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MICHAEL MARIE

TAKE YOU DOWN

WHISPER ME NOTHINGS

BOOK 1

MICHAEL MARIE

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Cover Design: Haya In Designs

Proofreading: Zainab M. - Heart Full of Reads Editing Services

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*To my mom,
for passing your love of reading to me and always encouraging me to read.
Now please, close the book and do not proceed any further.*

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Mention of mass shooting (past), alcoholism, exclusion from religion, mention of a DUI (past)

Scar's Playlist

Take You Down - Illenium

Falling - Harry Styles

Vices - MOTHICA

Not Ok - Kygo, Chelsea Cutler

Take Me to Church - Hozier

I'm Tired - Labrinth, Zendaya

The Sound of Silence - Disturbed

Leaving - Illenium

Firestorm - Adventure Club, Sara Diamond

Pray - Illenium, Kameron

Killin' It - Krewella

Someone Else - Sullivan King

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6a9nzCMwmu2GOd52SfjibT?si=51ff178e418a4206>

Walker's Playlist

Burn It To the Ground - Nickelback

Teeth (Live From The Vault) - 5 Seconds of Summer

Kiwi - Harry Styles

I WANNA BE YOUR SLAVE - Maneskin

Paralyzer - Finger Eleven

Have You Found What Ur Looking For - Ashton Irwin

Sideways - Illenium, Valerie Broussard, NURKO

We Will Rock You - Queen

Slow Ride - Foghat

Beautiful Life - Disco Killerz, Delaney Jane, Sarah Charness

Need Your Love - Gryffin, Seven Lions, Noah Kahan

Love is Madness - Thirty Seconds to Mars, Halsey

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5hYw2r8a1WGHkvrRUYBgue?si=12cc2194f94b4911>

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WALKER

You'd think being a drummer I'd be used to a pounding in my head and a ringing in my ears. But standing in this brightly lit coffee shop at 7:00am on a weekday morning in the same clothes that I wore out last night, I couldn't be more miserable.

The sunglasses I have perched on my eyes can only do so much to help alleviate some of the brightness of the sun shining through the windows, reflecting off of the phones of everyone standing around me. The mob of people rushing to get to work impatiently stare down the baristas as they maneuver around each other.

No one is paying me a lick of attention and for that, I'm extremely grateful.

"James," one of the baristas calls, sliding my coffee across the pick-up counter after slipping a sleeve on the steaming drink. I straighten up from where I've been leaning against the back wall and make my way through the throng of the waiting crowd. I always use my first name when ordering in a place like this. Let's be honest; it's a basic-ass name and not very remarkable. Whereas when I use Walker, if someone is watching a little too closely and has listened to the radio for the past ten years, they might put two and two together and turn my quick trips in for a cup of coffee into mayhem.

"Thanks, man," I tell him, dropping a twenty-dollar bill in the tip jar.

The guy's eyes widen, looking back and forth between the tip and me. I see a flash of recognition before turning and getting the fuck out of there. It's not that I don't like talking to people when they recognize me, but I look and feel like shit so I'd rather get out of there unscathed and back to my

untouched hotel room for a quick nap before heading in for rehearsal and sound check later today.

The sun is giving a surprising amount of warmth for a January morning in Los Angeles and I wish I didn't have my jacket on. I've been used to the snow and cold living in Pennsylvania the past few months. With the break from touring and the holidays, I spent some time in my hometown with my folks and twin sister. I've only been back in L.A., for a week and now am getting ready to take off on tour for the next four months straight.

It was nice to visit them for a little bit, because I know my family feels robbed of my time spent with them over the years since I started touring when I was nineteen and haven't made it back very often. So, while the break from live shows and touring wasn't entirely welcomed by me, it did feel good to have some down time with them.

By the time I make it back to the hotel, I feel the alcohol starting to sweat out of my pores, and I make a mental note to send these clothes out to be washed before we head out tomorrow night. Living on a bus doesn't allow for much closet space, so I've got to keep my clothes clean as much as I can.

I give a wave to the front desk workers and make my way over to the elevator bank. It's only when I step on and the doors are about to close do I realize I have no clue what room number I'm in or which floor to go to.

Sticking my hand in the path of the closing door, I wince as it just about shuts on my fingers. That would've sent Arun, Whisper Me Nothings manager from day one, into a spiral if I showed up for the brand-new tour with a broken hand.

"Can one of you lovely people tell me what room I'm in again?" I call out, my voice echoing off the pristine white walls of the lobby. The place is much classier than my behavior at the moment, but I put on my most charming smile as I look at the front desk staff, awaiting their response.

One of the women opens and closes her mouth, before opening again, obviously questioning if she really should yell out my room number across the entire lobby. I do a quick survey, noting only one other guest in the room. The man is shuffling around the coffee bar, hunched over his cup as he dumps more than a handful of creamers in, completely unaware of the conversation going on twenty feet away from him.

I'm not trying to judge people, but I highly doubt this elderly man is going to leak my room information to any fans.

"I think we can trust him." I wink at the women. The elevator starts to

beep as I block the doors from closing. The sound shoots through my head, reminding me that those last two whiskey sours last night were a mistake.

“1826,” the taller of the two calls out, elbowing her counterpart when she shoots her a look.

“Appreciate it,” I say, tossing them both one last smile before stepping away from the doors and punching the floor number, letting the elevator finally get on its way. Taking a picture of the room number is a habit I’ve clearly lost over the time spent off the road.

The music pouring through the overhead speakers is supposed to be light and relaxing although it’s anything but at this moment. My body sways as the elevator ascends, as if it senses that I’m close to a bed to and passing out for a few hours.

I say a silent thank you when my key works as I arrive at my room. Not bothering with my laces, I kick off my black boots and strip down to my briefs in record time before sliding onto the crisp white sheets.

Being hungover is not the way I wanted to start this tour, but the anticipation in my chest last night had me convinced that just one more drink wouldn’t hurt, even after I was several past intoxicated. There’s been a lot to celebrate the past few nights and we’re only two days into the new year. But hell, it’s only day one of the tour, and I have many months ahead of me to build my tolerance back up. I may be dubbed the “dad” of the band, but that doesn’t mean I still can’t hang like I used to in the height of our party days.

I fall asleep with a smile on my face, despite the ache in my bones and the familiar nervousness in my stomach ahead of tonight’s show.



I TAKE A DEEP BREATH IN, imagining the musk of a couple thousand bodies replacing the almost sterile scent in the arena. Cigarettes, body odor, and beer combined to create the most intoxicating scent and I can’t wait to breathe in a lungful.

Standing at the back of the arena near the sound booth, I take a long look around before tipping my head back, eyes closed, enjoying the excited buzz of the crew running around getting everything squared away for the show. I can feel the anticipation stirring in my veins, palms twitching, ready to

unleash the pent-up energy I have stored up the past year.

While a year off may sound nice, it was anything but relaxing for any of us. If we didn't get our asses back out on tour like we were scheduled to, lawsuits were going to start popping out of the woodwork.

I sense Hayden lean back next to me before I even open my eyes.

"Doing all right, man?" he asks.

When I look over at him, his shoulders are stiff with tension, but the bags under his eyes have long since cleared. He still carries a bit of a haunted quality around with him like a second skin, but the time off has been good for him.

I can't help but worrying though how he will do being back out surrounded by crowds of people.

Both sets of management involved in the tour have assured us they have tightened security measures beyond what would be normal for concerts, but it was the only way we were gonna agree to sign onto this tour. Well, that and the lawsuit threats.

"Just ready to be back out there," I answer, clapping him on the back. I catch a glimpse of guilt twisting the corner of his mouth, so I move quickly to shut it down.

"Nothing wrong with the break. You needed it. We all needed it," I say, huffing out a sigh. "And I wouldn't change our decision. It was the right one. But I can't say I'm not anxious as fuck to be back playing every night, falling asleep in one city and waking up in the next. Hell, I'm even ready for the cramped bus bunk beds and living with the guys again. Like the good old days." I nudge his shoulder, earning a smile.

"You're gonna eat those words when Nikolai's spinach rots at the back of the fridge from the juices he claims he's going to make and then gets buried behind takeout and beer."

My nose wrinkles, having forgotten about the three bags that sat at the back of the fridge for months on our last tour. Sure, it smelled like hell on the bus, but after years of us on the road together, we got used to the bus smelling like shit. But it wasn't until one of Reid's hookups tried to cook us all a late night snack after a show one night and did some digging, only to find three brown, rotting, dripping bags of spinach. There was a strict no-greens policy enforced for the remainder of the tour following that.

"The girl replacing Kerra here yet?" Nikolai asks, strolling in, long blonde hair mussed from the wind or someone's hands. Hard to tell with him.

“Nope. We’re the first ones here,” Hayden answers, flicking the rim of Nikolai’s sunglasses that he’s wearing. “When’d you start wearing sunglasses inside? You’re not that famous.”

Nikolai leans back on the metal rail on the opposite side of Hayden, unfazed. “When I woke up this morning with a massive fucking hangover.”

“I did the same shit earlier grabbing a coffee on my way back to the hotel,” I say. “But it’s just like you pretty boy to show me up.”

“You’re both tools,” Hayden mutters, although a smile crosses his face as he does.

He gets two middle fingers from me and Nikolai in response.

I take in Nikolai, having not seen him much over our hiatus. He spent much of his time partying, traveling, hiking in the desert, pretty much anything but relaxing at home like Hayden. His fair skin has a golden tan to it, weathered from months spent out in the sun and further exaggerated as he stands next to Hayden, whose pale skin hasn’t seen Vitamin D in quite some time.

“Reid with you?” I peer around Nikolai, looking around for our guitarist. He, like me, is always on time. Even more of a stickler than me about it.

Nikolai shakes his head, pulling out his phone to answer a call. His expression shifts, even behind the shades, darkening as he sees the name on the caller ID.

Lauren. Here we go.

I make eye contact with Hayden as Nikolai walks off, his stride never straying from the casual confidence he holds himself with, no matter what’s on the other end of that phone call.

“I was hoping this shit was done before the tour started.” Hayden wipes a hand down his face. “One less tainted situation to start with would have been nice.”

To be honest, I’m still a little shocked that I was able to pull everyone together and get us on tour. Yeah, the lawsuit threats were a strong motivator, but getting Hayden to leave the house again, Nikolai to clean himself up enough to be responsible, and getting Reid to go along with any idea that isn’t his—it’s taken a lot to get here.

“Aye, fuck faces!” a deep voice reverberates around the stadium, loud enough I hiss as both Hayden and I clap our hands over our ears. My attention is pulled to the stage ahead of me, where Boone Maxwell has climbed up on one of the speakers with a microphone in his hand.

The man we're co-headlining this tour with. Boone's a DJ, making mostly progressive and electro house music. We collaborated with him back toward the start of our career and that song helped us reach a whole new audience with our music, one that we never would've been able to reach on our own as a pop rock band. We've kept in touch with him over the years, always promising more collaborations but between our tour schedule and his, ideas have stayed just that—ideas.

However, when we were finally beginning to plan this new tour, we knew we didn't need all the pressure that came with a solo headlining tour of just Whisper Me Nothings. We've done plenty of those in the past, but after everything that happened, we needed to ease back into things a bit. When Boone and I met up for dinner last summer, he was talking about how he was trying to adjust his next tour so it was more of a bus tour, like bands do.

The poor bastard. I used to think our schedules were bad until I met him. He spent years hopping on a plane and doing multiple shows in one day across different countries. I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

As soon as he mentioned trying to schedule a bus tour across the country this year, I immediately called Arun to see if we could do the comeback tour co-headlining with Boone. It's safe to say that Arun would've been sold on almost anything as long as he could get the four of us back out on the road.

As soon as we got the greenlight from Arun and Vik, Boone's manager, we got the dates on the book and here we are. A pop rock band and a house DJ co-headlining a tour across North America. There's supposed to be a third act as well, but Kerra, a singer/songwriter from Ireland, had to drop out just two weeks ago. Still not sure what all went down with that, but something about some copyright infringements.

Yeah, not touching that one.

"Y'all gonna get your asses over here or what?" Boone yells in the microphone, clearly unaware of the volume the speakers have in an empty arena.

Maybe he has some hearing loss from all of the years behind the decks. He may only be thirty, but he's been DJing since he was thirteen.

"Let's go." I wrap my arm around Hayden's shoulders, the two of us strolling toward the front of the stage. "Ready to be roomies?" I yell to Boone.

He not-so gracefully jumps off the speaker and sits at the edge of the stage, his stocky legs dangling in front of him.

“Didn’t Vik tell you? We got two buses for the musicians and one for the crew, along with a few SUVs for the rest of them. You know Naomi is coming with me this time, and I wanted to have some semblance of privacy with her.”

Naomi is Boone's long-term girlfriend. They met when he was touring in Japan years ago, dated long distance for a while, and she eventually moved to the States to be with him. She’s probably the one and only constant in his life and I understand why he would want to do what he can to make sure she’s happy, even if that’s as simple as having a separate tour bus.

“So, you get to share a bus with your beautiful girlfriend, while I have to wake up to this ugly face everyday?” Hayden pats my cheek like I’m a little kid he’s consoling.

Faster than he can react, I grab his wrist and twist his arm behind his back.

He shoves me, laughing as he does so. God, it’s good to hear that sound again. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard Hayden genuinely laugh.

“You break his arm and I sue you,” a monotone voice calls out from behind us. Cocking my head over my shoulder, I see Arun striding toward us, bald head shining under the stage lights. “Can’t have a bassist with a broken arm.”

Hayden uses my distraction to his advantage and breaks free of my grip, only to deliver a swift slap on the back of my head, white teeth grinning after he takes a few steps back to allow Arun to join in our semicircle.

I swear in all of the years that I’ve known Arun, I’ve barely seen him in anything but a crisp white button up under a navy suit that brings out the warmth in his golden brown skin. Even when we’ve had “emergencies” in the middle of the night where he has had to come pick me and Nikolai up from a club because we lost track of our security three drinks ago, he still showed up in a fresh suit.

“Then this is probably a bad time to tell you I almost shut my hand in an elevator door this morning,” I say.

Arun quickly surveys my hands before returning his attention to his phone that he’s been typing on since he walked up. “I would’ve sued you for the stupidity of that as well.”

Boone gives a low *oooh*, swishing his feet back and forth like a child.

“Where are the other two?” Arun asks.

“Nikolai walked off to take a call,” Hayden answers. “Lauren,” he adds to

answer Arun's unspoken question. That earns a heavy sigh.

You and me both, man.

It's not that Lauren isn't a nice person or anything. From the single interaction I had with her, she seemed like a nice enough person and very much in love with Nikolai.

But therein lies the problem. Nikolai falls hard and fast, always convinced he's found his soulmate. He falls out of love just as quickly as he falls into it, leaving behind quite a line of women whiplashed by his quick turnaround.

And Lauren is the latest casualty in his love life, however she isn't seeming to let go quite as easily. Not everyone is as willing to give up on six months invested in someone as others.

I love Nikolai like a brother, but if my sister ever brought a guy home like him, I'd kick his ass to the curb.

"Is that going to turn into a problem for me?" Arun asks, probably worried about yet another scorned lover of Nikolai's, talking to the press and a new story added to the pile of his failed relationships.

"Potentially." I shrug, playing it off, knowing full well Lauren is most likely going to be causing some waves before we're even out of L.A., tomorrow morning.

Arun cracks his neck back and forth, the sound making Boone cringe. "You guys need to get your man a chiropractor," Boone admonishes.

"Trust me, I think I pay the rent for mine," Arun grunts. "And, Reid?"

"No clue," Hayden responds.

A stagehand calls Boone over, someone in the shadows waiting with them off to the right of the stage. I crane my neck, trying to see what it's about, but the lighting is too dim offstage.

When I turn my attention back to Hayden and Arun, they start walking toward the sound booth at the back of the arena, and Hayden nods for me to follow.

"We have six hours until showtime and you still need to sound check, so one of you please get Reid's ass over here."

Hayden makes no move to reach for his phone, so I grab mine and shoot him a text to see where he is.

Out of all the guys, Reid's been the most MIA over our hiatus. Even Nikolai says he's been hard to reach, which is odd. Out of the three of us, Reid always picks up Nikolai's calls first.

I slip my phone back into the pocket of my jacket and rest against the

rails bracketing the booth in. The stage looks so far away from here, the arena one of the bigger ones we'll play in during this tour. That only serves as a reminder to play big tonight, not just in sound but the energy. I may be stuck behind the drum kit for the entirety of the set, but that doesn't mean I still can't make a production of things.

I half listen to Arun and Hayden's conversation, mostly talking about the new security measures again. We've received multiple briefs on the protocol already, but if it helps Hayden's peace of mind to go over everything repeatedly, I don't see a problem. Most of my attention is drawn to the stage, where a stagehand is getting someone mic'd up, whoever Boone is talking to, still offstage.

"We're gonna run Scarlett's sound check now if y'all wanna stick around," one of the sound engineers says as she leans over the panel behind us.

I exchange a confused look with Hayden before Arun amends, "The artist replacing the opener. Scarlett Lane."

The name doesn't ring any bells for me, and judging from Hayden's facial expression, it doesn't for him either.

"I'll stick around," I say, settling in. Hayden leans back next to me, obviously as curious about the newcomer joining the tour as I am.

"I'm going to go track down Nikolai and see what headache I may be dealing with tomorrow," Arun shoots over his shoulder as he strolls off.

The lights dim around us, leaving just the stage lights casting a white glow across the various speakers and instruments onstage.

"Ever heard of her?" Hayden asks.

"Don't think so. Assuming Boone knows her?"

Although looking toward the stage, Boone is nowhere to be seen and neither are the stagehands that were just there. There's only one lone person now, very small-looking from here, but I think even offstage, she would be petite. Her head is tilted down toward the floor, hair obscuring most of her face, not that I would be able to see very clearly from back here anyways. She's adjusting her in-ear monitor before shooting a thumbs-up toward the booth behind me.

There's some chatter before a song begins, guitar chords reverberating off of the empty seats. The intro is vaguely familiar, my brain racing to try to place it, until the most hauntingly beautiful voice rings through the stadium, immediately ripping any focus away from anything else and demanding I

zero all in on it. My attention is now transfixed on the woman in front of me, singing with a voice full of pain, as if spilling from a void deep inside.

WALKER

The lyrics sing a tale of torment and agony, but it's the ache in her voice that sells them. It's mesmerizing. It's as if you can hear her heart bleeding into each word she sings, pulling them from the depth of her being and pouring into each note.

"She's incredible," I whisper loud enough that even Hayden nods. The metal of the security rail is cool under my burning palms, tapping along on their own free will to the beat of the song. The drop is heavy and melodic, sounding very similar to something Boone had played for me a while ago.

As she's nearing the bridge, I finally place the song. Boone *had* played it for me when I spent some time in his studio with him, messing around for a few days with different genres of dance music, trying to get some creative juices flowing again during Whisper Me Nothings time off.

This version is much more polished, the vocals sound almost completely different even though I'm sure the first version I heard of it also had Scarlett singing on it. Her voice is distinct enough to place the two together in my head.

I turn my attention back to Scarlett as she sings out the final notes of the song, leaning over as if the song physically pained her to sing, before turning to the side of the stage to call a note out to the stagehand that mic'd her up. When she sang, her voice hinted at a brokenness deep inside, but now as she's talking to the stagehand, there's a confidence in her tone, and I can't decide what I'm more drawn to.

Which is fucked up, I know, but something inside of me is drawn toward the jaggedness of those broken shards I saw a glimpse of and I want to know

more. I watch as she talks, her expression focused, yet expressive. It's only then that I realize I drifted closer to the stage as she sang, because I can make out her facial expressions now. She gestures to her in-ear monitors and the guy makes a note on his clipboard before walking off.

Her hair is long and slightly curled at the ends, coming down almost to her waist. If the lights aren't deceiving me, it looks like the ends are a deep purple, the rest a jet black, matching the rest of her outfit.

I'm distracted, trying to take her in before another song begins, this one slightly more upbeat than the last.

"She's good, yeah?" Boone strides up beside me, his eyes soft as he watches Scarlett, at odds with the tense set of his shoulders.

I nod. "I'm pretty sure you played that one for me before, did you not?"

His brow furrows for a moment, trying to recall, before smoothing out and confirming, "Yeah. It's all hers though. She wanted to sell it to me, but I insisted she keep it."

"She sell a lot of her stuff?"

He nods, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Do I know anything of hers?"

"Watch her full set tonight and see for yourself."

Like I wasn't planning on that ever since I heard her sing that first note.

"Look, Walker, I'm not trying to give some sort of speech to the rest of the guys or anything." Boone turns to face me, his stare locking in on my own as I reluctantly drag my eyes away from Scarlett. His serious tone pulls my full attention.

"Scar's had a rough past couple of years..." He pauses, as if considering how much he wants to divulge. "That's for her to get into with y'all if she wants, but I'm telling you this now because I know how you and guys like to get on tour."

I blink, not sure where he's going with this.

Well, maybe I do know where he's going with this. If the state Nikolai and I were in this morning is any indication.

"I'm not her dad, but if you see her drinking, can you please let me know? She just doesn't need any shit going down right now. I'm hoping this tour is gonna be a good thing for her."

I start to open my mouth, but he adds, "I don't think she's going to, but just in case. Someone else should be watching too as I might be more distracted than I usually would be with Naomi around."

“Is there something more I should know?”

“That’s her business, but I just wanted someone else to be looking out for her when I’m not around. She still likes going out, but she...” he trails off. “Look, I know you still like having your nights out, but you’re probably the best one of the four to ask.”

My curiosity is piqued, but I don’t press for more details.

I mull over the fact that out of the four of us, Boone’s telling this to me. The more I think about it, the more it makes sense, even if I’m not exactly a role model.

Hayden hasn’t stepped foot in a club since the incident, or even gone out to any gathering of sorts. If Scarlett is going out, he’s not going to be there with her.

Nikolai is barely responsible for himself, often relying on myself or Reid to keep track of his wallet and phone.

And Reid doesn’t give a shit about anybody but himself. He’s not going to watch out for someone he doesn’t even know.

So, I understand how Boone came to the conclusion by talking to me about this.

“I’m not asking you to babysit her or anything; she’d have my balls if I did.” He laughs. “But it’s more for my own peace of mind to have someone else watching her back a bit.” His eyes shine with genuine concern as he watches her wrap up her third song.

She hands over her mic pack back to the stagehands, which means we’ll be up soon for sound check.

I hold my right hand out in front of me, offering it to Boone for a handshake. He’s a good guy. That’s hard to come by in this industry and judging from the fact that he even took the time to have this conversation shows some level of love for Scarlett.

I’m curious what their story is and how they met.

Have they fucked?

I immediately push that question out of my head, not sure why that was the first thought that came to mind with what their history might be.

Yes, you do.

Okay, maybe I do. My interest is piqued by her and I’m wondering if there may be any sort of territoriality out of Boone, even if he is happily with Naomi. He’s obviously protective of Scarlett.

But I’m not going to go there.

I walk back to Hayden, who's still standing back by the booth, now joined by Nikolai and Reid.

"Look who finally decided to show up," I greet Reid, clapping him on the back in a half hug when I reach him. I may have twenty or so pounds on him, but Reid is easily the tallest out of us, standing at 6'4". If he wasn't a musician, he easily could've played college basketball between his height and natural athletic ability.

He returns the hug, a bit stiffly, but still a win in my book. As he pulls back, a ghost of a smile touches the corners of his eyes. Even if he won't admit it, I think the bastard's looking forward to being back on tour too.

"All right, boys." Nikolai claps his hands, rubbing them together as he looks at each of us. "Who's ready for this shit?"

SCAR

Fucking cheap-ass suitcase. I knew the three-piece luggage set deal online was too good to be true, but my procrastination got the best of me and I was running out of time to get my stuff packed.

And to be fair, I didn't even know I was going on tour until about three weeks ago, so it's not like it's entirely my fault that I wasn't well prepared in advance.

I try sitting on top of the largest suitcase, tugging on the zipper with as much strength as I can manage, but it doesn't budge.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I have one suitcase that won't zip, one with a broken wheel, and one still sitting open, only half packed and I'm supposed to be out of this hotel I've been calling home for the last week in less than an hour. Maybe I should've woken up earlier to have this done before I went over for sound check a little bit ago, but I knew my days of sleeping in however late I wanted were over.

Any ideas I had of folding and packing things in nicely have flown out the window as I begin grabbing armfuls of clothing out of the closet and shoving them in the cases however they can fit. I'd like to think these will eventually get refolded or hung nicely, but knowing I'm going to be on a bus for the next six months doesn't bode well.

As I move into the bathroom to pack up my makeup and skincare, a knock at my door interrupts my haphazard dumping of products into my smallest bag. I peer through the peephole and am met with Boone's eyeball just as close as my own.

I fight a smile as I open the door for my mentor and closest friend. "You

said 6:00pm.”

Never one to wait to be invited in, Boone breezes past me and flops backward on my unmade bed. “I said 6:00pm to meet at the venue for a little pre-show huddle, but we need to get your shit on the bus before the show. And from the looks of things”—he surveys the piles of clothing, journals, phone cords, and more scattered around—“you need a swift kick in the ass to get it in gear.” He claps his hands as if that’ll get me moving quicker.

I check my phone, noting that we only have a little over an hour until this pre-show huddle, and head back into the bathroom to finish packing up my toiletries. “I’ll be ready, I promise.”

“I’ve heard that one before.” He snorts.

I shoot him a middle finger, reaching behind the shower curtain to grab my shampoo and conditioner. I zip up my bathroom bag and toss it on the empty desk in the bedroom before settling on the floor in front of the mostly packed suitcase to finish shoving the last of my clothes in.

“Now I’m going to ask you something and I just want you to know that you are more than welcome to refuse. And honestly, I feel like a dick even bringing it up, but you know with Naomi coming on the road this time and we’ve spent most of our years together in short spurts where I can carve out the time...” Boone rambles on, sitting up and sliding to lean off the edge of the bed.

“Get to the point,” I cut him off, grabbing the scrunchie from around my wrist and pulling my hair back into a low ponytail to keep it from falling in my face.

“I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind maybe for at least the start of the tour staying on the second bus with the Whisper Me Nothings guys...” His tone is guilty, even as his eyes are hopeful.

My brow furrows, unsure of why he seems so nervous to ask me this. “I don’t care where I bunk. It’s fine, dude. You and Naomi can have the bus to yourself for the whole tour, I get it.”

Boone instantly relaxes, his posture melting into the mattress below him. “Are you sure, Scar? I don’t want you to feel like I asked you to join me on this tour and kick you to the curb before we even start.”

I meet his stare head-on. “Unless I totally blew at sound check this afternoon and you’re kicking me off before we even start, then like I said, I don’t care.” And I mean it; I really don’t care who or where I bunk on this tour. I’ve never met any of the guys in Whisper Me Nothings, but since

Boone trusts them, I don't mind bunking with them. And if they suck, I have noise canceling headphones and two working middle fingers.

I move over the last unfinished suitcase, the one with the stuck zipper. "You know if you ever start feeling like—" Boone starts, but I cut him off before he can say anymore.

"I told you I'm fine. My counselor said I'm fine, Vik couldn't be happier that I'm going to be bringing her more money, and I've been sober for almost two years now. Spare me another conversation about it," I bite out, feeling tension lock up my shoulders and neck. He means well, they all do, but it gets a little grating when everyone around you feels like they need to constantly check in on how a twenty-four-year-old grown adult is doing.

A flash of hurt crosses Boone's face, so fast I almost miss it, before he's hopping up and nudging me out of the way to get this damn zipper to close.

"I got it," he says softly, like I'm a spooked abandoned animal he's trying to approach, which only further adds to the annoyance bubbling inside me.

Instead of picking a fight where deep down I know there isn't a need for it, I gather the rest of my bags up and start piling them at the door. Boone only takes a few moments of gliding the zipper back a couple inches before smoothly sliding it around the entirety of the bag. As I stand there watching him, frustrated that I couldn't do it myself but also grateful that he's here, he shoots me a knowing smile and without another word, starts pulling the larger two suitcases behind him toward the door.

As I open it up and he starts to walk past, I step out in front of him for a moment, blocking his way through. Craning my neck back, I press a kiss to his cheek and he wraps one arm around my shoulders, bringing me in for a hug.

"Thank you for bringing me on this tour with you. You know I appreciate you, even if I don't always say it." I sink into his embrace as a voice in the back of my mind wonders how long it's been since someone has hugged me like this.

Too damn long.

"I always got your back, Scar." He presses a kiss to the top of my head before pulling back, his peppery cologne clinging to my nose. I swear he hasn't used a different cologne in the six years that I've known him.

"Now, let's get this shit loaded up on the bus. We've got a tour to kick off tonight!" he booms, clearly not caring that the volume of his voice could be disruptive in this quiet hotel hallway. I shake my head, turning around to

gather up the final few bags. My scrawny arms are weighed down with way too much but there's no such thing as two trips in my book.

I take a final look at the hotel room. No empty liquor bottles and broken glass, no lingering stench of vomit, no stained sheets or ruined towels strewn about.

Progress.

As Boone starts down the hallway toward the elevator, he curses as the suitcase with the broken wheel drags like dead weight behind him.

“Of course you stick me with a dud here,” he grumbles. I huff out a small laugh because even though I didn't purposefully task him with that bag, I can't say I'm not happy I'm not the one having to lug that thing all the way down from the room to the tour bus waiting downtown at the arena.

“Sucks to be you.”

SCAR

“Welcome home, milady.” Boone extends his arm out in a flourish, gesturing to the open door on one of the three tour buses parked around the back of the stadium. He mocks a bow forward as I step onto the bus and I can’t stop the grin that catches the corner of my mouth.

Yes, Boone is being Boone. But I can tell that he’s making an effort to get me excited. I haven’t been on a tour before and even if I don’t want to admit it, I’m nervous. I’ve spent so many years writing and selling songs behind the scenes and I was happy with that. But there is a whole different kind of rush that comes with being not only the voice behind the words, but also the face of them.

The first thing to greet me as I climb up the few steps of the bus is a whiff of wicked strong cologne. It’s kind of like those stores that used to be in malls that were so dark you couldn’t tell what you were buying and had bass music pulsing through them at 10:00am on a Tuesday morning.

The second thing to greet me is two bare chested men. One is sprawled across the sleek black sofa on my left, booted feet kicked up on the cushions, a beer in one hand and a phone in the other. The other one is standing at the small dining table on the right, chopping a pineapple into quarter sized cubes.

The one cutting the fruit must feel my eyes because he immediately looks up and jumps back at my presence. He still clutches the large knife in his hand, although I think it’s from me startling him and not in a threatening way.

His brown eyes are wide, assessing me, as he says, “Can I help you?”

Before I can answer, Boone pops in behind me and the man in front of me

visibly relaxes. The guy on the couch still hasn't bothered to look up from his phone, clearly very engrossed in whatever conversation he's having with the person on the other end.

"It's okay, man." Boone throws one arm around my shoulders, the other held up at his side. "This is Scarlett." He gives me a little shake as if I'm the new kid being introduced to the class, and I use my foot to step lightly but pointedly on his toes. He lets me go and pushes me aside, shooting me one of his signature smirks.

Boone crosses the few feet over to the counter and nabs a few pieces of fruit, popping them in his mouth and not bothering to swallow before he continues the introductions. "Scar, this is Hayden," he says around a mouthful of pineapple, pointing to the one in the kitchen area.

"Hey." Hayden wipes his hands on a towel before stepping forward and offering me his hand. "Nice to meet you, Scarlett." His voice is deep but soft, like a weighted blanket.

"Scar," I correct. "Nice to meet you too," I shake his hand and try to keep my gaze fixed on his eyes, but as he pulls back, I can't help but sneak a peek at his heavily tattooed chest, admiring the artwork that spans across his body. He's lean but toned, his time spent working out apparent by the dips of definition on his torso and arms. When I bring my eyes back up to his, his cheeks are flushed and he reaches for the t-shirt hanging out of the back pocket of his joggers.

"Sorry," he says as he pulls the shirt over his head. "We weren't expecting company just yet."

I shrug. "Nothing I'm not going to be seeing a lot of soon."

He averts his gaze, running his hands across the sides of his pants before slipping them into his pockets.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say this rockstar's a little shy.

"And that one over there is Walker. Walker"—he points at the one on the couch—"Scar." He points back to me.

Walker's attention is finally pulled from his phone and when we make eye contact, his body goes rigid for the briefest of moments before he jumps to his feet. Now that he's standing, I can tell how tall he is; a good eight or so inches above my 5'6" frame.

I immediately feel myself wanting to shrink, my body canting into a submissive stance in front of this man. It's not just because he's taller than me or that his broad shoulders cut a powerful picture. It's that he has an aura

about him, a cool sort of confidence that speaks without him even needing to open his mouth. He has a presence about him that makes you take notice.

This man was *born* to have people notice him.

I straighten my spine and lift my chin, refusing the pull of my body.

“Welcome to the family.” He smiles, extending his hand and I shake it without a word. His hands are calloused and rough against the softness of my own.

I know a few of their songs, but they’ve never been a band that I’ve paid much attention to, even with them being very popular mainstream. So I can’t be certain what role Walker and Hayden play in the band, but judging by the fact that as soon as we break our handshake and Walker immediately starts tapping his fingers against his jeans, I’d say it’s a safe guess that he’s their drummer.

Unlike Hayden who moved to put a shirt on after we got introduced, Walker seems to be in no such rush. Instead, he leans against the counters and crosses his arms across his bare chest. Whereas Hayden looks like his muscle definition comes from weight training, Walker’s arms are thick, corded, and built from years of playing drums. I’d bet money on it.

His pale chest is free of tattoos but he has patchwork ink running down the lengths of both of his arms, all in black and gray.

I didn’t realize I was zoned out of the conversation until a piece of pineapple flies across the front of my face, narrowly missing the tip of my nose. I shoot a look over to my right to locate the source of the flying fruit, although I already know the culprit.

Boone widens his eyes innocently, holding up two empty hands. “Wasn’t me.”

Shooting him a look that tells him there’s no way in hell that I believe him, I look back at Walker to find him grinning.

“Something funny?”

“Did you see something you like?” he asks, puffing his chest out slightly.

Oh my god.

Is that an attempt at flirting?

For his sake, I sure hope not.

Deciding to ignore him, I instead turn back to the one who didn’t just give me the ick and ask Hayden, “What bunks are already claimed?”

“I can show you,” Walker says, shifting in my peripheral vision.

“Wasn’t talking to you,” I respond, not even looking his way. I’m trying

not to start a fight since we're going to be living together in very close quarters for the upcoming months, but I've also never been one to beat around the bush either. I brush past Walker, following Hayden as he walks deeper into the bus.

It's a pretty spacious bus with six bunks total, three on each side stacked atop each other.

"This one's mine." Hayden kicks the mattress on the first bunk on the bottom left. "Nikolai's above me in the middle. Reid's got the top one on our side, and Walker's got the middle on the other side. They had to run out to get a few last-minute things before we take off tonight, but you'll meet them later," he says, referring to the other two members of the band that are currently missing from the bus.

That leaves either the top or bottom bunk on the right side of the bus. Even with sleeping in beds like this before, I'm still slightly paranoid of rolling off the top bunk, so I shrug off my jacket and throw it on the bottom bunk, claiming it as mine.

"What's back there?" I ask, looking around Hayden's shoulder toward the very back of the bus. From here, it looks like just a few more couches and a bunch of luggage piled high on top of them.

"Since we'll be staying in hotel stops on this tour, we opted for more living space back here this time 'round," Hayden says as I follow him to the back. Walker and Boone stay in the front, talking too softly for me to pick apart any of their words.

My boots clunk across the spotless, cool toned wood paneling on the floor as we walk to the back. This is probably the cleanest these floors are ever going to be.

Hayden steps to the side so I can get a full look of the back space. It's not multiple couches like I originally thought, but rather one continuously wrapping around the perimeter of the space, making one giant sectional. There are cabinets above the couch on the back side of the wall, definitely for extra storage space. The windows have black privacy screens pulled down over them. A large TV hangs on the left wall with an Xbox already hooked up to it.

"We'll keep most of our clothes and stuff on the trailer attached to the crew's van, but feel free to take out whatever you wanna keep on here and put it wherever you can find space. We're obviously still in the process of unpacking." Hayden leans against one of the walls, looking at the mess of

luggage precariously towered around the space with a slight cringe.

The haphazard organization of the bus doesn't bother me in the slightest. Years of couch surfing and living with various roommates strips away any standards of living.

I nod, giving one final look to the space before heading back to the front where Walker and Boone are now seated at the dining table, one on each side of the booth. A bag of chips and guacamole are split open between them, along with the pineapple and a fresh beer for Walker.

I watch as the condensation drips down the side of the bottle and itch to hold it in my hand. I'm not even a beer drinker; it's not the taste that's calling to me. But I miss the feeling of having that cold glass in my palm, the feeling of security in holding it close.

Boone watches me stare at it, but I don't bother looking back at him.

"So, you think you're ready to be roomies?" Walker flashes me a smile, leaning in the corner of the booth. One large arm is thrown over the back of the seat, fingers tapping lightly while the other hand runs through his dark hair. He still hasn't put a shirt on.

"I think I'm ready to get this shit on the road," I respond, reaching forward to grab a chip and scoop a good amount of guacamole on it before popping it into my mouth. Walker's eyes don't leave mine as I chew, but I refuse to be the one to look away first.

Is this some sort of battle of dominance?

Still maintaining eye contact, he reaches for a piece of pineapple and eats it slowly, the juice glistening on his full lips that are still tipped into a smirk.

A fucking annoying smirk.

It isn't until Boone pipes in about tonight's show that Walker draws his eyes away from mine and I mentally catalog the win.

"Nikolai forgot his phone charger at his house and Reid wanted to get a few more games for the Xbox, so they ran out to get those, but Reid assured us they'd be back in time for the huddle," Hayden says. "Still planning for a 6:00 pm meet up?"

"You got it." Boone claps his hands down on the table and stands. "Let's get your bags, Scar, and then I'm out of here to go find Naomi before the show starts."

We step outside the bus, and I squint against the setting sun.

"What'd you think of the guys so far?" Boone asks once we're outside. It's clear that he wants to ensure I'm comfortable, but he's starting to feel like

a parent dropping their kid off at college.

No drinking, no parties, make good choices...

At least that's what I think it would feel like. I never went to college. Never even made it as far as filling out an application.

"They're fine," I offer. Hayden seems like a nice enough guy and Walker seems like a bit of a tool, but that's only based on maybe ten minutes of interaction. I've learned not to judge people too quickly, but that doesn't mean I'm not cautious when getting to know new people.

Boone doesn't seem satisfied by my answer, but he knows not to push and instead scoops up two of the larger bags, leaving the small ones for me to carry back onto the bus. As we step back on, I see Hayden in the back area, shifting clothes around and unpacking.

Walker is still seated at the booth, drumming a beat against the table while fiddling on his phone. His attention is solely zoned in on the device, and as I walk by, I try to catch a peek at what, or who, has his attention.

Bright colors flash on the small screen, and is that...

Candy Crush!

Yep. That's what he's been so engrossed since I first stepped on the bus? And he's still annoyingly shirtless.

WALKER

My boots tap along to the beat of Nickelback's "Burn It to the Ground" as it pulses through our greenroom. Reid's on the couch opposite of me, chugging a bottle of water while I sip on tequila and soda water.

His brown hair is shorter than the last time I saw him, which, hell, must've been about four months ago. When we took the hiatus, he took some distance from the band. Not surprising he put distance between him and Hayden as they tend to get into it the most, but I know Nikolai felt a little hurt by his silence. Nikolai was the one who brought Reid into the fold all those years ago back in high school when we needed a guitarist and even though we've always been a group of four, those two were thick as thieves.

Reid's jaw is tight with tension, and I can't tell if it's from nerves or something more. I don't get nervous going on stage like I used to, but it's also been a while and we're playing a completely new set so there is a bit of worry in the back of my mind of how it will go. Even though we've been playing together for ten years, there's still room for error every single night we step onstage.

"I'm jacked for the show tonight. Looking forward to being back out there playing with you," I say, loud enough to be heard over the music.

Reid looks up from his phone and nods. "Me too, man."

Just as I'm about to ask him what he's been up to while we were on a break, Nikolai comes charging over from the bathroom and plops down on the couch next to Reid, doing vocal warmups while he tries to burrow his way into Reid's side. I half expect Reid to shove him off, but he instead looks resigned to the close contact and the line between his eyebrows relaxes the

slightest bit.

“Hayden, let’s go,” I yell toward the bathroom.

“One second,” he calls back.

I stand and jump up and down in place a few times, shaking out my hands and letting the adrenaline begin to flow through my entire body.

This is the feeling that I’ve been missing.

Been craving.

I can see my excitement mirrored on Nikolai’s face. His cheeks are already slightly flushed and there’s a glimmer in his eyes that only comes from being onstage.

Hayden joins us finally dressed in black joggers and a button-down dark gray shirt with the arms rolled up his elbows, covering a tight black tank. Typical stage outfit for him.

We used to try to change our style for each individual tour, but ever since we released our past two albums, we’ve all decided to just settle into our own personal styles.

For Nikolai, that’s often suits sans any shirt underneath the jacket. For Reid, that’s typically dark jeans and a mix of t-shirts and jackets. For me right now, it’s whatever pants are the cleanest and bright colored shirts with the sleeves cut off.

Always with the sleeves cut off. My arms gotta breathe.

“Finally,” Reid mumbles, shutting the music off with his phone and standing to leave. He shoots Hayden an annoyed look and Nikolai slaps his arm.

Either Reid doesn’t pick up on the worry lining Hayden’s mouth and the rigid set of his shoulders, or he just simply doesn’t give a fuck.

My bet is on the latter.

I quickly chug the remainder of my drink before tossing the solo cup into the trash can by the door.

As we all head out, I pull Hayden under my arm and tuck him close to my side. “It’s gonna be okay,” I tell him.

He doesn’t seem fully convinced, but he nods anyways. I’m already proud of him making it this far and being willing to get back out here like we are.

It’s a short walk from our greenroom down the dimly lit corridors until we spot everyone huddled together backstage. Boone stands facing us, arms wrapped around Naomi, both smiling and joking with one of the stagehands.

A pang of jealousy runs through me at the sight. Not jealously over Naomi herself, but at the love and admiration between the two of them.

I need to get laid.

Scarlett's back is to us, unaware of our approach. The way her long hair is curled reflects more of the purple on the ends. It's the only pop of color that I can tell that she's wearing.

"Ticktock, boys," Boone calls out as we approach, checking an imaginary watch on his wrist. I know without having to reference my phone that we can't be more than a minute or two behind.

There's a large group gathered and as soon as we enter the fold, Boone rattles off introductions.

We have a crew of stagehands that will be traveling with us for the whole tour so they'll know our routine as well as we do. Arun's off to the side with Vik and they'll be joining us for many legs of the tour. Boone introduces Naomi to those who haven't met her before and I offer her a warm smile and she shoots me a familiar one back. I've gotten to spend a decent amount of time with her since she moved here to be with Boone and as the two of us have grown closer.

Boone then introduces Scar to those who haven't met her yet and Nikolai and Reid cross the circle to offer her a handshake. Reid seems slightly standoffish as he does so, but I don't think twice about it as that tends to be his nature with new people. Nikolai, however, always one with a flair for the dramatic, mocks a bow and kisses the top of Scar's hand in lieu of a shake. She only stands there looking bored, not even a flicker of surprise crosses her face. She watches him with indifference in those sharp eyes of her.

A flair of satisfaction jolts through me as I see her unaffected by Nikolai's presence.

Two unfamiliar faces jog up to the group, both dressed in all black and carrying different cameras.

"This dynamic duo right here," Boone beckons them closer in the circle, the man immediately stepping in front of the woman with him, blocking her from fully entering the fold and edging his way closer. "This is Daniel and Carter. They'll be with us the whole time taking videos and pictures for all of our social media. Daniel's shot shows and festivals with me before and does really sick work. And he brought Carter to help him out with everything, so we're very lucky to have them on the team."

"Any content you need, you just come see me, all right?" Daniel grins

and puffs his chest out, as if trying to measure up with all of the tall people surrounding him.

It doesn't slip past me that he either doesn't notice or doesn't care that Carter can't seem to get around him to also introduce herself.

I already don't like the guy.

Once introductions are over and Boone's rallying speech is complete, Nikolai leads a round of applause and everyone heads off to get ready for Scar's set beginning in just a few minutes. I'm about to follow her as she steps away from the group, but I'm pulled into a huddle with my bandmates.

We form a circle, blocking the rest of the world out with our arms around each other's shoulders, heads leaned in so close our foreheads are all almost touching. A mix of sweat and various colognes fill the air while I feel my heartbeat begin to rise. The white noise of the crowd in the background, eagerly anticipating the show's start serves as the backdrop to our moment, just the four of us. The four of us have been together since we were fifteen and sixteen, playing in Hayden's parents' basement and begging for shows at local bars.

I close my eyes and take a moment, breathing in sync with my brothers around me, and send a prayer of thanks to whatever resides above that this is my life that I get to live. I don't know what I did to deserve it, but I'm thankful as fuck everyday.

"I know it's been a while," I start, always the one to speak up at moments like these between us. "And we may be rusty, we may make mistakes, but we're going to put on a damn good show. We're going to show everyone that a break didn't kill us, didn't kill our talent, drive, or love for what we do."

Nikolai nods to my right, murmuring softly to himself.

"I love you, guys." I slap Hayden and Nikolai's backs, then give a pat on top of Reid's head as we break apart.

"Let's do this."

SCAR

As our group huddle disperses, Boone and Naomi, unsurprisingly, book it back toward their greenroom. The stagehands all scatter around, buzzing bees all working together to keep the hive up and running. Arun and Vik appear as if they are trying to “out business” each other, pecking back and forth on who was dealing with the most important matters to come out on top. The two photographers are digging around in their large camera bags, the dude barking orders at the girl with him.

He seems like a real treat.

Hope that isn't her boyfriend.

The Whisper Me Nothings guys all huddle close, weaving their arms around each other and leaning in closely, as if they are in their own world, own atmosphere. You can feel it in the air around, as if they are all breathing one breath together, all tied by invisible threads, like four puzzle pieces falling gently into place and locking tight. It's oddly fascinating and I want to scold myself for watching, feeling as if I'm an intruder even from afar.

You know it's a funny thing being a solo artist because I love the creative control I get, and as a solitary person, I don't often wish for company or someone else to attach their name to my own. But as I look around, standing in the cloak of darkness that backstage provides and see everyone around me move with a purpose, and as a unit, my chest grows tight.

Fuck that.

I crack my neck right, then left, doing the same to each of my knuckles, and bounce a bit on the toes of my boots.

There's no room for this sort of “poor me” mindset where I'm going in a

few short minutes. This is the first show I've ever done of this size and I'm not about to let anything weigh me down; especially not myself.

But then again that's always been my problem, hasn't it?

I've hid long enough though, and I'm fucking done with it. This is my time for me to put my name, my face, my voice, to the lyrics I've written and sold to other artists for years when I was too scared to do it for myself.

This is my time.

I squeeze my eyes shut, breathing in and out, counting to myself as I do so. I settle into the breaths, letting them wash over me with a wave of cool calmness, imagining it kissing my skin and receding.

When I feel my body relax from the tips of my toes to the individual strands of hair on my head, I open my eyes and am immediately met with a piercing stare. Walker's eyes look almost black in this light. Either that or his adrenaline is high and it's showing itself through his pupils swallowing his eyes whole. The guys have broken their circle apart, leaving Walker to be the lone one standing backstage.

Maybe I should be bothered that neither Boone nor the rest of the band are seeming to stick around to watch my set, but I'm not here to perform for them.

My sense of peace is disrupted, and I divert my gaze, instead turning to look out toward the stage, seeing almost all of the stagehands have left and I expect to see the lights dimming any second now, which will be my cue.

And just as that thought crosses my mind, the lights flicker off and the crowd begins to scream. I inhale their exhilaration, feeling my fingertips begin to tingle.

God, this is a feeling I've been craving my entire life.

A tall woman comes rushing to my right, wordlessly handing me my microphone and I take it from her with a nod of thanks while I put my ear monitor in on my left ear. The opening chords of my first song fade in, the guitar slowly building, my spliced vocals prelude into the first verse. With one final shake of my hands, I step out onto the stage that I spent my whole life working toward and welcome the blinding lights and deafening roar.

A light layer of fog covers the stage as I walk across, my boots scattering wisps of it in their wake. I adjust my in-ear, listening for my cue.

The stage setup for my set is fairly simple. I have a piano to the left for a stripped-down version of one of my songs, but otherwise I just have a microphone and my usual DJ setup behind a small booth with an LED panel

on the front for graphics to flash across.

Although for this first song, I don't need to be behind the booth.

No, for these first opening notes, I stand open, exposed onstage. Nothing and no one is blocking the crowd's view of me. I scan the arena and heave a small sigh of relief that besides the people pressed up against the rails, I can't really see anyone's faces clearly. All I see is flashes of phones directed my way, cameras recording as I start my set.

A pit of nerves sits in the center of my chest as the final few counts ring through my ear, signaling it's almost time for me to begin.

Steeling my spine, I lift the microphone in my hand to my mouth, knuckles gripping it so tightly I hope the audience can't see they've long since turned white. A breath in and out, and I begin.

My first note is shaky, and I curse myself, quickly fixing it and infusing the next lyric with more confidence. As the song builds toward the chorus, I feel myself falling into the familiar rhythm of the song, finding comfort in the words I wrote and letting them carry me across the stage. I feel the audience's attention follow me, waiting to see if they are going to accept me. If I'm worthy to be opening for two such huge artists.

And as I move from one song into the next, getting behind the deck to mix them together, I feel them coming over to my side. I feel them becoming invested, liking what they are seeing and hearing. My confidence grows, allowing myself to shed my jacket partway through the set, letting my body breathe as the heat of the arena and the rush of adrenaline spike my temperature.

My hair sticks to my neck and shoulders, a light sheen of sweat coating my skin. As I look at my track list, I realize I'm already close to the end of my set, even though it feels like I just started. Disappointment fills me, but I sweep it away with a shake of my head in time to the beat, knowing that this is only the first of many shows.

I get to experience this feeling, right here, right now, standing on a stage in front of thousands of people, moving them to the music I'm creating, the words I'm singing, for the next four months.

As the final chords of my last song ring out, I stand up on the decks, arms open at my sides, head thrown back toward the ceiling and close my eyes. The crowd cheers, clapping and yelling their appreciation, their approval, their joy.

I can't help the smile that crosses my face, reveling in the moment.

WALKER

A bump that just about sends my head crashing into the ceiling that is dangerously close to my face is the greeting I get coming out of a deep slumber. A vicious throbbing behind my eye settles in as I open them and take in my surroundings, clearing away the fog of sleep and a few too many tequila sodas. I toss off the blanket that is covering my lower body, a light sheen of sweat already coating my skin.

Goddamn, this bus is toasty.

Before pulling back the curtain that gives a semblance of privacy in this not-so private space, I strain to listen above the noise of the bus chugging along to gauge if anyone else is up and moving around yet. Hell, I don't even know what time it is and none of the bunk beds have windows so I can't tell if the sun is up or down.

Where the hell is my phone? I blindly feel around the narrow space and come up short. I just hope it's somewhere on this bus because Arun will kill me if I left it behind at the venue last night. We're on a tight schedule, places to go and people to play for and all.

I sit up with a groan, or as much as I can with my large frame in the small bunk. Granted they're bigger than the ones we had for our first couple of tours. I remember just being in awe of the opportunity and the stars in all of our eyes that we didn't care that the beds felt more like little caskets than actual places to sleep at night.

Sliding the curtain back and shielding my eyes from the sunlight that pours in, I hop down and pad barefoot down the narrow hallway. The front of the bus is quiet despite Hayden, Nikolai, and Scarlett all being awake and

hanging out.

Correction: Hayden and Nikolai are hanging out on the couches on opposite sides of the bus, tossing a foam football back and forth playfully, their conversations hushed. Scarlett is tucked into the corner of the dining booth, hunched over a laptop with noise canceling headphones on. They look slightly ridiculous on her small head, and I smile. But when she glances up and sends me a look that instantly cools any lingering heat that I carried with me from my bunk, I let it slide from my face.

“No one’s cooking me breakfast?” I ask the boys, flopping down beside Nikolai and intercepting the pass from Hayden. Nikolai tries to swat it from my hand but I hold it outside of his reach before tossing it back to Hayden.

“It’s almost noon, dude,” Hayden says.

“Reid still sleeping?” I ask.

“I think he’s in the back.” Nikolai claps his hands, motioning for Hayden to toss him the ball, which he catches with ease. “Probably already trying to pass my achievements on Dead Island 2.”

Well, good luck to him then. Nikolai hasn’t met a video game he can’t master. He’s just one of those people that when he decides he’s going to try something, he’s going to be one of the best. We’re damn lucky to have him as our lead singer and guitarist.

My body lurches forward a bit, and I slam my hands on the leather seat to help brace myself, Nikolai and Hayden doing the same.

I peer at the driver’s seat, before a beefy hand waves around the curtain in apology.

“Sorry, guys,” one of our drivers, Darian, calls out. “Bit of traffic coming up here and asshole cut me off.”

“All good, man,” Nikolai calls back, settling upright again and continuing to toss the football. We’re all used to the blips that come with being toted around the country on a bus, but when I turn to look toward the kitchen, judging by the harsh scowl on Scarlett’s face, it’s safe to say she wouldn’t have called back the same understanding response Nikolai did.

I get up and walk the short distance to the fridge, opening it up to inspect what we all got stocked for our first few days. Shuffling items around, I don’t even notice I’ve been holding my breath until I begin to see little sparks dance along the edge of my vision. I release a puff of air, realizing I was already bracing myself for how nasty our fridge will surely end up being in the coming months.

“Don’t let all the cold out,” Scarlett says, the first thing she’s said to me since she dropped her stuff off on the bus yesterday.

Not that I’ve been counting or anything.

I grab a container of raspberries and a carton of yogurt, knocking the door closed with my elbow before leaning against the counter, the marble cool against my bare hip.

“I don’t really get bothered by the cold.” I shrug, crossing my arms over my chest, maybe flexing them *just* a little bit. I watch her eyes closely, seeing if she’ll dip them down from my gaze to glance at my naked torso. Her deep brown meets my dark green, not wavering.

She’s wrong if she thought I would be letting any cold air seep from the fridge to cool the space down because with the way her eyes are burning through mine, she’s ratcheting up the temperature in here by a few degrees.

I’m the one to cave, letting her have this small win, and break eye contact to grab a paper bowl from the top cupboard as she silently resumes whatever it is she’s doing on her laptop. Scooping a generous amount of yogurt in, I top it with a handful of raspberries and a dollop of honey. I’d love a warm, more comforting breakfast spread but if it’s closer to lunch time, that probably means we’ll be stopping to switch drivers and get gas soon, which means shitty gas station taquitos and chicken wings are not far off.

I slip into the opposite side of the booth as Scarlett, sitting sideways to kick my legs up on the seat and rest my back against the wall of the bus. I watch her as I eat, waiting to see if she’ll look back up at me.

After a few quiet mouthfuls, I ask, “Whatcha got going on there?” I’m not sure she even hears me with her headphones on, until she hits the spacebar and slips one side of her headset off to free up her right ear. Her hair falls around her shoulders in dark, messy waves. Most likely her natural hair since she hasn’t had a reason to style yet for the day.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“I asked what you have going on there,” I respond, taking another bite, getting a sour berry that twists my face.

She tilts her head and raises her brow mockingly, as if to say, *Seriously? That’s what you interrupted me for?* But after a brief pause, she twists the screen around for me to take a look.

“Working on my set for tonight.” The program she has running on her computer looks completely foreign to me.

“Do you normally switch it for each show?” I ask, genuinely curious.

With the band, it's hard enough building a set list out to include all of our most popular songs, fan favorites, and new material, that I can't fathom switching anything up the morning before a show.

"Depends."

I watch her and wait for more, but instead she simply swivels her computer back around to face her and adjusts her headphones, instantly hunching back over the screen with determination.

I finish off the rest of my breakfast before getting up to discard my bowl, locate my phone in my jeans from last night, and settle back in beside Nikolai as he and Hayden flip through a list of movies to watch. As I sink into the soft leather, leaning shoulder to shoulder with my best friend and bandmate, it's almost as if I can feel my muscles relax one by one. We've been through a lot these past few years, and here with the bus chugging along, picking out a movie to pass the time between cities, I feel a sense of belonging I haven't in a long time.



AT THE STOP TO switch drivers and refuel, Arun pops over from the crew bus to sit us all down and check in on the day's schedule.

"We should be at the venue in about two hours, traffic depending," he says, checking his watch that easily costs more than half my wardrobe. "I need you all to be showered, dressed, and ready to go for the show since we have interviews right before. You won't have much time besides a quick sound check in between. Got it?"

He looks around at each of us, meeting our eyes and waiting for our agreement. The four of us shake our heads in understanding.

"Do we need to know any of the questions ahead of time?" I ask. Our early interview days were a little rough, none of us knowing how to properly, or appropriately, answer questions.

We've since refined our media skills a bit, with time, age, and experience in the industry, as well as a few tongue lashings from Arun and our label.

"Nothing you haven't already been asked before. You'll probably get a few questions about the canceled previous tour, when to expect the next album, typical boring bullshit. Just be your charming selves, don't fight with

the reporter or each other, and we'll consider it a success." Arun claps his hands as he stands, clearly done with the conversation. This isn't anything new to us, so he doesn't need to be too worried.

"Thanks, dude," Nikolai holds out his fist for Arun to tap with his own as he passes by the exit, to which Arun slaps the back of his head with a smile instead.

"Concussion!" Nikolai shouts, grabbing the back of his head in mock pain. "That's coming out of your pay!"

"See you boys later." Arun waves, exiting the bus.

I scan the room, Reid nudging Nikolai off of him as he tries to flop over into his lap, but it's a half-hearted attempt.

"We're not boys," Reid mutters, not actually bothered by the comment but also not able to let an opportunity to complain about something pass him by.

Good to see some things haven't changed.

SCAR

I hate to admit it, but my palms are damp with anxiety as I sink into the deep leather lounge chair in Boone's greenroom waiting for the cameraman to finish setting up his tripod. The interviewer talks softly with Naomi, huddled near the table in the corner piled high with bags of chips, bowls of nuts, and a massive spread of gourmet looking donuts.

Maybe I need to step my rider game up because Boone clearly has got his down. When Vik asked me what I wanted included on mine before heading out on tour, I simply said gum and protein bars, not fully realizing what I was missing out on.

"You're gonna do great." Boone slaps my knee as he plops beside me, holding out a handful of M&Ms and extending them to me in a silent offer. Some of the colors have dyed his skin, looking a little sweaty. I shake my head in disgust.

"There are plates over there, you know."

"Who needs 'em?" he says, tipping his head back and pouring the remaining candy down his throat, chewing extra loudly just to annoy me. I kick him in the shin, lightly, as I'm wearing some of my chunkiest boots and don't actually want to cause him any harm.

"Good to go," the camera guy announces to the room, stealing the interviewer's attention away from her conversation and turning to focus on me and Boone. She does a bit of a double take, scanning the two of us up and down before awkwardly glancing back to Naomi to gauge her reaction.

I know how it must look, the two of us settled in close with each other, Boone wrapping an arm around me to pull me in closer to his side, my body

turned toward his. Our legs seem to tangle themselves together unwittingly. It looks like we're something more than we are, and boldly displaying it in front of Boone's long-term girlfriend.

But Naomi doesn't bat an eye and we don't make a move to disentangle ourselves. We have and always will be best friends.

"You got ten minutes before I need Scarlett for sound check." Vik pops her head around the door, her buzzed hair freshly bleached white, highlighting her razor-sharp cheekbones.

That snaps the interviewer's attention into gear and she strides across the room in even steps before settling into the couch adjacent to ours. She gives us each a small smile, before pulling out her phone and nodding to the cameraman to start rolling.

"Hi everyone, it's Jada, and today I'm fortunate enough to be with one of the biggest names in the dance world, Boone Maxwell. He's on the second stop of his U.S. tour co-headlining with pop rock band, Whisper Me Nothings, and their opening act, Scarlett Lane," she says, ramping up her enthusiasm with each word.

"I know many are curious to know, why co-headline a tour around the country? You could easily do your own tour, especially after your latest album blew many fans away?"

I'm grateful her first question out the gate is directed at Boone. When I signed onto the tour, I knew there would be interviews and media requirements involved, but I've never had the spotlight turned on me like this. Thankfully, Vik and Boone agreed that for the majority of the smaller interviews throughout the tour that radio stations and bloggers were signed up to do, we could do them together. And for the bigger ones like TV or news spots, they didn't really want me anyways since I'm still under the radar, so Boone can take those up on his own.

"I love the blend of genres together," Boone replies sincerely, genuinely interested in her question and doing his best to be engaged. "We collaborated years ago when they were just getting started and had a blast doing that song. I've kept in touch with Walker since then and we've had a lot of fun in the studio, messing around with our two very different styles and I'd love to do another collab with those guys soon. It was about time for both of us to head out on the road, and doing a bus tour like this with a band provided me some of the stability I've really been trying to find for myself after so many years of flying city to city, playing multiple shows in one day in different time

zones.” Boone drags a hand down his face as if even remembering his past touring schedule exhausts him.

“Now wait a second, did we just get another confirmed Boone Maxwell x Whisper Me Nothings collab?” Jada prods, leaning forward in excitement, eyes glinting.

“Hey, no, no, no, nothing to confirm right now,” Boone backtracks a bit. “I just said I’d love to collab with them again. It’s a really interesting mix of talents and sounds, especially as we’ve all evolved as artists over the years. So who knows, we’ll see what we come up with. We got four months on the road together after all.” He smiles, teasing the camera with his big smile.

Boone is magnetic to watch interact with people, the way he can make a person instantly feel like he knows them down to the core and puts them at ease.

“Well, I know you’ve piqued a lot of fans’ interest with that one,” she says, peeking down at her phone before directing her attention to me. “Now Scarlett, speaking of collabs, I understand that you got your career started by collaborating with other artists?”

I nod.

She pauses for a beat, clearly expecting me to elaborate.

I don’t.

She looks down at her phone again, rattling off a list of songs that I wrote for other artists, many of them Top 100 singles with a few breaking the Top 10 and one number one. “You’ve written so many incredible songs for other artists. Why not keep those as your own from the very beginning?”

Easy.

“No one cares to listen to what a nobody has to say. And that’s who I am. Or I guess, I *was*,” I correct, the weight of my past anonymity settling deep into my bones. It’s not like I wasn’t aware that choosing to sing my own songs and put my face to my work would undoubtedly unlock a whole new world that I previously was able to stay away from by selling my songs to other artists.

But I still squirm a bit under her gaze and watchful lens of the camera.

“It’s easy to write songs for someone else, let them take the public stage.” I don’t add that it’s easier to keep your own emotions and baggage settled deep when you don’t have to face it every day through the words you cut yourself open with and bleed into the songs. Let someone else take those emotional burdens on through the music.

I also don't add that when you come from a family like mine, they aren't exactly jumping for joy when their oldest daughter wants to write songs and sing anything other than hymns. Oh no, no. It wouldn't be suitable for the preacher's daughter to step out and muddle the family name with such things.

It's why I'll never use my full name for any of my work.

Sensing I've lost myself in my head, Boone pipes in, "Scar was one of the most relentless people when it came to bugging me to listen to her music, that it basically came down to blocking the poor girl or listening to what she created." He gives me a warm smile, which I return.

Early memories of sending Boone DMs with my latest mixes and vocal cuts flit through my mind, hours upon hours I would spend hunched over my laptop in Ableton, mixing really shit mashups together that at the time I thought were pure gold.

Boone sends an elbow into my side, jolting me out of memory lane and back into the interview.

"I don't know if that's really how it happened." I clear my throat, wishing I had grabbed water before sitting down. I pick at one of the holes in my jeans, looking for something to do with my hands. "Boone just happened to be the first one to respond to any of the DMs I sent to a few of my favorite artists, trying to get them to listen to my mixes."

Boone chuckles, remembering those early days too.

"And did he? Listen to them?" Jada clarifies.

"He did," I say.

"They were shit," he responds at the same time.

My turn to sock an elbow into his side, which he dramatically overexaggerates the aggression, even getting an eye roll from Naomi who sits off to the other side of the room, watching the interview with an encouraging smile.

"So how did you come to be on this tour with Boone?"

I tilt my head, thinking about it. Thinking how such a short question could be answered in such a long, long way. How did I get from where I was at eighteen years old, couch surfing from here and there, working on music all day and drinking all night, stumbling my way through life, to now twenty-four years old, being interviewed for my music, about to do my second show for thousands of people on a huge nationwide tour, with my best friend by my side, and sober?

I could give her the logistical answer of how we share the same manager

so the contacts for the tour were already there. And how I don't really have a lot going on for myself outside of working on music, so I didn't have to do much schedule rearranging.

But that's not the only reason I'm here. I'm here because Boone vouched for me, over and over, year after year, screwup after screwup. And he never left. He believed in me until I could start believing in myself.

So I answer as honestly and simply as I can. "He took me under his wing at a time when no one else cared if I even woke up that morning."

WALKER

“I think I speak on behalf of all Whisper Me Nothings fans when I say that I am so stoked to see the show tonight and watch you guys back up on that stage, doing what you do best.”

Jada, a woman from one of the local radio stations, leans forward in her chair, resting her elbows on the table in front of her. Either purposely, or accidentally, but my money's on the former, pushing her chest out and letting her top slip a little more than what would be professionally acceptable.

I peek at the guys, but no one is allowing their gaze to stray from her face, not even Reid, who she has been basically eye-fucking since she walked in our greenroom.

Interviews are part of the job and most of the time, they can be fun if you put a little effort into it. But sometimes interviewers ramp it up a little too much, playful banter turning into suggestive jokes, lines get blown right past, even from the time we were teenagers.

This lady seems pretty harmless, and besides, if it's Reid she's eyeing up, God help her.

“I'm curious, do you each have a favorite song to perform?”

We all give each other a look, waiting to see who will speak up first. When the other three sit silently and look at me, I give her an answer. “I'm really looking forward to performing a lot of the songs off of our last album. The process of creating that body of work was a special time for all of us, and we haven't gotten to play them live yet. So I think the fans are also in for a treat with hearing the new material live.”

I allow my mind to drift away from the interview for a moment, getting

lost in the memory of writing our fourth album. Lyrically, it's some of Nikolai's best work. Although we all contributed to the lyrics, he really took charge and encapsulated the message we wanted to send with the album. He was deep in the headspace and heartbreak of his most recent fling at the time. That one resulted in a drunken night in Vegas, a drive-thru wedding, and an annulment the following day. It always hurts to see your friend hurting, but damn did it really pull some inspiration from him.

I was feeling a different kind of hurt when we were writing that album. It had been a while since I had been in a relationship with someone I truly cared about, so while Nikolai was dealing with heartache in the present, I was dealing with feeling lonely when I left the studio every night and came home to an empty house. After so many years of success, you start to look around and wonder if people are in your life for what you can do for them, or because they actually like who you are. And I was in a place where I felt like no one cared to get to know the real me and not just the man I am onstage.

Hayden was struggling with the same feeling, tired of wondering if women just wanted to use him for bragging rights. Out of the four of us, he's always been the most selective about who he lets into his bed and his heart.

And Reid really came through with pulling together a lot of the composition for each of the songs. Everyday, the four of us showed up to the studio before our time was even supposed to start because we were all brimming with untapped ideas and ready to spit them out as fast as our hands could keep up. We all stayed long past sunset every night and after everyone else had long since left the building.

It was an album that when we listened to it front to back, we all knew we had made something really special. Something to be proud of. Our best work to date.

I feel Hayden tense up next to me, and I pull myself out of the past and back into the present.

"Many fans were disappointed when you announced that your tour for your fourth studio album would be canceled indefinitely," Jada says, and I now realize why Hayden has stiffened.

"That's not to say that fans weren't understanding though. Hayden, Nikolai, how have you two been doing in the year since the shooting at your siblings' high school graduation?"

Well damn, rip the Band-Aid right off, why don't you. I choke, expecting a little more tact in handling such a delicate situation. A situation that is the

reason we haven't played any music from our fourth album.

I turn to my left, Nikolai and Hayden sitting on one side of me, Reid on the other closest to the interviewer.

Nikolai's face may appear impassive to the strangers in the room with us, or those who will eventually watch this interview back. But I see the slight flex in his jaw, the way he begins to toy with the long strands of hair that curl around his ears.

Hayden is a little more obviously uncomfortable, cracking his knuckles and visibly paler than when we started the interview.

I eye Arun across the room, waiting to see if he'll step in and say something, but from his relaxed posture against the grimy, discolored walls, I'd say he's not going to stop this.

And honestly, I wouldn't expect anything different. As much as it hurts me to see them put in an uncomfortable and painful position to rehash one of the worst days of their lives, it's almost impossible to never have it come up since it was the sole reason we canceled our last tour and have such strict security measures on this one.

About a year and a half ago in June, right after we finished the album and were getting ready to tour it, one of Hayden's brothers and Nikolai's little brother were graduating from high school. The same school where the four of us met and our lives were forever changed when we formed our band. They both attended graduation with their families to support their brothers, when a fellow student opened fire on the ceremony, killing three people and injuring six others.

Two of the victims were students graduating that day, never getting to move onto their next phase in life. The other was a teacher, an older woman who dedicated her life to her students.

Fuck, my chest wants to cave in on itself just thinking about it, fury and pain dragging its way through my entire body.

Thankfully, none of Hayden or Nikolai's family were harmed.

Physically that is. Mentally, different fucking story.

"I can only speak for myself when I say that I'm stoked to be back on the road, giving the fans the show they've been waiting for and deserve. I needed the time off to spend with my family, rest, and get my mind right before being able to do my best out there on that stage." It's a good answer, a great one even, but does anyone else see how Nikolai's blue eyes don't hold the sparkle they had a few minutes before he got pulled back into that nightmare?

Jada nods, appearing empathetic, and turns her questioning gaze to Hayden, waiting on his response.

“Um...” He coughs, clearing his throat of the anxiety I know that has balled itself up in there. “What Nikolai said, um, yeah, spent a lot of time with my family and resetting.” He nods rapidly. “Ready for the tour.”

I grab his knee under the table, squeezing hard to give him something to zero in on and also in comfort. He knocks his leg into mine in a silent thank-you.

Reid sits stoically to my right, and I can't tell if he's bored or pissed.

“Well, I want to personally tell you how sorry I am that you both had to witness such a tragedy, and I'm happy you were able to take the time that you needed.”

I want to believe Jada is being sincere, until she abruptly turns her attention to Reid and asks, “It's been quite some time since you've been spotted with any ladies out and about. I know many out there are dying to know if *the* Reid Keely is finally off the market?”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes and tamp down the annoyance rising inside, especially when I see how Hayden and Nikolai have each seemed to deflate a bit, at ease that the attention is off of them and the topic has changed.

Reid shifts in his chair, too small for his large frame. Hell, all of these chairs are too small for us. What are we, fucking kindergarteners? Is this a tea party table for toddlers? I'm shocked as hell these plastic chair legs haven't snapped under our weight.

“No comment,” Reid replies, grabbing his mug of tea set in front of him and taking a sip. Such a tease, that one. Not a denial, not a confirmation, just a no comment. Enough to keep people interested and curious to know more.

Jada's eyes light up at his response, inching to the edge of her chair to lean closer, not even worried about being subtle anymore. But Reid's eyes don't once leave her face, as if challenging her to work harder, test the boundaries more, push the line as much as she can until it snaps. And when it does, she's still not going to get what she wants.

Reid doesn't have a girlfriend or even someone he's talking to, but I know what he looks like when he's interested in a woman and I know for a fact he's not interested in this one blowing past her professional boundaries. Not that it would stop Reid, or has even stopped myself in the past, but this is a game to him, seeing how badly he can make a woman want him before

snapping her out of it with a cutting comment and dust in his wake.

I cough, breaking the unrequited tension, and check my watch. Two minutes left in this interview before I know Arun will step in and pull the plug for us to go to sound check. And at the moment, I'm so very thankful that Arun is so big on punctuality. It normally annoys the shit out of me when he's drilling time frames into our heads for even the simplest of tasks, but in cases like these, I relish him stepping in and cutting the interview off.

Sensing that she's starting to lose the rest of the band, Jada directs what I hope will be her last question to me. "Walker, can you tell us what fans can expect from you all on this tour?"

Basic question but appropriate. Her first one this whole time.

I crack my neck side to side and sit forward, intertwining my hands on the table.

"Fans can definitely expect to hear staple songs from our entire discography, not just our fourth album that we previously were going to tour, although they will get a lot of songs from that one as well. Some fan favorites that we haven't played a lot on other tours or for festivals for the ones who have been with us through many of our different eras. And they can expect a high caliber entertaining show. Performing is what we do best as a band and I know people are going to appreciate the time and work we've put into making this show our very best." I mentally pat myself on the back for that answer, and judging by the smile on Arun's face, he's happy with my response as well.

He steps forward, and Jada must feel the end coming near, because she quickly wraps up the interview, thanking us all for our time and wishing us luck on the tour. A brief handshake and she's off with her cameraman, leaving us to heave a sigh of relief that we made it through our first interview of the tour.

I stand and stretch, needing to warm up my muscles before the show, and walk to the table in the corner piled high with food and drinks. I pour myself a tequila on the rocks, relishing the warmth that spreads down my throat as I take my first sip. Reid sidles up next to me, pouring one for himself. I hold my cup out in cheers, which he returns and we each take another sip.

"Feeling exhausted after that eye-fucking you just got for the last fifteen minutes?" I tease, laughing into my cup.

Reid holds out his hand, a small piece of paper in it, while he takes another drink.

“Of fucking course.” I laugh, ripping the paper from his hand and opening it to see a number in neat handwriting with a little heart after the last digit.

“When she’d slip that to you?”

“Shaking hands before she left,” Reid says. “Actually a little impressed by how slick she was with it. Didn’t even realize what she did until she was already onto Nikolai thanking him for the time.”

The ladies love Reid, have since we were sixteen.

“Gonna give her a reason to stick around after the show?” I ask, knowing that even though we’ll be peeling out right after the show ends tonight, there’s still about two hours for Boone’s set that we have to wait for.

Reid shakes his head, tossing the paper in the small trash can at the end of the table, before topping off his drink and pouring a second one that he walks over to Nikolai.

Now, as annoying as the interviewer’s question was, it does have me thinking. I haven’t seen Reid with anyone in a while. He never has serious relationships, always going for flings or one-time things. But even those seem to have ceased lately as far as I can tell. There’s no way he’s in an actual relationship and none of us know about it.

But it does make me wonder why the parade of women that Reid usually boasts seems to have stopped.

WALKER

The second show goes by in a blur. Screaming fans, aching arms, a permanent smile I can't wipe off my face. The buzzing adrenaline doesn't fade as I walk offstage, arm slung around Hayden's shoulder, both of us smiling ear to fucking ear, proud of the performance we just put on.

"Sticking around to watch Boone's set tonight?" Hayden asks, tossing me a water bottle from the mini fridge in our greenroom. I catch it, chugging half in one go.

"Not tonight." My once light green tee is fully plastered to my chest, the color now a few shades darker. The sweat is starting to become itchy as I begin to dry off. As I walk over to the table to pour myself a fresh drink, I cringe at the thought of peeling off my black jeans, so damp with sweat that feel like they've been swam in.

"I'll see you on the bus then," Hayden says, heading back out to watch Boone. I loved watching him the first night, but with this only being the second show, there are plenty more for me to catch over the upcoming months, and right now, the tiny little thing we call a shower on the bus is calling my name.

I walk down the winding hallways toward the back entrance where all of our buses are set up, nodding at the security that line the way. These guys are mostly venue staff, not the security traveling with us on the road full time. I tower over most of them, packing more muscle than at least half, but I still feel a peace of mind having them here, knowing the comfort that it brings Hayden and Nikolai to have these folks watching out for us and everyone

coming to the shows.

Pushing open the rusty metal door, I'm met with more sticky, heavy humidity.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, draining the last of my tequila and pulling an already soaked neck towel from my back pocket to run across my forehead and push away the locks of hair that have decided to cling for their lives against my face.

The door slams to a close behind me, cutting off the murmured noise of the crowd and leaving me in peace, the parking lot basically deserted back here besides a few guys having a smoke break. They lift a hand toward me, and I return the wave before walking over to the second bus in line, only knowing it's ours by the tiny white square in the door window.

To not make it too obvious to an outsider, each of the buses have a little colored patch in the lower left corner of the bus window to designate whose bus is whose. Ours is white, Boone's is red, and the crew's is yellow. No rhyme or reason from what I understand, but I like the understated approach. A good additional security measure.

The bus is quiet as I step on, no lights on except for the ones that run along the floor, illuminating the narrow walkway. I make my way to my bunk, grabbing the pair of gray sweatpants I stashed there before the show, and head toward the bathroom.

I strip off my sweat-soaked clothes and add them to a laundry bag to be sent out to wash at our next hotel stop, and have a quick shower. By the time I'm out and scrounging around the kitchen for a late night snack, my fingers are still restless from the buzz of the show, and even though I'm physically exhausted, I know sleep is far from me yet. So I find a bag of chips, onion dip, and crack open a beer before heading to the back room of the bus to play some video games before everyone else is back and ready to head out.

As I reach to my left to flip on the light switch, I'm startled and almost drop my loot.

"Shit," I say, taking a step back as Scar shoots up to a sitting position, just as surprised as me. "Sorry, didn't know anyone else was in here."

Her dark hair is damp like mine, fresh off a shower, although the ends are beginning to dry and slightly curl. She's dressed in an oversized black hoodie and short black shorts.

Scar's face is clean of any traces of makeup. A rosy blush spreads across both cheeks, stark against her otherwise naked complexion.

She removes her headphones, which explains why she didn't hear me earlier. But it doesn't explain what she was doing lying back here in the dark...

I ask her just that, and she diverts her eyes, almost as if she's embarrassed.

"The space is yours," she says, scooting off the couch and standing to walk past me, but I keep the doorway blocked with my body.

"You don't have to scurry off," I say, leaning against the frame, watching her shift from foot to foot, sizing me up.

Maybe scurry was the wrong word, because she's not some frightened little bird that I need to step carefully around so as to not spook it. No, she's more like a cat standing in front of me, sizing me up just as much as I am her, watching for an opening to excuse herself from any social interaction.

I've gathered that she doesn't seem one for small talk, but we're going to be on this bus together for a long time, and the least we can do is get to know each other a little bit.

"Want to watch a movie?" I propose, moving further into the room, leaving the door open, free for her to leave if she wants, but hoping the promise of social time without much talking will have her stay. I set my snacks and drink down on the armrest that sits between two of the sections of the couch, flopping down into the soft leather and letting out a sigh I didn't know needed release.

Scar watches me, her gaze sharp, trying to read me to find out if there's some deeper meaning to me offering to watch a movie with her. I don't look away, matching her stare with my own, honest and open. She must like what she sees, or at least be satisfied with it, because she sits back down on the other side of the couch where she was previously lying and reaches for a handful of my chips.

I smile in silent victory, and she frowns, settling back and popping a chip in her mouth. My eyes follow the way she licks the salt from her lips.

"You want a beer?" I ask and then cringe; the conversation with Boone popping up in my head.

"I don't drink," Scar answers before I can amend my question.

"I'm sorry, I knew that. Just always used to offering one, I guess."

Scar's eyes narrow. "How did you know that?"

Clearing my throat with a sip of beer, I tell her about my conversation with Boone, downplaying the way he asked me to keep an eye on her. She

doesn't seem like she'd appreciate someone watching her like that.

"He seems to really care about you and just wanted to make sure that we were keeping ourselves in check on the bus and don't unknowingly offer you something, like I just did."

She seems to settle a bit at my answer, but there's still something off about her expression, and I don't know how to place it. She's quiet for a few moments and just as I don't think she's about to say anything further, she says, "I've been sober for almost two years now." Her face glows with pride as she says it.

"That's amazing," I tell her and hope she can hear the sincerity with which I say it.

I wait for her to elaborate more, and I'll admit I'm curious about her story and what led her to her sobriety, but she doesn't add anything else.

"I can go throw this out—" I start to rise off the couch but she grabs my arm to stop me, her skin burning into my own from where she touches me.

"No," she tells me. "You don't have to do that. Trust me, I'm good."

I scan her face, trying to see if she's telling the truth or just trying to appease me and make me feel comfortable.

But of course she's telling me the truth, because I don't think Scar gives a damn if anyone else is comfortable or not. She wouldn't say something she didn't mean, just to mollify someone else.

Sitting back, I un-wedge the remote from a crack in the couch, likely left there by Nikolai and not in the little holder next to the TV, and kick my bare feet up, hitting the power button and turning my attention back to Scar. "What kind of movie are you in the mood for?"

"What were you planning on watching?" she answers my question with a question.

"Not sure, maybe Transformers?" It's not as if I haven't already seen the movie about a hundred times, but it's a comfort watch. And while my body slowly drains itself of the adrenaline, I want something familiar to watch, not something that I have to pay too close attention to or something that only further pumps me up.

Scar shifts on the couch, reaching near me to grab one of the throw pillows to stuff behind her back so she's in an elevated position, and as she does so, a waft of vanilla and something warm tickles my nose. I inhale, trying not to make it too obvious, and let the scent wash over me. Beautiful, pleasant and inviting.

So at odds with the disposition she presents to the world.

“Haven’t seen it,” she responds.

I turn to her, mouth aghast as if it’s the most preposterous thing I’ve ever heard and lay a hand over my bare chest dramatically. “How dare you!”

And there it is, just at the very corner of her mouth is an inkling of a smile, the first one I’ve gotten out of her in these past couple days. Something I’ve learned in the very short amount of time living with Scarlett is that she’s not one for showing much outward emotion, positive or negative. But as hard as she tries to keep her eyes on lockdown, every once in a while, I’ll catch a look into what lies deep inside, past the steadfast mask she keeps in place.

She reminds me a bit of Reid in that way, keeping a neutral exterior, only those closest to him privy to seeing what’s underneath it all.

“This was my favorite movie growing up. God, Jane must even have it memorized at this point, even if not by her own free will.”

She gives a slight frown, and I note her confusion. “My sister,” I say. “Twin sister, Jane.”

“Jane and James?” she says, a mild note of humor in her voice.

Not the first time I’ve been teased about that one. “I know,” I say with a sigh. “It’s a miracle I got any creativity at all with parents like mine.”

“So very creative,” she responds.

I smile in return, a realization hitting me.

“What?” she asks.

“I never told you my first name,” I say. “How’d you know my name is James?”

The flush on her cheeks turns darker, more pronounced, and for the first time in all of our interactions, she is the one to crack in our little stare down.

“Must’ve heard one of the guys call you by it,” she says, the usual confidence in her voice not present.

That makes me smile even more and I sit up straighter, abandoning the remote. “You most definitely haven’t. The only ones who call me James are either my mom, my dad, or sometimes Jane. And since none of them have stepped foot onto this bus, there’s no way you would’ve heard anyone call me by that name.”

She looks back at me, fire in her eyes, knowing she’s been caught but refusing to back down.

“So what’d you do then? Google me?” I smirk and lean my elbow onto

the top of the couch, flicking my eyebrows up, eating up the way the flush works its way down her pale neck to the top of her hoodie.

Scar glares at me, her cutting gaze meeting my playful one, and I know I've nailed her. She's been so aloof, not wanting to socialize much with myself or any of the guys so far, and I took that as a lack of interest in getting to know any of us.

My my! Who knew Scarlett Lane sat up in her bunk at night Googling me.

Well, hopefully just me. Selfishly.

"Fine," she states. "I looked you up. I don't like living with complete strangers without a little knowledge in my back pocket."

"You know how you gain some of that knowledge, sweetheart?" I lean closer, and she leans back. "You talk to people."

Her lip curls, as if the idea of sitting around the table with us for a meal sounds like the most repulsive thing that could've come out of my mouth.

"Don't call me sweetheart."

I pop another chip in my mouth with a heavy scoop of dip and turn my attention back toward the TV to queue up the movie. Noting a mental tally for a win on my side, I keep quiet for a bit, knowing that if I keep pushing, I might run her off. However I can't help myself when I ask shortly into the movie, "Find out anything interesting about me?"

She pulls her attention away from the movie, not that I think she was really paying much attention to it to begin with. It's clear by the way that her eyes are slightly glazed over that she doesn't find the subject matter of robots too fascinating.

Scar cocks her neck to the side, and just when I think she's not about to answer my question, she goes all in.

"According to the latest TMZ article about you and the band, you've apparently had a healthy string of flavors of the evening in the past year, mostly spotted exiting clubs or bars past closing time, sunglasses often covering your eyes, your leather jacket that you keep on your bed always on your back. You apparently have also not had a serious girlfriend in recent years and people are beginning to speculate on what might be keeping you from settling down, some of it just plain nasty if you ask me."

It's mostly true. With the time off, I've been restless, needing to let out all of my pent-up energy. And I often channeled that into going out and picking up women. But what they don't report is how many of those women I ended

up dropping off at their own places without so much as a kiss before I went home alone. Sure, the occasional one made it home with me, but more often than not, I was the only one in my bed at night.

“I also learned that Hayden hasn’t been spotted out with you for any of these late night outings, something that apparently you two used to always do together. The speculation on that front...” She trails off, a look of sympathy crossing her eyes. She must know then, about the shooting that Hayden and Nikolai lived through.

“I’m sorry,” she says with sincerity, and without even really knowing her, I can tell she doesn’t say those two words lightly.

“Appreciate it,” I respond, knowing it’s sympathy not intended for me.

She clears her throat and continues, “Nikolai has been in a serious relationship with someone named Lauren, a gardening influencer. Who knew that was a job title? Although she has been notably absent from his recent social media posts and posting quite a few cryptic stories, so many are speculating if there might be trouble in paradise.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes at that. They might spew a lot of bullshit, but trouble is never far from Nikolai’s paradise.

“And there’s not much to be found about Reid as he has apparently deactivated all of his social media and is rarely caught out and about by paparazzi.”

Reid deactivating his social accounts caused quite the headache for Arun as the label ripped him a new one now that Reid wouldn’t be able to promote anything on his account, even though there are three more of us, plus our main band account.

“Well, sounds like you got quite the inside scoop,” I mock, knowing that doesn’t even scratch the surface of the very deep swell that is the four of us and our history.

“Since you Googled me, it’s only fair game that I do the same for you. Unless you feel like sharing anything with me straight from the source?” I goad her, hoping she’ll give me even the smallest details of what makes her tick.

Instead, she just settles back on the pillow and turns her attention back to the movie. “Go ahead. There’s hardly anything out there about me anyways.”

“Well, that’ll change soon enough.”

She lets out a long exhale. “I’m sure it will.”

SCAR

We wake up in Seattle and are greeted with a downpour and while some of the crew seems to be bummed out by the weather, I like the dreary welcome the city has brought us. We have a day off before our show tomorrow night and I plan to make the most of it and get the hell off the bus as soon as possible.

After last night's show, I talked with Naomi and we made plans to do some exploring together this morning before Boone joins us this afternoon after he's had some studio time. It's hard on the road to stay consistent with making music and working on what's next, but Boone is one of the most diligent guys in the business, almost to a fault.

I think Naomi is just as grateful to have me along on tour to hang out with when Boone holes himself up with work as much as I'm grateful to have a woman on the road that I trust. We invited Carter to come exploring with us, but she said she and Daniel had too much work to do today in the downtime and promised us she'd join us out in the next city.

We begin our day at Pike Place Market, Naomi buying armfuls of flowers with plans to spruce up her and Boone's bus, whereas I stick to buying a few fresh food items to stock up. I pass on the fish that is flown around, soaring from one man to the next behind the market booths. Flying fish wasn't on my must-see bucket list for the road, but a unique experience nonetheless.

Naomi is particularly grossed out by the infamous gum wall. Meanwhile, I negotiated a fresh piece of banana bread I bought at the market for a stick of gum off of a stranger to chew myself and add to the wall. A gross but somewhat momentous thing to do. Long live my shortly chewed piece of

bubblegum and therefore my stamp on Seattle.

After a mid-morning pick-me-up at the first ever Starbucks location and many streets roaming around in the rain, we settle in for lunch at a small cafe, chilled to the bone but both feeling fulfilled by the busy morning.

Our waitress takes our order and each of us slump back in the wooden chairs, letting out a sigh and a laugh at the mutual exhaustion that has set in.

“So how are you liking tour life?” I ask Naomi. She’s been on short legs here and there with Boone over the years of their relationship, normally on a jet or commercial plane. It’s a very different thing compared to a nationwide bus tour.

“It’s been great, honestly,” she says on an exhale. She fiddles with the paper straw in her water glass. “This is probably the most time I’ve gotten to spend with Boone since we first started dating. The past couple of years have been a week together and then he’s off for three more. Or he flies back into LA to do some work for an extended period of time, but then he spends most of it locked up in his studio. I know how important his music is to him, and he makes sure to let me know that I’m a priority as well, but it finally feels like he’s *showing* me that I’m a priority.”

“I’m happy for you,” I tell her sincerely. I didn’t know Boone before he met Naomi, but from what he’s told me, she brought a new sense of purpose and light into his life. Before her, he said his entire focus was on making music, touring, partying, repeat. And it was great for a time, but where the songs would once pour out of him, he was dried up. And to cope, he fell deeper into partying, not caring who was around or what he was putting into his body just as long as it kept him from feeling, period.

I could relate to that feeling. Drinking started a bit out of rebellion for me, growing up as a preacher’s daughter and all. But it turned into needing it to just take the edge off of things, until it turned into needing it before I needed food when I woke up in the morning. It was a spiral I didn’t see coming until it was too late.

“How are things going over on your bus? Not too smelly, I hope...” Naomi trails off with a smirk.

“Well, they shower regularly, which I think is more than you can say for Boone.” I laugh.

She raises her glass in a silent salute.

“But seriously,” I say, “they’ve been fine. Honestly, I don’t interact with them all that much.”

It's partially true. After the shows, everyone does their own wind down routine and crashes. Some of the guys like to sleep in in the morning, so the bus is usually pretty quiet when I get up and I'm able to eat in peace and do some work on my laptop. Hayden is typically the first one up from the band and he seems content to coexist in silence as he does his usual morning routine. Activity doesn't really start until Nikolai rolls out of bed and that's when the quiet hum of the bus is overpowered by his chatter, and Walker's when he wakes up to join in.

"I don't think Reid has said a single word to me the entire time so far." Not that I care honestly. He always looks pissed off about something, and I know I tend to have a resting bitch face, so it's not like either of us are going to go out of our ways to engage with the other.

"That doesn't surprise me," Naomi says. "We've hosted the guys over for dinner a few times over the years, but Reid's often not shown up and if he has, he's polite to me, but not one to engage in conversation or ask me about my day."

"That sounds a bit like myself."

"No." Naomi waves my comment off. "People just have to talk to you in order for you to talk to them. And then keep talking and talking and talking until you have no choice but to engage." She smiles teasingly, and I return it. "You're too hard on yourself."

I shrug like it's nothing, a habit I've formed since childhood. When you were raised like I was, there was always something I could do to improve upon. Something I did wrong that needed correction, something that wasn't perfect. There were always areas for me to pray to God for his grace to improve me in.

Blah blah blah.

"Have you gotten to know Walker at all? He's a big sweetheart behind the rockstar playboy image he puts off. Nikolai, too," she adds.

I think back to last night, watching a movie with Walker at the back of the bus after the show. I went in there after I was showered and ready for bed after my set, expecting the bus to myself for a few hours while Whisper Me Nothings and Boone performed their sets back-to-back. All set up and ready for my mindfulness time, Walker came barreling back into the room, shirtless, once again, and plopped himself down and somehow talked me into watching a movie about robots.

I'd like to think I'm fairly resistant to the charm of men after I've seen

past the masks of many around me in the church as I was growing up, but something about his large frame, loudmouth, and carefree attitude had me lowering my hackles last night. It was actually...nice.

“A little bit,” I say, not extrapolating any further.

Naomi raises an eyebrow at me, but doesn't push any further as our food arrives and we dig in like we haven't had a warm meal in days.

We scarf down our food and order another cup of coffee, before heading back out into the rain to get a little bit more shopping in before Boone comes to whisk Naomi away for a dinner date. She's reluctant to leave me out, and Boone even extends the invitation my way, but I shoo them away and let them have their romantic dinner together. Last thing I need is to be a third wheel at some fancy surf and turf spot.

As I stroll around by the pier as the light is beginning to leech from the sky, a light gray turning dark but not letting up on the rain, I'm left with a lightness inside that doesn't reflect my current setting. I'm so thankful to have Naomi on this experience with me and to be able to call her my friend. When Boone and I first started working on music together and that morphed into a friendship, never once did she ever make me feel bad for the amount of time I was taking her boyfriend away from her, or look at me with an ounce of jealousy or apprehensiveness. Instead, she treated me with kindness and an open heart, always including me in their plans when she knew I didn't have anywhere else to be. I've spent more holidays with the two of them the past few years than I have with my own family and never once did they make me feel like a burden.

Never once did they make me feel like I fell short and didn't deserve to be shown love. Unlike my family.

WALKER

Five shows into the tour and things have been going pretty smooth honestly. Hayden's been relaxing little by little into the routine and dealing with his anxiety on the road. Nikolai has officially broken things off with Lauren and she only caused a mild shitstorm with an Instagram Live where she ripped him a new one, but that's already old news. Thank god people's attention spans are so short and the news cycle is always chasing the next story.

Reid's been integrating back into the group more. He joined all of us down in the hotel gym this morning for a workout and even graced us with his presence at breakfast. We're in Salt Lake City for a show tomorrow night, before we all jump on a red eye to play in New York City the following night. Then we fly south to jump back on the bus and keep going on our route. Boone had the New York show booked before the tour got set in stone, so they opened it up to all three acts and built it into our schedule.

It'll be an exhausting few days ahead, but I'm looking forward to going back to NYC and getting some studio time in while we're there. Hayden and I have been tossing around ideas and I'm stoked to get started on album number five.

A knock coming from the front of the bus signals our lunch delivery, and I jump off the couch to greet the crew member who brought it over, slipping her an extra \$20 as she exchanges the food. The tall brunette shoots me a flirtatious smile, to which I quickly duck my head and walk back onto the bus, not interested in entertaining that any further.

"Food's here," I call out, summoning Scar and Hayden from their bunks,

Reid and Nikolai both already seated on one side of the booth. They're laughing about something Nikolai is showing Reid on his phone and Reid pushes a hand playfully in the side of Nikolai's head.

The smell of cilantro and beans is calling my name from the depths of the plastic bag as I unload containers filled with burritos, chips and queso, and tostadas. My mouth waters the second the lids start getting pulled off.

I find my burrito in the stack and ditch the rest, scooching into the other side of the booth and dig in, letting everyone else find their own food. The first bite pulls a groan deep from within, to which Scar gives me an annoyed look as she now stands at the end of the table, rummaging through the bag to find her own order. Hayden slips in beside me and presses in tight, his body fully shoved up against my own. I'm about to tell him to scoot over and let me have my time with my burrito, but I realize he's making room for Scar to sit next to us. I squeeze myself as close to the wall as possible to allow her more room.

The table is quiet as we all eat, everyone too hungry for small talk.

That is until the door to the bus swings open and in enters the big boss. Or bosses, as Vik struts in behind Arun. It's safe to say that I'm a pretty confident guy, both of my parents raising me to be strong and bold, my sister almost getting ready to graduate law school. Us Walkers know how to stand tall.

But I'd be lying if Arun and Vik didn't intimidate me a little bit. Arun is in his typical rich, navy suit, tailored to fit his every toned muscle, gold cufflinks catching the sunlight streaming in through the front open window. Vik's also in a suit—a deep red color that compliments the warm undertone of her brown skin. They cut quite the image together and if it wasn't for the fact that I know Vik is happily married to her wife of many years, I'd be trying to play power couple matchmaker.

They're sharks in their field, going to bat for their clients and not taking no for an answer. I know what an asset Arun has been for us since we were dumb teenagers who never bothered to read anything we needed to sign on the dotted line for and wouldn't have been able to navigate what opportunities are yeses and what ones are nos.

From what Boone has said, Vik is very similar to Arun in her approaches to business, although slightly colder and more cutthroat than him as she needs to be in order to be taken more seriously in the very male dominated industry. She scares me a bit...and I kinda love it.

“Oh good, you’re all here,” Arun says dryly. He immediately grabs his phone out of his pocket and I’m honestly surprised it was in there to begin with. If Arun was a Barbie, the one and only accessory he would need would be his phone.

“Since the tour has been receiving such positive reviews and selling out every show thus far, we’ve decided to add some additional dates at the end of the tour. They won’t conflict with the summer festival season dates already on the calendar, so no need to worry about that.”

We nod, still focused on eating our lunch. Doesn’t make any difference to me. The more shows, the better.

“Arun has forwarded all of the new dates to each of your calendars and social media posts are scheduled to go up tomorrow afternoon, announcing the additional shows and ticket sale information,” Vik says. Similar to Arun, she’s busy typing away at her phone, half in one conversation, half in the other here on the bus.

I decide to join the club, along with the rest of us at the table as we pull our phones out to check out the new dates. I scroll through the list, six more in total over an additional two weeks.

Fine by me. The guys all seem to have the same sentiment as one by one they put their phones back down and dive into their food. But I look around Hayden and see Scar locked in on her screen, her face pale and mouth downturned.

“The second to last show...” She trails off, looking up at Vik, who pulls her full attention to Scar, and upon seeing her reaction, gains a warmth to her expression I haven’t seen from her before.

“I know, I’m sorry.” She lays a hand on Scar’s shoulder.

I watch Scar closely, trying to understand what her concern might be.

“What’s wrong? Not a fan of the Carolinas?” Arun attempts to break the tension, but fails when Vik immediately turns to stare him down. If looks could kill, Arun would be on his way to the morgue right now.

Scar rolls her lips in between her teeth, as if choking down what she really wants to say. She grabs the paper napkin off her lap and wipes her mouth, before tossing it on her half-eaten lunch and storms to the back of the bus, slamming the door shut behind her.

We look at each other with wide eyes, while Vik lets out a heavy sigh and grabs Arun’s arm, marching him out the front of the bus.

“Anyone know what that was about?” Nikolai asks, talking around a

mouthful of chips.

I exchange glances with the guys, no one seeming to have a clue.

The conversation switches to what we want to start working on first when we get in the studio in a couple days, but my focus isn't here. It's on the woman who just took off to the back of the bus at the mention of our show in Charlotte.

What could've happened there that makes her so upset about having a show there?

My knee bounces under the table, slightly shaking the drinks resting on the surface. I scarf the rest of my food down in record time, before pushing Hayden out of the booth, grabbing my half-drunk soda, and heading toward the back room while the guys protest to come back so we can figure out our game plan.

I stop short of the door, pressing my ear against it to see if I can hear her at all. I don't hear any crying, so that's a good thing, right? Tapping out a light knock, I call out, "It's Walker, can I come in?"

I hear a heavy set of boots clunk on the floor before the door cracks open enough for me to slip through. Scar paces the small space, her short legs not getting more than a couple strides in before turning around the way she came. When I catch a glimpse of her face, I'm relieved to see her eyes don't look red or puffy, so I don't think she's been crying.

"So, uh, have some enemies residing in North Carolina?" I ask jokingly, trying to lighten the mood and then immediately want to eat my words, because wasn't that what Arun just attempted to do and was quickly escorted off the bus for? "Sorry," I add, and shift from foot to foot, feeling like I'm taking up too much space in this small area.

"No apology needed," she says, but the frown doesn't budge from her brow. "It's just that the new date hits close to home...literally."

Ah. I nod, although I still don't quite understand her reaction to it all. "You're from Charlotte?"

"No, South Carolina actually, just under two hours away from there. But a lot of people I used to know have found their way to Charlotte, and it's closer to my own family that I'd like to be." She chews on her bottom lip, the skin turning red under the work of her teeth.

"Do you not have much contact with them?"

Scar just shakes her head and it's as if I can see her mentally shutting down, lights flashing off and going out one by one, so I change the subject.

“Are you having a good time on tour? Excited about the other additional couple of weeks tacked on?”

“I am,” she says. Scar picks at her nails, and when she notices my attention on them, she sticks them in the pockets of her oversized hoodie that is basically a dress on her.

“Playing these shows has been arguably the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. That first night felt like a puzzle piece falling into place after being lost on the floor for months. Don’t get me wrong, being on the road has its challenges.” She eyes the cup dangling by my fingertips and licks her lips in quick sweep. “But I would do this forever if I could.”

I smile, and when she returns it for once, my chest blooms in awe, and I wonder if she knows how devastating she looks with a smile on her face.

“Well, good to know we haven’t scared you away from your first bus tour and here’s to many more in your future.” I raise my cup in cheers and drain the last bit before tossing it in the small garbage can tucked in the corner on one end of the couch.

A loud thud sounds behind me and I pop open the door to see Nikolai sprawled across the floor on his ass laughing, with a grumpy-looking Reid now sitting in his spot in the booth wiping a smear of sour cream from the top of his head.

Idiots.

I love those idiots, but still. Idiots.

I turn my attention back to Scar, but the sliver of light that was there a moment ago has vanished. In its place is a solemn mask and a tiredness behind her eyes. Whatever set her off about these additional shows is not something she’s going to share with me. Not now anyways.

But for the first time tonight, I saw something in her that I’ve only witnessed when she’s been on stage performing. I’ve seen it in every single show so far from my secluded spot in the curtains backstage when I normally should be back in the green room with the guys getting ready for the show or warming up. Every night, I find my way to the wings and watch her.

Watch her move with grace and purpose, interact with the crowd as if she’s been doing it all her life, sing like it’s what she was born to do. There’s light behind her gloomy exterior, and whether she snuffs it out purposefully or on instinct because of how people may have treated her to do so in the past, I’m not sure.

But the world deserves to see it. Scarlett deserves to live it.

SCAR

“I thought you’d be trying to catch a few z’s before flying out like the rest of them.” Walker plops down in the seat next to me with about the same gracefulness as a newborn calf, gesturing to the row of people behind us. I crane my neck, seeing everyone from Walker’s band, Boone and Naomi, and a few of the crew all passed out. It’s almost 1:00 am and our flight is delayed another forty-five minutes.

The show tonight shows its wear on everyone.

Thankfully the airport is dead, so Boone and the guys have made it through without being noticed. The terminals are quiet, little shops gated shut, only the sounds of planes taking off and landing in the distance.

“Can’t really sleep in airports.” I shrug, turning my attention back to the journal on my lap. On stage tonight, I heard a new melody in my head and I want to make sure I get it down before forgetting. My mind feels clearer today, thoughts of the additional dates tacked on at the end of the tour pushed to the farthest recesses of my mind. It’s not like I have to tell anyone I’ll be close by. They wouldn’t want to see me anyways, so no reason to really tell anyone. And I highly doubt my parents are keeping tabs on my tour schedule.

When I moved out after graduation, I think both of them breathed a sigh of relief that I was now out of sight, out of mind. For my family and for the church.

So no use in spending energy worrying about something I’m not able to change because there’s no way anyone cares whether or not I want to perform in Charlotte. It’s just a done deal.

“That’s not helpful for an artist on the road.” He slides down in the chair

and props his arms behind his head. “Gotta learn to sleep anywhere, Scarlett. Planes, cabs, buses, sharing beds...” His eyes twinkle with amusement as a smirk pulls up the corner of his mouth.

“I share beds just fine, thank you very much.” I wrap the leather band around my journal and tuck it into my bag, clearly not going to be getting any more work done.

Walker gives me a once-over, eyes glinting in approval at my rebuttal. I’ve grown accustomed to his playful manner, begrudgingly even starting to become a little fond of it.

Fuck it. It’s been a while since I’ve flirted with a man. You’d think with the bit of growing fame that’s starting to come my way, that would bring a little more male attention.

Not yet at least. So if Walker wants a playmate here at the airport while we wait on these shitheads to get it together and get us on this damn plane, and I’m in an airport and can’t go sit at the bar for a drink, I might as well indulge him a bit. Reward him for the olive branches he’s extended me.

“In fact,” I say, angling my body toward Walker and peer over our shoulders and say as dryly as possible, “maybe I’ll ask Vik to bunk me with Nikolai in the next city. You know, see if all those rumors are true.”

Nikolai is slouched and leaning into the seat to his right, his tall frame not quite suited for the tiny airport seats. He has his jean jacket lying over his face but it doesn’t mask the snoring that drifts through the gate area.

“Scar, sweetheart. You’d rip him to shreds before he’d even lay a hand on you. Spare my boy, please.” Walker pouts his bottom lip, still with that sparkle of humor in those eyes of his.

I turn around and face forward again, tucking my legs up onto the seat. When I can’t stifle a yawn from finally coming out, Walker offers his sweatshirt up with a silent eyebrow raise. I hesitate, but at the flash of disappointment that crosses his face at my reluctance, I take it gratefully and scrunch it up behind my head, leaning back and closing my eyes.

I can feel Walker watching me, the shaking of his leg bouncing the seats and the almost silent tapping of his fingers against his thigh.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” I ask, not opening my eyes.

A heavy sigh. “Still got too much energy left over from the show, I guess.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Me? Joking? Never,” he drawls.

I open my eyes and turn my head toward him. “You’re seriously still wound up from the show? Aren’t you tired after drumming like that for almost two straight hours?”

Walker perks up at that. “You watch our set tonight?”

“No, but you think I can’t hear you all the way in the green room?”

His face twists in hurt, but it’s gone before I know it, quickly replaced with a cool veneer. “Ah, all right then. You gonna ever stick around to watch our set one night? I know you go back and watch Boone sometimes.”

“You keeping tabs on me, Walker?”

“Yes.”

Yes. One word. No bullshit, no evading the question, just a simple yes.

He smiles and resumes tapping his feet.

“I don’t know if I should be flattered or annoyed.”

“I thought you would appreciate honesty, Scar. That’s all I got to give.”

And when I look at him, I can tell he means it. His eyes are shining, face open and expressive, showing he’s willing to talk and willing to listen. It also doesn’t hurt that he’s devilishly handsome and while he’s aware of it, he doesn’t seem to flaunt it like Nikolai. He looks like a rockstar, with that other worldly kind of aura about him, but also someone you could approach on the street if you needed help. Someone that if he moved next door to you, you’d feel safer knowing you had someone like him nearby.

“Can I ask you about one of your songs?” he asks.

“Depends on which one.”

“The second to last one you sing.”

Ah.

That one.

Not the one I necessarily love talking about. He must see that written across my face because he quickly adds, “You don’t have to. I know that shit’s personal. I just see the way it affects you when you sing it. And I know that’s the same kind of look Nikolai gets when he sings a certain song in our set.”

He shifts his gaze to his hands, twirling one of the silver rings he’s wearing. He even seems to have a rhythm to doing that, a beat invisible to my ears, but I know he hears.

I hedge around the truth, not wanting to burn the small bridge we’ve created at this moment but also not really feeling like going to the place that song takes me right now either.

“It’s just a song I wrote after a bit of a wake-up call in my life a couple years back, after I thought I had sunk so far past the point of no return. And I didn’t want anyone else getting pulled down with me.”

Walker studies me for a moment, as if knowing I’m not giving him the full story and internally debating on pushing me for further clarity.

“I was writing songs for Boone at the time and a few other people still. I had been doing that for a while and was content with it.” I stare ahead as I continue, picking at the cuff of my sweatshirt. “And after that night—” I pause, words clogging my throat, fighting to be released, but I push them back down, too scared to bring the memory back to the surface.

“After something happened, I wrote this song and sent it to Boone, asking him to shop around to sell it, and it was going to be the last song I ever planned on writing.”

I glance over at Walker, making sure he’s still alive. This might be the first time I’ve ever seen him be this quiet and still. He only lifts a dark brow, encouraging me to keep going, probably pleased to hear me carrying the conversation for once, even if I’m keeping him in the dark on the details.

“But clearly, you’re still writing music?” he asks.

“Clearly.”

“And you ended up keeping the song.”

“I did. Boone refused to help me find anyone for it, and instead went ahead and put his own production on it, kept my shitty vocal demo and reworked it until I was ready to sing a final cut for it, and told me we’d either release it under my name, or the song would stay locked away on his computer forever. And I couldn’t let that happen. It holds too much space inside of me already,” I trail off, looking out across the lights lining the runway.

I expect Walker to keep digging, yearning for more after the scraps I’ve been giving him since we met. But instead, he seems content, his gaze soft and safe, and I want to bask in the light that seems to pour out of him at all times. Even stuck at the airport in the middle of the night after multiple delays, he exudes patience and a sense of calmness I wish would flow off him and seep into me.

Maybe I’ve been too stubborn to take notice of it before, too overwhelmed with this new turn my life has taken, or maybe it’s years of feeling like I only had myself to keep me protected, and instead of keeping myself safe, I’ve done more harm than good.

I rest my head back against my makeshift pillow of Walker's sweater, discreetly inhaling the cologne that clings to it, minty and sharp. And as I begin to doze off, knowing that I can count on Walker to wake me when we're finally ready to board, I feel my head slip slightly to the side and rest on a strong, warm shoulder.

But I don't bother to move.

WALKER

“I told you to stick to writing your shit and keep the hell out of my bass lines.” Hayden seethes, finally hitting his breaking point with Reid after an exhausting and frustrating morning in the studio.

To be fair to both of them, we’re all wiped out. Our flight into the city last night was delayed multiple times and the wheels had barely touched down before we were being whisked straight into the studio. The only sleep any of us got was what we could manage on the flight. We have limited time to work, so no rest until we’re back on our regular schedule on the bus.

“Dude, just let him do it how he wrote it for a couple takes, and if it’s not working, we’ll reconvene,” Nikolai pipes in, trying to be the peacemaker. He’s got deep purple bags under his eyes that he somehow still manages to pull off into not looking like a total pile of shit, unlike me who gave myself a little jump scare this morning when I looked in the mirror. My hair’s getting long; long enough to walk the line of messy but in a good way.

Today, it’s just plain messy.

But luckily, we’ve managed to stay under the radar since we arrived, only a handful of fans waiting at the airport when we landed and none managed to follow us to the studio.

Hayden goes for another take on his bassline for the song we’ve been working on this morning. Between Nikolai and I, we had most of the lyrics laid out, so today is mostly focused on getting the instrumental tracks started. Ever since we first started writing music, we found it easier to start with Hayden getting the bass done after we had a melody and some lyrics and build from there. But this morning, maybe it would’ve been better to start

with Reid getting his lead guitar parts ironed out since he's been particularly testy.

"It sounds like shit," Reid mutters, leaning over the mixing console in the control room. I quickly check to see if the mic is off so that Hayden can't hear him from where he is in the live room.

Thankfully, it's off.

"Shut up," I exhale.

"You're seriously going to tell me that's what you had in mind for this song?" Reid spins around, pinning me with an ice-cold stare.

"It's different from our original idea," I concede, "but it could work, so let him go for it. He knows what he can do best, so let him be. If it's not working, then like Nikolai said, we'll try something else."

Reid lets out an annoyed laugh and shakes his head. "Always gotta coddle the little baby."

I'm up off the couch and in Reid's face before I know it, pushing him back against the console, anger heating my blood.

"Woah, woah, woah, watch the controls!" Nikolai calls out, probably worried that we're about to damage thousands of dollars of equipment.

"You need to lay the fuck off," I grit out.

"You need to *back* the fuck off," Reid returns, anger twisting his face but also there's a hint of satisfaction. And excitement.

There's nothing Reid Keely loves more than picking a fight. Been that way since I met him ten years ago. Always has that anger simmering under the surface, just waiting for the smallest of sparks to let himself rise.

But I wouldn't classify him as a typical hothead. Oh no, he's far more calculated about when he lets his anger strike, and he's excellent at getting a rise out of the person he most wants to pick a fight with.

Hayden was definitely his intended target, but from the way he's looking at me, I can tell he's not unhappy with picking a fight with me instead.

"It's not just you in here trying to write these goddamn songs, and you're not the only one who's operating on barely any sleep. Either sit down and be a team fucking player, or take a break far away from here. We barely have any time as it is to get these tracks done and if we want to get this next album done on time, we need to be working together. Not against each other."

I take a step back to give us each some breathing room, but Reid's fists don't unclench. Peering over his shoulder, Hayden watches us closely from the live room, waiting for his cue to start or waiting to interfere if need be.

But from the tense set of his shoulders and the way he's nervously running his hand through his hair, he doesn't like the idea of having to break up a fight between us.

"Like I'd leave this shit strictly up to the three of you," Reid mutters.

"Hey," Nikolai calls out from his spot on the leather couch, button up shirt only done up halfway.

"Just shut up." I push forward, knocking him out of the way and taking over the main position at the console, gearing up to record Hayden's track so we can get on with it.

Reid stiffens as I take his spot, clearly contemplating if it's worth it to deck me or not. Even though he's got a couple inches on me, I'm bulkier than him, arms corded in muscle from years of playing drums. We've come close to blows before, but none of us have ever actually thrown a punch at each other.

Today's not going to be the day for that.

Reid blows out a strangled breath, snatching his water bottle from the small coffee table in the middle of the room and storms out of the studio. Nikolai hauls his ass off the couch and follows him out.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, mentally counting to ten, before turning my focus back to Hayden.

"All set?" I ask him, pushing down on the intercom.

He gives me a small smile and nods, swinging his favorite bass over his head and fixing it over his left shoulder.

I get everything queued up, shoot Hayden a thumbs up, and try to settle the frustration still swarming my skin while he begins to play.



SCAR

"This is fucking sick!" My head rocks back and forth, hair swishing across my face with the movement in time with the beat. Boone and I have been messing around with a few more trap elements lately, and combining it in with my typical progressive and electro house sounds is proving to be a really interesting dynamic.

Boone is hunched over his laptop, neck also moving with the beat, a huge

smile across his face. Even though my body was heavy with exhaustion this morning, getting off the red eye and the call to my hotel room bed was strong, I dragged myself into the studio with Boone so I could show him what I've been working on lately.

I've been starting to think about writing my first full-length album, hopefully shortly after the tour is over. It's daunting to think about pulling together an entire body of work like that, but it's good for me to have a goal to keep my mind focused.

Plus, having Boone with me to bounce ideas off of and encourage me along the way, it feels more manageable.

"Got any vocals ready to go for it?" he asks, stopping the track and leaning dangerously far back in his swivel chair.

"A few ideas but nothing quite ready to go yet today," I say.

"Then let's get some lunch." He claps his hands once and rises.

I shoulder on my leather jacket and stand to follow him out. My little legs strain to keep up with his long strides down the various hallways with doors for other studios.

Records and posters line the wall of other artists who have recorded here, and I can't help but stop and stare at some of them, in awe that I'm in the same place that some of these musical legends were.

At some point, Boone must've realized he lost me and his head pokes around the corner, calling out to me. I shoo him away, instead taking my time walking down the hall, soaking in all of the memorabilia. I can't help but think about what it might be like to have something of mine up here one day. A surge of motivation courses through me, a lightness springing into each of my steps.

Just as I'm about to round the corner, I smack straight into a broad chest, nose stinging with the contact. "Shit," I say, hands immediately reaching up to cup my face.

"Woah, sorry," Nikolai apologizes, steadying me with his hands on my shoulders. "You okay?"

"God, pecs of fucking steel you got there." I scrunch my nose, shaking it off.

A Cheshire cat grin stretching across Nikolai's face as he leans against the wall with one shoulder and crosses his arms across his chest, flexing his pecs through his open shirt. I can feel his eyes on me, as if daring me to drag my attention to them.

“You wanna touch?” he asks.

“No thank you.” I back up a step and keep my eyes trained solely on his face.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“I won’t.”

That only makes him smile bigger, clearly loving the challenge. But it’s one he’ll lose, which he seems to be aware of but can’t resist.

“Done for the day?”

I shake my head. “Boone decided it was time for lunch, but I think I’ve been effectively ditched. I’m not hungry yet anyways, so I just figured I’d wander around a bit and take a look at everything.”

Nikolai pushes himself off the wall and lays his arm across my shoulder, turning me around and guiding me back down the hall from where I came from. “Come on in and join us for a bit. We could all use a neutral party in the studio with us today.”

I begin to protest but stop. What better things do I have to do? Boone’s likely already off at lunch with Naomi, Vik was tied up in as many in-person meetings as she could squeeze in today with the short time we have here, and no one else was propositioning me with a better offer. So I let myself be guided into the studio at the end of the hall, a little bit of excitement simmering at the thought of watching the guys record live.

Doing so much of my song composition on my computer, I rarely ever get to see artists recording their tracks with live instruments, so it’ll be interesting to see how their process goes.

As Nikolai pulls open the heavily insulated door, the quiet hallway is quickly filled with loud drumming and my attention is immediately pulled to the live room in front of me, feet carrying me inside with a mind of their own, taking me right up to the window opposite where Walker is currently playing.

He leans far over the drum kit, this one white and gold, looking very plain compared to the black and neon green one he has on the tour. Walker’s muscles bulge as his arms move quicker than my eyes can follow, sweat dripping from his forehead and dark hair hanging in his eyes, swaying with the rhythm he bobs his head along to.

His large chest glistens, sweatshirt abandoned in a heap next to the kit. The pounding of the drums reverberates through the small space from the speakers built in around the room.

Shaking myself out of the trance watching Walker put me in, I scan the room. Hayden is lying on the leather couch across from the console, typing away on his phone. Reid is notably absent. Nikolai strolls up beside me, watching Walker for a moment before turning around to ask Hayden, “When did you guys switch?”

Hayden doesn’t look up from his phone, but answers, “A few minutes ago. He couldn’t stop tapping on the console, pacing up and down the studio. Thought he might burn a hole in the carpet. He clearly needed to work off some energy, so I told him I wanted a break and he jumped in there.”

My focus is pulled back to Walker as he rapidly fires on one of the cymbals, before stopping and throwing his head back, dislodging the headphones he’s wearing. They fall behind him, but he makes no move for them, instead grabbing a hand towel hanging over a music stand to his left, quickly wiping his face and neck.

His chest heaves and I can’t look away, watching every rise and fall of his breath. Walker cracks his neck side to side, Adam's apple partially hidden behind a dusting of hair that’s grown overnight. The stubble fits him and my palms twitch with the desire to run my hands across it.

What the fuck?

I shake my head slightly, my cheeks warming with embarrassment. It seems hotter in this studio than the one Boone and I were working in and I roll the sleeves of my jacket up as far as I can.

Tossing the towel aside, Walker grabs his drumsticks and spins the one in his right hand. I’m momentarily mesmerized by the speed at which he deftly twirls it around his fingers and hand, never faltering or letting it slip from his strong grasp.

He looks up to the window for the first time since Nikolai and I entered the studio and I’m surprised at the twinge of disappointment that zaps through me when Walker doesn’t seem to acknowledge me. Not a smile or an eyebrow raise, not even a not-so-subtle flex of his muscles that I’ve caught him doing to me before.

No sign of his usual humor dances on his face. Instead, he jumps right back into playing, sans headphones, and gets lost in his rhythm.

I hang out in the studio for about an hour with Nikolai and Hayden, talking off and on with them in between Walker’s playing. We talk about our various projects we’re working on, mine seeming to be going much better than theirs if the dark look on Hayden’s face has anything to say about it.

When my stomach starts to growl, I bid them adieu and head out in search of food. Walker's still in the booth pounding away when I leave and I don't spare a glance back at him as I exit the studio.

Making my way down the hallway with lunch on the brain for the second time today, I'm stopped in my tracks once again as my name is called out behind me.

"Scar," Walker yells as he jogs to me, towel hanging from his hand. "Didn't even say hi to me? How unlike you," he says sarcastically.

I turn to face him. "You seemed pretty busy in there."

As he closes the gap between us, the smell of his cologne and sweat, strong and masculine, hangs heavy in the air, making my head spin.

"Where are you headed off to?"

"Going to grab something to eat. You want anything?" The offer spills from my lips, surprising us both.

Walker vibrates with energy, foot tapping on the floor. "I'm good," he declines. "I gotta get back in there, but I didn't want you to leave without getting to say hi."

I nod, not sure what else to say and turn to leave, but before I get around the corner, he calls out again.

"You like what you saw in there? Think any of it has potential?"

Turning around, I can't hide the confusion on my face. Is he asking for my opinion on his drumming? That's not quite my area of expertise.

Picking up on my hesitation, he shifts from foot to foot. "I just mean...did you enjoy watching at all?" If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's nervous.

I answer honestly. "I did." His chest falls a bit, as if he was holding his breath awaiting my answer. "It was cool to see you in your element."

"Maybe next time, you'd like to watch me on stage? Finally stick around for one of our sets?"

It's not like I've been purposely avoiding watching their sets. But by the time I'm done with my own, I'm emotionally and physically spent, and always craving the peacefulness of the empty bus and a long shower.

But it's time I show Walker the same support he's been trying to offer to me this entire tour, which I have been trying to accept little by little.

"Tomorrow night," I respond with a nod, making him a promise.

Walker's face lights up as he begins to walk backward to the studio, eyes burning with a fire that stirs something low in my stomach, causing me to shift on my feet and I see him note the movement. "I'm holding you to it," he

calls out, happiness clear in his voice.

I stifle a smile and finally exit the studio, the noise of the city greeting me as I step onto the pavement. People rush past me on the sidewalk, not sparing me a second look and I welcome the chill of the air against my warm skin as I begin to stroll, no destination in mind and enjoying the knowledge that I'm free to wander wherever I please, no meeting or show to prep for, for the rest of the day.

And giving me the chance to clear my head as the only thought that occupies it is a certain drummer.

SCAR

Just as I'm about to slide my key into the lock on my hotel room door, a door swings open behind me and I'm hit with a draft of cool air against my back.

I peer over my shoulder and see Carter exiting the room across from mine. Her short hair is full of static as she pulls the collar of her puffer jacket around her neck.

"Hey." She smiles as she steps out into the hallway. "Didn't realize we were neighbors."

"I didn't either," I respond, pulling my key away from the lock and turning around, leaning back against the door. "I haven't seen you around since we got here yesterday."

"Been catching up on all of the content from the recent shows so I really haven't left this room much." She laughs but it falls flat.

In *the* New York City and barely leaving the hotel room?

I feel bad for her.

"Have you been here before?"

Carter shakes her head, some of her hair catching on the gloss on her lips.

"C'mon! You gotta get out and see some of the sights then. Or at least get out to try some of the food."

Her eyes fall to her feet. I should've thought to try to find her this morning before I went out and about and invited her to tag along. I check the time on my phone, noting that I still have about an hour before I need to be heading over to the venue for the show tonight.

The pull for a nap is strong, but the desire to try to get Carter out to enjoy

at least a small part of our time here is stronger.

“Wanna go grab a bite to eat? There’s a great pizza spot just down the street from here,” I offer. She doesn’t need to know that I already ate dinner before coming back to the hotel, but I can most certainly always go for a slice.

Carter hesitates, looking at her phone. “I don’t know. Daniel said to stay here so he can come and get me and the equipment before tonight.”

My face twists at the way she just said that, like she’s a child waiting for her parents to pick her up from school and not a grown ass adult with autonomy.

So where the hell is he if she’s been stuck here in the room all day?

“Then come down to the bar off the lobby for a drink with me?” I hate the idea of her just sitting around here by herself.

She pauses, but only for a moment. “I’d love to.” She checks her phone once last time before turning it off and following me toward the elevator.

We make small talk as we ride down to the first floor and take up two empty seats at the bar. The cushions are plush as we sink onto them, the lighting bright and airy, sparkling off of the white tiled floor.

The bartender meanders over, polishing a glass in her hand as she does so. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll take a Red Bull,” I order, then look to Carter.

“Diet Coke.”

The woman’s face falls a bit before she catches it and shoots us a smile, likely calculating a smaller tip because of our cheap drink orders. But she nods and goes off to gather the drinks anyways.

“So where is your other half then while you’ve been here working all day?” I ask, turning in my chair so I’m angled toward her.

Carter does the same as she answers. “He said he had a meeting this morning.”

I blink at her. “And now, it’s already evening?” I ask, dragging out the last few words.

She purses her lips and nods. “Yes, it is. I have no idea where he’s been the rest of the day, just that he sent me a list of edits needing to be made and requesting that I get them done.” She rolls her eyes. “As if this is not also my job and I didn’t already know what needed to be done.”

The bartender sets our drinks on a small napkin in front of us and Carter reaches forward and takes a sip.

“If I would’ve known you were sitting around here doing work by yourself all day, I would’ve tracked you down and dragged you out with me earlier. Naomi, Boone, and I just walked around all day and it would’ve been nice to not be the third wheel again,” I joke.

Carter’s mouth pulls up at that but she shakes her head. “The work needed to get done.”

I bite my tongue, not saying that if the work needed to be done so badly, then maybe her boyfriend and business partner should’ve been here to help her.

“Have you always shot for musicians?”

“No,” she answers, taking another sip and I do the same, enjoying the way the sweetness explodes across my tongue with the bite of carbonation. “I love shooting live bands and artists, but I also love doing portrait photography. I used to set up photoshoots with different friends back home who were willing to pose for me.” She gets a far-off look and I can almost see a portfolio flipping through her mind across her face.

“You miss it,” I say.

“I do,” she confirms. “But I wouldn’t give up this chance for anything. I’ve been having a lot of fun watching you perform every night. Don’t tell Boone or the Whisper Me Nothings guys, but your sets are my favorite to shoot.”

My cheeks heat at her compliment, and I take another drink to distract from my rising blush. “Stop it.”

She sits up straighter. “No, I mean it. It’s mesmerizing watching you bring an audience onto your side when you know that they’re there for the headliners.” As soon as the words leave her lips, Carter’s eyes widen and she slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry, that totally sounded wrong.”

I let out a small laugh, waving her off. “Don’t worry about it. I know what you mean and you’re right, I know every time I step out on that stage that no one in that audience bought a ticket specifically for me.”

But that only makes me want to work harder every performance. I want those people to have come to see Boone or Whisper Me Nothings but leave thinking about my set, my songs, my performance.

I don’t walk out there knowing anyone is waiting with bated breath for me. I need to prove to them that I deserve to be opening for the acts following me.

Carter’s phone buzzes on the bar and she flips the screen over. Someone

is calling but the screen is tilted away so I can't tell who.

"You can answer it," I tell her, spinning my chair to angle myself back toward the bar and lean my elbows on it, giving her a little semblance of privacy.

Carter declines the call and then shoots off a quick text before turning her attention back to me. "It's just my dad, I can call him back later."

"You sure? I don't mind." Although if my father was calling, I most definitely would be declining that call too.

"I talked to him this morning already." She waves me off. "He's probably just on his way home from work and wanted to chat while he drove home."

"Are you two close?" I ask, assuming if she talks to him multiple times a day, they like each other more than my own father and I do.

I bet if I pulled up my call log on my phone right now, I wouldn't have a single call, in or out, from my father in years. We haven't spoken since Beth's wedding and he's not the type to call just to check in. And I'm not the type to call and try to start up a conversation with him when I wouldn't even know where to start.

Growing up as a preacher's daughter, there's a certain level of expectations of not only myself but our entire family. He was the leader of the flock, and we were the role models. My mother fit in perfectly by his side, organizing the children's ministry and hosting bible studies for fellow women. As the eldest daughter, I should've fallen in line behind my mother, adopting her mannerisms and sweet voice, always looking for ways to be involved in the church.

But I hated bible study. I hated getting dressed up to the nines multiple times a week for service, not being allowed to play sports because they weren't for little girls and instead forced to babysit in the church nursery.

I hated going to youth groups and sitting there while an adult droned on and on about purity and sin, scaring the hell out of other kids but fueling the anger inside myself toward the whole thing.

I hated the way any questions I asked were silenced. It's not that I thought everything was a lie, but I had doubts. And you weren't supposed to have those. Especially not when your father was the mouthpiece of those teachings.

But when my little sister came along and fit in perfectly in the role of a dutiful daughter, a small weight was lifted off my shoulders. Whether she knows it or not, Beth being born and enjoying all of the things I revolted

against was one of the luckiest things to happen to me.

Carter's voice pulls me out of my tumbling thoughts. "We are close. He's like my best friend." By the way her face softens talking about him, I believe her.

I give her an awkward smile, not sure what to say to that because there's not much common ground there for the two of us to bond over. Instead I fill the silence with a long drink.

"Are you close with your dad?" she asks, trying to make conversation.

"Not really. I haven't talked to him in years."

Her face falls. "I'm sorry. That's too bad."

I shake my head. "Trust me, it's not. If you knew my father, it's not a bad thing to not have to deal with him very often."

I can tell that she doesn't understand my casualness about it, not able to imagine how I can go years without talking to him when it's clear she doesn't go maybe even a day without talking to hers. But I don't judge her for it. Part of me wishes I had a father that made me excited to pick his phone calls up just to talk while he drives home. But there's no point in wishing for things that I can't change and if I've learned anything over my twenty-four years, there is no changing Phillip Whelan.

A gasp from the bartender has Carter and I whipping our heads in her direction. She's staring off toward the lobby and when I follow her line of sight, I see Walker, Nikolai, and Reid walking toward the front door, a couple security guys with them as they do. No Hayden in sight though.

Luckily for them, the lobby and bar are relatively empty, so no one stops them as they walk through. That is until Walker looks over and spots us, a broad grin appearing on his face as he parts from the group and comes over.

I feel his eyes on me the entire time he closes the space between us and my body warms under his gaze.

"Ladies," he greets, leaning an elbow on the bar and casually crossing one ankle over the other. "How's it going?"

"Good," Carter answers, then asks him the same in return.

"It's a great night for a show," he says, winking at me, reminding me of my promise to watch him tonight. I give him a small nod in confirmation and raise my drink in cheers.

Before Carter can open her mouth to say anything more, Daniel appears behind Walker, his brow furrowed in anger and zeroed in on her.

The change in Carter is instant. Where she was once at ease and calm, her

body is now radiating with tension, spine so straight I'm surprised it could ever bend to begin with.

"Didn't realize we were having a party down here," Daniel says, trying to keep his tone casual while he keeps his eyes lasered on Carter.

"We weren't," Carter is quick to say before she pops up from her stool and throws a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. "I was actually just getting ready to go back up to the room and get everything together for tonight."

Daniel cocks his head to the side. "I handled that." He turns slightly to show the backpack he's wearing. "I went to the room, where you said you would be, and when I didn't find you and you weren't answering my texts, I figured it was up to me to pack the equipment up for tonight." He says it all with a smile but his tone is infused with none of it.

I look back and forth between them, wondering if I should say anything to this condescending prick about leaving her alone all day to do work by herself while he went out and did whatever he wanted. So what if she wants to take a little break.

But before I can say anything, Carter is up and moving toward his side, ready to go. "We'll see you at the show," she says, before ducking her head and waiting for Daniel to walk away and then falling into step behind him.

My dinner threatens to make a reappearance at the image of her trailing behind him, flashbacks clicking through my head of watching all of the women around me growing up doing the same with their husbands and fathers. Always letting them take the lead and following one step behind, remembering their place.

He slaps Walker on the back as he does so and Walker pulls his shoulder away from his touch, whether subconsciously or not, I'm not sure.

"Where are you all headed?" I ask Walker, the bar now feeling smaller with just the two of us here.

"Gonna go to a bar for a quick drink and then head over to the venue. I'd ask you to join, but I think Vik would have my balls if I made you late for a show."

I let out a small laugh, knowing he's right.

"I don't want to keep you," I tell him, seeing the guys growing restless by the front door. "I'll see you later."

Walker starts walking backward, and does he have eyeballs in the back of his head or something? He seems to do that a lot, and without incident. "You sure will." He smiles, before he reaches the guys and they leave.

I down the rest of my drink and excuse myself after paying before the bartender can ask me any of the questions that are so clearly on the tip of her tongue about Walker coming over here and the familiarity in which Carter and I interacted with him.

I've got a show to get to.



IT'S thirty minutes to showtime and I'm the only one backstage. I saw a glimpse of Daniel and Carter heading out into the pit a little bit ago to get set up, but no sign of Walker or the rest of Whisper Me Nothings.

I get a zing of excitement when I think about watching them perform tonight and seeing Walker out there onstage and not just in a recording studio.

About to slip my headphones on to get focused for the show, I feel my phone buzzing in my pants pocket. Thought I left this in the greenroom already.

Pulling it out, I see the name Beth bright and flashing across the screen.

What the hell...

I give it another few vibrates, debating if I want to answer or not. A war rages inside me, to answer or not to answer, part of me wanting to hear my sister's voice and the other part dreading it, and at the last moment, I make a split-second decision and hit accept.

"Hello?" I hate how quiet my voice sounds.

"Scarlett! I'm...happy you answered," Beth says, surprise evident in her tone, but she doesn't necessarily sound relieved by the notion.

"Are you?"

"Yes, sorry." She sighs. "It's good to hear your voice."

"Good to hear yours too, sis," I admit. I haven't seen her since her wedding, but we kept in touch for a bit after, trying to build some sort of adult relationship outside of the confines of our parents' house. But those check-ins stalled almost two years ago and I have no one to blame but myself.

"I know you have a show tonight, so I'll make this quick. I wanted to call to invite you home for Ruth's baptism."

My stomach hits the floor.

“Now before you say no, it’s not for a few months yet as Christopher’s mother has been going through chemo treatments and we want her to be present as well. Ruth will almost be one year old at that point, but it’s worth it to wait to be able to have her there. And I saw on your social media page that some additional dates were added to the tour you’re on, and the show in Charlotte lines up perfectly with her baptism so I was thinking you could hopefully drive home for the day, before you have to get back.”

I don’t correct her that it’s not my home anymore. And I don’t ask her when the hell she joined social media. Wonder what her fellow congregation members think about that one.

Beth rattles on with more details, explaining her perfectly cultivated plan that pulls the noose tighter and tighter the more loopholes she closes. By the time she finishes telling me the ideal timeline she has laid out that would not only allow me to attend my niece’s baptism at the church that never once felt like a safe space to me but also a dinner with our parents, my knees feel ready to buckle and my eyes dry as sandpaper.

“Scarlett?” Beth asks in that soft, sickening sweet voice that she was trained to have. The same voice my mother possesses.

I shake my head, gears turning, trying to find a way out.

“I’d have to check with Vik to see if I can get away. They have me pretty busy with interviews or studio time during the days and we don’t usually have much downtime in one city to be able to take an entire day trip.”

She doesn’t need to know that I’m actually staring down almost a week off once we fly out tomorrow to meet back up with the buses. It’s not a lie. But I also don’t actually know if Vik has anything else on the calendar yet for that day. But Beth doesn’t need to know that.

“Of course,” she says. “Check with your management and then let me know as soon as you’re able to.”

I’ll beg Vik to find something to keep my schedule busy.

“But promise me you’ll try.” Her voice changes, taking on a seriousness I didn’t know she was capable of. “She’s your niece. And you didn’t even come for the birth.”

A sharp pain slices through my chest at that, regret clogging my throat. But there was no way I could’ve gone back there then. I was too fragile, too early on in my sobriety.

I love my sister, I truly do. When my parents and our community looked

down upon me, iced me out when I refused to sit down, shut up, and pray, Beth never did. She also never stood up for me, but I knew she was conflicted, and unlike everyone else, I'd never ask her to pick sides.

She wanted the life we were born to grow into, the happy wife and sweet mother, content to follow her husband's lead and raise godly children. I would never try to take that away from her, or stain her in their eyes because of her support for me.

Although I would be lying if I said that it didn't hurt me that she never stepped in when our father would spend hours lecturing me, berating me until I broke down into tears of frustration and hurt, not only at him and everything he was trying to force me to be, but also angry at myself. Why couldn't I just believe everything he said? Why was it so hard for me to be subservient and docile, like my mother and sister and the other women around me?

But that's just not who Beth is. It probably didn't even cross her mind to try to defend me, and in doing so, challenge our father. That's not what women were taught to do in the community we were raised in.

"I'm truly sorry I missed that. And that I haven't met her yet," I say honestly, voice cracking and tears beginning to burn at the back of my eyes that I will to go away. "Look, Beth, I've gotta go. But I'll let you know, okay?"

"Okay," she agrees, satisfied that I didn't immediately refuse and hang up.

"I love you. Send some pics of Ruth, all right?"

She laughs, light and airy. "Of course," she answers and I can hear how she lights up at the mention of her daughter.

Beth was born to be a mother.

I, on the other hand, was born to write music. And it wasn't good enough for my family.

Hanging up the phone, I walk on numb legs back to my greenroom and toss my phone against the couch occupying half the space. I note the time from the digital clock on the wall, only ten minutes to showtime, and grab my oversized denim jacket off the chair I had previously laid it over, not planning to wear it onstage tonight. Between the lights, the movement, and thousands of bodies crammed into one space, I usually opt for lighter clothing, tanks or short sleeves. But tonight, I welcome the worn and well-loved fabric as I slip my arms into it, pulling it tightly across my chest, reveling in the layer of protection and comfort it gives me.

I walk back out toward the stage, passing the Whisper Me Nothings greenroom, noticing out of the corner of my eye that it sits empty. Peering inside quickly, I see their rider items splayed across a shitty folding table. Piles of protein bars, bowls of fruit, and more packs of gum than any single person could chew in their lifetime.

But what catches my eye are the bottles of beer lying open in an ice bucket, the glass bottles glistening with moisture and beckoning me to just feel the cool glass of them in my hand. Liquor bottles, along with tonic water and lime juice are lined up in a neat row, with a large stack of red cups just waiting to be poured.

My palms twitch, yearning to reach out and just feel the weight of the bottles in them, hear the *glug* of them being poured into the plastic cups. I can almost taste the tartness of the lime juice and the burn of the tequila in my mouth, tastebuds watering for it and my anxiety screaming for the sweet relief I know it will bring, dulling the edges of my worry and sadness.

With a pit in the bottom of my stomach, my head starts to override the desires that have taken over, logic fighting for its way back in the driver seat.

I don't need a drink.

I don't need alcohol.

I can deal with stress and anxiety on my own.

I don't. Need. A. Drink.

My feet carry me backward, pulling me away from a temptation I haven't felt this strong of a pull toward in months. My mind is exhausted, emotions drained, and I sink further into myself, allowing my muscle memory to take over and it's as if I'm on autopilot, going through the motions of getting mic'd up and ready to take the stage.

I'm in a fog, sounds dulled, lights dimmed.

I'm aware people are talking to me, aware my intro is being queued up to begin the show, aware of the crowds screams of excitement.

But it's all muted.

When I walk onstage, it's as if someone else is in my body, taking over pulling my voice from my chest, singing songs without being fully aware.

My set passes in a blur, and all I can think about the entire time on stage is how much I long to be tucked away in bed, locking out everyone and everything in my head.

WALKER

I have a good buzz going tonight, not able to hide my excitement for the show the entire time we're out at the bar and on our way back to the venue. The guys can tell I'm in a particularly good mood, and Nikolai can't resist asking what's up with me after he catches me zoning out with a smile plastered across my face.

"Did you take something? Cause whatever it is, I want some." Nikolai leans forward from his spot in the backseat of the SUV. We're almost at the arena and Arun keeps brake checking, the traffic heavy. My knee bounces anxiously, ready to get onstage, knowing that Scar is going to be watching tonight.

"Nope," I answer. "Just excited for the show."

Hayden eyes me suspiciously from his spot in the captain chair next to mine in the middle row, Reid riding shotgun with Arun at the head.

Arun picked up Hayden from the hotel before swinging by to get the rest of us.

"What? Suddenly got a problem with my *sunny disposition*?" I joke, using the description from the article that was released from our press junket earlier in the week. The reporter called me a bright young man, with a mature voice and sunny disposition that will serve me well for many more years in this industry.

Meanwhile, he called Reid a stereotypical jackass who gives artists a bad reputation for being short-tempered and ungrateful.

Honestly, not a bad read...

Nikolai huffs and falls back in his seat.

We finally make it around to the back entrance, fans lining the rails, set up to allow access in and out of the door.

“Hurry inside, you go on twenty,” Arun calls to us as we file out of the car. Reid and Hayden follow his orders, Reid doing so because he doesn’t want to interact with anyone, even if it’s fans who allow us the opportunity to have this career. Hayden because he still gets uneasy in crowds, especially ones like this where none of these people have likely gone through any kind of security since they’re outside the venue.

A shared glance between Nikolai and I have us hanging back, greeting as many fans as quickly as possible, taking a few pictures and signing whatever people shove our way. In my case, that means a woman’s large chest, pushed up by a red lacy bra.

I shoot her a wicked smile, careful not to touch her with anything besides the marker she hands me. “Will you be coming back out this way after the show?” she asks, her tone sultry and I can practically see her picturing me naked in her head as she eyes me.

“Probably not,” I answer, handing her back the marker and moving on to the next few fans lined up. I don’t want to ever be rude, but the usual overt flirtation hasn’t been doing its thing for me lately.

I take a few more pictures, shake a few more hands, before grabbing Nikolai and thanking everyone for coming out before we dip inside.

No bass booms through the backstage area, so Scar’s set must’ve been already wrapped up. I check the time on my phone and see we only have a few minutes to spare before we go on. Before I can look for Scar to see how her performance went, I’m pulled into our usual band-only pre-show huddle. But my mind wanders and I can’t help but scan backstage for any sign of Scar.

She must be changing or grabbing some water. My excitement grows and builds until I can hardly stand still, so much pent-up energy for not playing a show in a couple days and ready to show Scar what I’m truly like in my element.

Our intro track begins to play and the crowd screams with excitement matching my own. We break out of our huddle and I jump up and down in place, shaking my wrists out and thank the stagehand who hands over my drumsticks.

I take one more look around backstage for Scar before walking out as the screams intensify. I climb up the few steps to the slightly elevated platform

that my kit sits on, take my spot on the small round cushioned stool, and take a moment to look around as my heartbeat speeds up with anticipation.

Reid settles his guitar around his neck to my left, Hayden doing the same with his bass to my right. Nikolai stands in the middle, grabbing the microphone off the stand and the three of them watch me, waiting for me to count us in.

Half of my mind is still preoccupied with where Scar is, but the other half is in performance mode. So with that, I take a deep breath in, give the drumstick in my right hand a few twirls, before kicking the bass drum and yelling out a four count to kick off the show.

The bass rattles my chest, feeling it deep down into my bones and letting the energy fuel my movements. I fall into my rhythm, letting the muscle memory of these songs take over, adding flair here and there, showing off with hope of a pair of dark brown eyes watching me from the wings.

But they never do.

With each song and each glance to the side, my heart sinks deeper and deeper, and I pound out my frustration and disappointment harder and harder, as time passes and the wings remain empty.

Scar never makes an appearance.

SCAR

The flight to Dallas the next morning is quiet. We're on the first flight out in the morning and everyone seems to be in a bit of a zombie-like trance, trudging slowly through the airport. When I woke up this morning, my body felt like I had been hit by a train, my muscles sore from the tension they held after the phone call from my sister last night.

Maybe Beth will forget to follow up, or maybe they'll have a chance to baptize Ruth sooner and they won't want to wait for a few months yet. Or maybe Vik will add something to my schedule to keep me from attending.

There's a dull pounding behind my eyes and I keep my sunglasses firmly planted on the bridge of my nose to block everything out.

But the one thing I haven't been able to block out is the way Walker has been acting this morning. I didn't see him down in the lobby before leaving for the airport, and we took a few cars so I was in one with Boone and Naomi. Even when we got to the airport, I didn't catch sight of him until we got through TSA. I tried to make eye contact, but he refused to look in my direction, or anyone's direction really.

He has on a large dark blue sweatshirt with the hoodie pulled over his hair, headphones in both ears, and radiating "don't fuck with me" energy, so at odds with his usual demeanor.

I wanted to try to talk to him before we boarded the flight to let him know I was sorry that I missed watching him last night, but after seeing him, I thought it was best if I gave him a little space.

Maybe he's hungover, or still just tired from a late night and early morning. But when we landed and were ushered into the SUVs waiting to

pick us all up, he still avoided any contact with me whatsoever.

Even now on the bus, I'm up at the front making a snack plate and he's holed himself up in the back lounge since we stepped onboard.

We have a few days off here in Texas, meaning we all get to have some decent rest and enjoy sleeping in a hotel again. However, when we arrived, there was an issue with our room blocks. So while Arun and Vik have been dealing with that, everyone else has just been hanging around in the back parking of the arena for our show later this week.

Licking the pickle juice off my fingers, I screw the lid back on the jar with my name in big, bold letters across it, and stick it back into the small fridge. I set up my laptop to get some work done on the song Boone and I were producing in the studio a few days ago, but instead grab the plate in one hand, sparkling water in the other, and head to the back of the bus to see what Walker's up to.

Is this what I've come to now? Me being the one to seek out his company?

I nudge the door open with my boot, the smell of various colognes hitting me like a wall, hanging heavy in my nose.

Nikolai's lounging across one side of the couch, eyes half watching the video game playing on the large TV on the wall, half tuned into his phone.

Hayden and Walker perch on the edge of the opposite side of the couch, controllers in hand and completely zoned in on the game unfolding in front of them. They jostle each other, trying to distract the other, teasing one another into messing up. It takes a moment for the three of them to register my presence, but when they do, the humor on Walker's face drops, leaving with him a cold stare fixated on me and instantly my entire body shakes with a chill.

I wait for them to say something, but an awkward silence fills the space instead. "Can I join you?" I ask.

Again, too long of a pause, before Nikolai clears his throat and sits up, swinging his legs to the floor to clear a space next to him for me to sit. "Come on in."

Taking the seat he freed up, I hold out my snack plate to him to offer a bite, to which he grabs a couple strawberries and nods his head in thanks. I do the same to Hayden and Walker, but Walker resumes the game and earns a disgruntled, "Hey," from Hayden as he wasn't prepared for him to start the game back up that quickly.

“Who’s winning?” I ask.

“Walker, but only because he’s played this game for years and I haven’t since our last tour. But once I get back into the groove, I’ll be kicking his ass,” Hayden nudges Walker’s arm, goading him.

Walker’s eyes don’t move from the screen, and at first glance it might look like he’s just really concentrating, but by the number of red splotches that are flashing across his screen, it doesn’t look like his character is faring too well.

I nibble on a few crackers, watching the game play out but it isn’t long until Walker’s top half of the screen goes black, signaling his death.

“Hell yeah!” Hayden cheers, elbowing him in the ribs, rubbing in his victory.

“Whatever.” Walker tosses the controller on the cushion beside him and stands to leave. “I’m headed to the gym,” he grumbles, tightening the strings around his hoodie so it pulls closer and lower on his head, partially obscuring his face. He doesn’t even make eye contact with me once on his way out.

After he exits the lounge and I hear the door slam at the front of the bus, I look to Nikolai and Hayden with wide, questioning eyes.

“What’s his problem?”

Nikolai scoffs. “You’re joking, right?”

My brow furrows.

“You’re not an idiot, Scar, but I also didn’t peg you as a liar.”

Woah, what the fuck?

“Excuse me?” I straighten up, offense coloring my tone.

“Okay,” Hayden takes over, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, brown eyes boring into mine. “Did you, or did you not, promise Walker you would watch our set last night? Or more importantly, watch him perform?”

My mouth opens but no words come out.

“And did you watch our set last night?”

“Well, no…” I start, before Nikolai interrupts me.

“I think that makes you a liar. And let me tell you, there’s nothing more that I hate than a liar.” I’ve grown accustomed to seeing the playful Nikolai, the one who’s always cracking a joke to clear the tension or try to make someone smile.

But this side of him takes me by surprise. His posture is stiff and distant, his normally welcoming eyes are shuttered closed, on the defensive for his friend.

“I’m not a liar,” I say. “I mean, yes, I did promise Walker I would watch last night but...” I don’t really want to give these two a whole glimpse into my life when I haven’t even shared certain things with Walker yet.

“I got a call last night and it just kinda upended my evening. I barely made it through my own show before I felt like I had enough energy to get back to my hotel room, let alone stick around for another two hours.”

“And never once did you think you could’ve texted Walker to let him know you weren’t up to staying?” Hayden probes.

“I don’t have his number.”

But as I really think about it, there are other ways I could’ve let him know, which Hayden brings up. “You could’ve let Vik know, or Boone. There were ways.”

“Fuck, I know.” The situation starts to sink in that I actually hurt Walker’s feelings, that his gloomy mood this entire morning has been caused by me. “I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Obviously,” Nikolai mutters under his breath.

“You got something to say, you say it louder,” I tell him, not going to put up with any passive aggressive bullshit. We’re adults.

“Fine.” He turns and squares his shoulders toward me. “You knew he was excited to have you watch him, I mean he could barely contain his excitement all night. And you blew him off, like it meant nothing to you. And maybe he doesn’t mean anything to you, but he means everything to us. And if you’re not going to appreciate him or at the very least treat him with respect and not make empty promises to him you can’t keep, then just stick to your bunk for the rest of this tour and tell him you’re not interested. He’s a big boy, he can handle it. But don’t play with his head like that.” And with that, Nikolai storms out of the lounge, leaving me sitting there like an idiot with my jaw agape and Hayden staring down at the floor.

I toss my plate of food on the seat next to me, uncaring of crackers that fall to the floor and grapes that roll around on the couch. Nikolai’s words sink in and I have a hard time swallowing them, edges jagged and cutting on their way down.

I was excited to watch Walker perform and I meant it when I promised him that day in the studio that I would watch their next show. I remember the happiness in his eyes when I told him I would, just like I remember the anticipation in my chest thinking about it. But to be honest, watching Walker’s set was the last thing on my mind last night after I got off of the

phone with Beth.

But after that phone call and walking away from the greenroom, I had a one-track mind and that was getting myself the hell away from everyone and everything and seeking out the comfort of my own silence. I didn't even think twice about Walker, now picturing him onstage and looking over the wings, growing more and more disappointed every time he looked and I wasn't there.

"Fuck." I exhale, hands coming up to cover my eyes. "I fucked up."

"Yeah," Hayden agrees, and I can't help the strangled laugh that escapes my throat at that.

"I'm not apologizing on Nikolai's behalf because to be honest, I agree with everything he said. Though, his delivery was a little harsh. You just gotta understand that we're protective over each other, and especially over Walker. He watches out for each of us like no one else. We owe it to him to do the same. So when his feelings are genuinely hurt by someone, we all hurt with him."

I can't help but admire the friendship and loyalty they all have for each other. Sure, being around someone 24/7 will bond people together, but this runs deeper than that. A flicker of jealousy cuts through me, realizing that besides Boone, I don't have anyone else in my life having my back like that.

"I'm going to fix it." I raise my chin, straightening up.

Hayden smiles, but there's some reservation in his face as he says, "You better. Otherwise, it's going to be awkward as hell around here."

WALKER

Water droplets drip down my naked torso before I can wring out the excess shower water left in my hair. The mirror is fogged up and I quickly swipe a hand over it, already sick of this small bathroom on the bus.

When we arrived yesterday, we were supposed to have hotel rooms reserved for our group for the next few days that we're staying here. But there was some big mix up and our reservations weren't actually scheduled to start until today. Arun tried his best to get it figured out and get us in last night, but they were fully booked and by the time he was done going back and forth with them, it was so late that I told him not to even worry about trying to find another place.

I know Boone and Naomi, along with some of the crew, went to another hotel farther away to stay in for the evening, but the guys, Scar and I all just stayed on the bus. I've spent many nights in this bunk already, what's one more.

My arms ache as I bring the towel up over my head, rubbing it vigorously over my hair before hanging it on one of the hooks on the back of the door. I'm going to regret pushing myself so much with my workouts when the time comes for our next show later this week and my arms protest at the speed I need them to move with.

But I had too much frustration, and yes, hurt, to work out this morning. Scar never showed up at our show in New York when she promised she would and I'll admit, it hurt my feelings. I was let down. I watched the wings for her, held my breath to just catch a glimpse of those dark, purple tips of

her hair. But there was nothing.

And then yesterday morning when I came down to get in the car to take us to the airport, I spotted her laughing with Naomi at the coffee bar, seemingly without a care in the world. It clearly didn't bother her that she didn't watch, so I avoided her.

And have been avoiding her ever since.

It's not a permanent thing. I'll get over it. It's just hard when you're forced to be around the person 24/7. I'm not ashamed to admit that I was starting to develop a little crush on Scar.

Or maybe a big one.

She's been on my mind since that first day I saw her sound check and heard her sing. And every time I've interacted with her after that, I've been itching to peel away layer after layer of who she is, whittling her down until I get to know who she is at her core, and learn what makes her tick.

But clearly, she doesn't have the same desire to get to know me and I'll just have to accept that.

I swing open the bathroom door and with it comes a puff of steam that was trapped inside, evaporating quickly as it's exposed to the cooling air on the bus. I walk over to my bunk to grab my phone, only to see the very person I've been avoiding sitting at the booth in the kitchen.

"Hey," Scar says, waving her hand in a small greeting.

"Hey," I respond, momentarily unsure of where to go.

Her eyes flick down my chest and over my black athletic shorts I threw on after I got out of the shower.

Good thing I took them in the bathroom with me.

Her stare lingers on my arms, scanning my various tattoos. I have a few different pieces on both arms, liking the way they look when I play.

"Where'd you get the snake done?" she asks, tilting her head toward my left forearm where I have a black and gray snake wrapped around my wrist and extending up part of my arm.

"The UK," I answer, smiling at the memory. I was nineteen and the guys and I were playing our first international show ever.

"Hayden has a matching one," I tell her and don't know why. She probably doesn't care about the details or the history of it.

"You guys are close, huh?"

"You could say that," I say, confused as to why she'd ask that when it should be fairly obvious judging by the fact that we've been in a band

together for ten years.

But if this is her attempt at bridging a conversation, I can't help but try to indulge her.

"Do you have any tattoos?" I haven't noticed any on her, but there are plenty of hidden places I haven't seen on Scar's body that could be holding pieces of art.

She shakes her head. "Nope."

"Don't like them? Or let me guess, afraid of needles?"

That earns me a flash of a smile and I feel a surge of satisfaction.

"No, not afraid of needles," she responds. "And I love them actually. But I just don't think I've seen anything worth imprinting on my body for forever. Plus, that's one last very permanent act of rebellion against my family that I haven't been able to bring myself to take."

My ears perk up at that, wanting to learn more about her family, where Scar comes from, any little crumb she wants to give me.

And then I remember I'm supposed to be trying to disentangle my feelings for her after last night.

But as I stand here, I can't help but take in her posture, slumped on her elbows over the table, head hanging low.

"You all right?" The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them, at the same time Scar says, "I'm sorry."

We pause, waiting to see if the other will continue. "Sorry, go ahead." I wave a hand at her and lean against the small counter.

Silence stretches between us, becoming a dull roar in my ears as I wait for her to speak. I stare into her eyes, refusing to be the one to look away, challenging her to do something that scares her. Challenging her to speak up, to be vulnerable for a moment, for her to show me something past the walls she keeps up.

Her mouth opens and closes, words struggling to come out and I can see her fighting to say them. I watch her lips, waiting to see if they'll bring me salvation or ruin.

Scar picks at her fingernails. "I'm sorry for not watching your set."

"It's whatever," I brush off, keeping my face neutral.

"It's not. I promised you I would and I let you down."

I shrug, not sure what to say to that. She knows I was excited for her to watch. I made that clear.

I'm interested; I'm just waiting to see if she's going to reciprocate.

“I’m going to watch your next one.”

I open my mouth to interject but she keeps talking.

“I know my word isn’t worth a lot to you right now, but I promise I didn’t intend to blow you off. I was planning to stay, that entire day leading up to the show I was going to stick around. But…” she trails off and looks up at me.

She looks haunted, hollowed out inside and fighting with herself on what to say next. I can see she wants to give me an explanation, but is reluctant to do so for whatever reason. Her eyes plead with me not to push her.

So I don’t.

For now.

“Okay, watch my next one then,” I say. Inside, I don’t get my hopes up. Not just yet anyways.

Scar’s shoulders relax and I can see the sigh of relief she sheds, realizing I’m not going to grill her for why she ditched the show.

Am I curious and feel like I deserve an explanation? Hell yes.

But if I’ve learned anything by watching Scar and interacting with her, I don’t think she’s the kind of person you push for answers. I have to wait for her to be willing to give information freely, letting down her guard with me and earning her trust. And even if she’s broken a bit of mine, I still want to earn hers.

“I got you something,” she says, ducking her head to the side and reaching her hand down below the booth where I can’t see it.

I raise an eyebrow, surprised.

Scar pulls out a pair of neon green drumsticks with black detailing around the tips. She offers them across the table and I step over, grabbing them from her. Our hands brush as she hands them off and a spark of electricity jolts through me as her warm skin meets mine, even for the briefest of moments.

She pulls her hand back quickly and tucks them into her lap.

“I’ve seen your kit,” she says, referencing the neon green kit I got for this tour.

It was a custom design I worked on for months, picking out the perfect shade of bright green and black accents. I love to have a pop of color onstage and it looks sick under the lights.

“I thought these would match.”

“They’re perfect,” I say, clearing my throat when the words come out strangled. My chest squeezes in on itself at the thoughtful gesture. I twirl one

around my hand, letting it dance between my fingers and enjoy the way Scar watches it move. And I definitely don't miss the way her eyes shift slightly to stare at my torso, raking their way up and down my abdomen.

"You like what you see?"

That breaks Scar out of her trance, and a scowl makes its way back across her brow.

There she is.

"Anyways, I just wanted to tell you I truly am sorry for missing it and hurting you. It wasn't my intention."

I grab hold of the drumstick and tuck them into my shorts pocket. Between the sincerity of her words and the gesture of the gift, I believe her when she says it wasn't her intention to hurt my feelings.

"I appreciate you apologizing. You didn't have to get me these, but I love them. I'll play them 'til I break them."

"Do you break them a lot?"

"More than you'd think." I laugh.

"Well then, I look forward to seeing you use them 'til you break them," she says, mimicking my words as she presses her hands on the table and pushes herself up, scooting her way out of the booth. "I'm glad we were able to talk and allowing me to make it up to you."

"Woah, I didn't say you made it up to me just yet." I stop her as she starts to walk away, enjoying the way she spins around and shoots me a baffled look. An idea formulates in my head and I know I need to get her to agree right here, right now before she walks away and we break this little moment we're in.

"What do you mean? I thought you just said we're good?" she says, her tone exasperated.

"Well, not in so many words." I wave my hand back and forth in a so-so motion.

Scar crosses her arms, and I do my best to keep my eyes on her face as the action squeezes her chest together, accentuating her cleavage over the low neckline of her tank top.

"Make it up to me by going out on a date," I tell her.

"A date?" Scar asks, blinking rapidly, her dark lashes fluttering over the tops of her cheeks.

"I plan an activity, we grab something to eat, we talk about ourselves, you know, that sort of thing. Never been on a date, Scar?" I smile at her, enjoying

the way her expression turns to one of annoyance as I tease her.

“I have,” she grits through her teeth.

“Then it’s a date. Tomorrow.”

SCAR

“**Y**ou’ve gotta be fucking joking...” I stare with wide eyes at the building in front of me, feet cemented to the ground. “Skydiving?”

Walker grins, rubbing his hands together, silver rings glinting in the sunlight. “Epic first date, right?” He can’t hide his excitement as much as I can’t hide my terror. He bounces on the balls of his feet, looking like he needs to pee.

“We’re in Texas,” I state the obvious. “Shouldn’t we be bull riding or line dancing, or I don’t know, something other than skydiving?”

“Indoor skydiving,” he corrects.

I hold my hands up in mock surrender. “Oh, my apologies. Indoor skydiving.”

“It’ll be fun!”

I can’t keep the cringe off my face as he guides me inside, one of the band’s bodyguards, Usman, trailing behind us. I shoot him a pleading look, and to give the guy some credit, he looks like he’s sharing in my pain. But Usman quickly diverts his attention into scanning around the lobby, always alert and monitoring for possible threats.

Walker and the guys typically go out solo without security, normally only having them join when they are out as a group or doing media events that they expect to draw high volume crowds. But since some of the security guys have been on the road and fairly bored by the lack of regular use for them in the past few days, Usman jumped at the opportunity to get out of the crew bus and on an outing today.

“Two for skydiving if you please.” Walker leans on the counter and

shoots the young girl working a megawatt smile. The girl looks at him for a beat, before her eyes go wide as saucers and her jaw unhinges.

“J-James Walker...” she stutters. A flush of rosy blush spreads from her cheeks to her neck, the red stain matching her red polo.

Walker is unfazed. “That’s me. What’s your name?”

She’s wearing a nametag and I know Walker can read, so he must be trying to be polite.

“Natasha,” she says, barely squeaking the words out. Walker reaches out to shake her hand. She shyly averts her gaze, and it lands on me, once again doing a bit of a double take.

“I didn’t see you at first, sorry, Scarlett. I’ve been listening to your songs ever since I found out you’d be on tour with Whisper Me Nothings.”

“I appreciate that more than you can know,” I tell her sincerely.

You can see the gears turning in her head, doing a bit of subtle back and forth glances between Walker and I.

Yes, Natasha, it’s what it looks like.

“So...about the whole skydiving thing,” Walker says. “I have a reservation at 10:00am for two.”

“Right.” Natasha nods her head once, focusing her attention onto the computer in front of her and scans the screen. “I’m sorry, I-I don’t see you on here.”

“Sorry, forgot,” he says. “It should be under Arun Kapoor.”

I nudge him with my shoulder. “Too famous to put your own name on it?” I tease.

“Let me feel cooler than I am, all right?”

Natasha finds the reservation and pages our instructor to come meet us at the front. After we’ve signed our waivers and Walker’s paid, we start to walk over to a bench to wait, but he stops short.

“Are you coming to our show tomorrow night?” he asks Natasha.

“Of course.” She lights up.

Walker pulls out his phone and starts typing on it. “What’s your last name, Natasha?”

She gives him her full name, as well as the name of her two friends who are going with her.

“What section are your seats?”

“Upper bowl.”

He nods, finishing his text before pocketing his phone. “Stop by the box

office on your way in tomorrow and there will be floor tickets waiting for you. We aren't doing any meet and greets on this tour, but I'll send someone to meet you at the box office to take you to your seats and they'll have some signed merch for you from the guys." He says it all so simply, as if rattling off a coffee order. Like what he did was a run of the mill occurrence, and maybe for him, it is.

But by the way that Natasha's entire face lights up and her eyes go as round as saucers, he just made her entire day. She's looking at him like he just hung the moon in here for her own personal enjoyment, and I think if there was a mirror in front of me, I'd see me looking at him the same way.

"Thank you," she whispers, the depth of her sincerity heavy in her tone.

"Did you want a picture? I'd rather do one before I fuck up my hair." Walker smiles.

Natasha stands on shaky legs, nodding her head emphatically. I offer to take it and she hands me her phone, coming around the counter and hugging Walker, his large frame swallowing her whole.

I snap a few photos of them, a smile pulling at my own face witnessing the kindness he's showing her. She thanks him over and over again, before our instructor comes out from the back suited up and ready to walk us through the process.

Throughout the entire interaction, I almost forgot I was here to get blasted around in a high speed wind tunnel that I voluntarily, or sort of involuntarily, signed up for.



"I WANNA GO AGAIN." My breath come in short bursts, like I just ran a marathon. My cheeks are flushed and still burning from the force of the wind, adrenaline flowing through me as easily as the blood in my veins. I haven't felt a high like this in years and to think I almost sabotaged myself by letting my fear override me.

Walker pushes a hand through his dark, disheveled hair and smiles at me. "Told you it'd be worth it."

He was right, though I won't admit it.

"I don't even care that it's going to take me hours to detangle this." I hold

my ponytail up in one hand, strands a tangled mess. I had it braided to start, but lost my hair tie partway through.

“I’ll help you out,” Walker offers.

“And what do you know about detangling hair?”

“I grew up with a sister with hair as long as yours.”

“Fair enough.”

We’re in a changing room, shucking off our suits that we wore on top of our regular clothing. The moment I have my boots laced up, I’m back on my feet, unable to sit still after an experience like that. I pace around the room, needing something to do, something to keep this feeling going.

Walker watches me with a fondness I haven’t really noticed before. “What?” I ask him. “Why are you watching me like that?”

He dips his head down to finish tying his laces, then flips his head back up to me, brushing the hair out of his eyes with a tattooed forearm. “I like seeing you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Alive,” he shrugs.

I jolt back at his response, but as it settles, I realize I just might like it too.



“THIS PLACE supposedly has the best TexMex,” Walker opens the door for me and I’m hit with a blast of much welcomed air-conditioning. The second thing I’m hit with is the incredible smell. Fresh tortillas, spices, the sound of sizzling plates coming out of the kitchen. My mouth instantly waters as we’re seated at a booth in the back corner of the restaurant, no one else in our section.

Usman takes a spot at the bar in sight, but far enough away to give us privacy.

Our waiter comes by to take our drink order and drop off chips and salsa, which I immediately dive into. A beer for Walker, a Diet Coke for me.

We peruse the menu quietly, enjoying the lively music wafting through the speakers around the dining room, both coming down a bit still from the adrenaline rush of our morning.

When we have drinks in hand and food orders in, Walker squares his

shoulders and gives me his full attention. I immediately want to melt under his strong gaze, not harsh but intense. Green eyes glimmer in the bright lighting, equal parts mischief and sincerity.

One thing I've noticed about James Walker is that when you get his attention, you get all of it. There is no half-assing with him.

I saw it in the way he played the drums that day in the studio. I saw it in the way he talks to his bandmates or Arun. And I saw it this morning in his interaction with the worker at the skydiving place.

I wonder how many people would die to have James Walker looking at them the way he's looking at me right now.

"So, Scarlett Lane, tell me. Is that a stage name?"

Starting off easy, I see.

"Sort of. My full name is Elaine Scarlett Whelan, but I never felt like Elaine suited me. Scarlett just always felt like that perfect pair of pants where it fits in all the right places and you feel great in them. When it was time to decide what name I wanted to put with my work, I knew I didn't want to keep my family last name for it. And knew they sure as hell didn't want it attached either. So Boone suggested a play on my own name so it still felt familiar, but a new identity. So, I went with Scarlett Lane."

"Elaine Scarlett Whelan..." Walker says out loud, chewing on the name and seeing for himself how it tastes.

I take a sip of my drink, relishing the cool and sharp carbonation. "How long have you been playing drums?" I ask, taking my turn to ask a question.

Walker slumps back in the booth, blowing out a breath. "Fuck...almost twenty years at this point? As you may or may not have guessed, I was a bit of a hyper child." He winks at me.

No surprise there.

"So my parents got me involved in as many activities as they could. Drums, swimming, soccer, dance, anything to keep me busy and try to drain some energy. Drums were the only thing that stuck."

And I can see why, even at this moment right now, he's tapping the fingers on his left hand rhythmically against his glass.

"Did you always want to be in a band?" I ask him.

He nods his head vigorously, taking a sip of his beer, a bit of froth sticking to his upper lip that he quickly licks away with a flick of his tongue and I can't help but track the movement.

"I just knew music was the only thing I seemed to be any good at, and I

love it, I really do. So I had planned to move to L.A., as soon as I graduated high school from the time I was in middle school. Planned to make it out there and see what I could get going. But then I met Hayden in 9th grade social studies and we instantly hit it off. We started playing music together after school everyday, watching videos on YouTube of bands playing together to study how they moved around on stage.”

Walker gets a faraway look in his eyes, nostalgia coating his face as he’s brought back to that time in his life.

“But you need more than just bass and drums to make a good song or a good band. And I had known Nikolai from when I was younger and playing soccer, though we hadn’t talked much over the years. I’d seen him carrying around a guitar case at school, showing it off to all of the girls, even though he wasn’t in any of the band programs where he’d need to bring it there.” Walker laughs and the sound of it fills me with something soft and sweet. “So I recruited him and he brought Reid onboard.”

“Did you know Reid beforehand?” I ask.

Walker shakes his head. “Nope. He transferred to our school sophomore year, so he was very much the new kid there. But you wouldn’t know it watching him. He walked around like a king in his land from his first day.”

I can definitely picture that. Good to know Reid has had arrogance in spades for years.

“Who came up with the name?”

“That would be me,” Walker says, smiling proudly. “And Reid too. We were always teasing Nikolai for being such a charmer, even back as teenagers. He’s never been at a loss for a pick-up line or struggling to find the right thing to say to a woman he’s interested in. We would watch him out at parties and always joke about what sweet nothing he was whispering in some girl’s ear, and the name Whisper Me Nothings just sort of came to us.”

“And the rest is history?”

“The rest is history.”

Our food arrives and we enjoy a comfortable silence while we dig in, both starved after the morning we had. The barbacoa beef tacos are so out of this world amazing that I don’t even care that I’m burning my mouth as I eat bite after bite, too impatient to let it cool.

“Now I’m going to ask you something,” Walker says, not asks, “and I want you to be honest with me.”

I chew the bite I just took slowly, apprehension rising. “Ok...”

Walker wipes his mouth with his napkin and leans an elbow on the table, propping his chin on his fist. “Why did you skip out on watching me the other night?” He studies me closely, gauging my reaction, seeing if I’m going to go on the defensive, or answer him honestly.

I choose the latter.

“I got a phone call from my sister.” I exhale, pushing my plate away from me so I can place both arms on the table. “Right before I went on.” I leave out the part about going into the greenroom and standing in front of their bar table, itching for a drink. I don’t want to get into that on top of telling him about my conversation with Beth.

He stays quiet, waiting for me to continue.

“I don’t talk to her very often. I don’t talk to *any* of my family very often,” I clarify. “She had a baby last year, my first niece.” I grab my phone from my back pocket and pull up the most recent picture of Ruth I have and show him.

“She’s adorable,” he says sincerely.

“It’s her baptism soon, and Beth wants me to be there for it,” I continue. “It lines up with the show in Charlotte. So she called me to invite me, and also to point out that she’s seen my schedule and has it all planned out for it to work perfectly for me to go home the day before our show there to join them.”

I chew my lip, reaching for my drink and wishing it was something stronger.

No. I don’t.

That was the old way of dealing with things.

“When’s the last time you’ve visited your family?”

I slump back, pushing out a breath. “Four years.” I watch him closely, waiting to see his reaction to that piece of information. Waiting to see judgment, confusion, anything to show me that he’s not the kind, understanding guy I’ve come to know him as.

But there’s not a trace of it there.

He’s still intent on listening to me and patient enough to wait for me to continue in my own time.

“I grew up in a very religious family and community. My father is the preacher of our church and while I don’t think they’re bad people, they weren’t the best parents. They love their God and His word more than they love me.” When I finally came to that realization as a teenager, I couldn’t

wrap my brain around it, the idea that they could love something that they can't even see so much more than their own daughter that was struggling right in front of them.

But it's just something I've come to accept over the years, even if I still don't think I'll ever be able to fully understand it.

"Something you have to understand about their church is there is zero room for doubt and zero tolerance for women being anything other than mothers and attentive wives. And when I started having doubts and wasn't the shiny, sweet, submissive girl that they desired and that would be a role model for other children in the church, I saw it. The disdain in their eyes."

I saw it when I was twelve and would do everything in my power to get out of going to services every week. My parents couldn't fathom why I didn't want to go, why I didn't want to sit there for hours on end and grew frustrated when I would push back on them, asking why I needed to spend so much time there. They found comfort in the prayers and teachings; I found them suffocating and draining.

I saw it when I was fifteen and came home from a youth group, asking them questions that no person of the faith, let alone the preacher's daughter, should dare be questioning. You weren't supposed to question what was being fed to you. Just take it with a smile, tuck it into your heart, and just pray, pray, pray.

I saw it when I was seventeen and I was caught drinking over a friend's house, only to be dragged home and given a lecture on the sins of alcohol. That lecture went on for four hours. Long enough for the buzz to leave my system and leave me bleary eyed the next morning for Sunday service.

And I last saw it when I was eighteen and chose to move to L.A., to pursue my career instead of being transferred from my father's authority to a godly husband to serve by his side for the rest of my days.

"I saw it every fucking day. And I also saw how well Beth fit into everything they wanted her to be. And better yet, how much Beth loved being a part of the church, being the model daughter, the soon-to-be perfect wife for some man. I can't fault her for it. She dreamed of being a wife and mother and knew that would satisfy her. I never once dreamed of those things.

"Instead I started wondering what I was doing wasting all of my time singing about some guy in the sky at church every week when I had real feelings stirring inside of me, doubts and demons creeping forward in my head and taking control. And I couldn't take it. I couldn't take the

disappointment, the judgment, the constant feeling of never being enough and I left. And I haven't been back." Except for Beth's wedding.

I sigh, feeling something wet on my cheeks and when I lift my hand to see what it is, I realize somewhere along the way I started crying.

"Fuck." I grab my napkin, but it's covered in barbacoa juice, and I don't want to burn my eyes. Walker quickly passes me his, but I refuse to meet his gaze, embarrassed by my venting and tears coating my cheeks.

"Hey," he says gently, "you don't owe anybody anything. And if you don't want to go back there, you don't have to."

I open my mouth to refute his statement, still feeling some sense of obligation to Beth, though I know deep in her heart, she'd understand. But Walker stops me and says again, this time overenunciating each and every word.

"You don't owe anybody anything. Point blank, bottom line."

"You asked me for an explanation," I counter.

"Yeah 'cause I'm selfish." He shrugs. "But if you would've told me to back off, I would've respected that."

"From what I've seen, you're anything but selfish, James Walker."

He ducks his head, hiding how my praise affects him.

"So did you give her an answer?"

"No, I said I'd have to check with Vik to buy me a little time. But honestly, it's just looming over my head, and I hate it."

"You know if you decide you want to go, I'll come with you," he offers, but his shoulders tense, as if preparing for me to shoot him down.

"Are you serious? That sounds like a fun way to spend the day, with my parents who hate me and watching my baby niece who I've never even met get baptized in the church that despises me because I dare sing music that's not dedicated to their one and only?" I arch a brow at him.

"Any time with you is time well spent." The corner of his mouth lifts in the smallest smile, a slight blush staining his cheeks and poking through his light stubble.

I can't help my own smile that creeps its way on my face.

The thought of having someone by my side if I return home brings a surge of relief through me, making the idea slightly easier to swallow.

"I just might take you up on that," I say.

"I damn well hope you do."

SCAR

Sweat trickles down the back of my neck as I pull my hair up into a bun on the top of my head to keep it from sticking to my hot skin. Grabbing my sunscreen out of my pool bag, I squirt a thick dollop onto my hands before rubbing it over my legs, trying to be careful to not burn under the blistering sun this afternoon.

Naomi and Carter sit in lounge chairs to my right, the three of us taking full advantage of the hotel pool before we pack up and get back on the road tomorrow. The large outdoor area is packed, everyone trying to either tan or keep cool in the water. It's nice to have a girls' day while Boone is tied up in meetings with Vik, the band is in the studio, and Daniel is off doing... whatever the hell it is he does. Probably harassing children or spitting on squirrels in the park.

He seems like a total dick if you ask me, but I've been careful not to say anything rude around Carter.

"So how long do we have to sit here and bake in the sun before you start coughing up details about what you were up to yesterday with a certain hunky drummer?" Naomi shoots me a wicked look over the top of her large square sunglasses, her lithe body stretched elegantly across the chair. Her deep green bikini compliments the cool undertone of her skin and offsets her black hair.

My cheeks flush and not from the heat. I feel like a little kid in school with a crush.

But that's what it's starting to feel like for me, or something even stronger, which scares me more. My date yesterday with Walker was one of

the best days I've had in a long time. The most I've felt emotionally connected to a guy in as long as I can remember, and my physical attraction is quickly picking up steam.

By the time we got back to the hotel yesterday, I was all but begging in my head for him to kiss me and pull me into his hotel room and have his way with me, but like the gentleman he keeps showing me he is, he instead walked me to my room and left me with a burning kiss to my cheek.

I had to take care of business myself last night.

"It was good," I say.

"That's it? C'mon, Scar, I'm all about the details. I want details!"

Carter sits up with both of her elbows on the arm of the chair, leaning closer to Naomi to get in on the conversation. She pushes her Ray Bans on her head, tucking her short blonde bob out of her face. "You went on a date with Walker?"

"She did," Naomi answers for me.

"I'm with her." Carter points a thumb in Naomi's direction. "I want details. He's sexy as hell."

"He is," Naomi hums in agreement.

"There's more to him than that," I say, instantly regretting how defensive it sounds because they both immediately have shit-eating grins on their faces.

"You like him!" Naomi claps her hands once and settles back in her chair, satisfied.

"Maybe a little," I say.

I eventually spill all of the details to them, both sitting raptly and giving me their full attention, even when a waiter swings by to ask for a drink order. It's too hot for anything other than water and we all chug it down the second we have them in our hands. I continue telling them about the skydiving and Walker being so sweet to the girl working there, which has the two of them swooning too. I gloss over our lunch time conversation, not wanting to get too deep into details as Naomi already knows most of my past and not wanting to dampen the day by explaining everything to Carter right now.

"He's a sweetheart," Naomi says.

"Are you going to go out again?" Carter asks.

We didn't discuss any further plans last night, but I definitely don't want whatever this is starting to turn into to stop. "I hope so. I'm going to watch his set tonight and then try to catch him afterward to see where his head's at."

They both seem excited for me, or maybe excited to have a romance

begin on the tour. Entertainment for all.

“What about you two? All this time talking about my date with someone who isn’t even my boyfriend yet, meanwhile you both are on tour with your partners,” I redirect the conversation.

Carter looks away from me and out toward the pool, pulling her sunglasses back over her eyes before I can get a good read on her face. Sensing her hesitation, Naomi jumps in.

“You said, boyfriend *yet*. Meaning he will be,” Naomi says with a smirk, but before I can cut in, she continues, “It’s been so much better being on the road with Boone with this tour. His schedule is always so crazy and even though he has always put me and our relationship first, it’s taken a toll. Even with me moving to the States last year, it’s still been a struggle to get quality time together.”

I nod in understanding, knowing how much of a strain Boone’s career has been on the both of them.

“And also I was getting lonely here when he was off playing shows. All of my friends are back home in Tokyo and it’s been hard to get to know people in L.A. Besides you, Scar, and now you too, Carter.” She turns and places a hand on Carter’s arm. “I don’t have a lot of girlfriends here. I’m really grateful to have you both.”

I smile and clink my water glass with hers in agreement. Boone will always be my mentor, but Naomi will always be one of my best friends.

“I’m grateful you two invited me along today and have welcomed me into the fold,” Carter says, checking her phone discreetly for the third or fourth time since we’ve been down here at the pool before continuing. “It can be intimidating being the new girl around a group of people who have known each other for so long, and especially girls can be cliquey, but I’m really liking getting to know you both.”

I hadn’t really thought of how daunting it might have been so far for Carter to be on this tour too. This is her first big job she’s ever been on with Daniel and while they both do photography and videography, Daniel has gone out and done larger festivals on his own, which is how he met Boone. When it came time for the tour, Boone was the one who called him up and offered him the job, but knew it would be a tall task for just one person, and that’s when Daniel offered up Carter’s help as well.

They’re both really talented and I’ve been loving the shots they’ve been getting each night of shows. Vik is always bugging me to post them to my

socials but I keep *forgetting*. Last time I logged on, I had gained 15,000 new followers and had a bit of a panic attack, so I quickly closed out the app.

“How did you and Daniel meet?” Naomi asks Carter, shifting in her chair so her back is slightly to me, giving Carter the same attention she gave me.

Carter leans back in her chair with a heavy sigh, as if she’s been anticipating and dreading the question. “We met our senior year of high school at a party. Different high schools, same city. We connected over our love for photography, wanting to hopefully get into the industry one day. Before I knew it, we became inseparable and a package deal, at least when he wants to be...” she mumbles that last part under her breath.

One of my eyebrows jumps up at that, curiosity piqued. I’m not one to pry, but Naomi...

“What does that mean, when he wants to be?”

I sit back, letting Naomi dig deeper for the both of us.

Carter’s face looks worried for a moment, as if regretting that she said anything at all. But the crease in her forehead eventually smooths out as she takes a deep breath. “He likes to do his own thing, get all of the credit, you know, at work. But it’s also a lot for one person to do, so he likes to have me there to compensate for where he falls short, even if he’d never acknowledge that he has any areas where he isn’t one hundred percent. So he likes to work together, but he also likes to be the star of the show. Which is fine by me honestly, just as long as I get to do what I love.”

Carter’s phone buzzes again and this time she throws it into her pool bag before tossing a towel over the top of it.

“Everything all right?” I ask.

She shakes her head, running a hand through her short hair. “He must’ve known we were chatting about him,” she tries to joke.

I eye her, waiting for more.

“He’s just going through the files I edited from last night and I must’ve slacked a bit with the editing on them. Said everyone’s unhappy with the quality.”

She’s trying to act casual about the whole thing, but I can see the way her spine has gone rigid and how she’s picking at the loose strings of her towel, nervously running them between her fingers.

“You mean the ones Boone posted today?” Naomi pipes up, grabbing her phone and pulling up Boone’s social media. “Those looked killer; I know he was happy with them this morning when he was posting them.”

Carter shrugs. “I don’t know, maybe it was some of the other guys.” She shoots me an apologetic look at that.

As far as I know, Walker’s been nothing but happy with the work Carter and Daniel have done so far, so I can’t offer her much insight. Although I do wonder if it’s truly *everyone* that is unhappy with them, or if it’s a certain *someone’s boyfriend*.

Sensing Carter doesn’t want to dig any deeper into it, I leave it be. Even when I do see her take her phone back out of her bag and watch as message after message rolls in, although I’m too far away to be able to read any of the contents.

Naomi picks up on the same energy I do, so she settles back, moving the straps from her bikini to hang off her shoulders to watch her tan lines.

I do the same, lying back and turning my face directly toward the sun, letting the heat melt over me and bring with it a desire to close my eyes and take a little snooze. Kids splashing in the pool, soft country music floating around the fenced-in area, ice clinking in glasses. The white noise of it all puts me to sleep and just as I feel myself about to doze off, a jolt at the front of my chair startles me upright.

I’m met with one embarrassed-looking woman and a guy rubbing his shin, a red welt already forming. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you if you were sleeping,” the guy apologizes.

“Are you all right?” I ask him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” He stands to his full height, leg forgotten. “My girlfriend thought you looked familiar...” he trails off when the woman standing next to him, presumably the girlfriend, slaps a hand against his bare chest and shoots me an apologetic look. “She was too scared to ask if you were who she thought you were.” Through clenched teeth, the woman mutters a low, “Shut up,” to her boyfriend.

My spine stiffens, and I raise my chin, noticing Naomi and Carter straighten up as well out of the corner of my eye. “And who do you think I am?” I ask, unable to hide the bite from my tone.

“Charlotte, right?” he says to me and turns to his girlfriend for confirmation.

“*Scarlett*,” she reprimands, before turning to me. “Are you Scarlett Lane?” she asks much lighter when speaking to me.

“Yes,” I answer apprehensively.

At my response, the woman’s eyes light up and she scoots closer to me,

causing me to shift back on my chair. If she notices, she doesn't comment or take a step back at the close proximity.

"I thought so! I'm a huge Whisper Me Nothings fan and I heard they were staying at this hotel. And when I spotted you over here, I knew that must be true! Are they around?"

I keep my mouth shut, obviously not about to tell this woman that yes, they are in fact staying here.

"We figured we'd come over to the hotel today and hang around to see if we could spot any of them before the show tonight. I can't tell you how long I've waited to see them. Haven't I been talking about this forever, babe?" She slaps her boyfriend's chest and he nods unenthusiastically.

"She has."

"Can I get a picture? I've been listening to some of your music so I won't stand there like an idiot tonight, not knowing anything before their performance."

Before I can even respond, she's squatting down next to me and smiling up at her boyfriend as he whips out his phone and snaps a picture. I don't even have time to look down to make sure my bikini is covering both nipples.

"Thank you so much! So great to meet you!" She pops up and gives me a quick wave that I don't return before grabbing her boyfriend's arm and dragging him away.

Unease settles in my stomach in a cold, rutting pit.

I've seen Boone get recognized before when I'm out with him and saw Walker have it happen just yesterday. But that's the first time it's happened to me alone, and something about having the attention turned to me, it's completely different.

I feel like an object, used and cheap. Once I confirmed who I was, it's like she didn't care about actually talking to me at all, instead just getting a picture so she can send it around to her friends. I mean I barely even participated in the interaction and the woman didn't seem to care.

"That was fucking weird," Carter says and I can't help the laugh that bursts out of me.

"Took the words out of my mouth," I mutter.

As hard as I try to lean back and enjoy the sun like I was only moments before, my nerves are on high alert, eyes scanning the pool to see if anyone else is watching me. I feel eyes on me, imaginary or real, I'm not sure.

Is this how Walker feels 24/7? Is this what it's going to be like now that

I've put my face to my songs, stepping into a more prominent role? Before, my loss of anonymity seemed like a far-off concept, something that was happening online but hadn't yet bled over into my everyday life. But now, I'm staring down the barrel of the gun.

I need to get out of here. As I stand quickly, stars briefly dance in the corners of my vision, reminding me that I need to hydrate more in this heat. Scooping up my towels and shouldering my bag, I lift my head to tell Naomi and Carter I'm gonna go, but I see them both doing the same thing, gathering up their items and clearing our spot.

My heart skips a beat at that, not even having to tell them I'm about to freak out and need to go. They just sensed it and decided to follow me.

The three of us make a quick exit out of the pool area, avoiding getting splashed by a lively water volleyball going on with a group of rowdy old men.

We collectively breathe a sigh of relief as we step back into the hotel and are hit with cool air.

"Holy hell, that feels good," Carter moans.

"Remind me never to move to the south. I can't take this heat," Naomi says.

I stay quiet as we wait for the elevator to arrive, shifting side to side, causing my slides to squeak on the shiny tiled floors.

Still sensing my unease, Naomi offers, "How about we ditch our lunch date and instead I'll run to the store to pick up some items and I'll teach you both how to make *nikuman*? I have my steamer on our bus," Naomi offers with a gentle hand on my shoulder.

At Carter's confused look, Naomi clarifies, "Pork buns. A recipe from back home."

"Sounds good to me," Carter replies. "I'm already starving."

I nod my head in agreement, mouth watering just at the thought of those steamed buns that Naomi has made for me a few times before. "That'd be perfect," I say, shooting her a grateful smile. I'm ready to be in the comfort of my own space, tucked away from people for the rest of the day.

Or at least until I have to get on stage in front of a few thousand of them tonight.

WALKER

These hotel curtains aren't doing shit to block the sunlight out of my room, keeping me away from a much-needed nap. I turn over on my side, throwing a pillow over my head to get comfortable and willing sleep to drag me under.

My phone buzzes on my nightstand and I ignore it. When it falls silent, I breathe a sigh of relief, only to have it start buzzing again a moment later.

"Fuck me." I sigh, chucking the pillow off my face and stretching my arm across the bed to grab my phone. The screen lights up with Jane's name, and I slide my thumb across to answer.

"What?" I say as I turn the call on speaker.

A scoff comes through the line. "Is that any way to greet me after you haven't called for weeks?"

"Sorry Janie, I'm trying to get some sleep here before the show tonight and it's been a fucking morning," I groan, rubbing the tension out of my forehead.

"Hit me with it."

She doesn't have to ask me twice.

"We've been trying to work on the next album and it's shit. Everything is feeling forced. No one's visions are aligning, and Hayden and Reid can't stop bickering long enough to even get a single idea fleshed out. And it's not helping that our studio time is so limited on the road that when we do get in the studio, we all feel a sense of pressure to make the most out of the time, but we're all so exhausted from the shows that we're barely making any progress as is. I don't know..." I trail off, anxiety churning in my gut. "I

don't know if we're gonna get this record together." The words are sour coming out of my mouth.

Never once have we struggled like this to write material together. And I thought all of us taking a break would be a boost we needed when we got back together, but instead it feels like everyone is out of sync with each other, which I've never felt in our ten years together.

"I'm sorry," Jane says, full of empathy. She's been our biggest fan from the start. From watching our band practice in Hayden's parents' basement, helping us plaster flyers for our first shows all across the school, and listening to me play drums for hours on end. She knows each of the guys like they're her brothers and hearing we're struggling hurts her too.

"And I'm sure Arun isn't going to be very giving with pushing back a timeline for it?"

"Hell no." I laugh, but no humor is behind it. Arun will support us as much as he can, but at the end of the day, this is a business and he needs us to deliver.

Jane doesn't even try to appease me, knowing full well how this all works. Our label was giving enough with postponing the tour after the shooting and letting Hayden and Nikolai take a breather. They aren't going to give us any more leeway now that they have us all back under their thumb.

"How's the tour going otherwise?" Jane asks.

"Good," I respond on instinct. "Great actually," I answer more honestly. "It feels so good to be playing live again. I missed it like nothing else."

"That's amazing, James. I can hear the smile in your voice as you say that."

"It's crazy how we can be so out of sync trying to work on this new album, but then onstage, every night it's like we're all one form extended through four people. And you can tell the crowd can see it, how they respond to it. It's electric, I don't know any other way to put it."

The screams, the cheers, the faces lit up in pure joy as we perform. We're in our pocket each night, all of us giving it our everything to them and to each other. When we're onstage, it's hard to think how we could be anything but cohesive offstage.

I'm not sure where that disconnect is lying, but we have to figure it out and figure it out fast.

"How are Hayden and Nikolai holding up?"

I shrug even though she can't see it. "Eh, I think as well as they can."

Hayden still gets pretty anxious whenever we're arriving or leaving the venue and there's a crowd gathered that security can't really check." He tries to play it off, but I know the fears are still eating at him.

"Nikolai doesn't seem to even think twice about it anymore, but you know how he is. Smooth sailing on the surface, torrential storm underneath."

Jane murmurs in agreement.

"How about Reid? I see he's deleted all of his socials. Not like he would post anything besides a shirtless photo here and there anyways."

Oh, the cries heard 'round the world when Reid deactivated his accounts, therefore taking with the many thirst traps he posted over the years.

"He's been off," I tell her. "And he won't talk to anyone about it, but he's distant."

"Well, that does sound like the usual Reid," Jane tries to appease me and she's not wrong.

He definitely has his moments and is moodier than the rest of us, but something's just off with him. I can feel it, and I know Hayden and Nikolai can too.

"And Boone?" she asks, breaking the silence that's stretched between us as my mind wonders. Jane's met him a few times and the two of them clicked well, as Jane tends to do with pretty much anyone she meets.

"He seems to be doing well. I don't remember if I told you but Naomi's on tour with us so I think that's been really good for him to have her here."

"Ugh, I hope you're all keeping that bus clean then with a lady onboard. I know how nasty the four of you can let things get."

"We're not teenagers anymore, we know how to use disinfectant wipes."

Jane scoffs and I can particularly hear her eyes roll.

"Plus, they have a separate bus. It's just the boys and Scar on ours."

Jane pounces before I even have the chance to realize what I said. "Scar? You mean Scarlett Lane, the opener? You're on a nickname basis with her?"

Jane the lawyer mode is coming out, grilling me with questions like I'm on the stand.

"Dude, chill out a second." I sit up, leaning my back against the headboard and stretching my legs out in front of me. Clearly, I'm not going to be getting any sleep.

"Yes, Scarlett Lane. And yes, she goes by Scar. It's not just a nickname I have for her, so calm down."

"Tell me about her," Jane presses. Some twin instinct must've flared in

her head, putting her on alert.

“We’ve talked about me enough,” I say, redirecting the conversation. “How’s your last semester of law school going?”

Jane’s in her final year at Harvard Law School, a dream that both her and my dad have always shared. Academics have always been her strong suit over mine.

“Uh, no thanks, I think I’d rather hear more about Scar.”

“Jane.” I sigh, but she cuts me off.

“This isn’t me just being an annoying sister, I promise. I just truly don’t want to talk about school right now,” she says, tone dropping off at the end.

“Is everything okay?” I sit up a little straighter, worry gnawing at me, followed closely by guilt over the fact that I haven’t checked in with her since the tour started.

A heavy sigh comes through the phone. “It’s fine, I’m just drained. And ready mentally and emotionally to be done.”

I nod, not able to fully understand what she’s dealing with, considering her course load and internship, but empathizing with her nonetheless. “I’m sorry.”

Growing up in the same grade level, Jane was still always miles ahead of me academically. She’s been the smartest person in the room since we could basically talk, excelling in not only the regular, required classes but also AP courses as well.

Twins are constantly compared to one another, and Jane and I were no different. Sure, it was less than twins of the same sex, but we always knew people were calculating in their heads who’s the smarter one, who’s the funnier one, who’s the more athletic one, and so on.

It could’ve been something that drove us apart, led us to be jealous of one another and treat everything like a competition. But it was clear from the beginning that our parents wouldn’t allow that to happen and bless them for it. They never drew comparisons between us, instead encouraging the two of us to find what we were good at and nurture it but not at the expense of the other.

Jane’s intelligence is intimidating for many, and I could’ve been by it too. But instead it felt like a gift that she enjoyed school so much.

Our father recognized that drive in her from an early age and dedicated much of his energy into her studies, helping her find more challenging courses and pushing herself in and out of the classroom. Her studies took a

lot of the heat away from me and how I was performing in school, which was always average to below average.

I struggled paying attention, not able to find it in me to care about mathematical formulas or the periodic table. I just wanted to make noise, create music, dive deeper into the creative side of things. If it wasn't for my parents basically forcing me to graduate high school before Whisper Me Nothings moved to Los Angeles, I never would've finished school.

A car horn blares through the line, startling me. "What was that?"

Jane lets out an annoyed huff. "Sorry, some asshole just making his impatience with traffic everyone else's problem."

"Where are you headed?" I check the time on my phone. I only have about an hour now until I need to be at the venue for sound check.

"To your hotel," she answers matter-of-factly.

My head shoots back, bumping into the headboard, and I grimace at the sharp pain. "What?" I ask, even though I heard her clearly.

"I'm about two minutes away from your hotel. Want to meet me down in the lobby or should I come straight up to your room?"

My mouth opens and closes, no words coming out as my mind races to catch up.

What the hell is she doing in Texas?

"I wanted to come see you, you idiot," Jane responds and I realize I must've said that last part out loud. "So, lobby or room?" she repeats.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, sweeping the room for my pair of jeans I shucked off earlier before climbing in for a nap. "I'll meet you down in the lobby. Let me throw pants on and I'll be down."

"Ugh, I hope you'd put on pants to greet me. See you soon." She ends the call before I can respond.

Surprise aside, excitement starts to fill me at the anticipation of Jane being here. I haven't seen her since Christmas, which for some siblings might not seem like a long time. But for us, growing up, we never spent a day apart until Whisper Me Nothings pulled me to L.A., and law school pulled her to Massachusetts. Anytime we get to see each other, we want to make the most of it.

I pull my jeans on and throw a t-shirt over my head, running my hands through my hair. Taking a look in the mirror, I cringe a bit, the wavy strands having taken on a life of their own while I laid in bed. I throw on a pair of sunglasses, which I know make me look like a tool wearing them inside, but

so far, I haven't been recognized at the hotel yet and I'd like to keep it that way.

Grabbing a room key and I'm out the door heading down to greet her. I have the elevator to myself the entire ride and I enjoy the brief calmness of the music floating overhead.

The doors ding as they open, spilling me into the lobby and my eyes immediately find Jane, holding her long, black hair off of her neck with one hand and fanning herself with the other. She spots me as I'm making my way over to her and she shakes her hand in an excited wave, but otherwise doesn't do anything else to draw attention to our interaction.

She instead scoops up her weekender bag, the hot pink matching perfectly with the color of her wedges and meets me across the lobby in a big hug.

"I missed you, big brother," she says into my shoulder, letting her weight sink into my embrace.

I wrap my arms around her back, squeezing her a little at her words. "I missed you too, little sister." Little sister by only four minutes, but still.

She pulls back, keeping her hands on my shoulders as she looks me over with green eyes that match my own, only hers have a sharper edge to them, used to sizing people up in court and analyzing every word spoken to her. With her heels, she's just about my height. Even without them, she's tall, standing at about 5'11".

"You look like a prick," she teases, flicking my sunglasses with a perfectly painted nail.

"Good to see you too," I answer, sarcasm dripping but a smile on my face. With a quick glance around the relatively empty lobby, I don't see anyone watching us, so I grab the bag from her shoulder and steer her over to the elevator, taking us up to my room.

I open the door and hold it wide, allowing Jane to enter first and follow in behind her.

"You think you'd be staying in suites by now," she jokes, surveying the basic but nice room.

"Some places we do, but just the standard for this one." I plop her bag next to the desk and settle into the chair next to it while Jane flops backward on my bed, letting out a long sigh.

"You know I love a good surprise, but wanna tell me what you're doing here in the middle of the semester?" I fold my hands across my stomach, leaning back in the chair as much as possible without tipping it over.

Jane groans and sits up, leaning back on her hands, and when she meets my eyes again, I can see the exhaustion settled deep into them. The usual spark has dimmed, replaced by dark circles that she's tried and failed to hide with makeup.

"I just needed a break," she says.

"That's not like you," I reply. My sister is usually full steam ahead at all times, often pulling all-nighters studying or working, pausing only to re-caffeinate and change her clothes.

"I know..." she trails off and ducks her head to her chest, shoulders slumped in defeat and exhaustion.

"Hey, hey, hey." I'm up and crossing the room, pulling her into my arms as I sit next to her. "If anyone deserves a break, it's you."

She relaxes into my hold and nods her head silently. We sit there for a few moments, relishing in the safe embrace that only someone who has existed by your side since day one can give.

Jane pulls out of my arms and straightens her spine, lifting her chin high and wiping the dampness from under her eyes. "I only have twenty-four hours here before I'm on a plane back to Boston, so I want to make the most of it," she says, her tone resolute. "After your show, we're going out."

My lips flatline, and I'm about to shake my head, but she cuts me off.

"I won't hear any *buts*. We're going out like old times. *All of us*."

I know without asking that she's talking about us and the guys. Blurry memories of us all sneaking into clubs with fake IDs flash through my mind, and I smile, thinking back to the simpler days.

"Fine," I say.

"Don't act so excited about it, jeez."

"It's not that," I hedge. Truth is I'm excited to get out with the guys and Jane. The past couple of weeks, we haven't even had the energy to go out to any bars or clubs after the shows, instead heading back to the bus or hotel after.

But I was mostly hoping to hang out with Scar tonight after the show, assuming she watches my set like she promised. Again.

"Did you have other plans?" Jane asks, picking up on what I'm not saying.

"Not really," I answer.

"Okay I'm not in the mood to grill you with fifty questions until you just say it, so c'mon." She waves a hand impatiently.

I can't help the smile that breaks out at her no-bullshit lawyer voice she slipped into there. Briefly debating if it's worth filling Jane in about Scar, I decide to just tell her knowing she won't drop it. She can see something's turning in my head over and over and will get to the bottom of it one way or another.

And by another, I mean she'd go and grill Hayden and Nikolai until they cave and tell her. They've never been very good at holding out secrets from her.

"I was planning on trying to hang out with Scar after the show."

A flicker of surprise crosses Jane's face, followed by a spark of excitement. "Oh?"

I laugh, not being able to help it. Her tactic to say less so I say more is going to be her approach then.

"She's planning to watch my set tonight and then I was planning after..."

"I don't need to hear the details," Jane interrupts, jumping off the bed like it burned her, backing up with her hands in front of her.

"God, Jane, I wasn't going there."

It's true, I wasn't. Like a fucking idiot, I didn't even kiss her after our date the other day. When I walked her back to her room and we stood there for a moment, breathing the same breath, locked into each other's stares, I had the opportunity. Scar seemed to even be anticipating it, waiting for me to make the move.

But instead, I pulled back a step, leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss on her cheek before heading back to my room. As soon as the door shut behind me, I scolded myself for not doing it.

But I got scared that she would pull away from me at the last second and my feelings and rebuilding trust for her couldn't take that possible rejection.

"We're not at that point," I say to Jane. "Not yet."

"Are you two an item?" she asks.

I shrug my shoulders, not sure how to answer her question.

"Well, have you taken her out on a date yet?" Her tone's exasperated, wanting me to offer up details rather than her pull them out of me.

"Yes." I roll my eyes. "It's just that...she's a little skittish when it comes to opening up to people. It took almost a week at the start of the tour to get her to even look at me without annoyance written across her face."

Jane smirks at that.

"She doesn't trust people very easily, so it's been a slow process getting

to know her.”

“But you like her, don’t you?” Jane asks softly.

I nod my head immediately, no doubt in my mind that yes, I like Scarlett very much.

“Well, invite her out tonight, I’d love to meet her,” Jane says.

“She doesn’t drink,” I answer automatically.

Jane looks at me as if to say, *so what?* “Would she still like to go out dancing?”

I can’t picture Scar at a club, dancing in a crowd of people, but it’s never come up before. “Maybe?”

“Well then, ask her. If she doesn’t want to, then we’ll figure out something else to do together.” She walks over to me and puts a hand on each of my shoulders. “But we’re doing something fun and we’re going to do it together. I need some time spent with my big brothers.”

My heart squeezes at that, loving the bond that Jane has with my bandmates.

An alarm from my phone cuts through the air. “Shit, I gotta get ready for sound check.”

Jane steps back as I brush past her, going for the small carry-on I load up from the bus each time we stay in a hotel. I only have the essentials in there, like my clothes for the show tonight, hair gel, cologne, and a toothbrush. I scoop up my black jeans, red cut-off t-shirt, and a fresh pair of briefs and quickly change in the bathroom.

When I come back into the room, Jane is pulling out a black dress from her bag, along with a small cosmetic bag. “I’ll leave my key here with you in case you need to get back into the room at all. Do you know where the venue is?”

“Arun texted it to me.”

I lace up my black boots and shoot to my feet, patting down my pockets and scanning the room for my phone and wallet.

“Desk,” Jane says without looking up from her bag.

Sure enough, both are sitting on top of it.

“Glad to have you here,” I kiss the top of her head as I pass her and am out the room to head to sound check.

SCAR

My unease from the interaction at the pool earlier today has soothed out after a long, relaxing shower, a good sound check, and Naomi's cooking.

I shrug on my oversized black utility jacket and pull my hair over the collar, fluffing out the fresh curls I put it in for the show. Checking my in-ears, I quickly scan backstage to see if anyone else is here. I spotted Reid heading into Whisper Me Nothings greenroom on my way out here, but he didn't bother acknowledging me. Blew right past me, only briefly meeting my eyes with a scowl that I've learned tends to live permanently on his face.

I crack my neck, closing my eyes and breathing deeply, settling into the right mindset needed for my show. My fingers and toes tingle in anticipation, a feeling I've come to love and crave. Before I know it, the lights are dimming and the crowd is roaring, the opening beats of my first song reverberating through the venue. I take one last look behind me, not sure why I'm even doing it before I am.

Vivid green eyes pierce back at me, Walker settled off in the corner, leaning against a pile of equipment cases, thick arms crossed over his chest. My breath catches for a moment, and when he winks at me, a new set of flutters take off deep in my gut. I feel heat rising to my cheeks as I quickly divert my head and step onstage with a new set of nerves, knowing he's standing there watching me.



MY SET FLIES by in whirls of flashing lights, singing crowds, and ringing in my ears. By the time I'm stepping backstage once again, my hair has completely lost its curl, instead falling in clumpy waves sticking to my neck and forehead from sweat. I shuck off my jacket and air out my shirt as much as I can.

Stripping off my in-ears, I'm startled by two large hands as they settle on each of my shoulders, and a low voice whispers in my ear, "Crushed it per usual."

I spin around and peer up at Walker, smiling brightly down at me. "Thank you." I smile back, adrenaline still high in my veins.

"Walker!" someone calls out behind him, and I shift my head to Hayden, Nikolai, and Reid all gathered in a huddle, waiting on Walker.

Walker tilts his head up at the ceiling, a look of frustration clear across his face. Whether it has to do with the guys themselves or just interrupting this moment, I'm not sure.

As he refocuses his attention on me, he asks, "You sticking around tonight?" There's a hopefulness in his eyes, but also hesitation in his tone and immediately guilt rises back up in my throat that I gave him a reason to doubt me. He wants me to stay and watch, but also is preparing for me to dip out again and disappoint him.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I place a hand on his chest, his skin burning hot through the fabric, pec soft and solid at the same time. "I'm sticking around tonight," I tell him, watching a grin stretch across his mouth, and I want to lean forward and press my own to it.

Walker instead grabs my hand, rings glinting, and presses a kiss to my open palm, the motion sending a spark straight to my lower belly, and I squirm slightly where I'm rooted.

"Do you dance?" he asks, dropping my hand and already starting to walk away.

My brow wrinkles in confusion at the swift topic change. "What?"

"Do you dance?" he repeats. "Like at a club."

"Umm...not for a while?" I answer, not sure where this is coming from.

"Will you come out after the show with us? My sister's in town for the night and wants to go out to a club after the show. We don't have to though..." he trails off, eyeing me with words he won't say out loud in front of other ears backstage here.

My chest constricts at that, the simple kindness of him taking into consideration that going out to a club may be hard for me and something I'm not ready to do sober. It's a kindness many have not thought to consider or haven't shown since I've stopped drinking.

"Sounds fun," I tell him with a reassuring smile.

He nods his head once, dark curls falling over his eyes before he brushes them out of the way and heads over to be with his bandmates before they go on.

Taking advantage of the quick break between my set and theirs, I head back to my greenroom to clean up as best I can. Grabbing a few wet wipes, I pull my hair up and wipe down my neck and chest, enjoying the coolness on my hot, sticky skin. I wipe down my arms as well, before pulling deodorant out of my bag I bring with me to each show and swipe on a fresh coat.

Looking in the mirror behind the door, I quickly realize my hair is a lost cause. I spray a little bit of dry shampoo at the roots to suck up some of the moisture and finger-comb the ends.

A slow bassline booms through the walls, followed by the distant cheers of the crowd, signaling the start of their set. I throw everything back on the couch and whip the door open, hurrying to the curtains offstage.

Just as I'm arriving, Walker and the guys are stepping out. His large frame stalks across the stage, climbing up the two steps to the slightly raised platform that his kit sets on. I almost reach up to cover my ears, never hearing the crowd react this loudly before. Not even to Boone when he gets onstage and definitely not for me.

The lights are flashing, white strobes dance across each of them as they settle into their spots.

Hayden is farthest from me on the right side of the stage, swinging his bass over his head and settling the strap in on his shoulder.

Nikolai at front and center, unbuttoning an extra button on his shirt before shaking out his hands and reaching for the mic stand.

Reid is closest to me on the left side of the stage and he stands there with his guitar as if he's waiting in line at the grocery store, cool and collected, aloof, as if their screams mean nothing to him.

But my eyes don't catch on any of them for long. Instead they're drawn to Walker lowering himself onto the small black and chrome stool. He flexes his arms, the cut-off shirt allowing full view of his muscles, highlighted by the strobing lights catching on the veins and grooves. He twirls a neon green

drumstick in each hand, fingers dancing quickly and deftly. The ones that I gifted him. My stomach flips at the sight of it.

Walker lowers his head down, his hair hanging around his face as the bassline builds, leading into a crescendo before he yells out a muffled count to the guys, and Reid starts a dark and energetic riff, Walker and Hayden joining in for a few bars before Nikolai starts singing, the crowd instantly joining him.

As the song builds, so does the energy of each of the guys, but my attention stays focused on Walker. I couldn't pull my eyes away even if I wanted to. As he pounds into the drums, completely controlling not only the song and each of them on stage, but also the crowd. They time their movements with the beats he's creating, allowing him to be their puppet master for the evening. It's completely mesmerizing to watch.

People in the crowd watch them in awe, euphoria and glee written across their faces. The same is mirrored back to them from each of the guys, even Reid's scowl has melted and he looks at peace, in his element.

They all do.

I peer down into the pit in front of the stage and spot Carter there, large camera in hand snapping pictures as they perform. Her lens is aimed at Hayden as his head lies back, pale throat gleaming under the stage lights, fingers flicking over the strings of his bass like it's as natural as breathing for him.

Daniel circles around the edges of the stage, camera in hand taking video of the show.

As each song goes by, Walker never loses energy or steam, beating the drums just as hardy and with even more enthusiasm. A thin coat of sweat covers him, his hair sticking to his forehead as he whips his head back and forth in time with the beat, eyes often closed and zeroed in on what he's doing. His arms bulge with his movement, forearms strained and strong as he occasionally throws in a flip of his drumsticks here and there.

"Show off," a voice says to my right, startling me and causing me to cry out in surprise.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." The woman laughs. I glance over to her quickly before wanting to put my attention back on Walker as soon as I can, but I double take.

The woman is tall, close to six feet, I'd say. Her hair hangs in a glossy, dark curtain down to the middle of her back, pin straight and shiny. A black

dress clings to her curves and stomach, showing off her long legs and ample cleavage.

She's hot.

Objectively speaking.

But that's not what catches my attention. It's her eyes, the same shade that I've come to look forward to seeing everyday.

My face must show the pieces falling into place because she smiles, extending her hand to me.

"Yes, I'm the twin. Jane," she offers as I take her hand, shaking it once, noticing the hot pink nails perfectly manicured against my own short, dark self-painted ones.

"Scar," I introduce myself, but by the sharp, calculated look in her eyes of recognition, I can tell she already knows that.

"Hell of a performance you put on."

I shift from one foot to the other, uncomfortable with accepting praise from strangers. "Thanks."

Jane turns her attention back to the stage, gaze bouncing from one of them to the next, pride radiating off her face. I resume watching Walker, chugging from a bottle of water in between songs while Nikolai talks to the crowd. His Adam's apple bobs as the water slides down his throat.

"Did James say anything to you about going out after the show tonight?"

I pause, taking a moment to realize she's talking about Walker, but she continues before I can say anything.

"Walker," she states. "Did you not know his first name?" A hint of judgment seeps into the back of her tone.

"No," I answer, defenses rising. "I knew his first name. Just easy to forget when everyone around here calls him Walker."

Jane crosses her arms, her gold chain link bracelet catching the light.

"And plus, it doesn't really seem to fit him. Too formal."

That cracks through her demeanor. "It doesn't, does it?" She laughs.

The guys start their next song, Nikolai bent at the waist, singing down to a pocket of women in the front row, screaming and reaching their hands toward him.

"And to answer your question, yes, he did. Sounds good," I tell her.

Jane nods, her attention also tuned on Nikolai, watching the fans practically melt where they stand while he gives them a sliver of his attention.

She clears her throat and brushes her hands down the front of her dress.

“I’m going to go down in the pit to watch the end of the set. Care to join?”

I hesitate, wanting to experience the show from all angles, but also wanting to stay right where I am where I have the clearest view of Walker.

Noticing that my focus is back on her brother, with a knowing smile, Jane bids me farewell and takes off around the corner, snagging Arun from his spot in the corner where he’s been working furiously from his phone and pulling him with her.

As they go through their last few songs, I’m surprised at how many I know. Not that I should be, because they’re big radio favorites and have been in the game for a while now. But I mostly stick to listening to music in the genre I write and create in, which means pretty much anything electronic.

But I find myself swaying along to the closing songs, singing along with Nikolai and Reid under my breath, loving the more rock edge their live performance grants to their music.

The final notes ring out, Walker crashing his symbols in rapid succession, lights flashing and hearts pounding. Nikolai swings his arm in a large arch, bringing it down and cutting everyone off, ending the set. Fans roar and cheer, wanting more.

Walker jumps down from his platform and joins the other three at the front of the stage in a bow, before they all pat each other on the back and nudge each other in a job well done as they exit.

Reid and Nikolai are the first to pass me, the heat from their bodies radiating outward, sending goosebumps across my arms. Nikolai shoots me a wink and shakes my shoulder as he walks by.

Hayden and Walker follow closely behind, and Hayden flashes me a smile before looking over his shoulder at Walker with a knowing smirk, then he takes off, following the other two.

Stagehands rush around us, hurrying to switch over the stage in the ten-minute time window they have between Whisper Me Nothings’ set and Boone’s. But they all disappear the second Walker’s eyes lock onto me and he stalks forward with a newfound purpose. And that’s me.

My heart immediately starts pumping hard and fast, palms sweating. He prowls forward and pulls me into his chest, wrapping his arms around my back and picking my feet off the ground. I’m instantly high on his scent, utterly masculine and the sharp undertone of spearmint from his cologne. Trying to hide my long inhale, I bury my face in his neck, damp with sweat but I couldn’t care less. Not when it feels this *right* to be in his embrace.

His heart is pounding against my chest, and I wonder if he can feel the excitement of my own matching his.

“What did you think?” he asks as he sets me down, but he doesn’t pull back. No, he keeps his arms locked around my neck, causing my head to tip back toward his.

In this position, it feels like nothing in the world can touch me. I’m surrounded by him, protected by him, entranced by him.

I stutter for a moment, not knowing how to put into words how incredible it was to watch him in his element, doing what he was so clearly born to do. My chest hurts with the weight of my awe at watching him perform.

“You were incredible,” I tell him, hoping he can hear the weight and sincerity behind my words and see the truth of it in my eyes. Hoping that he can see what I can’t find the words to say.

Walker smiles at me, so brightly, and I want to capture the sight of it and hold it in my memory forever. His eyes bounce back and forth between mine, tongue darting out to lick his lips, chest heaving against my own.

Without hesitating, without letting him overthink it and get stuck in his head about it, I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him.

He pauses ever so slightly, surprised by my move, before melting into me, pulling my body impossibly closer to his so I can feel every muscle, every curve and groove of his body against my own. His mouth opens to mine, inviting me in deeper, faster, harder.

I groan as he brings his hands to the sides of my face, palms hot and calloused from playing, as he tilts my head the way he wants, taking charge of the kiss. I allow him, following his lead, relishing in him finally taking what he wants and what I haven’t been able to stop thinking about since yesterday.

“Fuck, Scar.” He pulls back slightly, panting against my mouth.

I reach up, grabbing a fistful of his curls and pull his mouth back to mine, not done with him yet. He doesn’t pull away. Instead, he reaches down and grabs the back of my legs, hoisting me up around his waist.

I yelp in surprise, wrapping my legs tightly around him, shifting to get comfortable, and that earns a low groan from him. “Scarlett...”

My core presses tightly to his stomach, and I stifle the whimper that begs to escape at the sensation of rubbing against him.

“Excuse us,” Walker calls out, carrying me through the hallway backstage. A few roadies watch us, some amused, some envious. Heat rises

to my cheeks, but I hold my head high, proud to be in his arms.

Walker carries me to the Whisper Me Nothings' greenroom, peeking inside and seeing the guys standing around, pouring drinks and thumbing through their phones. Before any of them can spot us, Walker takes us over to my greenroom and kicks the door open, clearly on the last tether of his patience.

A figure on the couch jumps in surprise, dropping a small bag of mixed nuts across the floor.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" Walker asks, frustration evident in his tone.

"What the hell are you doing kicking doors open?" Jane asks, affronted by the intrusion.

"This is Scar's room."

"Well, she wasn't using it at the moment." She nods toward us, me still wrapped around her brother like a koala.

"We'd like to use it now."

My face flames, but the pounding at my core causes any embarrassment to slip away. I shift, rubbing myself against Walker as discreetly as possible, trying to soothe the ache. He notices and squeezes my ass tighter, jaw clenching, trying to keep himself under control.

"Ugh, gross. These couches are disgusting," Jane says, lip curling at the extremely worn down leather.

"Who says we need the couch?" Walker says, and I stay quiet, letting the siblings figure this one out.

"Oh my god, I don't want to hear that." Jane shoots to her feet, grabbing her small clutch and brushing any spilled crumbs from her dress. "I'll go hang out with the guys."

She struts past us and Walker pulls us into the room, turning around to throw the door closed just as a strong hand presses against the side and prevents it from shutting.

"Ready to go?" Nikolai asks, boldly popping his head around the door when it looks like Walker would love nothing more than to close it right on his face.

Walker doesn't answer, instead shooting daggers Nikolai's way, to which he seems to be utterly amused.

"C'mon, everyone's out here waiting." He laughs, pushing the door open all the way, showing Hayden chatting with Jane in the hallway and Reid

standing there, attention drawn in on his phone.

Walker tilts his head back, taking a fortifying breath, before pulling his attention back to me. His eyes search my face, the want and desire burning down deep inside of me.

“I’m not finished with you,” he whispers in my ear, sending chills all over my body, nipples peaking under my shirt, and when he sets me down and pulls back, I know he spots them. He cracks his neck from side to side, jaw clenched, and I look at his pants, at the evidence of how badly he wants me too.

I roll my lips between my teeth and peer back at him. A knowing look is shared between us before he grabs my hand and pulls us into the hallway with everyone else.

“Let’s go then if everyone is so eager.” He flips his hand at everyone, gesturing to get moving.

“It looks like someone else is the eager one if you ask me.” Nikolai laughs and immediately sprints away as Walker raises a hand to try to jab him.

Hayden laughs and walks in stride with Jane, the two of them chatting as we go.

Just as we’re about to exit, Carter walks by, Daniel hot on her heels. Neither of them looks very happy.

“We’re headed out if you guys want to join once you’re wrapped up with Boone,” I offer Carter, trying to silently check in without asking in front of everyone if she’s all right. “I can text you the details.”

“We’re good,” Daniel cuts in, shooing Carter along. He doesn’t even make eye contact with me, just completely brushes us off.

My head whips back at his tone, but all it takes is one look from Carter that keeps me from snapping back at him, knowing it would just make her night worse.

“Fucking hate that guy,” I mumble, pushing out the exit door, Walker close behind me.

The night air is cool against my hot skin, and I welcome the brief chill before we all pile into a black SUV waiting to take us to the club.

“Where are we going?” I ask, sandwiching myself in between Walker and Reid in the second row, Nikolai riding shotgun, and Jane and Hayden in the back.

“Just settle in and trust the ride,” Nikolai says, kicking his feet up on the

dash and cranking up the radio, silencing any further conversation for the duration of the drive.

WALKER

I've finally calmed down enough and adjusted myself by the time we're all piling out of the car and spilling into the club through the building's back entrance. There was a long line wrapped around the block up front and we didn't want to draw any extra attention to ourselves by walking past folks waiting.

I look over at Hayden, eyeing him up to see how he's doing. It's his first time he's gone out to a bar or club since the shooting. He's said the packed crowds and dark lighting put him on edge now where he used to find freedom in it. But he looks mostly at ease, Jane walking next to him and chatting his ear off, likely helping keep his mind off of his anxiety.

As we step inside, my eyes take a moment to adjust to the darkness that sucks us all in, air rife with the scent of sweaty bodies and expensive champagne. Reid leads us through the crowd, us all following in a single file behind him as we walk through to the VIP section upstairs. A few people turn and do a double take, recognition washing over their faces as they drink and dance, tracking us all the way to the stairs currently being blocked off by a meaty bouncer. I grab Scar's hand from behind me, pulling her close to my back.

Words I can't hear over the booming club music are exchanged between Reid and the guy, before he's stepping aside and letting us through.

The area up here is next to empty, only a few cocktail waitresses roaming about, trying to make themselves look busy wiping down tables that already look clean and hovering for refills on drinks that the few patrons up here still have half full.

A short man in a neatly pressed suit appears out of nowhere, gesturing to a section of plush couches that overlook the dance floor at the farthest end of the space, guiding us toward them. I reach behind me for Scar and pull her around in front of me, following her as we walk over and settle in. Before my ass even hits the couch, a waitress appears, body encased in a short, dark red dress with a plunging neckline. Her eyes flit around the group in a knowing gaze, clearly aware of who we are and sizing each of us guys up, her attention catching on Reid the longest.

“Welcome to Indigo,” she purrs, voice soft but loud enough to be heard over the music. “My name is Alex and you just let me know whatever you all need tonight.” The double meaning rings loud and clear. “Shall I bring a few bottles over for the table to start?” She directs the question to the group but continues to eye Reid.

“We’ll do a round of tequila shots,” Reid says, elbowing Jane as she perks up at the mention of her favorite liquor. “And I’ll take a whiskey sour.”

“A bottle of champagne as well, please,” Jane adds.

“Gin and tonic,” Nikolai orders next, Hayden echoing the same thing for himself.

By the time the waitress’s attention is on myself and Scar, everyone else is chatting among themselves. I look at Scar first, waiting for her to order.

“I’ll take a club soda and lime please.”

“Any spirits?”

“No thanks.”

I wrap my hand around Scar’s thigh, rubbing my thumb back and forth over the ripped denim.

“Can I just get a Red Bull?”

Alex nods her head, sashaying away to get our drinks going.

Scar leans in, making sure I can hear her over the music. “You can have a drink, you know.”

I take a deep breath in, enjoying the faint vanilla scent of her hair as it falls over her shoulder and curtains us off in our own little world.

“I know,” I answer. “And if I really wanted to, I would. But tonight”—I stare into her eyes and wish that in that moment I never had to leave them—“I don’t want to.”

Scar dips her head down a bit, giving me a small smile. “Okay, I just wanted you to know. My sobriety shouldn’t stop you from enjoying a drink with your bandmates and sister on a night out here and there.”

“I know that, Scar, I do. But trust me when I’m telling you that tonight, I really just want to experience this night with you, without anything in between us.”

God, I wish I could climb inside her head and hear what she’s thinking right now as she watches me, wheels turning behind her eyes as they dart around my face, mouth opening but words not coming out.

“Okay,” she says and leans back on the couch. I wrap my arm across her shoulders, pulling her into my side and relishing the comfort she brings with her.

Our little section is in an L shape with two couches; one looking directly over the dancefloor below with the other couch perpendicular to the railing and kiddy corner with the other. Reid, Jane, and Nikolai sit on one of them; Hayden, myself, and Scar on the other. Jane chats animatedly with Hayden while Nikolai looks on and jumps in here and there to tease Jane, which I can tell by the way she shoots him the middle finger every now and then.

Looking over at Reid, I find him watching me. Or more so, me and Scar, and the way I’m holding her close to me. His stare is impossible to decipher, and I flick a brow up at him in a silent question.

Reid gives me the smallest of nods, and I take it to be his blessing. Not that I need approval from him or give a damn what he thinks about who I choose to spend my time with right now with how our relationship is at the moment, but I’ll take it.

Alex comes back with a tray full of drinks, Nikolai and Jane greeting her with a cheer as they both reach forward and start handing out the shots. Hayden tries to pass two down to me and Scar, but I give him the slightest shake of my head and he pulls them back. He doesn’t question why I’m turning down a shot for maybe the first time in my life or try to draw attention to it, and I love him for it.

As the group grabs limes from a small bowl, I lean forward and grab my Red Bull, pass Scar her club soda, and stand, pulling her with me.

“We’re going down to dance,” I announce, stepping around the low table, careful not to bump into it and spill the remaining drinks.

“Wait! We haven’t taken our shots yet,” Jane yells over the music, holding a small glass in one hand, lime wedge in the other.

Scar shifts next to me, and I wonder if she’s been in an environment like this since she’s stopped drinking. Has she had to turn down a round shots with friends?

“You can have ours,” I tell her, then direct my attention to my friends. “And you three, keep an eye on her. She needs the night to let loose, but ideally not by barfing all over the car on the way back to the hotel.”

“You got it, Dad,” Nikolai mocks, raising his shot up in salute and downing it, not even flinching as it goes down. “Little Walker is safe with me.”

Jane throws an annoyed look at Nikolai as he smirks at her. I’m not sticking around to hear these two start to go at each other, so I quickly turn and grab Scar around her waist, guiding her over to the stairs and down onto the dancefloor.

I feel people watching as we descend and enter into the swirls of bodies, jumping and grinding into each other, all controlled by the DJ playing from a sleek, elevated platform in the middle of the floor.

The ground is dark, only illuminated by white strobes lights with the perimeter encased in a dark blue neon border.

Tucking Scar close to my body as we weave through, getting deeper into the throng of the crowd, I feel her tense. Putting my lips close to her ear, I ask, “You okay?”

She nods her head, twisting her neck and standing on her tiptoes to speak closely to me. “Just trying to get used to it.”

“To what?”

“The stares.”

I pull back and scan the area, noticing some people eyeing us either unabashedly, or trying to be more discreet and averting their attention when I make eye contact. It’s something that I’ve grown accustomed to over the years.

But for Scar, this is all new to her. She’s been delivering a great performance on tour and people are noticing. I overheard Vik and Arun talking about it last week, how much her streams have risen over the past month and a half. The demand of her doing more solo interviews, instead of always being paired up with Boone for them. Her social media accounts, which I know Scar doesn’t bother to check or update, have been growing steadily. It makes me proud of her, to see people starting to recognize the talent I saw that very first sound check I watched of hers.

But with all of that success and love come the stares. And clearly, she is uneasy with her newfound attention.

“Do you want to go back upstairs?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “No.” Turning her body toward mine so we’re chest to chest, she says, “Make me forget them,” as she starts dipping and swaying with the music. My attention zeroes in on her hips, watching them glide smoothly back and forth with the beat, the song familiar to her and her body sinking into its rhythm.

I fall into her sphere, moving along with her like I’ve been meant to do it my entire life. The bass rings through my ears, keeping us steady and grounded.

With each moment, the people around us fade away little by little, until Scar becomes the only thing I see. The strobe lights flash across her, causing her to look as if she’s moving in slow motion, delicate neck extended and dark bangs clinging to her forehead with sweat.

Scar’s arms extend above her head, moving along to the beat before they find themselves wrapping around my neck, her drink splashing on my shoulder and running down my exposed arm, but I couldn’t care less. She pulls herself close, and I chug the last of my drink before crumpling the can and tossing it out toward an empty spot on the perimeter of the floor, doing the same with her drink right after. A dick move, but at the moment, I couldn’t care less. I need to have both of my hands on her body now.

I reach forward and pull her flush to me, her breasts pushed up between us, and I glance at them, straining in their confinement, pale in comparison to her dark shirt. I reach behind her again, slipping my hands under the bottom of the fabric to settle against the bare skin on her lower back, damp with sweat.

We dance together, song after song, getting lost in each other and the thump of the music. She turns around, putting her back to my chest and winds an arm up around my neck. I grip her hips, pulling her ass against my cock, letting her feel my body’s reaction to what she’s doing as I strain against my pants. She wiggles her hips side to side, twisting around to give me a downright devilish grin, letting me know she knows exactly what she’s doing.

I lean down and bite the shell of her ear, earning a small yelp barely heard above the music and run my tongue up the side of her neck, tasting the salt on her skin, determined to drive her as crazy as she’s driving me. The heat of the club sticks to both of us in a heavy coat, further fueling the burning frenzy for each other.

Scar twists her face up to me and gripping the back of my hair, she brings

my mouth down to hers, crashing together in a desperate kiss. Her soft lips meet mine, and I nip at them, before diving deep into her, tongues dancing and battling for power.

Without breaking the kiss, Scar pulls out of my grasp, turning and bringing her chest to mine, leaning into me, clawing at my shoulders, her moans echoing my own.

My body burns, the need to taste her overriding every other thought and emotion. I give her one final kiss before I pull away. Her eyes are glazed, lids heavy with desire.

“Tell me to stop.” The words barely escape my lips, and I watch Scar’s face closely, waiting to see any hesitation, any hint that this isn’t what she wants, but I so desperately do.

Without saying a single word, she shakes her head, licking her lips and staring hungrily back at my own.

Without a second thought, I grab her hand and drag her off the floor and toward the stairs, taking us back up the VIP section and beelining for the bathrooms.

Thank God for the private bathrooms and it being a slow night up here.

I don’t even stop to look to see if Jane and the guys are still at the couches or if they’ve moved down to the dance floor. Hell, they could’ve left for all I care.

Pushing open the large door to the men’s room, I quickly survey that it’s empty before rushing in and pulling Scar behind me. There’s no lock on the door, so I’ll just have to take our chances and make this fast.

The music is muted in here, only a low humming of the bass accompanying our heavy breathing. I face Scar, and when our eyes meet, I see a shiver break out across her body at the animalistic look I know is on my face. I slowly back her up, step by step, until her back meets the counter’s edge, and I pin her to it with my hips.

She lets out a strangled breath, watching, waiting. Waiting for me to make the move now.

I don’t think twice.

Dipping down, I smash my lips to her, resuming our frenzied kiss and wrap her hair around my fist, yanking on the strands to pull her head back.

A whimper falling from her has me stopping for a moment, trying to read her reaction, gut immediately clenching in guilt that maybe I pulled too hard.

But no, when Scar opens her eyes, they shine with lust, and she shifts her

legs, spreading them to wrap around one of my thighs and rubbing herself against me shamelessly.

“Fuck, are you a dirty girl, Scarlett?” I ask, keeping her neck open and exposed as I press my lips to it, sucking and biting my way across and down to her chest as much as her shirt will allow. I want to rip it to shreds, exposing her to me.

“Don’t tempt me, James,” she breathes heavily over my head, nails digging into my shoulder.

I pull back and stare at her eyes, letting her see the fire in mine. “No, don’t tempt me.”

Releasing her hair, my hands find the waistband of her jeans, popping the button open so quickly I’m shocked it doesn’t fly off. Yanking down the zipper, I make enough room for me to reach one hand inside, finding the lace of her panties and pushing the fabric aside and start circling her clit.

Scar reacts immediately, jumping slightly in my grasp and letting out a little cry, head falling forward against my shoulder in pleasure. “Ohhh!” She lets out on a strangled breath.

Keeping pressure on her clit, I reach my hand further back and curse at the wetness that I find.

“Oh, you’re fucking soaking, sweetheart,” I hum and dance my fingers around her entrance. She shifts her hips, trying to find relief, but I don’t give her what she wants just yet.

As I withdraw my hand, Scar raises her head back up, brows furrowed in pent-up frustration. “Walker,” she moans.

I silence her with a kiss before I kneel in front of her and pull her jeans down, taking her panties with them. Pushing her feet apart as much as the material will allow, I run my hands up and down her thighs, enjoying the goosebumps that rise in their wake.

“As much as I want to take my time with you, we gotta make this fast.”

Leaning forward, eyes locked in on Scar’s, I part her with my hand and latch my mouth around her clit, sucking as she starts to buck against my face. I use my other hand to grip her hip, trying to hold her steady.

“Fuck,” she cries out, pushing herself harder against my face, and I nip lightly at her in response. I knew she’d be a little vixen, unashamed of her body and the pleasure it desires. I love the way she opens herself to me, legs straining to step further apart than the pants around her ankles will allow her.

At the first taste of her, I know I’m doomed. She’s intoxicating and I

want more, more, more. As I continue tonguing her, I tease a finger around her opening, rubbing the wetness around and coating my finger before entering.

Her walls immediately clamp down on me, aching for me to fill her more. I start fucking her with a single digit, before adding a second, keeping a steady rhythm.

Scar leans against the counter with one hand, while the other finds its way into my hair and holds me tightly to her. By the way her cries quicken and the shakes that start to rock her body, I know she's close.

"You gonna come for me, Scar?" I moan against her.

"Yes," she cries out, eyes shut as all of her focus is shifted to every little thing I'm doing to her, all in the pleasure I'm giving her.

My cock is impossibly hard in my pants, pushing painfully against the zipper. I remove my hand from her hip to reach down and palm myself over the fabric, trying to give the smallest relief I can at the moment.

Scar's hip buck against my face, and I know I have her right on the precipice.

"You're so beautiful. I know you're going to look fucking amazing as you come on my mouth," I say, increasing the suction on her clit and pumping my fingers faster, curling them inside to hit the front of her walls.

"Fuck, Walker, I need to..." She tips her head back, eyes screwed shut in ecstasy, and comes. Hard.

I keep on what I'm doing, taking her through her orgasm. She shakes against me so hard I'm worried she might collapse. Only when she tries to shut her knees around my head do I pull back, savoring the taste of her and cleaning her off my fingers with my mouth.

When she finally opens her eyes and looks at me, there's a sense of peace behind them that I haven't seen before and I decide right then that I want to keep that look on her face for the rest of my life.

It fades as she comes back to the awareness of our surroundings, and before she bends down to do it herself, I pull her pants up, righting them on her hips and fastening them closed, pressing a gentle kiss to her hip.

I stand, and she looks over my shoulder at the door, chewing her lip for a moment before reaching a hand down to palm my cock. I can't help the low groan that escapes over the feeling of her rubbing against me, hand hot through the fabric. What I wouldn't give to not have a barrier between us right now.

But before she can go any further, I grab her wrist and bring her hand up to my mouth, pressing a kiss to it.

“I’m not taking you for the first time in some club bathroom. The first time you have this cock”—I push my hips forward, pressing myself against her—“will be somewhere that I can keep you for hours, not just for a quickie.”

Her eyelids fall partway closed in desire and I can almost see her thoughts running across her face, me fucking her over and over again, bodies entangled until we don’t know where one ends and the other begins.

“But I want to return the favor.”

Planting a kiss against her, letting Scar taste herself on my lips, I say, “Trust me, Scar, that was just as much for me as it was for you. I thought I would go insane if I had to take one more breath without knowing what you tasted like or sounded like while you came.”

Scar groans, melting into me, and if she even made the slightest brush against the front of my jeans, I think I’d be in a very embarrassing situation here.

“Should we go see if everyone else is still standing upright?” I ask, taking a step back from Scar and instantly missing the heat of her body.

Nodding in resolution that I’m not going to take her in here, she grabs my hand and guides us out of the bathroom, popping the bubble we were in.

The music engulfs us as soon as we’re back out in the open, eyes adjusting to the low lighting again as we search for everyone else.

SCAR

An insistent pounding at my hotel room door startles me out of a deep sleep, eyes crusted shut from unwashed makeup. I throw a pillow over my face and let out a loud groan, not ready to be one with the world yet.

The knocking persists until I have no choice but to drag my ass out of bed. The empty bed that only I slept in last night. I look to the other side, covers still tucked in on the edges of it. If you would've asked me at Indigo last night if I would've been waking up alone this morning, I would've said hell no.

But as Walker and I ventured out of the bathroom and in search of our group, we found a very intoxicated Jane, crying into Nikolai's shoulder at our section.

Walker immediately ran to his twin's side, ready to confront whoever had put her in such an emotional state. But no one could make sense of what she was upset about, not even Nikolai who had been lending her the shoulder to cry on.

Upon finding her, Walker and Nikolai propped her up between them and safely carried her out of the club, with myself in tow. Turns out Hayden had left shortly after Walker and I went down to dance, so that only left Reid. Walker had shot him a text, letting him know we were leaving, but he had found company that he wanted to stick around and see things through with.

Glad someone is getting laid on this tour.

So by the time we made it back to the hotel and Walker was in full big brother mode, I knew I was going to be spending the night by myself, with

only the memory of Walker's hands trailing across my skin, his lips against mine, his mouth bringing me to the highest pleasure...

"Scarlett Lane!" I jump out of my trance, mind orienting itself back into this moment, where there is still someone currently banging on my door. I'm shocked no one has called in a noise complaint yet.

I walk a few steps across the room, grabbing a large hoodie on my way over and pulling it over my head, leaving the hood over my head to hide what has got to be a tangled mess before I peek through the peephole and swing the door open to Vik.

She's looking powerful this morning, as usual. A black and white pinstripe suit with gold accents mold perfectly to her strong frame, pixie cut freshly bleached white blonde. She holds a coffee cup in one hand, which she extends to me the moment I open the door, and her phone in the other.

"Answer your phone next time please." She walks in, not bothering to wait for me to invite her inside. "I've been trying to get a hold of you all morning."

I glance at the alarm clock next to my bed.

"It's 7:45 am...that's hardly enough to constitute an 'all morning' exaggeration," I say, taking a sip of coffee and letting it warm my hands.

"Have you looked at your phone yet?"

"No," I answer, and for the first time since she's arrived, I look at her face, really look at it. Something is up.

"What is it?" I feel my heart sink, gut twist, and reject the coffee trying to make its way down.

"Nothing tragic!" she rushes to reassure, sensing me jumping to worst-case scenarios. "Boone's fine, the tour's fine, your family is fine."

I wonder if she notices that my family is the third thing on her list to reassure me of. And honestly, I don't know if I'd even reorder them myself.

"Then what's going on? National tragedy? Plane crash?" I wave my hand as if flipping through the various occurrences I can think of that would warrant an early morning visit like this.

Vik unbuttons her suit jacket before taking a seat at the desk chair in my room, turning it out to face me while she talks. "I didn't mean to alarm you, so I apologize. But I did want to catch you before you had a chance to get online this morning, as this is something that you haven't had to deal with so far in your career."

That doesn't really settle my nerves. My mind is still racing as I take a

seat on the edge of the bed, almost knee to knee with Vik.

“Now before you start getting too concerned, this isn’t a bad thing. It could actually be beneficial for you. But I need you to be completely honest with me,” she continues, calculating eyes boring into my own. “I’ve always kept it straight up with you, so give me the same in return, yeah?” she asks with a raised brow.

“Of course.”

“There were photos of you taken last night at Indigo.”

My head rears back a bit, eyebrows drawn together. “Ok?”

“Photos of you on the dancefloor. With James Walker.”

Ah.

All right then.

Is that cause for an emergency morning meeting...?

“You two looked quite...close,” Vik says, the innuendo clear.

My mind immediately flashes back to last night, trying to think if there was anything compromising on the floor. Sure, we were definitely handsy but who isn’t when dancing with someone in a club. It’s hardly anything to wave a finger at.

Unless you’re my parents. I’m sure they would’ve choked on their morning tea at the thought of me out at a nightclub, with a man I’m not married to on top of that. But thankfully, gossip sites and social media is not something they browse on the regular.

Or ever.

“Are they bad photos?” I ask, still not quite understanding her tone.

“Not anything to bat an eye at. You two are obviously dancing in them, entangled in each other. A few of them include you two kissing and then him dragging you off the floor and up a set of stairs until you’re both out of view.”

Thank god for the VIP bathrooms or this could’ve been a different conversation...

“They’re mostly gaining traction on various social media sites, fan pages, and a few gossip blogs. You’re both identifiable in them, so your names are each attached.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Vik says, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest. “It’s getting your name talked about more, gaining more attention for the tour, creating buzz around where you two might be spotted again and if

this is a full-blown relationship.”

“It’s comp—”

“I’m not asking you to give me a full rundown of what’s going on between the two of you,” she cuts me off. “I just need you to be honest with me because now that people are paying attention to you for more than just your music, you become more of a target. Especially dating someone high profile like Walker. Their fans are invested in who those guys are dating and have opinions on their romances, whether educated or not. Your name has already gained traction being on this tour and being associated with them, but this is different. You’re now more than a fellow artist or an opening act. You’re a girlfriend to one of them. One of them is your boyfriend.”

“He’s not—”

“Again, doesn’t matter. The conclusion has already been made by the public.”

My throat is tight, tension bare knuckling my chest.

“So what I need you to be honest with me is, is this a fling or something more? I don’t need to know your timeline and if you hear marriage bells or not. But I need to know if this is going to be an ongoing thing.”

I rub my forehead, trying to wake my brain up the rest of the way to help me sift through this.

Is this going to be an ongoing thing? Is it going to turn into something more? Is that what I want? A month ago, I would’ve snorted at the idea of dating the shirtless guy playing Candy Crush that I met when I first stepped onto the tour bus.

But now, the Walker that I’ve come to know today...my heart already knows what my mind is just now catching up with.

“Yes, it’s something real. Something with potential,” I tell Vik, picking at the paper ring around the coffee cup.

Vik’s silent a moment, mentally switching gears from my answer, always trying to think one, two, three steps ahead of anything in terms of my career.

“If he’s in the same place as me,” I add on, a blush rising to my cheeks, butterflies taking flight in my gut, and I feel like a child again, worried if the boy at church group liked me back.

Vik scoffs, flipping a hand through the air. “Scarlett, anyone can tell looking at those photos that he’s into you.”

My eyes jump up to hers, my curiosity now really piqued to see the pictures.

“Arun is talking to Walker too, checking in to see if he is on the same page. Once everyone is good, you and I will have some time to sit down before your next interview to go over some points in case you are asked about your relationship. It will come up; I promise you that.”

I grimace, already not a fan of interviews, even when they so far have been mostly focused on my career, the tour, the songs I’ve ghostwritten for other artists.

“Walker will get asked too, but this isn’t the first time he’s had a relationship in the spotlight so he should be an old pro by now.” Vik pulls her attention to her phone, fingers flying across the screen jotting down notes.

A pang of jealousy rips through me that I quickly try to shut down. I can’t be getting jealous of past relationships that Walker’s had when we haven’t even defined what our...situation even is.

Vik stands, buttoning her jacket and smoothing her hands down the front. “Manager hat off for a moment, friend hat on,” she says, reaching forward, grabbing my shoulders. “Are you happy with him? Whether or not you two are officially a couple yet. Is he adding something to your day each day?”

I smile and lean into her touch, enjoying the friend hat Vik pulls out from time to time.

“Yes,” I answer honestly, and knowing Vik likes it straight to the point, I leave it at it.

“Good,” she nods, dropping her hands and already starting toward the door.

I follow behind her, eager for her to leave so I can grab my phone to track down the pictures. Normally, I avoid my social media or anything online about myself, but the idea of getting to see our time at the club last night through a second set of eyes has my stomach tossing in anticipation.

“One more thing,” Vik says, turning around but with one hand still on the door. When she looks back at me, her face is serious. Manager hat is back.

“I know you don’t monitor what is out there about you online, which is healthy and exactly how you should keep it. But it would be unfair of me not to warn you of what lengths people may go to find any tidbit of information on you now. With you not using your legal name, that is a bit of a deterrent for people trying to do searches and find things like your home address, family members, etc. But they *will* find it. Interest has been growing around you since the tour began and this is going to put it into overdrive. I just want you to be prepared.”

And it's with that final sentence that I know exactly what she is saying without saying it. What she and I both know people will find if they dig deep enough.

I don't say anything to her, letting the silence stretch until she pats my shoulder in support and leaves, the door clicking shut behind her.

Alone in my room and phone in hand, I'm suddenly not so excited to search for the photos.

SCAR

My mood is sour for the rest of the morning, so instead of trying to go down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, I order enough room service to last me until we have to check out later and get back on the road. I tuck my phone away in my backpack and zip the pocket closed, trying to keep it out of sight, out of mind.

Waffles, toast, eggs, bacon, various types of jam, platters of fruit, and plenty of orange juice and coffee are rolled in on a white clothed cart, which I park next to my bed so I can eat from the comfort of bed, lounging back and watching TV, something I haven't been able to do for so long. There's not a whole lot on at this time in the morning, but a Forensic File marathon catches my attention and before I know it, I've sucked away two hours, mind spinning with DNA evidence, cheating partners resorting to hiring hit men, and poorly done reenactments.

Knocking at my door rouses me from my bed for the second time this morning. When the hell did I become so popular...

However this time when I swing open the door, I'm greeted by the very man that took up all of my dream space last night. Walker leans against the doorframe, black jacket hung over his shoulder with one hand, a shopping bag in the other. Dark sunglasses cover his eyes, resting on his sharp nose, hair laid back in perfect waves that I know he didn't actually style besides running his hands through it, a few loose curls falling over his forehead.

"Morning, sweetheart," he greets, his voice dancing over my skin and brightening my mood.

"Does it still classify as morning if we're heading into the lunch hour?"

“Always gotta be a smartass.” He smirks. “You gonna invite me in?” He tips his sunglasses down, peering at me over the rim and raising a teasing brow.

I step aside and hold my arm out, gesturing for him to enter.

The room instantly feels smaller with him in it, my every instinct tuned into his movement and I realize in that moment what makes him such a great musician and performer. It’s not solely his musical knowledge or drum skills. It’s the way he commands attention by simply walking into a room, the way he pulls everyone and everything into his orbit, whether you’re aware of it or not.

I think back to that first day I met him on the bus and how my body reacted to him, wanting to lean into his space without my permission because the force of him was so strong.

I feel the same way now, only this time I don’t fight the pull. I fall into it, allowing my attention to be zeroed in on him, watching him take in the room, the city skyline from my window, and finally landing on the TV where blurred out crime scene photos are currently flashing by with haunting music.

“Is that legal to show those on there?” He points to the screen.

I shrug. “I assume so, but kinda fucked up.”

“Yeah...” He stares for a moment longer, before shaking his head and redirecting his attention to me. “Sleep well?”

“All right,” I answer, wanting to add that I wished he would’ve been beside me, but I refrain. “How’s Jane doing?”

He grimaces. “She’s fine. Embarrassed that she was crying in the middle of a nightclub last night but besides that and a headache that she said she wished she could carve out of her brain, I think she’s okay. For the most part.”

“She shouldn’t be embarrassed. Trust me, I’ve seen worse.” I don’t tell him that by *I’ve seen*, I actually mean *I’ve done* worse.

“She’s normally the more put together one but I don’t know, something’s up with her. She’s just not ready to talk about it.”

“Did you ask her?”

“Of course. But Jane only shares what she wants to share, where she wants to share it and when she wants to do so. It’s a good talent for her in her career, being such a locked vault until the time is right to bring forth a piece of information, but it’s frustrating as her brother when I just want to help her.”

I nod along, pretending like I understand. While Beth and I were never enemies growing up, we definitely weren't what I could call best friends. More like two girls who lived in the same house and passed by each other in the bathroom in the morning. Neither of us ever tried to dig much past the surface. Whether that was learned from our community or just the way our sibling bond developed, I'm not sure.

But it's nice to hear how much Walker cares about his sister. I'm sure being a twin brings a whole other element to their closeness, but the troubled look on his face shows how deeply he cares for her well-being.

"Is she still here?"

"Nope, I rode with her to the airport about half an hour ago."

"Quick trip then. Do you want anything?" I gesture to the cart with half eaten plates of food, my eyes more hungry than my stomach.

"I'm good, thanks." Walker clears his throat. "I assume Vik talked to you already?"

Exhaling, I slump onto the bed. "Yep. Came by first thing this morning."

"Arun too. Have you seen the photos?"

"No. I was planning to, but Vik kinda scared me off a bit. Not sure I really want to see what anyone else is saying about me."

Walker nods, eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, I should've been thinking more clearly last night."

My shackles instantly rise, my breakfast starting to churn in my stomach.

He regrets it. Shit, he regrets *me*.

The instinct to protect myself blazes through me, walls shooting back up, words rushing from my mouth before I think them through, tone flat and distant. "We don't have to make it a big thing. Let's just forget anything ever happened, no hard feelings."

Walker's head snaps up. "What do you mean?"

"You obviously are having second thoughts about what went down between us last night and I'm just saying, let's not turn it into a whole ordeal. People hook up, they move on. It's cool." The words leave a bitter taste in my mouth.

He rears back as if I slapped him. "I'm not having second thoughts about anything with us, Scar. I meant that I wasn't thinking clearly enough to be conscious of people with cameras around us, who would be recognizing us and talking pictures of us together dancing. And that those would end up online."

“Oh,” I say, embarrassment heating my face.

“Do you regret what happened last night?” Walker asks me, and there it is again. That same apprehension that he used to have with me that I never wanted to see again.

“No!” I rush out. “Not at all. Last night was amazing,” I tell him truthfully.

He visibly relaxes, understanding I jumped into defense mode when I thought he was rejecting me.

“I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions, I should’ve let you elaborate.” I sigh, frustrated with myself.

“Hey.” Walker steps forward and cups my face in his hands. “It’s okay, it’s been a stressful morning for both of us. We’re both a little on edge.” He presses a light kiss on my forehead before resting his chin on top of my head as he pulls me to his chest. I listen to his heartbeat for a few moments, letting it soothe me.

“Did Arun ask you if this was the real deal?” I say against him, my words muffled by his t-shirt.

“Yeah,” he answers softly.

“And?”

His heart beats once, twice, three times.

THE MOMENT SEEMS to stretch forever, and I find myself holding my breath.

“I told him it’s the real thing. I’m in it.”

I let his words fall around us and sink into my bones, the reality of them settling in. And with them, the comfort of his reassurance that this is something he wants just as much as I do.

“Good.”

Walker laughs, the sound full and light all at once.

“That’s all you have to say?”

I bury my nose into his chest, finding solace in a deep inhale of his cologne. “Yes,” I mumble.

He pulls me back and looks at me, eyes searching mine, brushing my bangs back behind my ears. “What did you tell Vik?”

“I told her the same thing. It’s real.”

It’s as if I can actually see Walker’s shoulders release the invisible weight that’s been on them, relief and reassurance bringing them higher.

“Hell yeah, it is.” He leans down and kisses me softly, both of us taking our time exploring each other, tentative nips and unhurried pace.

Just as I reach around to slide my hands up the back of his shirt, hungry to feel his skin, he breaks the kiss and pulls back.

I pout, startled by the chill that covers me by the absence of his body.

“I came over here for more than just to talk to you about all that,” he says, turning around to retrieve the plastic bag he brought with him. As he empties the contents, my brows rise.

“Want to help me dye my hair?” Walker asks, holding up a box of dark green dye.

My instinct is to laugh, thinking he’s joking. But when he doesn’t crack even a smile, I realize he’s serious.

“You want me to dye your hair green?”

“Why the hell not?”

Yes. Why the hell not.

I smile and grab the box from his hand, pulling him toward my bathroom. “Can I ask why green?”

“It’s my favorite color. And thought it would look sick under the stage lights having it match my kit.”

I can picture it now, and honestly, he’s right. It will look cool.

“Is purple your favorite color?” he asks, thumbing a few strands of my hair, the purple ends fading. I need to touch them up in the next city we stop in.

“I guess.” I’ve had the ends a few different colors over time, but purple is the one I’ve always liked the most.

As we step into the small bathroom, I kick the toilet seat down and push Walker onto it. “Since we’re not bleaching your hair, this probably won’t show up much,” I tell him, ripping the box open at the sink and starting to mix the various tubes and bottles together, chucking the directions straight into the trash. I’ve been dyeing my hair for years. I could practically do this with my eyes closed.

“That’s cool. Even if it shows up in certain lights like yours does, I’ll be happy.”

I smile at him in the mirror and see his eyes drift to my ass, which is barely covered by my panties and oversized hoodie. I never bothered to put pants on this morning and didn’t even think twice about it when he came over. I push my hips back a bit and watch his eyes darken, enjoying the way

he stares at me with hunger.

Before he can pounce though, I'm slipping on the gloves provided in the kit and shaking the bottle, turning to him. "Hold this." I hand him my comb. "We'll need that as we go."

I step to the side of him and start to pull some of his hair up and over the side of his head, starting at the bottom layer. Squirting the dye against his strands, I use my hands to work the color in section by section, nose tingling with the pungent fumes but falling into the familiar rhythm.

Walker's fingers alternate between tapping against his legs and tapping against mine, another beat invisible to me but strong to him.

"Wanna hear a secret?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"You bet your ass I do," he responds, winding his arm around me to give a slap against said ass with a devilish smirk twisting his full lips.

I wipe a streak of green down the side of his cheek in rebuttal before he can duck his head away.

Unbothered as usual, he doesn't even attempt to wipe it off. That'll create a nice stain for interviews tomorrow.

I tilt Walker's head forward so I can begin working the color into the hair close to his nape. "I'm a natural blonde," I whisper, as if I'm passing along national security information and not the God-given hair color I've possessed since birth but have covered up since I was fourteen.

He whips his head up, knocking the bottle from my hand, and it falls with a splatter on the pristine white tile of the hotel bathroom, sending sprinkles of green across everything in its vicinity.

"Walker!" I scold, rushing to grab one of the towels stacked on a chrome rack next to the sink and throwing it at him. "Clean that up."

He catches it but makes no sign of moving as he just stares at me, assessing me with a studious look.

"What?"

He shakes his head. "I'm just trying to picture you as a blonde..." he trails off, frowning and reaching out to tilt my chin this way and that. "Yeah, can't see it." He smiles.

I return his smirk as I bat his arm away and point to the mess still lying at our feet. "Clean it up," I order again, trying to sound stern but humor licks its way into my tone.

"Yes, ma'am," he salutes and slides gracefully for a 6'2" grown man to his knees and begins swiping up the mess.

And yes, I say swipe because he seems to be spreading it around and making it worse more than actually cleaning it. There isn't anything saving the grout between the tiles now. Hope Vik doesn't flip too much when she gets a hotel bill full of damages.

"Bleach or dirty?" Walker asks, grabbing another towel. Add those to the damaged list too.

"What?"

"Bleach blond or dirty blonde?" Walker asks again, throwing the soiled towels aside to a pile in the corner of the room.

"Dirty," I clarify.

His eyes alight with fire and mischief as he responds, "Yeah, you are, baby." He wraps his large arms around each of my legs, pulling me closer, still kneeling in front of me. Strong hands squeeze the backs of my thighs, slowly grazing their way up, up, up, leaving a path of scorched skin in their wake.

"You're ridiculous," I say, trying not to let what his hands are doing to my body affect my voice, but failing.

Walker dips his head, pressing light kisses over my bare thighs, before pulling back and putting his head directly in front of my center.

And inhaling.

"Christ," he mutters, fingers also painfully tight now against my ass.

I lean into his touch, canting my hips forward, enjoying the punishing strength of his hands as they knead my flesh. My fingers twitch with the desire to tangle in his hair, but I resist, not wanting to disturb the dye as it sinks in.

"I fell asleep last night with my hand around my cock, thinking of getting another taste," Walker says, and my legs buckle, his words sending flashes of him doing just that through my mind.

"I wish I could've seen that," I pant, staring down at him and letting him see the truth of it behind my eyes.

His own reflect the mutual desire burning inside us and the bathroom walls seem to grow smaller and smaller, closing in around us until our bodies burn the space.

As he takes a single finger and slips it under the side of panties, ready to pull them aside and replace them with his mouth, I push him away.

"It's my turn this time."

I pull Walker to his feet and spin us around, so he's now the one leaning

back against the counter, although the edge settles on the back of his thighs instead of lower back like mine did.

His face lights up as he sinks back, eyes burning, watching me closely as I lower myself to my knees in front of him.

I've hated this position for many reasons over the years. I hated kneeling for hours of prayers on the cold, hard floor of the church. I hated being in such a subservient position and feeling like I was going to be stuck there for the rest of my life, constantly under someone else's authority and never my own. I hated being on my knees for other men, feeling less powerful and in control, feeling used for their pleasure and no regard for my own.

But as I kneel in front of Walker and reach forward, slowly unbuttoning his jeans and slipping down his zipper, I see him writhe with desire for me, for what I'm about to do to him, for the heights I'm going to bring him. I see the attraction he has toward me written all over his face, but behind it, I see the care and devotion he has for me.

He watches me with hunger, but also with tenderness. Walker doesn't just expect me to get on my knees before him because I'm a woman and someone he's dating. He doesn't view me to be in an inferior position at the moment, unlike the way it felt in front of the altar.

I hold all the power in this moment, over myself, over him, over the way this interaction is going to go, and I relish in it. I let it empower me, invigorate me. I let it shine through my eyes as I look up at him through my lashes, let him see how sexy being in this position makes me feel.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Walker praises, smoothing a hand over my hair and wrapping it around his fingers.

I grin, running my palms around his toned thighs, getting close but not close enough to where he wants my hands, enjoying the tease and the way his fingers tighten in my hair the longer I hold out on him.

My mouth is watering and I've teased even myself long enough. I grip the waistband of his briefs, about to pull down the final barrier separating my mouth from his cock, when a blaring ring sounds off from the bedroom.

I jump back, startled by the interruption. "What the hell?"

"Ignore it," Walker just about begs, frustration clouding over his face at the intrusion.

"It's the hotel phone," I say, not sure why anyone would have reason to call on it. "I don't want to ignore it if it's something important."

"*This* is important." Walker gestures between the two of us, pointing

downward at his clear erection.

“I’ll just be a second,” I say, rising from my knees and walking over to the phone, catching it close to the last ring. “Hello?”

“Hello, Miss Whelan, this is Salvatore from the front desk. I apologize for the call, but you have missed your checkout time. Do you need a team member to assist with anything for your departure?”

Shit, what time is it? I cock my head to the side, reading the digital clock on the nightstand. It’s 12:20 pm, officially twenty minutes past checkout.

“I must’ve lost track of time this morning. Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be out of here.” I sigh, making eye contact with Walker as he leans against the doorframe, watching me closely.

Wash your hair out, I mouth to him, listening to Salvatore chatter away on the other end of the phone.

Walker throws his head back like a child, throat corded with veins as he lets out a groan I hope the poor hotel employee can’t hear. He then strips his briefs down, letting his cock spring free and I can’t hide the widening of my eyes as I take him in.

Holy shit. My entire body runs hot, and I squirm where I’m standing, thighs rubbing together at the thought of him trying to fit every inch inside of me.

My dirty thoughts must not be well hidden from my face because Walker shoots me an arrogant smile, along with a stroke of his cock, the tip glistening as his hand slides upward. Before giving me any more of a show, he turns around and walks back into the bathroom. I hear the shower start up a moment later, before I realize I’ve completely zoned out and have been ignoring the phone conversation I’m still apparently a part of.

“I’m sorry again for the delay,” I interrupt, hanging up the phone and start to quickly pack up my bag and get dressed.

I have the room tidied up by the time Walker is hopping out of the shower and back into his clothes, rubbing a towel over his wet hair.

“I can’t see any green,” he says.

“Not while your hair is wet. You’ll be able to tell when it’s dry and probably best out in the sunlight.”

He does one last glance over in the mirror, before shrugging and chucking the towel on top of the soiled ones stained with dye.

“If I get billed for those, you’re covering them.” I point at him.

“Oh no, I don’t know if I’ll ever financially recover,” he jokes and grabs

my backpack from my shoulders, slinging it onto his own.

I raise on my toes, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Don’t think I’m not going to finish what I didn’t even get to start in there.” Pulling back and patting his ass quickly, I add, “Just not right now or else we’re going to have Salvatore up here rapping at the door to kick us out.”

“Fine.” He lets out on a deep breath, but before I can take a step away, he pulls me back into his arms, wrapping them around my shoulders. “But one last thing before we close out this conversation.”

I focus on his face, studying the serious, small lines that have appeared around his eyes, reaching out and tracing them with my finger.

“No matter what people say online, to our faces, or what is to come with this out in the open, I’m happy to have you by my side. And I’m proud to get to claim you as mine.” His voice is soft but strong, the truth of his feelings in his words.

Flutters explode in the bottom of my stomach, words I didn’t know I needed to hear until he just said them.

And I smile as I get to tell him, “I’m proud to claim you as mine too.”

We stare at each other in silence for a moment, letting everything that has happened over the last twenty-four hours sink in, the realizations and confirmations of our feelings for one another. There’s a lightness to my body that I don’t think I’ve ever experienced before and I want it to last forever.

“So what number public girlfriend of yours am I now?” I tease, lightening the mood and recalling back to what Vik told me about this not being his first public relationship.

Walker holds my face gently, brushing a thumb over my cheekbone. “The only one that has mattered.”

WALKER

Mom: James, do you ever plan on calling your mother to fill her in about the new woman in your life?

Shit. She first named me. I quickly type back a response to her text, knowing that if I'm not speedy with it, she will start calling me.

Me: Sorry. You know how busy it gets on the road.

Her text bubble starts bouncing immediately.

Mom: If your sister can find the time to fill us in while she is finishing up law school, you can find time while you dilly dally on the bus all day.

Her tone sounds harsh, but I know she's not actually pissed. She just enjoys giving me a hard time.

Me: You're right but what are you doing reading those articles anyway? I told you to stay away from them.

Mom: When they are discussing the business of my son, they become my business.

I roll my eyes. Those sites were how she used to discipline me on the road years ago, when she still wanted to parent me even though I was an adult. She'd read up on some of my wilder nights out, then call the next morning bright and early for a lecture, before doing the same for the other guys.

Her lectures were never very serious though, and I could always tell that even if she preferred I was a little more discreet when I was younger, she was happy that I was getting to live out my dream and enjoying my life.

Me: What do you want to know?

Mom: Many things, but like I said, I'd love for you to call me at some point so we can further discuss. But for now, I will settle for, are you happy?

Me: Yes.

Mom: Then that's all that matters to me. Jane said she was sweet.

A laugh bursts from my lips at that. I wouldn't exactly classify Scar as sweet, but it was nice of Jane to say.

Me: She's great. I'd love for you and dad to meet her.

Mom: You just give us the word and I will have your room all made up for you to come home for a visit.

I try to picture Scar in my childhood bedroom with me. The way her eyes would scan over the line of posters I have covering my walls, all from my favorite movies and bands I looked up to. She'd definitely give me shit for the giant Princess Leia one I had hanging on my ceiling over my bed.

Me: I'll see what I can do.

Mom: Tell her I say hello, and that I would love to chat with her sometime. We could Skype one evening. I located my computer charger finally. Your dad told me he didn't take it but I found it in his desk drawer.

I smile.

Me: You can use your phone to video chat, you know? You don't need Skype or your laptop.

Mom: Don't confuse me. Just give your mother a call once in a while, will you?

Me: Love you.

Mom: I love you, too. I'm glad you have someone else to care for you besides the boys. Tell them all I said hello.

Me: Will do



THE NEXT COUPLE of weeks fly by so fast I feel a little whiplashed. Restless nights on the bus, writer's block every time the guys and I sit down to try to work on the next album, and sexual frustration. The last part is definitely the worst of it all.

We've been going back-to-back nights, in a stretch of the tour where we haven't had a stop in a hotel for an entire night and have been falling asleep in one city just to wake up in another.

Don't get me wrong, I fucking love it, the deep-seated exhaustion down to my bones that you only get from hours of playing. If I could live my life on tour forever, right now I'd take it.

But what I wouldn't give for one night in a hotel with Scar, uninterrupted by anyone or anything. The bus doesn't create much privacy with so many other people around. And the guys know it and are having fun messing with me and Scar.

They all saw us that night at the club and then the photos posted online. I was grilled by Arun the morning after, to which he visibly relaxed when I assured him that this wouldn't be causing him another headache fresh off the situation with Nikolai's last ex-girlfriend.

Even though it was milder than some of his previous relationship drama.

The guys have adjusted quickly to the new dynamic I have with Scar. None of us have ever had a girlfriend with us on tour and in this cramped environment, but they got to know her as a peer before she became my girlfriend, so there hasn't been much change in any of their relationships.

Hayden clicks well with her, the two of them often in the back of the bus during long stretches between cities playing video games together.

Nikolai hasn't stopped flirting with her, but it's just how he is and I know there are no feelings behind it. He enjoys riling me up and Scar's quick

tongue rejecting him.

As for Reid, I can't tell if he's remained standoffish with her because of the growing tension working on the next album, or if there's something else there.

I expected Boone to give me some sort of warning to be careful with her, as he first entrusted me to keep him in the loop if she appeared to be struggling at the start of the tour, but when I saw him the morning after the club, he simply shook my hand and told me he was happy for the both of us.

So far, it's been relatively smooth sailing, which I've enjoyed, but I can tell Scar has been on edge, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What she's waiting for, I don't know. I've tried to ask her about it and she's brushed it off, assuring me it's nothing more than still getting adjusted to being more of a public figure. Which I completely understand. Going from relative anonymity to then having your face splashed across headlines and social media is a hard adjustment for any normal person. I'll forever be thankful that I had Jane and my parents, as well as the guys to keep us all in check as our fame grew.

The sun is starting to set, taking with it any slight warmth it provided throughout the day here in Iowa. A chill settled in everyone this morning as stagehands unloaded the equipment and got things set up for tonight. The cold won't keep me from not wearing sleeves tonight, but I tuck my leather jacket close to my chest as I step off the bus and cross the lot to the backstage door. I nod at the security guard posted as he opens the door and allows me through.

"Hold up!" a voice calls out behind me just as the door is about to close. I turn around and hold my hand out, propping it open as Hayden jogs across the lot, black hoodie pulled over his head and hands tucked into the pocket.

"How you doing, man?" I slap a hand on his shoulder as Hayden passes and walks stride for stride with me backstage.

"Fucking freezing," he answers. "It's crazy how quickly you can forget what a cold winter feels like after moving."

"Amen."

Growing up in Pittsburgh, we understood the cold. We could weather the low temperatures just fine.

But living in California for the past eight years has turned us into whiners when it drops below 70 degrees.

We walk through the maze of hallways, following the flow of stage hands

and crew members until we reach the stage for tonight, currently being set up for Scar's set.

The arena is empty, the doors not opening for another hour and somehow it seems so much scarier to stand up here with no one in the audience than it is when it's packed full. There's a level of anonymity that's missing now. I'm not one of thousands of people, I'm one of only a few.

I feel naked, exposed.

"Hey, guys," Boone calls out in greeting as he strides across the stage, arm thrown around Scar's shoulders with her walking by his side. My eyes immediately go to hers, locked in and blurring everyone else around.

As soon as she's within arm's length, I reach out and pull her from under Boone's arm, wrapping her in my own and tilting her head for a kiss. Her body leans into mine, small frame overshadowed by my large one.

"Get a room," Boone jokes.

"We've been trying," Scar says against my mouth, annoyance coloring her tone.

Boone groans, clearly not wanting to hear it. "Can you believe we're over halfway done already?"

"It's wild, man," Hayden says.

Scar and I pull back from each other, and I press another kiss on top of her head before spinning us to face Hayden and Boone, joining in the conversation.

"Although y'all got a full summer schedule lined up, I heard?"

Hayden and I nod. We have summer festival season coming up, so even once this tour is over, we only have about a week off before we begin that cycle. Although the schedule is much less intense. We only have a few shows each month, so we have longer times in each of the cities if we want to stick around, or time to fly back home in between.

It'll be nice to have some sense of privacy back that you lose on the bus.

"You doing any festivals this summer?" I ask Boone.

"Nope. I have a residency at a nightclub in Vegas, so I get to stay in one place for a couple months." His shoulders relax and by the long sigh that expels from his chest, I can tell it's a relief.

"You got shows booked after this?" Hayden asks Scar.

I peer down at her, curious about her answer myself. We haven't talked about anything to come post tour. We've just been taking things day by day, sometimes hour by hour.

“I have to talk to Vik, but I don’t think so. I’m hoping to get some studio time in, work on my first full-length album.”

I squeeze her shoulders and beam down at her, seeing the same excitement reflected in Boone’s face. Scar knocks one of her boots against the other, uncomfortable by the attention.

“I can’t wait to hear it,” I whisper close to her ear, enjoying the blush that creeps up her cheeks.

“Anyone wanna go grab some food quick before—” Boone starts, before a muffled yelp rings out from the pit in front of the stage.

We turn our heads, following the direction of the noise and find Daniel and Carter standing down there, cameras in hand.

At first glance, it looks like they might be having a private moment with the way Daniel has Carter backed up against the rails and head tucked low over hers. But looking closer, I notice Carter’s hand shaking, knuckles white around her camera. And when she turns her head to the side, the corner of her eyes are wet, the stage lights illuminating tear tracks down the side of her face.

My arm is off of Scar and I’m charging forward before I can blink. Anger barrels its way through every step I take closing in on them. But before I can call out, Hayden is quicker than me, jumping off the front of the stage and into the pit, yanking Daniel back and taking the bastard by surprise.

“What the hell are you doing?” Daniel calls out, grappling at Hayden’s hands, trying to pull them off his shirt. But Hayden doesn’t budge, pushing him backward, silent fury steaming from him.

I hop offstage, coming down right next to Carter. She’s watching Daniel struggle against Hayden, eyes wide in shock.

“Are you okay?” I ask, leaning in but not close enough to invade her space after the way Daniel just was.

Carter nods her head quickly, wiping her face with the back of her free hand. “I’m fine.” She turns and shoots me a watery smile.

I raise a brow at her, but don’t question it. She doesn’t need me calling bullshit on her lie right now.

“Get the fuck off me, man, what is your problem?” Daniel yells, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him about to raise a fist, winding up to land one on Hayden.

“You do that and that’s the last time you’ll ever work for anyone of importance.” Boone’s voice rings out, cold and detached in a way I’ve never

heard before. He walks toward the scuffle with purpose, shoulders back and ice in his eyes. Scar walks alongside him, almost jogging to keep pace. She goes directly to Carter, pulling her close and whispering to her, concern written all over her face.

“Boone, c’mon man, help me out here,” Daniel says, raising his hands up, trying to put on a show of innocence.

Disgusted, Hayden lets him go with a hard shove, Daniel almost tripping over his feet before he regains his balance. He shoots Hayden a look of pure venom, before it disappears the moment he turns back to Boone. It was a *blink and you’ll miss it* moment and I feel my blood chill, watching him snuff out that rage so quickly, or more like masking it so fast.

I look around, seeing if anyone else saw it.

From the haunted look in Carter’s eye and the fury behind Scar’s, I take it as a yes.

Boone ignores Daniel completely, turning his attention to Carter. “Are you all right?” he asks her, the familiar warmth seeping back into his voice.

Carter nods her head, gaze shooting over to Daniel and back to the group, before dipping down to her feet.

Scar cracks her neck side to side and I can almost see the burst of air that comes out of her nose on a deep breath, face twisting as if it physically pains her to not say the words I know are sitting at the tip of her tongue right now.

She’s made her opinion of Daniel to me quite clear over the past couple of weeks as I’ve grown to know more about her friendship with Carter. If it were up to Scar, he would’ve been dropped from the tour five cities ago.

When I questioned her about why she didn’t like him, she was tight-lipped, saying it’s just “woman’s intuition”. But I’ve always thought there was more to it than that and she was just respecting the privacy of her friendship with Carter.

And by watching the way that Carter seems to shrink in on herself as he stares her down, her hand clinging to her camera as if it’s her very life force, I’m starting to see what she was alluding to.

“Look, I don’t know what you all think is going on here.” Daniel starts stepping forward, closing the distance between himself and Carter, which Hayden swiftly moves in and blocks his path.

Daniel stands toe to toe with him, lifting his chin, trying to gain every inch possible in height but still falling short to Hayden’s six feet.

“I think we saw enough,” Hayden says, voice low. He’s unmovable,

unwavering, as Daniel's chest rises and falls in anger.

"Just because those two started fucking, everybody thinks they can be involved in everyone else's relationship now?" Daniel gestures to me and Scar.

Ah, so that's how he'll play it. He realized Boone wasn't falling for his act, and now he's going to try to deflect the attention onto someone else, and mine and Scar's relationship is the easiest picking as it's still circulating heavily in the media.

"Pathetic." I laugh under my breath, shaking my head at the sad excuse for a man in front of me.

"What'd you fucking say?" Daniel seethes, letting his fury slip back over his face. Hayden steps between us, ready to block him if he tries to charge over here and I almost wish he didn't. I'd like to see what he'd try to pull with me.

"I said, you're pathetic."

Daniel's nostrils flare, jaw clenched, and I smile at him, taunting him, enjoying his reaction.

Reid would be having a field day with this fucker if he was here. He'd be more than happy to take charge in a fight.

"We'll honor your contract, but once the tour is over, you're done," Boone says, interrupting the starting match we're locked in.

Daniel rears back and scoffs, turning incredulously to face Boone. "I'm not going to be disrespected like this," he spits, striding over to the rails and reaching down, grabbing a large black backpack of camera equipment. "You know, I've worked for some of the best in this business. I have my own contacts. I don't need you for shit."

Boone silently watches him pack his things. Carter shifts from foot to foot, clearly not sure if she should be packing up her things as well or staying right where she is.

Before she can make up her mind, Daniel straightens up and looks right at her, studying her face. He must get whatever answer he's looking for because he lets out a low laugh with no humor behind it, shakes his head and starts walking away.

"Don't fucking follow me," he says to Carter as he walks by her. Then he calls out over his shoulder to the rest of the group, "Keep her. Her work's shit anyways."

I put a hand on Hayden's shoulder, squeezing it and pinning him in place

as he rocks forward, ready to charge after him for that final comment. I don't need him beating the hell out of Daniel right before a show and risk hurting his hand.

Even if it would bring all of us immense joy to see that fucker bleed right now.

"Christ, he's a dick," Scar says, her words dripping with distaste and I nod my head in agreement.

"What was that all about?" she asks, rubbing a hand over Carter's arm.

"It was my fault." Carter shrugs, looking down at her shoes. "I forgot to upload the files from the memory cards last night so they'd be freed up for tonight's show. There's no time to do it now, so we don't have any open ones to shoot with tonight..." she trails off, voice starting to break as she begins to hyperventilate.

"Hey, hey, hey," Boone says, walking over to her and putting his hands on her shoulders, bringing her head up to look at him. "It's fine, you're okay. It's not a big deal."

Hayden appears by her side, a folding chair in hand that he quickly sets up and gestures for her to sit.

Carter continues to breathe heavily, tears streaming down her face in black ribbons. Hayden kneels down in front of her, tattooed hands gently laid on her knees.

"You're having a panic attack," he says matter-of-factly. "Have you had one before?"

Carter nods her head, trying to force air into her lungs and regain the sense of control she's lost.

"Okay. I need you to breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth."

Hayden breathes along with her, helping guide her through her panic. I watch him take control, trying to remain a steady presence for her while she struggles through it, and a pain slices through my chest at the sight, knowing all too well how much experience Hayden has with panic attacks himself.

Once she starts to steady out her breathing, he says, "Now help me out and find five things in the room for me that you can see."

Carter's eyes start scanning, still blurred with tears.

"Can we get some space?" Hayden asks me and Boone after Carter notices us still gathered around her.

Boone cocks his head to the left and I follow him, leaving Hayden and

Scar to help Carter calm down.

“How well did you know Daniel before the tour?” I ask Boone once we’re out of earshot and I regret the accusatory nature of it.

Boone shoots me an exasperated look. “Do you mean did I know if he’s a piece of shit who looks like he mistreats his girlfriend? No, I didn’t know. He’s worked on a lot of festivals I played at before and always did good work. He was just one of the few names I had in mind when it came time to bring someone on board and his schedule worked for it. If I would’ve known that’s how he talks to Carter...” he trails off and rubs his forehead.

“I know, man, I’m sorry I didn’t mean it like that. I know you never would’ve worked with him if you knew.”

But I can’t help now running through every moment I’ve interacted with Daniel and Carter so far on this tour. Granted, our interactions have been fairly minimal. They shoot the shows, edit the pictures and videos, and then send them to one of Arun’s assistants who post them for us. They’re on the crew bus, so I never really saw them on the road at all, and then in the precious hours we have off, I’ve been wrapped up in Scar or spending time in the studio.

I can’t help but wonder though if I’ve missed something, or didn’t take Scar’s dislike for him serious enough.

Looking over at Scar while she rubs Carter’s back in gentle circles while Hayden talks to her, I can tell she’s thinking the exact same thing.

Boone pulls out his phone and starts typing furiously. “I’m letting Vik know what just happened and that Daniel’s out. She’ll love getting this news,” he says, sarcasm thick.

I throw my head back with a groan. “Can you have her tell Arun?” I really don’t want to be the one to have to do that. Not that this really affects the band that much, but it’s more just one more headache to add to his already overflowing plate.

Boone nods, still typing as Carter, Hayden, and Scar make their way over to us. Scar has an arm looped around Carter’s waist, and I suppress a smile, enjoying seeing her nurturing side come out for her friend at this moment. Hayden walks close to Carter on her other side, hands tucked deep into his sweatshirt pocket as if having them in there will keep him from reaching out to Carter.

“Sorry about all of that,” Carter says, and the four of us immediately jump in, all talking over one another to assure her that she has nothing to

apologize for. She smiles, but there's no heart behind it.

"You know you're still welcome here, right?" Boone assures her, and my heart twists at it. Seeing the way he is looking out for Carter makes me a little emotional thinking about the way he's done the same for Scar over the years.

"I don't know, I've never done a job like this on my own before," Carter hedges. "And Daniel is my partner, in more ways than one, so I'll need to talk to him about it."

Hayden's face sours at her response, but he keeps his mouth shut.

Boone nods. "I understand."

And I do, too. Even if I don't like it.

And by the looks on everyone else's faces, I would say we all feel the same way.

SCAR

I stare at the screen in my hand until my eyes burn with dryness, the salacious headline scraping like sandpaper.

SCARLETT LANE, REAL NAME ELAINE SCARLETT
WHELAN, THE NEWEST GIRLFRIEND OF WHISPER ME
NOTHING'S DRUMMER JAMES WALKER, CHECKERED
PAST EXPOSED! A DUI, THREE-MONTH STINT IN
REHAB, AND MORE BELOW!

I always knew it was bound to come out, one way or another.

Felt like a guillotine was always hanging above my head by a precarious little string.

I just hoped that it would be from my mouth instead of some reporter and anonymous *close sources*. But that doesn't help the pit in my stomach that seems to be eating its way through my intestines, rotting and sour. Shame heats my face at the reminders of my past.

My phone buzzes and Boone's name flashes across the top of the screen. I swipe away his call, declining it for the third time since this article hit the internet and started gaining traction quickly due to my newfound success and status as the "newest girlfriend of James Walker". I roll my eyes, but scold myself, knowing there are more pressing matters to be pissed about that aren't being labeled as someone's girlfriend.

Especially when I'm quite proud of that label.

But the other labels the article is attaching to me? Those feel branded into my skin. Alcoholic, drunk, criminal, lush. Each one sends a tiny stab of pain through my body.

A pounding at the front door to the bus breaks me out of my stupor.

“Open up, Scar. It’s me.” Walker’s voice calls out, muffled by the barrier between us.

I swing my legs over the side of my bunk and walk to the front of the bus, unlatching the door and before I know it, the breath is knocked clear out of my lungs by the force of Walker as he picks me up and cradles me close to him.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he whispers over and over into my hair, head tucked in close to my neck. His cologne surrounds us in a fog, and I let the warmth from his body seep into me, allowing it to loosen all of the muscles I’ve been holding so tightly since the moment I woke up and saw the headlines.

Walker carries me over to one of the couches and sits down, bringing me with him so I’m straddling his lap. I pull back and make eye contact for the first time since he’s arrived and the pain he holds in them guts me worse than the words people are saying about me.

“I take it you read the article?” I ask him, dread already filling my stomach, alongside anger at the idea that someone took what wasn’t theirs to share and told it to the one person who has started to matter the most to me.

“No.” Walker shakes his head and at my surprised expression, he continues, “I saw the headline, but I wanted to hear about it from you.”

He stares at me expectantly, waiting for me to fill him in. Previously, he’s hedged around what he really wants to find out, never pushing me to talk if I don’t want to or telling me he’ll wait until I’m ready. But I can see by his rigid shoulders and the expectant look on his face, he needs me to open up to him now. He’s not going to wait forever.

I wish I could go back to last night, where we went to a late night movie at a small local theater after the show. Walker rented out the entire theater for us and we spent half the movie tied up in each other’s mouths like horny teenagers. By the time the credits were rolling and it was time to go, our popcorn bucket was still mostly full and our knowledge of the movie we just saw was limited because all of our attention was wrapped up in each other.

Stupid, blissful ignorance, not knowing that the next morning the exact thing I’ve been struggling to figure out how to bring up to Walker would instead be splashed across the internet, forcing my hand before I’m ready.

But there’s no more of that now.

With a sigh, I begin.

“I’ve told you before that I grew up in a very religious community and always felt very restricted by its rules and my family.”

Walker nods.

“When I was about fifteen, I started to really resent my friendships with kids that I went to church with and how easy it all seemed for them. How natural it all seemed for them to fall in line exactly how they were supposed to. I got angry, bitter, and I wanted to do something that made me feel like I had control over something and a decision that was all mine. And if it flew in the face of what I was being taught...well, even better.

“I started drinking with some friends from school on the weekends, sneaking out to go to parties, helping distract the clerks at liquor stores to get booze for everyone. It was fun, indulging in something everyone around me told me I shouldn’t.”

Until it wasn’t.

“Where my friends would drink on the weekends at parties and go about their week like usual, I started to pregame the pregame, then began craving a drink while I was sitting in class, trying to focus. Then it started that I wanted a drink before I wanted breakfast in the morning.”

The reprieve that drowning myself in alcohol gave me went far beyond the fun and partying that my friends enjoyed it for. It finally allowed my mind to turn off and forget the constant expectations put on me by my family, their church, that community. With every shot, the feeling of being a failure to them and myself faded and faded like dust in the wind.

In that drunken, delirious state, I could forget that I wasn’t fulfilling the purpose I was intended to and instead exist free of the weight of that guilt that always followed me around like a shadow for not being a good enough, godly woman.

I look down at my hands and twist one of the gold rings around my finger. “Then I just spiraled.” The words are barely audible, but I know by the way that Walker's hands squeeze me a little tighter that he heard me.

“It got bad. Especially after I moved out and didn’t need to do as much work to hide it. I was also very isolated in those early years when I moved out to L.A. I didn’t have many friends and the ones I did have were drinking just as much as me, so no one was batting an eyelash when I fell so far down that I didn’t know which way was up.

“Boone tried to get me help before, God did he fucking try.” My words come out with a huff, my chest aching at the pain I put Boone through over

the years, self-hatred burning my throat. “He was doing everything he could to get me connected with artists to write for, producers to work with, fellow songwriters to collaborate with, anything to get me where I wanted to be. And instead of doing the responsible thing and getting my priorities straight, I would show up to studio sessions so many drinks deep I could barely write words down. I flat-out missed meetings, fumbled deadlines, everything.

“But you can’t accept help from others if you don’t want to help yourself. And at the time, I had no plan on stopping. I loved the feeling when I forgot my own name and hated the feeling when consciousness crept in enough that I never wanted to sober up enough to face it.”

Pausing to take a breath, I look at Walker’s eyes one last time before I fear he may never look at me the same way again.

“And I don’t know when I would’ve stopped if it wasn’t for a night almost two years ago. I was drunk, obviously, and out at the bar with one of my friends whose couch I had been crashing on for a few weeks after getting kicked out of my last apartment.”

I haven’t talked to Lydia since that night, but clearly, she hasn’t forgotten about me as she was quoted in the article this morning, confirming the stories and adding her own comment in here and there, I’m sure for a price.

“She wasn’t supposed to be drinking that night because she had an early shift at work the next morning, so she drove us to the bar so we didn’t have to pay for a ride. But when we got there, she insisted she’d just have one or two, but she’d be fine to drive at the end of the night. I was already three sheets to the wind by that point and wasn’t keeping track of my own drinks, let alone hers.

“By the time that last call came around, she could barely stand up straight and I knew there was no way she could drive home. And for some reason, I thought I could.” The last words come out so small, my voice barely above a whisper.

I feel a tickle on my face and before I can reach my hand up to scratch it, Walker’s thumb is wiping across my cheek, collecting an escaped tear. My brow scrunches. I didn’t even realize I was crying.

Walker nods his head in encouragement, waiting for me to keep going. His hands squeeze my hips and I focus on them, tethering me to the present while I expose him to my past.

“I don’t remember what happened after that. Only that when I woke up, a car alarm was blaring and someone was yelling at the car window, pounding

on it to get my attention.

“I had somehow driven the two of us back to her apartment, only to crash into a parked car on the street and pass out. The worst of it didn’t even hit me until the next morning when I woke up in the drunk tank at the station and realized where I was and that I had been arrested.”

I still can’t decide to this day if it’s a blessing or a curse that I don’t remember being arrested that night.

But one thing I won’t ever forget is the panic I felt that morning when I searched through my mind and couldn’t remember how or why I got there. And in that moment when I woke up alone in that small, cold little box with nothing on me except the clothes on my back and a camera watching me from the corner, fear paralyzed my entire body.

I can still remember the way it came in a singular crashing wave, suffocating me and sending me into a blind panic. The way my lungs screamed for air as my mind screamed for answers and I couldn’t find relief for either of them.

“I thought I had killed someone,” I choke out, not able to keep the tears at bay any longer and they begin to stream down my face. “I remembered getting into Lydia’s car at the bar, grabbing her keys and putting myself behind the driver’s wheel when I should’ve been nowhere near it. But I didn’t remember anything concrete past that point and for the fifteen minutes that felt like fifteen hours for an officer to come in and take me to a different room to give me a rundown of my situation, I truly thought I had hurt someone.”

Walker lets me fall into his shoulder, arms squeezing me tight and hands running comforting circles over my back while I cry, letting the pain of that day resurface. He rocks us gently in his lap, not rushing me through my pain but letting me feel every jagged bit of it and waiting for me to come out the other side.

I wish I could stay like this forever and ignore everything else, tied up in Walker’s arms, the world around us spinning but just the two of us existing in this moment.

When my sobs calm down, and I feel like I can speak again without crying, I continue.

“The officer sat me down and told me how lucky I was. I had driven us home without incident, until they think I tried to park and crashed into a parked car on the street in front of the building. I wasn’t going fast enough at

that point to hurt myself or Lydia, and we were both wearing our seatbelts. Thankfully no one was in the car on the street or walking on the sidewalk nearby.

“He just kept saying how lucky I was, that no one was hurt and how easily it could’ve been so much worse but I don’t even remember feeling any sense of relief when I found out what happened. I just felt such deep and utter shame. And anger at myself. God, I was so fucking disgusted with myself that I never thought twice before driving home that night, so convinced that I would be fine and that I was being the responsible one by not letting Lydia drive.”

I sit up, not wanting to be held in Walker’s arms anymore as I feel that same shame and disgust for myself rip through my body, leaving behind a film on my skin that I want to scratch off.

“It was one thing when I was only hurting myself with my drinking but the thought that I could’ve hurt someone else...I would’ve never been able to forgive myself if I would’ve hurt any other person that night.”

Walker’s voice is scratchy, dry from sitting silently for so long as he speaks. “But why were you okay with hurting yourself in the first place?” he asks, cradling my jaw, eyes searching my face like it holds the answers he so desperately wants but fears.

“Because a part of me feels like I deserve it,” I whisper honestly, lip trembling.

I’m a sinner, a disgrace in my family’s eyes, the eyes of the community who raised me. I challenged God and His beliefs, so maybe I deserved it. Maybe I was looking for penance and the only place I could find it was within myself, punishing myself.

Walker opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off, not wanting to hear his assurances or affirmations that I don’t deserve the pain I’ve caused. I crave the comfort of his arms right now but reject the comfort of his words, not deserving of them as I bare this part of myself.

“The rest of that morning was a blur as my charges were laid out for me and I was shuffled around from room to room, before I could make a phone call. But that phone call to Boone...” I shake my head, grinding my teeth together to keep tears from falling again. “That was one of the hardest phone calls to make because when he answered, and I heard his voice, I could instantly tell that it was a phone call that he’d always been anticipating, and the moment was finally here.”

There wasn't a chance in hell I was calling my parents and while I debated calling Beth, there wasn't much she could do for me all the way across the country. While at the time we were checking in on each other more, trying to strengthen our relationship after her wedding, I didn't want her to get a phone call from me in jail.

Boone was my only logical option, as well as my only true friend at that point. But even as the reality of it sunk in that I would need to call him and ask him for his help, my mind still raced with every other possibility, trying to come up with some way to avoid having to drag him into my mess and disappoint him once again.

But Boone's my family, and I needed him.

"He agreed to post my bail and come and pick me up, if I would finally get help. I think he expected me to argue with him, try to tell him it was a mistake, an accident, it wouldn't happen again, that sort of excuse. But I agreed before he even finished his sentence, having already come to the decision before I called him.

"I needed help, and I couldn't do it on my own."

"I'm glad he was there for you," Walker says gently.

"Me too. He helped get me into rehab that very next day."

I spent the next three months at a rehab center, getting sober and untangling the reasons of why I drank in the first place, and how I was going to manage once I was back out into my everyday life and didn't have the accountability of others like I did at the center.

"That night was the last night I've had a drink." I sit up, wiping my fingers under my eyes, collecting any lingering tears.

Walker's quiet, studying my face. He's still as he does so, and I realize that this is the first time I think I've been around him where his foot isn't tapping along to some song in his head or fingers drumming on their own beat. It makes me nervous, and I study him back, wanting to crawl into his brain and hear what he's thinking. How he's processing everything that I just told him.

Does he hate me?

By the way his hands still cradle my hips and the fact that he hasn't pushed me off his lap, I don't think so.

Does he still want to be with me though? That's a different question.

And I have to ask myself, if he even *should* still be with me. I mean, this is what I've always been worried about: getting close to someone, falling in

love with someone, and hurting them with who I am and what I've done.

And I can't forget that this relationship is different from one I could have with someone who isn't famous and in the public eye. My past, my reputation, my actions, they affect Walker and *his* reputation, *his* career. They affect Hayden, Nikolai, and Reid now too.

My shoulders slump as the full weight of what my past coming to light could do to Walker and the guys, and I start to wish I never would've let him in in the first place.

"Walker," I say, voice cracking.

"No." He stops me, already anticipating where my mind is heading and trying to stop it. "Don't think about me, don't think about the PR, don't think about the public opinion right now. That doesn't matter."

"But it does," I argue.

"Not to me, it doesn't!"

"I can't be selfish just because I love—" I stop, catching myself from finishing that sentence.

But Walker isn't going to let it drop. "Finish that sentence."

I shake my head, looking down at our laps.

Walker grabs my chin, and our eyes lock, his blazing. "Finish that damn sentence, Scarlett."

My stomach flips at him pulling out my full name.

"I love you. I love you, James. And it's because of that that I can't. I won't allow myself to take you down with me."

My voice cracks, tears returning, blurring my vision and distorting the image of Walker in front of me. Sharp jawline filled with stubble that I love to run my hands across, deep green eyes that hold my future in them, dark hair falling across his brow and curling around his ears. All of it melts together from my mess.

He's perfect and he makes me want to be perfect with him, but I fear I'll never be able to live up the good that lives inside of him and shed the darkness that lives inside of me.

"That's not your decision to make and we decided a long time ago that we were going to do this together, face these things together. I was all in then and I'm all in now."

His eyes bounce back and forth between mine, voice serious.

"You're not taking me down with you. If bad press got to me, I would've quit this industry a long time ago." He laughs, but there's no humor behind it.

“And I’m not letting you push me away because you’re scared. Because you know what? I’m fucking scared too. Every day, I wake up and my first thoughts are of you. When I swing my feet over the edge of my bunk, my eyes immediately look toward yours, wanting to catch a glimpse of you. When I get on stage every night, I should be playing for the audience but instead I’m playing for you. Every moment of my day is consumed by you because I love you too, Scar. I fucking love you and I think I have since the first moment I ever saw you sing back at that very first sound check on opening night. And it’s terrifying because whether you know it or not, you hold my entire heart in your hands and it no longer belongs to me. So I’m asking you, please don’t break it just because you’re scared, too.”

I let his words sink in, the plea in his voice and the sincerity in his eyes.

There’s no stopping this. I tried to keep him at arm’s length at the beginning, fearful of this very thing where so much of myself is entangled with him and so much of him is entangled with me. But I’ve spent my entire life being scared, pushing people away and thinking I didn’t need anyone or anything because I had no trust or love to give.

But Walker has shown me I can trust him, proven to me I deserve more than I settle for, and showed me what it’s like to be unconditionally loved. I just revealed some of the ugliest parts of myself, and instead of running away, he’s sitting here, begging me to stay.

I stopped running from my problems that night I was arrested, and today is when I stop running from the man I love.

WALKER

My lungs scream for air as I hold my breath, waiting to see Scar's next move. I just laid it all out there for her, put everything I had on the table and it's up to her if she's going to send it all crashing down or choose to be by my side.

When the article broke this morning, my phone immediately blew up with notifications from my various social media accounts, calls and texts from people I haven't heard from in months. Arun and the guys hunted me down at the local gym I found and got a day pass to lift some weights before it got too busy.

Judging by Arun's sour expression when he found me, I figured he didn't know about the article going live ahead of time. I would assume Vik didn't either or else she would've clued Arun in and likely Scar, who would've told me.

Or I hope she would've told me.

I didn't touch the article, wanting to hear everything from Scar first. And as she sat here on my lap and tearfully shredded herself apart to bare her wounds to me, I'm thankful I did because she deserved to be the one to tell people about her past when she was ready. Not when some assholes did some digging and wanted their fifteen minutes by exposing her.

Anger on her behalf simmers inside of me, but I try to keep a lid on it on the outside, not wanting her to feel responsible for it when it's not her fault.

After what seems like minutes but I'm sure is just mere seconds, Scar closes the small space between us and slams her lips to mine, devouring me with a hungry kiss I quickly return.

I grab her hips, pulling her closer and grinding her over my lap, earning a groan from both of us.

“You love me?” She pulls back, breathless.

“I love you.”

Her eyes, so dark they look almost black, search mine, seeing the truth behind my words. Scar’s tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I track the movement with hunger.

Accepting my words for the truth they are, Scar leans in once more and just as she’s about to kiss me, she darts her head to the side, instead peppering soft kisses along my jawline, my throat.

Her lips leave behind shivers, my entire body tuned into each new spot she kisses. My cock strains against her core and by the way she shifts her hips slightly side to side, I know she can feel it too.

“Wait, Scar.” I pull back before my head is too far gone.

She moans in frustration. “Distract me. Please.” She just about begs, her voice catching on the last word.

I tilt my head to the side and look at her, not sure if emotionally she’s here with me at this moment. I don’t want to be a distraction from her pain. I want to help her carry it.

I gently pull her off of my lap and stand, needing a moment to take everything in and take a breath.

Nothing that she just said changes the way that I feel about her. If anything, it makes me love her more to see her finally open up and be vulnerable with me. That’s what I’ve wanted since the beginning. I wanted to see her walls come down between us, turn into rubble at our feet.

But it’s also been a heavy morning for her, for the both of us. And I want to give her a second to also come down from the adrenaline that’s been coursing through her since she saw the article.

Fucking bastards. I’d love to have even just a minute with these close sources and writers who laid all of Scar’s pain out for the world to feast on.

“Are you okay?” Scar asks me, pulling her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. Like if she curls herself up into a small enough ball, she can disappear.

“I should be asking you that question.” I crack my neck side to side, relishing the pop earned with the movement.

“You have, in so many ways. So now, tell *me* the truth.”

Her eyes bore into me, as if they could carve the answer out of me.

“I’m angry.” The words come out with a puff of air as my chest deflates. “Not at you, but at the people who did this to you. But then I’m also happy, because you finally said the words I’ve been dying to hear from your lips for a while now. And I don’t know how the two can coexist in my body at the same time.”

I pace the small walkway of the bus, the two polar opposite emotions swirling inside of me, battling for dominance, and I honestly don’t know which one I’m rooting for to win.

Part of me wants to cling to the anger, to stroke it and let it burn inside of me. It fits in so nicely with all of the frustration I’ve felt over the past few months with working on the album and failing, the two situations cozying up to one another and wanting to be felt.

But the other part of me just wants to let all of it go, even if just for a moment, a minute, an hour. Let it go and let the satisfaction and joy of hearing Scar tell me she loves me override everything else. I want to spin around and grab her, hold her, kiss her, fuck her. Just be close to her and relish in this moment where through so much darkness there was a ray of hope that shot through it all.

As I reach the end of the bus and turn to look at her, still sitting on her spot on the couch, my mind is made up.

I stalk forward and grab her face, dipping my head down to find her mouth. “I’m not going to be a distraction from your pain, do you understand me?” I say against her lips, keeping us just a breath apart, denying her what she wants until she answers me.

“You’re not. I didn’t mean it like that.” She pants and her hands cling desperately to my waist, fingers digging in so hard they may leave bruises behind. “I’m sorry.”

I hold her in place, still not letting her kiss me. Not yet.

“If I take you into that room and fuck you, is your mind going to be with me because you want it to, or because you need it to?”

“I want it,” she begs. “I want you. Please, Walker. You’ve kept me waiting long enough, haven’t you?”

Her words go straight to my cock.

“Fuck, I love hearing you beg.”

Before she can blink, I reach forward and grab her thighs, pulling her up from the couch and into my arms. Scar’s legs cling to me as she lets out a surprised yelp. I slam my mouth to hers, dominating her, refusing to let her

take over as she fights for power.

I carry her toward the back of the bus, taking us into the back room and swiftly deposit her on the large sectional. Not my first choice in location for fucking her for the first time, but it'll do. There's no more waiting for a hotel room or a long weekend that we can spend free and wrapped up in each other's arms. This is what we have and I'm going to make the most of it.

I pull my shirt off in one easy swoop, watching Scar track my movement as her eyes devour me, scanning my chest and arms like she wants to taste every inch.

Reaching down, I pull the hem of her own shirt up and over her head, and let out a strangled breath when I realize she's naked under it. Her nipples peak under the cool air and I can't help myself as I reach out and palm her breasts, softly pinching and rolling them between my fingers.

Scar throws her head back, arching her back and pushing her chest further into my hands. "That feels incredible," she says, her breath already starting to pick up.

I bend down and pull a nipple into my mouth, gently biting it and smiling at the sharp gasp it earns me. Scar's fingers find their way into my hair, and I love the desperation in which she holds it tightly at the root.

"What if the guys come back?" she pants. "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"Don't fucking care," I grit out. "They'd leave as soon as they'd see these pretty little legs of yours wrapped around my waist, crying my name loud enough to wake the other buses."

Her face darkens at my words, a gasp slipping past her lips. "You talk a big talk," she taunts, hands slipping down my chest and settling at my waistband, fingers curling under the fabric and tickling my heated skin.

"It's not just talk." My patience has officially run out. I've been waiting for this moment for weeks, months, too fucking long. I drop my shorts, my cock springing to attention, precum dripping from the tip.

Scar doesn't hesitate. She takes me into her mouth, licking hungrily at the drops she can get.

"That's it, sweetheart." I run my hands over her hair, pulling it back from her face and wrapping it around my wrist as I start to thrust deeper into her mouth. She moans around me and the vibrations cause my teeth to clench. Her nails dig into my thighs to help steady her as I fuck her throat and she bounces slightly on her knees, clearly seeking relief that she can't find

without my help.

I yank her head back and she inhales loudly, licking her lips and staring up at me powerfully, and I wonder who is really in charge here. A smile picks up the corner of my mouth.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

Grabbing a hold of one of her ankles, I pull her leg out from underneath her, causing her to fall backward on the couch.

“Should I take these off?” I ask her, running my fingertips gently across the tops of her sweatpants, careful not to dip my fingers under the waistband.

Scar nods her head rapidly, mouth open and zeroed in on my every move.

“Use your words, sweetheart,” I taunt her and goddamn I love the way she narrows her eyes at me.

“Fuck you,” she spits, but there’s no venom behind it. Just pure lust, desire, want.

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

Without waiting another moment, I tug her sweats down her legs and throw them over my shoulder, pleased to find she’s bare under them. Her pussy is glistening, so wet and waiting for me. Gripping her thighs in my hands, I spread them wide, pressing them into the sides of the couch before I dive in, feasting on her like it’s my last meal.

“Walker!” she cries out, and I hear her hands slap into the leather of the cushions, trying to find purchase in her haze of pleasure.

I take one long, slow lick of her center before I pull her clip between my lips and suck gently, earning me a buck of her hips, trying to dislodge my hands and close her thighs around my head but I hold them firm. I don’t want anything getting in the way of me and Scar’s pussy.

Once her legs settle for a moment, I pull one hand away to slip two fingers inside her. Scar immediately clamps down on them, moaning and writhing as I twist them, plunging in and out in a steady rhythm. I lap up every drop I can get from her and I can’t think of anything sweeter.

“James.” Scar sighs, my name sounding like a prayer dripping from her lips and my cock twitches in response. My ears perk up at the use of my first name, one she rarely uses. Only bringing it out on serious occasions or for right now, where I’m buried between her legs, finally giving her the pleasure we’ve both been aching for and obliterating any lingering fears we had between us before now.

I continue licking, sucking, nipping, and teasing until I feel Scar’s legs

start to quiver around my shoulders and with one final taste, I pull back on my knees.

“Why’d you stop?” Scar asks, lifting her head and looking down at me with equal parts lust and frustration.

I rise and quickly make my way over to one of the cabinets above the couch, opening the door and pulling out a condom. Using my teeth to rip it open, I turn back to her.

“I want to be inside you when I make you come,” I answer, quickly rolling the condom on and taking a few steps back over to her.

Scar reaches up and grabs the back of my neck to bring me down for a kiss, moaning as she tastes herself on my lips.

“Dirty girl.” I pull back and swiftly flip her around. She lets out a surprised yelp as I slap a hand across her ass, watching her pale skin immediately flush a deep red.

“On your knees,” I instruct her, stroking myself as I watch her get into position, kneeling on the couch with her elbows propped against the back cushions.

Her dark hair fans across her back in long waves and my fingers twitch with the desire to run my hands through it, feeling the silky strands fall through my grasp.

“Do you need me to tell you what to do?” Scar asks, turning her head to look at me over her shoulder, ass swaying behind her. “Or are you just gonna stare at my ass?” A devilish grin overtakes her face, enjoying provoking me and constantly fighting me for power.

Instead of answering her, I deliver a sharp slap to the other cheek, marking that one with a matching handprint before grabbing her hips and slamming her onto my cock in one hard thrust.

Scar cries out, head flying back and back arching into me, pulling me deeper.

“Take it, sweetheart,” I moan, letting my own head fall back and eyes fall closed as I relish in the feeling of her warm, wet cunt gripping me tightly.

“Take it all.” I still for a moment, letting her adjust, and allowing myself to take a few deep breaths to center myself, already feeling too close to the edge.

But Scar has other plans as she wiggles her hips from side to side, silently encouraging me to move. And who am I to deny this stunning woman in my hands right now?

I pull almost all the way out of her, leaving just the tip of my cock inside, before pushing back in, enjoying the way Scar drops her forehead to the cushion in front of her as I hit that deep spot inside of her.

“That’s my girl,” I praise, rubbing my hands up and down her back, sneaking them in front of her to palm her breasts, teasing them down her thighs and snaking one around to her clit, pinching it and causing her to cry out.

I rub her clit between my fingers as I continue to fuck her at a deep, steady pace.

“Fuck, Walker,” Scar cries out, lifting off her elbows and grabbing the back of my neck, bringing my mouth down to hers as she twists her head to the side. She kisses me roughly, biting my lip as I continue to thrust into her. Our foreheads lean into one another, sweat across both our brows as we stare into each other’s eyes, sharing the same breath.

I feel my release building at the base of my spine and I know I don’t have much time left. Pulling out quickly and before Scar can protest, I flip her over and lay her down on the couch, climbing over her and sliding myself back in.

“More,” Scar says, meeting my thrusts, giving just as good as she takes. I keep the same pace, but make each stroke deeper, harder. She whimpers, and I sit back on my knees to take her all in.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

Her lips are swollen from sucking my cock and our kisses, cheeks high with color. Her hair is fanned out behind her, neck tilted toward the ceiling, begging for my hand to wrap around it. Scar’s skin is glowing, even in the sparse lighting of the bus. Her legs wrap around my waist to pull me closer and urge me faster. But what I can’t look away from are her eyes. Deep, burning brown eyes stare into my own as if we are one.

And at this moment, we are.

My mind is clear of the stresses of being on the road, the tension within the band, the article from this morning, Scar baring her soul to me, everything. Here, right now, my one and only thought is of Scar and the feeling that is passing between us. It’s more than the sex and the high we’re chasing. It’s an understanding and emotional depth that I feel being reborn with each touch. And looking into her eyes, I know she feels it too.

“Harder.” Scar brings me out of my trance and I feel my control slipping. I lean back over her body, bringing us chest to chest, and cover her neck with my hand. Before applying any pressure, I look into Scar’s eyes, silently

seeking permission. A wicked little smile curves on her soft lips and she places her own hand over mine and squeezes it.

“Fuck, sweetheart. You’re gonna be the death of me.” I bear down, careful to keep pressure on the sides. We can’t look away from each other as my hips begin to move on their own, growing more erratic by the minute. I feel the pressure locking up in my spine and I know I can’t go for much longer.

Scar’s nails dig into my shoulders and down my back and I can feel she’s close too. Reaching my free hand down between us, I circle her clit and it only takes a few times around before her back is arching, mouth open in silent ecstasy and she’s clamping down around me like a vice.

“Scarlett!” I cry out as I come, slamming into her once, twice, three more times before I still and release the pressure of my hand. Scar’s body shivers, riding out her waves of pleasure.

I rain soft kisses across her cheeks, forehead, mouth, neck, anywhere and everywhere I can as she comes down from her high. Her hands skate along my back, rubbing soothing circles over my skin.

“Thank you,” Scar says softly, breaking us both out of a trance.

I shift my body so I’m lying on my side and pull her tightly to me, wrapping her in my arms. “No, thank you,” I say. “You were fucking incredible.”

“I wasn’t saying thank you for that.” She laughs, slapping my hand that I’ve laid on top of one of hers.

Scar turns her head so she’s looking at me as she says, “Thank you for not looking at me any differently than you did yesterday before you knew all of the ugliest parts of myself.”

Her eyes gloss over with tears and I lean forward, placing a kiss on top of her forehead.

Finally in this moment when I look at Scar and feel her body cuddled close to mine, there are no walls up, no barriers surrounding her heart to keep me out. Her guard is down and she’s handed me her trust, which I hold tight to my chest and will protect with everything I have.

“It’s a privilege to get to see and love every part of you, Scar.”

SCAR

It's been almost two weeks since the first article came out and we have just over three weeks left on tour. I've been having a hard time wrapping my brain around it. My life is going to be completely different when I go back to L.A., yet also somewhat the same. The past few months, everything has changed both personally and professionally for me. The exposure this tour has given me has been both a blessing and a curse, but I'm trying to be a glass half full kind of person for once in my life.

And that's all thanks to Walker. Before him, I felt stagnant, content with living in relative anonymity, had found comfort in gloominess and the hollow feeling that usually occupied my chest. I protected my heart and feelings so soundly with walls so high no light could be let through and I didn't realize how much I missed the sunshine until he started chipping away at me, little by little.

There's an air to each step I take now, a freedom I've found in having everyone around me know the ugliest parts of myself, the worst mistakes I've ever made, and not have to be worried about letting them slip past my defenses.

When the guys all showed back up to the bus the afternoon after everything went down, my nerves were shot. I didn't want to see if they looked at me any differently, or held any resentment toward me for bringing this sort of negative attention around myself, and by proxy, to one of their best friends.

But Nikolai pulled me into a hug the second he saw me, telling me how proud he was of me and how I've handled myself on this tour being around

temptation at every corner and staying strong.

I could tell Hayden was disturbed by what he read, by what I did, and I didn't blame him for it. I gave him some space for the remainder of the day, and the following morning when we were the only two awake, he sat down and had breakfast with me. I let him ask me anything he wanted and he did. He grilled me for almost an hour, but by the end of the conversation, we both felt better having him get everything off of his chest. And I know he could tell how much I care about Walker and how I've been trying to keep his feelings in mind throughout all of this.

Now Reid on the other hand...the moment he stepped back on the bus, he brought with him air so cold I felt my blood chill. He hasn't said a single word to me, and I know he's been shorter and shorter with Walker too. I tried talking to him after a few days, going to the back of the bus where he sat playing video games. But he wouldn't even look away from the screen.

The Boston air chills me to my bones and I pull my jacket collar tighter around my neck as Vik and I walk to the shared work space building I'm scheduled at for an interview this morning before our show tonight. It's my first interview since the article came out and I thought I'd be more nervous than I am.

But there's nothing left of me to shed, no ugly truth left unturned. Many old "friends" have come out in the past couple weeks, sharing their own stories of times where I was blacked out and did something stupid or embarrassing, all hoping to cash in on a couple hundred bucks by selling their stories. But me falling down a few stairs after getting kicked out of a bar or breaking someone's family heirloom at a house party didn't catch the same fire as my arrest.

As we enter the large lobby, Vik crosschecks her phone with the panel of room numbers listed and finds the one we're looking for. Walker and his band are at a radio station today for an interview, but Vik thought it would be best if my first sit down after everything exploded was on camera, not just over the radio. So, she found a local music critic who interviews artists as they come through the city for their YouTube channel and booked me in.

The elevator is quiet as we ride up the fourth floor. Vik has always been careful with me, holding me with delicate hands ever since she took me on as a client, but even more so since everything came to light. I think she still feels guilty that she didn't have a heads up about it and wasn't able to warn me ahead of time. I don't blame her though; there's nothing she could've done.

It all would've come out one way or another.

We arrive with a *ding* and step out onto the gleaming white floors. A short woman stands outside one of the doors, leaning against its frame and scrolling on her phone. As soon as she hears the click of Vik's heels, her head pops up and she breaks out into a warm smile.

"Scarlett, Vik, so nice to meet you both." She extends her hand for a shake, grip firm. "I'm Allison, thank you for sitting down with me today."

"Nice to meet you." I return her handshake and follow her into the office. Two orange velvet couches sit opposite of each other with a small coffee table in between, already stocked with water and a bowl of fruit. A couple of cameras are stationed around the small sitting area to catch different angles, and microphones stands extend from the back of each of the couches for both of us to have our own.

"Can I get you both anything else to drink besides water?" Allison offers, grabbing a small stack of cards and straightening them in her hand.

I shake my head at the same time Vik answers, "No thank you."

"Let's get going then." Allison gestures for me to sit on one of the couches while she takes a spot on the other. As soon as she sits, she kicks off her flats and brings her feet up to tuck her legs as she sits.

I'm put even more at ease by her casual posture and appearance, so unlike many of the other interviewers I've sat down with over the course of the past few months. Allison's hair is tied back in a loose bun like she didn't think twice about her hair this morning, and wears baggy jeans and a vintage KISS tee layered with a few different necklaces.

While I normally look like the odd one out in these scenarios in my black jeans, t-shirts, and oversized jackets and boots, now Vik looks like the odd duck in her suit. She chose a deep purple one today, and I told her this morning she should wear it more often since it compliments my hair and we look like a real duo.

She looked at me like I had two heads and then told me Walker was rubbing off on me.

I settle into the couch, sinking into the soft cushions and reach forward for a sip of water while Allison quickly gets everything recording and ready to go.

"Ready?"

"As ever."

She smiles again, before beginning her intro. "I'm sitting down today

with Scarlett Lane, the opener for Whisper Me Nothings and Boone Maxwell's dual headlining tour across the US, which has been selling out city after city. If you didn't know her name before, you probably knew some of her songs as she's written for some of the most prominent artists in the game right now. But she's claiming her words as her own now, stepping into the spotlight and captivating audiences each and every show. Let's start out easy with this one and tell me if there's a song you now wish you had kept for yourself but didn't?"

"Huh, that's actually a really good question," I say, and then regret how shocked I sound. "Not that I didn't expect you to ask good questions," I quickly add, which earns me a laugh.

"No worries."

Wracking my brain, I answer, "Honestly, at this point no. There are so many songs that I still love to this day that I wrote and sold, but they don't feel like me and where I'm at in my life anymore. They were more of a snapshot of who I was at the time, or who I wanted to be. None of them feel like they belong to me anymore. The songs I have now, that I sing every night, those feel right."

"Interesting point. So how did you come to be on this current tour?"

"Boone. I've known him for years now, he's like my big brother. When they had an opening come up, he called and there was no way I was saying no to a chance to do this and see the country."

"Did you know any of the Whisper Me Nothings members before you joined?"

"No."

"Well, from what we've all seen online lately, it seems you know at least one of them pretty well." Allison smirks at me and I see her lowballing questions are a thing of the past now.

I shrug, playing coy. "You could say that."

Not satisfied with my answer, she digs. "For those who have been living under a rock, Scarlett here is currently dating James Walker, Whisper Me Nothings drummer. You've both confirmed the relationship. Can you tell us how it started?"

I glance over to Vik, who's seated in a chair in the corner of the room. She raises an eyebrow at me, silently letting me know I'm on my own to answer these questions if I want. We knew they may arise, and Walker did too. We've talked about how much or how little we want to reveal to the

public, and after a few discussions, decided we'd stick to the basics. We're together, we're happy, but no one else needs to know anything more than that.

"We obviously met when the tour started and got to know each other. And I think everyone else seems to know how that has ended up for us."

"C'mon, can you give us any details? Maybe a funny moment for the two of you, or how you both realized you wanted to be with each other?"

I think about her question. I don't know if I can pinpoint a moment when I decided I wanted to be with Walker. It just sort of happened. He slowly became my favorite part of each day, my favorite company to keep, and I kept wanting more. And as he's shown me what a thoughtful, caring, and loyal man he is, I knew I never wanted to not have him in my life.

But I don't say any of that to Allison.

"We both understand that we are in the public eye and of interest to some because of our careers, but we're choosing to keep our relationship more private."

Allison nods in understanding, immediately flipping to a new card, and I shoot her a grateful look as she doesn't keep prying.

"Let's transition then into what I think most people are curious to hear about from you at the moment, besides your relationship." She shifts slightly, sitting up straighter and voice taking on a more serious note. "A couple weeks ago, an article came out exposing some pretty serious things from your past. For those who haven't read it, you were arrested and charged for a DUI, which led you to entering a rehab facility for three months. Because the charges were under your legal name, it took some time for these things to come to light. I first want to ask, did you ever plan on talking about them or were you hoping it would stay buried forever?"

I reach forward and take a sip of water, having been prepared that I would be talking about this today.

I didn't get the chance to tell my story from my lips first, but I can do so now. Taking a deep breath, I answer, "Honestly, I'm not sure. It's not something I'm proud of or walk around advertising. I think in the back of my mind, I knew that after I started gaining more attention on this tour that there was a chance it would come to light and that maybe I should get in front of it, but I didn't even want to talk about it with—" I stop myself, not wanting to say that I didn't even want to share it with Walker because that would be a lie. I did want to talk to him about it; I was just scared to. And fear has a

powerful silencing effect if you let it.

I clear my throat and continue, “I don’t know what I was planning to do in terms of ever talking about it, but it doesn’t matter anymore. It’s out there for everyone to know.”

“How did you feel that morning when you woke up and saw the story had broken?”

“Embarrassed. And scared, but mostly just ashamed. That night was the worst night of my life and I regret it deeply. I could’ve really hurt someone and I’ll never stop thanking God that I didn’t.”

“You went to rehab after the accident and arrest. Was that court ordered or something you chose?”

“I chose. I had been struggling for a long time.” My throat burns, tears well in my eyes and I blink them away. “I was an alcoholic, and unfortunately, it took something drastic for me to admit it to myself. But it happened and now I’ve been sober ever since that night.” I raise my chin, proud to be able to say those words.

“Good for you,” Allison says sincerely. “Has it been hard to maintain your sobriety on the road, always being surrounded by alcohol and parties?”

I don’t want to think back to the night when Beth called me and the temptation I felt stronger than I had felt in such a long time.

“I can still have fun without drinking.”

“All the fun and none of the hangovers,” Allison jokes.

“Pretty much.” I laugh.

Allison switches to another card. “Now one of the reasons things took a while to come to light I’m sure had to do with the fact that you don’t use your legal name anywhere associated with your work.”

“I’m not sure how anyone even found it,” I mutter.

“How did you come up with Scarlett Lane?”

“Well, as you can see from that article, my middle name is Scarlett and it always fit me better. And then I pulled Lane from my first name, Elaine.” I shrug. It’s not a very exciting story.

“That’s nice that you still kept the essence of it but morphed it into something else,” Alex says. “Does your family still call you Elaine?”

My stomach instantly twists, the way it always does when the topic of my family comes up.

“Yes.” I keep my answer short, hoping she’ll move on to something else. She doesn’t.

“I’m sure it’s been an adjustment for them to see their daughter in the media.”

I nod my head. I’m sure it is for them, if they have actually seen any of it. They aren’t on social media, and besides the daily news, neither of them spends much time on the internet. Don’t want anything to be a temptation or distraction from Him.

“You’ve mentioned in previous interviews that you moved out to L.A., as soon as you turned eighteen. Do you get home to visit often?”

I shake my head.

“Well, I’m sure they’re proud of everything you’ve accomplished lately,” Allison offers, finally seeming to have picked up on the shift in my demeanor since the topic of family arose.

“I bet they are,” I say sarcastically, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

But I wouldn’t know if that’s true or not, because I haven’t heard a single peep from them in four years.

My mind feels like it’s underwater for the last bit of the interview, clouded with thoughts of Beth and the fact that I still haven’t responded to her. I know in my heart, I’m going to end up going. But I still like the idea that right now it’s not confirmed. I could still back out.

But something Allison says snags my attention and brings me back into the moment. “There have been a few people who have come forward now, claiming to be old friends of yours and selling stories and photos of you partying from years ago. And there has also been a source, allegedly a close source to you, that has said you’ve been spending time out in clubs and bars along the road, potentially falling back into bad habits.”

I stare at her, blinking. What is she asking me?

“Is there a question in there?” I ask, only feeling slightly bad when Allison winces at my tone.

“I guess what I’m wondering, and I’m sure others are wondering is, how do you feel about that? And do you have anything to say in response?”

I crack my knuckles one by one, letting that information sink in for a moment. I knew that people were selling old photos and stories of me, but nothing is worse than what is already out so I haven’t sweated it.

But an alleged close source who is saying that I’ve been out partying on the road...that’s a new one.

“I have nothing to say to those people who have chosen to sell stories

about my past and post old photos of me. I'm not at that point in my life anymore and if that is the way they can make a few bucks, go for it."

I sit up straighter and deliver my next answer with zero room for misinterpretation. "But as far as that 'close source' goes, I'm not sure who it is and honestly I don't care. Have I been out to a few clubs after shows with friends? Yes. But I have maintained my sobriety for almost two years now and that's something I'm very proud of. So don't get that twisted. I can still go out and have fun with my boyfriend and friends, and not drink. Whoever that is, needs to get their facts straight."

With that said, I slump back against the back of the couch and relish in the thumbs up that Vik shoots my way.

WALKER

“Is this dude going to ask us about anything other than you and Scar?” Hayden whispers, putting his hand over his mic and leaning back in his chair so mine doesn’t pick it up either.

I roll my eyes and crack my knuckles, annoyed as much as the rest of the guys. Every single interview we’ve sat down for the past couple weeks have been all focused around my relationship with Scar and the article. I’ve said “no comment” so many times that it doesn’t even sound like English anymore.

The four of us are crammed in a small radio studio with some jackass whose voice, I’m pretty sure, is fake. When he’s off the air, it goes up at least two octaves, and I look around each time it changes to see if anyone else is noticing.

We’ve been sitting here for almost ten minutes and the majority of the time he’s spent talking about Scar and asking us about her, now directing his questions at the other guys since I’m refusing to speak anymore.

It’s not my place to speak on her behalf at all. She didn’t get to tell her own story the first time, and I’m not going to continue to take that away from her.

The rest of the guys are as fed up with it as me. Nikolai has completely checked out of the interview, typing away at his phone, talking to who knows who. Reid sits sullenly in his chair, headphones half hanging off his ears. When we make eye contact, his face cools, shooting me an icy look.

What it’s for? Couldn’t fucking tell you.

Hayden has been the only one trying to engage and shift the direction of

the conversation, but I can tell he's about to hit his wit's end. But his cheeks are full of color and he sits high in his chair, at ease and finally appearing somewhat relaxed. If there's one silver lining for mine and Scar's relationship being the main topic of conversation lately, it's that interviewers have finally left Hayden and Nikolai alone with questions about the shooting.

"Did you know about her problems with alcohol before getting involved with her, or did she reveal them to you after she already had you tied into a relationship?"

My eyes about pop out of their sockets at the audacity of this fucker and his question.

"You know how women can be." The guy laughs, looking at others to join in.

They all sit silently.

"Once again, no comment," I grit out, holding onto the arms of the chair so tightly they could snap under my grip. I look out the window in search of Arun, hoping to see he's listening and will come in and put a stop to this interview, but he's nowhere to be found.

"Now life on the road, I bet that's the best." The guy leans back in his chair, a dreamy look on his face. "Booze, women, money, the world on your fingertips. Every man's dream! Is that not a buzzkill being tied down to someone?"

"We've all had relationships while being on the road before," Nikolai jumps in, sensing my impending explosion and trying to diffuse. "It's not a buzzkill when you're with the right person."

The guy pounces on Nikolai, finally joining the conversation. "But didn't you break up with your most recent fling right before the tour? The vixen caused quite the stink about it." He smiles, and my skin feels gross watching it, desperately in need of a shower after being in the presence of this guy.

Nikolai sucks on his teeth, and I can see the internal debate on his face of whether or not he wants to dredge that mess up again.

"No comment," he says.

"You guys are no fun." The interviewer waves a hand at us. "Okay, let's see what else we got here..." he trails off, looking down at a computer in front of him, likely stocked full of notes that some poor, underpaid intern put together that he didn't even bother to look at before coming in here with us.

"So it looks like there is a source close to the situation has not only confirmed everything in the article, but has also added that Scarlett in fact

frequents outings with your band and the crew on tour to clubs and bars for afterparties.”

What the hell is he talking about? What close source to the situation?

“Has she slipped up in her—”

“Don’t finish that fucking sentence.” I jump to my feet, seething, headphones crashing against the table. How dare he question her sobriety when I know Scar holds such pride in it. “You keep her name out of your fucking mouth or I promise I’ll knock every last one of your goddamn teeth down your throat.”

The sick fuck smiles at me, enjoying my reaction, and I immediately regret giving him exactly what he wanted. Without another word, I turn and storm out of the studio, making my way back to the front of the building and pushing open the doors, welcoming the bitter April air as it hits my skin.

I close my eyes, trying to calm my heart rate and focus on the sounds of the city, letting the distraction of car horns and chatter drown out my anger.

“You okay?” I hear behind me, and look over my shoulder to see Hayden walking out, Nikolai and Reid right behind him.

I shake my head, still too angry to speak.

“Dude’s a total dick,” Nikolai mutters, stuffing his hands in his baby blue jacket. The color matches his eyes and I didn’t miss the way the young woman who got us coffee when we arrived also took notice of it.

Nikolai didn’t either.

“You shouldn’t have lost it on him; he was just doing his job,” Reid says, glaring at me.

“Woah,” Hayden says at the same time Nikolai scolds, “Reid.”

I cock my head to the side, jaw clenched so tight my teeth could crack.

“We’ve all had questions asked that we don’t like before, but none of us have ever been so unprofessional to storm out mid-interview,” Reid says.

“Are you serious?” I scoff. “I’m unprofessional? *That asshole* in there was unprofessional.” I point my finger at the building. “And I’m so sorry that for once in the ten fucking years we’ve been doing this, I didn’t carry that entire goddamn interview and cover for your ass when you didn’t feel like talking. I’m always the one trying to keep us on track, promote our music, divert the attention when it gets uncomfortable for one of us, and the one time I needed you to step up and do your fucking job, you sat there watching him pick Scar apart when she’s not here to defend herself.”

“So I’m supposed to do damage control for your girlfriend’s issues?”

“That’s not what I’m asking and you know it!”

“No, I don’t know it.” He closes the gap between us and brings us chest to chest.

My body vibrates with barely restrained rage.

“What I see is someone who was a nobody until she dug her talons into you and now is dragging your name through the mud with her shit and I’m not going to apologize if I’m not going to go to bat for her when it’s probably not going to be long until she starts fucking up her life again.”

My fist flies, connecting hard with the right side of Reid’s face. A splash of red bursts from his lip, and too quickly before I can duck, Reid’s own fist slams into my left cheek, pain instantly ringing through my head.

“Break it up.” Nikolai and Hayden jump in between us, trying to pull us away from each other but they struggle. We’re taller than both of them and I have the most meat on my bones. I manage to sneak another punch over Hayden’s shoulder as he pushes me back and it grazes the front of Reid’s nose but not hard enough to do any damage.

“Stop, man.” Hayden grips my jaw in a forceful clutch, bringing my face to his. My breath comes out in hot bursts, chest heaving. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a few people gathered around on the sidewalk, phones out and directed at us. “Look at me,” he demands, voice brokering no arguments.

I listen and let him try to talk me down while Nikolai does the same with Reid, but I’m not done with this yet.

“What is your fucking issue with her, man?” I yell over Hayden’s shoulder at Reid.

“You’ll always be second to her!” Reid yells back, arms thrown out to his side. “Get that through your fucking head. You will always be *second* to her.” He takes a deep breath, chest starting to slow, and he pushes Nikolai away from him. “And believe me or not, but I don’t want that for you. You don’t fucking deserve it. Trust me, being second to someone’s vices is not the way you want to be loved.”

I look at him, really look at him, for the first time in this whole argument. The red has cleared from my vision and I try to slow my heart, willing myself to look past my anger with him and listen to what he’s trying to say.

Reid shifts uncomfortably, as if he said something he wishes he could take back. His eyes are downcast, head drooped forward on his shoulders. In the ten years I’ve known him, Reid has been tight-lipped about his family or past before he came to our high school. I know he was in the system and that

his father is dead, but he's never told us why he didn't live with his birth mother, or even much about his foster parents he was placed with for the last two years before he turned eighteen and we were moving out to L.A.

Maybe he's opened up to Nikolai about it, the two of them always being closer than Reid is with me or Hayden. But even if he did, Nikolai would never betray his trust by telling us.

"You're always going to be her second thought each morning when she wakes up, right behind what she will always crave most."

"That's a pretty bold assumption to make seeing as you haven't made an effort to get to know her at all."

"I don't have to. They're all the same." Reid's lip twists in disgust and I just know, deep down inside, this anger he has is not for Scar. She just represents to him something that he hates, someone he resents. And she just happens to be the one in his life right now that he can take it out on.

"That's not fair to her, or what she's been through."

He shrugs, as if he doesn't care if he's being fair or not. His opinion on her is decided, based on the very thing that is the most raw for her, the exact thing she's most worried about people judging her for.

And I know I can't change his mind. Scar can't change his mind. It's not worth trying to. I see the resolve in his eyes.

"I love her," I tell him, ending the conversation. "You don't have to agree with my relationship or my choice. But you will respect me, and you will fucking respect her. If you can't do that, then I suggest you stay the hell away from her and keep your opinions to yourself from now on."

With that, I turn and walk away, not needing to engage with him further. Scar has shown me who she is, showed me the deepest parts of herself, her insecurities, her fears, her passion. She has never put me second and I don't believe she will. I'm not naive enough to believe there won't be seasons of struggle for her, and in turn, struggles for us. But I'm going to be there for her, through hell and high water, because I love her.

And it's my choice to love her, just like it's her choice to love me and choose me, choose herself over her addiction.

SCAR

Walker comes barreling into my hotel room just as I'm stepping out of the shower.

"How'd you get in here?" I ask, pulling a towel tightly around me in surprise. When in all honesty, it's nothing he hasn't seen before.

He doesn't say a single word as he tosses a key on the floor and charges at me, eyes boring into my own, and I swear I can see a trail of smoke behind him.

"What's going on—" My words are cut off as he slams his mouth to mine, devouring me in a deep, blistering kiss. After my moment of shock wears off, I soften my body and melt into him, sinking into his lips and allowing his tongue to tangle with mine.

Walker pushes me up against the bathroom wall, damp with condensation from the steam of my shower. Snaking a hand between us, he rips my towel away, not breaking our kiss. He bends down and lifts me by the back of my thighs and I wrap them around his waist, grinding myself against him as I get settled.

He pulls back and starts kissing down my neck, biting me as he goes.

"Is everything okay?" I say, voice airy as desire builds in my core.

Walker looks up at me, and the moment our eyes meet, concern washes over me. A bruise is blooming on one side of his face and under his left eye. Strong creases mar his brow and his jaw clenches as I study him.

I open my mouth to push him for more details when he brings a hand up and cradles my face gently. "I need you." His voice is hoarse, words broken in a way that cracks my chest open for him.

The desire to know what happened is overridden by the desire to give him what he needs, and right now, what he needs is the relief my body can bring him.

I feather my fingers through his hair, pulling his face to mine and kissing him, silently giving him permission.

He doesn't waste a second. Walker holds onto me tightly as he walks us out of the bathroom and tosses me onto the bed. I land with a thud, my breasts bouncing at the impact, wet hair clinging to my skin.

Walker throws his jacket off, quickly removing his shirt and reaches to start undoing his jeans. I prop myself up on my elbows and admire him and his body. His chest is broad, leading into large biceps and arms, tattoos scattered across them both. His waist is thick, torso strong and still slightly tanned from our warmer tour dates.

As he slides down his jeans and briefs, I notice the knuckles on his right hand are bright red, blood crusted across a few of them.

What the hell did he do?

I raise an eyebrow at him, darting my eyes back and forth to his knuckles in a silent question.

"I punched Reid," he responds flatly.

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Why?"

"Can we please talk later?" he all but begs, bending down to grab a condom from his pocket.

I nod in agreement, knowing I'll get my answers later. "I'm on birth control."

Walker pauses, about to tear the foil open.

"And I got tested before we left, so I'm fine to go without that if you are."

He tosses it aside, crawling onto the bed, hovering his body over mine. "I'm in the clear."

I reach between us and grab his cock, stroking it back and forth, earning a long groan from Walker's throat. Veins bulge in his neck as his head falls forward on my shoulder, hair tickling my chest. He's hot and heavy in my hand, a bead of precum at the tip that I swirl around with my thumb, pumping him faster.

"I need to be inside of you now," he grits out, flipping us over so he's lying on his back on the bed and I'm straddling him.

I smile at him, loving having this strong man under my body, completely at my mercy. "What if I wanted to play with you a little longer?" I taunt him.

“Scar, not now. I need you, fuck, I need you right now.” His hips jerk up, almost dislodging me from his lap but I don’t stop stroking him. A muscle tenses in his forehead and I can see I have him at the edge of his control.

Sitting forward on my knees, I position his cock at my entrance and slide down slowly, letting him in inch by inch. Walker throws his head back toward the ceiling, eyes shut in ecstasy of me taking all of him.

It’s like I’m feeling him inside of me for the very first time, skin to skin, not a single barrier between us and I can feel every vein and groove.

I take a moment when I’m fully seated, letting myself adjust and reveling in the full feeling only he can give me. I rise slowly, dragging myself up his length until he almost falls out before slamming back down, a moan forcing its way out of my mouth.

“You look so sexy riding my cock.” Walker brings his hands up my chest, cupping my breasts and squeezing my nipples. I bring my own hands up and lay them on top of his, keeping them in place, enjoying the way each tug sends a spark of pleasure straight to my core.

I grind against him, dragging my clit across his heated skin and whimper at the sensitive contact.

“You fit so perfectly; it’s like you were made for me,” I tell him, watching him watch me.

But Walker isn’t one to sit back and let me do all the work. He grabs my hips in a punishing grip, planting his feet on the bed to give him some leverage as he starts guiding our pace, lifting me up and down over his cock, pushing me deeper over him each time. My eyes roll back in my head as he hits that perfect spot inside of me with each and every thrust.

“Tell me you choose me.” His words are strangled as his movements grow more erratic.

I’m taken aback by his question, but he continues pumping his hips up, driving us both closer and closer to our peak and my mind can’t process anything through my haze of pleasure.

“I choose you.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you,” I answer without hesitation.

Walker grabs the back of my neck, bringing us chest to chest, heart to heart, mouth to mouth, as his tongue dives in meeting mine, desperation pushing us higher and higher. I feel his love behind the kiss, as if he’s trying to brand it across my lips, my body, my soul.

“Walker,” I cry out, feeling my body about to break apart. He snakes a hand between our bodies, and the moment he pinches my clit, my body convulses, brain scattering, back arching in white-hot pleasure.

“That’s it, come for me, sweetheart,” he chants in my ear, pounding me through my orgasm until he cries out, reaching his own and I feel him expand inside of me, filling me.

I collapse on his chest, listening to his heart as we come down from our high, sweat slick across both of our bodies.

“I think I need another shower.” I laugh.

“In a minute,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “Stay with me for a moment.”

His arms wrap around my back, keeping me caged in, wrapped up in the smell of cologne and sex. I let my eyes fall closed, soothed by the way he runs his fingers through my hair and gently massages my scalp.

“Do you want to tell me why you punched Reid?” I ask, hating to break our little bubble but curiosity getting the best of me.

He expels a loud huff and his grip tightens against me.

“We got into a fight after our interview this morning. The guy at the radio station was a total dick and I lost my cool. I left mid-interview and Reid came after me, not too happy about it.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

Walker is usually pretty levelheaded and arguably the most professional one out of the four when it comes to engagements they have to attend or business matters they need to take care of. Something must’ve really hit a nerve and the longer I think about it, a deep sense of dread spools in my stomach.

“Did they say something about me?” I ask quietly.

Walker’s hands still against my back and I have my answer right there.

I sit up, body chilled now that I’m not wrapped up in Walker’s arms. This is exactly what I was worried about happening, my actions affecting him and his career. And to cause a physical fight between him and Reid? Sure, tension has been brewing between them for months now with the struggle of working on their new music, but I was the thing that set it over.

“I want you to stop right now.” Walker sits up and pulls me into his lap, forcing me to look at him. “I’m not going to lie to you and tell you it wasn’t about you because it was. The interviewer was beyond inappropriate in his line of questioning and I shut it down and left. Reid is having his own set of

issues and you're just an easy target for him right now to take them out on. Nothing about us has changed." His green eyes are burning into mine, begging me to see the truth behind his words.

But I call back to what he said just moments ago.

"Why did you ask me to tell you I choose you? That I love you?"

His mouth twists to the side, a shadow of stubble covering his jaw. "I just needed to hear it again." He looks embarrassed, as if asking for validation is something silly.

I grab his face in my hands, lightening my grip when he grimaces as I come in contact with the bruise. "I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it. I don't know what was said to make you doubt it, but I'll never stop telling you how much I love you."

I'm not sure what Reid or that interviewer said to get in Walker's head like this, but irritation slips through me at the image of Walker being pushed into a corner in what should be a professional setting, and then Reid not only not coming to his defense but digging a deeper hole and throwing Walker over the edge.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." My answer is immediate.

"Are you ever tempted?"

"Tempted?" I ask, stalling, while my brain fumbles with whether or not to be truthful.

"To drink," Walker says, scanning my face.

My mouth opens and closes, no words coming out. Fuck me. I can't lie to him and I don't want to, but I also don't want to hurt him.

"Sometimes," I settle on.

I don't miss my life before I got sober, the way I felt, the way I made other people feel around me. But I would be lying if I said I didn't wake up some mornings and crave a drink more than I craved my next breath.

"But I never want to go back to the person I was before," I tell him honestly.

Walker searches my face, a sense of relief falling over him. Pulling me close, we hold each other until the air conditioner kicks back on and goosebumps cover our skin. We rise and go take a shower together, taking turns lathering the other one up and ending with my legs wrapped around his waist, him driving into me against the tiled wall and hushed *I love yous* whispered into each other's ears.

WALKER

I want to be sitting here about as much as I want needles to be stuck in my eyes. And by the looks on the faces around me, I'd say that feeling is mutual.

Arun called a meeting with the four of us the second we arrived in Cincinnati this morning, reserving a large conference room at a nearby hotel. The show last night was awkward at best, and the bus ride here wasn't much better.

The photos of me punching Reid outside the radio station are everywhere. Fans saw them ahead of the show last night and I could feel the energy was off in the arena, just like I'm sure they could tell the chemistry was off onstage. Reid and I haven't spoken since our fight, even skipping our pre-show huddle which has been our ritual for every single performance we've ever done.

Nikolai and Hayden have tried to remain neutral since everything went down yesterday, but the air is still so thick with tension you can almost visibly see an overcast hovering above us all.

I lean back in the swivel chair, kicking a foot up across my other leg, attempting to lull my mind into a false sense of casualness that my body emits. Hayden sits to my right, hood up over his head and staring blankly around the room. Nikolai sits directly across from me at the table, eyes bloodshot and hair stuck in all different directions.

Reid sits diagonal from me, refusing to make eye contact since he entered. His hair is still damp from his shower, splotches of water darkening the collar of his shirt. He has a faint bruise on his cheek, and I try not to smile

in satisfaction, considering I have a matching one.

We sit in silence, waiting for Arun's arrival. We all received a group text this morning featuring a picture of me being held back by Hayden with my fist raised in the air, inches from Reid's nose as Nikolai attempts to hold him back, with a message that said, *8:00am, Conference Room B*, and the hotel address.

Scar wasn't up when any of us left the bus this morning and I was thankful for it. My insides have been twisting since the fight with Reid yesterday and I didn't want her to see my worry heading into this morning.

In the ten years that we've not only been friends but also been a band, I don't think we've ever hit a low as low as this one, both personally and creatively. And I'm scared that when we get up and walk out of this room later, we may not be Whisper Me Nothings anymore.

Arun strides in, head shining and wrapped in a camel-colored suit with a navy blue button up underneath, the top few buttons undone as always. Phone in one hand, a manila folder in the other.

"You're late," Nikolai says, pointing to the clock that reads 8:12am.

Arun pauses pulling out the chair he was about to sit in and stares at him. "At least my tardiness isn't making the rounds of every single pop culture site now, is it."

Nikolai shrinks down a few inches in his chair, grumbling.

"Now, we will not be leaving here today until we can come to some sort of understanding. I have not been oblivious to the issues the four of you have seemed to be having the past few months, but I hoped they were due to the close proximity you were all back under and trying to work on the album. But judging by these"—he opens the folder and tosses out copies of the photos of our sidewalk fight yesterday, letting them splash across the table—"and the fact that you all have written one, only *one*, song for your next album that should be close to completion, I'm concerned things go deeper than that."

I avert my eyes from the pictures, not needing to see the fight secondhand. Reid seems to do the same.

"Let's just get everything out in the open, shall we?" Arun sits back and opens his hands up, signaling for us to begin.

The four of us look at each other, all waiting for someone to jump in.

"The studio time has been hard," Hayden starts, clearing his throat. "We've never had to work this hard on music together before. There used to be a flow the four of us had and it's gone."

Nikolai and I nod our heads in agreement. It's sad but true. We all feel it. "What do you think the issue is? Why is it gone?" Arun asks.

Hayden shrugs.

"Well, you can't take a year long hiatus, ghost your creative partners, and then show back up and expect it to all fall into place again," Reid says, shooting Hayden a glare.

Hayden rears back like he was slapped. "What the fuck, dude?"

"You can't. And maybe you don't want to admit it to yourself, but while some of us took time playing music, working on our songwriting, actually improving, you've slacked off. And it's hurting our sound."

Hayden slaps a hand across the table before pointing a shaking finger at Reid. "Fuck you." He sneers. "I didn't take time off because I was bored or wanted a vacation. I saw people, *fucking kids*, die in front of my face. I'm not going to apologize for needing to take a breather after that."

Reid sits silently, staring Hayden down.

"We all agreed the break was needed," Nikolai pipes in. "I needed it too, man." He tries to appeal to Reid, knowing he has a soft spot for him and trying to angle Reid's attention toward it. Nikolai was there in that gymnasium too.

"We can't go back and change anything now so arguing about that is pointless. Maybe we need a trip away together after this to a remote studio, like we did with the third album. Change of pace and atmosphere," I throw out.

By the way Reid's face twists like he tasted something rotten, I would say he's not a fan of the idea.

"You have your summer festival circuit starting after this tour ends," Arun reminds us. "I can find something for you all after that, but you need to do those shows first. That's priority right now."

"I think one of the main issues is that we don't know what we want to say with this next album. With all the previous ones, we all were at similar points in our lives, living a similar experience, and as a whole, we had an idea of what we wanted to convey. But now..." Nikolai pauses, rubbing his forehead. "It feels like we're all in such separate places that we can't even begin to find a common ground."

I chew on that for a moment, letting the truth of it sink in.

When we wrote our first album, we were all teenagers, moving out to LA and trying to make music our reality.

When we wrote our second album, we had found a sense of success and were riding it high, feeling the world at our fingertips and like we were invincible.

When we wrote our third album, we felt like we could finally take full creative control and experiment, decide what kind of sound felt like us and not just what could get us the most hits.

When we wrote our fourth album, we had all finally experienced true love and true heartbreak, bleeding our lust and pain into each melody.

But now for our fifth album, where do we all fall?

I'm not sure it's the same direction anymore.

How did we get here? How did we get so out of sync, lost our connection as a group?

When we were younger, nothing could tear us apart from each other. We were inseparable, bonded together over our mutual dreams and love of creating music. We rode to school together in the morning and home together in the afternoon, practicing until our parents all beckoned us home. And even then, we would often be texting ideas to each other, lyrics we wanted to fit into a song the next day, a melody that we wanted to each remember.

We hustled each and every day, loading and unloading heavy equipment into Hayden's mom's old van she gave us, playing shows for ten people but performing like we were playing for ten thousand. Every day, we woke up and just hoped someone would take a chance on us, and one day, someone finally did. Are we really here prepared to throw that all away?

We moved as one. And now sitting here in this conference room, separated by a table and built-up frustration so thick my eyes feel like a film has coated them, I don't know how we get back to how we once were.

WALKER

“All right, we’ll put the fifth album on pause, at least until we get through the summer shows. If you guys ever find yourselves wanting studio time, let me know and I’ll make it happen.” Arun types notes into his phone, jotting down everything we just discussed.

“But this pause is not permanent, correct?” He raises a dark brow at us, eyes scanning from one to the next.

I cross my arms, waiting to hear what everyone else has to say.

“I don’t want it to be,” Nikolai puts out there, Hayden nodding in agreement.

They both turn to look at me and Reid. “Me either,” I agree.

Now the three of us turn to Reid. His eyes, so dark blue they look almost black, are unreadable. “Sure,” he says, voice flat.

Not the most convincing, but at least we’re walking out of here today still as a band, I guess.

Arun nods his head, relief sagging his shoulders a bit. As much as he wouldn’t want to lose us as clients, he doesn’t want to see us fail on a personal level. He’s been with us since we started, and these issues weigh just as heavy on him as they do on us.

“Last matter of business then before I let you return to your day before the show tonight. You all have a podcast appearance next week. It’s your last media obligation of the tour. This will come up.” Arun gestures to the photos. “How would you all like to address it? And please note that fists are not a viable option.”

I shoot him a dirty look to which he shrugs, as if to say *that’s what got*

you into this mess.

“There was more to it than just these two getting pissed at each other,” Nikolai says. “The guy was a total dick, asking us all sorts of inappropriate questions, bringing up Scarlett over and over again.”

“Walker couldn’t handle his girlfriend coming under a little fire which in my opinion, she most certainly deserves,” Reid says.

My teeth clench, keeping words I so badly want to spit back at him lodged firmly in my throat. I won’t let him get a rise out of me today. I said what I needed to say to him, I’ve made my peace with it. I’m not going to engage with him again.

“Shut up,” Hayden tells him. He turns to Arun. “The guy was a misogynistic dick. Walker leaving that interview was warranted. I mean, c’mon, have you ever known him to do that before?”

Arun shakes his head, giving me a sympathetic look. He knows I’d never explode for no reason or blow up an interview like that unless I was really pushed to the brink.

“I listened to the audio back and I have to agree with you all. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to intervene before it reached that point. I will be there for the podcast interview to ensure no questions like that come up again.”

“Hopefully, it’ll all blow over soon,” Hayden says, earning nods from everyone except Reid.

“I know Vik and Scarlett would certainly love that, as would I. However, with this apparent ‘close source,’” Arun says, making quotation marks with his fingers, “confirming items in the article but also adding fuel to the fire, I’m not sure it’s going away so easily.”

My brows shoot low on my forehead and I sit forward in my chair, resting my elbows on the table. “Do you know who it is? Question the crew?”

Arun holds his hands out, at a loss. “I’m not sure and neither is Vik. Neither of us have heard any chatter and everyone was well vetted and signed contracts when they were hired. No one would be stupid enough to break them.”

“Well, you need to find them,” I demand, knowing logically that Arun is doing the best he can but emotionally, I feel sick thinking about someone trying to further smear Scar’s image and being close to her.

“No need,” Reid says, folding his hands across the table cool as can be. “It was me.”

My head slowly turns in his direction, the room so quiet you can almost

hear my muscles creaking. “What did you say?” I ask, even though I heard him loud and clear the first time.

He stares me down and as I look at him, I wonder if I’ve ever known him at all. He doesn’t bother answering me, knowing I heard him too.

Rage rushes over me, pumping gasoline through my veins and Reid is dancing around with an open flame.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Nikolai’s mouth is agape, staring at Reid as if he’s a stranger. Hayden shifts his body, putting himself between me and Reid, preparing to stop a fight, even though we have a giant, wooden table between us.

“Why?” I ask, the word coming out quietly and I hate the way my voice cracks at the end.

“I told you, you’ll always be second to her. Do you not think I’ve seen the way you’ve been distracted ever since you met her? No one else wanted to bring it up earlier but she’s part of our problem. Your head isn’t in it like it used to be and it’s thanks to her. And judging by her past, she’ll self-destruct again, and I don’t want you, or this band’s name, anywhere near the carnage. So the quicker she fails and is out of the picture, the better.”

A bitter laugh bubbles and spills out of me before I can stop it. “You sick, fucking asshole. You’re mad because I’ve finally found someone I’m happy with, and you decide to aid in trying to tank her name and career?”

“She did that on her own. I just confirmed it.”

“But you didn’t even know what you were confirming as truth! You added in shit that never even happened. She’s never once drunk when we’ve been out.” I stand, tipping my chair over and sending it crashing into the wall.

He remains seated, refusing to match my anger. “Doesn’t matter if it hasn’t happened yet. It will, and one day, you’ll realize I was just trying to help you.”

I shake my head, wanting to clear my vision like an etch-a-sketch, wishing to wipe away the Reid in front of me and bring back the Reid that has been one of my closest friends for years.

But he’s not here.

And I’m not going to stick around and try to find him, or let him hurt the woman I love.

“We do the summer shows,” I say, walking toward the door at the front of the conference room and grabbing the knob so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t fall off. “But after that, we’re done.” With that, I open the door and let it slam

shut behind me, not looking back.

SCAR

I still remember the feeling I got when I first heard “Levels” by Avicii. It felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest when the bass dropped, pure bliss tickling every inch of my skin as goosebumps rose. It was the first time I really felt moved by music, even though I’d been singing all my life.

I was on YouTube, having snuck into the family office to use the computer. Growing up, Beth and I weren’t allowed to use it unless we were supervised. But I would wait until my parents went to bed and would tiptoe across the house to the office and sit in there for hours until my eyes drooped and the sun was starting to rise.

I stumbled upon the music video accidentally, but the entire course of my life was changed from that point on. I went down a rabbit hole, discovering every subgenre of dance music and finding which ones I liked best. It’s from there that I started writing lyrics to songs that just had beats on them, before saving up enough money from my landscaping job at the church to buy a laptop of my own and began producing my own music. Up until that point, I had only listened to hymns and worship music, as it’s the only music my parents allowed to be played in our household.

I was tired of singing the same hymns in church over and over again, and instead started writing music that felt true to what I was feeling. It was one of the most liberating experiences of my life.

When I told my parents I wanted to drop out of our church choir, they couldn’t understand why I would want to waste the gift that God had given me. And when I told them I wanted to start writing my own music, outside of

any religious influence, they wished I'd keep my gift locked up and forgotten about.

Clearly, that didn't happen.

And as I sit here, head swaying back and forth to the beat of the song, hand shaking out in front of me in time with the building crescendo and eventual drop of the newest track I've been working on, I feel that same sense of euphoria.

Boone and I sit in the makeshift studio he built in the back of his and Naomi's bus. I came over here as soon as I woke up this morning and found my own bus empty, Walker and the guys nowhere in sight.

It was actually a relief to wake up alone this morning, the bus free of the tense energy it was stifling with last night. Reid and Walker weren't speaking to each other and Hayden and Nikolai didn't bother trying to lighten the mood. Instead, after the show was done, we all filed on the bus, took turns showering, and went to sleep.

As the tour is coming to a close, I have mixed feelings about what lies ahead. I'm excited to dive headfirst and devote all of my time to working on this album, but also it's hard to picture not waking up every morning and getting to be around Walker. Our relationship, while it feels like we've established a solid foundation, will undoubtedly be tested as he heads off with the band for their next set of shows and I head back to L.A.

But that's a problem for future me. Another problem for future me?

The hole my phone is currently burning in my pocket, a text from Beth I've left unanswered since it came through bright and early. I've pushed it to the back of my mind, but I know I can't avoid it forever.

Ruth's baptism is coming up in just under two weeks, right before our last show of the tour. I talked to Vik and there are no conflicts I have that would keep me from attending, and the show schedule falls with a little break in between, so I can't even use that as an excuse since we'll be in the area for an extra day.

Beth's message this morning was to the point, asking if I knew if I could come yet because she was making dinner reservations for the family the night before, and sent through a photo of the announcement card she sent out to family and friends with the details of the baptism itself.

A feeling of dread has slowly been trying to creep its way up and over my body, smothering me like a second, suffocating skin, but I push it down, crushing it with distractions of the song in front of me and the promise of

being tangled up in Walker's arms tonight.

"How are the lyrics coming?" Boone asks, pausing the track and leaning back on the couch, popcorn bowl balanced on his lap.

"Good. I'll be ready to record a demo as soon as I'm back home."

"That's great." He nods enthusiastically. "This is going to be good; I can feel it."

My smile comes easily because I actually feel it too.

"Do you two want to take a lunch break?" Naomi calls from the front of the bus. Boone's up and moving so quickly I'm shocked he didn't send popcorn flying everywhere.

Guess we're taking a break.

I make my way down the narrow walkway and am greeted by a bowl of bright green lettuce, grilled chicken, chickpeas, loads of veggies, and a creamy green dressing. My mouth instantly waters.

"That looks amazing," I give Naomi's shoulder an appreciative squeeze as I pass her and settle in at their small booth. Boone already has his mouth full, letting out a satisfied moan.

"Are you still thinking of writing a cookbook?" I ask her, remembering her mentioning it awhile back.

She nods her head, stabbing a piece of chicken with her fork and cutting it into an appropriately sized piece, unlike Boone who just shovels it in. "I've been working on recipes while we've been on the road, but it's hard to truly test them out with a sad excuse for a kitchen like this." She gestures behind her at the small, single hot plate and air fryer she was scolded at by the bus company for bringing on board.

"Our place in Vegas is going to have a five-star kitchen." Boone leans over and kisses Naomi's temple. "Only the best for you."

Naomi shoots him a grateful smile, blush staining her cheeks.

"Well, I can't cook for shit, but you best believe I will be buying every copy I can find," I tell her.

"I'll come over and walk you through them. After all, you need to be needing to learn how to cook for two," she says with a sly grin.

"Fair enough," I agree. "But Walker will probably be doing most of the cooking when he's back. He says he's pretty good."

"Is he?"

"I guess I'll find out." I laugh, picturing him cooking for me. The way he'd hunch over the counter like his does his kit, deftly handling knives,

chopping food with the same precision he handles his drumsticks. A sense of comfort washes over me at the image, the two of us creating a home after all of this is over, doing things normal couples do.

“I’m glad Carter decided to stay,” Naomi says.

I nod my head in agreement. “Me too. I would’ve hated to watch her leave with that asshole. I don’t know if I could’ve done it.”

After the blowout with Daniel, she followed him but came back to the buses after the show, asking if the offer still stood for her to stay on. Boone welcomed her in with open arms and she’s been with us flying solo with taking all of our videos and pictures. It’s a lot for one person, but she’s great at what she does and has seemed so much lighter since Daniel left.

She’s been pretty tight-lipped about what their conversation was like since she came back, and I haven’t wanted to push her. But I’m just glad she’s away from that fucker.

“I think the guys are planning to ask her to join them at their summer shows, shooting content for them at the different festivals,” Boone says around a mouthful of food.

My brow rises in surprise, Walker having not said anything about it. But I’m happy for her. I’m hoping to keep in touch with her once we wrap in a couple weeks, and if she’s at the festivals shooting for them, I’ll likely see her for the ones I can make it out to.

“Good, she deserves it.”

“Are you ready to head back home?” Naomi asks me.

“Yes and no,” I answer honestly. “I’m excited to be in my own bed again and working on my album. But also, this has been some of the best months of my life. Getting to fall asleep in one city, waking up in the next, playing shows almost every night. I love it.” And then I add, “And I’ll miss being around Walker.”

“What about me?” Boone asks, hand pressed to his chest in mock insult.

“I’m going to be seeing you all the time, you idiot.” I plan to spend some time in Vegas while Boone does his residency.

“I’m glad you came on this tour.” Naomi reaches across the table and pulls my hand into hers. “I can see a change in you, and I’m proud of you.”

I’m proud of you. Words I wanted to hear my entire life from the ones who were supposed to love me most but never did.

But Naomi looks at me with such warmth, such care, that I feel a lump gather in my throat. I take in the two of them sitting across from me, two

people that always welcomed me, never judged me, and always supported me. They've shown me that blood isn't family and the people who want to show up, will.

"Thank you." My voice cracks. It feels good to know that through everything, I have people by my side. Something I've longed for since I was in youth groups growing up and never felt like I quite fit in, that no one really understood me.

A loud bang at the front of the bus has us all whipping our heads toward it, seeing the front door crash into the wall behind it. Boone starts to jump up from the table, ready to confront whoever is barging in when a thick head of dark hair with the smallest green tint to it appears over the ledge.

"Hey, man, scared the shit out of us," Boone calls out to Walker as he walks up the last step.

All it takes is one look at his face to know something is wrong. His shoulders are tight, mouth in a thin line, fingers drumming rapidly against his pants.

"Did you run here or something?" Boone teases, but when Walker doesn't even crack a smile, his face falls flat.

"I need to talk to you," Walker says, attention lasered in on me, words rushed. He puts his hands on his hips, trying to catch his breath.

Boone and Naomi sit awkwardly, watching Walker's chest heave and look back and forth between him and me.

"We'll be in the back," Naomi says, standing and pulling Boone out from the booth, taking him down the hallway with her. But Boone stops her for a moment, grabbing a bag of sour candy from the top cabinet before allowing her to drag him away.

"Is everything okay?" I turn my attention to Walker.

"It was Reid," Walker says, and I wrinkle my forehead, confused.

"What?"

"The source. The close source that confirmed everything in the article and added that you have been going out to clubs and afterparties across the tour."

I blink, dumbfounded. Why the hell would Reid do that? I've barely said five words to the guy the whole time we've been on the road.

"How do you know?" I ask.

Walker laughs, but there's no humor behind it. "He told me. This morning in our meeting with Arun."

I rear back, trying to figure out his motive but coming up blank. I'm

surprised, but not just by the fact that Reid did it. But also that while I'm confused, anger is nowhere to be found.

Maybe that's because Walker seems pissed off enough for the two of us.

Or maybe I'm just already becoming desensitized to people saying things about me in the media.

Or maybe because I didn't really have much of a relationship with Reid to begin with to mourn.

"Oh."

"I'm so sorry, Scar." He pulls me into his chest, letting out a loud sigh.

"You don't have anything to apologize for."

"I just hate that you have to be around him for the next two weeks still."

That realization hadn't hit me yet. "Well, it's not like we talked a whole lot anyways."

Walker pulls back, staring at me like I've grown another head. "Why aren't you more upset about this?"

I plop down on the couch, shucking off my jean jacket.

Why am I not more upset about this?

"Honestly, I have bigger things to worry about than Reid being some anonymous source when all of my dirty laundry is already out there. Beth texted me a little bit ago."

Walker's entire demeanor changes at that last sentence. All anger is wiped from his posture and instead concern washes over him. "What did she say?"

"She asked if I was going to be able to make it to the baptism and sent over the details. Including a family dinner out with my parents the night before." I pick at a loose thread on my jeans, wrapping it around the tip of my finger until it turns bright red and develops its own heartbeat.

"What did you tell her?"

"I haven't answered yet, but I think I'm going to say yes. I don't want Ruth to grow up and not know who I am at all and look back at photos and see her only aunt was never around."

Walker nods his head, and even though I know he would never tell me, I think he's always thought I should go.

"Does your offer still stand to join me? Walk into the lion's den with me?"

Walker leans forward and kisses the top of my head. "I'll be right by your side the entire time."

I stand and wrap my arms around his waist, enjoying the way my body melds so easily into his, how safe he makes me feel. “Thank you.”

It’s comforting to know I’ll finally have someone who has my back going home.

“How did you all leave things after your meeting this morning?” I ask.

Walker’s arms tighten around me. “Not great.”

“What’s ‘not great’ mean?”

“I said after our summer shows were over, we’re done.”

I rear back, looking up at him, checking to see if he’s serious. Because surely, he can’t be. They’ve been together for so many years. They’re more like brothers than friends. “You don’t mean that, do you?”

He rocks us gently back and forth, silent for so long I don’t think he’s planning to answer.

Walker stares out the window, voice distant as he finally says, “Honestly, I don’t know.”

SCAR

The bus has been awkward as hell the past week and a half. After the meeting the guys had with Arun where Reid confessed to talking to the media about me and Walker ended it by basically saying the band is done after their scheduled dates, it's felt like walking through a cemetery on a rainy day.

I must admit that part of that is my fault, as my attempted conversation with Reid definitely didn't go...great.

"I FIND it interesting that the little boy who has barely been able to look me in the eye seems to know so much about me that he can report on my life to journalists. That's odd, right?" I say, standing stock still in front of Reid, arms across my chest, not budging from blocking his way to continue down the hallway of the bus to his bunk.

Reid stares down at me, eyes cold with icy rage like I'm a bug he would love to squash. He has almost an entire foot on me, but I refuse to shrink under his glare. He doesn't get to be the one upset here.

"Got nothing to say to me?"

His jaw clenches, and for a moment, it looks like he's about to open his mouth, but he just cracks his neck side to side and stares over my head, ignoring me.

I laugh, or more like let a strong puff of air through my lips and crane my neck up and down, surveying his entire body.

"Looks like you can talk all the shit you want behind my back but not to

my face? Fucking coward.”

Reid steps forward, as if he’s going to bulldoze right through me.

“Don’t you touch one fucking inch of her,” Walker spits from behind Reid, watching the interaction closely but not intervening.

I hold my hand up to him, letting me deal with this. Although I don’t know what else there is left to say. There’s no love lost between Reid and I; hell, I barely know the guy. He made it clear he was never interested in getting to know me, and I never cared enough about him to push it.

My heart isn’t hurt in this situation, but when I look around Reid’s shoulder at the man standing behind him, eyes blazing with fury on my behalf, it’s him that my heart aches for. Because Reid has been like a brother to him for years. I don’t want their relationship to completely go up in flames because of me.

And I don’t want Nikolai and Hayden to be collateral damage either.

So I take one final look at Reid, staring into his lifeless eyes that he refuses to train on me, and say, “I don’t know what you were trying to get at by talking to that reporter and honestly, I don’t care. Just keep my name out of your fucking mouth moving forward. We both care about the same person, so let’s not make him choose.”

With that, I step aside and Reid stalks back to his bunk and pulls the curtain closed without another word.

LONG GONE ARE the days of video game tournaments in the back, movie nights up front. No foam football being tossed around the small space, no general chatter that used to take up the airspace.

It’s been quiet, everyone sticking close to their bunks, headphones constantly over ears. The bus used to feel like home, the guys creating a familial environment with their banter and liveliness.

Now it feels cold, even as we’ve made our way back to a warmer climate.

I dreaded leaving the darkness of my bunk this morning to venture out and see the familiar scenery of Charlotte, North Carolina. The reminder that Walker and I will be driving a little under two hours today to go back to my hometown in South Carolina to reunite with my family for dinner this evening, followed by my niece’s baptism in the morning. Then we have our show in Charlotte and just one final performance in Atlanta and the tour is over.

I hugged Walker a little tighter this morning, knowing that our time on the road together was coming to an end, and that we'll never have an experience like this again. I savored the way he tangled his fingers through my hair, wrapping the strands around his fist and pulled my head back, angling my face toward him for a kiss.

While I have faith we'll make our relationship work even when we're not together all the time and things like distance and our careers keep us apart from time to time, I already miss the moment we're in right now.

Okay, well not *right now* right now.

Because Arun is currently handing over the keys to one of the tour's SUVs for us to drive to meet up with my family. Walker fiddles with them of course, filling the quiet afternoon air with the jingling of metal key rings sliding against each other.

I pull at the collar of my jacket, a long black overcoat that is definitely too hot for this weather but makes me feel safe, protected, hidden from view. I settled on a bit of a more conservative wardrobe by my standards this morning. Black jeans with no wear or tear to them, short sleeved black, flowy blouse with an open neckline that could lean a little provocative for my family's taste, if not for the sheer necktie detail that hangs over the front. Matched with my coat and a pair of nicer black boots than my usual clunky ones, I may look like I'm dressed for a funeral but at least it seems fitting for the occasion of going back to the place that killed my soul.

Only being slightly dramatic.

Walker also decided to dress a little more conservatively. He would never tell me because he doesn't want to add to my stress, but I can tell he's anxious. His fingers haven't stopped tapping, knee hasn't stopped bouncing since he woke up. While that's not normally anything unusual for him, I can tell by the slight shake in his pinky and the gnawing on the inside of his mouth that it's not his typical fidgeting.

My mouth turned down this morning when I saw him walk out from the back room, dressed in a forest green button down with sleeves all the way down to his wrists, the tattoos I adore covered, fingers absent of their usual rings. While I appreciated the way the shirt hugged his arms so tightly I think the fabric could pop at the seams at the smallest flex, I hated the way he seemed to be trying to hide part of who he is for my family.

He refused to change his shirt, so he's standing in front of me, opening my car door like a gentleman with it on, the color making his eyes shine. But

he did add his rings back on, and I shoot him an approving look.

As soon as we get settled and started on the road, music playing softly throughout the car, Walker reaches over and grabs my hand tightly, pulling it to rest on the console between us.

I stare at him appreciatively, loving the way he falls back into the driver's seat, one hand slung over the top of the wheel so casually, dark sunglasses settled on the bridge of his nose. His hair is swept back off his forehead, waves tumbling back and wrapping around his ears, the hint of green all but gone. He looks completely effortless and devastatingly sexy.

Walker glances over at me, noticing me checking him out. A smirk touches his lips. "You like what you see?"

"Mhmm," I answer, shifting in my seat so I'm angling toward him. I reach out and twist a lock of hair around my finger. "You can hardly tell we ever dyed your hair. We'll have to do it again soon. What color do you think next?"

"What about purple? Then we can match."

I make a gagging sound, smiling at the laugh it pulls from Walker's chest. "We're not going to be one of those couples."

"The guys would never let me live that down, either," he says. "I'm not sure. Maybe we stick with the same thing. I liked it. And I know you did too." He shoots me a knowing look. "But it's probably for the best that it's faded out for tonight."

The smile melts from my face. "Don't say that. I don't want you to think you need to change yourself to impress them. Because I hate to tell you this, but you probably aren't going to anyway. And I don't care about their opinion of you, because I don't even care about their opinion of me."

But as those last words leave my mouth, they taste wrong and something twists in my gut. That's not entirely true, as much as I'd like it to be. I've been trying to free myself of the weight of caring about what my parents, their church, that community think of me, and while I definitely have come to terms over the years that the vision of who they want me to be versus who I am will never align, there's always a little voice at the back of my head yearning for approval somewhere deep down.

Walker sighs. "I know I just...I don't want to make this any harder on you by them judging me and who I am being a reflection on who you are."

"You are the best person I know. And if they can't see that, can't look past all of the exterior things that they turn their noses toward, then it's a

reflection on them.”

He squeezes my hand, keeping his eyes on the road as traffic gets a little heavier, some construction work ahead closing one of the lanes.

“So tell me what to expect. What am I walking into? Who’s going to be there tonight and tomorrow morning?”

“For dinner tonight, it’ll just be my parents, Beth and Christopher. But tomorrow, who knows how many people will show up. Baptisms are a big deal for them, so probably lots of family friends, fellow congregation members, Christopher’s parents and grandparents. But I wouldn’t worry about any of them. Between the service and ceremony, there won’t be much talking to be had.”

If my plan goes as I hope, we will arrive at the very last minute before it all starts, be one of the first to talk to them after, and dip out very quickly, citing the show we have that night as our reason we need to scoot so soon.

Minimal conversations, minimal contact with people who think I’m never going to see the gates of Heaven.

“I know you said your parents haven’t reached out since everything came out online, but did you ever hear from Beth?” he asks.

I shake my head. I didn’t expect her to. I called her that morning after I was bailed out and was heading into rehab, so at least someone in my family knew where I was, but it was an uncomfortable conversation. I know she loves me, and she will always be supportive of me even though she doesn’t approve of my choices. But I know my addiction makes her uncomfortable, so it’s not something she’s going to voluntarily talk to me about.

“If it gets to be too much tonight, you just say the word and we’re out. I’m following your lead here.”

I rest my head against his shoulder, eyes staring out at the road in front of me, trees whizzing by in my peripheral.

“When am I going to meet your parents?”

“You want to meet them?” he asks.

“Of course.” I straighten up. “It’s gotta happen eventually. And I want to meet the people who raised you.”

The way Walker treats everyone around him with respect, actively listening when they’re talking, the protectiveness that he has for the ones he loves. I want to see who nurtured those qualities in him and helped shape him into the man he is today.

And after meeting Jane a while ago, I’m even more curious.

“Well, my mom actually already asked when she gets to meet you and would love to video chat with you sometime.”

“Really?”

He nods. “And she said she’d love to have us for a visit sometime.” His cheeks flush and I can see how happy the prospect of me meeting his parents makes him.

“Do you think she’ll like me?” I ask, voice betraying the shyness I feel asking him that question.

Walker takes his eyes off the road to look at me, letting me see the truth with which he says, “She’s going to love you. Trust me.”

I don’t have a great track record with parents, but if they’re anything like their son, then I’m sure I’ll love them too.

“Take me to Pittsburgh,” I say, and he smiles, breaking the hold on our hands and reaching over and giving my thigh a hard squeeze.

A low, steady drum beat floats out of the radio and Walker’s spine straightens as if struck by lightning, dislodging my head from its resting place. “Turn that up,” he orders me.

I do as he says, reaching forward for the volume dial, turning it to the right, the song growing louder around us.

It takes me a moment to place the song until the guitar crescendos, before breaking into the chorus. “Slow Ride” by Foghat fills the car, bringing with it a look of pure joy over Walker’s face as he starts to sing along.

His voice rings out, strong and raspy, exactly as he sounds when he wakes up in the morning or as we lay in each other's arms in post sex bliss. Walker’s head bops back and forth with the beat, hand bouncing in the air playing along to the drums.

I settle back, enjoying watching him belt along with the song. His voice is amazing and I wonder why he only sings backup vocals on any of their music. Not a knock against Nikolai’s talent, but Walker’s got a voice on his too. He has a richness and fullness to his sound that serves the rock track well.

He whips his head over to me, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to serenade me and I wish I could capture the happiness of this moment and savor it forever. He reaches out and pulls my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to the top of it during the guitar solo before dropping it and singing along to that part as well.

I laugh, enjoying the weightlessness that fills my chest, listening to him

sing and perform for me and me only. There are thousands of people all over the world who have seen Walker on the drums night after night, listened to his albums over and over, but no one gets to see this side of him. No one gets to see this performance, no fancy lights or stage equipment, no drum kit to sit behind. Just the radio and him driving down the highway.

As the song comes to an end, Walker reaches for his water bottle sitting between us, taking a long sip, and I watch the way his throat bobs as he swallows.

“Why the hell don’t you sing more in your music?”

He shrugs, as if he doesn’t have an incredible voice. “I like the drums,” he answers simply.

“Well, I could listen to you sing all day,” I tell him.

“It’s a good thing you’re stuck with me then.”

“If only because I want to hear you sing all the time and not for anything else,” I tease.

Walker reaches over and lays a hand on my leg, slowly dragging it up, fingers grazing the inside of my thigh. I slouch in my seat without a second thought, letting my legs fall open and allowing him easier access. As his hand drags higher and higher, fingers so close to my center, my core starts to pulse.

“Is that the only thing I’m good for?” he asks, voice scratchy.

“No.” My own voice is unsteady, desire lacing its way in.

His pinky finger is almost right there, and I curse the fabric covering my skin from his. Just a little bit higher...

Walker pulls his hand away, and I groan in protest.

“Hook your phone up to the system, you got the next song,” he says, like he didn’t just get me wound up and leave me hanging.

“Fine,” I mumble, and he laughs, enjoying my pouting. Although as I dart my eyes over to his lap, I see I’m not the only one affected here.

I pull up my music on my phone and get it connected to the car, scrolling through, not sure what to turn on.

“What do you want to hear?”

“Dealer’s choice.”

I continue scrolling, not having an extensive rock catalog in my library.

“Don’t think about it too hard. Just play something you love. I want to know what music you loved and was influential on you before you started making your own.”

I nod, going to my ‘favorites’ playlist, and hitting shuffle, smiling when

the first notes of “Killin’ It” by Krewella flood the speakers.

“You want to know some of the songs that got me into the type of music I create today? Well, here’s one for you.”

It’s my turn to sing along, head rocking back and forth with the song, my hair swaying with the motion. Walker watches me and I’m not sure if he’s enjoying the song or just the way my body moves to it, falling back into the melodies I know like the back of my hand.

As the song comes to an end, I say to him, “Okay, you give me the next one.”

“I feel like I just learned so much about you in those three minutes,” he says, before rattling off the next song and I queue it up.

We go back and forth like that for the rest of the drive, taking turns playing our favorite songs and biggest influences for each other, a blend of rock and house music. My face hurts from smiling, and Walker’s cheeks are flushed under his stubble that I begged him not to shave this morning.

We both fall back against our seats, catching our breath for a moment until I see our exit sign flash by, alerting us that we’re close.

The joy from the past hour singing and joking around with Walker fades quicker than a puff of smoke in the air as Walker turns on his blinker, the car slowing to take the exit, the scenery around me annoyingly familiar. After a few turns, I can see the nice steakhouse up ahead, our destination edging closer and closer.

“Is this a bad time to say I wish I had something stronger than this?” I shake the slim can of my energy drink, the last dredges splashing around at the bottom, taste buds not satisfied.

Walker turns to me, face falling. “Scar, you don’t have to do this. You don’t owe anybody—”

“Anything,” I finish for him. “I know, I know. Sorry, I wasn’t trying to worry you.”

But I would be lying if I didn’t admit to myself that right now, the draw to a drink, even just a sip, a taste, a moment to forget myself and forget my surroundings, sounded like the sweetest fucking thing in the world.

I crack my neck side to side, closing my eyes for a moment.

You don’t like who you are when you drink.

You have come so far.

You don’t want to hurt anybody.

You don’t want to let Walker down.

You don't want to let yourself down.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out.

I open my eyes and see we've arrived at the restaurant, car parked in the back of the lot. Walker sits quietly, letting me center myself, patience holding him stock still.

"I have your back," he whispers softly, and I let the words fall over me like a warm blanket. I may be heading into a situation with people I don't feel safe with, but I'm not going in alone.

I don't have to be alone anymore. Not with Walker.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I lean over the console, ignoring the way it digs into my hip, and kiss him. It's a gentle kiss, not one leading with desire but with love. He wraps a warm hand around my face, cradling my jaw to keep me there for a moment longer, before pulling back.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you, too."

And with that, I pop out the handle on the car door and set my feet on the pavement below, ready to get the next twenty-four hours over with.

SCAR

Walker holds open the door for me, beckoning me to enter the restaurant, but I'm stopped as a young couple comes walking out. They're dressed to the nines, and I do a quick scan of the exterior of the place, and then over Walker and my outfits.

Why the hell didn't Beth mention how swanky this place was?

"Jesus Christ," I mutter under my breath, annoyance building on top of anxiety. "Would it have killed her to tell us we needed a fucking dress and suit jacket?"

Walker's forehead wrinkles as he takes in the couple as well, noticing the same thing I am.

"Well, at least you're getting used to being stared at," he tells me, trying to lighten the mood.

I shoot him a dry look, letting the couple pass before we can walk in.

But as they do so, the woman's eyes snag on me, scanning from head to toe. I survey her back, trying to see if anything jogs my memory.

Do I know this woman?

Besides a slightly downturned corner of her mouth, I can't read anything else on her face.

Maybe she's doing a double take because of the way Walker and I appear to be underdressed.

Maybe she recognizes me from my music, or from the article.

Or maybe, and the one that turns my stomach the most, she's a member of my parents' church and recognizes Phillip's oldest, disgraced daughter. We're now in my parents' territory, and it wouldn't surprise me if someone

recognized me here due to my relation to them and not because of my career or Walker.

My feet glue themselves to the pavement, unable to move as they finish walking out and the woman gives me one last glance before ducking her head and following behind the man with her.

By that simple act alone, tucking her head down and her falling just a step behind her husband, I think I have my answer as to where she recognizes me from.

Walker places a hand on my shoulder, the weight familiar and soothing. “You okay?”

I nod, watching the couple get in their car and drive off.

“Let’s go.”

Soft jazz music floats through the air as we step inside, the lighting dim and atmosphere stifled with entitlement radiating off of the patrons. The maître d’ gives us a disapproving look the moment we walk up to his little booth, rich wood paneling stretching across the front. But it quickly falls from his face as my sister swoops in, walking toward us with her husband.

Beth looks beautiful, blonde hair falling in long curls over her muted peachy dress, the pattern covered in florals. The neckline is high, the sleeves long, her skirt brushing the bottoms of her knees. She smiles at me, true excitement on her face as she pulls me into a hug. “It’s good to see you,” she says softly, face tucked into my neck. She’s an inch shorter than me, but her small heels bring us on eye level.

I take in a lungful of her familiar perfume, rosy and sweet, and say, “It’s good to see you, too.”

It’s been years since I’ve seen her in person, and when I pull back, I see the years on her face. Her eyes now crinkle just a smidge at the corners, the faintest of smile lines on her cheeks. But it’s not just the physical marker of time, but also her aura. Beth has always been mature and wise beyond her years, but she holds herself with such grace, such poise, that I don’t know if it can be traced back to her settling into motherhood or the wife of a future preacher.

Speaking of future preachers, I turn my attention to Christopher, greeting him. “Nice to see you again.”

“You as well,” he says, though I’m not sure I believe him, even though it’s a sin to lie.

Christopher gives me a stiff half hug, and I keep my body angled,

knowing he wouldn't want any part of my chest to come in contact with his. He's a nice enough guy, my brother-in-law. He's always treated Beth well and I can imagine he's a solid father to Ruth. He's just so...bland. And proper. Made even more apparent to me when I look over my shoulder at Walker as he introduces himself to Beth.

Christopher and Walker couldn't be any more opposite, the way Christopher stands straight as a rod, shirt buttoned up to his throat, formality shaping his every movement, even when interacting with family. Walker stands tall, but his posture is relaxed, his face open and inviting as he talks to Beth, collar open at his throat.

But then I look between myself and Beth and realize there's a person out there for everyone and while I would suffocate with boredom and be stifled under Christopher's expectations of what he looks for in a partner, Beth would be lost with someone like Walker, who holds zero expectations over me and doesn't live his life by a book of principals and rules.

"Walker, this is my brother-in-law, Christopher." I gesture between the two as Walker and Beth turn their attention to us.

"Nice to meet you." Walker extends his hand, which Christopher gives a solid shake before dropping it, wrapping his arm around Beth's shoulders and pulling her into his side. "Sorry we're a little late."

"No apologies necessary." Beth waves a hand, before starting to walk over to a table tucked in the back corner of the room. "Our table was ready, so Mom and Dad are already seated."

We fall into step behind them, my nerves ratcheting higher and higher with each step I take. Walker grabs my hand and holds it tightly, a reminder that he is here, he is with me.

As we approach the table, I see a familiar low bun with two perfectly curled strands hanging delicately in front of the woman's face. And as she turns her attention to me, I'm met with eyes just like my own, rich brown surrounded by thick, dark lashes. Her nose is sloped like mine, ending in a soft point, lips rounded and full. But that is where the similarities between my mother and myself stop.

"Look who's here," Beth says, going around to sit in the chair next to my mother. The table is round, six chairs spread out evenly. My mother sits to my father's left side, now sandwiched in by Beth. I stare at the remaining chairs, not wanting to sit next to my father but also not wanting to put Walker in that position either.

But Beth must've already considered that, because Christopher pulls out the chair next to my father and takes his spot, leaving Walker and I to settle in between my sister and brother-in-law, directly across from my parents.

I shoot her a silent *thank you*.

She inclines her head in the slightest acknowledgment.

"Mom, Dad," I say, waiting to see if they'll stand in greeting.

My mother gives me a subdued smile. "Elaine," she says, using my first name. "Nice of you to join us."

I can't tell if that's backhanded or not, but in order to not tank the evening before it even starts, I bite my tongue.

My father rises, eyeing Walker and myself like we have rotting garbage lining our pockets.

"This is Walker," I introduce, keeping a death grip on his hand. "Walker, this is my mother, Elizabeth."

He reaches across the table and shakes her hand, or more like waves it up and down because her grip is so loose in his.

"And this is my father, Phillip."

"Nice to meet you, sir." Walker offers my father his hand next, not recoiling it like I wish he would when my father eyes it with veiled disdain as he stares at the rings decorating his fingers.

"Nice to meet you, Walker," he says, before giving me a nod in greeting as well and taking his seat again.

Guess that's all the greeting I get after four years. I try to throw a shield back up around my heart to keep the sting of it away, one that I let down over the past months for Walker.

Walker pulls the chair out next to Beth for me to slide into before settling in the last remaining spot.

The table is quiet for a moment, awkwardness filling the air as we look at each other. Four out of the six of us are tied together by blood, but you wouldn't know it looking from the outside.

"Walker's an interesting name," my mother says, breaking the tension, tone indicating she in fact doesn't find it interesting but instead finds it mildly distasteful.

"Walker is my last name actually. My name is James, but I've been called Walker my whole life."

"James is a lovely name," she says, showing her preference and I wouldn't be surprised if that's how she chooses to address him the rest of the

night.

Walker gives her a small smile, likely not sure how to respond to that.

I direct my attention to the menu in front of me, the font small and slanted, hard to read in the low lighting. But it's a small menu, not many choices to pick from and not the kind of food I would typically go for. My eyes sweep past some of the items with a cringe, before settling on a steak just as our waiter appears.

"Good evening." He inclines his head to our table, white buttoned shirt pristine. "My name is Ethan and I have the pleasure of serving you all tonight. Can I get everyone started with something to drink?"

Ethan looks at my parents first. Iced tea for my mother, sparkling water with lime for my father.

Water for me and Beth, Diet Coke for Walker, and Coke for Christopher.

Looking around, we're one of the only tables without a bucket for champagne stationed at its side or long-stemmed glasses filled with red wine.

Ethan asks if we have any questions on the menu before disappearing to get our drinks. While we can all still avoid conversation with a valid reason, everyone looks over their menus again, reading the same items over and over.

My parents lean over and talk softly to one another, pointing out various things on the paper in front of them. While my relationship may be strained with them, I can't help but watch them, admiring the way they listen to each other intently, sharing small gestures of affection and finishing each other's sentences. They may not have modeled a life that I wanted to live growing up, but they never made me question that true love does exist.

"Do you know what you're going to get?" Walker leans over and asks. I inhale the puff of cologne that comes with his movement, letting it settle over my skin and calm my mind.

"The sirloin and grilled asparagus. You?"

"Sirloin too, but I'm getting the potatoes. Need some sustenance after that car ride." He pats his stomach.

"That was barely a road trip." I roll my eyes and turn to Beth. "How's Ruth? Where is she tonight?"

Beth folds her hands neatly over the table in front of her. "She's amazing." Her face lights up at just the mention of her little girl. "She's with Christopher's parents tonight, but I can't wait for you to see her tomorrow. She's finally is getting enough hair for me to clip a bow in it." She reaches to the side for her purse and pulls out her phone, scrolling through recent

photos.

My heart swells looking at them, her eyes round and crystal blue, skin soft and squishy. She looks just like Beth, to which I tell her and she smiles. “She’s my mini me.”

“She’s beautiful,” I say. “And I’m not just saying that because she’s my niece.”

Beth laughs, the sound light and airy. “I don’t mean to be prideful, but I would have to agree.”

“Never,” I assure her. While Beth may still maintain a close relationship to my parents and their faith, she’s never once adapted their air of superiority.

Ethan returns with our drinks and takes everyone’s orders before taking our only distraction device away and leaving us all with no option other than to talk to each other.

“So tell us all about the tour,” Beth says to the table but directing the question to me and Walker. “What’s been your favorite city so far?”

Walker inclines his head to me, letting me answer first. “It’s been good,” I say, then correct myself. “Great, actually. We’ve gotten to see a lot of really cool places, play in some really incredible venues. It’s opened a lot of doors for me so I’m very grateful I’m able to be a part of it. Seattle was a cool city, and I liked the sightseeing I was able to do there.”

I turn to Walker, letting him speak. He clears his throat. “Dallas was my favorite city so far. It’s where Scar finally agreed to let me take her out on a date.”

Beth smiles at his answer, as do I. “Did you know each other beforehand?”

“Nope, met the day of our first show in L.A.”

“Are you also a singer?” Christopher asks, clearly out of his depth here discussing music that isn’t hymns but I appreciate the effort he’s putting in.

Walker shakes his head. “Drummer.”

“That’s great,” Christopher says and lets the conversation drop, not sure what to say next.

“How’s work going?” I ask my father, trying to pull them into the mix. I don’t actually want to know how his work as the leader of the church is going, but I’m making an effort to be polite.

“Fine,” he answers.

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t, blue eyes cold as they stare at me. His hair is much thinner since the last time I saw him. Almost no traces

of blonde exist anymore, gray taking over the remaining closely cropped strands.

As I open my mouth to ask my mother how her work with the childcare at the church is going, my father pipes up, “Although, there was a bit of commotion about a month ago, when some *information* was publicized, alongside our family name.”

My stomach drops, knowing exactly what he’s referring to.

“Imagine my surprise when I was leading the men’s bible study one evening, and during our final prayers, one of the men asked if I would like them to all pray for my daughter. And I was confused when he asked, because Beth and Christopher have already been in everyone’s prayers at church while his mother has been going through treatment.”

He straightens in his chair and carefully folds his hands on the table in front of him, voice steady but I can sense every bit of disgust he holds for me in his words.

“One of them had to pull up the article for me to read. Do you know how embarrassing it was for me to learn that your unsavory history is made public knowledge in front of the men of my church and not from my own daughter?”

I keep silent, knowing he doesn’t actually want me to answer the question. He just wants to continue to hear himself speak.

“Do you know how that made me look? How that made your mother look and our entire congregation?”

Because it’s all about how everything *looks*, isn’t it? Can’t have anything distort the perfect image of a godly man and his little family.

I guess niceties are out the window. I look at my watch, pleasantly surprised it took this long in the meal for one of them to bring it up actually.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was coming out,” I say, hating the way my voice sounds small as I speak to him.

He doesn’t acknowledge my apology. “As if you didn’t give us enough grief in your adolescence.” My father reaches forward for his glass, taking a sip.

My mother lays a hand in his lap under the table, trying to diffuse his rising anger. But by the look on her face, I know she feels the same way as him. She just doesn’t want to create a scene and would prefer to leave the elephant in the room alone.

“And to not even tell us when it happened. Instead, you selfishly put that

burden on your sister, letting her inform your mother and I of your arrest, while you went into hiding at that rehabilitation center,” he says as if the words *rehabilitation center* are dripping in sin.

Like hell I was going to call them from jail and let them know I needed to be bailed out. Neither of them would’ve even taken the call. And I don’t point out to him that neither of them ever tried to get in touch with me once I was out.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself and not let anger get the best of me.

“I would’ve warned you ahead of time if I knew.”

He scoffs. “What good would that have done? And really, what was the point in changing your name for your work if all of your skeletons would come out anyway? I’ve always told you, you can’t run from your sins.”

I trap the groan that so desperately wants to escape at him trying to preach at me right now. “I wasn’t trying to hide anything.”

Subconsciously, yes, maybe I was, but it’s not like I never planned on talking about my sobriety one day.

“But that wasn’t the reason I changed my name for my work,” I mutter, taking a sip of my own drink and wishing it was something stronger.

“You’ve always been ashamed of us, is that it?”

I can’t help the laugh that comes out. Is that a joke?

“Are you serious? Me being ashamed of you? Are you sure it isn’t the other way around? Because the only reason I never put our last name on my work was because I knew you wouldn’t want any association with me or my career.”

My father waves his hands dismissively and that grinds against me like sandpaper, the way he always has been so dismissive of me and anyone else who does not fit into the mold he likes to see for a person.

“You’ve been off in California for so many years, it just seems odd that it took so long for it to all come to light is what I think your father is trying to say,” my mother pipes in and while my father’s shoulder stiffen, surely not what he was trying to say, he doesn’t dare contradict her in front of others.

I turn my attention to her, hoping she will help the situation. “I have been writing music for other artists for the past five years, and only within the last year have I started keeping my work for myself. So it’s a different level of recognition now, along with the tour,” I tell her.

“And he’s a new factor.” My father motions to Walker and my defenses

shoot up. Walker must feel my protectiveness rising because he reaches a hand under the table and places it on my thigh, giving a slight squeeze as if to say, *it's okay*.

“Yes, my relationship with Walker has definitely created more buzz around myself and my music, but he had nothing to do with anything coming out either.”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” my father says sarcastically, and then under his breath, he adds so low I just barely hear him, his words instantly infuriating me. “Just look at him.”

“You don’t even know him,” I say, gripping the armrests of my chairs to try to steady myself against the rising anger flowing through me. I know what my father sees when he looks at Walker and I know it’s all surface level judgments he’s passing. The faded green dye in his hair, the rings on his fingers, the sliver of a tattoo peeking its way out from his wrist. It’s Walker’s way of expressing himself and because it’s not the way my father approves of, he turns his nose to him as a person entirely.

“Fine.” My father steeples his hands in front of him. “Tell me about yourself, son.”

God, he’s a patronizing prick.

I look at Walker, apologies written all over my face at bringing him into this situation but he just gives a small nod of encouragement. Looking past him at Christopher, I watch him shift uncomfortably in his chair, but also there’s a bit of relief behind his eyes that he’s not the focus of my father’s attention.

He may maintain a respectable relationship with my parents for Beth’s sake, but I don’t doubt for a second that he ever feels like he can let his guard down around them, even if they are family now too.

Walker adjusts the cuffs to his shirt as he begins. “Well, I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, my mom is a graphic designer and my dad is a professor. I have a twin sister who is going to be graduating from Harvard Law next month. I moved out to L.A., with my three best friends and bandmates after high school and have been working in the music industry ever since.” He hesitates, not sure if he should add in more detail, but my father interrupts.

“Oh. Interesting to mention that your bandmates are your *best friends*.” He puts those last two words in quotation marks with his fingers. “Was that not also something I saw in the news recently, you assaulting one of them out on the street?”

His fight with Reid...

Walker pauses for a moment, thinking about how he wants to respond, but my father continues.

“Is that how you treat your best friends? Because if so, then I would be remiss to not be concerned over my daughter’s safety.”

The table is silent for a moment and it’s as if the entire restaurant freezes around us, my vision turning red at the edges and my focus zeroes in on my father. If looks could kill, he’d be a pile of ash under my glare.

I shoot up from my seat, chair rocking back until Walker extends a hand to right it, keeping it from tipping over.

“You couldn’t give two shits about my safety since I moved out, how dare you make such assumptions about him when you don’t even know him.” I seethe, teeth clenched so hard I swear I can feel them cracking. I lean over the table, finger raised at him while my father sits cool as can be, as if I’m nothing more than a child throwing a tantrum.

Walker grabs my hand, pulling my attention to him.

It’s okay, he mouths and tips his head to my seat, inclining me to sit back down.

“It’s not okay,” I tell him as I settle back in, collecting my napkin from the floor.

He gives my hand a squeeze before turning back to my father, chest rising and falling once before he starts.

“Sir, I understand that it may be difficult for you, to see your daughter in the media and have personal and private things aired out about her. But with all due respect, you don’t know her, and I don’t think you ever did. And you certainly don’t know me. And as much as you think those things being publicized affect you, I promise you they affect her ten times over.”

“Now listen—” My father tries to cut in, but Walker silences him with a raised hand and continues talking, and I don’t think I’ve ever been more attracted to him than in this moment, watching him handle himself under scrutiny and disrespect with such grace and fortitude.

“But I’m not going to sit here and let you assassinate my character and insinuate that because I got into an altercation with a fellow band member, which by the way was because I was defending your daughter and her name, that I would ever treat her with anything less than the utmost care and respect she deserves.” Walker’s voice is deadly calm, cold like I’ve rarely heard it, and my heart flutters at the way he’s standing up for himself and me.

I look around the table, taking in the shock on both Christopher and my mother's faces at the way Walker shut my father up so effortlessly.

My father's face is bright red, restrained anger wanting to lash out but as he glances around the restaurant at the other patrons, I know he won't want to draw any further attention to our table or himself.

Beth looks at me, eyes wide but full of...pride? No, I must be misreading her, but as she slightly inclines her head at myself and Walker, the smallest of smiles tugging at the corner of her lip, I think I'm correct.

"Thank you for that additional context," Beth says, breaking the tension. "We all saw the story but didn't know what might have transpired behind the scenes. So it is good to know that you had a just reason and were standing up for her."

My sweet sister, who I sometimes couldn't feel any more different from, thanking my partner for standing up for me and being open to what he has to say. Tears spring to my eyes, watching the way she accepts not only him at this moment, at this table, but also our relationship. Not that I ever needed her approval, but it feels good to see.

Maybe I have more than one ally sitting at this table with me after all.

WALKER

My fingers twitch against my sides, wishing to reach out and throttle Scar's dad for the way he talks to her, for the way he dismisses her so easily, and the way he dared to insinuate that because of my fight with Reid, that I may treat Scar the same way.

However Scar described her parents to me before, they're definitely worse. I just can't fathom how two people who made this person, their own flesh and blood, could be so completely dismissive of her. Hell, they didn't even stand up and hug her when we arrived. *After four fucking years.*

Pieces of work, let me tell you.

It's no wonder Scar had so many walls up when I first met her, guarding her heart so fiercely. I thought maybe she was just a standoffish person, not interested in getting to know people. But now I see why she needed to guard herself the way she did, how she came to have walls so high.

I'm also slightly amazed at how quickly this dinner has gone downhill. It's one thing for Scar to warn me it might, but it's another thing to see it actually blow up in our faces.

The poor bastard sitting next to me looks like he couldn't be any more relieved that I'm here, taking the brunt of the attention from Phillip. Christopher sips on his Coke and sits back, not daring to interfere as Scar and I take bullets from the other side of the table.

At least Beth is attempting to smooth things over and I'm grateful to her for it.

And while Elizabeth isn't saying a whole lot with words, her face speaks volumes, and I can tell she's on the same page as her husband when it comes

to me and Scar.

I adjust my collar discreetly, trying to get some cool air on my neck, but not wanting them to see me sweat.

Just in the nick of time, Ethan arrives with our food, eyes bouncing from person to person as he picks up on the strain between the group. He freezes for a moment, probably regretting walking over here, before he swiftly deposits each of our plates in front of us and scampering off without another word.

Probably not the best idea to arm everyone around the table with steak knives.

We all turn our attention to our food, forks and knives scraping against the plates in place of conversation.

This steak could very well be the best steak known to man, but it tastes like dust in my mouth and I have a hard time swallowing it. I peer out of the corner of my eye at Scar and see she's feeling the same way.

"I know there is some unresolved tension between us," Beth says, dotting her mouth with her napkin, the first words spoken since the food has arrived. "But I would love it if we could put that aside for tonight and enjoy a meal together ahead of celebrating Ruth's big day tomorrow."

Christopher sends a look of support to his wife across the table, and Scar nods her head in agreement. I can still feel her hostility toward her parents, but she's willing to put it aside for Beth and Ruth's sake.

I follow Scar's lead, laying down the metaphorical weapons and preparing to hold my tongue for the next few hours to keep the peace.

But Elizabeth seems to have other plans as she opens her mouth, turning her attention to Scar.

"It may not be wise," her mother says, and I hate the way I see Scar's shoulders fall in my periphery. "I think it would be for the best if you and James don't join us at the church tomorrow morning. We wouldn't want to make anyone uncomfortable."

My eyes bulge at her words. Is she seriously disinviting Scar from her own niece's baptism that Beth invited her to? After Scar took time to drive the couple of hours over here, found a hotel for the evening, and had so much anxiety over, only for her mother to say it would be best if she did not go tomorrow.

Scar clears her throat of the anger lodged in there. "Why, exactly, would it be wise if we didn't go? We drove here for this, taking time away from our

schedules for this.” Her hands shake holding her silverware, food forgotten.

“Well, unless something has changed since you left the congregation and you’ve found your way back, which by your display this evening, I don’t think you have. We want tomorrow to be a joyful moment for Ruth to be baptized into His kingdom, and I don’t think any of us would feel comfortable having someone like you standing there to witness such a glorious thing.”

Her mom’s voice is sickly sweet, as if she’s relaying a beloved story over tea and not disinviting her daughter from her own niece’s baptism because Scar isn’t a part of their church anymore.

“Someone like me?” Scar asks, voice cold with barely restrained anger.

Elizabeth shrugs her shoulders. “Well, I think it is fairly obvious based on your choices and lifestyle you’ve chosen to live, that you don’t follow His leadership. It’s a sacred moment happening tomorrow, and it should be treated with the respect it deserves, and I don’t believe you are capable of that.”

I’m almost too stunned to speak and Scar appears to be in the same boat. She stares at her mom, mouth opening and closing before she scoffs, pushing her chair back and throwing her napkin over her half-eaten plate.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she tells her mom as she stands and I can feel the eyes of surrounding tables looking at us. “You don’t know a single fucking thing because you haven’t bothered to try to talk to me since I moved out. You don’t know the absolute hell I have been through, the accomplishments I’ve had despite my *life choices*,” she spits out the last two words. “What do my beliefs have to do with Ruth’s day? And actually, let me stop there for a second. Have you ever even thought to ask what my beliefs are? What might my relationship with God look like?”

She pauses, waiting for Elizabeth to respond. She doesn’t.

“No, you haven’t. And for years I wondered if you ever thought about me, worried about me, *cared* about me.” She’s almost shouting now but I don’t lean in to tell her to keep her voice down or sit down. No, she deserves to get this out, to let her parents have it.

“And I see that the answer is no. You don’t give a shit about me. You only care about how your image looks by association. I’m your daughter.” Her voice breaks, but she refuses to let any tears fall in front of them. “And you discarded me before I was even out of your house because I wasn’t like you. Wasn’t like Beth.” She shoots an apologetic look to her sister for

bringing her up, but Beth watches her, silently letting her continue.

“I’m so sorry that I couldn’t be the perfect, righteous daughter you hoped for, I really am. But I’m also sorry for myself that you’re not the loving, supportive parents I hoped for either.” And with that, Scar turns on her heel and stalks toward the front of the restaurant.

I look around and everyone seems frozen for a moment. Christopher is watching the condensation drip down his glass like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s watched in his life. Beth is on the verge of tears. But her parents? Their faces are blank, as if nothing Scar just said to them is sinking in past their layer of piousness.

“It’s just like Elaine to make a scene,” her dad mutters, cutting another bite off of his steak.

“You’re a fucking asshole.” I laugh, no humor behind it and throw my napkin down, standing as well. “Not that I expected anything different, but I would’ve hoped that for both of your daughters’ sake, you could’ve treated Scar with even the smallest amount of respect. But I see that’s too much to ask for someone like you.” I push my chair in and look at her parents one last time.

“You don’t deserve Scar in your miserable, self-righteous lives. You don’t deserve to know her, or to feel the love she is capable of giving.” And with that, I turn on my heel and leave the table.

WALKER

I twist my head side to side, scanning the parking lot for Scar. Patting my pocket, I feel the car keys nestled inside so I know she couldn't have driven off. But as I look and look and come up empty, my heart starts to race.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I open up my contacts and click on Scar's name, bringing the phone to my ear and listening to it ring. I hold my breath, waiting for her answer, and curse when I get her voicemail.

"What the hell, Scar?" I mutter, hanging up and trying again.

The door to the restaurant pushes open behind and I spin around, hoping to see Scar emerge and maybe I just missed her walking out.

But it's Beth.

"Where is she?" Beth asks, noticing Scar's absence.

"I have no idea," I tell her, still listening to Scar's phone ringing and ringing.

Beth scans the lot as if she'll suddenly appear. "She couldn't have gotten far," she offers, sensing my rising panic and trying to soothe it. "Did she take the car you came in?"

I shake my head, pulling the keys out of my pocket.

"Maybe she just needed a walk."

I try not to scoff, knowing Beth is just trying to help. "It's dark out. I know she's familiar with the area, but it's been a long time since she's been here. I don't like the idea of her wandering around by herself."

Beth pulls out her phone, trying Scar's number as soon as I hang up when I get her voicemail again.

I pull at my hair, enjoying the sting it brings, mind racing, trying to think of where she might've gone off to. She couldn't have had more than a minute head start.

Beth's mouth falls as she also gets her voicemail and I curse.

Where did you go, Scar...

"I'm sure she just needs a little time to cool off—" Beth says and I cut her off.

"You don't get it. When we pulled in here, she was nervous and talking about how badly she wanted a drink—" I stop, trying to keep my frustration in check. "I'm sorry," I tell Beth. "I didn't mean to be rude."

She gives me a tight smile. "You don't need to apologize. I know you're just concerned for her. As am I."

We're on the same side here, I realize. Scar may think that everyone in her family has discarded her, but Beth seems intent on maintaining a relationship with her.

"It's just that I'm worried about her safety, walking around late at night like this. But also for her sobriety," I trail off. She's always seemed so strong in it, so steady, but today in the car was the first time she's ever outright admitted to me that she was craving a drink and I begin to wonder how many times she may have felt that way inside but never said anything to me.

A ball of dread lodges itself in my throat. I need to find her.

And standing here staring at an empty parking lot isn't going to do shit.

"I'm going to start driving around and see if I can find her." I start walking toward my car, purpose and panic alighting every step. "Will you stay here and see if she comes back?"

"Of course," Beth says with a firm nod. She calls out her number to me, which I quickly type in my phone and shoot her a text so she has mine as well. "Let me know when you find her."

"You too."

I reach the car and unlock it, jumping into the driver's seat and turning it on when I'm hit with a wave of her perfume, so strong it's like she's sitting right next to me. But as I quickly scan the car, she's nowhere to be found, her scent still clinging to the leather seat from our ride here.

Throwing the car in reverse and backing out of the spot, I turn onto the road and start driving, eyes scanning the road as I go, hoping to see her walking along the sidewalks. I pull out my phone and call Boone.

"Hey man, how'd meeting the parents go?" he says as soon as he picks

up.

“Fucking horrible. But not what I called to talk about. Have you heard from Scar?”

He must hear the panic in my voice and I can picture him on the other line, jerking to attention, his care for Scar taking center stage. “No, why?”

“Damnit,” I say, the little spark of hope I had in my chest that maybe she called him, needed his words of encouragement and a moment alone squashed. “Things went bad at dinner and she left and now I can’t find her.”

“Did she drive off?” he asks, trying to stay calm but I hear the worry edging its way into his tone.

“No, I have the car,” I tell him, turning right down a street filled with grocery stores, big box buildings, coffee shops darkened and closed for the day.

“Did you try calling her?”

“Of course. Keep getting her voicemail.”

Boone starts whispering away from the speaker, presumably filling in Naomi.

Tears start to crest in my vision, blurring the road in front of me but I refuse to let them fall. The worst-case scenarios flash by in my mind and I violently rub my eyes, trying to wipe the images away. I need to stay focused and there’s no time to lose it right now, even if the images of Scar off somewhere in a ditch, or being hit by a car, or sitting at a bar throwing back a line of shots flash through my head.

“Can you call Vik and see if she’s heard from her at all? I’m gonna call Hayden and see if he can track down Carter.” Maybe she called one of them, needing comfort or a way home.

But even as I think it, I know the chances are slim. If she was going to call anyone besides me, it would be Boone.

“Sure thing. I’ll let you know if I hear anything, but keep me updated too,” Boone says.

“Will do.”

“And Walker?” He pauses. “I know you’re scared, but I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s done this before where she just needs time to herself and isolates from everyone else.”

I grit my teeth, voice threatening to break. “And was that before or after she stopped drinking?”

Boone’s silence is the only answer I need.



THE LOW FUEL light pops up the dash, letting me know I have thirty miles to empty. I look at the clock, seeing that almost three hours have passed since I started driving around.

Three hours of fear, dread, and frustration as I turn corner after corner, stop at bar after bar, and come up empty.

Hayden found Carter and she hasn't heard from her, neither has Arun or Vik. Nikolai called to be filled in on the situation and said he'd keep an eye out if she turned back up at the buses or hotel, but so far, no luck.

I can tell with every call Boone makes to check in, that his own panic is rising by the hour.

My phone buzzes in the console, rattling around, and I rush to pick it up, seeing Beth's name across the screen.

"Did you find her?" I spit out as soon as the line connects.

"Not yet," Beth says, and I slam my hand against the steering wheel in frustration. "But Christopher just got an alert on his phone that the front door sensor was triggered twenty minutes ago at the church."

I pause, not sure what that has to do anything. "So?"

"So," Beth says, never-ending patience in her voice. "I think that might've been her. The alarm is never set, so it wouldn't go off, but Christopher and a few of the other men have the security system hooked up to their phones so they can track activity in and out of the church outside of service hours."

My ears perk up and heart begins to race. "Can you send me the address?"

"Already texted it to you." I pull my phone from my ear, and sure enough, she did. I click on it, showing it's only a few minutes away from my current location.

"I'm on my way there," I say quickly, going well over the speed limit but not bothering to slow down. Not since this is the first time in hours that I have any sense of an idea where she might be.

But would she really pick to go to a church? Doubt rings in the back of my mind but I push it down, letting hope override it.

"Please let me know," Beth says, before hanging up.

The streetlights pass in a blur before a large structure appears up ahead. Even under the night sky, it looks grand and intimidating, with high peaks on the roof and stained-glass panels wrapping around its walls. The parking lot is empty and I screech to a halt, putting the car in park and shutting it off before jumping out and jogging up the steps to the front doors. They're large and arched, the wood beautifully carved with figures and scenes I can only imagine are from their texts.

I grip the large handle and pull the door open, a musky scent hitting me as my eyes adjust to the dark inside. Candles burn low up at the front of the room, but it's so large that it casts very little light over anything here at the back.

A cold wind brushes over me and I shiver, not having stepped foot in a church since my grandma died when I was a child.

The air is still and my hope starts to sink, feeling like I'm alone in here.

But as my eyes adjust to the darkness and I walk down the aisle toward the altar in front of me, I see a small set of shoulders with a long cascade of hair down her back and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I found her.

WALKER

The relief of seeing Scar in front of me, safe and sound, is washed away almost immediately as I hear her voice ring out, so broken and filled with tears as she sings, a way I haven't heard since I saw her singing at that very first sound check. Her voice reverberates off the walls of the church, the stained glass bouncing her vocals around like a pinball, echoing the sadness ten times over as it fades out.

I start walking down the aisle, passing empty pew after empty pew, worn fabric covering the dark wood. Scar doesn't hear me approach, or if she does, she doesn't acknowledge me.

She just keeps singing, almost chanting, but it's not a gospel song like I originally thought. She sings of a weariness inside her soul, crushing and heavy under the weight of the world and not wanting to hold it inside of herself anymore. She sings of a desire to free herself of her demons, of how hard she's fought them for years and needing help.

It's haunting and utterly enchanting, her words creating a spell around herself and pulling me in. The way she calls out to the air in front of her, desperate for relief from somewhere beyond.

I take a few steps closer and slide into the pew behind her, movements silent to not disturb her. I settle into the uncomfortable seat and stare ahead, looking around at the space filled with colorful glass, white banners draped across the far wall, a large cross hanging from the ceiling.

A shiver creeps down my spine, the low lighting of the candles and Scar's wistful voice creating an eerie atmosphere here late at night.

I peer over her shoulder, careful to not disrupt her but freeze the moment

I spot what's sitting next to her on the pew. A small bottle of vodka perches there and my heart drops into my stomach. I dart my eyes to Scar's back, watching the way she sways slightly as she continues to sing, before looking back at the bottle. The slightest consolation runs through me as I notice the seal isn't broken, contents full.

But it's sitting there next to her, waiting for her to twist the top and break her sobriety. She went, she purchased it, and now I just hope she doesn't have the intention of drinking it, no matter how naive that may seem.

Her words trail off, followed by a sniffle and she wipes her face with the backs of her sleeves.

"Scar," I say softly, not wanting to scare her. She doesn't react, just tips her head back to the ceiling in silence.

The air is still around us, not a whisper of the wind outside or a creak of a pew.

"You know, growing up I thought I needed to go to church three times a week, spend hours reading my bible, talk to Him throughout the day, all in order to be a good follower," she says, eyes staring at the cross in front of her.

"But as I got older and my doubts got louder, I started to wonder what the point of all of it was. I got sick of singing about something in the sky every weekend and wanted to sing about the real-life tangible struggles I felt every single day. Why did He make it hard for some and so easy for others?" Her voice cracks and tears spill down her cheeks, the candlelight illuminating them and my breath catches in my throat looking at her. She's so utterly beautiful in this moment it hurts.

"And I wondered why so many people in this community growing up only made it harder on everyone, judging each other and so strictly enforcing rules from a book when everyone is just trying their best. Everyone is just trying to make it through this life."

She's quiet for a moment and it's almost as if I can hear the gears turning in her head, unlocking the frustration she's held inside.

"I didn't know where I was going tonight until I showed up here," she says, voice hushed. "It's like while my head went numb to block out the panic and pain that infiltrated it, my body took over and carried me here. Like a subconscious part of my brain knew I needed to come here, had unfinished business here."

I stay silent as I stand and move into the row in front of me, sitting at her

side, letting her talk out what she needs to.

“The smell shot me right back to my childhood the moment I opened the door and I saw our family sitting together in this very pew every week, my father up onstage in his neatly pressed suit. I felt the itchiness of the robe I wore when I sang in our choir. I heard the cadence of my father’s speech as he spoke to our congregation, voice pitching and falling and steady in a rhythm.”

She’s lost to her memories and I reach out and grab her hand, tethering her to present.

“My feet carried me up front as if on auto pilot and as soon as I sat down, it’s like the seat below me remembered me too.” Her voice cracks. “And I just started singing.”

I didn’t grow up in a religious household and have never given much thought to God or the church or what lies beyond, instead always trying to live in the here and now because that’s what I can see, that’s what I can control.

But I can see it’s something that has weighed on Scar’s shoulders, something she’s pushed away and repressed for years and is being brought to the surface returning home, returning to the church she was raised in.

“I think I’ve been so scared to even touch that part of myself for so long because with it I always felt judgment and unworthiness, like I was less than because I didn’t want to be part of everything I was raised in. But tonight, for some reason that all cracked open inside of me and I think I realized that I don’t need to fit into everything they demand to want to believe there’s something out there, some reason for everything,” Scar says and turns for me for the first time since I’ve arrived. Her eyes scan my face, looking for my reaction to her revelation, scared of what I think about what she’s saying.

We haven’t discussed religion much so far in our relationship, as I knew it was a sensitive subject for her that she preferred to never dive into. But I would never discourage her from exploring all that she needs to in order to feel at peace.

“Whatever you need to do, I’m here to support you,” I tell her, letting her see that I’m not here to judge her for whatever conclusions she comes to tonight. “But I do need to ask you if you intend on opening that bottle.” I tilt my head toward the bottle of vodka sitting on her other side.

Her brow creases, mouth straining at the corners. “I don’t know why I bought it.”

I shake my head at her. “Yes, you do.”

She sighs, heavy as if the weight of the world is sitting on her chest. She purses her lips, a dark rose color staining them, before turning her attention back to the altar in front of us. “I think in the same way my subconscious carried me here, I also fell back into the habit of when it all becomes too much, the world becomes too loud and the voice in the back of my head telling me I have a way to get relief for even a moment, I let myself feed into it.”

“Do you want to open that bottle?” I ask her, holding my breath awaiting her answer.

Scar’s silent for what feels like minutes but is only a few moments. “No.” She exhales. “I do, so badly. But I don’t want to go back. I’m sick of feeling stuck down in the past. I want to look ahead and keep moving forward.” She grabs the bottle and hands it to me, fingers holding on tightly for a moment as I take it from her before she releases it and as she does, it’s as if I can see a wave of darkness receding from her face.

I set the bottle on the floor by my feet and pull Scar into my side, the two of us sitting and staring at the church surrounding us, getting lost in the soft glow of the candles.

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her, kissing the top of her head. “Not just for that, but for coming here in the first place and facing those feelings I know you’ve kept buried for too long.”

Scar snuggles closer into me and the smell of her shampoo fills my nose, fresh and clean.

“I’m sorry if I worried you tonight,” she says against my chest.

“*If?* Scar, I was scared shitless.” I cringe, shooting an apology toward the ceiling and earning a soft chuckle from Scar. “No one had any idea where you went. I searched all over town for you, had Boone and the guys looking everywhere for you back in Charlotte in case you caught a ride back there.”

“I just needed some time alone.”

“I understand that. But you also have to understand that after a night like you’ve had with that dinner, I had a right to be worried about your well-being.” The words are unspoken, but I know she knows I’m referencing the bottle sitting on the ground.

“You’re right,” she says. “I’m sorry.” She turns and lifts her head, bringing her lips to mine. I return the kiss, sinking into the comfort of her, opening my mouth to allow her entry, kissing her back with every ounce of

love I can possibly give her.

I pull her tightly to me, never wanting to let her go.

Scar winds her hands up, rubbing them over my jaw and snaking their way into my hair to deepen our kiss, tongue tangling with my own.

Always trying to wrestle for dominance, this one.

I smile, pulling back and stare at her swollen mouth, wanting another taste but also aware of our surroundings.

“Are you ready to go, or did you want to stay a little longer?” I ask her, not wanting to rush her if she needs more time here by herself now that I know she’s safe.

She looks around for a moment, and I see a sense of peace has washed over her that I now realize has always been missing. “No,” she says, chest rising and falling. “Let’s go.”

And with that, we rise together as one and we exit the church into the cool night air, leaving behind the bottle and a weight off of Scar’s shoulders.

SCAR

I sleep soundly in Walker's arms, him not letting me out of his sight or grasp since he found me at the church. We slept for the few hours left of the night, tangled in each other's embrace, hearts settled by our closeness.

I scared myself tonight, and I scared the man I love the most. I don't want to put him through that panic ever again, or the panic I sent others through when I finally turned my phone back on.

Tons of missed calls and texts flooded in from Boone, Naomi, Carter, Vik, Hayden, Beth, Walker. Months ago, I felt so isolated and alone, like I only had maybe one or two people who cared to check in on me. But now I have my own community, people who care about my well-being and I care about theirs. It's been so long since I've had a sense of family, and now I feel like I have one, even if it's not by blood.

The sting of my parents' dismissal hurt, but it faded quickly, a sense of contentment filling the space. After that dinner, I know I'm never going to see eye to eye with them. They're never going to look beyond their own version of who they wish I was and love me for who I am.

And I've come to terms with that.

But I refuse to let them get in the way of my relationship with Beth or my niece.

So the next morning, Walker and I wake up and get ready for the baptism. He stands behind me in the bathroom mirror and watches as I apply my makeup, as if he's scared to take his eyes off of me.

I turn around and kiss him, assuring him I'm not going anywhere.

I feel stronger this morning. The desire for a sip from that bottle I bought

last night still lives in the back of my mind, but it's overpowered by my thankfulness to my own strength that I didn't do exactly that.

We get dressed and pack our bags up, loading them into the car and driving to the same church as last night, only this time it's filled to the brim with people. He holds my hand as we weave through the crowd, the stares for me and not him for once as people who knew me from years ago recognize my face.

I keep my head high, returning the smiles I'm offered and holding back from returning the scowls.

We find Beth and Christopher up front talking with his parents and join them. We join in on the small talk, steering clear of any conversation of last night. I hold my niece, enjoying the way she laughs in my arms and the innocence she possesses.

When my parents arrive, Walker and I excuse ourselves and take a seat, not wanting to engage with them here when the moment is meant for Beth and her family.

The service is long and boring, just like I remember but I find comfort in it strangely.

At the end, Ruth along with two other children are baptized and welcomed anew with applause from the patrons. Seeing the way Beth and Christopher smile down at Ruth and are filled with joy by having her, I know in my heart that there is good here.

Even among people like my parents who twist it for their own selfish standard.

We don't stick around for long after the service, saying a quick goodbye to Beth and promises are made to keep in touch with each other more often and a potential visit out to L.A. I smile at the idea of seeing Beth in a large city.

I offer to drive us back to Charlotte. The bags under Walker's eyes give away his need for rest and he agrees, handing over the keys and he's asleep within minutes on the road.

The radio plays softly, and I hum along, not wanting to disturb him.

When we arrive, he's sleeping so soundly it takes a few minutes for him to wake and realize the car has stopped. I took us to the venue for tonight's show and parked by the buses. We don't have enough time to go to the hotel before sound check.

Walker yawns and stretches. "That was a fast drive."

“It is when you sleep the whole way.” I poke the bare skin that’s exposed as his shirt rides up.

We hop out of the car and I’m immediately swept up in a hug.

“You’re crushing me.” I wheeze against Boone’s shoulder.

“Don’t care,” he says, holding me tighter for a beat, before setting my feet back on the ground.

His eyes dance over my face, as if the text I sent last night letting him know I was okay wasn’t enough until he saw me with his own eyes.

“Don’t do that again, please,” he tells me and his words land a swift punch into my gut once again at the worry I put him through.

“Okay,” I tell him, not making false promises because I don’t know what tomorrow holds. I don’t know how I’ll feel tonight, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year.

But as I feel Walker come and stand behind my back, arms snaking around my waist and holding me to him, I feel confident in knowing that whatever I have to face, I can handle it because I have him with me.

EPILOGUE

WALKER

“I ’m going to buy you a plane ticket to come join me for our first festival out in Chicago,” I tell Scar, pulling her into my side as we stand off in the wings, watching the stagehands rush around with last minute tasks before Scar’s set begins in just a few minutes.

“I can buy my own ticket,” she says, chin high.

“I know you can, but you’re going to let me do it for you.” I kiss her, shutting down any retort she was about to give me. Her mouth tastes like the sweetest vice I’ve ever known, and I pull away, leaving us both wanting more.

“Later,” I promise her, looking forward to our night spent in a hotel room, uninterrupted by a schedule to keep, coworkers hanging around, the pressure of another show hanging over our heads.

This is the final show of the tour and while my heart aches at not only the band's uncertain future and the fact that I don’t get to wake up next to Scar every morning, I’m relishing in the fact that we will be able to exist as simply boyfriend and girlfriend after tonight. No more work obligations tying us together. We get to be more intentional about our time spent with one another.

“I have a surprise for you,” I tell her before taking a few steps back to a dark corner I stashed her gift in earlier so she wouldn’t notice.

Her eyes track my movement, confusion written all over her face. “What do you mean you have a surprise for me?”

“Well, I’ve been feeling a little guilty that I’ve never bought you a gift since you gave me my very favorite drumsticks ever,” I tell her, leaving out

the part about how I broke them at our show in Indianapolis.

Although it was fine and to be expected. Scar did say she found it very sexy that I didn't miss a beat when a new pair was tossed to me by a stagehand.

"I didn't give you those so you would get me something in return, you know," she says, crossing her arms.

"I know, I know." I grab the square box and pop the lid open, holding it out for her to see the contents.

Her entire face lights up as she looks inside. "Shut up," she says, words harsh but voice full of love. Scar reaches forward and grabs one of the neon green combat boots out of the wrapping and twists it this way and that, examining every inch of it.

"Since you said I couldn't dye my hair to match yours, I figured we could do something different to match. So now, you have boots to match my kit." I smile at her, enjoying the way she holds the boots with such care.

When she looks up to meet my eyes, hers have the smallest sliver of tears lining them, and for once, she doesn't try to blink them away before I can see them.

No, she tilts her head higher, showing her emotion to me, the way my gift has touched her.

"I love them," she says before standing on her tiptoes and pressing the softest kiss to my lips.

"I love you," I tell her. "Want help putting them on?"

She nods, and I run into one of the green rooms to grab a chair for her, bringing it back out for her to sit on while she changes out of her usual black boots.

I help lace them up for her, or more so, she allows me to help lace them. Then I pull her up and she does a couple little jumps in them, testing them out, seeing how much movement she gets in them.

"Fit okay?" I ask.

"They're perfect." She nods. "Thank you."

They are a nice pop of color with her all-black ensemble and I can't wait to see how she looks in them under the stage lights.

I pull her close and whisper in her ear, "You're welcome."

The lights dim and the crowd begins to cheer, sending a wave of electricity all throughout the venue, rushing over my body in a flood of chills. Scar pulls away and straightens her long trench coat, so familiar to the one

she wore the very first time I heard her sing. She cracks her knuckles, gripping tightly to her microphone, before the booming bass of her opening song pours from the speakers, sending the screams higher and louder in anticipation.

She turns to look at me one last time, shooting a wink over her shoulder before walking out on stage. My heart soars with the way the crowd reacts, seeing her silhouette appear against the fog covering the stage. She walks with such confidence, shoulders back, head high, and as she lets out the opening verse to her first song, her voice reflects those things.

Gone is the hollowness I first heard from her, what first drew me into her and had me wanting more.

Gone is the stab of pain her voice sent through to anyone who would listen. Her lyrics may be the same, but I can tell she doesn't feel them the same way she used to.

It's a beautiful thing to witness, the way she's transformed not only as a musician but as a person over the past months, and I'll never once take for granted the fact that she's let me inside and shared those moments with me.

Because it's an honor to be able to know Scarlett.

THE END

While this may be the end of Walker and Scar's story, there are still three other members of Whisper Me Nothings who need to get their stories out there...

Stay tuned for TMH, the second book in the Whisper Me Nothings series coming Spring 2024!

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Music has always been very important in my life, and it was vital to writing this story. The first scene I ever saw play out in my head was the scene where Walker sees Scar in soundcheck for the first time and hears her singing. The song that I hear for that scene is Take You Down by Illenium. I remember it like it was yesterday when I listened to that song for the first time. The second I heard the lyrics, it became Scar's song for me. I saw that entire soundcheck scene and I never got it out of my head. Her playlist truly feels like it tells her whole story for me and makes up a lot of who she is. But if you listen to one song from the playlists for this book, I hope it's Take You Down and I hope you hear Scar in it like I do.

As far as Walker went, his vibe was a little different for me. The songs I put on his playlist were more about me getting into his mood, getting into his vibe, as it was very different to write from his POV than Scar's. So while songs like Burn It to the Ground by Nickelback and Kiwi by Harry Styles put me into the mood to write him, I don't think the lyrics really have anything to do with his story. But if there's one you want to listen to where I think the entire message reflects who he is, and the love he has for Scar, then listen to Sideways by Illenium, Valerie Broussard, and NURKO.

(P.S. I promise I listen to more than just Illenium, his music was just on heavy rotation for me while I was creating this story and I've been a fan of his for years.)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is so wild to even be writing these. I always love to read them at the end of books and now it's finally time that I sit down and write my own.

Nicki and Cheyenne, thank you both for your invaluable feedback on this story. I gave you a tall ask, reading your friends work and then asking you to be honest about the good and the bad and you both came through for me. This story is better because of your feedback and I'm better because of your support throughout this whole process.

Ally, thank you for always being so excited every time you asked me how this book was coming along and sharing that excitement with others around (even if it made for awkward dinner conversation lol)

Katie, thank you for being a sounding board for this series early on in its conception. lylas.

To Dorian and Arya, my babies. Even though the two of you gave me challenges trying to get this done by sitting on my computer, laying across my printed edits, crying at my feet for more Tiki Sticks and pets, I wouldn't want it any other way. I love you two more than anything in the entire world and you make getting out of bed every morning worth it.

To my friends, thank you all for being so supportive of me during this time when I often struggled to respond to texts in a timely manner or when my mind drifted off mid-conversation because Walker and Scar were interrupting me.

To my family, who, surprise...I wrote a book. I really hope you skipped the whole thing and just came back here for the acknowledgments. I didn't tell

any of you what I was always spending my evenings and weekends on because I wanted to surprise you all and I sure hope I did, but in a good way...

Tori, thank you for sending resources my way when I needed it. Doing this all for the first time is overwhelming and your willingness to share was so helpful.

To all of the authors who have inspired me, thank you for writing your stories and sharing them with the world. Your stories changed my life, and I'm so grateful to have found them.

Haya, thank you for this absolutely incredible cover. You took all of my random ideas and turned them into something insanely beautiful and perfect and I'm so grateful to have a cover like this one. You're stuck with me now and I can't wait to see what else you come up with for this world.

Zainab, thank you for your watchful eye editing this and adding in all of the commas I missed because lord knows there were a lot of them. And thank you for your comments along the way that brought a smile to my face during the stressful last few weeks of this process.

Thank you to anyone who came here from my YouTube channel. I love our community over there and even though I'm on this new journey, that doesn't mean I'm leaving that one behind. I appreciate every single comment and interaction we have over there. You guys started this all for me, and I'm forever grateful for you.

And lastly to anyone who picked this book up and gave it a try. Thank you for taking a chance on a new author. It has been a dream of mine since I was a little kid to be a published author, and because of you reading this book, I've fulfilled that.

And if there's anyone out there with a story in their head to tell, fucking do it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michae Marie would rather do just about anything else than have to write this section...so this is all you get.

She resides in the Midwest and prefers cats over people. If she's not reading or writing, she's probably rewatching Game of Thrones or Survivor.

Instagram, YouTube, & TikTok: oheyitsmichae

michaemarieauthor@gmail.com

