

Drive Me WILD



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIM LORRAINE

DRIVE ME WILD

SUNRISE COWBOYS

KIM LORAINÉ



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DRIVE
me
WILD

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KILLIAN

THE SUN SETS on Big Sky. What happened to Killian Wilde?

Life as I knew it was over. Everything I'd worked for was gone in one stupid decision, and as I stared down at the headline on my phone screen, my chest tightened with another round of crippling anxiety.

The device vibrated in my hand, a notification popping up and doing nothing to ease my stress.

Incoming call: Jackie

Nope. No way could I handle her right now.

I knew exactly what she was going to say. There was nothing on earth that would make me answer that call.

"You know, you're supposed to answer those things when they ring, right?" My brother Luke sidled up next to me, leaning against the side of the stable and joining me in my self-imposed wallow.

"Yeah. Thanks for the sage words of advice, big brother."

"Something wrong? Aside from the usual?"

The usual meant my miserable failure of a life.

"The label's gonna drop me. I just saw it on social media. It's fucking everywhere."

"Why would they?"

"I went off the grid for months. Of course, they would. I'm a rock star cliché at best and a country music sob story at worst."

"You're struggling. There's a difference."

I let out a bitter laugh and finally looked at him. His eyes, now ringed in dark circles only worn by the exhaustion of a new parent, were still bright and shrewd.

"What do you know about me?"

"I know you're my brother and—"

"Am I? We didn't know that until two years ago. I'm not suddenly just magically close to you now that we found out your dad couldn't keep his dick in his pants and fucked his sister-in-law."

Luke pushed off the wall and adjusted his Stetson as he stared me down. "Our dad. And I guess you forgot about the summers you spent with us when

we were all kids, huh? We might not have known you were our brother, but I remember you being as close to a brother as you could be back then.”

I sighed, taking off my hat before running my fingers through my hair and replacing the damn thing again.

“You’re our brother. End of story. So, get your head out of your ass and tell me what’s going on.”

“The band broke up. They fucked off and left me behind.”

“Why?”

My gut churned. “Because I’m Killian Wilde now. Didn’t Mav tell you?”

Luke frowned. “No. He’s been a little busy with Clara and the baby, not to mention his hockey team.”

“Well, they officially dissolved the band last week. But it’s been in the works since the night I arrived in Sunrise. I haven’t written a single fucking song in six months, and I’m in breach of contract as of tomorrow because the label wanted me to start a solo album, and I have nothing.”

“Fuck, I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I stared out at the land our family owned. Horses grazed the pasture, and a couple of younger mares played together as our brother Sutton rode the fence line.

“I’m not a solo act. I can’t do it. I’ve only ever been good because of the band.”

“But you were the songwriter.”

“Sure, but they were my sounding board. They told me what was good and what was garbage. I can’t do this without them.”

“Have you reached out? Talked to Ian or Rush?”

I shook my head. “There’s no going back, not after what went down. I abandoned them. I let the label break us up because my ego got in the way of everything.”

“And now you’re hiding from reality? Ignoring calls?”

He was right. I knew exactly what I was doing. If I didn’t answer the call, maybe it wouldn’t happen.

“I guess my question is, do you still want it? Are you Killian Wilde, Country star? Or do you want to go back to your roots, cowboy?”

“I was never Killian Wilde.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, you were. You’ve always been a Wilde boy, Kill. No matter what you want to think. You’re one of us. That means if you don’t want to go back to music, you don’t have to. You can stay here with us, run

the ranch, ride all day, get your hands dirty, and fall in love with something else.”

I stiffened at that idea. There was part of me that wanted nothing more than to be immersed in a world where no one wanted anything from me except for my time helping with the ranch. But the truth was I’d never be able to ignore that gnawing ache inside my chest that needed to create music. Part of me was missing because I couldn’t do that now. No matter how hard I tried.

My phone rang again, the fucking thing buzzing in my pocket and making me grimace.

“Listen, Kill, it’s not gonna stop until you face it. I promise, it’ll just get harder every minute you ignore the truth.”

My jaw was clenched so hard my head began to throb at my temples. “Yeah.”

He clapped me on the shoulder and turned to walk away. Before he rounded the corner, he called over his shoulder, “Mack and I are having her family over for supper. Why don’t you come? Hawk will be there. Maybe you two could bring your guitars and jam a little?”

Hawk Langston had been in my first band, back when I was a kid, just starting out. He’d taught me to play one summer, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit I’d had a bit of a crush on him. Unrequited, of course. One, he was way too old for me, and two, the man was straighter than a fence post. I never stood a chance with him, but I sure as shit figured out a lot about who I was that summer.

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll let you know.”

My fucking phone rang again, and with an annoyed grunt, I sent my manager straight to voicemail. I might be avoiding the inevitable, but I just wasn’t ready for my entire career to be flushed down the drain. Maybe tomorrow.

Tonight, I’d drink it all away.

TWO WEEKS PASSED, AVOIDANCE STILL WORKING LIKE A CHARM. THIS WAS good. Healthy. Avoidance worked. It wasn’t a crutch. It wasn’t bad for me. Everyone else was full of shit. I was managing just fine. Me, Johnnie Walker,

and silence.

I narrowed my eyes at the guitar sitting in the corner, untouched, collecting dust. I'd had her for fifteen years. She'd been on every demo I made, every song was written with her in my hands. My perfect, solid cedar-topped Taylor acoustic. Nothing fancy. But she had a rich, warm sound I'd never been able to find from any other instrument.

"Don't stand there and judge me. You don't want me touching you right now, anyway. I'd probably break you."

The doorbell rang as I carried on a conversation with my completely inanimate object. I was losing it. Gone off my rocker, as my granddaddy used to say.

The bell rang again, followed by the sharp rap of knuckles on the door.

It couldn't be one of my brothers. Mav and Clara were still getting settled in Seattle, where they'd live during the hockey season. Sutton and Luke would just barge in using their keys after the first time I didn't answer.

"Go the fuck away!" I shouted from the couch.

"Killian, you answer this goddamned door, or I'll break that window and come in that way." Jackie Russell, my manager, shouted back. Her voice was strong and a little terrifying.

With a long-suffering sigh, I adjusted myself in my boxer briefs and stumbled to the door. Was I still drunk? Maybe I should put some pants on? Shrugging, I continued on. She'd seen me at my worst before. She'd survive.

She banged on the door again as I unlocked it.

"Hold your horses, darlin'. I'm comin'."

I opened the door and was met with the woman who had taken on the job of holding my balls firmly in check the last five years.

"Jesus, Killian, put some clothes on. You look like a goddamned underwear model...on Instagram...maybe TikTok. Actually, now that I've said it, that's not a bad idea..." Her face crinkled in disapproval as she got closer. "And you smell like a whiskey distillery. This is what you're doing with your life? Ignoring my phone calls, texts, and emails and drowning your liver in alcohol? Are you trying to join the 27 club? It's not a good look. No one will remember you fondly. They'll say, here lies Killian Wilde; he had so much potential but couldn't cut it because he was a selfish bastard."

I winced. God, she was harsh. I'd hate to be her kid.

"Nice to see you too, Jackie. Come on in."

She barreled past me and began cleaning up my living room without an

invitation. Arms full of empty liquor bottles, she bustled into the kitchen.

“I can’t believe your brothers are letting you be this stupid. When Mav called and told me you’d been arrested, I made him promise he’d take care of you. This is not taking care of you. This is letting you kill yourself. And ruin your career.”

I snorted. “What career?”

She pinned me with an angry stare. “The one I’ve been trying to save. If you’d answer your phone, you’d know.”

“Jackie, love, where should I put my stuff?” A smooth, sexy British accent hit my ears from behind me.

My eyes went wide. Who the fuck was that? What stuff? Turning toward the sound, my whole body tightened at the sight of Jameson fucking Lorde standing in my entryway, ripped jeans, a tight black T-shirt, and arms covered in a mosaic of multi-colored tats. Jesus Christ. Jameson Lorde could not be in my house right now. I was in my underwear. Fuck. I was practically naked in front of a rock god I’d fantasized about in the early days of my sexual awakening.

“Jackie, what is he talking about?” I managed to croak out.

She smirked, her gaze raking my body, which I was sure was covered in a head-to-toe flush. “Jamie is here to write a single with you, Killian. He’s staying in your spare room and not leaving until the two of you have a gold record written and a demo laid down.”

I looked to Jameson. The man smirked and gave me a once-over.

I could not get an erection right now. Not while his eyes were on me. There was no way a pair of boxer briefs would do anything to hide the thickness of my cock.

“Hiya, I’m Jamie,” he said, stepping close and holding out a hand.

Fuck. I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

“Killian.” I shook his hand and forced myself to think about anything other than the sexy as fuck veins in his forearm.

“I’ll...go put some clothes on.”

Jamie’s gaze flicked down to the traitor of a hard-on I was failing to conceal. “Don’t get dressed on account of me.”

Jackie groaned. “Please, get dressed. For me. I’m not here for a show.”

Jamie gave a soft huff of laughter. “I might be.”

Was Jameson Lorde...flirting with me?

No. The man was straight. Wasn’t he?

JAMESON

GOD, this guy was a fucking disaster. There was no way I'd be able to write a single with him, let alone an album. He was a drunk asshole who clearly had been a one-hit-wonder. He did have a nice arse, though, I noted, as he went up the stairs in those black boxer briefs. I wondered if I could petition for whoever invented those things to be canonized. Especially the ones Killian Wilde was wearing. I was thankful as fuck I'd worn jeans instead of my usual travel clothes, joggers. While comfortable as hell, they'd have done nothing to hide my body's reaction to seeing a shirtless, nearly nude cowboy the instant I stepped inside the house.

"I thought you said he agreed to this," I hissed at Jackie as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Technically, his brothers agreed, and they are three-fourths owners of this ranch. They out-voted him."

"He didn't even know this was up for discussion? I can't write a bloody song with someone who doesn't want to."

"Yeah, you can."

"No, Jackie. That's not how this works. We have to be in sync."

"Listen, Jamie, I like you. A lot. You're talented, dynamic, charming, but the truth is, the Jameson Lorde from twenty years, hell even *ten* years ago, doesn't exist anymore. You're washed up and stale. No one has said a damn thing about your last three albums. They barely hit the charts. No noms, no awards, no more gold records. You know what that means, don't you?"

My gut twisted. "I'm disappearing."

"Exactly. So, we shake things up. Killian's in a shit place. His band fell apart just as he was hitting it big. Your solo career has slipped into oblivion. You need each other."

I sighed and ran a hand over the back of my neck. "I can do this without him."

"I'm sorry to burst your bubble, handsome, but you can't. You've done everything on your own all your life. He's done it all with a team. Why don't you give it a go and see what happens? Dare I say, you might make some magic?"

Killian came down the stairs dressed in tight black jeans and a white T-

shirt that spread the logo for Wilde Horse Ranch across his chest. The slogan, *Go Wilde* written in script under a rearing horse silhouette.

“Thanks for waitin’ on me. So, Jackie, you wanna explain what in the world makes you think Jameson and I can do anything together that makes any fucking sense?”

Jackie rolled her eyes and pointed to the loveseat. “You two, sit.”

Every passing second only made that feeling of something being wrong grow in my gut. Killian clearly didn’t want this. He hadn’t had a clue. Me? I didn’t know what to do. Jackie was right, my career was floundering. The shine had worn off. I was one more flop away from a full-time gig as a reality TV contest host.

Killian sat first, and I joined him, the heat of his thigh next to mine undeniable and more arousing than I wanted to admit. It had been a long fucking time since I’d been with a man. My last two relationships were with women. But there was definitely something here. A spark of attraction. This could get messy.

If the way my dick was reacting to him was any indication, I needed to make sure I kept my distance. Living in the same house wasn’t a good idea.

“You know, I think I’ll just—”

“You’ll just sit there and listen to what I have to say, Jameson Lorde.”

Fuck, Jackie was scary. Like an angry primary school teacher.

“Now, you two both need a win. Jamie, you’re approaching has-been status, and Killian, you’re being called a flash-in-the-pan. That won’t do. No clients of mine are going to be forgotten. Do you understand me?”

Killian swallowed, his hands gripping his knees, white-knuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

I snorted. “What a pussy.”

“I heard that, Jamie. He’s smart. Smarter than you are. You want to get back on the horse? You need to hitch your wagon to Killian. He can still turn this around. A secret project with sexy, bad boy rocker Jameson Lorde is exactly what can do that for both of you.”

“We don’t even work in the same genre.” My protest was weak at best.

“Neither did David Bowie and Bing Crosby, but we still have to listen to their god-awful Christmas song on the radio every fucking year. Not to mention Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett. If you’re going to try and tell me the two of you are too different, you’d better come up with something else. That ship has sailed. The USS Collab has left the station.”

“That’s not how that saying—” Killian withered under her stare. “Never mind. It’s great.”

“Twat,” I muttered under my breath.

“So, you just expect us to be able to write a song together, just like that?”

“Yeah, this guy is clearly too clean-cut for my style, Jackie. Look at him. He’s like a Johnny Cash wannabe.” If Johnny Cash was the sexiest motherfucker I’d ever seen and smelled like whiskey and bad decisions. And there went my dick, talking for me. Again.

“And who are you, a Jim Morrison knockoff?” Killian’s blue eyes found mine, a challenge burning in them. “Or maybe it’s Adam Levine? All that ink. Do you have the Union Jack tattooed on your belly? Maybe a portrait of the King? Definitely not as sexy as California.”

“Sounds like you paid a lot of attention to what kind of tatts Adam Levine has. Are you a big Maroon 5 fan? I could probably get you an introduction.”

He scoffed. “Don’t do me any favors.”

“You two are impossible. This is fantastic.” Jackie stood up and snagged her handbag from the floor. “Keep me posted on how it’s going. I need at least one demo from you in two weeks if we’re going to keep the label happy. You two will get along just fine once you work out the tension.”

Tension. Yeah, that’s what we’d call it. Killian might be hot, but he was no match for me. I wasn’t going to ride his damn coattails. He’d ride mine.

“So, you’re just dropping him off, and you expect me to be okay with a stranger living in my house?” Killian stood and dragged a hand through his hair before he began pacing in front of the large stone fireplace. “This isn’t even my place, Jackie. It’s my brother’s.”

“Your brother moved to Seattle. He’s not going to mind if Jamie stays.”

“God, you don’t even have your own place? Mooching off of big brother, huh?”

Why was I such a wanker?

“I own this ranch just like they do. I’m not a fucking mooch.”

“Listen, boys, I know neither of you likes the idea of sharing the spotlight, but here’s the truth. Either you write a hit and an album to go with it, or you’re both going to find yourselves without a label and, more importantly, without me. You got it?”

That sent a wave of cold dread through me. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly.”

Gritting my teeth, I nodded. “Fine. Let’s get to writing so I can move on

from this.”

“Glad you can be an adult about this. I really need to go; my flight leaves this afternoon. Killian, I mean it, give this a shot. It could turn everything around.”

Killian stayed silent, but his brow drew down into a deep frown.

“I’ll do my best not to corrupt him, Jacks.” I was only teasing, but the smirk on her face told me Killian was more of a troublemaker than I’d given him credit for.

“Maybe a little corruption is what you both need. Spark some creativity. Be bold. Make something new.”

She waggled her fingers at us both as she left in a whirl of perfume and clacking heels.

My bag and guitar case sat in the entryway, looming like the final thing we hadn’t established yet.

“So, uh...where’s my room?”

KILLIAN

“YOU FUCKING KNEW?” I burst through Luke’s front door and rounded on him as he bounced gently with his baby in his arms.

“Shut up, you asshole. She’s almost asleep.” Luke looked at me as though he was ready to castrate me. “It’s taken me half an hour just to get her to stop crying. Mack is taking a hot bath and having some well-earned *her* time, and I’m pretty sure if I play my cards right and get this little lady down for bed, I just might be able to get some tonight. Don’t ruin it for me.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if you get some. I have an unexpected rock star in my house right now, and you and Sutton okayed it. Without telling me.”

My niece gave a little whimper, and I immediately felt like the world’s biggest douchebag. I lowered my voice to a heated whisper. “I’m supposed to write a song with him. How can I do that with someone I don’t even know?”

Luke propped the baby up on his shoulder a little higher and began this strange sort of bouncy-sway dance as he patted her back and made shushing noises. “Look, I know you don’t want to face the facts, but your manager is the scariest woman I’ve ever met, and when she called us to tell us what was going on...Sutton and I both caved pretty quick.”

“Traitors.”

He raised a brow. “Are we? It seems like this is a surefire way to get your career back on track.”

“If he wasn’t a cocky asshole, sure. The guy thinks I’m some kid who doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. You should have seen the way he looked at me.”

“You think maybe it has less to do with you and more to do with his ego? There’s nothing more fragile than a rock star with a god complex.”

I snorted. “How would you know?”

“I was raised by one.”

That shut me up. Our dad might not have been a literal rock star, but he was the son of Hollywood royalty. He grew up thinking his name afforded him all the respect our grandfather commanded. And he burned plenty of bridges because of that attitude.

“I don’t know if this is going to work.”

I watched as my niece’s shoulders finally relaxed, and she became as

slack as a noodle in my brother's arms. He cradled her to him, pressing a kiss to her downy head. "She's out. Thank God. Let me put her down, and we can talk more about this, okay?"

I shook my head. "Nah, it's okay. You're right. I think my own ego is getting in the way of what's right in front of me. I'm not a solo act. I never have been. Jackie knows it. She wouldn't have suggested this if she didn't believe we could pull it off."

Luke smiled at me. "Guess you'd better pull out that old six-string and see if you remember how to play, huh?"

My stomach churned. He was right. I just wondered if I still had the chops to write something worth Jameson Lorde's time. Something told me the rock god would let me know exactly what he thought of my songwriting skills. Whether I wanted to know or not.

JAMESON WAS PLAYING GUITAR IN MY LIVING ROOM WHEN I GOT HOME. HE'D just moved right in, taken over the guest room—where I'd been staying until Mav moved out—and made it his own. Cocky motherfucker.

But I had to admit, the way he worked his fingers over those frets and wove an intricate melody on the strings was mesmerizing. I just stood there, watching as he played, his head bowed, dark hair falling into his eyes, the muscles in his forearms working in tandem with the notes.

But then he began to sing. It was a song I recognized, one I knew well. Fuck me if I didn't break out into goosebumps at the sound of his voice. Rich and smooth, with just a hint of smoke behind it. Beautiful couldn't even describe the sound of him singing. But this man making music in my house was surreal.

He stopped, his head snapping up, and I realized then that I was singing along with him without my knowledge. My mouth just...couldn't help it.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to distract you." I fought the hot wave of embarrassment that curled up in my gut. "That's Trust in You, right?"

His lip twitched, a soft smirk curling one side of his mouth. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and I was that teenager with a crush all over again.

"Yeah. You sounded good singing it."

My chest tightened. "It's a really good song. I don't know why you don't

do more ballads.”

A sarcastic laugh escaped as he stood. “That’s not how this business works, mate. You do what the label tells you. Because when you don’t, you become obsolete. Take it from someone who knows, lad.”

Lad? “I’m not a kid.” I was about to turn thirty, for fuck’s sake. He wasn’t that much older than me, but he had a twenty years of experience on me.

“You are to me.”

“Fuck you. From what I’m seeing, I’m the one who has his shit together, and you’re the sad old rock star who can’t write a hit to save his life.”

His warm brown eyes went cold. “My five platinum records say I can. How’s your band working out for you...kid? From what I hear, you haven’t put anything out worth listening to since your debut. And correct me if I’m wrong, but they ditched you after your name changed.”

I gritted my teeth. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? Poor little rich country boy used his daddy’s money to hit it big. It’s amazing what knowing the right people can do to get your career started. All the doors are open for a guy like you. Some of us have to work for it. Sacrifice everything just to get in front of the right people.”

“Fuck, off, Jamie. You don’t know anything about me or my situation.”

He snorted. “I know a hell of a lot about you and guys like you. If you think Wes Wilde didn’t have a hand in getting you signed by Tryst, you’re more naive than I thought.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your daddy paved the way with a check big enough to build a new studio just so the execs would give Big Sky their break.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Aw, don’t take it too hard, mate. Plenty of people got a leg up because they knew the right people. I’m just surprised they kept you on so long after your dad kicked the bucket.”

I felt sick. Not because he was talking about my dad’s death, I hated the man, but because none of it had been real.

“I’m...done with this conversation. Good night, Jameson. If you need...fuck...whatever, I don’t give a shit what you do.”

As I moved to leave, Jamie grabbed me by the elbow, and the touch of his fingers against my skin sent a zing of electricity through me. I jerked out of his hold.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room. I have an early morning. Some of us actually work this ranch, you know.”

“We have to start writing.”

I shook my head and laughed. “You really think I’m inspired to write a single word with you after that conversation?”

He gaped at me. “That’s what I’m here for. The only reason I flew in from London. We have two weeks to show them something.”

“Well, I have horses that need tending and a ranch that needs to be worked. So I don’t give a single fuck what you do with your days, but I won’t be writing until my duties are done each day.”

“This is your job. Your career.”

I sighed and glanced around the house. “And *this* is my family. My legacy. I’m sorry you don’t have anything as important in your life aside from being an infuriating douchebag.”

His annoyed glare told me everything I needed to know. He didn’t have a comeback for me because I was right. The guy was hot, rich, and a complete ass. The only thing redeemable about him was his ability to create music.

Besides, the last thing I was going to let him in on was the fact that I hadn’t written a new song in close to six months. I had to get my shit together, so when we really had to sit down and make something between the two of us, I wouldn’t make a fucking fool of myself.

“You can’t avoid this forever, Wilde,” he called up the stairs. “Better to rip off the plaster and get it over with.”

Was it? Maybe, but not when the wound was still raw and bleeding. He didn’t know the first thing about me. Not really. And the fact that he suggested we just get this over with proved it.

JAMESON

What the fuck was this guy’s problem? Couldn’t he see I was giving him the benefit of my years of experience in the industry here? I’d walked the same path he was on. Turned to too much alcohol in a wasted attempt to ease the pressure of being ‘Jameson Lorde.’ It hadn’t been the answer. Oblivion never solved a bloody thing.

It was well past midnight by the time I finally gave up the ghost, put my guitar away, and took myself to bed. I'd played through practically every album I'd put out, some B sides, and a few unreleased songs the label had cut in hopes of finding that spark I used to have. Desperate to catch the love of writing and creating I'd feel when those first few chords in a new progression began to flow. But nothing happened. All I felt was a deep emptiness, a hole in my chest where all the heart seemed to spill out of me.

Headlines flashed in my memory as I laid on my bed, things like 'The Lorde has lost his flock.'

And my favorite way to torture myself, 'Jameson Lorde's big flop and how to save yourself from hearing it.'

"It wasn't that bad," I muttered, thinking about my last album, *Velocity*, and just how much I'd phoned in when writing it. I'd been nothing more than a mannequin with a pencil at that point. So detached from everything, I couldn't put two notes together and make them feel like music. But I'd gone through the motions, written through burnout, forced myself to produce even though my heart wasn't in it.

Hot garbage is what one critic called the album.

My girlfriend dropped me like yesterday's leftovers, and the next thing I knew, it was a year later, and Jackie was on the phone, telling me I had to shit or get off the pot.

Fuck.

Here I was, shacking up with a hot new country artist who didn't want anything to do with me. The guy couldn't even look me in the eyes for more than a second. Although, I hadn't really been much of a houseguest so far. But my defenses were up. I didn't know anything about him. At the point when Jackie called me, I'd been ready to throw in the towel and be the has-been she accused me of being. I was so eager to fix this shit, I jumped at any chance.

I hadn't anticipated being attracted to him, though. He had this broken, brooding artist thing about him. It's a good job I'd Googled him, or I'd have been far more unprepared for the smoldering good looks I'd been greeted with.

I had to change course with Killian before we went off track too far to be saved. Not because he stirred things in me I'd not acted on in a long fucking time, but because he was going to help me save my own life. And it wasn't a stretch to call my music career my life. Jameson Lorde was me on stage and

off. I didn't have a plan b. This was it.

I put on my noise-canceling headphones and began scrolling through every video I could find of Killian Wilde and his band Big Sky. I should have done this before now, but honestly, I'd been too numb to care. All I'd allowed myself to do was learn his history.

What I found shocked the hell out of me. This kid was pissing good. He owned the stage like he was born to be on one, sang with every cell in his body, and charmed his audience. Until about a year ago. That was when the light left his eyes, and the soul withered from his performances.

“Thank y'all for coming out tonight. I'm Killian Wilde, and this here's my band. Rush Connors on lead guitar, Ian Grant on bass, and Atticus Price on drums. I couldn't do any of this without them, and I'm so damn grateful to be on this ride with them. They're gonna take a well-earned break for a few minutes while I play you a new song I just wrote. How's that sound?”

Killian's voice, resonant and deep with just a hint of gravel, sent tingles through me. He sat with his guitar and a simple spotlight shining on him as the band left the stage, but I didn't miss the harsh tension in their posture, and the expressions on their faces. They weren't happy to be excluded from this.

Then Killian began to play his guitar and fucking croon. The crowd ate it up as he sang an angsty as hell ballad, his voice frying just a little on the higher notes.

Those tingles I'd been feeling turned into full-on shivers, and my cock sat up and took notice.

But I couldn't get involved with him, not in the way my dick wanted to. The last thing we needed was to muddy the waters with sex. Or...feelings.

I watched that video over and over until a glance at the clock on my bedside table said it was already three in the morning. Sighing, I gave up on sleep, as I so often did, and got up, padding into the bathroom to shower and get dressed in clothes I wouldn't mind getting dirty.

I might know nothing about ranch work, but I was here to write music with Killian Wilde, and if I had to learn how to shovel shit and deal with livestock, I would. One British cowboy coming right up.

Nothing was more important than getting our first hit song written. Nothing.

KILLIAN

I Poured steaming hot coffee into my travel mug, then leaned against the counter, sighing as the heavy ache of exhaustion radiated through my limbs. I hadn't slept a wink last night. All I could think about was what Jameson had said and how good he'd looked saying it. Rip the Band-Aid off. As if it was so easy.

"You got some of that for me, cowboy?" His voice had me flinching. I was thankful I hadn't turned on more than the stove light; the darkness gave me a chance to adjust myself and hide the erection simply thinking of him gave me.

Did I really want him? Or was this just the byproduct of being completely celibate for the better part of six months? I was starved for sex. And Jameson Lorde was sex on two legs.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He let out a low chuckle. "I live here, remember? At least, until we write this song."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, what are you doing up and in the kitchen?"

He shrugged, his rumpled hair falling into his eyes. "I'm not much of a sleeper. Too many things running around up here." Raising a hand, he tapped his temple.

"No wonder you look so tired all the time."

"Piss off," he said, but there was laughter in his voice. "What's your excuse?"

"Good one." Sarcasm dripped from my tone. "Here's your coffee." Did I give him my favorite mug? Yes. Was I going to tell him that? Fuck no.

"You didn't spit in it, did you?"

"I guess you'll never know." I cocked a brow. "Are you afraid of sharing bodily fluids with me, Jamie?"

A flare of heat in his eyes had me fighting the urge to take a step closer. "If saliva is the only thing we share, I'll be surprised."

My gut clenched. "What?"

"Blood, sweat, tears. You know, all the stuff that goes into writing music."

"Oh, right."

He smirked. “Why? What did you think I was talking about?”

Nope, not going there. He didn’t need to know where my dirty mind went. Screwing the lid on my coffee tumbler, I brushed past him. It took every ounce of strength I had not to breathe in his scent as I walked by. But I had work to do, shit to get done, and I wasn’t going to let Jamie distract me from the job I needed to do for my family. I had to earn my place at Wilde Horse Ranch, no matter what they said.

Because I’d seen how quickly the spotlight can dim, and the last thing I want is a life where I’m not doing something that matters. Music matters. The ranch matters. My brothers matter.

I shrugged into my fleece-lined denim jacket before sitting on the bench by the front door and tugging on my boots. The sky was a multitude of colors this morning; velvet purples and pinks splashed across the horizon, visible from the window next to the entryway. Fuck, I loved this part of the country. At this point in my life, I’ve been just about everywhere you could go. Toured each state, seen the sun rise and set from both sides of the country. Nothing matched the beauty of Sunrise, Montana. It’s why I came home when everything fell apart. To find myself because I was fucking lost.

A shadow fell across the floor in front of me, pulling my attention away from the sky and to the man standing there in his leather jacket and tattered jeans.

“What are you doing?” I stood, coming to my full height, only a few inches taller than him.

“I’m coming to help.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t know the first thing about working a horse ranch.”

He shrugged. “It can’t be that hard. Not if you’re doing it.”

I didn’t flinch at the dig. “That depends on your definition of hard. Complicated, no. Backbreaking? Yeah.”

Jamie shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “If you can do it, so can I. We have music to write, Killian. I need you to be able to devote time to this with me every day if we’re going to make it happen. And I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready to let go of being Jameson Lorde just yet. Are you really willing to give up on Killian Wilde?”

I took a sharp breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I wasn’t ready to quit on my dream. But, my dream had also lost me three of my best friends.

“No. I’m not.”

“Okay then,” he said, pushing up off the wall. “Let’s get to cowboying or whatever.”

I chuckled. “You can’t go. Not dressed like that.”

“What do you mean?” He glanced down his body, a band T-shirt that fit him like a dream, dark wash denim with holes in the knees, and solid black Converse. “What’s wrong with this?”

“First off, a horse steps on your foot with those shoes on and you’re in the hospital with broken toes, at the very least. And you’re gonna ruin pretty much anything you wear. I can guarantee it. Hang on, I’ll get you something better.”

I slipped off my boots and headed up the stairs, Jamie on my heels. I hated how aware I was of him. His presence was electric, a force of nature I could sense.

He stood in my doorway as I rooted around in my drawers, pulling out a pair of Wranglers, an old T-shirt and, last but not least, my spare boots from the closet.

“You a size twelve?” I asked, assessing his feet.

“In US sizes I am.”

“Here. These should do just fine. Might be a hair big, but they’ll keep you from losing a toe.”

“Thanks. I’ll...Well, I guess I’ll need you to show me where I can buy some new stuff, so I don’t have to borrow yours.”

“We can do that, but I don’t mind sharing. It’s not like you’re moving in permanently.” I laughed at the thought. “Jameson Lorde trades in his leather and fast cars for Wranglers and horses.”

He smirked back at me. “It doesn’t sound so bad when you say it like that. In fact, it sounds kind of peaceful.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I could buy a place out here where it’s quiet, make my own private studio where I could record whenever I wanted. Sounds kinda perfect, actually.”

“What about touring?”

“Well, I’d just have to hire some cowboys to run things while I was gone.”

He took the clothes and headed to his room, and part of me hated myself for thinking about him with my scent all over him, his body touching my clothes. By the time he came downstairs, I already had my hat on and was

holding my spare for him. If he was gonna play cowboy, he had to at least look the part.

He was still wearing the leather jacket, those tattoos on his neck and fingers the only ones visible because of the coat, and my jeans fit him like a glove. Fuck. This was a bad idea.

“Is that hat for me?” The excited glint in his eyes had me fighting a laugh.

“Yes. There’s no way I’m not gonna give you the full cowboy experience now that you want it.”

“Oh, does that mean you’re going to take me for a ride too?”

On my dick? Yes. I pushed the dirty thought out of my mind. “If you want. But let’s start with getting to know the place before we do any riding, okay?”

“I’m all yours, Killian. Teach me everything you know. I’m a good student.”

“We’ll see. From what I know of you, you’re a spoiled rock star used to the finer things.”

He bristled. “You might be right. I haven’t exactly had to fend for myself in a long time.”

It surprised me that he’d admit to being out of touch with reality, but then again, so had I. A few years of even the taste of fame had spoiled me.

He put his hat on, and I couldn’t help but reach out and adjust its position.

“There. Now you’ll do.”

That cocky grin of his made something twist inside me. He liked my approval of him. Maybe we could make this work. Of course, there was the small problem of me not being able to write a fucking song.

I backed away and shut down that line of thinking. I couldn’t get caught up in what I wasn’t able to do, not if I wanted to get on with my life. The truth was, we’d figure this out, he’d see I was a lost cause, and then he’d leave. It was just a matter of time.

As I walked to my truck, the crunch of his boots on the gravel behind me was like a rain cloud hanging over my head. That wasn’t fair to him, but I couldn’t deny the pressure his being here put on me.

“Get in,” I grunted.

“You’re really leaning into the whole grumpy cowboy thing, aren’t you?”

“And you’re leaning into the irresponsible rock star. Which one’s worse?”

He shrugged. “At least I know who I am. You can’t seem to make up

your mind.”

I gritted my teeth against the dig. “I’m plenty sure of who I am.”

After getting into the cab, I started up the big diesel engine and was fucking thankful for the loud rumble of the ancient vehicle. It distracted from the need to fill the silence with some sort of a conversation.

We pulled up to the stables where my brothers Luke and Sutton were already parked and standing at their own trucks, drinking coffee and shooting the shit.

“Hey there, Kill. What brings you here?” Sutton asked.

I winced. “Oh, you know, just here to work...like *always*.” I begged silently for him not to blow my cover.

The dumbass frowned. “Always? I can’t remember the last time I—”

Luke elbowed him. “Yeah. Always.”

As Jamie sidled up next to me and took up too much space for me not to notice him, I held my breath, hoping he didn’t catch on to the fact that I was lying through my teeth about my daily chores on the ranch.

“Hey, I’m Jamie,” he said, holding out a hand first for Luke, then Sutton.

“Yeah, we spoke on the phone. Nice to meet you in person. Is my little brother treating you all right?” Luke asked. He smirked as he looked between us.

“Well, he’s got me ready to work, if that’s what you mean. Though it’s not what I was expecting.”

“You didn’t have to come out here with me,” I grumbled.

“I wanted to make sure you came back. Seems to me like you’re hiding from our project.”

Sutton’s brows rose. “Oh, those are fightin’ words if I ever heard them. Sounds like Jamie here’s got your number, Kill.”

“He doesn’t have my anything.”

Luke chuckled. “I’d say the fact you’re here at nearly six in the morning says otherwise. He’s got you running scared.”

I narrowed my eyes at both of my brothers in succession. “I hate you both.”

Sutton shook his head and pushed off the side of Luke’s truck. “Nah, you don’t. There’s a whole mess of stalls that need mucking today, guys. Have fun.”

Luke followed him, both of them heading for the stables. “If you need us, we’ll be out in pasture twelve. Got a controlled burn happening today.”

I sighed and took a sip of my still-scalding hot coffee. “Fuck!” I hissed as the liquid burned the roof of my mouth. “Come on. I’ll get you some gloves and show you what to do.”

“You going to enlighten me as to why your brothers seem surprised to see you, cowboy? If you work the ranch all day every day, that doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Irritation raced through me. “They’re always gone by the time I get out here. Those two got a late start this morning.” I was such a lying sack of shit.

“Oh, really? It seemed to me they aren’t ever used to seeing you. And from our conversation on the phone, Luke thought you’d have plenty of time to devote to writing with me.”

My hand balled into a fist. “Luke doesn’t know shit about me.”

“You wouldn’t be lying about how busy you are to avoid your job, would you?”

“Fuck off, Jameson.”

He sighed. “Look, I know we don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things, but —”

“But nothing. You and me, we’re not the same by any stretch of the imagination. This co-write is a stupid fucking idea. I don’t even like your music.”

His eyes flared. “That’s too bad. You’re stuck with me, unless you want to throw in the towel and shovel shit for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t need *you* to make it.”

“You probably don’t. But this is what we’ve got. Your band ditched you, a stupid move on their part, but it’s what happened.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, I do. I spent my time doing research about you last night. You can learn a whole hell of a lot about a situation on social media these days. The theories fans have are wild.”

Dread crept up my spine. My stomach churned. I’d stayed away from most social media. Especially after the band broke up.

“Oh, yeah? And what did you piece together, Sherlock?”

He leaned against one of the stall doors, sipping his coffee and wincing a little as the temperature burned him, too. Good. I hoped it hurt.

“Your band couldn’t take it when you became Killian Wilde. They knew you didn’t need them, and their egos got the better of them. Biggest mistake of their lives right there. Those three don’t have what you have.”

Gritting my teeth, I opened the tack room door and stepped inside, grabbing a pair of work gloves for each of us.

“And what’s that?”

“Presence. I watched you on stage. When you performed that solo song at Red Rocks, the crowd went fucking nuts. Something magic happened up there. It was probably the final nail in the coffin for them, honestly.”

“So, you’re saying it is all my fault?”

He shrugged, the infuriating man. “I’m saying, if you’re going to be who you’re meant to be, you can’t let jealousy weigh you down. They either rise with you or get left in the dust.”

“Wow, you must be real loyal to your friends.”

“I’m just a realist. I have friends. I also have enemies. You can’t be in this business without both.”

A brown muzzle poked through the bars behind him and knocked his hat off his head.

“Hey, what the fuck?”

I laughed. “That would be Luke’s favorite horse, Turbo.”

“He’s a menace.”

“Yeah, he is. He likes to play dead too. I think we’ll get you up on him first.”

Jamie arched one eyebrow. “You trying to get me killed? He clearly has it out for me.”

“Nah, he’s a big softie. We put all the old farts and kids on him because of it.”

“Well, I’m not a kid.”

“Guess that makes you an old fart.”

He held out his hand. “Give me the gloves and that fucking shovel. I’ll show you just how old I am.”

Why did the low growl in his tone hit me right in the gut?

But more than that, why was I actually looking forward to watching him prove me wrong?

JAMESON

WELL, that backfired. Here I was, thinking I'd help him out and shovel some shit for the day so we could get back to the house and start working on putting together our first song. Instead, we worked until sundown, both of us exhausted by the time we walked through the door.

My back was screaming in agony from the repetitive motion of scraping out each stall and replacing the hay with a fresh clean layer. How did he do this all day long? Had I just gone soft after years of letting everyone else take care of moving gear for me and handling the manual labor? Was he right?

I gritted my teeth at that last one. Killian might be the sexiest man I'd ever met, but I would *not* let him be right about me. I wasn't pampered and spoiled. Out of touch with the real world. I'd been through plenty of hard stuff in my life. Done my time hauling gear and killing myself night after night on tour.

"So," Killian said, half-hearted at best, "you ready to write?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Fuck no. I'm ready for a beer and my bed. Not necessarily in that order."

Sitting down hard on the stairs, I pulled the boots from my feet and let them fall where they did, not giving a rat's arse about politeness. I'd clean it up later.

"You okay, old man?"

"Call me that again and see where it gets you."

"If you're having a heart attack or a stroke, I should call Doc. Those first hours are crucial, you know."

"Leave me here to die."

A warm chuckle filled the air around me, pulling my focus from the ache in my lower back to the soft blue eyes twinkling with mirth. "You're not gonna die. But you sure do sound a hell of a lot like me after my first week mucking stalls."

"You can't honestly tell me you enjoy doing that kind of work every day."

He shrugged, then held out a hand to help me up. Fuck, when our palms touched, we both tensed a little. But I shook it off and pretended like he didn't just make me harder than anyone had in a long bloody time.

“I don’t do that work every day. That was the first time I’ve mucked out a stall in...over a month.”

“What?” Shock raced through my veins. “I thought you ‘had to work your family’s land’ or some such nonsense?”

“I do. I just don’t do it by shoveling horse shit anymore. We pay people for that.”

“Are you paying me?”

“You’re staying at my house for free, aren’t you?”

I opened my mouth to protest but shut it again. He had a point.

“So, what kind of work do you do here?”

He dragged a hand through his dark hair. “Right now? A whole lot of nothing aside from take up space. Until today. I’m supposed to be helping with branding and social media, but everything I touch goes up in flames lately.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

A bitter laugh escaped him. “Try me.”

“Maybe you need to find your spark.”

“And you think you can help me with that?”

Shrugging, I offered him a cocky smirk. “The label does.”

“Let’s get those beers you mentioned. We’ve both earned them.”

I nodded, watching him walk into the kitchen as I took a seat on the sofa.

What was I doing? I wanted to be in bed, resting my sore muscles, but instead, I let this handsome plonker get me on the couch with him. I was asking for trouble. Too attracted to him for my own good, and I knew where that would lead. To the two of us fooling around, getting involved, and someone, probably me, ending up with a broken heart.

“I really should get cleaned up. Hit the hay, or whatever it is you cowboys like to say,” I called after him.

He snorted out a laugh as he came into the room from the kitchen with two open bottles of beer and a bag of frozen peas. Before handing me a bottle, he tossed the bag at me. I caught it easily and offered the veggies a dubious look. “Thanks, you shouldn’t have.”

A smirk turned up one side of his mouth, sending a warm tingle straight through me. “For your back, old man.”

I frowned. “Piss off.”

“Make me. The way you were hobbling inside, I like my odds.”

“Are you always this much of a cocky wanker?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Are you really that out of shape?”

“I’m in fucking great shape. Best shape of my life in fact.”

“Really? You must’ve been so weak before.”

I was gonna kill him. Or possibly kiss him. I wasn’t sure.

“Give me the goddamn beer,” I grumbled.

He handed it to me, and even the brush of our fingers had me shifting my hips to give myself a little more room behind my fly. He irritated the fuck out of me but also...God, there was an undeniable spark between us.

“You did good today,” he muttered before taking a pull from his drink.

“Brilliant, I’m great at two things, making music and shoveling shit.”

“Sometimes both at the same time.”

That had a laugh escaping me unexpectedly. “Look at that; the grumpy cowboy made a joke.”

Killian’s mirth died the second I brought it to his attention. His expression closed down as he trained his eyes on the floor.

“I wasn’t always like this.”

I shrugged. “Neither was I.”

We sat there together, both quietly sipping our beers, existing in the same space without forcing the other to talk for a long time, until his stomach let out a loud growl.

“Hungry?” I asked.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Fuck, it’s already seven.”

“You got anything to eat?”

“One thing I know how to do is stock a fridge. I’ve got pretty much everything we need for burgers if you want.” His shrewd gaze locked on mine. “Unless you’re a vegan or something. If you are, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you’re in beef country. You’ll want to special order yourself some food.”

I chuckled as I finished the last of my beer. “I eat meat. My good mate is a vegan chef, though. She makes these amazing pecan patties, almost better than—”

“Do not say they’re better than the real thing.”

“I said almost. They’re different in a good way.”

He hummed in appreciation. “I can see that. Like rock is different from country.”

“Not that different. It’s rooted in the same thing.”

“Of course it is. And that’s jazz.”

Nodding, I stood and stretched, my back less sore after using those peas to ice it. I stared at the thawed and mushy bag. “Please don’t tell me we have to eat peas tonight.”

“Definitely not. They’ve got your ass print all over them.”

“You have a problem with my arse?”

Heat banked in his eyes, and Killian gave me a slow once-over. “Turn around, and I’ll tell you.”

Killian

WHAT THE FUCK WAS I DOING FLIRTING WITH THIS MAN? THIS MAN I’D thought was straight since the first moment I saw him perform on TV years ago. But he’d flirted first, hadn’t he? He checked me out blatantly when he got here yesterday. Or was I so hard up I’d forgotten the difference between an appreciative glance and a look of disdain?

“So, burgers, then?” I asked, trying desperately to change the subject.

“Do you want to handle the meat, or should I?”

Oh, Jesus. “I got it. Didn’t you say you wanted to shower or something?”

I stood and headed into the kitchen, needing some separation between us so I could just fucking think.

“Oh, yeah. I suppose I could...”

“Good.” Shit, I *was* a grumpy bastard.

He left without another word, and I stood there, hands braced on the countertop as I forced myself not to call out and tell him he could handle my meat all he wanted.

I pulled out the preformed patties I’d made yesterday and unwrapped them, letting them sit on the counter as I heated the grill pan. These burgers were always better the second day. It was a recipe I’d perfected over the last year and one I was damn proud of. As soon as the cast iron was hot, the oil near smoking, I laid each patty across the pan. The satisfying sizzle that filled the air made me smile. I could always count on cooking to center me, help me feel grounded and in control of something. Even if my life was spiraling.

As the meat cooked, I gathered up the fixings we’d need. Buns, buttered and set under the broiler to lightly toast, mayo, mustard, some jalapenos,

cheese, and of course, lettuce and tomato. I didn't know why I was going to so much trouble for Jameson. I shouldn't have cared what he ate. It didn't matter to me, but the thought of him having a bowl of dry cereal alone in my spare room made me feel like a real asshole.

I flipped the burgers and pulled the buns out from under the heat of the oven, then got to work slicing the perfectly ripe tomato. I even put the jalapeno slices in a bowl so he could get them without getting the juice all over his fingers. What was happening to me? I wasn't his fucking boyfriend. This wasn't a date. I had no one to impress.

"Get it together, Killian. Jesus."

It was just because the guy was a rock superstar. Because I'd had every one of his albums. Because I'd been in love with the idea of him since I was a teenager.

Laying the cheese on top of my burger, I hesitated on his. For all I knew, the guy had a dairy allergy. I couldn't slap it on there and hope he didn't die. Could I?

The sound of footsteps on the stairs had my heart lurching.

"God, that smells really bloody good. Do you cook for all your unwanted and unannounced houseguests? If so, I'm surprised you're not married yet."

How had the simple act of showering made Jameson hotter? His thick golden hair was still damp and curling at the ends. Skin pink from the heat of the water, eyes bright with renewed energy.

"Uh...cheese?"

He smirked. "What?"

"Do you want cheese?"

"Sure. I'll just have it however you do."

I pulled myself together and tore my gaze away from him and the fact that I could see his nipple piercing through the fabric of his thin white tank.

"Hope you like it spicy then."

"I'm not afraid of a little heat."

JAMESON

WE'D BEEN at this for two straight days now, and this dancing around each other thing we were doing was getting old. I didn't have time to waste on polite and respectful boundaries with this man. Not when my career was on the line. Honestly, couldn't he see that? This wasn't just about him. I wouldn't go down in flames because he refused to do the work.

I poured myself a coffee and added a splash of milk before striding outside with my guitar to sit on the front porch. Needing some fresh air and clarity before I figured out how I was going to attack this problem that was Killian Wilde. Before my morning of working the ranch with Killian, I'd operated on the misguided notion that daybreak in the country would mean calm, peaceful scenery and, above all, quiet. Now I knew better. At least, here on Wilde Horse Ranch, anyway.

The sounds of the ranch filtered to my ears as soon as I stepped out the door, accompanied by the scents of livestock. Horses, in particular. An earthy odor of wet grass, dirt, and manure. It wasn't the most pleasant aroma, but I'd smelled so much worse after years on tightly packed tour buses with my crew, especially after long nights on stage, followed by longer ones drinking ourselves into oblivion.

Sharp whistles followed by the calls of cowboys as they worked with a herd of horses had me glancing to my left at the pasture beyond a fence that demarcated the end of Killian's property. Not ready to start playing yet, I leaned my guitar against the house and stood, collecting my mug and giving in to curiosity. I strode down the porch steps and across the front garden until I reached the fence so I could stalk the cowboys and see them in action. Was Killian out there, distracting himself from me? Avoiding me?

"You must be Jameson," a soft feminine voice said from behind me.

Turning on my heels, I came face to face with a pretty brunette with big blue eyes and a sweet mouth absolutely made for kissing.

"That's me. I see my reputation precedes me. What did he tell you, then? Go on. Do your worst."

She took up the place next to me, leaning against the fence with a grin. She wore a pair of cowboy boots with turquoise detail on the toe and heel, a pair of jeans that hugged her curves perfectly, and a Wilde Horse Ranch T-

shirt similar to the one Killian had worn.

“I’m Sera. Sutton’s wife.”

“Lovely to meet you. Your husband’s certainly a lucky man.”

“Yeah, he is. How’s my brother-in-law treating you?”

“He’s...hesitant to accept any of this.”

She heaved a sigh. “Killian’s a complicated man.”

“I’m beginning to understand that.”

“I could throttle Sutton for not telling him you were coming. I swear, the men in my life are one bad decision away from ruining their lives at all times.”

I cocked a brow and looked at her. “They’re a wild bunch, then?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m not busy, clearly.” I gestured to myself and then the wide expanse of the ranch property.

Her laughter made me smile. “I’d have you here for hours if I told you every story. I have four brothers back at Ryker Ranch, plus these idiots I gained through marriage. I’m surrounded by testosterone.”

“Sounds like it.”

I’d heard of Ryker Ranch from the smash hit reality TV show *Saddle Up*. They were quite famous even in the UK, though I hadn’t ever had time to watch an episode. By the look of these cowboys, I’d missed the boat on that one.

“Killian!” Sera shouted, startling me as I brought my coffee to my lips. “Killian Wilde, I know you see me. Get your handsome butt over here.”

My gaze followed hers to the man on the back of a midnight black horse. He was fully kitted out in a cream straw hat, denim, boots and spurs, and... fuck...whiskey-colored leather chaps.

What was it about a cowboy hat and a pair of chaps? I hadn’t realized I was a goner for them. Fucking hell, I was acting like a teenager. My dick hardened behind my fly, and I had to fight the urge to reach down and adjust myself as he approached on horseback.

Killian tipped his hat at me, one hand on the reins, jaw clenched. “Mornin’, Sera. Jameson.”

“Don’t give me that Wilde boy charm, Kill. What are you doing out there? We have plenty of ranch hands working, and you know it.”

His cheeks went pink. “I’m just helping out. Earning my keep.”

“Oh, please. Go put Bella away and get your ass back to writing music

like God intended. You are too talented to keep your gift from everyone.”

“Sera.”

“No, Killian. You have been moping around here since you got back, and I was willing to give you some grace for a while. That’s over now. We’re all cheering you on, and Jameson is here to work, so you need to do that.”

I stared on in shock. This tiny thing was fierce and a little terrifying.

Killian’s eyes shot to mine. “I see you’re not too British to throw me under the bus.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I thought you were supposed to be too polite for subterfuge.”

I laughed. “Polite subterfuge is my specialty.”

Sera looked up at me. “Oh, I like him. Let’s keep him. It’d be nice to get to hear your accent every day. Darlin’ only goes so far unless you’re my husband.”

“I dunno, being a cowboy doesn’t really suit me,” I admitted.

“Not true. I bet you’d wear a hat and boots well. And if my family can make TikTok famous pretty boys into cowboys, I bet I could help you pull it off.”

“He does,” Killian admitted before clearing his throat.

Her eyes widened. “Oh. Okay. I see.”

What was that? Did she think something was going on between us? “I helped out mucking the stalls the other day. Killian let me borrow some boots.”

“You did? Where was I?”

Killian brought his horse closer to the fence. “Filming the anniversary special.”

“Oh, right. God, I can’t believe it’s been five years. Daddy would be so proud of how Clint managed to turn things around.”

“Yeah, he would.” Killian cleared his throat and sent a glare my way. “I’ll wrap things up here, and then we can get to work, I guess.”

“Don’t rush on my account. I’m still on my first coffee of the day.” I didn’t want this man to think I was helpless without him. If he didn’t want to write with me, I’d just have to start on my own. Jackie wouldn’t be thrilled, but perhaps if I gave her something brilliant, it wouldn’t matter that I deviated from the plan.

Killian gave me a curt nod, then clicked his tongue before digging his heels into the horse’s side. They took off together, his hips rolling in the

saddle in a way I really bloody liked. Christ, I was a disaster.

Sera shook her head, a laugh escaping her. “God, he’s a stubborn idiot. Just like his brothers.”

“There are three of them, yeah?”

“Wildes? Four counting Kill. Though we didn’t know that until Wes died.”

I’d heard that, but figured it was a sore spot. “The secret brother. Such a scandal, worthy of a historical romance, I’d wager.”

Her brows lifted. “You read historical romance?”

Shrugging, I stared out at the cowboys hard at work. “I read whatever’s nearby. Tours are long, and there’s a lot of downtime. I grabbed a paperback at every stop we made. Sometimes it was a romance, others a thriller. Once, it was a horror novel that gave me nightmares for weeks, but I couldn’t bear to put it down.”

“Did you like it?”

“No. But I finish what I start. I’m no quitter.”

Her laughter filled the air around us, a bell-like sound that made me smile. “You’re going to be very good for my brother-in-law. Even if he doesn’t want to admit it.”

“I don’t think he’s going to let me attempt anything of the kind. But I’m hard to shake. Like a dog with a bone, some have said. I want to keep my star shining, and if Killian can help me do that, I’m not going to let him sabotage us.”

She linked our arms and dragged me away from the fence. “Come on, Jameson. How are you on a horse?”

I swallowed, flicking my gaze back to the porch where my guitar was waiting. “I’ve ridden a pony once in my life.”

“Oh, perfect. I love a beginner. I can teach you before Killian gets his hands on you and starts letting you develop bad habits.”

“Why shouldn’t I get my hands on him?” Killian’s voice broke through our conversation, making my stomach tighten and a rush of excitement as he met us on horseback as we strolled toward the stables.

“You heard me. We’re going for a ride, and you’ll teach him lazy habits, the ones all you Wilde boys have.”

“There’s nothing lazy about me. That must be Sutton. He’s been babied his whole life.”

“Careful, that’s my husband you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I know. You’re just too in love with him to see past his obvious flaws.”

The way he grinned as he teased Sera gave me a glimpse of who Killian was when he felt safe. What had happened to this man to cause him to become so guarded and closed off? Fame? Pressure? All the same things that had nearly ruined me when I first made it big. Perhaps I knew him better than he realized.

“So, what do you say, cowboy? Are you going to let her talk about you like that, or will you come for a ride with us?”

“I thought you wanted to get to work.”

“I can spare an hour.”

“Yeah, Kill. He can spare an hour. Especially since you’ve been fucking around out here all morning.” Sera’s lips twitched with amusement as Killian’s expression went stormy.

I couldn’t resist. I pushed. “Besides, me on a horse, with a cowboy hat on and rocking a British accent? I’ll definitely take home the title of sexiest man on the ranch.”

He frowned, gaze raking over me. “We should get to work. You’ve been hounding me for days.”

I bristled. This handsome frustrating asshole really thought he could control me? An argument just for the sake of one-upping him was on the tip of my tongue. But I bit it back. I was getting what I wanted, wasn’t I? Let him think he won. As long as it got him playing.

I turned my attention to Sera and offered an apologetic smile. “Another time?”

Her knowing smirk made my skin prickle as she glanced between us. “You bet. Kill, give me the reins. I’ll put your horse away.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Shock had his eyes wide as he processed her words.

“You heard me. Don’t make me offer again.”

In one fluid move, he dismounted and did as she asked. Then, eyes cast down, he came up to me.

“Meet me inside,” he grumbled, shoving past me and adjusting his hat as he walked away.

“Well, that’s one way to get to him.” Sera smirked.

“What is?”

“Poke the bear until he either bites or gives in. Bold tactic, Jameson. I’m impressed.”

KILLIAN

“So, where do you want to start?”

I sat across from him in the living room. My palms were sweaty as I held my guitar for the first time in far too long.

He smirked, the handsome bastard. “Well, I like to start with a couple chords, you know, test it out, get things going.”

Of course, I knew what he meant. He wanted to ease into it and warm up, which made perfect sense. That was how I did things too, but a big part of me didn’t think I was capable of any of that anymore.

“All right. Go ahead.”

A slight frown turned down his lips. “You don’t have anything to add? No opinions on what key you want to start in or whether you want to go angsty or sexy? Nothing?”

“Nope. Take it away, rock star.”

“All right. I really thought you’d have more of an opinion on this.”

“Well, I don’t. You want to just call it? We can do that.”

“No, we can’t. We are meant to turn in something to our label next week, so no.”

My chest went tight as anxiety careened through me. We *did* have to turn stuff in and get approval. We had to keep our contracts, and the only way we were going to do that was if we wrote this damn song.

“Like I said, take it away.”

He shook his head and sighed. “I don’t understand you.”

“What’s there to understand?”

“You’re just letting your whole career go up in flames.”

“No, I’m not. I’m here working with you, aren’t I? I just don’t get why you’re trusting me. I sure don’t have any Grammys to show for my career.”

“Fine, but I don’t have a single number one hit to show for the last five years, either. Seems like you’re putting a lot of stock into my history and not what I can produce now.”

“Isn’t that why she put us together?”

His unaffected shrug was kinda infuriating, especially when he said, “Suit yourself.”

But then he began slowly strumming a soft chord progression, one I

recognized far too easily. I cocked my head.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m warming up.”

“With one of my songs?”

“Yeah, with one of your songs. You bothered, cowboy?”

“Why aren’t you using one of yours?”

“Because mine are old and tired. But yours, they have something special.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Yeah, they do. Kill, *you* do. And if we’re going to be successful, which I know we are, we’re going to need to use good material. And mine right now leaves a lot to be desired.”

“What are you talking about?”

He took a heavy breath. The sigh that followed on a deep exhale was nearly painful. “Listen, I’m not an idiot. I know exactly how this industry works. You stop making music, you die, and no one’s going to be there to watch out for you. Help keep your career going. We’re lucky. We have Jackie in our corner. That doesn’t happen very often. She’s a gift, and we need to treat her like one. So that means the two of us have to get over our differences. We need to take care of the person taking care of us.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing here?”

“Yeah, and that means we’re gonna write Jackie the best song we have in us, all right?”

I narrowed my eyes, frustrated because he was right. “You playing one of my songs isn’t gonna do that.”

“It’s like you don’t even listen.”

“I do listen. I’m listening. This is me. Ears open, all right?” My throat tightened as I watched his expression flicker from panicked to resigned.

“I haven’t been able to write anything worth listening to since my last Grammy nom.”

“You haven’t?”

“No, I haven’t. I want to, but I haven’t.”

This was a disaster in the making. Neither one of us could write. We were just going to what? Sit here and stare at each other, willing the music to appear?

“So, how are we going to do this?”

“We’re gonna get started with me using this song you wrote. We’re

gonna take it apart and figure out what made it so bleeding good. And then we're going to use one of mine and do the same thing."

My eyes went wide as a realization settled deep in my bones. We were going to merge our styles together. It made sense. In a way, the two of us had our own audiences, but we also had strong styles that really could come together. I'd heard it before, witnessed it, listened to it, and enjoyed the hell out of it.

"Okay, I'm ready."

"Good," he said, nodding. "First thing I'm going to need you to do is stop staring at me and start playing."

So, I followed his lead. I began strumming the chords of the song that had catapulted us into the spotlight. It came to me easily once I got started, just a simple set of changes— Cowboy chords—but it wasn't long before we began singing together, him harmonizing with me, the melody coming through strong and solid. Something magical happened as we continued to play, the music between us morphing and changing into something a little slower. A lot sexier, with an intensity I couldn't escape. The air around us grew heavy, layered with a different kind of tension.

He sighed as the last chord played and let out a groan that had me fighting one of my own. I wasn't supposed to want him. I knew that sure as I knew my own name. But there was no way to deny the truth. I did want him.

He swallowed thickly, a muscle in his jaw working as he stared me down, a deep furrow building between his brows.

"Why the fuck would you ever consider quitting this?"

I had to swallow back my initial response, which was for me to tell him it wasn't any of his goddamn business. Instead, I simply shrugged.

"There's a lot you don't know."

"Yeah. Well. That's not news to me."

"I'm a fucking mess."

The laugh he let out was tight. "And you think I'm not?"

"I never said that."

"That's right. You didn't because you can't. Tell me what happened."

The truth was, I was too fucking embarrassed to say anything about what caused the breakdown of my band. I didn't want anyone to know.

"If you don't tell me, I can't do anything to help you."

"You can't help me anyway."

"You really believe that? I just helped you right now, didn't I?"

If my sighs got any more long-suffering, I swear to God.

“I fell for the wrong person, okay?”

“The wrong person being your bass player?”

Embarrassment shot through me. How did he know that?

“Yeah, I fell for him. I thought my feelings were shared. They weren’t.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“Are you happy now?”

“Am I happy that you got your heart broken?”

“I broke up my band and...and I’m a rock and roll cliché.”

“I wasn’t gonna say that.”

“You don’t have to say it for it to still be true.”

“All right, fine. You fell for the wrong guy. Fucked up your relationship, and what, he couldn’t deal?”

“No, he couldn’t.”

“Because he’s straight?”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Ouch.”

I sighed. “Yeah. Ouch.”

“Well, you might not want to hear this, but it seems to me you’re better off without him.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s that?”

“If I could have someone talented, creative, who understood this business the way you do, there’s no way I would let you go.”

“Why?”

“Because finding someone who understands this world we live in is rare.”

Damn him. Why did he have to be right? I shrugged.

“Sure. Doesn’t change things. He’s not you. He doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. My band is gone, and I don’t have anything left.”

A smile bordering on sweet curved his lips. “I wouldn’t say you don’t have anything.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“You sure as hell have me.”

“I do?”

Why did that do things to my insides? Things I didn’t want to admit.

“Yeah. You do.”

“You don’t seem the type.”

“What type?”

“My type,” I challenged, knowing that it was not going to be long before Jamie finally took back his support. He stood up, laying his guitar carefully against the couch.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You know,” he started, “Sometimes it pays to have a little faith in people.”

“And sometimes it fucking hurts,” I shot back. “Sometimes people let you down and disappoint you and break your goddamn heart.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Absolutely right. But there are those times where they don’t. And isn’t that what counts?”

“What are you talking about?”

“For every person that broke you, I sure as hell see a lot of people who are over here in your corner loving and supporting you. Your brothers are three of them.”

He wasn’t wrong. My brothers took me in and made me part of the family with no questions asked the moment they found out I was theirs.

“I think it’s worth mentioning you also have a pretty fucking great support system in Jackie.”

“I do. She’s never lost faith in me or my music.”

“Of course she hasn’t. Jackie doesn’t invest her time in people who aren’t gonna be worthwhile. You and I both know that.”

“All right. You’ve made your point.”

“Have I, though?”

I raked a hand through my hair. “I think so...yeah.”

“Why won’t you let me be in your corner?”

Glaring at him, I had to fight back the wave of emotion that question set free. “And how exactly do you plan on being in my corner?”

“Jesus, Killian. Will you stop fighting me for once?”

“I’m not fighting you.”

“Yeah, you are. You’re fighting so hard, you can’t even see it.”

The anger blazing in him as he stood and got in my face was a fire I didn’t know if I really wanted to put out.

“What do you expect from me, Jamie?”

“Well, I expect you to fucking try.”

“I’m trying. Okay? This is me. Fucking trying.” He rolled his eyes, so I continued. “It is, goddammit. What else do you want from me?”

“I want you to admit you need my help.”

“I did. I do. I need your help. Happy?”

“No.”

“Fuck you, Jamie. I don’t know how else to admit it. Do you want me to get on my knees? Beg?”

He smirked.

“Now, there’s an idea,” he muttered under his breath, so low I almost didn’t hear it. “All I know is that I’m here and ready to work with you. It seems like every time I try, you’ve got some excuse. Something keeping us from doing the job. And that’s not helping anyone.”

“I’m not trying to keep us from being successful.”

“Then I need you to explain the hold up.”

I took a deep breath, then sighed. This was the moment I’d have to really open up. I didn’t fucking want to. “I haven’t played my guitar once since the day the band broke up. I haven’t even picked it up. This was the first time.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking serious. I’m a failure. I haven’t been able to do my job. Be a musician. Do anything worth doing, worth calling music. And the idea of sitting in front of the man who was one of the reasons I started playing music, not being able to do that for him and letting him down, broke something inside of me. So yeah, I’ve been hesitant, and I’m still going to be hesitant because I haven’t created anything new in a long time.” I gestured at the guitar. “Even now, all I did was play some old songs of mine and listen to you make them better. So please don’t sit there looking at me thinking how pathetic I am because I can’t take it from you too.”

He reached for me, grabbing me by the arm and shocking the hell out of me when he pulled me against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, held me tight in a hug I wasn’t expecting, and we just stood there together. Me confused as fuck in my living room, a rock god holding me like I mattered.

I felt every beat of his heart hammering against his ribs as he took a shuddering breath before he whispered, “Killian.”

I backed away and stared into his eyes—beautiful fucking eyes. Swallowing hard, I did the one thing you should never do in the middle of a vulnerable moment. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

He tasted minty, like he'd just brushed his teeth, and the way his stubbled jaw brushed against mine, the soft little hitch in his breath, all came together and made my cock thicken against my fly. And for a moment, I thought this was it. I'd been right, and he did want me. I wasn't just crazy and inserting my fantasy into real life.

But then he broke the kiss and stepped away, confusion and fear flickering in his eyes. "We shouldn't—"

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I misread things I shouldn't have." Pure panic ran through my veins. God, I was a dumbass.

"Killian, it's okay."

"No, it's not okay. No matter what. It's not okay." I backed away from him, moving myself out of the danger zone as embarrassment burned across the back of my neck and my cheeks. "You know what? I got an early day tomorrow. I'm sorry. I can't keep doing this tonight. Can we try again tomorrow? And...I won't cross that line with you again. I promise."

Something flickered in his eyes. "We won't."

I couldn't tell from his tone if he was confused, sad, happy, or relieved. But the tension in him said everything I needed to know. He hadn't wanted that. I misread the signals and had taken a leap like the idiot I was because I was feeling vulnerable. And I wanted...I didn't know what I wanted anymore.

I dragged a hand through my hair, wincing when my finger caught on a thick tangle. "I'm going to bed early. I'll see you tomorrow."

He nodded. Still frowning, not meeting my eyes, but before I could head up the stairs, he called out, "Killian, wait."

A stupid flutter of hope built in my chest. I turned to look at him. *Big mistake.* All I could focus on were his lips and the feel of them against mine.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have some paper and a pen? So I can write down these changes."

Deflating, I walked to the bookshelf in the corner, grabbed my old songbook, pen already attached to it, and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he said as his fingers brushed mine. He bit his lower lip, then nodded. "You're right. That's not a line I want to cross, but you don't have to apologize for it."

"Yeah, I do. I was...fuck...I was stupid."

"You were in an emotional place, and I'm glad you felt safe talking to me."

“Safe, sure, that’s what we’ll call it. It won’t happen again. I promise I won’t make that mistake with you.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“No, that’s okay. Don’t try to make me feel better. I’ll see you in the morning. Night.”

He gave me a curt nod. “Good night, Killian.”

And then I went upstairs to lick my wounds and remind myself exactly why it was best if I were single.

JAMESON

I COULDN'T GET that kiss out of my mind. His lips had been full and warm, soft but firm all at the same time. He'd caught me off guard, but I didn't know why. We'd been dancing around our attraction since the moment I arrived, and I'd really fucked up by pushing him away. But the guy had just told me exactly what led to the end of his band. I wasn't going to be the reason he repeated a mistake.

And then there were my own experiences with mixing music and romance. Neither one of us was ready for this; that much was clear. Better to put on the brakes now and keep the air clear between us than to muddy the waters and get sex involved.

Or love, a little voice in my mind said.

I shook my head. Love that wasn't in the cards for me.

So, I sat there on the couch, quietly strumming the chord progression we'd worked on. Writing it down along with the framework of lyrics that had been spinning in my mind.

Part of me hoped Killian would come back downstairs, swallow his pride, and help me. We'd been on the verge of finding something special. I could feel it. It was that moment, right before the sky opened up and a torrent of rain escaped. Absolute magic. I was really good at finding it but terrible at keeping it. This was like a live wire bouncing around on the ground or a snake coiled and ready to strike, dangerous but fucking exhilarating all at the same time.

My phone danced on top of the coffee table, the name Aiden flashing on the screen. What the fuck did Aiden Boyd want now? I sighed and rolled my shoulders as I reached down and answered the call.

"Hey, Aiden. What's going on?"

"What's this I hear about you shacking up with Killian Wilde?"

My stomach twisted, a pit opening up. "What are you talking about?"

"It's all over the rags. You and Killian living together. Are you two an item?"

"No."

"Then why are you pictured shirtless at his ranch?"

"What?"

“Hang on. I’ll send it to you.”

My phone buzzed, and I put him on speaker as I stared down at the photo he sent me. Sure enough, there I was, dirty, sweaty, shirtless, and staring straight at Killian’s perfect fucking arse as he took the saddle off his horse. Oh, God.

“So, you two aren’t a thing? Not that I’d have any issue with you being with a guy. Just to make sure we’re clear on that.”

“No, we’re not a thing.”

“Then why the hell are you in bumfuck nowhere, Montana?”

“We’re co-writing, all right?”

“Co-writing? No way. You’re a solo act. You’ve always been a solo act.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a solo act whose career is stagnant. Jackie put us together writing. It’s that or get dropped.”

“Shit. Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess it could be worse. You could have been put on a reality show. Or, you know, been told to fake marry an up-and-coming singer, then get your heart broken.”

There was bitterness in his voice. It was impossible to deny. Aiden had been on the wrong side of a deal with the lead singer of a band that was just about to breakout. The tabloids had ruined them both. Though he’d come out looking like a peach, and of course, she...had not. It went so wrong. Her career ended before it could really begin. This was the kind of shit I wanted to avoid.

“Well, I’m not dating him.”

“All right, good. If you want my advice don’t. Steer clear of anything that would link you together. Aside from the writing.” He heaved a sigh before continuing. “I don’t think you should be living there. You two need to go somewhere secluded, where there’s no possibility of the press finding you. He’s a rich rancher; doesn’t he have like...some cabin in the mountains where no one will know what you two get up to?”

“We’re not getting up to anything.”

“Sure. Whatever. I really don’t care. What I do care about is you and him and your well-meaning manager not fucking up your entire lives. Hell, I’m still trying to pick myself back up, and it’s been years.”

“I thought you were doing just fine. Violet Hour is bigger than they’ve ever been.”

“Sure, the band’s doing great. But my personal life is a disaster.”

“You really fell for her, didn’t you?”

He groaned. “Don’t you dare tell anyone. I don’t want her to know. She’s happy, as she should be. I’ll figure my own shit out. Okay?”

“It’s our secret. Do you think the press is gonna start hounding us now?”

“I think if the Wildes don’t amp up their security, yes. They’ve already got that reality show one ranch over.”

“Ryker Ranch isn’t one ranch over, it’s miles away.”

“Doesn’t matter. Everything’s miles away in the middle of the country. I think you need to be cautious. Maybe go out on some dates with some other people, separate a little bit, or maybe I’m wrong, and the two of you are going to be the golden couple that everyone roots for and loves to see together. Maybe they’ll be shipping you before anything happens.”

I swallowed thickly. Something already had happened.

“Just be careful. That’s my main concern. As somebody who’s been down this road, it’s not pretty when it gets ugly.”

“Course it isn’t, man. That goes without saying.”

The way he chuckled under his breath had me desperate to get off the phone. But he continued. “How’s the writing going?”

Aiden and I had talked more than once about the creative process and how tough it could be when the muse didn’t want to cooperate. If anyone was familiar with my struggles, he was.

“I think there’s something there.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He might not agree, but it’s...there’s a spark, you know?”

“Yeah, I know that feeling. You’ve just got to feed that fire. Unless he doesn’t want to do this.”

“I think he does. He’s just not as willing as I am.”

“There’s always got to be one holdout.” A soft murmur trickled over the line, voices in the background distracting him. “Sorry, man, our plane’s about to take off. I gotta hang up.”

“Thanks for calling, Aiden.”

We hung up, and I heaved a sigh before raking a hand through my hair and sitting back on the couch.

“Was that Aiden Boyd?” Killian asked, his voice rough and a little shy, but all I could think of was how bloody glad I was to see him again.

“Yeah. He’s a friend.”

“I figured.”

I glanced down at the picture Aiden had sent, but I didn't want to bring it up to Killian. No sense adding to the already difficult situation we found ourselves in.

“Was I playing too loud? Sorry, I'm really a night owl.”

“Nah, I just realized I was being a little bitch. I shouldn't have left.”

“You were just giving us both a little space. There's nothing wrong with that.”

“Do you still need space?”

“I don't. I'm fine. We're fine. Let's move past it, yeah?”

“Yeah. You're right. You want to show me what you got written down so far?”

“Of course I do.”

He sat next to me, looking at the notebook he'd given me, and I took that opportunity to begin playing. The melody we'd worked out together fell from his lips, along with the lyrics I'd written down. We made music over the next hour, sang the chorus together over and over, me layering in harmony until the two of us had tweaked it just enough that we really had a solid hook. It was so fucking good.

When his leg brushed up against mine, my mouth went dry. I had to lick my lips so I could keep singing. I really needed to find myself a distraction to keep us out of the spotlight in every way, but the one way that counted. The last thing I wanted was for the press to get wind of my attraction to him. They already speculated enough about my romantic relationships.

Glancing at the clock, I feigned a yawn. “I think that's good for tonight. Don't you?”

His eyes burned bright, excitement I hadn't seen in them before flickering in the endless pools. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“It was good, Killian. Really bloody good.”

He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze to the floor. “Tomorrow night, I'm, uh...going out to The Silver Spur with my brothers. You want to come with us?”

“What's The Silver Spur?”

“Basically, the only bar in town, and it's not even in town. It's twenty minutes away.”

“Is it a real cowboy bar?” I tried and failed to hide my excitement.

“Yeah. With line dancing and a country band. There's even sawdust on

the floor and bull riding...”

“And bar fights?”

He chuckled. “It’s not a good night if there’s not at least one fight.”

That was a far cry from anything I had found in LA or London. “Hell yeah. Do I need to dress the part?” I asked. “If so, I’m gonna need to borrow your boots again. Maybe some jeans.”

He shook his head, smiling. I loved the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled and how even through the shadow of his trimmed beard. I could see the dimple on one cheek. Fuck. I had to stop looking at him and appreciating anything about him.

“You can just go as you. Although I will warn you, you’re going to get recognized.”

I shrugged. “That’s part of it. Comes with the job.”

“And I’m sure you’ll be asked to dance.”

“I like dancing.”

“Do you know how to two-step?”

“No. But I can learn.”

“All right. I’ll have Sera teach you.”

“Your brother’s wife? I quite like her.”

“Yeah. She’ll give you the rundown. You’ll be a professional by the time she’s done with you.”

“Sounds good.” I stood and put my guitar in its case, then handed him the notebook. “You should add some lyrics.”

His jaw tightened, but he nodded. “Yeah, I will.”

Standing there, awkward as arse, I tried to think of something to say. “Thanks for coming back down.”

Eyes not meeting mine, he gave a short grunt. “Goodnight, Jamie. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I’D NEVER BEEN TO A COWBOY BAR BEFORE, BUT I HAD TO ADMIT I WAS excited for my first time out. Especially because it meant I got to see Killian let loose and relax a little. Maybe if he let himself have some fun, he’d be able to tap into some of that creativity I knew was waiting just under the surface. Tonight, I had plans as well. I decided to follow Aiden’s advice and

put a stop to any gossip about me and the country star. Neither one of us needed that hanging over our heads. We both had plenty we were working on at the moment and romance wasn't one of them.

As I came down the stairs dressed in my typical outfit of dark jeans, a soft and comfortable vintage band T-shirt, and a leather jacket, it was hard to miss the approving glance Killian gave me before he schooled his expression. He liked what he saw; that much was clear. So did I. The man wore a black T-shirt and a pair of tight-fitting dark Wranglers, but when he snagged his dark Stetson off the rack in the hall and put it on his head, my mouth ran dry. He had no idea how good he looked. I could tell just by the way he self-consciously rubbed at the back of his neck. The man was a mess. *But he's not your mess.* I reminded myself. *You've got to fix yourself before you can help anybody else.* That was the advice Jackie had given me. She said it was left over from her days as a flight attendant. Rescue yourself before you rescue anyone else. Because if you don't, you'll both die. Perky? No. Positive? Not a chance. True? Fuck yes.

"Will this do?" I asked, holding my arms out and turning around so he could have a full 360 view.

He swallowed and gave me a curt nod before reaching into the bowl on the small table near the front door and snagging a set of keys. "They won't know what to do with you," he muttered.

I let out a low laugh. "Good. I don't want them to. That's how you keep them interested. Keep them guessing." I waggled my brows.

He shook his head, but a soft chuckle escaped him. "Let's go. My brothers are already there. And Sutton already texted me reminding me that they're paying a babysitter by the hour."

I got in the truck, thinking about the domestic life his family was leading and how different that was for people like us. On the road all the time. Never really settling down.

"Is that something you want?" I asked after he directed the truck onto the main road that would lead out of this ranch.

"A babysitter?" he asked.

"No. Knobhead. Kids, a family."

He shook his head letting out a soft huff. "Well, I don't want a wife. In case you didn't do your research, let me clue you in. I'm gay."

"I know that. And you don't have to have a wife to have kids."

"No, you're right. I don't."

Heaving a sigh far too heavy for my liking, he gripped the steering wheel, frowned, and then said, “Yeah, maybe. I always pictured myself with a family. I just don’t know how I’m gonna have one without fucking it all up.”

“Why do you assume you’ll fuck it up?”

“If you did all your research, you should know plenty about my dad.”

“Of course. I know all about your dad. Everyone does.”

Wes Wilde had his own reputation, and it wasn’t a good one.

Killian wouldn’t meet my gaze, so I continued. “But that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to be happy.”

“Sure. I know that. Hell, I look at my brothers and their lives and can see it. They’re all settled down and happier than they’ve ever been. Maybe that’s part of the reason I’m here now.”

“You’re looking to settle down?”

“Maybe. My whole life, I’ve been moved from one place to the next. When I was a kid, my mama was too stubborn to take any money from the Wilde family, especially after my dad, shit—he wasn’t really my dad, but I don’t know what else to call him—her husband left.”

“How old were you when he left?”

My heart went out to him. My own parents split up before I was born. Mum was addicted to drugs and by the time I was five, I’d been taken from her because of severe neglect. I never saw her again, because she’d not tried to get me back even once.

“I was really young. So young I barely remember him. He abandoned our family and cut himself off completely. From me, from his brother, Wes, from anything that had to do with this ranch.”

“You think he found out?”

Killian clenched the steering wheel a little tighter and slowed to let the gates open before heading off of Wilde Horse Ranch property and toward the outskirts of Sunrise, where he told me the Silver Spur was.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it had something to do with Wes and my mama, but she never said anything.” The way his voice wavered broke my heart, but instead of doing what I wanted—reach out and grip his shoulder to show him he wasn’t alone—I stayed still as he continued. “I never saw him again after he left. For all I know, he’s dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“So, your last name...it’s been Wilde all this time?”

“Legally, yes. I started using Winter back in high school. I didn’t want to be known as one of the Wilde boys. They had reputations, and I didn’t really

want to give the Wilde name any more power.”

“Sure, that makes sense.”

“So, I legally changed it right before we hit it big. Mama wasn’t happy. She said I should always be proud of who I was. But how could I be proud of being an abandoned son?” He let out a bitter laugh. “I’m the black sheep of one of the biggest families in Sunrise. You know, even before I knew the truth, I was ashamed of my dad. I was embarrassed by the way Wes acted. The guy was...well, imagine every stereotypical soap opera dad. Dramatic, manipulative, evil, selfish.”

“It’s pretty amazing your brothers turned out so well, growing up with a dad like that.”

“Yeah, it is. A lot of that is because of Sutton’s mama. God rest her soul.” He smiled softly, which made something loosen in my chest. “Then there’s Mama Ryker, Sera’s mom.”

“I don’t think I’ve met her yet.”

“No. You will eventually if you’re here long enough.”

That made my stomach twist. The way he said, if you’re here long enough. Because truthfully, I wasn’t going to be here that long. We’d write the song, we’d write a few more, and then we’d part ways.

He sighed and finally relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. “To be honest, this town is the only reason I made it through high school. People here are special.”

“Is it why you ran back home when things went tits up? It’s your safe place?”

“Yeah. Do you have a safe place?” he asked me.

“No. Not really.”

He kept his eyes on the road. But his posture softened a little. “All right, I told you about myself. Tell me what shaped you into the dark and broody problematic rock star you are.”

“I’m not problematic.”

“Sure, that’s what they all say.”

“I grew up in the foster system from the age of five. Spent a lot of time bouncing from house to house. I had severe behavioral issues as a kid. Never got adopted. But my last five years before I aged out, I lived in this house. It was a home for boys. Run by this amazing woman who was a music teacher. She had the biggest heart I’ve ever known. Her name was Kelly. She was this feisty little Irish woman who scared the shit out of all of us. But she loved us

more than I could have ever imagined anybody could love me. So one day, she called me into the music room. She'd just finished up teaching piano for the day, and she sat me down and stared me down. She told me, Jameson, you've got two ways your life can go. You can make something of yourself, or you can feel sorry for yourself. Which one will it be?"

"That's the definition of tough love."

"I think she is the photo reference for that concept on Wikipedia."

"So, what did you do?"

My stomach clenched at the memory of the moment that changed my entire life. "I looked at her, and I wanted to argue. I was ready to tell her she was wrong, but instead, I broke down crying. So she picked me up off the couch and led me to the piano, then taught me how to play. That woman gave me a piano lesson every day. Then she brought home a guitar for me when she realized my 'God-given gift,' as she called it."

"And what was your God-given gift?"

"I have this thing you might have heard of it. It's called an eidetic memory. I can see something and remember it perfectly after the first time I see it."

"Can you really do that? With everything?"

"Yeah, but especially music. I was able to memorize everything she gave me. And with a little practice, my fingers caught up with my brain. I was playing Mozart and Beethoven but also reading charts for popular songs and classic rock. She was the reason Jameson Lorde exists."

"Was?"

Sadness crept into my brain at that one word. "Yeah. She died two days after I finished school."

"I'm so sorry."

"Me too. But she got to see me sign my first record deal. And the pride on her face is something I won't soon forget. I hadn't had a mum for a really long time. I never thought I would by the time I went to live with her, but the moment I walked through her door, that's what she became to me."

He pulled into the car park and stopped the truck, shutting off the engine as he turned to look at me.

"I'm surprised I've never heard that story before," he said.

"Well, well. You've been researching me. Are you obsessed with me?"

He smirked, and his cheeks went a little pink. "You were kind of my idol. Growing up."

“Ouch.” I put a hand over my heart. “Bullseye, right in the weak spot.”

“Oh, you’re vain. Are you ageist?”

“I am not ageist. I just know that I am definitely your elder. And now you’ve rubbed that fact in.”

“It is true. But don’t worry,” he said, a wicked smirk twisting his lips. “I can drop you at the door, you know, since you’re so infirm and might not be able to make it across the parking lot.”

Rolling my eyes, I reached for the door handle.

“Are you sure? Do you need me to get it for you? I wouldn’t want you to fall out of the truck and break your hip.”

“I’ll have you know even young people can break their hips.”

“So, you admit you’re old.”

“Oh, he’s a genius. I see. You get him out of the house, and he goes wild and becomes a smart arse. Come on,” I said. “Let this old man show you exactly what he’s capable of.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got 911 on standby.”

I wanted to say his jokes about my age were getting old, but I liked this side of him. I wanted to see him playful and easy. I wanted him smiling because, so far, smiles were hard to come by. But his frowns were ten a penny.

“You ready?” he asked, adjusting his hat before flashing me another grin.

“If you laugh at me, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Why would I laugh at you?”

“I might make an arse of myself. I’m not as dashing and suave as I seem.”

Killian bumped my shoulder with his as we walked toward the Silver Spur. I’d never seen him so playful. He looked ten years younger.

“You know, I quite like you like this,” I said, reaching up and snatching the hat off his head.

“What do you mean? Like what?”

“Like this. Like we’re actually mates who want to be spending time together and not reluctantly forced into each other’s proximity.”

Lifting the hat, I almost got it atop my head, but he stopped me. “Ah, ah. No way.” He laughed and took it back from me. “That’s bad luck, London boy.”

God, I really bloody liked this side of him. If I could tap into this and pull it out of him all the time, I wondered exactly what kind of magic we could make together.

Loud country music blared through the open door of the bar as we approached. Couples walked in, all wearing cowboy hats and boots. A few of the women caught my eye, giggling as they recognized me, adjusting their cut-off denim shorts or tiny skirts. I didn't have eyes for them, though. I wanted to look at Killian, but I couldn't because, of course, right at the door, being held at bay by a bouncer, were a couple of paparazzi.

"Jameson, are you and Killian Wilde an item? Are you ready to address the rumors of your sexuality?"

Killian stiffened beside me as we walked up to the doorway. "Don't answer them. You don't owe them a damn thing."

A tall woman with shaggy red hair and a fiery attitude stepped right up to the photographers. "You're on private property. I expect you to either pay the cover charge and come inside or leave. If you don't, I'm sure our sheriff will be happy to escort you to the local jail for a short stay."

"Come on, Frankie," one of the guys said.

She turned on him like he was a fly in her soup. "Oh, no. You don't get to call me by my first name. You can call me Ms. Silver. Or better yet? You can leave, and I never have to see your face again. I've already told you paps. I don't want you here. Not when the show is filming and not when the season is over. Don't make me break out the big guns."

I leaned into Killian. "A show?" I mouthed.

He leaned closer. "Saddle Up, the Ryker's reality show. As soon as it became a hit, paparazzi started crawling out of the woodwork. People trying to catch glimpses of contestants and sometimes the Rykers."

I stepped up to Frankie. "Thank you for your help. But I got this."

She nodded. "Suit yourself."

Facing off with the two paparazzi, I said, "Listen, fellas. I'll give you this exclusive if you leave us be."

"You got it." Eagerness flashed in their eyes.

"Killian and I are writing a song together. That's it. Nothing else is going on between us. But he did bring me out here in order to help me find..." I hesitated dramatically. "My muse. And I don't know if you saw any of the ladies that walked through that door, but there are quite a few potential muses out tonight. It being Ladies Night and all."

"That's not an exclusive. We knew you were writing together."

"Did you know it's going to be an entire album? Not just one song."

Again, their eyes brightened. "When's it going to drop?"

Killian cleared his throat, a warning.

“That I can’t tell you, but feel free to print that Lorde and Wilde are the hottest new duo in music right now.”

Killian stepped up next to me, tossing his arm around my shoulders as they snapped photos of us standing together. Appeased, they left, and as Killian and I walked inside, he leaned down, whispering in my ear, “That’s gonna piss off the label. They haven’t greenlit us yet.”

“No. But now they’ll have to, or someone else will snatch us up. Because Lorde and Wilde are the hottest new duo.”

“How do you know?”

“Oi, you. Have a little faith. I’ve been at this a long time, Killian. I know a good thing when I hear it. And we are a good thing.”

We joined his brothers at a table just as Frankie brought us both a pint. I couldn’t keep myself from watching the man take a long swallow, my body reacting to the sight of his Adam’s apple bobbing. God, help me, but I wondered, not for the first time, if that’s what it would look like as he swallowed me down as well.

Fuck. I had to get myself under control and stop thinking about him so I could think about our future instead. Because there was no future for Lorde and Wilde if I ruined everything between us before it even got started.

KILLIAN

I THOUGHT it would be easier to be around Jameson with other people acting as my buffer. Somebody to keep us each occupied or at least distract me from his sexy smolder that he exuded all the damn time. But I was wrong. In fact, it might have been harder to be around him with all of Sunrise, Montana, crammed into the small bar. Because everyone and their mother paid attention to him.

Try as I might, I fell right into my old broody ways. I sat there, frowning into my pint glass, pretending not to notice him. Except, I noticed every-damn-thing. The way he gave everyone a piece of him when they asked. The way he smiled for selfies and signed shirts and cocktail napkins. And I especially noticed the way women raked their gazes over his body, hunger in their eyes. That was something I was far too familiar with. I understood exactly what they wanted. I understood how they coveted him because I did the same thing.

It didn't help that he'd come down the stairs dressed like he'd stepped right off the pages of a photo spread for Rolling Stone. How could a simple T-shirt make him look so hot, and why was I letting myself think about it? He clearly wasn't interested. He shot me down, couldn't have gotten away from me faster, and I still sat in the corner watching him like a lovesick puppy, ready to let my fantasies take me away.

He, on the other hand, flirted with every woman who came up to him.

God, it drove me wild in the worst way. I wanted him to be flirting with me, not them.

"Who pissed in your cheerios?" Luke asked, elbowing me as he passed me a fresh pint.

I hadn't even realized I'd finished the first one. Snagging the glass, I downed half of it in one gulp. "Thanks."

"Ookay, then. I guess you really are in a shit mood. What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Why do you look like Sutton did that one time Justin got a little too flirty with Sera?"

I straightened up, adjusting my posture, so I wasn't slumping over my beer like a dragon protecting his horde. "No reason. I just don't like getting

harassed by the press. I like my privacy these days.”

“Sure you do. Looks like Jamie is fitting in just fine. How are you two getting along? Have you had that magic moment yet?”

Alarm shot through me. “What? No. No magic. There’s nothing going on.” Did my voice just crack? Jesus, I was pretty sure it had.

“Sure, I’ll pretend you’re not lying and blushing then.”

“What’s he blushing about?” Sutton asked, sliding into the seat next to me.

“Nothing. I’m not fucking blushing.”

“Yeah, you are. Your cheeks are on fire. What’s going on? Does our baby brother have a crush?”

If my career wasn’t already in the toilet, I’d be worried it would go straight down the drain in a minute because I was about to end up in jail for murdering my brothers. “I said there’s nothing going on between Jameson and me.”

Luke’s eyes widened, a shit-eating grin on his lips. “Okay, fine. I wasn’t asking for that information, anyway. All I wanted to know was if you two had finally clicked. You always say it takes a little magic to make music. That’s all I meant by my question, but this was very illuminating.”

Shit.

“I just...” How did I explain to them that I’d already crossed the line with Jameson once and that, yes, I was crushing hard on him but trying to keep that to myself? Maybe I shouldn’t. “We’re working on it. And, of course, I’m attracted to him. Look at the asshole.”

We all glanced over to where he was dancing with a pretty young thing with long dark braids that fell to her waist and a sinfully curvaceous body. Immediate jealousy spiked in me.

“Aw, shit, he’s dancing with Pete’s girl. She’s a contestant this season on Saddle Up. Someone better get out there and help him.” Sutton tipped his beer to his lips and pinned me with his stare.

“Nah, I’ll let him learn his lesson,” I said, squirming a little in my seat as the beauty reached up and brushed Jameson’s shaggy blond hair out of his face.

The song ended, and she wrapped her arms around him, whispering something in his ear before dropping a soft kiss on his cheek. My hands balled into fists at my sides, but then Luke murmured, “Oh, hell.”

Pete Carpenter stormed across the bar, fury blazing on his face. “Excuse

me, pretty boy, what the fuck do you think you're doing with my girl?"

"She doesn't look much like your girl right now, mate. And she definitely didn't when she asked me to dance."

Jameson put himself between Pete and the woman, his body blocking her from the angry cowboy. What the hell was he doing? He was going to get a fist to the jaw any second now.

Pete lurched forward, but I was up and out of my chair as soon as the man got in Jameson's face.

"Hang on now. He's just dancing with her. If she's with you, what's she doing all alone?"

"She wasn't alone. I had to hit the head."

"What a tosser," Jameson muttered.

"What did you call me?"

"You heard me. Or do you have cotton wool in your ears? She asked me to dance. I'm not moving in on your woman."

Pete narrowed his eyes, then looked past him. "Baby? You done slumming it with the Brit?"

Jameson stiffened, but I put a hand on Pete's chest, pushing him back. "From the way she's hiding behind him, I'd say she doesn't want to join you just yet. Why don't you back off and give her some space?"

The ranch hand huffed. "You think you're some kind of badass now, Killian? You come back to lick your wounds after your career tanks and figure you can coast on the Wilde name? You've always been a fucking loser. That's why your daddy never claimed you as his."

Before I could shoot back a barb, Jameson's fist connected with Pete's jaw, taking the bigger man by complete surprise. Pete stumbled back a few steps but righted himself before leveling his gaze on Jameson and spitting blood on the sawdust dance floor.

"You're gonna regret that, Brit boy." He lunged, but I intercepted him, not willing to let Jamie get hurt over me.

Pete crashed into me, knocking me to the floor and landing a few well-placed punches. Pain blossomed across my cheek, my jaw, and when he stood and started kicking me in the side, I thought I might throw up all over him. The crowd erupted into hoots and hollers, more people joining sides, my brothers coming in to tear the ranch hand off me. But Jameson was already there, grabbing Pete by the arms from behind and pulling him away.

He got a head to the nose for his troubles, blood spilling down his

handsome face as the music cut off and the flashing blue and red of police lights spilled in from the open door.

Pete's girl handed Jameson a wad of napkins for his nose as the sheriff strolled in, his expression unamused.

"It's always the Wildes. I thought settling down and getting hitched would keep y'all in line. Clearly, I was wrong."

Luke helped me to unsteady feet as I favored my ribs and tried not to puke.

"You need an ambulance, Killian?" Sheriff Paul Barker asked.

"No, sir. I'll be fine."

"Who threw the first punch?"

Jameson opened his mouth to speak, but I interrupted. "I did. He had it coming."

"C'mon, Kill. Let's go." He jerked his head at Jameson. "You too."

Sheriff Barker cast a glance at Frankie. "I'll take care of these two for the night. You send Pete and his buddies packing?"

She nodded. "No one's pressing charges, right, fellas?"

Pete grunted, and the two buddies of his who'd been trying to stop the fight tugged him back. "We're good," one of them said.

"Luke, you can come get your brother and his friend in the morning," the sheriff said.

"Sheriff, let him come home. He was—"

"Nope. There's a drunk tank in the jail with his name on it. We'll see you in the morning." He leveled a stare at me. "Don't make me cuff you."

Shaking my head, I sighed. "I never do."

"Paul," Frankie said, "It was a sucker punch. No one saw who started it. Let these guys go home and sleep it off. They're beat up enough as it is."

The sheriff looked from us to Frankie, his jaw clenching as she nodded slightly. Was it just me, or did those two have something going on?

"I want anybody involved in this fight to head home. You hear me? There's a strict no fighting rule in this bar, but y'all seem to have thrown it out the window."

Jamie looked at me with surprise flaring in his eyes. I simply picked up my hat, dusted it off, and put it on my aching head before grumbling, "C'mon. Let's go."

Thank God for Frankie. The last thing we needed was to have pictures of Jameson Lorde and Killian Wilde getting tossed in the back of a cop car

splashed all over the fucking place.

JAMESON

“HERE, PUT THIS ON YOUR FACE,” I murmured as I held out a bag of frozen peas.

Killian grunted, his eye nearly swollen shut, lip split, and a dark bruise forming at the corner of his mouth. “I’ll be fine.”

“You look like hell. I’m sorry I threw that punch.”

“I’m not. Fucker would’ve gotten it from me if you hadn’t stepped in.” He gently pressed the peas to his eye and leaned back on the couch. “How’s the nose?”

“Hurts, but I’ll be fine. I don’t think it’s broken. I’ve definitely had worse.”

“You have?”

“Oh yeah. I was a lot of trouble growing up. Got into more than my share of fights. It was why I started playing rugby when I was in school. Had to ‘get the aggression out’ somehow, you know?”

“For me, it was playing guitar.”

“That too. I dunno. I had a lot of big dark feelings swirling around. Something about playing rugby and not thinking about anything else helped me compartmentalize.” I thought back to all the instances my emotions had got the better of me over the years. This was the first time in a very long time I’d slipped up.

“I get that. I feel the same when I’m on the back of a horse. They can feel your emotions. Did you know that? So if you’re stressed or scared, they know. Riding clears my mind. Keeps me grounded.”

I wanted to say something stupid like, *and you look fucking hot doing it*, but I stopped myself. It wouldn’t do any good to keep blurring the lines between us.

“Why’d you step in?” he asked, shifting on the couch and wincing a little.

“I wasn’t going to let him talk to you like that. Are you kidding?”

“You didn’t have to come to my rescue.”

“I wanted to. You didn’t deserve that.”

The look on his face was like a knife twisting in my heart. Had no one ever stood up for him?

“You know that, right? That you’re worth being defended?”

He wouldn't meet my gaze, but his breath hitched. "You should do yourself a favor and ice your nose too. It might not be broken, but it looks bad."

I stood and went into the kitchen, snagging another bag of frozen peas as well as two beers. "Either you've got a real thing for peas, or you get into a lot of fights."

Handing him the beer, I fought my need to give him an appraising once over. I went to twist off the cap on the bottle and frowned as I realized these required a bottle opener. "Bugger," I muttered. "One sec, I forgot the opener."

"I've got it," he said, lifting his shirt and undoing his belt. I swallowed past the lump in my throat as he used his belt buckle to pop the top.

Why was that so sexy? He did the same to my beer, and I took the distraction of a long pull from the bottle for what it was, a way to tear my focus from his tight abs and that trail of dark hair leading down into his jeans.

"Sit down, Jamie."

I grabbed my guitar off the stand and used it to play double duty. Job one: cover my unwanted erection. Job two: give me something to do besides look at him.

Strumming across the strings, I checked to see if the instrument was in tune, then began lazily picking out a melody, playing with something that'd been building in my brain the last few days.

"Who was the last person you wanted that you couldn't have?" Killian asked out of the blue.

'You' was on the tip of my tongue, but that would defeat the purpose of everything I'd done tonight. It would break down the wall I built up and put me right back at his feet.

"Trust me, I've been there, just like you were with your bandmate."

"So, do you want to keep drinking or do you want to play?"

"Both?"

He nodded and got up gingerly, heading into the kitchen. To my surprise, he brought me a shot of whiskey and another beer chaser before snagging his own guitar.

"Are you meant to be working tomorrow?"

He shook his head. "No. My brothers have put me on a forced leave of absence until I get this single recorded. Someone"—he shot me a glare—"told them exactly what would happen if we didn't get this done."

I felt zero guilt, and I had no shame. “Someone must really want you to succeed then, yeah?”

“I guess so.”

Sitting down next to me on the couch, he shrugged. I grabbed the whiskey and raised the shot glass.

“To future us.”

“Why future us?”

“Because current us is a hot fucking mess.”

He laughed, genuine and full, and it made my heart lighten a little bit. “All right. To future us.”

We clinked glasses and downed our shots before chasing it with the beer.

“That whiskey is bloody good. It’s almost a shame to wash it down with this.”

“Yeah, Langston distillery really knows what they’re doing. We’ll have to go visit.”

“Yeah?”

“We can anytime. We’re silent partners, you know?”

“I did not know that. So let me get this straight. You’ve got a distillery, an ice hockey team, a winery, a resort in Vegas, and...”

“And I have the horse rescue.”

“A horse rescue? Brilliant. Anything else your dad was hiding?”

“No. Not that I know of, but knowing him, five years from now, we’re all gonna find out he bought us a town or something.”

I laughed but stopped myself at the look on his face. “Would he really do something like that?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Well, they’d be lucky to have you taking care of them.”

He let out a rough laugh before draining half of his beer. “Sure.”

“Shall we pick up where we left off?” I asked, giving my guitar a cursory strum. “We got a strong start last time.”

His eyes blazed as he stared at me, intense and unsure as he cleared his throat. “All right.”

Killian

OH GOD, I COULDN'T DO THIS. HE SMELLED FUCKING AMAZING AND THE WAY he made music? It was like watching a master craftsman work. But I'd been working on this song and really did want to show him what I'd come up with. "Listen to this. I've been thinking about it since our first session. I thought maybe we could start it off with some fingerstyle. Set the tone, yeah?"

I played, following the chord progression we'd toyed with once before. When I got to the chorus, he picked up his guitar and started playing the rhythm underneath what I was doing.

"I was thinking something like this?" he offered as his fingers worked the strings, adding more intricacies to the chords.

I began singing a melody that'd been stuck in my head the last few days.

His eyes were bright with excitement. "Yeah, that's brilliant. What if we added a harmony?"

"Okay, show me what you got."

Damn him and that grin. "Back to the chorus. Do that bit again."

So, I did. He picked it up instantly and joined me by singing a tight harmony that gave me pure shivers. It wasn't just the harmony, though. It was that voice. Hauntingly beautiful, it spoke to my soul. A long time ago, I'd spent hours alone in my room, avoiding everyone and everything, with Jameson Lorde's voice as my only companion. He'd gotten me through more than he could ever know.

"Did I do it wrong?" Uncertainty colored his tone as the last chord echoed in the living room.

I had to clear my throat before I could speak. "N-no. It was perfect. Fucking beautiful."

"Beautiful. You wrote it, I just sang it." He moved to put down the guitar, but I stopped him.

"No, keep going. What's next? Where do we go?"

He played a new progression, this one clearly meant to be the bridge, and as he did, I wrote out the chart. Then I joined in, playing with melody, harmony, and then circling back to the core to tighten it. We did it again and again, adding more intricate rhythms to flesh it out a little and give it depth. By the time I pulled out my phone to record just a rough demo, we had a full song.

We had magic.

“All right, from the top. Let’s lay this down so we can send it to Jackie.”
He took a deep breath and nodded. “Roll it, cowboy.”

I hit record and started just as I had the first time we played it. Then we let go and let the music take us.

“That was fan-fucking-tastic, Wilde,” he whispered when we finished. The last echoes of the final chord still ringing, he locked eyes with me. Absolute euphoria on his face. Even battered and bruised, he was hot.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t smiling. I was fighting a groan. Was this the look he’d have after I made him come? I hoped so, because if I could make him look like this with something as simple as my hands, I wanted to.

He snagged the whiskey and took a pull straight from the bottle. “We just wrote a fucking hit, Wilde.”

I stopped the recording and immediately sent it over to Jackie, no hesitation, no listening back to it. Then I poured each of us another shot because I needed something to do. I couldn’t move my guitar out of my lap, not if I didn’t want him to see how fucking hard I was.

“Do you want to go again?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“Same one or something new?”

“I don’t care. I just want to feel that again.”

“So, you felt it too? The lightning?”

“Yeah, I sure as shit did.”

Nothing’s ever made me feel like that. No one.”

“Same. Even when I was writing with my band, it wasn’t this electric. All you had to do was start singing and then...”

“Magic.”

We worked together, coming up with the framework for a second song, and it was almost as easy as the first. This time he took the lead writing the lyrics, but they all spoke to me. By the time we finished, the bottle was gone, and both of us were a little sloppy. For the first time in a long time, I was relaxed. Well, mostly, anyway. My dick had other ideas. Big ones.

“I’ve gotta go to bed,” I muttered, shoving my guitar into the stand as I brushed past him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired. Goodnight, Jameson.”

I couldn’t look at him. Not after what had just passed between us. Not yet. I wasn’t strong enough not to let his gravity pull me into something I would never escape.

KILLIAN

I WAS WELL and truly fucked. I'd tried my best to deny it, but I couldn't. Because every single time I thought about Jameson Lorde, I imagined what it would sound like when I made him come. Or what he would look like under me, on top of me, falling apart.

I'd imagined it before, when I was younger, and I had a stupid crush on him, but now I couldn't stop adding in the way he smelled, the small details that were inherently him. Like the faint lines next to his eyes that deepened every time he laughed, or the way he looked first thing in the morning in my kitchen. He'd shuffle in, stubble on his jaw, sleep ruffled, wearing low-slung sleep pants and a thin cotton shirt, looking sexy as hell as he poured himself a coffee. And I wanted him so damn bad I could barely stand it.

But after last night? I couldn't take it anymore. I'd tortured myself enough.

After a night spent tossing and turning, I finally gave up and trudged to the shower. Maybe that would distract me. Stripping down, I groaned as the memory of his lips on mine flashed in my mind.

"Pull it together, Killian."

I stood under the spray of hot water in my shower, praying my hard on would go away because I couldn't take being around him in this constant state of need. He might not feel the same way, but it didn't change the fact that I wanted him. He'd made it clear there wasn't anything between us. The man had gone to great lengths in fact, but last night, I heard his grunts through the wall separating us. I tried to tune it out, but they were impossible to ignore. I knew damn well what they meant. Of course he was rubbing one out. It was perfectly natural, especially since it wasn't like he'd found anyone to help him relieve the tension.

I should have been the bigger person and put on my noise-canceling headphones rather than sit there in my bed and listen. But knowing that's what he was doing and asking me to tune it out was like asking a drug addict to turn down his next fix. Nearly impossible. And apparently, I was weak as fuck.

I'd gone to bed with a cock so hard, every time my sheets rubbed against it, I was hissing in agony. Finally giving up, I'd popped my earbuds in and

cranked the latest episode of my favorite podcast in hopes of distracting myself. I refused to let myself lie there like a fucking weirdo voyeur. If I heard him coming, there was no way I'd have gotten through the night without knocking on his door and asking if he needed any help.

Stepping into the shower, thinking about what he'd looked like with his fist wrapped around his length.

"You're not a creep at all. Real hero-level stuff, buddy," I muttered to myself as I lathered up my hair, then rinsed out the shampoo. Using the anti-fog shower mirror Sera had gotten me for Christmas, I shaved my face clean. Attempting to distract myself by washing myself more thoroughly than I ever had, but unfortunately for me, my dick did not want to be distracted.

I closed my eyes and pressed one palm against the tile wall while I finally let myself reach for my aching cock. As soon as I made contact, I let out an almighty groan.

"Fuck," I whispered. "You feel so fucking good, baby."

In my head, Jameson was touching me. In my stupid, weak mind, the man was caressing me and making me his. I was fucking desperate as I stroked my cock, slowly squeezing at the base, then twisting as I got to the head. But it wasn't enough. I needed more. I pictured him pushing me down on the bed, opening me up, spreading my ass, and working two lubed fingers inside.

He'd let out a dark chuckle as he watched me with a wicked smirk. Jesus, the things I'd let his mouth do to me if I had the chance. My skin was hot and tight. Every inch of me tingling on the edge of my climax. But I couldn't get there, no matter how much I tried.

Reaching down with my other hand, I fondled my balls, tugged and twisted them. My fingers slipped along my taint before tracing the rim of my ass.

"Come on," I whimpered, desperate for release.

I could hear his deep, smoky voice in my ear, but I wanted it to be real. I needed it.

"Fuck, Jameson. Goddamn it."

My hand wasn't going to be enough. Finally, I gave up, left the shower running, and got out before yanking open the cupboard under the sink where my very special and most favorite toy waited for me.

I coated the dildo with a healthy dose of lube, then mounted it to the tiles. I hadn't used this in a long time, but I knew it would give me what I needed. Something to take the edge off. Something I could pretend was him without

feeling like I was crossing the line. Except, of course, picturing him at all was obliterating any lines we'd drawn. I closed my eyes again and let the vision of Jameson work its way back to the forefront of my mind as my lubed-up fingers sank inside my tight, desperate hole. I fucking whimpered with each slow thrust of my fingers.

When I was ready, I lined myself up with the dildo, pressing my opening against the slick silicone and letting the memory of Jameson's lips on mine have free rein in my mind. I arched my back, and my legs trembled as the fake dick filled me slowly. The stretch and burn was almost too much.

"Yes, baby. Please. Fuck." I cried out a garbled moan as my prostate lit up like a damn Christmas tree when the toy hit me just right. Reaching between my legs, I stroked my hard cock once, twice, three times, in rhythm with the rocking of my hips. Precum leaked from my tip, and my balls tightened with the urge to come.

"God, Jameson. God, fuck yes. Fuck me, baby." My orgasm slammed into me as I took the toy deep and grunted in blinding pleasure.

Breaths coming in heavy pants, I rode out my climax, eyes rolling back in my head and euphoria buzzing in my blood.

It wasn't the same as having Jameson, but it was all I had. I certainly wasn't going to chase this feeling with anyone else. I was better off alone anyway. I'd made myself a promise to keep business and pleasure separate, and that's exactly what I planned to do.

I COULDN'T LOOK HIM IN THE EYES WHEN I FOUND HIM DOWNSTAIRS WAITING for me with a mug of hot coffee in his hands, and his lyric book open on the kitchen counter.

"How was your shower?" he asked, lifting his cup to his lips.

"What?" My voice cracked as I forced the question through a tight throat.

"Your shower? Did you have enough hot water? I didn't use it all up?"

"Oh, uh, no. It was fine. Nice and hot." My cheeks burned as a flush crept across them.

"There's coffee in the carafe there for you. I didn't know when you'd be down, so I wasn't going to pour you a cup and risk it getting cold."

I let my gaze drift to the open notebook on the counter, his sharply angled

handwriting filling the pages.

“What’s this?” I asked, finger trailing over the scrawl.

“Oh, just some lyrics I’ve been working on. I was up late last night writing. Couldn’t sleep, you know?”

Oh, I knew. I heard him not sleeping. “I used to write when I couldn’t sleep. I was always my most creative when everything else was quiet.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“Not in a long time.”

“Well, perhaps next time I can’t sleep, I’ll come knock on your door, and we can be creative together.”

KILLIAN

“COME ON, you bloody bastard. You know you want to. Just let me grab you.”

What the hell was going on? The sound of Jameson’s groan followed by a few heavy sighs and then eventually a horse’s whinny had my curiosity piqued. I made my way into the stables, ready to intervene on either Jameson’s behalf or the horse’s.

“Jamie? Everything okay in here?”

The man wasn’t in a stall, fighting with a stubborn mare. He was balanced precariously on top of a ladder leading into the loft, reaching for something.

“What are you doing up there? Are you trying to break your neck?”

He sighed before climbing down, his ass on full display in those tight jeans, and I had to bite back a groan at the sight. God, the man was handsome.

“Trying to get this little bugger so he can stay out from under Turbo’s feet.”

As if on cue, Turbo stuck his head through his stall and nickered. When Jameson reached the floor, he turned around and showed me the little orange kitten nestled in the pocket of his hoodie.

“A barn cat?” I asked.

“Yes. I was trying to save him. I came in here and found him weaving his way between Turbo’s legs. I didn’t want him to die.”

I laughed and shook my head, reaching out to scratch the kitten between the ears. “Trust me, he’d be just fine. Turbo is used to cats. Specifically, this one’s tomcat of a daddy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, by the look of him, his daddy is the one who claimed himself a home here a few years back. Turbo is his favorite place to sleep. Turbo’s rump. He’s used to barn cats weaving between his legs, jumping up onto him, making themselves right at home.” The horse in question nudged my shoulder with his snout. “But it was a very noble thing you did, trying to rescue this kitten. Now, let him go so he can get up to more mischief.”

Jameson offered me a dubious look in response. “Let him go? What are

you on about? He's too little to be on his own."

"I'm sure his mama is somewhere."

"Are you? Have you seen him before? He's so little."

"He is very little, and no, I haven't."

"And how do you know that he's okay? How do you know that his mum is waiting for him?"

"That's usually the way of it."

"Sure, but what if he was abandoned, and he found his way here? What if we're the only people who will take care of him?"

"Jameson Lorde, are you a...cat person?"

He shrugged. "No. Not really. I just...I can't bear the idea of him on his own with no one to care for him."

Oh, God. Was I about to have a house cat? By the look on Jameson's face, that was exactly what was going to happen.

"You can't be serious. You want me to take in a stray cat? You're not even sticking around much longer."

"If you don't want him, I'll take him with me."

"No, because I'm going to fall in love with him. And then you'll take him away. We should leave him here."

"I can't."

The defensive tone stopped me from arguing. He seemed scared, fragile. Like, perhaps his entire world was about to collapse if he had to abandon this cat. It was then that it hit me. This was exactly what had happened to Jameson Lorde when he was a kid. He'd been bounced around from home to home just like a stray cat. Never settling. Never having the security of someone to take care of him. At least my mother was around, as challenging as she had been for most of my life.

"You really want him to stay with us?"

"I do. At least for now. We should make sure he's okay first."

Tipping my head in the direction of the main house, I muttered, "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

Sighing, I cast a long glance at the main house. "Mav's place. He's home for a while, and his wife is a vet. I'm sure she'll check out the little guy."

Sure enough, Mav's truck was there, the lights were on in the house, and I was confident in my sister-in-law.

"Okay, let's take him home, but he's not sleeping in my bed."

“He can sleep in mine. I don’t mind sharing.”

Something in me twitched uneasily. I was jealous of a cat. I wanted to be the one sharing a bed with him. *No, Killian. You do not. Just because he’s handsome and everything you’ve ever wanted, he’s also established that nothing’s going to happen between the two of you.*

The cat poked his head out of the side pocket of the hoodie and gave me a sweet little meow before turning around and settling in the kangaroo pouch. His little orange tail hooked out of the side, swishing every now and then.

“I think he fancies me.”

The soft rumble of the kitten’s purr seemed to be his way of saying, ‘yes, of course I fancy him, you idiot.’

As we walked back through the house, I glanced at him and asked, “Why were you in the stables in the first place?”

“I was looking for you, actually. I thought perhaps I’d find you there.”

“Oh yeah?” Excitement flooded my veins. Why did I care that he was trying to find me, that he was thinking about me? I knew exactly why, but I just didn’t want to admit it.

“Jackie called,” he said.

“And?” I asked.

Our steps crunched on the gravel as we continued down the path on the way to my house.

“She said the label loved our first demo.” He stopped and locked eyes with me, the thrill of possibility glimmering in his. “They want more.”

I wouldn’t have been able to hide my smile if I tried. “Yeah?”

He met my grin with his own. “Yeah. She said there were even some execs who threw around things like Lennon and McCartney and Record of the Year.”

Record of the Year? That was some stiff competition. “That’s amazing.”

“Fuck yes, it is.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That we needed to talk and make sure that we had another eleven songs in us.”

“And what do you think? Do we?”

Jameson shrugged. “I guess that depends on if you’re interested in sharing your home with me a while longer.”

Honestly, I didn’t really want him to leave. I’d planned to hate him and make this the final nail in my career coffin. I’d expected a cocky,

overconfident asshole who'd crush my teenage self's hero worship in one conversation. Instead, Jameson was kind, intelligent, and gentle, while still somehow exuding that rock star swagger that eluded many people. He was also pure temptation. And that made me nervous.

"All right, I guess it's time to get a little more serious about Wilde and Lorde."

He grinned, not even bothering to correct me on the order of our names. "Seems like."

I wasn't sure I'd survive months of Jameson within touching distance but so far out of reach. I couldn't imagine what it would be like on tour with him, sharing a bus, performing closely. I'd break. I'd slip up and kiss him again. Or worse, fall in love with a man I couldn't have.

KILLIAN

THE DOORBELL RANG, pulling Jameson and me from our session. We'd written an entirely new song over the last two days, and now we were working on laying down the demo.

"Who's that?" Jamie asked, setting his guitar in the case.

I got up and padded to the door, looking out the peephole to find Sera standing on the porch with her trademark mischievous grin.

"It's my sister-in-law."

"Don't just stand there. Let her in."

I opened the door, smiling wide, even though I really just wanted Jameson all to myself. "Hey, Sera, what's up? You're not freaking out, so everything should be okay. No emergency?"

She ignored me completely, waving at my roommate instead. "Hey, Jamie." Her gaze flitted back to me. "Oh, you two are working."

"That's why I'm here and not helping on the ranch. What did you think we were going to do? Sit around and stare at each other all day?"

Her cheeks went pink, and embarrassment curled in my belly.

"Well, I just never thought Jamie was going to get a chance to get you to focus, Kill."

"That was obvious from your last intervention."

"Do you need another?"

"No," I said, irritation obvious in my voice. "I am a grown-ass man. I'm able to make my own decisions."

"I know, but sometimes you need a nudge," she stage-whispered.

"And you thought you needed to give me that nudge?"

"Yep, I did. You're welcome."

Jameson snickered from where he was now standing in my kitchen, pouring himself a cold beer.

"You want one, Kill?"

"Yeah. Looks like I might need it. Especially if Sera here has some crazy plan."

"What plan? I don't need a plan. You two are working together. That was the goal. I just came to invite you to family dinner tonight."

"Family dinner?" I asked. "We don't do family dinners."

“We do now. I’m starting a new tradition. Just like Mama.”

Mama Ryker had her kids trained to attend family dinners weekly. Honestly, I envied that. So I didn’t know why I was resisting, aside from the fact that they were trying with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer to include Jameson in our family.

“What time is family dinner?” Jamie asked.

“Six,” Sera said.

“Lovely. Count us in.”

I sighed.

“What should we bring, love?”

“You don’t need to bring anything. Just your smiling faces. Ooh, but maybe your guitars? I’d love a sneak peek at what the two of you are working on.”

I stiffened, but Jamie shot me a reassuring glance. “I don’t know if our stuff is quite ready to share, but I love any opportunity to play. So I’ll bring my guitar. Absolutely.”

I loved the way he was with my family. Easy. Kind. He was a good man. There was no doubt in my mind. Sera left, her ponytail swinging, and I turned to face the rock star standing in my kitchen.

“We don’t have to go to family dinner.”

“Why? You don’t want me there?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good. I could do with some time with more of the Wilde clan. Especially when they’re doing so much to help keep me comfortable.” He knocked back another swallow of beer before coming back into the living room. “We’ve still got a few hours before we need to get there. Shall we crack on?”

I nodded, trying to control my happiness at his willingness to be part of my life. Two hours later, after we wrapped up, I came down fresh from the shower and found Jamie standing in the entryway, guitar case in one hand. It was the grin on his face that sent my heart fluttering, though. He was truly excited.

“So, who is going to be at this family dinner?” he asked as we walked together across the grounds toward the main house.

“Well, by the look of it, we’ll have Mav and Clara and their little girl, Sutton and Sera for sure, and their two kids. And...yep, that’s Luke coming down the drive now. So it looks like the gang’s all here.”

“Kids?”

“Yes. Lots of them.”

“You are quite the uncle, then.”

“That’s me. I’m very good at it. I’m the fun one.”

“You know, I have heard that. I like kids. They’re funny, and they say what’s on their minds. They won’t hesitate to tell you if you look weird. Or when you look nice.”

He was right. My nieces and nephews didn’t hold back. They also loved me unconditionally. They didn’t care that I was a fuckup.

We walked through the door, and I was instantly taken out at the knees by my niece. She was all fire and fury. Sweet and sour all at the same time.

“Hey, Sour Patch,” I said, scooping her up.

Her blonde curls bounced around her face as she wriggled in my hold. “Who’s dis?” she asked, pointing to Jameson.

“That’s my friend, Jamie. He’s staying with me for a while.”

She stared at Jameson. Assessing him. “You look like a prince,” she said.

His grin was fucking heartwarming. His whole face lit up. “Oh, do I, little one?”

“Yes. Like from *Tangled*.”

Jameson threw me a *help me* look, and I realized he’d never had the joy of seeing *Tangled*.

“He’s handsome. It’s a compliment.”

“Well, then, thank you.”

I put her down, and she walked right up to Jamie, took his hand, and dragged him into the living room. He was lost to me for the rest of the day. He played with the kids, he charmed my family, and by the time we finished dinner, I was pretty sure they liked him better than me. He broke out his guitar and engrossed the kids by playing *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, singing and making the animal noises and everything. And God help me. I fell a little bit in love with him.

But then he started playing one of his hits, and the room went silent. Sera sighed and leaned against Sutton, a dreamy look on her face. Mav cradled his little girl against his chest as her eyes drooped, and Clara leaned her head on his shoulder. All of them were just as enamored as I was.

When he finished, he looked at me with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “What do you say, Killian? Shall we show them?”

My palms broke out in a sweat. I hadn’t performed for anyone but him in

so long. But then I took a deep breath, sucking it up as I sat down next to him.

“It’s not done yet,” I offered, but Jamie interrupted me by starting the song.

As we sang together, my family watched in shock. Clara wiped away a tear as she snuggled their new baby, a serene look on her face. When we finished, Jameson looked into my eyes and smiled before mouthing, “Well done.”

“Killian, that was so amazing. You guys wrote that?” Mack asked.

“Yeah, we did.”

“How many songs have you guys written together?” This from Luke, who had his arm around his wife, holding her close.

“Five so far,” Jameson offered. “Somehow, I convinced this country star to agree to the daft idea he should be paired up with me on a more permanent basis.”

“Really?” Luke asked.

“Yep. Lorde and Wilde are kind of a thing now,” I agreed, excitement buzzing through my veins. I hadn’t planned on finding a new partner, but I was fucking glad I had. The last person I’d worked this well with was Rush, my guitar player, and we all knew how well that ended.

“I’m really excited you guys are working together. You sound so great. Thanks for breaking him out of his solitude, Jameson,” Sutton said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think your brother is the one who broke me out. He saved me more than he could ever know.”

My heart swelled. I had never heard that from him before.

“Speaking of saving people. How’s that sweet little kitten you two adopted?” Clara asked.

I chuckled. “You mean the kitten Jameson convinced me to keep?”

She grinned. “That’d be the one.”

“He’s bloody brilliant. He’s decided Killian’s place is as good as any to claim as his kingdom.”

Mav chuckled. “Sounds about right for a cat. Why do you think we let them have the barn? They ran us out.”

Jamie packed up his guitar and stood, the rest of us following as the night wound down. He amazed me with the way he was able to simply fit in with my family and make himself seem like an integral part of my life. Like there wasn’t a glaring obstacle keeping that from happening. Namely, the fact that

we weren't a damn couple.

"Ready to head home?" Jamie nudged my shoulder. "I'm knackered."

"Yeah. Gotta get the old man to bed."

After we said our goodbyes, Jamie and I walked toward my house, our footsteps the only sounds in the quiet night.

"You call me old one more time, and I'll show you exactly how much stamina I have," he murmured low in my ear.

God, did he know what he was doing to me? Was he teasing me on purpose? Driving me wild just because he could? Jameson Lorde was many things, but cruel wasn't one of them.

"I just call 'em like I see 'em, Jamie."

He chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder. "You'd better look again."

That was exactly the problem. I couldn't keep looking. Not if I wanted to keep my feelings for him under control.

JAMESON

I was greeted by the sound of boots on the hardwood floor heading my way as I stood in the kitchen, polishing off the last of the coffee. Killian had left the house before I woke, leading me to believe that I had somehow pissed him off. He was also back to his old tricks of using ranch work as a way to get away from me. I didn't know how to get through to him because it felt like with each stride forward we made, I was always on the verge of being forced ten steps backward. It was frustrating, and if I was honest, bleeding annoying.

I wanted this to work for a multitude of reasons, but I couldn't deny that a big part of me enjoyed his company when he wasn't being a grumpy arse.

He appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame with one arm over his head, hat still on, dressed in sinfully tight jeans and a black western-style shirt with what looked like mother-of-pearl snaps down the front. The way the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows had my attention focused on the muscular forearms he was displaying.

"How do you look like this first thing in the morning?"

"Like what?"

"Like you just stepped out of a bloody photo spread for the cowboy issue

of Men's Health."

His soft huff of laughter and the pink creeping up his cheeks told me I'd gotten to him. Good. He needed his feathers ruffled.

"Come on," he said. "Get your shit."

"What?" I asked.

He came over, snagged my mug, and brought it to his lips, polishing off the remainder of my coffee.

"Oi, you tosser. I was enjoying that."

"I've got something better, trust me."

Heaving a sigh, I followed him to the foyer, where I found a pair of boots waiting for me.

"You'll want a jacket. It's chilly this morning."

He jerked his chin toward the rack, which housed a couple of work coats, and then above that, two hats, one a baseball cap, the other the cream cowboy hat I borrowed when we mucked out stalls together.

"What the devil are we doing?" I asked.

"I'm taking you riding. There's no way on God's green earth I'm gonna let my sister-in-law teach you. She'd never let me hear the end of it if she got her hooks in you."

"Okay, but surely, we can do that a little later."

"Is it too early for you? Are you still dealing with jetlag? I would have thought you'd be adjusted by now."

"Are you sassing me, Killian Wilde?"

He grinned. "Maybe I am."

So, this was playful, friendly Killian. Not the broody, avoiding-responsibility country star. I could work with that. I slipped my feet into the boots, snagged a jacket, then put on the hat. He gave me an approving nod after letting his eyes rake over me.

"So you've been around horses more than once, right?"

"If you consider looking at them and patting them being around them, you could say that."

"But you're not afraid of them?"

"No, I think they're beautiful animals."

"Okay. Today we're going to have a basic lesson, and we'll do one every day until you are comfortable riding. Consider it your exercise."

I'd been going for runs in the late morning, but if this got me a little more time with Killian, I would do whatever I needed to do. He needed to trust me.

When we reached the stables, I could hear the occasional whinny from a few of the horses who were in their stalls. Turbo poked his muzzle out, searching for something, and Killian surprised me as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small peppermint stick before letting the horse take it. Turbo crunched loudly on the treat, and Killian patted him on the cheek before pressing his forehead to the horse's.

"I didn't know horses like sweets."

"This one likes just about anything. We really should have named him dumpster or garbage disposal."

My laugh was louder than I intended, but Killian so rarely made jokes, I couldn't help it. We reached the end of the big barn, and I gasped at the sight of the beautiful midnight black steed who greeted us.

"Who is this beauty? I asked.

"This is Hera. She's mine. The only good thing my dad gave me."

"She's gorgeous."

"I know. I got her as a birthday present the day I turned seventeen. I didn't realize it was because he felt guilty for knocking up my mama and then lying to me my whole life, but you win some, you lose some."

This poor man. At least I've known my story from the beginning. I'd always been a foster child, always known that my birth parents were never going to be in the picture. But Killian had gone his whole life thinking one man was his father, only to find out that wasn't the case at all. And then, he blamed himself for the breakup of his parents' marriage. It must have been a heavy load to bear.

"Am I riding her?" I asked.

Killian shook his head. "No, she's feisty. We're gonna start you off with a more entry-level pony."

"You don't think I've got what it takes to handle her?"

"I know you don't."

He pointed across the stall facing Hera's. This horse was a lovely dappled grey, and the name Dusty was engraved above the door.

"Dusty?"

"Hmm, yeah. Seems fitting. You know, since you're so old."

"I am not old, and you know it."

"Keep telling yourself that, grandpa."

"You're gonna give me a complex."

"Somehow, I doubt that," he said.

The way his eyes twinkled with mischief made my belly tighten. A few minutes later, after he taught me how to properly saddle and prepare the horse for riding, we led both animals to the outdoor arena. It was a dirt-covered enclosure, clearly set up for teaching or, as Killian told me, for breaking wild horses.

“All right,” he said. “Here we go. Time to earn your spurs.”

Coming up next to me, he tied off his horse, but from one look at her, I could tell she was so well trained, she probably would have stayed right next to him the whole time.

“First things first,” he said. “We got to get you up there.”

He placed a stool next to the horse, then looked from it to me.

“That’s your mounting block. You’re gonna walk up there and grab on to either the horn or the saddle. Right up here.” He reached up and grabbed the front of the saddle, then grabbed onto the horn to show me where I was supposed to put my hands. “And you’re gonna put your left foot in the stirrup there, and then swing your right leg over.”

“But what if Dusty moves?”

“Then you will fall. Don’t worry. Dusty won’t move. See this?” He gestured toward the rope in his hands that was connected to the halter around Dusty’s head. “You’re going to be fine. I won’t let him go anywhere.”

So I did what he told me, and in moments, I was high up above the ground sitting atop a horse.

“Now what do I do?”

“I already put the reins over for you. But once you’re ready to mount by yourself, you’re going to want to remember to put those over the horn before you get on because those guys? They’re how you keep your control.”

“Okay.”

I grabbed the reins, and after a little instructing on what I needed to do, I had the basics well in hand.

“Looking good, Jameson,” Sera called from where she’d stopped and leaned up against the arena fence.

She was beaming, and her husband, Sutton, was standing right next to her. She watched me like she knew something I didn’t.

“Kill, you’re a natural teacher,” Sutton said.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Killian grumbled. “If he’s going to be on a ranch, he needs to know how to ride.”

“I’m not arguing with you.”

Killian held on to the lead rope, then looked at me and said, “Keep your heels down and squeeze your thighs together, then tell Dusty to walk.”

Dusty didn’t budge until I did as I was instructed. And then the big, sweet horse took pity on me and began a slow walk led by Killian. I felt like a kid getting a donkey ride on the beach. If I’d been a weaker man, I would’ve been embarrassed.

“You’re doing real good, Jamie,” Killian said. “Do you remember the emergency stop I taught you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Pretty important piece of information, that.”

A soft chuckle rumbled from deep in Killian’s chest. “True. All right. I’m gonna unclip the lead, and I want you to take the reins and keep him going at a walk.”

“What if he decides to go faster?”

“Then you pull back on those reins. You’re in charge. He’s listening to you. Don’t let him run you around, okay? Remember, whichever way the reins go, that’s the way he’s gonna go. You’re leading his head. It’s just like steering a car.”

“A car. Right.”

We went around a few times, and then Killian told me to stop, so I pulled back on the reins, pushed my heels down, and said, “Whoa.”

“Really good,” Killian said as he mounted his horse.

He’d opened the gate without me realizing it, and he gave me a once-over.

“How are you feeling?”

“All right.”

“Good, let’s head out into the pasture for a nice easy ride.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why, are you nervous?”

“A little. What if he freaks out?”

“Dusty doesn’t freak out. But also, we’re not going anywhere new to him. The ground is flat, the weather’s been quiet. It’s the best time to go out. If something bugs him, you keep your seat, and you use that emergency stop.”

“Okay, let’s do it. It’s a good job I trust you.”

Something sparked in him at that last statement, and he sat up a little straighter. Bringing the horse right up next to mine, he gave me a cocky wink.

“Follow me.”

We rode together until my arse was numb, my thighs were aching, and I understood what the term saddle sore meant.

Bloody hell, I was going to be a wreck tomorrow. Maybe I *was* old.

“I think you’re a natural, Jamie,” Killian said after we’d brushed down our horses and put away the tack as he’d explained it was called.

“You think so?” Pride swelled in my chest. “I always wanted to ride a horse. Ever since I was little.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help you with that.”

“Me too. I was worried you weren’t gonna get your head out of your arse, and I was gonna have to let Sera teach me.”

“She’s an excellent teacher.”

I stopped us as we walked back to the house. “She might be that, but I wanted you to teach me. I think it’s important for us to trust each other.”

“It’s true,” he agreed. “Writing music together creates a special bond. There’s a certain level of trust you have to have.”

“And I think I’ve proven that by letting you put me on a potentially deadly animal that could crush me with one well-placed kick.”

“That might be a bit of a stretch, but yes, he could do some damage.”

I smiled at him, trying to hide the pain I was feeling in my hips and back, and inner thighs, not to mention my balls.

“You okay, rock star?” he asked, a grin in his voice.

“Am I meant to be this sore?”

“Oh yeah. Come on. I’ll draw you a bath. That’ll help.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. I don’t know if you’ve seen it, but my bathroom is the single most amazing room in this house.”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Well, allow me.”

He opened the door and led me upstairs. I didn’t take the time to look around the place he called home, aside from taking in the large king-sized bed, neatly made with a deep green plaid duvet on top. He walked into the bathroom and flipped on the light, revealing an enormous egg-shaped bathtub. Across from it was a glass enclosed-shower big enough for two, complete with a bench, which could be very, very nice.

He started the bath, the hot water steaming almost immediately. Then he poured in some deliciously scented salts.

“They’ll help with your muscle aches,” he offered.

I nodded. I was very familiar, and honestly, I was surprised that he cared enough to do that for me. Then, without asking, he poured in a liberal dose of bubbles.

“Bubbles?” I questioned.

“Oh, shit. Sorry. I didn’t ask if you wanted them. I like them.”

Honestly, I was indifferent to bubbles, but it was endearing all the same.

“Bubbles are lovely.”

“There are clean towels in that cupboard there, and if you need anything, just holler.”

“Thanks, Killian. Give me thirty minutes to soak, and I will be right as rain.”

“Good. Don’t go falling asleep in there. I don’t want to have to drag your naked ass out and give you CPR.”

I chuckled. “We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

He left me alone, and as I slipped out of my clothes and stepped into the hot water, I wondered what it would be like to have Killian Wilde taking care of me like this on a more permanent basis and not just as a writing partner. That scared the hell out of me.

KILLIAN

JAMIE HAD BEEN weird over the last few days. Not like the you-kissed-me-and-violated-my-personal-space kind of weird or the I-had-a-sex-dream-about-you weird that I've been dealing with. He was cagey. Like he was hiding something from me. And I didn't like it. Because things between us were already tense, the last thing we needed was more awkwardness.

"I'm going for a ride tonight. Want to join me?" I asked as I came down the stairs and found him fully dressed and looking really damn good.

Did he have a date? Oh my god. Was I just sitting here lusting after a man who didn't give a rat's ass about me? Wouldn't be the first time, and it probably won't be the last.

"I'm doing some promo stuff."

"Oh, you didn't mention that."

"No, I-I..." he stumbled over his words. "It was unexpected, but it'll be good to do. So I didn't say no."

"Am I supposed to do this with you?"

"No, it's just me, on my own."

That hurt. I was supposed to be his partner. "Okay, well, I guess I'll see you later then."

He offered me a distant, "Yeah, see ya," before I headed out.

I wasn't sure what had just happened. Had I been dismissed? I guessed so.

"What is wrong with you?" I murmured as I kicked at a rock on the path to the stables.

I heard the sound of a car door opening and closing, then the engine starting up. I forced myself not to look back at Jameson as he went wherever the fuck he'd gone.

Siren, one of my favorite horses, was waiting in her stall, so I saddled her up, and the two of us raced under the open sky. The stars had never been brighter, and by all accounts, it was the most beautiful night, but I couldn't think about that, and instead, I took her back to the stables.

Standing at the fence nearby, all I could do was look out at the vastness of the ranchland and wonder why I hadn't been included in Jameson's promo.

Songwriting partners did this kind of shit together. Was he ready to call it

quits and move on? Had he decided I was a lost cause and there was nothing to be done for it?

But then I thought about the song we wrote together. Maybe I was just self-sabotaging again. It was a skill I had no doubt mastered over the last twenty-odd years. Maybe I was ruining a good thing.

“You know, little brother, they might say a brooding musician is sexy, but they’re liars. Nobody really likes it.” Mav sidled up next to me, leaning on the fencepost.

My brother had a special ability to make me aware of my own bullshit like nobody else could. He always had, even when we were kids. He’d look at me, shake his head, and say I was full of it, and all I could do was nod because the asshole was right. I was. One hundred percent. And I knew it. I didn’t even try to deny it.

“You sure do keep me humble.”

“Well, somebody has to tell you; otherwise, you’re just gonna keep ruining everything for yourself before you get a chance to enjoy your life.”

“I enjoy my life.”

“Yeah?”

“I do.”

“Bullshit. Tell me the last time you did something just to enjoy it.”

“Well, I was doing *this* before you showed up and started yelling at me.”

He let out a harsh bark of laughter. “You don’t look like you’re enjoying a damn minute of this.”

“Well, that’s because you won’t let me.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yeah, it is. I was perfectly fine on my own before you came racing up here and started criticizing me.”

“I wasn’t criticizing.”

“What would you call it?”

“I would say I’m looking out for you. Tell me what’s going on, and don’t fucking lie to me.”

I sighed, tipping my head back and trying to figure out the quickest way out of this. “Look, Jameson is off doing his own thing without me.”

“What do you mean he’s doing his own thing? I thought you two were working together.”

“So did I, but he said the label didn’t want me for this one. I wasn’t invited.” My chest tightened with the sting of rejection.

“Well, that’s a bunch of horseshit,” Mav said. His defensiveness made me happy; it felt good to have somebody standing up for me.

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“Did you tell him how you feel?”

“He knows.”

“Does he? Because one of the worst things you could do is expect him to understand what’s going on in your head without you spelling it out.”

“He doesn’t actually know what’s going on, but I made it pretty clear I wasn’t happy about it.”

“All right. I just know when I assume Clara feels one way, I’m usually wrong, and it comes back to bite me in the ass. Every time.”

“He’s not my wife.”

“No, but he’s—”

“He’s my writing partner.” I couldn’t contain the harsh tone I used on him.

“Yeah, I get it, but that’s like marriage, too, don’t you think? The two of you work closely together. You’ve got to trust each other.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. “You might be right.”

“I am right. I’ve learned that you have to give people a chance to prove you wrong. If you don’t, you’ll never really know the truth.”

I nodded, and with a heavy sigh, I let myself agree with my big brother. I didn’t want to admit it, but he was on to something. “All right, so what do you think I should do?”

All he did was grin at me.

“I have to go talk to him, don’t I?”

“Yep. You do.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

With a low, rumbled laugh, he clapped me on the shoulder. “It’s not gonna get any better if you don’t. You and I both know that.”

My palms were sweating as the thought of confronting Jameson tightened my chest. “I go talk to him and tell him I’m feeling left out?”

“Not exactly the words I’d use, but sure.”

“Then what? Wait for him to figure out he hurt my precious feelings?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“What if he just tells me I’m stupid?”

“Then we’ll see him for who he really is. A fucking asshole.”

I groaned and rubbed at the back of my neck. “I don’t like this.”

“It’s never a good feeling, but if you want a partnership with him, you have to fight for it. Don’t you think?”

He was right. I couldn’t deny it, but damn, did I want to.

“Come on, Kill. Let’s get home. You shouldn’t be out here alone, especially not when you’re feeling like this.”

It was impossible to ignore the concern in his voice. I’d been a disaster when I first came back here, and Mav had nearly lost Clara because of me and my tailspin. He was a better big brother than I could’ve imagined.

“Thanks, Mav. For everything.”

“Course. We’re family. That’s what we do. We take care of each other. No matter what.”

We went our separate ways and I had to admit, I felt better after talking to him. Half an hour later, I sat on my front porch with a freshly opened beer as the sun sank below the horizon. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t stalking Jameson on social media. But his accounts were dark. He’d gone silent in order to *focus on our music*.

So when post after post began showing up with pictures of Jamie walking into The Silver Spur hidden poorly by a hat, my chest tightened.

“What are you up to, Jameson?” I murmured.

Dialing The Spur, I waited for Frankie to answer.

“The Spur, can I help you?” Her voice was already tired, as though she’d been fielding annoying questions all day.

“Hey, Frankie. It’s Killian.”

“Hi, Kill. You want to come play tonight too? Jameson’s set is about an hour, but I could probably squeeze you in after.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. He was playing a show and didn’t think I should know that? What was more, he was playing a show without me.

“Nah. I… I want to surprise Jamie. Can you set aside a table for me?”

She chuckled. “Of course I can. Show starts at seven. Do yourself a favor. Come in the back.”

JAMESON

MY HEART WAS GOING a mile a minute as I prepared to take the stage at The Silver Spur. As far as Killian was concerned, I was meant to be doing a private promo shoot. At least that's the lie I'd fed him so I could come out here tonight incognito—if a cowboy hat and an unshaven jaw were considered incognito. But it had gotten me past the few photographers waiting at the main entrance to the establishment, so I'd take the win.

The bar was filled with patrons waiting for Open Mic Night to begin. What they didn't know was that I'd be treating them to a concert, and I'd be the only act. Equal parts excitement and guilt raced through me. If Killian were here, we'd have taken the stage together. But that was the problem. I'd get too wrapped up in him if I didn't force us apart.

I hadn't known what to say to him. How to explain to him that I just needed something to do to keep my creativity flowing. Something to keep me from thinking about him when I shouldn't be. So I had lied and told him I was going to do promo instead of being honest about tonight's open mic.

I'd seen the hurt flash across his face when he thought he'd been excluded, but honestly, I hadn't let it go that far in my mind. We both still had solo names. We weren't linked in the public's eye. That wouldn't happen until we performed together and released our single, and then after that, the album. But now that I was here, everything felt a little dimmer without Killian.

Frankie, the Spur's owner, took the mic and stood in front of the stage, giving a sharp whistle. The patrons quieted down instantly, all attention on her.

“All right, y'all, we've got a very special guest joining us tonight for Open Mic Night. He's come a long way to be here in our little town, so don't embarrass me like you did the last time he was here. Let's give a big Silver Spur welcome to the one and only Jameson Lorde.”

My pulse picked up again the moment I stepped on the stage and the lights went down. It was always like this when I performed. That thrill, akin to the rush of a high. I'd never needed drugs to give me a blissful euphoria. Not when I had this.

All I did was sit on a stool with my guitar, but the crowd went mad as

soon as I took off the cowboy hat I'd borrowed from Killian. I placed it on the small table next to me and strummed over the guitar strings. I wondered what it would be like if the audience thought I was just some random. I'd briefly considered putting on a fake beard and shades, maybe leaving my hat on and going up there and playing like I had when I was first breaking out. Back when I pretended I was of age so I could get into the pubs with a fake ID.

"Play 'Sighs and Sorrows,'" somebody shouted.

"Play 'Your Everything,'" another called.

I chuckled and dropped my gaze down to my scuffed pair of solid black Converse. Taking a deep breath, I pulled myself together and leaned into the mic, staring at a point on the back wall that I knew would make it look like I was focused on the audience.

"Thank you for having me tonight and letting me crash your open mic. I'm Jameson Lorde, and this is 'Drowning in You.'"

The audience went crazy because, of course, this was my biggest hit, my very first number one. Angsty and filled with yearning, this song quickly became my brand. I liked it best unplugged. The studio version had too many bells and whistles for my liking, but that hadn't stopped it from winning a Grammy.

I played my heart out, pouring every drop of passion I had into the music. I had to let it free somehow. If I didn't, I'd pour it out all over Killian and make him think I could offer him more than a night or two. The concert went on, and that void inside me that could only be filled by performance was filled, and a sense of relief flooded me.

Once I played the last strains of my final song of the night, I allowed myself to look at the crowd. The woman I'd danced with the last time I was here sat at a table front and center. She was all smiles for me, her crimson lips a beautiful invitation. Those wide, deep brown eyes promised me we'd have a lot of fun together tonight if I was interested. Was I? She was a knockout, and it would feel good and perhaps release some of the tension that had been pent up between Killian and me, but that wasn't fair to her. She deserved more than that from me, and I couldn't give it to her.

The stagehand took my guitar back to the small greenroom, and I stepped off the stage to sign things for people, chat, and just sit back for a while with a pint. I wasn't ready to go home and face Killian. Not yet.

Except, I felt it the minute he found me with his gaze. A twinge right in

my belly as my eyes locked on his. The confusion on his face spoke volumes. He didn't understand, and I needed to explain. Before I could get to him, a blonde hugged me against her and took my face in her hands, laying a kiss on me. Frankie was right there, stopping her, pulling her back.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Darlene."

"What, he likes it."

I looked at her, trying my best to remain kind. "No one likes being touched without their consent, love."

That shut her down. Her shoulders slumped, but the damage had been done. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Killian rise from his seat and storm down the hallway toward the toilets.

"Excuse me," I said, shrugging out of the grip of the others who wanted a piece of me.

I chased him down, stopping him in the hall.

"That wasn't—"

He interrupted me. "What it looked like?"

"Exactly. You know how the fans get."

"I don't care that she kissed you, Jameson. That happens all the time. Fans are excited. They think they own a piece of us. You handled it exactly as you were supposed to."

"Well, then, why are you cross with me?"

He let out a bitter laugh. "Why am I cross with you? Because you left me so you could what? Come play a solo gig without telling me? Why did you make me think you were doing a promo shoot without me?"

"I didn't want you to think..." I didn't know what to tell him.

"You didn't want me to think that this between us was permanent? Didn't want to lose your identity because of me? Because you're being forced to be my partner."

The way his voice trembled punched me right in the gut. "Killian, that's not what I'm saying."

"Well, then explain it to me. Because we're either in or we're out. We need to understand where the other one's at. You sneaking off to do a solo show doesn't feel like you're being open with me."

"Oh, that's rich. You want to talk about open. I had to pry every note out of you. You've been so closed off I've almost packed my stuff and left multiple times."

A crowd was starting to gather at the mouth of the hallway, so I snagged

him by the elbow and tugged him into the greenroom. I locked the door behind us and raked a hand through my hair, wincing when my fingers tugged on the strands.

“I don’t know what you want from me. You have the ranch. You have your family. I have nothing here. I took a risk coming here and leaving everything behind so that I could be part of something special. But all I feel like is I’m a burden that you don’t want here. Those little glimmers of magic we can make are the only things keeping me going. So forgive me for wanting to make some magic on my own. Performing is who I am. It’s what I do. It’s part of my soul that I’m leaving out on the stage and sharing with everybody. I was meant for this. I don’t think I could do anything else. You seem to think it’s a cross to bear, but it’s not. It’s as vital to me as breathing.”

“I don’t think that. I never said that.”

“You could have fooled me.”

We stood there together, close enough to touch, but not allowing that connection. His eyes were trained on me, jaw clenched, body tense.

“I need to know. Do you want me or not?” That question hung heavy in the air between us. I hadn’t quantified it by asking if he wanted to make music with me, or if he wanted *me*, and I didn’t correct myself.

His brows pulled together, and he bit his lower lip.

“Look at me, Killian,” I said, voice shaking. “Do. You. Want. Me?”

The vulnerability flashing in his eyes told me he was desperate for me to give him an out. To clarify what I meant. So I reached out and cupped the back of his neck, pulling him closer to me until our faces were nearly touching. I could smell the whiskey on his breath, the scent of his aftershave, and I needed more. Closing my eyes, I pressed my forehead to his and just breathed him in.

“Do you want to do this?” I whispered.

He only uttered one soft trembling word. “Yes.”

The dam broke between us at his consent. I crushed our mouths together in a frantic, hungry kiss filled with all the pent-up longing I’d been hiding behind our *just friends* façade. His lips were warm and soft against mine, but his hands in my hair were rough and wild.

“Fuck, Jamie,” he groaned into my mouth, walking us backward until I slammed into the wall.

His tongue slid past my lips, and God, did he taste good. I wanted more.

Pulling away, he stared at me, eyes bright with confusion. “I thought...

you turned me down. I thought I misread things again.”

“I’ve been trying to keep my distance. I don’t want to muck it all up between us, Kill. I’m not the guy for you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I grabbed his hips and pulled him firmly against me, the hard ridge of his cock pressed to my aching length, making me groan in response. “I want you. Can you feel that? You didn’t misread a bloody thing.”

He groaned against me, then pressed his mouth to mine as his heated touch trailed down to cup my rock hard length.

“But you’re not...Jamie, you’re not gay.”

“No, I’m not. I’m bi.”

“What?”

“Is it that hard to believe?” I grinned against his mouth, rocking my hips forward in search of more of him.

“No. Especially not with the evidence right here in my hand.”

Twisting my head, I feathered my lips over the pulse in his throat. “Just because I’m not public about my sex life doesn’t make me beholden to what the press wants to label me as. I’ve been with more women than I have men, but since the moment I walked through your door, the only person I’ve seen is you. I can’t stop seeing you. Even when I close my eyes.”

“Fuck, Jamie, I thought I was the only one.”

“You definitely weren’t.” I kissed him again, desperate for more, but the door rattled, and Frankie’s voice called, “Have you two killed each other yet? Or have you made up?”

Killian pressed his forehead to mine and exhaled a shaky breath. “It’s all right, Frankie. We’ll be out in a second.”

“It’s best you two go out the back. The press is out here waiting for you. And I’m sure they’re gonna have a hell of a lot of questions with the way the two of you looked like you were about to come to blows.”

Killian gave a sharp, jerky nod even though she couldn’t see him, then grabbed me by the face and kissed me hard. “We’re not done with this conversation,” he murmured.

As far as I was concerned, the only conversation we were going to have was going to involve me getting him on his back, so I could worship every inch of his body.

KILLIAN

MY BLOOD HUMMED in my veins as I slid into my truck. The feel of Jameson's skin on mine, of his scruff where it pressed up against my lips, still lingered and caused an ache between my legs. I wanted him more than I wanted anything. This man who I'd idolized and thought could never want anyone like me had just had his tongue down my throat. My hand on his cock. And if Frankie hadn't interrupted us, I would've let him fuck me right there in the greenroom of The Silver Spur for anyone walking by to hear.

I hated that we weren't going home in the same car. That he was driving by himself and could possibly be rethinking everything. I wanted to be touching him right now, not pausing everything for the twenty extra minutes it took to get home. But then my phone rang, and I jolted as I started the truck, answering it and immediately putting it on speaker.

"Jamie? You okay?"

A soft sexy laugh filtered through the line before he said, "I'm so fucking hard it hurts. I don't know if that counts as being okay."

I had to spread my legs a little wider to make room for my own arousal. God, why were my jeans so fucking tight?

"I am too. You have that effect on me."

"Oh, tell me more, cowboy."

"I'm miserable."

"How long does it take to get home?"

I loved that he called my place home.

"Twenty minutes."

"Fuck. Is there somewhere we can meet? Somewhere that's closer?"

I chuckled, relieved he was as desperate as me. "Yes, there is. Turn left on Winter Creek Road. You'll see it just after the stoplight. Drive until you reach the end of the road. I'll meet you there."

"Will anyone be there?"

"Not if we're lucky."

"Let's pray fate is on our side then."

My chest was tight as I followed my own instructions. Pulling down the back road that led to the old entrance of Winter Creek Park. And sure enough, it was deserted.

It was late enough everyone had gone home, and I was fucking grateful. I pulled up next to Jameson, and the two of us sat there together in our respective vehicles for just a moment before we both got out, eyes fixed on each other.

“I need you,” I rumbled.

“Yes. Fuck, I do too.”

I didn’t know how far we were taking things. But what I did know was, I wanted to taste him. I wanted to feel his cock in my throat. Swallow down every drop of his orgasm and know what it was like to have the man of my fucking dreams at my mercy.

“I know we’ve been dancing around this thing between us for ages and —”

“Lean against the hood of the truck, Jamie, and stop fucking talking.”

He did as I asked, a cocky smirk on his lips as I dropped to my knees and made short work of the fly of his jeans. I slid his jeans down his hips, freeing his dick as I went. He was long, thick, uncut, perfect, and all I wanted was to trace my tongue around the barbell piercing his swollen crown. I looked up at him, the heat in his eyes making me groan.

“I didn’t know you were pierced.”

He smirked. “How would you? I never told you. It’s not really a question we’d ask each other, is it?”

“No, I just like my fantasies to be accurate.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“Fuck no.”

I licked my lips and swallowed.

“What are you waiting for, Killian? Make me come. Remind me why this is not a bad idea.”

A curl of fear built in my belly because it was probably the *worst* idea. If this turned into more, and then one or both of our hearts got broken, how were we going to continue our writing relationship? It could ruin everything.

His fingers threaded in my hair, and he pulled my face to look at him. “Get out of your head and put your lips on me. I want to see if that mouth feels as good as I imagined.”

So I did. I parted my lips and took him deep inside, the cool metal barbell sliding along my tongue, only further ratcheting up my own hunger for him.

“Fuck yes,” he groaned.

All I could do was grip his hips and take him further, over and over. He

was too long for me to take all the way, so I wrapped my palm around his base and moved along the length of him in time with my mouth. His thighs trembled, breaths coming in harsh pants.

“Fuck, Killian. I’m close.”

I backed away and looked up at him, his whimper of protest making me reach down and open my own pants.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked, breathless.

“Good Christ, if you stop, I might die.”

I grabbed my length and stroked furiously as I sucked him down again, the desperate, ragged moan that left him the only indication he’d reached his end. And then he jerked in my mouth, pulsing straight down my throat. His fingers tightened in my hair, and he called out my name as I came in my hand right along with him.

Backing away, I licked my lips and got to my feet, moving to wipe my hand on my pants, but he stopped me by grabbing my wrist.

“No. You tasted me. It’s only fair I clean you up.”

He lifted my palm to his mouth and licked my cum off. “It’s my turn next,” he said, his voice low and deep. Needy.

“Jamie,” I whispered, but he stopped me.

“Don’t overthink it right now. Don’t get in your head. That was fucking incredible, and I don’t want anything to ruin it.”

“We can’t let it.”

“Exactly. Besides, I’m much more inspired when I have a muse.”

I grinned. “Is Jameson Lorde saying that I’m his muse?”

He bit his lower lip, then stared me in the eyes, the only light spilling over us from the moon and making him look ethereal and beautiful.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Killian. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Hell no.”

“Come on, cowboy. Let’s get home, so I can take you for a ride.”

JAMESON

WHAT HAD I been so bloody afraid of? We walked through the door of Killian's home, and almost as soon as we were inside, he had me against the wall, his arm braced over my head, big body crowding me in the most enticing way.

"You said something about a ride," he whispered.

"I did, yeah. Unless you're not up for it, of course."

"Oh, I'm fucking up for it." He rocked his hips into me and dragged his nose along the side of my neck, the gesture sending shivers up my spine. "I want more than just a fumbling blow job in the dark. I want you naked, in my bed, with the lights on so I can see all of you."

"Has anyone ever told you, you talk too much?"

He chuckled, his breath fanning over my skin. "They might've a time or two."

"Don't listen to them. I love the way you speak. Your accent is...dead sexy."

"No one's ever told me that before."

I nipped his bottom lip. "Well, it is. Say some cowboy shit to me, and I'll prove exactly how much I fancy hearing you talk."

"I...Well, now the pressure's on. What if I just show you how good I am with a rope instead?"

That was more exciting than I expected it to be. "Oh, really? Are you telling me all this time I've been holed up with a closet Dom?"

The laugh that burst out of him was half shock, half embarrassment. "What? No. I mean...um..."

Oh, this was too delicious. "Relax, Killian. I'm only kidding. Besides, you were the one who brought up the ropes."

He shrugged. "Cowboy shit."

"I guess I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Guess so."

Gripping his firm arse, I pulled him forward, closing the distance between our bodies. "I don't need kink to enjoy this with you. What I do need is a bed before you wise up and realize this is more complicated than you want to invest in."

I was pissing proud of myself for not faltering, for keeping my voice steady as I spoke aloud the fears that kept me from having any meaningful relationship.

“Never gonna happen, Jamie.”

He backed away but threaded our fingers, tugging me upstairs and into his bedroom without another word.

Killian Wilde’s bedroom was neater than I’d realized during my initial visit, though I’d been focused on the pain in my entire body at the time. Now I took it in with a different lens. Soft bluish-gray walls and white curtains framed a large window that overlooked the pond next to the house, a big bed with plenty of room for us both sat in the center of the far wall. Tonight, with the moonlight spilling inside, the room seemed almost magical.

“So, this is where you have all your best wank sessions, yeah?”

A huff of good-natured annoyance escaped him before he thought on it, then nodded. “Here and the shower. I guess it depends on whether or not I’m using a toy.”

Toys? Well, that was exciting. I reached for his shirt and popped the buttons one by one, exposing his carved chest, taking in the slabs of muscle layered on top of one another.

“Did you often touch yourself to thoughts of me?” I asked.

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“These toys. Did you fuck yourself with them?”

His fingers went to my shirt, pulling the fabric up and over my head. “God. Yes.”

“How many do you have?”

The way his cheeks turned pink was charming as hell. “A few.”

“A few? I need to see them.”

“Threatened?”

“Well, I personally like to think of them as teammates, not rivals. And then there’s the most important question.”

The smirk that answer earned me sent my heart pounding. “What’s that?”

“Did you pretend it was me?”

“Yes, Jamie. You know I did.”

“That’s fucking hot. Where do you keep your toys, Killian?”

Shaking his head, he reached for his belt and opened it. “I’m done playing. Take off your clothes. I want to see every inch of you.”

As he undressed, I did the same, frantically tearing at each item of

clothing I wore. We stood there for a beat, drinking each other in. The hard lines of his form were accented in the soft light spilling through the window, his eyes fathomless blue pools I could fall into and never try to leave.

“Fucking perfect,” I murmured.

“I was thinking the same. Jesus, Jamie.” Killian reached out a tentative hand, and I caught him by the wrist, yanking him against me. I was done with the tender approach. I wanted to throw him down, spread him open, and take him just like I’d fantasized about.

“Do you have what we need?” I managed to ask as he grabbed my cock and stroked once, twice, a third time.

“Condoms and lube in the bedside table.” He ran the pad of his thumb over the crown of my throbbing cock, toying with my piercing. “I want to know if this feels as good as I think it will.”

“I haven’t had any complaints.”

The room was filled with our soft groans and tight breaths as we explored each other. It was intensely intimate, being in the dark, alone with this man, and the way he was touching me had me on edge, desperate to come again.

“Lie back, Killian. Let me have you.” I barely recognized my own voice. It was so rough with need. “When was the last time you did this?”

“It’s...been a while.” The vulnerability behind his eyes had my chest swelling with pure pride.

“I’ll take care of you, love. I swear it.”

Walking away from him so I could collect the lube and condom was torture. But when I returned from foraging his side table and found him on his back, watching me as he lazily stroked his dick, I forgot all about the agony of being without his touch. I grasped his knees and spread them apart as wide as I could before I opened the cap on the lube and poured a liberal amount in my palm. Then I teased the fuck out of him, running my fingers along his arse, massaging and tracing his entrance until he was shaking.

“More,” he whispered, voice tight.

So, I sank one finger inside him and worked him over until I knew he was ready to take my cock.

“Are you ready for me?”

He nodded, biting his lower lip and groaning as I curled my fingers.

Rolling on the condom, I added extra lube to ease my entry, then pressed inside as slowly as I could manage. We both hissed in pleasure, his body trembling, abs flexing, cock twitching and leaking pre-cum all over his belly.

“You were right. It feels so fucking amazing.”

Gripping his thighs, I shifted us so I could get deeper with each roll of my hips. “You feel better than I ever imagined. So tight and hot. God, why didn’t we do this as soon as I got here?”

“I don’t know. Fuck.”

I rocked into him over and over, making him grunt, groan, and—my favorite—whimper.

“Gonna come. Shit, Jamie. What are you doing to me?”

“That’s it. Take my cock, and never forget what I make you feel. Don’t look away from me.” Our gazes locked, and I watched him ride out his climax.

He cried out, painting his chest with his orgasm, the clenching of his walls around my dick like a vise.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned, coming right after him.

I fell onto the bed next to him, curling into his side as we came down together, sweaty, breathing heavily, and desperately in need of a shower.

“That...Jesus, Jamie. That was so much more than I thought it would be.”

“That’s lovely. What a brilliant compliment,” I deadpanned.

“I meant it as one. It was intense. Real.”

I sighed. “It is.”

Too bloody real.

KILLIAN

SOMETHING WARM WAS SITTING on my chest. Warm and...purring? I blinked open my eyes to see the little orange tabby staring me down from where he was curled up right in the center of my chest.

“Morning to you, too, little fella.”

Bringing my hand up, I gently stroked him between his ears. He closed his eyes, his head chasing the touch every time I brought my fingers close. I was on the couch, which meant I had finally passed the fuck out last night. Jameson must’ve put a blanket over me at some point. That made my heart swell. It was a tender gesture, simple and caring.

The little cat began kneading my shirt with his—*ouch*—very sharp claws. “Okay, that’s enough. Thank you for being my little alarm clock, but I am not interested in being your pin cushion.”

Holding him to me, I sat up and then carefully deposited the furball on the couch. My neck was stiff from sleeping here instead of my bed, and as I stood and stretched, the symphony of pops and cracks that followed proved my point. I was too old to sleep on a damn couch.

My songwriting book lay open on the coffee table, lyrics and chord changes scrawled across the paper, my handwriting getting sloppier and sloppier the more tired I’d become. Jamie and I had worked into the wee hours of the morning, putting another two songs on paper. My phone was right next to the notebook, and I grinned as I remembered our latest number, knowing how fucking good it was deep in my bones. We’d come to an understanding, him and I, that we were too good together not to take this beyond co-writing a few songs or even an album. Last night fueled by a little too much whiskey and a lot of courage, we’d mutually agreed that Lorde and Wilde would be our new adventure. We were in it for the long haul. I honestly thought we could go the distance. Build something powerful. Knowing he wanted this just as much as me eased some of my stress.

I wasn’t a solo act, and I never had been. Shit, I was hardly even a front man. I might have been deemed that because I was the lead singer of Big Sky, but it wasn’t a one-man show. I’d never wanted it to be. Now I had a partner. Someone I could see writing songs with until we retired.

I pressed play on the recording we made last night, a tingle of excitement

shooting down my spine as Jameson's low, smoky voice came over the speaker, counting us off. As I listened, I shuffled into the kitchen and got a pot of coffee brewing. It was only eight am, and we'd been at it for a long time last night, so I didn't know if Jamie was gonna get up any time soon. But my stomach was grumbling, and I needed a caffeine injection as soon as possible.

I set about making pancakes, knowing those would heat up easily, no matter what time he woke. The coffee pot beeped, letting me know it had done its job like the good boy it was. Before I did anything else, I collected two mugs and set Jamie's on the counter. Pouring myself a full cup, I inhaled the rich scent and took a sip.

"Good morning, you beautiful, beautiful beast, you."

Was I making love to my coffee? Yes, I was, and I didn't give a damn.

I sang along with the music playing on my phone as I flipped pancake after pancake and moved the bacon around from its place in the frying pan to keep it from burning. That was when I felt him. Jamie was right behind me, his tall frame pressed against my back, one hand on my waist, and his lips brushing my ear.

I desperately tried to keep my cool as he murmured, "Good morning. Did you sleep okay?"

My fucking god. I'd been worried that Jamie had changed his mind about us crossing the line after his concert at The Silver Spur two nights ago. We'd sort of danced around the fact that everything had changed, neither of us really talking about it and instead focusing on work. Avoidance, the healthiest of tactics, right?

"I've slept better," I admitted reaching out and turning off the burners after plopping the last pancake on the plate next to me.

I turned to face him, the stubble on his jaw longer, giving him a roguish pirate-like appearance I really liked.

"I'm sorry I passed out."

He shrugged, backing away and leaning against the counter behind him. "It was kind of adorable, actually. One moment you were prattling on about something you thought would make a good bridge, then the next, it was off to dreamland for you."

I chuckled. "That's usually how it happens. I go until I can't hold myself up anymore."

"You could have told me you were tired."

“No way. I didn’t want to miss a minute. We were making magic.”

Affection flashed in his eyes, which only served to cause my heart to thump wildly.

“I tried to wake you and take you to bed.”

I ran my hand over the back of my neck, embarrassed. “Yeah, once I’m out like that, it’s best to just leave me be. Nothing short of a natural disaster will get me to open my eyes.”

“Noted,” he said, his laughter filling my soul.

“I made pancakes. You want some?”

“That’s brilliant. I’m so hungry. And there’s coffee too?”

“Of course, there’s coffee. Do you even know me?”

“I’m beginning to.”

We set about plating our food, him pouring himself a cup of coffee while I refreshed my own, then we sat together at the kitchen table and ate in a strange tableau of domesticity. The cowboy and the rock star playing at happily ever after.

“Should we—” I started.

“We should probably—” he said at the same time.

We both sat back, waiting for the other one to say what they needed to say. I deferred to him, desperate to know what was on his mind.

“We should probably talk.”

“Yeah, I think we should.” My gut clenched.

We should talk was never a good way to start a conversation that was going to end happily.

“I can’t stay here forever, Killian.”

Suddenly, the pancakes tasted like ashes in my mouth. “I know that. I didn’t expect you to.” I didn’t know what I had expected. Certainly not this. This was a fairy tale. This wasn’t real life.

“How do you want to keep this going?” he asked.

“Well, we can see each other. It doesn’t all have to be angst-ridden hookups.”

He bit his lower lip and looked down at the table, his cheeks going adorably pink. “That wasn’t what I meant. I was talking about our writing partnership.”

Fuck. Here I was, practically picking out an engagement ring. I always took things too fast. “Yeah, I mean...sure, I know.” I hated stumbling over my words, but I was so fucking flustered. “I suppose we could have video

calls and do writing sessions together that way. Or I can come to you, you could come back to me. We'll make it work long distance."

"No."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about. Because, of course, we could write long distance. We could send each other clips of what we'd put together, and then the other could expand upon it. It wasn't impossible. People did it all the time.

"Yes, we can. We'll write long distance."

"What if you came with me and stayed with me at my house in LA for a while? It might be nice...since, you know, everything's so new."

"Are you asking me to move in with you?" I asked as slowly as I could to maintain some semblance of control over myself.

"Not permanently. No. That's...that's too fast. Bloody hell, I'm mucking this up. I just meant, I'm not ready for this to end, and since we've already been sharing a home, I thought maybe you'd like to keep doing that when my time is up here. I have to head back to LA in a week's time and spend a month or so there before I can go back to London. There's a photo spread I'm scheduled to do, as well as an interview, and it's not one I can miss. So, I thought perhaps you would join me. Especially if we're going to be going public."

"Going public with us as a musical duo?" I asked hesitantly.

"If that's what you want."

I took a tight breath. I wanted to scream from the rooftops that he was mine, and I was his, but we hadn't fully established that yet.

"I...Yeah, that's what I want."

I wasn't going to push him into something public. Not yet. Not ever. I was out and had been since I was a teen. Ever since I figured out that my crush on Henry Cavill was a lot more than hero worship. But Jameson was complicated and private. He didn't owe anyone his sexuality.

"You'll come, then?" he asked, excitement in his voice.

Anxiety twisted in my belly. I hadn't left here since the band broke up. I lived in relative anonymity, save the occasional paparazzi, but they cared a lot less about me than they did about the contestants for the Ryker's reality show. I was just a bonus for them. At least I was until Jameson showed up.

"Can I think about it?"

Disappointment flickered in his eyes, and I knew I'd fucked up just like I always did.

“Right. Yeah, of course. Take all the time you need. I’ll just go wash up. I was thinking about heading out to visit Dusty for a little while. Would that be all right?”

“You don’t need my permission. This is your home as long as someone’s around. Do what you want to.”

“All right. Cheers.”

He pushed back from the table and took his plate to the sink before rinsing it off and loading it in the dishwasher. Then with one look back at me, he left, and I sat there kicking myself for not just agreeing to go with him.

JAMESON

I TRULY HADN'T EXPECTED Killian to not want to come with me. It had been a blow to my confidence, but I also understood where he was coming from. We'd really only known each other for a matter of weeks, and he'd been hurt in the past by misunderstandings. The last thing I wanted to do was rush him into anything.

He deserved to know he was important to me in every way. That I valued our partnership on and off stage. I'd stupidly thought bringing him to LA with me would be the thing that would help him move past his experience with his former band. That it would show him I was serious, that I wanted this—us. And most importantly, that I was all in. But clearly, I had jumped the gun, and instead of bringing us closer, everything between us seemed on the verge of going tits up.

The front door shut, pulling my gaze out my bedroom window. There he was, getting into his truck, then backing out of the gravel driveway and heading somewhere on his own. Nervous butterflies built in my stomach, and I wondered if this was how he felt when I went to play at The Spur without him. It didn't seem fair to have to feel this way. I needed something to keep my mind off of where the two of us were in the complicated web of our relationship. Making my way downstairs, I spotted a note neatly folded and propped up on the coffee table. Opening it up, I read the sharp, angular handwriting.

*Jamie,
I had to go to Whiskey Ranch to help out
with an all-hands-on-deck situation. Don't worry.
I'll be back in time for supper, and we can
talk more about your offer.
Killian*

Something about the fact that he left me a note eased the worry in my

heart. So, I pottered around the house for a few hours, using the time alone to work on more lyrics, catch up on some emails, of which I had many, and interact a bit on my social media pages. Jackie would be chuffed.

Hours later, when he still wasn't back, I'd grown restless. There was nothing left for me to do here, and I needed to make some decisions about my life and face the very real probability that I wouldn't be including Killian in those choices.

Returning to the note he'd left me, I grabbed the pen and added my own missive just in case I wasn't back by the time he returned. Under his note, I wrote,

*Cowboy,
I went for a walk. Should be back by the
time you get home. But just in case, don't
worry. I'm still here.*

Then, I put on a pair of boots, a jacket that smelled like the man himself and didn't ease the situation one bloody bit, and grabbed Killian's spare hat before I ventured out to explore more of this beautiful ranch. It had been nearly a month, and as much as I loved my home in LA, and the one I kept in London, there was something magical about the wide open sky of Montana. The sunsets quite literally took my breath away, and the night sky was a black velvet blanket strewn with glittering diamonds unlike anything I'd ever seen. Add to that the company of Killian Wilde, and I almost didn't want to leave.

After my initial riding lesson, Killian and I had gone on multiple trail rides. I'd worked up to being able to manage two solid hours without begging to stop because of the ache in my thighs. I found, just as he'd said, horse riding was almost therapeutic. It gave me time to think, to focus, and to ground myself. I thought it worked because if I was stressed or scared, so was the horse. I *had* to calm my worry and train my attention on what I was doing.

The ranch was quiet, with everyone seemingly busy helping Whiskey

Ranch with whatever problem they were dealing with. But that didn't mean I couldn't go for a ride, especially now with the sun just beginning to set. I'd be able to enjoy the wash of color from my favorite spot where Killian and I had gone together and written the lyrics of what I thought might be our very best song. It was called, *'London days, Montana nights,'* and I was certain it would be our breakout hit.

Dusty poked his nose out of his stall as soon as he realized I was there. Tossing his head, he whinnied as though he was asking me to come see him.

"Oi, you troublemaker. Did you think I was going to ignore you today?"

I'd gotten in the habit of visiting the horse—who seemed to have claimed me as his own—every day. The meow of our little barn cat as he scurried in had me grinning. He rubbed his orange-furred side along my calf.

"You too. What am I going to do with you lot? How am I going to go without seeing you every day when I have to head home?"

As if he understood me, Dusty gave a short huff of disapproval.

"What do you say, Dusty? Fancy a solo ride tonight?"

I'd gotten everything ready multiple times now without help. So, I followed the steps and saddled up Dusty. Then let him out, and the two of us ventured across the pasture. It was peaceful and quiet, the soft croaking of frogs and the chirp of crickets creating a symphony I would never forget. Even if I had to go home without Killian. I forced myself to remember that it wasn't the end of the world, that the two of us could absolutely continue on without constantly being together. It was just my fear of abandonment talking. My worry that I didn't matter and was replaceable.

We rode up to the crest of the hill, stopping just under a large tree that overlooked the babbling brook beyond. Proud of myself for the confidence I'd gained on this horse, I dismounted and led him over to the small hitching post designed for just such an occasion.

"Well done, mate. Let's take a rest, shall we?"

I tied him off and left him to his own devices, so he could happily graze on the lush green grass nearby. Then I found a spot to sit and think as I watched the sunset.

The clouds in the distance had grown closer, their presence making the colors even more vivid. Pulling out my phone, I snapped shot after shot, trying to immortalize this beauty, so I'd never forget it.

The sky was a deep violet when I stood and brushed off my jeans before heading back to collect Dusty and return him to the barn. Except, when I got

there, Dusty was nowhere to be found.

“You have to be kidding me, No. Dusty!” I raked my fingers through my hair and stared out at the vast land before me. “Here, horsey, horsey!”

Bleeding hell. What was I doing? Calling a horse like he was a cat? He was nowhere to be found. No trace. Which meant the smart as a whip horse had made his way back to where the food was.

Less worried about him being lost and more concerned about myself, I began the slow journey on foot. The sky opened up above me, pissing it down. I’ve never been more thankful for a hat. But it wasn’t long before I was soaked, shivering, and pissed off with myself. Lightning flashed in the distance, and I picked up my pace, hurrying along to try and get somewhere safer. The last thing I wanted was to make headlines with my untimely demise because I was trying my hand at being a human lightning rod.

All I could hear was the pounding rain and the roll of thunder until the hammer of hoofbeats caught my attention. I snapped my head up and saw Killian racing toward me on the back of Hera. His eyes were wild, laced with fear as he came up alongside me.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Jamie. What happened? Did Dusty throw you?”

“No. I wish it was something as dramatic as that. I tied him to the hitching post, and he must have got loose. Is he okay?”

“Yeah. He’s back in his stall. Sera took care of him.”

That woman was a saint.

“Come on.” He held out a hand, and I let him help me up so I could sit behind him. “Hang on tight. This’ll be kinda awkward. Neither one of us is what I’d call small.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, and we rode back to the stables in silence. Not a soul was there. Everyone likely having gone inside, where they were warm, dry, and safe. And I figured that’s where we would go too, but Killian had other plans.

I got down, and then he dismounted, but he didn’t say a word to me as he went through the motions of putting away the saddle, brushing down Hera, and making sure she had a treat.

“Thanks for coming for me,” I murmured. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I just walked.”

“You shouldn’t have gone out by yourself. Why would you do that?”

“I see cowboys out by themselves all the time.”

“Cowboys who’ve been riding since they were knee high to a bug’s eye.

You only have a couple of weeks of experience. You could have been thrown. You could have been trampled. You could have died. I don't...I can't lose you."

"Kill, what are you on about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. It's dangerous. It's not something you should do alone. Promise me you will never do that again."

"Okay."

He crowded me until I was pressed against the tack room door. "Promise me, Jamie."

"Killian, what is this about?"

Fear, clear and present, flashed in his eyes. "That was how we lost Sutton's mama. She went riding alone. Horse threw her. She hit her head. Didn't come home. And then Wes went out and...well, she was gone. She was like a second mother to me, even though she had no reason to be. She loved me and treated me like I was her own. Her death damn near broke all of us, so please, I can't lose another person. I—" He stopped, checking himself, swallowing down the word I knew was on the tip of his tongue.

"I'm sorry, Killian. I'm so sorry. I just wanted to think some things through, and it seems like something as safe as walking. I won't do it again. You have my word."

He took a shuddering breath, then pressed his forehead to mine, our hats getting knocked off our heads as he tilted his face and claimed my lips. Every ounce of fear and desire poured from his kiss and into me, and I took it all. I was lost in Killian Wilde, and I didn't think I ever wanted to be found if it meant I didn't get to keep him.

The kiss turned heated, filled with desperate groans and pained whispers of need from both of us. I reached between us and unbuckled his belt, needing to touch him, to make him feel me, have him understand how much I wanted this. How hungry I was for him all the time.

"Fuck, Jamie," he whispered against my mouth as soon as my palm wrapped around his swollen cock. "I love the way you touch me."

"And I love the sounds you make," I replied, giving him a firm stroke and drawing out a desperate moan.

"Let me touch you, too," he murmured.

"Be my guest. I'm all yours."

He opened my jeans and mirrored what I was doing to him, the two of us working each other as we kissed and sucked and nipped. His stubble dragged

along my cheek as he found my earlobe and sucked it between his lips. The sensation sent shock waves through me, my body tightening, the need to come already so close to the surface.

“Fuck, Killian. God, it’s so good.”

Shoving his jeans down enough that I could see all of him, I pulled him closer. He did the same to me, understanding what I wanted. The two of us pressed our straining cocks together, and we wrapped each of our hands around the shafts, moving in sync as we stroked in the exact same rhythm.

Rubbing against one another, getting each other off with our hands and our dicks, it seemed so vanilla, so simple. But the act of using him, and him using me to do something we could do on our own, was incredibly intimate and beautiful. Especially when he released my earlobe and stared into my eyes, a wild kind of yearning in his blue depths. His brows pulled together, but he didn’t look away from me.

“Jamie, god, I’m gonna fucking come.”

I was so bloody close I could barely speak. My legs were trembling. My balls full and aching. “Fuck, me too. Together?”

“Yeah. Abso-fucking-lutely. Faster,” he urged.

We picked up the pace until I could feel him pulsing against me. That sent me off, my orgasm hitting me first. Splashes of hot cum spilled across my hand and onto him, lubing him up and dragging him right over the edge. He let out the most perfect, guttural groan, his free hand shooting forward to brace against the wall right next to my head.

When we finished, we stayed there like that together, breaths coming in heavy gasps, his forehead against mine once more. Offering me a perfect view of this beautiful, broken man. It solidified for me then. I wanted to be the one to put him back together, just like I knew he could do the same for me.

JAMESON

I WOKE up surrounded by Killian's scent and the warm feel of him pressed up against me. It had been so long since I'd been with anybody. I had almost completely forgotten how much I liked it. Knowing I wasn't alone, feeling another person's body, hearing them breathe. The soft sighs—in Killian's case, low snores—made me happy, but I thought it was more due to the fact that it was him than anything else. Instead of breaking the moment, I pulled his arm over my waist, encouraging him to hold me tight.

I've never had a full-on relationship with a man. If I was honest, I'd only ever had one long-term thing with anyone, and she'd broken me on purpose. My few previous encounters had all been random, frantic nights of passion. Because when you were as well-known as I was, that seemed to be the only thing you could have. So instead of searching for something more, I stopped looking altogether, which only added to the rumors and speculation about me.

But relationships were complicated. They came with rules and so many feelings and risks. I had mistakenly thought that avoiding the feelings part would keep me safe. And that's what I tried to do with Killian. I tried to push him away and only allow friendship rather than give in to my attraction, but I wasn't going to do that anymore. Not after seeing what I could have with him.

I chuckled to myself as I laid in his arms. In trying to keep us from acting on our attraction, all I had succeeded in doing was falling for him.

Well done, Jamie.

Enjoy it while you can. He'll break you.

I closed my eyes and sighed when he pulled me tighter to him, then I let myself drift back into a dreamless easy slumber.

The smell of coffee and the sounds of Killian singing and playing guitar woke me. I loved all of those things, but I especially craved the sound of his voice. I could tell he was trying to be quiet so as not to wake me, but I didn't want to miss this. So, I threw off the covers and padded down the hall in nothing but my boxer briefs. It wasn't as though anyone else was going to see me. The two of us had been alone in this house going on a month now. His family respected his privacy, and I appreciated them for it.

“Wow, man. It's really, really good.”

The voice caught me off guard as I stood at the top of the stairs, out of sight but not out of earshot.

“You think so?” Killian asked.

“Yeah. I think it’s a hit. Play the chorus again.”

I sat down on the top step and listened, not recognizing the song as one of ours. It was bloody brilliant. Filled with angst and longing. Perfectly on-brand for the man himself.

“Where’d this come from?” his friend asked.

“Don’t know. I’ve just been inspired.”

They sat in silence for a moment, then one of them sighed, and Killian said, “I’m so sorry. I ruined everything between us.”

My heart stuttered. I knew how hard this had been for him, how hurt he was by losing his band.

“No, it’s...it’s all right. I’ve been working through some shit myself and trying to figure out where I’m at. You know?”

“Still, I shouldn’t have put you in that position. I got carried away, not to mention we were all drunk.”

His friend chuckled. “That too. Still, it didn’t need to go the way it did, and I overreacted. I shouldn’t have broken up the band over a kiss.”

“Well, it wasn’t just that I kissed you. I think you’re more secure in your sexuality than that. We had a lot of unresolved issues.”

“Yeah, I was jealous of what Killian Wilde was becoming. You’d been Killian Winter so long, I forgot who you were related to, and then when the label wanted to capitalize on it. It just threw me into a tailspin. All I saw was Clapton and his band, and how they got left in the dust, and it wasn’t Cream anymore. It was all him, and he went on to do his own thing.”

“Justin Timberlake and NSYNC,” Killian offered.

His friend huffed a soft laugh. “Exactly. It made me feel like the Chris Kirkpatrick of the whole show.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel that way, Rush.”

“That’s just it. *You* didn’t. They did. I let them get to me. And I ruined a great thing for everybody. Because my ego got in the way.”

I shouldn’t be listening to this. This wasn’t a conversation meant for my ears. So, I stood up and made to head back to my room. But then Rush said something that turned my blood to ice.

“I want to get the band back together. Write a new album. Go back on tour.”

Killian took a deep breath and sighed. And I waited, wondering what this was going to mean for him and me in more ways than one. Everything hung on what he was going to say next. My heart couldn't take it.

"I don't know; there's a lot going on right now."

"I get it. You're working with Jameson Lorde. You probably don't need us anymore."

"No, that's not the point. Let me get through this with Jameson. See it to the end. And then I'll let you know...if the offer's still open by then."

"Kill, we're not doing anything without you."

I couldn't listen anymore. I went back to the bedroom and sat there on the mattress with my head in my hands, trying to figure out how I'd been so stupid.

'Let me get through this.' Like I was some kind of obstacle he needed to pass by. Like this was just one more hurdle to get him to where he needed to go. I had stupidly let my emotions get the better of me. I had fallen, if not fully, at least halfway in love with the broken man who had been abandoned, and my stupid heart had thought it could help fix his. This was why I didn't let myself fall. It was why I didn't seek out relationships. Because all that happened was that you got hurt and you got left behind. And you didn't matter. You were disposable. I was disposable.

'Let me get through this. See it to the end.'

The end. I had naively thought the end was never going to come. I'd seen a future with Killian Wilde, *wanted* a future with him, and hoped he wanted the same thing. But clearly, I had been wrong. Instead of being an adult about all of this, I did what I did best. I ran.

Was it the most mature decision?

No.

If I had simply told him how I felt, maybe things would be different. But here's the thing. Even if we're adults, we don't always make the best choices. Sometimes we let fear rule us. Sometimes we choose not to communicate to avoid hearing the thing that might break us.

But even more than that. If I pushed to be together now, to work as partners with or without sex as part of the relationship, I was holding him back from finding something good with his band again. His band had been with him since they were kids. I couldn't stand in the way. We'd initially agreed to co-write one song and a b-side. Now we had seven solid tracks. Numbers I'd gladly just take a co-writing credit on and let him and his band

have if it meant he could get back what he'd lost. Because I'd seen how much it had hurt him. I'd listened when he told me his story, and I'd looked at his expression and seen the truth there. So instead of spending the day wrapped up in each other like I'd hoped, I packed everything I'd brought, got dressed, and cleaned up. Then I made my bed and laid the hat I borrowed from him on the center of the mattress.

"You know that's bad luck, right?" His voice made my shoulders stiffen.

'Everything's bad luck to you cowboys.'

"Why does it look like you're leaving me?" Killian asked, the words soft and broken.

"Because I am."

"But last night—"

"Last night was a mistake. You and I both know it. I need to get to LA. I have things to take care of. I've had enough playing cowboy."

"What? I don't understand."

"Look, we've done what we were supposed to do. Two fantastic songs and half an album."

"What am I supposed to do with an unfinished album?"

"Keep the songs and give them to your band. Just give me writing credit on it, please."

His lips pressed into a thin line as he assessed me. "You heard that? Downstairs?"

"Yeah, I did."

"I didn't know he was coming to visit."

"I know. But I also know that you're happiest when you're with them. You're not Killian Wilde. You are Big Sky. You always have been."

"You don't have to leave. I don't want you to leave." God, I hated the break in his voice. It hurt.

"I need to leave because if I don't... If I don't, I'm just gonna get pulled deeper into your orbit, and I won't survive."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know what's gonna happen. You'll choose me because this is new and intense between us, but then weeks, months, *years* down the road, you'll resent me, and we'll both end up with hearts so bruised they barely work anymore. And I don't want that. Besides, I bet you'll write one hell of a breakup album."

"We only just found each other."

“And I’m really bloody glad we did. But I have to go. I can’t be the thing that keeps you from being as great as you should be.”

“We’re better together, Jamie.”

“No, I’m better with you. But you, Killian, you’re magic.”

“Can I say anything to keep you here?”

My heart clenched. There was one thing he could say, but I didn’t want to hear it. Because if he said he loved me, I would stay. I would stay, and my prophecy would come true. And then I’d lose him at the worst possible time.

“No. It’s over. I’m so glad fate put us together. I’ll see you in the studio.”

And with that, my hands shaking, my stomach sick, I walked out of his life and didn’t look back. But worst of all, he didn’t stop me.

JAMESON

WALKING AWAY from Killian was the most painful thing I'd ever done. I hadn't expected it to hurt so badly. I should've, but then again, I wasn't incredibly familiar with commitment. Even after a solid week of no contact, I knew I'd have to see him again, eventually. That we'd reconnect, only so we could make good on our contract with the label. We'd record our singles, do some promo shoots, maybe film a music video, then separate again. But that was a problem for future Jameson.

Currently, I was sat at a bistro with Aiden Boyd lounging across from me, pretending my heart wasn't broken.

"You are so full of shit," he said, lifting his old fashioned and taking a sip.

"What are you on about?"

"You told me you were fine. This"—He gestured across the table at me—"this is not fine. You look like ass."

"Thanks. Have I told you how glad I am we're friends?"

"Honestly, no, you haven't. You really should work on that. I might start to feel unappreciated."

"Look, mate, you asked me to join you for dinner. I didn't come here to be told how crap I look."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Why wouldn't I be?" My chest tightened. I hadn't told Aiden a damn thing about Killian and me.

"Jamie, don't bullshit me. I've known you for what, twenty years now?"

Close but who's counting? I didn't say that. Instead, I let him continue.

"If you try to tell me there wasn't more going on with Killian, I'm gonna throw this drink in your face."

I heaved a sigh. "Fine. There was more."

"Thank you. Jesus, was that so hard?"

"Too bloody right, it was. You know I don't talk about my relationships. That's private."

"There it is. Relationship."

"We were..." I sighed heavily, trying to figure out the best way to tell him about Killian without diminishing the importance of what he was to me.

“He was my...fuck, my reason.”

“Shit. Wait. You mean like...your *one*.”

“What do you mean one?”

“You know, the one. The one we write songs about. *The one* every gut-wrenching power ballad is about. The one you come to with open arms. You know that one.”

God, was he? Maybe.

“Possibly?” I said it like a question because I wasn’t sure, and a big part of me didn’t want to admit it.

I’d been the one to walk away. I’d let him go. I’d hurt him. I was sure of it.

“But you’re sure this was the right decision?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“You don’t know?”

My gut churned. “I’m fucking miserable.”

“Then why are you here?”

I was really regretting agreeing to meet him for dinner now. “Because he has an opportunity to get everything he wants.”

“You sure about that?”

“Wouldn’t you have given anything to get Violet Hour back together?”

Aiden sat back in his chair, let out a low whistle, then knocked back the rest of his drink. “Yeah, I fucking would’ve. I did.”

“Exactly. I’m not gonna keep him from being the best version of himself he can be. That would be like if he asked me to stop performing. It would be cutting me off at the knees and then watching me bleed out. I won’t do that. Full stop.”

“Jamie, rock and roll doesn’t deserve you. You’re such a good fucking guy.”

I shook my head and toyed with the rim of my pint glass. “So are you.”

“So, what are you going to do? Just sit here and be miserable? Hide away? Maybe write an epic breakup album?” He waggled his brows. “I hear those are really hot right now.”

“I don’t think I could write a song about him and not break down crying on stage performing it.”

“God. You really did love him?”

Fuck, I felt like I had a hole in my chest, and my emotions were just spilling out of me. Soon I’d have nothing left.

“I wanted to. I’m telling you, Aiden. I wanted to give him everything.”

He scoffed. “It sounds like you fucking did.”

“Maybe. He’s so bloody talented. You should see him when he starts writing. This strange sense of calm settles over him, and he gets this crinkle right between his eyebrows. He’s focused on making the song as good as it can be. The man’s a genius songwriter, like Lennon and McCartney level genius.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. It’s such a shame his band broke up. He was the heart of that band, no question, and they were pleased as punch to ride on his coattails. He won’t let himself see that, though. He was the driving force.”

Aiden frowned. “And you’re just letting them swoop back in and reclaim him?”

He was missing the point, and I was clearly doing a shit job of explaining. “No, I’m giving him what he wants. He was missing part of himself without them. He lost who he was.”

Shrugging, Aiden flagged down the server and asked for the bill. “I don’t know, man. Sounds to me like you helped him find himself again. Like maybe without you, he’s in worse shape than he was.”

“If that was the case,” I said, sighing and taking a long pull from my pint. “Why has it been a week without him contacting me?”

Aiden winced. “That is damning. But maybe he’s just a stubborn fucker like you are.”

I laughed and tossed a crouton at him, ping-ponging him right in the chest. “Oi, watch it, you.”

“I just call ’em like I see ’em.” He leaned in closer, expression serious now. “The worst thing I ever did was not tell Angela Peters how much I loved her. I let her slip right through my fingers and into the arms of another man.”

“But you said she’s happy now.”

“Oh, she is with someone else. Married, couple of kids, living her best life.”

“You do realize you’re only making a case for doing exactly what I’m bloody doing. You gave her the life she wanted. It just wasn’t with you.”

“Shit, you’re right,” he muttered. “I think I’m really bad at this wingman thing.”

“Yeah, you are.”

We paid our bill and got up. Aiden giving me a big hug. The two of us weren't afraid of affection. That was reserved for the toxically masculine, and I'd learned long ago that perpetuating that stereotype was only doing damage.

"Thanks, mate. Truly."

"Whatever you decide, I'm here for you. All right, Jamie?"

"Yeah. I appreciate that."

He looked back at me before he crossed the street. "And for what it's worth, if I could do it over again, I'd shoot my fucking shot with her. Even if it meant me risking getting crushed."

Somehow, that didn't make me feel better. Because that meant I needed to do the same.

Just not quite yet.

KILLIAN

One of my specialties was avoidance. I'd grown skilled at dissociating when things got hard, at numbing the pain with tasks I could lose myself in. In this case, it was horsemanship.

"That's a good girl. I know you like it."

I ran the brush across my horse's beautiful midnight coat over and over, stroking gently until it was gleaming and perfect. Then I spent far too long working on her mane, getting every knot out, and braiding it for good measure. When I finished with that, I picked out her hooves, brushed her tail, and only when I had nothing else to distract me did I finally leave her stall.

Somehow, the handsome Brit who'd broken me still crowded my brain as I slumped down on the chair outside the tack room. It might've had something to do with the photo I saw this morning of him locked in an embrace with Aiden Boyd at a restaurant. The headline, *Wilde's out, Boyd is in. The many partnerships of Jameson Lorde.*

The jealousy I'd felt over that one picture had sent me down a spiral. Hell, I didn't even have Jameson's phone number anymore. I'd been so hurt, so angry at him for making decisions for me that I'd deleted him from my contacts, and he sure as shit hadn't called me. Instead, it looked like he'd up and replaced me.

Now I was kicking myself because I needed to talk to him. I had a lot of

choices to make, and he'd been gone two solid weeks without a peep. Jackie told me he'd already killed the album with the label. Apparently, Jamie told them it wasn't going to work long-term, but we were still on track to release our single.

I didn't know how I was gonna survive seeing him, not to mention recording in the studio. The minute I was with him, I'd sure as shit be outed for the heartbroken, lovestruck fool I was. I'd given myself to him and trusted he'd take care of me. Instead, he threw me away.

Except, I wasn't so sure that was true. Jameson had made it clear he wasn't leaving because he didn't want me. He was leaving because he wanted me to be with Big Sky again, and for some unknowable reason, he thought he would drag me down.

I heaved a sigh and leaned my head back, tipping my hat so it covered my eyes. I hadn't slept more than an hour or two a night since he left me. I couldn't. It didn't feel right, knowing he wasn't in the house.

A soft little meow caught my ear and made me open my eyes. "Scoot, what are you looking for out here?" I asked the orange ball of fur who'd taken over my house.

Scoot weaved himself between my legs, then climbed up into my lap before turning on his motor, and purring like this was the best thing in the world. I ran my fingers between his ears and just let him love on me for a little bit.

"You miss him too, don't you?" I asked the cat.

It was then I realized that this cat and I weren't that different. Except, when he wanted love, all he did was ask you for it. And me? I kept quiet for fear of ruining everything.

That was my biggest mistake. But it was something I could rectify if I'd just swallow my pride and go after the man I wanted.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and sent a text to the only person who could help me.

Killian: I need Jameson's phone number right now, Jackie.

Jackie: Took you long enough.

Killian: Come on, Jackie, please?

Killian: He left, and I didn't get to tell him why that was a bad idea.

Jackie: So is the album back on?

Killian: Let's just say we're in a holding pattern, all right?

She replied with his contact information, and then the phone flashed with another message from her.

Jackie: Just in case he doesn't answer because he's a stubborn asshole.

Then she sent me an address.

Jackie: He'll be there. That's where he goes to hide. The gate password is 1234, and if you tell him I gave it to you, I will castrate you in your sleep.

We weren't going to talk about how terrible that password was.

Killian: I don't think it'll come to that. I just need to talk to him.

Jackie: Okay, keep me posted. You two have something special. I can see it in the way he looks at you.

Killian: You never saw him look at me.

Jackie: Yeah, I did. I saw him fall for you the first time he saw you.

Killian: You knew?

Jackie: Of course, I knew. Are you kidding? I know everything. Most of the time, before you do.

I chuckled.

Killian: Thanks, darlin'.

Jackie: You did not just darlin' me. Go get your man. He's hopeless without you.

Killian: That makes two of us.

I stared down at the phone, itching to call or text him. But she was right. I bet his phone wasn't even charged. He was doing everything he could to stay out of the limelight and hide in his self-sacrificing way. So instead of calling or texting, I did the next best thing. I called my sister-in-law Clara.

“Hey, Killian, what's up? You know I'm just down at the house, right?”

“Yeah. Hey, listen, do you have a cat carrier?”

Twenty-four hours later, I was standing outside the gated entrance to the address Jackie had given me. Cat carrier in one hand, suitcase in the other. I didn't wait for him to let me in or even notice I was standing there. I simply keyed in the code and strolled my happy ass all the way up the long winding driveway.

Scot yowled, annoyed he was still locked up in his prison.

“Oh, come on. It wasn't even that long. You're fine. Quit your whining,” I muttered.

When I reached the front door of the secluded, sprawling house, I knocked, then rang the bell, but nobody answered. I heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“Just our luck, buddy. He's not home.”

But then I heard the familiar strains of one of our songs coming from around the back of his house. My heart rate picked up as I made my way around the house. He was there, with his back to me, sitting in front of an infinity pool, the view of the city stunning as the sunset cast him in a warm glow.

I had to take a steadying breath before I could speak. “Damn, whoever wrote that song really deserves an award. It's really good.”

He stopped, his back stiffening, shoulders going tight. And then he stood and turned to look at me, anguish on his face.

“Killian? What are you doing here?”

“What do you think I'm doing here, you handsome idiot? Not letting you leave me.”

“I can't be the reason—”

“You can't be the reason, what? I'm happier than I've ever been. In love for the first fucking time. Take your pick.”

“In love...with me?”

“Yeah. With you. And I'm so mad at you. You didn't even give me a choice. You just left.”

Jamie took a step toward me. “I didn't do it to hurt you. I was trying to help you.”

“You're not my caretaker. You're not my daddy. You're my partner in everything. Making music, making love, and everything in between.”

“I just thought you wouldn't make the right choice. That you'd be too worried about my feelings to get back with your band.”

“I’m not getting back with the band.”

“See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Frustration tightened my chest. “Yeah, but it’s not because of you. It’s because we’ve all grown apart. They’ll be fine, and we’re going to repair our friendship. But nothing with them will be the same, not after what happened. There were a lot more issues to work out than just me misreading the vibe. I realized that after some long conversations with all of them. We grew apart even before I was Killian Wilde, and it’s okay.”

Jamie’s eyes were bright and focused on mine. “You really came all this way?”

“Of course, I did. Did you miss the part where I said I love you? That’s what you do when you love someone. You go get them and bring them back when they do something stupid like this.”

“Do you want to come in?” he asked, closing in on me.

God, I ached to touch him. “I was kind of hoping you would invite me.”

His lips twitched up in a grin. “I think I have room.”

“Are you sure? I don’t know if the house is big enough.”

He chuckled. I loved seeing the light in his eyes again.

“Killian?”

“Yeah?”

“Is that a cat carrier?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s ours. I couldn’t leave him behind.”

Jameson crossed the large patio until he was standing right in front of me.

“Put the cat down,” he whispered.

So, I did, and then he took me in his arms, stared deep into my eyes, and kissed me. It was everything I’d been waiting for. He made me feel so safe, so needed and cherished. And I loved him. Fuck, I loved him.

Breaking our kiss, he pressed our foreheads together and huffed out a soft surprised laugh.

“I really thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I get that.”

“But now I see it was the last thing I should do to somebody I love.”

Everything stopped. My breath caught, and I waited to let the words sink in. Because it was the best ending, I could possibly have hoped for when I executed my wild plan.

“So, we’re doing this?” I asked.

“We’re doing this. Us.”

“We’re together?”

“Yes, we bloody well are. I love you, Killian Wilde.”

“That’s good, because I already told Jackie to put a pause on canceling the album.”

“Oh, have you?”

“Yes. And you know what’s better than a breakup album?”

His brows lifted. “No, but I’m sure you’ll enlighten me.”

“A make-up album.”

“Then I guess we better start the making up portion of the evening.”

Scout yowled again from the carrier. “Yes, but first, let’s let him out of his cage. He really doesn’t like flying.”

“I can’t believe you brought him.”

“He’s part of us. I couldn’t leave him at home. Just like I could never leave you.”

Jameson threaded our fingers and squeezed.

“Come on, cowboy. I think the muse needs a little refueling. What do you say?”

I gripped him by the nape of the neck and pulled him in for a searing kiss. When I broke the kiss, we were both breathing heavily. I was hard, aching, needy, and it was all for him.

“I’d say let’s make tonight worth writing a song about.”

The soft sexy sound he made went straight to my dick.

“With you, it’s always song worthy.”

JAMESON

“JAMIE? Why is there a packed suitcase in the hall?” Killian asked as I led him through into the house.

My shoulders stiffened because, at first, I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to seem desperate. He'd come back for me. He loved me. But then I let myself think about all the ways I would have felt if he'd done the leaving.

“Actually, I was meant to be heading to the airport in about half an hour.”

“Oh, shit. Where are you going? I didn't mean to...fuck, I'm an asshole. I just showed up. You have somewhere to be?”

The way his shoulders slumped and that defeat on his face made me want nothing more than to fix it.

“No, Kill. I was on my way to Sunrise to go back and get you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I've never had anything like this before. But I don't want to let it go. We can split our time between here and Sunrise. Or, I don't know, just go back to Montana. I don't have to live in LA.”

“So, you don't want to do the long-distance thing?”

I shook my head. “We've successfully proven we can live together and not lose our minds. I think that would be a step backward.”

“But if you're not ready—”

“It's not that I'm not ready. It's that nearly everyone in my life who's meant something to me has left me. There weren't that many of them to start with. It's always been hard for me to make connections, but you? Even when you didn't want me there, for some reason, I still persisted. I couldn't let you go.

“There was this niggling thought in the back of my mind that if I gave up on us, I'd be letting go of the best thing in my life.”

“You still left me behind, though.”

That stung, but it was true. “Yeah, I did. I thought I was being an obstacle. And I didn't want to do that to you.”

“But you aren't. You know that, right? I've made it fucking clear. You are the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. I thought my life was over when I lost my band. I had accepted that I was the fuckup I always worried everyone thought I was. And then you made me see that couldn't be farther

from the truth. And I need to know that you understand how special that is, and what you did for me.”

“I just told you the truth, Killian. You’re magic.”

“And what happens when that magic disappears?”

“You’ll still be mine, and you’ll always be magic to me.”

“You don’t care what other people think?”

“I don’t care if I never have another hit record. I just want to be yours. And I want you to be mine.”

I kissed him then, taking his face between my palms, running my fingers through the hair on the back of his head, gripping the too-long strands and tugging. His moan was ragged and desperate. Just like I liked him.

“Two weeks without this is too bloody long,” I murmured against his mouth.

He sighed and nodded. “Show me your bedroom. I want to see where the rock god sleeps.”

“I’m not going to be doing any sleeping. Not with you here.”

“We’ll see about that. I plan to wear you out thoroughly.”

I threaded our fingers and walked him down the hall, then up the staircase, and around until we reached the primary bedroom. It was sparsely decorated. The only area I’d spent a great deal of time on was my music room, but I didn’t think he cared.

“Have you been thinking of me when you touch yourself, Killian? Have you been missing me?”

“God, yes. Of fucking course, I have.”

“Good. Tell me what you need, love?”

“I need your mouth.”

That sent a jolt of arousal straight to my dick. I hadn’t ever sucked him off, and that was a travesty.

“Take off your clothes. Lie back on the bed. I’ll be right back.”

He must have done as I asked because, by the time I returned from my bathroom with lube at the ready and a packet of condoms, he was sprawled out naked, rock hard, and straining. My very own feast.

The way his gaze raked over my body made fierce pride well in my chest. “God, Jamie, your body is fucking incredible.”

I’d taken it upon myself to undress as well, and as I approached him, I stroked myself with my free hand.

“Spread your legs. Show me what I want.”

He did, his eyes never leaving mine. Dropping the lube and condoms on the mattress, I climbed up and fitted myself between his spread legs. My palms skated across his inner thighs until I cupped his balls and wrapped one fist around his swollen length. Every muscle in his body tightened, and he groaned.

“That’s right. Make as much noise as you want, Killian. No one’s gonna hear you. Bring down the fucking house.”

I toyed with him, tracing the line of his taint, touching everywhere but the one place he was so needy for me. Then I scooted back far enough, so I was at the right angle to take him in my mouth.

And I did. I sucked him long and slow, torturing him and savoring every single sigh and whimper, reaching down and giving myself a few strokes while I was at it. He threaded his hands in my hair and began fucking my face in earnest. Tears sprang to my eyes as I worked not to gag around him, but I wanted to make him come down my throat. I wanted to feel him pulsing in my mouth and know that it was me who gave that to him. Me who made his toes curl.

“Fuck. Fuck, Jamie. I’m gonna come. You need to stop now.”

I did not need to stop. What was he on about? I coated my fingers in lube and sucked harder, paying special attention to his sensitive crown. Then I sank one finger into his tight hole and swirled my tongue around his head. He bucked under me as I took him to the back of my throat, curling my finger in a come hither motion. I toyed with him and hit that special place inside that I knew would light him up.

His bark of pleasure was pained and wild and full of euphoric surprise. Then there it was, his orgasm on my tongue, his cock swelling in my mouth. I swallowed him down and didn’t stop until he was shaking.

Finally, I backed away and sat on my heels, staring at the man I fucking loved. Little aftershocks ran through him, making him tremble. His eyes were heavy-lidded, expression blissed out and sated.

“We’re definitely doing that again,” I said. “How have I waited so long to get you in my mouth?”

“I don’t know. It’s a crying shame.”

“I guess I’ll just have to make up for lost time.”

He let out a ragged breath. “I’m going to need a minute.” The awed laugh that escaped him had me grinning, “Fuck. You know, when they say mind-blowing, I never really realized what they were talking about.”

“Glad to be of service. Shove over, I’ve gone too long without touching you.”

I crawled up the bed and got behind him.

“Oh, are we spooning?” he asked, making room for me.

“We are absolutely spooning. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No. I’ll be your little spoon any day.”

“Too right, you will. Now come here.”

We curled up together, my arm around him, hand over his heart, as I pulled him tight against my chest and buried my nose in his neck. I loved the scent of him, the feel of this man next to me, and the knowledge he was all mine.

“I love you, Killian Wilde, and I’m so glad you came to find me.”

“I love you. Whatever we do, we’ll figure it out. All that matters is that we do it together. Wilde and Lorde taking over the world.”

I laughed and squeezed him tighter. “We already agreed; it’s Lorde and Wilde. Alphabetical.”

“Oh, right. I forgot. It makes sense. You do like to be on top.”

EPILOGUE

KILLIAN

THE ALBUM HAD BEEN out two weeks. Simply titled ‘London days, Montana nights,’ which was the title track and our first single. It was a surprise how well it was received, but that’s what happens when your romance and your music go viral on social media. As much as Jamie and I didn’t like being publicly discussed, I had to admit knowing there were so many fans rooting for us only added to the enjoyment of our success.

I found my boyfriend—I still wasn’t used to that word—at the stables. He was having an entire conversation with Dusty as he fed the horse an apple. It was endearing, watching him, knowing that he’d chosen this. He’d chosen to be here with us, with me.

“We’re going to be late if you don’t get your ass in gear right now, London boy,” I said from where I leaned against the entryway to the stable.

His gaze shot to mine, a little embarrassment creeping up on his cheeks in the form of a pink blush.

“I was just saying goodbye. We’re going to be gone for a solid fortnight. What will Dusty think if I don’t give him a proper farewell?”

“He’ll probably think, who’s going to feed me my extra snacks and keep adding to my weight problem?”

“Killian, we do not shame him over his weight. He’s perfect as he is.”

“That’s not what Clara says. Pretty soon, we won’t even be able to ride him.”

“He’s just sturdy. That’s all.”

“Whatever you say. You’ve lived here for three whole months, so it does make you an expert.”

He smirked before heading my way. “Quite right. I’m glad you’re seeing things my way. Is the car here?”

“Yes.” The car was waiting and had been for the last five minutes. “Just pulled up. I already loaded our bags. Are you ready?”

Nervous excitement filled his eyes, and he nodded. We were headed to London, not only for a two-week getaway where the two of us could enjoy each other before the craziness of public appearances and the inevitable tour happened, but so he could do something very important.

After jumping through every governmental hoop thrown at him,

undergoing background tests, and a rigorous application process, Jamie had purchased the home for boys where he'd spent the most important years of his life. He'd renamed it in honor of Kelly, the woman who took care of him and fostered his love of music. Then he had vowed to take in every young unhoused child he possibly could.

While the two of us weren't in a place in our lives where children were a possibility, he hadn't wanted to squander this time by ignoring a need he was all too familiar with. So, he partnered with Wilde Horse Ranch and created a trust to pay for staff and supplies, room and board, and everything these children might need. His reasoning was that if he couldn't give them a home with parents, he could at least give them a home where they would feel safe.

Tomorrow morning, he would be there for the ribbon cutting and the dedication of the garden in memorial to the wonderful woman who'd saved his life.

As we rode in the back of the SUV taking us to the airport, I noticed the uneasy jitter of his legs, the way he fidgeted and picked at his cuticles, and his compulsive gum chewing.

"Hey," I said. "You're all right. I've got you."

He looked at me, eyes a little worried, and it broke my heart. He said once he was in my corner. Now it was my turn to be in his.

"What if they tell me I waited too long to do this, and now it doesn't matter? I've had more money than God for a long time. It shouldn't have taken me so long, Killian."

"Jameson Lorde, you look at me."

He pulled his gaze back to mine from where it had fallen to his fingers, and I continued.

"You are the most amazing person I have ever known. And it doesn't matter that you didn't do it then. What matters is that you're doing it now. You're in a place where you can give these kids as much as possible, and even if you can't be their dad, you can love them by providing for them. The music program alone is gonna reach so many of them."

He took a shuddering breath and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "All right, thank you for being here with me."

"I'll always be here, Jamie. Always."

We reached the airport and blew through security. That was one of the perks of being well-known. We had certain security clearances a lot of people weren't afforded. I wasn't going to complain. And for the rest of the time we

were traveling, Jamie and I distracted each other with playful conversation, gentle touches, and supportive hugs, and I reassured him as often as possible that I loved him.

On our layover, we were met by a crowd of excited fans. People who took pictures with us, asked for autographs and told us how much we'd inspired them. It was moving to see the couples who were equally excited about seeing us. They told us by Lorde and Wilde becoming a duo, they now mutually shared a love of country music and rock. Our sound blending their interests together. But it was the stories we heard that really hit home. Some about their late-in-life discoveries of their own sexuality because of Jameson openly discussing his bisexuality. Others about how they knew they would find their one if they just kept looking.

I'd never thought that would be possible for me. But I'd been dead wrong. While we waited for our connecting flight, I took Jamie into the lounge. We found a quiet corner, and I pulled out my phone, nervous for what I was about to do. But knowing how he felt, how on edge he was, and the self-doubt chasing through his system, I had decided this was the right moment to give him something he could hold on to as a lifeline, for lack of a better word.

"What are you doing? Bored of me already?" he asked, teasing but a little bit hesitant.

I shook my head. A soft smile on my lips.

"I want you to listen to something."

"Now? Did you write something new? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've been working on it for the last few weeks. It was kind of a secret project."

"A secret? We don't have secrets."

"This one had to be, and if you don't like it, we don't have to record it. But I really want you to hear it."

He put his headphones in, and I connected my phone to them. Then, when he was ready, I pressed play. I watched his face for any sign of his reaction, and at first, fear coiled in my belly because he remained stoic, listening intently. But then his expression changed. His brows drew together. His eyes widened. Understanding dawned on him.

He glanced up at me, and I saw tears shimmering in the beautiful depths. He'd figured it out. This was his song. The one I wrote for him and no one else. It was about a man who had lost all hope, who had given up on his

dreams, and then was rescued by the most wonderful man, and given a completely new lease on life. It spoke of forever. Of deep and true love and of the absolute gratefulness I felt when we finally came together.

The edges of his nose reddened, and his lower lip trembled as he continued listening. Then he reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling my arm toward him until he could press his mouth to my knuckles, and just sat there holding me to him while he listened.

When he finished, he took out his headphones and put them away before gifting me with his eyes.

“Killian, that was us, wasn’t it?”

My throat was so tight, I could barely get the words out. “It was. I started it when you left. Then I picked it back up again and really worked on it these last couple of weeks. I just needed you to understand where I was at and how you saved me. I’m better on paper, in music, than anywhere else.”

The smile on his face made my heart swell. “It’s my favorite song. No one’s ever written me a song. It was always me doing it.”

“I thought that might be the case. You deserve a song. I love you, and I’m so proud of you and everything you’ve done. And I’m so thankful we’re on this journey together.”

He let out a watery laugh. “You better stop making me cry.”

“Isn’t it okay if they’re happy tears?”

“Right. I suppose so. When we get back—no—when we get to London, I’m renting a studio, and we’re gonna lay that down.”

“We don’t have an album to release it with.”

He shrugged. “This is the social media age. We don’t need an album to release it. We’ll lay it down, and you’ll have Jackie post it. Everyone needs to hear this. It’s the best thing you’ve ever written.”

“Okay, we can do that. But first, I think it’s time we take our trip to London. Flight’s boarding.”

“Come on, cowboy.” He took my hand but stopped me and kissed me hard before pulling back and saying, “I want to listen to it again. Or, better than that, I want to watch you play it for me.”

I smirked. “All you have to do is ask.”

Jameson
Two years later

I FOUND KILLIAN RESTRINGING HIS GUITAR ON THE PORCH WHEN I RETURNED from my visit to Sunrise High School. I'd gone in to oversee the final planning phase of the new after-school music program Killian and I were sponsoring. We called it Rock University. Each session was a twelve-week course that gave kids the opportunity to try different instruments, choose their favorite, and build their own bands. At the end, each band would perform two cover tunes and an original. Bloody brilliant. If I did say so myself.

I was determined to continue giving back and helping this generation find their voices.

"How'd it go?" he asked, glancing up from the guitar in that sexy way he had. It was the whole looking up from his lashes thing that really got me. Like he had a secret, and he really wanted to tell me.

"They've got fifteen kids signed up. All on scholarship."

"Kelly would be so damn proud of you, Jamie."

That made my heart flutter. What he thought of me mattered more than anything. I loved this man, and knowing he was proud, that he respected what was important to me, that we had the same goals, mattered.

"Did you send those new tracks to Jackie?" I asked.

"Sure did. She's already sent me a bunch of gibberish emojis. I think she liked them."

"Of course, she did. They're stellar."

I sat next to him, pressing my shoulder against his before sighing happily. "Two years on, and we're as good as ever."

"I don't know. I'd say we are even better."

"You might be right."

"I think this new album is going to blow 'London Days' out of the water."

I glanced at him, surprised. 'London Days' had been a breakout success. We'd swept awards season, taking home a Grammy and a CMA for album of the year. What a pair of nights that had been. Especially our warm-up in the greenroom at the CMAs. Fuck, I was getting hard just thinking about the noises he'd made.

"Jamie? Where'd you go just now?"

I let out a soft huff of laughter. "The greenroom."

Heat flashed in his gaze. “I was just thinking about that. Remember when you tied my hands behind my back with your belt?”

“Fuck, yes. You look so good at my mercy.”

“If you don’t stop it with that sexy velvety voice of yours, I’m gonna have to cancel our plans tonight so I can stay in and relive it all over.”

If he was trying to convince me not to seduce him, he was failing. But I had other ideas and really didn’t want to be distracted.

“What kind of plans have you made, cowboy?”

“Do you know what today is?”

I did. Of bloody course I did. Today was the anniversary of the day he showed up on my doorstep and told me he loved me. It was two years ago that he and I professed our love to one another, and they had been the best of my life.

“Friday?”

He laughed and elbowed me in the side. “If you forgot, I might have to find myself another handsome British bloke to entertain me tonight in the loft.”

“Take it back, Killian,” I growled, grabbing him by the nape and leaning in.

“Make me.”

“I just might.” I took his earlobe between my teeth, and he shuddered in pleasure.

“Marry me,” I blurted, well before I had planned to tonight. I’d written a beautiful speech where I told him how deep my love for him ran and how I couldn’t live without him being mine.

“What?” he asked, backing away and staring at me.

“You heard me, Killian. Marry me. I love you so much I can barely see straight, and I need you by my side.”

“You really want to get married?”

He seemed so bewildered. Like he couldn’t believe I’d want this.

“Don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. You are literally the man of my dreams and have been since I was a teenager. Of fucking course, I want to marry you.”

That bubble of terror in my chest popped and dissipated. Thank fuck.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring box I’d been carrying around the last few days, afraid I’d forget it when the time came.

“So, marry me, yeah? Be mine forever.”

Killian's eyes found mine, and he smiled so bright, I knew this was the perfect moment. We'd love each other for the rest of our lives, make music, make a life, make our own family right here in Sunrise.

He kissed me, not even looking at the ring, before murmuring one word against my lips and making me whole. "Yes."

Want a little more of Lorde and Wilde?

[Click here](#) to read their bonus scene **The Green Room.**

Sunrise Cowboys

Saddle Up (Opposites Attract)

Bucked Off (Fake Fiancee)

Ridden Hard (Surprise Baby)

Ignite (Age-Gap/Forbidden Romance)

Roped Tight (Second Chance M/M)

Wild Ride (Accidental Marriage)

Wild Mistake (Best friend's little sister)

An Irresistible Chance (Single dad)

Reined In (Friends to lovers/Surprise baby)

Drive Me Wild (M/M enemies to lovers)

Anything For Love

The Baby Proposition

The Dating Playbook

The Marriage Arrangement

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim writes steamy contemporary and sexy paranormal romance. **You'll find her paranormal romances written under the name K. Loraine and her contemporaries as Kim Loraine.** Don't worry, you'll get the same level of swoon-worthy heroes, sassy heroines, and an eventual HEA.

When not writing, she's busy herding cats (raising kids), trying to keep her house sort of clean, and dreaming up ways for fictional couples to meet.

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KIM LORAINÉ
ROMANCE AUTHOR

