



Showers

JENN BULLARD

Show Biz

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The words you speak to someone can rewrite their story. Use them with caution.

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Forward

Show biz is a standalone, though you have seen glimpses of Layla before this. It may whet your appetite to read my Darkest Nights series, but it won't spoil the series for you if you read this first. Layla is sunshine and light next to Lennon, but she fully grows into who she is meant to be in this book. There will be some triggers, because that's just who I am. Oh! Also, unfuckablewith is a word, I promise. It just seemed like the perfect word to describe Jordan. While I sometimes make up words, this is a real one.

Thank you for taking a chance on a newer author. I have really been enjoying writing, going on an adventure with you all, and being equally surprised as things unfold.

If you love this book, please consider reviewing. I read them all. A little pixie author literally squeals when you do.

Content Warning

Show biz is a dark second chance, age gap reverse harem romance. There is MM content, CNC, kidnapping, unaliving, torture outside of the harem, overdose/drug use. Please understand that your mental health is very important to me, and I never want anyone to be triggered. For a complete list of triggers, please email Jenn at jennbullardwrites@gmail.com.

Prologue

Today is the day my heart shattered into a million pieces. It's also my sister's wedding, and I'm so happy for her. My heartaches are separate from the beautiful ceremony I'm part of. Each detail is exactly the way my sister, uncle, and I planned. Most importantly, her grooms are standing at the end of the aisle waiting for her excitedly. Lennon and her men have walked through fire together, and this is their happily ever after. They deserve every perfect moment.

Tears of happiness keep welling up in my eyes, and I blink them back. I know there will be photos later, and I don't want to ruin my makeup. Yet, those same tears slowly dry up as I see Atlas and Mav sitting in the front row, looking beautiful in their tuxes.

I know why my sister didn't tell me they'd be here, but I'm furious just the same. Atlas and Mav were a crush that I let become something more, something they didn't deserve, and

now I'm licking my wounds. I can't lie and say they mean nothing to me when my heart aches just looking at them.

Walking up the stairs to my spot as the maid of honor, I turn to look at my boyfriend, Tyler, with a smile. He can tell there's something wrong, and I can feel the unwavering support from him. We haven't been together long, but we click well.

Tyler is sweet, with a deep well of patience, and an equally strong need to protect the people he cares about. As I turn to watch my sister move down the aisle with my uncle, I feel blessed that I'm one of those people.

Tyler knows Mav and Atlas played with my emotions on tour, winding me up before throwing me away to fuck each other. Those two have this presence that's impossible to ignore, even as I feel their eyes on me.

I still have this feeling as if I'm not enough for anyone. It's an unfair perception when my family shows me every day that I'm more than enough, and now Tyler. It's amazing the scars an interaction like this can leave on you. I'm a twenty-one year old virgin, but not for lack of trying.

Swallowing hard, I avoid the heavy tripled weight of eyes on me as Lenny is greeted by Turner, Derek, Orion, and Roark. Their love is enough to force myself out of my funk, listening to every word my uncle utters as he marries first Roark and Lennon and then hand-fasts them all.

By the time it's Roark's turn to speak, I'm struggling not to sob at how beautiful their vows to each other are. This is an all-consuming love. There's not a dry eye at the ceremony as the adults all celebrate these incredible people. Let's be honest, the kids probably wonder why we're leaking everywhere, and I can hear them trying to console their parents.

Evil could have won instead of love, but it didn't. Holding tight to this, I look over at where Atlas and Mav are sitting as Roark directs something over his shoulder at them. My ears ring as I see they're no longer sitting there. My vision blurs as if trying to make them reappear and make sense of this. Worst of all, I have to catch myself before anyone else notices,

because the world started to tilt. I'm not taking this very well. I can't pass out at my sister's wedding.

How dare they leave?

They're my sister's dearest friends and they couldn't stick around long enough to sit through the damn ceremony?! My fingers tighten so much that they appear bloodless against my dress as I stand there stunned. Roark, in true fashion, shrugs as he goes back to his vows.

I think I'm in shock. I should know by now. Atlas and Mav aren't the sticking around type. Not for me. Not their best friends. The least they could have done was swallow their discomfort and wait until the damn vows were over.

I won't make this mistake again. I will never forget this, and I will never forgive myself for believing they were better men than this.

Never.

Swallowing back my feelings of ire and sadness, I force a saucy smile to grace my lips as I cheer, walking down the steps of the platform with excitement as the men kiss their bride. My legs move faster as Tyler opens his arms to me, hugging me firmly against his lithe, strong body.

"No matter what, little flower, you've got me. It's us against the world. Let's find ourselves a drink, and then I plan to remove this beautiful dress, so I can have my cake. I've been a very good boy, haven't I?" he murmurs into the shell of my ear.

Gulping a breath, as a shiver of desire rolls over my body and my smile becomes wicked. This is a solid man who has always shown me how good he is. Tonight is the night I'm going to lose my virginity.

Taking his arm, I ask myself how long we have to stay at the reception before we can step out for our own fun.

One

5 YEARS LATER

“Layla, you’ve been solo the last couple of years, and it’s gone really well,” Uncle Jordan begins and I nod. I’m in a board meeting with the record label executives, which oddly makes me feel as if I’m in the principal’s office.

However, my music is going really well, fans loved my last two solo tours, so I don’t think I’m in trouble.

Two years ago, Lenny told me she thought I was good enough to fly solo, make my own music. My sister didn’t want to hold me back or limit me when she was slowing down her touring schedule due to wanting to be with the kids.

“Uncle Jordan will make sure you fly and don’t burn out. Enjoy it, nothing lasts forever,” my big sister told me. She’s right, this was the next step for me.

“Am I in trouble?” I blurt out, wincing. “It’s just... I can count the number of times that I’ve been in this room with all of you, and it’s a bit daunting.”

“You’ve known most of us your whole life,” Mr. Laurence chuckles. I’ve always added “Mr.” to the executives first names because I met them all when I was three. It felt instinctual to give them that respect.

Now, I wince with a nod. “I’m such a small artist in the grand scheme of things,” I admit. “I figure something awful must have happened if I’m here.”

“Not at all,” Mr. Allen snorts. “You’re trending on top of all the charts right now. There’s nothing small about your music, and I wish you saw that. I know it feels as if you have big shoes to fill next to your sister, but you are both two very different people. Your music has its own personality, as it should.”

“What we’re saying is that you’re not in trouble,” Mr. Terrick chuckles. These men have the ability to help careers or topple them, and when I was a kid, sometimes I would sit outside the boardroom door as I did my homework, watching people walk in and out.

Sometimes the bands would be ecstatic and laughing, while others they’d find that they had lost everything. My life was dull in some aspects, and incredibly exciting in others.

I got to see history happen.

“Good,” I tell them, my breath whooshing out of me.

“Your band walked this morning,” my uncle says with a wince.

Way to pull off the bandaid.

“Damn,” I whisper.

Karina, Marin, and Zeke always had a problem with me. They’d make fun of me under their breath because I was a

“Label Princess”, but what they failed to realize is how hard I worked in spite of it.

Karina also really enjoyed her coke habit, and I couldn't help but give her shit about it. Drugs aren't my thing, even though I grew up around it, because illegal substances and music go hand in hand.

Daddy never realized how much I saw, regardless of how sheltered everyone kept me.

“What did they say?” I ask, resigned. I don't think I personally did this, but I try to be self aware. So am I the problem and a cunt bag or are they?

“They said you were too much of a princess and couldn't work with you,” Mr. Laurence says with a roll of his eyes. He lost his daughter because she got mixed up with the wrong crowd.

There's a shrewd glint to his gaze, and I know he's wondering if I really am the problem. Especially, when Mav and Atlas left five years ago.

I may have had a small hand in that. I'll admit it.

“My ex-bandmates really enjoy their drugs,” I explain. “I won't touch the stuff, and coked out musicians make mistakes. We had a show in Texas and Karina was so high she missed her entrance during it. It's not ideal to lose my band, but I can say I'm not surprised.”

“Layla,” my uncle says, eyes wide. I didn't hide their habit, but I didn't exactly yell it from the rooftops, either. Jordan keeps an eye out for any issues, but he's been pulled in a lot of different directions lately.

The label has started calling him the musician whisperer and asking him to work with more people after my own success grew.

I have my own tour bus, so I was able to limit my interactions with them, which was nice because Zeke is an asshole when he's high. Handsy too.

Tyler started his own company a year ago and hops on my bus whenever possible when he heard me complain about Zeke's 'sleepwalking' issues. He scared the shit out of me when I found him standing over me while I was in bed, his hand reaching out to touch me.

No thanks.

"Zeke might have mentioned that your boyfriend was overly possessive and threatened him for looking at you," Mr. Allen says carefully, watching my face.

I feel as if cold water has been splashed on me and sit straight. This could be really bad. I never mentioned anything because I didn't make waves after Atlas and Mav left the band. I didn't want to be labeled as the diva who ran off all of her male bandmates.

"Did Zeke also mention climbing onto my bus while I was asleep?" I ask calmly, arching my brow. "Did he mention that Tyler is now staying with me as much as possible to deter Zeke from being creepy when he's high and supposedly sleepwalking?"

I keep my voice level because these men won't appreciate hysteria. Jordan, however, doesn't care and slams his fist on the table.

"Goddamn it, Layla, when are you going to stop acting like you have to handle everything? Fuck, girl. Slimy fucker," my uncle snarls.

I barely keep myself from flinching at his tone. I'll cry later. I know he's not mad at me, but I'm feeling a little raw at the moment.

"I didn't want to rock the boat and I had it handled." I shrug. "Three weeks ago, Zeke was high out of his mind and climbed onto the bus while I was with Tyler. We weren't asleep..."

Blushing, I force myself to continue because who cares if I was having sex with my boyfriend? It was probably the only reason he was caught. "Anyway, Zeke got aggressive and Tyler beat the shit out of him, which is well within his rights. I

will come forward with all of this and press charges if necessary.”

Mr. Terrick grimaces, and I wonder if I pushed too hard. I’ve heard a lot of stories of how misogynistic the music industry can be, where they tend to blame the victim. My stomach rolls at the thought of this happening to me.

I love the music, but is this really worth it?

Jordan places his hand over mine, making me flinch. I’m definitely spiraling. Taking a breath, I remind myself that my uncle is on my side.

“I almost wish you would press charges on the dickhead,” Mr. Terrick mutters. “As much as this conversation is uncomfortable, we are on your side. If it felt differently than intended, that’s our fault entirely. You may be James’ daughter, but we’ve had the honor of watching you grow up into this beautiful, intelligent woman.”

“You’re going to make her cry,” Mr. Laurence chuckles. “He’s right, though. I’ve been wanting those three off our concert circuit for ages, so this allows me to fire them. They won’t be hired by another band that we manage. They’re now banned from working with us.”

I really was very close to crying before he announced that. My jaw drops in surprise. “Really?” I gasp.

Music Horde Records has a huge reach, and the fact that they’re insistent on doing this means a lot.

“Lay,” my uncle admonishes. “We’ve fucked up with Lennon in the past by working her too hard and ignoring issues with her support team. There’s no way we’re doing the same to you. The second Zeke started getting aggressive he should have been gone.”

“That’s the issue. It was more creepy than aggressive, but he’s such a big guy. It could have—”

“Yes,” Mr. Allen growls. “I don’t want our minds to go there because it’ll piss me off even more. I’m really glad that your boyfriend—Tyler?”

“Yes.” I nod, waiting to see where he’s going with this.

“I’m glad Tyler is staying with you more. What does he do for a living?” Mr. Allen asks. They’re not really this interested in my love life, not that it’s anything crazy. Whereas Lennon and her men were often caught having sex in public, I’m a bit more reserved.

“He recently opened his own business doing IT work about a year ago,” I explain. “He has contractual work that he can do anywhere, so he’s been spending more and more time with me.”

“How much time?” Jordan asks, a slight gleam in his eyes. I don’t know what it means, but the three men in front of me appear to be plotting.

“A few days out of the week?” I guess. Tyler lives in an apartment that he sublets for cheap. It’s in a great area of Georgetown, and we’ve been discussing if he should even keep it with how much time he’s on the road.

I have a cottage on Lennon’s back property that I stay in when I’m in town, so it’s not like we’d be homeless...

“Is there anything keeping him from being with you more often?” Mr. Laurence asks.

Nose wrinkling, I decide to call the old men out. Not that they’re all that old, but clearly they’re acting oddly.

“Spit it out,” I warn. “You’re up to something.”

God save me from wiley, old music industry men. They’re not fooling me.

“We have a band without a lead singer currently,” Mr. Allen says slowly. “You’re without a band it seems, so it makes sense for us to meld you together. However, the band is composed of all men and we need to pull your uncle for some work.”

“I don’t really like throwing you in with another band because it’s hard finding the right people to work with,” Jordan admits. “I want to stress that this is on a trial run basis

only. If there are issues, please tell me. No more of this suffering in silence bullshit, Layla.”

“Who is this band? What happened to their lead singer?” I ask, ignoring his demands even as he glares at me. He’s a teddy bear with me for the most part, so I’m going to take my chances.

“Lyrica Travers with *Pull Down the Moon* is currently in rehab,” Mr. Laurence tells me. My head tilts as I think about who that is. Nothing pops into my mind so I shake my head, looking confused. “She’s really big on the international scene, and has been overseas for the last six years.”

“She overdosed last week,” Mr. Allen sighs. “It’s been a bit of a mess, and we told her that she needs to be completely clean before we’ll have her back. So now we have a bass guitarist, keyboardist, and drummer without a band. They won’t be split up, so this may be their best option.”

I would ask for their names, but I still live in a bubble. I tour, only meeting other musicians if they open for me or vice-versa, and then I’m home to play with my nieces and nephews. The rest of my time is filled with my sweet, growly boyfriend who enjoys making my toes curl... often.

Forcing my thoughts away from Tyler, I think about what the label’s executive board members are offering me. A fresh start.

“Will I be touring overseas then?” I ask. I wouldn’t be against it, but I have ties that keep me in the US. Is this why they asked me if Tyler would be willing to stay on tour more?

“I can hear your thoughts from here,” Jordan chuckles. “The band returned to U.S. soil yesterday, and are already aware that they may be joined by a new lead singer. They want to continue touring and making music, so they’re open to it. We haven’t told them who it is yet. Figured you could meet together in a couple of days and see how you blend together.”

“It’s hard to find a perfect mesh,” Mr. Allen sighs. “I’m hoping this works, but if it’s a hardship and things go sour, I need you to promise me that you’ll speak up.”

“It really would be perfect if Tyler can join you on tour if you do decide to make a go of it,” Mr. Terrick says, twisting his lips in thought. “Do we have any work we can contract with him?”

“Well, I do Layla’s website, social media, and new music announcements,” my uncle says with a shrug. “I really hate assistants. None of them ever work out, and they just manage to piss me off.”

“No one can do it the way you can,” Mr. Allen snorts. My uncle is a bit of a control freak and perfectionist. The good news is that when he’s in charge, things go off without a hitch.

“Exactly,” Jordan growls, making me snicker.

I feel a little more relaxed now that I know I’m not in trouble and they’re on my side. I don’t know what these new band members are like, but I hope we mesh well. I miss making music where I’m not pulling teeth. Maybe I need to go home soon just to jam out with my brothers-in-law and Lenny...

“Did we lose you?” Mr. Terrick teases me.

“No, I was just thinking about the ‘dream’,” I chuckle. “Finding band members that you mesh really well with and the music flows. I haven’t had that since *The Darkest Nights*. Even my first band members were assholes.”

“Leo was one of their names, wasn’t it?” Jordan snorts. “It’s been long enough that I don’t remember. I can’t believe your dad let them live with you so long.”

Dad is still in a mental health hospital after he attacked my sister a few years ago. He snapped when he swore he saw Lenny’s dead mom. It’s hard for me to go see him, though I force myself to at least once a year.

“I still don’t really understand why Dad thought they’d make good babysitters and bandmates,” I agree.

“Control maybe,” Mr. Laurence says distastefully. “You’re an adult, you can make your own decisions. We’re just here to guide you a little, while your dad is away.”

Away. As if the man isn't completely fractured. Sure, I'll go with it.

"Before we conclude, I think we should extend a job to your boyfriend," Mr. Allen says, steering the conversation back to the topic at hand. "Jordan has a diva to wrangle, and this way you have someone in your corner at all times. We aren't micromanaging anything, and Tyler can still work his own hours the way he does his other contracts."

Chewing on my lip, I nod slowly. This could solve a lot of things...

"Can we loop him into this meeting and call him?" I ask. As much as I want him to be with me more, this is ultimately his decision.

"Yep," Uncle Jordan nods. "Let's do it. I can tell you, we're hard to refuse."

The three men in front of me wink, making me giggle as I call Tyler.

"*Lay? Are you okay?*" he asks, his voice colored with amusement as he listens to my laughter.

"Yes, just some old men with jokes," I snicker.

"That will be quite enough of that, young lady," Mr. Laurence says, though his lips twitch. "We have been talking with Layla, and there are some changes happening in her career. They're all good things, but we have to pull Jordan away as her manager."

"While we absolutely are all in agreement that Layla is an adult and a big fucking girl," Mr. Terrick says, sobering me. "We all want to make sure that she has a really solid support system in Vermont when she goes to meet her new bandmates."

I mouth "*Vermont?!*" Why the fuck are they in Vermont right now when they flew in earlier this week?

"They tend to do their thing when they're off, so they chose to go there to unwind," Allen explains, seeing my face.

“I’m tracking this all, but what do you need from me? Is this in any way dangerous to my girl, because her past experiences with her previous bandmates were pretty awful,” Tyler states. He is a pretty gruff person, and calls a spade a spade. I don’t have to guess what he’s feeling, he tells me.

“Not at all dangerous, but we heard that you’ve been staying with her on tours more recently, and wanted to offer you a proposition,” Uncle Jordan explains. “There’s a hole now where I was, since I managed all of Layla’s website and social media accounts, would you be willing to contract with the label to take them over? It would mean that you’d be able to go anywhere she is.”

“Full security clearance,” Mr. Allen agrees. Oh that would be nice. There’s been a couple of things he couldn’t come with me due to security concerns, even as my boyfriend.

“Keep talking,” Tyler murmurs. *“Social media is something that I can schedule to post if I have images and text, and her website needs some updating I noticed.”*

I didn’t realize that he paid that close attention.

“She’ll have a new assistant assigned to do things like remind of her calendar obligations—”

“Send her calendar to me as well, and I can sync it to her Apple Watch,” Tyler says nonchalantly. *“Layla, you already wear it religiously, you may as well make sure it keeps you organized too.”*

“Technology and I are not friends,” I sigh.

“Eh, it’s literally your one and only flaw, and it’s not even a very big one,” Tyler teases me, making me smile.

The men in front of me eat this shit up. They’re looking at the phone and then me as if they can hear wedding bells, and I roll my eyes. They’re too much.

“The computer networks for those working on the tour probably need to be updated, and the security on our servers need an overhaul,” Jordan says, warming up.

“Okay, okay,” Tyler chuckles. “Yes, send me the contract, and I’ll look it over. I’ve been talking about releasing my subplot because of how much time I spend with Layla, but was worried about the days I’m in Georgetown.”

“You’d be with the tour during your contract, and of course able to work on whatever else you need to do. You’re completely remote, correct?” Mr. Allen asks.

“Yes, I am,” Tyler says, though he sounds preoccupied. “Lay, are you ready to basically move in together? We talked about it...”

“You’re kidding, right?” I tease. “I am trying to stay still so I don’t embarrass myself in front of the bosses, but yes I am absolutely ready for this! You?”

“Yeah,” he says, and I can hear his smile through the phone. It’s the slow, ‘cat that ate the canary’, shit-eating grin that makes my thighs clench every damn time.

“Okay,” I breathe. I blush as I shiver. Damn, I can’t wait to see him.

“I can push the meeting to Friday,” Mr. Allen says, clearing his throat. Blinking, I nod, trying to get a hold of myself. I can not be turned on during this meeting. I’ll take care of myself on a video call with Tyler and my trusty vibrator. You gotta do what you have to do when you’re long distance.

“Yep, and I’ll text you your plane details,” Jordan says, hiding his smile. “Are you good to fly in tomorrow? I would say tonight, but it’s short notice. Thursday shouldn’t cut it too close and there’s no chance of snow this early in the year.”

It’s August, so I would hope the fuck not. I love the sun, which is why I love living in South Carolina when I’m not on the road. The cold and I are not friends.

“Great,” Tyler says. “So you just casually decided this was a solution to your problems?”

“Yep,” the men in front of me say with Cheshire grins.

They're up to something. "I don't trust whatever is happening over there," I mutter. They're some of the most powerful men in the music industry, but then I'll see the little boys in them. I don't think guys ever really grow up.

"You don't have to trust it," Jordan says. "This is the best outcome for things. I'm calling it serendipity."

Shaking my head, I decide to just go with it. Either way, I get to see Tyler tomorrow for better or worse. Hopefully, the band I'm going to see this week doesn't completely suck.

I don't think I, or my career can take it.

Two

TYLER

I'm a little surprised by the turn my life just took, but I can't say I'm not excited. Layla is the love of my life. She's so passionate about her work, makes me feel like I'm the center of her world when she looks at me, and we make sense together.

My gorgeous flower in a sea of numbers and computer facts. I love it, don't get me wrong. Coding speaks to me in a way few things do, and fixing things fuels my soul.

The execs promised to send me a contract, so as I maneuver to my email, I see it's already there. The old men work fast. Not only that, it sounds as if they're genuinely interested in keeping Layla safe.

She's had a shit run of bandmates since she's been on tour, outside of her family that is. Lennon and her husbands are amazing, and you can see the magic they create when they play together.

Unfortunately, when they took a step back from touring, Layla started traveling and performing with Mav and Atlas. The unfortunate part is that they played with my girl's emotions, without any intention of following through.

I may punch them if I ever see them again for forcing the world to accept that the pieces of shit have to exist with the rest of us. And lastly, the previous group of idiots that walked off Layla's tour: the drug addicts and the sexual predator.

Shuddering, I force my thoughts away from what could have happened the last time Zeke climbed onto Layla's bus without permission when I was there. He deserved every bruise and punch while my little flower wrapped the blanket around her body like a toga and then kicked him in the balls. The bastard was still holding onto his tiny, injured... *pride* when I threw him off the bus.

Taking a cleansing breath, I open the email offer in my inbox, adjusting my glasses. I've been working for the past year to contract companies looking for cyber security as well as the typical IT services. They pay well, on time, and tend to let me do my own thing as long as I can continue to make their networks impenetrable.

This can't be right.

There are way too many zeros in this contract for my work. Picking up the phone, I call Layla's uncle, who is the contact at the end of the email. I have already scoured the contract, which asks me to oversee all of the networks for each tour remotely. In theory, it's something I can do, but it's still too much damn money.

"Hi, Mr. Miles," I say politely as I sit back, brows furrowed. "I'm looking over the salary proposed for the work contracted, and it just seems like an astronomical amount for what you're asking for. Is this a mistake or a joke?"

“I can assure you that Music Horde Records doesn’t joke about money in any amount,” Mr. Miles says ruefully. “Not only are you taking over the social media for Layla, you’re also making sure our systems can’t be hacked, and our computers actually work. There are some people who work with us who hate computers. Do you work alone?”

“I do, so day to day management may be difficult if it’s something I need to be present for to fix,” I admit. “This money would allow me to expand, find good people in Los Angeles who would be able to take care of the in-person customer care for you. This is just insanely generous, Sir.”

“It is. Layla is incredibly special to the label, and since her father isn’t well, we take responsibility for making sure she’s safe and happy. Giving you a way to expand your company while being with her is important to us,” Mr. Miles explains.

I know Layla’s dad had a break with reality five years ago, but she doesn’t talk about him often. My little flower also won’t let me go with her when she visits him once a year, so I’m just grateful she’ll let me hold her after.

One day she’ll learn she doesn’t have to be so damn strong all of the time.

“Layla is special to me too,” I say, realizing I’ve been quiet for too long. Mr. Miles doesn’t mention it. I have the feeling he’s used to sitting in silence and waiting people out. He’s damn good at it. “I think I’m in shock after this offer.”

I have no problems being bluntly honest, and Layla’s uncle chuckles. *“You come very well recommended. We may have poked into your past employers before we suggested this to Lay,”* he reveals.

Yep, wiley bastard. I never want to play poker with this man.

“Okay then,” I whisper. I want to be with Layla every moment possible, and as I look around this apartment, I know this isn’t where my heart is. It’s in Los Angeles with my girl. I won’t miss this place, and it came furnished. I can fit all of my

belongings in two duffle bags. “I just need to sign this contract then and pack up, and I’ll be in Vermont tomorrow.”

“Did you see the other email come through? It’s from my personal email instead of the label’s,” Mr. Miles says.

Leaning forward, I scroll through, finding it in spam. According to this, I’m flying out at two in the afternoon in business class without a connection. Nice.

“I see it now, thank you. It looks like I’ll have plenty of time to be ready. I’ll let the company I sublet from know that I’m giving up the apartment. I’m all paid up through the end of the month.” I shrug. I’m not worried about the three weeks I won’t be living here.

“Absolutely not,” Mr. Miles says. *“We’ll be reimbursing you for that forfeit because of the lack of time given to you to make other arrangements.”*

“Oh, well...”

Mr. Miles won’t hear of it, and I shake my head because the man is a force of nature.

“We’re excited to have you on the team. Do you have an idea of who you’d like to join you that would be able to live in Los Angeles or lives here now?” Mr. Miles asks.

“I’m excited too,” I say respectfully, because I am, despite the lack of time to wrap my brain around it. “I actually have some friends from college that are located out there that are amazing at tech. They have their own business as well, but this would fit well into it.”

“Name of the business?” Mr. Miles asks. I can hear him tapping at the keyboard, and I have a feeling he has a penchant for getting information in illegal ways. I use my skills for good, but I’m sure he has his reasons for it.

“Liam Cybersecurity Experts,” I tell him. “They are more than capable of doing IT work as well, and that’s where they started before finding they enjoyed this a bit more. They’re three brothers, and named the business after the eldest.”

“A bit egotistical,” Mr. Miles snorts, making me smile.

“You’d think, but there used to be four of them. Liam died in combat, working behind enemy lines. He was going to join them in creating the company when he got out, but it just didn’t happen,” I explain. “So, this is their memorial to him.”

“I stand corrected,” he says softly. *“I’ll do a little research on them, but give them a call and see if they’re interested. We’ll send out a contract to them if everything works out.”*

“You’re like magic,” I mutter before I can bite the words back. I’m just in awe of this man.

Chuckling, Mr. Miles says, *“I actually get that a lot. Take care of our girl for us. She’s had a hell of a last few years.”*

“You got it,” I say before signing off.

Now, to convince people I haven’t spoken to in way too long to go into business with me. That’s just perfect.

Dialing a number I know from memory still, I listen as the line rings and rings. Hanging up, I call back once again because I’m a persistent asshole. I can barely remember why we stopped talking, because it was a stupid fight that happened seven years ago.

We got drunk together, when they were in town over the holidays because their parents still live in Georgetown. One thing led to another, and I called them out for letting their grief continue to haunt them. They’re not the same men as before, and while I understand it because Liam was my best friend too, he’s been gone for almost ten years by now.

They forgot how to live.

“Hey, asshole,” Ronan barks when he finally picks up the phone. *“You finally over our tiff then?”*

Sputtering in surprise, I shake my head. Same old Ahearn brothers.

“I didn’t realize I was the one with my knickers in a wad,” I snicker.

“Meh, Finn is still a bit sore, but we’re good if you are,” he reassures me.

“How good?” I ask with a small wince. “I kind of fell into a business proposition.”

“You sound like you’re clenching,” he says. *“It’s best to use lube before you take it up the ass, or at least that’s what I hear.”*

I shake my head. I just can’t with him, but I really have missed Ronan.

“I didn’t fall onto a cock, I said a business proposition,” I remind him.

“Sometimes that’s the same thing,” Sean chimes in, making me realize that I’m on speakerphone.

Son of a bitch.

“Are you done?” I ask. “My girlfriend’s uncle hired my services for their music label. Network security, IT services, troubleshooting. The issue is, I’ll be on tour with her for—”

There’s a request for a video chat and I sigh.

It’s going to be one of those calls. Great.

Accepting that it is my fate to face the Ahearn brothers today, I click the button so that a video call will begin. The unhelpfully good looking brothers make faces at me, squishing their faces against the phone and making me chuckle.

“You have a girlfriend?” Finn crows once they move back a little. I guess he was listening the entire time. He may still lay me out the next time I see him in person, but I figure I’m safe enough for now.

“Layla Campbell,” I chuckle, pushing my hand through my brown hair as I think about her. “She is a musician and we’ve been together for five years. Her uncle is offering an obscene amount of money to work with their label. They need people who are local to do the hands-on tasks, and you’re the first intelligent knuckleheads I thought of.”

“That’s an oxymoron,” Sean says helpfully, making my lips twitch.

We could go around and around like this for hours, but I need to get packed.

“So noted. Do you want the details? I know that your company is doing really well—”

“I’m touched. You’re cyber stalking us,” Ronan teases. *“We are, but we just ended a pretty big contract we were working with, so we have some time on our hands.”*

“Did you end on good terms?” I ask, interested.

“Oh, yes, but it was a two-year contract, and they don’t need as much maintenance for their servers anymore. Plus, the government contracts that they were concerned about people hacking information from also ended, and we scrubbed their servers,” Ronan explains. *“We ended amicably with the understanding that they could reach back out if needed.”*

Nodding, I decide that all makes sense. “I’m not a stalker,” I scoff, returning to a past comment he made. “My new contract is, though. He’s currently checking into you after I mentioned that you may be able to take on *Music Horde Records* for their IT needs. Like I said before I was so rudely interrupted, I’ll be remote, so I won’t be able to go into the office if there are troubleshooting issues that I can’t fix over the phone.”

“So hand holding,” Finn says. The way he says it could be taken as a sneer, but there’s not a hint of it on his face or tone. Sometimes, you need to walk someone through a computer issue, or show them a new skill for people who are visual. Other times, it feels like the computer is possessed by a demon that likes to spit out error codes for no damn reason.

“Pretty much.” I shrug. “The money is really good, the record label is clean, and the opportunities are endless.”

“You’re selling this hard,” Sean snorts. *“What’s the deal with you traveling with the girlfriend. Is she a stage-four clinger or something?”*

“Not at all,” I scoff. “She’s had some very shady bandmates, and I beat the shit out of one recently because he kept coming onto her bus when she was supposed to be

sleeping. Fortunately, I was with Layla the last time. Unfortunately, we weren't wearing many clothes. It didn't keep her from kicking him in his balls, though."

"Fucker," Finn snarls, surprising me. *"Are they still on tour with her? What the hell kind of record label is this?"*

"Calm down," I tell him. "They're actually really invested in her safety, and recommended that I start touring with her full time. That's kind of how this all came about today. Her bandmates all over indulged when it came to drugs, and Zeke kept blaming that along with the sleepwalking. The three of them walked off the tour. So now, she's meeting with potential new people to see if they're a good fit."

"Damn," Ronan mutters. *"Has she had any other issues with bandmates?"*

"Yeah," I sigh. "A couple of older guys who had no business messing with Layla when they weren't serious about her. She was barely twenty-one, I think? Her uncle and the other exec guys want to make sure she has a good support system when she meets these new band members. I don't think they'd let her even consider them if they were dangerous, but she's had enough issues that they're being cautious."

"Any other time I would warn you that you may be dating a drama queen, but I get the sense this isn't the case," Sean says, lips twisting. *"Alright, well I'm willing to have a go at the contract they send over. Finn? Ronan?"*

"Yeah, got nothing better to do." Ronan smirks.

"Don't you have an apartment?" Finn says out of the blue. *"What are you doing with it while you live out of a bus?"*

"I am moving out tomorrow morning and letting it go." I grin. It's kind of freeing in a sense to be a nomad, and I'll be able to spend every night with Layla wrapped in my arms.

"Oh, you got it bad." Finn smirks. *"Yeah, I'm in. I want to see where this all goes. I demand popcorn!"*

Rolling my eyes, I say, "I missed you assholes too. Talk soon. Oh, and the man hiring you is Layla's uncle, so maybe

don't mention that you think she's a dramatic princess. It also couldn't be further from the truth."

"Alright, alright, I'll behave. I still want to meet the woman who stole your heart. You're one the prickliest bastards I know," Finn says.

It's true, but Layla softens me. She also brings out the protector in me, so the guys she's meeting better fucking watch it.

"Yeah, maybe. I have to pack up my shit, but we'll definitely chat soon. Don't lose my number." In the true asshole fashion, I disconnect the call without saying goodbye.

Smirking at the middle finger emojis I receive in a newly created group chat, I hum under my breath as I start to pack.

Three

ATLAS

I'm so bored. Propping my legs up on the table in our hotel, I take a drag of my blunt as I stare up at the ceiling. I just want to forget that our tour is over for now. The high of badly behaving and playing our way through Europe was a pretty great way to ignore our Stateside mistakes. Damn, Lyrica, why did you have to go off the fucking rails?

Mav and I went into hiding from our own life five years ago on an international tour. It was the perfect way to disappear, get lost in the music, and we had a blast. Even made a new friend, even if he is psychotic.

Now the record label told us that we're unfortunately getting a babysitter for our new performer. Jordan and the

other execs explained that we are considered a liability right now, and that no one else will have us.

Fucking great.

“Are you in your head again, boy?” Mav asks, making my lips twitch slightly as he launches his big frame onto the couch. It’s a good fucking thing that this thing is made for nuclear destruction. If it was super fancy furniture, it would be kindling now and we’d both be on the ground.

We aren’t staying in a complete shithole, but it’s not the Ritz. We want to fly under the radar without the media figuring out we’re back in the States after a long hiatus overseas. It was the only way for us to be able to try to forget Layla.

Burlington, Vermont also has some of our favorite dive bars, so we are spending this week getting stoned and drunk before we have to reign in our shit for whatever goody two-shoes the label is giving us.

Jordan has been good to us over the years, even though we didn’t deserve it after what happened with his niece. Our intentions didn’t align with what she needed or wanted. Besides, I’m pretty sure she’s dating someone now.

Not that I’ve been stalking the internet for information on her or anything.

“A bit,” I admit to Mav as he settles his head in my lap. My dick immediately twitches, making sure to announce that our hot boyfriend is incredibly close to it and we want attention.

Down boy. Daddy will give us what we need when we deserve it.

I will say, the time away has allowed Mav and I to engage in some pretty kinky shit. We’ve shared women in sex clubs, dominated them together, but surprisingly neither of us have fucked them.

There’s a lot you can do to edge and tease a woman before giving her the release she begs for without even taking your dick out of your pants.

It's something we agreed upon, we'll only ever fuck each other. It seems odd, but we know we're committed to each other. We're the only ones that know every dirty secret about the other and we still accept the other.

He's my ride or die. No one else will understand our choices.

Taking another hit from the blunt, my lips twitch as Mav's eyes zero in on them.

"You got any to share there, Altas?" he teases. Mav has thick lips, and they're meant to wrap around my cock and suck. He's gorgeous with thick black hair and amber eyes I could drown in any day. There's so much his soulful eyes can say when they're not shuttered and locked down.

"Hmm," I say, leaning over to press my lips against his. Mav opens his mouth, so I can exhale hard, shotgunning my smoke. There's a vague stinging sensation along my scalp as he digs his fingers into my naturally spiky hair. I've let it grow out a bit more, loving the pain when he pulls on it.

We've both leaned into our depravity the last few years. There's no one to pull us back, no one to tell us no. Jordan sent us off with *Pull the Moon Down* and told us to figure out our shit.

Instead, we decided to stop fucking caring.

Together, we drift in the feel of our high, lips pressed together as the smoke curls around us as it escapes from his nostrils. Slowly, we indulge in a slow kiss, moaning as our tongues tangle together.

Only the bang of the hotel door as it slams against the wall makes me glance up. Draven, our other disgraced band member, walks in with boxes of pizza, eyes raised.

"Unless you're planning to fuck each other out here and let me watch, you may want to cool that shit out. Maybe share your weed with me too?" he suggests as he closes the door behind himself.

I roll my eyes. I know I'll be hungry soon, and pizza really does sound delicious.

“You always joke about it, but I don’t think you could handle watching Mav and I fuck,” I chuckle darkly. Mav doesn’t move, watching our exchange with detachment.

I’ve been smoking most of the day, while that was Mav’s first real hit today. He’s going to be adorable and super mellow for a bit.

“We could be anywhere, and while the pizza is decent and the drinks are good, why Vermont?” Draven asks with a sigh.

“For the reasons you stated and because it’s easy to disappear here,” I explain. “We also needed to give the label a base of operations where we’d be for a bit. We’re supposed to be meeting that chick tonight, remember?”

“Ugh, the cunt babysitter,” Draven groans. “Lyrica, how could you do this to us!”

Did I mention that he’s psychotic as well as dramatic?

Snorting, I shake my head, handing him my blunt. There’s not much left, and it’ll help take the edge off his crazy. “We don’t have veto power, but the chick we’re meeting does. No one else will take us unless we’re willing to break our contracts with *Music Horde Records*.”

“I would much rather stick my dick in a hole filled with rusty nails than cross Jordan Miles or any of the execs over there,” Draven snorts. A little graphic, but same. “*Music Horde* has always been good to me, we can meet the wench and see if she’s any good as a performer.”

Draven is British, and actually dated Lyrica off and on while we toured. I’ve managed to get used to his odd sort of charm over the years.

“I don’t want to stick my dick in any hole yours is in, for the record,” Mav says, grimacing. Pressing my lips together, I hide my smile behind my hand. “Atlas, for real, what the fuck?”

Losing the battle, a chuckle escapes. “I’m sorry, I can’t help it,” I snicker. “We all know, though, that the only hole you’re interested in is mine.”

Mav gives me a heated look, sitting half up to kiss me hard. My hand presses against the contracted muscles of his abs, making me groan. We definitely don't have time for the things I want to do to him. We have two hours before we have to meet this girl, and I'll need food and a shower first.

Mav situates himself next to me, opening a pizza box as Draven takes a drag from the blunt, collapsing into an armchair.

"Jordan wouldn't send us someone who can't sing," I remind them.

"Singing and performing are two different things," Mav counters, nudging me with his shoulder. Draven drops his head back as he holds the smoke in his lungs before slowly exhaling it. I can literally see the tension beginning to slowly bleed away.

The man is wound too tightly. Maybe he should be high when we go to the bar. At the very least, it would be funny.

"Agreed to both counts," Draven murmurs. His tattooed fingers hold the blunt, his tall, lithe body no longer coiled like a snake. This man doesn't have many sweet bones in his body, not even for us.

I don't know if this girl can handle us. "I have no time to babysit the babysitter. Whoever she is, she'll sink or swim on her own merit. We won't help her either way. I have a feeling we'll have to accept her as our new lead singer if there's no one else who will have us."

"Fuck, it's not even our fault that Lyrica couldn't keep it together," I sigh. I'm too old to babysit anyone, though I gladly did it for Lennon, Layla's older sister. We were family... until we weren't anymore and I fucked it all up with Mav.

Finding Lyrica laying in her own puke with Draven screaming for help wasn't pretty, and I'm adding it to one more mistake in my life that I'll never be able to atone for. I hope she gives rehab a real shot this time.

“Aye,” Mav sighs. “We don’t touch anything harder than pot, but Lyrica’s demons demanded a little more in payment.”

“That’s quite enough of that,” Draven says, thumping the arm of the chair as he stands. His blond, wavy hair sits perfectly, even as his piercing blue eyes glare at me. I’ve never seen this shade of eye color on anyone else, and I’ve even checked to see if they’re some sort of contact.

He tried to beat the shit out of me for searching his eyes for them. Eh, I call it bonding.

Pinching the end of the blunt to make sure it’s out, he pockets it. “We knew Lyrica well and hoped she’d get clean. That’s all we can do. I don’t like to think about... that night. I’m going to catch a nap before this fiasco.”

Grabbing my own slice of pizza, I watch him dramatically flounce to his room. The room is just nice enough to be a suite with two bedrooms. I’m bunking with Mav, which is just the way I like it.

Taking a bite, I get lost in my thoughts as I eat. Mav brings me back to the present when he squeezes my thigh.

“I think a nap sounds good,” he teases with a smirk. Throwing my crust back into the box, I shake my head.

“If I go into that bedroom with you, I will not be napping, and neither will Draven with how loud we are,” I remind him.

Shrugging, he closes up the boxes and gets up, shoving them into the fridge. There’s a tiny microwave in this place too which will heat the pizza up well later, but I do love it cold for breakfast too.

Ugh, sometimes, I really miss Roark’s cooking. Hanging out with them on tour while we ate and hung out was everything. I’m just glad I still have Mav.

“Do you care who hears?” Mav asks. “I think you need to get out of your head for a bit, and let Daddy take care of you. If you’re really worried about Draven’s beauty sleep, I have a new leather gag I’ve been wanting to try out.”

My dick stirs again, and I nod eagerly. I need this. The pot hasn't helped me feel settled yet, but this never fails. Otherwise, I may bite the head off this girl, despite my good intentions.

Mav grabs me around the waist as I walk toward him, big, burly bastard that he is, and throws me over his shoulder. I'm not a small guy, though he's built like a tank.

"I need you to be nice tonight," he says as he crosses the living room. If this was five years ago, we'd never have to have this conversation. I was typically the easy going one. "So, if I have to fuck my cum into you a few times to calm the beast, I'll consider it my duty to the label."

Barking out a laugh as he steps into the bedroom, I remind myself of how lucky I am to have Mav. My life would suck without him.

"Yep, love you too," he says, right before he launches me on the bed.

Damn, I will never get used to that, and yell my head off every time.

"Oye, people are trying to sleep here," Draven complains as I bounce on the bed.

Sputtering out a laugh, I yell, "Not anymore!"

Mav slams the door behind himself, stalking toward me, and I give in to every depraved craving I have when it comes to this man.

Never being judged for them when he's just as bad makes for the perfect relationship.

DRAVEN

I'm listening to my bandmates, and the closest things I have to friends, bang each other in the room next to me. Ugh, I really need to get laid, but I haven't put any effort into it since I

found Lyrica on the floor of the hotel bathroom after she overdosed.

Nope. Not thinking about that. I meant it when I said earlier that I didn't want to talk about it.

Knowing how to push through these unwanted thoughts, I push my boxers down my hips. The second I walked into my bedroom, I stripped off my clothes. I can't sleep in anything constrictive, and at night I tend to sleep naked. Atlas and Mav are the same way, so it's never been an issue.

Palming my cock, I listen to the grunts as I assume Mav takes Atlas' ass. Mav seems like a top. *Fuck.* My breaths get thready as I tug the piercing in the crown of my cock. It jumps in my hand, making me smirk.

"Take good care of me, and I'll do the same," I mutter to my dick. It's not the first time I've spoken to it, and I doubt it'll be the last. My tattooed hand strokes and tugs my cock expertly, the sounds coming through the walls a pornographic musical accompaniment.

I've heard them fuck so many times, I'm dying to watch them. I don't know if it's simply because I'm curious, or because I'm interested. The only person I've ever loved was Lyrica, and the drugs twisted that.

No.

My other hand squeezes my balls punishingly, because pain helps me focus. It's my friend, a way to control my crazy, and sometimes even gets me off.

I surprisingly can't hear much from Atlas, making me wonder if Mav has him gagged.

"Such a good boy, taking my cock. Fuck, you're so goddamned tight, baby," Mav groans.

Dammit, words like that may make me come too soon. Mav has such fierce Daddy vibes.

Taking a breath, I glide the hand squeezing my balls up my body. I continue to stroke my cock, grunting as I get closer. The tip is red and weeping pre-cum, begging me not to draw it

out too long, but it's not in me not to torture myself. I like to do things the difficult way.

It's more fun that way.

As my fingers graze my nipple, I pinch it hard, gritting my teeth together as I drop my head back and groan. I don't want the fuckers to know that their fuck fest is keeping me awake. They clearly already knew it would before starting.

The hand on my cock smears the pre-cum beginning to slide down it, using it as lube. I love pain, but less friction will keep me from coming too soon. Grunting, my fingers leave my nipple to wrap around my throat.

Lyrice loved to choke me during sex, and would ride me with her hands around my throat. Fuck, she was my match in every way when it came to sex.

Tightening my hand to close off my airway, I continue to stroke my cock. At first it's lazily as I listen to Mav fucking his pretty little bottom. My pace speeds up as my ears begin to ring as my lungs begin to beg for air.

Ignoring it, my eyes roll as my balls start to tighten. Goddamn, I love the rush, the high of seeing if I can come before I pass out.

I have only passed out twice, waking up later to find that I came after my air ran out, and I was covered in quickly drying cum. I'm a kinky asshole.

"That's it, baby. I control your orgasm. It's fucking mine," Mav growls. It may as well be a shout with how well I can hear him. I can't tell volume control as well when I'm in the middle of a choke and wank. "I'm gonna fill your ass now. Fuck, you're so gorgeous."

Shuddering, I can't hold out anymore as I explode. Ropes of cum hit my abs and chest, my release making my eyesight start to darken. Wait...

That's my hand. Releasing my throat, I gasp in a breath as I continue to stroke my dick as I drain my balls.

“Fuck,” I rasp, aftershocks still rolling through me. I’m quite the mess. I should get up, but continue to lay on the bed until the black dots racing across my vision stop. It would suck to fall and have to interrupt Mav and Atlas midfuck.

Swallowing hard, I finally sit up, content when the room no longer swims. While I won’t be catching a cat nap, I do feel much better. I need a shower, though.

Getting up, I whistle to myself as I push my boxers off my body, leaving them on the ground as I step out of them. Opening the door, I smirk as I listen to Mav talk Atlas through his orgasm. Yep, I’m almost convinced that Atlas is gagged right now.

I can’t pass judgment, nor would I ever. At least I get first dibs on the shower. Walking into the bathroom, I wince as I feel the cum drying on my skin. Turning on the water, I climb in, not minding the sting of cold water as I pick up my body wash and clean my body.

I really hope this girl can sing. No bullshit, I love playing the drums, losing myself in the music. I crave the feel of the lights, the sound of the crowd, all of it fuels me. I’ve had month-long hiatuses between gigs as one tour ends and the next begins, and it’s never bothered me because I had the guarantee I would play again.

Frowning, I pour some shampoo into my hand before massaging it into my hair and scalp. I could make the water warmer, but Mav, Atlas, and I haven’t really slept since we arrived back in the States.

I’ve been awake for at least three days straight, and really would have loved a nap. I’m forty-two and the oldest of these assholes, though not by much. I need some beauty sleep. Since I’m not going to get it, I’ll shock my body into thinking the stinging, freezing water drops are my salvation from sleep.

Once done, I shut off the water and dry off.

“You about done in there?” Atlas asks, knocking. His voice sounds rough, and I smirk imagining the way he must

have grunted and screamed his pleasure out around the gag. Some guys have all the luck.

“Just drying off,” I respond, doing just that. Deftly tying the towel around my waist, I stride around him after opening the door. “Thanks for the mood mission. I didn’t have that nap after all.”

Mav snorts as he leans against the wall, watching Atlas disappear into the bathroom hungrily. “Do you need coffee or something old man?” he teases me.

“Nah, I think my cock cage will keep me awake as long as this chick’s hot,” I tell him with a shrug. As my dick swells, the bite of it will be delicious.

Mav looks at me for a moment before a slow, vicious smile curls over his face. “Did you decide to run her off then?” he asks.

“No, we need the wench. Instead, we’ll see what she’s made of. If she can’t handle me at my best behavior, she won’t be able to handle me at my most psychotic.” I shrug. “Do you truly expect me to be good the entire time she’s with us?”

“That’s asking for too much,” he agrees. “Alright, if you don’t need me, I’m going to go save water with Atlas. Don’t dismember your cock there, alright?”

Snorting, I enter my room, dropping the towel to give him an eyeful of my ass before shutting the door behind me. Deciding to not wear underwear, I find the cock cage and fasten it around my dick. The trouble I have with these is that I still get hard, so I find that I enjoy the bite of pain when I wear them.

While others wear them to give complete control over their body to someone else, I haven’t found anyone that I want to do that with. Not even Lyrica.

Blowing out a breath, I pull on a soft pair of leather pants, tucking myself carefully in as I zip them up. There’s something sexy as fuck about wearing these. Maybe I’m a glutton for punishment, but I love the way they feel along my

skin. I've also found that the weather cools off in late August in Vermont.

It can go from summer to fall the moment the sun goes down. It's bizarre. It does remind me of England in that sense, though, so it's not so bad. Typically, I'd just wear a mesh shirt with this, but they're a bit stuffy in Vermont. They have a thing against nipples I think.

Rolling my eyes at the thought, I compromise with a tank top that shows off the music related ink that curls up my arms. We're meeting in a bar, this should work fine. A quick brush and style to my blond hair, I call it good. I finish the outfit off with black socks and combat boots. This is about as normal as I get.

As I leave the room to meet up with the guys, I find that Atlas is wearing jeans, a black long-sleeved tee-shirt, and black eye liner with his shit kickers, and I bark out a laugh in amusement. I took so long fiddling with the cock cage that they are completely ready to go.

Even Mav is wearing about the same in a pair of dark wash distressed jeans, a hunter-green shirt with the sleeves pushed up, and combat boots. I'm glad we're all showing our true colors today.

"Did you think we'd dress up for this girl?" Mav chuckles darkly. "The bar we're meeting at is just down the road. We can easily walk, which we planned when I gave the bar name to Jordan. It's just a quick meet and greet. Who knows, this is how I met Lennon from the *Darkest Nights* years ago."

"I wish I'd met her as a scared little girl," Atlas says. I don't know what the story is there, but I know they used to be really tight with her. Toured with that band for years.

Whatever, I have no business pushing, so I don't. We all have our ghosts.

"Let's get this over with and meet her," I mutter, grabbing my room key. I really don't plan to be there long. Maybe I will catch a nap before these two insist on bar hopping again.

Together, we walk out of the room and lope through the hotel lobby. No one pays us any mind, which is exactly how I like it, unless they're screaming my name at a concert. There's a degree of separation there, and I'm riding the high of performing.

It's just different.

The walk to the bar isn't long, the sun already gone from the sky. Wind tears through my hair, but I'm not bothered by it. The pinch of the cock cage is worse than this weather could ever be.

"I forgot to tell you something," Mav says, throwing his arm around Atlas.

"Oh?" he asks, waiting.

"Draven is back on his bullshit and is wearing the penis prison," Mav tells him.

Bollocks. That's not what it's called. Asshole.

"Yes, please refrain from making out in public to keep me from getting hard," I say sarcastically. Opening the door to the bar, I'm surprised it's fairly busy. Possibly regulars, I refuse to believe that people go out of their way to discover dive bars. "Do we know what she looks like?"

"You looking for someone?" a bouncer asks, brow raised. He's clearly checking identification, but I haven't needed mine checked in quite a while. We also don't plan to be an issue.

"All I know is that she's got dark-blond hair and will be wearing a dark blue dress." Mav shrugs. Ugh, that could be half a dozen people. "Oh, she'll be wearing a bracelet that has a single musical note on it apparently too."

How cliché. Straightening, I realize I'm prepared to hate this girl. No matter what she looks like, how well she can perform or sing, she won't be good enough.

Even I can agree that that's not fair. Damn it, why do I have to grow a conscience at the oddest of times? Pulling on my big boy undies, that I'm actually not wearing, I decide to give her a fair shake. If I decide to hate her after, then so be it.

“Alright, let’s go find her,” I say with a forced smile.

Mav looks at me funny, and I realize I probably look silly. I don’t ever do amiable. Dropping the smile, my eyes scour the area. There’s a girl by the bar with gorgeous blonde wavy hair, but there’s a man leaned over her, chatting. Hmm, that can’t be right...

She’s the only one wearing a blue dress, though her long, tan legs take center stage in it. My dick decides to perk up, making me hide a wince. *Down boy.*

“Think it’s the girl down at the end of the bar?” Atlas asks, his gaze taking her in with interest. I didn’t know he could be interested in a girl. Hmm.

“I think it might be,” I agree. “I don’t see anyone else in a dark blue dress. It looks like she’s with someone though?”

“Jordan may have told her to bring someone with her. She looks kind of, I don’t know, young?” Mav grunts.

“We’re going to see if she’s a good fit for the band, not your cock,” I tease him. Mav flushes, making me fist pump inside. It’s rare that I can rile either of them up, so they’re moments I treasure.

Crossing the bar, I tap her on the shoulder. The most stunning blue eyes look up at me, making me swallow hard. “Excuse me, love. You wouldn’t be waiting for us, would you?”

“The label didn’t give me names,” she says with a husky laugh. Her voice reminds me of really good liquor. Dark and smooth.

Damn... I’m rooting for you to be able to sing now.

“Is this her?” Mav asks. His deep voice makes the girl shiver and her breath hitch. I’m in his line of vision, so neither he, nor the girl can see each other.

Her boyfriend cranes his neck around to look at Mav, and appears to pale. What the fuck is going on?

“I don’t know yet. I think she might be,” I tell him, though I know she is. Reaching for the wrist that has the bracelet

hanging from it, I lift it to see the musical note hanging from it. “Yeah, this is our girl. You got a name?” I ask, moving to the side so Mav and Atlas can see her.

I have a feeling something is about to happen and I want to have really good seats for it. The girl’s boyfriend looks murderous, while the girl appears pale. Eh, if she passes out, the boyfriend can catch her, right?

“Layla Campbell,” she whispers. “Fuck, what is happening right now?”

“Did you plan this?” Mav growls. “You and your uncle put your heads together because you’re that desperate, aren’t you, Layla?!”

Atlas’s eyes look as if they’re about to pop out, his mouth dropped. He seems less concerned with Mav’s words than with the specter in front of him.

Oh shit, maybe I need some popcorn. We found ourselves an ex from the past. What are the chances?

Four

LAYLA

I'm in Hell, which just so happens to exist in Vermont. Swallowing hard, I blink against the tears that threaten to well in my eyes. How are they here?

I'm going to have so many words with Jordan. Damn old man. I love him, but fuck.

Pulling on the anger I've felt for five fucking years, I channel that instead of my pain. "You think a lot of yourself for washed up musicians no one else will touch," I rasp harshly, standing tall. "The only reason my uncle would have to send me here is if there was no other choice for you. I happened to have a need for a band, you're in need of a lead

singer. If we can't make this work, I'm sure I can get on a plane to tell him that."

I don't recognize the cold, smooth words coming from my lips, but I embrace it nonetheless.

"Wow, you were always so sweet. Apparently the spoiled ice queen is making an appearance," Atlas snorts. I'm anything but what he's saying. I feel things too hard, I'm too in tune with the emotions of others.

He was always the sweet one. I remember my sister telling me all sorts of stories, and he used to be the most affectionate when we first started touring together. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Show biz," I lie, looking into his gray-green eyes. They used to say so much before this, but they're cruel and cold now.

"Why do you need a band, Chickie?" asks the man who insisted on having my name. "This seems to go both ways. Maybe you're a problem child? Emphasis on the child."

His otherworldly blue eyes move down my body, his beautiful lips curled as if I smell bad. Everyone is always so damn worried about how old I am. How is twenty-six a child?

"My bandmates have issues with overindulgence when it comes to their drug use, with one in particular having a problem with boundaries," I explain vaguely.

Mav has been scrolling his phone and ignoring me, but slowly lowers it until it hits his thigh. There's a lot that I'm not telling them, like how Zeke would make me feel uncomfortable by cornering me after a performance. He had a way of making sure everyone else was busy elsewhere when he did it too.

There was nothing innocent about it. He even moved like a predator.

"I don't think I ever got a name, but you're the boyfriend, no? I vaguely remember you from the wedding," Mav murmurs. "Where the hell were you when she was having this 'boundary' issue?"

“First of all, I’m Tyler, and I am the boyfriend. As to your question, I was having sex with her when Zeke decided to climb onto the bus uninvited. He had a key that no one knew about, and kept taking it upon himself to use it in the dead of night. He wasn’t expecting me to be visiting after one of their performances. I then kicked his ass,” Tyler grunts, unimpressed by Mav’s grumbling.

Tyler can be just as big of an asshole as these guys, if not more. He’s just never one to me. Apparently I’m attracted to men who growl. Go figure.

“I sent him packing after ensuring his balls don’t descend for a bit.” I shrug. Mav and Atlas cross their arms as they listen, as if surprised that I had the nerve to kick someone. They don’t need to know that I only had a sheet wrapped around me when I did it.

“I can take care of myself, but I don’t like to leave myself in vulnerable positions if I can help it. I have self-preservation, after all. It worked out that Tyler decided to start joining the tour more to stay with me. Now, if we’re done with the dick measuring contest, are we going to give this a chance or not?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Mav says, pocketing his phone. “I have more questions, and I need a drink. Are you even old enough to legally drink yet?”

Rolling my eyes, I turn to catch the bartender’s eye. Smiling because he didn’t do anything to me and I’m genuinely a nice person, I wait for him to make his way over to me.

“How can I help you tonight, beautiful?” he asks, waiting for my order. I was carded at the door, so he doesn’t bother doing it again.

“Can I get a Jack and coke please?” I ask sweetly. Glancing over my shoulder at Tyler, I love how he stands to cover my back with his body, his corded arms reaching around me, to lean on the bar. He’s not jealous that I smiled at the bartender, but is laying claim to me.

His glasses make him look adorable, his caramel eyes doing weird things to my insides. Tyler merely smirks as I drink him in, leaning to kiss my neck. He looks amazing tonight, his long-sleeved burnt orange shirt pushed up to show his only tattoo on his arm. His goatee tickles my skin, and makes me shiver in delight. I even manage to ignore a growl or two behind us.

I don't belong to Mav or Atlas. I never did.

"I'll take that beer on tap, please," he says, gesturing to a craft beer. The glasses add to the teacher vibes we enjoy playing with in the bedroom. Tyler enjoys orgasm denial while telling me that I'm his very good girl.

"You got it." The bartender nods. "You folks need anything?" the bartender asks Mav, Atlas, and the nameless bandmate. I refuse to push for it, I may just start calling him No-name.

It's not my fault he doesn't have manners.

Mav and Atlas order drinks, while No-name declines.

"I don't even know if we can work together," Mav tells me, continuing our conversation. "It seems like your past band wasn't a good fit, but is your boyfriend going to hang around all of the time? If you're planning on making new music, won't he get in the way?"

"Derek never got in the way when he was your social media manager," I shoot back, twisting around to look at him. Tyler moves, giving me some room, though his hand lands on the small of my back. Letting his warmth fade into me, I bite the bullet. "Tyler is the band's new social media manager, IT consultant, and cyber security expert. He's going to be with me on the tour at all times. *Music Horde Records* hired him to take over all of their technology needs."

"Oh this is good. The old man is my hero, even though I want to wring his damn neck," No-name grits out. Raising my brow at him, I wait for him to remember his manners. "Damn, Chickie, I don't think I offered my name, did I?"

“Nope,” I agree, popping the ‘P’. I’ve been fairly patient, and really need to get into the specifics, or let my uncle know that I’m going home. Maybe Tyler can move in with me at the cottage since he no longer has an apartment? Would my sister mind?

Tyler kisses my forehead, murmuring in the shell of my ear something that he tells me often. “You and me against the world, Little Flower. Take a breath.”

Forcing air into my lungs, I force myself not to nod like a loon. The last thing I need is for someone to accuse me of spiraling out. There’s just so much running through my mind.

“My name is Draven, are you quite all right over there?” He’s looking at me as if he can tell I’m having a heavy internal monologue with myself. I’m just freaking the fuck out over here.

“Fine,” I bite out, turning when my drink arrives, to take a deep sip from it. Sighing, I face them again, and no it didn’t make it any better. I don’t consume alcohol very often, so I’ll be drinking this slowly. “Too much history that should stay buried.”

“So you know these two assholes,” Draven teases me. Atlas and Mav are looking at him as if he’s grown another head, and I take this as evidence to tread lightly around him. None of them are safe.

“I used to tour with them a million years ago,” I confirm. Damn, I need to change the subject. “It was brought up that I need a babysitter. I can assure you Uncle Jordan didn’t contract Tyler to do business with him because I need a keeper.”

“I have a feeling he knew you’d need me regardless, though, Lay. You can take care of yourself just fine,” Tyler says. Always on my side, this man. His hand moves to my hip as he takes a small sip of his beer, and Mav and Atlas move to grab their drinks.

“Let’s move this conversation where there will be less people,” Mav grunts. There are booths toward the back of the

bar, away from everyone, and we walk toward one.

“I feel as if there’s a lot I’m missing,” Draven says, making me shrug. I don’t have to rip myself open for his pleasure. If the guys decide to tell him, that’s up to them. Draven stares at the booth for a moment before turning and grabbing a chair to sit at the end.

Wondering why he’d do that, I slip in after Tyler, so I’m not forced to sit next to the douche-canoes. I don’t miss the hiss as Draven tries to get comfortable.

“Problem?” I ask him. He asked me, so I feel as if it’s fair play for me to ask in kind.

Mav chuckles darkly, his cheeks becoming ruddy with color. He hasn’t had much to drink, so I wonder what is causing it. Glancing between the two of them, Draven gives a ruthless, private smile.

“Best not to ask, Chickie. Something tells me you’re a bit too innocent for the likes of us,” he says.

I dig my nails into my palm to hold onto my anger. They’re making fun of me, and I have no idea how or why. Tyler squeezes my side, forcing me to pay attention to him as he leans over enough to grab the hem of my dress and starts to slowly pull it up. Draven can’t see it, and we’re in a corner as well.

Fuck it, I’ll go wherever Tyler will lead me. I lost my virginity on a blanket on the beach, the crashing of the waves the perfect soundtrack. Of course, we made sure to take a walk further down the sand beforehand after Lenny’s wedding, so no one would trip over us.

I have no regrets. It was perfect in every way and I came five times. The feeling of Tyler’s roughened fingers as he moves higher and higher up my leg makes me want to squirm, but the guys will notice. I don’t want to end my fun before it’s started.

“Whatever that means,” I tell Draven, struggling not to roll my eyes again. At this rate, they may stay up there. “Here are things you need to know. My bandmates quit earlier this week,

saying I was difficult to work with. I'm sorry if I'm not a drug addict and refuse to do them. I also have an issue being raped in my own tour bus while I'm sleeping. Does this make me difficult to work with?"

I'm being deadly serious and Atlas leans forward as he shakes his head. "No, it doesn't. How long did you work with them?" he asks.

It's as if as soon as I stopped entertaining their bullshit, they stopped shoveling it at me. Miracles do happen.

"Two years—"

"You worked with a possible rapist for two years? Goddamn, let me guess, you didn't say anything at all?" Draven looks at me closely, and I ignore him.

Despite the conversation, Tyler's fingers graze the edge of my panties. My pussy contracts around nothing, making me stifle a huff. He's asking to be fucked for hours after this. I can feel the vibration of his chuckle, though he doesn't make a sound. I wonder if this is what it's like to use one of those remote control toys?

Could be fun.

I need to do some internet research later.

Pushing my mind back to the annoyed men in front of me, I decide to give them some honest. "Mav and Atlas had left *The Darkest Nights* three years before this, and I was going solo. I wanted to prove I could. So I ignored every time Karina, Zeke, and Marin called me the 'Label Princess' because of who I'm related to. I didn't want to rock the boat, so I sucked it up. They were fine for a while until—"

"Spit it out, Layla," Mav growls. Tyler rubs my other leg with his hand that's now under the table, deftly reaching over to pull aside my panties.

Oh fuck me. This man.

I have to answer Mav as Tyler's long fingers drag through my wetness, slowly pushing them into my channel. I open my legs even more, careful not to bump Draven.

“They started to miss their cues, play the wrong notes on stage, trying to make me fuck up,” I gulp, pretending it’s just the weight of their eyes that is making me nervous. “Zeke started ramping up his bullshit, and I only told Tyler.”

Mav and Atlas’ eyes widen at my cursing, but I’m not the same girl they knew. Lennon and her guys have ruined my language.

Tyler nods and his thumb rubs my clit as he continues to finger fuck me with the same hand. My toes curl in my boots, and I force myself to lean into his side, appearing to relax. Tyler just continues to rub my leg as he continues to tease me with his very talented ministrations.

God, I’m trying so damn hard not to make a sound.

“I will always work within whatever framework is best for Layla,” Tyler says seriously. “She was adamant she didn’t want to tell the execs or her uncle, and I already had my own company at the time, so it freed up my ability to work remotely.”

“Tyler was with me a lot, though there were some things he couldn’t come with me to, so we arranged his schedule to match when I would be available,” I explain. I’m going to need some serious gold stars for my voice barely wobbling. “We were already starting to talk about how he could travel with the tour more when my bandmates walked, stating that I was difficult to work with and Tyler was always with me on tour.”

“Slimy bastards,” Draven says, grunting as he leans forward, bracing his tattooed arms on the table. I think he may be having a personal issue, because he appears to be in pain.

Tyler starts to curl his fingers inside of me just the way I like, and my eyes flutter. My thigh muscles start to tremble and I fist my hands, sure that someone will see my fingers are shaking.

“It’s irresponsible,” Atlas says, glaring at me. Tyler simply hums under his breath, letting me know he’ll step in wherever I’m ready. Besides, my boyfriend is having way too much fun

playing with my pussy. “You could have seriously been hurt. The music industry isn’t going to respect someone who’s a martyr, Layla. You’re still too innocent for this world.”

“Speaking of, just how old are you, Tyler?” Mav asks. Draven watches interestedly, trying to piece together our misbegotten history. Pressing my lips together, I let my man speak for himself as I swallow back a whimper.

“I’m thirty-nine. Layla handles me just fine in case you’re wondering,” he says drolly. “Performing on her own solo tour is important to her, so I gave up my apartment to make this work. I’d do it again.” Tyler shrugs at their surprised faces.

“So you’re now homeless and mooching off Layla, aye?” Mav growls. I can’t help Tyler right now as he keeps me right on the edge of bliss. We’ve never done this before in public, but in bed he’ll edge me for hours until he gives me permission to come.

I’m not a virgin anymore, and I don’t pretend to be. No one can see, anyway. Besides, riding Tyler’s hand is more fun than the direction this conversation is going. Barely paying attention to them enough to follow what’s happening will keep me from blowing my ice queen personality that I’m wearing so well.

My nipples could cut glass with how hard they are right now, and Draven’s eyes keep being drawn to them. Shamelessly, he squeezes his pants-covered cock, wincing as if he’s in literal pain.

“Tyler is being paid really well by the label,” I respond to Mav, breathing through my nose to ride the waves of pleasure mounting through my body.

“Absurdly well,” Tyler snorts, moving closer to me to kiss my forehead. The move ensures that he can hold me tightly enough that the men around me can’t see my shudder of pleasure. His words are close enough to calling me a good girl that I almost tip over the edge.

“There’s no way they’re paying you all that well to stare at a computer screen,” Draven scoffs, though he’s staring a bit

too closely at me. I'm too far gone to care if he figures it out.

Tyler turns his caramel eyes to Draven, and I know his usually warm gaze is staring the man down. "The number of zeros in the contract made me call Jordan Miles, because I was convinced I was mistaken," he tells him.

"You're really saying you aren't interested in Layla's money?" Atlas chuckles. There's no mirth in his laugh, and I watch him closely. My hips want to shift, thrust, to move Tyler to fuck me harder, but I can't.

Tyler is holding me too tightly, and as if to remind me that I can't come yet, his fingers slow inside of me. Fuck, I want to whimper, complain, and tears of frustration prick at my eyes. I blame this for the words I bite out at Atlas. Sexual frustration brings out the worst in me.

"What money?" I ask. "I don't own a car, I live in a cottage in my sister's backyard, and everything is tied up in investments outside of spending money."

Tyler begins to speed up again, and I don't bother to regulate my breaths as they come faster. Let them think I'm getting riled up for a very different reason.

"So you don't have any money?" Mav pulls out his phone, and I realize he googled me while he was staring at his phone earlier. His amber eyes look angry on my behalf.

"Ty- uh." I'm having a hard time speaking as I twitch hard enough for them to notice.

"I pay for everything," Tyler reassures him. His lips touch my ear as he breathes, "You've been such a good girl for me. Cum for me, Baby Girl."

Tyler covers my mouth as I moan, gritting my teeth as I do exactly that. I don't even care as Mav and Atlas' jaws drop and Draven groans.

"I had a feeling something was happening under the table," he mutters, looking jealous as fuck as he squeezes his cock in pain.

Their eyes on me, make me gush harder around Tyler's fingers and he coos in my ear. "You deserved that, Little Flower."

Gasping as he releases me, Tyler pulls his fingers out of me to suck them clean.

"No fucking way," Atlas breathes as I fix my dress.

My chest heaves as I look at him in the high of my orgasm. "I'm not innocent, nor am I desperate. I am not a project for you, your responsibility, or a babysitter. I am twenty-six years old, and no I don't care if you have T-shirts older than me, Mav," I growl when he opens his mouth. "You know I can sing, songwriter, and perform. Those are the only things that matter right now. Are you in or out?"

"You just... shit," Draven says. I didn't think this would shock him, I'm sure he's done worse things. I know Mav and Atlas have: like fuck each other because I was a disgustingly innocent virgin.

"My decisions regarding money or my love life are also none of your business, agreed?" I press, pushing my hair over my shoulder as if I didn't just have a screaming orgasm during a business meeting. "If we are going to work together, you will respect the fact that I'm with Tyler, and he works for the label. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Draven purrs, saluting. "Fuck, please, stop being so sexy. It really hurts."

"Dude, what are you talking about? What hurts?" Tyler asks, done with his dessert.

Atlas and Mav look at each other before they crack a smile at Draven. "Since Layla gave us such an award winning performance, I'll tell you," Mav says. "Draven is wearing a cock cage, so it physically gives him pain when he gets an erection."

"Why?" I ask, intrigued. I may not be very experienced, but I am adventurous. It just usually doesn't happen in front of an audience.

“I get off on pain,” Draven says with a toothy grin. There’s an edge of pain in his beautiful blue eyes, and together, it all makes him seem a bit deranged. There’s something that’s still attractive about it, though. “I enjoy a great many things that would make you turn tail and run.”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “Either way, I’m not interested in doing any of them with you. Now are we good?”

“No,” Draven says, startling me when he slams his fist on the table. “Mav and Atlas have the unfair advantage of knowing what you sound like when you sing. For all I know, you have them under a spell, little witch. I want to see it for myself.”

“I’m not breaking out into song in a bar,” I tell him, breaking down and rolling my eyes. I don’t care if it makes me look petulant, he’s not making any sense.

“Maybe not, but I’ve seen that this town enjoys their open mic nights. I want to see what you can do with one of the rougher crowds,” Draven smirks. I’m not sure if he wants me around, or simply is pushing my buttons.

Performing no longer scares me, though songwriting still makes me nervous.

“Whatever, fine,” I sigh, gaze moving to Mav and Atlas.

Mav takes a slow sip of the last of his beer before giving me a smug smile. “I had a feeling he may insist on this. You see, I’ve been friends with this crazy fucker for a long damn time. I already signed you up for the eleven o’clock slot tonight at O’Malley’s.”

Turning his phone to me, I see that’s in exactly thirty minutes.

“Is this place within walking distance?” I ask him. I’m wearing high-heeled boots with this dress that are comfortable, so that’s at least a plus. The downside?

I’m going to be doing this without panties because they’re wet.

“Yeah... what are you doing?” Mav asks in horror as I wiggle my panties off without flashing them. Dropping them in Tyler’s lap, I shrug.

“I have a rule about performing in ruined panties,” I lie because while it’s a good rule, it’s not one I have.

Tyler merely gives me a slow, shit-eating proud smile as he shoves them in his pocket.

“We should probably go then,” he says, gesturing for me to go first.

Draven pushes away from the table as I get out of the booth.

“Knowing you’re not wearing knickers is not what I meant when I asked you to tone it down,” he says with a wince.

“Stop putting your dick where it doesn’t belong,” I tell him.

Tyler’s warm hand finds the base of my spine, and I know between his familiar warmth and the long-sleeves of this dress, I should be fine. I didn’t think it would be fifty degrees at night here in August.

“Ah, you found the root of all the evils in my life,” Draven snarks, standing.

Mav and Atlas shake their heads, moving toward the exit. I watch Draven follow them, waiting for Tyler’s lips to find the shell of my ear.

“Talk to me, Little Flower,” he murmurs.

“I don’t know if I want to kill this performance or tank it,” I sigh. “I’m feeling very conflicted.”

“We never bow to the storm, baby. We stand and tell it to fuck off. Those pipes are priceless, let’s give them a spin, shall we?” Tyler says with a sinful look. “Besides, if you throw it, I’ll know. You don’t like spankings nearly as much as I enjoy giving them.”

Smirking, I link my arm in his, strutting for the exit. We’ve been trying new things recently, but he’s wrong about this.

I like being spanked more than I let on.

Five

MAV

I never thought I'd see Layla Campbell again, but especially not like this. Atlas wraps his hand around the back of my neck, his thumb caressing my wildly thumping vein. I'm pretty pissed and insanely hard after her performance with her boyfriend.

"She grew up well," Atlas grunts, not sounding very pleased about it.

"She's still a baby, and getting into shit she can't handle," I mutter.

Layla can't handle us, and she damn sure shouldn't be garnering the looks Draven has been giving her. I don't trust

his interest or his ability to not act on his impulses. While he's a good man, there's something very twisted inside of him as well.

I don't want Layla to get any ideas about latching onto him or starting anything again with any of us. She may be with someone, but her sister is married to four men. We're too damn old for her, too damaged, not good enough.

Off-limits. It's what Atlas and I agreed when we left our best friends' wedding, joining a tour a few days later that would take us out of the country.

"I don't think Layla cares how young she is. Tyler is almost fucking forty," Atlas complains. "Is it wrong that I hope she tanks when she performs tonight? I don't know how long I can keep myself from touching her, Mav. If she doesn't impress Draven, he'll never accept her as his lead singer, and this isn't her normal crowd."

No, this bar is very blue collar and I doubt Layla will be able to impress them. The patrons like their music dark and twisted, and Layla is too bright and sparkly for them. They probably will eat her alive. I should feel bad about this, but if it gets her to fuck off back to South Carolina, so be it.

"No, because it's what I want too," I confess.

"Ho-ho, do I hear mutiny in the ranks against the great and powerful Jordan Miles?" Draven sneers, catching up with us. A glance behind us gives me a glimpse of Layla's dark-blonde hair as it bounces along her gorgeous face. Her boyfriend has his hand wrapped around hers as if he's worthy of her. No one is worthy of this beautiful girl.

Not even him.

"Maybe," I grunt. "You wanted to hear her sing, it's not my fault this bar is a little rag tag."

As I stop in front of our destination, Draven snorts. We've participated in a bar crawl or two while we've been here, and he saw just how rough this place can be three days ago.

"This is just so wrong," he sighs, shaking his head. I'm not surprised he didn't remember the name of the bar. Draven

tends to have a selective memory of things that he actually cares about. “I hope we don’t have to go back on tour right away, I’m sure to get in a fight while we’re here. I suppose I should start drinking now.”

Fuck.

“Maybe you should get rid of the cock cage,” Atlas snarks. “I’m surprised you haven’t dismembered your cock with it after the Princess’ performance.”

My lips twitch enough that I can almost ignore how hard my own cock is. I forgot how beautiful she is when she comes. We only indulged enough the last night she stayed on the bus before we fucked it up.

I wonder if Tyler is the lucky fucker who took her virginity.

“Said Princess is incoming,” Draven reminds me. “It’s probably best to fix your face.”

Great, now I’m snarling like a damn dog. Taking a breath, I nod at the bouncer before walking inside the opened door.

“Can I get an ID, girl?” the bouncer asks, making me shake my head. They didn’t bother to check mine or the guys.

Looking over my shoulder, I watch Layla merely smile, handing it over. I guess it’s different for girls. I remember how upset and petulant Lenny was the first time she didn’t get carded at a bar. I thought it was hysterical, but still handed her a travel-sized pack of gummy bears to perk her spirits up.

I used to know my tiny Valkyrie so well, but after five years of no contact with Lennon, I wouldn’t be surprised if she never wants to see me again. All because I don’t know what to do with her little sister, other than stay away from her, and that doesn’t look like a possibility.

Blowing out a breath, I head to the bar to grab a drink too. Layla isn’t supposed to be on for another few minutes, so I’ll let her figure out where to go. Dick move after I signed her up for this without permission, but I see her already making her way up to the girl coordinating this event.

“Hey, what can I get you?” the bartender asks. She’s a brassy blonde with big tits in a halter top and practically painted on jeans. I think her name is Holly? By the time we hit this bar during our bar crawl, my memory wasn’t very reliable.

“A beer please, surprise me,” I tell her with a tight smile. I’m not interested in any woman right now who isn’t Layla Campbell, even though I shouldn’t still want her after all of these years. My cock decides to deflate as I watch Holly lick her lips. No thank you. She’s a beautiful woman... for someone else.

“She’s trying a bit too hard, isn’t she, Daddy,” Atlas purrs in my ear as he grabs my ass. We’ve become more comfortable in public over the last five years. We already hurt Layla by surprising her with our secret relationship, there was no reason not to make it official.

“She is,” I sigh. “Holly isn’t my type.”

“Hailey,” Atlas corrects with a chuckle. “Let’s not piss off the woman making our drinks, baby. Now, should we bet on how badly Lay will tank?”

Glancing over at the girl in question, I see her smiling at the coordinator with a nod. Mila isn’t the most friendly person, but I can tell even she is warming up to Layla.

“I have a bad feeling this may blow up in our faces,” I mutter. “She practically grew up at Music Horde Records. Layla is used to being around all types of people. I think she’s even winning over the coordinator of this open mic.”

“No way. Mila’s got steel balls,” Atlas groans.

Tyler walks next to her, scowling to make a path through the crowd. Surprisingly, it seems to work, and Layla strides up to us.

“Nice place,” She smirks. “They have a guitar I can use, so I’ll just go solo.”

“When is the last time you’ve performed alone, chick?” Draven asks, his brow raised as he takes a sip of his drink. Whatever it is, it’ll be strong knowing him.

Leaning against the bar, I drink my beer as I realize what Draven's nickname is short for: baby chick. Apparently, he appreciates our concern about her age and singing with us, even if he's an asshole about it.

"Good question," I agree. "Can you even sing without someone to make sure you sound good?"

My question is greeted with a punch to my gut. Damn, it's even well placed, making me lose my breath as I also almost lose my grip on my beer.

Tyler glares as he moves back to Layla's side. "That's quite enough," he growls as I remember how to breathe. Atlas merely smirks at the knight in shining armor act from Layla's damn boyfriend as he pats my shoulder. "I let you get it out of your system. I'm even fine with Layla singing in this shithole because I know she can handle it. I will absolutely not allow you to psych her out before going on that stage. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," I grunt, wincing as I take another breath. Damn, he can land a punch. Fuck me.

"I don't think I've ever performed alone before," Layla says with a shrug. "I've never had to before. I write song lyrics at home or while jamming with Lennon on FaceTime on the road. Collaborative work has always resonated with me."

I don't even know how to respond to such an eloquent response. Damn, maybe she has grown up. I mean, Layla never acted immature even five years ago, which is part of what attracted Atlas and I to her. She was merely inexperienced, which appears to be something she's been busy working on as well.

"Next up, Layla!" Mila says from the stage with her microphone. "She's a first-time performer for O'Malleys, but I have a feeling she can handle this crowd just fine. Come on up, girlie."

Yep, she's officially gotten onto Mila's good side. Lay wasn't even talking to her for very long, for fuck's sake.

"Break a leg, Little Flower," Tyler says, kissing her forehead. "You got this."

Layla looks up at him, giving him a brilliant smile. Damn, she lights up the bar with her brilliance. Why does she have to be so damn beautiful?

“Coming through!” Layla yells, walking between the crowd. They part for her as if by magic, many of them a lot bigger than her. I guess if you act as if you’re full of piss and vinegar, people will believe it.

“She’s so goddamn tiny,” Draven mutters so softly I nearly miss it.

“You can’t think of her like that,” Tyler says, blowing out a breath. “Layla knows how to shoot a gun, take and throw a punch, and stab a man twice her size. Her sister’s husbands and friends have more than prepared her on how to survive in the world. No one babies that girl except you all.”

“How can she take a punch?” Draven gasps. “I could break her.”

“You’re not a violent man, don’t pretend you are,” Atlas chuckles darkly. The only reason Draven got into a fight earlier in the week here was because some ass muttered gay slurs at Atlas and I. We were a bit sloppy drunk at the time and horny as fuck so we overdid the public displays of affection.

The police weren’t called, so I didn’t even bother to tell Daddy Jordan about it.

“Derek and Orion have worked with Layla over the years,” Tyler says, answering Draven. “Lennon spars with her whenever she’s home to keep her sharp. The road isn’t a safe place for a woman without a plan, and Layla knows this. I think the only reason she froze when Zeke was standing over her bed the first time, stroking his cock was because she was in shock. It didn’t last for long. She grabbed the latest book she was reading and hit his dick with it before screaming for him to get out.”

My inability to breathe is no longer from him punching me. Damn, she could have been raped by this douchebag. I want to find him just to make sure he can never get it up ever

again. Layla should never have been in that situation. Dammit, what kind of tour was she on, and where was Jordan?

There are so many questions I want to ask, but I've made it very clear over the years that I don't care about Layla Campbell. Even if it's all a well crafted lie.

"Dick punches are effective," Draven says sagely, cupping his own. I can tell he's still wearing the damn cock cage because of how he's standing. Crazy fucker.

"Hello, O'Malley's!" Layla says over the microphone as she picks up the acoustic guitar. "I've been promised my instrument is ready to go, so please don't lose your mind if it isn't. I was blindsided about playing for you all. Doesn't mean we won't still have a good time, though."

I can see the hard weathered men and women in here looking at Layla in amusement as she plays a note to make sure the guitar is tuned. I'm surprised anyone had an instrument to loan her. She's always played an electric guitar with us, so I wonder how she'll do with this.

I think a part of me forgot Layla has an Irish heritage, because her choice of song is on point. It sounds as if she's crooning into the microphone as she plays, and it's a song I've never heard before.

"A pretty young face seems like she could have it all. There's no lines to tell a story, because her truth lies beneath her skin. Don't be so hasty about who you think she is..."

Mistakes tend to haunt you forever."

The song chills my blood as she tells a story about a woman who was scorned and broken, who was scared to love again. Swallowing hard, I wonder why I've never heard this song before. She's so confident as she changes tempo, moving on to talk about the irony of life.

There's an undertone of anger and sadness that makes everyone stop talking and lean in to listen to Layla. I never realized what a storyteller she was, because I left before she fully hit her stride as a songwriter.

"Jesus," Draven mutters. "This girl is fucking dangerous."

Nodding, I drink my beer even as it warms, simply to have something to do. The bar is mesmerized instead of throwing shit at her. I half expected them to eat her alive.

"Did you expect them to hate her?" Tyler asks, his eyes on Layla. "Would that have proved something to you? Layla is one of the most flexible people that I know. She reminds me of a few women in my life in fact."

"Pretty bold to tell us you have women on the side," Atlas says. I know that's not what he meant, but we're both tired and annoyed right now. I was really hoping she'd fuck off back to her sister.

Tyler snorts, shaking his head. "I don't like many people, I can assure you I don't have anyone on the side. I used to work IT for Lennon's neighbors, who are both quite happily married. Those women are some ball busters."

Fuck, yes I know those two well.

"Please tell me Tesa didn't teach her how to mix poisons," I groan. That is all I need: to worry I'll have rampant shits because I pissed Layla off.

"Lennon wouldn't let Tesa teach Layla anything outside of medicinal stuff for cramps, headaches, and sleeplessness." Tyler shrugs. "My point is that just because she's strong, doesn't mean she can't break. I'm here to make sure she's never pushed that far, but don't mistake my presence for her weakness."

There's definitely more to this guy than I imagined. The crowd claps as Layla finishes her song. The amount of emotion she infused into each note is different from her previous lyrics.

Placing the guitar on the stand carefully, she bows with a saucy grin.

“Thank you for not booing me off the stage!” Layla giggles. “I know I’m probably not your normal performer at an open mic night, but I appreciate your willingness to listen.”

“Ah, darlin’, you can’t be done yet,” someone groans up toward the front. Frowning, I try to spot who it is, so that I can track him while Layla walks back to us.

Unfortunately, several people ask her to sing another song, and Layla shrugs. Picking up the microphone, she says, “It’s up to Mila. Should I sing another?”

Mila hops up onto the stage and says something in Layla’s ear that the microphone doesn’t pick up. While her eyes widen, I don’t see anything else in her demeanor to show cause for alarm.

“I’ll do you one better,” she says calmly into the mic. “It seems I’m your last person tonight, so I’ll sing a couple more songs.”

“Something is going on,” I murmur as Mila hurries off stage. “Do you think there’s a fight going on that she’s trying to cover up? She said something to Layla.”

“This place isn’t exactly filled with upstanding citizens,” Draven smirks, his eyes beginning to move over the crowd, looking for hidden threats.

Layla continues to sing, but I can’t enjoy it as I watch Mila disappear into the back of the club. Hmm, not a fight, maybe something else? The last thing I want to do is witness a crime and become a liability, so I get rid of my bottle so my hands will be free.

“Let’s get closer to the stage,” I say just loudly enough for Atlas to hear me. As we move, Draven follows on instinct, as does Tyler. I think he can tell we’re on edge, and his eyes stay on Layla.

As much as I’m trying not to be pulled into her orbit, I can’t help it as she jams to the music as she plays. She can handle an acoustic guitar just fine, and couples dance as she sings. There really is something magical when Layla gets on stage. Even her sister noticed the first time she saw her, when

Layla opened for *The Darkest Nights*. None of us knew they were sisters at the time.

Damn. So much history in so little time. I would love to say it's all water under the bridge, but it's not. The water is murky and turbulent when it comes to Layla, Atlas, and I.

As she finishes her third song, the crowd whoops and hollers, and Layla carefully looks over my shoulder. Turning slowly, I see Mila give her a thumbs up. Suspicious as fuck.

“Mila just told me to wrap it up, and she's the boss,” Layla says, lying through her teeth. I don't remember her being this cool and collected or such a good liar. Who the hell is this girl? “Thanks for giving a girl such a warm welcome. This is the first time I've ever sung in a bar in front of people.”

She's gracious as she waves and slowly moves off stage as the crowd bemoans the fact that she has to leave. They have an hour or less before the last call sounds. I'm sure they'll stay occupied somehow.

Tyler meets Layla at the bottom of the stage steps, holding out his hand to help her down. He doesn't treat her as if she's made of glass, but still shows he can be a gentleman. Atlas, Draven, and I are rough and tumble guys who don't do any of that shit.

Another reason we would have never worked out.

Layla and Tyler make their way to us, smiling and chatting with people as they walk toward us.

“Time to go, now,” Tyler grits out of the side of his mouth as he passes us.

Shit.

Wondering what the fuck is happening, I move ahead of them, carving a path for us. People jump quickly out of the way even as they tell Layla how amazing she was, and somehow that burns a fire inside of me. We're officially stuck with her.

Unless we drive her out, that is.

LAYLA

Mav surprises me as he helps us leave the bar. He has amazing instincts, so even though he doesn't understand the specifics, he still can read the room enough to know that it's time to fucking go.

Smiling, I wave at the bouncer as if nothing is wrong as we walk into the crisp air.

"Spill, chick. What the hell was all of that back there?" Draven asks once we're clear of the claim.

A shudder moves down my body as I remember Mila's words. "*There's been a murder and we need to clean it up. Be a good girl, keep your mouth shut, and keep them all occupied.*"

"Mila is really fucking scary," I mutter, shaking my head. Swallowing hard, I wrap my arms around myself. "She came up and told me there had been a murder and I needed to keep everyone occupied while they cleaned it. Mila's signal to get the fuck out of there was her thumbs up."

"Fuck me," Mav whispers, shaking his head.

"Not my job," I respond automatically. Is this what it feels like to crash from adrenaline? Lennon has described it feeling twitchy and shaky, and that's exactly how I feel right now.

"Ha ha..." Atlas begins to say before he looks over at me. "Hey, are you okay, Layla?"

"Yep," I say shakily. "I think Lennon said sugar was good for this."

"For helping to cover up a murder?" Mav asks with a snort. "I guess things really have changed a lot with her."

"Adrenaline crash, you dicksicle." My boyfriend sighs as he puts his arm around me. The familiar tattoos that peek out of his sleeve help ground me. I don't feel so hot right now. "How do you feel about soda, Baby Girl? Will that work?"

“Mmhmm,” I tell him as I blink rapidly. I’m not even really upset, but it’s been a long ass day, and I’m done with today.

“Are the tears part of the crash?” Draven asks carefully, looking as if I may break.

Nodding, I brush under my eyes, getting rid of the evidence that I’m not completely bulletproof.

“I’m done with your little games, I’m tired, and I just managed to cover up a murder at a seedy bar thanks to you three insisting we go there. Are you going to tour with me or not? If not, I’m not going to just disappear like I think you want me to. I’ll have to look for other musicians who will work with me, and since I’m under contract with the label—”

“Your uncle would never let you work with someone who would hurt you,” Mav scoffs, making me roll my eyes.

“I would rather show I can make it work and deal with it than tell him. That’s what I do,” I growl, leaning into Tyler’s arms. I’ve spilled enough truth for tonight, I think.

Tyler’s phone pings, and he pulls it out as we walk down the sidewalk. “There’s a convenience store up ahead for your soda, Layla,” he says as he checks it. With a heavy sigh and curse, he shows it to me.

Mr. Miles: Layla hit the social media pages singing at O’Malleys. Not exactly the kind of place I’d suggest she perform, but a few people recognized her. I’m glad you got the guys on board. I assume Draven insisted on hearing her sing, which is typical for him. Sorry I threw you two into the fire, but glad to hear it’s working out. I’m canceling your hotel room, and having your bags delivered to theirs, so you can spend some quality time with your new bandmates. Take care of our girl.

“Fuck, this can’t be happening,” I whisper. What is he thinking? If I call him to yell at him, I’ll burst into tears.

Goddamn it, Uncle Jordan! Clearing my throat, I take a breath and start again. “It appears we have a problem.”

“What now?” The three of them practically growl.

“Uncle Jordan says that my performance hit some of the social media pages, and they’re blowing up,” I begin. “He is taking this as evidence that Draven is accepting me as your lead singer because I did so well at my ‘audition’.”

I’m adlibbing his message a bit, but I don’t think my uncle will care at this point.

“The fuck I am,” Draven snarls.

While I’m still twitchy, the tears have subsided for now. As long as I don’t have to call my uncle, I’ll be fine, I think. Turning to face him, I get in his face. “Did I not sing well? Did I not perform well enough under unbelievable pressure?”

“You mean the murder you helped to cover up?” he hisses, bending to press his nose against mine. I hate being so short even in heels. I can’t do anything about that, so I stomp on his foot. “Bloody hell, you’re feral, Jesus!”

“The three of you will stop behaving like a mix of children and kicked puppies,” I tell them, as if I have any business dictating to them. “You’re sunk without me because I’m sure you want to stay together, and that won’t happen without me. I’m not an idiot. I can tell your asses are over a barrel even though you’re insisting on giving me shit. So do you want to disappear and never perform again, or are you going to try to make this work?”

This is way more than I’ve said to any of them, and Draven holds on to his foot as he winces, while Atlas and Mav glare at me.

“You don’t have us anywhere, little girl,” Mav growls. “I suppose you’re right about our little predicament, though. We’re in until we can figure something else out. I swear trouble manages to find you.”

“It’ll be a full time job attempting to keep you safe,” Atlas mutters.

I feel naked as I shift in front of them, and I really wish I had a new pair of panties. Shit. Which leads me to my next problem. Folding my arms under my breasts, I think about the

best time to tell them I seem to be without a place to sleep thanks to my meddling uncle.

“I just want to sleep, chick,” Draven says, dragging his fingers through his blond waves. They barely tussle, and I vaguely wonder what kind of hair products he uses. Digging my fingers into my palms, I use the pinch of pain to focus. “We’ll see you whenever, but I’m ready to go home.”

“Great, Tyler and I are going to need to bunk with you,” I announce, even as my fingers twitch. “Uncle Jordan seems to think we need to bond, so he canceled our hotel room.”

Tyler hands the phone over to Mav with a heavy sigh. “We could see if we can find somewhere else, but Jordan would just figure out how to cancel those too. Fucking hacker,” he grumbles.

My uncle is many things, and he’s really damn good at all of them. Shit on a cracker. Tyler is right.

“You remember what Jordan was like when Lenny was taken,” I remind them. “You know this is child’s play to him. So unless Tyler and I are sleeping on a bench...”

“Fuck,” Atlas groans. “You’re already a pain in the ass.”

Stomping away, my eyes widen as he slams into the convenience store. Atlas grabs a couple of sodas, bringing them to the register.

“You’re hurting yourself,” Draven admonishes, tapping my fingers. He’s finally stopped hopping about like a baby, but I’m apparently still digging my fingers into my palms. “Not that I care, mind you, but you still have to play.”

Opening my hands and flexing them, I drop my arms to shake them out. I’m sure that’s the only reason he cares. Tyler rubs my back, sending me his reassurances that things will be fine. He’s yet to steer me wrong, so I’ll go with it.

“What is he doing?” I ask as I watch Atlas pay for his drinks and walk back out.

“Here’s your soda so you can stop acting so weird,” he says crassly, handing me one. It’s a coke, which is my favorite.

Something about the carbonation and sugar always helps.

“Thank you,” I say, opening the can and taking a sip. My eyes close as I swallow, humming in happiness. Adrenaline crashes really suck.

As I open my eyes and bring down the can, Mav, Atlas, and Draven are staring at my lips, while Tyler merely smirks in amusement.

“What?” I ask with widened eyes.

Shaking their heads, they walk away. “Don’t dawdle, chick. I need my beauty rest,” Draven says over his shoulder.

Tyler wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me into motion. “I’m pretty sure you’re getting under their skin, Little Flower,” he says against the shell of my eye. “The question is what are you going to do after?”

Focusing on drinking my soda, I don’t answer. Do I even want their attention? I’m pretty sure I’m still angry with two of them.

This is going to be a long damn tour.

Thanks a lot, Uncle Jordan.

Six

TYLER

Things just got a whole lot more interesting. Fucking shady ass Irish bars, asshole band members, and Jordan Miles.

Holding Layla close to me, I call her uncle. She may not trust herself to keep her emotions in check, but I have no issues calling him out.

“Is there something else you need, Tyler?” Mr. Miles says drolly.

“With all due respect, you’re a dick for putting your niece into their orbit,” I tell him, annoyed.

Layla merely looks up at me with a small smirk playing on her lips. *“I love you,”* she mouths before snuggling into me. I

feel ten-feet-tall whenever she says those words to me. It makes me want to always be worthy of her, which is why I'm so careful to never stifle her.

Layla Campbell was meant to fly free.

"Please, by all means, tell me how you really feel," her uncle says and snorts. *"Look, yes it wasn't the best way to get her a ready-made band, but at least they'll play well with her. It's about time they figured out their shit."*

"There's so much more to this than you even understand," I sigh. "The bar she played at was really rough and filled with criminals. How does that help your image with the record label? Do you enjoy putting her into dangerous situations?"

"Well hold on right there," Jordan growls, but the warmth of my girl keeps me going. She trusts me to know how far I can go.

"Layla helped cover up a murder tonight while on stage, so you may want to look into any possible mafia connections to the bar we were at," I continue. "Draven may very well be unhinged, and Atlas and Mav... I'm pretty sure they're not at all the guys Layla used to know. They're cruel now. So if you expect us all to play happy family, you're going to be very disappointed."

"What... murder? Hold the fuck on," Jordan says, and I hear him scrambling to grab his computer. It may be nearing one in the morning here, but this man doesn't seem to sleep. *"O'Malley's you said?"*

"There weren't any police presence or anything, so you're not going to find any reports. We're walking back to the guys' hotel room right now, where I doubt they'll have much space for us."

"Ask if we can maybe get a room at the same hotel as them?" Layla asks softly, peeking up at me. She looks sleepy, and confirms that as she yawns.

"Sure thing, Little Flower," I murmur. "Layla and I would like to know if it would be possible to maybe get a room at least in their same hotel?"

I'm willing to work with you, old man.

Honestly, he's only fifteen years older than me, but still. Jordan is being an asshole right now.

"Ah, about that," Jordan says with a wince in his tone.

"Fuck, you're going to owe us so much aren't you?" I sigh.

"Afraid so. The city is slammed with people over the next few days with festivals and concerts, so there's no room anywhere," he says. *"I'm afraid you're stuck. The guys aren't staying in the best area either. I may have gotten a little too excited."*

"When do you expect Layla to go back on tour?" I ask.

"She has dates for the end of next week, which is why the record label was hard pressed to scramble," he explains. *"It takes time to vet people."*

"So you chose three broken men who I wouldn't leave with a dog, much less Layla," I snark. "This is really fucked up."

"We gave her you," Jordan says archly. *"It's one of the reasons we made the position irresistible, other than the fact that you adore her and want to spend more time with her anyway. Win-win."*

"We need to discuss your definition of what that means," I mutter. "Whatever, it's late, and we're tired. What are the chances that our luggage will be delivered soon?"

"It's with the front desk at the guys' hotel," he immediately says. *"I'm going to dig into the bar establishment to make sure there won't be any blow back for Layla. She sounded amazing, though."*

"She is amazing," I return simply. "Even when scary people threaten her. Mav, Atlas, and Draven gang up on her about everything. I'm worried about the shit-show this tour could end up becoming."

Layla elbows me, making me wince. Yes, I overstepped a touch. Message received.

“The guys want to perform,” Jordan says gruffly. “I’ll warn them about sabotaging this tour. Everything else... They have shit to figure out, and five years is a long time to not see each other. I want my nieces to be happy, and I know Lennon also misses her best friends. If it means Layla being a bit uncomfortable, then so be it.”

Blowing out a breath, I wonder if it’s against the law to reach through the phone and throttle him. “Fine,” I growl. “Remember, my priority is Layla and no one else. If things go sideways, I’m beating the fuck out of the three of them and we are walking away.”

Jordan is quiet for a moment before he says, *“I expect nothing else.”*

The line goes dead immediately after, and I shake my head.

“He’s hardheaded, but I didn’t think he’d be playing matchmaker,” Layla says as I pocket my phone.

We’ve arrived at the hotel, the guys already inside and walking across the lobby. I’m glad it’s not awful, and as I open the door, I inhale deeply to test for mold. While it’s an older hotel, it’s still relatively nice.

“We need to check with the front desk first for our luggage,” I tell Layla as we walk in. I still speak just a touch louder than I need to, knowing that the guys will hear me.

Draven huffs, stopping, while Atlas and Mav continue on, unconcerned. I definitely think Draven is protecting his friends from my gorgeous little flower, or maybe it’s the other way around based on their attitude toward her.

Approaching the front desk, I give the woman a smile. Layla is still tucked under my arm, and the receptionist gives us both a sympathetic look.

“Hi, I’m sorry, unless you have a reservation, we’re fully booked for the next few days,” she winces. I have a feeling she’s been saying this often.

“No worries, we have a room reserved already, we’re just here to pick up our luggage. Jordan Miles had it sent over for

us?”

Her eyes light up with pleasure, probably because she won't have to turn us away. God, it must suck to work really busy weeks in this city when people are desperate for a room.

“Yes, I have your bags in the back room. Just give me a minute,” she says with a nod, bouncing away. Okay, this girl is really happy or maybe high.

“That’s a very peppy receptionist,” Draven says, coming up by my side.

“Yeah, it was kind of odd.” I shrug. Still, his agreement has me on edge as she wheels out our luggage. It’s already been a really long night.

Thankfully, the bags don’t appear to have been altered in any way from when we left them, though I won’t know until we get to the room. I’m glad we left everything packed when we went out tonight.

“Thank you,” Layla says as I kiss her forehead before grabbing the handle on both bags. She grabs my backpack with my computer to help, and we walk away.

“Is this really all you have?” Draven asks as he follows us. Layla has a small carryon wheeling suitcase, as do I. I’m pretty sure I brought more than she did because of my equipment.

“I don’t need much,” I tell him. “Layla has been traveling on the bare minimum outside of her clothes and makeup for the past few years, and my computer is my most important asset. Check your assumptions at the door with us. Layla isn’t at all a pampered princess.”

“I’m only letting you fight my battles because I’m tired,” Layla says with a jaw cracking yawn. “For the record.”

“Sure, chick, I can see that. Mav and Atlas are probably showering, fucking, and then going to sleep,” he says. Layla stiffens for the barest moment, and I wonder if sleeping on a bench with my girl may be better.

She has worked hard to forget Mav and Atlas, but I know she's still hurt. I should be jealous, yet I'm not normal. I recognize what she needs. I just don't know if she'll ever have the attention and respect she craves from them.

I know there's more she wants from them, except they're both very stuck in their delusions of age and who you can love.

"There's also the issue of there only being two beds," Draven says as he walks back toward the rooms. We're on the bottom floor, which means easy access to escape. I can already feel a pit of unease in my stomach.

Layla glances at a notice for rooftop access, and I can tell she's wondering if she can just sleep there.

"Is there a sofa?" I ask with a sigh. I can make us a comfortable bed and she can sleep on me. As long as we don't have to listen to people fucking, that is...

Unfortunately, as Draven opens the door to the hotel room that's exactly what I hear.

"You're going to take my cock like the dirty little whore you are, aren't you baby?" Mav growls from his room. It's closed, but these walls may as well be made of paper.

Layla takes a step into the room, as if she can't stop herself. Bringing in the bags, I take my computer bag before she drops it.

"Fuck me, Daddy. Please," Atlas groans. He sounds as if he's partially blissed out and partially in pain.

"Wonderful, they skipped the gag this time," Draven sighs as he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. "Well then, pillows are in the closet and there are more blankets in there too. What's wrong with the chick?"

His eyes are on Layla as tears run down her cheeks, her breath hitching. She told me about the night Atlas and Mav kissed her, teased her, played with her beautiful pussy, and then freaked out just before she came. Horny and angry, she watched as they left her on the couch as if she may light them

on fire to disappear into the bus bedroom to fuck each other. I can see she's reliving that day.

"Don't worry about it," I grunt, knowing I sound like an ass as I follow on her heels when she turns and flees from the room. It's not my story to tell. Mav and Atlas need to pull their heads out of their asses, or figure out how to stop hurting my girl.

They are putting on a different kind of show tonight, and I am not entertained.

"Lay," I say softly as I wrap my arm around her waist, hauling her against my chest. Her gasped sob breaks my heart as I bury my face in her sweet cherry blossom scent. "Talk to me, Little Flower. Tell me what you want to do."

"I want... to punch something," she whispers, clinging to the other arm that I band around her body. "If I can't do that, I want to go up to the roof and write. I'm not going back there to sleep."

"Your wish is my command," I tell her. There's rooftop access from the elevators, I saw. I guess we're watching the sunrise from there. "It's going to be cold up there, so I'm going to go ask the front desk receptionist for a blanket, notepad, and pen. Unless you want a pencil instead?"

"Pen is fine," she says, shifting her face so her nose is buried in my throat. "Thank you."

Moving away from her, I stride across the lobby. I have a purpose, and may even see if I can grab an extra pillow.

"Hi, I was wondering if I could get a few things. I know it's late," I tell her. The receptionist seems bored, and perks up as I look at her. As she drinks me in, my tone becomes a little more gruff because the only person I want staring at me like that is Layla. "I need a blanket, pillow, notebook and pen please."

Flinching, she realizes she's being unprofessional, and scurries to grab the items I've asked for. Not wanting to be a complete ass, I thank her as I collect them. The only person I

want to stare at me with heat in their eyes is hiding around the corner, struggling to get her hurt and confusion under control.

My items secured for a good hide and rage session, I hurry back to Layla. She looks up at me with puffy eyes, and I smile gently at her.

“I can’t help you break shit, but we can find a spot to chill and process, Baby,” I promise. “Let’s find the elevator, yeah?”

Nodding, she walks with me to the elevator bank. It happens to already be on this floor since it’s so late and we enter inside of it.

“I wasn’t expecting to be so upset by them,” she whispers as I hit the button for rooftop access. If anyone gives us shit, I’ll growl and bribe them. Nothing is keeping me from giving Layla what she needs. We aren’t sleeping in that goddamn room with the exhibitionists. “I was surprised when I saw they were who I’d be working with, and then I decided to suck it up, but now...”

“Tell me, Little Flower. Take your time.” I really wanted to beat the shit out Mav and Atlas when I heard them. Not because I have any issues with their relationship, but for the heartbreak their flaunting it causes Layla. It makes her feel as if she’s not enough for them.

I saw their faces when she came on my fingers, though, at the bar. I saw the hunger on their faces. They have a long way to go before they’ll earn the pleasure of being responsible for her noises and shivers.

For now, those will continue to be mine.

“It hurts,” she admits, dashing away tears. “I know I started things when you made me come at the bar, but that wasn’t vindictive. This was. It reminds me of when they made me feel like there was a chance they could want me as someone on their level instead of Lenny’s sister that was just hanging around. This makes me feel as if I’m not good enough.”

“Not good enough for what?” I rasp. Layla is one of the best people I know. Even when she’s angry, she fuels that

energy into breaking shit, writing songs, and making something beautiful. She doesn't make an effort to hurt people.

Words have power and last for a long time after they've first been heard.

"I don't know. There are days where I wonder if I'm not good enough for Mav and Atlas, or a singing career, or even my life. Imposter syndrome starts to eat at me, and then it's an endless cycle," Layla explains as the elevator dings to announce that we're at the rooftop and the doors open.

Motioning for her to step out first, I follow as I think about that. The rooftop area has a now closed bar area, as well as lots of cute nooks and seating. It's currently abandoned, but there's a corner that's calling my name.

"Let's set up over there," I murmur to her, jutting my chin to show her where I mean.

Layla nods and keeps pace with me, but shivers as the cool breeze blows through. Damn, I kept meaning to give her my jacket. I'll be fixing that soon.

As soon as we arrive in our new little corner of the world for the foreseeable future, I dump my pile of things on the couch area and pull off my jacket.

"Here, Layla. It's a touch cold for your dress up here," I tell her as I shrug off my coat. The truth is that we could possibly freeze up here tonight even though it's August, since it's forty degrees, but that's what the blankets and I'm here for.

Layla smiles as she takes my jacket, pulling it on. She's learned that it's fruitless to argue with me once I start to pull off clothes. Smirking at the thought, I push the ottoman closer, shaking out the blanket and fixing the pillow.

"Alright, come snuggle." I smile, laying on the couch and opening my arms. Layla clambers up after pulling off her boots, burrowing into my arms, as I cover us with the blanket. I have her notebook and pen next to us, ready for whenever she wants it. "Want to keep talking?"

“I think I want to write,” she sighs. “I’m a little angry at myself for my reaction. I don’t want Draven digging into what happened with Atlas and Mav. He seems like the kind of person who likes to pick at a sore continuously.”

“Maybe,” I agree. “I think he was more curious than anything. I also think you may have piqued his interest, Baby.”

“I don’t think I’ve met anyone like Draven,” she admits, peeking up at me from her long lashes. “He doesn’t care what anyone else thinks. Is it me or did they seem weird after O’Malley’s?”

“You mean after you helped to single-handedly cover up a murder?” I tease her. I am still hoping that it doesn’t come back to bite us in the ass, but she didn’t have any good options.

“Umm, yes. Should I apologize about that?” she asks.

Kissing her cold nose, I shake my head. “Don’t you dare. I think it’s fucking sexy. You do kind of terrify me with how well you roll with the punches, though.”

Rewarding me with a huge smile, she reaches out for the notebook and pen, turning so she can lay in the crook of my arm. I’ll gladly be her bed any day.

My eyes begin to get heavy an hour later, and I fall asleep listening to Layla hum to herself.

Seven

DRAVEN

After the sound of Mav and Atlas' fucking died down, I laid in bed waiting for Layla and Tyler to come back. Well, first I took off the damn cock cage and fucked my hand to get the blue-eyed temptress out of my head.

I'm not a damn mother hen. I don't care about anyone outside of Lyrica, Mav, and Atlas. Even then, Lyrica is getting special care in a hospital, and Mav and Atlas can fend for themselves for the most part.

So why do I desperately want to beat the shit out of whatever put that tortured look in her eyes?

It's three in the morning when I finally throw off my blankets, cursing under my breath. Pulling on a pair of jeans and hoodie, I shove my feet into a pair of boots. *Where the hell did they go?*

They honestly could have ended up at another hotel, but when I open the door to my room, I find their shit is still piled in the living room. Atlas takes a long, slow sip of water from a glass, and I sigh.

"I'm going out for a bit, I'm going to see where our missing baby chick went," I tell him.

"She's not our anything, Draven. Layla is a girl who is part of my past and should stay there. Nothing has changed, Mav and I still don't want her." Atlas shrugs.

He's shirtless in a pair of low slung gray sweatpants, with his feet bare. Atlas looks a bit like a caveman in the middle of the night.

"Do you think her uncle will care if she goes missing? What do you think our careers as musicians will look like then?" I scoff. "I haven't asked yet because I try not to poke at my best friends' ghosts, but we need to have a conversation about what you did to that girl. She looked like she saw a ghost when she heard you fucking."

Atlas winces, raking his fingers through his hair. "I would offer to come find her with you, but I'm honestly the last person she'll want to see right now. It's almost... shit it's after three in the morning. Where the fuck would she go? Where's the boyfriend?"

He sounds disgusted as he mentions Tyler, and my lips twitch. Now he realizes why I'm a tad concerned. Fucking great.

"All great questions. I have fuck all for answers," I grunt as I pocket my room key and shuffle out the door.

There's no one out here, so I walk around the corner and into the lobby. The receptionist looks half asleep, and I only know she's here all night because she made eyes at me earlier when she told me.

I'm not in this godforsaken country to fuck around. I just want to be able to play music again. I think our only chance at that is this baby chick we seem to have lost.

"Hey, doll?" I ask with a slow smirk as I approach the desk, leaning over it on my forearms.

"Yes? Did you decide you were bored?" she asks with what she thinks is a sultry smile. Poor girl just isn't my type.

I have a very specific type, so much so that I don't even know what it is.

"Not quite," I say apologetically, as if I actually give a shit. I can be a decent actor when I want to be. "Did you see a blonde with blue eyes and a man with a goatee by chance? They're part of our group, and they haven't been by the room yet."

"Oh," she says, pouting a bit. It's kind of funny, and I roll my lips inward to keep the inappropriate laughter back. "The guy asked for a blanket and pillow and then walked toward the elevators. That's all I can tell you."

Elevators...

"Is there rooftop access by chance?" I ask, my mind working to figure out where they could have gone. Layla joked about finding a bench, and this would be close enough to that. My fist clenches, thinking about how much I want to tan her ass right now.

The receptionist takes a small step away from me, and I realize I'm probably wearing a fearsome scowl right now. I'm incredibly frustrated by the things that I don't know at the moment.

"There is," she squeaks.

"Perfect. Night now," I say, turning away from her. My mood is shifting very quickly, something that happens when I'm worried. This is why my circle is so damn small, and at least two of them can fend for themselves typically.

Stalking away, I hit the button to call the elevator. It takes a while, making me glance up. It looks like it's at the top of

this fucking building and coming down. If I find myself a bad little chickie and her boyfriend up there right now, I'm likely to blow up on them both.

I'm scary under the best of circumstances, but I want to find them. Taking a deep breath as I finally walk into the elevator, I try to calm my racing pulse down.

I'll just look at her and leave. I just need to see her, then I'll be good. If she wants to freeze her nipples off, that's on her.

My cock twitches as the thought of her perky tits, and I shake my head. At least I'm less murderous now. Blowing out a breath, I tell myself that I cannot be taking a shine to the very off limits chick. Nope.

The elevator opens at the rooftop before I can think too much about it. Striding out, the wind blows through, making me pull the hood over my head. Beginning to jog, I look around for the two of them.

While it's the end of August, it does still get very cold at night in Vermont.

Fuck, there they are.

Layla is curled up against Tyler with the blanket almost over her shoulders, wearing a jacket. Tyler is snuggling against her, but his lips are twitching with the cold.

Frowning, I flick the bastard in the nose. I understand that sometimes you need to coddle your girlfriend, but this is just stupid.

"What? Shit," Tyler says, shaking his head. His arms protectively squeeze around Layla, glancing down to check on her.

"Didn't you notice how cold it is?" I hiss. While a part of me wants to yell at him, Layla does look really cozy cuddled in his arms.

"It didn't feel this cold earlier," he mutters, contemplating his next move. "There's no way she's going to sleep in that room. That's not going to work."

“Why?” I ask. “Do we smell? Are we that fucking scary for the poor, soft, baby chick?”

My voice is starting to rise, and Layla flinches in her sleep.

“No. It’s not my story to tell,” Tyler bites out. “Ask your asshole bandmates what they did and then use your brain. Listening to them was fucking traumatic. She would rather sleep up here than spend the night down with them. Connect the goddamn dots, man.”

Blinking, I shake my head, still confused. “It’s too cold for you two to sleep up here,” I try again. “I shouldn’t care about either of you, but she’s digging her way under my skin. I really do need my beauty sleep because Atlas and Mav have had me partying too hard.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Tyler asks, practically covering her head to keep the warmth in. He protects her, even though I have major issues with this decision. Another gust of wind blows over the top of the roof, making me shiver. Fucking Vermont.

“If you repeat this to anyone, I will deny it,” I growl. “I won’t be able to sleep unless I know you’re warm and in the room. Call me ridiculous, but I really did try to sleep.”

“Layla has a way of making people care.” He shrugs, kissing her forehead. There’s no jealousy in his face, no complaints. This guy can’t be for real.

“I keep thinking if something happens to her, Jordan is going to be really fucking pissed. I don’t enjoy disappointing that man if I can help it,” I mutter, blowing out a breath. “Just come down and take my bed, we’ll figure out the rest tomorrow.”

“What about your beauty sleep?” Tyler teases me. People don’t typically joke around with me. I’m too much of a scary asshole usually.

“Eh, I’ll figure it out.” I shrug.

“What’s going on?” Layla asks softly, peeking up from her cocoon. Her eyes blink away the sleep, trying to catch up to why I might be standing here.

“It’s too damn cold up here, chick. Time to come back downstairs,” I inform her.

“No,” she says simply, eyes starting to close again. Tyler merely smirks, pushing her hair back from her face. “I’m comfortable, and there are assholes downstairs.”

“Am I an asshole?” I ask, raising my brow. I don’t usually care what other people think either, yet here I am. Annoyed that I asked at all, I cross my arms over my chest, glaring at her.

“My brothers-in-law kill people for a living. You really don’t scare me,” Layla says before starting to fall asleep again.

“Chickie has this odd obsession with death,” I grumble. “You can’t sleep up here. I will carry you over my shoulder.”

The impious snort as she waves me away with her fingers before tucking them back under the blanket, infuriates me. Layla is out of Tyler’s arms, still wrapped in the blanket and tossed over my shoulder before I fully grasp the movement. Damn, I really am tired.

Tyler gasps, scrambling up and grabbing the notebook and pen. “So, we’re moving apparently,” he mutters.

“You may want to snag that pillow for the brat too. She may need something to sit on later,” I rumble before spanking her ass. Layla squeals, her trapped arms slapping down to hit my ass. “Careful with the goods, Chickie. I happen to like a bit of pain.”

“Put me down... you asshole!” she yells. Well, I can’t win them all. As long as she’s not sleeping outside in this fucking frigid weather.

Tyler follows me across the expanse of the roof, hitting the button to open the elevator doors. It’s still patiently waiting for us, as no one else needs it.

“Yeah, yeah. Nothing you have to say will change you sleeping in my bed, Chickie. Atlas and Mav couldn’t have done anything that terrible to your spoiled ass,” I grunt. She makes me a damn caveman. Tyler is suspiciously quiet as he

hits the first floor button. “Could they have?” I ask before I can bite back the words.

Layla simply thumps her arms down on my backside, so I widen my stance. I’ll spank her again if she hits my dick. I know my friends, while they have been circumspect about why they left their last band, I doubt it’s for any nefarious reason.

“Mav and Atlas remind me of the past,” Layla says softly. “They made me think they wanted me and then threw me away when things got too hot and heavy. They fucked each other instead of me in the back room and I had to hear it all. I left the tour early and refused to share a bus with them after that.”

While that is a dick move on their part, I remember the haunted look I caught in her eyes, and I realize it meant more to her. She thought they had something real.

“Is that why they left their last band?” I ask.

“It hurt too much to see them. It sounds silly, but their bandmates Turner and Roark agreed Mav and Atlas should leave the band,” Layla says. She’s still hanging upside down, her voice different as she tries to talk to me. “I had feelings for them, but my age clouded everything. I didn’t expect to see them again. I just need to suck it up, but listening to them fucking threw me.”

“You looked like you had demons chasing you when you left,” I tell her as the elevator rides us down to our floor. “I don’t typically fuck children, but— Fuck!”

Layla punches me in the dick and I almost drop her. Tyler’s eyes widen, ready to catch her.

“Don’t drop her. Damn!” Tyler barks.

“Jesus, Mary, and my cock,” I groan. “Are you going to suck my dick to make it feel better too?”

“No!” Layla yells, twisting in my arms. Swatting her ass, I band my arm around her legs so I won’t drop her.

Limping off the elevator as the doors open, I wince as I walk. “Damn, your aim is almost too good, Chickie.”

“Stop calling me that,” she growls. “Just put me down.”

“No, no. It’s much too late for that. You’ve made yourself entirely too interesting now,” I admit. “So do you not take rejection well, is that it? You’re obviously with Tyler now... so why does this bother you?”

“They found out she was a virgin that night,” Tyler sighs, picking up the thread of conversation now that she started. “Mav dropped her as if she was on fire on the couch, and they went into the bedroom to fuck each other, so they could ignore her. Imagine feeling like you aren’t good enough to be around because of your innocence when your age has already been a source of contention.”

“Huh,” I mutter. “Why didn’t you just leave?”

“The tour bus was moving,” she responds. “Throwing myself off of it seemed a bit dramatic.”

Layla’s voice doesn’t have any humor in it the closer I get to the room. Glancing at Tyler, I notice that he is looking down at her with concern.

“Pull her up,” he says seriously.

Stopping, I lift her gently and place her on her feet. Her head is down, so I can’t see her face.

“Come on, little fighter, look at me,” I cajole softly. Her shoulders shudder and she shakes her head.

“So many nicknames. Is this how you get away without remembering anyone’s names?” she deflects.

“Layla, your name has been burned into my mind since I met you. Look at me,” I command.

Slowly, her head rises, and I see her eyes are red and shiny with unshed tears.

“It was shitty of them to make you feel as if they wouldn’t fuck you because of an issue they have,” I tell her softly. “You

were their best friend's little sister. What if they were worried about fucking it up?"

"If they were worried about what they thought, they wouldn't have left my sister's wedding before it was even over," Layla scoffs. "Atlas and Mav were cowards then and they still are. I'm sorry, I really don't think this is going to work. I'm tired of agreeing to do things to keep from rocking the boat."

Glancing around, she sees a couch in the middle of the lobby and lights up. Oh no. That's not happening.

"You're sleeping in the room, *Layla*," I rasp, turning her toward the room. She startles as I emphasize her name. "I know your name because it's branded on my brain. Keeping you from trouble is going to be a full time job I see."

Tyler rubs the back of his neck, shaking his head as Layla wraps the blanket tighter around herself.

"I'm not your responsibility," she yawns, her jaw cracking. "I'm sleepy, and just want to go to bed. Anywhere. Why can't I sleep on the couch over there?"

She sounds like she's pouting, and it's mildly cute. Ugh, yes, she's like a puppy. I'm not interested in the least. Down, boy. No fucking the tiny pain in the ass.

"It's not safe," I tell her as I steer her toward my room. "You're a celebrity, a musician, and you need a damn door between you and the rest of the world."

"I'm standing right here," Tyler says, but his lips twitch. Glad he's enjoying my arguing with the tiny, sleepy blonde right now.

"You don't get a say. Hush. You were going to let her sleep outside on the damn roof," I complain. "We'll figure things out tomorrow over coffee and breakfast. Preferably much later. The only responsible adult here right now needs some sleep."

Layla's shoulders are visibly shaking, and I wonder if I broke her. Is she crying? Did I offend her? Damn, usually I'm better with women than this.

A snort sounds and Layla almost trips. Oh my god, she's laughing. "That's rich," she giggles. "You're *the* adult. Oh my god, we're all in so much trouble."

Tyler huffs out a laugh, and I shake my head in indignation. "I'm perfectly fit to right this ship," I tell them. "Oh come on!"

Layla falls into her boyfriend's arms as she laughs, and he catches her, looking down at her in amusement.

"We're seriously fucked, aren't we, Little Flower?" he asks softly.

"Without lube," she cackles up at him, making a chuckle escape from me. My dick thickens at the mention of lube, and I give up the fight. She's just going to have to deal with my erection grinding into her ass tonight.

"Ha ha ha," I grumble as I corral them both toward the room. Opening the door, I have to say they are adorable together. "So how long have you two been together?"

"Five years," she says automatically, making me surprised. That's an odd overlap. Layla doesn't seem like the type to cheat, especially not with Tyler.

"I met her online, shortly after the tour fiasco with Atlas and Mav," he says softly as they walk inside.

This all gets more and more twisted. I need to talk to Mav and Atlas about this, figure out what happened on their end. My brain hurts.

Shutting down my brain, I close the door behind me.

"Change and get ready for bed. No outside clothing in my bed," I grunt, pulling off my hoodie.

"What?" Layla asks, already halfway to her bag to pull out pajamas.

"I sleep in my boxers, I'll take the spot by the wall," I continue, toeing off my shoes.

"Draven," she says darkly, turning toward me. Her eyes widen at the sight of my quickly disappearing clothes. "Why

are you getting naked, and what spot by the wall?"

"I've decided that I'm not giving up my bed entirely," I announce as I push my pants off my hips. Layla flinches in surprise and then keeps her gaze on mine. I can tell she's dying to look. My body is a work of art after all. "Chop, chop. I want to go to bed, Chickie."

"Ugh, enough. Go get into something warmer, Baby," Tyler tells her. "We'll see what we can figure out tomorrow."

Sighing, she grabs clothes, and goes to find a bathroom.

"It's the door right there, to your left," I call out. The following room is Mav and Atlas, and I don't want her to rush in unannounced. It would be funny, but only for me.

Watching her disappear, I glance at Tyler. He starts to change in front of me, obviously unbothered. Digging into his bag, he pulls out a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt.

"For the record, my entire being revolves around her happiness," he hisses as he dresses quickly and efficiently. "I don't care what stick everyone else is riding up their asses, I want Layla to smile again and be confident in her own skin. Mav and Atlas are destroying the progress she's made over the last five years. They remember the sheltered girl who wasn't allowed to do anything. She's not that person anymore."

"Sheltered because she's the label's Princess?" I ask, confused.

"She's the younger daughter, so she lived in a gilded cage in a lot of ways. Her roommates refused to let her do anything, and her father approved of it to keep her his sweet little girl," Tyler grunts. "Layla is capable and talented. She deserves to be seen as such. Mav and Atlas make her question if she can do anything without her big sister or if she's any good."

"Didn't you see her perform tonight?" I snort. Well, technically it was yesterday, but that thought just makes me more sleepy. "Chickie was on fire, the entire bar was clearly enthralled. The girl can sing. I want to see what she can do in a stadium."

“She’s amazing,” he confirms as the door snicks open. “I’m going to brush my teeth and use the bathroom, and then I’ll be ready.”

Tyler strides for the bathroom, kissing Layla’s forehead as he passes her. He’s curt, blunt, and almost rude at times, but not with her. He tempers his words, and he’s sweet when it comes to Layla.

Interesting. I wonder what other snorting dragons she can take. With that thought, I gesture to her to go into the room.

“Pick a spot,” I tell her as she looks at the queen-sized bed. Tyler and I are big guys, so it’s less space than it seems.

Layla shakes her head, as she climbs onto the bed. She doesn’t have her clothes from earlier, so I assume she left them in the bathroom. That’ll be a fun surprise for the guys later.

“We’re having a meeting tomorrow about this, preferably with coffee and pastries,” I grumble.

“I was perfectly fine where I was,” Layla yawns again, wiggling under the covers. She’s wearing fuzzy pants with a long-sleeved top that shows off the expanse of her toned stomach. In what world are these considered pajamas?

My dick asks if I’m also seeing her stiff nipples, making me close my eyes in frustration. The universe is trying to make me insane. I haven’t had sex since, well, the last time I had sex with Lyrica. I may be an asshole, but I’m a loyal one at that.

Getting into bed, I band my arm around her waist, pulling her away from the edge of the bed. “I’m not waking up to Tyler’s dick digging into my ass, chick,” I tell her. Her hair smells amazing, and I growl under my breath. No, no, no.

This girl isn’t all that interesting. She’s not that pretty, and her body wasn’t created with the sole reason to be worshiped. Often and thoroughly.

“You’re not my type,” Tyler says, walking in as if he’s been following the entire conversation. The walls are that thin, so I’m not surprised. “I’m only interested in cherry blossom scented skin and my little flower.”

Taking a deep breath, I silently thank him for helping me to identify what she smells like.

“Yeah, yeah. Still don’t want your dick digging into my back while I’m sleeping. Turn the light off and get your ass in this bed,” I mumble.

“I can’t move, Draven,” Layla sighs. I have her on her side, my arm banded around her stomach, and my leg shoved between hers. Getting comfortable, I shrug.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping. Sleep,” I remind her as the light turns out.

“We’ll figure it out tomorrow, Baby,” Tyler soothes as he gets into the bed next to her. Layla runs her hand through his hair as he snuggles against her until his head is burrowed in her breasts.

I barely have a chance to think about what a lucky fucker he is, or that the door to my room is wide open before I’m drifting off to sleep. I’ve always had a hell of a time sleeping. I may need to bottle up whatever this is.

Eight

LAYLA

There's banging. Where is it coming from? Ugh, why is it so loud?

“Layla Campbell, why is Draven Hendricks' hand in unconscionable places right now?” Uncle Jordan roars, making me jump with a gasp.

Sitting up, I brush Draven's hand off my breast. For goodness sakes, the man is handsy in his sleep. Tyler groans as he flops until his head is in my lap.

“Do you want to tell him that we all of a sudden started screwing a drummer with a terrible attitude or shall I?” he asks

with a smirk, squinting at me. Tyler's adorable in the mornings before he puts his glasses on.

Brushing his light brown hair out of his eyes, I glance up at my uncle from under my lashes. "Sorry Uncle. There was only one bed, and I fell on his cock," I tell him before smirking.

We're clearly all wearing our clothing, so my uncle snorts as he realizes he's being ridiculous. While I slept really well, I doubt I'll ever be going anywhere near Draven's cock.

"Please don't get me killed this early in the morning, chick," the man of the hour groans. "I solemnly swear my hands only drifted because I like to cuddle in my sleep. I saved her from becoming a popsicle, though. She wanted to sleep on the roof to get away from my best friends."

Uncle Jordan looks flummoxed as he stares at us and then turns to survey the rest of the hotel suite. "Right, two bedrooms," he mutters. Facing us again, he shakes his head. "Family meeting. Right now. We need to discuss how this is going to go, and I brought coffee and food."

"Do I want to know how you got in here?" I ask, tapping Tyler's nose to move so I can get out of bed.

"I hacked my way into the hotel's computer system of course and changed the reservation into my name. They were only too happy to provide me with a room key," he says with a shrug.

"Of course," I sigh.

As my uncle leaves, Draven grabs my arm before I can follow. Tyler is standing by the bedside already, stretching with his glasses in place. I wish it was just the two of us so I could take care of the thick impression of his cock this morning.

Pity.

"Did he just say he hacked into the system?" Draven asks.

"My uncle has super powers." I grin, dropping my head back to look at him upside down.

“Cheeky chick,” Draven snorts. “I always felt like he wasn’t someone I should fuck with. Now I know my instincts are right, as usual.”

Rolling my eyes, I shrug off his hand and get off the bed. The idea that I would fall on his dick just because we shared a bed is laughable. I don’t even think he’s my type.

Tyler wraps his arms around my shoulders as we walk out, and I ignore my uncle as he bangs loudly on Atlas and Mav’s door.

“Oye, get out here, you two. I have a few things to say about you assholes letting my niece sleep on the roof of the hotel,” he yells.

Oh. Glancing at him, he winks at me as I hear yelling and scrambling on the other side of the door. Jordan Miles is unfuckablewith. As annoyed as I am with him, I kind of want to be him when I grow up.

“I’m going to brush my teeth,” I murmur to no one in particular as I move away from Tyler to grab my toothbrush.

“Why bother when you’re about to eat and have coffee?” Draven asks, forehead furrowed.

“I don’t feel like myself until I do.” I shrug. I’ll brush my teeth again after too, but I’m truly just hiding for a second. As Atlas and Mav’s door opens, I scurry into the bathroom and my bladder also wakes up. Hurrying through my routine, I wash my hands after and take a deep breath. If I don’t get out there, I’ll be yelled at next.

Looking over, my eyes widen as I see my balled up clothes from last night. The last thing I need is to be called lazy or a slob when I’m not. I was just so damn tired last night. Grabbing my things, I walk out of the bathroom and put my clothes and toothbrush away in my bag.

“The princess is joining us at last,” Mav says drolly. Tyler gives me an indulgent look as I come over to the kitchenette area to join them before glaring at Mav.

Uncle Jordan? He smacks him over the head. “Stop being a dick. I know your history with my niece and this is your only

chance to be able to play music and not get split up. No one else needs a keyboardist, drummer, and a guitarist so just stop,” he insists, handing me a to-go cup of coffee.

Bringing it close to me, I inhale gratefully. Fuck, I really do need coffee for this bullshit. Just smelling it is helping to revive me.

“You’re supposed to drink it, not smell it,” Atlas snorts. Rolling my eyes, I take a sip, finding it exactly the way I love it.

“This is better than sex,” I mutter before I can help myself. Tyler chuckles when I give him a stricken look.

“I’ll work on that, Little Flower,” he teases me as I flush in embarrassment. Tyler can give me mind blowing orgasms while barely trying, but coffee? I really need this for the following conversation I think.

“Should have fallen on my dick after all,” Draven teases me as he takes a sip of his coffee and grimaces. Glancing at Tyler, he shrugs with a smile, giving a happy sigh when he takes another sip of his coffee.

Mav and Atlas also look down annoyed at their coffees, and I realize my uncle is playing dirty. Good for him. Fucking with people’s caffeine injections should be a federal offense.

“I brought breakfast,” Uncle Jordan says, sitting at the small table in the kitchenette and gesturing for us to join him. Tyler sits down and pulls me into his lap, where I relax against him. Nothing too terrible can happen to me while I’m with him.

“Layla, here’s a breakfast sandwich for you and Tyler, and chia seed pudding and fruit for the rest of you lot.”

Yes, my uncle is being petty and mean and it’s glorious. Grabbing the two sandwiches, I hand one to my boyfriend and unwrap mine. The other guys make faces as they pull out their food, looking longingly at me when I take a bite of my sandwich and moan.

“Okay, I can see the point of this all, Jordan, but I saved her from the damn roof,” Draven sighs as he grabs a spoon and

begins to eat the pudding. Chewing, he makes a face but continues to eat it.

“I didn’t know about the roof until now.” My uncle shrugs. “Tyler, can you pull the security tapes from the hotel and send them to me? Their system is child’s play.”

Turning, Tyler snags the strap of his computer bag and nods. “Do you mind if I work and listen?” he asks. Jordan shakes his head, and I shift to move, only to have Tyler band his arm around my waist and rock me against his still hard cock. Hiding my shiver is difficult, and I sneak a glance at him. “Please stay where you are. I don’t feel like making you get up.”

“I won’t until I’m in the way,” I promise him.

“Okay, let’s get down to brass tacks,” Mav says, pushing away the food and coffee with a scowl. “Are you really here because we weren’t nice enough to Layla? This business isn’t all roses and sunshine, and you pretty much threw her at us without notice. What did you expect?”

Draven tries to get Mav’s attention with no avail and Atlas looks as if he’s counting down in his head with his eyes closed.

“Things I did not expect from grown ass men,” Uncle Jordan says, head tilting. “I didn’t expect you to take her to a sketchy bar for an open mic night where she’d have to cover up a murder. I also didn’t expect you all to be so awful to her that she’d attempt to sleep on the roof when it was forty degrees out—”

Tyler has been working with one hand to hack into the system, and mutters to himself when he finds the footage, turning it toward my uncle.

“Why would you sleep on the roof?” Mav asks. “I heard Jordan say that, but I still don’t understand it. What’s up there?”

“Couches, a view of the city, and hypothermia,” Draven snarks, glaring at me. “She decided sleeping up there and

catching her death was better than this room after you two serenaded her with your fucking.”

“Ah,” Jordan says in a dead tone. He watches the footage at an accelerated pace as I write up on the roof for an hour before falling asleep in Tyler’s arms, and then the footage where Draven came upstairs and hauled me back down like a caveman.

My uncle’s eyes are cold, his anger banked as he turns to Mav and Atlas. “You see, this is why you were asked to leave *The Darkest Nights*, because you’re bad for the continued mental health of my niece. You are replaceable, and I have invested interest in her wellbeing. I felt bad that you’re without a lead singer and Layla was the perfect option because you’ve worked together. However, that’s also the problem. My niece is much too good for you. The three of you.”

Deflating, I let him lay into them. Mav and Atlas hurt me, and I don’t owe them any kind of loyalty. Draven? My feelings about him are up in the air. I do, however, want to be able to continue to play.

“Jordan, I can figure my way through this, but this hotel situation isn’t going to work,” I say softly. “I can put my big girl pants on if it means I can start touring next week.”

“Next week?” Atlas asks.

“Mmhmm. It’s why we’re looking for new band members. I have a fully booked tour,” I tell him, my eyes on the table. Reaching out, I lift my coffee cup and take a sip, finally looking up to meet his gaze. “You’re not going to scare me away, Atlas. Mav can call you his whore and make you scream, but it also damn well won’t be happening on my goddamn tour bus.”

Draven’s breath hitches as I watch him shift his weight. I’m sure he wasn’t expecting my little speech. Well, neither was I.

“It’s my bus, I’m sleeping in my own bed,” I continue. “Comments about my boyfriend staying on the bus aren’t acceptable because he is also employed by the label. He’s our

tech, social media manager, and my person. I'm not here to make friends, and don't expect to. I do, however, expect band members who aren't complete assholes and can be professionals."

My uncle lets me say my piece, his tattooed forearms on display as he crosses his arms in front of him. He rolled up his sleeves, which I've noticed means he's going to make someone cry or drop some truth bombs.

Either could still happen.

"Anything you'd like to add, Uncle Jordan?" I ask him. Atlas scoffs, and my uncle's eyes move back to him.

"What's your problem with what Lay said? I think you should be thanking her, because I really wanted to send you packing," he growls. "Her safety is my priority, and while I appreciate her love of music and not wanting to rock the boat, I refuse to let her sacrifice any part of herself for this tour. Lennon and you all did that for too long. It will not happen again. Is that understood?"

Draven looks around the table, trying to figure out the dynamics and history. Laying my head on Tyler's shoulder, I decide to throw him a bone.

"My sister and her band were roped into a contract that didn't benefit them," I explain. "My uncle wasn't there when she changed the contract because he wasn't her manager at the time. Lennon and *The Darkest Nights* worked back to back shows, did a ton of interviews and photo shoots, and I was her opening act when she almost passed out from exhaustion."

"You just came at us like a pitbull over Layla. Why wouldn't you do the same for your other niece? Playing favorites there, old man?" Draven jokes, but he looks confused.

Unfortunately, he's also poking at an old wound. "I didn't know she was my niece," my uncle says softly. "My brother left her mother when she was very young, and disappeared from her life. Lennon had a very hard past, none of which I knew about because I didn't know about her outside of the fact

that there was a child from that previous marriage. I became involved with the band because Lenny reached out to me for help with her manager.”

“I’m so glad that bitch is gone,” Mav growls. “Where the fuck is James anyway? I figured he’d have his two cents to say about all of this.”

Closing my eyes for a moment, I shake my head. “He’s in a mental hospital for trying to kill Lenny five years ago,” I rasp. “You’ve been gone a long time, I don’t think you have the right to ask questions of any kind.”

Tyler rubs my thigh as he watches impassively. I can fight my own battles, but I have no problems tagging him in when needed.

“Touché,” Mav says, swallowing hard.

“I feel as if I’ve fallen into *Family Feud*,” Draven mutters.

“A whole lot of history, and most of it isn’t necessary to rehash,” Jordan says softly. “The most important question is can you handle this? Layla is a different kind of performer than you’re used to, Draven. Sometimes she’ll change shit up because she feels like it, which means following her cues.”

“An unpredictable lead singer, hmm. I’m sure I can handle that,” Draven says. I get a feeling his last lead singer may have been unpredictable in another way, but he’s watching me with interest. It’s as if he wants to pull me apart and dissect me, though hopefully not for real.

“Most importantly, I shouldn’t have to say this because you’re adults, but I am. There is to be no sexual fraternization between you and Layla,” my uncle says sternly.

Please, kill me. He just told them they couldn’t fuck me.

I wouldn’t want to, but holy shit. My uncle isn’t leaving anything to chance.

“In fact, expect a contract in your emails with that addendum if you three decide to make this work. Keep your dicks to yourselves, and I think we’ll all manage to make this work,” my uncle says smugly. “You will also find somewhere

other than the bus to fuck. Don't bring girls onto my niece's bus, and don't decide you're going to flaunt your relationship in front of her, Mav and Atlas. You got me?"

Atlas flushes as he rubs the back of his neck, while Mav glares at me.

"Don't look at me." I shrug. "I never told him that you were pornographically fucking each other when I came into the hotel room last night. Maybe you should have remembered the gag, Mav."

I widen my eyes innocently as Draven tries to hide a smile unsuccessfully. Turning to my uncle, I decide to tell him one last thing before we continue with our days.

"I was writing up a storm while I was up on the roof, and I think I have some viable songs. I need my guitar to put it to music, though," I tell him. Lennon really is better at songwriting than I am. She can feel the words as they pour out of her. I can't do that usually unless I'm really emotional.

I'm scared of feeling so deeply, and I think that may impact my skills as a musician and songwriter.

"Yeah, I can make that happen," Jordan says with a nod. "We're checking out of this place though, and putting you on the bus to Cleveland. It means you'll be in town early, but I'll book you into a proper suite. Don't get it twisted..."

Jordan lobs us with a serious look. It's why he's so good at his job, and I'm reminded of all of the careers he's helped to build and end. My uncle is a damn force of nature.

"You lot will learn to respect each other and get along," he says. "I want a cohesive band where no one notices the broken pieces because there are none to be seen. I'll book some interviews with some radio stations in Cleveland to introduce you as Layla's new band. I'll send a list of approved questions to them so you won't have to worry about them trying to fuck you over, either. I wanted to nip this all in the bud before I have to go deal with a forest fire."

Wincing, I think about the pop star diva who is going to learn the hard way that it's not all about her. The music

industry is about playing ball with the people who sign your checks, too.

“Who am I coordinating with for interviews and such?” I ask. I can only hope it isn’t a twat nugget, because these men may eat her or him alive.

“That’s where it gets tricky, because no one is me,” Jordan says with a shrug. It’s not even ego, because he really is that good. “Kyle Long has been managing bands for the last four years, and his latest group is on hiatus for a few months. Their tour just ended, so they’re taking a break to create music.”

“What’s his damage then?” Draven asks. “There has to be something wrong with him, no?”

“The man is a philanderer and likes to fuck anything with legs,” Jordan admits. “I’ll make it known that if he does anything inappropriate around you that he’ll be fired, but he is very good at his job and that kind of pisses me off.”

“I’ll start wearing a knife,” I shrug. “Lenny gave me one of her favorite holsters, and I have a throwing knife tucked on my bus.”

“Who the fuck are you now?” Mav asks, staring at me in surprise.

“Someone completely different,” I tell him. “Anything else I need to know, old man?”

“Watch it with the old man, Lay,” Jordan snarks. “No, I’m good. The tour bus will be arriving later today, cleaned and fully stocked. Any questions?”

Thinking, I shake my head, but Atlas nods. “How long is our contract for? We’re looking for something long-term, and I don’t want to be at the mercy of a spoiled princess.”

Tyler squeezes my thigh hard, almost as if he’s imagining what it would feel like to lock his hand around Atlas’ throat. The bite of pain makes me gasp, flinching, and Tyler leans forward to kiss my forehead in apology before releasing me.

“I was with a band who bullied me for two years, and they walked away when I wouldn’t let one of them rape me,” I tell

Atlas, rolling my eyes. “I will bend so far over to keep the peace I may snap eventually. There’s absolutely nothing spoiled about me.”

“So says the girl who stormed out of the room because of a little fucking. Grow up, Layla,” Atlas rumbles. His large body shoves away from the table, standing, as he looks over at Jordan. “Are we dismissed yet?”

“Yep, sounds like you got your answer,” Jordan says, lips pursed. “Those contracts will hit your emails today as well. Please be sure they are signed before boarding the bus.”

The glares from Mav and Atlas make me straighten, meeting them head on. I don’t know what I’ll have to do to get them to take me seriously, but not backing down seems like a good way to start. Stomping away, they slam the door to their room, making me bite back a flinch.

Draven has been surprisingly quiet, and I force my eyes to leave the guys’ room to look back at him.

“I can recognize talent, and you’re incredible, chick,” he says, staring at the table. His blue eyes flick at me, and there’s a myriad of emotions staring back at me. The one that I recognize that surprises me is self-loathing. “I fucked up and didn’t recognize the signs that my lead singer was spiraling. The drugs were never really an issue before so I didn’t realize how deep their claws were embedded. Burn out, mental health, so much can eat away at who we are, and I don’t want that to happen to you. I may be an asshole, I may not always get it right, but I’ll do my best to help.”

It feels as if he’s saying so much more, and I shiver as I nod.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Yep. I need to do something before we roll out of this city, so what time is the bus leaving, Jordan?” Draven asks, tearing his eyes away from me. I feel strangely empty when he continues to speak to Jordan as if he didn’t just show me a piece of his soul.

“Five at the latest,” Jordan tells him, pulling out his own computer to start working.

Tyler leans forward, speaking into the shell of my ear. “I want to ask your uncle really boring technical questions for a while. Want to grab a shower so I can save you from the boredom?” he teases.

He’s right, I don’t understand the tech talk at all. I just want to know that when I turn on a device that it’ll work.

“Yes,” I grin, leaning my head back to kiss him. My stomach is happy, filled with a breakfast sandwich and coffee, and a shower sounds amazing. I hear movement behind me, making me sigh as I break away.

Draven is pulling on a long-sleeved T-shirt over the jeans he threw on when my uncle started banging on doors, and shoves his feet into boots. Single-mindedly, he gives a two finger salute to my uncle and walks out the door.

“You have quite the project on your hands, love,” Uncle Jordan says as he fires up his computer.

“I can tell,” I mutter, getting up to grab my things to shower. As I stand under the surprisingly nice water pressure, all I can think about is all of the ways this could go spectacularly wrong.

Fuck me.

Nine

ATLAS

“**W**hat the fuck are we supposed to do with her?” Mav hisses behind the door. Layla’s uncle is working in our tiny ass kitchen with Tyler, and I can hear Layla showering.

“Hush,” I mutter, blowing out a breath as I throw myself onto the bed. It smells like both of us, and I take a deep breath to let it center me. Cedar, amber, and a deep musky undertone. It’s been us against the world for a long time.

“We do nothing,” I say softly. “We stay the fuck away from her, play music, and find a way to coexist. Jordan has us by the short hairs because he’s right. There’s no other way to

just blend our talents with a lead singer who doesn't already have a core group of bandmates.”

Mav sighs as he lays next to me. “Her hair is lighter than I remember,” he says softly. “She holds herself with more confidence too, until—”

“We knock her down like the assholes that we are,” I finish. “Ignoring her hurts her feelings, paying attention to her makes me notice things that piss me off. I bought her a soda because watching her try to cover up her shakiness upset me. Sure, Tyler was going to get it, but he wasn't moving fast enough for me.”

“We still care too much,” Mav groans. “Everything we did was wrong five years ago, and it makes me angry. Walking out on our little Valkyrie's wedding, leaving Roark hanging mid sentence. We lost our best damn friends.”

“We also gained one. As much as you can say Draven is a friend,” I grunt. The man is prickly on a good day. But he's...

“Draven is family,” Mav acknowledges. “I don't know where he stands on Layla, though. Should we be worried?”

“Let him play with her a bit.” I shrug. “He'll get tired of her and Layla will learn to keep to herself. She can't handle him.”

The shower shuts off, and I yawn. May as well enjoy one last shower in a real bathroom before we're all cooped up in the same bus. While Jordan promised hotel rooms for us when we get to Cleveland, I never know what those will look like.

We got used to tiny rooms overseas, so this is almost luxurious. Best to take advantage while I can.

Leaning over, I cup Mav's face. He looks a bit worried and lost, and I hate that this situation is making him feel this way. Usually when he's like this, I let him punish my ass, but that's off the table for a bit. I don't know how we kept our relationship from everyone else for so long now that we're fucking like bunnies.

It just felt like something we weren't ready to share with the world at the time.

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise him. “She’s got the boyfriend to keep her busy, interviews, and music. I think it’s best to make ourselves scarce unless we’re needed, too.”

Brushing his lips with mine, I close my eyes as I deepen the kiss. Mav’s stubble is prickly against my hand, and I revel in the feel of it, knowing he’ll be shaving today. His goatee is always perfectly trimmed, and he’s so damn gorgeous.

“Now to throw the girl out of the bathroom,” I tease, my voice low and husky from kissing him.

“Good luck,” he chuckles.

Getting up off the bed, I struggle to remember how much of a girly girl Layla was all of those years ago but can’t. Did she stay in the bathroom for hours primping?

It doesn’t seem to jive with the girl I was falling for.

Opening the room door, I almost collide with Layla as she comes out fully dressed in a pair of ripped up jeans, boots, and a tank-top. Rolling my eyes because she’s sure to freeze, I huff as I let her pass. Layla doesn’t bother to react except to raise her wide eyes up at me before rushing past.

I should snap that she should excuse herself, but all I can think about is if she would look at me like that if she were on her knees for me as my cock bobbed in her face.

Shaking my head, I slam into the bathroom, thinking that as much as I talk a good game, I agree with Mav.

We’re fucked.



“OKAY, this is where I’ll leave you all,” Jordan says, standing in front of the bus. He stares at Layla as if there’s a thousand things he wants to say to her but can’t.

“This shit right here is what I have a problem with,” I grunt, my finger pointing between them. “You coddle her too damn much. She’s an adult, she can work and perform without you hovering.”

I know Layla is the baby of the family, but if she wants to pull the ‘adult’ card, then she needs to act like one.

“It’s time to push her out of the nest,” Mav says, rolling his eyes. We’ve always been good at feeding off each other, but in recent years it’s gotten hard not to channel that into snark and sarcasm.

“I’ll be fine,” Layla says with a smile. “I won’t get kidnapped, there’s no one to climb onto my bus without my knowledge, and everyone who would want to hurt me is dead. I promise, I’m good.”

Blinking, I realize I missed something as Jordan nods and hugs her. Her sister went through some serious shit and we lost her for a while, but I didn’t think Layla was in any danger.

There’s a lot I don’t know about the girl in front of me. I’m not sure if I want to know, but if I don’t make some kind of effort, I’ll continue to be smacked in the face by these truth bombs. Even Draven is watching her like a puzzle he wants to solve.

Tyler just takes it all in stride, shaking Jordan’s hand and reminding him that they’ll be in touch if necessary. Jordan Miles had a back up plan in Tyler to ensure she’d be alright around us.

As they say hello to the driver and climb up the stairs, Jordan’s blue eyes almost look stormy as he gazes at us.

“I’m going to have lunch at O’Malley’s, do a little work, and see if I need to do any damage control,” he murmurs. My eyes widen at his words. “Layla has a lot of friends in fun professions. I need to see if I need to call in any favors before I leave. You lot are already giving me more work to do. Could you at least try to keep your noses clean?”

Jordan Miles has cleaned up a lot of messes in the last five years. He’s never complained about it till today though. Although, we also never accidentally put Layla in physical danger before, either.

“Deciding on that bar for the open mic night was my fault,” Mav rumbles. “I didn’t realize how rough it was. Have

you been able to figure out if there are mafia ties?”

“Yeah,” Jordan sighs. “Bailey O’Malley runs that bar, and his cousin has mafia connections. They either owe my niece a favor or she’s a liability. I just need to figure out how I’m going to need to play this.”

“When did you become a superhero?” Draven snorts. “Hacker, fixer, what else can you do?”

Smirking, Jordan shrugs. “Whatever is needed,” he says. “Layla is going to start carrying her knife again. Don’t piss her off.”

Waving, he walks off, leaving us to stare after him.

“Did you know he was this dark and broody?” Draven asks, his tattooed hand waving after our manager.

“No,” Mav says, shaking his head. “I mean, the man is incredible with a computer, but Jordan Miles really is an enigma and can’t be replaced. We’ll see how this new manager stacks up.”

Grunting in agreement, I climb the stairs to the bus, because we’re supposed to leave in a few minutes, and I don’t trust this new driver not to leave our asses. Jordan Miles is a scary fucker lately, and I’m sure he also put the fear of God into this guy.

A bus driver for a tour bus can either be a great ally or a pain in the ass. If they aren’t vetted properly, they can even be dangerous. We sleep, live, and eat on this bus, so it would be very easy to hurt us if they were a deranged fan.

Fortunately the driver simply smiles from his seat. “Let’s get you all to Cleveland in one piece then,” Benny says. I heard him introduce himself to Layla and Tyler, and his name stuck. “If you need anything or need to stop, just let me know. I expect we’ll be fine, though. It’s a pretty easy ten hour drive.”

That’s the thing about a tour: anything is an easy drive as long as it’s under a day’s drive. *The Darkest Nights* put a lot of miles on their tour bus I remember. I found ways to pass the

time with Mav, or I'd hop onto Lennon and the guys' bus to chill.

In the UK, we traveled a lot too, but the weather was always so overcast that I watched a lot of movies or napped. I was never as close with Lyrica. She was moody, and I never knew if she was having a good or bad day.

Pushing away the memories, I nod at the driver, forcing a smile before walking by him. I have to admit that the bus is spacious. There are places for storage as well, and I wonder if it's custom built the way Lenny's was.

I don't see Layla when we arrive in their kitchen area, but Tyler is checking the fridge and cabinets to see what Jordan filled them with.

"Hey," I say softly to him, glancing toward the back of the bus where Layla has to be. "Where's Layla?"

Tyler looks over at me as he closes the door to a cabinet, brow raised.

"She's putting away her things, and asked me to give you a tour," he says with a shrug. "Behind here are bunks, storage for your stuff, and then the bathroom behind that. There's actually two bathrooms on this bus: one at the front and one back here. They both also have showers."

"Why so many if she was usually the only one here?" Mav asks, surprised.

"This tour bus was remodeled for her when she went solo, and she didn't see any reason to rip out a working bathroom," Tyler explains. "Lay usually will write or read on longer bus rides, so I doubt you'll see much of her."

I should be happy about that, but it feels a lot like she's hiding. "Hey Layla," I call out as I walk back with my bag to store my things. Mav and Draven silently follow me, but Tyler stays where he is.

I don't know what he's doing, but I did see his computer bag, so maybe he's setting up his stuff.

“Yes?” she asks, poking her head out of the bedroom. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and she’s wearing an off the shoulder sweater over her tank-top. “Did Tyler show you where everything is?”

“Yes, he’s a perfect host,” I say sardonically. “Isn’t this your bus though?”

“If you’re living on it too, it’s our bus.” She shrugs as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I need to call Lennon to check in, work on some lyrics. So if you hear my guitar, I’ll try to keep it down.”

“We’re musicians,” Draven snorts. “You shouldn’t have to worry about noise control around us.”

“Tyler’s working out there, and is probably going to need any of your computers or devices at some point to make sure they can’t be hacked into. I don’t want to bother him.” She smiles. “If there’s nothing else?”

Layla is so damn polite it hurts my teeth. I can’t live around someone who is like this. Sweet, careful, hiding. I shouldn’t care, but I signed a contract that will lock us in for at least the next six months, so I need to nip this in the bud now.

“Layla,” Tyler calls out, making her perk up. Her feet are already moving before she realizes it, and she brushes past us. Damn, it also makes me realize that she changed into leggings that look buttery soft and make her ass look fantastic.

Dropping my shit on the bunk, I start to put things away. I used to crash with Lennon all of the time, and these actually look a bit wider than the ones on her bus.

Draven moves closer to the curtained off partition that divides the living room from the bunks, as if it’ll keep his large body hidden as he eavesdrops. Rolling my eyes, I attempt to pretend that I’m not doing the exact same thing while Mav snoops in Layla’s bedroom.

“Why don’t you work out here?” Tyler asks her. “You know damn well your gorgeous voice won’t bother me at all.”

“The lyrics are still really rough,” Layla confesses. “I’m hoping Lenny or Turner may have some time to help me with

them today. I think I may be able to get some studio time at the end of the month if I can get this polished up. It feels really raw to perform for anyone...”

I remember the last time her sister thought her songs were too raw, and instead I pushed her to work through that. Fuck, why does she remind me so much of Lennon?

Blaming my sentimental feelings for this, I reach over to open the partition.

“Music belongs to everyone, Layla. If you’re writing lyrics and need someone to jam with, you have musicians right here. Don’t bother your sister and her husbands over it,” I tell her.

Tyler rubs his nose with his middle finger while Layla looks over at me in surprise, and I realize I’ve stepped in it again. Fuck.

Oh well, I’m not coddling her the way everyone else does. If she wants to work on this song, it should be with people who will tell her if it sucks or not.

Swallowing hard, she shrugs as if she doesn’t care either way. Draven’s fingers twitch as Layla brushes past us, and he ties back the curtains as if they were bothering him. Instead, I can tell that he’s starting to obsess about the baby chick, and the last time he was involved with anyone ended in an accidental overdose.

Fuck, I’m an asshole.

Mav glances at me for a moment, and for some reason it makes me wonder if we even have our instruments on the bus. I’m so used to having my things, I didn’t think of that, and Jordan was busy helping us pack up our things this afternoon.

“Atlas,” Tyler hisses as my phone buzzes.

“Yeah,” I respond as I pull it out to check it.

“Don’t ride her too hard today. Layla isn’t... she’s very sensitive about her words and music. It doesn’t come easily to her,” Tyler says softly, his eyes trained on the back bedroom.

“See, I don’t really understand that.” I shrug. “Lennon could always bust out her words and then had us help her with

the music. I always knew, though, that the energy of vibing and creating is what fueled her. She didn't actually need us."

Opening up my texts, I see that Jordan messaged me.

Jordan: You may be wondering where your instruments are. They're in the middle storage compartment where the bunks are. I know Layla's been feeling creative, so she may reach out for help.

I was just wondering about this. Thanks, boss.

I know how to play ball, even though I dislike to bend for others. I used to be pretty easy going, but I don't have the patience anymore.

"It sounds like the sisters are pretty different, yeah?" Draven says under his breath as Layla comes out with a notebook and her guitar. Unfortunately, she hears him, almost tripping, so Mav has to reach out to catch her.

"Thanks," she murmurs. As Layla steadies herself she stretches her neck as if getting herself together. When she meets my eyes and shrugs off Mav's hand, I can see there's a determined edge there I didn't see before. This is the girl I first saw at the bar yesterday. The one who didn't give two fucks what I thought.

"Lennon and I are different people, so it just makes sense we'd act, think, and process things differently," Layla says haughtily. "I've never had to go through any of the things she's had to, and I'm not unaware of what she's done to keep me safe. Now that we've determined that I'm not, nor ever will be, my big sister's clone, can we move on?"

"As you wish," Draven says automatically. He used to tell Lyrica this when he would put his foot in his mouth. Fuck, this girl is just wrapping all of us around her dainty little finger.

Layla walks through the pulled back area, grabbing a bottle of water before she passes Tyler. There's a sitting room area in the next room, so I figure that's where she's headed.

“Jordan stashed our instruments right... here,” I explain, opening doors until I find them. Mav grabs his guitar from me, and I hand Draven a traveling drum set that easily breaks down to fit in a closet like this. It obviously isn’t what he usually plays on, but his eyes light up as he sees he’ll be able to jam whenever he wants.

He’s been extra twitchy lately, and I think this is part of the reason. Music lives in our hearts and blood.

There’s also a traveling keyboard for me, of course, and I bring up the back of our not-so-merry group as I walk behind them all.

“I need your phones and any computers you regularly use, please,” Tyler says as we move into the kitchen area. “Write any passwords or codes I’ll need on this notepad too, so I’m able to do what I need to. I want to put software on it so that you won’t be able to be hacked, and it’ll put you on the same network my associates will be working on from Los Angeles.”

Handing him my phone, I admit that I don’t have a computer. “You sound like Jordan when you say things like that,” I tell him as Draven and Mav walk back into our bunk areas to grab their computers.

Mav usually only uses his computer to video chat with his younger brother and watch movies with me, but it would be best if people can’t eavesdrop on us in any way. It’s hard enough to maintain our privacy as it is. We’re all more well known in the UK though, so the anonymity here is nice.

“I can do things that would make Jordan wonder if he should rethink his decision to hire me,” Tyler snorts, taking all of our electronics. Glancing at the drum kit, he pulls out ear plugs. “Try not to be a bag of dicks. Bye now.”

He’s the perfect boyfriend. Rolling my eyes as he puts the ear plugs in, I walk into the living area where Layla is curled up on the couch with her guitar plugged into a built-in amplifier.

Fancy.

“There’s a place for you to plug into under the seat across from me, Mav,” she says without looking up. Layla is frowning at her words, and the uncertainty she has is pissing me off.

She yo-yos between being super confident to worrying about whether or not she’s good enough. It’s hurting my head.

“You have until we finish setting up and then I’m ripping your notebook out of your hands, Layla,” I tell her. “Get your shit together and be who you’re supposed to be.”

TYLER

So I’m faking it. While I put in ear plugs to work, I immediately took out my right one to hear how things are going. Atlas and Mav have this way of picking at every insecure thread inside of Layla’s soul. I don’t want her to lock herself up, because I love every part of her.

Playful, daring, caring, and unsure.

Layla is twenty-six years old, and has grown up fast the last five years, but I want her to enjoy her life. I love watching her find her way, and break into who she is, the way you would shoes that you love.

Our age difference didn’t bother me at all, not from the second she smiled at me with a drink in her hand and said: “So I’m Layla. Please don’t be a dick, because my vibrator is tired.”

I almost spit my drink out. Fuck, I love this girl, but I can’t protect her from her demons, and two of the three men in there are exactly that.

Hearing Atlas bark at Layla makes my muscles tighten, and I force myself to stay sitting. *Come on, Little Flower, clap back.*

“All I heard was you trying to rush my process like a bully,” Layla says. I can hear her rustling on the couch as she

tosses her notebook to the side. Her memory isn't photographic, but she's stared at the lyrics for so long, I'm sure they're embedded into her brain.

Pretending to work by picking up the first phone and my notepad, I identify it as Mav's and unlock it. I also tap a few strokes on my computer just so Layla and the guys can hear me.

"If you weren't so damn slow—" Atlas begins.

"Children, for the love of God," Draven says, thumping Atlas in the back of his head. "Chick, I'm not above throwing you over my knee to spank again, so don't try me. Show us what you've been working on so we can actually be productive."

The bus pulls away as he finishes expressing his annoyance, and I silently say goodbye to this small town.

Should I tell Draven that isn't actually a threat?

My little flower enjoys being spanked, and I've been wanting to play with that idea soon. Tour life may throw a wrench in how soon it actually gets to happen though.

"Oh no, whatever will I do? You just spanked me last night, Draven. Don't show all your cards at once now," Layla snarks. Hiding a smile, I keep loading anti-spyware software onto devices. While I'm at it, I also set up location apps on their phones, so that I can find them anywhere. Just in case.

"What the fuck, Draven?" Mav roars, and I clear my throat to cover up my laughter.

"I promise it's much less nefarious than the baby chick is making it seem," Draven seethes as Layla picks up her guitar and strums it. "Thank fuck. Not that I don't think these assholes wouldn't enjoy watching me spank your ass red, but I'm extremely uncomfortable being this hard in your presence."

"Already forgot my name I see," she tsks before beginning to sing.

“

"I would love to forget, and sometimes I'm jealous of those who can. Forget the slights, the sins, the pain projected by others. Every rock is one I rebuild my life with, so baby give me your worst. I'll burn the world down with the gasoline of your words."

The music isn't peppy the way a lot of others would think would work. No, instead, Layla makes the notes curl and twist to her own style. I strain to hear more, promising pain if they decide to mock her for her choices.

"Keep going," Draven rasps. "Atlas, play with her. Do you have more written, Layla?"

"Yes," she says. My little flower doesn't mince words once she's in the zone. Layla continues on, and Atlas chimes in as he starts to play on his keyboard.

The hairs on my arm start to stand up, and I make no move to keep working. Instead, I abandon my project to listen.

"Layla, play that last line a half an octave lower?" Mav says, interrupting her.

Layla simply stops, takes a breath, and starts again. They work together to piece her song together, making me smile. If they would stop sniping for just a few minutes, it'll be fine.

I forget about my ear plug, letting it hang over my ear as I go back to my work, listening to them as Draven jumps in with his drum set as well. Usually, the drums would be too much stimulation for me to work around, but I find it doesn't bother me either.

"The song is solid," Atlas rasps as the last note fades away. "Your voice really shines through in the emotion of the song, too. Why didn't you want to work on it with us?"

Because it's about you, dingbat.

“There’s a lot of emotions in this song, and I wasn’t sure if I could objectively work on it.” Is all she says instead as she puts up the guitar. “Thanks for helping me with it, I think it’s good.”

Layla sounds tapped out, and I shake my head at how obtuse Mav and Atlas are. I’m proud of her for sticking it out, but I can tell she needs a break.

“Lay,” I call out, willing to give her an out.

“Yes, Baby,” she says automatically, getting up to come over to me. I can see the relief in her eyes as she leaves the room, and I tap my lips for payment with a wink.

Layla enthusiastically kisses me before leaning back with a grin. “What’s up, love?” she asks.

“You need a break,” I tell her, so low I’m barely moving my lips. Raising my voice, I say, “Your sister texted me, wanting to know if you could call her. She wants to know how things are going.”

There’s silence in the next room, and Layla’s eyes say volumes in response to her gratitude. I can tell she’s raw. This will give her some much needed space. I’m sure Lennon wants to know who her new bandmates are too.

I’m sure she’ll want Jordan’s head for it too.

Get him, Lenny.

“Thanks! I’ll go call her, and then figure out something for lunch. I’m starving,” Layla sighs with a smile. Leaving the room, she blows me a kiss before closing the door to our bedroom.

“Well, if that wasn’t masterful, I don’t know what was,” Draven murmurs from the doorway. Mav and Atlas can’t hear him as they have a conversation amongst themselves. “She was amazing just now.”

“Lay always is.” I shrug. “Her words are so personal, I think that’s where she gets tripped up on. There’s so much noise in her head, she second guesses everything.”

“I can see that,” he says, moving further into the room. “The song needs a name, but it’s about those two, huh?” Draven juts his chin in the direction of his friends and I nod. I’m not telling her secrets, it’s clear to anyone willing to pay attention.

“Layla had some inspiration,” I grunt. That’s an understatement, the poor girl was shaking from more than just the cold as she stabbed at the notebook paper last night. “There’s no shame in letting her recollect herself, and she probably really does need to talk to her sister about all of this.”

“The chick has a lot of talent, and she could have been petty, you know? Told her uncle to tell us all to shove off,” Draven says contemplatively.

“Layla isn’t like that at all,” I snort. “A part of it is that she’s the golden girl. Layla will make shit work even if it shouldn’t, especially if it’s work related. She doesn’t like to let people down.”

Mav’s head pops out as my words die away, and since I didn’t say anything wrong, I don’t feel badly about it.

“Is she gone?” he asks, his eyes tracking to the closed bedroom door.

“Yep,” I say, going back to working on the phones. I can multitask well.

“I just want to say that I’m not an idiot and neither is Atlas,” Mav begins as Atlas gets up to stand beside him. “We didn’t handle a lot of things right five years ago. Layla is complicated for us, but the truth is nothing has changed.”

“She’s twenty-six years old, and really has no business being with you either,” Atlas says, lips pursed in disgust. There’s nothing wrong with my relationship with Layla, because there’s no one else I would rather spend my life with. Feeling a bit annoyed on her behalf, I drop a bug in each of their phones, so that I can track their phone calls, texts, and everything they search or email.

Don’t piss off the nerd.

Handing back phones, I work on their computers. “Not to be rude, but you’re projecting,” I tell Atlas, adjusting my glasses. “Anyone who has two eyes in their head can see that Layla was meant to be mine. I understand her, know when to give her space, and have no problems letting her do her own thing.” Raising my gaze to theirs, I shrug. “Even when I know she may be making a mistake. Loving someone means loving them despite their mistakes or missteps. It’s how we learn.”

“Is that why you told her Lennon was texting her?” Atlas asks, brow raised.

“Yes, because you would have wanted to keep going through her notebook,” I snort. “She wrote a lot of songs last night before she fell asleep. She’s insanely hard on herself, so she’s going to tell you they’re shit when they’re not. They are, however, intense and full of unprocessed emotions.”

“It wasn’t a picnic for Mav or I, knowing we stirred up the chaos of her words, either,” Atlas sighs. “I figured it would be easier to ignore the pain she was experiencing when she wrote the song in an effort to help her score it to music.”

“It’s been five damn years, but there are moments when it feels as if it was yesterday,” Mav mutters. “I want to give her space, let her be. It’s just... are all of her songs like that?!”

“No,” I chuckle. “They are all emotional though. Layla feels everything deeper than other people. I think she’s very like her sister in this, and I feel comfortable drawing this comparison. However, her fans love her music. Sometimes it’s sultry, other times there’s something about it that makes you want to burn down the world.”

“Recording this is going to suck,” Atlas huffs. “The music is incredible, her voice is amazing, but the way she weaves her words together feel like a punch in the gut.”

“Sounds like you two deserve it, mates.” Draven shrugs. “I’m grateful we met, but finding out you’re cowards sucks.”

Walking off, he climbs into his bunk, closing himself off to the world. It’s the closest thing I imagine to a mic drop possible for him.

“Fucking great,” Mav sighs. “Another one is biting the dust. These interviews are going to be fucking interesting this week.”

Smirking as they take over the front of the bus, I finish up the work on their computers before starting on dinner for Layla and I. At the last minute I have a change of heart and make a big pan of chicken enchiladas. They’re my little flower’s favorite, and I have a feeling comfort food will help.

An hour later, Layla follows her nose, leaving her room. Her eyes are a little red, but she gives me a big smile as she sees what I made.

“Have I mentioned that I love you?” she asks with a squeal as she reaches for the plates.

“Maybe?” I tease her with a laugh. No matter what rough seas she’s in the middle of in her life, I always plan to be her safe port.

Ten

DRAVEN

Kyle, our manager, seems like a shiny asshole. You know the type. He seems to say all of the right things, but you'll probably find him fucking a roadie later with his pants around his ankles. I never thought I'd say it, but I already miss Jordan.

"So now that you're here," Kyle says, standing in the small tour bus kitchen as we listen to him, "I'm going to take you to your hotel to get you settled so you can freshen up before your first radio station interview."

"What time is that at?" Layla asks, glancing at the time. It's currently five in the morning, and while we all slept a bit, it's still too early for me.

“Six-thirty,” Kyle responds. “I’ve given them a list of questions to ask, so there shouldn’t be any surprises. People are very interested in hearing how you all came together. They may ask for an impromptu song, Layla.”

Double fuck. I’ve avoided people, the media, and interviews since Lyrica overdosed. People want to know how her now ex-boyfriend is handling it. Or worse, people are speculating that I ditched her while in her time of need.

The truth is, Lyrica dumped me for what feels like the millionth time right before she overdosed. It’s why I almost didn’t find her in time. I was wallowing in sadness, hurt, and a kind of relief. Her mood swings were slowly chipping away at my existence.

When she went to the rehab center, we agreed that we weren’t good for each other and it was better not to pick things back up. I hope she gets her shit together, but Lyrica and I are not meant for the long haul.

Of course, while this isn’t anyone’s business but ours, the tea is considered piping hot. People will want to know why Atlas, Mav, and I left the UK for America. The answer though isn’t as easy as everyone wants it to be, and I have no desire to rehash that on the radio.

The other issue is that Atlas, Mav, and I don’t know any of Layla’s songs, so she’ll be performing alone today. After the other night’s performance at the bar, I know she can handle it, but I feel shitty about it.

“Of course,” Layla says with a tight smile and a nod.

“I know you guys are going to need some time to practice and get used to playing together, so we’ve rented out two hotel rooms toward the back of the property. The staff doesn’t have a problem with noise control, though they’ve asked that you try not to practice before the sun comes up,” Kyle chuckles awkwardly.

As the bus pulls up to the hotel, he nods sharply. Kyle hopped onto the bus about twenty minutes ago, and hasn’t stopped yapping. Thank God I’ve had coffee already.

“Let’s get you checked in, then. Mav and Atlas have a room together, and then Draven and Layla are booked into another,” Kyle continues, ignoring Tyler.

Layla purses her lips, her spine straightening. A diva would start yelling, but I don’t think that’s the direction she’s heading in.

“What are the room arrangements as far as beds?” Layla asks coldly. It amazes me how she can turn into a blonde, blue-eyed ice queen before my eyes. “While I found out that Draven is a cuddler, Tyler and I would prefer a little more room to spread out, since we’re going to be here for a week.”

Kyle clearly expected her to lose her shit too, and raises his brow. “There’s two beds, Layla. You’ll also find that I booked you out two suites, so you’ll be able to enjoy some room. I know that buses can be a bit cramped, even though yours is gorgeous and you’re used to living out of a suitcase.”

“Perfect.” She grins, her demeanor thawing out. “Let’s unload then and get ready.”

Layla heads to the bedroom to grab her bag, Kyle’s eyes trailing after her. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it. I don’t think she’ll have any issues with the interviews,” he mutters.

Tyler smirks as he grabs his computer bag and travel suitcase. “Layla cut her teeth on the media,” he chuckles. “She’s a ball buster even though she doesn’t appear to be, so she’ll be fine. Can we get some of Layla’s music to the guys so they can look it over in the meantime?”

I should have thought of that, glancing at Mav and Atlas. They nod at me in agreement. A united front means learning a couple of her songs before the interview, especially her more popular ones. I looked up some reports on Layla, and they’re already whipped up in a frenzy about why her band would walk out on her.

Despite the non-disclosure agreement, her old band is spilling just enough lies about what happened to make it interesting.

“I’ll send over music sheets, videos, and the like to your emails,” Kyle says with a nod. “It’s good that you’re here, Tucker. It’ll be nice to have someone else to help with the tour.”

This man is too stupid to live. Tyler simply stands, not giving Kyle the time of day. While Tyler is the epitome of sweetness to the baby chick, I can see that there’s a mile wide grumpy asshole that lives just under his skin.

As much as I can’t stand people, I’m intrigued at how there’s two completely different sides to him. The side that is Layla’s alone, and the one who openly shows his disdain for the world.

“I’m here for Layla, the tech side of *Music Horde*, and the job I was hired to do,” Tyler says coldly. “I was merely mentioning something you should already have offered.”

Mav snorts as Layla comes out with her things. Her arms are full, and my fingers itch to help her. I’m torn because I’m still not clear on where I stand with the baby chick. She’s not one of my best friends’ favorite people, so does bro code mean I have to stay away?

Having friends is exhausting.

Shuffling off the bus with everyone, I decide that I don’t agree with how Atlas and Mav treat Layla. My cock hardens at the thought of her being in the same hotel room as me. Maybe I’ll be able to learn a bit more about this baby chick too.

Yawning, I nod at the doorman as he opens the door for us.

“Thank you for staying with us. Have a good morning,” he says to me. I appreciate that he doesn’t expect me to have a conversation yet with him because it’s too damn early.

“The only thing that’s going to save me today is more coffee and a shower,” Layla sighs as Kyle walks to the reception desk to sort out our rooms.

“We’re leaving in forty minutes,” Benny says, having followed us in to grab his own key. “It won’t be a long break, but at least you’ll all get to stretch your legs.”

Kyle hands out key cards as he reaches us, and Benny disappears.

“Your instruments will be making their way upstairs at some point today. As Benny said, we don’t have too long. Any questions?” he asks.

“Nope,” I tell him, taking my key and making my way to the elevators. For some reason, this guy really rubs me the wrong way.

Pulling out my phone, I text Jordan before I can second guess myself.

I have a feeling your prep work is making this guy look good. Please tell me you’re at least keeping your eye on Kyle?

I don’t expect him to respond as I shove my phone away with a grunt as if it offends me. Mav and Atlas are used to my fits, so they don’t ask, merely glancing over at me in amusement.

“Who pissed in your cheerios?” Tyler teases me as we get onto the elevator. We’re towards the top of the building, so I hit the twelfth floor. Cleveland is overcast, which is what I’m typically used to so it doesn’t bother me at all.

“Our new manager is annoying,” I mutter.

“Kyle talks a good game, but he seems sleezy,” Layla says, wrinkling her nose. “If I make it a point not to be caught alone around him, consider it self preservation.”

The idea of him possibly hurting her makes my blood freeze. “I think that’s a good idea,” I tell her. “I get sleazeball vibes from him as well.”

Tyler nods as he meets my eyes to show he’s on board. Layla’s man may appear to be easygoing in many ways, but it’s a show. There’s a pitbull underneath that’ll fight for the baby chick.

“I really want to be contrary, but I can’t,” Mav grunts as the elevator chimes its arrival. “I wouldn’t trust him around

any female. As long as he can get the job done, we'll put up with him until Jordan returns."

Layla steps out of the elevator in response, turning right toward the back of the building. "Definitely carrying my knife everywhere," she mutters, making me hide a smile. She's pint-sized, but she intrigues me.

"No," Atlas says, walking next to me with a pinched look. "What ever happened to hating everyone on sight?"

"I don't know what you mean," I lie. While I'm a prickly ass, I've never been much of a fan of bullying, and I don't like the way Atlas and Mav keep pulling the wind from Layla's sails. Besides, I would much rather see her face as she comes apart for Tyler again.

I think I'll very much enjoy being a fly on the wall as their new roommate.

"Draven," Mav barks as he stops at his door. Giving him a two finger salute, I ignore him, continuing toward my room next to them.

"Everything okay?" Layla asks, her gaze sliding to Mav and Atlas. Their faces are annoyed as they let themselves into their room, but they're on their own with this. The chick has me firmly in her thrall, and I want to learn more about her.

I've never been very good about ignoring pretty, shiny things. I'm not about to start now.

"Yes," I tell her. "They're grumpy is all. I think we're all happy to be put up in a hotel with more room for the next week."

Tyler looks at me knowingly, opening the door. Walking in, I notice that the room doesn't have a kitchen, but it does have a large living room area and two bedrooms on either side of it.

"This is perfect," Layla sighs, hurrying into the bedroom and closing the door behind her.

"Forty minutes to make herself beautiful, and she'll only need twenty," Tyler chuckles as he closes the door behind

himself.

“Thank fuck for that. There never seems to be enough time in the day,” I tell him, making my way to the other bedroom and pulling off my shirt as I walk into the adjoining bathroom after throwing my shit on the bed.

I don't bother closing any doors as I strip and turn on the shower. My mind turns to the possible interview questions and how awful this could go as I get into the shower.

Was Lyrica suicidal?

Don't you think you should have stuck around to help after she overdosed?

Everyone thought you were the perfect couple. Where did things go wrong?

I often ask myself where things went off the rails. Tilting my head back, I let the water run over my blond hair. Lyrica has been on antidepressants for years, but always hated the way they made her feel. I'm not her babysitter, so I never said anything.

I'm shit when it comes to loving people. I wanted to make her happy. I went out and partied with her because she was fun when she went out. But after? The spiraling depression was awful.

I did some research on the plane on the way to the States and realized that recreational drugs, depression, and prescription drugs don't play well together. Stupid mistake. The combination of Lyrica deciding to take one more pill and her prescription drugs tipped her over into an overdose. I decided to check on her after spending the night drinking and angry, only to find her lips blue and unresponsive.

There's no better way to explain the way that night went down except that it was a series of bad decisions, much like our six year relationship. I kept making excuses for her, because when we were good, it was incredible. I don't ever want to make someone my entire world who doesn't deserve it ever again.

Lips pursed, I wash my hair and body. My cock bounces against my stomach as I clean it, because it's always hard. The piercing winks at me, and I know I'll be fucking my hand later after spending so much time around Layla.

Finishing up, I turn off the water and dry off.

A glance at my phone on the bedspread as I walk into the room tells me I was in the shower longer than I intended to be, and I can see glimpses of the chick already dressed.

Damn, she really is fast.

Pulling on a pair of dark denim jeans without boxers, I rifle through my bag for a thin long-sleeved, dark blue T-shirt as well. While it's warm in Ohio today, it'll be colder inside of the buildings.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone get dressed so quickly," I call out into the living room as I pull on my shirt.

"The only time I take a bit longer is for a show, and that's because of the makeup," Layla says before she flops onto the couch. She smiles as she lays back in her cropped black shirt and black and white knee length skirt. There's something chic in her outfit choice while also giving her rocker girl vibes with her choice of dark hoop earrings and multiple necklaces.

I don't think I've ever seen anyone else pull something off like that.

Forcing myself to turn away, I grab my toiletries bag and brush my teeth and style my hair. My hair looks effortlessly done in waves, just the way I like it.

Walking out of the room with my necessities stuffed into my pockets, I see Layla grab her bag and stand.

"Ready?" she asks. Layla is wearing high heels with her outfit that make me want to beg her to have them dig into my back while she bounces on my cock. Goddamn, there's just something about her that drives me mad.

"Yeah," I rasp, my mouth dry. Her makeup is done in light purples and browns that somehow make her blue eyes sparkle and appear doe-eyed. Needing to change the subject, I decide

to tease her. “You mentioned wearing a knife, but I’m not really sure where it would fit.”

Tyler snorts as he walks down the hall with us, shooting me a “*really*” look. It’s the first thing that popped into my head, so sue me.

Layla turns to face me, pointing at a high slit along the right side of her skirt. “I strapped the thigh holster to my right leg. It rubs a touch, but it does the job,” she explains.

Fuck me.

As she turns back around to walk properly, I shake my head as my cock throbs in my pants. The chick is way too sexy for her own good. I’m glad she can take care of herself, but my dick is going to be wearing an indentation of my zipper along it very soon if this keeps up.

Forcing my feet to move, I send Mav and Atlas a text to get their asses in gear. Thankfully, they step out of their room just as we begin to pass it.

Tyler wraps his arm around Layla, telling her how beautiful she looks, and she blushes for him. Her hair is artfully piled at the top of her head so it’s off her shoulders, which is probably smart for this weather. Curling my fingers, I deny the urge to fuck her hair up.

I can’t tell you what’s changed from yesterday to today, except that I can see the compassion and passion in Layla Campbell. She thinks I can’t see her, but I do, and I want to know more about what makes this chick tick.

I check out as we go down the elevator and then through the hotel. It’s pretty typical for me to get lost in my own thoughts, so Atlas and Mav don’t mention it. Sticking earphones into my ears, I play one of Layla’s songs, letting her words flow over me. Somehow, they help me a little as the bus takes us to the first interview. The first radio station is pretty close by, and I can see the sky begin to lighten up.

Kyle walks up with us to the radio station booth, and the co-hosts grin as they greet us.

Please don’t be dicks.

I have a sort of phobia of interviews I think, and I can feel my hands begin to sweat. Tyler comes in with us to take a few photos for our social media with the radio station's permission.

Not wanting to appear constipated, I take a deep breath.

It's fine. If I decide I don't want to answer something, I'll just tell them to fuck off.

“Thank you for coming to talk to us, guys. Jerry and I know you're just getting into town, so we'll ask you some questions, maybe take some calls?” Cash chatters on as we sit down in the booth.

“That all sounds great,” Layla says with a grin. She's relaxed with the interviewers, and I wonder how often she's done this. Launching a solo career takes work after being part of a larger band, so I'm sure she's been on multiple radio shows, interviews with magazines, etc.

Fuck, I didn't even ask what our band is called. I should know this, right?

Mav and Atlas seem as if they're content to fade into the background until they're needed. There's no way to ask, and I'm surprised that this is one of the things I'm panicking about all of a sudden.

Headsets are all handed out, and Jerry checks the time. “Here we go then in just under a minute. Layla, I know you're still feeling out your new band members, but would you mind singing us something if we have time?”

Kyle is fiddling with his phone, and completely quiet as Layla is put on the spot, but she just nods graciously. “Of course, I'd love to. I just unpacked the bus, so it'll depend on if my guitar is still on the bus. Kyle?” she prompts.

There's grace as she turns to look at him, brow raised. It doesn't look like she's being bitchy, she's just reminding Kyle to do his damn job.

“Guitar? Oh, yes, of course. Instruments haven't been unpacked yet, so I'll just go grab it for you. Sure thing, Layla,” Kyle says, jumping up and putting away his phone.

Layla doesn't even bat an eyelash as she thanks him before she turns back to smile at our hosts. "It looks like we can accommodate that." She smiles.

Jerry and Cash look at each other, then Layla as if wondering who this cool and collected twenty-something is, and I have to say that I feel the same. A knock on the window from their producer gets them moving again.

"It's six-thirty in the morning with Cash and Jerry. Today, we have *The Midnight Lights* with us as a special treat. Layla has her new band members Maverick Lawson, Atlas Ryles, and Draven Hendricks with her, and I have to say she looks absolutely gorgeous," Cash says smoothly.

I check to see if he's leering, but he appears to be playing into morning niceties. Tyler doesn't say a word as he takes a few photos before paying attention to the interview. Oh well, at least I know what our band name is.

I need to pay attention to the smaller details on this tour. The problem is that I've never cared enough before.

"How is Cleveland treating you so far?" Jerry asks with a jovial smile.

"I've been here for less than an hour," she teases, "but so far it's been really good. I'm excited to get back on tour, dial back in with my fans and perform again."

"Your old bandmates walked off on you in between tours, is that right? You're ending one and starting another," Jerry confirms, glancing at his notes.

"That's correct. We worked together for two years, and we were no longer a right fit." Layla shrugs.

"Can you tell me what that means?" Cash presses.

Mav, Atlas and I glance at each other in unease. This doesn't feel as if it's right. Not that Kyle would do much, but they seem to be taking advantage of his absence.

"It means that I don't enjoy being around drug use," she says. "It was beginning to affect the performances, and my fans deserve better than that."

Layla literally rolls with the punches as she answers all of their questions, and Kyle is still absent.

“Let’s take a few calls now, shall we?” Cash says with a wide smile. I’ve actually started to relax, so I’m very much not ready for the caller or the question.

“Carla is calling from her morning commute. Good morning, what’s your question, darlin?” Jerry asks. He doesn’t seem too worried about whatever she may ask, and I wonder if their producer is vetting calls.

Checking the producer booth again, I notice that Kyle has finally put in his appearance, but appears to be arguing with him. Hmm.

“Hi! I did a little googling, and I found that Layla’s new band members are formally of Pull Down the Moon. I have a question for Draven,” Carla says. Most people would have paused, but not this gal. *“How does it feel to know you failed, Lyrica, you piece of shit?”*

The co-hosts yell for her to watch her mouth, while my lips part in surprise. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Cold floods my body, and my ears ring. I can still see Lyrica’s blue lips...

“I’m going to take this one, guys,” Layla says brightly, reaching over to squeeze my fingers tightly. “Sometimes, you can’t help people, no matter how much you want to. Whatever mistakes were or weren’t made, my understanding is that Lyrica is getting the help she needs now.”

A banging on the window makes us all twist in our seats and Kyle makes a slicing motion with his hand across his throat. About fucking time.

“It appears you have your answer, Carla,” Jerry says over her sputtering voice. “You have a great day now.” Hitting the button, he begins a recorded commercial, his eyes wide as they swing to me. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m very sure the question Carla asked was not on the list of approved questions,” Layla says smoothly, rubbing her finger over my racing pulse point.

“I also believe this interview is now over,” Atlas continues, standing with Mav. “You understand, don’t you? Lyrica’s overdose is a very serious and real traumatic event that happened to us, and we are concerned this line of questioning could happen again.”

“I also think Draven needs a break. What do you say, mate?” Mav says.

“A break sounds lovely,” I mutter, standing up. Layla moves to take her hand off my wrist, but I refuse. Instead, I thread my fingers through hers, locking them together.

“Thank you for having us,” Layla says primly as we walk out.

Kyle has a blood vessel that is pulsing in his forehead as he sees us. “Time to go,” he grunts, taking the lead.

“I’m really very sorry,” the producer says as we leave.

“All calls go through him. The girl either lied about her question, or he’s lying,” Layla says softly. “Either way, I’m so sorry, Draven.”

“You made it better,” I mutter. “You didn’t have to say anything to help.”

“Of course I did,” she says in surprise. “I refuse to suffer idiots or bullies, and that woman was both.”

Tyler chuckles, his hand cupping the back of her neck. He doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that I’m making Layla my new support blanket for a bit.

“Fuck, Draven, that was shit luck. Kyle, how do we keep that from happening?” Atlas growls.

It feels nice to be taken care of. I rarely need it, nor am willing to accept it.

“I’m good,” I rasp, though I still refuse to pull away from Layla. “I let my guard down and that was stupid of me.”

“No, this is why we have an approved question list,” Kyle says, shaking his head. He has Layla’s guitar in his hand, and

it makes me feel a bit better to see that he really did go to fetch it.

A part of me felt as if he was leaving us to hang in the wind. “The next interview isn’t until eleven, so I’m going to take you back to the hotel and call the three other radio stations we’re booked with to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

It makes sense that people are curious, but is it wrong that I don’t want to give them that part of my soul? Shuddering, I try to shake off the feeling of owing people my blood and pain.

The walk through the lobby of the radio station passes by in a blur, and then we’re back on the bus. I let go of Layla’s hand, telling myself I shouldn’t depend on her. I need to find my way on my own two feet.

So why does it feel as if I’m drifting the second I let go?

“What do you need?” Mav asks under his breath as he sits next to me. Layla is laying into Kyle, and I have to admit she’s awfully cute when she’s angry.

These are exactly the feelings I don’t need, so I decide to shove them away. “I think I need to smoke,” I sigh. “I need something to quiet the pain and the itch I feel under my skin.”

Atlas is close enough to hear me and nods, glancing over at Layla. Grimacing, he shakes his head at me. Yeah, I’m going to need to do this in their room. The baby chick has made it quite clear how she feels about drugs.

When we arrive, the three of us make tracks as if we’re young kids trying to get away with something. Atlas and Mav always have pot on them as a rule of thumb, and they rarely touch anything stronger than that.

I gave up most of my vices, but when the world is just too loud today and my demons are calling for their pound of flesh, I find that it helps.

“Lay is going to be so pissed at us later,” Atlas mutters once our asses hit the couch cushions in his room.

Despite how I've been thawing toward the baby chick, I shrug. "She's not our keeper," I remind him as he pulls out a joint from his bag. I don't want to talk, I rarely do that with these guys, and they're my best friends. I just want to drift for a bit.

Atlas lights up, and I swear I start to feel better as soon as I begin to smell it. Mav and Atlas found a decent weed connection in Vermont, which is working out perfectly right now.

As Atlas hands me the joint, I place my lips on the paper and slowly suck in, allowing the smoke to fill my mouth before I pull it into my lungs. It's a slow, steady routine that I'm well used to, and my eyes draw closed as I enjoy it.

"The sun is barely in the sky, and today already sucks," Mav sighs as I hand him the roach. Thankfully we have some time to enjoy smoking before I have to face the music. I know she'll know we smoked the second I walk into the room, but I do plan to shower and change my clothes.

Just because I need to disconnect from the world right now doesn't mean I can't be a fucking professional the rest of the day.

Eleven

LAYLA

“**Y**ou’re going to wear a hole into the ground, Little Flower,” Tyler says, amused, from the living room as he works. He fired off an email to the label earlier to let them know about the incident at the radio station just in case, and uploaded a few photos from the interview to our social media accounts.

Tyler doesn’t really like Kyle either.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I mutter, forcing myself to stop moving. I don’t even know Draven, so why am I worried about him? Glancing at my phone, I decide to kill some time and call my sister.

Ugh, the guys looked really guilty and kind of sketchy when they disappeared earlier.

Whatever, they're adults. As long as they can show up and do the rest of these damn interviews without making a fool of themselves or me, I don't care.

I tell the traitorous part of me that is calling me a liar, to shut up just the same.

"I'm going to go call Lenny since I'm bothering you," I sigh. I know that's not what he meant, but I'm feeling twitchy. I miss Uncle Jordan too, because the radio station never would have pulled something like that with him.

I'm also worried because I haven't heard from him either, and he would usually check in to see how things are going. I hope he didn't have any issues at O'Malley's. Mila and those people really do scare the shit out of me.

A strong, tattooed arm wraps around me, and I know I'm in trouble. My ass falling into his lap, Tyler buries his nose into my neck.

"Let's try that again, Baby Girl. Take a deep breath for me, yeah?" Tyler murmurs. I can feel the deep gravel of his voice rumble through my body, and it makes me shiver.

Taking a deep breath, I nod. "I'm a ball of anxiety," I whisper. "I don't know if I need to pace, talk, or get spanked and then fucked."

Tyler chuckles, squeezing me tightly. "I know which one I prefer, but my way would mean that we cancel all of your future engagements for the rest of the day. I love when you're naked and begging me to come."

"Yes, please," I moan, wiggling.

"As much as I would love that, we don't have enough time right now. Instead, tell me the top three things that are bothering you," he says, kissing my neck.

Laying my head back on his shoulder, I think about it. "I'm worried something is wrong with my uncle. I haven't heard from him, and if he were here, the radio show interview

would have gone smoother,” I tell him. “I guess, both of those things are bothering me. Draven also never should have been asked that question, and his face gutted me. He looked like a deer in headlights.”

“It was rough watching it,” Tyler reassures me. “Now tell me why you care that he was hurt?”

Wrinkling my nose, I ask myself that same question. I don’t know him well, he’s friends with Atlas and Mav who think less than well about me. I’m a child in their eyes, regardless of how much I’ve accomplished.

“Layla?” Tyler asks, and I can hear the frown in his voice.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Small spiral. I shouldn’t care outside of the fact that I really hate a bully. Carla the cuntasaurus was fucking ruthless. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of me.”

“Can I tell you that it was really fucking sexy?” he teases me. “It truly was. Draven looked like he couldn’t wrap his brain around why you would help him.”

“He confuses me,” I admit. “He didn’t have to insist I sleep in the room the night before last either. I’m pretty sure he was listening to my songs on the way to the radio station too.”

“You have a concert in less than four days. They fucking better care about your music if they want to stay a part of your band,” Tyler growls. “I think you’re getting under Draven’s skin and you confuse him as well. Do you like him?”

Blinking, I turn in his arms. “What do you mean? Like him in what way? It shouldn’t matter if I do or not because I’m with you,” I tell him, brows furrowed.

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” Tyler says, kissing my nose. “I adore you, and you’re my entire world. However, I acknowledge that you have a really big heart. You’re allowed to like other people. I see how much your brothers-in-law adore your sister, and I have eyes, Baby. Atlas and Mav still live rent-free in your head.”

“They didn’t want me then and they don’t want me now,” I mutter. “It again shouldn’t matter because most people have one boyfriend. That’s what’s expected in society.”

“Do you really give a shit what society says?” Tyler asks, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Relationships as a social construct don’t matter to me. Want to know what does?”

“What?” I whisper. Tyler is insinuating he’d be willing to share me, but that’s insane. Draven hasn’t shown me he has any interest in me other than as a possible passing phase. I’ve been there with Atlas and Mav, and I refuse to be anyone’s playtoy ever again.

“You matter to me, Little Flower.” Tyler grins. His glasses are a little skewed as he drops his head back on the couch, and it’s adorable. “I know perfectly well that you can handle your shit, but I am still willing to burn the world the second you give me the go ahead. If you find yourself tied up in knots at some point because you feel like you may like Draven, give yourself a break.”

“Is that what these weird butterflies are? He keeps calling me baby chick, and it doesn’t seem like a pet name,” I say ruefully. “Age is such a big deal to people, but you don’t seem to care.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Tyler admits. “I hate people, the frivolity of getting to know them and small talk. We didn’t have any of that, and I started falling for you the second I saw you. That’s what matters to me. Any experiences you haven’t had yet or want to have, I get to be a part of. Maybe that makes me a selfish bastard—”

“It makes you mine.” I grin, knowing he’ll understand I’m not calling him a bastard. Kissing him hard, I move to straddle him. Tyler’s fingers tangle in my hair as he groans into my mouth.

“Don’t let me interrupt anything,” Draven says, letting the door hit the wall as he comes in. The closer he gets to us, the more the overpowering scent of weed gets.

Wrinkling my nose, I turn to see his goofy, relaxed smile and red eyes. Ugh.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, but I’m not in the mood to be entertained,” I grumble. “I think I’ll make that call after all,

love.”

Tyler gives me an understanding smile as I get up. Ever since Roark almost overdosed a few years ago, I’ve found myself really intolerant of all drugs. I know people don’t typically overdose on marijuana, but it still bothers me.

“I needed to take the edge off, chick,” Draven says, taking a step toward me as I walk past him. “I would have just showered and changed in Atlas and Mav’s room, but I don’t have clothes there. Does this really bother you?”

“Yep,” I say, closing the door behind me. I swear, the smell was so strong, I can still smell it.

“Layla, are you just going to hide from me?” Draven asks through the door. “I’m a full grown adult, I don’t need you to ‘mom’ me.”

A grunt makes me smile, because I’m pretty sure Tyler got up and elbowed him.

“You can do anything you want to do, Draven. I was worried about you, but it’s clear I didn’t need to be,” I tell him as I pull my sister’s number up and climb into the bed.

The silence is telling as he walks away and closes the door to his room. Asshole. I really need to stop sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong. Admitting that I was worried about him wasn’t what I planned to do either.

Fuck.

Draven has been fending for himself for a long time. I’m sure Atlas and Mav had their reasons for getting high with him if that’s what he needed.

Hitting the call button on my phone, I brush away my thoughts about the blond haired, blue-eyed drummer.

“Hi, sis,” Lennon says as she answers. “How are you? I caught the radio show.”

“You did?” I ask in surprise. I figured it would be too early, and I didn’t really give her the schedule. It wouldn’t have been hard for her to get though.

“Of course I did,” she chuckles. “The kids make great alarm clocks, so I was already awake. How the hell did Jordan let that get past?”

“Oh... I forgot to tell you,” I sigh. “Jordan isn’t with me. The label pulled him to work with someone else, but I’m a little concerned because he went to that Irish bar I played at a couple of nights ago to make sure we wouldn’t have any issues.”

“You told me about the dead body, but not Jordan,” Lenny snorts in amusement. “Have you heard from him at all? I texted him after the interview, but haven’t gotten a message back.”

“No. I haven’t heard from him at all, and that’s not like him. What if something happened to him? I made a joke that I promised I wouldn’t get kidnapped, but now my mind is racing. Our family doesn’t have a great track record.”

“Fuck, don’t even joke about it,” Lennon mutters. “Hey, Orion? Can you help me out with something?”

I can hear his deep voice as he comes closer, but not the words.

“I’m putting you on speaker,” she warns. “O, Can you see if Jordan made it home after he went to O’Malley’s? They seem to have some mob ties, and Layla was pulled into helping them a couple of nights ago.”

“Yeah, I’ll check cameras, and see if his location is turned on his phone,” Orion murmurs. “I would ask that you stay out of trouble, Layla, but that would be silly. It has a way of following people.”

It doesn’t seem like an admonishment, but my lips still twitch in amusement.

“Yes, it does,” I murmur.

“Okay, he’s off to do his stalker work.” Lennon says. “You sound weird, Sis. What else is going on? Turner keeps asking if he needs to pull Sally out of retirement and if Atlas and Mav have gotten their heads out of their asses.”

Sally the bat and Turner. “I don’t think she’ll ever fully go into retirement,” I giggle. “Unfortunately, Atlas and Mav have a permanent stick up their asses when it comes to me. It seems childish to say they’re mean, but it is unpleasant to be around them.”

“*Are they bullying you?*” I can hear Derek next to her, and wonder when he came into the room. “*I may have cornered the market on being a douchebag at one point. The only thing I can say about it is that sometimes it’s guilt and other times it’s struggling with unresolved issues.*”

“We shared a couple of kisses a long time ago,” I remind him. “They decided to reenact their actions a few years ago and made sure I walked into the hotel room while they were going at it. I tried to sleep on the roof because there weren’t any rooms.”

“*Is it roof sleeping weather?*” Derek teases me.

“Not in Vermont,” I grumble. “That’s part of what’s twisting me up. Draven, my new drummer, came upstairs and made me come back to the room and sleep in his bed.”

Derek, I’ve found, really enjoys gossip. “*Do I need to ask if you fell on his dick?*”

“Derek!” I laugh. Lenny snickers on the other end of the phone, and I shake my head. “It really wasn’t like that, but Jordan found the three of us in bed together and asked the same question. I was fully dressed, thank you.”

“*So you said you were twisted up, what’s the problem?*” Lenny asks.

“Draven didn’t have to be nice. In fact, he was very much on Atlas and Mav’s side. The three of them are best friends from their time touring in the UK. It makes sense he’d be an ass.”

“*Lay, you forget, I heard the interview and that awful woman’s question. You didn’t hesitate to step in to help. Maybe he’s realizing that Mav and Atlas’ issues are their own,*” Lenny suggests.

“How are those assholes, anyway?” Roark calls out. Hearing them all makes me feel homesick, and I blink rapidly. I’m an adult. I shouldn’t feel like this.

“They’re still dickheads,” I confirm. “Purposely obtuse, pushing me into situations that are impossible, and I’m pretty sure Atlas got mad at me at one point because I was crashing from the adrenaline rush at open mic night at O’Malley’s.”

“You covered up a murder,” Lenny scoffs. *“I would have been twitchy afterward too.”*

“I heard about the murder from Lenny,” Roark says. *“Look, I’ve never known them to act like this before. They’ve changed a lot. Sometimes I wonder if this is them pulling the pigtails on the pretty girl in the playground.”*

“I don’t think I was even born yet when they were playing on the playground,” I mutter petulantly. Roark barks out a laugh, and it makes me feel a little better. “Besides, I only enjoy my hair being pulled in very specific situations. None of them are ones that Atlas and Mav are interested in pursuing.”

“Lay, I think they’re acting like this because they are, and that’s their issue,” Roark rumbles unhappily. *“I don’t think they deserve you, so give them hell if they ever get their shit together.”*

Giggling, I try to imagine a world where Mav and Atlas ask me to forgive them. So much of how I perceive myself is indoctrinated in our short time together. I say things in my head before I speak, to make sure I don’t sound weak or immature, which means that instead my words come out cold and polished. An interviewer once said that I was stuck up, which I’m very much not.

She kept trying to compare me to my sister, which is another one of my triggers. I hate being compared to her. We’re entirely different people.

“I promise,” I tell Roark. Glancing at the time, I realize it’s time to go. “Will you let me know if you find anything out about Jordan, please? Kyle is a poor substitute for him, and

even Atlas and Mav agreed that I should make it a point to not talk to him without someone else.”

“*Has he said or done anything to make you worried, Layla?*” Orion growls. I’m careful with my next words, because I know O wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of Kyle and make it seem like an accident.

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s more the feeling that something is off. Better to be safe, O. I’m good, I promise. I actually need to head out to the next interview, so I’ll check in later?”

The guys and Lennon say goodbye, and even Turner pops in as well. Smiling, I hang up the phone. I feel better after talking to them, even though I’m going to need a video call with the kids soon. They’re getting so big so fast, and Lennon and the guys are loving having baby Senan to spoil now.

Getting up, I pull the pins out of my hair in the bathroom. My kiss with Tyler was hot, but my updo didn’t survive it. Still worth it.

Pulling out a curling iron, I frown at my outfit. I’m just not feeling it anymore. Twenty minutes later, I’m wearing cute ripped jeans, a cropped band tee, and flats. My hair is now styled into pretty curls, and I apply a dark mauve lipstick.

“That’s as good as it’s gonna get, folks,” I mutter. The weather is muggy right now in Cleveland, so I may as well be cute and comfortable. Unplugging the curling iron, I spray my hair with setting spray and grab my bag.

“Are we ready?” I ask, stepping out of the bedroom. Draven looks up and his mouth drops open when he sees me. His eyes don’t look red anymore, and I can’t smell weed either. He’s also changed into dark jeans and a long-sleeved thin shirt with the sleeves pushed up. Damn, I can see the abs and tattoos from here.

“Yeah. Damn, chick, did I miss the memo? You look beautiful,” he says, surprising me.

“I... um, thanks. I just felt like changing,” I tell him with a small smile. I don’t miss Tyler’s face as he hides a smirk as well as he packs away his computer.

“Did you remember your knife, Little Flower?” Tyler asks. Patting at my pants as I loop my bag over my head, I shake my head.

“Shit,” I mutter, turning around.

“Is that really necessary?” Draven asks. “It’s the middle of the day, and you’re going to be with us all day.”

“It is,” I grunt, walking back into my room. I left it looped over a hook in the bathroom, and I roll my eyes. Unbuttoning my pants, I’m pushing them down my thighs as Draven follows me. “Do you mind?”

Propping himself against the door, he shakes his head as I strap the thin thigh holster to my body. “I don’t mind at all. The view is pretty from where I am. Now why do you feel like you need that?”

“I can’t get in contact with my uncle, so I asked my sister to look into finding him,” I begin, making sure the holster is tight enough. Pulling out the pocket in my pants, I rifle around for a pair of mini scissors in my makeup bag. “I can trust exactly one person on this tour to be responsible. You bet your ass I’m going to wear the fucking knife.”

Snipping through the thread that holds together the pocket enough that I’ll be able to get my hand through to pull my knife, I nod as I throw the scissors back into my makeup bag. Glancing up as I grab the knife, I notice Draven’s stricken face.

“If you’re getting high, Draven, and I disappear, then you’re immediately an unhelpful shit,” I huff, sliding the knife into my holster. It’s a present from Lenny and her husbands from a previous Christmas, and one of my favorite things.

Pulling up my pants, I fix my pocket and rebutton them. “My sister disappeared off the face of the earth a few years ago, so I’m not being dramatic. It happens, and I promised my uncle I would take care of myself. This is what that means.”

“Fuck,” Draven mutters. “I thought it was odd that I hadn’t heard back from Jordan. I also didn’t think of things like that. I

wanted to forget, but I'm also your roommate, Layla. I should—”

“I don't need to be babysat,” I sigh. “I am just making sure I feel comfortable being out in public today.”

“You know how to use it?” he asks carefully, as if I'll accidentally stab him with it even though it's put away.

“Yes,” I chuckle. “I can shoot a gun, use a knife, and put you on your ass despite your size. I have had really good teachers.”

“Why am I worried about that last part?” Draven growls as I brush past him.

“I don't know. It sounds like a personal problem. All you need to know is that I'm ready to go now,” I say brightly.

“Kyle texted me,” Tyler says, looking put out. Raising my brow, I shrug as if to ask why. “He said he's adding an extra interview at the tail end of the day.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “Fine, but I need food soon. It already feels like it's been a long day.”

“I'll make you something on the bus,” he promises. “I'll throw together food before we get there. It looks like it's a thirty minute drive, and there will probably be traffic.”

“I've never been more thankful for traffic,” Draven rumbles as he follows us out.

DRAVEN

Tyler threw together sandwiches and a salad, and it was very much needed. I always have the munchies after smoking. It never fails.

My eyes follow Layla as we get off the bus, and I think about her words. Am I dumb for simply expecting she would be completely safe with us? I suppose it doesn't help if I'm

fucking around with Atlas and Mav, instead of hanging out with her.

I know about the generalized situations that Layla should avoid, like sleeping on the roof or a couch in the lobby of a hotel. Those things make my palm twitch because they're common sense to me. I also don't want her walking alone at night.

See? Normal safety precautions for a beautiful young girl in a city.

I can't even see the imprint of the knife or leather strap she is using to hold it in place. I'm not someone well versed in weapons, which is why it makes me twitchy that she feels she needs one.

"You look off," Mav comments as we walk in. There's a security guard that simply waves us through, and all I can wonder is how many other people they do this with. It feels decidedly unsafe.

"Me?" I grunt. "I'm thinking about how much I don't know about the little chick. It's bothering me."

"Absolutely not," Atlas hisses as we walk. "Please don't get obsessed with her. Layla Campbell is off limits."

"Only for you." I shrug. "You have your own issues with her, but all I've experienced is a sweet girl who has been really nice to me. I trust your judgment typically. I just think you're biased here."

"You're as old as we are," Mav groans, making me shrug.

"I'm going to shoot my shot, and continue to shoot it. She may be a baby chick, but I was informed today that Layla could also kill me in my sleep if she decided to," I tell them. "I enjoy living on the edge. She could be just what I need."

"Your ideas on what makes an acceptable partner are really disturbing," Atlas rumbles. "The girl I know is scared of bugs and very coddled. There's no way she'd tell you that or that she can handle you."

“I think the baby chick has changed over the last five years.” I frown. I haven’t seen evidence of a coddled, incapable girl in the last couple of days. The way they talk about Layla is starting to chafe at me. “She said her sister and her husbands taught her how to shoot a gun and take care of herself.”

“The little Valkyrie is a damn warrior,” Mav chuckles. “I can believe that Lennon can do all of that. I haven’t seen much change in Layla to be honest.”

I feel really uncomfortable with this conversation. My friends are usually fair, even when they’re assholes. I don’t like the way they’re talking about her.

“Besides, Layla has a boyfriend,” Atlas reminds me. “She doesn’t seem like the type of girl who would agree to be shared, and I know how you feel about cheating.”

I hate cheaters. Despise them. “I have a feeling you don’t know anything about Layla anymore, so making assumptions isn’t helping anyone,” I tell them.

Arriving at the radio station office, I end the conversation as we step inside. I have some things to think about. All I know is that the little chick is interesting and I want her.

The next few hours pass by in a whirlwind, and I’m bored to tears by the last interview. Layla sags against Tyler, groaning as we drive to the station.

“All I want is a nap,” she whimpers.

“I’d love to say you’re being overdramatic, but I’m right there with you,” Atlas groans.

“This is the last one,” Kyle reassures us. “I decided to have them all packed into today, so that you can practice leading up to the show. Layla, you may want to do something to perk yourself up, though, because I promised them you’d play a song or two.”

I stare down Kyle, annoyed that he’d make that call. She’s sung at the last two interviews with very little sleep. I really hate this man.

Layla stands with a sigh, and Tyler shakes his head. “I’ll make you coffee, Baby. You’re doing all the heavy lifting today, Lay. I got this,” he says gently, pulling her back to the chair.

I watch as he gets up to make her coffee, and I study how in tune he is with her. Tyler really is good for her. Leaning in toward Layla I tell her, “You’ve been smashing today, little chick. Let’s play a game.”

Chuckling tiredly, she drops her head back. “Hit me with it, Draven. Please help me stay awake until I get a caffeine boost,” Layla says.

“If you could eat anything after this, what would you choose?” I ask. This is a barely veiled attempt for me to get to know her, and Mav snorts.

“God, I’m really craving moo shu pork,” Layla groans as the coffee machine gets to work. “I wonder if there’s anything close by or on the way back.”

Tyler immediately pulls out his phone, glancing at me in surprise and appreciation. I feel bad about this morning, but drugs in some form are just part of the music world. I don’t have a problem with picking it up or dropping them cold turkey. I’m not Lyrica, and never plan to be.

My addictive personality is tied up in other things: like the pretty woman who is currently dreaming about Chinese food.

“There’s a restaurant around the corner from where we’re headed with decent reviews, Lay,” Tyler confirms. “I’ll order for everyone a few minutes before you’re done, so we can just pick it up. Airdrop me your orders.”

We all do that while Kyle texts people on his phone. I don’t know what this man actually does for us, because Jordan would have jumped at making sure we were taken care of.

The next interview moves the way the last few have, and Layla sings her heart out for the station. My fingers itch to play with her. It’s been too long since I’ve performed, and I loved jamming out with the little chick. Even though she was hesitant...

I find myself frowning as we walk out. Atlas did push her hard to give us what she's working on. Layla shouldn't be so worried about what we'll think about her words. While they were personal and obviously about the shit heads, they would never make fun of her for it.

Song lyrics are words your soul is screaming to have a voice. They're sacred.

"Freedom!" Layla yells as she climbs the stairs to the bus. My lips twitch as I follow her, shaking my head.

"It's been a long fucking day," I agree. I can't stop thinking about how pouty her lips are or how they may look smeared with my cum. I'm done fighting my attraction, even if I'm not ready to admit it to her.

As we drive to pick up the food and head back to the hotel, it's almost nine at night. None of us can wait, and Kyle bounced after he saw us safely back on the bus, so we tear into our food.

"I just want to eat and then head right to bed," Layla sighs. Her lips wrap around her moo shu pork stuffed tortillas and my cock makes a point to thicken in my pants. Food and Layla may be permanently twined together in my spank bank.

I wonder how deep she and Tyler sleep? Being in the same room as her means that it'll take an act of God to keep me out.

Atlas and Mav keep sending me furtive glances as we eat, but I fully intend to ignore them. I don't think I've ever seen anyone enjoy food the way Layla does.

I wonder if she'll enjoy wrapping her lips around my cock, and I force myself not to growl at the thought. I have some pretty dark and depraved fantasies surrounding the little chick right now. I wonder if she can handle it.

Twelve

DRAVEN

It's been a couple of hours since we all returned to our hotel rooms, and I made an excuse a few minutes ago to head to bed early. Switching out my clothes to get comfortable in a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else, I listen to their voices as they slowly retire to their own room.

Layla giggles in her room with Tyler, and I can hear muffled words as they talk. I wonder if they're talking about their day, or if he's talking dirty to her. The possibilities are endless. I wish I had more insight into their relationship or at least their sex life.

How innocent is the pretty little chick, and what does it take to make her sing?

A sound makes me sit up. Is that what I think I hear? It's hard to know from across this huge suite, so I stand, palming my lengthening erection. Biting my lip, I walk slowly across the room. Heel to toe is the best way to keep from the floor creaking.

Slowly opening the door, I wince, grateful for hinges that are well oiled. My cock is so hard, it may as well have its own pulse at this point. Fuck.

"Yes," Layla pants, making me fist pump in my head. I knew something was happening in her bedroom. My baby chick is so quiet. Please sing a little louder.

Atlas and Mav are right to worry. I am a possessive and obsessive asshole, and want Layla for myself. I don't mind sharing, but I want to make her moans mine.

Leaning against the wall in front of her and Tyler's bedroom, I feel confident that they won't be able to see my shadow either since the room is so dark. Pulling down the waistband of my sweatpants, I quietly spit on the crown of my cock.

"You're so wet, Little Flower," Tyler groans. "Come on my face before bed. You deserve it."

"Ty... oh God, please," she gasps. Yes, please drench his face in your juices. As I tug at the piercing at the tip of my cock, smearing my pre-cum and spit over it, I wish I could watch her as he eats her out. I bet he knows all of her secret spots.

God, I've never been so damn jealous as I listen to her little moans and cries as she gets closer to her release. This isn't like when I listen to Atlas and Mav and I'm perfectly happy to use it as live porn to fuck my hand. No, I physically ache with the wish to watch.

Layla comes, and I swear I also hear a rush of liquid as she does. Laying my head back quietly in frustration, I close my eyes as I fuck my hand. I'm so damn needy, but I can't seem to get to my release. My abs contract and release as I fuck my hand, but it does no good.

Instead, I release my dick in disgust, my hands fisting as I listen to Layla and Tyler move around in bed, getting comfortable. Sooner than I'd expect, I hear their breaths even out.

I should go back to bed, or at the very least take a long, cold shower. Unfortunately, I'm not that good of a man.

Easing the door open, I push my sweatpants to the ground. Quietly, I walk into the room, easily able to pick my way through to their bed because of the ambient light outside. Layla is wrapped in Tyler's arms facing me, the blanket around her waist.

Her breasts are full, her nipples pebbled in the cool air. I doubt it bothers her, though, because I'm sure her boyfriend is pumping out a lot of heat as he curls up behind her. She looks happy and sated, her cheeks still tinged with color from her orgasms.

My tattooed fingers wrap around my cock, my eyes closing to half mast as I watch her breathe. I should feel like a creeper, but I won't lie to myself as my dick weeps with more of my arousal. Grunting softly, I use it to fuck my hand.

I wonder what she would look like with my cum on her body?

My chest heaves as my cock jerks in my hand, my balls starting to draw up against me. It's amazing how difficult I was finding it to come earlier, yet just staring at her makes me want to explode after just a stroke or two. My dick curves, practically preening for this blonde-haired chick.

Fuck. I can't hold back. I wish I wasn't so fucked up, but I truly am. Bracing on the pillow above her head, I hold my cock at the base as I bring it to her lips. They're slightly parted, and my eyes roll as her tongue slips out to lick her lips instead. Fuck, her tongue feels incredible. Instead, I hold back a moan as I push the tip of my cock between her lips. I don't know how she's sleeping so hard, but I gently rock back and forth, half terrified she'll wake up.

The rest of me wants to see how far I can take this. Would she wake up when she gagged around my cock?

Fuck. Fuck. I'm gonna come. Pulling back quickly, I don't even have to stroke myself again before I'm coming all over my hand and chest. My brain shorts as I shudder, biting my tongue to keep from making a sound.

I've already pushed this too far. My luck has to run out at some point. My eyesight tunnels and blackens with the force of my orgasm, and my knees almost buckle. I don't think I've ever come this hard before.

For a second, my harsh breathing is the only sound in the room other than the soft breaths of the people in the bed in front of me.

"Do you think you could maybe wake her up next time so she could enjoy your little performance?" Tyler asks with a yawn.

Oh my God.

"What?" I whisper, holding out a hand to catch myself on the wall. My cum covered hand is still around my dick, and I feel as if I've fallen into an alternate universe.

"You heard me," he murmurs, kissing Layla's neck. "She likes you, you know."

"I didn't actually know that," I grunt, feeling awkward as my endorphins start to drift away. "It shouldn't matter because you two are together. You should be really pissed off at me right now."

"Don't tell me how to feel, and I won't give you shit about jerking off while we're sleeping," he admonishes.

Maybe he didn't see everything. Feeling a little better, I try to process what he said.

"So you don't care that I like her? I can be obsessive and possessive..."

"All I care about is if you'll be good to her," Tyler sighs. "She has a lot of hang ups about her worth because of your friends. Show her she's amazing. Be willing to push back

when she pushes you away. And for fuck's sakes, don't be a dick. Lay was worried about you today."

Wincing, I flush with shame. Today was not my finest moment, even outside of shoving my cock in a sleeping girl's mouth. I feel much worse about how I treated her earlier though.

"I didn't want to bring my bullshit to the room, so I made myself scarce," I mutter. Turning, I grab a towel and start cleaning myself off. "I figured that would be better than being a growly asshole."

"I'm a growly asshole and she likes me just fine," Tyler says. I swear he hides his smirk from me as he talks to me.

"Yeah, but you're fucking perfect for her too. You always do or say the right thing. I would fuck it all up if she were mine. I usually do," I sigh. There goes all of my insecurities, laid out to him. I'm not going to be able to know what she needs or how to give it to her. But damn do I want to.

"I've known her a lot longer than you. We just clicked the first time we met. She doesn't always understand where I'm coming from, and that's what you heard. We had a little misunderstanding, and my penance was her orgasms," he chuckles. "It's a hard life, let me tell you."

"I could hear," I say in a strangled voice. "I don't know how this will work, but I want to try. It's been a long time since anyone has intrigued me like this."

"Layla isn't a toy unless it's in the bedroom, and we're playing with her. Remember that," he says, and it sounds like a warning I'm more than willing to heed. Fuck, I'm not one to feel embarrassment usually, but the curl of heat floods my veins.

Nodding curtly, I walk away, snagging my pants on the way out. As I stand in the shower, once I'm back in my own room, letting the water wash off my drying cum that I didn't completely clean off, I think about Tyler's words. I don't think it's about whether or not Layla can handle me. I think it's about finding out if she even wants to.

As I stare at the water as it swirls around the drain, I promise myself that things have to change. It may not be all at once, but I want to start by showing her that I want her. No more cloak and dagger shit. I don't care if it pisses off Atlas or Mav either, they need to figure out where they stand, because I know I want to be at Layla's side.

ATLAS

“What's on the agenda for today?” Mav groans, burying his face into my neck and inhaling deeply. Smirking, I let my fingers play in his straight black hair.

“I don't have the slightest clue, but I'm starving, Baby. Let's get breakfast,” I murmur, turning my head to yawn. Yesterday was a roller coaster of ups and downs, and it was a long damn day.

“Mmmm, I can almost hear your stomach growling, so I won't try to tempt you to stay in bed awhile longer,” Mav rumbles with a chuckle.

Smirking, I kiss his forehead before pushing him away. My cock is already perking up, and I really am hungry.

“Let's get dressed and I'll make it up to you,” I tease him with a chuckle as I sit up. “Will you text Draven to see if he wants to come with us?”

“Did you see his face when he was watching Layla?” Mav asks as he picks up the phone. “He doesn't need to obsess over her. She's...”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I think we're going to find new excuses, Mav. She's almost tentative and careful in how she talks to us, but the way she took control of that interview was bad ass. Do you ever get the feeling like there's two different people inside of her?”

Mav taps out a message, his brow furrowed. “Two people how? I don't understand.”

“There’s the girl who will tell the world to fuck off in the nicest way possible, with balls of steel,” I explain, pulling on a T-shirt and jeans. Mav and I showered last night after fucking, so I’m not worried about grabbing a shower this morning. “But there’s also the girl who is afraid to share her lyrics with us, who doesn’t like to rock the boat and make waves. Which is the real Layla? Which one is fake?”

Mav sits up, shaking his head. “I think the better question is what makes her feel like she has to act two different ways? We haven’t exactly made things easy for her.”

“I don’t know how to sugarcoat shit anymore,” I sigh. “I’ll push and push and push until people give me what I want. I expect people to shove back, but Layla doesn’t. I can’t respect someone who lets me walk all over them, and I think that’s one of the things that pisses me off about her. She wasn’t like this five years ago. So what the hell made her change?”

“I hate to say this, but do you think we did this?” Mav asks, getting up. “We left so we could forget her and she could move on. More and more I’m starting to wonder if we made the wrong choice when we left. I’ve seriously started thinking about reaching back out to Lenny.”

The sound of her name makes me wince. “We fucked up really badly with her,” I rasp. “I don’t know if we can fix that one, big guy.”

Mav shrugs as he walks into the bathroom to take a piss. I’ve been living with this man for so long, it’s never phased me, so I follow him in to brush my teeth.

“I have a feeling, Sally the bat already has a standing date with us,” Mav sighs. “Nothing will change if we don’t at least try.”

Spitting before I rinse, I think about all of the times Mav and I tried to reach out to Lennon and the guys. “It’s been five years,” I grunt. “It may not make a difference, but we owe her after we walked out of her wedding. It was too hard to see how happy they were while Layla was there with *him*.”

Tyler is the perfect damn boyfriend. Even when I think he should be moving faster or jumping on to help her, Layla looks at him as if he hung the damn moon.

“Can you check the phone while I finish getting ready?” Mav asks as it vibrates on the nightstand.

Nodding, I dry my face as I walk over to the table. I have to shave soon, but don’t feel like it just to go down to breakfast. We can decide if we’ll eat in the hotel or take a walk. There’s plenty of options in Cleveland. A diner sounds really good right about now.

Ignoring as Mav lumbers around the room pulling on clothes, I pick up the phone.

Draven: Yeah, I’m starving. I would die for pancakes and coffee. Is there a diner somewhere? I’m inviting Tyler and the chick to come with us. Attempt to be a better human than the one she brings out in you, for the love of God.

Blinking, I read the text twice. “Our best friend has become a pod person,” I complain. “He’s also inviting Tyler and Layla to come with us.”

“And another one bites the dust,” Mav confirms. Stomping as he puts his boots on and ties them, he shrugs as he grabs his wallet and phone. “We had a feeling she was going to pull him into her web. Think she has a magical pussy?”

The thought of it makes me snort in derision. “I really hope Tyler isn’t proclaiming open season on his girlfriend’s pussy,” I tell him as I make sure I have everything.

Walking out the door together, I watch as Layla smiles up at Draven as they step out of their hotel room. Tyler follows behind them, looking amused. Why doesn’t he look annoyed by this?

Doesn’t he understand how Draven’s brain works? Give him any kind of inch, and he’s liable to invite himself to the rest.

“Good morning,” I murmur, surprising myself. Maybe little miss sunshine really is contagious.

“Morning,” Layla says, turning with a nod. The smile is gone from her lips now, her brilliant blue eyes slightly cooler. “I’m starving. Do we have anywhere in mind?”

“I was going to start looking for something on our way down,” I tell her. I’m not someone who tends to plan my every move.

“I found a diner earlier that will probably work,” Tyler says with a shrug. “I bookmarked a few food places within a walk’s distance as soon as we got here.”

“I’m not exactly a gremlin when I’m hungry, but I do tend to forget to eat when I’m in the zone,” Layla says with a small smirk. Tyler and she share an amused look as we head down to the elevator banks.

“Do we have any plans today? I know we had all of our interviews yesterday, but Kyle isn’t the best at being forthcoming about anything else,” Mav explains.

Draven rolls his eyes with a nod. “That’s for damn sure. I checked my email too, just in case, and there was butkus,” he says.

Draven may as well be allergic to his email, that’s how much he hates it. He’ll log in only to clear it all out typically.

“Kyle definitely didn’t email any of us,” Layla says. “I’m taking it as an excuse to practice. He said he wanted to give us some time to learn the music together, get used to our musical styles, so that when we perform it’s seamless. The fans deserve a solid performance.”

“Don’t worry,” Draven says. “We won’t need long to learn your songs, but we should spend the time going through it today.”

“If we’re good boys can we hear more of your new songs?” I snark as the elevator chimes, announcing its arrival.

Layla smirks, turning my words on its head without effort as we walk inside. “I doubt you’re a good boy for anyone except Mav, and even then, only when you’re on your knees for him.”

Mav and I flinch as if we've been slapped, surprised she'd joke about that. We've hurt her so often with our relationship, first unintentionally, and then by weaponizing it. Damn, what the fuck has gotten into her?

Layla ignores us as we descend to the lobby. "I really hope there are pancakes. I'm so hungry," she groans. Draven glances over at her while Tyler throws his arm around her shoulders and cuddles her close to him.

"Next time I need to wake you up earlier or feed you a midnight snack if you're going to be this hungry," Tyler teases her. Draven's eyes look as if they're going to explode out of his head and he begins violently coughing.

"Draven?" Layla asks, turning toward him with a worried expression. Draven shakes his head as he waves his hand, trying to tell her not to worry. His face is violently red as he tries to figure out how to breathe around whatever he's losing his mind about.

It's not like him to be this flustered around, well, anyone. His saving grace comes in the form of the elevator doors opening to the lobby, and he rushes out to find a water fountain.

"Weird," Mav grunts as we follow everyone out. "Why would he react like that? Do you think Layla and Tyler were fucking and Draven heard it? You know how much of a voyeur he is."

Mav's voice is so low, I know no one else can hear his rumble. Layla and Tyler are walking ahead of us, but I slow my walk even more.

"I don't think Layla is really a screamer though," I scoff. I've watched her come when Tyler decided to play with her under the table that first night, and even then I saw that she can be quiet.

"Either way, no one can expect them never to fuck," Mav chuckles under his breath. "Tyler signed on for a tour, knowing there would be tight spaces and people all around. He is also not shy about teasing, Layla. Fuck, that really was hot."

It was, but that's not the point. "Mav," I warn. "We can't go down that path, remember?"

Mav huffs and doesn't respond, and I start to worry. Everything feels like it's unraveling on me. We made decisions to keep ourselves from Layla, ones that cost us everything, and here we are back again.

I spend the walk to the diner seething, barely talking as we find a booth and order. I'm pretty sure my hash and eggs are stabbed more than their fair share as I eat them as well. This isn't how things are supposed to be.

Layla smiles and chats, firmly ignoring me and the black cloud that I'm casting over the table. I'm fucking pissed right now that she's so perky and happy. I want her to be as miserable as I am. I want her to realize there's no point in happiness because everything can be taken away in the blink of an eye.

Blowing out a breath as we leave the diner after breakfast, I realize my thoughts are dark. Too damn dark. I'm being a damn bully, and five years ago I would have kicked my own ass.

Refocusing, I tell myself I'll practice and then bounce with Mav. I don't think he'll act on his feelings for Layla. If I'm being honest, they never went away. For all of the partying, drugs, and alcohol we consumed on tour, Layla Campbell has never disappeared entirely.

Layla's legging-clad-ass sways in front of me as she walks, her shirt a tease of a crop top. How the fuck does her man let her walk around in that? People keep turning to stare at her, and Tyler doesn't seem annoyed by it in the least.

Kyle is waiting in the lobby as we walk in, and he smiles at us as he sees us. "The label would like a word later this afternoon," he says to us. "Today, I figure you could get acquainted and work on the music. I noticed none of you offered to play with Layla yesterday, and let her do all of the heavy lifting. I think a little bit of team building would be helpful."

“Practicing isn’t team building,” Layla says absently, biting her lip as she thinks. “Is there a certain time the label wants me to call?”

“No, just whenever you’re finished practicing. They want the four of you on the call,” he explains. “The first concert is in just a couple of days, and I figure you’ll want to rehearse at the stadium as well?”

“It’s not something I usually do.” Layla shrugs. “It’s very appreciated though. We’ll take you up on it, thank you.”

As Kyle nods, glancing at his watch and walking off, I approach Layla. My anger is banked now that I’ve maturely recognized it as being unfair, so I trust myself to speak to her.

“Do you think we’ll make you look bad?” I ask. “We haven’t played together in a long time, fine I get it, and you’ve never performed with Draven before. Do you think a dress rehearsal will be necessary?”

“My previous band used to miss their cues on purpose and try to fuck me over,” Layla says, looking tired. “You don’t know any of my new music, and extra practice in such a small period of time can’t hurt. My career is important to me.”

“Who the fuck were these people?” I ask, eyes wide.

“People who felt getting high was more important than the music,” she says. I can see she has a strong aversion to getting high and drugs. I’ve never seen pot as something to avoid, and anything stronger isn’t something I made a habit of doing.

Seeing Lyrica and Draven make a mess of their lives definitely kept me from getting too comfortable with the hard stuff. Pot and alcohol are the only things I regularly use, and I won’t do either before a show. It would mess with the high of performing for me.

“Music is everything,” I tell her simply, meaning it. “Draven, Mav, and I would never show up stoned to a show. Ever.”

Layla stares at me for a moment, her anger at her previous bandmates making her blue eyes appear stormy before she

nods. “Okay then,” she says as if that’s exactly how simple it is.

I can hear so much in her voice as she turns away. There’s a warning there for us not to fuck it up, and we follow her back up to the room. Unsurprisingly, our equipment is set up in Layla’s suite, and she rolls her eyes as she sees it.

“Let’s start with *Never Again* and then go from there,” Layla says as she walks toward the instruments. A part of me wants to demand that she put on real clothes, but I spent the majority of the ride up here telling myself I would attempt to be nice.

“I’m going to check in with the Ahearn brothers, Lay,” Tyler says as he crosses the room to go to what I’m assuming is their bedroom. “They should have started getting a feel for what kind of upgrades the computers and network will need at the label by this point. Yell if you need me.”

The door closes behind him, and Layla simply smiles after him.

“Trouble in paradise?” I ask her before I can bite back the words. “He just kind of left.”

“He’s in the next room,” Layla giggles. “I’m completely capable of surviving without him in the short interim.”

“Love you too, Little Flower,” Tyler calls out to show he can hear us. “No offense, but that doesn’t sound like practicing.”

Layla smirks as she picks up her guitar. “Want to hear it from the top?”

“Yes,” Mav says, eyes on her. He’s ignoring my shitty mood, and I’m honestly grateful for it. I can barely stand myself. “I want to hear some of the songs you sang at the bar too. Do you perform those at concerts?”

A shadow crosses over her eyes, and I realize she’s worried. I haven’t heard anything from Jordan, and this makes me think that she hasn’t either.

“I do,” she says with a nod. “We can work through those too, and create a set list. I don’t think I’ll be able to be spontaneous at a show until you know all my songs, huh?”

Layla doesn’t let him respond before she jumps into the song. Draven’s fingers twitch as he listens to her, as if he’s itching to have his sticks. When we are in full on tour mode, he’ll typically play nonstop, but nothing about this tour is normal yet. We’re still getting our bearings with Layla and she with us.

Her voice washes over me and I sway with the sultry air of her words. The emotion is heady, filling the room with her words and music. The song is about never letting people make her feel small, or make decisions for her. There’s power in her voice as she sings, and Draven, Mav, and I hang onto each note until the very last one rings out.

“Can I join in this next round, Chick? Please?” Draven asks, his body leaning forward as if he’s just waiting for her word. My fingers are aching to hit the keyboard, and I can see Mav is hurting just as badly. When I tell Layla that music is everything, I am not lying to her.

“Of course,” she says with an open smile. The sad emotions of the song don’t seem to bring her down, while the blood is practically buzzing inside of me. Maybe it’s because she’s so used to singing these lyrics, but there’s magic that happens when you share your words with another person for the first time.

Mav, Draven, and I don’t need any encouragement after those sweet words. I’m a shit to Layla because my heart still feels a pull toward her. The sweet looks, the kisses five years ago, all of that was the rabbit hole connected to the first vestiges of love.

When Mav and I walked away from her, we were trying to kill off what we felt, but it clearly didn’t work.

Now I’m still fighting the same fight, but finding it may be useless.

Fuck.

Taking a breath as I stand in front of my keyboard, I look over at Draven and Mav. There's an energy and spark in their eyes that I haven't seen before. Not once did Lyrica's songs make us feel this before.

Mav and I played for years with the *Darkest Nights* and I don't ever remember feeling as if I were standing on the edge of a cliff, being dared to fall.

"Again," I say simply, and Layla inclines her head, taking a breath to sing. One song leads to another that she teaches us, and the hours roll effortlessly away. The Princess of the label doesn't seem fatigued at all, simply giving us another chance to see her soul as she moves into the next song.

I'm seeing a new side of Layla, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to pretend to unsee it. Instead, it makes me want to peel back the secret parts she keeps hidden away, even if I know damn well I'm not good enough.

Do I want to try anyway, or do I want to make an effort to be worthy of her sharing more of her soul with me?

Thirteen

LAYLA

As Atlas and Mav leave, I sigh as a wave of exhaustion crashes over me. I'm not used to moving at this pace anymore. Jordan always spaced out my interviews and practices so they weren't back to back, and I got so swept away playing that I forgot to eat again.

"Layla?" Draven looks at me funny, moving quickly to wrap his arm around my waist. "You just got really pale, Lovely."

Lovely? That's new. I thought I was the annoying baby chick.

Closing my eyes, I try to shake myself out of it. “I should have taken a break,” I tell him. “It’s been hours right?”

“Lay, there are granola bars on the counter, Baby,” Tyler calls out from the bedroom. I think there’s been a few hiccups as the Ahearn brothers are getting acquainted with the team, because he’s been in there most of the day taking calls.

This is his job, and I’m doing mine, so I haven’t paid it any mind.

“Thank you,” I tell him with a smile.

“Sit here, please,” Draven says with a scowl, pushing me onto a stool. Stalking to the counter, he grabs a bar before coming back to me.

“I’m fine,” I reassure him as he rips it open. I don’t understand why he seems upset. Most of the time he’s pissed at the world, and the other he can’t be bothered to be around me.

He confuses the hell out of me.

“Open,” he grunts. “Wrap those beautiful lips around the bar and take a bite.”

My lips part open in surprise, doing as he asks. Shifting uncomfortably, I tell my body to take a chill pill. There’s no reason for his words to sound so sexual. Chewing my granola, I can feel my body starting to relax as it gets much needed nourishment, while my core tightens in need.

Draven is not hitting on you right now. Down girl.

The man in question hovers over me, his scowl melting away as he stares at me.

“Can I have another bite?” I tease him, opening my mouth. The only way I can convince myself that he’s not flirting with me is to push him a bit. He’ll inevitably get annoyed and walk out of the room.

“You can have whatever you want,” he says instead, feeding me another bite. “Do you usually get like this? Is it sugar? Are you a diabetic or something?”

My mouth is full, so I shake my head as I chew. “No,” I tell him, covering my mouth with my hand.

Draven smirks as he grabs a water bottle I was drinking from on the table. “Here,” he says, handing it to me to take a sip. It’s my fault I took too big of a bite. I really am starving. He’s lucky I didn’t bite down on his finger.

As I swallow, Draven reaches out and brushes away a crumb with his thumb.

“Why are you so damn pretty?” he mutters. I definitely didn’t hallucinate what he just said.

Eyes widening, I try to deflect. Tyler is right on the other side of the door, and I don’t understand what the hell is happening.

“I’m not diabetic,” I tell him instead. “I’m just not used to practicing for hours without food. Sometimes, my sugar will crash if I’m running all day on just carbs during the morning.”

“I guess I need to pay better attention to that,” Draven says, his thumb lingering on my lips.

My breath has to be tickling his skin, and I swallow thickly, my eyes searching his in confusion.

“Layla...” His voice sounds uncertain as he pulls away his hand. I can feel the imprint of heat on my skin, and I miss it. “I want to apologize for being an asshole before. I don’t understand what your history is with Atlas and Mav...”

Feeling better, I stand, needing space. “That all happened a long time ago, and I was dumb back then. I’m not that girl anymore,” I tell him, folding my arms under my breasts. My water bottle is long forgotten, dropped on the floor by my feet.

“I have a feeling you weren’t dumb back then, either. You’re a very smart girl, Lovely,” Draven says, following me slowly. “I’m not choosing sides only because it’s up to the lot of you to figure out. I’m not participating in their bullshit anymore, though.”

“This is a joke, right?” I laugh, but it’s not a normal one. It’s more strangled as I take another step away. “You’re

fucking with me right now? God, I just thought you were being a decent human, but you're not. I can't handle whatever this is right now."

My arms uncross to wave my hands in front of me. Draven moves so close, I accidentally hit him, and I gasp. While I have zero problems with violence, I'd rather do it intentionally.

"Layla, why would this be a joke?" Draven asks, stilling. His almost colorless blue eyes watch me as if trying to figure out how to fix me, but he has to know that I'm broken.

"You're acting as if you like me, and you can't. Atlas and Mav would lose their minds. Anyway, you know I'm with Tyler," I tell him, blowing out a breath. Tyler has said that if I ever find someone my heart calls out to, to be open with him. I think he knows that I'm still not over Atlas and Mav.

It doesn't matter because they don't want me.

Fuck.

Closing my eyes, I can feel hot, hateful tears starting to overflow. Pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes, I struggle to get a hold of my emotions. It was just a touch. Why am I being so weird about this?

"Little flower, you okay?" Tyler opens the door, and I can hear him padding over to me. "Overwhelmed by his attention, huh? He's not very good at going slow."

"You knew about this?" I ask, dropping my hands. Tyler wouldn't pull a trick on me like this, I know he wouldn't. "This isn't some kind of way to fuck with me? Because I can't..."

"I didn't think you'd think that," he murmurs, brushing away a tear. "No, I would never let anyone hurt you. This isn't a joke. Don't you see how perfect you are?"

Shaking my head, I deny it. I don't see it. It's why I'm always working harder, preparing to be better, because I don't believe it. Tyler leans forward, his soft, warm lips touching mine.

“Open up for me, Baby. I love you. Let Draven hear all the reasons why,” he says, his arms pulling me tightly to him.

“Will you make her sing for me?” Draven says softly, his fingers tentatively brushing my hair off my neck to press a kiss to it. “You’re stunning when you’re giving people what for, beautiful when you cry, and breathtaking when you come. I bet your noises when you explode would remind me of a different form of singing.”

His words make me smirk against Tyler’s lips. This entire conversation is so ridiculous. Leaning my neck to the side because it feels good, and my boyfriend is giving me strength, I decide to play along.

“Why? Why do you want any of me?” I ask, whimpering as he sucks hard where my throat meets my shoulder.

“I’m going to spank you, Layla,” Tyler says, stepping back with a brow raised. “Are those assholes the cause of this? Baby, you’re twenty-six-years-old playing to a sold out tour.”

“Is it really?” Draven says, pulling me away so my back is plastered to his chest. “See, if you were mine, I wouldn’t spank you. You’d enjoy it too much. There are so many other things I would do.”

Blinking up at him, my breaths begin to pant as I face the fact that no one is fucking with me. I just don’t know how to make myself blend this Draven with the one he’s been showing me. Though, not all of it is bad.

The spanking was kind of fun. Shivering, I press my thighs together, making Tyler and Draven smirk at me.

“Do you know why the door’s been closed all day?” Tyler asks, curling my hair around his finger.

Shaking my head, I enjoy the slight sting against my scalp as he refuses to let go of my hair.

“No,” I whisper, biting my lip.

“Fuck, I want to do that,” Draven rumbles. He’s large enough to make me feel tiny as he tugs my bottom lip free.

“You look too edible in this damn outfit,” Tyler says with a smirk. “We both had work to do, and all I’ve wanted to do is rip off this sorry excuse for clothing, and fuck you.”

“No fair unless you’re open to group activities,” Draven groans.

“Let’s build up to that,” Tyler says, his mouth claiming mine. My hair tumbles down my back as he pulls out the hair tie holding it up. His fingers dive into my hair, forcing my head back as he kisses me.

I can’t believe this is my life right now.

Whimpering, Tyler swallows my noises as Draven’s hands squeeze my hips, slowly moving up my body to cup my breasts. I’m starting to burn from the inside out, goosebumps covering my body as he tweaks and pulls on my nipples through my clothes.

“Is he making my girl feel good?” Tyler growls in such a way that makes me shudder. Fuck me. I love when he gets growly. It makes me feel adored and it usually happens right before he’s going to devour me.

Tyler’s hand wraps around my neck, turning me toward Draven’s waiting lips. I don’t think I’ve ever been kissed like this before. Draven nips and sucks at my lips before forcing me to let him in. It’s a battle to kiss him, a declaration of his intentions.

Maybe he should have led with this kiss, because I never would have second guessed him otherwise. My shirt and bra are forced up and Tyler’s lips begin to suck on my nipples.

Soon, he has me mewling, my moaning growing louder.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful when you’re needy,” Draven says in awe, his hand covering one of my breasts to squeeze and knead it. “I’m going to be a dick and ask for things I don’t deserve, but I promise to make it up to you.”

Tyler chuckles darkly as he drops to his knees, kissing my stomach.

“Draven asked to hear you sing, Baby,” he says, his fingers twisting in the waistband of my leggings. “Shall we give him his wish and let him watch you come? Maybe help a little too?”

This is all happening really fast, and reality wants to barge in and break up the party.

“I will never use this against you,” Draven promises, pulling me back into a blissful kiss. “I want to date you, make out with you whenever I can, and show you how incredible you are. I will tell you every day, because I’ve never met anyone like you. No one ever stands up for me.”

Remembering the interview with that awful woman, I wrinkle my nose. “Bullies are gross, and she just wanted her five seconds of fame— Oh!”

Tyler pulls my leggings off so hard that they’re only still on one of my legs. Lifting my thigh onto his shoulder, he buries his face into my pussy, giving my clit a kiss before sucking on it hard.

“Fuck, so damn lovely,” Draven growls as he buries his face in my neck to suck and kiss on my pulse point. “I should warn you about how I’m obsessive and going to make you crazy, right?”

All I can do is grab onto his shirt, gasping as I attempt to stay upright. Draven rips my shirt over my head, leaving my bra cups pushed up and my wrists behind my back. Banding his arm around my waist, he grinds his huge erection into my ass.

My body shudders from all the sensations as he watches Tyler eat me out over my shoulder.

“As long as you want me, why would that make me crazy?” I gasp. “Tyler, I need more...”

Tyler pushes three thick fingers into my pussy, and I almost shatter. Crying out, I see out of the corner of my eye as Draven takes two fingers and taps them along my lips. It feels as if he’s done this before, and I open my mouth as if he’s pulling my strings.

“Suck on my fingers and get them good and wet. I’m going to teach you a little something about being mine. It’s overwhelming, and a lot, but I think you can handle it,” he growls.

Tyler looks up at me from between my legs, arousal all over his face as he grins. “Suck, Layla. Get them good and wet, Baby. Draven, tell her about what you did. Get it all out in the open so she knows exactly what she’s in for. I think she can handle it, though, can’t you Baby?”

His fingers rock perfectly over my g-spot, making me whimper. I suck on Draven’s thick fingers, unsure what he’s up to. He pushes deeper, and I struggle not to gag, eyes widening.

“That’s it, Lovely. Fuck, I love watching your eyes water. I bet they do this when you suck Tyler’s cock too, don’t they?” His words are filthy, and I should tell him that I don’t like it, but I do. I love seeing how far I can go as I suck on Tyler’s cock. Edging goes both ways.

I like to see how far Tyler’s control will go before it snaps and he’ll fuck my face. Remembering the last time we did that makes me writhe, moaning loudly.

Tyler chuckles against my body, as if knowing what I’m thinking about. His lips and tongue are magical, forcing me closer and closer to my orgasm.

“Here goes nothing. Last night I heard you and Tyler, and I couldn’t help it. I wanted to get closer. I stroked my cock as I listened to you come,” Draven confesses, pulling his fingers out of my mouth. His hand disappears and I gasp as he rubs his fingers along my tight asshole. “Do you like your asshole played with?”

My brain short circuits as he pushes a thick finger inside of me. Crying out as they work me together, I find I don’t hate it. “Yes,” I whimper when Tyler swats my ass cheek.

“I bet you’d look beautiful between us, both inside of you, fucking you. We’ll work up to that,” he murmurs as he pulls my lips back to his. Draven adds a second finger inside of me,

and I force myself to breathe through the pinch of pain as I stretch around him.

“I like to watch you sleep,” Draven sighs, his tongue running up my face to catch a stray tear from earlier. “You looked so beautiful, and I couldn’t come. I needed something more.”

“What did you do?” Tyler asks lazily as he continues to fuck me with his fingers.

“I brushed my cock along your lips,” Draven groans. “Be a good pet and take one more finger. Can you do that? Be my good girl...”

Shuddering, I gasp as my pussy clenches around Tyler’s fingers. Tyler groans, looking up at me as he licks up my core. “Goddamn, you taste so good. I want to fuck you so bad.”

I want to tell him to, beg him to fuck me. I’m not thinking clearly, riding the edge between pain and pleasure. Draven’s finger pushes inside, making me pant and gasp as I struggle to take him.

“One day, we’re both going to take you, and I’m going to fuck your tight little hole while you scream for us to make you come,” he growls. I want to touch him, but my arms and wrists are still banded together by fabric. “I can’t help what you make me want to do to you, I’m sorry...”

“What did you do?” I breathe. I want to know. Tyler either doesn’t know or doesn’t think it’s too terrible.

“When I brushed my cock along your lips, that was going to be it. I wanted to see my cream smeared across your lips. I had to see it, but then your tongue flicked out and licked up my slit, and I couldn’t control the urge to push my cock between your lips. So I did,” Draven groans. “Fuck, you were so beautiful too. I had to come. I didn’t want to come on you or anything, so when I stood up—”

“I woke up to him coming all over himself, stroking his cock as he stared at you, Little Flower. Draven looked ashamed and turned on, so I had to put him out of his misery,” Tyler says.

Pushing his pants down his hips, he groans as he strokes himself. “Fuck it, I may not be fucking you, but you’ll wear my cum, won’t you, Baby?”

“Are you a pretty little cum slut?” Draven asks, biting my ear. I’m so worked up after hearing his truths and Tyler’s words, that I explode as Tyler’s lips close around my clit one last time, adding a little teeth. I scream as I come, Draven’s arm around me the only thing that keeps me upright as they make me come.

I swear I saw white lights too. I’m shaking as Tyler and Draven pull their fingers out of me. Tyler stands, grunting as he strokes his cock. He looks so intense as stares at me. Draven rocks his dick against me in his pants, breathing hard as he groans into my neck.

I can’t ask him if he’s coming because Tyler groans, his head dropping back as ropes of cum hit my stomach, breasts, and pussy. All I can do is smile wildly, proud I make these two men so wild.

Tyler’s chest saws as he kisses my lips, his fingers tangling in my hair. Draven pulls my shirt free, tossing it away as he continues to hold me.

“How are you feeling?” Tyler asks, searching my eyes.

“I’m pretty sure Draven came in his jeans,” I giggle, my breaths still coming in pants. “I don’t know how this is all going to work, but I’m willing to try.”

“I’m not too much for you?” Draven asks. Turning to look at him, I shake my head.

“I’m a little overwhelmed, but weirdly okay,” I tell him.

“Good. I’m going to go clean up, and you should do the same, because I’m stealing you,” he announces, kissing my cheek before striding off.

“You’re definitely not wearing this outfit anywhere else,” Tyler decides, picking up my crop top to clean us both up.

“Dude!” I yell, shaking my head. “Did we really have to spread cum all over this top?”

“I’ll do laundry before we leave Cleveland,” Tyler promises with a smirk, pulling me into our room. Cleaning up and getting redressed in a pair of jeans, another crop top and my knife, I shove my feet into flats and call it good. My lips are swollen, my pupils a little blown with lust still, and my stomach is rumbling again.

“I need to feed you,” Draven says, frowning as he walks out of the room wearing a new pair of jeans. My lips twitch, incredibly tickled right now.

“Okay,” I tell him, my voice giving away my mirth.

“Something funny?” he chuckles. “I had to give myself an intense wipe down, I had cum everywhere. I just decided to throw myself in the shower for the world’s fastest wash with soap.”

I can’t breathe from giggling so hard. I think my funny bone was hit after I orgasmed. “Did you wash your hands too?” I wheeze.

“Yes, chick,” he growls, as he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder. It doesn’t feel like the insult it used to be somehow. “I’m taking the comedian to dinner, Tyler.”

I can hear the water running and roll my eyes. “Did everyone get a shower except me?”

“Mmm, I like the idea of his cum on you while I take you out on our first date.” Draven smirks.

“Text me with where you’re going. Have fun!” Tyler yells.

I’m hanging upside down, bouncing slightly as Draven starts toward the door.

“Ooh! Please grab my phone,” I tell him with a grin. “Dinner is on you, though, because I have no idea where my purse is.”

Scoffing, Draven pockets my phone. “As if I would ever let you pay for a meal, Lovely. You’ve built up an appetite, so how do you feel about Italian?”

My stomach growls so loudly Draven stops, shaking his head. “Baby, I swear to god, we need to make sure you eat

better,” he says.

“Food on tour is a crapshoot,” I defend myself as he walks out of the room, his arm wrapped around my legs.

“What the hell is this?” Atlas asks, looking amused.

“Mine, bugger off,” Draven grunts, ignoring them. Looking up, I see Mav and Atlas’ surprised faces and realize Draven really is straddling the line the best way he knows how, between my world and theirs.

Maybe this tour won’t suck so badly after all.

DRAVEN

I don’t know what to do with Layla now that I’ve basically kidnapped her. What the fuck does someone do on a date?

I saw a hole in the wall Italian restaurant when we were walking earlier, so I figured I’d take her there. Now that I’m inside, I’m wondering if this place is a front for something. There are large men chatting in corners, and the woman who seats us has a wide, welcoming smile.

I don’t know, maybe it’s because I’m extra protective.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Layla says with a saucy smirk. She sticks out a bit here where everyone is in suits or long skirts, but she doesn’t seem to care. This is the girl I want to see more of.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been on a first date,” I tell her honestly.

Layla licks her lips as she looks down at the menu. She’s clearly amused, and I can’t help but see the irony.

“My only first date was with Tyler, and my sister and her husband brought me to the club to make sure he wasn’t an ax murderer,” she giggles. I’m fascinated by everything about her, especially her important core memories.

“It’s an important trait,” Teresa, the waitress, says, coming back to the table with a wide smile. “Do you know what you’d like to order?”

“I really want rolls,” Layla murmurs. “Oh I know. Can I have the tagliatelle alla bolognese please?”

“Excellent choice,” Teresa says with a nod. “I can bring our garlic knots as well. For you, Sir?”

I order lasagna, handing the menu back to her with a smile. I’m suddenly glad we’re here because the small restaurant does smell amazing. I need to feed my girl.

“If he gives you any trouble, you let me know,” Teresa teases. Gasping, I put my hand on my heart as if scandalized. Layla snickers, thanking her.

As the waitress walks away, I lean forward. “I am most definitely not an ax murderer, but I do occasionally bite,” I warn her.

Layla rolls her eyes, her hand covering her lower neck. Her shirt covers the hickey I probably gave her there. I didn’t mean to, I just got a little ahead of myself.

“Ugh, we have a show in a few days, I should have been more careful,” I wince.

“Makeup,” she says with a shrug. Meeting my eyes, her gaze is happy and at ease. “I’m really not worried about it. So why are we on your first ever date? You are clearly gorgeous.”

“Clearly,” I chuckle. “I haven’t been one who enjoys dating. Lyrica and I kind of fell into a relationship, and while we had some fun times, we also were really toxic. Being out of her orbit is helping me realize just how bad it used to be.”

“I’m sorry,” she says sincerely. “I had roommates like that. My dad wanted me to stay safe, and he vetted and found these guys for me to live with. It honestly is kind of bizarre now that I think about it. Unsurprisingly, they could play fairly well, so we went on gigs together. Outside of that, I wasn’t allowed to work or go out. I was stuck in this gilded cage.”

“Your dad knew about this?” I ask, my lips twisting in annoyance.

“There’s a reason people think I’m this pampered princess.” Layla shrugs. “Growing up, I practically lived at the label, and then I fell into playing with a band. I wasn’t allowed to talk to boys, in fact Leo and Albert really enjoyed cock blocking me.”

“What about your sister?” I ask. I feel like a man dying of thirst. I just want to know everything.

“My father isn’t a great person,” she says with a sigh. “He left her when she was little and didn’t look back. I wouldn’t even know I had a sister if I wasn’t a professional eavesdropper. My dad and Uncle Jordan have had some really wicked fights. I found out she was my sister shortly after I opened for her band.”

“Wow,” I mutter. “You obviously have some kind of connection with Atlas and Mav. I just don’t understand why the animosity on their end.”

“I’m a reminder of the life they left behind,” Layla says sadly. “They got in too deep with their best friend’s baby sister, and I was devastated. I didn’t know how to handle being on that bus after the constant teasing. I thought they actually liked me. So I went home and my brothers-in-law made me my very own rage room in the backyard.”

I can just imagine Layla fucking shit up after my best friends fucked things up. I’m sad they fucked up with her, but I meant it. They need to work it out with her. I’m not getting in the middle.

Swallowing hard, I think about what it would be like to be her. Emotions and I are not typically friends. “Did breaking shit help?” I ask.

“It did.” She smirks. “I even wrote a song while Lenny, some friends, and I beat the hell out of things. It was therapeutic.”

“Do you perform this song?” I ask. That’ll be interesting. Atlas and Mav have an idea of how they hurt her because

we've heard some of it in her songs. I'm not against some exposure experiments to make sure they understand how much they fucked up.

"It's rare." She shrugs again. "I recorded it, though. It's a lot of emotion to drop on people."

We chat easily until the food comes, and I swear I about die as her sexy noises begin as she eats.

"I'm going to have to lock you up when you eat," I grumble. "Your noises have me rock hard right now, Lovely. I do love how much you enjoy food, though."

"There's a happy wiggle dance when I get sweet treats," Layla teases me.

I need to see this. We are stuffed, though. Deciding we'll have to come back just for dessert one day, I link my fingers through hers as we walk out of the restaurant after settling the bill.

"Oh crap," she groans as we step out onto the sidewalk.

"What? Did you forget something?" I ask her.

"I have to call the execs at *Music Horde Records*." She sighs. "They should hopefully still be at the office. At least one of them should be. I'm still worried about my uncle, and I don't know if that's why Kyle wanted me to call."

Digging out her phone, I hand it to her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. "Let's see what's going on while we walk," I suggest.

Layla calls the label as we continue to the hotel, asking to speak to one of the senior executives.

"Hi, Mr. Laurence," Layla says as they connect her. "I'm sorry it's the tail end of the day. I've been practicing all day and... You haven't heard from my uncle?"

Squeezing her shoulder, I gesture for her to put the phone on speaker.

"I'm sorry, Layla. No one's heard from him, and he didn't make his appointment today either with his new lead singer."

This isn't like him," the exec, Mr. Laurence says.

"This is going to be really weird, but have there been any strange calls or emails talking about a ransom?" she asks. Her voice sounds off, and my eyes pinch as I realize she's trying not to cry. All I can do is walk with her and send her strength.

Dammit, Jordan, what the hell happened to you?

"Layla, tell me everything, please. I'm going to record this just so I can relay this properly," Mr. Laurence says. *"Give it to me nice and slow."*

Layla explains how she went to the Irish bar and everything that happened. She also tells him about how that's where Jordan went to make sure there wouldn't be any backlash on her behalf.

"What if he's in trouble?" Layla whispers. "I don't know if his location is even turned on on his phone, but Lennon said that she was going to look into it."

I wonder how her sister is able to find out, but I remember Layla once said her brothers-in-law taught her how to fight. They probably have channels to ask for missing people as well.

"I'm going to call your sister and see if there's any more information. Just sit tight, okay? If anything like a ransom note comes in, know that we'll pay it," Mr. Laurence says firmly. *"Jordan is family. I won't lose him. I need a bit more time to gather all of the facts though."*

"Okay," Layla whispers with a nod. "Thanks so much. Nothing is the same without him."

"It's why we've been looking for him," Mr. Laurence confirms. *"He usually will check in as he goes about his day, or give me updates. I haven't had a call since he went to meet you."*

"By the way, this was really dirty. I haven't forgotten about how you all withheld information from me," Layla growls. My cock stands at attention and salutes. Damn, baby, get 'em.

“Yes, I definitely owe you. Is Kyle working out? If not, I’ll fire him and come down myself, and you know I hate to travel. Anything. You’d never have gone along with it if you had known,” Mr. Laurence pleads.

My lips twitch at how sincere he sounds, and Layla looks up at me, rolling her eyes. She doesn’t seem very impressed. Good for her.

“I am choosing to pocket this favor for a rainy day,” she says primly. “Know that it’ll hurt when I cash in on it. Kyle is fine, not my favorite person, but not the worst manager I’ve ever had.”

“Yeah, I owe you for her too,” Mr. Laurence says softly. *“I’ll call you when I find out anything. Take care.”*

It feels as if a lifetime of memories just passed between them, but I don’t need to know. I could hear the pain in his voice, and I know better than to poke a bear. Layla says goodbye, hangs up, and leans into me. I kiss her forehead, wishing I could help her find Jordan.

“Let’s get home, Lovely, and see if we can con Tyler into watching a movie with us. If we really push our luck, maybe he’ll let me sleep with you and you really will fall on my cock,” I tease her.

The guffaw that rings out into the night is the best thing I’ve ever heard.

“Oh my God,” she giggles. “Maybe I’ll even be awake for it?”

“God, you’ve officially unlocked a new kink, Lovely. The first time I fuck you I want you to be awake and begging. Have you ever been fucked in your sleep?” I ask her.

I know if I’m asleep next to her, I won’t be able to keep myself from sliding my cock into her tight cunt. There is only so much restraint I can handle before the animal inside of me comes out.

“I haven’t,” Layla says with her lips pursed. “I’m a heavy sleeper at times, so I wonder how long it’ll be before I even realize it.”

“Fuck, you’re killing me, Baby,” I whimper. “Can I have your consent to fuck you in your sleep one day? Please, please. I need your consent, but I’m liable to do it without it if your ass is against my cock. Layla...”

“You beg so pretty,” she croons, making me growl. Pocketing her phone so it’ll be safe, I pick her up and tickle her. Layla screams and wiggles, making me cackle like a loon.

“Submit!” I yell as the hotel gets closer. People are staring at us, some are smirking, but I don’t give a fuck about any of them. All I want are her words.

“Yes, yes! Draven, I have to pee! Oh my God,” she screams.

“Good girl,” I gasp, putting her down and pulling on her hair to be able to devour her lips. Teeth, tongue, and moans are my favorite things about kissing this woman. She rolls with whatever I need.

Some day she’ll get sweet kisses from me too. Maybe. Layla sighs as we walk into the hotel, her body relaxed and happy. The realization that I’m responsible for this almost stops me in my tracks.

Maybe I’m not a fuck up after all.

Fourteen

MAV

“I ’m going to kick his ass,” I mutter as I see Layla smiling up at Draven. It’s the night of our first performance together, and we’re backstage as her opener plays. The music is solid, we’ve learned her songs, so I’m not worried about how we’re going to sound out there.

It helps that we had time to rehearse together on this stage a few hours ago too. Throughout all of it, Draven has looked like he can’t help but glance over at her, touch her skin when he talks to her. When the hell did they get so close, and why does it bother me so much?

“I may join you,” Atlas grunts. “Layla shows off her savior complex and he practically swoons into her arms. I don’t get

it. Why is the perfect boyfriend also not more upset about it?”

Tyler has taken over Kyle’s job of making sure everything is running smoothly. He took his checklist and ran through it faster than anyone else could have other than Jordan. I almost don’t mind this part because it means Layla and we will have a good concert.

Tyler’s bark definitely gets people moving, that’s for sure.

Layla’s eyes trail over to where Tyler is talking to a roadie about something, and her lips twitch in amusement.

“I don’t know why I was worried he’d be bored tonight,” she chuckles. Kyle comes out of a back room with his hair mussed, a roadie following him. They’re not even trying to be discreet. I can’t deal with idiot managers anymore.

Not after Prescott and her crazy bullshit. The girl fucked us over so hard when she was *The Darkest Nights*’ manager. Managers are supposed to be our organizational team so that everything runs smoothly.

Using our time and the label’s money to drain his balls isn’t acceptable. I also don’t like how there were dark circles under Layla’s eyes earlier today, either, and that could be why I’m being a growly asshole.

I shouldn’t care, but I’m not willing to look at why I do right now. Avoidance and firing this asshole over there will go a long way toward changing my mood, though.

“I hope Tyler is ready to be our new manager in the interim,” I grunt as my feet move into action. I barely hear her words as I walk over to Kyle and grab his shirt at the back of his neck. “Hey, Kyle. Can we talk?”

“Is there a problem?” he asks, eyes wide. “You’re supposed to be on stage soon. I figured you wouldn’t need me.”

“See, we don’t, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t things to be done. See Tyler over there? He’s making sure every detail is covered,” I tell him. I know it’s not his job, but I have to admit that it’s nice knowing it’s done. My guitar went missing for an hour, making me panic. No one knew where it was.

Tyler found where someone had moved it, and then proceeded to lecture the person on why instruments shouldn't be moved into a random storage space. Regardless, this should have been Kyle's job.

"I could have done that," Kyle grumbles. "I figured everything was done. What is he even doing?"

"Your job," I say smugly. "Please pack your bags and get the fuck out. We'll let the label know that you've been relieved of your position."

"Excuse me? You can't do that," Kyle complains.

Layla walks up as he argues, her brows drawn down. We have fifteen minutes before we have to go on, but this couldn't wait.

"Did we just fire our manager?" she asks brightly. There is no ire in her voice. I don't deserve her understanding or support, but she easily gives it to me anyway.

"Yep, seems so," I tell her. "Are you okay with that?"

"Pretty sure he was fucking a roadie on the job, so I actually am. Get the fuck out, Kyle. We have a show to do, without you," she says. There's a shadow that passes over her face, and I know she's thinking about Jordan.

I don't know where he is, but I hope he makes an appearance soon. None of us have heard from him, and that's just not like him. Tyler walks over, already checking his watch. He's been very on top of things, as much as I hate to admit it. He can have the job.

"I think we just added to your job description," I snort. "I just fired Kyle."

"Good riddance. I'll email the label," Tyler says to Kyle's face with a shrug. "Do you need an invitation to leave, or can you just go?"

"I'll go," Kyle mutters, practically stomping away. Layla bites her lip, but Tyler shakes his head at her. "He was making you crazy anyway, Baby. I may need a little grace while I figure it out, but I got this."

“You’re already doing a better job than he was,” I tell him. Tyler looks surprised, but I can rise above my issues with him. They aren’t really even issues, it’s more the fact that he’s my age and regularly puts his dick inside of Layla. That’s my issue.

Not really much I can do to get him to stop, though.

“I’ll see what the label wants to do, even if I coordinate with someone in LA while the tour continues. This isn’t exactly my forte,” Tyler says, blowing out a breath.

“Sorry,” Layla winces. “Kyle was really vile, though. Mr. Laurence offered to send someone new a few days ago, but I thought we could stick it out.”

“That’s the problem,” I growl. “You always let things go on for too long, and then you find yourself in a mess. Grow a damn backbone.”

Layla’s eyes grow large, her pouty lips parting open. There are so many things I want to do to those lips, which is why I throw up an arm in disgust and stalk away. Fuck, I was doing so well, and managed to lose my cool yet again.

Why am I like this?

“Knock it off,” Tyler snarls. “You’re up, Layla. Go kill it, Baby.”

I try to ignore the deep breath she takes, trying to shake off her surprise and pain. I don’t know why she lets me get under her skin. We were never more than a flirtation five years ago, how much could she have really liked us?

Draven glances at me, curiosity in his eyes as I come back. “We’re out a manager,” I explain. “Tyler is taking over for a bit, because Kyle can’t keep his dick in his pants.”

Shrugging, Draven nods as he watches the opening band wrap up. “It sounds like he deserved it. Hey Lovely, you ready for this?” he asks Layla. She gives him a tight smile, nodding, and he glances at me in confusion.

I can’t tell him I fucked up, because that would be an admission of guilt. “Buckle up, buttercup. Part of show biz is

looking like a million bucks even when you don't feel like it," I growl.

Layla turns her back to me, rolling her neck from side to side to release the tension that I undoubtedly put there. Tossing her curled hair over her shoulder, she congratulates the band who played before us.

Layla takes a deep breath before her lips curl into a smile that's clearly fake to me. Walking behind her as she crosses the stage, I watch as she takes her spot in front of her mic in her leather pants and mesh crop top over a black bra. Layla's braided the front of her hair back so that it won't be in her face, and as she starts to speak to the crowd as the lights turn on, it reminds me of the braids of a warrior.

"Hello, Cleveland!" Layla yells out as people cheer. I watch for signs of cracks, but there's none. The energy of the crowd makes her bounce on the balls of her feet, and I can see the fake smile turn feral. "Thank you for the amazing energy, let's start this out with something worthy of your excitement."

Layla picks up her guitar without telling any of us the song she's chosen, and my eyes widen. Oh fuck.

"Someone's going to be getting her pound of flesh tonight," Draven growls under his breath so only I can hear him. He picks up the beat as she plays and starts to drum out a beat, and I recognize the notes for *Raging Queen*. Jumping in, I hear the exact moment when Atlas catches on.

Note: don't piss Layla off before a show.

Over and over, it's like a pop quiz in front of two-thousand people as Layla makes us guess her songs. Maybe it's petty on her part, but there's a pressure not to fuck this up in front of so many people. It's also a really fantastic payback. Sink or swim, I guess she's lumping me in with my friends.

Soon, the four of us are completely in sync as we play, and I notice a pattern to her songs. They're full of anger, sorrow, and pain. The emotions are big, the words a crooning story of tragedy or a more upbeat song about finding yourself.

Layla has big emotions hiding in herself, and I'm starting to wonder if I was wrong. She never sang like this five years ago. There was emotion, sure, but this frenetic energy in her music didn't exist.

Are Atlas and I the cause? I've seen her draw herself up when we've ganged up on her, the way that she's hesitant about sharing her words with us, and the way Atlas and I could see some of her songs were about us.

Fuck. Why does this have to be so hard?

As the last note disappears into the ether, Layla looks like an entirely different person. It's as if singing purges the emotional state she was in earlier. There's still a flint in her eye as she says goodbye and we walk off stage.

Whirling around once we're backstage, Layla turns and kicks my leg before sweeping them out from under me. It happens so fast, I'm left to gape up at her.

"You don't know who I am anymore," she growls. "I'm not the girl you knew, and you don't know why I do the things that I do. Stop pretending you understand me, asshole. I promise I will put you on your ass every time you say something to me that is the slightest bit derogatory or inappropriate. Enough is enough!"

Layla is breathing hard as she hisses the words out. I can tell she'd rather be screaming at me, and I swallow hard. Everyone has their breaking point, and I think she's nearing hers. Tyler watches her with worried eyes, but doesn't come nearer. I get the impression he'll let her fight her own battles until he feels as if he needs to tap in.

I respect it, but if I were him, I'd already have given myself a bloody nose. I can see why Tyler frustrates Atlas at times. We wouldn't have the patience to let her flounder or work it out on her own.

"I'm not even remotely done," I tell her, getting onto my knees. "You're too soft, you refuse to push back or rock the boat, and it leaves you open to too many issues. Sometimes dangerous ones. Why are you always so damn amenable? I

meant it when I say you need to grow a damn backbone, Layla.”

“Mate, I think that’s quite enough,” Draven grunts, anger beginning to bank in his gaze.

“Have you fallen into the spell of her magical pussy too? Isn’t there a fucking fraternization policy in your own contract too?” I yell at him. I know the people out in the crowd can’t hear me. There’s too much other noise. I’m angry for no reason and every reason, which is a dangerous combination for me.

Atlas chews his bottom lip as he watches us, unsure what to say.

“I don’t think I have any say on the magic of my girl’s pussy,” Draven says calmly. The way he says “my girl” makes me realize he’s drawing a line in the sand. “I do know you need to shut the fuck up and take a walk, Mav. The second Layla sheds a tear, I won’t be responsible for my next actions.”

Layla isn’t one to weaponize her tears. She fucking hates crying. I watch her swallow hard as she holds onto her anger, and see it as my cue to leave. A walk sounds like exactly what I need.

“If you dislike the way I handle things, then I think you should take a long, cold look at yourself, Mav,” Layla rasps. “The way you treated me five years ago, your words, it all runs rent free in my head and my heart. Please feel free to take all the blame for it, because I’m sure I wouldn’t be this version of myself if I’d never met you.”

Stumbling to my feet, my jaw drops. I don’t think she could have said anything else that makes me more sick to my stomach. I knew I was responsible for some of her songs, but the way she lives her life is just unhealthy.

“Time to take a walk,” Atlas grunts, pulling me toward the exit. I don’t know what I could have said to her anyway. Guilt starts to kick at me, and the word ‘*coward*’ starts to score itself across my soul.

Is this how it feels to realize that your actions molded someone into a version of herself that's less than she should be? There's strength, sure, but there is also fuckload of self doubt inside of her too.

"I think we fucked up," I rasp as I stumble out of the stadium.

"I think we did too, and I don't know how we can fix it," Atlas mutters.

TYLER

I don't think I've ever been as proud as when Layla knocked the big oaf on his ass. Unfortunately, we're back in our hotel room, and she hasn't returned from sitting out on the balcony.

"She didn't cue us in all night," Draven says softly, staring at Layla from the couch. "It was like she was singing to the crowd and forgot we even existed."

"Layla retreats into music when she's feeling a lot," I tell him. She has a notebook with her out there even now, furiously scribbling before staring out into the night. She hasn't changed yet, and I'm sure there's a cold breeze out there.

"That I know. There are holes I don't understand and I think Mav and Atlas are at the root of it," Draven grumbles. "I was totally okay not sharing Layla with them, but now I'm torn. I think they owe her a shit ton of groveling, though."

Playing devil's advocate, I sit across from him. I'm always in my girl's corner, but I need to know if Draven is.

"What if they thought they were doing the right thing?" I ask. "Layla was a virgin, and a threesome is probably a lot to ask of a twenty-one-year-old."

Draven's lip curls as he shakes his head. "There are much better ways to handle it than fucking your boyfriend and making the baby chick feel undeserving or unwanted," he

snarls. “Who’s team are you fucking on, anyway? Do you not see how small she makes herself around them?!”

His voice is a roar as he stands, breathing hard, his eyes on me now. His gaze promises to burn the world down, and I smirk with a nod.

“I will always be in Layla’s corner,” I confirm. “I just needed to know that you were too.”

My voice is calm and collected as Draven glares at me. “You arse,” he mutters, walking outside to Layla.

My lips twitch as I watch him talk to her, coaxing her to come inside. I wonder if he’ll have to carry her in like a caveman, chuckling at the thought. My girl is feeling a bit stubborn, and she gets the royal treatment of being thrown upside down over Draven’s shoulder. I swear this is their form of foreplay now.

“You’re such a pain in the ass,” Draven growls as he brings her inside. “Since you insist on being one, I’ll entertain your need to have one.”

Getting comfortable in my chair, I watch as he sits down heavily, picking her up to toss her over his lap. “Draven, let me up,” she complains.

Instead, he gives her a warning spank across her ass, tangling his fingers in her hair to push her head down. “Punishment for bratting is necessary,” Draven says, peeling her leather pants down her body. Layla isn’t wearing underwear currently because she says the lines bother her when she wears these pants.

Her ass cheek is slightly red, and I move from my chair to one closer so I can see her beautiful, pink pussy. Licking my lips, I watch as he swats her ass again.

“Arg, Draven. What am I being punished for?” she asks.

“Refusing to rock the boat when my friends clearly need their heads knocked together,” he says, swatting her again. “I think she should count, don’t you, Tyler?”

“Yes, Little Flower. Count for Draven,” I murmur. My cock is hard as steel watching them together. Draven is gentle at times, but has no problem with being a disciplinarian either. Fuck, it’s really hot as his tattooed finger moves through her core, smearing her arousal over her before kicking her feet apart. His next spank is right over her pussy.

“Draven!” she screams, writhing in his lap. Watching her carefully, I see she’s fine, so I sit back to enjoy the show.

“I believe you forgot something, Lovely,” he says, pushing two thick fingers inside of her channel.

Groaning thickly, I watch as she widens her stance. “This is ridiculous. Please,” she both admonishes and begs in the same breath.

“Count,” he insists, removing his fingers from her cunt to spank her again.

“Ahhhh,” she mewls. “One, you asshole.”

“There’s my good girl,” he chuckles darkly before spanking her again. “I swear you have no self preservation sometimes, kicking a man’s legs out from under him like that. You’re this tiny pixie!”

Draven can’t think Mav would hurt Layla, despite their history, but he continues to grumble as he hits lower on her ass this time. Layla hisses, leaving him to smirk as he lets go of her hair to gather her wrists in his huge hand.

“Two,” Layla says churlishly. “I don’t pretend to be any bigger than... I am.”

Draven plays with her clit as she talks, making her breath catch in desire.

“You’re so pretty splayed out in my lap, Lovely. If you can be good and take four more spanks, I’ll consider letting you come,” he instructs.

“Consider? That’s so rude—”

I think Layla’s broken as she’s robbed of her next words. Draven plays with her as if she were an instrument, pushing inside of her pussy before playing with her clit and alternating

with a spank. Over and over he goes as Layla squeals, counts, and moans.

Rubbing my growing erection over my pants, I stare at her arousal spread all over her thighs.

“If you’re quite done, I see a meal begging to be eaten,” I growl, standing.

Draven pushes apart her ass cheeks to give me a Lovely view of her puffy lips. “Poor, sweet girl,” I murmur, walking closer until I drop to my knees. “How do you see tonight playing out, Draven? Tell her all about it.”

“I want a front row seat to watching you come again,” Draven says as I spread her ass cheeks wide and lick up her core. Damn, this is what heaven is like. “I want to fuck this beautiful cunt, feel you strangle my cock as I fuck you into oblivion.”

“Draven, ugh yes more, yes,” Layla pants. She’s losing the ability to speak, which is one of my favorite things.

“Sing for Draven, Little Flower,” I tell her as I devour her sweet arousal. I suck and lick and fuck her tight pussy as she gasps and pushes my fingers deeper inside of her. “Such a greedy girl.”

“Are you someone who demands what she needs in the bedroom?” Draven asks, his hand still tight on her wrists. “How good is Tyler at eating pussy, Lovely?”

“Oh, oh, it feels so good,” she whimpers. “Tyler eats pussy like it’s his damn job. More, more, please!”

“You’re starting to sing so pretty, goddamn. Can you feel how damn hard you make me?” Draven groans. He rocks her over his cock as she lays over him, while I push three fingers inside of her.

Layla gives me a lovely groan as she lets me stretch her walls, begging for more as I rock against her g-spot.

“I can feel you start to flutter like a butterfly,” I tease her as I slurp up her arousal.

“You’re so damn wet, I can hear it as Tyler fucks your pussy with his tongue. Fuck, I can’t come in my pants again. Once was enough torture,” Draven gasps.

Jordan worked a no fraternization clause into his contract, but I doubt he cares. I also think it was more to get the guys to play by the rules and fuck with Layla than to deter them from physically fucking her.

“I’m... oh, I’m close,” Layla whimpers. “Please don’t stop.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I groan around her clit. The vibration makes her scream, and I rock my fingers over and over her bundle of nerves deep inside of her as she explodes. Layla squirts all over my face as she shudders, while I grin maniacally.

I’m a squirt whore. I fucking love when she bathes me in her cum.

“Fuck yes, Baby Girl,” I chuckle as I pull my fingers away from her body.

“We’re all on board with me sinking my cock inside of her tight cunt?” Draven growls. I can tell he’s trying to hold himself back and I’m kind of impressed. I know he would never hurt or force her, but I can recognize a man sitting on the razor’s edge of insanity by pussy.

“I am,” I tell him. “Layla, I know words are hard, but speak now if you don’t want your pussy filled with Draven’s cock.”

“Gimme,” she says instead, struggling to sit up but unable to due to how Draven is holding her. “Yes, Draven, please give me your cock. I need it.”

My girl is dickmatized. I’m sure it’s a myriad of things, but the last two days Draven and Layla have also been pretty inseparable except to sleep. Even then, he finds his way into our bed halfway through the night. It’s kind of adorable.

Lifting her into his arms, he stands easily, walking toward our bedroom. “I want to fuck you in a bed the first time I feel you strangle my cock, Baby,” he says.

Standing, I follow them, musing to myself about how that was almost romantic. Dropping her on her feet, he helps her out of clothes, his eyes moving over her body.

“Damn, I’m not worthy, but I swear I’ll try to be,” he prays, pushing her back on the bed. Layla opens her arms to him as he follows her onto the mattress.

Smirking, I pull out a condom, throwing it onto the bedspread. Sitting on the armchair, I pull out my cock and slowly start to tug and fuck my hand.

Layla pulls off Draven’s shirt, leaning up to kiss his lips. “You feel so good,” she sighs, her hands following the ridges and dips of his body. Twisting them, she manages to turn them both so she’s on top. “Mine.”

“Cavewoman looks good on you,” he breathes as he unbuckles his belt. “Fuck, I can’t wait to watch you bounce on my cock.”

I can’t either if I’m being honest. My breaths stutter and pant as I watch Layla unbuckle his jeans. I never thought I’d enjoy watching her fuck another man, but the excitement and desire in her eyes makes me even harder.

Shoving his pants down, Draven releases his cock, and my eyes widen as I see the piercing he has. Layla licks her lips, wiggling down to run the flat of her tongue over the length of his cock before sucking on the head. Draven’s eyes roll as he lets her explore before he taps out.

“I’m too close, Layla. Fuck, it’s going to be hard not to come the second I’m inside of you. You’re a siren that’s pulled me in with your song. Come here,” Draven begs.

Ripping open the condom, he pulls it out and rolls it down his cock. “Come ride me Baby, though I have to warn you that I’m going to buck and fuck you from underneath,” he says.

Shrugging, Layla smirks as she crawls up his body. “I know what I’m signing up for. Fuck me, have me however you need, Draven,” she says.

I love watching how bold she gets, the look she gets as she realizes how large he is, and the sounds she makes as she

lowers herself onto his dick.

“Fuck, Baby. You look so good taking his cock. Look at that pussy getting filled. So goddamn sexy,” I whisper in awe.

My cock is weeping, the tip almost purple and angry. I need to come almost more than I need my next breath.

“You’re strangling my cock, oh fuck,” Draven gasps. “God, you’re so damn amazing.”

“Doesn’t she feel good?” I ask him. “Can you feel how her walls contract and release? They’re going to milk you of every damn drop of cum. It’s like a religious experience every time I fuck her.”

Draven’s eyes roll back as his hands tighten and relax along her hips. “Yes, oh, oh,” he groans. “Such a good girl. Take it all, Baby Girl.”

Getting up, I pull my clothes off, climbing onto the bed to lazily stroke my cock as I watch them.

“Tyler, I want your cum,” Layla says boldly. “Please, give me your cock.”

One day, I would love to push my way inside of her pussy too, but I don’t think she’s ready for that yet. Instead, I wrap my hand in her hair and let her wrap her lips around my cock.

Draven grunts as Layla continues to ride him, taking even more of his cock inside of her. He’s not a small man, and she’s rocking and rolling her hips as she rides him.

Pushing deep down her throat, I fuck her face as Draven gets his hand in between them, furiously rubbing her clit as they rut and fuck.

“That’s it, damn you’re close again. Shower my cock with your cum like a good girl. You’re so beautiful, Baby. Give me what I want,” Draven implores.

Layla shudders as she gets closer, her throat even tighter than she normally is. “That’s it, you feel so good. God, you’re so pretty, Baby. Bounce on his cock, show him what it’s like to have Layla Campbell as his girl.”

Draven leans up to suck on her tits as he continues to rub her clit. Layla's sounds as I fuck her throat are unintelligible, but I can tell she's loving it. Her breasts bounce as he ruts up into her, and her eyes roll.

"So good. Shower his cock with your cum. I bet that his thick tip is rubbing you in all the right places with that piercing. Show him how good it feels. God, fuck, yes," I shout as I can feel her start to come.

Her throat is strangling me almost to the point of pain as she screams out her release, and I shudder as I feel the first wave of my orgasm. My balls draw up tight, I have tingles in my thighs, and then I'm gone.

Ropes of cum hit the back of Layla's throat and I grunt as I watch her work to swallow all of me. Draven praises her until he goes rigid, cursing as he shudders. "Fuck, that hit me out of nowhere," he gasps. "Ninja chick with the superhuman pussy. Goddamn, yes, fuck!"

Draven comes hard, and if my eyesight whites out for a moment, I can only believe his does as well. Breathing hard, I collapse onto the mattress next to them as Layla drops onto his chest.

He smooths her hair as he tells her how amazing she is, and how he's going to need to live inside of her pussy from now on. Chuckling, I struggle to breathe as my blood roars in my ears. Layla looks at me with a wide smile as she lays on Draven's chest, making me grin.

"Little minx. You look well and properly dicked down," I tease her. Her cheeks are flushed, and she looks incredible. My phone starts to blow up, making me sigh. It's always something.

Sitting up, I grab my phone to see that it's a video call. Standing, I decline it and call back. I'm still naked, and I may kill anyone else who sees my girl sated and beautiful. My ability to share only goes so far. If Draven thinks he's going to take her on another breakfast date tomorrow without me, he can eat a dick.

Unless he'd like that. I don't believe in rewarding naughty boys though.

"Hey, sorry I can't video chat and allow you to live," I greet Ronan.

"Fair enough. Mr. Laurence asked us to look into Jordan Miles' disappearance," Ronan says. Wincing, I put the phone on speaker because she needs to hear this.

"Go on. You're on speaker with Layla, his niece," I tell him.

"Hi, Layla," Ronan says. *"Unfortunately, it's not good news."*

"Is he alive?" Layla asks, her voice strangled as she sits up.

"Yes," he says quickly. *"I'm sorry, I worded that wrong. As far as I can tell he's alive, but the Irish Mob called the label today, stating that they were holding him for ransom."*

"What do they want?" she asks, her voice tiny and soft. Layla is preparing herself for the worst, her arms crossing over her breasts. Draven recognizes the movement, grabbing a blanket to wrap her in, sitting up to hold her. They're still connected, neither of them in a hurry to move.

"You," Ronan says simply. *"They want a meeting with the girl who helped them cover up a murder as if she'd been doing it all her life."*

Layla's lips part as her eyes roll back and she passes out in Draven's arms.

"Fuck, Layla?" he says. "Come on, honey."

"Who is that? I kind of felt like you were fucking when you said you couldn't video chat," Ronan jokes.

"Now isn't the time to gossip like school girls," I admonish. "Tell me everything else you know."

This is bad.

Fuck.

Fifteen

DRAVEN

Cuddling a passed out chick in my arms, I try to figure out how everything went wrong so quickly. I'm still inside of her for fuck's sakes. Tyler is still talking to his friend, and I rub Layla's head gently.

"Layla, honey, come back to me, beautiful," I whisper softly. Jordan being kidnapped confirms all of our worries. The question is why the fuck Layla is so interesting to these people. "It's okay, wake up, baby. We'll figure it out."

Tyler hangs up the phone, crawling into the bed next to me. "Little Flower," he says softly, rubbing her forehead. Layla moans, making me wince. Tours can be stressful to begin with, and today has already been a long fucking day.

“A part of me just wants to let her sleep,” I admit, watching her.

“She’ll wake up in a panic soon,” Tyler says with a sigh. “Her body overloaded and shut down. I’m sure it’s a mixture of the stress of today, kicking Mav’s selfish ass, and orgasms along with the news just now. This could be really bad.”

“Is she really meeting with this guy? I mean, it’s a mob boss, could it be a female? I have no idea,” I mutter.

“Either way, knowing Layla, she’ll want to go,” Tyler grunts. “Come on, Baby. Up you go. We need to make a plan.”

Layla’s eyes flutter open, and she looks lost when she sees us. Shifting, her eyes widen, because I am still inside of her and hard despite everything. It’s difficult not to be with a woman as beautiful as Layla draped over me.

“I promise your dick is amazing and has nothing to do with me passing out,” she says furtively, making me laugh.

“You had some shit news, Lovely. Thank you for the vote of confidence though. Let’s scoot you off, yeah?” Easing myself out of her, I hiss as I move her to straddle my thigh. “What do you need?”

“Me?” Layla bites her lip as she thinks. “I need a shower and to call my sister, and I need the number of whoever this person is who has my uncle, though not in that particular order. Do you think they’ve hurt him?”

Jordan Miles is probably super pissed off, wherever he is. He doesn’t seem like the person who will be the perfect prisoner.

“I don’t know, Layla. I hope not,” I tell her. “Grab a shower, and we’ll go from there, okay?”

Layla nods, then climbs off the bed, and I dispose of the condom, getting up to pull on a pair of pants.

“When is our next show?” I ask, trying to piece our way through this.

Tyler pulls up his phone, wincing. “It’s in Chicago in two days, and I don’t know where they’ll want to meet her. I just

hope they're willing to work with her schedule. If we need to, I'll tell the label to cancel it." He shrugs. "I'm not telling her or you guys to perform when this is going on."

"You're a good man," I sigh. I can hear the sound of water running from the shower, and I listen carefully for signs of crying. Not hearing anything except for Layla moving around, I blow a breath. "She said she wanted to talk to her sister and call this person who's ransoming her uncle. Which order should this be done?"

"Lennon first," he says, pulling out his phone to text someone. "My best friend is married to someone who works for the government, I guess Special Forces is the best way to describe it. I think he should be on the call to see if he can help."

"Fucking super heroes," I snort. "What kind of family is this anyway?"

"The best," Tyler says with a smirk. "Greg is married to my friend, Tori, and I think he'll be able to assist in this. I would be surprised if Lennon hasn't already reached out to him, since they're neighbors."

The water switches off, making me turn. "Hey," Tyler says softly, leaning forward. At some point in our conversation, he managed to pull on a pair of sweatpants, and I let myself notice the expanse of tanned, caramel skin.

No wonder Layla is all over that. "She's not going to break, you know? Lay is going to bounce back and be fine, just give her time to process. She's really close to her uncle."

I could tell they were from the way they interacted with each other, and I nod absently, turning to find Layla wrapped in a towel. Biting her lip, she walks into the room slowly. Her hair is wet, and I have to admit that she looks stunning.

"Let's get you dressed before you fall on my cock again," I tease her. Tyler pulls a couple of things out of her bag, and again I find myself envious of how easy it is for him to take care of her.

Tyler hands me the shirt, pulling the towel from her.

“I can get dressed,” she giggles as I help her into a long-sleeved shirt. Tyler dresses her in leggings and socks, and she’s under the covers before she can complain anymore with her phone in her lap.

“Just because you can do it, doesn’t mean we don’t want to help,” I tell her. “Besides I got to brush past your breast. If there’s a chance of that, I’ll take it every time.”

My words, though silly and immature, make her lips twitch.

“Here we go,” she sighs, opening her phone to call her sister and putting it on speaker.

“Hey, I was just about to call you,” Lennon says, blowing out a breath. *“I have less than stellar news about Uncle Jordan.”*

“I just found out he’s been kidnapped and is being held for ransom,” Layla says, wrapping her arm around herself. Tyler sits on the edge of the bed, his eyes on her. “The person who has him wants me as part of his return.”

“Wait no!” Lennon yells. *“I was going to tell you that he’s been taken by Seán O’Brien, who is known to be a miserable bastard. Mila is his niece, though, so I’m not surprised the bitch would have mentioned you to him. Is there any way we can get him back without you seeing him?”*

“I don’t think so. I am the ransom,” Layla explains. “The ransom sent to *Music Horde Records* said he wanted to meet the girl who helped cover up a murder without hesitation.”

“Fuck,” Lennon sighs. *“I don’t want you to go, but it doesn’t sound like there’s any other way to get Jordan out. He just went to the bar?”*

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t be surprised if something happened while he was there. The bar was kind of sketchy,” Layla explains. “I got the call from Tyler’s friends who are working for the label.”

“Good, you’re with Tyler?” Lennon asks. She sounds worried, and I feel as if I would like her.

“Yes, and Draven,” Layla says immediately. My lips curl as I appreciate how she didn’t try to keep me a secret. Of course, I am staying in the same hotel room, so it makes sense that I would be with her.

My mind goes down a rabbit hole of what ifs, but before I can go too far, Layla links her fingers in mine, leaning against me.

“*Draven,*” Lennon says to me, making me blink.

“Yes?” I ask.

“*Are we going to have issues because you’re being a dick like your friends?*” she asks.

Rolling my eyes, I scoff. “I’m an adult, I make my own decisions, thank you. While I think Atlas and Mav were premature in their actions, they’re realizing the little chick is not a pushover. She dropped Mav on his ass today after our show.”

“*Little chick?*” asks a deeper voice. “*What the fuck is going on in Cleveland?*”

“Roark,” Layla giggles. “Hi, big guy. I’m fine, I swear.”

“*Aye, I’ll believe that when I see ya. I don’t really care for you being bait, Lay,*” Roark grumbles. I can tell that he loves her too, and I kiss her forehead when she lays her head on my shoulder.

“I know, but I have the knife Greg gave me, and you know I’ll be fine—”

“*The Irish really like their guns, Layla,*” someone else says. “*I think we need to figure out what Seán wants and then go from there.*”

“Greg, I have a tracker on her phone and it’s bugged just in case,” Tyler says. Shaking my head, I swallow back a snort that the techy nerd would Lo-Jack his girlfriend. “What? I put it in after the bar. I don’t fuck with our girl’s safety.”

Our.

Damn.

Fuck.

I think my head just exploded.

“I think I need some girl talk soon, Lay,” Lennon chuckles. “Draven’s little speech was much too polished to be just a kind gesture. Look, just take care of my little sister, guys, okay? I’m not comfortable with her going to see this guy, but I do know she can take care of herself.”

“I have a question before I get off the phone,” Layla says, her cheeks flaming. It’s absolutely adorable. “Where does Seán live?”

“He is too cagey to let anyone know where he lives, but he calls Chicago home,” Greg rumbles.

“Fuck,” Tyler, Layla and I mutter.

“My next tour stop is Chicago, Lenny,” Layla says. “I won’t be able to put him off, and it’s a five hour drive here from Chicago. This is going to limit my ability to negotiate.”

“Uncle Jordan would tell you that you can always negotiate, even when the choices aren’t great,” Lennon says seriously. *“I’ve been there, done that, but I am worried about you. Keep your wits about you, and your knife with you, okay?”*

“Okay,” Layla says softly. I thought a twenty-six-year-old woman walking armed everywhere was overkill, but I can tell from Lennon’s voice that she thinks it’s necessary. It also sounds like this girl has been through some shit in life.

“Get some sleep, Lay. We love you. I still need a video call at some point too,” Lennon tells her.

“Snuggle the babies for me,” Layla says with a small smile. “I have some new songs written, so hopefully I can show you them when things settle down.”

“My recording studio is yours,” her sister says warmly. *“It’ll be a good excuse for the boys to beat the shit out of Mav and Atlas.”*

Snorting, I can tell she’s quite serious. My friends are in for a world of hurt. If I had been in their shoes five years ago, I

don't think I'd have the strength to kick this incredible woman out of my bed.

Layla simply smirks. "I will make sure to make their lives hell in the meantime," she chuckles. "I think I've finally had my fill of their attitudes."

"So what I hear you saying is that I can rearrange their faces with Sally," someone snarks, making Layla giggle.

"Yes, Turner. I have no use for them. Have at it," Layla says, rolling her eyes.

I have a feeling she's getting ahead of herself, but I really do hope she gives them hell.

"Good night, guys. Talk soon," Layla says before hanging up. It's nearing midnight now, and she bites her lip. "Do we have a number for this guy?"

There's a small tremble in her voice, and I squeeze her fingers. "We'll be here the entire time," I reassure her.

Layla's gaze cuts to Tyler and he nods. "I have the number. Ronan texted it to me. Draven is right, Little Flower. We got you, no matter what, Baby Girl," he tells her.

Nodding, Layla takes a deep breath as she takes Tyler's phone for the number.

"Can I dial it?" He winces. "I know you can, but I can make it so you can't be traced."

"Go do your thing." Layla smirks.

Nodding, Tyler adjusts his glasses as he takes off for his laptop. It really is adorable how nerdy and capable he is. Jumping back on the bed, he grins at us manically as he opens his computer and does a few things before he hums under his breath.

"It's not perfect, but he won't be able to figure out exactly where you are. It's safer this way. I want you to actually sleep tonight," Tyler says. "You've been working so hard, I can see how tired you are."

Layla washed off all the makeup from earlier, and her hair is starting to curl as it dries. I can see a slight bruising under her eyes now, and I frown. This week has been non-stop work. Kyle's an asshole for setting this pace for us.

I'm so glad that he's gone now.

"Let's do this," Layla mutters as the phone starts to ring. It's on speaker, and every shrill tone makes my skin crawl. Ready or not, here we come.

LAYLA

I'm wondering if the number is just going to go to voicemail, when it's finally answered.

"*Yeah,*" someone barks. "*What do ya want with me then?*"

"I don't believe it's what I want at all, but what you want with me," I say coldly. "Is this Seán O'Brien?"

My hand is in my lap now instead of Draven's warm hand. I need to be able to think, and he just smells so damn good. Damn, I really want cinnamon rolls now. *Focus, Layla.*

Taking a quiet, deep breath, I wait for the man on the other end of the line to finish seething.

"*Who the fuck is this, and how did you get this number, you little twit?*" he growls.

"Layla Campbell, and I received a practically engraved invitation," I say airily. Draven looks ill as he watches me, while Tyler merely smirks in amusement. If Seán really wants to see me, he'll expect a girl with a backbone, willing to push back a bit.

"*Layla,*" he murmurs. "*Yes, you're right, I have been looking forward to speaking to you. You're awfully cheeky, though. Should your uncle suffer for that, I wonder?*"

"I would prefer he be returned in one piece, without any extra holes or anything," I tell him, swallowing hard. I'm

thankful it's inaudible, and I struggle to remember to breathe.

"You've got moxie," he mutters. *"I'm Seán, and you are the key to your uncle's continued existence."*

"May I ask what you want with me?" I ask him. I'm trying to be strong, but knowing that I may be the only thing keeping my uncle alive is hard to swallow.

"I want to meet you, and I have a proposition. I understand you're on tour right now, what is your next stop?" Seán asks. I'm sure the question is just for show, because the tour is posted on my website and various places on social media.

"I'm leaving for Chicago tomorrow," I acknowledge slowly. I'm not supposed to know where he lives, so he may feel extremely smug about this. I'll let him have it.

"Where is your hotel? I just so happen to reside in Chicago," he says.

"Is it possible for me to come to you? I don't feel comfortable telling a man I don't know that information," I say primly. I sound just the right amount of innocent and Draven shakes his head at me.

"How old are you?" he asks suspiciously, and I have to swallow down a laugh.

What is with men being obsessed with my age?

"I'm twenty-six," I tell him. "I don't know my age has anything to do with my overall safety, though."

"Nah, you're right. I am the head of the Irish Mob, and I regularly have people executed. I'm not used to people trying to negotiate with me," he chuckles.

At least he isn't angry about it. I'm sure he could easily find out where I'm staying because it's essentially his city, but I'm still going to do my best not to personally disclose it.

"I grew up in show business, everything is a negotiation, Sir," I explain to him. "Uncle Jordan taught me that."

I doubt humanizing my uncle will help when dealing with the monster on the other line, but I'll fight dirty.

"The man's a scoundrel," Seán scoffs. *"He asks too many questions."*

"He was worried about me." I shrug. "Uncle Jordan wanted to make sure that night wouldn't follow me, and look at where we are."

"There's more at stake than you know, and I am enjoying his hidden talents at the moment. It would be a huge gesture of faith if you'd come to my club tomorrow night," he tells me. *"You don't have another show until the day after, isn't that right?"*

I fucking knew it. Wiley old bastard.

"That's correct, Sir," I reply. I don't really understand what he'll want with me. I'm not as exciting as he seems to think I am.

"Come to the Irish Flower tomorrow night, and we'll talk some more. Do not stand me up," Seán growls.

"Wait!" I say quickly before he hangs up. "My bandmates aren't going to want me to go alone. Is this a single invitation, or can I bring them with me?"

"If you bring them with you, expect to give me a free performance," is all he says before he hangs up.

"Fuck," I whisper. "I don't even know what kind of performance he means, the man is fucking scary."

"There's definitely some bite to his bark," Draven mutters. "Shall we tell the boys our plans?"

Shrugging, I agree. "I don't want to put shoes on," I sigh.

"I won't tell anyone that you're walking in stockinged feet if you don't." Draven winks, making me chuckle.

"I have a feeling it won't be hard for him to find out where we're staying," I tell Tyler as I stand up. "Plus, he could force my uncle to figure it out. I'm really scared for him."

“He’s tough, we’ll figure out how to help, okay?” Tyler says to me. “Let’s go tell the dickheads the plan now. I’m sure they’ll have lots to say about this.”

Draven snorts as he looks over at me, getting up to pull on a shirt. The way his stomach contracts with all of his muscles as he does it makes my mouth water.

“Little chick, if you continue looking at me like that you won’t be getting much sleep.” He smirks when he notices. “How’s your ass by the way?”

Wrinkling my nose, I don’t want to tell him that it still stings deliciously. “It’s fine,” I squeak, moving away from him when he threatens to look. I checked in the mirror, and it’s still a little pink from his attention.

“I can see that,” he chuckles evilly. Tyler grabs me around the waist, kissing my lips soundly.

“You were stunning on that call, Little Flower. Don’t doubt your instincts, they’re good,” he tells me as we move toward the outer door to walk into the hallway.

“I was worried I was pushing too much and would end up hurting Uncle Jordan,” I sigh as we walk. “It’s such a razor’s edge.”

“You straddled it very well, though,” Draven praises. “Regardless of how many mini heart attacks I think I suffered as I listened to you. That’s not how I want to go out, lovely.”

“And if you had a choice, how would you choose?” I ask him. Yeah, it’s a bit macabre, but he brought it up.

“With you riding my cock, years down the road, of course.” He smirks. Draven, the smug asshole, is also perfectly in place to catch me when I trip over nothing in shock. Holy shit. “I told you, I’m obsessive and a lot. You’re stuck with me now.”

Tyler barks out a laugh as he watches us, highly amused. “He warned me too,” he says with a shrug. “I told him to shoot his shot.”

I’m surrounded by crazy people.

Standing at Mav and Atlas' room, I bite my lip as I knock on the door.

"They're not going to hear that," Draven admonishes. "Knock like you mean it."

Raising his fist, he pounds on the door, making me wince. It's late, though we are tucked away, Kyle said. "Open up, assholes!" Draven yells.

I can hear grumbling before the door opens, and I steel my spine. No matter what they have to say about it, I'm going to that damn club. I'm not willing to live a life where others tell me what to do.

"What's going on? I thought that may just be Draven having an attack of insomnia, but didn't expect everyone," Mav mutters. "Come on in then."

It doesn't look like he's still upset, so I grab the door as he walks back inside. It's cleaner than I would have thought as I look around the hotel room too.

"Atlas, come out here," Mav calls. It looks like he was starting to doze as Atlas walks out with a yawn and shirtless.

Nope, I'm not going there. I've been burned, have the scars to prove it.

"I just needed a second to give you an update on Jordan," I tell them, wrapping my arms around my waist. "I know where he is, kind of."

"Oh? He finally showed? Man, even I was starting to worry. What's he have to say for himself?" Mav asks, brow raised.

"He's been kidnapped by the Irish Mob," I tell him with a straight face. "I don't think he made it out of O'Malley's. I think Uncle Jordan is okay for now, but a ransom letter was dropped off at the label today."

"Well, how much do they want?" Atlas asks, crossing his arms over his chest. I stare at his face instead, so that I'm not distracted.

"Me," I tell him. "Our next stop is in Chicago—"

“Excuse the fuck out of me,” Mav growls. “Did you just breeze over important information?”

“Why do you even care?” I ask. “I’m letting you know we’re leaving for Chicago bright and early tomorrow, because I have to meet with the man who took my uncle.”

“Who is that man?” Atlas asks darkly, taking a step toward me. I know he won’t hurt me, but I still wish I had my knife. These men are so much bigger than I am, and it’s easy to feel intimidated.

“Seán O’Brien, figurehead of the Mob.” I shrug. “I’m meeting him at his club tomorrow night to talk.”

“You can’t just go and talk to a man like that, Layla. Are you fucking insane? Does Lennon know you’re doing this?” Mav complains.

I hate how he does that. It makes me feel as if I need permission when I most certainly do not.

“Let’s get this shit very straight,” I say softly. “I do not need permission for anything, yes she knows and she supports my decision. Lastly, you’re the reason my uncle is where he is and I am where I’m about to be. Next time you decide to test someone’s mettle, maybe make sure it’s not a goddamned crime family’s business!”

I’m breathing hard as I turn and walk from the room. I do however, notice the glare Draven gives them.

“Come on, you’re seriously on her side with this? This is a suicide mission. She’s literally insane for doing this,” Atlas says, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, because I have her back. We’ll go in with a plan, and figure it out,” Draven says, slowly walking backward out of the room. “It’s well past time the two of you think before you speak, because you may very well become the voice in her head. All you’re doing is making things more difficult, sewing seeds of doubt in her head that could get her killed. Stop fucking talking.”

Mav and Atlas are silent as we walk back out. Draven is right, except they already are the voices in my head. They

make me rethink every word I say, worried it sounds dumb. The only time I don't have them in my head is when I speak with Tyler. The voices that sound like Mav and Atlas quiet down then, and I can be myself.

Hurrying back to our room, a wave of exhaustion hits me.

I'm so tired.

"Don't think I didn't see how exhausted you are, lovely," Draven grumbles. "Off to bed with you, right now. You're no help to anyone if you pass out tomorrow."

Tyler lets us into the room, and I nod, a wide yawn almost cracking my jaw. Stumbling into the room, I brush my teeth, use the bathroom, and finish up my bedtime routine.

Tyler is working on the computer, shooting off emails, when I climb into bed. Draven usually gets into bed with us halfway through the night, and I remember Mav's words about his insomnia. It explains a lot actually.

I don't want to wait tonight for him to come find his way to my bed. Pouting, I wonder if it would be too weird and forward if I asked him to join us. Would I be considered too demanding?

"I can hear your thoughts from here, Little Flower. Just ask him to come to bed," Tyler chuckles.

"You know me so well," I sigh, throwing off the blankets and getting out of bed. Walking across the living room, I stop outside of Draven's room. "Hey."

Draven is playing on his phone, and immediately puts it down to look at me. "Are you okay? Do you need something?" he asks. "Please ignore the guys, they just don't know when to shut their mouths—"

"Will you come to bed with us?" I interrupt, my anxiety twisting inside of me. "It would just help me sleep better, and... please?"

Draven grins, getting up. "Baby, all you had to do is ask. I've been staying up until you're both asleep before crawling in bed next to you. Being wrapped around your body, hearing

you breathe as you sleep, it all helps me sleep and know everything I need is in one room,” he confesses.

“Good,” I tell him simply, holding out my hand. It’s amazing how fast someone can easily fit into your life, and get under your skin. As Draven snuggles next to me, his arm wrapped around my waist and his leg between mine, I slip off into sleep.

Sixteen

ATLAS

It's six in the morning, and we're loading up the bus. Tyler is in drill sergeant mode as he gets people to help reload our instruments, making sure we don't miss anything. We've been on the road enough to have our shit together, but it still makes me smirk to watch him.

"Leave him alone," Layla tells me as she passes my seat. "We kind of dropped him into a new job out of the blue, and he's never toured full time before."

"I'm still confused as to why he's even here," I sigh. "I know he's employed by the label, but is he really that desperate to be with you?"

“Yes,” Tyler says, popping out like a damn ghoul. “My place is wherever she is, especially when I know there are assholes like you in her band. Now with everything she’s about to head into with Seán, I’m glad I’m here.”

“You’re not going to see him,” I growl, turning back to Layla. Damn, maybe Mav is right in that the past not being as far away as I thought. Five years wasn’t nearly enough time, and I don’t think any amount will ever be enough. “What kind of assets do you have when it comes to a man like that?”

Layla smirks and grabs her tits with a shrug, walking away from me. I can’t help the snort I make, because damn the girl is amusing.

“Besides those!” I yell, laughter in my voice.

“She put me on my ass,” Mav reminds me. “Layla may be fine. I don’t like it either, but remember how often people tell her what to do. It’s not going to work.”

“Thank you, Mav, for getting your head out of your ass, if only for a second,” Layla says with a wide yawn. “I need a nap, who wants to cuddle?”

Blinking at how easily she says that, I watch as Draven chuckles and links his fingers in hers.

“I have more paperwork than I even want to talk about,” Tyler groans. “Sleep well, Little Flower.”

Watching her disappear into the back room with Draven makes me jealous as fuck. It doesn’t make sense, I walked away from her, but why is she choosing him?

“That seriously doesn’t bother you?” I ask Tyler, shaking my head.

“She’s not sleeping well, so I’m more than fine with it. Layla passed out when she got the news about her uncle. I really need you to stop being a dick to her, because if she doesn’t lay you out next, I may,” Tyler grunts. Pulling out his computer, he starts booting up his device.

“Aye, I noticed the bruised spots under her eyes,” Mav said worriedly.

Are you fucking kidding me? Draven's words last night gutted me. I don't want to be the negative voice that tells her she's not enough.

I simply wanted her to have the space to live without tying herself to Mav or I. It looks as if it doesn't matter, because she's with Draven and Tyler anyway. What would my life look like if I hadn't walked away from everything?

Blowing out a breath as I tune out Mav and Tyler, I pull out my phone. Scrolling social media just means that I'm stalking Tyler without meaning to as he updates our accounts. The tour has a photographer who is sending him photos of each venue, so Tyler doesn't have to worry about taking them himself. The photographer drives himself to each venue, and the label covers his costs. It's a win-win situation.

Wrinkling my nose, I start going through my contacts. Swallowing hard, I decide to try to talk to Lennon. She's got to be super pissed off at me. I don't know how to stop being a dick to her sister, when all I can see is how beautiful she is. Layla's performance was incredible last night, her ode to tell us to fuck off executed perfectly.

I'm glad Mav and I have been obsessively listening to her songs at night in our hotel room, sometimes even fucking to her voice. I never said either of us were normal. I don't know how to speak to her anymore.

Layla isn't the same person as she was five years ago. She's not as open, innocent, or as excitable anymore. I wonder if that's just something that life or touring has done, or if we're responsible for that too.

Fuck it. Maybe I deserve to get yelled at, but I'm tired of having radio silence with people that used to be my family. The bus pulls out of the hotel lot, taking us to Chicago and a damn mobster.

Seriously, what are the odds?

I don't know how not to be an asshole about this. I know I've left this for way too long, but please don't hate me. Mav and I didn't know what else to do.

Tiny Valkyrie: How about not walking out of my wedding? That would have been a great goddamn step, you twatwaffle.

Somehow, it makes me feel a little better to get yelled at. I can feel the muscles start to loosen because it's a response. Mav and I didn't get any kind of response or a very limited one five years ago. Please keep yelling at me.

It was selfish of us to leave. Layla was practically wifed up, and you all were so happy. We didn't fit anymore.

There are bubbles! As they start and stop and then start again for so long I begin to wonder if she'll even send it. Glancing at Mav, he raises his brow at me as if to ask me what I'm doing. Handing him the phone, he curses under his breath.

Tyler continues to work in the background, snorting out of nowhere. The guy is kind of weird. There are ear plugs in his ears, and I wonder if he can hear us.

I just don't understand what makes him tick.

Knowing he can't possibly know what I'm talking about, I turn back to Mav. Standing, he moves in the small space, until he's sitting next to me.

"I can't believe she answered you," he grunts under his breath, glancing at Tyler. "Fuck, I miss her. I really regret things now that we're back in the States. It was easier to ignore everything when we were working half a world away from her."

"Aye," I mutter methodically.

Tiny Valkyrie: You made yourself not fit. No one asked you to put your dick anywhere near my sister. You were supposed to watch over her, be a safe space to land when we weren't around and I was fucking gone. Nowhere within that did it say to please dick down my baby sister!

"She's not playing very nice," Mav snorts. "Lennon O'Reilly has always played for keeps, Atlas. If you're getting

into this conversation, be prepared to have Turner ready to smack some retribution into you with his bat.”

“Turner and fucking Sally.” I smile. I should be scared and not amused, right? I can’t help how backwards my feelings are, or how much I’ve missed my friends. “I caved and had to text her.”

“I don’t blame you, but she’s never going to understand our side, Atlas,” Mav says.

“She’s never going to understand it because you fucked over her sister,” Tyler says, continuing to work. He doesn’t even look away from his computer as he adjusts his glasses. I guess he can hear with those stupid ear plugs. “I’m not saying you should have actually fucked her and taken her first, because I had the honor of that, but you could have handled it very differently.”

“Bastard,” I mutter. I didn’t need to be reminded that he got her firsts. I mean I figured, but it’s a bitter pill to swallow. “I didn’t think it all the way through, but I have to sit with my choices, regardless if I don’t fully agree with them now.”

I could have handled it differently with Mav when those beautiful blue eyes begged me for more. Or we shouldn’t have gotten hot and heavy at all with our best friend’s little sister.

“The fact that you’re speaking to Layla’s sister right now says you’re a liar,” Tyler says evenly, waving at his computer screen. “I don’t consider that a very good apology, though.”

Mav and my lips drop open in surprise. *How does he know that?*

Looking down at the phone as it vibrates again, I read the text.

Tiny Valkyrie: This is Turner. You’ve upset my wife, and there will be consequences for that. Figure your shit out.

“Well that sounds ominous,” Tyler chuckles. He’s definitely reading my texts from over there.

Fuck.

“Why are you bugging my phone?” I ask. It’s surreal that I even have to ask that. I feel like I’m living in the Twilight Zone.

“I don’t trust any of you,” he says. “Draven I’m coming around to, but you both? Not even a little bit. You get the full stalker nerd treatment.”

“You’re a dangerous man, Tyler,” Mav grunts. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

“I do believe you have a text to respond to.”

Forcing myself to look down at my phone, I swallow thickly. Fuck it, here we go.

I owe you all an apology. Mav and I left the country the second we could to get space, and didn’t tell a soul. The label and Jordan have always known where we were, but they promised to keep it to themselves. Mav and I got hard and bitter over the last five years, and I’m positive it’s because we’ve been running from our pasts.

Mav glances down to read the text before I send it, nodding curtly. “That’s exactly what it feels like,” he says softly. “We’re very different people than we were five years ago, and not in a good way.”

“Yeah, we’re dickheads,” I sigh, lunging to my feet to fall into a bunk. I need a nap before I face this nightmare that is my life again.

Mav throws out his feet where he is, dropping his head back to nap, and I don’t have the heart to tell him he’ll wake up sore. Stomping to the back, I pull off my boots and flop into the bunk. The bedroom behind me is completely quiet, I notice.

Guess they really are sleeping.

Layla’s screamed words to Mav and I float back to me.

“The way you treated me five years ago, your words, it all runs rent free in my head and my heart. Please feel free to take all the blame for it...”

The way she thinks over her words carefully, how she's afraid to share her lyrics, it all comes crashing down on me. Mav and I aren't the only ones who have changed, and not all of it is from growing older.

Our choices have caught up to us, and I'm fully seeing the consequences of them. Maybe I've seen some of them before, I just couldn't allow myself to care. Now that I'm fully sober, and we haven't smoked in almost twenty-four hours, I'm seeing everything in a new light.

I don't much like what I'm seeing.

TYLER

I wasn't planning on showing my hand so early, but damn was it fun. I needed them to really face their idiotic behavior. Everything they do is hurting my little flower, and I've decided in the face of Seán fucking O'Brien that it needs to stop. I don't doubt that that man will pull on any strand of weakness.

Mav is passed out in the living room while I work on managerial duties, IT issues, as well as social media related stuff. My head is spinning a bit from all of the work, so I decide to call the label to figure out what can be done.

The line rings as I wait for the receptionist to pick up. I would prefer to speak to Laurence because he's aware of what's happening, but any of the execs would work.

"Music Horde Records, how can I help you?" asks the receptionist, and I cross my fingers that Laurence isn't busy.

"Hi, this is Tyler Mallard, and I was wondering if Mr. Laurence was available?" I ask politely.

The receptionist asks me to wait, putting me on hold. My ear plugs are on the table in their case, and I lean back in the chair to get comfortable. I've been working for a while, so my ass is starting to go numb. It's almost ten in the morning by

now, a few hours past my pot stirring ways. Ugh, are we there yet?

Thankfully, the label begins their work day at six in the morning in pacific standard time, so they're already in the office.

"Hello, Tyler. How are things on the tour? I got your email about Kyle. Just disgusting behavior," Laurence scoffs.

"Umm, they're complicated," I admit. "Ronan and the guys called me about the ransom letter, but Layla is the ransom. He doesn't want anything else except to meet with her."

"I didn't think he actually wanted her, though," Laurence grumbles. *"You're headed to Chicago, right? Can you tell him you're on tour or something? I want Jordan back as much as anyone, but he would skin me alive for this."*

"Seán O'Brien is based out of Chicago," I sigh. "We're meeting him at his club tonight. We're probably half an hour outside of the city right now. I'm also juggling a lot now that Kyle's not here. As much as he sucked at his job, I don't have an itinerary or know what he had planned while we're in Chicago. Kind of out here with my ass in the wind, Laurence."

Scoffing at me, I can tell he's amused by my words. I have a certain way with them.

"Alright, I'll send you the itinerary I have. I still want to send you an assistant. I have an amazing intern, and he's very detail oriented. Tell him where to run, and he'll go with it," Laurence reassures me.

Sighing, I ask myself if I want another body to worry about. It's probably not going to be very safe in Chicago while we're here.

"Thanks, I'll think about the extra body to train," I rumble. "I will take the itinerary and veto ability on anything that's too much for the band to take on. Kyle had *The Midnight Lights* on too many interviews in one day in Cleveland. Layla is exhausted."

“You were only initially booked out for three,” Laurence says, surprised. *“Dammit. She’s probably been practicing like mad too, huh?”*

“It’s like you know her or something.” I smirk. I know Laurence has been around Layla since she was a kid, and knows a lot of her quirks.

“Yeah, I do. She’ll work those boys until they can play her songs in their sleep. How are they doing with her?” Laurence asks.

Stretching my neck to help relieve the tension, I think. “Layla went rogue in the best of ways and refused to cue her bandmates of what song she was singing next. It was the most epic pop quiz I’ve ever witnessed. They hit every mark, even if they took a second to get it. Then, once they were off stage, Layla laid into Mav and swept him off of his feet, literally.”

“He probably deserved it,” Laurence mutters. *“I’m sending the itinerary over to you now, but there aren’t any interviews in this city that I can see. There will be one in a few days in Indianapolis, which is the next concert. You have three days in Chicago. I would say I hope you’re able to take a breath, but a mob boss in that city isn’t very relaxing.”*

“Nah, it really isn’t. I’m glad we’re staying in a hotel for the next few days. I wouldn’t want to live on the tour bus in Seán O’Brien’s backyard,” I grumble. “Otherwise, we’re really just trying to stay afloat while we see what he wants. I hope we’re able to get eyes on Jordan because I’m starting to worry about him.”

“You and me both. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if you need anything. Even if it’s just an intern to fetch you things,” he teases.

Smirking, I say goodbye, shaking my head. The execs are a tad ridiculous. It’ll be interesting to manage a band, but as long as I keep my checklist with me and the itinerary, I should be fine juggling things.

“What’s the label have to say about things?” Mav asks lazily, yawning. “God, we should almost be there. Thank

fuck.”

“Laurence said there aren’t any interviews in Chicago, but we’ll be here for three days before moving on to Indianapolis. I have veto power on interviews and extra commitments, so you won’t be overscheduled,” I explain. “Otherwise, we’re pretty much on our own, and the driver should be taking us to our hotel soon.”

“How do you feel about the extra workload? I wasn’t thinking when I fired Kyle,” Mav winces.

“It needed to be done.” I smirk. “The man isn’t great at his job.”

“He really wasn’t,” Mav sighs. “Look, I know you probably have a lot of thoughts about what happened with Layla—”

“I think whatever you may have felt scared you,” I say honestly. “You made several really bad decisions, and now things are cockeyed. I’m not the one you need to apologize to if that’s where you’re headed. The girl in there sleeping after performing her ass off, despite her feelings, deserves it. A fair amount of groveling is necessary, too.”

I throw in the last bit, but I want them to fucking crawl over glass for her. I’m rarely petty, but I’m feeling it a bit right now.

“Huh,” the big lout mutters before he gets lost in thought.

I know these two have only ever been in a relationship with each other for a long damn time, but they’re a bit emotionally stunted if you ask me.

Breathing a sigh of relief as we pull into the hotel parking lot, I pack up my bag and get everything moving. Hotel keys, luggage upstairs, ensuring the band will be able to practice as needed, etc. I’ve scoped out several restaurants within walking distance as well, and a cupcake bakery I plan to surprise Layla with. Our anniversary happens to be tomorrow, right in the middle of our crazy lives.

I just want to show her a small bit of my appreciation, even if we can’t celebrate big. I’ll figure something out, though

she's performing tomorrow. Tour life is insanely busy, where's a guy to get some romance in too?

Throwing an arm around a yawning Layla, I bring her upstairs to our room. We're bunking again with Draven, and I find I don't mind it at all.

"Hey, Layla?" Mav asks as I start to open our hotel door.

"Yes?" she asks sleepily. There's time for her to simply go back to bed if that's what she wants to do, and I may join her. I'm done with my work until tomorrow.

"Can we talk later, do you think?" he asks.

"Yeah, maybe," she says softly. Layla doesn't look very convinced that she wants to and I push the door open. She's not in the right frame of mind for this conversation until she gets more sleep, coffee, and food in that order.

"Okay," Mav says softly. "Are you going back to bed?"

"Yes, I'm so sleepy," she says with another huge yawn. Pushing the door open wide, I let her and Draven in. I should throw Mav and Atlas a bone, but I don't feel like it.

They fucked up. It's one thing if it was just a matter of Layla's age, then they should have simply left her be. Stringing someone along and then pushing them away as violently as they did was wrong. Now they can sleep in their shit.

"Hey Baby, pick a bedroom and let's get into pajamas," I tell her as I slowly close the door. "Draven, you feel like a cuddle session with our girl?"

The snick of the door tells me it's closed, and I flick the lock on it. Draven smirks as he pulls his shirt off. Layla stares as she drinks in every single ab, then starts to pull off her boots as well.

"I do fancy a cuddle session." He smirks. "I'll fall back asleep if she's in my arms. I don't know what's with that. She's like sleepy dust."

Layla smiles brightly at the admission, now that we know he's an insomniac, it hits differently. There's something about

being someone's safe space that's damn attractive.

Dropping our bags, we change into more comfortable clothes and climb into bed. Setting two alarms on my phone, I plug it in and place both my glasses and device on the nightstand. Layla wiggles a little until she's comfortable, and I can tell sleep is already starting to pull her in.

"Tyler?" she says sleepily. Her words are already starting to slur, and her eyes are closing.

"Yeah, Baby?" I ask.

"Thank you for always being in my corner. I love you, and I'm so happy to ring in another year as your girl tomorrow night," she mumbles.

Smiling, I kiss her neck, loving that she remembered. I didn't think she would with everything happening.

"I love you too. I'm the lucky one," I tell her as she drifts off to sleep. There's no one in the world like Layla Campbell. She should be protected at all costs, that is if she'd let anyone do it.

Listening to Draven and Layla's evening breaths, I decide there's nothing wrong with having someone who's capable of taking care of themselves. I just need to be there to throw in an assist, just like I always am.

My eyelids are getting heavy, so I'm glad I already set an alarm before getting into bed. The darkness takes over as I fall asleep quickly, wrapped around Layla.

Seventeen

LAYLA

I'm twitchy as I get dressed to meet with Seán O'Brien. The nap and shower helped a lot, and Draven got in with me to make sure I was thoroughly clean. My lips twist into a smirk as I remember the way his hands kneaded and tweaked my skin in the effort of cleanliness.

I don't think that's what they mean when they talk about cleanliness being next to Godliness, though.

"You're thinking dirty things, aren't you, Chick?" Draven teases me. I'm realizing he doesn't mean it in a derogatory way now. "Clamp those pretty thighs together and get dressed before I keep you to myself, Layla."

His voice reminds me of sex. It's gravelly, and feels like a living thing as it travels across my skin. Shivering, I decide I can't be half naked around him right now in my bra and panties.

"What does one wear to meet a mob boss?" I sigh, looking through my clothes.

"It's unseasonably warm right now," Draven mentions. "As much as I want to bundle you into a turtleneck and leggings, I can't, so wear something that you're comfortable with, that will also conceal your knife."

"These are people that'll probably check for weapons, huh?" I mutter as I continue to look through my clothes. It is ridiculously hot today in Chicago. It's almost September, why haven't they gotten the memo?

Pulling out a black dress with a corset top, I add thigh highs as well. May as well put the damn knife on display. Seán wants to meet the girl who's fearless, so I'm going to lean into that persona.

Thirty minutes later, I'm dressed, adding a pair of midnight-blue peep-toe heels as well.

"Holy fuck," Draven mutters. "We went in a different direction I see."

Strapping my knife on so it'll be covered unless someone goes looking, I shrug. My hair's curled in ringlets, my makeup is done in purples and dark browns, and I'm wearing a mauve lipstick. I decided to go with a sultry look.

"I'd rather he underestimate me," I tell him. "If he doesn't, then I want him to see me as more dangerous than I am. He's interested because of my cool head under pressure, but I don't know what he wants with me otherwise."

Draven is wearing a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing off his delicious black ink. There's a guitar, a keyboard, and drums interwoven in the sleeves of his arms.

I can even see sticks crossed on his inner arms with a quote that says "*Music is life.*" His tattooed hands have black

and white ink shading of musical notes with a microphone. Draven Hendricks is a walking, talking artistic masterpiece.

The ink rolls on his skin as the muscles bunch and relax, and I swallow when I realize I'm very close to drooling.

"Little Flower, we won't be going anywhere if you keep looking at him like that," Tyler teases me. Taking a deep breath, I look his way, drinking him in with my gaze. He's also in a black dress shirt and pants, but his collar is unbuttoned. They both look like dessert and a snack.

"We should get going then, because my self control is shit right now," I tease him, my voice low and throaty. My tone is typically deeper than most women, which is why I sing alto, but Tyler's heated stare tells me I'm playing with fire.

A knock on the door saves me from the possibility of being thrown on the bed and fucked instead of going out tonight. I wouldn't mind it in the least, except that Uncle Jordan is counting on me right now.

Walking out of the bedroom, I check the peephole, surprised Atlas and Mav are outside. I really didn't expect them to be dressed up, let alone willing to come with us.

"Yes?" I ask them as I open the door. I'm done playing nice right now, while my stomach is in knots. Tyler ordered room service for dinner earlier so I actually ate today. As much as I talk a good game, I'm really nervous about tonight.

Atlas and Mav stare at me for longer than is polite, and Atlas's hand fists for a moment.

"Wow," Mav mutters, licking his thick lips. "There are a lot of things I want to say, but I don't think you'll take any of them the way I intend them. That dress is... something else."

Blinking, I decide to take the rest of his sentence into consideration as I wonder if he means it as a compliment or not. Neither are known for their complimentary language when it comes to me, though.

"Okay... why are you here?" I ask, not moving away from the door. I'm not making this easy, because I don't need them to bring their bullshit with them.

“You said we were going to the club, so here we are,” Atlas explains.

“No, you gave me a bunch of pushback about it, which is why you’re no longer invited. I don’t have the time nor the energy to babysit you two,” I tell them, beginning to close the door.

“Damn,” Mav mutters, sticking his black boot in the door. While they’re dressed nicely, they’re wearing their standard boots as well, except these look exceptionally shiny. “Can we please go with you? We promise not to say a word. There’s strength in numbers, especially when your backups are big fuckers.”

Atlas and Mav are not small men at six-foot-three and over two-hundred and fifty pounds. They aren’t fat in the least with all of their muscles they always tend to display. Is it worth the headache though?

“Who’s at the door, Lay?” Tyler asks, opening it wider and wrapping an arm around my waist. He rarely claims me like this, and I find I’m enjoying a bit of my quiet man showing off his caveman skills. “Hello, boys. Are we going to play nice tonight?”

I feel as if I’ve been dropped into the middle of a half finished conversation as Tyler smirks at them and Atlas and Mav glare at him.

“Aye,” they grunt, making me roll my eyes. They are so in tune with each other, sometimes it feels as if they’re an extension of the other. Sometimes they can have entire conversations without speaking.

Fucking annoying if you ask me, but a part of me is jealous too.

“Fine, let me grab my bag so we can go,” I tell them, turning to walk back into my bedroom.

“I hear Mav and Atlas,” Draven says when he sees me.

“They seem odd,” I complain as I grab my clutch. I don’t really need anything except my drivers license and phone.

Draven peeks into my bag before rolling his eyes and pulling out his wallet to tuck my license in with his.

“I want your hands unobstructed with *stuff*,” Draven scoffs, surprising me. “I’ll take your phone and put it in my pocket, so you can leave the ridiculous bag.”

“That’s weirdly sweet.” I grin back at him. He’s sitting on the bed, so I climb him like the tree he is, straddling him to give him a kiss. Thank God for smudge-proof lipstick. His large hands roll me over his already hard erection, making me shiver in need.

Focus, hussy.

“I think I’m biting off more than I can chew with you,” I tease him. “Thank you for making tonight easier.”

“Lovely, you are perfect for me. Your pussy wraps around my cock like a glove, your lips are always sweet, and you embrace my crazy. That’s all I need,” he says sincerely, standing.

Gasping, I squeeze my thighs around his waist so I won’t fall, hugging his neck tightly.

“There’s not an alternate universe anywhere that lets me drop you,” he chuckles. Hugging me to him as if he doesn’t want to let go, he walks to the doorway of the room before carefully placing me on my feet.

Draven isn’t an asshole to the guys, even though they do deserve it. He doesn’t throw our budding relationship around either. Turning, I find Atlas and Mav staring at us intensely as they sit on the couch, and I shrug. *Well, he tried.*

“So this is a thing now, I see,” Mav says lightly. Even last night it would have been said with snark or coldness. What the hell is going on?

“It is,” I tell them, handing Draven my phone to tuck away. Tyler looks amused by this, inclining his head toward the door. “If you’re coming, we should go now.”

Mav and Atlas stand, quiet mountains as we walk out of the room to the elevator bank. It’s a little unnerving, but better

than them fighting me the entire way.

“I called a ride-share,” Tyler says quietly as we get into the elevator. “It’s about a twenty-minute drive and then we can figure things out from there.”

As the ride-share arrives, Draven startles, pulling out my phone. “Your vibrate setting is strong enough to make my cock think it was all for him.”

Giggling, I shake my head. “I won’t pay attention to it if it’s not jarring and obnoxious,” I explain as we get into the car. Taking the phone from him, I notice an unknown number. Knowing, I click the accept button.

“Hello,” I say as I scoot to the end of the seats.

“I hope you’re not planning on standing me up,” Seán says smoothly, making me frown as I put on my seatbelt. I make sure the sound is loud, gesturing to Mav to slam the door loudly as he gets in.

Confused, he closes the door hard, thanking the driver for picking us up. I want Seán to hear the evidence behind my words.

“I figured it was too early to arrive at the club,” I say primly. He didn’t specify a time. “You hung up last night before giving me a time of arrival. I’m in a ride-share now.”

“*Oh,*” he grunts. I have a feeling he’s used to being in charge, but I doubt people make a point of ghosting him.

“You’re awfully anxious, Sir,” I tell him. “Do people make a point of not doing what they tell you they’ll do?”

“Only the dead ones,” he says, sighing. *“I don’t really want to kill you. Mila said she was impressed with you.”*

“If this is a job invitation, I’m already employed,” I tease, even as my heart pounds in my chest. I’m used to speaking to men in power, because I’ve been around the titans of music my entire life. I’ve watched them build careers and topple them just as easily. They don’t enjoy the word ‘no’.

“I’m quite aware of that,” Seán grumbles. *“I can hear you’re in the car now. When you arrive, walk right up to the*

red velvet rope past the line. Cormac will let you in.”

“Thank you,” I say, not wanting to press my luck. “Will—” Seán hangs up on me before I can ask if Jordan will be there.

“The man has the manners of a man child,” I sigh. “Lord help me with grumpy assholes.”

“Do you have a death wish?” Atlas asks with wide eyes. “I’m positive you do with the way you were speaking to the head the The Irish Fucking Mafia!”

The last part is hissed in anger at me, which simply causes me to shrug. I decided I’m not going to let their words hold any power over me anymore. They’re just words, I can survive them.

“So he’s a fairly powerful man,” I tell him. “You clearly don’t know who raised me.”

“I don’t,” Draven says, an interested gleam in his eyes.

“The execs at Music Horde Records all had some kind of hand in raising me.” I smirk. “My dad was on the road a lot, or would take me into the office and drop me in front of the main conference room at the label. I colored a lot, while watching people come in and out of that room. Or, as I got older, I did my homework as a homeschooler. My dad didn’t want to deal with questions at school about where he was. I wasn’t ever home alone, though there were times I’d have a long-term babysitter or Jordan would stay with me.”

“So what was your dad’s deal?” Draven asks, confused.

“He scouted talent for the label. Whenever he could, he would try to make his trips quick so I would have him home as long as possible,” I explain. “When I was six or seven, I remember sitting at a desk next to his and playing *Record Label* make believe games. My dad thought it was hysterical. It’s just all I’ve ever known. For the most part, I had a really decent childhood, not like Lenny.”

“Lennon had a rough go of it with her crazy fucking mother,” Mav rumbles.

“Your childhood feels a little lonely, Chick,” Draven says worriedly. “What about your Mum?”

“I don’t even really remember her,” I say. “It’s always been my dad, Uncle Jordan, and the label. It’s why people call me “The Label Princess”, if only they knew. My dad had a big fight with my uncle when I was seven, but he always insisted on staying in my life, even if they would barely speak to each other at times.”

“They fought over Lenny, right?” Atlas asks, looking sad. I don’t like a lot of my dad’s decisions when it comes to my big sister, and they make me disappointed.

“Yep,” I mutter, looking out the window. “Now Dad is in a psychiatric facility for possibly the rest of his life, and Jordan is all I have, so let’s not fuck this up, alright?”

“We wouldn’t fuck this up, not when it counts.” Mav growls.

The car slowly comes to a stop in front of the Irish Flower, and it appears to be a fairly nice club. I don’t know what I was expecting, but the rich brick building with the gorgeous sign was not it.

“Nice digs,” I murmur, thanking the driver as I open the door. Due to having so many large men with me, we had to get one of the larger ride-share cars, so Tyler meets me as he opens the door in the third row.

“Seán seems to be doing well for himself,” he agrees. Once everyone is out of the car, we make our way over to where Seán asked us to go. A large, scowling Irishman stares us down as he watches us.

“The line is over there, girlie,” he says dismissively.

“Cormac?” I ask, waiting. I could play the damsel in distress card, but I’m not feeling it. “Seán asked me to come to this door, as he’s waiting for us. I don’t think it’s healthy to detain our group.”

“Mr. O’Brien,” Cormac stresses with a glare, “is waiting for you, but don’t make your presence to mean more than it is. You’re just a little slut he’s taken a shine to.”

There's a distinct Irish brogue to his words, his vitriol coming out worse for the accent.

"I think your mama should have taught you manners, Sir," I tell him, flipping my hair over my shoulder. "Are you going to get out of the fucking way or do I need to call your boss?"

Cormac growls, stepping toward me when his phone rings. Grumbling, he picks up the call, talking to whoever it is with respect. Hanging up, he looks at me disdainfully.

"Right this way," Cormac mutters. "You lot don't look like the type to carry weapons, you're too fruity or soft."

"You called me fruity, oh what shall I do?" Draven drawls. "Enough with the cutting words and let us in. We'll be out of your hair as soon as possible."

"Aye, we will," Mav confirms.

Cormac looks at Mav appreciatively for a moment before yanking open the door to let us in. Draven places his hand on the small of my back, making sure I'm as far away from the grumpy Irishman as possible.

"Sometimes it works in your favor to be adorable and tiny," Draven growls in my ear. Shivering, I force myself not to squeeze my thighs together. This man manages to turn me on at the worst times. I'm pretty sure I've ruined these panties.

"Draven," I gasp as Cormac calls someone over to walk us through the club. Draven merely smirks at me as his thumb rubs my back.

I can feel Mav and Atlas's eyes on me, but I choose to ignore them. I don't need to explain my life to them or my relationships.

Following the tall man through the club that Cormac assigned us to, I ask myself if everyone Seán employs has these ridiculous muscles and anger issues. Maybe it's part of the job description?

My lips twitch as I move into a VIP part of the club, led to stand in front of a large table where there's a man waiting alone. I would have thought that he'd have people with him as

such an important man, but he's merely sipping his whiskey in a perfectly tailored suit.

"Layla?" he says, brow raised. Nodding, I say hello, waiting to see if I'm supposed to sit or stand the entire time. As much as he growled at me on the phone, this man is not a pussy cat. "Well don't just stand there, come sit and send your little entourage to the bar. Honestly, who needs so many panting men at her feet?"

I can't help it, I have to swallow a laugh as I raise my hand to my lips. "They insisted," I tell him. "What can I say? Some of them think I can't handle myself."

Sliding into the booth, I incline my head to the bar. Tyler and Draven leave immediately, a testament to how much they trust my judgment, while Mav and Atlas hesitate before following.

"Alright, lass," Seán says, turning his body toward me. I can see the authority that lives in every fiber of his body, and his eyes are hard and cold. The sweet little pet name belies the hard man in front of me, making it difficult for me to decide which personality to believe. "Tell me, what the fuck were you doing in my bar to begin with?"

Swallowing hard, I really want to kick Mav in the balls. "The open mic night was a test of sorts," I begin to explain. "I was vetting new band members, and they're a package deal. If one of them decided against me, then they were going to walk. Two of them have a past history with me, so they were being difficult, throwing me to the wolf in the group. He demanded to see me sing in public to see if I was any good—"

Seán snorts, surprising me. "I'd say you're more than just 'good'," he says. "I saw the viral videos from that night. You brought a fair bit of interest and publicity to my little bar I didn't really need that night."

Wincing, I think back to the poor person who was killed that night. I'm not naive, sometimes there are times when people need to be wiped off the face of the earth. I just don't know which camp he or she was in.

“I can promise that wasn’t my intention,” I tell him. “I was simply doing as Mila asked of me once I was on stage. Before that, I was basically showing some stubborn men I was willing to rise to the challenge.”

“The ones who didn’t want to leave? Looks like they’re sweet on you if you want my opinion,” the old man says. He’s probably in his late fifties, and looks like he runs his business with an iron fist.

“I appreciate it, but even if I was interested anymore, that ship has long sailed. They can sit at the bar like good little boys while we discuss whatever business we have,” I say.

“I didn’t expect to like you,” Seán sighs. I don’t know what he means by this, goosebumps erupt all over my skin.

“It’s probably not a good idea for me to disappear,” I mutter. “The label, my sister, and dangerous men who adore me as the baby of the family, all know where I am. You know I’m here for my family, because we don’t leave anyone behind.”

My fight or flight instinct is working hard, but I’m unsure if the danger is in front of me or in the fringes of my eyesight. While I’ve been taught how to fight, I don’t have the killer instinct my sister or my brother in law, Orion does.

“Aye, I don’t plan to keep you long,” he says with a cruel smile, waving toward someone I can’t see. My arms are grabbed before I can take a breath and I’m dragged from the booth.

Stepping on the man’s instep, I drop my weight, ensuring he loosens his hold. It half works because he lets go of one of my arms, while twisting my other around my back painfully.

“Let go of her!” Draven yells, but I block him out. I can’t focus on anything but the man behind me, and the fact that I need to get away. He needs to bleed for the infraction of touching me.

Pulling my knife from my thigh holster, my lips curl into a wicked smile as I stab him in the femoral artery, tearing as much as possible. The goon screams, letting me go, and I walk

forward, effectively pulling my knife with me. Pointing at Seán, I ignore the guns being pulled on me and the men holding back my people.

“Do not fuck around, I came in good faith, and you’re breaking it,” I growl. Seán’s eyes grow wide, glancing back at the man I stabbed who I’m pretty sure is bleeding out. I’m sure I’ll care later, as I’ve never killed a man before.

Right now? I’m pretty damned pissed.

“Holy shite,” Seán grunts. “Who the fuck are you?”

“The baby sister of someone who made sure I was trained for a rainy day. Now where the fuck is my uncle?” I ask him.

“Stand down, don’t shoot the lass. We don’t kill people for defending themselves unless I really don’t like them. Take her men to cool their heels, and I’ll take her to see her uncle,” Seán says, standing. “Knife, if you would. Now that I can see what you can do with the thing, I don’t want you stabbing me in the back.”

Dropping it in his hand, I smile sweetly. “It doesn’t serve me to kill you yet, Sir,” I tell him.

Shaking his head, he pockets my knife, despite the blood. “You must have been a hellion growing up,” he grunts. “Jordan have anything to do with raising you?”

“He had everything to do with it,” I say honestly. “Uncle Jordan is as close as I have to a father right now. I’ll burn everything down around you if you hurt him.”

I’m talking out of my ass because I don’t have that kind of power, but I definitely know people who do.

“Those are very strong words, girlie,” Seán says.

“Sometimes it’s not about who you are, but who stands with you, Sir.”

Inclining his head, he starts to walk. Making sure not to touch myself with my bloodied hand, I follow him. Cutting my gaze to Tyler whose eyes are pinched, I shake my head. I think I’m fairly safe for the immediate future.

I'll worry about the rest of the time later. I don't know why he even wants me. I'm a twenty-six-year-old rockstar. My vocal chords are insured, as are my hands because of my talents. He didn't say he hated my singing, so I doubt it has anything to do with that.

I trail after him as he pushes open an employee's only door.

"I can't promise to give you back your uncle right now because he's doing very important work for me, but I can give you five minutes," he grunts when I hesitate. "You will owe me dearly for that time, with compounded interest if my man dies. Jack has been with me for years, I don't know how the fuck you got the drop on him."

"He was cocky," I say hoarsely. Fuck, looks like I'm going through this door after all. Seán opens it wider like a gentleman, and I walk right through it.

Eighteen

TYLER

I'm a pretty calm person, but my chest is heaving as I watch the love of my life saunter out of the VIP section with Seán Fucking O'Brien after having stabbed one of his goons. The man deserved it too.

"Is she seriously going with him?" Mav asks, jaw dropping. He doesn't know how tough Layla is yet. I don't think he can handle her, nor does he deserve her.

"Yes, dick. Listen, I think I should go with her," I tell one of the men glaring at us. There are four men holding us still, and I yank on my wrists that are firmly behind my back, stomping the fucker's foot the way I saw my girl do it.

“Fuck,” he groans, kneeling me hard. The man in front of me rolls his eyes before punching me in the face. As if triggering the violence, Mav, Draven, Atlas, and I all get the shit kicked out of us. As they haul us back onto our feet, I realize they all were punched in places no one else can see.

It’s as if someone told them to rough them up if needed, but to avoid their faces. Apparently I’m exempt from the rule. Lucky fuckers.

They drag us out of the VIP area, tossing us into a small room before locking the door behind us.

“Fuckers,” I mutter. “What the hell does he want with Jordan?”

“That’s the million dollar question,” Atlas grunts. “Do you think Layla killed that guy?”

He wasn’t moving when we were dragged away, though someone was attempting to put pressure on the wound and move him.

“Oh yeah, he’s not going to make it. My girl dug deep.” I smirk. It doesn’t even bother me that Layla probably killed him. “Some people need to learn to not touch what doesn’t belong to them. Layla taught him an important lesson, though he may not live to appreciate it.”

“It doesn’t bother you how easily she went into defense mode?” Mav asks. “I didn’t know she could move like that.”

“My girl can protect herself,” Draven chuckles. He’s being more and more open about claiming her, and I love the looks of confusion on Mav and Atlas’ faces. Shifting, he winces as he touches his ribs.

They definitely didn’t go easy on us. “I appreciate that the training Layla has means she can do what’s necessary. I hope the fucker bleeds out, but he looked like some kind of enforcer, so old man O’Brien will probably be pretty pissed off about it.”

Breathing carefully, I lean against the wall and slowly slide down it. I’m not too proud to sit on the floor. Fucking ow.

“I don’t think he wants to hurt her,” I say as Draven follows my lead, sitting next to me on the tile. “I also trust Lay’s instincts. She looked at me before she walked out and told me she’d be fine. It was stupid of me to press for more.”

Mav groans as he drops to the ground as well, leaning on the wall across from me. It’s a damn small containment room.

“You have a lot of faith in her,” he sighs, rubbing his face. I’m jealous they avoided his face right now, because mine definitely hurts, and I can feel my right eye closing up. I’m lucky they didn’t break my glasses. Pulling them off, I check them, sighing in relief.

“A relationship is a two-way street, which is why you and Atlas fucked up. You didn’t trust my Little Flower to know her own desires or heart, and made her second guess everything. Even now...” I sigh.

I wasn’t planning on dropping truth bombs. Fuck a duck. Pain makes my tongue wag like an old lady.

Pressing my lips together, I ignore Atlas as he collapses onto his ass on the floor. We’re all going to need Advil and a hot shower after this to dull the pain of the ass beating we just received.

“Even now, what?” Atlas asks. “Enough gatekeeping. According to you, we ruined Layla Campbell. Lay it out for me like I’m a toddler.”

“There’s nothing wrong with her,” I growl. My nostrils flare in anger, and my hands fist. I’m not above attempting to kick Atlas’ ass, but he’s got a lot more muscle on me. I’d rather fuck with him in other ways.

I’m a nerd by trade, but I have my own flare of psychotic energy.

These fuckers are going to learn very soon. For now, I’m going to enjoy holding up the wall here.

“Thinking you ruined the beautiful woman who fearlessly walked into the lion’s den to help her uncle is exactly what’s wrong with you two,” I tell him, closing my eyes. There’s no way I’m falling asleep here, but it’ll help me think. “In some

ways, your rejection made Layla stronger, while in others it made her overthink things.”

“I think she’s a badass,” Draven says softly. “I also get the feeling that she’s done taking your shit, gents. Get ready for a reckoning. Don your armor, because my girl isn’t going to pull her punches anymore.”

“I may deserve to be stabbed by her, the more I think about it,” Mav mutters. Slowly opening the eye that isn’t swelling, I look at him. He’s staring at his folded hands between his knees as he leans forward, looking pensive as he thinks.

I get the feeling there may be some groveling in his future. I just don’t know if Layla is going to want anything to do with him now. She’s growing in leaps and bounds lately, deciding who deserves her time and who doesn’t.

Atlas glares at me, pissed I’m being closed-mouthed, so I close my eyes and pretend he doesn’t exist. Draven snorts, muttering, “Silly Atlas, tricks are for kids. Adults figure shit out by putting in the work. Stop looking for the shortcut.”

Yeah I think we’re definitely keeping him.

LAYLA

This corridor should be in a scary movie. I can hear people shouting, but can’t see them as I walk down the sparsely lit walkway. Seán strides with purpose ahead of me, knowing I’ll be following closely behind him. What the hell else would I do?

There’s clearly no way I’ll be trying to escape, not when I desperately want to see my uncle. I don’t know what kind of work he could possibly be doing for a crime family, though I’m sure it’s not legal.

I don’t even care about the legalities of shit, mostly because I don’t have a leg to stand on. I’m pretty sure Jack is bleeding out on the floor of the VIP room and I can’t bring myself to feel badly about it.

One of the light bulbs pops as I walk past it, causing me to stiffen. Thankfully I'm able to bite back a gasp. Fuck me, can we be there yet? This corridor is a hall of nightmares.

Someone steps out of the door in front of me, cutting me off. He's wearing black plastic gloves, but it doesn't change the splatter of blood I can see. There's a man hanging from a hook in the room, passed out, and my jaw drops in surprise.

"What are you doing back here, girlie? Did you get lost or wander somewhere you're not supposed to be?" he growls.

Stepping back quickly, it doesn't seem to matter as he cruelly grabs the inside of my arm, squeezing so hard I whimper in pain.

"Hey! She's not yours," Seán says gruffly, turning back to shove at the man's shoulder. "Layla owes me a debt, so I need her in one piece. Let go of the girl, Bruin."

The deep gravel tone of the head of this family makes me shiver in fear. Seán is the only person keeping me semi-safe right now, and I don't know how long that'll last.

"Why is she dripping blood on the floor?" Bruin asks, squinting at me. "She's awfully tiny to be shedding people's blood."

"I'm sure everyone is tiny next to you," I tell him. I'm trying to be brave, but there's a tremor of fear that bleeds through. There's a reason my sister has tried to keep most of the seedier side of life from me. It doesn't appear to matter though, because I'm the poster child for finding trouble it seems.

"Hence the debt," Seán grunts, tapping on Bruin's hand. "Off, you brute. You're the one getting blood on her now."

Startling back to himself, he lets go. When he grabbed my arm, he also lifted me off the floor, so my heels hit the ground heavily. Seán steadies me, which surprises me, glaring at the man in front of him.

"Off you go, now. Clean yourself up, and then dispose of the body," he barks.

Grimacing, Bruin shakes his head. “Bobby didn’t give me shit, so I’m not done with the arse yet. I was gonna grab me a snack before I wake him up,” he mutters.

“Go on, then,” Seán says, rolling his eyes. “You’re in my damn way.”

Nodding, Bruin almost scurries off under the weight of his boss’ stare, surprising me.

“I rule here, girlie. I don’t put up with bullshit either. Don’t dawdle, now. I’m sure that’s going to bruise,” Seán says, shaking his head as he looks at my arm before striding away.

Not wanting to get caught in this cursed hallway alone again, I walk quickly to keep up with him. I don’t pepper him with questions, because I don’t have a death wish, but there’s an awful lot of them running through my head.

What kind of debt do I owe? Where’s my uncle? What kind of place is this?

Forcing myself to breathe even as my ears ring, I listen to the punches happening behind closed doors, and the noises coming afterwards. Could they owe Seán money? Maybe offend him in some way?

“I need to check on some things, girlie. Don’t get any bright ideas about getting old Jordan out of here, because I doubt he’d go,” Seán says cryptically, stopping at a door. “I’ll give you just enough time to get your answers and see that he’s quite alive. How big your debt to this family is depends on whether or not Jack survives.”

“His death seems like a heavy price to pay for touching me, but I’m alright with it,” I tell him, looking up to meet his gaze. I hate being so much shorter than everyone else. “It appears a lot of your men seem to have that problem.”

He can take it as a threat if he wants to, but the truth is I’ll be spending a lot of time talking my sister and brothers-in-law down if they see the bruise I can already feel forming.

“You and what army will teach them manners, girlie?” he scoffs. “There’s a sink in there to wash your hands.”

“Seán, I’m going to remind you that you don’t know who I am. It would be a very poor choice to hurt me or mine. I feel as if you’ve lived this long as the head of your family for a reason,” I say to him.

His hand fists in anger, but he thinks hard as he stares at me. I want to tell him not to hurt himself, but I’m already pushing my luck.

“Jordan said something of the like as well, but I didn’t believe him,” Seán grunts. “You’re too well trained just to be a silly little girl with great pipes. I’ll take it into consideration. Now go visit with your uncle.”

Pushing open the door, he shifts back, allowing me to take a step forward. Uncle Jordan is working on something on his computer, sporting a black eye and split lip. Quickly checking the room for dangers, I walk inside, certain Seán is going to lock me in with my uncle.

The slamming of the door behind me alerts my uncle, jerking his head up.

“Uncle Jordan,” I breathe, walking forward.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” he roars, but still opening his arms to me as he surges forward. I don’t care if he yells as he hugs me tightly. His bark was always worse than his bite with me, anyway.

Nineteen

JORDAN

I'm holding the woman I was trying to protect, and now I feel like a dick for yelling at her. Pulling away from Layla, I squeeze her shoulders as I stare into her blue eyes.

“How are you here?” I rasp. “I think you just broke me, Layla.”

Her lips twitch as she looks up at me. There's mirth and mischief in her eyes, and I can tell this story is going to be more fun for her to tell, than for me to hear.

“Let me wash my hands first. I had a bit of trouble earlier,” Layla begins. Turning, she washes quickly, my face paling as I watch the water tinge with red.

What the hell happened?

“Sit, and tell me everything. Don’t start and stop to make me insane. I don’t know how long you’ll be allowed to talk to me,” I insist, grabbing the only other chair at the table as she comes back after drying her hands. Pushing her into the awaiting seat, I wait for an explanation.

“I’m going to give you the cliff notes,” she says, rubbing the inside of her arm absently. Sitting down, I can see there are darkening fingerprints, making me growl. “Hush, uncle. I’m completely fine. It’s just a little sore is all. So you went missing, and I was starting to worry. I reached out to Lenny and the record label about my worries, only to find out that I was right to ask. The label ended up getting a ransom note from Seán insisting that I call him. When I did, he insisted I meet him.”

“Woah,” I grunt. “I’m sure you’re skipping a lot. What the hell is wrong with your arm and where is Tyler?”

“Well that’s a two part answer...One of Seán’s goons grabbed me, so I stabbed him. I’m pretty sure Jack is dead. The other guy was too rough when he found me following his boss in the back hallway. Who the fuck grabs people in this day and age?” Layla rolls her eyes.

This girl is going to give me more gray hairs. Saints preserve me.

“Seán—”

“You’re calling the head of the Irish Mafia by his Christian name? Are you insane, because I’m very sure he’s not your type,” I hiss. My eyes are huge, and I’m pretty sure my blood pressure is insanely elevated. I need to get that checked out when I get out of here. And then it hits me... “You stabbed someone? Layla Louise Campbell!”

Layla giggles, shaking her head at me. “He’s probably dead, which may be bad. I’m not worried about that or the blood debt Mr. O’Brien keeps blathering on about,” she says. Yes, my youngest niece is going to kill me. “Tell me why you’re here? How did this happen?”

Sobering, I think about that story, and how I'm stuck here for a while. I hope she didn't promise anything crazy, because Seán O'Brien isn't likely to let me leave anytime soon.

"I went to the bar, and started digging into their security system on my computer while I was drinking a pint. I didn't expect the fuckers to find me," I complain. I usually watch my mouth a bit more around Layla, but I think we're a little past that right now if she's killing Irish mobsters.

What can I say? They grow up so fast.

"I managed to trip one of the fail safes in their system as I was digging around, and next thing I knew I was getting yanked into their back room. It was dumb," I sigh. "I didn't even plan to hack into their security feed and computers, I just couldn't help it."

"Why are you still here?" Layla asks. "You have access to a computer, but haven't contacted anyone?"

She sounds hurt, and I squeeze her hand. "It's not like that. They're watching me," I explain, pointing at the cameras in the room. "I'm money laundering for them. The Irish Mafia recently lost their main guy for this because he double crossed them. They know I won't do that."

"Why not?" she whispers. Layla is a smart girl. I know she knows.

"I have a family," I remind her gently. "Lenny is fine with Orion and Derek, but you're a bit more vulnerable. Though, I have to ask myself what your sister is teaching you in those self-defense classes."

Layla bursts into laughter before looking at the cameras. "I'm convinced they were too cheap to wire it for sound," I tell her, keeping my lips angled away from the camera.

Being a quick study, she nods. Staring at me hard, I wait for her to ask the next question. The one that'll shatter me to have to lie to her to answer.

"You're not going to be able to come with me, are you?" Layla whispers. Shaking my head is hard as her eyes fill with

tears. Blinking hard, I force mine away. I need to finish what I'm doing here first. There are people who need me.

My entire future could change because of my decisions here. Thankfully, she takes a shuddering breath, pressing her lips together to hold back any other questions. She has to know on some level that I won't be able to answer them.

"Be safe?" she asks as the door is violently unlocked and opened. Seán O'Brien's face is red, his hands shaking in anger.

"You owe me a blood debt, girlie. How a tiny little chit like you manages to get the drop on Jack-o, I'll never know," he growls. Seán is barely keeping it together right now.

Layla stands like royalty, back straight, winking at me before facing a man that I've watched murder several people in cold blood.

Oh fuck.

Her face is a cold mask as she stares back at him. The only evidence I can see that she's affected negatively by the man are the goosebumps raised along her skin.

"I don't know what kind of women you're used to having around you, Sir, but I take issue with being manhandled. As you saw earlier, I bruise easily," she tells him, showing off the finger impressions that are quickly darkening.

She's going to need heavy makeup or long sleeves to cover that at her next performances. "You know damn well I have a concert tomorrow."

The ire slowly bleeds away as he looks at the prints. Scowling, he steps inside the room, slamming the door behind him.

"He shouldn'ta done that," Seán grunts, his brogue riding him hard. "Did you really have to tear Jack's skin to shreds? It was impossible to save him. Fucker died on the way to our makeshift clinic that we have at the club."

As beautiful as I'm sure the club is because the man knows music and how to entertain people, altercations happen often

enough here to need a clinic. Rolling my shoulders, I watch my niece both calm and goad the beast. It's kind of impressive.

"You ordered him to grab me instead of continuing our lovely conversation. Now, where are my men? You can return them and my knife to me, and then you can see me out," Layla says. "You're clearly not keeping me here when you know there are people expecting me to play at a sold out show."

Seán snarls at me, throwing up his hands. It's actually almost comical. I don't think this'll blow back at me, so I merely shrug, leaning back in my seat to cross my arms. I can't work if he breaks me too badly. He forced his men to go easy on me so my eyes wouldn't swell shut.

Great employer. Real peach.

"The girlie here says you had a part in her growing up. Tell me, was she this much of a pain in the ass as a teenager?" he complains.

Looking back, I can't say that she was. Shaking my head with a small smile I deny it.

"She was a perfect angel," I chuckle. "Layla is growing into her own person, I for one love it."

"Yeah, yeah. Your uncle is a bad influence," Seán mutters to Layla. He doesn't appreciate the bond I'm forging with his daughter, but it frankly isn't any of his business. "Come along then, you saw him, Layla. I'm not planning on killing the man anytime soon, he's too valuable."

"This is incredibly petty," Layla says, following him as he opens the door.

"The Irish are not known for being level headed," he barks out in laughter as he escorts her out.

And then I'm alone with my thoughts again. Sighing, I start laundering the money to this very club, shaking my head.

Great job being "valuable", Jordan.

LAYLA

I'm freaking out more than I'm letting on. Huge men stare me down as I flip my blonde curls over my shoulder, pretending they don't bother me.

"You're a troublesome woman," Seán grumps, making my lips twitch. I have to make sure I don't underestimate this stone cold killer, because he's acting like a petulant child.

"Seán, you didn't answer my question about my men or knife," I remind him with an elegant sigh. I'm playing it up, but I'm more worried about Tyler and Draven than my damn knife. I don't know where I stand in my feelings for Mav or Atlas, but I guess I'd miss their arrogant asses. Maybe I'd just miss their talents... or their instruments. Yes, that's exactly it.

"They're totally fine, I'm not surprised in the least that they all belong to you," Seán huffs. "I don't think one man would be enough to keep your interest."

My cheeks color slightly at his insinuation, but the damage has been done. Not only am I insatiable in bed, I must be high maintenance too. Oh well.

"And my knife?" I ask, my brow arching as we walk out into the main club.

"Washed and with one of my men at the front door. So many questions," he mutters. It's loud in the club, so I almost don't hear him.

Leaning over me, he places his lips outside of my ear. It's weirdly intimate, and incredibly uncomfortable that he's choosing to talk to me like this instead of finishing the conversation in the quieter hallway. I have a feeling there's a reason.

Men in power always have a reason.

"Before you ask, I will be holding onto the details of my blood debt for now. I want the details of where you'll be touring for the next two months, because God forbid I come

between your adoring fans and the music,” he scoffs. “When I call in my debt, you will be a good girl and do exactly as you’re told. While your uncle is valuable, he doesn’t need all of his limbs to be useful to me. Is that understood?”

“Threatening me is beneath you,” I tell him, strapping on my big lady balls. Inside, I’m quaking, trying to remember if I’m supposed to lock my knees or not to be able to stay upright.

There’s a reason Seán O’Brien is the head of this crime family.

He’s really scary.

“It’s true,” Seán grunts, surprisingly resigned. “You’re a smart girl, you know what’s at stake. It wasn’t even fun. Sorry, girlie. I still meant it.”

“Of course, Sir,” I say softly. I don’t want to even breathe wrong, because he’s a damn yo-yo right now. I don’t know if he’ll yell at me or simply let me go. I’ve had quite enough of having his attention.

“Come along then. Your men should be getting their phones back right around now,” he says, moving back to lumber toward the exit.

I can’t even take a second to think or figure out how I feel about everything, because I know I’m not safe. As scary as Seán O’Brien is, he’s still my only protector while I’m here.

Hurrying, I stay practically on his heels, feeling eyes on me as I walk.

Seán opens the door for me, stepping out into the night air to point the guys out to me. They all take a step toward me when they see me, but I raise my hand up to have them wait. They aren’t a danger to Seán or his men, and I don’t want them to be mistaken as such.

“Your knife, Miss,” the bouncer says, holding out the handle to me. I still have the holster strapped to me, so I take it and slide it home.

“That’s where you hid it,” Seán chuckles, but it’s an unhappy sound.

“I wasn’t searched.” I shrug. “Why would the tiny pixie need a weapon?”

“Exactly, because she’s tiny,” the bouncer mutters.

“Stay out of trouble, Layla. We’ll be in touch,” Seán says. Taking this as my cue, I walk away seemingly without a second thought.

All the while, I feel like I’m prey right up until the door shuts behind me.

“Layla,” Tyler says softly, waiting for me to decide what I want to do.

“Walk,” I hiss, striding toward them quickly. “Call a ride-share at the corner. Don’t stop moving till we get there.”

My ankle rolls just as I pass Mav, and he reaches out to grab me quickly. Funny, I thought he’d let me fall. My thoughts are dark and angry as I struggle to process everything that just happened.

“I’m good,” I say hoarsely, struggling to take a deep breath. I can feel myself tearing up even though I’m not hurt. I’m perfectly fine. Everything is good.

I keep lying to myself as I shrug out of Mav’s hold. I can be fine for another thirty seconds, and another after that.

Just fucking peachy.

MAV

I think we have a quickly spiraling girl on our hands. Layla’s hands are trembling, and as she shakes them out, Tyler simply watches her carefully as he walks next to her. I hope he’s ready for her ankle to roll again, her body looks like it’s shutting down after she was a badass.

Tyler's words knock around my head. Layla seems very critical of herself, doesn't want to share her lyrics with us, holds herself back a lot when speaking to us as if waiting for a hurtful word to be volleyed.

Unfortunately, we didn't disappoint. Atlas and I were right there to tear her down. The gorgeous woman who tore back into me has my full attention. That's who she's meant to be, not the girl who hides from our cruel words.

Fuck, I'm an idiot. How can I help fix it?

Layla walks with her head up high, walking around the corner with her merry band following behind her. Each step away from this damn bar seems to help, and I wonder what happened behind closed doors. I don't think she was hurt?

I need her to stop to be sure. I can't help the insistent hammering of my heart that demands that we put more space between us and the bar. She definitely has the right idea in this, just putting one step ahead of the next until we're out of the Irish Mafia's space.

Once we're far enough removed that Layla's shoulders begin to relax, I start to notice Draven moving closer to her.

"Layla, I know you're trying to keep it together, and I respect that. Are you hurt?" he asks.

Now that I hear him say that, I can see the truth of it. There's so much I haven't bothered to learn about Layla, and here is Draven showing how much he gets her.

I'm so fucking stubborn.

Atlas' fists are closing and opening in frustration, and I elbow him and shake my head. I know the signs. I know him better than I know myself. Atlas Ryles was going to say something really stupid.

"Not hurt," Layla rasps. "Jordan is there and I had... to leave him. He's fine but he's stuck working for Seán."

"Why exactly are you on a first name basis with the scary mafia man?" I ask. Well, the trophy for dumb questions apparently goes to me.

“Because I had to get on his level!” Layla screams at me. “I couldn’t be a weak girl, or a simpering sycophant, Mav. I killed his man tonight. I needed to make myself just interesting enough and dangerous for him to think twice about killing me or throwing me to his men.”

My eyes grow wide as I think about what Layla means. She offered herself up to the lion tonight, in the hopes he would decide she was more interesting alive.

“You beautiful, stupid girl,” I spit out. “This was basically a suicide mission!”

“I lived.” She shrugs. “You’re all alive, though a bit banged up. Draven, Tyler, I’m sorry about that.”

Atlas growls but bites his words back as he rubs at his ribs. We’ve been in fights before, it’s just not usually so one-sided. Getting banged up is par for the course. Neither of us are upset by that.

Layla just dismissed us. It didn’t feel very good.

“I have arnica in my bag at the hotel.” Tyler shrugs with a wince. “Is Mr. O’Brien going to retaliate for the death?”

“He’s insisting on a blood debt,” Layla whispers, making my blood run cold. A man like that could mean literal death or twist it into whatever he wants. “Seán wants my touring schedule sent to him, Tyler.”

“Done,” he says, eyes on her as she weaves on her feet. “Can I carry you, Little Flower?”

She almost looks drunk, but I know she’s not.

“I’m fine,” Layla says. “Jordan is laundering money for Seán, so I think he’ll be okay for a bit. I get the feeling there’s more to it though. I feel like he’s protecting someone.”

“Your uncle is tough,” Atlas says gently, making me glance at him. I notice he’s closer than he was a moment ago. I think he’s as worried as I am that she may pass out from the stress. “Anything else we need to know?”

“My knife needs to be sharpened,” she says absently, touching her thigh. Fuck, Layla isn’t making sense.

“Chick, are you feeling faint at all?” Draven asks gruffly.

“No?” she says. I don’t think Layla realizes it sounded as if she was asking a question more than making a statement.

I can’t help it. I feel sick to my stomach, and I can taste the bile creeping up my throat.

“I’m sorry, Layla,” I rasp.

“Sorry?” she asks, locking her eyes on me.

“Oh, fuck, really, Mav?” Draven grunts, his eyes on Layla’s twitching fingers by her thigh. I probably should have waited until she wasn’t armed before confessing this, but I couldn’t wait. It’s an apology I shouldn’t have to make because it never should have ever happened.

“I behaved really badly before and I still am. I shouldn’t have done all of those things before. We really thought it was for the best...” I trail off as I watch Layla’s eyes spark and catch on fire.

“Humiliating me was for the best?” she screams, pushing Atlas out of her way.

“Shitballs,” Atlas curses. “Lay, can I have your knife for a second?”

“Don’t call me that,” she growls. “You can’t have my anything, dingbat. It’s been five Goddamn years, Mav!”

Every step toward me makes Layla angrier. I think my face is going to explode with how hard she’s staring at me.

“I overthink everything, I can’t make new friends, because who wants to forge a friendship with the girl who can’t make a decision. I’m constantly worried about inconveniencing people, even my sister!” Layla screams. “Want to know why?”

“Why?” I breathe. My blood is roaring in my ears as I wait for her to drop the next verbal blow.

“You taught me my words are worthless. My wants are meaningless, and my desires don’t matter. I’m just finding my rhythm in talking about what I enjoy in any capacity. Half the

time, I forget to eat because I don't want to bug anyone by telling them," she tells me.

Tyler stares at her with glassy eyes, sighing. "God, Baby Girl," he whispers.

"My strength is a joke, my coldness an effort to hide away from the world, and I kept thinking, Seán would realize I'm just a bimbo Barbie playing dress up. I'm not Lenny," she rasps.

"No one needs you to be her," I rumble, trying again. "You just have to be yourself."

"Who is that? I don't fucking know," Layla says, the tears starting to track their way down her cheeks. Angrily sniffing as she dashes away her tears, she shakes her head. "I'm a ghost of a person. I don't ever know what the right thing to do is, and that dance in there was one of the scariest things I've ever done. Seán O'Brien let us walk out because he wants something from me and I made it known people would miss me if I disappeared. Professionally as well as my family. Lennon would fucking burn the world down."

"We'd join her," Draven mutters. "You moved so damned fast tonight. One second you were smirking at a mob boss and then next... you were killing a man who deigned to touch you."

"Fucking, grabby Jack," she grunts, spitting on the ground. My eyes are wide as I watch her. "I hear he bled out."

"You're not even sorry," I snort.

"If he was willing to grab me on command for God knows what, then no I'm not sorry," Layla scoffs.

There's a dark spot on the inside of her arm, and I lurch forward, grabbing it to look. There are darkening fingerprints wrapped around the crook of her bicep.

"What dickless son of a bitch grabbed you like this? Was it Jack?" I ask her. I don't think he touched her for long enough to hurt her.

“One of Seán’s goons,” she says airily. “Seán protected me. It’s just a really ugly reminder of this fucked up night. I don’t need your apologies, Mav. I need my Goddamn life back.”

Pulling away from me, she looks over at Tyler. “I think we’re safe enough for you to call a ride-share now. I’m more than ready to get the hell out of here, please,” Layla says.

I feel as if I just had my heart stopped as she steps away from me. Layla trips in her hurry, but Draven scoops her up into his arms.

“I think that’s enough, lovely. Your legs are shaky, aren’t they?” he croons.

Her fingers are twitchy as she nods, tucking her head into his neck. “I think I need some sugar,” she says softly.

I remember Lenny always had gummy bears hiding in all kinds of places, and I wonder if it was because of adrenaline crashes. Lennon O’Reilly’s life is always busy, full of surprises, and a performance is the biggest high that I’ve ever experienced. It trumps drugs any day.

“A soda it is, beautiful,” Draven promises right before she faints dead away.

“Shit,” Atlas mutters.

“I think we need to talk about your timing, man,” Tyler says, meeting my gaze. “It sucks.”

The ride-share pulls up as I nod, feeling as if I’m holding my dick in the wind. I didn’t need to bring it up today, but I needed to start to apologize.

Now to show her I mean it.

Atlas stares at me as we get into the car, accusation in his eyes. I’m done playing the ogre in Layla’s story. I love Atlas, but I want to be a part of the best bits of this beautiful girl’s story too.

It’s a very confusing place to be.

Twenty

LAYLA

My mind is whirling, and I didn't mean to say so much to Mav. I'm a little raw right now. I was really hoping to be able to get my uncle out of the club, but I wasn't expecting what I found.

Uncle Jordan is protecting someone. He didn't say it, but he has that determined look he gets when he has to do something and people may not understand it. I saw it when I was seven for the first time when I overheard Uncle Jordan and my dad arguing over a sibling I didn't know I had.

Lips pressing together, I sigh as my eyes flutter open. I'm laying in my bed at the hotel, with four men whispering outside of it. I swear, I have never fainted so much before. I

don't feel like going out there yet, so I pick up my phone that's charging and listen to them.

Thank goodness Draven had the foresight to put it on the charger.

"She had a hell of a night, guys. Mav, you need to learn how to time things," Tyler sighs. "She didn't need you to unload on her tonight."

"I know," I can hear him wince from here. Second hand embarrassment is real. My mind is still racing from what he said. I can't forgive him, what he and Atlas have said and done to me is too ingrained now in who I've become.

Who am I without that burning pain?

Opening my phone, I check the time. It's after two in the morning and my sister has been blowing up my messages.

I'm back at the hotel safe and sound. Uncle Jordan is stuck though and can't leave. Long story, I'll tell you tomorrow. Oh, I also owe Seán O'Brien a blood debt. Oops?

There are furious bubbles under my messages, and I look up to pay attention to the guys. Draven leans against the door frame, lazily glancing over at me to wink. I know I'm not putting one over on him, he probably knew I was awake the second my breathing changed. The man can tell every small change in me, because he pays attention.

It's nice to be cherished like that, even though we haven't known each other long.

"It's a little late for a change of heart, Mav, don't you think?" Draven drawls cruelly. This beautiful man twists his lips into a sneer as he watches one of his best friends.

"I didn't know we did so much damage," Mav says brokenly. "She left after the incident on the bus, and I only saw her at Lenny's wedding since. Layla looked so beautiful, perfectly shacked up with Tyler. How could Atlas and I stay when it was clear we no longer fit?"

“We were in the way,” Atlas murmurs, cool and collected. “I want to repair my relationship with her sister, but I still stand by my decision to leave Layla alone. I think she has some screws loose, waving a red flag in front of a mob boss.”

“Layla knew what she was doing,” Draven scoffs. “Besides, who do you think taught her those moves? Her sister! It’s obvious she thought it would be needed at some point in her life.”

“Lenny and Layla are girls who hate bullies,” Tyler chuckles darkly. “They’ve both suffered, but Lennon chose to burn the world down to ash for those who hurt her. It’s in the genes. Don’t fuck with either of them if you don’t want to be burned.”

“Being burned by her is one of my favorite things,” Draven smirks, meeting my eyes. My lips part as I think about all the possible ways we could play, my thighs rubbing together uncomfortably. Fuck, and now I’m horny.

“I don’t like how you two are working together now,” Mav grumbles. “This bromance is really weird.”

I personally like it.

Tuning them out for a second, I check my phone.

Lenny: Did Jordan freak out? I taught you how to defend yourself for a reason, Lay. At least O’Brien cleans up those kinds of messes in-house. Are you okay?

Smirking, I shake my head. I thought my big sister would be losing her shit. I should have known better.

I’m good. A little more concerned about Mav and my screaming match after. Why are guys such idiots? I also think they miss you more...

More what? More than they’re sorry they hurt me? More than they ever cared about me? I don’t even know.

A tear rolls down my cheek as I violently blink. If anyone was looking at me I’d look like some kind of demented doll

with the eyelashes that move.

“Is she awake yet?” Atlas asks. Looking up in a panic, I see Draven blocking the entrance to the room.

“Nope,” Draven lies smoothly. “I’ve been watching for signs that she’s stirring. Let her sleep. You can fuck up another day, torture her into wondering why she ever gave you two the time of day.”

“Fuck, you’re in love with her, aren’t you?” Atlas stumbles back, a stunned look on his face. Sometimes, things move faster than can be explained. I don’t know how to explain the bubbles of happiness inside of me when I think of Draven yet.

The problem is that I don’t trust many people. I trust Tyler, but he’s the unicorn of men. He’s always shown me exactly who he is. There’s no games, just this intense, nerdy, beautiful man.

“I don’t think it should be a surprise to you how I feel for Layla,” Draven sneers. “She doesn’t run from the fucked up parts of me, she calls me out on my bullshit, and Lay is willing to catch me if I need it. She’s shown me exactly who she is. You’re my best friends, but you’re fucking up left and right with her. She needs to be protected from you and Mav tonight, so I’ll stand between you with nothing but respect for you. But get the fuck out.”

“Damn, I don’t blame you, though,” Mav mutters. “We’re going so she can sleep, but we’ll be back tomorrow.”

“We perform tomorrow, of course you will be,” Draven says, ignoring the underlying meaning of his friend’s words.

“Draven,” Mav growls. The sound makes me shiver. I know he’s dangerous. Maybe he doesn’t mean to scare me, but he does. It’s one of the reasons I dropped him... to prove I could.

Swallowing hard, I tell myself I should get up, but I’m more likely to throw a light on the flame than extinguish it. I don’t trust how I feel right now.

“Take your big bear ass out of this room. We’ll have none of that,” Draven says. His voice is so low it rivals Mav’s

growl. I know none of them are saints, and yet it doesn't bother me when it comes to Draven. While he doesn't treat me like glass, I know my lack of personal care worries him.

Speaking of, I think we'll need a late night snack in a bit. Listening to them argue, I sigh softly, glancing at my phone.

It's barely a puff of air, but it attracts the wrong kind of attention.

"Oye, you faker! We aren't finished yet, young lady," Mav yells, leaning around Draven.

"Whatever you say, Daddy," I tell him without paying attention before stilling. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Sitting up, I stare at Mav's shocked face. "I've never had any interest in being anyone's Daddy until you called me that," he says darkly before Tyler pushes him away.

"She's not ready for that conversation, Mav. Good night you two!"

I can hear Maverick and Altas complaining as the door finally closes behind them.

"It just slipped out," I mutter as Tyler and Draven appear in the doorway of the bedroom, smirking.

"I don't personally care," Draven chuckles as he crawls onto the bed. "Woah, what's with this tear, lovely?"

I forgot about it, and wipe my face with my thumb, annoyed.

"I was talking to my sister." I shrug. Draven takes my hand, sucking on my thumb to get every bit of my tear as my lips part in a gasp.

Tyler shakes his head as he watches us. "Unpredictable is fun," he laughs. "I think Draven means he doesn't care what you call Mav, but it was interesting to hear."

"It was instinctual. I don't even know how I feel about it," I tell them, my voice low and raspy.

"So fucking beautiful," Draven groans before kissing me. This man makes me internally swoon. He kisses with his entire

being, and it's fucking sexy. "You taste good."

"Thank... you," I gasp, blinking like an idiot. Today has been a lot.

"Give her some space, Draven," Tyler chuckles. Biting his lip, Draven nods, laying back against the pillows.

"You feel the way you feel," he says with a shrug. "Your fight with him tonight felt really intense, lovely."

"It was. I didn't expect to explode the way I did," I sigh. "There was so much going on in my head, and I was struggling to walk without falling. Seán O'Brien may not be shouting for my death, but I still don't think I'm one of his favorite people. He scared the shit out of me."

"I was starting to worry you had some kind of death wish," Draven says with dramatic relief, making my lips twitch. "I'm very happy to hear you don't."

"When dealing with scary people, sometimes you have to back it up by being scary too," I explain. "Even if you're tiny and any of them could squish you like a bug."

"Speaking on squishing," Tyler mutters, moving to the bathroom. "I need to put some arnica on your arm. The bruise is getting darker."

Looking down, I turn my arm out, wincing. "Bruin is a damn beast, and he raised me clean off my feet."

"Bruin needs to make sure he doesn't find me in a dark alley," Draven growls. "Look at you, Chick. Does it hurt?"

The man is practically cooing at me and it's adorable. He's so cute.

"I'm totally fine," I promise. "How are you? Tyler don't pretend I can't see your eye or how you're holding onto your ribs, Baby."

"Too smart for me," he teases as he puts some of the cream on my bruise. It's cool and feels good. "I don't think anything is broken. I got a little loud. I knew you were probably fine, but still."

“You’re allowed to worry, Baby,” I tell him, brushing my lips against his. “Tonight has been a lot, and I’m still processing, but I’m also starving.”

“Did you just ask for something you need?” Draven asks in mock shock.

“Yes,” I giggle. “Don’t make a big deal about it.”

“They still have room service running, or I can just order a pizza?” Tyler asks.

A pizza makes my stomach growl, and Tyler smirks, pulling out his phone. “A sausage and pepperoni pie it is, then.”

“I’m slightly jealous at how well he knows you,” Draven grunts, making me smile. Cuddling into his side, I pull up his shirt to touch his skin.

“I’m an open book for the most part.” I grin up at him. Claiming my mouth, he gives me a toe-curling kiss.

“Why sausage and pepperoni?” he asks.

“I love pineapple and ham too, but recently got out of the habit of eating it. That’s a long story.” I shrug. “My brothers-in-law and I just collectively decided to start eating sausage and pepperoni recently.”

“Your sister is odd,” Draven murmurs. “I’m assuming it’s something to do with her? Pregnancy aversion maybe?”

“No, nothing like that.” I grin. “She actually has rockstar pregnancies. I can only hope I end up having such an easy time.”

“So you do want kids?” he asks.

“Mmhmm, maybe one day. I love performing and touring. Kids change that.” I shrug. “It’s why Lenny doesn’t perform as often, though music is in her soul. She’s still recording. How do you feel about kids?”

“I think with the right person, anything is possible,” he murmurs, his hand gliding up my back. “Why were you crying? It’s important to me to know.”

“I was telling Lenny about my night, and she surprised me,” I explain. “I thought she was going to yell at me or freak out because I killed someone. Want to know what she said?”

“Desperately,” he says without irony.

Smiling at him, I blink as the memory makes me emotional. “She was totally fine with it. Lenny said she taught me the skills she did because one day I might need to use them. Then she asked if I was okay. That’s not why I was crying though...”

“Tell me,” he whispers. Our noses are against each other because of how he turns, so we’re cuddled even closer. I’m under the blankets and he’s not, but it’s not as awkward as I’d think it would be.

“I told her I was okay, but that my yelling match with Mav was odd. I’m not usually someone who’s dramatic like that but he just kept pushing,” I sigh. “What if the only reason he feels any kind of remorse is because he misses Lenny and the guys? What if it has nothing to do with me?”

Staring intently at me, he kisses my nose. Tyler is in the next room now, he left without me noticing, but I can hear him talking to someone on the phone.

“What if it has everything to do with you, pretty girl? He looked pretty wrecked. What did your sister say?” Draven asks.

I never checked.

“I don’t know, I think I lost my phone,” I giggle. Together we manage to locate it, and I open the messages.

Lenny: There’s not an alternate universe that exists where they don’t realize how much they fucked up. We’re a package deal, Lay. I’m pissed at them too. When you three figure it out, they’re welcome to come see me to sort shit out. Maybe other people wouldn’t understand, but they walked out on me too. So they have a lot to make up for.

The words blur as I read them, and I hand them to Draven. “That’s one badass big sister, Lovely,” he says softly. “I’m so

glad you have each other.”

“Me too,” I whisper. Draven holds me as I cry, not a drop of disgust visible.

“Everything okay?” Tyler asks, climbing into bed right between us to lay his head in my lap like a lap dog.

Giggling, I run my fingers through his light-brown hair. God, that black eye is awful against his caramel eyes. At least they didn’t break his glasses. The black rim of them may be only a hint darker than the bruised skin underneath it.

“My poor wounded warrior, we’re fine,” I tease. “Hungry and sleepy though.”

“Food is coming, Little Flower, I promise. I was checking in with Ronan, too. I asked him to call up some friends of his to install a camera across from our hotel room,” he explains. “I want to know we’re all going to be safe. Someone will watch the door for us while we get some sleep after eating.”

“Someone is coming out at this time of night?” I ask him.

“Yeah, as much as we all haven’t talked in years, Ronan and his brothers don’t like that we’re still in this city. They were more than happy to be of help,” he explains. “Mr. O’Brien also has his schedule. Asshole.”

Smirking, I shake my head. “My growly men,” I say sleepily.

“At this rate you’ll be falling asleep before food comes,” Draven chuckles.

“I promise to wake you up.” Tyler grins. “Close your eyes, Baby Girl. We got you.”

My eyes get heavier by the second, and I drift away.

TYLER

Today has been so busy, I’m ready to go home and sleep. *The Midnight Lights*’ crew is filled with lazy assholes who won’t

be returning after tonight. Laurence is going to get a laundry list of things that I'll need from him before the next show.

It appears without an iron fist, things behind the scenes go to shit. None of that flies for me, so I'm cleaning house.

Layla looks on in amusement as I fix things. I'm not even micromanaging, it's just obvious they're giving this job less than their best. I don't need my girl getting hurt on stage because of it, or having their equipment not working correctly.

It doesn't help that I didn't sleep well last night despite the added security of the video camera. Blowing out a breath, I nod as I watch everyone busy actually working. Sitting in a chair, I pull out my phone to start drafting an email with a list of people I need to replace this tour.

"Already sleeping on the job?" Looking up, I smirk as I see one of the only roadies who actually knows what he's doing and is willing to do the work.

"Emailing the label," I explain. "We're going to need new people for the rest of the tour. I apparently have a very different view of work ethic than some of the people here."

"We need a hard ass." Bernie grins. "Jordan wouldn't have let this shit slide. He's been in the music circuit for years. Miss seeing him."

"I'm filling in for the moment," I say with a tight smile.

"I'll leave you to it. I can go bark at them now that you've laid down the law, and they'll listen," he says with a nod.

Jaw tightening, I think about how Jordan is stuck with the head of the mob boss working for him under duress. Layla is heartbroken and wondering if it's her fault he's there at all. Shaking my head, I decide it's definitely Mav's fault. We wouldn't have been there to begin with otherwise.

Banging out the email, I struggle to control my breathing. I can't beat the shit out of someone just because I don't like their face. I'm definitely too old and mature for that shit. It would feel really good to beat his face in, but I won't.

“Hey, what did that phone ever do to you?” Draven asks, squatting next to me. “You look terrifying.”

“I’m pissed off and irritated,” I mutter. Poor Laurence is getting an earful right now and I don’t even care.

“Do tell?”

Draven isn’t someone I talk to. Will I fuck the love of my life with him because it makes her happy? Absolutely. Are we braiding each other’s hair? Not a chance.

“I hate people, and I’ve been having to deal with a lot of incompetence today. Also, Mav’s face is bothering me,” I grunt. I finish off the email with a flourish, making sure it was professional and authoritative, and send it off.

I take great pride in the fact that not a single F-bomb squeezed through.

“Do you need to rearrange it?” Draven laughs. “If the asshole didn’t have so many adoring new fans, I may be coerced into holding the ass for you.”

“That’s... Um, thanks?” I say, kind of confused.

“Look, the guy fucked up and I think it’s really sinking in now,” he says, jutting his chin over to where Mav is staring at Layla backstage like a kicked puppy. My girl is ignoring him and Atlas by watching the opening show wrap up.

“It took long enough,” I sigh, standing and putting away my phone. Layla looks gorgeous with a long-sleeved black bodysuit with pearls sewn in that covers her bruised inner arm. She is wearing a black skirt that hits her knees that’s frilly and ruffled. I think it’s called a tutu?

Her knee-high combat boots even things out with her blonde curls looking wild and beautiful. My girl looks like the warrior she is. Striding over to Layla, I drag my finger up her throat, pushing gently until she’s staring up at me.

“Hey,” she breathes.

“I wanted to tell you how beautiful you look before you went on stage,” I say, kissing her forehead. I don’t want to fuck up her dark pink lipstick. I know she usually uses smudge

proof makeup, but what are the odds that this one time she chooses one that isn't?

Her makeup is made up of browns and golds, her wing tip perfect and sharp. Her earrings crawl up her ear before they dangle, and she's not wearing any necklaces because the bodysuit has a high neckline.

"Kill it up there, Little Flower," I breathe. Her lips part into the most perfect smile before she nods and turns away. Stepping back, I watch as the opening band walks off stage and *The Midnight Lights* steps on.

As much as they give each other shit, I watch them transform when they're on stage. Layla walks taller, her hips rolling with every step, Mav looks lighter in his mesh T-shirt and low slung jeans, and Atlas smiles more. I don't know what it is about performing, but they're the best versions of themselves when they're out there.

Draven? His smile is more mischievous than ever. I think he's about the same on stage and off. His sleeveless T-shirt and leather pants are definitely drawing attention as the crowd screams.

Switching my attention to Mav still makes me want to punch him, and my hand fists.

I need to do something about this before it becomes an issue. Maybe I'll talk to Draven about doing something to make me feel better. I need to know that Mav's serious about making things up to Layla.

Maybe I'll see if Draven is up for a small kidnapping and roughing Mav up. Fuck, Ronan and his brothers wouldn't be against it either. A plan is starting to form, helping me to relax.

Layla fidgeted all night in her sleep, another reason I'm dead on my feet. I'd rather blame the mob and the stupid camera, than ever lay my problems at her feet. We were supposed to spend another night at the hotel, but I'd rather sleep on the damn bus on the way to Kansas City.

My neck itches as if I'm being watched and it's making me feel fucking paranoid. I need to get the hell out of Chicago as

soon as possible.

Layla puts the band through their paces again, refusing to give cues, but it forces them to give her laser focus. The three of them give her intense eye contact and attention, and it makes the band look like they're much tighter knit than they actually are.

The crowd goes insane for them, making me whoop and yell like mad. I don't usually watch them perform, but I couldn't pull myself away. Trial by fire looks damn good from here.

Mav and Atlas stare at Layla in awe as she talks to the crowd, making sure to introduce each of the band members and let them show off a bit. The crowd loves it, making Layla's head drop back in a laugh.

Fuck, I hate my decision to get the fuck out of Chicago right now because I want to give my girl so many orgasms. I know another game we can play, and I'm sure Draven will be down to participate.

His cock looks amazing when it's deep down Layla's throat. Sounds like the perfect way to keep her quiet.

Layla jumps into my arms, but I'm ready to catch her.

"You were perfect out there, Little Flower. I'm so damn hard right now, all I want to do is sink my cock into your perfect pussy. Change of plans that I want to run by you which will lead to how I'm going to make this happen. We are going to pack up the rooms and take the bus early to Kansas City, okay?" I ask her, already walking toward the exit with her as the guys follow us. My words are running into each other right now, and I'm not usually one to talk so fast.

"I feel it too," she murmurs. "It doesn't feel safe here."

"Then we're in agreement," I growl. "So I was thinking... I need to give you orgasms and Draven's cock should perfectly gag you while you come while we're on the bus. Are you in?"

Grinning evilly as she tries to process my words as the guys walk behind us, she nods. I know they can't hear us

because I'm speaking so softly. If they have superhuman hearing, then fuck them.

"I'm so in. I'm a little disappointed you can't walk and fuck, Tyler," she says, pouting.

Throwing my head back in a shout of laughter, I shake my head. "I love you so much, Baby. Never change."

Now that she's thrown down the gauntlet, I need to find a way to walk and fuck and not go to jail.

Challenge accepted.

Twenty-One

ATLAS

I don't understand how this tiny woman can throw grown men into a tailspin. Mav is growling and snarling at everyone as he sits in a corner of the bus thinking. I don't know how to help him, which pisses me off.

Layla is snuggling with her boyfriend, chatting with him as she snacks on some cheese and crackers. I think she needs real food, but at least she's eating something. The constant fainting is getting a little irritating.

She needs to eat more.

Draven's glance at me makes me realize that I made some kind of noise to myself. Fuck. She's like a damn infection,

burrowing under my skin. The old me enjoyed taking care of people, keeping gummy bears in my pocket or Mav's for Lennon.

Now? Caring about people hurts. It cuts both ways because I just manage to disappoint them, and they disappear which makes me feel abandoned. I haven't texted Lennon again. I should be crawling across glass to make things right with her, but I know it all starts with the woman across from me, smiling at her man.

She used to smile at me.

I shouldn't be thinking about how it feels like the sun is always shining when Layla Campbell smiles at you. Maybe that was one of the appealing things about moving to the UK, when I left everything behind: the overcast days.

Forcing air into my lungs, I stare out the window, ignoring her laugh. It's nearing one in the morning and we're headed to Kansas City, Missouri. We quickly packed up our bags and checked out of Chicago. I don't blame Tyler for moving like someone set his ass on fire. Chicago doesn't feel safe for any of us, especially the blonde girl who finds herself attracting dangerous attention.

Fuck, I'm just talking myself in circles. I'm pissed off and horny, and I shouldn't feel either of those things for Layla. Pushing myself to stand, I scrub my spiky blond hair with my hand, deciding I need a shower.

Maybe it'll help me get some perspective. My tight black shirt and jeans are bothering me, so it's time to get something more comfortable. I hope that this is what I need to get back to normal, because everything is annoying me.

Can men go into asshole menopause? Obviously not, but my skin feels too tight. While I'd normally have Mav fuck my bad attitude out of me, I won't do that on the bus, not ever again.

My eyes naturally find Layla, who just finished polishing off her snack.

“We should get a real breakfast in the morning,” I say to the bus, because I’m sure as fuck not speaking to her. “Maybe we can find a decent place before we check in. Performing always makes me feel like my stomach is attempting to eat itself afterwards.”

Tyler’s lips twitch as he nods. “Hungry, angry ogres are definitely not something on my bingo card for tomorrow,” he says, making me snort in amusement.

I kind of wish he wasn’t such a good person. Is there an asshole that lies in wait? Oh, for sure. Tyler just isn’t an asshole to Layla I’ve noticed.

“I believe you promised me my bed and snuggles.” Layla grins. I notice as I move to my bunk to grab a towel and clothes that Draven follows them nonchalantly.

“Night,” he says as he passes me. Draven’s become a staple next to Layla and it both irritates me and makes me sad. It feels as if he’s chosen a side, just like Mav has. I’m the only one who still irrationally hates this beautiful girl.

I grunt in response as I squeeze myself into the tiny bathroom. Everything about Layla makes me twitch. The way the corners of her eyes crinkle with the smiles, how she scrunches her nose when she’s writing in her notebook, and the way her legs would look wrapped around my waist.

Fuck me.

Stripping my clothes off, I shake my head as I turn on the water for the shower. Mav and I left our lives so we could give her space, let her grow up without our presence. Neither of us wanted to remind her of our rejection, and I didn’t want to feel the crushing shame.

Stepping inside, I’m pleasantly surprised to find the water warm instead of freezing cold. I hate these tiny bathrooms, almost sharing in my old ex-friend Turner’s unhinged love affair with the opulence of a real bathroom.

Sighing, I stand as the water runs over me to really think about it all.

Mav and I haven't fucked around outside of each other in years. Yeah, we enjoyed pushing others to the edges of their comfort, teasing people to orgasm at clubs under anonymity, but we didn't fuck them.

It was more about the high of the power play between us. Mav and I lost interest in fucking anyone except each other. I think emotionless sex is now overrated for me. I'm sure my old bandmates thought we had both taken a vow of chastity, since they didn't know we were together, but it never really came up. Lenny, Turner, and Roark fucked each other without a care, so they never got very caught up in our sex lives.

Stealing some of Layla's frou-frou face wash, I scrub my face. It smells a little like cucumber, and it's surprisingly not terrible.

I pretend I haven't looked Layla up on social media at all while I've been gone, but that's a lie. She looked happy as she climbed the charts, and she's in a lot of photos with Tyler. I don't know why her uncle chose us to be her bandmates, outside of maybe familiarity.

We'd never creep into her room to do God knows what, or miss a cue on purpose. Tonight was wild because the brat refused again to give us a single clue as to what her next song was. I can't even bring myself to call her petty, not after what Mav and I have put her through.

What the memories of our actions and words have done.

How would it feel to have an ugly, running mantra of words running through your head, that reminds you constantly that you're not enough? Biting my lip as I struggle to think of things from her point of view, I wash my face.

Shampooing my hair next, I remember the hesitance in her eyes when we goaded her to showing us her songs. My annoyance at her twisted my words into live weapons, because I literally ached to hear what she'd been working on. Now, I think her refusal came because they were so raw, so definitely about Mav and I.

My poker face is better than most, and Mav and I pretended they weren't about the two of us. We pushed her work on the music, drawn to the emotions of her words. If she can feel like this, then...

Maybe we didn't break her five years ago. It was a real worry we both had, but I should have known Tyler would buoy her. The way Layla lost her shit at Mav says so much. There's a burning fire inside of her, and the reality is that with so much sadness and hate, there's a thin line from that to love.

Washing my body in a cherry-scented body wash, I think of Layla's pouty pink lips and light-blue eyes. They tend to change color when she's angry, which happens really often with Mav and I.

As my hand rubs my cock under the guise of cleaning it, I drop my head back with a grunt. I can still remember how perky and sweet her tits were five years ago, how tight her cunt was as Mav and I worked her over.

We pulled off all of Layla's clothes, kissing and nipping at her body. Mav whispered in her ear about how amazing her pussy must taste, how beautiful she'll look when she comes. My thick fingers were deep in her tight channel as Mav stole all of her beautiful sounds that night. Layla was so flushed and perfect.

And then... she begged for us to fuck her, and I remembered why we haven't. I remembered why she's strangling my fingers, and that they were the first to ever be inside of her.

We. Were. Unworthy.

My hand strokes my cock with a quiet desperation, tears beginning to leak from my eyes. The shower washes them away, but I can't pretend they don't exist. We dropped that gorgeous girl on the couch and barricaded ourselves in the room as it was the only way to keep from going to her.

We were feral for her, so Mav and I fell on each other like wild beasts instead.

My balls start to draw up, a tingling sensation rolling up my spine. I'm so close, it's insane how just thinking about that fucked up night makes me explode.

I wonder if Layla is sleeping or getting fucked by Tyler and Draven. I bet she'd look so beautiful swallowing Draven's pierced cock while Tyler made her come on his dick.

Shuddering, I brace my arm against the tiled wall in this tiny shower, as I imagine the sounds she'd make. They would be so much better than the tiny mewls she gifted Mav and I, even as undeserving as we were...

Groaning, ropes of cum explode out of me, hitting the wall before being washed away as if they never happened. Breathing hard, I feel ashamed for thinking of her like that. I'll never get to experience her pleasure, not unless I earn her forgiveness.

Staring unseeingly as I think about every interaction I've had with Layla Campbell. I don't hate her, I never have. I love her.

Holy fuck. We spent weeks alone on the road with her, performing, going out to eat, curled up watching movies in that stupid bed on the bus. It makes complete sense that Layla would want more with us.

Mav and I kept trying to figure out how she would fit with us, but it always kept coming back to our hang ups about her age.

Sighing as I turn off the water to towel dry off, I face the weight of my decisions. Something's gotta give. All of the little things that I thought bothered me about Layla and her quirks are because I'm stupid.

I scoff at myself as I roughly run the towel over my body.

I want to be the one who brings her food, the simp she turns to when she needs something. Could she do it all herself? Probably. However, the pace we all work at is insane, and the fact that she isn't willing to mention she needs a break or to eat, because she thinks it'll make her a burden hurts my heart.

Mav and I made her believe that.

Now we need to fix it.

Pulling on my soft gray sweatpants and long-sleeved shirt, I take a hard look at myself in the mirror. *It's time to do better.* No more biting remarks or cutting comments I could just fix myself.

It's time to do the work to mend what I broke.

Layla Campbell is a grown woman, she shouldn't have to live with the mistakes I made.

MAV

Hell yes, hello Kansas City. My neck itched the entire drive out of Chicago. Taking a deep breath as I see the sign for the outskirts of the city go by, I roll my neck to release the pressure.

I should have tried sleeping in the bunk, but Atlas has been muttering to himself, finally falling asleep an hour ago.

Guess I'll just need some really strong fucking coffee to survive today. Thank God our next performance isn't until tomorrow night and then we're in Nashville for two days, where I'm assuming there will be some marketing opportunities for the band.

Things have been so crazy, I haven't logged into my email to check what's happening next. Tyler is on top of everything though, so I'm sure communication has been made in some way. I just have to stop being lazy and actually check it.

Blowing out a breath, I watch as Layla comes out of the back room. Her hair looks... even wilder than last night. Skin flushed, sated eyes, I'm pretty sure they were fucking. I don't know how I didn't hear any of it, unless someone was doing a very good job of using their cock to gag her. Clearing my throat, I find I need to say something now that she's looking at me.

Ugh, I can't even adjust my cock against my zipper with her watching me. Unlike Atlas, I didn't bother changing.

"Good morning," I say dumbly, my eyes on her swollen lips. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah," she says with a smile. Her voice is unlike anyone else's. There's a richness when she speaks that's incredible. "Good morning, I'm so glad we're almost there. I'm starving. Maybe I'll make some toast..."

Getting up, I surprise myself as I walk to the fridge in the small kitchen. Surveying the contents, I think to myself as I pull out ingredients. I may not cook very often, but I make great waffle nachos.

"Atlas teases me about my cooking skills," I chuckle as I start working on food. "I don't make food very often, but I can make waffle nachos really well."

"Waffle nachos?" she asks with a giggle as she sits at the table.

"Mmhmm. They're so easy, too. The bacon takes the longest to make." I shrug. "It's frozen waffles, which I toast last, eggs, bacon, sour cream, and cheese."

"God, I'm so hungry. Please tell me you're making enough to share," she groans. It's sad to me that she would have to say that. Who hypes up something like nacho waffles and then doesn't share?

"Of course I'll share." I smirk instead. Her words hurt, but I deserve this. "Do you want coffee?"

I'm already popping a pod in as I make eggs and bacon.

"Sure, I'll make it now—" Layla looks curiously as the single serve coffee machine starts to work its magic.

"I got you," I promise. I don't want to fight anymore, I'm done talking. I want to show her how sorry I am. It's okay if she doesn't want me anymore, I'll take any punishment she wants to dole out to me.

I deserve it for every negative thought I ever put in that pretty head of hers.

Tyler walks out of the bathroom with a yawn, his sweatpants are low slung and he's shirtless. I guess I can see Layla's attraction to him, in that he's smart and sexy with the black-rimmed glasses and mussed hair. It doesn't hurt that he adores her too.

The eggs and bacon are done, the frozen waffles toasted, and the oven is preheated. Assembling it all, I put it in the oven to melt and crisp.

"I smell waffles," Atlas groans as he gets out of bed and comes to the curtain to peek into the kitchen. "Mav, waffle nachos? Damn, I don't know when you last made that. It smells amazing."

Shrugging as if it's not a big deal, I ignore the warmth of the stares from Atlas, Layla, and Tyler. I put the coffee mug down beside Layla with milk and sugar, going back to make my own.

Draven is the last to emerge from the bedroom, obviously driven out by the smell. There's an obnoxious amount of food, but it should hold us over for a bit. It's barely six in the morning, and we still have to check in and unload.

Pulling out the food, I grab plates as well. Tyler comes over to help, looking at me oddly.

"Did you hit your head or something last night?" he asks without moving his lips.

"Nope," I grunt, beginning to serve. "Make sure Layla gets some first. I can practically hear her stomach from here."

"I'm considering taking you to the hospital," he mutters. Layla is sipping her coffee with a happy hum, which is all that matters to me.

Sitting down after everyone gets food, I dig in, enjoying the appreciative sounds made as people eat.

"This is really good," Tyler admits as he eats. "Why don't you cook more? I kind of thought you couldn't."

Chuckling, I shrug. "When we were on tour with *The Darkest Nights*, I didn't really need to. I got so dependent on

Roark's amazing food. Waffle nachos is like the ultimate late night food or breakfast, so I usually only made it for Atlas and I."

I guess I only cook for the 'right' people. If that doesn't say something about how I feel about Layla, I don't really know what does. Quietly, I finish up, but Tyler takes over to wash dishes as we drive through the city. No one else speaks, though I don't know if they're as lost in their thoughts as I am.

"Do we have any interviews in Kansas City?" Layla asks, taking a deep sip of water. I take immense satisfaction in how she looks full and happy right now.

If no one fucks it up, that would be great.

"There's one scheduled for you. Laurence and I worked through what Kyle set up for you, sending our regrets to some of the radio stations because he had originally planned for you to have six interviews in the next two days," Tyler says in disgust.

"That's insane," I mutter. "The label knows better than to burn out their bands. I thought that shit wasn't happening anymore."

"Who did it happen to before?" Draven asks.

"My sister," Layla says. "She had this insane manager who didn't care about *The Darkest Nights* or their mental health. The night I met my sister for the first time, she almost passed out on stage. I was opening for her."

"We were all so worried about her that night," Atlas sighs. "It wasn't just Prescott who was the problem, it was our tour schedule too. It was insane. We didn't have a chance to breathe. It looks like we're averaging like three shows a week right now?"

"This is more than I usually do," Layla admits. "My sister insisted I cut down to one a month when I was playing with her, and then it was two a week when I went solo. I usually have a pretty low stress level too, regardless of how awful my band members became."

“It’s not every day a mob boss takes an interest in you,” I snort. “Sorry, too soon.”

Layla giggles anyway, shrugging. “It’s really not. A part of me is happy to be out of Chicago, but the other...”

“You’re worried about Jordan,” Tyler says knowingly, drying his hands.

“Yes,” she says, blowing out a breath. Her hair flies up with it, making me hide a smile. She’s so expressive, it doesn’t bug me the way everything else about her used to.

Atlas and I are assholes.

“The radio station wants us to come in later this morning,” Tyler explains. “It was supposed to be this afternoon, but I let them know we were coming in earlier. This will give us time to unwind, change, and make it out there.”

“Sounds good. Now that I’ve eaten, a long shower and some song writing sounds good,” Layla says. “I almost have enough new material to record, so I want to polish it up and make sure it’s good enough.”

“I’ve never found any fault in your lyrics,” I tell her honestly. It’s true, I know she’s a hesitant songwriter, but her words strike true. The music is a collaborative effort, and there’s no shame in that. “If you want to jam together to put words to music, I’m sure that wouldn’t be a problem.”

I glance at Atlas to see if he’s going to make me a liar, but he’s staring intently at Layla. Interesting.

“I’m in,” he says simply, making Draven stare suspiciously at both of us.

“So am I,” Draven says slowly. “Maybe this afternoon if you’re up for it?”

“After lunch,” I add firmly. “You admitted this is a faster pace than you’re used to, so it’s important to stay fueled.”

Atlas nods. “Zero fainting,” he growls. “Watching you drop unconscious yesterday wasn’t my idea of fun. You need to take better care of yourself.”

The bus pulls up to the hotel, and Atlas gets up as if his ass is on fire, to grab his stuff. Layla looks confused and I don't blame her for it. Draven catches up to me as I lumber off the bus with my bag.

“Are you fucking with her?” he hisses. “If you're messing with her, it's cruel. What the hell are you doing?”

“I don't know what's gotten into Atlas, but you heard me last night,” I tell him. “I want to fix things. We fucked up five years ago, I just didn't realize how badly until last night.”

Draven doesn't seem to know what to think as we walk into the lobby, and Tyler follows us to check into our rooms. Watching him, I realize there's something wrong after a few minutes. He's arguing with the staff.

“What do you think is going on?” I ask softly. Layla is standing slightly in front of me, Draven is next to me, and Atlas is striding across the room to find out. Sounds about right, because he doesn't have much patience.

A few minutes later, he looks resigned as he walks back to us with Tyler.

“The hotel chose to upgrade us to a premium suite with two rooms because they're fully booked. Unfortunately, that means we're sharing space for the next two days,” Tyler sighs. “We're all adults, we can make this work.”

“No loud fucking,” Draven growls. “I swear to God, guys.”

Layla turns bright pink, making me smirk. I can't help it, she looks so uncomfortable. Hiding my face, I grunt in agreement. I don't want to hurt her, and throwing my relationship with Atlas in her face would do that. I always knew this, I just didn't give a shit before.

“Agreed,” Atlas says softly, holding up his key. “There's at least two bathrooms which is a plus, a huge balcony, and direct access to the roof. The receptionist said we'd have to go up there to practice.”

“What is with hotels and their fucking roofs,” Draven mutters, throwing up his hands dramatically.

“Fresh air is, ah, great,” I tell him before breaking down and laughing. Even Layla’s lips twitched a bit before she managed to control it, as we walked across the lobby to the elevator.

It’s not anywhere close to perfect, but I think we may be making progress.

Twenty-Two

MAV

I'm hot and sweaty after an afternoon on the roof playing with the band. The interview went great, lunch was fine, but you could tell Atlas, Draven, and I were excited to jam with Layla by the afternoon.

Even Layla seemed a little freer as we finished up our commitments for the day, and didn't fight us working on her new songs. Her voice is incredible, and her words tug at my soul.

It's been a while since I've felt so light, even as dark and sad as some of her lyrics were. This is the real Layla, and this is who I want to get to know.

Jogging into the elevator, I press the button for the twelfth floor. I have my guitar with me, and I want to hit the shower. Everyone else is chatting as they break things down, but I wanted to get a jump on things.

I need to talk to Atlas about where his head is at, but I think we should pursue Layla. It may seem like a jump to some people, but we've wasted so much time. So many years running away from what was right in front of us over something as dumb as age.

It's a number, not a death sentence. No wonder Lennon won't speak to us.

Blowing out a breath as I ride the elevator down, I think about any roadblocks we may have, but can't really think of any. Tyler obviously doesn't have a problem with sharing her, and I think Atlas is slowly changing his mind about Layla as well.

I know this is going to be confusing for her, I just need to show her that I'm serious and I'm so sorry for everything.

Stepping out of the elevator onto our floor once it arrives, I sigh as I take a right toward my room. My mind races as I wonder how I can show her how sorry I am. I'm riddled in shame as I rewind her lyrics over and over in my head.

Every harsh word, every thing that shows how entrenched Layla's imposter syndrome is inside of her. My mother used to tell me that words don't mean shit if you fuck things up, you need to be willing to do anything it takes to fix what you broke.

My mother was a good woman. She'd kick my ass if she saw who I am now.

Atlas and I almost broke Layla. She shone today in a way I haven't ever seen before, and I want to see more of it.

Opening the door, I put away my guitar as I look around the room. There's a small fridge with snacks, so I start pulling things out and set up a fruit board with cheese. It's lame, but everything in me wants to feed this girl. She worked really hard today and it's already early evening.

She needs to eat.

Scrawling out a message, I write:

Please snack when you get back.

-Mav

Too much? Too little? Ugh, fuck my life. What am I even doing right now? I need to move, so that I won't rearrange the fruit board for the third time. I don't know how to be sweet anymore without just being corny.

Picking up the ice bucket, I decide to grab some new ice for the smoothie drinks in the fridge. I've been dating Atlas for so long, I'm out of practice at being sweet. He doesn't need romance or anything and is very adamant about it.

I know he loves me because of the way he looks at me when no one is watching.

It's broken me a little of how to be nice to a girl I like, so I feel like a bumbling fool. I'm so in my thoughts as I make sure to grab my hotel key and head out with the ice bucket, that I barely acknowledge the dark haired man fiddling with his door. Maybe it's stuck?

Ignoring him, I start trudging to the end of the hallway. I swear, they couldn't have made it further—

Someone grabs my hair, shoving their fist into my mouth when I open it to yell. It's an effective way to gag someone, even as I bite down on his hand. A metallic taste fills my mouth as the man behind me grunts in pain.

I use the bucket as a weapon, immediately wondering if we aren't as safe as we think. Fuck, Layla and Atlas will be here soon.

What if...

"Just calm down," a deep voice mutters as a thumb is pressed hard against the pressure point in my neck. I've always been really sensitive in this area, so I fight harder before I inevitably pass out.

Kicking, biting, elbows digging into the man's stomach, I do it all. I can feel two people struggling behind me as I fight and attempt to pull away. "We have some questions, it'll just take a moment. It's about the little blonde girl."

I can feel darkness crowding into my vision, and the bucket is taken from me and thrown when I manage to connect to someone's head.

Fuck, Layla...



THE SOUND of metal against metal makes me gasp awake, swallowing a scream. Blinking the last of the unconsciousness away, I realize my arms and legs are tied tightly to a metal chair.

I'm a big guy, and could easily break a wooden chair with my size if I fell over in it. Metal? Fuck me that's not happening.

There's a bright light over my head illuminating me, but the rest of the room is a sea of inky darkness. *Where the hell am I?*

Looking around, I try to figure it out but it's impossible.

"Look, he's awake," sneers a man. He has an Irish accent, which makes my blood run cold. It appears like we didn't leave the Irish Mafia in Chicago after all. Walking into the light, he's wearing a black mask over his face, and his black shirt is rolled up to show off his muscular arms.

His hand clenches around a metal bat, and I can see a grotesque tattoo of an eye socket and smile on the back of his hand.

Swallowing hard, I wait. No use blathering on right now when I need to focus on whether or not they have Layla as well. I'm silently cataloging every hint about who they may be or why they took me.

I just need a slight edge to get away.

One mistake. Give it to me.

“Tell me what’s so special about the girl? Our boss has been too interested in her and it doesn’t sit right,” he says, running the end of the bat roughly into my stomach. It hurts, but I braced myself for it, so it doesn’t wind me as badly as it could have.

Try better, asshole.

“There’s nothing special about her,” I lie. “Just a pretty songbird.”

“A girl with tits like that,” another masked man says, stepping into the light. He squeezes his erection, making me snarl in disgust. “I bet her cunt is fucking tight...”

“I wouldn’t know. Leave her alone!” I yell, earning myself another hard poke with the bat. “Jesus fuck, can’t you learn another trick? That one is getting old.”

Poke, poke, poke the bear. I can be really damn annoying as the youngest of my family.

“You’re a musician, so you need your hands, right? What if I fooking break them, dick?” the first man snarls. Apparently he doesn’t think I’m as adorable as I think I am. That’s too bad. “I need to know who is important to her, and I need it now.”

Rolling in my lips, I look up defiantly at him even as a sliver of cold ice runs through my veins. Yes I damn well need my hands to play the guitar, but I want to protect Layla and Atlas.

Shrugging, I earn myself a rough boxing of my ears. Fuck, it looks like they learned how to beat people up at their mother’s knees. I can’t tell if these two numbskulls are siblings, but maybe?

“Fucker isn’t going to talk,” a third masked man says, rubbing his lips with his thumb. I can see a hint of a tattoo peeking out from under his long-sleeves. I find it a little dumb that they’re showing off such identifying features but commit each one to memory as Numbskulls One, Two, and Three.

“Talk about what?” I ask smugly. Fuck, this might hurt, but I deserve it all. Even if she never finds out about it, I can show

how much I care about Layla by not giving these assholes a damn thing.

Numbskull number one rolls his eyes and the third comes around and unties one of my hands. If it was normal rope I'd already be out of it, but they secured me way too well. Someone is very well versed in kidnapping.

Slamming my hand on the table, Numbskull number three asks, "Are you sleeping with the little bitch?"

"No," I tell him honestly, trying to ignore how Numbskull number one is looking lovingly at his bat. He'd get along really well with another asshole I know.

"You looked like you were in your own little world earlier. It was way too easy to get the drop on you," Numbskull number one chuckles. So he has the dark hair, thanks for that information. I'm tucking it all away until I can escape.

"It's not a crime to bring a girl some ice, nor is it a proposal," I snort. Numbskull number one smiles cruelly and I realize I'm showing my hand a bit. I clearly care in some way.

"Why bother being nice to someone who you're not fooking?" Numbskull number two snorts.

The first man grins, lifting his bat. "Answer the question," he says, slamming the fucking bat inches from my hand. I can't help it, I scream, shuddering. My hands are my entire damn life.

Fuck.

My chest heaves as I glare at the asshole. "Go fuck yourself, dick."

"Why can't people do things the easy way? Do you care about the girl?"

"Why do you need to know?" I ask the psycho with the bat as he raises it again. "She has protection from your boss. I personally wouldn't mess with her."

I'm trying to redirect him as I struggle to get my left arm out of the ropes. It doesn't help that my legs are quickly going numb, but I have to do something.

“God, so damned stubborn,” he grunts. Lifting the bat again, he shrugs. “Oh well, it’s not my hand,” he smirks.

Horrified, I watch him start to bring the bat down, my eyesight tunneling to this one moment. How do I feel about Layla Campbell?

I feel everything.

“I love her, you motherfucking asshole!” I scream, managing to get my arm out of the rope. Reaching across at lightning speed, I grab Numbskull number three and pull him into the way of the bat. Numbskull number one pulls his swing but not fast enough and hits a glancing blow off his skull.

At Numbskull number three’s scream, I grin. Not so numb after all, huh. The other two look on in horror, but I’m already yanking my arm out of the groaning guy’s grip and untying my legs.

“Well that took a turn,” chuckles a voice I know well. Jaw dropping as the rest of the lights turn on, I tune out the stumbling idiots cursing around me as I see Tyler.

“You’re shitting me,” I whisper.

“And you’re in love with my girl.” Tyler shrugs as he walks over to untie me. We’re in some kind of warehouse. What the hell is happening?! “Let me introduce you to my work colleagues, the Ahearn brothers.”

Straightening, the three numbskulls pull off their masks. The last one is still rubbing his head and groaning, making me smirk.

“The first guy is Ronan and the oldest of the three brothers,” Tyler explains. Something in how they carry themselves is so similar, which is why I thought they were brothers. “The second is Sean, who is a bit of an ass.”

Sean shoots Tyler the bird like any self-respecting man would. He’s dark-blond with light-blue eyes, and they’re all very tall. Funny enough, my interaction with him was pretty brief, but it was enough for me to see that he enjoys getting under people’s skin.

“I’m injured,” the last brother whines.

“You kidnapped me,” I remind him, rolling my eyes as I work the blood through my legs. Pins and needles hit my system, making me wince. I’m beating the hell out of Tyler as soon as I can stand without falling.

“The whiny one is Finn,” Tyler chuckles. “This bullshit with Layla needs to end. I don’t want my girl to hurt anymore. You clearly want her.”

“Aye, I do,” I tell him, noting how the three brothers no longer have an Irish accent. Damn fakers. “I’m trying to make it up to her. Apologies and I aren’t friends.”

“Well as long as you don’t do any dumb shit, we’re good,” Tyler says, offering his hand.

Taking it, I stand and punch him in his face. The brothers yell and chuckle, making me bark out a laugh in amusement. Clearly, they have no problems with him receiving his comeuppance. Letting go of Tyler’s hand to allow him to crumple to the ground, I nod. “Now we’re good,” I tell him.

He’ll have a black eye to match the first one, as it should be. Asshole looked lopsided before.

“Can we get out of here now?” I ask, arching my brow at the men around me.

“Yeah, we can. Damn, I think you’re going to fit in just fine. Just remember, Tyler is quiet but just as dangerous as any man. Don’t fuck up with the girl,” Finn grunts. He has a bump on his head, and they’ll probably have to watch for a concussion.

“Sorry about your noggin,” I tell him. “Heat of the moment and all.”

“Awe, don’t ruin the moment by being all nice,” he teases as he steps over Tyler. “Let’s get out of here. It’s a shitty part of town, after all.”

Tyler groans as he sits up, and I ignore him as I walk around him. He can sort himself out. I just want to see Atlas and my girl.

Layla, you are mine. You just don't know it yet.

ATLAS

I'm wearing a hole in the carpet right now. When I came downstairs with Layla and Draven, there was an empty ice bucket in the middle of the hallway, an abandoned key card, and no Mav. The hotel room yielded much of the same, except there was a cute little note for Layla and a fruit plate.

I feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone.

"I'm going to call the police," I grunt. "Where the fuck is Tyler? Did you know he's tracking our phones? I would have him track Mav except he didn't even bring it with him."

Huffing in frustration, I close my eyes to keep from yelling. It hasn't been long, but the three of us have canvassed the hotel already looking for him. Layla's eyes are wet as she struggles to keep it together, and I force myself to reopen my eyes once I feel a bit more together.

"It's been an hour and a half," I remind Draven and Layla.

"Yeah," she says softly. "Shit, I was hoping we were far away from Seán, but his reach may be longer than I thought. What if he's retaliating because of what I did?"

"It's our fault you were even at that bar," I tell her, surprising myself. "If it is Seán, Mav and I will shoulder that responsibility, I'm just worried—"

The snick of the hotel door is loud as someone uses their key card. Frowning, I glance at the abandoned card on the counter, and Draven and I step protectively in front of Layla. All bullshit aside, he doesn't even look surprised by it.

The first face I see is Tyler, who is now sporting the beginnings of another black eye. Layla's soft gasp as she looks around me fades into the background as I see Mav push past him.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice gruff and worried. His face is red, his hands are clenched together, and he looks pissed off. Something definitely went down.

“I am now,” he mutters, grabbing my hair and kissing me soundly. It surprises the shit out of me, but he feels so good. I’ve been so worried, I allow myself to melt into him, my hand cupping the back of his neck.

“Looks like he’s fine,” Layla says lightly.

“Woman, I’m not done with you,” Mav growls, his arm wrapping around her waist as she starts to walk away. It’s clear she was retreating, but he’s not having any of that today. It’s damn sexy as my growly man takes control. “We aren’t done. Tyler taught me a very important lesson, now I’m passing it along. Sharing is caring.”

His lips slant on hers, dominating them. My cock lengthens as I watch Mav’s tongue demand entry, Layla’s tiny whimpers making me bite my lip. I don’t feel the least bit jealous, which says a lot to me.

“Holy shit,” Draven grunts. “What the fuck happened? It looks like he’s sharing quite a few lessons.”

His crass words make me snort, burying my face into Mav’s neck. Breathing in his cedar and sweaty scent, I start to feel a bit more normal. Mav is everything. My ride or die, the love of my life, and I haven’t been showing him this enough.

I think I’m learning a lesson as well right now.

“Do you want to tell them, Mav?” Tyler asks.

Coming up for air, Mav shrugs. “Just a little kidnapping between friends. I’m good, more than good,” he says. Barking out a laugh, he shakes his head. “What does it say about me that I’m not even that mad about it anymore?”

“Gibberish,” Layla mutters. “Boy secrets suck, but that kiss definitely didn’t. You scared, ah, Atlas.”

I can hear the lie in her words, smirking. “Someone sounds hungry,” I tease her. “I think that’s why Mav made you a snack.”

“It was really sweet,” she whispers. Realizing she’s still wrapped in Mav’s arms, she wiggles a bit in discomfort. We’re not small men, and Layla is tiny in comparison.

“Does Chinese food or Mexican food sound better?” I ask. I think Mav’s need to feed Layla is catching.

“Neither?” she giggles. “We’re in Kansas City, barbecue sounds amazing.”

Mav’s stomach rumbles, making me roll my eyes. “I think you’ve found a solid vote for your choice. It sounds good, let’s order in,” I tell her.

Tyler and Draven watch on, their hands stuffed in their pockets in amusement.

“Can you let go of me, Mav? I have to pee,” Layla says, her cheeks burning. Mav’s hand squeezes her hip, and I can tell he doesn’t want to let her go.

I’m careful to not touch her, understanding full well that we’re overwhelming. Watching her, I feel pretty sure she’s lying, and just needs some space from us. I don’t blame her one bit right now though. Mav releases her, watching her run to the other bedroom like her ass is on fire.

“Layla isn’t going to just fall at your feet in gratitude that you’re paying her attention,” Tyler warns as we turn to him. “She’s going to be shoring up her boundaries, and that usually means brat mode will be activated. Be ready for her to push all your fucking buttons.”

“She likes us,” I chuckle like an idiot. I’m focused on something different and it gives me hope. “Layla probably won’t believe us for a while, and that’s fine. I’m willing to show her.”

“I almost had my right hand broken by a bat to show her,” Mav rumbles, glaring at Tyler.

“The fuck?” I ask, eyes wide. “Are you serious?”

Mav once had a door slammed on his hand ten years ago when we were playing for *The Darkest Nights*. He still figured

out how to play. I don't even understand how, but music is a huge part of his life.

"I didn't think it would go that far, the Ahearn brothers are a little unpredictable at times," Tyler admits. "We just started talking again very recently. They're even more insane than they used to be."

"Only the best of us are," Mav snickers. "My hands are fine, I'm good, and your eye is going to bruise beautifully. In fact, I'm fucking awesome. Someone order barbecue, I'm going to shower."

Mav saunters to our room without a care in the world, making me stare after him in surprise.

"Twilight Zone," I grunt, shaking my head.

"Sit down and drink something, I think you're losing it," Draven snickers, pushing me toward the couches.

My mind races as I try to figure out how I can get Layla to forgive us. Mav and I are a package deal in my mind. The idea of us coming at this separately doesn't make any sense to me, so it won't be happening.

It's just that simple.

"Did you know Mav was going to be kidnapped?" I ask Draven suddenly, looking up at him. The idea that he could watch me lose my shit and know Tyler's plan while all the while not telling me makes me spiral.

I'm glad I'm sitting, because otherwise I'd be falling on my ass as the room spins.

"What? Never," Draven growls, grabbing my face. "You and Mav are soulmates. There's not an alternate universe in the world where that would ever happen."

"Okay," I rasp.

"No, it was all me," Tyler says, walking over to squat in front of me. "I needed to know you'd be able to move past the bullshit. Granted, it was a bit traumatizing, but neither of you will forget your lesson. I will do anything to make Layla happy, even if it means getting you shitheads to be better

people for her. Her songs lately are making me want to kill you two, and I don't look good in orange."

Draven lets go of my face, collapsing on the ottoman. Big emotions exhaust him.

"Someone has to keep us in check," I chuckle. "Be aware that we may not always get it right, but we'll be making an effort from now on."

"Perfect. Now I need a package of frozen peas for my face and to lay down. One of you fuckers order food," he grunts, walking to the freezer.

Amused as fuck, I pull out my phone and find a restaurant with good reviews that'll deliver.

Layla, I hope you're ready. There's a whole lot of groveling coming your way, Baby Girl.

Twenty-Three

LAYLA

What was that kiss? It's hours later and my mouth can still feel the heat of Mav's lips. Is he still messing with me?

"You're thinking really hard," Draven says, kissing my shoulder. I'm hiding in my room with him, because those big, growly men are confusing me. I need space.

"Uh-huh," I tell him instead. My brain is too chaotic for a conversation right now.

Draven tsks, turning me in his arms to lay on his bare chest. My fingers trace over the black and white tattoos over his arms, focusing on them instead.

“I just want to know one thing,” he says, his fingers running through my hair.

“If I know the answer, then it’s yours,” I say simply.

“Lovely, I don’t think you understand the trust those words imply,” he says softly. “You haven’t known me very long, but you’ve given me so much of yourself. Why?”

“Is that your question?” I ask surprised. I really thought he was going to question me about Tyler’s decision to kidnap Mav, or the ‘kiss’ afterward, or even Mav’s apparent epiphany. Or why Atlas is less of an asshole today?

So many questions. Ugh.

“Damn, you think loud,” Draven laughs. “For now, yes, that’s my question, Chickie. Give me your words?”

My eyes flutter in pleasure at those words. Few people ever ask for them. The world demands them in my lyrics, which is entirely different.

“You haven’t hurt me before, not really,” I tell him. “Pushed me, shocked me definitely, but otherwise? I feel safe here with you.”

Draven closes his eyes almost in pain before looking down at me. “If you knew what I want to do with you, I don’t think you’d think that. It says a lot about the bullshit Mav and Atlas have put you through, that you think I’ve not hurt you. I was kind of a dick to you early on,” he admits.

“You didn’t have all the facts.” I shrug. Draven sits up, pulling me onto his lap. His cock is hard against my ass in my T-shirt and panties, but I’ve learned he’s almost always thick and hard.

“You don’t either,” he sighs. “I worry I’m not good enough for you. My relationship with Lyrica was pretty toxic and I’ve never really dated anyone else before that. What if I suck at this?”

Smirking, I shake my head, moving to straddle him. His big hands encircle my waist and hips, his thumbs playing with my panty line.

“You’re worried about taking me on dates, spending time with me, and making sure I’m okay. I don’t think you suck at this at all,” I say.

“Your standards are set too low,” he grumbles.

“Eh, or just perfect,” I giggle, gasping as his thumb dips underneath my panties.

“I don’t think I’m perfect,” he says, looking worried.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Tell me what has you so worried?” I ask him.

“Is it wrong that I don’t miss her? We were together for a long time, and I just feel relief that we have a sea between Lyrica and I now,” Draven mutters.

“It doesn’t sound like things were very good toward the end, so it’s not wrong at all.”

“We were always high, she was always upset at me for something,” he sighs. “I’m pretty sure she was depressed too, and the drugs were just making it worse. I didn’t care enough to push her to get help. When I found her on the floor that night...”

I wait, struggling not to wiggle. I don’t think he realizes what his hands are doing right now.

“I was terrified to find her lips blue,” he says, his eyes unseeing as he pushes up my crop top. I was supposed to be napping, but that definitely isn’t happening.

“Lyrica wasn’t moving or responding, and she had some new designer drug dangling from her fingers. I left her a few hours before that because she broke up with me, said I was worthless and she didn’t love me anymore. If I had been there...”

“She would have found a new drug and overdosed at another time,” I whisper. I don’t know this woman, or if this was a plea for help. Maybe it was accidental? I have no way of knowing though.

“Maybe,” he grunts. At least I know he can still hear me as he visits his past. “After my initial terror and screaming for

help, I thought maybe this was for the best. Maybe I'd finally be free of her. What kind of terrible person am I?"

"You're not terrible," I deny. "You were someone pushed to the brink of what they could deal with. She is getting the help she needs now, right?"

"Yeah," he says, lost to his thoughts. "I visited her once in the hospital before we left London. Lyrica told me I needed to cut her loose. We agreed not to contact each other anymore, and leave the past where it belongs."

"It sounds like she was doing you a favor," I murmur, brushing his hair off of his forehead.

"Maybe? It feels like something between us just died along the way. I don't want that to happen to us, and I'm worried the things I like or want will be too much," he explains.

If this was even a few days ago, I'd worried it was because of inexperience, but Tyler and he offered to fuck me like they were my bookends not too long ago.

I definitely need some of that in my life.

Shivering at the thought, I struggle not to grind against his erection.

"Hit me with it," I tell him, my voice low and thick. Draven smirks, rocking me over his cock.

"Is my gorgeous girl feeling needy?" he teases me as Tyler slips into the room.

"This conversation sounds like it's getting good," Tyler chuckles. "Everything okay here? I see that a nap isn't happening."

"It's too late to nap now, and my brain is loud," I complain. Since I'm up, I'm invested in what Draven looks so uncomfortable about.

"I wanted to talk about limits... during sex," Draven winces.

"Oh this'll be good," Tyler chuckles, crawling onto the bed like the lithe predator he pretends not to be. A part of me isn't

surprised by his kidnapping escapade, because he doesn't like to see me hurt or upset.

He just handled it in a really interesting way. Thank God Mav didn't get his hand smashed. Yes, I heard all about it.

"You know about it?" I ask with a surprised laugh.

"Mmhmm. I don't know everything, but some. Go on, then," Tyler prompts, throwing himself onto his back.

"So the night I heard you and Tyler having sex, I snuck in and rubbed my cock over your lips," Draven says slowly. "Since you opened your mouth and licked the tip, I pushed my luck and gently pushed my cock inside. I know I shouldn't have, but that's honestly tame compared to the things I want to do..."

"What do you want to do to me?" I breathe. My thighs clench, wanting to know. It explains the salty taste I remember, and why his cum tasted so familiar. There must be something wrong with me because I'm not even upset.

"Are you wet, Little Flower?," Tyler teases me, moving to drag his nose up my neck.

"Oh shit, are you really?" Draven asks curiously with a wicked smile.

"Maybe," I whimper as he pushes my panties to the side and drags his knuckles up my core.

"Fuck, maybe you can handle this," he mutters to himself as he leans forward to kiss me. "You're beautiful when you're sleeping, you know that?"

Tyler smirks, and Draven continues to nonchalantly bump his knuckles against my clit, making me writhe. Tyler moves behind me, straddling Draven's legs unapologetically as he plasters his front to my back to hold me in place.

"Am... am I?" I gasp.

"When you're sleeping next to me, I wonder if you'll wake up if I were to hitch your leg over mine, and slide into your wet, tight cunt," Draven growls, pushing two thick, tattooed fingers inside of me as I moan.

I'm more than wet, and as he slowly finger fucks me, he can hear exactly how soaked I am.

God bless this man and his dirty, filthy mouth.

"I... I don't know if I would," I moan breathily, struggling to follow the conversation as Tyler's hands run over my rib cage, pushing my shirt up and over my breasts. When he starts to squeeze them and pinches my nipples, I whimper, trying my best to stay quiet.

"I can't stuff your mouth full of my cock yet, Little Flower," Tyler chuckles. "Answer Draven. Put him out of his misery. Would you be okay if he fucked you while you were sleeping? Or pushed his thick cock into your mouth to suck on, to see how long it took for you to wake up?"

Draven sits up to suck on my nipple, while Tyler so helpfully holds my breast for him. These men are going to end me...

"Yes, yes, oh," I moan.

"How did I get so lucky," Draven mutters, pushing down his pants to release his cock. Removing his fingers, he slides his dick through my arousal as my chest heaves.

Tyler drops his hands to my panties, rolling the waistband twice around them. "I hope you're not attached to these, Little Flower." I barely register his words before I feel the sting as he tears them off of me.

"Oh my God," I gasp.

"I want you bare, baby. I'm clean, I got a full check up before I left the UK and I haven't touched anyone since," Draven promises. His neck is tight as he forces himself to wait, to be good, to get consent. I believe him, and it's what I want too.

"Yes," I say simply. It's the only word he needs and the one that means the most right now.

"Thank fuck," he sighs, lining himself up at my hole before pulling me down his cock. Tyler yanks my shirt off and over my head as I get used to Draven's girth and length,

panting as his piercing slides across my sensitive nerve endings.

“Tyler, I want you too,” I beg. My thoughts of sexy bookends make me shiver and clamp down on Draven’s cock.

Adjusting his position so he’s on his knees, Draven groans, burying his face into my neck.

“Where do you want him, Lovely? The way you just strangled my cock was divine,” he whispers in my ear.

Tyler runs his hand down my back, goosebumps following his touch. He massages my ass cheek before pressing on my tight hole.

“Do you want me in your ass while Draven fills your tight pussy, Baby?” he growls. “Use your words.”

“Yes,” I whimper. “Please, I want you both.”

Tyler moves to grab the lube we never go anywhere without, while Draven whispers in my ear again.

“You’re so damn beautiful. Thank you for being so good to us, Baby Girl,” he says softly. His thumb brushes against my clit as he rocks inside of me, robbing me of my ability to speak. I feel so much right now, I should say something back, but I can’t.

Cool lubricant is pressed against my ass, making me gasp. Draven swallows my sounds as he kisses me, his continued rubbing of my clit catapulting me closer to my release.

Tyler pushes a finger inside of my tight asshole, robbing me of my breath once more as it goes from a sting to warm pleasure. Anything backdoor related tends to be like that for me. Slight pain before reminding me why I like it so much.

Damn, I’m going to have a hard time being quiet.

Tyler removes his finger to lube his cock, and then I can feel the thick head of his dick against my hole.

“Are you going to have trouble being quiet, Little Flower?” he teases, kissing my neck.

“Yes,” I gasp coming up for air as I pull away from Draven’s all consuming kisses.

“Open,” Draven says, grabbing something. As my lips part, something is pushed into my mouth. I don’t have time to wonder what it is, because I can feel Tyler destroying me in the best of ways.

Draven coos into my ear, and they both tell me what a good girl I am as I struggle with how big they are.

It’s incredible, even as the stretch stings. I feel like I’m flying as I can tell my orgasm is getting closer. Tyler tightly holds my hip, while his other arm is wrapped around my body, his hand squeezing and torturing my nipple. My hands are lost in Draven’s hair, pulling on it as they both make me feel so good.

All you can hear are my muffled whimpers and mewls as I struggle to still stay quiet. Draven pushes the fabric deeper into my mouth, pinching my clit as Tyler bottoms out inside of me. A strangled scream releases from me as they both fuck me through my orgasm.

They both compliment me and touch me, whispering more filthy things that they want to do to me.

“Your body is amazing,” Tyler groans as his hips thrust his cock in and out of me. I can feel myself starting to build toward another orgasm, and I am just in awe. How many times is too many? Am I being greedy?

“Your cunt is so tight, so wet, so perfect. I’m never wearing anything between us again. I’m hooked, no going back anymore,” Draven chats.

Fuck me.

“We are,” Tyler chuckles. I didn’t mean to say that, though the words are so garbled with the fabric in my mouth, it’s a wonder how he understood me.

“Come again for me, Lovely. I need to feel you come apart around me before I do,” Draven begs. They’re rutting into me on both ends, my tits bouncing as they fuck me. It shouldn’t make me feel as cherished as I do, but I’ve never been normal.

I feel like I'm everything to these men right now as they worship me.

Draven's thumb finds my clit again, taking command of my orgasm. His cock is making me insane with his piercing teasing my G-spot. Tyler and Draven change positions slightly, making my vision white out. It feels so good, I can't get enough air into my lungs as they push me closer to the edge.

"Let go, Beautiful. I'm gonna come, and Draven is just as close," Tyler begs. As if I needed the permission, I mewl as Draven coaxes me over the edge with a bit more pressure on my bundle of nerve endings.

Shuddering, Tyler holds me tighter as his movements get out of sync, painting my inner walls with his cum. Draven turns red, panting as he grunts.

His hand wraps around my throat as he comes, the pressure encouraging a strong aftershock that could well have been another small orgasm. I'm not keeping score, I'm just an overstimulated mess as tears roll down my cheeks from the sensations.

Draven pulls the fabric out of my mouth, smirking when my eyes widen as I realize they were my panties. "Oh my God," I rasp, my chest still heaving from being out of breath.

"Hang tight, Baby. Going to move," Tyler says softly. Hissing as he pulls out, I go willingly as Draven pulls me to his chest, laying down. Carefully pulling out of me, he tries to get his breath under control as well, and I get to listen to his thundering heartbeat.

I'm already falling asleep as Tyler cleans me up with a damp washcloth, so I may be dreaming as Draven whispers, "Love you, Chickie."

MAV

The last two days have flown by, but one thing is for sure: Layla Campbell is avoiding me. She always found a way to be

somewhere other than where Atlas and I were whenever possible. It ends now though.

It's our second morning in Nashville, and Layla is smiling at the radio station host.

"I'm glad to be touring again, finding our way to connect with our fans," she tells him. We're supposed to have a small meet and greet after tonight's show, which I'm actually excited about. I enjoy chatting with people who love music as much as I do.

"You've had an interesting time of finding new band members after your old ones quit with very little notice," the host, David says. Tyler is glaring at him, waiting for him to fuck up.

I don't think I'll ever think of Tyler the same way again. The man is low-key scary. Never underestimate a nerd with a grudge.

David should watch his mouth.

"We made it work," Layla says smoothly, waiting for his point.

"Do you know her songs?" David asks, looking around at us. "How does it work when you join a new band when she's been writing and performing diligently for years?"

Oh. He's worried about her. I didn't take into consideration how much Nashville adores Layla Campbell. She may be rock and roll, but they are hardcore fans of her music.

A pair of co-hosts sang her lyrics back to her, absolutely delighting Layla. Some people would think it was dorky, but Layla?

She loved it.

"We know all of Layla's songs," Atlas says, leaning forward into one of the microphones. "We've been practicing, Draven listens to them on a headset pretty religiously, and we play without cues on stage. Layla keeps us on our toes, so we're laser focused when we're performing."

Impressed, David smiles. “That’s pretty ballsy of you, Layla,” he says.

“Little gal like me has to keep these men in line somehow.” She winks. Fuck me, this woman is something else. Soon, we have the host eating out of the palm of our hands, and she treats him to a small sample of one of the songs she’s working on.

“Thank you so much, *Midnight Lights* for spending some time with us,” David says, getting ready to sign off. “It was truly a pleasure. I hope Nashville treats you well while you’re here.”

“It always does.” Layla grins. He shakes her hand, and I notice he holds on to it for longer than normal before saying his goodbyes to us.

Walking out of the room, Layla sighs as she turns to us. “I’m not going to make it to the bus, I need to run to the restroom. I’ll be back in a second,” she tells us.

Layla practically runs to the bathroom, making me chuckle. The girl has been chugging water all day, and with how hot it’s been here, I don’t blame her.

Draven and Tyler chat with the radio station manager, giving me an idea. Making eye contact with Atlas, I smirk, jerking my head in the direction of the bathroom.

“This is either the best idea ever or the worst,” Atlas chuckles as we stroll down the hall. Draven and Tyler have their backs to us, so neither notice where we’re walking to.

Atlas and I have spoken a lot over the past two days about Layla, making sure we’re in agreement about fixing things with her.

“Let’s go show her how it should have gone five years ago,” I growl, opening the door to the bathroom. Thankfully she’s the only one in here as she stands washing her hands.

“What are you doing?” she asks, watching as Atlas locks the door behind us. “Guys, this isn’t funny.”

I crowd her against the wall, my eyes running over her. Layla is wearing a short green dress with some sort of low cut white top under it. The dress reminds me of suspenders in a way, and of course she's wearing her combat boots. I never thought those things could look this sexy on a woman.

"I want a redo," I rumble, reaching out to play with one of her blonde curls. "You can take your best shot at me with the knife I know you're carrying if I don't blow your mind, Baby Girl."

Slanting my mouth over hers, I steal the complaints I'm sure she was going to give me. Hitching her leg over my hip, I shove my thick thigh underneath her, rocking her over it.

"We aren't going to stop until you're soaking me, Baby," I rasp into her ear.

"Why," she whimpers, her eyes rolling.

"We fucked up five years ago," I whisper, kissing her again. Her lips are going to be puffy and swollen by the time I'm done with her. Licking the seam of her lips to get her to open, I kiss her again as I swallow her little noises. "I've seen what you look like when you come, now I need to taste it."

Dropping to my knees, I kiss her inner thigh where her knife is strapped to her leg. Pulling aside her panties, I lick up her arousal like a man starved. She's such a good girl, already soaked for us.

"Just hold on," I rasp, grabbing her thighs and lifting them, so she's pinned to the wall above me. Eating her sweet pussy like I've been starving to do, I grunt as I suck on her clit.

She's going to be one of my favorite instruments to play. So fucking delicious.

Staring up at her as she pulls on my hair while she struggles to ride my face, I smirk as I push my tongue inside of her sweet channel.

"Mav," she gasps, eyes wide. "What has gotten into you?"

"This is what it looks like when we're assholes and apologize," Atlas says idly as he leans against the wall,

fucking his hand as he watches us.

His cock is hard, thick, and proud as pre-cum starts to weep from the tip. His gray-green eyes are stormy as he looks conflicted with sorrow and desire. “Obviously, we can’t win you over with just orgasms, but it’s a start. This is what should have happened five years ago, even if we didn’t take your virginity. We should have given you your first orgasms.”

“How do you know I... hadn’t had any?” Layla gasps.

This doesn’t work for me. She shouldn’t be able to still talk. I can do better.

Moving back to lick and suck on her clit, I push two thick fingers into her slick channel. “So goddamn tight,” I praise her as she writhes against the wall. I may not have any more hair at this rate, as she forces my face back into her cunt, but it doesn’t bother me.

“You were such a good girl, you would have given us all of your firsts,” Atlas says lazily as he twists his fist around the crown of his cock, gathering his arousal. “We should have done better.”

“Have you ever had two men in this sweet pussy yet?” I growl against her clit. The vibration makes her mewl as I fuck her tight pussy, fluid squirting over my fingers. She’s close, but not there yet. So Goddamn beautiful.

“No,” she gasps, but her words are failing her. My lips twist into a smug smile, loving how I affect her.

Atlas leans over, brushing his lips over hers. She allows it for a moment before turning away. Atlas doesn’t let it bother him, knowing he has work to do. Anything worth doing is worth failing at the first few times.

Laying against the wall next to her, he pulls up his shirt. I can tell he’s close. I know all of the signs: the stilted breathing, the grunts, the way his cock gets even harder. Now I need to learn this beautiful girl like the back of my hand, too.

Not a chore at all.

The scent of cherry blossoms surrounds me, making me crazy. “You smell so damn good,” I growl. “Come all over my face, I want to smell you in my goatee for the rest of the damn day.”

Layla’s eyes grow wild in surprise, but I can tell she enjoys the dirty talk by the way her pussy strangles my fingers. Curling them as I push a third finger inside of her, I wrap my arm around her waist so there’s no space between us.

“Mav, oh God. Fuck, yes... Ah!” Layla screams, unable to keep her noises to herself as she squirts all over my face. Her gasping breaths are all that can be heard before Atlas finds his release with a grunt. Ropes of cum hit his abs as he watches Layla slowly come down from her orgasm.

Carefully putting her feet on the ground, I pull my fingers from her perfect pussy, slowly getting up. Atlas smears his cum on his fingers before running them all over my lips.

Smiling, I wrap her hair in my fist as I kiss Layla hard, making sure she can taste his salty cum. Atlas claims my hand to lap at Layla’s cream from my fingers, groaning at her taste.

“No more fucking around,” I grunt against her lips. “If you want us, we’re all in. We won’t flaunt our relationship because you’ll be firmly entrenched in it. We’ll show you every Goddamned day how cherished you are—”

The point of her knife against my dick tells me I’ve overstayed my welcome. Letting go, I raise my hands, taking a step to let her walk past me. Atlas licks his lips as he watches Layla unlock the door after rearranging her clothing.

Her lips are swollen, but otherwise you can’t tell that I made her come against a bathroom wall.

As the door slams shut behind her, Atlas cleans up before putting his cock away and washing his hands.

“That could have gone worse,” he grunts, his lips curving into an amused smile. Drying his hands, Atlas shrugs. “We’ll keep trying.”

Chuckling, I nod, glad to see he’s in. As we walk out the bathroom, I watch as Layla slides her knife back into its

holster before she touches her lips with a small smile. Seeing us, Layla transforms her face into a cold look, turning her back on us to return to Tyler and Draven.

“She’s not going to be easy to crack,” Atlas sighs as he watches Draven kiss her.

“Nope, but she didn’t wipe the cum from her lips.” I smirk.

One step at a time, Layla will be ours, just like she always should have been.

Twenty-Four

DRAVEN

“I ’m going to make dinner, Layla, why don’t you go chill,” Tyler suggests as we get back from a busy day in Nashville. I didn’t even really mind the interview, even though David touched Layla for too long.

I wanted to punch him for that, but we don’t have Jordan to smooth things over right now so I kept my cool.

“That sounds good,” Layla sighs. I wasn’t the only one to see how out of sorts she looks. Mav and Atlas don’t look at all innocent. “I’m going to go call my sister.”

Atlas pales as she says that, making me smirk. *Who is this sister that scares the shit out of him?*

Tyler thought of everything, stocking up the fridge for the days we'd be here. Tour life is rough when you're eating out every night, so it's nice that he thought of this.

Layla disappears into the bedroom, and as the door closes, Tyler rounds on the guys.

"What did you do? I swear, she only went to the bathroom alone. Do I have to start escorting her everywhere?" he growls.

"We cornered her in the bathroom and I insisted on a redo," Mav says with a shrug, walking over to the couch and sprawling out. He looks completely unbothered.

"A redo?" I ask curiously. That doesn't sound too bad, but what did it entail?

"Mav pinned her to the bathroom wall and ate her pussy out like the perfect meal," Atlas explains with a slow smile.

"Oh shit," Tyler mutters.

"I fucked my hand while I watched. She's nowhere near ready for me to touch her," Atlas murmurs as he moves to sit next to Mav.

"She came so hard she had to have seen stars, and then pushed her knife against my cock after I kissed her with Atlas's cum smeared across my lips," Mav says sheepishly.

"Yeah, I expect you'd deserve that," I chuckle. "Good for her."

Tyler shakes his head as he goes into our kitchen area to make an early dinner. Our performance is tonight and then we're supposed to have one more interview tomorrow morning before we leave Nashville.

"It's fine, she doesn't believe we're serious about her," Mav grunts. "I swear I saw my life flash before my eyes when that bat came for my hand."

"In my defense, they may have gone a little too far," Tyler winces. "The Ahearn brothers are a little unhinged."

“Just how I like them.” I grin. “Whatever helps to get you to remove your head from your ass is a worthy choice.”

“You would say that,” Mav chuckles. “As much as it pains me, I’m going to wash my face so I’m not rock hard while on stage.”

“Want my cock cage?” I tease him. I’m not above admitting that Mav’s cock is fucking huge. I’m no slouch in that department, but it’s tailor made for me.

“Does it look like I have a death wish?” he asks as he pushes himself from the couch and lumbers off to the bathroom.

“Do I need to wonder about the washing his face comment?” Tyler asks.

Raising a brow, Atlas barks a laugh. “He told Layla that he wanted her to soak his face, so he’d continue to smell her in his goatee for hours.”

Rubbing his face and his own goatee, Tyler grins wickedly. “Poor Layla,” he chuckles. “We’re going to kill her in the best ways with the dirty talk.”

My girl loves dirty talk. I’m so glad she wasn’t upset about my feelings or kinks. I know we’re still getting to know each other, but I’ve fallen hard for her. I can wait for her to fall with me.

LAYLA

Staring out at the crowd, I allow myself to let go of everything. I’ve been a ball of confusion since the bathroom of the radio station, where Mav made me come so hard, I almost blacked out while Atlas fucked his hand.

I know Mav isn’t fucking around anymore, but I don’t know where Atlas is at. Either way, I’m not giving in easily, though my pussy is a traitor. They’ve been finding reasons to touch me ever since.

Mav had his hand on my back as I walked across the stage, and I've never had anyone escort me before. Lennon's guys do it every show to make sure she doesn't trip, while I've always made my own way.

I know Tyler watches carefully as I cross the stage each time, but there's nothing he can do from behind the curtains if I was to fall. Out here? I've always been on my own.

Taking a breath, I grin out at the audience. "Hello, Nashville!" I yell. "It's been a while, hasn't it, friends? I treated 109.7 with a small piece of a song I just finished writing. Should I open with it?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as Draven, Mav, and Atlas stare at me intently. I know I've been a brat by not leading them into each song, but I don't think Mav or Atlas would have learned my songs backwards and forwards otherwise.

Sometimes the hard way is the only one people understand.

"Ready boys?" I tease them. Draven's eyes move down my body with a wicked smile. We decided to go out to a club after the concert, so I dressed accordingly. Black combat heeled-boots with my knife tucked into it, violet corset with a leather miniskirt, and jewelry to match.

My hair is in a high ponytail with bouncy curls as well, as a nod to the big hair of country music.

I may not sing the genre, but I do love the joy and angst found within the lyrics of the music.

Atlas winks at me and starts the song on his keyboard making me shake my head. Cocky ass. Mav jumps in too, with Draven picking up the drums. Mav and Atlas have always been incredible musicians, but the three of them are the trifecta of what singers dream of.

Turning back to the crowd, I shrug as they go wild. Guess we're all in agreement.

“

*"The world will tell you to stay
small, keep quiet, don't rock the boat.
But, don't listen to the lies, Baby, you
were meant to shine..."*

For so long I thought if I was quiet, I wouldn't create issues, I wouldn't get canceled by the label, or the media for something out of my control. It's a silly thing to worry about because everyone calls me the "Label's Princess", but I want to earn my career.

The new song goes over well, and I promise the crowd that we'll be recording soon. I need to find some time to get home, but that creates its own issues, since Turner and Roark are bursting at the seams to speak to Mav and Atlas.

I'm sure there will be black eyes and bruises on that visit. Men are dumb, but these men figure out things with their fists. It worked for Tyler and Mav, so who am I to mess with it.

As we finish up the set, Mav and Atlas flank me on either side. Surprised, I wait to see what they're up to.

"Can we give it up for the amazing Layla? Nashville, you all always give the best welcome, thank you for letting us debut a new song with you all," Mav says with a grin into the microphone.

Showboats.

Hiding a smile, I wave as we walk off, and I realize they did it so both Mav and Atlas could escort me off of the stage.

"You sounded amazing," Tyler says, sweeping me off my feet. "We need to find time to get you into the recording studio."

"We need to get to Lenny's for that," I remind him.

"Lenny?" Atlas asks, raising his brow.

"Yeah, she has a recording studio built in her basement. Why should I book studio time when I can borrow my sister's whenever I want?" I tease with a giggle.

“Well... You have a point.” Atlas smirks.

“Maybe we can find time to go by after New York?” Draven asks as we start to move to the area where our VIP event is set up. Tyler is slow to put me down, making me smile brightly.

“I miss the babies,” I sigh. “I video chatted with them earlier today, and they’re all getting so big. Where are we going after New York?”

“We have a week break after New York, and then we’re in Florida,” Tyler explains as he links his fingers with mine. I love how affection is so easy for him.

My mind trails to how Atlas and Mav touched me earlier, but I don’t know how to process the emotions thoughts of them bring. “There would be time to record and spend some time with your sister.”

“So you’re telling us we have a very small window in which to get you to forgive us?” Atlas asks as he walks along next to us. He looks like he’s thinking really hard about something. “Roark is gonna beat the shit out of us.”

“We deserve it.” Mav shrugs as Atlas nods. I may as well not be here for this as I roll my eyes. For some reason, their conversation doesn’t bother me even though they’re talking about me. Their relationship only bothered me when they left me out...

Remembering how well they can share me together makes me swallow hard. They can talk about forgiveness all they want, but I don’t think I’m ready to go there with them.

The door to the meet and greet opens, and I smile as people turn to see us. This is something that I love about touring: meeting our fans. Walking through, we all break off to chat with people.

I love getting to know the lives of my fans, where they come from, what they’re excited about. I always forget they want to know about me too.

“Can I ask you about where you got the inspiration for this song?” Maddie asks. She’s twenty-one, brunette, and makes

me smile at how excited she is to be here. Tyler has people's ticket numbers chosen at random from the crowd, which makes this even more special.

"I... had my heart broken," I tell her honestly. "It took me too long to realize during that time that I don't need to play by other people's rules to make my way through life. I can keep my boundaries intact, use my words, and refuse to do things I simply don't want to do."

Maddie's eyes widen as she thinks about that. "I have always wanted to ask people this, but always worried someone would spew bullshit back at me," she admits. "Thank you for being real with me."

The next hour flies by and then we're catching a cab to a club. It's supposed to have really good music, so Tyler suggested we go here. Except, as we walk up to the bouncer, I frown at the name of it: **Club Kink**.

What kind of club is this?

"Welcome to Club Kink," the bouncer grins. "Please be advised this will be an experience unlike anything you've ever had. The second floor will have BDSM scenes, so if you're interested in viewing those there will be forms for you to fill out. This is also an open space to consensually explore any kinks you may have, so don't be surprised if you find people having sex around you."

My head whips around as I find Tyler's eyes who smirks with a shrug. "Did you know?" I mouth. I'm all up for something adventurous, but a heads up would have been nice. He shakes his head at me, and I figure we're already here, may as well stay.

Thanking the bouncer as he lets us in, we sign the NDAs for the club, which is why we didn't even know this was basically a sex club. No one can talk about what's inside these walls, and the club doesn't advertise it.

The walls are black and a navy blue, and the club is lit up with soft lighting as we walk through a walkway that opens up to the dance floor. The music is exactly what I want to move

my body to, and the lights aren't the typical strobe that gives me a headache.

I think I'll be very happy here. Whether or not I work up the courage for some public sex remains to be seen, though.

"Drink, Baby?" Tyler asks in my ear as my hips start to roll to the music, and I nod. A drink or two sounds perfect.

Together, we cross to the first bar area we see. Catching the eye of a male bartender, I smile brightly at him.

Nodding, he makes his way over to me, bending over the bar to talk to me. "What can I get you?" he shouts.

"Shot of tequila!" I tell him. Tyler raises a finger to tell him he wants one too, Draven shrugs and holds up a finger, and Mav and Atlas glance at each other before nodding.

"Damn, I haven't had tequila in a long time, Lovely," Draven murmurs into the shell of my ear as he wraps his arms around my waist.

"You don't have to have one," I remind him. I don't want him to feel pressured to drink with me. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Nope, I plan to have one and that's it," he murmurs. "Just be aware that it may make my cock need to be deep inside of your pretty, pink pussy."

"When I'm asleep or awake?" I sass. Draven stares at me in shock for a second before treating my ass to a spank. I swear my pussy contracts in need as I gasp, and I decide maybe I will be having a little naughty fun tonight.

Giggling, I turn to where the bartender is lining up our shots.

"What's so funny?" Mav asks, startling me as he speaks to me with his hand on my hip. He's so quiet for being as large as he is.

"Draven apparently gets very naughty when he drinks tequila," I tell him. Mav barks out a laugh.

“I don’t think he knows how to be any other way, Sweet Girl,” he says easily. I shouldn’t enjoy the pet name, but I catch myself staring at him for longer than I want to.

Nope, I shouldn’t want to go there. I admitted to Maddie that Mav and Atlas broke my heart. I may not have mentioned their names, but I know when I made myself vulnerable to them and they rejected me, I was crushed.

It was hard for me to even want to date anyone else, which is why I was obnoxious when I met Tyler.

I didn’t want to be sweet or innocent, and he just wanted me to be myself. It’s why it’s always been so easy for us, even when I misread him. He won’t let me run from him or storm away until I understand what he meant.

Picking up my shot glass to get out of my head, the guys follow me, clinking my glass. I don’t bother with salt or lime, simply tossing it back. Making a face as I swallow, Tyler smirks at me as he easily downs his drink.

“Now I need to dance,” I decide. “Any takers?”

“Me,” Atlas grunts, holding his hand out to me. I don’t want to take it, but I won’t ever crush someone the way they did to me. It’s just a dance, anyway. Right?

Twenty-Five

ATLAS

Layla Campbell is a vision. Her eyes seem to sparkle as she takes my hand as if accepting a dare.

Tyler leans against the bar as he watches us. He seems relaxed, but after he had Mav kidnapped, I know he's a lot more dangerous than he seems.

Only a stupid man would cross him by fucking with his girl. I don't blame him either.

Draven is watching me too, his eyes tracking me carefully as I curl her hand in mine, basking in the warmth.

Layla really does remind me of the good in the world, and how long it's been since I've let myself feel it. It explains a lot

about the last five years, and why Mav and I allowed ourselves to get lost in the haze of pot.

Fuck, we haven't smoked in days. I can't tell you the last time that happened.

We seem to get the same high from being around her, and to be honest, it's even better.

Looking down at the blonde-haired goddess, as we walk to the dance floor where people are practically fucking, I marvel at how damn feisty she is. She put Mav on his ass easily, even killing another who put his hands on her without permission, but there's a vulnerability to Layla as well, and Mav and I are responsible for it.

We put the chink into her armor.

As we find a spot on the dance floor, I match Layla as she moves to the beat. While my eyes are glued to her, in the periphery I can see that a few people are actually fucking.

Smirking as I remember what the bouncer said, I pull her closer to me until she's riding my thigh.

"Feeling adventurous?" I tease her as I kiss up her neck. The tequila makes her cheeks look flushed, even though it was just a shot. Layla's eyes widen as she's on her tip-toes trying to stay balanced, and her hands fly up to my shoulders, clenching to find purchase.

My arm wraps around her waist, my lips by her ear. "I won't let you fall, I promise. Never again, you hear me?"

Her uncertain look guts me, and I skim my fingers up her leg to find she moved her knife to her thigh.

"I have a story to tell you. You're going to ride my thigh as you listen. If you come before I finish, you can walk away. What do you think?" I ask her.

I don't want to push, but I'm going to have to. This isn't the best place to tell her this since it's loud, but I'm taking a page from Mav's book. Sometimes there's never a good time to bare your soul.

And it's a sex club for me.

If she doesn't want to listen, my thigh is right against her hot pussy. I can feel how warm she is, and my cock is straining against my zipper. This isn't about me right now though, it never will be when it comes to her.

I'll grovel for the rest of my life if it means I can be near her.

Layla's eyes harden into a wicked gleam as she swivels her hips, finding a rhythm. "With this thick, hard tool...I don't think that'll be a problem," she says, her breath hitching as she rubs her clit in just the right way.

"That's it, Baby," I rumble into the shell of her ear. "You take whatever you need while I tell you a story. Fuck, you're so sexy."

Taking a deep breath even as my chest starts to feel tight, I struggle to get my thoughts together. I'm too young for a heart attack, so this must be what anxiety feels like. Focusing on Layla's beautiful face as her eyes start to hood, I tell myself this is the right thing to do.

I need to be honest with myself and her.

"When Lennon asked us to tour with you, Mav and I thought it would be a fun way to get to know you," I begin gruffly. I keep my lips by her ear, my hips moving of their own accord, my fingers rubbing the small expanse of skin exposed to the world above her skirt.

Needing to be closer, I want to throw her leg over my hip, but I don't want her to come yet.

I'll play dirty and edge her, if only so she can hear my truth.

"I'm listening," Layla murmurs, gasping as I rock her against me.

"We started going out to eat, exploring the cities we were visiting even with our crazy schedule, and Mav and I found ourselves attracted to a girl for the first time in years," I confess.

“Why years?” she whimpers. Fuck, Layla feels so good against me. Too good.

Nipping her neck with my teeth, I enjoy her yelp of surprise at the slight pain. I want to confuse her body so she won't come yet, though she's soaking my thigh. She's so damn responsive. Goddamn.

“Speaking for myself, I lost interest in women. They always wanted something from us, and it's hard to get involved long-term with someone when you're touring,” I explain, kissing her neck where I bit her.

Everything else may not exist in the club right now. I know self consciously that it's loud, and there are people all around us. Yet, in the twinkling light they have, it's easy to forget them.

“You didn't want a damn thing from us except our time,” I tell her, kissing the side of her lips. I don't want to push too far after she refused to kiss me earlier. Layla's breath gets raspier as her fingers slide into my hair.

Her curls sway across her back as she rocks over my thigh. I can see she needs more, so I throw caution to the wind and pull her leg over my thigh.

“That's it, Baby Girl. Fuck, you look so sweet right now. Mmm,” I groan. “Layla, we ran from you five years ago, and it was like the sunshine left our world. I can speak for Mav because I guarantee he feels the same way. Music and getting stoned helped dull how we feel about you, the hole we carved out of our hearts.”

Layla shudders, a light sheen of sweat covering her forehead, but even that makes my heart pound. It doesn't lessen her beauty in any way though.

It's too bad my next words may push her away. Burying my face in her throat, I suck on her raging pulse as she moans. I'm so glad I'm not the only one affected right now.

“I don't think your age was really why we pushed you away at all,” I rasp. I can feel tears, of all things, pricking my eyes. I can't tell you the last time I cried. My feelings have

been repressed for so long. Marijuana is a great way to push the real world away. Mav and I didn't care that we lived in a drug haze, just so long as life stayed muted.

"Then why?" she cries out. Fuck, the things I want to do to this girl. I want to mark her, fuck her, fill her with my cum. Growling, I tell her my truth.

"Because I love you," I tell her as her eyes roll back and she comes.

Holding her tightly, I reach between us, rubbing her clit through her panties, swallowing her noises as I kiss her.

She can cut my balls off later, they're already partly hers anyway.

LAYLA

I'm kissing Atlas Ryles and I don't want to disembowel him for it.

He tastes like tequila and salt as he kisses me like his life depends on it. As I brush his face with my fingers, I realize the reason why I taste salt is because he's crying.

All I've ever experienced from Atlas is teasing, sarcasm, or cruelty. I never thought he could give me anything else.

"You what?" I gasp, tearing my mouth from his. Atlas is breathing hard, his fingers digging into my hip as if he's terrified I'll leave. I've wanted him to admit to feeling something, anything for me besides disdain for so long, that I think I'm in shock.

Brushing his thumb against my panty-covered clit once more to make me shiver, he moves his hand to my waist.

"I love you," he repeats slowly to me.

"About fucking time, mate," Draven mutters. We were so in our own world, neither of us noticed him walk up to us. "You good, Lovely?"

“I don’t know yet,” I rasp, eyes wide. I’m still having aftershocks from one of the best orgasms of my life in a sex club. I don’t know what to feel yet.

Setting my leg on the ground, Atlas makes sure I’m steady on my feet before he removes his leg from between my thighs and fixes my skirt.

“You don’t have to feel anything yet,” he says with a small smile. “I’m so sorry for hurting you, making you feel as if you weren’t worthy of everything you deserve. Layla, you deserve everything, Baby Girl. I’ll grovel at your feet forever if it means I can fix what Mav and I broke.”

Draven pulls me into his arms as Atlas takes one more look at me before turning and walking away. It doesn’t feel like he’s leaving me this time, but more giving me the space to figure out what just happened.

“What do you need?” Draven murmurs into my ear.

“Clarity and another shot,” I mutter, a hysterical giggle escaping at the insanity of the last few moments. My panties are wet and uncomfortable, and I’m wondering if it would be a terrible idea to remove them.

“I think the two of those cancel each other out,” he chuckles as he puts his hand on my back to guide me across the club to where Tyler and Mav are. “I’m going to watch you take this shot, so I can be whatever you need tonight.”

What is with the men in my life surprising me?

It doesn’t feel very long ago that Draven was doing anything and everything to drown out the noise of his life with drugs or alcohol. Now he’s abstaining to make sure I’m okay.

“You look confused and flushed,” Tyler says with a smile as he sees me.

“I am both things.” I pout. “My panties are wet and I’m uncomfortable.”

Mav almost spits out his beer at my words, coughing when he swallows it instead.

“Poor, sweet, girl,” Tyler chuckles, pulling me toward him. “Give them to me.”

He deftly moves up my thighs, ripping them right off of me. My jaw is still open as he’s tucking them into his pocket.

“I’m going to need to go shopping for panties,” I sigh.

“Does this happen often?” Mav asks now that he’s not dying.

“Often enough lately to need to go shopping.” I shrug.

“You lead an exciting life, Layla,” he smirks. “Want that tequila shot?”

“Please,” I say.

One more drink won’t hurt anything and I want to explore the club.

“Are you okay?” Tyler asks into my ear as Mav orders my drink.

“I got an apology, an orgasm, and Atlas told me he fucked me over five years ago because he was running away from his feelings for me,” I tell him softly.

“Well fuck,” he mutters. “I need a shot too, Mav. Can’t let you drink alone, Little Flower.”

Tyler hasn’t had anything else to drink, so I smile brightly at him. God, it feels so much better not to be wearing wet panties. Grinding while dancing always sounds like a great idea until you’re greeted with the aftermath.

Totally worth it, even if I have a lot to think about. Words don’t make things better, even though his gray-green eyes were sincere.

“Layla?” Mav asks, handing me my shot. Nodding, I clink my glass against Tyler’s before drinking it. Funny enough, that one didn’t sting as badly and there’s a warm feeling in my tummy.

“Thank you, anyone want to go exploring?” I tease. Three sets of eyes turn predatory as they grin. I find I really like

Mav's eyes on me right now. Maybe it's the tequila, but I want to do something fun and a little outrageous.

"Absolutely," Tyler says. "This is one of the only times we can get away with it. Everyone signed their NDA, and there's a no photo policy inside of the club. I think I need you to sit on my face, Baby."

I have no air in my lungs as I stare up at him. I think I just fell a little farther in love with Tyler Mallard. Damn, I need that right fucking now too. My pussy is a hussy, and I love it.

"I think you just became the prey, mate," Draven snickers.

"If you don't almost die because her thighs tried to murder you, then you're not doing it right." Tyler smirks.

"Do you want a cock with your side of orgasm, madam?" Draven asks, as we start to walk, in a really terrible French accent. Barking a laugh, I shake my head no before reconsidering and doing the opposite.

"So yes, you want my cock, Lovely?" he croons.

"Yes, please," I tell him, biting my lip. Mav ambles along next to us, watching in amusement.

"You've bitten off a lot between the two of them," he says with his brow raised.

"Are you questioning if I can handle them, because I'll have you know I absolutely can," I inform him before blushing to the roots of my hair. I'm not as naturally blonde as Lennon, so my roots are brown. I have to get it touched up occasionally, because I've never liked how it washes me out. I started to dye it shortly after I met my sister.

I learned early on from her that if you don't like something, it's okay to change it.

"Layla," Tyler roars with laughter.

"I... fuck," I sigh, hiding my face.

"Please, go on about how you can take both our cocks, Chickie," Draven grins as he throws his arm over my shoulder. "Feel free to tell him all about my sexual prowess as well."

“I don’t think you have any outside of your fancy dick,” Mav teases him. “Layla, does the cock jewelry make that much of a difference? Do I need to get one?”

I can’t stop laughing at their ridiculous posturing as I die of embarrassment. I think I’m going to blame the tequila on this one. It’s a great night for a little debauchery. I haven’t seen Atlas again as we walk through the sea of people dancing, kissing, and fucking.

Sure that he’s fine, I let the guys walk me down a side hallway.

“Hands on the wall, Beautiful, ass out. Do you trust me?” Tyler asks with a smile. He’s so damn gorgeous when he’s mischievous. His caramel eyes are molten with desire, so I say the only thing I can, as I rub my thighs together.

“Yes.”

Moving away from Draven’s arm, I place my hands on the wall with my back flat so my butt is on display. Tyler flips my skirt up to get the best view, smacking my ass as he bites his fist.

“Such a pretty, wet pussy,” he praises, making me whimper as he runs his finger through my arousal. It sounds obscenely loud. I know it’s a sex club, but we’re out in the open and...

Smack.

“Pay attention, Baby. Don’t get distracted,” Tyler admonishes.

“Yes, Sir,” I gasp, shivering. I love when Tyler is like this. I’m in new territory, in ultimate brat mode, and need him to keep me in check.

“Fuck me,” Mav growls. I can feel their gaze on me, feel the heat of my skin from the spanking, and crave more.

Tyler’s big hands massage my skin, his thumb teasing my asshole as I whimper. “I’m addicted to your ass, Little Flower,” he says reverently. “You’ve been a sassy brat, so

you're going to count, one for every swat. Can you handle that?"

"Yes," I promise, looking over my shoulder at the three of them.

"Such a good girl for him," Mav rumbles. I swear my pussy contracts around nothing, making me shiver just as Tyler hits my left cheek.

"Ahh!" I cry out. Fuck, he swats hard. "One."

"Damn, this is the only time I like it when you cry," Tyler grunts. I'm positive there's a red handprint on my ass as he hits the right cheek with his palm.

Dropping my head between my arms, I take a steadying breath.

"Layla," Tyler barks. Goosebumps erupt over my body as I smirk and say, "Two."

"Brat," Draven chuckles. I'm sure there's a smile somewhere, but I gasp as I am treated to another smack.

Fuck, that one hurt. Tyler rubs the sting out of it as I hiss, "Three."

There's a stream of curses flowing through my mind, but I stubbornly roll my lips inwards to keep them in. Tears well in my eyes as I sniffle.

Mav wraps his hand around my hair, forcing my head up. "You cry so prettily when you're getting your punishment. Just a couple more, then you can have your tight little cunt flooded with cum," he promises.

I'm sure my pupils are blown with desire as I swallow hard.

I'm riding the edge between pain and pleasure, which keeps me centered. Today has been a lot, and I can't think past the next swat of Tyler's hand as I gaze up at Mav.

"Relax, Little Flower," Tyler croons as he massages my back and ass. I know he doesn't want me to tense when he spanks me and I try to breathe.

“You’re doing so good,” Mav murmurs before he kisses me upside down. My traitorous body relaxes, and that’s when Tyler strikes. Mav swallows my scream. Only after does he whisper against my lips, “Four.”

“Teamwork from the dom, I see how it is,” Tyler grumbles. “One more, Baby, and then Draven is gonna fuck your dripping pussy, okay? God, you should see yourself right now. Your thighs are coated in your cream, Baby Girl. Goddamn.”

Whimpering as Tyler slowly rubs my clit, my eyes roll as I stare up at Mav. He wraps his hand around my neck, his thumb caressing my racing pulse. As Mav squeezes, I swear there’s a direct cord between my clit and his hand.

Tyler continues to tease my bundle of nerve endings, detouring to gather some of my arousal before continuing to edge me closer to my release.

I whine because I know he won’t give it to me, and Mav’s cut over to Tyler. “Shh, Little Dove, you’re okay. Soon you’ll be able to fly. Just a little longer.”

He used to call me his songbird five years ago, and this feels close to that. I had forgotten Mav used to say that, because I pushed all of those memories away.

Large hands grab my ass, pulling my cheeks open. “Such a beautiful sight,” Draven drawls. “My cock is lucky. Your pussy is glistening, and all you need to do is push through one more spanking. Can you do it, Lovely?”

“Yes,” I rasp, because that’s all I can get out with how tightly Mav is squeezing my throat.

I can feel black sparkles sliding over my eyesight, but I don’t want to succumb to it. Instead, I want to come more than anything right now. These men control my next breath, my orgasms, my movements, and I love it.

“Stay with me, Layla,” Tyler commands as my legs start to shake. I can feel tingles throughout my body, a testament to how this is all affecting me. My arms and Mav are the only thing holding me up right now, I’m a puddle for these men.

A thumb other than Tyler's slides over my core, pushing inside of my tight channel, so it's completely coated. "One more, Beautiful," Draven growls, removing his thumb to push it deep into my ass.

My eyes roll at the stretch, and then Tyler spanks me one last time before dropping to his knees and stealing my soul out of my body, as he licks and sucks on my clit. Mav releases my throat, so that I can inhale enough to scream, but clamps down again to strangle the sound out of me.

Between the three of them, they hold me up as my legs fail me.

Tears streaming down my face for an entirely different reason, I sob in relief as Mav kisses my forehead when he steps back. I can hear Draven drop his zipper as he shifts his hand to my hip before dragging his crown through my core. "Do you want my dick now as your reward, Sweet Girl? You've been so damn good for us."

"Yes, please, yes," I cry out as he pushes his cock inside of me. The stretch is significant as Draven groans.

"Fuck, I could die happy right here, Layla," he says.

"No, not until you're done fucking me," I scream. I don't have it in me to be quiet as he shoves me against the wall.

I'm barely able to turn my face in time.

"So demanding, Baby," he croons, kissing my cheek. "Let's turn you around now, shall we? Someone would very much like to eat your pussy."

Whirling me around so his back is against the wall, my jaw drops when I see Atlas on his knees in front of me. "I promised I'd spend my life on my knees for you, may as well start now," he says.

Atlas' hands rub my thighs, my skirt long forgotten and pushed up to my waist, but his eyes remain on mine. Draven pushes down my corset so my tits spill out, yet it doesn't change Atlas's supplication.

His gaze remains on my eyes and only there.

“Are you okay with this?” Atlas asks. “I don’t want to ruin your fun, Baby.”

“I…” My mind whirls as I think. I may be a lightweight because between the alcohol, breath deprivation, and orgasms, I feel really fucking floaty. Fuck it. I’ll deal with it like an adult tomorrow. “Yes,” I promise. “Make it good.”

Atlas smirks and gives a bark of surprised laughter. “You’re so cute when you’re needy and authoritative. Your wish is my command. Draven, give her your A-game, man.”

“It’s bollocks that you would think I would give any less,” he scoffs. Atlas moves my leg over his shoulder and Draven scoops my other leg over his arm, making me squeal. I’m fully suspended, with Draven’s other arm wrapped around my waist, completely at their mercy.

Atlas looks at my swollen pussy with desire and yearning. “So beautiful, Baby Girl. Even if this is the only time I get to experience this, it’ll have to be enough,” he whispers. Tears spill from my eyes at how heartbroken and sincere he sounds.

Licking up my core and around my clit, it’s clear Atlas doesn’t give a fuck if he’s also pleasuring Draven. “Fuck, Atlas,” Draven groans as he thrusts deeper into me. “I know you’re a team player, but goddamn, I don’t want Mav to beat me later.”

Mav leans on the opposite wall with Tyler, watching the show. “Sucking dick while pursuing Layla’s orgasms, doesn’t count in my book as a breach of commitment,” he says with a shrug.

I don’t even know what he means because between Atlas and Draven they’re playing me like an instrument they’ve played for years.

“Oh my God,” I cry out as Atlas sucks and kisses my clit. He is so fucking thorough, I can tell he’s giving Draven the same kind of attention as if by default.

“Yes, fuck, he’s doing such a good job of apologizing, isn’t he?” Draven moans. Draven’s piercing is making me see stars

as he fucks up into me. The angle hits my G-spot perfectly. I think being their fuck toy may be my new favorite thing.

“Yes,” I mewl, my fingers tightly holding Draven’s hair as I bounce on his cock. I have no control, every molecule of my body focused on pleasure, and the way Atlas eats pussy.

I know he said that he hasn’t been with another woman in years, but that must mean he was downloaded with a manual on how to eat my pussy.

Every kiss, flick, and suck is perfectly timed, making me lose the ability to speak.

Mewls and crying is all I can do as my pussy starts to clamp down on Draven’s cock. I’m so close.

“That’s it, Baby. Let go. Soak my cock and Atlas’ face. Show him how magical your cunt is, Lovely,” he growls.

God, dirty talk is the end of me. Shuddering as I explode, I do exactly what Draven tells me too. My vision whites out as I scream his name, strangling his cock as I come. I can hear Draven whispering things that I can’t make sense of, but it sounds like prayers to my pussy as he paints its walls with his cum. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised.

Breathing hard, I blink as Draven carefully pulls himself out of me, and Tyler is in front of me instead of Atlas.

“Hey Gorgeous.” He grins. “I think you passed out a little bit there.”

“Did I?” I ask. I feel a little disoriented, and Tyler wraps his arms around me.

“Mmhmm. This was a lot for you,” he chuckles. “Atlas went to grab you a bottle of water. I want you to drink some before we go, okay?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I snark, but my yawn ruins my delivery.

“There’s my brat,” he teases me.

“Never left. Multiple orgasms, and the brat lives on,” I giggle. Yeah, I’m definitely a little loopy.

Atlas looks a little worried as he comes back. I don't know how he found water so fast, or maybe I lost more time than I thought. Breaking the seal, he lifts the cap of the bottle, handing me it. My hands are a little shaky, and my body is a little twitchy from the aftershocks of my orgasms.

Tyler helps me sip some water before I yawn again.

"I'm so sleepy," I admit. "I think I'm ready to call it a night. I want my pajamas and maybe socks. I can't stop shivering."

"You're overstimulated, Lovely. Let's grab a ride-share, and we'll take turns snuggling. Then you'll have a nice, warm shower at the hotel, yeah?" Draven says with a smile. He looks a little worried, but I yawn again and shiver.

Walking through the club, I notice one of the guys called a ride-share already because there's a car waiting for us. Confused, I glance at them, but they shrug.

"No use waiting around tonight, Layla," Tyler says. "I want to bring you down nice and easy. I don't think we've ever pushed you so hard before."

"I'm fine," I remind him, letting him bundle me into the car.

"And you're going to continue to be perfect, because I love you," he tells me, rubbing my arms as he places me in his lap. My eyes get heavy as we drive, and it's hard to stay awake.

They don't seem worried about me falling asleep though, so I let their chatter lull me to sleep. My ass may be sore for a while, but tonight was the best night ever.

Twenty-Six

ATLAS

Looking down at Layla as she sleeps in her bed, I sigh. I want to touch her, but I don't want to wake her up. We worked her over hard at the club and she seemed a little spacy afterwards.

"She's not made of glass, mate," Draven says, rolling his eyes as he climbs into bed with Layla. He's not careful or quiet, and my gaze flies over to Layla to see if she'll stir. "Layla is a very deep sleeper."

"Why do I feel as if you've pushed the limits of it?" I ask, slightly amused. Draven is a kinky fucker, even if much of it has been alone or with Lyrica. I once walked in on him with a

belt around his throat as he fucked his cock with a fleshlight. I made sure he was alive and then walked back out.

“She looks really pretty with her lips wrapped around my cock while she’s fast asleep,” he says dreamily.

“Seriously?!” I ask. I don’t know whether to be impressed or horrified. For so long I was worried about mussing up her perfection, running away from my love, and here is Draven preening about his nightly debauchery.

“Oh yeah,” Tyler chuckles as he walks in. “I woke up to Draven coming all over himself that night. It was impressive she never woke up, but Layla has been exhausted. The tour’s pace has been rough.”

“Yeah.” I frown. “Does Layla know about your kinky fuckery?”

“She does,” Draven says with a proud grin. “Chickie told me she doesn’t care. I’m pretty sure Layla was oddly turned on by it too. She just keeps surprising me.”

“Is she going to be okay? Tonight was a lot...”

“Layla is fine.” Tyler smiles. “Too many orgasms makes her spacy. Add to that the long day and the spanking, and my Little Flower was done. I’m surprised she let me get her in the shower and cleaned up before she fell asleep for good.”

“She even got her comfy pajamas and socks,” Draven chuckles. “I didn’t think this could be sexy, but because it’s Layla, it works for her.”

“She has a unicorn onesie for sleepovers with her sister,” Tyler confesses. “Even that hideous thing looks incredible on her.”

“I think that’s what sappy love looks like,” I tease him. We’re all so gone for this girl.

Tyler clears his throat as he sits on the edge of the bed. “Speaking of, you two looked pretty intense on the dance floor earlier,” he says, raising his brow. I nod, taking a breath, knowing this was coming. Mav already went to bed, or I’m sure he’d be having this conversation with us now.

“Yeah, I may have pulled a Mav,” I tell him sheepishly, rubbing the back of my neck. “I had her in my arms, and it just all clicked for me that I’m an idiot. It was never actually about her age. Mav and I were cowards. We’ve always been in love with her.”

“So what’s different now?” Draven asks, propped up by pillows. He looks like he belongs in her bed.

“I’m going to do my best to show her I meant what I said. She doesn’t need a protector, Layla can clearly protect herself, but I do want to fix what I fucked up,” I explain. “She’s so damn talented, it’s not fair that she has a running soundtrack in her head that tells her she isn’t.”

“Then prove to her that you’re someone she can trust,” Tyler says. “If you think I’m not moving fast enough, go do it your damn self without making a fuss. Ask her what she needs. Mav has noticed she forgets to eat until she’s shaky, so he leaves food where she’ll see it. If she doesn’t have to make a big deal about it, Layla will just eat and keep moving. I don’t like the pace of this tour, but we’re getting a break soon so we’ll suck it up.”

“Understood,” I murmur. I feel as if I just got my ass handed to me, but he’s right. Tyler grabs his computer to start checking emails and do whatever the fuck he does for the record label, and I take that as a dismissal.

I’m halfway across the living room when Tyler starts cursing up a red streak. Turning, I raise my hand as if to ask what the fuck is happening, only to find Draven waving at me to come back.

“Seán decided to email me like the respectable prick he pretends to be,” Tyler grumbles. “He wants to book Layla and *The Midnight Lights* to play at The Library tomorrow night as part of her debt.”

“It’s three in the morning,” I sigh. “Where is this place?”

“New York City,” Tyler grunts. “We’ll have to drive through the night. I should just ask Lennon to kill him.”

“I’m surprised you know about that.” I wince.

“I’ve watched her train Layla,” he says and shrugs. “It’s obvious in how she moves that she doesn’t mind getting her hands dirty. I don’t know everything about her past, but I don’t need to. You know what, fuck it.”

Tyler picks up the phone, wincing at the time. “Sorry, Lenny,” he mutters before dialing her number.

“*Hello?*” a sleepy voice asks.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” Tyler says. “We have a problem. Seán is calling in his blood debt, but I doubt he’ll ever be satisfied. I’m a bit tired of being jerked around by him. Want to come help?”

“*Do I get to kill people?*” Lennon asks.

Tyler must really be family if she has no problems asking.

“*Who are we killing at three in the morning, Little Love?*” Orion asks.

“*An Irish asshole who’s fucking with Lay,*” Lennon explains. “*I think she can handle him, it’s just getting her out afterwards that’s the problem...*”

“It’s a place in New York City called *The Library*,” I tell them before wanting to kick myself. I should have just stayed quiet.

“*Atlas?*” Lennon asks softly.

“Hey, Lenny,” I say softly.

“What’s going on?” Mav asks sleepily. He walked across the hotel room, drawn by the noise from our conversation. Mav tends to wake easily.

“We have to get moving, Babe. We’re headed to New York City at Seán’s behest,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

“He’s such an asshole,” Mav mutters. “He’s just going to keep pulling Layla’s strings. It’s not fair.”

“*Sounds like you boys have had a change of heart over my baby sister? Why would you even care?*” Lenny asks.

“We care, Tiny Valkyrie, we were just idiots,” Mav says. “We’re working on it, I promise. I’ll even tell you all about it whenever you want to talk. I’m going to pack our room up, Atlas.”

Mav slips out of the room without a word, but I can see the pain in his face from talking to our ex-best friend. Our idiocy cost us a lot of things.

“Hmm,” Lennon says “I’ll get the kids next door and set them up with Tori and Tesa. I’ll meet you in New York to help, and I’ll probably bring a little back up with me. Find out if this thing is invite only. I’ll be in touch.”

She hangs up before any of us can ask anything else, and Tyler rolls his eyes as he dials Seán’s number. “May as well go straight to the source. I’m not playing email tag with him,” Tyler mutters. “I’m not worried about Lenny at all. She’ll figure shit out.”

Lennon O’Reilly is a badass. That’s never been something I ever doubted.

“Why are you calling so late?” Seán gruffly asks, answering the phone. I guess no one is sleeping tonight.

Well... except Layla. She’s completely oblivious to the world right now, and I’m grateful for that. Touring is exhausting at times, so she needs all the sleep she can get. I don’t have a problem just carrying her out to the bus, the princess can have her chariot in the comfort of my arms.

Smirking at the thought, I force myself to pay attention to Tyler’s conversation.

“You are the reason I’m calling so late,” Tyler says drolly. “You sent me an email at an obscure time when we had a show tonight. The only reason I saw it was because I always triple check my social media and emails before I go to bed. I need more details for this ‘event’ that we are being encouraged to attend.”

Tyler is being utterly sarcastic, because we haven’t been encouraged to do shit. Seán O’Brien is spitting out demands.

“The little girl owes me a debt, and I have highly important people to impress tonight. Layla will do this free of charge and sing as if her uncle’s life depends on it,” Seán growls. *“As important as his skills are to me, he’s being a real pain in the ass, too.”*

“You can’t kidnap a man like Jordan and expect it to be peaceful,” Tyler says mildly. “He creates and topples empires for a living. Making an enemy of him by threatening his niece probably isn’t a good life choice.”

“Are you threatening me, boyo?” Seán asks indignantly. I roll my eyes because sometimes this man acts like a child. I don’t know how he’s managed to hold onto his power for this long. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has his own sharks circling for his position as the head of the family.

“Nope, just telling it like it is. We’re about eleven hours away right now from New York City,” Tyler continues. “What time is this elaborate event you expect us to drop everything for?”

“It’s at nine tonight, so you have plenty of time to get here,” Seán scoffs. We do, but it also gives Lennon time to get some things together as well. Damn, we’re going to have to wake Layla to talk to her. Fuck.

“You understand that you can’t demand our presence whenever you feel like it, right?” Tyler asks him. “As *The Midnight Lights* manager, what you’re doing is disgraceful and disrespectful.”

“I don’t care!” Seán roars, making Layla gasp as she sits up in shock. So much for sleeping. *“The girl owes me, she will do whatever the fuck I tell her to do. There are very important people who will be there tonight. It is my daughter’s debut into our society. Everything has to be perfect. Tell the precious girl her uncle will be there.”*

Layla doesn’t say a word as she struggles to shrug off the last vestiges of sleep. Instead, she listens intently. Layla doesn’t really seem to throw herself into things unless it’s life or death, or her temper gets the best of her.

Instead, I'm noticing she watches to see how things will shake out. I wonder if this is a learned practice from watching so many meetings at the record label.

Layla had a really lonely childhood. Realizing this, I find I want to help her find happiness with us. If she wants babies, she can have those too. Anything to make her smile.

"So important criminals," Tyler confirms. "How are you going to keep Layla safe in a room like that?"

Layla rests her head on her fist as she listens and Draven leans forward to wrap his arms around his legs.

It's a good question, especially since Seán knows about her love of knives.

"I don't want Layla to be armed," Seán growls. "I will bring people who I trust who can control themselves. Bruin has been punished for manhandling Layla, and I won't be bringing him for this event. Otherwise, I give you my word that Layla will be completely safe while she's in New York City tonight."

I don't like the way he said that, and I frown at Tyler. He merely nods at me as if he understands. "I don't like this," he tells Seán, "but we'll start heading that way since it doesn't appear we have a choice."

Tyler is stroking the mafia boss' ego after ruffling his feathers, which makes me smirk in amusement. The man knows how to work people. Tyler says goodbye to him, hanging up with a sigh.

"It's a good thing you have all of that hair, Little Flower, so your sister can hide some pretty weapons in it," Tyler says. "I don't think you'll get a knife into the building, though."

"I think this needs to end tonight," Layla murmurs. She's been in her head, and clearly thinking through all of the moving pieces. "Jordan won't be able to come home until Seán is dead, so that's what will happen tonight. I know Lenny can help with my hair, I'm just worried about getting back out afterwards."

“Let’s pack up and then you can plan how to kill a mafia leader,” I tell her, shaking my head. *Who the fuck is this girl?* Layla isn’t upset about the idea of killing someone in the least, and from what I can see, she doesn’t seem to have any remorse about killing whatshisname either, Jack, was it?

As I start walking toward the door, I realize that I could say something cutting, but I don’t feel like it. Instead, feel pride that she’s just willing to do what’s needed. Fuck, I should tell her that.

“For the record, I think you’re completely capable of it,” I tell her, rapping my knuckles on the door frame before walking out.

“Did you just give me a compliment and praise me on my killing skills?” Layla calls out after me, making me chuckle under my breath. Yeah, no way on earth was she letting me get away with that one.

“As long as you promise to fit through doorways, I’ll continue to give you compliments,” I promise, turning to face her as I walk backwards. Tyler is hiding a smile and Draven is staring at Layla as if she hung the moon.

I don’t know about the moon, but she is definitely my sun. The world feels warmer and kinder with her in it. Turning around before I trip like an oaf and fall, I walk to the room Mav and I are sharing.

“Let’s get out of here in the next fifteen minutes!” Tyler calls out. “I’ll call the driver now.”

Damn, I hope we’re able to tip him. It’s now almost four in the morning, it sucks that we have to pull our driver out of bed.

“We’re all packed, Atlas,” Mav says with a nod at the bags. “Go grab a shower, you’ll feel better before we’re crammed in the bus.”

Wow, there’s even clothes on the bed, waiting for me. Glancing at him in surprise, Mav shrugs. “I realized I stopped doing nice shit for you. It’s dumb, but I want to start again. I don’t say it enough, but I love you. We got each other through

a really dark period of time. It's time to figure out what life looks like now."

Blowing out a breath, I nod. Everything got screwed up when Mav and I pushed Layla aside. We got lost in each other and sex, but we became really ugly people in the meantime. He's right.

Walking over to him, I give him a kiss, hugging him tightly. "Thank you for putting up with my shit," I tell him. "I love you, and I have no idea where I'd be without you."

My eyes feel funny, and I bite my lip as I blink. Mav chuckles even as his eyes get glassy too. "Same, Baby," he rumbles. "Now go shower before you run out of time."

Smacking my ass as he pushes me away, I chuckle as I head to the bathroom. A shower sounds really fucking good now. I'm such a good boy, my cock is already rock hard just from a single spank.

I need some time with my hand and a replay in my mind of how gorgeous Layla was earlier as she was having her sweet ass punished for being a brat.

I didn't make my presence known, but the guys knew I was there the entire time and then they offered me the best place of all: on my knees at Layla's feet.

LAYLA

Tyler is a machine as he hurries us all out the door. Draven hooks his arm around me, pulling our suitcases behind us, and before I know it, we're on the bus.

"Lennon is flying to NYC," Tyler says, sitting next to me with a small yawn. Damn, I'm the only one who went to bed I think. "She texted me as we were walking out to tell me. We have our own army on the way."

"I hate that I'm dragging her out of bed," I sigh. "What about the babies?"

“Lenny said that she left them with Tori and Tesa. Everyone is taken care of and good to go. How are you?” Tyler asks.

“I’m okay, kind of annoyed I have everyone running around in circles because of an overgrown manchild who doesn’t know how to play nicely in the sandbox.” I pout. Seán is pissing me off. “Egomaniac ass.”

“You’re so sexy when you’re mad.” Tyler smirks, leaning over me to claim my lips. “Be careful, don’t take unnecessary risks, and get the fuck out. Is that understood?”

Swallowing thickly as I look into his caramel eyes as he pushes up his glasses, it’s easy to get lost in them. “Yes, Daddy,” I whisper as he growls.

“Nope, none of that,” Draven chuckles. “You need to sleep, Lovely. Off with you.”

“I don’t want to sleep alone.” I pout again.

“I’m still tired if you don’t mind sharing your bed with me,” Mav says with a yawn. I’ve noticed that he tends to sleep in the bus living room a lot or cat naps. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him sleep like a normal person.

I blame these thoughts for my next words. “I don’t mind,” I squeak. Tyler raises his eyebrow at me with his lips pressed together and I wrinkle my nose at him. It’s amazing how much we can say to each other while never speaking.

“I’ll see you when it’s a decent time with food and coffee,” Tyler says aloud, kissing my nose to make me smile.

“You’re the best. I love you,” I tell him, standing to go back to the bedroom. Mav’s hand sits lightly on the base of my spine, and I find I don’t hate it.

Opening the door, I step inside while Mav hesitantly follows me. “For the record, this doesn’t have to mean anything. You can still hate me in the morning,” he mumbles as he watches me toe off my shoes and burrow into my blankets. “Lay, you look like you’re tunneling when you get into bed.”

There's amusement in his eyes as he leaves the door cracked and walks over to me. I don't correct his use of my nickname today, because I really am sleepy, and I find I hate him a little less today.

The voice that typically runs through my mind is quieter as well.

It's like when they apologized the running track that repeatedly tells me I'm not good enough wasn't as loud. I don't hate them as much, but I can't trust them yet either, which means they aren't forgiven.

"It gets cold back here so there's always a million blankets on this bed," I giggle. "The only time I'm not cold is when I'm sleeping with someone, which is more often lately."

"I promise to keep you warm, Baby," he murmurs as he crawls into bed. Grabbing the back of his shirt, Mav pulls it off in a way that makes all of his muscle contract.

Why is that so sexy? Mav has a tattoo on his forearm, but he moves too quickly for me to see what it is. I've caught glimpses of it, and it looks like some kind of bird.

Tossing his shirt away, he flicks the button on his jeans before stilling. "I can't sleep in these pants..."

"It's fine, Mav. Strip," I tease him. It was cold when I stepped outside this morning, so I pulled on a sweater. It's baggy and unflattering, but it did the job. Pulling it up and over my head, I toss it the way of his shirt with a giggle.

Mav stares at me appreciatively in my tank-top as he shucks off his pants before getting under the blankets with me. "Layla, Baby, there's like a million of these," he complains as he starts throwing them off until there's a thin blanket over us. "Come here and snuggle. If I get the privilege of sharing a bed with you, then I want cuddles."

"You're like the world's gentlest giant," I tease him as he pulls me into his arms. In the dark, it's easier to pretend things could have been different.

"I'm gentle for you," Mav says softly. My back is against him as he curls around my body, and he rests his chin on my

shoulder. His goatee tickles me as he rubs it against me. “I have to apologize for something else...”

“Hmm?” I ask as his fingers push aside the strap of my tank-top to look at my tattoo. It’s a blue songbird, and the first and only tattoo that I have. There are musical notes that escape from its mouth.

The artist I had it done with was really talented and did an incredible job.

“My pretty little Songbird,” he grunts reverently. “I never should have tried to scare you with my size. I’m a big fucker, intimidating at times, and I used it against you, because you’re much smaller than I am. I think I wanted to prove to the both of us that we were never meant to be. I was wrong.”

His arms are around my waist, and I can’t resist. I need to see his tattoo. Flipping over his right arm, I pull it up to see there’s a beautiful blue bird on his forearm. Running my fingers over it, I realize it’s a much larger version of mine.

“I didn’t have any tattoos until we went to the UK,” Mav chuckles. “I got really drunk and lost my shit not long after we joined *Pull Down the Moon*. Even the name of the band was completely different from the sunny personality you emit. Atlas went with me and had no idea I was getting this until afterwards. He refused to talk about it, but it reminded me of you.”

“If you hated me, why did you get this? It’s a larger version of my bird,” I sigh.

“Because I love you,” Mav murmurs. “You’ve always been my Songbird. I only hated that I couldn’t have you.”

The bird has the same black notes leaving his beak, and it’s gorgeous. “Why are you so dumb,” I whisper.

Mav flips onto his back, pulling me with him, so that my head is on his shoulder. “If you hated me, then I felt like I was making the right decision. There’s no way you could or should like me, because I’m clearly not good enough for you. At least, not while Atlas and I were being assholes. When you put

me on my ass and really made me see you, I started to realize it was all bullshit.”

“Why? What about that changed things?” I ask.

“You’ve always been my Songbird,” he says, showing me the tattoo again. “Atlas and I caged you with regret and lies. I wanted to free you from mediocrity, but what we did wasn’t right five years ago. Atlas feels the way I do. We’ll be anything and everything you need now.”

“What about what you need?” I ask. My eyes are getting heavy again, because Mav really is warm.

“We need our sunshine. We’ve been lost without you,” he whispers as I drift off.



“ALMOST DONE,” Lennon murmurs as she does my hair. My bus has turned into ground zero for planning our night at *The Library*.

“Can I come in?” Greg is a family friend and often runs mercenary work in conjunction with his jobs for the government. I once heard Roark say he may as well be a ghost because there aren’t any records of him having worked for the government. People still whisper his name though because he’s lethal.

“Sure,” I tell him. I’m dressed in a blush and white cream dress. Seán had Tyler pick it up from a designer store, insisting that I wear it. Tonight must be pretty damn special for him to be micromanaging everything.

“Perfect, thanks,” Greg murmurs, stepping inside before staring at me in awe. “Damn, you look amazing. Can I ask where your weapons are going in that?”

The dress is a tulle and appliqué flower monstrosity. Don’t get me wrong, it’s gorgeous, but it’s also very sheer in places. The dress is tea length without feeling like it’s a bridesmaids gown. It’s also a well fitted halter-top, and there’s no room for a bra to tuck a knife into. Lennon and I attempted it.

“Her hair,” Lennon says calmly, holding up an exceptionally sharp bobby pin. I’m trained in using a garrote, but my sister doesn’t want me to be that up close and personal with anyone for as long as it takes to strangle someone.

The thought turns my stomach a bit, though knives don’t bother me.

My bobby pins are a happy medium because they’re very long and sharp, helping to hold my hair up in a chic chignon. My earrings are dangly rose and clear beads, and my shoes are dark rose pumps. If I have to make a run for it, I will be sacrificing them because they’re very tall.

“Good,” Greg mutters, crouching in front of me. I feel as if he’s gearing up to give me a pep talk, like you would before a big game. “Seán is announcing that his daughter, Líadan, is his twenty-three year old heir tonight at the club. Her birthday is tomorrow, and there’s been some speculation as to who he’s going to be naming. He’s hoping that you’ll help ease his announcement with your performance, because it likely won’t go over very well. He doesn’t have any sons that lived, and he refuses to name anyone else. She’ll likely need to take a husband or have a son to keep her position in the family.”

Chewing on my lip, I read between the lines. When Seán dies tonight, she’ll become the new mafia boss. Shit.

“I see what you’re thinking, Líadan is strong, she’ll be fine. Seán fucked with one of my favorite people. Odds are, she won’t follow you for this ridiculous debt,” Greg scoffs. “She’s known for being a hot head, but attempts to be fair. My concern is getting you out of the club afterwards. The people who are going to be there tonight...”

Lennon has me turn to face her so she can start on my makeup as she continues for him. “These are the heads from the other Irish crime families who are waiting to see who will be Seán’s heir. It may be her debut appearance, but they don’t know that. He’s guarded his daughter for years, training her for this moment. It’s why he’s panicking. Some of these people sell people, Lay, and you’re stunning. Seán is desperate...”

“If he tries to throw you to the Goddamn wolves, strike first and run,” Greg growls. “He’s been unstable for a few years. I looked into him when Lennon asked me to, and I think he has undiagnosed bipolar disorder. He’s always been paranoid, but it’s getting out of hand lately.”

“Close your eyes, Lay,” Lennon murmurs, lifting a shadow palette. I do as she asks, and I can feel the whisper of her breath as she picks up where Greg left off. “What Greg means is that a blood debt could be paid in a variety of ways. One of them is to sell you to some of the sick fucks out there, because he’ll be able to show how valuable you are. Pretend you don’t know why you’re there. Perform, go pay your respects to him and his daughter, and kill the fucker.”

Mind reeling as Lennon does my makeup, I realize how deep I actually am right now.

“Do the guys know?” I rasp. I know they know some of this, but I doubt they’d be okay with this.

“No,” Greg grunts as Lennon tells me to open my eyes and applies false lashes. “I don’t think you’d get within ten feet of the club if they knew.”

“Tyler could probably handle it,” I admit. “He’s seen me train with you and Lenny. The others... not a chance.”

“I can see that things are different with you now,” Lenny murmurs. “Tesa sent special tea just in case they were still douche-canoes.”

Giggling, I cover my mouth. Thankfully, she’s just about finished. “I would have taken you up on that yesterday.”

“Hmmm, do I want to know?” Lenny asks.

“Atlas has a really good tongue game and looks good on his knees,” I tell her as I laugh.

“Thank fuck they finally made you come!” Lenny yells. There’s silence on the other side of the door and she shrugs. “It doesn’t mean I’ve totally forgiven them. Roark and Turner may still beat the shit out of them.”

“Ooh, Mav got kidnapped! So maybe just beat the shit out of Atlas,” I tell her, loud enough that I know they can hear me outside.

“Layla,” Atlas groans. “I’ll totally let Roark and Turner take their anger issues out on me if it makes you feel better.”

Lenny rocks her head back and forth with an amused expression. “I’ll give it a seven out of ten, Lay. Alright, it’s time. I have an invite to this thing, so I’m going to go with Roark. We’re going to channel our inner spies tonight,” she says. “Greg will be lurking with Turner, Derek and Orion. We’ll try to get at least two of them in as your instrument crew. There’s also a camera in my pin, so they will see what I do in case that doesn’t happen.”

Lennon is wearing a sexy black pants-suit without a shirt. There’s a beautiful pin on her jacket, and she’s wearing gorgeous red-bottomed heels. I noticed Roark was also dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, so they’ll fit in perfectly.

“Alright,” I tell them, standing as I smooth out my dress. Seán may be a dick, but he has exquisite taste in clothes. “Let’s topple a king from his empire tonight.”

Twenty-Seven

TYLER

Layla has her head held high as we walk off the bus and she smiles as we approach the back door, where a bouncer is standing. We already left Roark and Lennon at an intersection ten minutes from here so they could arrive by cab.

“Name please,” the bouncer says, bored, staring at the bus in disinterest.

“Layla Campbell,” she answers blithely. The bouncer straightens faster than expected, nodding.

“Mr. O’Brien has been eagerly waiting for you all,” he murmurs. “Do you need help with any equipment?”

“We have a crew that can bring in my things,” Layla says airily with a smile. It’s her borderline airhead tone that makes my eyes narrow. I don’t know the entire plan, and I’m quite certain there’s a reason for that I won’t be pleased with.

I hope my little flower is ready for another spanking. Fuck.

If there’s one thing I won’t be doing, it’s not backing up my girl.

“Will that be a problem?” I ask. “Some of it has to be positioned appropriately or it could be damaged or affect how the band sounds on stage.”

“No, it’s not a problem. Everything has to be perfect tonight,” the bouncer says, swallowing hard. “Please tell them they’re welcome to come in and set up. The boss would like to see you first, though.”

Layla stiffens a bit, and Draven, Mav, and Atlas watch her carefully. Good, I’m not the only one realizing our girl is keeping secrets.

“That’s acceptable,” she murmurs. Turning, I raise my hand to Turner and Derek. They’ll be the easiest two people to get in with the equipment since they’ll know what they’re doing. Greg and Orion will stick out like a sore thumb, unfortunately, since they haven’t set up our equipment before.

The bouncer lets us in, handing us off to someone in a black suit who looks familiar.

“Hello Cormac,” Layla murmurs as she looks up at him.

“Good evening, girlie,” he mutters. I remember him now as the man who gave her shit outside of Seán’s club in Chicago. Fantastic. “This way, then.”

Following him, I look around as we walk through the carefully lit hallway. It still manages to seem dark, since every four feet has a recessed spotlight. Taking a left, I look out on a sea of important looking men and women as we walk up an aisle together.

Layla looks like a queen as she pretends to ignore everyone around us.

However, I know she sees the woman on a leash on her knees by a large man who casually looks her over. Layla has a tell that only I know, which is when her fingers twitch from stress.

This group doesn't discriminate with their sex slaves though, because a woman has a bound, naked man on his knees in front of her while he pleasures her. *Who the fuck did Seán invite?*

"Layla." Seán grins when he sees her. He's seated toward the back of the room where he can see everyone and everything. There's a beautiful raven-haired woman next to him who watches Layla carefully.

"Seán," Layla murmurs. "How are you? Quite the crowd tonight..."

His smile never falters as he turns toward his daughter. "It's all for my daughter, Líadan's, debut. The Irish families want to meet my heir."

"It'll be interesting to see what they think when they find out she's a woman," Layla says mildly. "It doesn't matter how capable you are to some people, they'll still underestimate you."

Atlas and Mav wince before smoothing out their expressions. I know my little flower is speaking from experience, but I know a lot of people underestimate her.

"Why do I like you?" murmurs Líadan. I don't like how she says that as her intelligent, forest-green eyes move over Layla. My eyes slowly move over the crowd, looking for potential threats.

Something is very wrong here.

"I said the same thing to her the other day." Seán beams at his daughter.

"Where is my uncle?" Layla asks idly. She's very calm throughout this all, which makes the back of my neck itch.

"Uncle?" Líadan asks.

“Jordan.” Seán shrugs. “He has a niece, and she’s a murdering pain in the ass.”

“Don’t hurt me, and I won’t have to kill anyone,” Layla says nonchalantly.

I really think it’s that simple for her.

“I need to check you for weapons,” Seán warns her. “I very much love this dress on you. I would hate to strip you naked before your performance.”

“You’re an arrogant dick,” Layla comments. “Go ahead and check for weapons. If your hand moves inappropriately, I will break your fingers.”

“The tiny pixie is feisty,” Líadan observes as Seán begins to check her for weapons. Layla flinches when his hand goes up her dress, and Mav growls so loud, Seán pales. “Don’t be a pervert, Daddy.”

“I’m not, hush,” Seán says, rolling his eyes before he stumbles as he stands. “I’m interested to see what other commands I can get you to follow.”

“Jordan is coming now, look,” Líadan tells us, looking over our shoulder. Moving carefully so we can still watch the O’Brien’s in the indicated direction, I see Jordan moving down the aisle to us.

His features look pinched when he sees Layla, and I decide I’m right. Something is fucking rotten. Draven shifts forward so he’s standing just in front of Layla, forcing Seán to step back.

“Your men are so protective,” Seán sneers. “I’m surprised your uncle lets you spread your legs for so many people.”

He times his words to be overheard by Jordan, who simply raises his brow. “If you’re insinuating my niece is a whore, then she’s been called worse things than that by her own father. Layla loves hard, and who she chooses to share her body with is absolutely none of your concern. Don’t you have better things to do than attempt to bait me?”

Jordan sits next to LÍadan without another word, and her mouth drops as she looks between him and Layla.

“You can see the family resemblance, can’t you, daughter?” Seán grunts. “The only reason both of them aren’t dead yet is because I also like them.”

“Please threaten to kill me again,” Layla surprises me by saying, baring her teeth. “I don’t have the patience to deal with small minded people tonight.”

Seán merely smiles at her as if she’s an errant toddler. “I’m not even the most dangerous person in the room tonight, girlie. A little chit like you doesn’t scare me. I have an announcement to make, and I’ll be keeping your manager with me while you perform,” he says.

I simply stare at Seán, unimpressed by his posturing. I’ll stay with him, but I somehow don’t think I’m his target tonight. There are way too many people staring at Layla, undressing her with their eyes.

These people clearly don’t care about the value of human life. Another man has a woman sucking him off roughly in the next row, and Seán is carefully ignoring them. A whisper of unease moves through me as I agree with him about one thing: he’s not completely in control here.

“You don’t need me right now, and I want the best seat in the house,” I murmur when Layla meets my gaze. We’ve never needed words when it’s important and she shifts her eyes to the man face fucking the girl with his cock.

Grabbing her hand, I tug her to me. There’s a warning in her eyes, and I simply smile to reassure her. I can see the weapons in her hair as I look down at her. Seán is an idiot for not seeing the truth of Layla Campbell.

She won’t be taking him at his word about being safe, and my little flower isn’t going to make whatever he’s planning easy.

“Love you,” Layla mouths before Mav and Atlas escort her by walking on either side of her toward the stage. Draven follows behind her, snarling at anyone who moves too close to

her. The guests keep wanting to touch her dress, and my lip curls at the disgusting company Seán invited.

“Don’t look at them like that,” Jordan hisses. “They bite back. Sit down.”

Moving into the seat next to him almost without looking, my eyes stay glued to Layla. Derek and Turner should be finishing up the setup, and I’m hoping they’ll be allowed to lurk behind the scenes. I really don’t like the greed behind these people’s eyes.

“They’re mostly harmless as long as you throw a treat their way or two,” Líadan says in a bored tone as several women dressed in nothing but pearls move down the aisle. “They’re for hire tonight of their own free will, and will help keep the bloodshed to a minimum, I think. I suggested it to Daddy.”

The idea that prostitution will mellow out this crowd is laughable. Cormac pats one of the girls on the head and nods for her to move on, standing behind Seán. I’m not a threat to him, though I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if I was in a position to.

Standing, Seán clears his throat. The room immediately quiets outside of the occasional gag as a man shoves his cock down his plaything’s throat. Yep, this is a classy event alright.

“Thank you everyone for coming tonight. I know you’ve all been anxiously waiting for me to announce my heir, and I am proud to tell you. Directly after this, we will have a private performance by *The Midnight Lights*. Layla is bound to me by a debt, so she was more than willing to attend tonight,” Seán begins.

There are way too many people who look over their shoulders as my blonde, blue eyed flower disappears behind the curtain.

Fuck, there’s going to be a lot of blood spilled tonight. The curtain next to the stage flicks to the side, allowing me to see Derek’s dark hair as he looks out at the audience. His almost black eyes meet mine for a moment before he disappears

again. It helps settle me a bit, knowing Layla has back up who will kill for her.

Forcing myself to pay attention to Seán, I catch him in the middle of his speech. "...future of the O'Brien family will lay in the capable hands of my daughter, Líadan. She will be taking a husband soon who will be her right hand as she navigates a world she was born into. I hope everyone will accept her, but know she will need to earn her place," he says.

There's a mixed reaction as everyone takes in the news, but none of it is positive. A part of me wants to shift closer toward a woman I don't even know, despite who her father is and what he's done.

I'm naturally a protector, but never have I had such a strong reaction toward a virtual stranger. The predatory looks they give Líadan, as they watch her, as she stands in a black dress next to her father is worrisome.

A part of me wonders how long she'll survive after being named heir.

Jordan watches everyone carefully, I notice, noting how they're reacting. He's always been good at reading a room, and this is no different. I can see why Seán doesn't want to cut him loose, but he is not part of their world.

Jordan Miles doesn't belong here.

Jordan's face is a perfect mask as Líadan steps forward. "My father has been careful to have me avoid parties since I was a little girl and someone tried to assassinate me," she says, meeting the eyes of what I assume are key players in the room.

Some of them snarl at her, while she blows them a kiss. "While I have been training in the wake of my brothers' deaths, I know I will need to take a husband to help me navigate this world. It is not because I am weak, but because this is how you all believe it should be done, so I will bow to our traditions. It is the only time I'll bow, so don't get used to it."

Líadan tosses her straight, shiny black hair over her shoulder, and I relax seeing she's just as much of a predator.

This girl doesn't need protection, at least not from me. I can see Jordan thinks differently though as he sits rigidly next to her as she resumes her seat.

"It is time for the entertainment and auction part of our evening," Seán says smoothly. My brain starts to catch up as I start to put together everything I've seen tonight so far. I'm too slow. Fuck. "The blonde will make a beautiful addition to anyone's human menagerie as their personal songbird and fill my coffers with the money from the blood debt she owes me. Your bids will be collected by the men on the ends of each row."

I can feel my blood pressure rising as the men assigned for this task move to stand at the end of each row of people. That's an awful lot of manpower, and it makes me grit my teeth in annoyance. My eyes find Lennon and Roark for a moment closer to the stage before moving on, not wanting anyone to notice that I know them.

As the noise level triples with excitement, Jordan leans forward to speak to me. I'm the hired help as Layla's stand-in manager, so I'm dressed comfortably in a pair of dark jeans and a gray sweater. I pushed the sleeves up ages ago, and the blue and white flowers I had tattooed there six years ago creep up my forearm. Now, they remind me of the little flower I was waiting to come into my life.

Jordan's breath whispers across my skin as he whispers urgently into my ear, "Keep it together, man. Layla knows exactly what a blood debt means thanks to her sister. I caught her as she was coming into the club earlier. Seán needs a diversion and to show that he still maintains the old ways. Unfortunately, this will probably be the last thing that he ever does. No matter what happens, tell my nieces I love them."

The moment passes before I can ask any questions, and everyone around me gets comfortable as the curtains open. Layla looks terrified for half a second before she takes a breath and forces herself to look indifferent to everything around her.

Something must have happened just now for her to be unable to force a smile to her lips.

Draven, Atlas, and Mav look angry as they pick up their instruments. Layla picks up hers as she looks out into the crowd, and I can see the moment she becomes more than herself. This is the Layla she gives to the world, while I get an entirely different person.

“Congratulations, Líadan, on your debut. There’s nothing I love more than a little girl power, wouldn’t you say?” Layla winks in the direction where she would be, and I know the lights from the stage would make it difficult for her to see past a few rows of people.

With the caliber of garbage humans in the room, it’s probably for the best.

“This next song is called, *Just a Pretty Face*, and it’s one of my favorite songs,” Layla says. It’s one of the songs she also sang at O’Malley’s during what feels like a lifetime ago, even though I know it wasn’t.

Jordan’s lips twitch in amusement as Layla starts to sing, and I know that no matter what happens tonight, her uncle has never stopped rooting for her.

Twenty-Eight

LAYLA

Séán lied. It's not really a surprise, but Bruin was waiting for me when I walked backstage. Smiling cruelly, he yanked me away from Atlas and Mav, despite their snarls to leave me alone. While sweet, there's not much I can do right now.

I have a job to do as a performer, so everything else is on hold until I do it. It's part of the plan, and one I have to do no matter what. So I let this brute dig his fingers into my arms, lifting me until we're face to face. Bruin is so damn tall, it's ridiculous.

“How does it feel to know you'll be someone's cum whore very soon?” Bruin sneers. “Your pretty voice is going to make

us a pretty penny as we sell you off tonight. Thank you for making it so damn easy.”

“I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself, Bruin baby,” I tease him. My heart is beating hard, and the bravado I’m showing the world is definitely not what I’m feeling. My hands are trembling, something I need to control so I can play my guitar tonight. “If I don’t play, no one will bid. I know math may not be your strong suit, but one plus one definitely equals two.”

Growling like an animal, he snaps his teeth in my face. Inhaling quickly, I choke back a scream. I refuse to flinch in front of this man.

“Get your girl in check,” he yells at the guys before he fucking throws me at them. Closing my eyes as I prepare to fall, strong arms catch me, holding me as if I don’t weigh a thing.

“He’s gone, open your eyes, pretty girl,” Mav murmurs in my ear. “You’re entirely too brave for your own good. I think I’m getting gray hair.”

Gasping in a breath as my chest heaves, I look up at his warm, amber-colored eyes, wrapped safely in his arms.

“I’ll always catch you,” he winks as he carefully puts me down. “I’m sure you have a plan, maybe clue us in so we stop panicking, okay?”

Swallowing, I look around, finding that we’ve been abandoned in the wings for a moment. I’m sure everyone thought Bruin would stick around longer than he did. Sometimes it pays to be a pain in the ass.

“Seán is going to find that he fucked with the wrong girl tonight,” I tell him with a smile as I adjust the layers of my dress. “I love these shoes, but I’m probably going to have to leave them behind when we make a run for it later.”

I’m wistful as I glance down at them. I’m trying to keep my mind on the present, so while this is a really dumb thing to be focused on, it helps beat back the terror of walking out onto that stage.

This isn't stage fright by any means, but it comes from the knowledge that people will be bidding to own me. Bruin is an idiot if he thinks I didn't hear Seán's announcement, my ears work just fine.

I'm not surprised the guys are begging for details on our slightly unhinged plan.

"Layla, I'll buy you a million fucking pairs of shoes," Atlas promises, worry pinching his features.

Draven rolls his eyes as he glances at him. "Pretend the assholes are all naked, Chickie. We've got this," he promises. I think my nerves are starting to show.

Nodding, I turn, pushing past the curtain to a brightly lit stage. I can feel Mav, Atlas, and Draven's steps behind me as they make their way to their instruments. As I face the sea of darkness except for a few faces, I force myself to look in the direction where Tyler and my uncle are sitting.

Turning on my mic, I take a deep breath, channeling my inner badass. I just need to get through this one song at a time. Nothing else matters, because this is show biz.

The words leave my mouth of their own accord as I congratulate Líadan on her debut into society, though personally I would never want to be a mafia boss in this world. The little glimpse I saw proves this is not something I could handle day in and day out.

I am not meant to live in the shadows, though I may flirt a little with them.

Atlas eases me into the first notes for *Just a Pretty Face* before Draven chimes in with the drums. I'm glad I have my favorite guitar with me, because I don't have to think as much as my fingers move on muscle memory. Each song I sing is about being underestimated, because I have no doubt Líadan knows exactly what that's like.

This is my way of apologizing for killing her father. There's no way I can allow him to sell me to one of these people so Seán can feel as if he's received his due. Jack should have kept his hands to himself and he'd still be alive.

As my set ends, I turn off my microphone and put my instrument down. There's no applause, no whistling, just the urgent whispers as people write things down on little pieces of paper. Feeling sick, I turn and walk off the stage with my bandmates following me.

Arms band around me, and I open my mouth to scream. "Lay, I'm so sorry, it's me," Turner whispers furiously.

Gasping as the terror continues to ride me, I close my eyes as tears slide down my cheeks. "Fuck," I whisper. "I'm fine, I swear."

"Aye, what did you think was going to happen when you grabbed her like that?" Mav grumbles as he pulls me into his arms. "You're doing so good, Little Dove. Just breathe, and then we'll get you a fucking root beer float as a treat."

The teasing makes me snicker. It's so ridiculous, but the stress is riding me hard. Damn, the sugar in that sounds really fucking good.

"She's not six, Mav," Turner chuckles. "Wait, are adrenaline crashes getting you like your sister, Lay?"

Knowing he just put two and two together like a good boy from the bemused look on his face, I nod. "I'll be a little twitchy, but I can make it through," I promise. "Everyone where they need to be?"

"Derek is letting O and Greg in the back door now." Turner grins. "Don't take any unnecessary chances, please."

Giving Mav a quick hug, I step back with a smirk. "I'll do my best," I tell Turner as I walk toward the stairs. Cormac is coming up to get me as my heel hits the top stair, and he sighs heavily.

"You sure are taking your sweet time," he grumbles.

"Where am I going to go?" I tease as Cormac lets me pass by him. Cutting the guys off from me, he barks over his shoulder, "You all aren't needed anymore, go pack up."

The growls behind me make the hair stand up on my arms, but I just raise my hand to them and wave. It makes sense that

Seán would want to separate me from the rest of the guys. Forcing myself to breathe, I walk up the aisle to where the lights have been turned on. The eyes of every single monster in this room are on me, and I can see that their bids are being collected.

Their money won't mean shit when Seán is bleeding out in a few minutes though.

The mafia members aren't being quiet now as I walk by them, openly staring at me.

"I wonder if she sighs as pretty while she's being stuffed with cock," a man with long, black hair sneers as he reaches over to squeeze my calf. Almost stumbling, I pivot and kick him hard.

"No touching," I tell him, smiling as he gasps in pain.

"Real cute, girlie. You're a fucking menace," Cormac mutters as he pushes me along ahead of him. "I wonder which one of these bastards will manage to get you to heel. Though, I can't say I like the boss' plan one bit."

Interesting, I focus on that instead of the predators salivating about my creamy skin, and speculating on how tight my cunt may be. Dicks.

"I thought you'd approve of his decisions, especially for the mouthy girlie." I smirk.

"Maybe, but this crowd even gives me the heebie jeebies," Cormac says before we turn down the row where his boss is holding court.

I can't see a single friendly face, as even Tyler isn't sitting next to them anymore. Fuck me.

"There's the pretty songbird," Seán crows as I stand in front of him. I'm utterly unimpressed, staring dispassionately at him.

"It seems I'll never have to deal with you ever again, so I felt like that's a plus." I smirk. I want to push his buttons, make him lose his shit.

I can hear Cormac grumbling to himself before he stomps off and it's just Jordan, Líadan, Seán, and myself at the back of the club. It seems Seán did this strategically so no one could hurt him, but all of his men have left him for the moment with the tiny blonde.

I can practically feel the stress vibrating off of my uncle, and I'm proud of his restraint. Anything that happens from here on out is on me. Getting out of here alive may be a group effort, though.

Deciding that's a problem for the 'me' in the future, I continue to needle Seán. "So what, you're throwing me to the wolves for your daughter?" I ask, rolling my eyes. "I mean, I guess that's noble in a way, but I still think you're a coward."

"You shut your mouth," he growls, grabbing my hair and yanking me toward him.

I hope he can't feel how sharp my pins are. I can feel them shifting against my scalp and pretend I'm trying to pry his meaty fingers from my hair as I work on carefully getting a pin out of my hair. I can hear Líadan's hissed demands that her father let me go, but push them to the back of my mind.

I need to finish what I started. Sorry, Líadan.

"Make me," I tell him, letting loose a hysterical giggle as I manage to pull loose my weapon. Lenny made sure to secure it all first before pushing the weapons into my bun. It would suck to show my hand too quickly.

"Stupid bitch! Oye, Cormac, start tallying up the bids while I teach this little girl a lesson. I want to know who will get the pleasure of breaking her in," Seán snarls, yanking me closer to him. My scalp feels as if it's on fire, but I'm close enough to slap the mafia boss, so I do. The gasps are enough to make me smile inside as he backhands me.

"Daddy, stop!" Líadan cries out, and I don't have the heart or the time to warn her he won't stop. I can't afford him to. I need to be a little closer as I hide the pin in the palm of my hand, as I touch my throbbing cheek with the back of it.

“So very weak,” I murmur as I push my knee between his legs to rest on the chair. I’m going to need a little leverage for this, after all.

“Women are weak,” he hisses. “I will be pulling the strings while my daughter does whatever I fooking tell her to do.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. Pushing myself up onto my knee as he pulls my face closer to his so I’ll hear him, I move my pin into position. “Why are fathers such a disappointment?” I ask. I honestly want to know, but I need just a little more leverage...

“Because you put too much faith in us and we are simply men,” he growls.

“Tianna McCall is the winning bid,” Cormac yells out just as I plunge the pin deep into Seán’s neck. *Looks like it’s just about time to go.* His eyes widen and blood bubbles along his lips are the only sign that he’s been wounded as I wrestle his fingers out of my hair and pull another pin from it.

Unfortunately, I pull out the wrong one, and my hair tumbles down my back as I stab him again for good measure in his trachea, pulling up to tear it. I’m sprayed with blood, but I don’t pay attention to it as I stumble back.

Líadan’s eyes are wide as they fill with tears, but they’re also hard and I know she heard her father’s words.

“I’m sorry,” I mouth as I glance over to look at my uncle as my feet start to move. Something tells me he won’t be able to come with me now, either.

“Go, Lay, and don’t look back,” Jordan roars at me as I turn and start to run. The heels give me a little difficulty and then I’m flying as the room explodes into screams and accusations. My hands run through my hair to pull more weapons, and I scream as a gunshot goes wide over my shoulder. I can feel the heat from the bullet, but keep running.

One of Seán’s goons grabs me around the waist, lifting me up, and I scream. The time for being quiet is over. I am not too proud to take help from my big sister or her husbands right now. I’m all alone in enemy territory.

Kicking and elbowing, I ignore how my head swims from Seán's earlier blow. Using my blades, I stab and slice, though it's hard to get anywhere vital. The goon grunts as he lets me go, and I whirl around to see Lenny grinning as she stands behind me. "Let's get the fuck out of here, Lay."

Nodding, I blink back my tears from how fucking exhausted I am. I just hope everyone else is okay, because I have no idea where they are.

"Tyler?" I ask as I grab her hand to follow her.

Lennon shakes her head as we run. "I haven't seen any of the guys, but Orion, Derek, and Turner will make sure everyone gets out. You're my priority right now. Roark is clearing our exit with Greg," she explains.

Lenny clears our path as we run, slashing and stabbing anyone who gets in our way.

"Layla!" I hear someone scream my name. I shouldn't turn, but I start anyway. I lose Lenny's hand as I do, and come face to face with Bruin aiming his gun at me. My ankle chooses to roll as he pulls the trigger, and everything feels as if it's moving in slow motion. The world bleeds of all sound as I begin to fall, helpless to move out of the way.

Atlas is running toward me on my left side, but I don't think he'll be able to help. Tears stream down my face as I realize I'm not going to survive this. Everything was for...

A tank hits my body just before the bullet does, and I scream. It's as if the world jump starts again as I feel Atlas' body jerk as the gunshot meant for me hits him.

"Help me up, I'm fine," he growls as he forces himself to his knees. Yanking off these cursed heels, I struggle to help him up, and then O is next to me.

"Bruin is dead," he reports as he shoves his shoulder under Atlas and pulls his arm around him. "Keep going, Layla."

Nodding even as it feels like my heart is going to explode, I keep going as a war zone continues around us. Lennon is waiting for us in the hallway entrance, eyes panicked. "What the fuck," she asks as she watches O help Atlas.

“Bruin shot at me, and Atlas tackled me out of the way,” I whimper. Blinking hard, I can’t keep it together anymore. Lennon hugs me as we follow O and Atlas down the hallway.

“It looks like it’s just his shoulder,” Lennon whispers in my ear as we run. “Greg will be able to tell better on the bus. Atlas is too much of a surly bastard to let a bullet take him away from you.”

Realizing this is her way of saying that she forgives him, I sob as I keep my arm around her waist. I can barely see due to my tears, so I definitely need her reassuring presence. Greg and Turner are waiting for us at the door, keeping it clear as he shoves it open for us.

“Everyone is clear,” Greg reassures me. “Derek and Roark are currently struggling to keep Tyler, Draven, and Mav on the bus, so let’s get the fuck out of here, yeah? Roark had to switch spots with Turner because he’s just a bigger bastard.”

Running barefoot across the parking lot, I thank God we relieved our bus driver of his duties as soon as we got into the city. There’s no combat pay big enough to explain tonight away. The doors open as Lennon and I get on together and Orion practically carries Atlas up the stairs.

Turning, I dash away my tears. “I can’t believe you did that,” I wail as Orion pushes him into a seat and pulls off Atlas’s shirt.

“I’d do anything for you,” Atlas grunts as Orion puts pressure on the wound. Mav runs out with Tyler and Draven, looks of concern crossing over their faces. “I’m fine, guys.”

“I heard what you said,” Mav says quietly as he pulls me into his arms and watches Atlas carefully as Greg turns on the overhead lights to work on him. Derek moves around us, and I lean into Mav, knowing that the bus will start moving soon.

“Hold on, we gotta go!” Derek says, getting into the driver’s seat and closing the door. Bullets start to hit the bus, making me flinch as Derek slams on the gas. “Holy shit,” I squeak as Mav holds me tightly. Everyone else hangs on as Derek maneuvers this beast of a vehicle.

Thankfully, a car chase isn't in our future as he turns the bus around the corner.

"How much trouble am I in?" I ask, wincing.

Greg snickers as he finds an exit wound and starts to patch Atlas up. "You're damn lucky," Greg grunts to Atlas before glancing at me. "I don't think Líadan is going to be interested in revenge while trying to bury her father and solidifying her position, Layla. What exactly happened?"

"Seán told me Líadan was a puppet for him as heir and it was basically a power move," I murmur, struggling to remember. "I'm pretty sure she heard what he said just before I buried my pin in his neck. Jordan told me to run right after. I think he's valuable enough to her that he'll be okay. I'm so angry for her, fathers are supposed to be better than this."

Lennon swallows hard next to me, Roark's arms wrapped around her. It looks as if our men aren't going to be letting us out of their sights for a while. I can feel blood on my face and my once beautiful dress is a mess. Lennon looks just as bad, and our hands are covered in blood.

Fuck, it's like a really bad horror movie.

"They aren't always as good as they should be, Lay," Lennon reminds me. My dad would lose his damn mind if he knew I was in love with four different men...

Woah. The room spins as I realize I'm in love with these men. Atlas took a bullet for me...

"I don't feel good," I whisper.

"Woah, Little Flower, come sit. Do you want water or soda?" Tyler asks, sitting as Mav carefully moves me into Tyler's lap.

"I don't know," I moan. "I'm going to get blood all over you, though."

Ignoring my words, he lays my head on his shoulder. "So we burn everything we're wearing later," Tyler chuckles. "I heard my girlfriend was a badass and needs a hug."

Lennon moves to grab a soda from Draven, who was already moving to get it when I said something.

“You were a total badass,” Lenny smirks, handing me the open can. “Just like we planned, huh?”

Nothing about this went according to plan, but it makes me burst into laughter with her. If a tear or two escapes for the fact that I had to leave Jordan behind, no one mentions it as Tyler holds me tightly.

Twenty-Nine

TWO WEEKS LATER

TYLER

Staring out at the turquoise water as I walk with Layla alone down Myrtle beach, I think about how close I was to losing everything. I called the label the day after we met with Seán O'Brien and canceled the next month of shows. We'll reevaluate afterwards to see how Atlas feels about playing.

“Penny for your thoughts, baby,” Layla murmurs as she snuggles into my side.

“I’m really glad Seán is dead,” I grunt. “I died a thousand deaths watching you on stage, but I’m glad it’s done.”

I got up when I saw Cormac walk up to the stage. I didn’t want to get in her way, so I helped Derek smuggle in Orion and Greg and then went to the bus to make sure no one could use me against Layla. If I was sitting next to Jordan, I know Seán would force my girl to quietly go with her buyer.

Any scenario where I lose Layla is unacceptable.

“It got a little close.” Layla winces, wrapping her arm around my waist to snuggle in as we walk. We got up early this morning to chat, have coffee, and watch the sunrise together. “I wish I could talk to my uncle, but Greg told me that the new O’Brien heir is scrambling to hold onto her power. It also looks like I’m going to be related by marriage to Líadan.”

“Hmm,” I mutter. “It’s a smart business decision for her to marry Jordan. He’s very capable...”

“Marriages shouldn’t be forced,” Layla sighs. “I hope when things settle that I can talk to him. A marriage in captivity isn’t something I want for him.”

“I’m sure he’s giving them hell, Little Flower,” I snort. “He has to have his reasons for going along with things. Jordan seemed very in tune with the little mafia queen.”

“I didn’t want to like her,” Layla grumbles. “It made me think of how time is short. Do you think I should visit my dad?”

Looking down at my girl, I bite back a sigh. Layla’s so different than she was five years ago. She’s not who her father expects her to be anymore. I don’t even think she wants to be that person.

“Are you going as yourself or the person he wants you to be?” I ask honestly. I don’t want her to set herself up to get hurt.

Layla sighs as she looks out at the ocean. She mentioned wanting to go to the beach when the tour was going to play in

Florida, so I booked us a little house for a few days with the guys. My girl deserves a break.

“I don’t know,” Layla mutters. “Lennon has a good excuse for not going to see him after he snapped on her, but I still feel like I should go.”

“We’ll make it quick.” I shrug. “I’ll go with you, and we can choose not to discuss your three other boyfriends.”

A giggle bubbles up from Layla, making me smile. I guess taking a bullet for her made her soften toward Atlas a lot, and even Roark and Turner only insisted on sparring with Mav because of Atlas’ injury.

“It’s surreal to be in love with four people,” she sighs. This is the first time she’s admitted it to me, but I saw her have a revelation on the bus after Atlas was shot. It rocked her after everything to realize that she loves them.

“Have you told them yet?” I ask, kissing her forehead. “I’m alright leaving them on tenterhooks for as long as you want, and I’m not rushing you.”

Layla grins up at me as we naturally stop. Moving her in front of me so I can tuck her into my arms to protect her from the cool morning breeze, I wait for her response.

“I haven’t yet,” she confesses. “I’ve almost told Draven a couple of times. I don’t know why I’m hesitating. We haven’t known each other long, but there’s something about him...”

“Draven doesn’t blink at your crazy,” I tease her. “He fell for you the second you insisted on going to bat for him.”

“Yeah,” she breathes. “I keep waiting for him to get bored of me, but he just wants to know more. I don’t think he likes my dad very much.”

Snorting, I turn her around to look out at the water as the sun starts to rise. “You deserved so much more, Baby Girl. Sitting a kid at an office and leaving them for the staff to parent isn’t really what I call ‘being a father’.”

“It’s more than Lennon got, so I never feel like I should complain,” Layla says softly.

“You don’t have to complain to know what not to do as a mom,” I tell her. Watching her with Lennon’s kids makes me excited to have that with her someday. Layla is incredibly gentle and loving with her niece and nephews. “We plan to love the fuck out of you. Get ready for it. You never have to be anything except yourself with us. We’ll adapt with you.”

It always amazes me how people expect you to never change or grow as you get older. It’s the reason so many relationships fall apart: they refuse to love the person you are five, ten, or twenty years down the road, because it doesn’t fit the construct they’ve created for you.

No one deserves to live in a box, no matter how pretty it may seem.

The soft smile on her face settles my heart. Layla is in her mid-twenties. I can’t wait to see who she continues to grow into, and I know the guys are along for the ride too.

Watching the sun rise with my girl gives us the time to just be together before we go back to the bustle of our little vacation house.

MAV

“Do we have plans today?” Layla asks as she finishes breakfast. This break was what we needed. The slower pace is good for her. We can get up when we feel like it, and do whatever we want. Honestly, it feels a little odd.

“Do we need to make you a schedule, Dove?” I chuckle. Layla blushes as she shrugs. “I’ve lived by one for a long time. Vacations are weird for me, though nice,” she explains.

The weather is beautiful on the beach for late September, which decides my next words. “Let’s be beach bums today,” I suggest. “We can put together a picnic, with some drinks and hang out.”

I have a thing about feeding Layla, and I believe Tyler thinks it’s funny. He easily split making meals with me,

though the internet is my best friend for finding recipes. I can follow directions just fine.

“Lazy feels nice, though don’t be surprised if I feel twitchy after an hour or so,” Layla giggles. “It always takes me a while to not feel as if I need to be doing something.”

“We’ll keep you busy,” Atlas chuckles though I roll my eyes.

“You’re not supposed to be doing anything either,” I sigh.

“But, Daddy,” Layla and Atlas whine with a grin, making me snort out a laugh. Now that they’re not at each other’s throats they play off each other nicely.

Everyone goes to get dressed, and I do the dishes with Tyler. “Is it just me or are Layla and Atlas going to definitely be a handful together?” he chuckles.

“I’m in so much trouble,” I rumble with a happy smile. We haven’t done much over the past week but spend time together or cuddle in bed. Atlas and I don’t want to rush her, and we’re fully prepared to continue to show her how much she means to us.

Things don’t immediately change just because you said I love you. It almost feels too good to be true sometimes, like now when Tyler isn’t warning me to get my shit together. I guess I’m still wondering if the other shoe is going to drop.

“Stop thinking so hard,” Tyler says, rolling his eyes. “I have cold chicken left over from last night to make sandwiches. I’ll assemble this and throw together some pasta salad before we go.”

Nodding, I walk into the huge bedroom in the little house Tyler found. There’s a private walkway down to the beach, and this little hideaway is incredible. It was exactly what we needed after the last few weeks.

Pushing my boxers off my hips as I walk into the room, I smirk as I see Layla only managed to get undressed before Draven threw her on the bed to eat her out.

“So damn delicious,” he groans. Layla’s fingers dig into Atlas’ ass cheeks as she drops her head back over the edge of the bed to suck his cock.

“It looks as if that’s not the only delicious thing,” I tease them as I move over to climb onto the bed. Tyler will no doubt come break up the party soon, but the sight of Atlas’ breaths getting short and thready as he uses Layla’s pretty little throat makes my cock bob against my abs.

Pushing Layla’s breasts together, I give them attention as I suck and nip her nipples. Her cherry blossom scent is getting heavier the closer she gets to coming, and it makes me groan.

“Fuck yes, Baby Girl, you look so beautiful. Come for us before we all get caught,” I chuckle quietly. I’m sure Tyler won’t give two shits about this, but there’s a reason Draven and Atlas were so quiet.

“Goddamn, Beautiful. I’m so close. Come with me, Baby,” Atlas sighs, his eyes starting to roll as he eases even deeper down Layla’s throat. Reaching up, I encircle the telltale bulge as she swallows and gags.

“Mmm, such a Good Girl,” I praise as she starts to keen. “God, doesn’t she sing so pretty for us?”

The sounds of her greedy pussy sucking in Draven’s fingers grow louder as he fucks her with them and sucks on her clit. His light-blue eyes are the only thing I can see over her mound as he pushes her closer to exploding.

“Fuck yeah she does,” he growls against her clit. Layla bucks against his face, and I push down on her stomach to keep her still.

“Almost there,” I soothe. “You’re gonna feel so good when you squirt all over Draven’s face, Baby.”

Layla’s skin has a thin sheen of sweat as she shivers, struggling to hold on as Draven works her over. Her nails are deep in the muscles of Atlas’ ass, whose teeth grit also in pain because he’s so close. Going back to sucking and torturing Layla’s breasts, I also tug Atlas’ balls the way he likes.

“Oh fuck, yes, God,” Atlas whimpers as his hips rock in the warmth of Layla’s throat. “Baby, I’m trying so hard, please please...”

He wants her to come with him, so I twist her nipple hard as Draven does something that makes her scream around Atlas’ cock. Shuddering, Layla squirts hard all over Draven’s face as Atlas roars his release.

Tyler walks in with a smirk as he grabs his swim trunks. “Doing good?” he asks as he undresses to pull them on. Atlas carefully pulls out of Layla’s mouth, where she lays starfished on the bed before she opens her mouth to show him his cum.

“I’ll take some of that.” I grin, crawling up her body as I pull her back up to the bed. Wrapping my hand in her hair, I kiss her hard, sucking on her tongue to claim every drop of Atlas’ cum. “You both taste so good together.”

“I’m perfect now,” Layla says slyly.

Getting up, we’re all dressed again in swimsuits, and Lay throws her hair into a bun. Large sunglasses and a cover up finish her light-blue ensemble. I’m not the only one left drooling and wishing we could just stay home as we head outside.

“Thank you for the orgasm,” Atlas chuckles as he bumps Layla gently.

“Your shoulder,” she admonishes, eyes wide. I would say he’s milking his injury hard, but I saw his shoulder. Atlas is going to need some physical therapy that he’ll be starting when we get back from our trip. Layla is babying him relentlessly.

I guess sometimes it takes getting shot to find your redemption. That’s not to say that we both won’t continue to show Lay how much we love her. I can’t wait for her to tell us those words either.

“I’m not in pain today, promise,” Atlas says as we walk down the private walkway to the beach. The weather is beautiful, the sun is out, and it’s the perfect day for this.

Setting up with the big umbrella Tyler insisted on bringing takes time, and I smirk as I agree it was a good idea once it's all done. Now, Layla won't have a chance of burning.

Once Layla lays down on the blankets, I join her, snuggling my head onto her stomach. Tyler and Draven head for the water, while Atlas lays on the other side of Layla's body. Her fingers play in my hair absently, making me hum.

I feel like a giant house cat, and my eyes start to droop between the sun and her methodic rubbing of my head.

"I'm going to fall asleep," I mutter. "Please don't stop, I just want to warn you in case I get too heavy."

"You won't get too heavy," Layla giggles. "I can barely believe we're here. It's been such a whirlwind of a tour, and now that it's over for a while, I've realized a lot over the last few weeks."

"Do tell," Atlas murmurs. He's laying carefully because his shoulder gets stiff when he lays for long periods. The mornings are the worst I've noticed.

"I love you," she blurts out, making me flip over onto my back to stare at her in surprise. "I've been trying to find the right time to say it, and..."

Atlas winces as he sits up to look down at her. "Baby, any time is a good time to tell us that," he says in awe. There's a sheepish smile on her lips as she looks between us.

"Yeah? I know we're getting to a better place, and I kind of understand what happened..."

"Nah, we were cowards, and you shouldn't forgive us for that," I growl. "So much wasted time, I'm so sorry, Dove."

"I know," she sighs. "I may still slide into some negative thoughts. I mean, it's not going to suddenly go away—"

"It's not a chore to tell you every Goddamn day how amazing you are," Atlas rumbles. Layla looks overwhelmed as she glances between us and I get up, hauling her into my lap.

"You and Atlas are my entire existence," I explain. "It should have always been the three of us against the world, but

we fucked up. Now, we have to share you with two other bastards.”

“They’re not so bad,” she giggles as Atlas rubs his fingers slowly over her neck, making her shiver.

“No they’re not,” I agree affectionately as Draven and Tyler come back, soaking wet.

Grinning at them as Draven and Tyler’s eyes land on Layla, I can tell some fuckery is afoot. “You look awfully hot, Little Flower.” Tyler smirks as he leans over the blanket, dripping water on her.

“Wait...Tyler, no,” she warns as I lift her up for him to take her. “Mav, traitor!”

Layla continues to squeal as Tyler throws her over his shoulder as he salutes me over his shoulder. There are a few water spots on his glasses, but they don’t slow him down as his hand swats Lay’s bottom.

Draven grins wickedly as he walks backward. “Pleasure doing business with you,” he snickers as he turns and runs with Tyler back to the water.

I’m going to have a very wet girlfriend when she comes back, and I’m not at all bothered. Atlas chuckles as he lays his head on my thigh, as we watch Tyler laugh, as he throws Layla into the water as she squeals. A water fight starts up as she surfaces with a yell.

This is chaos and heaven all at the same time. My girl loves me, everything else can wait as we work our way through things.

Thirty

LAYLA

My lips curve as I think about the first vacation I've had in five years. God, as hard as it is to just relax, it was incredible.

“Aye, I like what I see. That smile tells me that I'm not going to have to kill my friends.” Roark smirks as he throws himself onto the couch next to me.

We got back last night from our trip, and I've been a little nervous about Mav and Atlas being in Turner and Roark's space.

“We're in a much better place,” I tell him honestly with a smile. “There were a lot of misunderstandings and mistakes on

both sides I think.”

“No,” Atlas barks, striding into the room. I didn’t even realize he had come into the house. He ignores Roark as he walks over to me. “I don’t want you saying shit like that when Mav and I were the fuckers who couldn’t use our words.”

Roark snorts as he watches Atlas kneel down to look at me. “You’re going to hurt your shoulder,” I mutter as I glance at it in worry.

“My shoulder is fine outside of the muscles pulling occasionally,” Atlas grunts as he wraps his arms around my waist and lays his head in my lap. “Stop making excuses for us, please? It pisses me off and I have to bite my tongue really hard.”

“It would be a shame if you bit it off,” I murmur as I brush my fingers through his spiky hair. “You’re really good with it.”

“Oye! Lalalala, that’s quite enough. I’m glad I don’t have to kill him, but give a man some warning before you start up with that nonsense,” Roark groans, smacking Atlas in the head with his huge hand.

Thankfully, he barely touches him, but it makes my lips twitch. While it may take a bit for them to find their way, I think their friendship will be okay.

Even Lennon has forgiven Atlas and Mav. Turner? I’m not so sure on that front.

Ror stands, stretching as he does. “Please don’t fuck on my sofa, that’s all I ask,” he says with a smirk as he leaves the room.

Giggling, I shake my head. Dev and Saira watch from the entrance to the living room as their father walks out, smiling as he gives them both kisses on the forehead. “Argh, come tell me everything, I’ve missed you two,” I groan as Atlas shifts to sit beside me.

“You were only gone four days,” Saira giggles as she runs and jumps onto the sofa next to me.

“Listen, anything can happen in this house in that amount of time. Give me the best gossip,” I beg.

“Aunt Layla, we’re not supposed to,” Dev teases me. Lennon is trying to get the kids not to tell non-family members things like how she and Tesa sometimes sing karaoke with Tori on the back porch.

It’s totally benign, but the little old lady at the grocery store was horrified. Judgemental old bat.

“You’re not allowed to tell strangers the tea,” I remind him. “I’m your aunt and don’t count.”

Devlin weighs that in his little five-year-old brain before grinning and jumping onto the couch with us. We spend the next half hour chatting before Mav comes to find us with Lennon. Little Senan is sleeping in his arms and my heart melts.

“Are you having a good visit and behaving?” Lennon asks, holding back a smile so she can watch them sternly. Dev and Saira glance at each other before nodding and slowly standing.

Not wanting to throw them under the bus, I agree with them. “They’re angels. I think they deserve a snack.” I grin. The little monsters cheer as Lennon bursts into a giggle.

“Daddy Ror is in the kitchen. See if you can coerce him into feeding you two,” she teases them.

“Bye Mommy,” the five year olds chorus before running out of the room.

“They’re so cute,” I tell her as Mav sits across from us and lays on the couch.

“Aye, they are. I bet they’re perfect little monsters too, aren’t they?” he chuckles.

“They really are, and they’re going to have a sibling very soon,” Lennon reveals nervously.

“Oh my God,” I gasp. “That’s amazing! Are you excited?”

“I am, I’m also in shock I think,” she says honestly. “Irish twins for the win.”

“Eh, they’ll be thick as thieves,” Atlas chuckles as he tries to get comfortable next to me.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yep,” he yawns. “Okay, I’m an old man and I think I need a nap.”

“You’re an old man who got shot and needs a nap.” Turner smirks, leaning against the wall.

Damn these men are too damn quiet.

“I just said that,” Atlas snarks back.

“It literally happened two weeks ago.” Turner rolls his eyes. “Go nap. When do you start physical therapy?”

“At the end of the month,” he grumbles. “The doctor looked it over and said Greg did a really good job, so no surgery was needed.”

“Yeah, sounds like groveling has become a dangerous activity,” Turner grunts. “What’s your next trick?”

Watching them spat at each other, I roll my lips in to hold back the words I want to say. Atlas won’t appreciate me standing up for him or Mav, and I think they need to just have it out.

“Continuing to adore Layla and show her how much I love her,” Atlas growls. “It’s not a fucking hat trick, dick.”

“Good, because you won’t get a second chance at this,” Turner says. “You’re damned lucky Layla is forgiving, but be ready to face the ultimate brat, because she can be just as bad as Lenny.”

Giggling, I shake my head. “I highly doubt that,” I tell him. “I’m an absolute an—”

I don’t get the rest of the words out because Lennon and Atlas start tickling me, which makes me squeal and beg for mercy.

“Please, I’m gonna pee!” I gasp, twisting and giggling.

“I guess we’ll give mercy,” Lenny laughs, high-fiving Atlas as I get up to go to the bathroom.

“God, now they’re working against me,” I sigh as I walk past Mav. I worried for a second that he was dozing, but he is staring intently at the little boy laying on his chest as if the mysteries of life live there.

Shaking my head, I leave them to use the restroom. Ugh, I seriously almost didn’t make it.

Tickling is my weakness. Unable to find my phone, I go back to the cottage in search of it and find it on my bedside table. Wow, I never leave it like this.

Picking it up, I start going through my messages. My heart starts to beat faster when I see a text from my uncle from an unknown number. I haven’t spoken to him since the debacle at the club. Biting my lip, I open it.

Unknown : I'm sorry I couldn't get away until now. Things have been... chaotic. I'm getting married tomorrow to LÍadan. It's complicated and I don't have the time to explain it, but I wanted to tell you that I'm alright. This isn't goodbye forever, just for right now because this world isn't safe. I love you.

Tears slide down my face, and I don’t need him to tell me not to respond to this text. I can tell he texted me in secret. Gasping as I sink onto the bed, I stare at the message for so long that the front door opens and heavy steps echo inside of the cottage as Draven comes to find me.

Unless he’s being sneaky, he tries to telegraph his movements for me.

“What’s wrong, Chickie?” he asks, sinking to his knees at my feet.

“Jordan is getting married tomorrow,” I whisper. “He snuck a text to me.”

Handing the phone to him, I watch as he reads it with a sigh. “Greg mentioned things would probably be hot there for a while,” he sighs.

“I know, I don’t have to like it though,” I mutter.

“Did you manage to get through the rest of your messages? Your phone is still vibrating. I’m sure it would be a fun party in your pants,” he teases me.

A small smile surprises me as I take my phone back. There’s a text from Mr. Laurence as well, though it’s cryptic as fuck.

Mr. Laurence: Call me, Layla.

Sighing, I hit the number for the recording label, wondering what other bullshit is coming for me. Swallowing hard, I clear my throat. I don’t want anyone to be able to tell I’ve been crying.

Draven grabs the water bottle I leave on my nightstand and I take a quick sip before the receptionist answers.

Less than a minute later, Mr. Laurence is picking up his line.

“*Layla*,” he says warmly. Though I’m sure it’s genuine, I don’t think he’s calling me to shoot the shit.

“Hi, Mr. Laurence,” I say softly. “What’s so important?”

“*Ah, I’m in a meeting with the other execs, and we’ve been talking about you and The Midnight Lights*,” he says. “*In light of Atlas’ injury, we want to pull back the tour a little and reschedule the rest of your dates for the next month and a half.*”

“That’s going to be a nightmare logistically, isn’t it?” I ask.

“*Not necessarily. Tyler has been making sure to keep your social media presence up, and your fans have been sending prayers for Atlas*,” Mr. Laurence explains. “*I don’t think they’ll mind if we shift your dates if we release a record with new songs. You’re in South Carolina, right?*”

Bingo.

“Yes, I’m home with Lennon, but Atlas can’t play,” I remind him.

“Will Turner fill in for him? You have so many amazing songs already done, it would go a long way toward smoothing ruffled feathers,” he continues.

Sighing, I know this is the right move. “I’m going to need to write at least three more songs before I can record,” I warn him. “I wasn’t expecting to do this so quickly. I thought I had a little more time.”

“You have time,” he reassures me. *“I would love to release this next month though.”*

“Alright,” I sigh. “I’ll start working on it.”

“Thank you! It will just go a long way toward helping us. We’re going to make the announcement tomorrow. Have you heard from your uncle yet?” Mr. Laurence asks.

“I did today,” I tell him. “Things still aren’t going well, though. It looks like he’s going to be stuck with the Irish Mafia for a while, and there’s nothing we can really do about it.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs. *“Keep me posted, okay? Please remember that none of this is your fault.”*

I feel differently, but bite my tongue. Hanging up, I make a face at Draven. “Looks like we’re recording an album,” I report.

Standing, he tugs me up to stand with him. “I’m making you a brownie sundae and then we can talk through that,” he says as we walk together. “Everything is better with sweets.”

I can’t even argue with that, so I follow with a nod. It’s never a dull moment around here.

DRAVEN

Layla is curled up in bed in my arms, warm and exhausted. She threw herself into creating, writing songs nonstop over the last two days, and I found she was less hesitant to share her words with us.

This record won't be a problem to record. I know it'll take some time, but Atlas and Mav have been completely focused on helping her gain confidence. Her soft snores are even adorable, confirming that I'm completely in love with her.

I'm a patient man, I don't mind fucking the words out of her.

Everyone else is sleeping, so I push my boxers off my hips and down my body, my foot wiggling a little to gently kick them off. My arm slides underneath her to gently band around her waist as I bury my nose in her throat. Her heartbeat is even as she sleeps, my every breath pulls her sweet scent into my lungs.

Layla fell asleep in a crop-top and nothing else, the blanket hides my movement as I push my hips against her ass. My cock is hard, the tip already starting to weep as I slide my other hand between her thighs to her slit, gathering a bit of her arousal.

It looks like she's having a really good dream as I watch her body start to flush.

"My beautiful, dirty-minded girl." I whisper with a smirk as I drag my finger up her core to circle her clit.

"I wonder how long she'll stay asleep," Tyler grunts sleepily on the other side of Layla, surprising me. I thought he was still asleep. "She's been working so hard."

"She really has," I murmur. Layla's hair is obstructing my view, but I can kind of see that Tyler is watching us with his hand propping up his head. His tattoos on his arm stand out in the darkness, even if I can't see all of the details. "I want to see if I can make her come before she wakes up. Fuck, her pussy is so wet."

Pushing two fingers inside of her, I smile as she whimpers softly, her hips bucking in her sleep. Layla settles again, though her skin pebbles in goosebumps. "So pretty. I'm going to fuck you while you dream delicious, filthy things," I chuckle.

Layla told us all she's been on the pill since she was twenty-one and we can officially throw out the condoms. I've never had sex bare with anyone else, and now I know I never will. Layla is my forever.

Pulling out my fingers, I fist my cock to lubricate myself with her arousal before lining it up at her channel. Lifting her outer leg a bit, I grit my teeth as I ease myself inside of her sweet pussy.

"Fuck, she's so relaxed," I sigh as I slowly rock my hips.

"Need an assist?" Tyler teases me as he moves his hand to rub and tease Layla's clit. I can feel his fingers occasionally touch my cock, but it doesn't bother me.

"Much obliged," I grunt, gritting my teeth to stay in control even as I keep my body loose and relaxed. I don't want anything to wake her.

Layla's head drops onto my shoulder as I push deeper inside of her, and she moans softly. My piercing has to be lighting up her nerve endings and her pussy clamps down on me for a moment before releasing.

My eyesight whites out as I pant, kissing her shoulder.

"That's it, Lovely," I rasp. Tyler pushes off the blanket so I can see her in all of her beauty, now that her top is also pushed up her body, to show her tits sway gently. "Jesus, I could fuck you every night like this, but I'd plug you full of cum so you could wake up to it."

"Draven are you being a kinky fucker again?" Atlas groans softly.

"Shh, you're gonna wake up my girl," I murmur. "Look at how pretty she is, getting fucked in her sleep."

Atlas and Mav carefully sit up so they can watch us. They may be rolling their eyes, but their cocks have got to be fucking hard as stone. How could anyone have any other kind of response?

Layla shivers in my arms, her lashes beginning to flutter a bit. Damn, I don't think she'll be out much longer. Fucking her

harder, I lift her leg a little higher to give Tyler more space. Shrugging, he wiggles down until his face is level with our hips to suck on her clit.

“Oh, oh fuck,” she gasps, her eyes opening to look up at me.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing, Baby Girl. Now come for me like the good, sleepy girl that you are,” I growl as I kiss her.

Swallowing her cries as her walls start to convulse around me, I feel the exact moment when she explodes around me.

“God, yes, Layla,” I yell as my hips start to lose their rhythm. Her breasts bounce as I fuck her, and her pupils are blown. She looks so damn perfect as I paint the walls of her pussy with my cum.

“I love you, Draven,” she gasps, her body still shaking with aftershocks.

My lips curl into the widest smile as I blink hard. I know I joked about fucking her into this, but I didn’t think it would really happen.

“You really mean it, Lovely?” I ask, hitching her leg over mine. Looking down at her as her chest heaves, my heart starts to beat faster as she looks over her shoulder at me and nods.

“Yes,” she rasps. “I wanted to tell you for awhile, but—”

“But what?” I ask her, searching her gaze for answers. Tyler lays back on his pillow, watching closely as he licks his lips. I wouldn’t want her cum to go to waste either.

“I was waiting for the right moment,” Layla confesses. “Waking up to your cock inside of me, seconds away from coming all over it seemed like the perfect time.”

Barking out a laugh as my eyes get suspiciously wet, I nod. “Yes, it sounds like it,” I tell her. “I love you so much. I want to wake up to you every day, and fuck you into submission every night.”

“It doesn’t sound like a bad life, I vote that you take that proposal seriously,” Atlas laughs.

Gently pulling my cock out of her perfect, pink pussy, I turn her in my arms. “What do you think?” I tease her.

“I think I need more of the being fucked into submission part.” She grins wickedly, kissing me hard and sucking on my tongue. Groaning, my hands squeeze her ass before spanking a cheek hard.

“Go on then, Baby. Go ride Atlas,” I tell her. Layla sits up, crawling over my body as she pushes him to lay down.

“Be a good boy for me and let me do all of the work,” she demands. Fuck, I think she’ll be a lot of fun as she learns all of her kinks both in and out of the bedroom. My cock twitches as if in agreement, making me smirk.

“I’m always a good boy, Baby Girl,” Atlas groans. Mav chuckles, doing him a solid by yanking down Atlas’s sweatpants. His cock pops out proudly, making Layla lick her lips.

Swirling her tongue over his crown first, Layla moans before she wraps her lips around his dick and sucks.

“Fuck,” Atlas groans. It sounds like the beginning of a prayer. I know they’ve danced around having sex, and I watch them, knowing it’ll be incredible. “You can suck my cock like your favorite ice cream cone another time, Baby Girl. I want you to ride me.”

Crawling up his body, Layla straddles him on her knees, dragging his cock up her core. Her head falls back as she bumps her clit with Atlas’s thick head over and over, until she shudders and sinks down on his cock.

“Oh fuck,” Atlas screams, his hips bucking up as his eyes roll. Layla is on the edge of her next orgasm, and I watch them closely. Tyler tosses Mav the lube as Mav moves to cradle Layla against him, and I know it’s going to be an orgasm filled night.

Fuck it, we’ll take a nap tomorrow, right?

I’m very glad we’re in this cottage far across from Lennon’s house so no one will hear Layla’s screams as Mav preps her ass with lube and his fingers before slowly filling it

with his cock. It took us a while to get here, but the journey is fully worth navigating with her. I'll gladly follow her anywhere.

Thirty-One

THREE YEARS LATER

LAYLA

My hand sits on my stomach as I look out at the dreary sky. It's January in Los Angeles and I am on my way to make some arrangements for my father. When he was institutionalized, Jordan had him moved closer to where he lives. Now that my uncle lives full time in Chicago, it's a hike to come visit my dad.

Tyler puts his hand on mine as he drives, squeezing it. "Are you going to be okay, Little Flower?" he asks softly.

I haven't been out here in over two years, not since the day I told Dad that I was engaged. I didn't tell him it was to four men, but he confused me for Lennon and started screaming at me.

James Campbell will never be able to leave Prairie Hills Mental Hospital. Every day he slips further into a mixture of dementia and schizophrenia, and is often violent.

It doesn't matter what I say to him, he doesn't know what's real anymore.

Tyler, Draven, Atlas, Mav, and I got married last year in Hawaii. We timed it so that we had a huge gap between our tours and made it a family trip. I loved every minute of it, but was happy to come home after our month was up.

There's nothing quite like sleeping in your own bed.

Looking down at the baby bump starting to show, I bite my lip. "I need to fill out the paperwork to ensure guardianship with the law firm," I sigh. "It's not a good idea for me to go see him anymore, especially while I'm pregnant, but I can make sure he's well taken care of."

Nodding, he drives me to the law firm to fill out the paperwork. Mav, Atlas, and Draven are at the hotel, waiting for us to finish so we can swing by *Music Horde Records* for a meeting on what the future of *The Midnight Lights* will look like.

With the baby coming, I know I don't want to be on the road for weeks at a time. I'm tired and would love to do a few concerts a year instead of a full tour moving forward. Music will always be a part of me, I just need to figure out how to meld the rockstar with being a new mom.

As we arrive, tears prick my eyes as he opens the passenger door for me. "How didn't we notice any of the symptoms?" I whisper, looking up at Tyler as he takes my hand to help me up.

I'm four months pregnant and an emotional mess. My hormones are wild right now, so I have no issues letting my husband pull me into his arms to hug me tightly.

“Layla, so much was happening when Lennon was taken that you couldn’t have been expected to notice anything else,” he whispers into my hair. “Please stop blaming yourself. Let’s get this over so his care is taken care of and we can move on.”

Swallowing hard, I dash away the tears escaping from my eyes as he closes the door behind me. Hand in hand, we walk across the parking lot to handle something I keep putting off.

It seems wrong not to handle it all myself, but traveling to Los Angeles for issues my dad may have isn’t feasible when I live on the other side of the country.

I haven’t even mentioned any of this to Lennon because Dad was never a father to her, and now he’ll never get the chance to be.

Fuck these baby hormones suck. Blinking away a new wave of tears, I smile at the receptionist as we walk into the office.

“We’re here to see Mr. Thomas Meyers,” Tyler says to her, sensing I need another moment to pull it together.

Jordan and I share Power of Attorney for my dad, and he is in the middle of some mafia trouble in Chicago at the moment. This is the other reason why this has to be done, neither of us are able to provide the care Dad needs.

“He’ll be right with you,” the receptionist says with a smile, nodding to the chairs for us to be seated.

This is just another decision I’m making to prepare for my future. Butterflies flutter in my stomach as I walk to the chairs before I realize that’s not what it is at all. Gasping in shock, my hands wrap around my tummy, a giggle bubbling up.

“What’s wrong, Layla?” Tyler asks. The question is almost a bark but I shake my head as I feel my baby move again. Tyler has been reading a lot of baby books and has been very worried about every step of the pregnancy. He was especially worried about us flying until my midwife swore it would be fine.

“The baby moved,” I breathe, still in awe as I look up at him. Tyler wilts in relief, practically collapsing into a chair as

he pulls me to stand in between his legs.

“Hello, Little One,” he says, kissing my belly. I’m wearing a long-sleeved lavender sweater dress and leggings because of the weather, and I know Tyler is restraining himself from getting skin to skin with my belly. “We all love you so much. Even when you spontaneously move and make Mommy make sounds like that.”

My fingers get lost in Tyler’s thick brown hair as I giggle at him. Looking up at me behind his black-rimmed glasses, I can read the relief in his eyes.

“Ooops?” I tease him, bending to kiss his lips. “I promise I’m fine.”

“Mrs. Donegal?” I hear. The five of us decided to choose a last name to take together so that we would step into our new life fresh and united. Smiling as I turn, I see Mr. Meyers is ready for us.

As we walk together to his office, I’m reminded that this is just another way I’m making strides in the direction for our family. Wishing things were different won’t make it so.

As the door closes behind me, I can only be grateful the facility Dad is at is reputable and treats him really well.

SIX YEARS LATER

The kids are playing with their cousins outside in the woods, in the new treehouse the guys worked together to make. The thing is impressive, and I have to admit that it’s really nice to live across the street from my sister and Tori and Tesa.

“Elora and Sloane are fine,” Atlas chuckles into my ear. Devlin and Saira are the oldest in the pack while Melly is at college. “Tori begged them to see the secret fort before she winked at me.”

“What do you have planned?” I giggle as he pushes me against the wall to slowly kiss me. I was seconds away from

going across the street, because while Elora is six, Sloane is only three and a wild child. She'll be the first to climb a tree with her cousins.

“Orgasms,” he grins, dropping to his knees in front of me to pull off my leggings and panties in one movement, leaving one leg hanging from my foot. “We have unofficial babysitters, and one is invested in us having time alone.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what that wink meant,” Tyler chuckles sarcastically as he sees us in the front hall. I really was on my way to go check on the kids. “We should never waste an opportunity for orgasms, though. I’m sure it’s in our vows somewhere. Mav, Draven! Want to come play?”

“Play what?” Draven asks as he walks out of the living room just as Atlas throws my leg over his shoulder and licks up my core. Gasping, I wrap my leg tighter around him to grind my pussy against his face.

“Me,” I cry out, as I hold tightly to Atlas’ hair as he wraps his lips around my clit and licks and sucks.

“In,” Draven growls. “Let go, Atlas. We have a perfectly good bed upstairs.”

“It’s far,” I whine. Now that I’ve been promised orgasms, I think I’d be perfectly fine with being fucked on the tile floor.

Atlas gives my clit one last lick before throwing me over his shoulder as he stands. I still have my leggings hanging from my foot, making Tyler snort as he pulls them off. I’m well supported by Atlas, so I simply do a little butt wiggle to mess with them. His shoulder healed beautifully after getting shot nine years ago, which means he can easily carry me up the stairs.

“Strip and show us that pretty pussy, Baby Girl,” Atlas says as he walks into our room before he launches me onto the bed. I don’t care how often he does that, I still squeal just before my ass bounces on the mattress.

Pulling off my top and bra, I grin as I watch them frantically take off their clothes. No matter how long we’ve been together, it always feels like the first time.

Turning onto my hands and knees with my hands stretched out in front of me, I moan as Atlas' big hands massage my ass. "So damn perfect," he murmurs before smacking my ass.

Tyler moves into my eyesight with a coil of rope, making me grin. "Yes," I tell him just as a blindfold is pulled over my eyes.

"Hello, Chickie," Draven says in the shell of my ear as he kisses down my back. His fingers glide through my arousal, and I can admit that I'm already embarrassingly wet. "We're going to fuck so much cum into you and then make you go see your sister for dinner while you're plugged full of it. Still in?"

Consent is so important to him, and I inhale sharply as Tyler ties my hands and wrists together before securing them to our bed frame. We had a custom bed made because there are so many of us, and all the kinky parts are creatively hidden from our children's eyes.

"Yes," I insist, wiggling my ass as much as his hand, now holding my hip, will allow. A teasing crack of his hand against my ass makes it bounce as I cry out. "Please, fuck me!"

"Be good and drown me in your cum first, Baby," Draven growls as he licks up my pussy.

Fingers grab my hair, forcing my head up, and the soft skin of a cock paints my lips in pre-cum.

"Open for me, Little Flower," Tyler murmurs. Opening wide, I suck on the crown of his cock as it disappears into my mouth. He tastes so damn good.

Together, Draven and Tyler work to turn me into a puddle. Draven makes me scream my orgasm, and Tyler is right there, gagging me with his cock.

"Fuck, my beautiful girl is so pretty," Atlas groans. I can hear sucking and licking and mewl because I want to see Atlas fuck Mav's face.

We had so many misunderstandings before, but it doesn't upset me anymore to watch them together. It was never their love for each other that bothered me, but rather, their refusal to love me too.

So much has changed now.

“Poor, Chickie, I should have known you’d want to watch,” Draven murmurs into my ear before tugging off the blindfold. Mav’s nose is up against Atlas’ pubic bone as Atlas fucks his throat roughly, grunting.

“Do you want me to make Mav my bitch?” he chuckles. Mav spansks his ass, making Atlas shiver. “Baby, you know I like that.”

“Mav is going to destroy your ass,” Tyler says goodnaturedly as he drags his cock in and out of my mouth. His hips find their rhythm as he fucks me, lulling me into a sense of security until Draven runs his cock over my heated flesh, coating himself in my release.

“Your clit is so swollen and pretty,” Draven grunts as he bumps it with the head of his cock. He teases me over and over until he pushes himself to the hilt inside of me, making me scream as I get used to his size.

They don’t worry about breaking me anymore, though they all check regularly to make sure I can take it.

“That’s a good girl,” Draven groans as his hips slam into my ass. The sounds of moans, skin slapping, and sucking dick are the only things you can hear in the room as we all get lost in each other.

Eyes rolling to watch as Atlas’ eyes close as he comes down Mav’s throat, I clamp down hard on Draven’s cock. There’s nothing I love more now than to watch them get lost in themselves.

Mav comes up for air, chest heaving. “You’re such a brat,” he gasps, moving on the bed and pushing Atlas’ head into the mattress, so he can fuck him. Cracking his palm onto his ass just to hear his hiss, Mav picks up the lubricant and quickly preps his ass.

“I hope it hurts to sit tonight, Baby,” he says sweetly as he pushes his cock inside of Atlas. The way he makes Atlas cry out makes me shudder again.

“Such a greedy girl,” Draven teases me, lips by my ear as Tyler forces my head back farther to make me swallow his cock. I love this, crave it, because even though Tyler is using me, I know I’m in charge.

It’s a powerful and heady feeling.

Draven’s thumb insistently rubs my clit, and he pushes me further up onto my knees, so that his dick and piercing hits a new place in front of me. I’m being spit roasted by my men, and I fucking love it.

Atlas groans as Mav fucks him, his hips grinding on the mattress because he’s hard again. We are definitely going to have to change the sheets. As Draven pinches my clit, driving me over the edge, my eyesight darkens as I come.

This is just the beginning of this fuck fest, and I won’t even mind being sore at dinner. At least I won’t have to worry about all the cum leaking out of me because of the plug Draven threatened me with.

The thing he needs to remember though, is that it’s not a threat if it makes your pussy clench and toes curl is it?

Our story may not have started perfectly, it sure as fuck is now though. Tyler’s amber eyes deepen as his pupils blow in desire. “Come again for us, Little Flower. You won’t get my cum down your throat, but in your tight little cunt. I want you to overflow for us,” he growls.

The low sound of a vibrator Draven finds tells me he’s serious. My clit is overly sensitive and swollen, but there’s no way I’m tapping out. As it touches my bundle of nerve endings, I keen.

My heart fills with gratitude and love for the man who’s never given up on me, the man who fell for me because I was more than he ever could have dreamed, and the men who were strong enough to admit their mistakes.

None of this was luck, but it’s all been worth it.

Afterword

How did I do? Wondering about Jordan? I promise he'll be just fine. Want to see what happens? One click here: <https://a.co/d/dHl06OZ>

If I made you cry, laugh, and curse me out...please consider leaving a review.

Acknowledgments

Oh my goodness y'all. They say new adventures take a village and this is so true.

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About the Author



Jenn Bullard is a tiny pixie author that loves to read. She has three daughters and is married to her golden retriever husband.. She is a stay at home mom with a healthy appreciation for things that vibrate. Most of the time, Jenn is ruled by her characters: they drive, she just tells their story. If Jenn could tell her readers anything: it's to follow your dreams. She wouldn't be writing if she hadn't.

Also by Jenn Bullard

Unwritten Truths duet:

<http://Books2read.com/livingwords>

<https://books2read.com/Takingchances>

Darkest Nights series

<https://books2read.com/TheDarkestChord>

<https://books2read.com/TheSweetestNote>

<https://geni.us/darkestnights3>

<http://books2read.com/darkestnights4>

Cinderella step-sister re-telling

<https://geni.us/cinderellasstepsister1>

<https://geni.us/cinderellasstepsister2>

Liadan's Code: A Dark Mafia Romance

<https://a.co/d/dHI06OZ>

Shared World books:

Isabela (Wicked Temptation Key Party): A Teacher-Student, Age gap, FFM
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<https://a.co/d/eCxPXd7>

Saved By My Buyers (A Night To Remember Auction): An FFM Friends to Lovers
romance

<https://a.co/d/0h9QHCl>

Other Works by Jenn Bullard with Amber Nicole:

FF, dark step sister: The Midnight Confessions

<https://books2read.com/TMC1>

Secret Society, Virgin MCs, RH, Taboo student/Teacher: Locked Souls Society

<https://books2read.com/Lockedsouls1>

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Forgive me Mother: A Novella

<https://a.co/d/b7eslWg>

Game of Survival: Saw retelling

[<https://geni.us/gameofsurvival>]

Stolen Eclipse: A dark Rapunzel retelling

<https://a.co/d/4KJdAi>

Elfnapped: A Cam girl Kidnapping Story

<https://a.co/d/6G2DLZM>