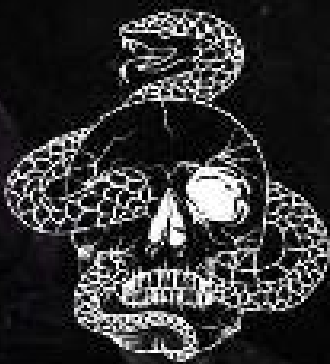




BLACK HEARTS



SAINTS & SINNERS SERIES BOOK ONE

TORI FOX

BLACK HEARTS

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T O R I F O X

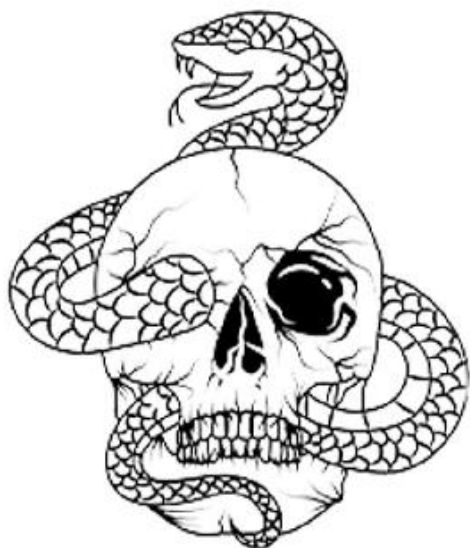
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A NOTE TO READERS...

This book does contain triggers that may be sensitive to some readers including:

- Drug use
- Alcoholism
- Rape
- Sexual assault/violence
- Domestic violence
- Self-harm

JACKSON

“Take it again from the top.”

I nod at my producer, adjust the headphones on my head, and start singing into the microphone. I try to find my voice, my heart, some kind of passion to put into the words flowing out of me, but I know they suck. I’ve been struggling for months to try and write music that our fans will love. Like our last three albums. All platinum records. All with chart-topping hits. Hell, we won a Grammy.

Us, Saints & Sinners, some shitty rock band that started in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And now we are selling out arenas across the world. I never thought I would get here. None of us did. We figured we would just be playing shitty dive bars for as long as we could support doing that. Playing with secondhand instruments and stolen amps. And now we have shit custom made for us. The kids from the wrong side of the tracks are living in mansions and flying on private jets. A life you only dream about that somehow became reality.

But now I stand in front of a microphone at one of the best studios in LA and the words coming out of my mouth are weak. Fake. I feel like a sellout. Some would say we are. After the success we had. But I never felt it. We worked our asses off to get here. And up until now, I’ve believed one hundred percent in the words I sing, in the music we play.

But these songs are shit.

I know it. The band knows it. The producer knows it.

We can’t give this to the label.

And I know if Riot hears this, all hell will break loose.

The playback cuts out in our ears and I look up at the booth to see a scowling Riot standing with her arms folded across her chest.

“What in the ever-loving fuck is this crap?” she shouts so loud I can actually hear her through the booth. And Rico, our producer, has his ears covered as he slowly rolls away from her.

She leans over the soundboard and hits the button to speak into my headphones. “Jax, I really have no idea what the hell that was, but I am hoping it’s some practical joke because y’all knew I was stopping by today.”

Fuck. I had no clue she was stopping by today. And this is exactly what I didn’t want to have happen.

She snaps her fingers. “Meeting now!”

I glance over at Rico, who is trying to keep a laugh in but gives me a sympathetic look.

“Fuck!” I scream as I toss the headphones aside and open the door to the recording room and slam it behind me.

Riot is already out of sight, no doubt rounding up the rest of the guys, with hellfire in her eyes.

I love the woman. She is half the reason we are where we are and have had the success we’ve had. But she is ruthless. She doesn’t take no for an answer. And when she is on one, you do not want to be on the receiving end.

Riot Arceneaux is a force to be reckoned with. One of the top producing managers for rock music in the country. And she is permanently a part of this band.

I head into the lounge and see my bandmates already in there. Roan, our lead guitarist, looks bored. Knox, our drummer, is tapping his fingers along the armrest of the worn-in black leather couch. Wilder, guitar and backup vocalist, is pacing behind the couch, no doubt anxious over what Riot has to say. And Silas, my closest friend in the band, my brother from another mother since we were eight, has a glassful of

whiskey. He smirks at me as I walk in, then mouths, “You’re in big trouble” before gulping down half his drink.

I lean against the wall, folding my tattooed arms over my chest.

Riot storms into the lounge as she hangs up the phone. She may only be five feet tall, if that, but her voice and her command of the room can make the largest men cower.

“What the fuck is this bullshit?” she yells, spreading her tattooed arms open wide.

Silas scratches the back of the head. “What do you mean?”

She glares at him. “Don’t give me that crap. Y’all aren’t that dumb. You’ve had the last six months off and this is what you come up with?”

Wilder stops pacing. “Well... we’ve been—”

“Cut the crap. I don’t need your sad excuses, Wilder. It’s not even your problem. Any of you,” she says as she looks at us on the couches. “The music is good, it’s catchy, it is what your fans love and what the label is looking for. But the vocals...” She turns and looks at me, and I swear it’s like looking at Medusa. “The lyrics are shit and the vocals are even worse. You sound like a pop star trying to be a rock star. Newsflash, never in the history of music has that worked.”

I stare at her, not letting her words get to me. Something I have learned over the years. She is blunt as fuck and if you show one ounce of emotion, she will pounce on that and take you down.

“You have nothing to say, Jax?”

I shrug.

She laughs dryly. “Wow. Do you even care?”

I clench my jaw, wanting to fight with her but know it will get me nowhere.

She looks around at all of this. “You’re a band. You need to work on this together. I know all of you know his lyrics

aren't up to par, his vocals are weak. There is no passion behind it."

The guys nod slightly, knowing they can't argue with her. Hell, there is no need to. I know my lyrics are shit. My vocals suck. Everything Riot is saying is true but I don't want to admit it. Not that I have to around her.

"I'm not your producer. Not the CEO of a record label. But I am your damn manager and this right here isn't good enough. This music is not Saints & Sinners. This is some band that wants to be like you. Who idolizes you but doesn't have the magic the five of you have." She looks around at all of us. "Unless you want to go back to being the opening act?"

Silas speaks up. "I thought you said once we hit stadiums, there is no going back to being an opener."

She snaps her head toward Silas. "I'm glad someone was listening. And you're right. I didn't say where you would be opening. But with this crap, I'm guessing some dive bar in Bumfuck, North Dakota."

Roan snorts, and Riot puts a hand up in his direction. "Y'all need to work together as a band. Help Jax out. Fix this album. Because the fans are not going to like it. The label is not going to like it. And you sure as hell won't have a future if you stick to this."

She walks over to me and I stand up straighter against the wall.

"You need to find your inspiration, Jax, and it's not going to be from fucking every girl that bats her eyelashes at you. Or from a blunt or a line of coke." She pushes her finger hard into my chest. I need to rub the spot after. "Look in that black heart of yours. Maybe you need to go home. The humid swamp air may do you some good."

I roll my eyes at her. "We aren't from the swamp. That's you."

"Well, either way. When was the last time you saw your brother? Pay him a visit. Hit your old hangout spots. Maybe hang out with your best friend."

“Hey, I’m his best friend,” Silas interjects as he stands and throws his arms around my neck.

Riot gives him a look. “You’re his worst influence, not his best friend.”

“I thought that was the role of a best friend.”

She shakes her head at Silas. “Jax... Jackson... just listen to me. I know you need this. Y’all haven’t been there in nearly three years besides when you’re passing through for a show.”

“Maybe it’s because I don’t want to go back. Nothing really for me there.”

Silas squeezes my neck. “Come on, man. It’s been a while. It would be good to go home.”

I don’t miss the sarcasm in his voice. He doesn’t want to go home either. None of us do.

“Just think about it. Please. We are wasting money recording this crap and the label won’t be happy.”

With that, she walks out of the room.

“It’s been three years. I’m sure things have died down,” Silas says to me.

I toss the cap to my beer bottle into the bucket on the table in front of me. “You know we take one step back in that town and he will be breathing down our necks.”

“We’ve paid him off,” Wilder says.

I rest my head against the back of the couch in my backyard. “You know that is not a good enough debt for him. He wants us under his control.”

“Well he doesn’t have it.”

Roan speaks up, his voice hoarse. “He’s been controlling us this entire time. Just because we aren’t there doesn’t mean he doesn’t have power over us.”

Silas looks over at me, his beer bottle hovering at his lips. “I think we just have to do it.”

“Riot’s right, man, you’ve been off lately. You know going home fixes that. She can fix that. Bring that music back to your life.” Roan’s voice is quiet, his dark eyes studying me as he speaks.

I raise a brow at Roan. “I can’t believe you’re agreeing with your ex-wife.”

He sighs. “She’s always been smarter than me.”

“No shit,” Silas snorts and Roan smacks him upside the head.

“Maybe we should just go out tonight. I can get some pussy and write about how much it sucked in the morning.”

Wilder walks out from behind the outdoor bar in my backyard and jumps onto the couch with a bottle of tequila. “No offense, dickwad, but that’s what your problem is. Did you not listen to Riot? That pussy you’ve been drowning yourself in isn’t doing it.”

“Because I haven’t been drowning myself in pussy.”

Knox throws his head back in laughter. “So you are just dipping your toes in it? You had three women on your lap last week at my house.”

I raise a brow. “I’m just more cautious of who I fuck.”

“Meaning he doesn’t fuck anyone more than one night. If he can remember who he fucked.” I ignore Silas. He has no room to talk. None of us do.

Roan lights up a joint and passes it to me. “Did you start getting letters again?”

I grab the joint out of his hand and inhale deeply, not saying anything because I don’t like to talk about this shit.

Silas answers for me. “Nah. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t scared shitless of every girl who wants to fuck him.”

“Fuck off.”

Knox grabs the tequila out of Wilder's hand and takes a swig out of the bottle. "Maybe his psycho found someone new to stalk."

"One can hope," I say as I grab the tequila.

"So are we gonna talk about what happened in the studio yesterday?" Wilder asks. "We need to figure out what the hell we are doing. Are we going home?"

Roan takes a drag of the joint. "You think the label is going to let us take time off? We have a tour scheduled immediately after the album comes out. They are already breathing down our necks about getting it finished."

"You really want to put this crap out in the public's eye?" Silas asks.

Roan flips him off. "Our shit is on point. Your bass lines are sick. My hooks are the best they've been. Knox is killing it on drums."

"And Wilder looks sexy as hell on stage, so no matter what he does, it's good." Wilder talks about himself in the third person.

Knox throws a beer cap at him. "We should kick you out of the band if we didn't need you to take over for Jax."

I rub my hands over my face. "I know, guys. I'm fucking this up for us. I just don't know why I have writer's block. Self-doubt is killing me."

"Like I said, I think Riot is right."

I look over at Roan, the man who I know is still head over heels in love with his ex-wife. He never agreed with her. The two of them fought all the damn time and ever since she filed for divorce, he pines for her. And agrees with everything she says.

"We know what's gonna happen if we go there."

Knox lights up a cigarette. "I think we need to risk it. I miss it. And I hate we let him control us to keep us from going back there. I think it would be good for all of us, honestly."

I bite my lip as I think about everything. The shit we got too deep into in New Orleans nearly destroyed us. But my brother is there. Everyone has some sort of family there. And Charlie is there. My rock. The woman can always bring me back to center.

I'm shaken out of my thoughts as I hear the glass patio door slam shut.

"Two months!" Riot shouts as she crosses the patio and lands on the couch next to Knox.

"For what?" Knox asks her.

"The label wants the album done in two months. They gave you an extension. I already got you studio time booked in New Orleans. Rico said he will come out. So find your passion again, Jackson. Show the world that Jax Knight hasn't lost his touch."

She grabs the tequila off the table, swallowing down a large gulp. I guess we are headed home.

I pop a few painkillers. I stayed up far too late last night partying with the guys. Riot is probably happy it happened at our house and not some club where she would need our publicist to do damage control.

She didn't stay long after letting us know the deal she made with the label. She had to head home to her kids. And she tried not to party with us. She says it's bad for her image. I get it, she doesn't need to be associated with the mess that we are. It's part of the reason she filed for divorce from Roan. Well and his inability to keep his dick in his pants when he's high.

I take a drag from my cigarette I left hanging on the edge of the sink. I inhale deeply, letting the smoke calm me before the high hits.

We have a red-eye flight tonight. Well in a few hours. I slept until four, so I have about three hours to make sure I have

my shit packed before our driver picks me up for the airport.

I don't want to go to New Orleans. Too much shit to remind me of all my past mistakes. I wasn't a good kid when I was younger. None of us really were. We did what we had to get by and if that meant stealing shit and reselling it at pawnshops or selling drugs then that's what we did. It didn't always work out for the best though. My older brother, Dylan, started selling drugs before me and slowly pulled me into it. But the difference between the two of us was that he spent too much time sampling the product. He died of an overdose when he was seventeen. I was barely fifteen and was left in charge of taking care of my younger brothers. Dylan always made sure they were taken care of. Our dad was an alcoholic and Mom left us when I was ten.

Another reason I don't want to go home. She left us and never looked back. No remorse for leaving us with an abusive, alcoholic father. She never said a word to us. And then my band made it big. She found me after a show in Vegas once, begging for money. And twice since I've gone back to New Orleans, she's found me. I know for a fact she is going to find me again.

Then there is Charlie. My Charlie. My best friend, whose heart I broke twelve years ago. We've managed to become friends again since then. But every time I see her, it hurts. Because she is the one person I can't have.

CHARLIE

“Let’s take a picture,” I shout as the girls and I slam down a shot.

They all hustle in around me on the side of the island I am on and Janae swipes a phone off the island and holds it up.

“Tummies in, tits out!” I shout as Janae starts tapping the phone for our selfie.

It’s my thirtieth birthday, and I gave myself the night off to party it up with my girls. Even Tacoma flew out here from her home in Tennessee to come celebrate with me.

We make our way down the street, heading to a new bar.

“Where’s Elijah?” Tacoma asks me as she loops her arm through mine.

“He had a show,” I say, keeping emotion out of my voice.

“Is he coming out after?” she asks me curiously.

I shrug. Not wanting to talk about my on-again, off-again boyfriend. Because I am not entirely sure if he is going to show up after or end up fucking some trashy whore in the bathroom after his show. When I first met him, I was head over heels. He was dreamy and tattooed and has the body of a god. But we fight a lot. He’s a flirt. And I’m stubborn. I know I can do better than him. I am not entirely sure he cheats on me. But I care about him for some stupid reason. My black heart always getting me into trouble with the wrong guys. But when he isn’t acting like a tool, he is the sweetest man I know.

“I still don’t know why you haven’t called things off for good with him,” Saylor says as she slides up to my other side as we get in line at a new club that just opened in the quarter.

“Because his dick is pierced and extremely satisfying,” Janae says from behind me.

“His dick is pierced?” Tacoma asks with wonder.

“Yeah.”

“Is it really that satisfying?”

I smile at her deviously. “Maybe you should ask your husband to do it and find out.”

Tacoma pulls out her phone, no doubt telling her husband he needs to get his dick pierced.

“Do you know who else has their dick pierced?” Saylor says.

“Oh boy, are you going to list off all the men you’ve slept with that have a pierced dick?” Willow, Saylor’s cousin, asks her.

“Do we have time for that?” Saylor asks with a hint of amusement on her face.

“Gross,” Willow answers, her face contorting.

“Anywayyyyyy,” Saylor says. “I heard Jax Knight has a Jacob’s ladder much more exciting than the Prince Albert that Elijah has.”

I raise a brow at Saylor. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Oh come on, we all know you’ve fucked him.”

I see the heads turn of the girls in front of us. And I shake my head. “In your dreams, Say.” At least, not since he became Jax Knight. When he was just the boy next door, my best friend, Jackson Knightley.

“You know the only man in my dreams is Knox Beckett.”

Janae snorts. “And your brother would kill him if he touched you.”

“My brother doesn’t have to know!”

I laugh at Saylor. I met her through Jackson’s band. Her brother being Wilder Reed. And he would absolutely kill the drummer in his band if he so much as laid a finger on his sister.

Janae pipes in, changing the subject. “At least Elijah is a better choice than Chaz.”

“Chaz!” Tacoma shouts. “Your mom is still trying to force you two together.”

“Why did you have to bring up Chaz, Janae?”

She shrugs. “Because I love to say his name. Charles Hennington Buford the third. What a douche canoe!”

“It’s been what? Like five years since your mom started to suggest it. How has he not found a wife yet?”

Willow laughs. “Probably because he goes by Chaz.”

“Chaz and Charlie sitting in a tree, k-i—”

I slap my hand over Saylor’s mouth. “Please don’t ever do that again.”

“So about Elijah?” Tacoma says, changing the subject, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“He’s supposed to text me.”

She looks at me with judgmental eyes. “You know—”

I hold my hand up to cut her off. “I don’t want to talk about it. I know, okay? But it’s my birthday, and I just want to have fun. And if I’m lucky, I’ll get laid later.”

Tacoma squeezes my arm, and the subject is changed again to something Saylor is talking about. We finally get into the club and I feel my phone vibrate in my clutch. I’m hoping it’s Elijah. He hasn’t even wished me a happy birthday yet today, but when I look at my phone, my heart squeezes.

Jackson: Happy birthday. Wish I was there. I miss you.

I take a deep breath and shove my phone into my pocket. Trying to remember all the things Janae tells me to clear my

mind of negative energy. But it's not working. All I can think about is Jackson now. And how I wish he was here. How I wish he was the one that would take me to bed later. Wish he was the one with his hands on my black heart.

But he isn't.

He never will be.

That train departed the station a long time ago.

Fuck this. I need a shot.

I plow through my friends to get to the bar. A shot necessary to get those thoughts out of my head.

CHARLIE

I grab my mug out of the cup holder as I slide out of my car and walk toward my bar, Talisman. It is my pride and joy. Even if I blackmailed my way into getting it. I wanted something I could be proud of, something that was mine. And I have it.

I unlock the door and walk into the place I spend more time at than my apartment in the French Quarter. I pass the tufted-leather booths and the antique mirror behind the back of the bar. I set my coffee mug on the edge of the bar then get to making a new pot of coffee so I can get on with my day.

I do a quick check of the inventory behind the bar and the overall cleanliness. I try to not micromanage and stay until closing on weeknights. But I always check to see how the staff handled the night. I make a list of things that need to be done for when my daytime bartenders come in, then pour a new cup of coffee and head up to my office.

I'm halfway through updating the website with the newest list of bands I booked for the upcoming months when my phone rings. My mom's name flashing across the screen.

I pinch my fingers between my brow and sigh as I pick it up. I have a lot of contempt for this woman but she is still my mother. And I should be grateful for the life she gave me, according to her. But she doesn't care or believe me about what happened behind closed doors of that ridiculous house she moved us to. She doesn't care about the man she left behind for a better life. A man who loved her so much her loss

caused him to deteriorate and turn into a drunk. A man I now pay a full-time caretaker for because he can't take care of himself even at the age of fifty.

"Hello?" I answer the phone and try to keep the poison off my tongue.

"Charlotte, it's so good to hear from you."

I hate that she calls me Charlotte. She never did. Not until she met Richard and decided I couldn't be Charlie, the tomboy who hung out with the boys and skateboarded in the street. No, I was to be Charlotte Fortier, a proper Southern woman. I snort as I think about that. Proper, my ass. We grew up in a double-wide in the bad part of town. Dad worked at the factory doing overnights. I never thought there was anything wrong with our life when I was little. There was always food on the table and I got gifts often. I loved hanging out in the neighborhood with my best friends. It wasn't until I turned ten that I realized life wasn't as golden as I thought. When I was smart enough to see the bills piling up on the table. When I realized the fairy tale I lived in was more of a nightmare.

"You called me," I tell her.

"Well that's only because you didn't return my calls."

I run my fingers along the rim of my coffee mug. "I've been busy."

"Doing what?"

I can hear the accusations in her tone. She doesn't even have to say them but I know she will.

"Working, Mom. Like usual."

She scoffs. "At that god-awful bar. I don't know what you see in that place."

"The same thing I've told you a million times. It's a gold mine. Something you should like."

"Don't get snappy with me."

"You asked." I roll my eyes and then take a sip of my now cold coffee.

“Well, I need you to put the bar thing to the side for a weekend. My annual luncheon is coming up and I need you to be here.”

I would like to tell her she can take her societal bullshit and shove it up her ass but I don't want to deal with her any more than I have to. “Mom, you know that is not my scene.”

“Well it would be if you stopped playing bartender and acted like a proper lady, Charlotte.”

“Sure, Mom. I'll get right on that.”

She ignores my sarcasm and continues going on about the importance of the event and the charity it benefits. Which from the sound of it is not a charity that needs money but just the rich looking for an excuse to pretend to be charitable and share their wealth among themselves.

“Besides, Chaz will be there for the auction. And you know he will bid on you.”

I snap my head up from where I was ready to fall asleep against the back of my chair. “Auction?”

“Have you not been listening? All the wives of our Southern Women's Organization have decided the best way to raise the money for the Audubon Society is to auction off our single daughters. It will raise a lot of money. And will look good for you.”

There are so many things wrong with all of this. “I am not auctioning myself off for some bird-watching group that spends their afternoons drinking brandy and gossiping. Not to mention I would never let one of those disgusting pricks you think is God's gift to man touch me, least of all bid on me.”

“Those men are the future of our country, Charlotte. The kind of man you need in your life.”

I shudder as I think of Chaz and his perfectly styled blond hair and too-white teeth. “Well, too bad I am not single.”

“There is no ring on your finger.”

Of course that is what she would say. “You know I am dating Elijah.”

She starts coughing, and I am not sure if she is choking or making a gagging sound. She does not approve of Elijah. Neither does Richard. But I could give two shits about that. It was entertaining as fuck when I brought Elijah to dinner at Richard's house one night and he nearly lost it when he saw the man that is tattooed head to toe. The exact opposite of who my mother and stepfather think I should be dating. But I own a damn rock bar. They should know I would never settle for Chaz.

"He is not a suitable husband, Charlotte."

"And I never said I was marrying him."

"Please just do this for me. You are my only daughter."

And this is when the guilt sets in. When she plays that card.

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you."

Awkward silence crosses the phone line, and I don't know what else to say. "I should get going. I have some things to get done before we open."

"Don't be a stranger, Charlotte."

I hang up the phone before I say anything that will piss her off or piss me off. I know I shouldn't be a bitch to her and I shouldn't let her get to me either. But it's hard when your mother turns a blind eye to everything that's happened to you. And even worse when she takes your abuser's side.

I'm in a shitty mood the rest of the day. Guilt eating me up for not being the daughter my mother wished she had. Even though I know I shouldn't feel guilty. I shouldn't let the ghosts of my past destroy my present or my future.

I take a seat at the bar just after nine. My day was long but productive. Jessica, one of my managers and lead bartender, sets a shot of tequila in front of me.

“You look like you need it,” she says, then walks away.

I shrug even though she’s gone. She isn’t wrong. And although she doesn’t know much about me, none of my employees do, she can read me like a book. I appreciate that she doesn’t ask questions. The only person that worked here that was somewhat successful at prying information out of me was Tacoma. Maybe because we had the same black heart. Luckily, she found someone that beat life back into it.

I end up staying far longer than I intend to. Making small talk with a few regulars and drinking more tequila than I should.

I set down my fourth shot glass when I look up at the entrance to the bar and need to do a double take.

“Fuck me,” I mutter to myself as I take in the five-foot pixie standing in the doorway.

She waves at me and passes through the crowd and approaches me. “Charlie, how’s it going?”

She squeezes me tight. For someone as cutthroat as her, she has a switch that turns into the sweetest thing when she isn’t running her empire.

“Hey Riot, it’s been a while.”

“Yeah, well life on the road isn’t much fun. Nice to have a break for once.”

“And you’re here?”

She raises a brow at me, then flags the bartender down.

“If you are here, that means the guys are here.”

She looks back at me. “Have you not talked to Jackson?”

“No more than usual.” Jessica comes by and takes her order and I nod at her for another shot, ’cause I sure as shit am gonna need it whenever Riot tells me why the hell she is in my bar. Because I can tell from the look on her face, it’s not to hang out as old friends.

“And how much has that been?”

Okay, maybe I need that shot now. “Why are you questioning me?”

Riot slumps against the bar. “Jackson has been in a rut recently.”

“Did he get the clap?” I joke, knowing my childhood best friend has trouble keeping his pants up around women.

“I thought the same thing.” She laughs. “But in all seriousness, I’m guessing he didn’t tell you he’s gonna be here for a few months.”

“No.” Asshole, I think to myself. Something must be wrong if he’s here. He hasn’t stayed for longer than a few days in the last couple years. He never told me why. But I know he and the guys were in some shit. But I’ve never asked. I knew he wouldn’t tell me to protect me.

“They got here this morning.”

“Hmm.”

“I need you to do something while he’s here.”

“This should be good,” I say as I fold my arms across my chest.

“Oh don’t look at me like I am asking you to fake a marriage or something for the press. God knows with his reputation that would be impossible.”

I laugh. At least you can always count on Riot for being blunt as hell.

“I just need you to keep an eye on him. Spend time with him.”

Jessica comes by with our drinks. “What’s wrong with him?” I ask.

“He needs his muse,” she says as she grabs her drink.

“Uh, I’m sorry, what? I am not his muse.”

She gives me a look that has me confused as shit. “Just make sure he isn’t fucking around.”

I snort. “You know I’ve never been able to help him with that since we’ve been friends. Just be straight with me, Riot.”

She swallows down half her drink. “Their new music sucks. Well, no, the music is dope as fuck. The songwriting though is awful. Wilder tried to help him but that was an entirely different problem.”

“So you want me to keep him away from the booze, the drugs, and the women?”

She shoots me a look that says get real. “We both know that’s not possible. But maybe just cut it back.”

“I’ll see what I can do. But not until that asshole tells me he’s here.”

“They all went out tonight.”

“Great,” I mumble into my shot glass.

“Thought I would let you know in case they swing by,” she singsongs and takes a step away from the bar.

“Hold up,” I say to her as I grab her arm. “They are coming here?”

She smiles at me deviously. “I said you were his muse, Charlie. I am more than confident Jax will do anything to get them to swing by here.”

I groan then throw my shot back.

“Good luck!”

Riot walks out of the bar and I know my night just got a whole lot longer.

JACKSON

My mouth is dry as fuck and I swear I can feel my heart beating in my head. What the fuck did I drink last night? Or what didn't I drink?

I pull the blankets tighter around my face. If I drank that much last night, how the fuck am I going to survive two months here? And I don't just worry about all the shit we got into with West. I know the guys worry about that more than anything. Hell, Wilder has a lot to lose if anything ever catches up to us. But I hate coming back here because somehow my mom always finds me. Turns out you can learn to love your kid once he is making millions.

And I don't even want to think about Charlie. Fuck, I've messed shit up with her so many times. Yet she is still around. She puts up with my shit. I am the worst friend on the planet but for some reason she deals with me better than most of the guys in the band.

I hear the click of my bedroom door and cringe. I don't remember if I locked the door and from the sound of it, I didn't. I only have flashes of memories from last night. I remember two girls. I think they were twins. But that was at the club. Did I bring them back here? And fuck me if I didn't lock the damn bedroom door.

I slowly pull the blankets off my face ready to face whatever mistake I made last night but I am blinded by the sun.

“What the fuck?” I yell, throwing my palms over my face to block the light.

“Good morning to you too.” That raspy voice goes straight to my dick. That voice that I have loved for years. But no one knows except for Silas and I have no idea what he told Riot because she made it sound like she knew too. But Charlie has no clue. She has no idea that I’ve loved her since we were fifteen.

“How the fuck did you know I was here?” I ask her. My own voice hoarse from whatever shit I shoved up my nose last night and whatever I smoked.

“You don’t remember drunkenly coming into my bar last night?” I can feel her attitude in her words. Lightly laced with venom. Which only means I caused a scene.

“No.” And that is the gods’ honest truth. I have no recollection of going to Talisman last night. I finally uncover my face, my eyes half adjusting to the brightness of the incoming light.

“Do you remember those two skanks I saw passed out in the guest bedroom?”

Well that answers that question. I did invite the twins over. But at least in my drunken state was smart enough to fuck them in the guest room. “Are they hot?” I ask, knowing it will get a rise out of her.

She picks a pillow up off the floor and throws it at me. “You’re hopeless.”

I shrug. At least she knows that much is true. “How the hell did you get into my room?”

“I have a key.” She raises her hand and holds out the key on a silver key chain. No doubt it has some sarcastic comment on it like every one of her damn mugs. “Smart locking the door so those girls didn’t wake up next to you.”

“Can you close the sun?” I ask, squinting and changing the subject.

“Drink too much?” she asks me as she sits on the end of the bed, ignoring my request to close the damn curtains.

“No I didn’t sleep enough.”

“Well I am sure that’s the case too. Who knows how late you were up with those girls. Do you have any taste anymore? They’re awful.”

I flop back on the bed and grab my head. “Why are you here?”

“To check on your drunk ass. I heard that you need to be recording an album and sleeping until four in the afternoon isn’t on the agenda.”

“Fucking Riot.”

“No, actually Silas told me. He’s the one who asked me to make sure you got your ass out of bed.”

Figures if it wasn’t Riot, it would be Silas. I rub my hands over my face. “Is it really four in the afternoon?”

“Hell no! I have a bar to run. It’s ten in the morning.”

I sit up too quickly, causing my head to spin. “What the fuck, Charlie? Why are you waking me up so early?”

“Early bird gets the worm.”

“Fuck off and leave me alone.” I lie back down and roll over to the nightstand, feeling around for the remote that will shut the curtains in my bedroom.

She doesn’t say anything and just sighs. I really hope I got rid of her. I don’t want to deal with her right now. I don’t want to deal with my music. I don’t want to deal with anything. I just want to go back to sleep until this hangover is gone and I feel like I gained my sanity back.

I must doze off because I am woken by the sound of Charlie screaming at the girls. I can’t help but smile at that. I hear scuffling and then silence and hope to hell she left with them but then hear the sound of my door opening again.

“Time to rise and shine!”

I grab my pillow and put it over my head, not caring how immature it is but I seriously need to sleep this one off.

I am startled by the sheets being ripped off my body and I roll over and face her.

“Put some clothes on, Jackson,” she yells at me as she covers her eyes with her hand.

I know she got a clear-as-day view of my hard-on. But what can I say, I am a guy. I wake up like this most mornings. And not to mention waking up to her sexy voice did things to my dick that shouldn't be possible with how drunk I still feel.

“Well, you kicked out my morning snack, so I guess you are just going to have to deal with this.”

“Gross, I am going to pretend I didn't hear that.” She bends down and suddenly a pair of jeans is coming at my head. “Put those on. I have coffee in the kitchen.”

“Why the rush? We just got here. Can't you tell Silas I need to sleep in?”

She walks toward the door. “I could, but then you would never make it to Talisman. I told him last night you could use the venue today to practice until Riot can book you a practice space.”

“Do I not get a day off?”

“I think you've had enough of those.”

What the hell does she know?

“Now I need to get to the bar and open it so you assholes can practice. So please get a move on.”

I grumble to myself as I pull myself off the bed. Why the hell did I agree to come back here?

“My dick is hard as fuck and I need to take care of it!” I yell at Charlie.

“Well make it quick, we need to go.”

“You sure you don't want to help me?” I tease her and see her stumble a bit outside my door.

“Keep dreaming, Knightley.”

“I will be your knight one day, just you wait.”

She shakes her head at me. “Keep telling yourself that, but you know I don’t need a knight in shining armor.”

If only that were true. And if only she knew I’ve already played the role.

This “practice” day as Charlie called it, is not practice at all. She put me to work the second we got to the bar. I don’t know why she thought I would be of any use sweeping the floors. It did nothing but make me want to puke. And I would have lain in one of the booths while Charlie went up to her office to work but some crazy bartender that was working would not let me quit. I didn’t want to pull the “do you know who I am” card but I was just about ready to when Silas and Wilder finally showed up.

“Dude, took you long enough,” I mutter.

Silas raises a brow at me. “We agreed to noon last night.”

“Noon?”

Wilder laughs as he punches me in the arm. “Your tongue was so far down that girl’s throat you probably don’t remember.”

I flip him off.

“Did the twins live up to their promises?”

I run my hand through my hair. “Fuck if I know. I don’t remember shit. Just Charlie waking my ass up long before I needed to be here.”

Silas snorts. “Did she kick the girls out of your bed?”

“No, I was smart enough to lock the bedroom door.”

“But I did get a wonderful eyeful of pierced dick this morning. Really lifted my mood,” Charlie says sarcastically as

she walks into the bar area. She's carrying a coffee mug that says, "I'm a ray of fucking sunshine." That woman drinks more coffee than anyone I know.

And now that I have sobered up a bit, thanks to a sprite and some hair of the dog, I actually take her in. Her ever-changing hair is half silver and half lilac, sitting in soft waves over her shoulders and chest. Her heart-shaped face framed by wispy bangs. The septum piercing she's had in her nose since high school is fitted with a diamond-studded ring. My eyes drop to her lips, the softest pink color, I can still remember what it was like to taste those lips the first time. I let the hollowness in my chest sputter to life for a second then push everything deep down into the abyss, where I let all my feelings hide.

She is wearing a loose T-shirt that is tied off in the front to reveal just an inch of skin on her stomach and a pair of washed-out black denim shorts that are ripped in strategic places. Her long tan legs on display. She gets sexier every year that passes and it's like a damn knife to my gut knowing that she's off-limits. I made a deal with that devil a long time ago and I will stick to my promises to keep her safe.

"At least when he is still shit-faced at ten in the morning, we know he can still rise to the occasion," Charlie teases.

"Fuck off. You wanted it."

She snorts. "Hardly. That dick has been in far too many holes for me to ever want to be near it. This morning was close enough and I still feel like I may have caught herpes."

"Bitch."

"Asshole."

She smirks at me and I can't help but laugh. We've been friends nearly our whole lives, over twenty years, since we were two kids in a bad neighborhood riding our bikes up and down the road.

"Well, Roan just texted me that they are out back. So let's get the show on the road and get you all in the back before this

bar starts to fill up with people and you spend your afternoon signing autographs.”

“Who would have thought that would ever happen to us?” Silas says as he follows Charlie to the double doors that lead to the small, intimate venue in the back.

Wilder points to an old picture of us that Charlie framed on the wall with some of the other bands that made it big that have played here. “Look at us young punks. There is visible skin on Jackson’s body.”

I look at the old picture of us. My skin only half covered in tattoos. I’m on my knees, leaning backward, screaming into the mic. My hair a lot longer than it is now. We were so young then, thinking we could take on the world. We did, we just didn’t realize the consequences that would follow. But that’s what happens when you think you found the easy way.

Silas has more tattoos than me in the picture and now our roles are reversed. He is heavily tattooed but there are still some spots on his skin that are visible. His hair is short too compared to the past shoulder-length black locks that he has now.

Wilder is screaming into the microphone at the corner of the stage, harmonizing with me. His blond hair piled on top of his head in a man bun before man buns were considered cool.

Roan is standing on a monitor screaming into the crowd, no doubt revving them up. He doesn’t do that anymore. His thrill for the crowds long gone ever since his divorce.

And Knox is a sweaty mess, his drumsticks in the air as he is about to drop his arms and rain havoc with sick beats. He looks scrawny in this picture. This was before he started working out twice a day to keep his demons at bay.

I sigh then look up to see Charlie holding the door for me. Silas and Wilder already climbing up onto the stage.

“You okay, Jax?” Her eyes are sad.

I don’t say anything for a beat, holding my breath at the fact she called me Jax. She rarely does anymore. Our friendship has been dangling by a thread the last few years.

Ever since I vowed not to spend time in New Orleans anymore. And she used to be the only one to call me that name. I was born Jackson Knightley. But ever since we were kids, she called me Jax. She would tease me about being a knight in shining armor because of my last name. It's where I pulled my stage name from. Jax Knight. The hero to Charlie Fortier. She just didn't know I was her hero.

I nod at her. "Yeah, I'm good."

She purses her lips as I start to walk toward her and grabs my arm as she passes. "Hey. I know things haven't really been the same with us lately. But I am glad you're here. Maybe we can finally spend some time together like we used to back in the day."

"Sure, Charlie."

"Hey, I mean it."

I go to reach for her face, to hold her in my hands but I stop myself. "I know you do."

She frowns at me and lets go of my arm. I can't stand to look into those clear-blue eyes anymore, so I walk toward the stage.

JACKSON

“You okay?” Silas asks me as he sets the case for his bass down next to me. I am lying on the couch in the greenroom of Talisman. Although I wouldn’t call it much of a greenroom. It’s an eight by ten room with a purple velvet couch, three folding chairs, a coffee table, and a mini-fridge. I mean, it’s at least something but nothing compared to what we have now. But I remember many nights in this room. The guys and I hyping each other up before a show. I look over at the wall where so many musicians have signed, our signatures lost in the mix. Charlie has really made this place a sanctuary for new bands and even the ones who have made it, like us. Too bad I feel like a fraud.

I look over at Silas then grab my smokes out of my back pocket. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I ask even though I know why he is asking.

“You sounded worse today than you’ve sounded in a while.”

“I told you I didn’t want to come back here.”

“What happened with you and Charlie?”

“What do you mean?” I take a drag of my cigarette then look around for an ashtray and don’t see one.

Silas grabs two beers out of the mini-fridge and hands me one. “I saw you two talking before you came to the stage. It looked...” He pauses and grabs the back of his neck. “Intense. I don’t know. It wasn’t the same Jackson and Charlie from five minutes before that.”

I swallow down half the beer then take a drag from my smoke. “Just same shit as always.”

“She worries about you, man.”

I take another sip of my beer. “Just like all of you do. But I assure you I am fine.”

“I’m not talking about everyone else, Jax. This is just between you and me. Not Riot. Not the guys. Not Charlie.”

I take a deep drag of the smoke in my hand before putting it out in my beer bottle. I know Silas worries about me. We’ve been friends almost as long as me and Charlie. He moved to the neighborhood when we were eight and he fit right in with the band of misfits, the name Charlie called me and my older brother. When Silas and his brother came into town, we all just fit together. Pieces of different puzzles that somehow fit and became their own picture.

I know not to shut Silas out. Not like I do with the other guys. But sometimes I need my space. Time alone. “I’m good, brother.”

He tosses his empty bottle in the trash. “No, you’re not, but I’ll let you keep believing it.”

I run my hands through my hair and sigh. I have nothing to tell him. Nothing to say that will make him understand what I’m feeling. ’Cause I don’t even understand what I’m feeling.

“Wanna head out? I’ll give you a ride back to your penthouse. Get outta this place before it gets too crowded.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“You going out tonight?”

I look over at him as we walk through the hall leading from the greenroom and up the stairs that I know lead to Charlie’s office. She locked the door to the concert hall so we need to use the catwalk entrance to the other staircase that leads to the back room of the bar.

“Nah. I’m still tired. I should try and come up with some new music since today was shit.”

We walk past her office and the lights are off. I doubt she left for the day. The woman practically lives here. I can only guess she is out bartending tonight.

Silas stops me as we make our way down the stairs and into the hall that leads out to the bar. “I don’t want you to rush. Don’t force out some shitty-ass music because you feel pressure from the label and from Riot. I know you don’t want to be back here. And while the guys might think it’s because of West, I know it’s not. But I also know she is what you need right now. So much time away from—”

“Please don’t tell me you think she is my muse. I hear it enough from Riot.”

Silas looks at me like I just told the biggest lie. “You guys have been weird the last few years and ever since then your writing has been shit. I know you don’t talk to her as much since she texts me and asks how you’re doing. I have no idea what happened. But you need her. And she needs you too.”

I want to punch a hole in the wall. I am so sick of everyone thinking that my fucking writer’s block is because of Charlie. It’s not. I don’t know what’s causing it. Maybe I am depressed. Maybe it was the stress from my stalker and what I did. Maybe it’s all the other shit I have to deal with on a daily basis but it’s not Charlie.

The sound of giggling and the rattle of bottles has us both looking into the storage room a few feet down the hall. Charlie is pressed against one of the racks holding her liquor stock with a man’s hand shoved up her shirt. His lips are on her neck and one of her legs is wrapped around his hip. The man’s other hand is shoved between her thighs and that’s when I see that damn black widow tattoo on his forearm. Fucking Elijah Nash.

I crack my knuckles, ready to pound that asshole’s face into the ground but Silas pulls me back before I can do anything.

“Doesn’t look like I need her, Silas. She seems to be just fine.” I push him off me then storm through the bar. It’s already crowded and a few people recognize me in my haste to

get outside. I ignore them as they shout my name and push through the crowd and out onto the crowded street.

I have no idea where Silas parked but I don't wait for him to get through the crowd and turn down a side street before pulling out my smokes and lighting one up. I wish I had something stronger. Something better than nicotine. But most of my good shit is back in LA.

Silas doesn't take long to find me and he's smart enough not to say anything. Even though I know he saw that tattoo. And I know he feels the same way I feel.

He nods his head toward Kerlerec Street and I follow him. He unlocks his SUV and I climb into it before saying anything.

“You think she knows?”

He looks over at me then pops open the center console and pulls out a flask. “I doubt it. She doesn't even know about Richard.”

“I fucking hate Elijah.”

Silas snorts and takes a large gulp of the whiskey I know is in the flask before handing it to me. “He's a dick twat.”

“Riot is rubbing off on you.”

“Are you surprised?”

I shake my head and take a shot of the whiskey. “You got anything stronger?”

Silas winks at me then digs through the console. “I think I have some coke in here from last time we were home. Probably is shit but should still do the job.”

“I should have more at my penthouse.”

“Beats going out.”

“I don't know. Those twins were worth it.”

Silas pulls out a tin and flips it open, a good amount of white powder filling it. “Like you actually remember them.”

I grab the tin out of his hand and pull a credit card out of my wallet and dip the tip in to get a bump. “Charlie’s face this morning told me enough.”

“Probably worth it that you don’t remember.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I couldn’t care less.”

Silas takes a bump after me, then slides the tin back into the console. “Well, let’s go get fucked up at your place.”

“You wanna sleep in those sheets?” I know he knows I am referring to the ones I had a threesome in last night.

“Fuck no, man. But your couch is hella comfortable.”

I laugh as he pulls out onto the road and heads toward my penthouse in the CBD. We talk shit on the short drive to my penthouse and just as we pull into the underground garage, my phone dings.

Unknown: Welcome home, Mr. Knightley. You still owe me a favor.

I curse as Silas looks at my phone then up at me. He just nods his head then parks the SUV. We both knew this was inevitable, just didn’t think it would happen so soon.

CHARLIE

I finish putting on my eyeliner when I hear the buzzer go off for my front door. I told Silas I would go over to his house in the Garden District for a small gathering. Which knowing the guys will turn into a full-on party even though it's a Monday night. But it's the one night I never work, so I might as well enjoy myself. And maybe figure out what's going on with Jackson.

I head to the front door and see Elijah standing outside on the video screen. I buzz him in without question. He has practice tonight and sometimes he likes to come over beforehand for "inspiration" as he calls it. Which usually just means some crazy sex against a wall. And I am not complaining about that.

I hold the door open when I hear his boots clomping up the stairs. "Hey," I say as Elijah comes into view.

He smirks at me and I can't help but smile. I hate the man half the time but the sex is decent. His black hair is cropped short, showing off the strong jawline he has. His arms are covered in tattoos, something I've always found attractive, probably since the day Jackson's older brother gave him a stick and poke when he was fourteen.

Elijah pushes me inside, his mouth finding mine immediately. His kisses are rough, they always have been. Everything about him is rough. His touch, the way he fucks, but I don't mind it. Most of the time.

He kicks the door shut behind him as he grips my hips and pulls me into him. His mouth drags down my neck, his teeth digging into my clavicle.

“Don’t you have practice?”

He squeezes my ass then runs his fingers under my oversized T-shirt, grazing the edge of my ass. “I do.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Can’t I come get some ass from my girlfriend whenever I want it?” His words are hard and his touch harder as he slides his fingers between my thighs. “Spread your legs.”

I do as he says and he shoves a finger into me even though I’m not quite ready for the intrusion. “Fuck, Eli. Give me a minute.”

He lets up for a second then looks me in the eye. His green eyes look messed up, like he’s on drugs and I’m suddenly completely turned off. He knows I hate it when he comes over here high on coke or whatever else he puts in his body. He’s always too rough. Too intense. Too abusive.

He takes me in then. “Why are you dolled up?”

“I’m going out.”

“Where?” he demands, his grip tightening on me, his fingers digging into my hips.

“Silas’s house.”

He shoves his finger back in me and I cry out in pain. “So because I have practice, you are going to go over and hang out with Jax and get your pussy fucked by someone else?”

I pull on his wrist and manage to get it out from between my legs. I push him back. “Hardly.”

“What does that mean?” he asks as I head toward the kitchen.

“I don’t know why you have such a problem with them. They’ve been my friends for over twenty years.”

“Because I don’t know who you are fucking when I’m not around.”

I scoff at that. “Like you have room to talk.”

He grips my hair hard and rips it backward, pulling me into his chest. I am ninety percent sure he just pulled out a chunk of hair. “Let me go, Elijah.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“About what?” I ask as I use my ass to push off him and twist my neck to turn and face him, pulling my hair out of his fist.

“About you and Jackson.”

“Oh my god. How many times do I have to tell you we are nothing but friends?”

He steps closer to me but I sidestep him. “Because every time you talk to him, text him, he is always more important than me.”

I scoff. “So you are jealous? Of someone I talk to. Wow. You are so pissed over that. I’m the one who should be pissed. I’m still fucking you even though I know you can’t keep your dick out of anyone.” He grimaces at my words. “I don’t even know why I deal with you. You’re such an asshole.”

The slap of his hand on my face shocks me. Heat radiating against my cheek. I didn’t even see it coming. I usually do at this point in our relationship. “Wanna say that again?”

Despite knowing I shouldn’t, I stand my ground. “You’re an asshole.”

His hand goes to my throat and I try to kick him away but he grabs my leg, wrapping it around his body. “You sure you wanna say that again?”

“Fuck you.” I spit. Suddenly realizing this wasn’t just coke he was doing but some mix of uppers and downers that always causes this rage.

He smacks my head against the cabinets then tightens his grip on my throat. “I don’t even know why I keep you around.

You're just an entitled whore."

"I'm the furthest thing from entitled," I gasp as I try to claw his hand away from my throat.

"You say that now until you run back to dear old stepdad and ask him for more money."

"You know I don't do that," I say as I try to push him away.

"You're just a rich bitch who thinks she can kick it with us scum."

I kick against his thigh with my free leg. "You're being ridiculous, Elijah."

"Says the woman living in a million-dollar apartment in the French Quarter."

"You're just jealous that I know how to run a business when you can barely hang on to a job." I regret the words the second they come out of my mouth.

He smacks me upside the head where he just slammed me into the cabinet and my vision goes black for a second before I start to see stars.

"Shut your mouth, bitch." Spittle hits my face.

I actually start to get scared. He has never acted like this before. Sure, he's been aggressive. And pushed me around, hit me a few times. But he's never been this physical with me. I dig my nails into his arm, gripping my throat. "I'm so done with you."

"You gonna go run to your little childhood boyfriend and cry because daddy won't give you more money."

I clench my hand in a fist and punch him in the jaw.

"Fucking bitch," he yells, his hand around my throat dropping as he goes to touch his face.

I take the moment to slip away from him and back up toward a set of balcony doors. I am questioning everything now. I don't know why I'm with him. Why I put up with this. Probably because I use him as a way to piss off my mom. Or

maybe because I spent my teenage years dealing with much worse. But it's the same thing every time. I threaten to leave him and he abuses me. I have no idea why it matters. He can get ass anywhere. But this vicious cycle needs to stop. The circle of asshole to sweetheart. It was fun at first, but it's growing old.

His phone rings in his pocket and he quits his approach to me. He grabs his phone and answers it, saying only a few words before he looks back at me, his eyes full of rage. "I'm not done with you."

"Get out, Elijah."

"We have shit to talk about."

My back hits the glass door behind me. "No, we don't. Get the fuck out."

He just grunts then turns around and heads out the front door, slamming it behind him.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Then rush to the door and lock it. I know he can't get back in. But it still freaks me out. This is the most aggressive he has ever been. And for the first time I've been with him, I was scared for my life.

I sit on the darkest corner of the couch in Silas's backyard. As I expected, it's no small gathering. There are at least seventy-five people here and half a dozen naked women in his pool.

I only came out because I felt safer here than at my own house. I don't know what happened with Elijah today besides a mix of drugs and jealousy but something was majorly off and I had to get out of that damn apartment.

I've barely seen Jackson since I got here. I don't even know when he got here, to be honest. He's been inside most of the night and I am pretty sure I saw him with some brunette kneeling in front of him at some point when I went to the bathroom.

I should probably go home. But I don't want to go back there in case Elijah comes back. Not that he can get in. And I don't want to call Janae because she will just do the same I-told-you-so spiel.

A body lands next to me on the couch and I look over to see a wild head of cherry hair right before it lands on my lap.

“You look cheery.”

I look down at Saylor and laugh. “And you look high as fuck.”

“Dude, I got this new weed and I swear it's like floating on a cloud.”

“That's exactly how you look.”

She smiles her big, goofy grin at me. “I brought you a present!”

She sits up and grabs her tie-dyed tote bag off the ground. She pulls a bottle of tequila out and then folds a leg under the other and faces me on the couch. “You look like you needed this.”

“You hardly even drink. I doubt you were carrying it all night.”

She giggles. “I stole it from Silas.”

I shake my head and spin the lid off and take a huge gulp, the burn warming my insides as it hits my stomach. I hand it to Saylor but she just shakes her head. She pulls a pipe out of her bag and takes a hit.

“You sure you don't want this?”

I laugh. “No thanks.”

She smiles at me and then takes another hit. Saylor is eight years younger than me. But we get along like sisters. Ever since Wilder and Knox joined the band, she's been a constant presence. Wilder practically raised her and I've always felt like the older sister to her ever since she was ten.

“So what's wrong?”

I look over at her and shake my head.

“Why does no one want to talk about their feelings tonight? First my brother, then Jackson, and now you.”

“It’s nothing. Just tired.”

“Yeah right. I think I have my cards with me. Let me do a reading.” She bends down to grab that giant tote again and pulls out a tarot deck.

I push them away. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Well something is obviously bothering you.”

I brush my hair behind my ear. “It’s nothing.”

Saylor stares at me then grabs my face and turns my head. “Did Elijah do that?”

“Say...”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? What happened?”

Even though I am close with Saylor, I try to keep her out of the drama of my life. Only Janae really knows about the abuse that sometimes happens. I try to cover things up whenever it does. But I guess I wasn’t thinking when I left the house today in a panic and thought the bruises would form later on.

“He was a dick.”

“He choked you.”

“I punched him.” I laugh.

She eyes me curiously. “Look, I know you don’t tell me everything. And I am just some young hippie that has her life handed to her. But this isn’t right, Charlie.”

I grab her hand and squeeze. “You aren’t just some young hippie, okay? You’re actually too smart for your own good.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I know.”

She takes another hit off her pipe, then tosses it back in her tote bag. “Well I wasn’t going to drink tonight cause you know

how I get. But fuck it. You look like you need to forget.”

I smile at her and open the tequila back up. “I am not your responsibility.”

“Gee thanks.”

“I’ll go find Knox and make him watch over you.”

Her green eyes light up. “Please do.”

“Not only would Wilder kill me but Knox would tell you to fuck off and deal with your own shit.”

“Mmmm. I would let him.”

I shake my head. “You are hopeless.”

“Have you seen him tonight? He is one fine specimen of a man just walking around.”

I look over her shoulder and see Wilder walking toward us. “You might want to quit your drooling before your brother gets over here.”

She groans and then grabs the tequila from me, taking a giant swig. She is coughing from the burn when Wilder walks over to us and leans his forearms on the back of the couch.

“You getting my sister drunk?”

“You know me. Bad influence,” I joke as I point at myself.

He laughs then looks at his sister. “You going to be okay?”

She rolls her eyes at him but I talk before she can answer. “She’s with family. It’s fine.”

He looks between the two of us then nods. “Alright.” He looks over at her. “Don’t leave the house. No wild shenanigans.”

“Me? Shenanigans? Never.” Saylor tosses her head back after saying it, cackling into the humid night sky.

“She is high as a kite too,” I tell Wilder.

“Good, then she won’t drink as much.”

I nod. I know he worries about her when she drinks. Too many mistakes from when she was younger, I think it’s half

the reason she is smoking weed all the time. Keeps her from drinking.

“Have you seen Jackson?” Wilder asks me.

I shake my head. “I think he was getting his dick sucked an hour ago so my only guess is he’s fucking someone in one of Silas’s guest rooms.”

Wilder stands and folds his arms over his chest. “Jealous?”

“Hardly.”

“Hmm.”

I ignore him and stand. “Well I am going to run to the restroom real fast.” Mostly so I can try and cover up the marks on my neck that Saylor noticed before anyone else notices.

“Tell Jackson I’m looking for him if you see him.”

I nod then head into the house. I still don’t see Jackson anywhere so I can only imagine he is with that brunette. I literally want to slap myself for the jealousy I feel. I don’t know why I have any. I gave up on anything between us when we were seventeen and he fucked my best friend after I admitted to him I had feelings. God, I wanted to murder him.

It all started when we were at Roan’s house playing seven minutes in heaven. Somehow I spun the bottle and it landed on Jackson. I was so nervous but he played it off as nothing. We had been friends for over ten years but as puberty hit, he was no longer the scrawny boy with a high-pitched voice. No, he grew six inches, his voice got deeper, sexier, and every day we hung out I started to get more and more attracted to him. But I never told him. I didn’t want to ruin our friendship. But then that damn bottle landed on him and I knew everything was going to change.

He laughed at me as we got pushed into the laundry room. He asked me why I was nervous. I just shook my head even though I knew he couldn’t see me. Then his hands were on me, he was touching me. One hand on my hip, the other against my cheek. He whispered my name, and I felt his breath across my lips. I remember how fast my heart was beating, how I felt like I was going to pass out. But then he kissed me.

He kissed me. And I thought I was dreaming. Until he said my name again and then I kissed him back. And I couldn't stop kissing him.

We dated for two months. Sneaking around my mom and stepdad's house. Or me traveling to the north side of Baton Rouge when I could. I was falling for him. Hard. But why wouldn't I? He was my best friend and then we were more. And it felt so right. Everything about us was right. I nearly told him I loved him. And then I found out from one of the girls at school that my best friend, Ashley, fucked him after a baseball game one night.

I was devastated. Heartbroken. I hated him.

I didn't speak to him for three months. It wasn't that hard when we lived in different parts of town and went to different schools. I only saw him once after graduation. But I couldn't stand to look at him. I felt betrayed. Lost. He was my best friend. We understood each other on so many levels. Maybe because we both felt like outcasts.

I went to college in Mississippi. He would text me every now and then but it never felt genuine. I was a loner in college. I couldn't make friends, not after losing Jackson. Not to mention Silas and Roan too. I ended up dropping out after two years and moved to New Orleans. I felt at home here. As soon as I turned twenty-one, I got a job bartending at a jazz club down the street from where Talisman is now. And when the opportunity came for me to purchase an old run-down rock bar, I sold my soul to make it mine.

I was just starting to book bands when this tiny girl with big hair and a loud mouth convinced me to book a band. I agreed because I would take anyone at that point to help gain attention to my bar. When Jackson walked into my bar a few days after that, it was like hell froze over when I saw him. I think it's the only time I've seen him startled. And then we kind of just picked up where we left off. We let bygones be bygones. And our friendship became stronger than it was before. But that's all it is, friends. We never really had a conversation about it. It just seemed like some mutual

understanding that we wouldn't ever pursue something more than friendship. And it's worked for us for the last eight years.

I fix my makeup in the bathroom mirror, covering up the bruises that are starting to form on my neck. The jealousy I had over Jackson being with some girl fading as anger takes its place. I need to do something about Elijah.

I step out of the bathroom and head down the hall when I run into Jackson.

"Hey Charlie."

"Hey."

"I haven't seen you all night."

I laugh. "I could say the same."

He raises a brow at me. "Are you suggesting I was doing something?"

I lean my shoulder against the wall and look at him. His hair is always messy but it doesn't look like sex hair. It actually looks rather normal. The sides faded, his hair much longer at the top, almost too long. It would be hanging down his face to his nose if he didn't have it brushed back.

"I saw you getting comfortable with a girl on her knees earlier."

He throws his head back and laughs. "I must have been fucked up early if I don't remember getting a blow job."

"Were you?" I ask and realize the jealousy is coming out of my tone. Fuck, I need more tequila. What is coming over me?

Jackson stares at me but doesn't say anything. His whiskey eyes are intense and I have to look away to escape his gaze.

"I need a drink," I say as I push off the wall and walk toward the parlor room in Silas's house. He bought an old mansion in the Garden District years ago when they first made it big. When Saints & Sinners spent their time split between LA and New Orleans. He had the house renovated and

modernized but somehow was able to keep a lot of the architecture and the Crescent City charm.

I can feel Jackson on my heels as I walk into the front room and walk behind the bar, scanning the bottles for tequila. Saylor brought me a shit bottle, so I know there is a good bottle here somewhere.

Jackson steps up behind me and reaches over my shoulder, pushing a bottle aside to grab the tequila I was looking for.

I spin around but he doesn't move, caging me against the bar. "Thanks."

"Why did you seem so upset I was with some girl?"

I swallow and mentally take a deep breath to calm my nerves. "I wasn't. I was just curious."

"You have a boyfriend."

I never told him that I was dating Elijah. It's only been like six months, and I obviously don't take it seriously. But I didn't want to tell him because I know they hate each other. Elijah has a deep jealousy over Jackson's success. And I don't even know why Jackson hates him.

"How do you—"

"I saw you with him the other night at Talisman when we were leaving after practice."

"Oh."

Oh! Shit. Eli stopped by the bar early before he had to go to work. I let him finger fuck me in the storeroom. Jackson smirks at me, and I know he knows what I am thinking about.

But his expression quickly changes. "He's an asshole, Charlie."

"I know." The makeup on my neck is proof of that.

"Then why are you with him?"

His voice goes quiet with the question and I try not to think too much of the change in his tone. "Why do you care?"

"He's trouble, Charlie."

“I know.”

“He’s probably fucking you because of us. Some form of payback.”

“I know he is jealous of you guys and your success. He wants his band to get to your level. Too bad they don’t have the magic that you guys do.”

“I wasn’t talking about the band, Charlie.”

My eyes snap to his.

“I was talking about you and me.”

Eli has always made remarks about Jackson and me having sexual relations but I’ve always told him it’s the furthest thing from the truth. But why would Jackson think that?

I am about to ask him when his hand that was resting against the bar behind me drops to my hip for a second. His thumb grazing my hip bone before he drops his hand and takes a step back, grabbing the tequila as he leans back against the bar top across from me.

I feel like I had to be making that up in my head because why would he touch me like that?

I grab the tequila bottle out of his hand just as he goes to put it to his lips.

“Bitch,” he mutters as I swallow down the largest gulp I can take without puking.

I shrug and hand the bottle back to him.

I use the liquid courage to ask him about what he said. “What did you mean about Eli and you and me?”

Jackson sets the tequila down and folds his arms over his chest. “The guy hates me. And he would do anything to get under my skin, including getting you under him.”

It takes me a second to process that. So many things said in just one sentence. Why would my having sex with Eli get under Jackson’s skin? Not to mention that he suggested Eli is just using me. I choose to ignore the former. “You mean he’s using me?” I don’t mean to sound defensive but I do. Hell, the

man had his hand around my throat earlier, I shouldn't care but I don't want to be some pawn.

Jackson frowns. "That's not what I meant."

"Well then what did you mean?" I ask, my voice getting louder with every word.

He runs his hand through his hair, pieces of the long strands falling in his face. "I just—"

"There you are!" Saylor shouts as she dances into the room.

I look back at Jackson, waiting for him to say something but he just hands me the tequila bottle and walks out of the room.

Saylor jumps onto the bar, swinging her legs over the edge. "Did I interrupt something?"

I bite my lip as I stare at the door then shake my head. "Nothing important."

"Sorry, if—"

"Don't worry about it, Say." I swig another shot of tequila. "But I definitely need a lot more drinks even though I know I'll be paying for it in the morning."

"Woo-hoo! Tequila!" she shouts and grabs the bottle from my hand, throwing back a shot.

At least I can keep my mind off Jackson if I need to babysit drunk Saylor. Which is exactly the distraction I need.

CHARLIE

My head is pounding from the copious amounts of tequila I drank last night. I knew I was going to pay for it this morning and I definitely am. But Tuesday mornings are my busy day. I need to place all my vendor orders. I need to go through all the emails from the weekend and get to work on bookings.

After two hours of staring at the computer, I cannot take it anymore. I let my day manager know I am going to take a nap and to wake me up if there are any emergencies. Of course she tells me I should just go home but I haven't been there since last night with Elijah. I don't know why I am psyching myself up so much. I took a shower at Silas's house this morning and wore yesterday's clothes to work. I have some extra clothes in my office and changed when I got here.

I head back upstairs and make sure I have no pertinent emails then lock my office door and head down the back stairs toward the greenroom. The couch isn't the cleanest, but it's comfortable as hell. I unlock the closet door in the room and grab a pillow then collapse onto the couch and fall asleep within seconds.

I wake up to someone saying my name quietly. Then feel the touch of a hand on my face. I blink my eyes open and see tattooed knuckles pressing gently across my cheekbone.

“Hey.”

I look up into those whiskey-colored eyes. “Hey.”

“You okay?”

I try to sit up but feel nauseous. “No.”

“I went up to your office but found it locked and then Jessica told me you were back here and that you are hungover as fuck.”

I press my palm against my forehead, my headache faint but still there. “Well that was so nice of her to spill my secrets.”

Jackson’s deep chuckle hits me in the gut and I want to tell my damn black heart to stop with the sparks. He pulls an electrolyte drink off the table behind him and opens a bottle of Advil. “Figured you could use these.”

“Thanks,” I mutter as I grab them from him.

“I... I wanted to apologize for last night. I said some shit that I shouldn’t have said.”

I sit up to swallow down the Advil then lie back down. “But did you mean them?”

He studies me, threading his tattooed fingers together as he rests his elbows on his knees. “Elijah is an asshole.”

“I think that is something we can both agree on.”

“But I shouldn’t have said he was using you. That wasn’t fair to assume.”

“I accept your apology,” I tell him. Even though I do want to ask him what he meant by getting under his skin.

“I also want to apologize for being a dick to you lately. Well, more just absent. I realized we haven’t really been talking as much as normal and I think it’s been fucking with my head.”

“I’m glad I work as well as the drugs that keep you sane.”

He smirks at me. “I mean it, Charlie. I’ve been having a rough go of it and I think part of it is that we haven’t been talking like we usually do.”

I nod. “You have been distant lately.”

“I’ve just been tired, you know. I want a break. Music used to come so easy to me and it’s been so hard. And Riot’s breathing down my neck more so than usual.”

“Does she have a step stool when she breathes down your neck? Cause it would be awfully hard for her to reach your neck.”

He punches me in the arm and I can’t help but laugh.

“She was the one that suggested we come home.”

I finally ask him a question I’ve always wondered about but didn’t press it. “Why haven’t you been? I rarely see you. Only when you have a show. And even then it’s just passing through. If you guys didn’t come here now, I probably wouldn’t see you for at least another six months, if not a year.”

He rubs the back of his neck, his hair flopping into his face. “It’s complicated.”

“That’s life.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t press the subject because he obviously doesn’t want to talk about it. And one thing with Jackson is if you try to pull too much out of him at once, he shuts down and then it takes weeks for him to open back up.

“How’s business been?”

I push myself up into a sitting position and raise a brow. “You don’t really care how business is.”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“But it’s been good. Can’t complain actually.”

“Good. Have you talked to your mom lately?”

I groan. He knows the complicated relationship we have. “Same as always. Still trying to get me to marry this guy Chaz.”

“Chaz?” he asks and when I look up at him, I can see him trying to hold in his laughter.

“Yeah, poor guy. Although he could just tell people to call him Charles but he doesn’t like that either apparently.”

“So what’s this Chaz guy got that’s so special?”

“Oh you know. A good family, a good job, money. He’s really every Southern girl’s dream.” I turn on the accent.

“Sounds right up your alley.”

“You know it.”

He chuckles. “I want to meet this Chaz and make sure he is good enough for you.”

“He would probably crap his pants if he met you.”

“Superfan?”

I laugh. “Uh, no. He is just a pansy. He is scared of anyone who is tattooed or pierced. Like, he legit thinks they are all criminals that are going to jump him.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s a real winner. I have no idea why he is so into me. I am clearly not his type. But maybe he finds a thrill in a girl with two-toned hair and a septum piercing. But if he ever saw me naked, he may run away holding his dick, scarred for life.”

“Now you have me intrigued, Charlie. Is the good girl hiding something under those nice clothes?” Jackson says sarcastically.

I throw my hand to my chest and bring out my strongest Southern flourish. “I would never.”

“So what is under all those clothes?” His voice drops and gets gravelly, causing those damn butterflies to take flight in my stomach.

“You are just going to have to use your imagination.”

“Lame.”

I laugh as I pull my hair to the side and braid it. My messy ponytail from earlier falling out from my nap.

I'm halfway through with my braid when Jackson's eyes darken and his hand reaches for me.

“What the hell, Jax?”

He ignores me and pushes my hair to the side. “What the fuck are these?” he asks, rage clearly fogging his brain.

“What are what?” I play dumb when I realize that my makeup must have rubbed off on the pillow.

He presses his fingers into a bruise and I flinch. “Exactly. Who did this to you? Did he do this?”

I push his hand away. “Did who?”

“Charlie.” His voice is stern.

“Elijah? No,” I lie. “That was a stupid drunken accident from last night. Ask Saylor, she was there and saw me trip over my feet as I tried to pull my shoes off and then fell into the dresser.”

I know he doesn't believe me. Just like when we were young and he noticed the bruises on me then. I made up so many excuses and every time he just nodded his head and said, “Yeah okay, Charlie.” It wasn't until one night when he snuck into my room to hang out and my leg started bleeding. He pushed my cotton shirts up and saw the cuts on my thighs. The only way I dealt with the emotional and physical abuse was through more pain.

He flipped out on me. Asked me why I was cutting myself. Told me to stop lying to him. I've never seen him so angry. And then I started panicking, scared Richard would hear him and walk into my room. I know what would happen if he did. He would kick Jackson out and threaten him. Then come back to my room and teach me a lesson like he always did. Whether with his fists or his dick.

That was the night I broke down to Jackson. I told him all my secrets. The truth about the bruises. The sexual abuse. He asked if Richard raped me. And I broke down even more, sobbing into his chest. I could feel his anger, feel his need to kill Richard. But he didn't leave me. He pulled me into his arms and let me cry for hours. I fell asleep curled into his chest

and he snuck out the next morning. But after that, he taught me how to protect myself when Richard was mad. But then Richard started wandering into my room when he wasn't mad. When Mom was passed out drunk. I would wake up to the feel of his body over mine. I panicked the first time and it was the worst I took. He kept a hand over my mouth and held my arms above my head. I fought him as much as I could with every thrust inside of me and he only made it more painful. I learned quickly to give up. To let him take what he wanted. I started cutting more when that happened. And when Jackson and I started dating, he realized it was worse than I was making it out to be.

“Are you lying to me?”

I wish I could tell him the truth but the last time I told him the truth, I lost him. Only a week after we slept together for the first time, what should have been me losing my virginity. I lost Jackson because he slept with Ashley. Part of the reason it hurt me so much was because I thought he thought I was worthless because of what was happening to me. I realized over time and a lot of therapy that even if that was the case, it wasn't my worth. I know now that he never saw me that way. But it still hurts sometimes, still brings back memories I don't want to surface.

I never reported what Richard did to me. I tried to tell my mom at one point but she brushed me off. I got my revenge on Richard by blackmailing him into paying for Talisman. He has a high-ranking job at LSU and it would destroy his career if I let his secret slip. He had no problem signing a check. I hate myself sometimes for taking that route. But it gave me power over him and that was the closure I needed to put the abuse in the past and keep that demon shut under lock and key.

I think Jackson is about to pry when Wilder and Roan come walking into the greenroom. “Hey Charlie. You alive today?”

“Barely,” I say, thankful I don't need to face Jackson's interrogation.

“I don’t know what you did to my sister, but I swear her face was green this morning.”

I laugh. “Because she thought she could keep up with me and go shot for shot with the tequila.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t even remember the last time she drank like that.”

I do but I am not going to tell him her secrets. All he thinks is that she just partied too hard one night and doesn’t drink anymore. He doesn’t know what really happened and the real reason she doesn’t drink much at all anymore. And I never plan on telling him. She can do that.

Roan walks over to Jackson and punches him in the shoulder. “You ready to actually write some good songs today?”

Whiskey eyes meet mine and I can see the anger in them. I know he is not happy that our conversation was interrupted and I know he also doesn’t believe me. But he won’t say anything in front of the guys.

“Well, I need to go check on the bar. Make sure everything is good. See you guys later. Feel free to have a drink on the house before you leave.”

I head out toward my office when I feel Jackson grab my arm.

“Maybe you can come over tonight when you’re off and we can just watch stupid movies and talk. I won’t bring up Elijah.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes and know he needs that connection with me as much as I do. “I’d like that.”

“*Goonies?*”

I smile at him. “I’ll bring the popcorn.”

“Extra butter.”

“Duh.”

“Okay, Charlie.” He lets go of me and smiles before letting his face fall then turns back to the greenroom.

I walk up the stairs and shut the door behind me when I get to my office. I close my eyes as I lean my head against the door. Time with Jackson is what I need. It's felt so awkward between us since he got back. And after that conversation last night, I just need us to be normal. I need him to be that constant in my life again.

I place my hand against my neck as my thoughts go back to Elijah. I need to end it with him before things get worse.

I use the bathroom in my office and fix the makeup on my neck. I add a few coats of mascara and some blush to my cheeks so I don't look so hungover then head down to the bar. I usually work for a few hours on Tuesday, spending time with regulars and just keeping an eye on things to make sure no shady shit is going on in my bar.

It's a slow night and I keep glancing toward the back, hearing the muted sounds of the guys practicing. Guilt eats me alive that I lied to Jackson. I always tell him everything. It's just something we've always promised each other after losing nearly four years of friendship. I should tell him but maybe not until I break up with Elijah.

I don't even hear my name as my thoughts jump between Elijah and Jackson. It's not until Elijah is standing in front of me that I realize he was saying my name.

I jump and take a step back but he just steps into my space. "Charlie." His voice is soft and apologetic and I know why he is here. It's the same tone he uses whenever he fucks around on me and I call him out on it.

I sigh and then glance at the flowers in his hand. This is the part of me I hate. I hate that I am once again going to take him back instead of standing my ground. But this Elijah is the one I fell for. The one who is sweet and caring. Who kisses my hand and then takes me out to dinner. This isn't the Elijah in a rage on drugs. Last night was different. It was the first time he put his hands on me so roughly. But I know he was fucked up on whatever the hell he took.

"Can we talk?"

I should tell him no. But one look at those green puppy-dog eyes and all I can do is nod. I pull him into the back and up the stairs to my office.

I barely get the door unlocked and he is shoving me inside, tossing the flowers onto a chair, and pressing his lips into mine. I at least have the strength not to kiss him back.

He pulls back, his hands framing my face. "I am so sorry, baby. I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have been in a rage like that. I shouldn't have hit you. I just was in a mood yesterday afternoon and then I took some drugs and it fucked with my head." He pauses as he gently brushes his fingers over the spot on my head that hit the cabinet. "Are you okay? Fuck, I should have taken you to a hospital last night."

I pull his hands away from my head. "I'm fine." I am surprised my words are short.

"Is this unfixable?"

There is so much remorse written across his face I actually feel bad. Maybe he really is regretful of what happened last night. Yes he has been rough with me before when it comes to sex but never threatened me like that.

When I still don't answer, he drops to his knees in front of me. "Please, Charlie. I am begging you to give me another chance. I will never lay my hands on you again. I promise."

Maybe it's my hangover. Or I am just not the brightest crayon in the box, but I slowly nod my head. "Okay."

What am I even thinking? I am better than this.

He climbs to his feet, scooping me up and pressing me against the door. I let him kiss me this time. And I kiss him back even though I feel like this is a huge mistake.

JACKSON

“I don’t know, man. I just don’t think it has that edge we usually have,” Silas tells everyone as we finish a run-through of a song we’ve been working on.

Fuck, I know. I feel worse than before I came to Talisman today. And I know it’s because of Charlie and her lying to my damn face. It pissed me off. I know that was some stupid lie about a drunk accident. I know Elijah put his hands on her. And that fucker needs to burn in hell for it.

“I’m not changing this drumbeat. I think it’s sick as fuck. And Roan’s guitar reminds me of when we first started.” Knox says as he looks at me. “You need to figure shit out, man.”

“Whatever, I need a beer.” I push past him and the looks on everyone’s faces as I head toward the greenroom to pull a beer out of the mini-fridge.

The sound of giggling as I walk past the staircase to the catwalk has me looking up toward Charlie’s office. I see her stumble out of it as Elijah walks out behind her. His hands are all over her body as she pushes him away to lock the door. She’s holding a bouquet of flowers and I want to strangle him. I know he put his fucking hands on her. And what? He bought her flowers to apologize. And why the fuck was she okay with that? I thought she was stronger than that. I watch with rage-filled eyes as he presses his lips along her neck and she leans into him. They walk the opposite way down the hall. And I am glad that fuckface didn’t see me or I would have strangled him and kicked his ass out the door.

“Fuck!” I yell as I punch my hand into the wall. I hiss as my knuckles slide across something sharp and I can only guess I hit a nail. “Shit,” I mutter.

Silas must have heard me because I hear his loud boots clomping down the hall. “Shit, man.”

“Fuck,” I yell again as I rip my shirt over my head and wrap it around my hand.

“What the fuck happened?”

I push him off me and head toward the greenroom. I push the door open hard enough it bounces off the wall. I grab a beer out of the fridge and chug half of it as Silas walks into the room.

He keeps his distance, knowing that I am in a rage and he shouldn't come near me. I open the closet door in the greenroom knowing Charlie didn't lock it when she rushed out of here earlier. I also know she always has a bottle of hard liquor in here. And I need something harder than beer.

I find a bottle of whiskey and drink straight from the bottle before flopping on the couch and pulling out my smokes.

Silas just watches me and I ignore him while I take another shot and a deep drag from my smoke.

“You done with your temper tantrum?”

“Fuck off.”

“Want me to look at your hand?”

I ignore him but put my cigarette in my mouth so I can unwrap my hand. I flex my fingers and the pain is a dull ache. “It's not broken.”

Silas takes that as his cue that he can approach me. He sits on the coffee table and looks at it. “What happened?”

“Fucking Charlie and Elijah. What the hell does she see in him?”

Silas picks up the beer I drank half of and takes a sip. “I wish I could tell you because that has me scratching my own head. He's a tool. But I heard his dick is big.”

“Doesn’t help man.”

He picks up the whiskey bottle and takes a shot. “You know I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with you lately. Well the last six months. And Saylor tells me that those two have been together that long. So you wanna tell me how long you have been pining after her? Cause as far as I knew you were totally fine being just her friend.”

I grab the whiskey out of his hand. “I’m not pining.”

“Seems like you’re pissed Elijah has the one thing you can’t have.”

“Fuck Elijah, man. And if I wanted Charlie, I could have her.”

Silas chuckles as he places his hands behind him on the table and leans back. “We all know that is not true. You signed your soul to that asshole with the terms being you would keep your hands off her.”

“That was twelve years ago. And she’s with Elijah. You don’t see him throwing a fit over that.”

“Elijah isn’t you.”

“Whatever, man.” I feel around in my pockets and find the tin I keep in there for emergencies. I pull out a Vicodin and pop it in my mouth and swallow it down with a shot of whiskey.

Silas sighs. “You should just tell her how you feel.”

I ignore him as I light another smoke and lean my head against the back of the couch.

I hear him stand up, clearly done with trying to talk any reason into me. “I’ll get some ice for you.”

He walks out and I know he will play the best friend role and let the guys know I need a break. Yet again. Just like the last six months we’ve spent trying to write this album. Me needing breaks constantly to try and find that muse, as Riot calls it.

Well there are no fucking muses in New Orleans.

My phone vibrates and I see a text from Charlie.

Charlie: I think I am just gonna go home and sleep. Still not feeling great. Raincheck for tonight?

I see red as I read her text.

“Fucking liar!” I yell and throw the bottle of whiskey across the room and watch it shatter against the wall.

I get up and grab the tequila I saw in the closet and take another shot. My head is filled with rage and my vision starts to blur from it. I left my notebook out on the stage where we were practicing so I find some paper and a pen stored under the coffee table. I start to scribble away viciously along the paper. My letters are a jumbled mess, words scratched out so deep it cuts through the paper, just like the rage is cutting through my soul.

I’m pissed. And not just because of Charlie and her lies. Or Elijah. But because Silas was right. Charlie is getting under my skin. I’ve wanted her since I kissed her for the first time in Silas’s basement bathroom. Hell, even before that. And even though I made that goddamn deal to save her from a lifetime of goddamn misery, I still want her. I don’t think I ever stopped. And she is the one thing I’ll never be able to have. Everything Silas said was true. I want her in my life. I want to talk to her all night until the sun rises. I want to feel my fingers graze her naked skin. I want to breathe the same air she breathes.

And I can’t do it.

I throw back another shot and continue to throw all my feelings onto this scrap piece of paper. Music has always been my therapy. And right now as I put my damn heart on the paper I feel all the tension, stress, anger, and sadness roll off of me. I let it go. I let the words take hold and do their job. Helping me find clarity in a fucked-up world.

Twenty minutes later, Silas walks back in the room with a bag of ice. “Have you calmed down yet?”

I shake my head as I grab my guitar from the corner of the room. I used to play guitar when the band was just four of us

back in Baton Rouge. When we used to call ourselves Saints of the Devil and Sinners of your God. Back when Silas's brother was our drummer. Before all of our lives went to shit. I always bring my acoustic with me. It helps when it comes to my songwriting at times. Even though Roan and Wilder write most of the melodies now, I still play when I feel the need.

I open up the case and pull my guitar out and sit back on the couch. I play a few chords, finding the right combination before I string together a melody so fast I can't believe it. I haven't written like this since we were just starting out.

Silas just stares at me as I start and stop, scratching out words and taking notes on chords. When I start over again and play the song from the beginning, Silas tosses the ice onto the coffee table and jogs out of the room.

Maybe this is just another shit song. But it's the therapy I need right now. I stop and scratch out some shit and change a few more lyrics then start over.

I don't even notice when all the guys walk into the room. I just keep playing until I finish the song, my vocals strained from the scream.

"Again," Roan says as he sits in one of the folding chairs and starts to strum along on his guitar. Wilder waits for me to get through the first chorus before joining in with another layer of guitar chords. Knox starts to drum against the wall with his hands.

Silas just stands there smiling then says, "Maybe we should try this plugged in now."

We all move back to the stage where the guys can plug in to really let the sound ring out. We play the same song over and over for two hours. It feels right. This is the feeling I've been missing for so long when it came to our music. And it suddenly feels magical again. We run through the song again with all the tweaks we made. I don't even care that my hand is throbbing or that I feel slightly fucked up from the alcohol and pills. This feels right, right here.

I scream out the last words of the song, collapsing to my knees on the stage as I do it, taking a long deep sigh of relief, knowing we finally did what we've been trying to do. And it all happened on the stage we started on.

As the reverb dies out from the guitars a slow clap starts from the corner of the room. Riot walks closer to the stage, a huge smile on her face. "Oh my god, we are finally getting somewhere."

"Thanks for ruining the moment, Riot," Wilder scoffs as he takes his guitar off and sets it on a stand.

"What? Y'all are stopping now that I walked in?"

Knox stands from behind the drum set and stretches his arms in the air. "We've been at it for five hours, Riot. We are calling it a night."

"Well I guess we all have to start somewhere." She jumps up on the stage and looks around. "Isn't it crazy this is where it all started?"

Roan looks over at his ex-wife. "We started long before you came into the picture."

She shoots him a glare. "Well this is where you all took off. I still remember your first show here. Charlie had just opened the place a month or so beforehand and I knew it was special. Just like you guys."

Wilder walks over to her and rustles the top of her head. "Are you getting all nostalgic on us?"

"Just brings back memories."

I don't miss the way her eyes flick over to Roan. I know those memories she has. This is where they started to fall in love. The shows we played here regularly as she worked her ass off to make us known across the city. Then the state. And within a year of us playing that first show here, we started to have a decent following across the country.

"The only memory I have of that first show we played here was me getting piss-ass drunk."

Roan laughs at him. “That’s because you were so nervous that you wouldn’t stop drinking before we played and then there were a total of about twenty people watching us and you were pissed, so you drank more.”

Wilder throws a guitar pick at him and Roan just rolls his eyes.

“Well I am just happy you guys sound like Saints & Sinners again. Whatever Charlie is doing for you, let’s make sure it keeps happening.”

I clench my fist at her words and pain shoots up my arm. I feel the scabs that were starting to form break open.

“It wasn’t Charlie. It was just Jax finally getting his shit together,” Silas cuts in.

I look over at him and he nods for me to leave.

But it’s not fast enough because Riot looks down at my hand. “What the fuck happened?”

“Hey Riot, can we talk about the kids?” Roan cuts in and I use that moment to sneak off to the greenroom, knowing he just stole Riot away for a good amount of time.

Silas follows me as I grab my backpack and guitar and we both slip out the back.

“You feeling better now?” he asks me as we both walk to our cars.

“Yeah. It felt good to get that aggression out.”

He looks over at me as I set my guitar down in the alley to light a smoke and he grabs one from my pack. “You gonna say anything to her?”

“Riot?” I ask with a raised brow.

“Come on, man, you know who I’m talking about.”

Of course I do. I sigh as I exhale the smoke from my lungs. “I don’t want to talk about it, man.”

He holds up his hands. “I get it. But you know that sooner or—”

“Well, if it isn’t like old times. It’s been a while, boys.”

Silas and I both freeze at the sound of Carter West’s voice.

“Did you think you would be able to come back to my town and go unnoticed? I know you boys have gotten my texts.”

I look over at Silas. He knows about the text I got but he never told me he got one.

“Or are you all keeping secrets from each other now?” He steps out of the shadow and underneath a streetlight. He’s wearing his usual three-piece suit with his dark hair slicked back. Two of his goons are behind him and I can only hope he doesn’t have two more behind us, cornering us.

“What do you want, West?” Silas asks him. “We don’t owe you any more favors. We paid our debts.”

“Perhaps. But you should know there is always another debt owed.” He looks over at me and I look away. No one knows what he did for me. “Besides, I told you all to stay out of my city and it looks like you just moved back home and decided not to tell me.”

Silas steps toward him. “You can’t keep us out of this place. It’s home.”

One of West’s men steps to the side and pulls out a gun.

“Looks like I can make a lot of decisions about what you do or don’t do,” he grins at us.

I run my hand through my hair and take another drag of my smoke before tossing it on the ground. “We had a deal. We fulfilled it. Now let us just be home for a few months and live our lives.”

“Well that is not giving me anything in return.” He frowns.

“We don’t owe you shit.”

He shrugs. “For now. But I know you all. And sooner or later you are going to step on someone’s toes you shouldn’t and I will be here to step in once again.”

Silas is about to get in his face but I pull him back.

“Well, until I need you, enjoy your time in New Orleans.” He snaps his fingers at his goons. “We’ll be in touch.”

Silas and I don’t move as we watch him turn and walk the opposite way down the alley. And we don’t say a word until we are sure we’re in the clear.

“What the fuck, man?” Silas says.

I look over at him. “You got a text too and you didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t think it was that important. Same shit yours said.”

“He’s going to find a way to get us in his web again.”

Silas grabs the back of his neck. “And how bad do you think it will be this time?”

I shrug. “Who knows? But I hope they are just idle threats.”

Silas nods. “Sure hope so. But what about Elijah?”

“I sure as fuck hope he doesn’t drag Charlie into all of this.”

“Fuck.” Silas pulls his hair up on top of his head before pinching his fingers between his brows. “I need a fucking drink after that.”

“Me too.”

CHARLIE

I hate that I canceled on Jackson a few nights ago. All because I thought things were going to be different with Elijah. I should have known they wouldn't be. He was great that night. He apologized. But then came over last night, fucked up again and forced me to have sex with him. He was rough, bruises on my hips and wrists to prove it. I know I am smarter than this. I am just too scared to actually break up with him. Worried what the repercussions may be.

And now I feel like I ruined things with Jackson. He's been weird around me since the other day. But somehow I convinced him to do our movie night tonight. I am sure he will lay into me about the other day too. I am positive he knew I was lying. And I know he is going to ask me about the bruises on my neck. About Elijah. But I am doing what Riot asked me to do. I am sure if I didn't come over tonight, he would go out with Silas or Wilder and get shit-faced and bring home some random girl or girls.

I park my car in the underground garage at his building, happy he gave me a key card because I hate parking in this damn neighborhood. I still don't understand why he bought a penthouse here. It's not his style. The building is obnoxious and lavish with an overdone Greek Revival architecture in the lobby. Even his place has elements of Greek Revival with the pillars in the entryway and in the living area. I swear he bought it just as a fuck pad but then realized he needed to live here at times too. When he spent less and less time here, I was surprised he didn't sell it but I guess he needed a place to crash

whenever he did come back. But the walls of his place are all painted black, gray, or dark purple. The furniture is all Victorian Gothic style. And the abstract art on the walls pulls away from the other parts of the penthouse that are gaudy.

I swipe my key card over the elevator button in the garage and again inside to get to his penthouse. I look in the mirror of the elevator and make sure my makeup still covers my bruises. Yesterday new bruises formed on the edge of my hairline where Elijah hit my head into the cupboard. I know Jackson will think the worst.

I walk down the hall when I get off the elevator, balancing the pizza box and groceries I brought with me. The loud beat of a bass drum beats through the double doors to his apartment. I juggle the pizza as I try to get the right key into the door. Somehow I manage not to drop everything and use my ass to push open the door.

The music is super loud and that asshole better not be having a damn party. Or an orgy. I make my way through the darkened apartment, only the purple LED lights lining the floors in the hall lighting up the space. I drop everything onto the kitchen island and find the remote to open the floor-to-ceiling curtains in the living room. The lights of New Orleans bring a soft ambience into the apartment and makes it slightly easier to see. I head toward Jackson's room in search of him and the damn remote for the surround sound system. Every single room in this house is connected to the stereo.

His bedroom door is open. A good sign he is alone and I am not going to stumble into tits and ass. He isn't here so I head toward the other side of the penthouse where his guest bedrooms are and the stairs that lead up to the rooftop terrace.

I head up the stairs and into the humid night sky. Edison lights hang over a small sitting area with a few couches and chairs. Jackson's boots are hanging over the edge of the couch and I smile, knowing he isn't with some girl.

I lean over the couch and find him smoking a joint and staring up at the sky. A notebook lying on his chest while he drums a pen on top.

“Were you actually working?” I ask.

He looks over at me and takes a huge inhale of the joint. “Kind of,” he says, then blows the smoke in my face.

I wave the smoke out of my face. He tosses his notebook on the ground then grabs my arm and pulls hard, causing me to flip over the couch and land on top of him. His arm wraps around my lower back.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” I smile at him, feeling slightly awkward lying on top of him.

“Did you want some of this?” he asks, holding up the joint.

I pull it from his hand and take a long drag of it before handing it back to him.

“Did I tell you I like your hair this color?”

I shake my head.

He tosses the joint into an ashtray. Then brushes the few strands of bangs away from my face. “I like it better than the green.”

“You told me you liked the green.”

“I did. But I like this better. You look more innocent and less bitchy.”

“Gee thanks,” I say as I try to push off him but he wraps his other hand around me, keeping me on top of him.

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened between us if we never stopped talking?”

My heart breaks a little. We both felt lost when we stopped talking. When he ruined our friendship. But I hate thinking about the what-ifs. I did it for far too long and I can’t do it anymore. “Jackson,” I sigh.

I watch his whiskey eyes as they look into mine. His hands play with the bottom hem of my shirt as his eyes drop to my lips. “I think about it a lot. Things would be so different.”

I can't help but think about how things would have been different. This might be our norm. Me lying on top of him under the night sky, except his lips would be on mine, on my neck, on my chest. His hands wouldn't just be playing with my shirt but going up and underneath or maybe sliding underneath the band of my cotton shorts.

I bite my lip as I look at him. God, he is the perfect man. His dark hair is so silky I want to run my fingers through it. His jawline is strong with just a hint of stubble across it. His nose is perfect and I know that's weird to say but it just fits his face perfectly and the double nose rings just add to his appeal. I don't want to look at his lips because I know how they kiss. I can still remember how they taste. And it's something I can never have again. Even if it's all I want.

That thought scares the shit out of me so much that I actually jump up fast enough that he loses his hold on me.

“What's wrong?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

He eyes me curiously then sits up and picks his notebook up off the ground.

“The pizza is going to get cold,” I say softly.

He looks up at me and smiles. “You brought me pizza?”

“No, I brought us pizza.”

“You know I can eat an entire one in one sitting.”

I place my hands on my hips as I stare at him. “And you're thirty now. That metabolism of yours is going to slow down and eating an entire pizza is going to make you fat.”

He laughs as he stands then runs his hands over his stomach. “The ladies will still be all over me even if I have an old-man belly.”

I snort. “Unlikely.”

“You don't think an old-man belly is attractive?”

“I am not talking about this. I do not want to hear about how you'll find some way to make it attractive.”

“The ladies will love me even when I am old and gray and fat.”

I shake my head. “Unfortunately, I think you are probably right.”

He tucks his notebook under his arm and starts walking to the door. “Guess I should go work on the old-man belly.”

I see the hint of deviance in his eyes then he runs to the door and I know that look. Asshole better not lock me up here. I chase after him and get to the door just before he slams it shut.

He jogs down the stairs and into the kitchen and turns down the metal blaring from the speakers. I half expect him to grab the entire box but he doesn't. He actually acts like an adult and grabs two plates out of the cabinet.

“So is it a *Goonies* night?” I ask.

He shrugs as he puts three large slices of pizza on his plate. “Or *Stand by Me*?”

I grab a slice. “Let's start with that.”

“Want a soda?”

I shake my head.

“Tequila?”

“Maybe later. I'll stick with water for now.”

“So well behaved,” he teases.

“Hardly,” I mutter.

He visibly swallows and that weird tension is back between us. I don't know why after all these years we would suddenly have sexual tension. He made it perfectly clear twelve years ago that I wasn't worth his time beyond friendship.

We sit on the couch and he turns on the movie. In the past, our movie nights usually turned into us talking about everything and never watching the movie. But as we sit and watch the movie, we stay silent.

When he finishes eating, I grab both our plates and bring them into the kitchen. I am tired of this. I need things to go back to normal between us. But Silas's party at the beginning of last week changed things. I don't know why. Just a simple touch and a few words and now I am questioning everything between Jackson and me.

I pull my sleeves up and rinse the dishes before placing them in the dishwasher. I jump when I see Jackson behind me. "Jeez, you scared me."

He isn't looking at me though. He is looking at my wrists. I wore a long-sleeve shirt tonight to cover up the bruises and mindlessly forgot about them. His nostrils flare as he looks at me.

"What the fuck are those?"

"Nothing," I say as I pull my sleeves down.

He rushes over to me and backs me into the refrigerator, hiking my sleeves up. "Those are fingerprints."

"Rough sex," I say weakly.

He grabs a towel off the counter and roughly wipes at my neck, rubbing the makeup off. "And this too? Rough sex?"

I swallow as I look him in the eye. He's angry, that much is obvious but he looks possessive over me. "It's fine, Jax."

"So I'm Jax now?"

"You've always been Jax to me. Long before everyone else in the world."

He sighs as his fingers trace over my neck. "Then why don't you talk to me anymore?"

"I do talk to you."

He rests his forehead against mine as his hand wraps around the nape of my neck. "I watched you from the sidelines for years. I know what your stepfather did to you. You told me as much. And now here I am watching it happen all over again."

“It’s not the same,” I whisper on the verge of tears. Because no matter how hard I try to cover anything up, Jackson can still read me like a book.

“Yes it is, Charlie.” His grip tightens on my neck.

“He’s my boyfriend.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s your stepdad or your boyfriend. Don’t throw your life away.”

I pull away from him. Defiance in my tone as I say, “I’m not throwing it away.”

He growls as his hands drop to my hips and shove my shorts down.

“Need I remind you of what you used to do because of your fucking stepfather!” he shouts.

I try to push his hands away as his fingers roughly trace the scars on my outer thighs, the way I used to cope with the abuse from my stepfather before I found solace in Jackson. Before I spilled every one of my secrets to him.

“This, Charlie, this is what you used to do and I know this is shit on top of what you experienced. But I won’t let another man ruin you the way he did.”

Tears stream down my face. Not because I am sad but because I am embarrassed, angry, frustrated.

His fingers hit the edge of my hip bone and I flinch. Jackson’s eyes flick to mine, his eyes dilating as he drops back down to my hip and pulls the side of my underwear down. Black-and-blue bruises in the shape of fingers mar my hip bone.

“Jesus Christ, Charlie.”

I drop my hands and push his away, pulling up the side of my underwear and my shorts. Humiliation takes over as I push away from him and rush off to the bathroom.

I slam the door behind me and twist the lock. Not that he will come in here. Jackson knows when to leave well enough alone. And right now, he knows I need my space.

I splash water on my face. And wipe away the makeup on my face and neck. There is no point in covering it up, he already knows what's there.

I hate that I'm crying. I was never that girl. I was the strong one. The one that got in fights. The one that stood up for others. Maybe I did it to hide my pain from everyone else. The way I used cutting to hide my pain from myself.

I take ten minutes to do the breathing exercises Janae taught me before heading back into the kitchen. Jackson is hunched over the island, his elbows resting on the marble, his head held low.

"Hey," I say as I walk back in.

He looks up and I see guilt written all over his face.

"I'm fine."

"No you're not."

I sigh as I prop a hip against the counter. "I don't need a hero, Jax."

"I know."

"Then don't act like one."

He stands up and looks at me with sincerity. "You know I am the furthest thing from a hero. And I know you are ten times stronger than me. But that doesn't mean I can't worry about you. Care about you. Fuck, Charlie, we used to be inseparable and that was before I ever touched you, kissed you, made love to you."

I put my hand on his arm. "Can we just let this go for the night?" I know most people would argue with me, tell me I need to figure all this out but not Jackson, he just nods.

He reaches behind him and grabs a bottle of my favorite tequila off the counter. "Thought we could both use some of this."

I smile at him. "I think so."

He pours us each a shot and we swallow them down.

“I’ve got this Elijah thing under control, Jackson.”

“I know you do. Because you would never let a man do that to you without repercussions.”

I give him a weak smile. “Should we watch *Goonies* now?”

“Sure.”

JACKSON

I scribble away in my notebook. A jumble of words and feelings. Anger, fear, frustration, lust. I've never let my feelings get like this with Charlie before. Even when we dated for two months in high school. This is on an entirely different level. And I don't know if it's because of the raging jealousy in me or if it's because spending time with her, the little that I have has knocked me into a time warp, into a place where Charlie was everything to me.

She fell asleep last night on my lap, halfway through the movie. I ran my fingers through her soft lilac hair as she snored softly on my thigh. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to let my dick come to life. I did let myself lean over and kiss her forehead, remembering what it was like to touch her body. But that was twelve years ago. We were kids on the verge of adulthood. And now she is like an entirely new work of art I want to explore.

I want to press my lips across her slender neck and down her clavicle. I want to lick between those perfect perky breasts and trace the lines of the tattoo I know she has there. I want to inhale the sweet, sweet smell of her and then devour her until she is crying my name.

She's always been my Charlie. She always will be my Charlie.

Ever since we were kids riding bikes in the street. When I taught her how to skateboard and use a BB gun. She taught me about the beauty of words. And music, we discovered that

together sitting underneath the stars on those humid nights when both of our parents were drunk or fighting and we wanted to drown out the sound. Nirvana, Beastie Boys, Foo Fighters, Jawbreaker, Metallica, Primus, Soundgarden, Nine Inch Nails, Pearl Jam. All bands that flooded are headphones.

Then it all changed when her mom cheated on her dad then left him for Richard LeBlanc. Charlie was taken away from me, moved to an affluent side of Baton Rouge. Not that it stopped us from seeing each other. And eventually falling into something more than friendship.

But I fucked up any chance with her when I saved her by making a deal with her stepfather. And I would do it over and over again, if it meant she survived the shit he put her through. She has no idea what I did. How much it's destroyed my life but I wanted her safe.

And with Elijah, she isn't safe.

I carried her to my guest bedroom last night even though I wanted her in my bed. The only woman I've ever wanted in my bed.

Then I spent hours upstairs on the roof drinking, smoking, and writing. Years of words I left unsaid to her. I let my black heart crack. And left everything on pages of paper. Words crossed out and scribbled, the story of our life.

You always said we were born with black hearts.

A gift in the dark.

A secret for our scars.

But without you around, my secrets do nothing but drown.

Now I am sitting in a studio in Mid-City. The label got us booked here for the next month and a half. Plenty of time for us to record if I can just get these songs up to par.

I chew on my pen as I rework some of the words from last night. Making the lyrics blend with the beats of the music better. I start one of the songs over, Knox's progressive drumbeats beating in my chest. I tap my fingers along my leg

to the beat of the music and then start to lace the melody with the guitars.

I rework the song a few times then jump when I see Roan walk into the room. I pull my headphones off and pause the music.

“Been busy writing?”

I nod. “Finally. This is much better than the shit I was writing before.”

“That song from last week was sick. I think this one is even better.”

“I hope so. I hate letting you guys down. And this last year has been a fucking mess.”

He folds his arms over his chest. “What changed?”

I shrug just as Silas comes into the room. “Charlie Fortier is what changed things.”

“Hardly.”

He smacks me against the back. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“I really don’t want to talk about Charlie.”

Roan laughs. “You really aren’t going to admit something we’ve known for years?”

“What? Because when we were kids we dated? That has nothing to do with life now.”

“You’ve been pining after her ever since we walked into Talisman eight years ago and she was there,” Roan says with a smile on his face.

I crack my knuckles in frustration and toss my notebook on the table. “Fuck off.”

I storm out of the room, shoving my shoulder into Roan as I pass. I don’t give a shit that the three of us grew up together, along with Charlie. I don’t care that they’ve seen all the ups and downs that have happened between us. Neither of them

gets to tell me how I feel about her. They don't get to put words into my mouth.

What I feel for Charlie is fleeting, a moment that will pass. And everyone in the band and Riot can all fuck off if they think she has anything to do with what is going on in my life.

I slide into my jeep and pull out a container of coke. I'm pissed off and I just need an upper to change my mood. I do two bumps before getting out of the jeep and lighting a smoke, leaning against the door.

I close my eyes, replaying last night in my head. I am startled by the clearing of a throat and when I open my eyes, I want nothing more than to get into a fight.

"Mr. Knightley, or should I say, Mr. Knight. Pleasure seeing you again."

I clench my jaw, trying to hide my emotions and then take a long pull of my smoke. "What do you want, West?"

He smiles at me in a way that sends a chill down my spine but I keep it hidden. I look quickly to see if he's alone, he hardly ever is. "You still owe me a favor."

Honestly, I probably owe him a lot of favors. "I know."

"But from the short communications I've had with the others they seem to know nothing."

I take another drag of my smoke then toss it on the ground. "That is the way I intend to keep it."

"Tsk-tsk. Secrets only destroy things."

I sigh and prop a foot against the door of my SUV. "Are you here to teach me life lessons or tell me what you want me to do?"

"I have a problem and I need it fixed."

"And what is this problem?"

"Someone is skimming from me, and I need him taken care of."

I raise a brow at him. "Isn't that what your men are for?"

“Loyalty, Jackson, is a precious trait.”

“Again, I am not interested in life lessons.”

“Always to the point.” He glances down at his watch. “Well this is one of my men that is no longer loyal to me. And I want to find out if he is working for someone else or is stupid enough to try and start his own business.”

“He would be a fool to try that.” And I am being completely honest. This is the kingpin of New Orleans. The crime lord. He owns the police, the lawyers, the judges. He can get away with anything when it comes to drugs and weapons and whatever else he may be involved in.

“Too bad he isn’t very smart.”

“So you just want me to find out what he’s doing?”

“Yes. And if you need to take him out for your own safety then by all means do it.”

I don’t trust him. But betraying him is even worse. “Fine.”

“Remember, you are tied to me. If you even think of not following through on any of this, your band is forfeit. Your lives are forfeit. You are only where you are today because I got you there.”

“Hardly,” I mutter.

His eyes snap to mine. Piercing silver eyes that look like the devil himself cursed him. “You boys would be dead. Another tragedy gone unnoticed. Your lives are tied to me. And I have no intention of ruining your life unless you ruin mine.”

“Who is he?”

Carter West smiles at me in a way that makes me want to recoil. “You will enjoy this, Mr. Knightley. Trust me on that.” He starts to walk away then turns back to me. “Elijah Nash needs to be dealt with.”

My stomach drops as he says that name. I watch him walk to a Rolls Royce standing idle in the street. He gets in the back seat and then it takes off down the street. I don’t know how he

found me but he has always just turned up out of nowhere. The man that kept us from being just another dead body on the street. I got tied up with him when I was a stupid teenager that didn't think twice about his actions. And somehow he has stayed in my life. He has done things for me I would never ask of anyone. And now I need to be a pawn in his game again.

It's why we spend so little time back home. We know what happens every time we come back. West always finds us and always keeps us wrapped tightly around his finger.

CHARLIE

I walk into Jackson's penthouse and head to his bedroom, surprised to find him awake. He usually sleeps past ten and it's only eight thirty in the morning. He is standing in his bedroom naked, looking out his floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the French Quarter and the Mississippi.

"I'm surprised you're awake," I tell him.

He jumps at the sound of my voice then turns to look at me, a cup of coffee in his hand. "I could have had a girl in here."

I roll my eyes at him. "You don't let girls sleep in here. You are some freak who fucks them in your guest bedroom on the other side of your house. You should really just invest in a fuck pad."

He takes a sip of his coffee. "Not a bad idea."

"You shouldn't stand in front of your window naked," I tell him. "Half of New Orleans can see your dick."

"Thanks." He smiles smugly at me.

"Of course you would take that as a compliment."

He walks toward me, purposely swinging his dick around. I find a pair of shorts on the ground and throw them at him.

"What are you doing here?" he asks as he hands me his coffee then slides his shorts on.

"I was going to go see my dad. It's his birthday. I wanted to know if you wanted to come with me."

“Sure. Let me shower real quick.”

I take a sip of the coffee he handed me. “You owe me breakfast too.”

“Why?” he asks.

“For kicking those girls out the other day.”

“Fine,” he huffs as he heads to the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, I am driving us toward Baton Rouge. I don’t know the last time Jackson came back here. I know his brother, Ethan, usually drives down to New Orleans to see Jackson. Baton Rouge is not Jackson’s favorite place. Too many bad memories. He told me once the only good memories he had were from when we were kids.

“How are your brothers doing?”

“Ethan just got a promotion at the marketing firm he was hired at out of college. He has a girlfriend too. So if you talk to him, make sure to give him shit for it.”

I laugh. Ethan is the baby in the family. Jackson and his brothers always picked on him but I doted on him. “You know I would never do that to Ethan. He needs someone on his side for once.”

Jackson just shakes his head while he laughs. “Julian is living his best life out on his boat in the Keys.”

“Is he taking after you and sleeping with as many girls as possible?”

I can feel Jackson staring at me. “I take offense to that.”

“Yeah, sure you do.”

“But to answer your questions, yes. Julian charts his boat and seems to always find some girl to spend the night with.”

“He has a boat in the Keys. Half those girls probably hope he asks them to give up their life and move in with him.”

“No doubt.”

“Have you heard from your mom?” I ask quietly as I glance over at him.

His jaw clenches and unclenches a few times. “Not yet. But I know it’s inevitable.”

“She still doesn’t get it?”

“I doubt she ever will. She thinks she did nothing wrong when she left us with Dad. The last time I saw her she still used the pathetic excuse that she was saving herself from his abuse. But she can’t comprehend that she left us to the big bad wolf in the process.”

I reach over and squeeze his forearm.

“The sad thing is she thinks that I don’t know she doesn’t go to Ethan or Julian. That she isn’t begging them for a spot back in their lives. Just me. Because I am the one that did something with my life. I went somewhere. I made the money. And it pisses me off that she doesn’t realize I can see right through all those pathetic lies she spews from her mouth.”

“If I see her, I’ll punch her.”

“I would like to see that,” he snorts.

We stop for breakfast at a tiny roadside diner halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. When we get back into my SUV, my phone is ringing as it sits in a cup holder, Elijah’s name across the top of it.

“Are you going to answer that?”

I look over at him and his anger is palpable. “No.”

I pull out of the parking lot and get back on the highway. I can feel Jackson stewing next to me. And I know he has something he wants to say. “Just spit it out.”

“I’ve already told you what I think about him, Charlie. He isn’t a good guy.”

“I know. You’ve told me plenty. And I am well aware he is an asshole. But he’s a good lay.”

Jackson curses under his breath and I know those words hurt. But it’s not like the two of us will ever be more than friends and I’ve seen him fuck around with enough girls.

“Then why are you with him? You can find someone that isn’t such bad news to be your fuck toy.”

I clench my fingers on the steering wheel. I have no idea why I am still with him. Why I put up with his shit, the abuse. Maybe because I know I can hit him right back. “How many times are you going to ask me that?”

“Until I get a fucking reasonable answer,” he screams as he slams his hand on the center console.

I jump at the aggression, the car veering into the lane next to us. A driver laying on their horn as I barely avoid sideswiping them.

Jackson grabs the wheel, pulling it back to adjust us back into the right lane. I take deep breaths to find my center and calm my anxiety and frustration.

Jackson is quiet as he speaks his next words. “He is only with you because he is watching over you.”

I snap my head over to look at him. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“He’s involved with bad people, Charlie.”

“The same people you were involved with in high school? The ones you did favors for when you moved to New Orleans?” His golden eyes pierce through me and I know the answer without him saying it. “I thought you stepped away from all that.”

“Some circles you can’t walk away from.”

I swallow as I think about the danger Jackson could be in by his association with whoever he worked for years ago.

“I’m not involved, Charlie. Okay? I just know a lot of what goes on.”

“And since Elijah is mixed in with all this you just assume he’s only with me for some other reason.”

“Whoever is close to you is one step closer to me.”

I shudder at the thought. At the idea that Eli could be using me to just get information on Jackson.

“Hey,” Jackson says as he grabs one of my white-knuckled hands from the steering wheel. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t want you to worry.” He brings my knuckles to his lips, an intimate gesture that has my mind spinning. “I’ll always be here for you. You know that, right?”

I nod.

“I’m just telling you, I think it’s best if you break up with Eli.”

“Let’s just drop it.” I don’t want to think about the words he implied. If I am being honest with myself, I am more worried about Jackson still having some role in whatever gang he is involved with. I take another deep breath and pull my hand away. “I can’t bring negative energy and tension into my dad’s house. It never makes anything better.”

After stopping at the store to grab my dad’s favorite cake and a few groceries that his nurse, Alice, said he needed, we pull down the street to my dad’s house. It’s not the house I grew up in but it’s the same neighborhood. This one is much smaller than the two-bedroom double-wide we lived in.

I pull into the driveway and see the grass overgrown and a few trees that need to be pruned. I make a mental note to call Sam, who lives down the road, to come by and do some yard work. I tried to get my dad to move out of this neighborhood to somewhere nicer for years. I even tried to get him to move to New Orleans or at least the outskirts of the city. But he hated me trying to pay for a place for him to live. He already hates that he needs a nurse here with him during the day. But I can’t let him fall apart more than he already has.

I put the SUV in park and both of us climb out. Jackson helps me grab the groceries then looks around the yard.

“Do you pay for someone to take care of this?” he asks me.

“Yeah.”

“I can do some work for a bit while we’re here.”

“You don’t have to, it’s fine. I’ll get a kid from down the street to take care of it.”

“It’s the least I can do to help. You know I wish you would let me help pay for his care.”

I hit the button to close the hatch on the trunk. “And you know how I feel about handouts.”

“You are so stubborn.”

“And you’re too generous.”

He stares me down for a minute before he starts cracking up. “Two peas in a pod,” he mutters as he heads toward the front door.

Alice is standing in the doorway with the screen door pushed open. “Charlie, it’s so good to see your smiling face.”

“Hi Alice, how are you?”

“Oh you know, happy as a clam. Here, let me take some of those bags from you,” she says as she grabs them from my arms. “Your father is in a good mood today. He will be happy you’re here.”

“I’m sure you’re happy he is in a good mood.”

“He hasn’t thrown any food at me today,” she jokes, the crinkles around her eyes getting deeper as she smiles.

“And the drinking?”

She shrugs. “I haven’t found any alcohol but we both know that doesn’t mean shit.”

“Yeah.”

Alice glances around me and fans her face with her hand. “Do not tell me you brought Jax Knight to your father’s house?” Her pale skin flushes a deep red.

“Your granddaughters will be jealous.”

“Please, child, I don’t care about them right now.”

I laugh as Jackson smirks at her. “I’d be happy to take a picture with you.”

“Oh goodness, yes please. But I can’t make any promises I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

Jackson’s deep laugh sends butterflies to my stomach. Not this again. I cannot let him get to me like this.

“I might just like it, Miss Alice.”

I push past the two of them. “If y’all are going to flirt, please wait until I’m not around.”

“Jealousy does not look good on you, Charlie,” Alice shouts as I make my way through the small front living room and into the kitchen. I can hear the noise of the TV in the basement. I set the bags on the counter and then head downstairs to see him.

I stand at the bottom of the steps, just out of his view. I try not to cry as I look at him. At my dad who used to be my hero. A big strong man that I thought could protect me from every monster that walked the planet. But he couldn’t. He didn’t protect me from Richard.

His once full frame is mostly skin and bones. He used to have shoulder-length blond hair but as the alcoholism got worse, his hair started falling out and he buzzed it off. Deep set lines frame his mouth, lines fanning out from his eyes. He looks much older than his fifty years and my heart hurts. His life was stolen from him the second my mom found something better.

It still hurts me to think about. Mom and Dad were head over heels for each other. Dad worked nights at the bottle factory north of town. And Mom would get bored. She would go out at night with her girls. She had been doing it for years. I never thought much of it. But Dad never knew. And I didn’t think to tell him. I thought they were happy. They always seemed happy around me.

Then after two years he got switched from graveyards to morning shifts, that’s when the fights started. He questioned her, asked where she went. She always said with the girls but I was getting older. I knew. Just like I know he did.

“Charlie? I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“And miss your birthday? Never.”

He pushes up from his old beat-up recliner and walks toward me, his arms wrapping surprisingly tight around me and I breathe a sigh of relief when I don't smell booze on him.

“You are the only one that keeps track of my birthdays. Another year older means shit now.”

I kiss him on the cheek. “You aren't a day past twenty-one, Dad.”

“Damn right.”

“How are the Braves doing?” I ask when I see the baseball game on in the background.

He sits back down in his recliner. “They are playing like shit today. And they are playing Colorado! This should be an easy win. They need to get their shit together if they want a playoff berth.”

I smile as I listen to my dad start telling me all about baseball stats. It's his favorite sport, always has been. And it's good to see he hasn't lost this one part of himself.

Jackson's booted feet clunk down the stairs causing my dad to stop talking. “Who's here?” he asks.

My dad doesn't like visitors. He lost his trust in most people after Mom left him. It took him nearly three months to warm up to Alice. And even that can be hit or miss at times.

But if there is one person my dad loves to see more than me, it's Jackson.

“Mr. Fortier,” Jackson says as he steps onto the concrete floor of the basement. “Charlie nearly forgot it was your birthday and I had to remind her and drag her ass here.”

“Asshole,” I mutter.

My dad's eyes light up as he stands to give Jackson a hug. I can almost see a spark in his eyes, like the life that was once behind them has reappeared.

“Jackson, look at you,” Dad says as he holds him at arm's length. “You got some muscle on you. And a lot more tattoos

than the last time I saw you.”

“Still got room for your name, Travis,” Jackson teases.

“And that’s where shit gets weird.” My dad laughs.

“What brings you here? Shouldn’t you be touring or living your rock star lifestyle?”

“We’re recording our next album. Nice to do it close to home,” he lies.

“Well I’m glad Charlie brought you out here.”

Jackson sits on the opposite end of the couch as me and starts talking baseball with my dad. Their conversation is so natural it’s like no time has passed between the two of them. Dad asks about Jackson’s brothers and life on tour. And Jackson finds a way to make my dad not feel like the weak man he is. I can see some of the fierceness return to my dad’s face. And that’s all I could ask for.

Dad starts to fall asleep near the end of the game. Jackson tells me he is going to do some yard work so I decide to help Alice with dinner.

I’m in the middle of chopping vegetables for a salad when I glimpse out the kitchen window and watch Jackson mowing the grass. I can’t help but stare. His muscular back flexes as he pushes my dad’s old lawn mower through the yard. Sweat drips down the giant tattoo on his back, one of my favorite pieces on him. A beautiful witchlike woman with whited-out eyes holding a bleeding crystal ball. Snakes, roses, and thorns surround the huge piece. It’s magical and mesmerizing.

When he reaches the fence line, he turns and starts walking toward me and I take in the perfection of his torso. Those abs that are barely there but just enough to make you want to run your fingers down them. I’ve seen Jackson naked. Hell, he was naked this morning. But there is something about watching a man do something with his hands. Maybe I am just fascinated with his body and the way that vee that drops below his waist looks so delectable I could—

“Those vegetables aren’t going to chop themselves,” Alice says.

I blink away and turn to look at her. “I was just—”

“You were fantasizing over that man. And you say he’s just a friend.”

She raises a brow at me, and I turn back to the salad. “He is just a friend.”

“That drool on your chin tells me otherwise.”

My hand goes to my mouth but comes up empty.

Alice chuckles as she turns away. “A man and a woman can never be just friends.”

Yeah, well tell that to Jackson, since I’ll only ever be his friend.

An hour later, the table is set and Dad is awake from his nap and sitting at the kitchen table. The crack of a beer can has me spinning my head so fast I nearly lose my balance.

“What the hell are you doing, Dad?”

He looks up at me as he takes a sip of the beer. “It’s my birthday.”

“Yeah, well you won’t have many more if you keep drinking. That shit is going to kill you.”

“Says my daughter who owns a bar and makes people become alcoholics for a living.”

I set the lasagna pan down hard on the table, causing the glasses to shake. “Me owning a bar has nothing to do with alcoholics.”

“Well I wouldn’t have become one if I didn’t have a bar to go to every night.”

Alice and Jackson stand still behind me. “You had a brain and two legs, Dad. You took yourself to the bar every night. You didn’t have to go.”

“What the hell was I supposed to do? My daughter was gone, my wife was gone. I had no one left. Let’s see what happens to you when you have no one left.”

I bite back tears. I hate this. I hate when he turns angry. I have no doubt he had a hidden bottle of whiskey somewhere downstairs and was drinking it while we were all up here. His attitude a combination of booze and regret.

Jackson’s hand is on my arm and I brush him off and walk outside, needing fresh air.

No one comes out after me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I can’t talk to anyone right now. I can’t make up more excuses. I can’t lie anymore and tell someone that things will change with him. Because I know they won’t. This is just a constant that is always going to be in my life and no matter what I do, he will continue to blame everyone else for his downfall.

And I don’t know how to fix it anymore. I don’t know how to get him to quit drinking. I’ve been trying to do it for ten years and have gotten nowhere. I know that if he keeps this up, he will die because of it. And I’ll blame myself, just like he blames me and Mom for leaving him here to rot.

I dig my fingernails into my palms and try to take calming breaths. I need to not let him affect me. I need to let it go.

Alice’s voice has me turning around. “Dinner is going to get cold.”

“Okay.”

“He calmed down a bit after eating some food.”

I nod at her and watch her walk back inside. I take one more deep breath and look up at the sky, looking for some kind of answer but I am not sure what.

Dinner goes by smoothly after that first outburst. Although I think most of it had to do with none of us stopping my dad from drinking. I hate enabling him. And I feel guilty for pissing him off and letting him win. But I don’t want to leave here with a fight between us. Because then my guilt goes on for days until I can come up here again.

We eat German chocolate cake for dessert. Jackson laughing at me for the way I devoured my piece. But nothing beats chocolate cake.

“You know your metabolism is going to slow down one day,” Jackson jokes as I start on my second piece of cake.

“You’re not going to be my friend anymore if I get fat?”

He takes his thumb and wipes a piece of frosting off my face, sucking the icing into his mouth. “Nope.”

I shake my head at him and take a huge bite of cake and get frosting all over my cheeks and nose as I try to shove it in my mouth. “Good,” I mumble over the chocolate decadence. “Then I am going to get so fat I don’t have to look at your ugly face anymore.”

My dad laughs, used to the ridiculous bickering between us.

Jackson wipes more frosting off my face then leans into my ear. “You would be beautiful no matter what, Charlie. Remember that.”

I shiver at his words. I want nothing more than for Jackson to call me beautiful every day. And I also wouldn’t mind if he had to lick chocolate frosting off other parts of my body.

He stands to clean up Alice and Dad’s plate. I catch Alice’s knowing gaze on mine and I have to look away because her words from earlier ring through my mind.

A man and a woman can never be just friends.

We end the night watching one of my dad’s favorite movies, *The Bodyguard*. It’s not lost on me that this was Mom’s favorite movie and I know that is why my dad watches it. We watch it every year on his birthday even though he usually falls asleep halfway through.

He didn’t drink another beer after dinner and it gave me some relief. But I know that relief won’t last long. I will get

another call from Alice at some point when he goes on a binge or when his body collapses because it can't take the poison he is putting in his veins.

A tear falls down his cheek as Rachel and Frank begin their relationship. And my heart breaks for him. Just like his heart broke when Mom left him. And even now, eighteen years later, he still loves her. I can see it as clear as day on his face. I grip his hand as we watch the movie.

I wonder if that will be me. Heartbroken for the rest of my life, knowing that all I ever wanted was Jackson and that I couldn't have him because he never wanted me in the same way I wanted him. I look over at Jackson and try to imagine what it would be like if we could have a life together. But I let that thought fade as quickly as it comes.

My dad snuffles and I squeeze his hand. This part of the movie isn't sad. But I know what he is thinking. I can see the love he is missing. I bite my lip to hold in a tear. To hold back so many emotions. I hate what my mom did but I hate even more that it destroyed my dad. That he wasn't the strong superhero I thought he was. That he was weak as he fell apart from a broken heart.

When Dad falls asleep in his recliner, I start crying. I feel hopeless. No matter what I do, he won't stop drinking. He won't stop hating himself for thinking he drove Mom away.

Jackson pulls me into his side and I cry silently against his chest while the rest of the movie plays.

JACKSON

The time I spent with Charlie yesterday helped me feel like the old me. Maybe because I wasn't Jax Knight at her dad's house. I was Jackson, the kid that lived across the street from them growing up. Who mowed their lawn if Travis was too busy to do it. Who made sure Charlie was always safe, no matter what. Yesterday felt like the me before everything else.

Not just the fame and fortune. But before the time when some idiot kids sold drugs and committed petty crimes for extra cash. Long before the time when we made the mistake of stealing rims off the wrong man's car.

I crack my knuckles as I pull out my laptop and type out the words written in my notebook. Turning my chicken scratch and dark thoughts into song lyrics. Pulling from every aspect of myself to put emotion into these songs. I think about my childhood, the trauma from losing my older brother, the anger I feel from my mom leaving us, the anxiety from raising my two younger brothers when Dad was too drunk to do anything but criticize us or beat us.

My dad's alcoholism is completely different from Charlie's dad. And while I wish he wasn't an alcoholic, wish he wasn't drinking away his pain, at least he rarely gets violent. And when he does, it's mostly toward himself. He hasn't lost Charlie the way my brothers and I turned on our dad. When he died, none of us cared. It felt more like a relief than anything.

I spend my morning pouring everything into these songs. And by the time I need to leave for practice, I feel like I have a

few more songs that would make the guys proud. That are worth putting on the album. And not the crap I've been producing the last year. These have the emotional grit like the song I wrote after my fight with Charlie.

Goddammit. Riot was right. She's always fucking right.

These songs wouldn't be here if it weren't for Charlie. Just like the last one I wrote in a rage. My entire life revolves around her and she doesn't even know.

I drag the files to a new folder and label it Charlotte.

“When are you gonna tell her the songs are about her?” Silas asks me as we take a break from practicing in the new space.

“They aren't,” I lie.

“Bullshit, man, we can tell.”

Wilder snickers. “Charlie's name is written all over these songs. You don't have to say it for us to know. We might as well name the album second-grade crush.”

I ignore Wilder as I lean my head back on the couch in the rehearsal space. I close my eyes and all I can see are ice-blue ones, framed by lilac and silver hair. A button nose with a septum piercing and full lips I want to suck on before pushing her down to her knees to suck on me.

“I saw what you saved them under on your computer. It's under Charlotte,” Silas says quietly but I know the guys can hear.

I'm surprised when Roan cuts in. He usually stays out of anything that has to do with feelings and emotions these days. “Dude, you are so fucking gone. You hadn't been able to write a fucking thing worth a dime for almost a year. Then you come back here, start spending all your time hanging around Charlie and suddenly you are writing all these songs again.”

“Did you ever think it's 'cause we are back home?” I groan as I rub my palms over my face, getting uncomfortable that

they can see right through me so easily.

“Why don’t you just tell her how you feel?” Knox asks.

“It’s complicated.”

“Most things are.”

I look over at Knox. “She won’t ever want me. I lost that privilege a long time ago.”

“What did you do?”

I stand up and head over to the window in the loft space and look out at the colorful buildings across the street. Wilder and Knox never knew about Charlie until that day we played at Talisman. I never even brought her up because I figured I was dead to her. I thought our friendship was long over and no point in telling them about someone they would never meet. And then they did meet her. We became friends again. But I never let them know what really happened. Neither did Charlie. It’s something that we’ve brushed aside even when it shouldn’t be.

Silas clears his throat and I know he’s going to tell them. These guys are all my best friends. They know everything about me. Everything except the complications between me and Charlie. “He fucked her best friend after she admitted she had feelings for him.”

“Shit. That’s fucked up, man,” Wilder says as he stares at me. “All this time. And you never told us?”

“I wasn’t good enough for her.” I say through gritted teeth.

“Yeah you were, Jackson. She never cared about the shit you were doing, you were her best friend and she would stand by you no matter what.” I could punch Silas for opening his damn mouth.

“I was saving her.”

Knox runs his hand over the back of his neck. “I don’t know how fucking her best friend is saving her.”

“Look, I told you it was complicated. Silas makes it sound like I ran at the first sign of feelings. We dated for two months.

I—” I loved her back then, but I’m not telling them that. “I had feelings for her too. But life sucks and sometimes you need to make decisions that benefit others and not yourself.”

“That’s not cryptic as fuck,” Wilder says.

I pull my smokes out of my back pocket, not wanting to talk about my feelings with the guys. And I sure as hell am not going to tell them what I did to save Charlie. Why I had to save Charlie. “I’m gonna go smoke. I’ll be back in ten.”

They don’t say anything as I slam the door behind me and walk down two flights of stairs to head outside. The humid air is not the kind I need but enough to get me out of the headspace I was about to fall into.

CHARLIE

I pull up to the country club where my mom and her gaggle of snobby friends are having their luncheon. Even after eighteen years, it's hard to believe this is my mom's life. She never liked that I was a tomboy as a kid but she never expected me to dress up and play a part. And that is her life now. She dresses up and gossips with these women. Women my mom would make fun of when we were poor. When she didn't understand paying five-thousand dollars for a handbag when there were people like us that struggled to pay the electricity bill in the humid heat of the summer. Now she is one of them.

I hand my keys off to the valet as I adjust my dress. I hate dresses. I am a jeans and T-shirt girl. I may dress up every now and then but it's usually leather leggings or shorts with some heels. Maybe on a rare occasion I'll wear a dress but it's going to be tight and edgy. Not this floral number I'm wearing. The only good thing about it is that it's got a rockabilly design and a sweetheart neckline that makes it actually look like I have some cleavage. If it was up to my mom, I would have a wig on too, to hide my half-and-half hair. But it's eighty-five degrees out and I did not want sweat dripping down my forehead.

I make my way into the private dining area where the luncheon is being held and see my mom on the patio outside near a slightly raised stage.

Do not tell me we are going to be paraded around on a stage for this auction.

I smile at a girl that's a few years younger than me as I pass through the doors. I've talked to her a few times and I know she is everything my mom wishes I was. Docile, compliant.

I shudder at the thought as I head over to the stage.

"Charlotte, honey, you look gorgeous today."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I'm glad to see you at least took that awful piece of metal out of your nose for this."

I roll my eyes at her, glad she can't see them through my black cat-eye sunglasses.

"I am so glad that you agreed to do this. Hopefully, you will find a nice man here. Well Chaz will be here, so I know things will be great."

"Mom, you know I am just doing this for charity. I'll get picked, go on a date. That's where it ends."

She snaps her fingers at someone setting down a giant display of flowers and tells them to move them to a different corner. "Nonsense. You will realize this is a much better path for you."

"I am perfectly fine with the path I am on," I tell her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she says as she starts walking toward a table and adjusting the centerpiece. "You are just trying to rebel by dating all those horrible men. You can't honestly think you can settle down with one and start a family."

I don't even want to get into it with her on my feelings toward having children. "I'm thirty, not fifteen. I'm not rebelling."

Mom looks up at me with a straight face. "I know you are only with Elijah because Jackson rejected you. Just like all those other god-awful boyfriends you've had."

"That's not true."

"Then why do you still pine after him?"

“I don’t.”

She purses her lips. “Hmm, well it sure seems like you do.”

I growl in frustration. “Maybe I just date these assholes because it’s what I grew up with. You know, being raped and abused by my stepfather.”

Her eyes widen and she pulls me as far away from anyone that could overhear us. “Shh, keep your voice down. You can’t make accusations like that here.”

I look around but don’t see anyone close to us. “I’m not so horrible that I would ruin my mother’s reputation,” I say sarcastically.

She glares at me. “You never know how someone could spin those words if they heard them.”

“So you are actually going to admit you believe me?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Unbelievable. I’m your flesh and blood, Mom. Not Richard’s. When are you going to see past his facade?”

A slight frown crosses her face but it’s gone so quickly I think I imagined it. “You are just exaggerating. You always have. And now you’ve decided to turn down a path like your father.”

I laugh at that accusation. “I’m not an alcoholic. And Dad wasn’t an alcoholic until you dragged us away to live in a mansion.”

“No, he was one long before then, you just didn’t know.”

I want to deny what she says, but it is partially true. Before they separated, he started drinking a lot more, but mostly because he knew Mom was up to no good.

“I don’t even know why you take care of him. He obviously has no regard for his own life. He’s just become miserable. Or so I’ve heard.”

“He needs someone. He can’t do this on his own.”

She sighs and I think I am finally getting through to her. “Is he nice to you?”

I shrug. “Depends on the day.”

She gives me a flat smile. Something crosses her eyes, a mixture of sadness and regret and I know that she still cares about him. “He was a good man before he turned to alcohol.”

“He’s still a good man, Mom.”

“Are you really paying for his care?”

I nod. “He would be in a completely different boat if he didn’t have Alice as his caretaker.”

“You know I can help you.” Her voice is quiet.

“I know. But I don’t mind doing it on my own.”

She gives me a weak smile and then one of her friends comes over and babbles about something to do with seating arrangements. My thoughts go to Dad and my worry takes over. And my pain. To think I am here at some country club I would never set foot in while he is struggling with his health.

“By the way, thank you, Charlotte. For doing this today.”

I stare at my mom in shock. My jaw practically dropping open.

“I don’t say it enough and I hate that I put this pressure on you. It stems from me and my need for everything to be perfect. But thank you for coming and doing this.”

“I know this meant a lot to you, Mom. So I sucked up my pride.”

She gives me a soft laugh. “Well you know Chaz will be good for you, but I don’t expect you to get married to him after one date. You’ll see what a great guy he is. I promise. So much better than those boys you date with no future.”

And there it is. She can only be nice for a few minutes. “Yeah, sure, Mom.”

I'm working behind the bar tonight for a few hours. It's pouring rain, so it's slow as hell. My other bartender is serving the few customers there are while I clean all the alcohol bottles.

I sip coffee from my mug that says, "I like to wrap both my hands around it and swallow," as I set a bottle of gin down on the top shelf.

"Can I get some service here?"

I snort. "No assholes allowed at the bar."

"Good thing I'm more of a knight in shining armor then."

I grin at Jackson, who is in his usual out-in-public disguise. A ball cap pulled low on his face and a pair of black-framed glasses. "Please don't tell me you've used that line on girls and it worked."

"Once or twice."

"Ridiculous," I say. "Want a beer?"

He nods so I grab a cold glass out of the fridge and pour him a lager I know he likes. I set the beer in front of him and he swallows half of it down.

"What's wrong?"

"Shit day," he says.

"Practice not go so well?"

He sips more of his beer. "Every time we have a good day, the next day is always shit. I think we second-guess everything too much."

"Makes sense," I say as I wipe another bottle down.

Jackson doesn't say anything for a while and just stares at the bar top. I can tell something else is bothering him but he needs to play it out in his head first.

“Silas drove me to practice. When he went to drop me off, my mom was standing outside my building. I had him bring me here instead.”

I watch him as he rubs the back of his neck, his jaw clenching as he does it.

“She called me this morning too. I should have known she would show up. She left a message saying her roommate kicked her out and that she needed a place to stay. I don’t know why in her right mind she would think I would take her in. I don’t even want to give her money anymore.”

I lean my elbows on the bar and squeeze his hand resting next to his glass. “You don’t owe her shit. But I can see the guilt on your face right now. Don’t listen to her. Don’t let her lies get to you.” I knock his chin with my hand so he looks me in the eyes. “It’s not your fault she left you and your brothers. She chose to leave. You know that. You have no obligation to her. The only thing she ever did for you was birth you. You’ve given her enough money. Don’t bail her out. You know the second she gets what she wants, she’ll just leave again.”

“I know. I haven’t given her shit in years, and right now, I am just more pissed that she keeps figuring out a way to find me. All the damn time.”

I stand up and head to the fridge to grab a glass and pour him another beer. “Yeah, that’s strange. Are you going to change your number again?”

He shakes his head. “No. It’s pointless. She somehow always gets it.”

I set the beer in front of him. “Well you can stay at my place tonight. You can come over and watch a movie. She should be gone by the time you get home if you hang out with me for a few hours.”

“You working much longer?”

I look down the bar and there are even fewer people here than thirty minutes ago. “Nah. I’ll head out. Neil and Alana can handle this.”

“Cool.”

I finish a few things around the bar then head upstairs and grab my purse. Jackson and I walk to my car in silence.

“How are things going with Elijah? Did you break up with him yet?”

Well fuck. I knew he would ask after our last conversation. And I can't tell him the truth. Because I know it will just piss him off and he will do something he'll regret later. “We're fine.”

I can't tell him he hit me again two nights ago when we went out for drinks. We went back to my place and then he blew up on me about some stupid shit I can't even remember. His rage is getting worse. He's always on edge. And I don't know how to act around him.

Jackson looks at me like he doesn't believe me but doesn't say anything.

I really need to deal with this Eli situation before it gets even worse.

CHARLIE

I smile at Chaz after he orders a bottle of wine for the table. I'm glad I can get this stupid dinner out of the way. I had to take a Saturday night off from work. A band was playing tonight with a decent following and I really should be at Talisman instead of Arnaud's but getting this out of the way seemed worth it. Jessica assured me that she would have everything under control. And I believe her. My staff is the best. They can always handle everything that goes on.

"You look lovely tonight, by the way. Don't remember if I told you or not."

I give a short smile to Chaz. He did tell me. Three times already. He insisted he pick me up even though I told him I could just walk here. He came to my door and tried to kiss me and I had to keep from gagging. He's not terrible to look at but he just isn't my type. His blond hair is slicked back and his face is freshly shaven. He's wearing a black suit which is probably custom fitted to him and costs more money than necessary.

I have no idea what to say to him. An awkward silence forms between us and I pray the waiter gets back here quickly with the wine. I read through the menu multiple times as I tap my foot against my leg.

"What are you thinking of eating?" he asks me.

I jump since we've been sitting in silence for five minutes. "Oh, umm. I was thinking the quail and maybe the potatoes and mushrooms."

“I’ve had the quail a few times. It’s delicious.”

I give him a closed-mouth smile. When I see the waiter heading our way with a bottle, I breathe a sigh of relief.

He sets the bottle on the table and mumbles off whatever year and blend it is. I may know a lot about booze and beer, but wine is not really my thing. “Would the lady like to try it?”

I go to answer but Chaz answers for me. “I’ll taste it. My palette is more refined.”

I roll my eyes and watch him swirl the wine around and sip it, swishing it in his mouth. He looks ridiculous and I just want to tell the waiter to leave the bottle on the table and go.

“Perfect,” Chaz says.

“Excellent.” The waiter pours us each a glass then asks. “Are you ready to order?”

“Yes, the lady will have the quail and I’ll have the filet, medium. We will take a salad, potatoes, and mushrooms as well.”

“Very good, sir.” The waiter bends at his waist slightly then walks off.

“You didn’t need to order for me.”

“I like to.”

I sip my wine and swallow down a larger gulp than necessary.

“So I was thinking, now don’t get upset, but I think you should dye your hair.”

I snort. “Why? You don’t like the two tone? I could color it teal. I was thinking of doing that next.”

He smiles at me in almost a demeaning way. “I love how edgy it is. I love how edgy you are. But I don’t think my mother would approve. In fact, I know she wouldn’t. Thank god you don’t have any tattoos. Not really proper for someone at my level in the business world to date someone with tattoos or piercings. So that nose thing will have to go too.”

My mouth is gaping open. I start and stop my response a few times, keeping back my urge to bellow on him. I settle on a softer response. “This is just a dinner, Chaz.”

“But the start to something new and wonderful.”

He raises his glass to cheers my own and I stand abruptly. “Excuse me, I need to use the washroom.”

I walk toward the restroom and then turn down the side hallway that leads to the bar. I order a shot and toss it back. I have no idea how I am going to get through this night if this is the way it’s going.

When I get back to the table, he is on his phone. I set my purse strap on the back of the chair and sip my wine.

“As I was saying earlier.”

Great, he is just picking up right where he left off.

“I already found a great home over in Covington. Close enough for me to get to the city for work.”

“You are getting ahead of yourself, Chaz. And honestly, if all this were to be true, I am not driving to Covington after shutting my bar down on the weekends.”

He raises a brow at me. “Well I figured you would close the bar or sell it.”

“Excuse me?” I ask a little too loudly and the table next to us turns and looks over.

“You don’t need to work if you are married to me.”

I snort. “I would never close my bar or sell it.”

“It just doesn’t work with the family, Charlotte.”

“Oh my god, Chaz, I agreed to this dinner to please my mom with the auction but nothing is happening between us. You need to learn that. I am not some prize. And I am most definitely not a housewife.”

He folds his hands on the table and I can tell he is getting annoyed. “Your mother told my mother this was happening.”

“Chaz, you need to grow up and act like an adult. You don’t have to listen to whatever the fuck your mother has to say. No matter if Jesus told her or not. This is not happening between us.”

“In my circles, this is how things work. So you are just going to need to learn—”

I don’t even want to know what bullshit he was about to drop from that mouth but I am saved by the waiter bringing our dinner.

The food is delicious and we eat mostly in silence. Then tension between us is thick and I just want to get this over with so I can get the hell out of here.

I am sipping my wine when I hear a commotion behind me.

“Sir, you can’t be in here. Sir, you are not dressed per our dress code. You have no reservation. Sir!”

I turn around to look and see Elijah storming over to the table. “What the fuck?” I whisper under my breath.

“Do you know him?” Chaz asks right when Elijah gets to the table.

“This is my girlfriend, you prick. Why the hell are you out to dinner with her? She is obviously just a whore.”

My eyes go wide as I pull on Elijah’s hand. “Hey Eli, calm down. This is just that charity dinner thing. It’s not a big deal.”

Elijah’s nostrils are flaring as he takes in Chaz and flits his eyes back to me. “And I told you I didn’t want you to do this.”

“Eli,” I groan.

“And this is why you shouldn’t settle for a man like him, he has no manners,” Chaz blurts out. “He is bossing you around like he owns you.”

I laugh. “Did you really just say that? You’ve been telling me—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence because Elijah punches Chaz square in the nose, causing him to fall backward out of

his chair. Eli jumps on top of him and goes to punch him again.

“Oh my god,” I screech. Just as a few waiters get to the table and pull Elijah off Chaz.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell the waitstaff.

“Get off me,” Eli yells at them but they are able to hold on to him.

I rush over to Chaz. A woman from another table already has ice wrapped in a napkin and is holding it to Chaz’s face. “Are you—”

“Let’s go, Charlie,” Elijah growls.

I shoot him a glare and go to help Chaz up but he pushes me away. He stands up on his own, holding the ice to his face, blood is trickling down his cheek and into the collar of his shirt. “Just go, Charlotte.”

I bite my lip as I feel my cheeks turn pink. I’m embarrassed that I caused this and angry that Elijah somehow followed me here.

“I’ll take care of him,” I tell the waiters as I grip Eli’s forearm and pull him out of the restaurant. When we get outside, I pull Eli down the street until we hit Bourbon. I can’t believe he did this. I can’t believe he caused a scene in Arnaud’s all because he was high and jealous over a stupid date I had to go on.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I yell at him.

“What were you thinking?” he asks me right back. “I told you not to go on a date with another guy.”

I throw my head back and look at the sky before looking back at Elijah. “I told you it was for charity. It means nothing to me. And now I am going to have to deal with the wrath of my mom and Richard. I can’t even look at you right now. You are such an idiot.”

I storm off down Bourbon and head toward my apartment. I know Elijah is following me, his anger building with every

block. I shouldn't let him in but I think now is as good a time as any to break up with him. He is silent until we get inside.

The second we get into my house, he smacks his hand across the vase of flowers in my foyer, shattering them across the floor. Another gift from him after our last fight.

“I told you I don't want you sleeping with other guys, Charlie.”

I actually laugh at him. “How many times do I have to tell you that was just a dinner with some guy for a charity thing? It meant nothing. And I didn't even want to be there.”

“What about Jackson?” he asks.

I scrunch my nose. “What about Jackson?”

“I know he was here the other night. I know he slept over.”

“He fell asleep on the couch while we were watching a movie.”

“And you expect me to believe that?” he yells.

I fold my arms over my chest and lean against the wall near the front door. “Yes, I do expect you to believe that because we are just friends.”

“I know you're lying!” he screams as he punches a hole in my wall.

I stand in the corner and watch him rage. He's near the kitchen, so I can just sneak out the door, but I don't want him alone in my apartment. He is dangerous and I am kicking myself for not breaking up with him the other night. Not that it would have stopped anything. It would have been the same. It feels like he thinks he has some claim over me. I don't know why. Maybe it's Jackson's words from last week. How he said Elijah was just watching over me. I have no idea why. Or what that could mean. And Jackson sure as hell wasn't going to tell me.

He slams his fist into the wall again and I've had enough. “Stop!” I yell.

He pauses in his drug-induced rage and stares at me.

“Get the fuck out of my house and my life. Do not come back here.”

He storms over to me and I should have seen it coming. He grips my upper arms and slams me against the wall. “You want me out of your life? Why, so you can find some guy like Chaz? You know no one will ever be as good to you as I am.”

I scoff at that. “Says the man that has me slammed against the wall, making threats.”

His nostrils flare as his grip tightens. “You are such a bitch.”

“And you’re an asshole.”

He pushes me against the wall again before letting go and taking a step back. “You know what? Fuck this. Fuck your stepdad’s money. Fuck your prissy bitch attitude. I’m done.”

He walks out the door, slamming it behind him, and I am so confused.

What the hell just happened?

I lock the door so he can’t change his mind and come back and then run to my bar cart and pull out the tequila, taking a long drink. This has been the strangest night of my life.

I grab my clutch off the table in the foyer and pull out my phone and call Janae.

“Are you closed yet?”

“I mean, I can be,” Janae answers.

“I need a drink.”

“Oh girl, spill.” Janae’s excitement is palpable through the phone.

I sip some more tequila. “I would rather tell you over drinks. Or else I am going to drink this entire bottle of tequila.”

“Fuck it. I’m closing. If anyone needs some goddess-damned herbs tonight they can go to the tourist traps on Bourbon. Havoc in twenty?”

“I’ll get an Uber now.”

She hangs up the phone without another word, probably so she can close up her shop. Janae runs a spiritual shop as she calls it. But it is a legit voodoo and witchcraft shop in the Garden District. It’s few and far between a tourist shows up there and if they do they are probably a real witch. Her clientele scares me sometimes when I hang out there but she acts like it’s nothing. Her mom is from Mexico and comes from a long line of brujas. When her mom moved here she met a Creole man who has a history of voodoo in his family. Of course, her mom thought it was fate and Janae was born. Their relationship didn’t last long but Janae has a good relationship with both her mom and dad. Her mom thinks she is some powerful bruja but Janae disagrees with her constantly. I don’t know though, Janae has done some weird shit and I am pretty sure magic was behind it.

Wilder hates when Saylor hangs out in her shop. He thinks she is going to turn into some crazy voodoo priestess but the girl smokes too much weed to actually commit to becoming a priestess. I just know that she enjoys her time with Janae and Riot’s family.

I pull up outside the dive bar between the CBD and the Lower Garden District. It’s one of my favorite places, dark and dirty, and it smells like shit half the time. But it’s only crowded when there is a band playing and the rest of the time it gives me and Janae time to talk shit and get wasted. Even though she tries to do it all the time at Talisman. But I have only got shit-faced once at my bar and realized I should never do it again.

I’m ordering a drink at the bar when she walks in. She stops in her tracks when she looks at me.

“Did I miss the memo?”

I look down and finally realize I never changed out of my outfit that I went to dinner with Chaz in. It’s nothing crazy but she knows me, I am usually in ripped jeans and crop tops or oversized T-shirts. I’m wearing a black dress that is skintight. I don’t have that many curves, thanks to my genetics to look

like a toothpick, but the ruching plays off my hips just right to give me some curve. The top dips low enough to make my girls look a bit more full. And I am wearing heels.

“I didn’t even think to change.”

“This must be a good story then.”

I grab my tequila, Topo Chico, and lime off the bar. “Girl, you can’t make this shit up.”

She grabs a drink and we head outside and sit near a fan to keep us cool. I proceed to tell her all about Chaz picking me up instead of meeting me at the restaurant, the way he tried to kiss me before we even left my apartment, the most awkward dinner conversation ever, and then of course Elijah showing up.

“I cannot believe Elijah was able to get past the freaking hostess in that place.”

“Oh she was chasing after him. I at least had some kind of warning that he was coming to the table from the gasps of the other patrons and the staff yelling.”

“Wow.”

I finish my drink and set my glass down. “The best part was watching Eli punch Chaz in the face. I really wish I had a picture of the shock on Chaz’s face.”

Janae laughs so hard she snorts. “He is probably at the hospital right now, worried he might die.”

“The man deserved a good punch. Probably the first one in his life.”

“I’m surprised your mom hasn’t called you.”

I pull my phone out and show her all the missed calls.

“Damn. So what happened with Eli?”

“I need more drinks.”

“I’ll get them!” she says as she bounces out of her chair.

I pick up my phone and look at the texts my mom also sent but just ignore them. She has to have lost her damn mind if she

thought I was going to fall in love with Chaz tonight.

I get a text from Jackson as I scroll through social media.

Jackson: How was your dinner date with sassy pants?

I smile at that. I showed him a picture of Chaz a week ago and he now refers to him as sassy pants because of the way the khakis Chaz always wears are a size too small for his bubble butt.

Charlie: I could probably write a book about it.

Jackson: He hasn't whisked you off your feet yet and taken you to some far-off kingdom.

Jackson: Oh shit, am I interrupting the mediocre missionary sex?

I decide to mess with him.

Charlie: You'd be surprised to find out the guy has some major fetishes. He just untied me from the sex swing in his room.

Jackson: Damn the douche has got some game.

I laugh out loud.

Jackson: Are you sure he would even know what a sex swing is? He would probably think it's some toddler feeding contraption.

I am dying of laughter as Janae comes back with our drinks.

"What the hell is so funny?"

I show her my phone.

"You actually thought Jackson would believe you?"

I shake my head. "Fuck no, but it's just so easy to mess with him."

"You should mess around with him. Find out if he really does have that Jacob's ladder."

I look down at the tray Janae brought over. Not only does it have our drinks, but three shots each. "You know that ship

sailed a long time ago.”

“And that ship needs to come back to the dock every now and then to refuel. The ship is at the dock, Charlie.”

I throw back a shot and she quickly follows. “No, it’s not.”

“He clearly is happy the ship returned.”

“What?” I ask her, confused.

“Oh come on, that man is in love with you.”

I shake my head as I suck on a lime. “No. I mean, yeah, sure, he loves me because we are friends, but it’s like a brother and sister thing.”

“Eww, unless you’ve been reading a good ol’ stepbrother romance, that is definitely not what you two have.”

“You know we’re friends. That’s it.”

“Yeah, okay. You keep telling yourself that.”

I ignore her and chug half my drink. Luckily, she changes the subject.

“So what happened with Elijah?”

“Ugh,” I groan and lean my head back against the wall behind me. “Asshole followed me home. Started spewing off a bunch of nonsense, broke some shit, punched a hole in my wall. You know, same shit, different day.”

She shakes her head at me then gives me a stern look. “I don’t know what your problem is but you need to dump his ass.”

“I did.”

“What!” she shrieks.

“Yeah, tonight after he had his little tantrum, I kicked him out and said we were done.”

“And he just left?”

“Yeah. I was actually surprised.”

“Wow. That’s a first. You think he is going to stay away?”

I shrug. “Who knows? But at least he is gone for now.”

She pushes another shot toward me. “Amen, sister.”

We slam the shots back and then spend another two hours being overserved as we talk shit.

By the time she is ready to leave, I can barely walk in my heels.

“Eww, do not take those off on this street.”

“But my feet are like nails.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense.”

I burp. “I know.”

“Okay, let’s get you home.”

I push my phone in her face. “I already ordered an Uber.”

She takes the phone from my hand. “Good, he’s almost here.”

“What about you?”

She smirks at me. “Nelson was working and you know I love that dick.”

“Mmm dick. I want some dick.”

Janae laughs. “Well you had two options earlier. Chazzy Suavemente or douchebag McGee and from the sounds of it you pissed off both.”

I pout. “I don’t want them anyway.”

She smiles at me then shoves my phone back in my hand. “Well, your Uber is here. Text me when you get home.”

I wrap my arms around her, almost knocking both of us over before she pushes me in the cab. “Behave tonight.”

Whatever that means. I shut the door and rest my head against the headrest. I push all the thoughts of what happened earlier out of my head. Then my thoughts switch to Jackson. I bite my lip as I think about the Jacob’s ladder. Janae is always asking if I know and I pretend I don’t. But I’ve seen Jackson’s dick. And sure enough, it’s pierced. But I am not going to tell

her that. Not that she would try and make any moves on Jackson. But I want him for myself.

What?

Even drunk me knows that was clearly not a thought I should be having.

But what if it could be true? What if I could be with Jackson? What if he really did want me like I've always wanted him?

I was half awake the other night when he carried me to his guest bedroom. And I was happy when he put me in the room he doesn't use as his fuck pad. He was so gentle as he laid me down and pulled the blankets over me. The way his lips kissed my forehead sent a zing of electricity through my body. I almost wanted to open my eyes and let him know I was awake. I wanted to pull him on top of me. Kiss those lips I haven't kissed in twelve years.

Or how we woke up wrapped around each other on my couch at four in the morning, two days ago. It felt so natural.

But I know he doesn't want me like that. He made it clear when he fucked Ashley.

I sigh as the Uber driver tells me we're here. I look outside and realize I am not at my house but at Jackson's.

Did I drunkenly type in his address? I look at my phone, confused.

"Ma'am, we're here," the driver says again.

"Um, yes. Right. Thank you," I mumble and probably slur as I try to gracefully get out of the car without falling on my face.

I walk to the front doors of his building and stop three times, wondering if I should even do this. It's a Saturday night. He is probably out partying. Or worse, he has a girl up there.

I go to turn around and look for a cab, but stop myself. It's late and the city isn't the safest. And if he is with a girl, I'll just crash on the couch or something. Drink more of his tequila so I cannot hear whoever he is fucking.

I open my purse, grateful I grabbed my normal one rather than the tiny clutch I brought to dinner. I find the key card for his building and pull it out, scanning it across the sensor so I can open the door.

I walk across the marble floor and try not to fall on my face as I head to the bank of elevators. The entire ride up to his place, I am telling myself this is a bad idea. But I still get off on his floor.

I stand outside of his door, wondering what the hell I am doing but find my body thinking something entirely different as I pull my keys out and unlock the door.

I stumble in through the front door. The place is silent. I stop in my tracks before walking any farther inside.

Maybe he isn't home. Maybe he went out with the guys.

I take a step back, ready to turn around and leave.

“Charlie?”

I spin around and lose my balance but Jackson swoops in and catches me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I don't know. The Uber brought me here.”

“Did it now?”

I nod. “Yeah. Oops. I guess I'll be leaving now.”

“Why?”

“You were clearly sleeping or occupied.”

He chuckles and the sound goes straight to my core. “I can assure you I am wide awake and not asleep. And I am not occupied. No girls here, if that's what you were thinking.”

I bite my lip, brush my bangs out of my eyes then push away from him. “Nope.”

“Yeah, okay, Charlie.” He just shakes his head at me as he walks down the hall to his living room.

I use the wall as support to take my heels off. I toss them by the front door then pad down the hallway.

He's in the kitchen pouring me my favorite drink. A bottle of whiskey sits partially empty with a full glass next to it.

“So what were you doing if you were all alone?”

He hands me my drink, then picks up his. “Writing. Working on songs, melodies.”

I take a sip of my drink. “Can I hear them?”

He shakes his head.

“Why not? You always let me hear them.”

He throws back his glass of whiskey, setting the cup down as he runs his hand through his messy hair. “They aren't ready.”

I push him in the chest. “Since when has that stopped you from letting me listen before?”

“Maybe these are just more personal to me.”

I smack my lips together, then drop my mouth open. “I can't even hear them?”

He smiles at me. “Not yet.”

I purse my lips then reach for the tequila. “You suck.”

He reaches into the cabinet and hands me a shot glass. I pour us both shots of tequila, making a mess as I do it.

“You gonna lick that off the counter?”

I roll my eyes at him and take a shot, half of it missing my mouth as it rolls down my chin. “You gonna lick this off me?” I tease.

He clenches his jaw as desire fills his eyes. I must be wasted if I think he has desire in his eyes.

I set my shot glass down and then he suddenly grabs me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he leans down and licks the tequila off me from the top of my breast up to my chin. I swear I am dreaming.

He slowly pulls away, smirking at me. “Your turn.”

“You're kidding?”

He shakes his head. "Clean it up."

"You're such a dick." I lean over and go to lick the tequila off the counter but he smacks the back of my head, causing me to crush my nose into the countertop.

I snap my head back, holding my nose as he laughs uncontrollably. "You're a dick!"

"And you are gullible as hell."

I punch him in the shoulder then grab the mixed drink he made and stumble over to the staircase leading up to the rooftop.

Jackson catches up to me and pulls me back. "Your drunk ass is not going on a roof."

"You're no fun."

"I know. I am such a Debbie Downer."

I sigh then head back to the living room. I sip my drink as he sits across from me. We end up getting drunk. Well drunker than I already was.

I stumble to his room when I feel like I am going to fall asleep. I trip over my feet then crawl into his bed and pass out.

JACKSON

I groan as I sense the sunlight coming through the windows. I must have been so shit-faced last night I forgot to close them.

I roll over to grab the remote and run into a body. I inhale deeply. The smell of cherries and jasmine. So familiar yet my still drunk brain can't wrap my head around it.

Then I open my eyes to see a messy head of lilac and silver hair. I don't know how much we drank last night but it's enough to not remember us falling asleep together. And I don't know what we did but I am going to take advantage while I can.

I run my hand up her thigh and then around her stomach as I press myself closer to her. She's naked. Did we...?

Then I remember her drunken walk to my room. Her struggle to get her dress off. Then she just pulled it over her head and tossed it on the ground before climbing into bed. I remember taking her in. I hadn't seen her naked since she let me touch her when we were in high school. And she is everything I've imagined and more.

I press my lips into her neck, inhaling as I go. She tastes sweeter than I remember. Better than I remember. My hand slides up her body and rests under her breast. She moans and she arches into my touch, causing my dick to stand at attention. I move my hand up over her breast, pinching her nipple as I go. She presses against me, causing friction against my dick. I trail a line of kisses from her neck to her shoulder.

She wiggles against me and I moan into her shoulder, biting softly. Fuck, I shouldn't be doing this. She is going to hate me when she wakes up and sees it's me. But I can't help myself. I've been in love with her for far too long for me to stop.

I move my hand up her chest and cup her cheek, turning her head toward me. But as soon as my lips go to touch hers, her eyes fly open and she scrambles out of my arms.

"What the fuck, Jackson?" She pulls back farther, gripping the sheet between us.

"Shit. Fuck." I feel like a douche, so I think of a lame excuse. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

She laughs as a smile takes over her face. "That is the worst excuse you could give me. You never let anyone sleep in your bed."

I rub my hands over my face. This is what happens when the one girl you want knows more about you than anyone.

"Why were you kissing me?"

I sigh and pull my hands away from my face and reach out to her. Surprisingly, she lets me touch her and I pull her into me. "Because I wanted to, Charlie, okay? I've wanted to kiss you for years. I've wanted to tell you how I feel about you, but you've always pushed me away. I wanted to say..." I can't finish the words.

"You wanted to say what?"

I look into her eyes and I can almost see the longing she has for me. The same I have for her. But she has buried her need so deep I don't even think she knows it's there. But I can see it underneath every single one of her layers. The years we spent apart, the years we were just friends. It was never supposed to be that way. We both know it.

"Jax?" she whispers as her hand reaches out for me.

I kiss her fingers and watch her as she bites her lip. "What happened between us, Charlotte?"

She closes her eyes as I use her real name. I only ever call her that in intimate moments.

“Life,” she whispers.

I shake my head as I wrap my hand around her neck, pulling her even closer to me. Close enough we are sharing the same breath. “Then what is keeping us apart?”

Her eyes look up to meet mine, those beautiful clear-blue eyes. Like the sky just after the sun rises. “Us.”

Her fingers glide over my lips and I can't help but suck them into my mouth. She moans and arches her back into me. Her tits rubbing against my chest. I slide my hand from the back of her neck, down her back, and over her ass so I can pull her into my hips. So she can feel everything she is doing to me.

“Do you think this will be a mistake?” she asks me quietly.

“Why would I think that?”

She closes her eyes as her face falls, a sadness creeping over her. “Because I'm not enough for you. I wasn't before, I won't be—”

“Stop. You were always enough, Charlotte. You were more than enough. It was me who wasn't good enough for you.”

She shakes her head. “I never needed you to be good enough for me, Jax. I just needed you.”

I growl at her words and dive in for her mouth. I can't wait any longer to taste those lips. She moans as I capture her lips. Her arms flying around my neck, pulling me into her, pulling me closer.

I press my tongue against her, begging her to open and she does. I grip her hair hard as I pull her mouth into mine, devouring every inch of her. My entire body is on fire from this one kiss. Like it knew all along, this was all I needed.

“Jax,” she moans against my mouth as she hooks her leg over my thigh.

I growl at her need, needing to take and take from her. Needing to feel her so deep in my soul, you can't tell the two of us apart.

I flip her onto her back, grinding my hips into hers as our kiss only deepens. Her nails scrape down my back as she thrusts her hips into mine.

“You are walking a fine line, Charlie,” I mutter against her lips.

She giggles and I want to hear that sound every morning. “And what line is that?”

I move my lips to her neck, nibbling at the sensitive spot just below her ear, the spot that drove her crazy when we were in high school. “If you keep grinding against me like that, I am going to rip off these damn panties that are in my way and have my way with you.”

She moans at my words. “And how exactly will you have your way with me?” she teases.

I press my very painful cock against her mound. “I don't know if you can handle me.”

She brings her hand to my chest, dragging her nails across the ink on my chest. Over the black anatomical heart that I have tattooed for her, not that she knows. “Then you better explain in detail exactly what you plan to do to me so I can let you know if I can handle you.”

I chuckle as I bite on her bottom lip then suck it into my mouth. “This is not the Charlie I remember.”

“The Charlie you had was scared of anything sexual. Things change, Jax.”

I drop my head to her nipple. “Do they now?” I suck it into my mouth and she curses as I flick my tongue around the pebbled bud and scrape my teeth against it. I run my hand up the outside of her thigh, wanting to feel every inch of her as I pop her nipple out of my mouth. “That doesn't seem to have changed.”

“Fine, not everything.”

I remember the first time she let me see her body when we were awkward teenagers. I thought I was so experienced in the sexual department. I wasn't. But she loved when I played with her nipples. "You know, if you get these pierced, you will like this even more," I say as I dive into the other breast, not wanting it to go untouched.

Her hands grip my hair as her hips start grinding in circles against my dick. "While I am enjoying that dirty tongue on my nipples, you still haven't told me what you plan on doing to me."

I let go of her breast and sit up, grabbing her hands and pinning them on either side of her head. "You want to know? You want to know what I have fantasized about for years?"

She nods her head and she sucks her bottom lip into her mouth.

"Well, darling, for starters, I want to tie these wrists to the headboard, so you feel helpless." I pause because I don't know how that will make her feel after the years of sexual abuse. But she just moans as I say it, so I keep going. "Then I want to lick every inch of your body until you are squirming beneath me. When you can't take it anymore, I will devour that pussy, sucking on your clit so hard you see stars when you come. But I won't stop. I won't let you ride out the orgasm. I will make it keep coming as I dip my fingers inside of you, spreading your wetness all over before sliding my fingers to that tight hole and teasing it. I don't know if you've ever let any man fuck your ass but when you're with me, I can guarantee you it will happen."

I can feel her heart rate picking up with every word I say. I can feel the wetness between her thighs soaking into my briefs. "When you are finally begging for my dick, I'll spread these thighs so wide it's almost unbearable and then I will slowly slide into you, making sure you can feel every single one of my piercings as I enter you. And when I have you shaking uncontrollably from pleasure, I will drive into you so hard you black out."

“Fuck, Jax, just do it already. I need you.” Her words are breathy and desperate and I want nothing more than to do everything I just said but I just want to feel her around me, feel her heat soaking into me. I don’t want the dirty, rough sex with her right now. I just want her.

I growl as I let go of her wrists and drop my hands, ripping off her panties. I push my briefs down as fast as I can, kicking them off my ankles. “As much as I want to do all of that to you, baby girl. I can’t wait any longer to feel what it’s like to be inside of you again.”

I grab my dick and line it up with her center. The only thing I am sticking to is sliding into her slowly. I don’t want to use a condom, I want to feel every single inch of her with nothing between us.

“I’m clean,” I tell her. She looks at me with desperation. “This thing between us, Charlie, I can’t not feel you, all of you.”

She grips the sheets as the head of my dick teases her entrance. “It’s fine, it’s fine. I just need you inside of me, Jax. Please.”

I slide an inch farther into her, the first rung of my piercing rubbing against her. Her hands leave the sheets and wrap around the back of my neck. I’m barely inside of her and I already know this is where I was meant to be. I am in complete bliss. I inch in a bit more, forcing her legs wider so I can get the best angle for her to feel the metal on my cock.

“Jackson,” she breathes, her fingers sliding down my back until she is cupping my ass, forcing me deeper inside. “Too slow, I need to feel all of you.”

I lean down and tug her nipple back into my mouth, hard. She yelps and I wish I had her on her knees so I could smack her ass. I let go of the hard bud. “So impatient.”

“Yes,” she hisses as I slide in a bit farther.

Watching her face now is the best damn thing in the world. Better than a sellout crowd in an arena, better than a Grammy.

Charlotte Fortier was made for me. Something I've known since the second grade.

I slip in a little more, wanting her to adjust to the size of my cock but she starts making these soft mewling sounds and I can't take it anymore. "Fuck," I yell then pull her hips down on my cock as I slam forward.

She screams at the intrusion but I don't stop, I start an intense rhythm. Her pussy is tight and wet and warm. It feels like it was made for me and it makes me want to go deeper. As deep as I can go.

"Jackson," she screams as her fingers dig into my biceps.

"You asked for it, sweetheart."

She hooks her legs around my hips. "I know. I know. God, this is nothing like what we did in high school."

I slide my arms under her back and lift her up so she is sitting on my dick. She groans as I get even deeper in her. "Baby, high school was nothing. I said you weren't prepared for me now."

She sucks on my earlobe hard, playing with the piercing in it with her tongue. "I may not have been prepared, but I don't want you to stop."

I grin as I lift her hips then slam her down on my dick. She wraps her arms around my neck tightly as she rides me. I can feel my balls tightening, pleasure racing through every inch of my body. I know I am about to come but I need her to come first.

I push her back down on the bed, lifting one leg up to my shoulder as I pound into her and press my thumb into her clit. She goes off like a rocket, I can feel the way her pussy is claiming my dick, sucking me in deeper. She groans as her grip on the sheets tighten.

I pull out of her just before I explode then come all over her stomach and tits, enjoying the view of myself all over her.

We are both breathing heavy as I collapse next to her. I trace my fingers along her thigh then look over to meet her

gaze.

But the look on her face has changed. Regret filling her features, her jaw tight, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I prop myself up on my side and cup her face, turning her to face me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

She pulls away from me and gets off the bed, going straight for the bathroom.

Fuck, what did I do?

I groan as I sit up and rub my hands over my face. I can smell her on my fingers and it causes my dick to harden.

I head to the bathroom, hearing the sound of running water. I push open the door and find her sitting on the toilet, her head in her hands.

“Charlie.”

She shakes her head but doesn’t look up at me.

I hesitate but then take a step closer to her. “Babe, what’s wrong?”

She stays silent, so I squat down in front of her and pull her hands away from her face. I can tell she was crying. She looks up at me with red eyes.

“Shit, what did I do?”

She sighs deeply, pulls her hands out of mine, then stands at heads to the shower. My cum is dripping down her chest, stomach, and thighs. I don’t know what the hell is wrong but I follow her into the shower.

“Talk to me.”

She looks up at me. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s obviously something. You got out of bed so fast. You were crying. And now you don’t even want to talk to me?”

She grabs my soap and starts washing her chest. I walk over to her and grab it out of her hands and press her against the shower wall. “Talk to me.”

“This was a mistake.”

My eyebrows shoot to my forehead. “A mistake?”

She nods.

“Did I do something wrong? Did I do something that Richard—”

“You know I am well over the trauma that happened from being raped as a child. It has nothing to do with that. Sex never has anything to do with that. So don’t try to psychoanalyze me.”

I grip her neck, maybe more forcefully than I need to as I step closer into her space. “Then tell me what’s wrong.”

“I did.”

I let go of her and step back. “Unbelievable. You are going to tell me to fuck you, beg me to tell you all the things I want to do to you. And after I do it, you are just going to call it a mistake. What the fuck, Charlie?”

She grabs the soap out of my hand and aggressively scrubs her body. “I can’t deal with this right now, Jackson.”

I laugh as I throw my head back in frustration. “You can’t deal with this? That is all the answer I am going to get?” I slam my fist against the shower wall. “Fuck, Charlie. I don’t know what the fuck I did, but what happened between us wasn’t a mistake.”

She sets the soap down and turns the water off. “I need to go.”

I don’t stop her as she walks out of the shower. She grabs a towel and dries herself off. I follow her into my bedroom, wrapping a towel around me as I go.

She picks her dress up off the floor, dropping her towel.

“Stop,” I command.

She actually listens and stops trying to wiggle into the tight-assed dress she had on last night.

“Look, I don’t know what I did. I know you aren’t going to tell me either. And that’s fine. You need space right now. But let me drive you home.” I walk over to my closet and pull out a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. “Here, wear these. You’ll be more comfortable.”

She takes the clothes and slides them on. “Thank you.”

I just nod as I walk back into my closet and get dressed. She isn’t in the room when I come out of the closet. Instead I find her in the kitchen, her arms crossed over her chest. I grab the keys to my jeep off the counter. “Let’s go.”

I drive her home in silence. The only words she says to me are a thank-you as she gets out of the car.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel as I watch her go inside her building. “Fuck,” I yell.

I have no idea what the fuck happened. And I’m pissed as hell she won’t talk to me. I decide to call up Silas. I know it’s early but I could really use a fucking drink.

But a text on my phone has me pausing.

Unknown number: Time is ticking. And I don’t think you will like the consequences.

A picture of Charlie is sent to me. It’s not old, maybe from a few days ago of her working at Talisman. And he knows how much she means to me from the last favor I asked of him.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel again, letting out a slur of curse words.

Now I really need a drink.

I peel away from the curb and head toward the Garden District. Silas is going to have to drink with me no matter what.

CHARLIE

I 'm an idiot.

Like capital I-D-I-O-T.

What the hell was I even thinking about giving in to Jackson this morning? It was a mistake. I knew from the minute he pulled out and came all over me like I was some slut he brought home.

I blame the alcohol. I had to have been still drunk this morning. And it was my drunk ass that stupidly decided to crawl into his bed naked last night and then let him fuck me this morning.

I slam my bathroom door shut as I jump into the shower, trying to wash away the memories of him. Maybe I am overreacting but I can't go down this path with Jackson again. He broke my heart last time and it nearly broke me. And now that he is Jax Knight, there is no way he could stay monogamous. It's not written in his blood. I know well enough, if he's done it before, he will do it again.

I rinse my hair out and step out of the shower, wrapping my towel around me. I don't have much time to get ready. I should already be at the bar. There is a big show tonight and I don't want it to fall apart before then.

I rush around my house getting ready and notice a text on my phone from last night.

Elijah: We aren't done.

Great. I don't want to deal with him too. I grab a mug of coffee and rush out the door.

When I pull up to the bar, it's past one in the afternoon. I rush inside, tossing my bag behind the bar temporarily and then pouring more coffee in my mug.

"You okay?" Jessica asks me.

"Hmm." I say as I look at her with a raised brow. "Oh yeah, fine."

"Okay," she says sardonically before walking the drink she was making down to the end of the bar.

I look at myself in the mirror, wondering if I forgot to put mascara on one eye, but I can't see anything out of place.

I take a large gulp of coffee and begin checking the stock of everything in the bar while Jessica serves the handful of customers at the bar. Everything seems to be stocked, so I wait for Jessica to finish pouring drinks so I can go over her plan for the evening.

When she walks over to me, I start talking. "So the doors are opening at six and the show is at seven. I want to make sure you don't have Molly at the bar. She is too slow when she is overwhelmed. I would say put her as a cocktail server in the back but I don't think that would work out well."

Jessica agrees. "Yeah, I am putting her on tables tonight. I have Drew and Nikki working the bar in back. I'm staying late since Sal is sick, so I'll be here until ten. I'll watch over this bar and I have Mags and Ryan covering it too. Ryan will always jump back and forth between the two, depending on how busy they get back there."

"Good. Did you have anyone run inventory in the back?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet. I was going to have Mags do it when she got here at four."

I shake my head. "I'll do it now. Just have her work on garnishes when she gets in."

"Got it."

“Okay, I need to go through some emails and then I’ll be in the back. Holler if you need me.”

“Umm, Charlie.”

“Yeah?” I ask her curiously.

She gets into my space and whispers. “You may want to cover up the hickeys on your neck.”

My hand flies to my throat as my eyes bulge out. “Oh my god.”

“I wanted to tell you earlier but don’t worry, I doubt anyone saw.”

I rip my hair out of the bun I put it in and let it fall around my shoulders. “Fuck me.”

“I’m guessing things are good again with Elijah.”

I shiver at her words. “No.”

“Oh, then who was the lucky guy? Oh wait, don’t tell me. Was it that preppy guy your mom wants you to marry?”

“God no.”

“Wasn’t that your date last night?”

I feel like that was years ago and not last night. Way too much has happened in the last twenty-four hours. “Yeah, it was.”

“And?”

I roll my eyes at her. “About as boring as I expected. But I am sure my mother will continue to push Chaz on me. Sadly, I think he is head over heels for me. But he said he doesn’t like tattoos or piercings so I don’t really see us having a future,” I say sarcastically.

Jessica props her hip against the bar and taps her cheek. “So if Elijah is out. And Chaz is out. Where are the hickeys from?”

Well shit.

I step away from her. “I have work to do. I’ll talk to you later.”

“You aren’t getting out of this,” she yells at me.

I flip her off and head up the stairs to my office, desperate to cover up the marks from Jackson’s mouth.

I’m in the venue, taking inventory of the liquor when I hear a pair of heels clacking toward me.

“Riot, how did you get in here?” I ask when I see her.

“Jess let me in.”

I nod my head. “What’s up?”

“Oh, you know, just thought I would swing by. See how everything is going between you and Jax.”

Great. “Oh, you know, same as usual.”

“Really?”

I nod.

“Then why did he have a piss-poor attitude at practice today? Not to mention he showed up drunk. Silas drove him in and he wouldn’t tell me shit.”

I shrug.

“You know, you not saying anything doesn’t help at all.”

I sigh as I set my clipboard down. I’m friends with Riot. Maybe not as close to her as I am to Janae but she is still a good friend. And since all Janae wants me to do is fuck Jackson, maybe Riot will have a different perspective. Of course, I never told her why we broke up in the first place.

“What do you want me to say?” My frustration is building up, it’s been building since this morning. “That I fucked Jackson this morning and it was incredible and I felt my walls falling down around me as I let him in. As I let him have every piece of me.”

Riot slides behind the bar and sits on top of a cooler and smiles at me. “This is very interesting information.”

“No it’s not.”

“Well what happened after? Because it looked like Jackson’s puppy got run over.”

I turn away from her and go back to checking the inventory.

“Come on, Charlie. You know if it was Janae, she would be giving you very different advice from me. So spill.”

I turn and face her. “I felt used afterward, Ri. That’s what happened. And then I was a bitch and told him it was a mistake.”

“Was it?”

I shake my head because deep down I know that it wasn’t a mistake at all.

“He’s a wreck.”

“Yeah, well we both know that we can’t do this.”

She raises one of her perfectly arched brows at me. “I thought you said it wasn’t a mistake.”

“It wasn’t. Ughh... what I mean is that it was fun to get out of our systems but us together, it just can’t be a thing.”

“He cares about you a lot.”

“Yeah, and I know what happens when he stops caring.”

She jumps off the cooler and puts an arm around me. “I know you never told me why you guys broke up and that’s fine. But that was twelve years ago and I promise you that whatever he did to break your heart then, he won’t do it again.”

“Look at his lifestyle, Riot. He’s on the road surrounded by beautiful women. I can’t be there. I’ll always be right here. It just won’t work. Hell, you and Roan were on tour together and it still didn’t work out for you. He still cheated on you.”

“Our situation is entirely different, Charlie. You don’t know that half of it.” Her voice is dominant and stern. Such power coming out of someone who is only five feet tall.

“Sorry, you’re right. I don’t know.”

“Apology accepted. But just so you know, Jackson wouldn’t cheat on you. I know how much you mean to him and even though he never told me his feelings about you, I can see them bright as day. You guys have something special.”

“We’re better off as friends.”

She shakes her head. “No, me and Roan should have stayed friends instead of getting married and having kids.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “Just give him another chance, Charlie. I think it would be good for both of you.”

“And not just his music?” I ask her with a hint of humor in my voice.

“Oh trust me, that is just a bonus. But you know I would much rather him be happy. Besides, he writes his best music when he’s happy so it’s kind of like a win-win.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you.”

She starts to walk away but I stop her. “Hey Riot.” She turns around and looks at me. “How are you so sure about Jax?”

“I just know.”

With that she walks away and I slump against the bar, torn once again between my head and my heart.

JACKSON

“So why are we here?” Silas asks me as we sit in a dark corner of a bar where Elijah’s band is playing. Both of us hoping no one recognizes us.

“West wants me to find out what Elijah is up to.”

“And why do you owe him this favor still?”

“You know what he can do to us,” I say, deflecting the question.

Silas sips his beer. “Yeah but he’s never acted on it.”

“I’ll tell you later,” I mumble into my beer. Not really sure if he believes me but I don’t want to say anything in public.

“So have you talked to Charlie since Sunday?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“So what happened? Since you clearly didn’t want to talk about it on Sunday and proceeded to down half a fifth of whiskey.”

I rub my hands over my face. “Fuck, man. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well you have to. Dude, you were writing good music again when things were fine with her and ever since then you’ve given up. It’s just like the last six months. And you know what? I’m no idiot. I know she started dating fuckwad up there six months ago.” He points to the stage.

I watch Elijah play the guitar. He's not bad but he isn't great and the other guys in the band are all mediocre too. Their singer can't sing and it just sounds like noise.

"She broke things off with him."

"No shit?" Silas says as he turns back to face me.

I don't need to tell him about the abusive nature of Elijah and what set Charlie off. Instead I just skip to her showing up. "Yeah. She got piss-ass drunk afterward."

"Because she broke up with him?"

I take a sip of my beer. "Nah. Because she didn't do it sooner. And she was with Janae so of course you know that means trouble. Pretty sure Janae ordered her an Uber and put my address in her phone. So Charlie ended up stumbling into my place while I was working on some new songs." I leave out how she looked. How that tight dress fit every inch of her petite frame. "Then we got drunk and passed out in my bed."

"And this is why you were in a pissy mood?"

I flag down the bartender and order the two of us shots. "No. Because I woke up the next morning and started touching her."

"Oh. I'm sure that went over well with her," he laughs.

"We fucked, Silas. I finally got a taste of her after twelve years. And it was the best fucking thing in the world."

"Damn. I didn't see that coming. I didn't think she would ever let you touch her in a way beyond friendship after what you did."

The bartender comes back with the shots and we both toss them back. "Yeah, well she did. Until the orgasm wore off and she said it was a mistake."

Silas freezes with his beer halfway to his mouth. "Oh shit."

"Yeah, so sorry if I've been in a piss-poor mood the last few days. But I promise I am working on some songs for tomorrow."

“Dude, that’s fucked up. I’m sorry. I know how you feel about her.”

I wave him off. “I should have known better.”

“So she hasn’t said anything to you?”

I shake my head. “No, and I don’t want to piss her off more by texting her or showing up at Talisman.”

The band’s set is finally over and I breathe a sigh of relief. I could not listen to that crap anymore.

“She’ll apologize, man. I know her almost as well as you. And those years you spent apart were no good for either of you. She needs you in her life as much as you need her.”

“Thanks, man, but I don’t know. I don’t know where I went wrong. I just…” I don’t even know what to say.

Silas’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Hey man, this is on her. It’s not you.”

“I’ve never apologized for what happened twelve years ago. We both just brushed it under the rug. What if she thinks I’d do that to her again?”

“She probably does think that. But you can’t just go run to her and apologize for it and hope you can kiss and make it better. You need to wait for her, man.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. “I feel like a pussy.”

Silas laughs. “Well you have been pining over her for well over a decade.”

I punch him in the shoulder. “Dick.”

“I’d rather be a dick than a pussy.”

“Why are we friends?”

He scratches his chin. “Been wondering that for years.”

I snort as he finishes off his beer. Then I notice Elijah leaving through the back. I nod to Silas.

“Let’s go see what this dick licker is up to,” Silas says as he stands from his barstool.

I throw a tip down on the bar then head out the front door behind Silas. We walk across the street and look down the alley and see Elijah talking to someone near the other end of the street.

“Let’s take the car,” Silas says.

We climb into his SUV and drive around to the next block. He pulls over to an open spot and we look down the alley. There is a streetlight shining just on the edge of whoever he is talking to. Their conversation lasts about ten minutes before Elijah heads back to the bar. The man walks out of the alley and makes a right so we can’t see his face. But his stature looks way too familiar.

“Was that Richard LeBlanc?”

I look over at Silas. “You thought that too?”

“What the hell is he doing talking to Elijah?”

“Who the fuck knows.”

CHARLIE

I wipe my sweaty hands off on my dress. I went to see my dad earlier and decided to swing by for dinner with my mom. Of course she asked about my date with Chaz. She wanted to know exactly what happened, how Chaz ended up with a broken nose. I brushed it off and changed the subject. Apparently, Chaz didn't tell anyone it was Elijah.

So now I am wearing one of the stupid A-line dresses I wear whenever I see her. This one is white with strawberries on it and while it has a bit of a rockabilly vibe it's still something I would never wear. I know Jackson will laugh at me but I didn't want to go home and change before seeing him. Because if I went home, I would chicken out.

It's taken me five days to get the courage to talk to him after everything that happened. I talked it over with Janae. She was happy to learn that I slept with him and not happy when I wouldn't confirm or deny the Jacob's ladder or his dick size.

I ring his doorbell. I don't know why. I have a key with me. I never ring it, I always just walk right in. But the fact I haven't heard a word from him since Sunday and the way his practice went, I am sure he doesn't want to talk to me.

He doesn't answer so I can only guess he is out. It would make sense. It's a Thursday night. He probably wants to find some girl to fuck so he can forget about me.

I turn to head back to the elevators when I hear the door open.

“Charlie.”

I bite my lip and close my eyes then take a deep breath and turn around. He's standing in the doorway shirtless and barefoot. The top button of his jeans are unbuttoned and his hair is a mess. Shit, was he fucking someone?

"Hey."

"What do you want?"

I wring my hands together then meet his golden-eyed gaze. "I just thought we should talk."

He nods. "Yeah sure. Come in."

I hesitate at the door. "Umm, are you alone?"

"Yeah."

I look down at his muscular chest, my eyes roaming over the tattoos coating every bit of skin. The skulls, the roses, the thorns, the snakes and daggers. I look at the anatomical black heart over the left side of his chest before finally looking him in the eyes.

"I don't bite."

I snort, breaking the tension between us. "Yeah, you do actually."

He smiles at me and it gives me hope that everything will be okay.

I follow him down the hall toward his living room but stop in the kitchen and watch as he shuts his computer and closes a notebook sitting on the couch.

He walks over to me and leans against the island, folding his arms over his chest. "So what did you want to talk about?"

"I wanted to apologize about the other day."

He looks annoyed. "What about it?"

"I was rude and I shouldn't have said what I said."

Way to not actually say anything or apologize, Charlie.

"You mean when you were a bitch and said what happened was a mistake?"

I deserve that. “Yeah.”

“So is that all you came over for? To give me a half apology?”

“What? No!” I take a step toward him. “God, I am doing this all wrong.”

“What are you doing here, Charlie? Because if you’re here to tell me you just want to be friends and that you need our friendship, I’m gonna need more time. I can’t have you fucking with my head right now.”

“I’m sorry, Jackson. I was scared. I was confused. I didn’t know what to think. And then I thought about what happened in high school and every emotion just hit me at once. So I just blurted the first words that came to mind without thinking.”

He stares me down, I can see the anger and hurt in his eyes. “Well, that makes me feel better, knowing that having sex with me confuses you.”

I step closer to him and press my hand to his forearm. “No, that’s not what I meant either.”

“Well spit it out then, Charlie. I have shit to do and if you aren’t going to tell me the exact reason you are here then I’m just going to show you to the door.”

Panic hits me. The last thing I want is for him to push me away. I step even closer into him and I can tell he wants me to step away. “I’m sorry, Jax. I never should have called what happened between us a mistake. And it wasn’t you who confused me or scared me. It was me. I put those thoughts in my head. Because for so long, I wanted you. I watched you grow to stardom. I saw the girls that you went through. I stood in the corner as the best friend but never the girlfriend and after we had sex I just felt like I was going to be another one of those girls. And that’s all I could think about. Because I never wanted to be that for you. I wanted more. I always wanted more. And I was so scared that you didn’t want that.”

He clears his throat. “I told you I did.”

“I know. But I couldn’t get out of my own head. Fuck, I’ve been stuck in it for days now. And I finally got the courage

today.”

“So what does this mean?”

I take my hand and move it up his bare chest until I am cupping the five o’clock shadow on his face. “That I want you.”

“You want me?”

I nod.

His arms finally drop from his chest and one snakes around my waist, pulling me flush against him. “How much do you want me?”

I drop my hand between us, sliding it between our two bodies as I reach for the zipper of his pants. He catches my wrist and pins it behind my back.

“You didn’t answer my question?”

“I want you to do to me what you told me Sunday morning.”

He smirks at me. “We can put that on the agenda. But maybe you should tell me how much you want me.”

I swallow as I take in the lust in his eyes. “I want you so bad it hurts every day to know that you haven’t talked to me. I want you so bad that you are all I think about. I want you so bad that I had to fight every demon inside of me to come here tonight and admit I was wrong.”

“Charlotte,” Jackson says my name quietly as he cups my cheek.

“I mean it, Jackson. It wasn’t easy to come here, to admit I was wrong. To put my heart on the table.” I use my free hand to trace the black heart on his chest. “I’ve wanted you for so long. Even after everything we went through. After those years apart. When I saw you in my bar that night eight years ago, something inside of me broke. But I couldn’t just give myself to you. I needed to lock up my own black heart because I didn’t want it to break again.”

“I never meant to hurt you so many years ago.”

“I know. You’ve told me. And while I still don’t know the full truth of it all, I know you will tell me when you’re ready. Because I know you, Jax, I know you better than I know myself sometimes. And I know that you wouldn’t have done something to hurt me so brutally.”

He sighs and drops his forehead so it rests against mine. His free hand grasping the one I have on his chest. “That was one of the worst days of my life. When I did that to you. And I hated myself for it. I still do.”

I try to hold back my tears as I listen to him spill his own heart.

“And when we were able to put it past us, it still tore me apart. To this day, it still kills me. To think of what could have been between us if we had been together all this time.” His grip on my hand tightens as his arm behind me pulls me even closer to him so that there is no space between us. “And I had to watch you date assholes for years. Guys that weren’t worthy of you. Guys that abused you. And the whole time I blamed myself because I made you think you weren’t worthy of love.”

“That’s not true. You know there are a million other things that—”

“I know. Because I know everything about you, Charlotte. And I slept with all those women because it meant nothing. I never found anyone who held my interest the way you do. Who tore open my black heart to find what was beating underneath.”

“Why did we do this to each other?”

He presses his lips to my forehead and chuckles. “Because we are both entirely too stubborn to take our own advice.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Yeah.”

“No more secrets, Charlie. No more holding back from each other. I think it’s time we go all in.”

I pull back a bit so I can look up into his whiskey eyes and all I see is love and affection. Not lust, not desire. But honest, soulful love. “And what happens if all of this falls apart?”

“Then we pick up the pieces and try again.”

I finally let the dam break and let the tears fall.

“Don’t cry, baby,” Jackson whispers as he frees my hands and cups my face, wiping away my tears with a gentle touch.

“Kiss me, Jax. I need you to kiss me.”

“Mmm. Is that so?”

I nod.

He wipes away the last of my tears and then his mouth is on mine. Hard and fast but somehow still soft. I open up to him immediately. His tongue playing with my own. His hands let go of my face as he slowly slides them down my body. I waste no time wrapping my arms around his neck, playing with the overgrown locks of his hair.

His hands slide under my dress, grabbing my ass and bringing me against his hard length. I pull away from his mouth, sucking hard on his lip, before trailing kisses to his neck and shoulder.

“Can I ask you something, Charlie?”

I pull my lips away from his body to look up at him. “You know you can ask me anything, Jax?”

“What the hell are you wearing?”

I burst out in laughter, the seriousness of the moment that we just had fading, turning into the energy we usually have around us. “I had dinner with my mom.”

“Last I checked, you could still wear ripped jeans and a T-shirt to dinner.”

“Really?” I ask sarcastically. “I had no idea.”

He chuckles as he drops his lips to my throat. “And how was dinner with mommy dearest?” he asks as his tongue starts drawing circles on my neck.

“I don’t want to talk about dinner with my mom right now.”

“Fair enough.” He pulls away from me and spins me around, pressing my chest into the island. He leans over me as his fingers trail up my thigh, getting so close to my center then pulling away. He whispers into my ear. “Would it be weird if I said it turned me on knowing that she probably brought up ChapStick or whatever the hell his name is and is still expecting you to marry him but I am the one with my fingers between your thighs?”

I bite my lip as I squirm against his hand, trying to get him to bring those fingers closer to where I want them. “No. But your fingers aren’t between my thighs, you tease.”

He chuckles against my ear. “Do you know what I think would be even hotter?”

“What?” I ask breathlessly as his fingers ever so lightly press against my clit. “If you went out on a date with Chaz and then came here and fucked me after. Or maybe if you met me in the bathroom for a quickie. I could even get you some remote-controlled vibrating panties. Now that would be fun.”

“Oh my god, Jackson. You are ridiculous. Now would you stop telling me your stupid fantasies and fuck me.”

He bites my ear hard then pulls away from me. “So demanding.”

“Well I know what I want.”

His finger slides under my panties and he traces a path from my center to my clit. “I love when a woman knows what she wants,” he says before pulling his hand away.

“Jackson,” I scream.

“I also love when I have her begging for more.”

He flips my dress up as his hand caresses my ass. My eyes fly open as he smacks it. The tingling from his palm fades quickly, but then he does it again. “Jax, please.”

“Mmm, there is the begging I was looking for.”

I whimper as his finger ever so lightly runs along the side of my panties.

His hand smacks me again, the pain lasting longer this time as I squirm against him.

“I don’t hear your words, darling.”

“Please,” I beg as I get more and more turned on with every slap, needing him to touch me or fuck me or do something other than tease me.

“Do you like this, sweet Charlotte?” he asks me as he smacks my ass a fifth time. “Do you like the pleasure mixed with the pain?”

I never wanted to admit that to anyone, not through any of my fucked-up relationships. But I feel safe with Jackson. I always have. “Yes.” The word quiet as I let it fall from my lips.

“Fuck,” he groans. And I wonder if I said the wrong thing. But then he rips my underwear down my legs and smacks me again before shoving two fingers inside of me. I groan at the intrusion but then ride against his hand. The pleasure overtaking the pain from the slap at lightning speed.

“That’s it, baby,” he says as his fingers work inside of me. “God, you look so innocent in this strawberry-printed dress. But your ass is telling an entirely different story as you ride my fingers.”

“Don’t stop, Jax. Please,” I beg. “I need you.”

He pulls his fingers out of me, and I see him suck them into his mouth. “Fuck, I missed this taste. It’s even better than I remember. I think I need more.”

He drops to his knees, pushing my legs apart, and then his mouth is on my pussy. His tongue licking up my wetness. He flicks my clit before pulling his tongue back through my folds, prodding at my opening. I squirm against him, needing more.

“So needy,” he murmurs against my center. The words sending a vibration through my clit, causing my entire body to light on fire. Then he starts humming against me, his lips my own personal vibrator. I grip the edge of the counter just as he puts his fingers back inside of me, pleasuring me as his lips do things to my clit that a vibrator has never been able to do.

Then he sucks hard on my clit and I fall apart, screaming his name.

He doesn't stop though, his tongue makes circles around his fingers, keeping the shock waves of my orgasm rolling through my body. Then his tongue moves up farther as it slides against the space between my opening and my ass. He hums against the sensitive skin and my knees buckle. He chuckles as he pulls his fingers out of me so he can use both hands to support my weight. Then he is pulling my ass cheeks apart, his vibrations leading up to my tight hole.

“Jackson,” I say breathlessly.

“I told you I would have all of you, baby.”

And then his tongue is prodding back there and I start to see stars. I have never had an orgasm last this long and I don't know if it will ever stop. My hips slam against the counter as he shocks me with another slap, just as he pulls his tongue away from my ass.

“I'm not going to hold back, Charlotte. I can't right now,” he says to me as he presses his hips against mine.

“Don't,” I moan against the counter.

“Fuck,” he mutters as I hear him pull his jeans down. Within seconds, he is slamming into me, my hips bucking against the counter with every rough intrusion of his body. But I don't want him to stop. I like it rough. And the feeling of his piercings rubbing against me has my whole body on fire. When I can finally gain a sense of control, I meet him thrust for thrust. The intensity of this fucking just what we needed after the words we said. Something to turn our sadness and regret into pleasure.

“Oh god, Jax. I-I need more.”

“So dirty,” he says as he pulls a hand from my hip and slaps my ass again. “So needy. Your pussy is dripping around me, yet you keep sucking me in like I am your lifeline.”

“You are my lifeline.”

He yells my name ferociously before pulling out of me completely and flipping me over. He lifts my legs around his hips so I slide forward off the island and then he is inside of me again. Thrusting with such intensity I know I am going to have bruises on my back. He lifts my legs so they rest on his shoulders, the angle driving him deeper inside of me. His piercings hitting me in a spot that has me convulsing with pleasure. Then his thumb is on my clit and I explode, I see stars behind my eyes as he grinds into me.

“So beautiful when you come.”

I moan as he continues to piston into me a few more times before he thrusts so hard he has to grip my hips to keep me from sliding up the counter. I can feel him pulse inside of me, streams of his cum coating my walls. I shudder from the feeling. Bliss. Pure bliss.

He drops my legs from his shoulders then rests his head against my chest. “You are exquisite, Charlotte.”

“You are a beast,” I tease.

He chuckles against my chest before lifting his head and pulling me up so we are face to face. His lips find mine. The kiss sensual, the complete opposite of the sex we just had.

When he pulls away from me, he rests his forehead against mine. “You are my world, Charlie. I mean it. You are everything to me.”

“I know, Jackson. I know.”

I wake up content the next morning. His arm is wrapped tightly around me as I hear his soft snores against my neck.

Last night was... I don't even have words. I never thought this was what would happen when I came to apologize. I never thought we would have both opened up the way we did. But I wouldn't change things.

After he carried me to his bedroom, he slowly undressed me and then we made love. He worshipped my body, taking things slow and steady. We came together, gazing at each other and I knew this was the best decision I could have made.

His hand glides up my body to my nipple and I don't know if he is awake or not because his snoring is consistent. When his hand falls away from my nipple, I know he is still asleep. His subconscious just needing to find a way to touch me.

I wiggle out of his hold and he flips onto his back. I look over at him. The sheet that was covering us has shifted and is covering one of his thighs and part of his dick. The head peeking out from beneath the sheets. I know from the few times I've seen him wake up that he always has morning wood. And I am not going to complain about that since morning sex is my favorite.

I pull the sheet back, revealing his pierced dick. I take in each piercing that lines the bottom of his cock. I want to lick each one then suck his large length so deep I gag against his piercings.

I lean over and do just that. My tongue tracing each rung of the ladder. His dick twerks at my movements but his soft snores tell me he is still asleep. I run my tongue along the head, barely sucking him into my mouth before I lick back down his shaft.

I straddle his thighs then use my hand to stroke him softly as I go back to playing with the head. He groans and I know he will wake up any second so I swallow him down as deep as I can go. His piercings against my tongue send shivers down my own spine.

Suddenly his hands are in my hair. "You dirty girl," he groans as I take him deeper. "I want to wake up like this every morning."

I chuckle against his dick and slowly suck him all the way up his shaft until I pull him out of my mouth completely and look up at him.

“Tease,” he mutters before taking my hand and forcing my mouth open to take him again.

I gladly take him down my throat and gag as he thrusts up into me. I usually hate when someone controls me during oral but with Jackson it's different. He massages my head as I take him deep before pulling out to the tip. Then he presses my head down again as he thrusts his hips up. We keep the rhythm going until I can tell he is close. His grip tightens on my hair so I suck harder.

“Fuck,” he yells as he rips my mouth off him.

He flips me over, lifting my hips up, then pinning my chest to the bed. He slams into me and I cry out at the intrusion. I'm already soaked from getting him off but the intensity he fucks me at has me closing my eyes and gripping the sheets. It's almost painful but not too much that I can't take it. He thrusts into me over and over, his movements becoming wild, the rhythm he had disappearing as his need takes over.

He grips my hair and pulls my head back, causing me to arch into an awkward position as he drives into me at a hurried and frantic pace.

“Jax,” I plead.

“Tell me what you need,” he groans and I know he is so close.

I can't even get words out as pleasure starts to overtake my body. I manage to slide my fingers beneath me so I can reach my clit. I rub it hard just as I feel him come, my own body climaxing at the same time.

His head falls forward, his sweaty forehead slick against my back. “God, your pussy is divine.”

“And your cock is a godsend.”

He laughs as he pulls out of me and flips me over, his mouth landing on mine. We kiss languidly for what seems like hours. Like two teenagers who can't get enough of each other.

He flips onto his back, pulling me with him so I am lying on his chest. He gives me one more chaste kiss before

brushing my hair out of my face. “Can you wake me up like that every morning?”

I laugh. “We’ll see. You are gonna owe me if I do.”

“I’ll eat your pussy for dessert every night if you take my cock for breakfast every morning.”

I bite my lip and shake my head. “We can negotiate on that.”

“Babe, you get pleasure either way so I don’t know what there is to negotiate.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I’m a guy.”

“And I need a shower,” I tell him as I pull away.

He smacks my ass as I get up. I know he is going to follow me. So I just ignore him as I walk into the bathroom. I turn on the showerheads from the panel outside the shower, one of my favorite things about his penthouse is the master bathroom. Whenever I did stay here in a guest room, I always insisted on using his shower. Three waterfall heads rain down from above, with four more heads that spray from the walls. It’s completely over the top, but the best damn shower I have ever had.

I find his hairbrush on the counter and brush the knots out of my hair, my lilac and silver mixing into his black hair. Something about seeing that makes me smile.

Then I notice the bruises on my body. Fingerprints from where he was gripping my hips and my wrists. I turn to look at my back and sure enough, a few small bruises are there from the rough fucking on the kitchen island, along with a giant red mark.

“I hurt you,” Jax says as he stands in the bathroom doorway.

I don’t answer. I just take him in. Because for once I can look at him naked and actually let myself enjoy the view. His tattooed legs that are almost completely covered, his muscled thighs, the delicious vee that leads to his very large, pierced cock. The faint outline of abs on his stomach and his smooth

chest. He is a work of art, a perfection of lean muscle. I make my way up his neck to the skull and roses tattooed there and up to his perfect smile.

My cheeks flame as he gives me that look as I take him in.

“By all means, don’t stop. I quite enjoy your perusal of my body.”

I roll my eyes and go back to looking in the mirror, picking the hairbrush up and combing back through it.

He walks up behind me, pulling the brush from my hand and setting it on the counter. He wraps his arms around my belly, his face cradling my neck, leaving a short trail of kisses before he looks at us in the mirror.

I smile at him, happy with what I see. Happy I let myself make this decision. The two of us just fit together. We look good together. We always have. Hence the rumors that sometimes emerged about us. But they were always quickly kicked to the curb when Jackson would leave whatever bar or club we were at with some girl or two for the night.

“Are you sure you aren’t hurt?” he asks me.

I nod and then turn to face him. “It’s just a few bruises. Besides, did I ever ask you to stop? No. I asked you to keep going and I do remember asking for it harder a few times.”

His dick stirs and I laugh.

“You can’t not expect this to happen when we are talking about you asking for me to fuck you harder.”

I run my fingers down his chest. “I’m fine, Jax.”

He nods then runs his fingers through my hair. “I just worry about you sometimes. A lot actually.”

“Why do you worry about me?”

“Just with everything you went through when you were younger. I hate myself for not stopping it. You don’t know how bad I wanted to kill Richard. I pictured strangling him so many times, seeing the light fade from his eyes.”

I put my hand on his cheek. “But then you wouldn’t be here now. We wouldn’t be here now.”

He shrugs. “Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better for me to be in jail than for me to be singing on a stage.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask, my brow scrunching as pain hits my chest.

“I feel guilty every day that I didn’t do something to change your situation. That it changed you in some way that you’ll never recover from.”

I sigh as I grip his hip and pull him closer to me. “It hurts me to think you feel guilty for something you had no control over.” I brush loose strands of his hair off his face that fell over his eyes. “And it sucks that I went through that.”

“I would kill your mom too, just so you know.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Yeah, well, I wish she just believed me.”

“Does she now?”

“I honestly have no idea. Some days it seems like she wants to admit the truth and other days she acts oblivious. But that is just her. It always has been. Even before she cheated on my dad and left him for Richard.”

“Back to you though,” he says as his hands roam over my shoulders and down my sides before resting above my ass.

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess I am your typical product of sexual abuse, settling for abusive guys and needing sex that is rougher than normal.”

“Don’t say that. Nothing about you is typical. You are exquisite, Charlie. A work of art.” I watch him as he takes me in, his gaze settling on my breasts before dropping lower to the small amount of hair above my pussy. His hands glide over the scars on my hip bones and then up to my breasts, squeezing them gently before wrapping back around my back. “I just want to make sure you are really okay. After everything you went through in your teenage years. I hate to think that you feel or think that you are anything less than you are.”

I nod. “I get it. But honestly, I am fine, Jackson. Like I said, I don’t make the smartest choices in guys, which probably has something to do with my subconscious and my past. And yes, I like rough sex, which I am sure has a lot to do with some pain-and-pleasure response after being raped so much.” He winces as I say it. “But I went through a lot of therapy. I learned that self-harm wasn’t the answer. I learned that it wasn’t my fault. And it took years to accept that. To understand that what happened to me would have happened to anyone who lived in that household. Sometimes I wonder if it happened to my mom. Or his ex-wife. I try not to think about if he did anything to his own daughters since they were so young.

“But I promise you therapy made a huge difference. I found a way to live with my past and become a better person from it. To be a survivor.” Part of which included blackmailing my rapist, but I don’t plan on telling him that yet.

“I’m in awe of you, Charlie. I really am. While you grew from everything that happened to you, I feel like I spent years blaming myself.”

“The only thing that was your fault was breaking my heart at seventeen.”

He frowns. “I still hate that I did that.”

“Well the past is the past.”

“I know.”

I bop him on the nose to try and get the darkness out of his eyes. “So learn from your mistakes and don’t do it again.”

He laughs, then leans in and kisses me briefly on the lips. Then spins me around and looks at us both in the mirror. “Did you ever think we would be here?”

I shake my head. “I was thinking the same thing before you walked in here.”

He runs his fingers down my chest, between my breasts and over the tattoo between them. “When did you get this? You never told me.”

I watch him as he traces the Victorian lace design under my breasts. “A few years ago.”

“And this?” he asks as his fingers trace over the script running down my side.

Well shit, I didn’t think this would ever happen. I try to cover it quickly but he pulls my hand away.

“Why are you covering... oh.” I watch him look at the script running from my rib cage down to my hip. I study him as he takes it in. Then his gaze meets mine and the lust is back in his eyes.

I wish I could bury my face in my hands. I am so embarrassed that I have their band lyrics tattooed on my body. I honestly never thought he would see them because I never thought we would be together again.

“Oh my god, I feel like some crazy fan.”

He runs his fingers over the script. “You are not some crazy fan, Charlie.”

“Yeah well, I still feel awkward for getting your words tattooed on my body.”

He runs his fingers over the words again.

I’m always lost, my compass broken. I can’t feel you calling me home.

“I wrote these words about you.”

I freeze at that. I’ve wondered about their lyrics at times. Some things are far too familiar and I wondered if they were about me. But I never asked. Because some of those songs were written when we weren’t talking to each other.

“Jackson.” I have no idea what I am asking him or begging of him. But he must understand because he spins me around and captures my lips with his.

“You were always my compass, Charlie. When I lost you, I didn’t think I would ever find my way home again.”

I jump into his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist as I kiss the hell out of him. This man, god I need this man more

than I need air to breathe. He's my compass too. He always has been.

His kisses are voracious as he bangs me up into the glass of the shower. I can feel his length hardening between us and I grind against it. Because everything is clicking into place at this moment. He's my North Star. My home.

He pushes open the shower door next to us and walks us in until my back is against the tiled wall. His lips trail down my neck, his hands exploring every inch of my body. And we let out all of our emotions as we take each other against the wall.

JACKSON

“**W**hy do you have to go to work?” I pout as I sit naked on the bed.

“Umm, because I have a business to run,” Charlie says as she slides on her wedged sandals. She is wearing the dress from last night but has thrown one of my T-shirts over it. She said she didn’t want to walk out of here looking like she was doing the walk of shame.

“You have people who run the bar.”

She props her hands on her hips. “I’m already late, Jax. And what do you want me to do? Stay here and let you tie me to your bed so you can make me your sex slave.”

I run my fingers over my lips as I take her in. “That thought hadn’t crossed my mind but now that you said it.”

“Like I said earlier, incorrigible.”

She starts to walk out my bedroom door but I stand up quickly, scooping her up into my arms. “Will you come over tonight?”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s try that again.”

She laughs as she presses her lips against mine. “Yes.”

“Good.” I set her down then smack her ass. “Then hurry up and get to work so I can get to practice.”

She spins around. “Oh so now I am the one delaying you.”

I smirk at her. “You will be if you don’t get that hot little ass out of here. Or else I will bend you over and fuck you until you pass out.”

Her cheeks flush and I grab my shirt on her and pull her to me for a quick kiss. “Tonight.”

She smiles at me. “Okay.”

I walk her to the front door and give her one more very long kiss right when she opens the door.

She pushes me away. “Jackson, we are literally kissing with the front door wide open and you are completely naked.”

“No one is out here.”

She kisses me one last time then pushes me back inside. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I shut the door and lean against it. I am so fucked with that girl. But she just brought my creativity to life. I walk down the hall and jump over the back of my couch. I pull out my computer and get to work. I have a few hours before we have practice and I want the guys to be blown away.

“No, let’s change the chord here and make it flat. It adds a melancholy to the song.” I scratch out some chord progressions and rewrite them as Wilder and Roan, work on the melodies on their guitars.

“Shit man, these songs are sick as fuck. They remind me of our third album,” Wilder says as he and Roan settle on a melody. Our third album was the one that took off. It came out right before we started touring with Death Angels, one of the biggest metal bands, seven years ago. Riot worked her ass off to get us on that tour. When we found out they invited us to be an opening band, we lost our shit then worked day and night to write one of the best rock albums ever. Well at least that’s what Rolling Stone magazine said.

Silas plucks away on his bass. “I wonder why that is.”

I flip him off.

“Riot was right to have us come home and actually record here,” Knox says as he fiddles with a drumstick between his fingers. “And it’s nice to be home.”

“That’s because your grandma has been bringing you pie every other day,” Wilder jokes. “You are gonna need to work out twice as much soon. I can see a gut forming.”

Knox ignores him and then looks at me. “Has being around Charlie done this? I mean, it’s hard to tell since the two of you seem to be more hot and cold than ever before.”

Silas snickers.

“What do you know, Silas? I mean, we all know the songs are about her but you couldn’t write shit for nearly a year.”

“He just had to get his dick wet,” Silas finally says.

Wilder drops his guitar pick and looks at me. “You fucked her?”

“How the hell did that even happen?” Roan says.

I go to start talking but Silas cuts in. “Charlie was drunk the other night and came over to his house and then they passed out in his bed. Then fucked each other in the morning.”

The guy may be my best friend but he is about to lose his balls.

“But she called it a mistake. This all happened Sunday morning, by the way, which is why he was a pain in the ass that day.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I tell the guys.

Silas looks at me with a raised brow. “But he was a whiny bitch the last few days and today he reminds me of the old Jax meaning something must have happened between the two of them.”

“Or maybe I decided to grow my balls back.”

“You would need balls to begin with.” He says as he grabs my computer off the table. I don’t even try to stop him because

I honestly don't care if they know about me and Charlie. As long as they are the only ones that know.

"Look at this. This song is dated an hour before we got here." He pauses as he reads it to himself, then he looks up at me, then back at the song. "Dude, when were you going to share this one with us?"

I grab the computer back out of his hands. "When it's ready."

"No fucking fair," Wilder cuts in. "Dude, we needed to start recording like two days ago. You can't hold back on us."

"So did she apologize?" Silas asks me, ignoring Wilder.

I nod.

"Oh shit," Wilder shouts. "Does that mean you guys are together?"

Might as well tell them. "Yeah."

"No wonder you look so cheery today, brother got laid," Wilder yells.

"Wilder, you are a worse gossip than your sister," Knox says.

"Hey I just like to know my man is no longer pining over her."

I look at the lyrics to "Black Hearts" and smile as I think about my night with Charlie. We have a shitstorm ahead of us but at least for now I have something to look forward to.

Black lines.

Black scars.

Black bruises on my heart.

The pieces now falling apart. I'm so blind in the dark.

Lost in a storm, broken on the floor.

Where did you go? Where did you go?

I see Roan look over at me and know he understands what I'm feeling. Knew about the longing I had for Charlie.

Because he is living it every day. Watching his ex-wife raise their kids. Luckily, he and Riot are able to work together and communicate. But where she seems to have moved on, he seems lost in a black hole. Like I was.

“We should really get this song figured out so we can move on to the next,” Roan says. “We need to get into the studio next week. And we are sitting at five songs. We need at least eight more for a full album.”

“I have about six more written.”

“Then let’s get to work.”

I set up the projector on my rooftop. I already brought up the tequila, Topo Chico, and limes for Charlie. And I have a few beers in the cooler for me.

I told her to come over tonight. And yes, I want to tie her up like I said but baby steps. I still worry that doing something like that will trigger something deep within her she has long since forgotten. And I also don’t want her to come over here thinking that I just want to have sex with her. I want this to work, I want this to be a relationship. And maybe I am getting ahead of myself thinking I want this forever. But the only person I ever thought about spending my life with was Charlie.

She’s been there for me since we were seven. When she punched me for pulling on her pigtails. When I bandaged her chin at ten when she took a crash into the curb riding my skateboard. When I promised her at twelve that I would still talk to her every day even though her mom was making her move to the other side of Baton Rouge. When some guy broke her heart at fifteen and I beat him up for it. When she opened up about her stepdad. When she told me she had feelings for me during that game of seven minutes in heaven.

She has always been my Charlie and she always will be. I will do anything I have to keep her as mine. Even if it means owing yet another favor to West. Because he is the only man who could end Richard and get me out of the damn deal I

made with him twelve years ago to ensure Charlie's safety. The deal that made me break her heart. But if it meant he would never lay a hand on her again then it was worth it.

I light a smoke and crack open a beer as I wait for Charlie. She should be here soon, she hasn't texted me that she was running late. I take a drag of my smoke and pull my notebook out of my back pocket, working on lyrics as I wait for her.

I've been struggling with words for nearly a year and I have so much pressure to get these songs finished and get this album done. I know the label isn't happy with us, mostly me. Riot has done a good job of playing it off and making excuses for my slack but it can't go on much longer.

I'm glad I've been able to get more songs written. That we are slowly making progress on this album. But I still feel like it's not enough. Like I've become so reclusive lately. Yeah, I would still go out with the guys but I was starting to feel more like Knox. He's always been the quiet type. Even before the accident. But now he is so withdrawn and I worry I'll fall down the same path. Kind of like how Roan is now. I worry about them but at least Knox has a handle on his shit. He keeps to himself but I know it's because he is working on his demons. Roan is an entirely different story. His drug use has gotten worse. We all worry about him and I know Riot worries about him the most. I see her watching him when she doesn't think anyone is looking.

The two of them were so perfect for each other. When they finally started dating after years of flirting, it seemed like all the pieces of a puzzle were coming together. When she filed for divorce, it threw us all for a loop. I still don't know what happened. None of us do. Roan and Riot do a good job of keeping it a secret from us all.

My mind is a mess of ideas as I put my pen to paper. It's only been twenty-four hours since Charlie agreed to give us a shot and I am worried that it's all too good to be true. That we will fall apart just like Roan and Riot. That I'll turn inward instead of asking for help like Knox.

I run my hand through my hair and take a sip of beer as I try to write down everything I am feeling. No matter how messy it is. If I can get it on paper, I can rework it to make it into music.

I question everything.

Our lives always intertwined.

But now we're pulled apart. Stretched so far.

I'm lost, I'm lost.

I jump when I feel hands on my shoulders that trail down my chest. The smell of cherries and jasmine overwhelming my senses as soft lips kiss my neck.

“I didn't mean to scare you.”

I wrap my arm around her head and pull her lips to mine. I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, wanting to get lost in her instead of my head. She pulls back and walks around the couch to sit next to me.

“You didn't scare me. I was just writing and was tuned out.”

Her fingers fall onto the notebook on my lap but I shut it before she can read it. “Top secret, is it?” she asks me.

“Yes. You need to do a lot of sexual favors in order to read it.”

She laughs. “Is that what you tell the rest of the guys?”

“Yeah. They are pretty good at giving head. You might want to take some pointers from them.”

She reaches out and plays with the hair on the back of my head. “Noted. I'll make sure to ask them next time I see them.”

I grab her hand and bring it to my lips, our eyes locked on each other. Her blue eyes feel like home. So many times when we were younger and needed an escape she was where I went and when I saw those eyes I knew everything would be okay.

“Quite the setup you have out here. When did you do all this?”

I look around at the bed of pillows I made in front of the projection screen. I want to be outside, one of the first cool nights in a while. I even set up some LED candles to add some ambience to the space.

“When I got home from practice. Figured it would be more comfortable than these couches.”

“I love it.”

I drop her hand and lean over to the cooler next to me and pull out a cup of ice I set in there, along with the tequila and soda water, and set it on the coffee table. “Thought you may want a drink too.”

She leans over me to look at the cooler. “What else do you have in there? A cheese tray? Snacks?”

I’m not really paying attention to what she is saying because her shirt is hanging open and all I can look at are her tits.

“Seriously?” she asks when she sees me looking down her shirt. “You are such a guy. You can look down my shirt and get me drunk but not even feed me anything.”

“Baby, I have something I can feed you.”

“Oh my god, I am going to pretend you did not just say that.”

I shrug. “I do have needs.”

She pushes off me and stands. “Well I am going to get something to eat, I’m starving.”

I grip her thighs and pull her on top of me. “So am I.”

“Jax, stop.” She giggles.

I ignore her requests and bring her mouth to mine, pushing my tongue against her lips. She lets me in and then settles into my lap. Our kisses languid as we explore our mouths, our hands all over each other.

Her stomach growls and she pulls away. “See, this is what happens when you don’t feed me, I turn into a monster.”

I stand up with her wrapped around me. “Don’t worry, babe. I have dinner waiting for us downstairs.” I kiss her one more time then set her down. “Go get comfortable, make yourself a drink. I’ll be right back.”

I head down the stairs and grab the food I made for us out of the oven and the refrigerator. I place it all on a tray and carry it back up the stairs.

Charlie is sprawled out on the large cushion, her hair fanning over the pillows. The woman is beautiful and I am still stunned that I can call her mine.

She flips over when she sees me, her legs folded up into the air behind her, swinging them like a kid. “What did you bring me?”

“Only the best.”

I set the tray down next to her and she laughs. “Mac and cheese and dino nuggies. I can see you make such great use of your kitchen.”

“I tried to make it more mature by adding a charcuterie board.”

“And did you pick that up from a market?”

I shake my head as I sit next to her. “No, I actually made that myself.”

“You’re lying.”

“Do you know how boring it gets on a tour bus? I got sucked into some damn videos a couple years ago and now that’s my hobby.”

She rolls onto her back, laughing so hard her cheeks turn red. “Jackson Knightley, how have you never told me you make charcuterie boards in your spare time?”

“I haven’t really told anyone.”

“So you just eat them yourself?”

I shake my head. “No. I actually donate them to soup kitchens and women’s shelters.”

Her face falls as she sits up and takes me in. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I... ever since I found out where my mom lived for a while, I figured it was a good thing to do.”

Her hand cups my face. “You’re a good man, Jackson.”

I put my hand over hers. “I try to be.” Because I need to make up for half the shit I’ve done somehow.

“So what movie did you pick out for us?”

“Edward Scissorhands.”

She sighs and presses her hands to her chest. “A man after my own heart.”

We spend the rest of the night watching movies and talking about everything and nothing. We end up falling asleep on my rooftop.

CHARLIE

“Tacomama!” I shout as she stands in my office doorway.

“The one and only,” she says.

“I thought you weren’t going to come out here until November.”

“Well, that was the plan, but then Ryder had some business to do, so we decided to move back here earlier, so I didn’t have to do it all by myself with the baby.”

I get up and walk over to her to give her a hug. “I still can’t believe you’re a mom.”

“Girl, me neither.”

“Come sit,” I say as I drag her over to the small love seat in my office. Tacoma worked for me a few years ago when she moved here from her small town in Tennessee. But I convinced her to give the man she loved another chance and it all worked out in the end. Of course she tried to tell me the same thing and I told her there was no hope for us and now look at me.

She now splits her time between Tennessee and New Orleans, working for me as a bartender when she is here. Although, I still pay her the manager salary I used to pay her because she is practically a manager.

“The bar looks great,” she says. “I am surprised your employees have been able to keep it to my standard while I’ve been away.”

“You do know I taught you that standard.”

“Did you though?” she asks sarcastically. “I am pretty sure I nailed it from the start.”

“You did spill coffee down my shirt the first time you met me.”

“On accident! Oh and speaking of coffee.” She digs around her giant bag and pulls out a box. “Here is a ‘you’re welcome to have me back working for you’ gift.”

I snort. “Thanks. I’ll make sure to remember that’s a thing.”

I open the box to find a gigantic black mug that is big enough to fit three full cups in it. It says, “I like my mugs how I like my men.”

“Wow, where the hell did you find this?” I laugh.

“Oh I had that custom made. Like I said, you’re welcome.”

I wrap my arms around her. “I am so glad you’re back.”

“Me too. It feels like forever since I’ve been here, even though I was here for your birthday.”

“That was only a few days.”

“True.” Her eyes light up. “So tell me, how’s the boyfriend? Still an ass? Or did you finally give in to dreamboat Chaz?”

“Please refrain from calling Chaz a dreamboat. Jackson called him ChapStick the other day.” I smile as I think about that being the best name for him. “And I broke up with the douche canoe.”

“Well I am glad to hear that. And I love the name ChapStick. I will stick to calling him that. Does this mean Jackson is in town?” She bats her eyelashes at me.

“Umm yeah. Saints & Sinners are recording their next album here.”

“So lover boy is here and you broke up with ass licker, so does this mean...”

I swear she has hearts in her eyes. This is the Tacoma I am not used to. Her heart was nearly as black as mine when I first met her. Ryder has definitely changed her for the better.

And as much as I want to tell T that we are together, I can't. Not yet. We don't want anyone to know. I am sure all the guys know and I trust Tacoma with my life, but I need to run it past Jackson first. And he's only ever met her in passing.

"We're just friends."

She puts her hand over mine. "One day, Charlie. Don't give up on him."

I give her a weak smile. I hate lying to her but it's for the best right now.

"Ryder and I are getting settled into our place with the baby. But I can probably start in a few days if you need extra help. And I already have Leon agreeing to babysit her."

My jaw drops at that. "How the heck did you get Leon to watch the baby? He does have his own bar to run."

"Oh well I guess I just have a way with words."

"Are you going to be singing there anytime soon?"

She nods with a huge smile on her face. "Yeah. Leon had someone cancel near the end of the month."

I clap my hands in excitement. "Yay, I am so excited. I cannot wait to see you sing again."

"I'm nervous for sure but also excited."

My cell starts ringing on my desk. I get up to grab it and see the nurse that takes care of my dad's name on the screen. "Shit, I need to take this."

"I should go help Ryder anyway. Text me when you need me to cover a shift."

"I will."

I wave at her as she walks out, shutting the office door behind her.

"Hello?"

“Hi Charlie, it’s Alice.”

“Is everything okay with my dad?”

She sighs into the phone. “Yes and no. He started coughing up blood.”

“What?” I yell. “That doesn’t sound like he is okay.”

“Well he is in the hospital and they have him stabilized.”

“Do they know what’s wrong?” I ask, panicked.

Her voice remains calm and it does nothing but make my heart rate increase. “They are running tests now. But they think it’s variceal bleeding. They noticed a few burst blood vessels near his stomach. They just want to make sure that’s all it is.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“He’s stable, Charlotte. You don’t need to rush. I want you to get here safely.”

“I will.”

I hang up the phone and grab my shit. I lock up my office and run down the stairs to talk to Jessica. She assures me everything will be okay. But I am barely listening as I run out the door to my car. It started pouring rain and I am getting soaked. It’s then that I realize my car is at home and Jackson drove me to work today before practice.

“Shit,” I mutter as I pull up the Uber app on my phone. But it’s busy and there won’t be anyone here for twenty minutes. “Fuck.”

I could walk, it’s only fifteen minutes home. But this is a torrential downpour.

I check the time. It’s almost four. Jackson had practice at eleven, but I know that they’ve been putting in long days so they can start recording in a few days.

I call him anyway, knowing he tends to not use his phone at all when he’s practicing so he can focus on the music.

“Babe, what’s up?” he answers over loud music in the background.

The sound of his voice causes me to start crying.

“Hey baby, shh.” I can hear the music getting more muted so I know he must have walked out of the practice space.

“It’s my dad. He’s in the hospital.” I sniffle. “And I just... I need to get there. But my car is at home and I can’t get an Uber.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you.”

He hangs up the phone and I walk back to the bar. Jessica stops talking to one of the regulars to come running around the bar with a towel. “Oh my god, do you not have an umbrella?”

“I wasn’t thinking. I just walked out there but forgot I didn’t drive.”

“Want me to get Mel to come get you?” she asks, referring to her wife.

I shake my head. “No, Jackson is on his way.”

“Okay.” She hands me a towel. “Let me grab you some dry clothes at least.”

I nod and follow her to the back. I could have done this myself, grabbing the bar merch, but I feel dead inside right now. My dad feels like the only real family I have left. And I don’t want to lose him.

I change in the stockroom and shove my wet clothes into a trash bag. The door bangs open and I am suddenly wrapped in Jackson’s arms. I have no idea how he got here so fast or maybe I’ve just spaced out that long.

“I’m here, baby,” he says as he presses his lips to the top of my head. “I’m here.”

I manage to calm down, my panic attack under a bit more control, so we head to his jeep.

Once we get on the road, I notice he is heading to the highway rather than my apartment. “Where are you going?”

“To Baton Rouge.”

“I can drive myself, Jax. I just need to get to my car.”

He looks over at me as we sit at a stoplight. “There is no way you are driving. You were having a panic attack when I walked into Talisman.”

“But you have practice and I can’t take you away from that.”

“This is more important than that.”

“But your al—”

“Charlie. Don’t worry. The guys are just as worried about you and your dad as I am.”

“Okay,” I say quietly.

He reaches over and rests his hand on my thigh. “Just tell me what hospital.”

My dad is dying. I mean I already knew that. He has chronic pancreatitis and chronic liver failure. But the bleeding was caused by liver issues and then they discovered his kidneys are failing. They don’t want to put him on dialysis because the chance of survival is so low. He’s only fifty. He should have decades left of his life. And he has months, if that.

Jackson ended up getting a hotel for us instead of driving back and forth to Baton Rouge. I told him that I could stay here and I would rent a car to get back because he has an album to record but he insisted we stay here. He talked to the guys and they said they could start recording without him and when Jackson was back he could record his parts.

I’m sitting on an oversized chair wrapped in a bathrobe in the suite Jackson got us in downtown Baton Rouge. The river

is just a block away, and I stare at it mindlessly. The night sky making the city lights look brighter.

“Here you go, babe.”

I look up at him and he hands me a mug of tea. “Thank you.”

He opens his palm and a pill sits in it. “I was able to get my sleeping pill prescription refilled. I think you should take one.”

“I’m fine.”

He squats down in front of me. “I know you are. But if you stay up all night worrying about your dad, then what’s gonna happen when he needs you?”

I don’t answer him and just look back out the window.

He fidgets with the pill and then holds his hand out to me again. “It’s just a half. If anything, it will just help your anxiety.”

I don’t want to fight with him. I am beyond grateful he is here. That I have someone to take care of me. Because if he wasn’t here, I would be a mess. His presence alone is enough to give me a tether to hold on to.

“Okay,” I say as I take the pill. I know he’s right. I am just worried something will happen overnight and I won’t be able to wake up.

“Where’s your phone? I want to make sure it’s charged in case anything happens.”

I nod and pull it out of the giant pocket in my bathrobe.

“I’m going to order room service. I’ll get you some soup. Do you want anything else?”

I shake my head.

He stands and presses his lips to the top of my head. I watch as he plugs in my phone on my side of the bed and then walks into the living area to order room service.

I sip my tea and think about the memories of my dad and me. When Jackson was the one that started skateboarding, I begged him to buy me a skateboard for my birthday. And he did. He gave me one when I turned eleven. My mom hated it. She hated the fact I was a tomboy and not a girly girl. She should be happy that I am into more feminine things now than I was then.

I push away the thoughts of her and let memories of my dad take over. He taught me how to ride a bike, how to fish, how to hunt. He even taught me how to drive a car. That was before his alcoholism really took over. He didn't get bad until I was away at college. And sometimes I wonder if it was because I wasn't there. I called him weekly but as time passed, those calls turned to once a month and eventually every few. That's when I knew things were getting bad. He lost his job when I moved to New Orleans even after I spent time trying to see him as often as I could.

He got better for a little while. He met a woman. They dated for nearly three years. But when she broke it off, he fell off the wagon again. And two years ago, he was diagnosed with chronic pancreatitis. Last year liver cirrhosis.

I knew this day would come eventually but I thought I could delay it as long as possible. And maybe hiring an in-home nurse made a difference. I just wish I could have made a difference years ago before things got this bad.

I finally get up when I hear the room service arrive. My half-empty tea has long gone cold. Jax is wearing a hat pulled low on his head as he tips the employee before shutting the door. I see a few plates of food on the coffee table and sit on the couch, setting my tea on the side table.

Jackson pulls his hat off and tosses it on the desk as he runs his fingers through his hair. "I got you French onion. I know you probably don't want to eat but I've never seen you turn down French onion soup."

"Thank you."

He sits next to me and brushes my wet hair out of my face. "I'll always be here for you. You know that, right?"

I nod as fresh tears start to fall down my face. My emotions are going crazy. And I feel guilty over them because not only do I feel sad about my dad, but my love for Jackson is growing stronger by the hour with everything he is doing for me. And I never would have doubted he would act this way. He was like this when I told him about my stepdad.

But right now, as I stare into those gorgeous whiskey-colored eyes, I just want to lose myself in him. I want to tell him I love him. I want him to take away all my pain and guilt by making me think of nothing else but him.

He leans forward and kisses me softly on my lips. But that's all the kiss is.

"I know how you're feeling, baby. I know you want to get lost in me and my body. But it's only going to feel worse in the morning. And I don't want you to have more guilt than you already have."

He wipes away my tears and I press my lips into his palm. "How do you know me so well?"

"Our souls have been connected to each other for over twenty years. I always know what you're thinking."

"Always?" I ask.

"Ninety percent of the time."

A small smile breaks on my face.

"There's my girl."

I lean over and kiss him. Not to start anything sexual but because I need him to know how I feel.

He squeezes my hand as I sit back on my side of the couch. Then he pulls the lid and the plastic off the top of my soup. "I got some pasta too if you want more than soup. Just some spinach ravioli."

"You hate spinach."

"It was all they had."

"Bullshit."

“Are you calling me out?” he teases. “I’ll put up with it if it makes you smile.”

I notice two other dishes still covered. “What’s under there?”

He grins at me and pulls the lid off a bowl of mac and cheese.

“Liar,” I mutter.

“Well, if you suddenly got a voracious appetite, I wanted to make sure I had something to eat.”

At that moment, my stomach decides to growl loudly.

“And it looks like I made the right decision.”

“Fine. You win. I haven’t eaten since breakfast.” I nod to the plate. “What’s that?”

He takes a bite of mac and cheese. “Dessert.”

I reach over the table and pull off the lid, revealing a piece of chocolate cake. “You don’t play fair.”

He grins at me. “I know.”

After I eat my soup and a few bites of pasta and pretty much the entire piece of chocolate cake, the sleeping pill or maybe the combination of that with the food makes me tired. I strip off the robe and crawl naked under the cool sheets. Jackson strips off his clothes too and pulls me into him as I drift off to sleep.

JACKSON

I watch Charlie as she sleeps. She was restless in her sleep last night. I spent most of the night awake as I ran my hands through her hair and over her arms, trying to keep her calm. I can't imagine how much she is hurting right now. I gave up on my dad when he became an alcoholic and he gave up on my brothers and me. He passed away a few years ago. My brothers barely talked to him and didn't even plan a funeral for him. I think his ashes may be sitting in my youngest brother's house, probably in the attic.

A knock on the door startles me from my thoughts. I get up and close the door to the bedroom and then head to the hotel room door. Janae and Riot are here. I texted them last night and asked if they could bring some clothes for Charlie. I also needed to fill Riot in on the details so she didn't blow up on me when she found out I wasn't at the recording studio.

Riot gives me a hug. "How is she doing?"

"She's dealing with it as best she can. Her emotions are all over the place."

Janae gives me a quick hug. "It's been rough with her dad the last couple of years."

I nod. "I went with her to see him a couple weeks ago. He was in a good mood then but she told me it's not always like that."

"He gets angry with everyone when he is in a lot of pain."

“I hope he is nice to her when he wakes up. They have him knocked out mostly to keep the pain at bay but they said they will ease off the pain medicine later today if some of his stats change.”

“Is she still asleep?” Riot asks.

“Yeah. She didn’t sleep very well last night and finally fell into a deep sleep around five this morning.”

“Poor thing. I brought her some stuff to help her sleep.” Janae pulls open up a large tote bag and pulls out a few tea bags. “These are my special blend. It will knock her right out.”

“I have to agree. I drink that on tour. It beats her hangover tea,” Riot chimes in.

“That stuff works,” Janae says to her with attitude.

“And you are the only person who can stomach it.”

I shake my head at the two of them. They are like sisters sometimes.

“Well I am sure you brought crystals and whatnot for her dad’s room too.”

“Of course I did.”

Riot sets a bag on the ground. “We brought her some clothes too, like you asked. I could have asked any of the guys to lend some clothes for you.”

“It’s fine. I am going to stop by my brother’s. And I need to run another errand this morning. You guys sure you don’t mind bringing her to the hospital?”

“Of course not. We will try to keep her spirits as high as possible.”

“Thanks.” I check the time on my phone. “Well, I need to get going. I’ll meet you at the hospital around one.”

“Sounds good,” Riot says.

I was able to grab a few pieces of clothing from my youngest brother's house. He is the only one of us that stayed in Baton Rouge. My other brother moved out of the state, wanting to get as far away from Dad as he could.

My other stop is one I did not want to tell anyone about, especially Charlie. Because I know she would tell me not to go despite my good intentions.

I pull up outside the estate of Richard LeBlanc.

I walk up the front steps of the Greek Revival home and ring the bell. I know it's a risk coming here but since it's midmorning, I know Richard shouldn't be here.

The door opens and I am greeted by Nina Leblanc.

"Jackson? What are you doing here? Is Charlotte okay?"

"She's fine."

She opens the door wider. "What brings you here then?" She pauses. "Sorry that was rude, but I haven't seen you since you kids were in high school."

"I'm surprised you recognize me."

She smiles. "Oh please. Your face is everywhere these days. Come in," she says as she opens the door the rest of the way.

I walk into the opulent grand entryway. I may have money now and could afford to live in something like this but I have always found this house tasteless and cold. It doesn't feel lived in. Not like the small, run-down two-bedroom house Charlie grew up in. The one that Nina worked to make a home despite them not having much money. But she's turned into someone else. Not the mom I remember her being. She never cared when Charlie would come home covered in dirt after a day of playing outside with Silas and my brothers. Back when she called her Charlie.

"How is Charlotte?" Nina asks me as she leads me to a formal sitting room.

"Travis is dying."

She stops in her tracks but doesn't say anything.

"His kidneys are failing. And the doctors won't put him on dialysis because of the liver disease and pancreatitis," I tell her as I walk around her and face her.

She clutches her chest like she is holding on to pearls that aren't there. "H-he's dying?"

I study her face and I can see her heart breaking. This woman who claims to have no love left for her ex-husband.

"Charlie is at the hospital now."

"W-when did this all happen?" she asks as she makes her way to a cream-colored divan.

I sit down in a stiff leather chair and lean forward, my elbows on my knees. "Yesterday afternoon."

She's quiet as she processes the information. She keeps her gaze away from mine, but I can see the emotions running through her. This woman who didn't think twice when she left her husband for a man with money, a man who promised her a better life for her and her daughter. But even when Charlie and Nina first moved into this home I saw glimpses of regret on Nina's face.

She stands abruptly and heads to the bar, pouring a healthy amount of scotch into a glass. She swallows half of it down before turning back to me. "Did you come here to tell me this? To make me feel guilty? Charlotte does it enough."

I shake my head. "No. I didn't. I actually couldn't care less if you feel guilt or shame or regret over your ex-husband's health." Anger flares briefly across her features. "I only came here for Charlie. She told me once that you have picture albums here from her childhood. I came here to grab those. I think it will help Charlie through this time. Looking back at good memories."

Nina frowns. "Yes, I suppose that may help."

"Thank you."

"I just need to go find them. You don't mind waiting for a moment, do you?"

I shake my head.

She walks out of the room, scotch in hand. It's just past ten in the morning, but I can tell the news of her ex-husband is hurting more than she is letting show.

I grab my phone and see a text from Charlie that the doctors are running a few more tests before they ease up on the painkillers. My heart breaks for her. I know how much her dad means to her. I know that she is worried she won't be able to talk to him again. That her last moments with him may have been a few weeks ago.

I hear the click of the front door and the sound of steps in the hall. I don't think anything of it until I hear Richard's voice and I clench my hand into a fist.

"Mr. Knightley, what are you doing in my home?"

I look up at Richard, at the man who stole Charlie's innocence, who scarred her more than she lets on. "I came here to ask your wife a question."

He ignores my response as he walks into the room, sitting in the spot his wife just sat in. "You aren't fucking my daughter, are you?"

I scoff at that. "Really? Have you looked in the mirror and asked yourself that same question? And she isn't your daughter."

"We had a deal, Mr. Knightley, and I would hate to see you break that deal. It would ruin your career."

"There is nothing going on between Charlie and me. I'm here as a friend."

"So what could you possibly want from my wife then?" he sneers at me. And I want to do nothing but throttle the man. I am sure he is fucking other underage girls or maybe students at his college. Charlie seems to think so, which is why she avoids coming here at all costs and makes an effort to find out if Richard will be here when Nina requests her presence.

"Charlie's dad is sick. I came here to get some old photo albums from when Charlie was growing up, pictures of her

and her dad.”

“Nina got rid of all that when she moved here.”

I ignore the comment.

“Only a lover would care so much about Charlotte. Are you sure you are just friends?”

“Her dad is dying. She needs a friend right now. Something to get her through this emotional time. Of course, Travis wouldn’t be dying if you hadn’t stepped into the picture.”

He leans back on the divan, his finger running along his chin as he stares at me. “Travis would have become an alcoholic either way.” He squints at me. “Are you sure you don’t wish I wasn’t in the picture anymore so you could have her?”

“After what I did for our deal, she would never have me,” I lie.

“Well that is good to hear. She deserves something more than some poor trash from the wrong side of the tracks. I don’t care what you do know. You’ll never be worthy of her.”

“I am well aware of that, Richard. I’ve never been good enough for her.”

“At least we can agree on something,” he says smugly. “Besides, she will be married to Charles Buford by this time next year. Finally out of that godforsaken city and being a housewife like she was meant to be.”

I laugh. “You can’t really believe that she is going to give up everything for Chaz. She is a strong woman, Richard. She will never marry him.”

“Trust me when I say she will. She has no power over me.”

“She was never meant to be a housewife.”

He smiles at me, a devilish grin that even gives me the chills. “Maybe housewife was the wrong choice of words. Chaz has plans for her.”

I am about ready to demand what the hell he means when Nina walks back into the room with her head down. “I found a few albums...” She stops when she sees her husband sitting across from me. “Richard... I—”

He snarls at his wife. “I thought you got rid of everything that had to do with that man when you moved in here.”

“I... well... these are pictures of Charlotte.”

“You promised me, Nina.” Richard’s voice is an icy growl.

“You can’t expect me to get rid of pictures of my child.”

“You promised!” he yells, causing Nina to drop the near-empty glass of scotch on the ground.

“Have you been drinking?” he screams. “I knew you would turn into a drunk just like that ex-husband of yours. The one you still pine after even though I give you everything.”

“I-I was just in shock. I thought it would calm—”

“Enough!” he yells.

What the fuck?

I don’t remember him ever acting this way around Nina before. But I also never saw the Richard that Charlie was fearful of back in high school. I’ve only ever seen glimpses of the monster and I can tell this isn’t even him at his worst.

I stand and walk toward Nina as she starts to fold in on herself but she holds up a hand to stop me. “I’ll get this cleaned up.” She hands me the albums. “You should go.”

I take them and put a hand on her shoulder. “Are you—”

“Get your hands off my wife!” Richard bellows as he storms over to us.

I let her go and take a step back as I see her mouth the words, “Get out of here” to me.

“Get out of my house, Mr. Knightley. And keep your hands off my daughter or you will find yourself in a situation you really do not want to be in.”

I back up, not feeling good about leaving Nina there but also knowing that there is nothing I can do right now.

I step out of the room and hear Richard give me one last warning. “And if you think of saying a word about this to anyone, you won’t be in prison, Mr. Knightley. There are far worse places for you to go.”

I give Nina one last look then walk toward the front door, the sound of her screaming as I shut the door behind me. I close my eyes, rage and guilt flooding me. I need to do something. I can’t just leave her there to his abuse.

I slide into my jeep and toss the albums on the front seat of the car then make a call.

“Do you have information for me?”

“No, I need another favor.”

CHARLIE

I t's midafternoon when Jackson comes back from whatever errands he had to run. I'm sitting next to my father's bed, holding his hand as the pain medication slowly wears off. I give Jackson a slight smile as he walks into the room. His hands are full and I'm curious as to what's in them and that's when I notice that he is carrying two photo albums.

"Where did you go?" I ask him.

"I went to see your mom."

"Why in the hell would you go to see my mom?"

"Because I wanted to get these for you. I remember you telling me a few years ago that she had photo albums there but you were too worried about searching the house to find them and didn't think that she would give them to you or admit that they were even there."

"So you went to see my mom so that you could get these albums for me? Even if they might not actually be there."

He sets the albums down on an empty chair by the door. "We didn't know what would happen with your dad, so I thought that it was the best thing that I could do. Thought the memories would be good for you."

He leans over me and presses a kiss to my forehead. "And how did she take it?" I ask him as I look up at him.

"What do you mean?"

“I’m assuming that you told her that there is something going on.”

“You mean finding out that her ex-husband was dying?” he asks and I nod. “Yeah, that didn’t go over very well.”

“Is she okay?”

“Not really. But I couldn’t stay there.”

“Why?”

He sighs and steps away from me to look out the window. “Was there ever anything going on between your mom and Richard? Was he ever abusive toward her?”

I look over at my dad and then look back at Jackson. “I mean, they would fight a few times. Nothing bad. But now that I think about it, it’s been weird recently. She acts different than she used to. I just thought maybe it was because of this stupid bullshit with Chaz but maybe there is something else there. What happened?” I ask him.

He turns to look at me. “Richard came home when I was there. Something I didn’t expect. That’s why I went so early this morning.” He pauses. “I saw her cower in front of Richard. I’m pretty sure he was hitting her.”

“Why didn’t you stay?” I ask with a raised voice, suddenly angry. “Why didn’t you do something?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” I yell at him. My father, though unconscious, must sense my raised voice because the beeping of his heart rate monitor speeds up.

Jackson crosses the space between us and takes my face in his hands. “I would do anything for you, Charlie. I mean it, anything. But Richard knows people, he’s not just some perv. And doing anything against Richard would cause repercussions.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I—” Jackson stops talking at the sound of the door opening. Riot and Janae walk in with bags of food.

“Are we interrupting?” Riot asks.

Jackson looks over at her and shakes his head. “No, all good. Hope you brought me something to eat. I’m starving.”

I step back as I watch Jackson interact with Riot and Janae. I know he is hiding something from me. He has to know more about Richard. I always suspected something was up with him. That he wasn’t just some provost at LSU. He thrives on power. He did when he raped me. When he would smack me around. I guess I am being naive in thinking he doesn’t do the same to my mom.

My heart aches thinking that I got myself out of the situation with Richard but never even thought that I was leaving my mom to be caught in his trap.

“How are you holding up?” Janae asks me as she wraps her arms around me.

I shrug. “The doctors think they can slowly wean him off the pain meds tonight into early morning. But they aren’t sure how his body will react.”

Jackson walks over and wraps his arms around me. “We will get through this, Charlie. We’re here for you.” He presses his mouth against my ear. “I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, Tacoma. I don’t know what I would do without you there,” I tell her as I head to the cafeteria in the hospital to get some coffee. It’s shit coffee but at least it does its job.

“You know Jessica would have stepped up,” she tells me on the phone.

I laugh. “Reluctantly. She has no problem bossing everyone around but the second it comes to admin work, she feigns illness.”

“She giving you shit?” I ask her jokingly.

“As much as she is taking mine.”

“Good.”

Tacoma starts talking to someone in the background. “I need to go. Call me if you need anything.”

“You’re already doing me a huge favor.”

“You did one for me when I showed up brokenhearted and jobless at your bar. I’m just paying it forward.”

“Thanks, T.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

I hang up the phone and grab a coffee. I usually drink it black but I add some cream to this to make it tolerable. I make my way back up to my dad’s room and see a text from Jackson letting me know he is headed back to Baton Rouge tonight.

He stayed with me for five days but has spent the last two in New Orleans to get some of his recording done. I had to force him to go. I knew that he wouldn’t go if I didn’t tell him to. But I know they were already behind on the album and the record company had them on a strict deadline. I promised him I would be okay by myself for a few days. He insisted on renting me a car but I told him I could take an Uber back and forth from the hotel to the hospital.

I get to my dad’s wing and say hello to a few nurses when I see my mom standing outside my dad’s room.

“Mom, what are you doing here?”

She is holding two Starbucks cups and I take the one she hands to me. “I know the coffee at this hospital sucks. Thought you would want a good one.”

“You didn’t come out here to bring me a coffee.”

She shakes her head then starts to brush a piece of hair behind her ear but stops. I don’t miss the action, don’t miss the faint markings of a bruise on the side of her face covered with heavy makeup. But I keep my mouth shut. For now.

“You’re my daughter, Charlotte.” She grips my hands. “And you came from the love that your father and I once had. I want to be here for you.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I have some friends that work here.”

I study her face and the way she glances toward his room. “You’ve been checking in on him this whole time. Since Jackson told you.”

She nods.

And then I see it clear as day on her face. “You still love him.”

She snaps her eyes to me. “That’s not... no. I care for him. We were together for fifteen years. Even if we got divorced, it doesn’t mean I don’t care for him.”

I could say a million things to her. Like how her leaving turned him into an alcoholic. He found company in a bottle when he lost the love of his life. When she left him for a man that could provide for her better and give her the things she always wanted but could never have. But I keep my mouth shut.

“Come on,” I tell her as I push open his door. “He was asleep when I went downstairs, but you can still sit with him.”

She nods and follows me into the room. She hesitates by the door, and I wonder how long it’s been since she’s seen him. He’s not the handsome, rugged man she was married to with beautiful shoulder-length blond hair and blinding blue eyes. You could tell he worked hard when I was younger, the broad set shoulders, the thick biceps. But he is half the man he was. His hair cut short, nearly buzzed against his aging skin. His eyes have lost their luster, more of a foggy gray now and I’m glad he’s asleep so she can’t see them. His limbs are thin, weakened from years of alcoholism.

I hear her gasp and then the snuffle as she cries.

The disdain I have for my mother disappears as I see her break down in front of the man she once loved, the man she once looked at with hearts in her eyes. The man she would dance around in the kitchen with at night to old jazz songs as they sipped on martinis in the dim kitchen lights.

I rush over to her and hug her tightly and she collapses into my arms, her cries no longer muffled but loud as she looks upon the ghost of a man lying in the hospital bed. “I’m so sorry, Charlie, I’m so sorry.”

I break down in tears as she calls me Charlie for the first time in nearly twenty years. As we both hold on to each other like lifelines crying over the man that used to mean the world to us.

“What have I done?” she cries into my shoulder and I can only grip her tighter.

“Don’t blame yourself.”

“But you already do.”

My chest aches at those words because she is right. I do blame her for my father’s downfall. I always blamed her because she tore our family apart and she never seemed to care. She never believed me when I finally got the courage to tell her what Richard did to me. And she never stood up for me since then. But she is still my mom and I can’t lose her too.

A knock on the door has me letting go of her before I say anything that will hurt her. The doctor comes in and I grab a tissue and hand it off to Mom.

“My apologies,” Dr. Wright says as he walks in. “I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“It’s fine,” I tell him.

He turns to my mom, who is wiping her tears away. “I’m Dr. Carl Wright. I am the attending physician overseeing Mr. Fortier’s care.”

“I’m Nina.”

He nods at her and then looks over at me when he realizes she isn’t going to say anything more. “I’ve been watching the protein levels on your dad, Charlie, and they’ve been rising quickly. It’s good news. We usually don’t see recovery like this so quickly when it comes to liver damage. The bad news is his kidney function hasn’t improved.”

I nod as I fold my arms around my body. “Is there anything you can do for him?”

“I’ve actually been talking with some other doctors and we’ve decided to move forward with dialysis.”

My eyes go wide at his words. “But I thought you said...”

“Normally, we wouldn’t treat a patient with these conditions with dialysis, but we think if he continues to improve and his protein levels continue to normalize, his liver can start repairing itself.”

“So he may have a chance at a normal life again?”

Dr. Wright nods. “It’s possible. If he can quit drinking and take care of his health. Then yes. I can’t say how long it will be but if he continues to respond well to the medication and the dialysis helps his kidney function, then he has a good chance at a good amount of healthy years ahead of him.”

“When can we get started?”

“I need you to sign off on a few things. But we discussed the first treatment as early as tomorrow morning.”

I smile for the first time in a week as I listen to the doctor explain what his treatment would look like. I end up walking out with the doctor to go through all the paperwork and leave Mom with Dad.

When I come back to the room, visiting hours are over. “You okay?” I ask her.

She is sitting in a chair a few feet from his bed. Her eyes are swollen and I know she’s been crying the whole time. “Yeah,” she says weakly.

“Visiting hours are over. I’ll walk you to your car.”

She stands up and walks the few steps to Dad. She pauses like she isn’t sure what to do but then reaches out and squeezes his hand quickly before turning toward me and briskly walking to the door.

We are quiet as we walk down the hall and take the elevator to the lobby. I want to ask her about what Jackson told

me. But I can't find the words. Maybe I'm being selfish because I have hope for the first time in a week for Dad. And I don't want to bring my mood down by arguing with Mom.

"I had Richard make a donation to the hospital to help your father," she says meekly.

"What?" I shriek.

She stops on the sidewalk to look at me. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry for everything I've put you through. And I know my words will never be enough. They can never take back what's been done to you. But I couldn't have you lose the one person that you love more than anything in the world. I couldn't have that taken away from you too."

I clench my jaw as I look at her. Angry that she is brushing off an apology. Raged that the only reason Dad is getting help is because of the man that tore my mom away from him. I shudder as my anger turns volatile inside of me.

"I don't mean to step over a line. But I knew he wouldn't get the help that would save him without the money."

"Go," I seethe.

"Charlotte."

Well, it's back to Charlotte again. "Please just go, Mom. I'll keep you updated on his recovery at my convenience."

She is quiet for a moment before she tries to reach for me, but I take a step back. "Go," I say louder.

Tears crest her eyes but she listens and walks into the parking lot.

I let my tears fall once she is gone. My anger and rage turning into sorrow. It seems like every step forward I make with my mom, something always sends us two steps backward.

I hear a vehicle pull up near me and then the slam of a car door. Warm arms wrap around me as I take in the smell of smoke and cedar.

“Hey baby,” Jackson says into my neck. “It’s gonna be okay.”

I know he didn’t hear the conversation with my mom, but he probably saw the tension between us as he drove up. I relax in his arms, happy I have my rock back.

JACKSON

I sip on hot tea with honey as I step away from the mic in the booth. I've been going through our vocals for three days and my voice is strained from the constant singing and screaming. But the good thing is the album is coming together. Rico tells us it's our best album he's produced so far. And I sure hope the fans like it. I've poured every ounce of emotion into these songs, cracking open the cage around my black heart.

"Let's roll through the bridge one more time and then you can take a break," Rico says into my headphones.

I nod at him and wait for the music to be queued up. I sing into the mic, the emotional melody vibrating through my chest and into the microphone.

I left you broken

Wounds bleeding across the floor

Apologies, apologies, left unanswered at the door

"We're good, man," Rico tells me.

I give him a thumbs-up and set my headphones on the stool in the booth. I grab my tea and head out to the lounge area. When I get in the hall, I see Riot and Charlie walking toward me.

"Hey, babe." I wrap an arm around her and grip the back of her neck so she leans back enough so I can kiss her.

I've missed her. She was in Baton Rouge for nearly two weeks. Her dad is back at home and doing much better. She

fussed over him for two days before he finally kicked her out. Alice said she would make sure he was taken care of. I know she didn't want to leave, but she also knew she had a business to run.

And I've been in the studio fifteen hours a day for the last week. She comes over every night but all we do is fall asleep, and by the time I wake up in the morning, she's already left for Talisman.

I press her into the wall, my tongue pressing into her mouth. She lets out a little moan and my dick stands at attention. I need to be inside of her.

"You two need to get a room."

Charlie pushes me off her and smiles at Riot. "Oh like that's the worst you've seen hanging out with these guys."

Riot props a hand on her hip. "Yeah, you're right. But please don't go back to mauling each other just yet. Business meeting time."

"Always meeting time, never any fun time," I mutter.

Riot ignores me and heads toward the lounge. I grab Charlie's hand and kiss her knuckles. "I've missed you."

She pecks me on the lips. "We've just both been so busy this week. But I'm finally caught up on everything after being gone for so long."

"Oh yeah?"

She gives me a curious look.

"Well, I'm almost done. A few more hours and the album should be done."

She runs her hands up my chest and wraps them around my neck. "So that means we can finally do all those wicked things you promised me?"

"Wicked things? Hmm, you'll have to tell me to refresh my memory."

"Oh please, you've got them memorized since you've apparently wanted to do them to me for so long."

I give her a smirk and push open an empty studio room that I know isn't being used. I pull her in behind me and set my mug down on a table. I finally have two hands, so I lift her up and set her on the soundboard.

I rip her shirt over her head and drop my mouth to her nipples, biting them through the lace of the bralette she has on.

“Fuck, Jackson. We can't do this here. Riot is waiting...”

I pop her nipple out of my mouth. “She can wait.” I push her thighs apart so I can step into them, pulling her ass to the edge of the soundboard so her center is pressed against my dick. My mouth finds her lips again, and she groans as I attack her mouth. Our kisses are fast and turbulent.

“Jax,” she tries to pull away from me even though her legs are wrapping around my hips.

“God, I could listen to you moan my name all day.”

Her hands glide down my chest and land at the button of my jeans.

“I thought you said we shouldn't do this.”

She unbuttons them and slides the zipper down. “I did, but that doesn't mean I want to stop.”

I grin at her and press her back until she is awkwardly lying across the controls. I pull her shorts down to her knees and lean down to inhale her core. “You smell like a wet dream.”

I slowly lick up her center, and she claws at my back. I take my time devouring her. Pressing my tongue against her clit, sucking on it, nibbling on it as I shove two fingers inside of her. The rings on my fingers rub against her entrance, making her moan loudly.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I pull away from her.

“What?”

“The booths are soundproof but not this room. And while I would love to have everyone hear you moaning my name, maybe we should move this somewhere else.”

“Are you stopping?” she asks me.

“Fuck no.”

“Then what—”

She stops talking as I lift her up and push open the door of the booth. I kick it shut behind me and set her down, then spin her around and pin her chest to the stool in the room.

She looks over her shoulder at me, and I drop to my knees. I push her legs apart and then go back to town on her pussy. I lick her from clit to ass, enjoying watching her squirm as I devour every inch of her. When I know she is about to come, I stand up, pull my dick out and slam into her.

“Goddamn,” she yells as I fuck her with abandon. I grip her hips firmly as I thrust into her, pulling her hips to meet each thrust.

“Jackson,” she moans as she explodes around me.

I tilt my head back and enjoy the feeling of her orgasm as her pussy pulses on my dick.

“God, I need more.”

I lean over her, my dick going deeper inside of her. “Whatever you wish.”

I lose all sense of control at this point, fucking her with so much force I know she will have bruises. She screams my name, and it only makes me get more rough with her. I slam into her hard and then twist my hips as I grind against her. But I know it’s not enough. She needs more.

I drag my fingers along her clit and she spasms at the attention but I pull away as fast as I touch her. I drag my fingers along her ass and she squirms underneath me. I press my thumb at her tight hole and press in slightly, feeling the resistance from her. “Relax, babe.”

I slow down my thrusts as my thumb gets deeper. She groans as I start to pump it in and out of her. Her hands are wrapped around the rung of the stool, her knuckles white. I smirk as I see her trying to hang on to any amount of control she has. Then I pick up the pace of my hips, pistoning into her

at the same intensity as earlier. I can feel her tightening around me, her orgasm so close. My own is right around the corner. I grind into her as I feel my balls tighten. Then I wrap my other hand over her hip and slide my fingers over her clit, pinching it hard.

Indecipherable words spew out of her mouth as she explodes, her entire body going weak as I thrust a few more times before coming inside of her.

I pull out slowly, keeping my grip on her so she doesn't fall. I wrap my arms around her stomach and lift her up, spinning her around so we are chest to chest. "That was another fantasy."

"Fucking my ass with your thumb?"

I chuckle. "That was an added bonus."

"Then what was the fantasy?"

"Fucking you in a recording booth."

Her eyes widen. "Jackson."

I smile at her as she realizes exactly what I did.

"Did you really record us having sex?"

I grin at her and then kiss her to get that look off her face. She doesn't fight me, probably because she is thoroughly fucked and wiped out. I pull away from her. "Well, I never thought about that but then your ass hit record while I was eating you out on the soundboard and I thought it was the perfect opportunity—"

"Oh my god." Her face lands in her palms. "What if that gets out?"

"It won't."

"That's what everyone says about sex tapes!" she yells.

"Good thing there was no video. Just sound. And if it gets out, no one will know it's you."

She pushes against my chest but I hold her tight to me. "You're an asshole."

I shake my head and kiss her temple then whisper in her ear. “But now I can play that in the sound system in my house and listen to you come on my dick. So when you aren’t around, I can use my hand and remember exactly how you tasted and how you felt in this moment.”

She pulls back and looks at me with lust in her eyes. “Can we fuck to it?”

“Mmm, I can think of nothing better.” I kiss her lips gently.

“I still want to murder you.”

“If you do that, then you can’t fuck me while listening to us.”

She pushes away from me and pulls her shorts on. “You’re ridiculous.”

I adjust myself back into my jeans and button them. “Ridiculously smart.”

“Hardly.”

I open the door to the sound room and see Silas sitting in a chair. “That was hot.”

“What the fuck?” Charlie screams. “Did you know he was here?”

I shake my head. “No, I was too lost in your pussy to know he walked in.”

Silas holds his hands up. “Hey now, I didn’t see shit. And I only made it in here for the climax,” he snorts as he says it. “Anyway, you may want to take that file before someone else finds it.”

“How did you know we were in here?”

“Riot sent me looking for you and then I saw that mug in here right before I heard the noises. Couldn’t really leave after that.”

“This is so embarrassing.”

Silas shrugs. “Oh, don’t worry about it, Charlie. When you come on tour with us, you’ll find out that running into one of us having sex is rather common.”

She holds up her hand in Silas’s face. “I do not want to know that.”

She storms out of the room and Silas follows her, no doubt teasing her. The idea of having her on tour with me makes me smile. Having her around me at all times.

I grab the recording from the board and delete the files from the computer.

“So glad you could join us,” Riot quips as I walk into the lounge.

I flip her off and then take a seat next to Charlie on one of the couches. My hand instantly goes to her hair and plays with the ends as I rest my arm on the back of the couch.

Wilder fist-bumps from the other side of the couch and Charlie punches me in the arm.

“Really?” she asks me.

I just give her my dazzling grin and wrap my arm around her.

Riot clears her throat. “Now that Jackson and Charlie got their fucking out of the way, we can begin.”

“Oh my god,” Charlie says, her cheeks turning pink.

Silas props his legs up on the coffee table. “She wouldn’t be embarrassed if I wasn’t sitting there listening to them. It was fucking hot. My dick is still hard from it.”

Knox smacks Silas upside the head.

“Let’s move on, shall we?” Riot says, shooting a glare at Silas. “You can all discuss this later on but I have places to be. Now I talked to the label after they listened to some of your rough demos and they are loving it. So the good news is once

you finish up a few backing vocals, the album will be done. That means we can start doing a few promotional shows and appearances to hype your fans up for release.”

I’m surprised when Charlie starts talking. “I told Riot I thought it would be good publicity for you guys to play at Talisman. It’s going to be a shit show. I know. So don’t even tell me. But I’ve already gone about getting more security and talking with the city about lines and blockades.”

“I think it’s brilliant. Hometown boys playing in the bar that made them famous.”

“It’s going to be a mess,” Roan says. “Talisman can fit like four hundred people. We play sold-out arenas.”

“And this is going to be announced the day before you play. The added security around the venue and the last-chance tickets are going to keep everyone from going crazy,” Charlie says. “For the most part.”

“Still sounds like a shit show.”

Riot raises a brow at Roan. “How about you let the women figure out what is going to work. I didn’t get you guys to this point in your career by not taking risks. And plenty of huge bands play intimate shows. So keep your opinion to yourself and let me do my job.”

Roan raises his hands in defeat. I see Riot’s eye twitch and I know she is pissed at his attitude but she won’t let it show in front of anyone.

“We were thinking of doing the show next Saturday. I have an opening that day. Kind of a celebration to the end of recording the new album,” Charlie says.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Wilder says. “Remember when we played ‘until my dying breath’ at Talisman a week before the album came out? That shit was insane.”

“Right, it was. And do you remember whose idea that was?” Riot asks.

“All hail Riot,” Silas jokes.

“All right, I’m done with you guys. I have more ideas to discuss but since the antics of Charlie and Jackson put me behind schedule, I will just email them to all of you.” She looks down at her watch. “I need to go pick up the kids from Janae. I’ll see you all later.”

Riot walks out and Roan gets up to follow her. I am sure he wants to ask about the kids. I have no idea what happened between them, but for some reason, Roan is cautious around his kids. I know he wants to be there for them but something is holding him back.

“Well, I am going to turn on some music so we don’t have to listen to those two fighting,” Silas says as he stands and turns the stereo on.

“I need to get back in the studio. Are you hanging out?”

Charlie nods. “Yeah, I had Riot drive me here so I could just go home with you.”

I pull her onto my lap so she is straddling me. “Is that right?”

“How much longer do you need to be here?” Her fingers trail down my chest until they brush over the top of my pants.

I grab them and pull them away. “An hour maybe.”

“Okay.”

“You can come watch.”

Silas chimes in. “I’ll come watch if you guys decide to do anymore—”

“Not happening.”

“Damn it.”

CHARLIE

I roll over in bed, exhausted. I spent yesterday morning at my dad's house and then worked until two in the morning at the bar. I got to Jackson's house and crashed so hard I don't even remember giving him a kiss when I got here.

I reach across the bed and find it empty. *How late is it?*

I sit up quickly and glance at the clock. It's nearly eleven in the morning.

Shit.

I climb out of bed and throw some clothes on. Jackson and I have been together for a month and I already have clothes at his place. Maybe we are moving too fast. I barely even sleep in my own bed anymore. I'm always over here. We are always together when we aren't working. I've barely hung out with Janae or Saylor. The only time I'm not around Jackson is when I go see my dad or go to work. And who knows how long this will last. Despite what Riot told me weeks ago, I just don't know if I can trust that this will work out. He cheated on me before, it could happen again. And it probably will. When he is back in LA or on tour.

I'm brushing out my hair in the mirror when I see Jackson standing in the doorway.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm late for work."

He crosses his arms over his bare chest. The only thing he has on is a pair of basketball shorts sitting low on his hips.

“You had the look on your face that there was something going through your mind. What was it?”

I pull my hair up into a topknot and brush out my curtain bangs. “Just my dad.”

“Bullshit. I know that look, Charlie. That was not your worried look.”

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

Jackson crosses the bathroom and wraps his arms around me from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder. “You know I’m here for you if you need me. Whatever you want to talk about or whatever you need me to take off your shoulders, I’m here for you. I always will be.”

Those words make me hate myself for the thoughts that went through my head. I know Jackson. I know he wouldn’t intentionally hurt me. Not again. Not after what we already went through. The years we spent apart.

“Come on, I made you breakfast.”

I turn around in his arms and kiss him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“I was going to wake you up earlier but you looked so peaceful in your sleep,” he says as we walk into the kitchen. “I figured you needed the sleep since you barely made it into bed last night before falling asleep.”

“I did not.”

He laughs. “That’s how tired you are. You’ve been overworking yourself. You’re running on empty between going to Baton Rouge every other day to see your dad and working late. You came into the bedroom and just flopped on the bed. I had to take your clothes off.”

“I’m sure that was a tragedy for you,” I tease.

He slaps my ass. “Taking clothes off a dead body is nowhere as easy as taking clothes off a needy woman.”

I shake my head at him as I grab a coffee mug and pour myself a hot cup. He sets two plates of eggs, toast, and bacon

at the island and I sit next to him and eat.

After we finish eating, I grab my stuff to leave for Talisman.

“We don’t have to do this party,” Jackson tells me as I slip my Chucks on and tie them.

I shake my head. “No, I want to. Besides, you guys finished the album yesterday, y’all deserve to celebrate.”

“We have the show next week.”

“And that will be flooded with fans. You need something smaller.”

“I’m just worried about you, Charlie. The pressure of running a business, your mom, your dad’s recovery.”

“He’s getting better by the day. I think the three weeks of no booze has helped.”

He cups my cheek. “I’m worried about you though.”

“I’m fine. Trust me. And after seeing him yesterday, things seem better. He’s in good spirits. He actually said he feels better than he has in a while.”

“That’s good.”

I nod, then tell him one of the things that is bothering me. More so confusing me. “My mom was there,” I say quietly.

“What?”

“When I walked into his house, Mom was there talking to him.”

He raises a brow at me. “And?”

“I don’t know. I-I don’t really know what to think. She was holding his hand, but the second that she saw me, she pulled it away.”

“Interesting.”

“I know. And she called me Charlie again.”

“Was this the first time you talked to her since that night at the hospital?”

I nod. “I was angry at first. Like why did she think she deserved to be in his house? Holding his hand! She used her husband’s fucking money to keep him alive. When he never should have been broken to begin with. Never should have been sick to begin with. If she never left him then—”

Jackson pulls me into him and kisses my forehead. “Baby, I know. But that is the past and you know you can’t change it. Maybe she wants to rekindle the friendship they once had.”

I nod. “Maybe, but after everything you told me with Richard... after seeing that bruise on her face. I worry about her being there. What will Richard do if he finds out?”

“I’ll make sure nothing happens to her.”

I pull away and stare into Jackson’s golden eyes. “Jax, please don’t tell me you are still tied up in all that shit.”

“I told you before, it was complicated.”

I step away. “You have so much going for you, don’t throw it away on some drug lord.”

“Charlie,” he exhales my name. “It’s not as simple as that.”

I close my eyes. I know it’s not simple. Things are never simple. Hell, nothing between us has ever been simple. I open my eyes. “Are you ever going to tell me everything?”

He sighs and I know from that one look it’s a no.

“Well, I should get to the bar. Make sure everything is good to go for tonight. Tacoma said she had it under control, but I just want to make sure.” I grab my bag and start to walk down the hall to his front door.

“Don’t walk away from me when you’re upset.”

His tone is commanding, and I snap. “Maybe if you told me the goddamn truth for once, then I wouldn’t be upset. But you won’t. So I once again will be left in the dark.”

“Charlie.”

“I’ll see you tonight, Jackson.”

He grabs my arm and spins me around, pulling me into him and cupping my face. “Hey, I am only doing what I can to protect you.”

I do believe he is protecting me, but at what cost? “I know.”

I kiss him quickly. But he pulls me tighter against him, deepening the kiss as he slides his tongue into my mouth.

I pull away enough to mutter against his lips. “Jackson, stop. I need to go to work.”

“You’re the boss. You can be late.”

I roll my eyes. I know he is using this as a distraction but then his lips nibble on that spot on my neck and I lean into his touch. I can feel his length press against my hip and I let out a groan as he presses his hips into mine in a gentle roll.

“Jax,” I say breathlessly.

He snickers against my throat as he pushes me into the wall hard. His mouth dropping to my breast, his teeth biting my hardened bud through my shirt. I groan as he sucks it hard.

“What were you saying about needing to go to work?” He asks me as his mouth finds mine again and he presses my arms above my head. Encircling both wrists with one hand as he unbuttons my jeans.

“Jackson, I mean it. I need to... fuck,” I groan as he thrusts two fingers inside of me.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You need to fuck.”

He spins me around so my face is smashed against the wall, his hard body pinning me to it. He pushes my jeans down until they are wrapped around my knees. He must push his shorts down at the same time because he is suddenly at my entrance.

“Are you ready for me, baby?”

I nod. I know this will be rough. I barely even have time to answer before his stiff length is thrusting inside of me. The tightness of this angle causing me to feel every single one of

his piercings as they rub against my entrance. His hands pin my arms against the wall, making me completely at his mercy.

And he fucks without mercy. My tits rub against the wall, causing even more stimulation. I can't keep my groans in. And I am nearly ready to come when he pulls out of me.

“What are you—”

I can't finish the question because he suddenly has me on my hands and knees on the ground. He pushes my chest to the ground just as he enters me again.

“Fucking hell, Charlie.”

I meet his thrusts. My mind forgetting that I was mad at him as my body enjoys every second of this.

He slaps my ass and I moan into the floor as I reach underneath me to find my clit. Jackson's hand joins me as he guides me on how much pressure to put on the sensitive bud. He stiffens behind me just as I fall apart and I can feel him release inside of me.

He slumps over me, leaving a trail of kisses up my spine.

I pour a shot of tequila for Janae and me. She came over to Jackson's early to hang out with me since she says my time is now taken up by the man. It didn't take her long to realize that we were more than just friends, that it wasn't just a one-time thing. Even though I wanted to keep it a secret. But it's hard to keep a secret from her. And with all the time she spends with Riot, I am sure the secret slipped. Or maybe it was the way Jackson always found a way to touch me when we were in the hospital.

“So are you going to tell me?” she asks as she holds up her tequila shot.

I look out over the Crescent City, watching a few boats float down the Mississippi from the rooftop of Jackson's

building. She has been bugging me for the last fifteen minutes about Jackson's dick. "No."

"Oh come on. It's not like I am going to ask you to give him up for a night so I can indulge in cock heaven."

"Cock heaven?" I laugh. "I don't know if that's the correct term."

"I like that," Jackson shouts as he walks up to the sitting area. "Or maybe god of cocks."

"Eww, that sounds like it has an entirely different meaning, Jax," I tell him. I knock my shot glass against Janae's and shoot the tequila back.

She sets her shot glass down on the table. "What about master of peni?"

"Peni? Why are we friends?" I joke.

"I do take offense to that."

Jackson sits next to me on the couch, his hand going to the back of my neck, massaging it. He half apologized to me when I got back from the bar a few hours ago. He was sorry he kept secrets from me but that didn't mean he was going to tell me the truth because it was better if I didn't know.

"So what brought up my pleasure penis?"

I smack him in the chest with the back of my hand.

"Janae wants me to tell her if your cock is pierced. She wants to know if the rumors are true."

He looks between us. "And you've never told her?"

I shake my head.

"What do you mean, never told me?"

"Jackson," I groan.

He smiles at me devilishly, realizing how long I've been keeping that a secret from her. "She didn't have to date me to find out about my dick. She's known about it for five years."

"What?" Janae shrieks.

I shrug.

“Want to see it?” Jackson asks her.

“Is that even a question? Show me the cock of pleasures!”

Jackson goes to stand up but I push him back down. “You are not showing her your dick.”

He leans into me and kisses me briefly, then trails his lips to my neck before muttering, “I wasn’t going to.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Janae pouts across from us. “You are no fun. And I can’t believe you kept it a secret from me. Saylor is going to be pissed too.”

“Saylor definitely doesn’t need to know about my dick,” Jackson says. “She’s like a little sister.”

“She’s almost as bad as Janae when it comes to it,” I tell him.

“Wait, y’all talk about my dick?” he asks with a smug look on his face.

I look over at Janae. “Now look what you started.”

Jackson pulls me into his side. “I won’t show her my dick. But if you wanna see a nice pierced cock, ask Silas. He will show you his without a doubt.”

Janae leans forward in her chair. “And what does he have? The same as you?”

“You are entirely too interested in his dick,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “No, piercings just mesmerize me. You know, in some cultures, genital piercings are seen as a sign of status.”

Jackson laughs. “Don’t tell that to Silas or he may think he is a king.”

“So what does he have?”

I look over at Jackson, just as interested as Janae. I know the two of them went together years ago to get pierced, but I never bothered to ask about Silas.

“He has a pubic piercing at the base of his shaft.”

“That’s it?” Janae asks. “I mean, that sounds amazing for the clit, but I feel like he would have more.”

Jackson snorts. “You didn’t let me finish. He also has a magic cross. Cried like a baby after he got it done. But he’ll never tell you that.”

“You really think he’ll let me see it?” she asks.

“Oh my god, Janae.” I lean over and pour us more shots. “Maybe you should find a new career as a piercer.”

“No way. Not my thing. But I do love to look.”

Jackson laughs and kisses my cheek before he stands up. “Well, I am going to go wait downstairs for the keg delivery. Don’t get too drunk up here.”

I flip him off and then go back to gossiping with Janae. The penis talk over. Although I am sure she will be cornering Silas later tonight.

“Tummies in, tits out!” Saylor shouts as we all take a picture together.

This party is not intimate. There are probably a hundred people here between the roof and Jackson’s penthouse. I should have known it would get crazy. The guys know way too many people for only a handful of people to show up.

Saylor’s cousin Willow grabs the joint out of Saylor’s hand. “So are they really playing at Talisman next week?” she asks me.

“I can see Saylor can’t keep her mouth shut.”

Saylor sticks her tongue out at me. “Hey, she’s family.”

I nod at Willow. “Yeah, they are playing, but please don’t tell anyone. We aren’t putting tickets up until twenty-four hours before.”

Willow laughs. “Who the hell would I tell? You know I live in Covington with my parents. Not exactly like I am hanging out with a crowd of people who would want to know. That’s why I hang out with Saylor, at least she brings some excitement into my life.”

“I’m glad someone appreciates my presence. Unlike my stupid brother.”

“It’s only because he thinks he needs to babysit you,” Willow tells her.

“He knows that Charlie does that.”

“I don’t babysit you,” I say. “I just make sure you don’t decide to drink an entire fifth of vodka.”

She shrugs. “That was teenager me. I’m much more mature now.”

Willow spits out the beer she was sipping on. “You took mushrooms earlier and have smoked so much weed you are practically floating.”

“Better than booze.”

Willow turns to me. “So, can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course.”

“My friend. Like the only one I have in Covington, she is going through some shit. And I want to bring her to see Saints & Sinners.”

“That’s no problem. I always have some extra tickets for friends and family.”

Willow smiles at me. “Okay, thank you. I’m not sure how she is going to take it with me dragging her to see them but I want to get her out of her comfort zone.”

“No!” Saylor shouts. “Are you talking about goody-two-shoes Marlene?”

“Yeah.”

“Ugh,” Saylor groans. “The last time you brought her out with us was dinner for your twenty-first birthday and she was

practically wearing a nun outfit.”

“You know she’s sheltered.”

I look between the two of them. “Are you trying to break someone out of their shell?”

Willow nods. “This girl needs to do something other than be a daddy’s girl and get her heart broken. She let her ex-boyfriend walk all over her. Okay, maybe not the right words. He is the type of guy her parents would want her with on the outside but he’s kind of a douche. And he finally took her virginity last weekend and then broke up with her two days later. I tried to drag her out here tonight but she wasn’t having it.”

“Her dad’s a pastor,” Saylor says. “She doesn’t know what fun is.”

“Well then she probably needs to go see the guys play. Break her out of her shell,” I tell Willow. “Unlike this one over here who never had a shell and was wild from the day she was born.” I point over at Saylor.

She shrugs. “I rather like myself, thank you very much.”

I hear a commotion at the other end of the roof. “I should go check on that,” I say.

I walk over to the entrance to the roof and nod at a few people I know from either Jackson or Talisman. When I get past the plants blocking the door, I see Jackson shoving Elijah.

“What the fuck are you doing here, man?” Jackson yells.

“My friend was invited, so I decided to crash this place.”

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

Elijah looks over Jackson’s shoulder and sees me standing in the shadows.

“There’s my girl.”

Jackson looks behind him and sees me standing there, rage crossing his face. “She isn’t your girl,” he says to Eli. “Not when you hit her and abuse her. Force yourself on her.”

Eli holds up his hands. “Hey, that was all in good fun. Besides, she hit me right back.”

Jackson goes to punch him but Knox is there holding him back.

“It’s fine. He can stay.”

“See, my girl,” Elijah says mockingly at Jackson.

I stand between them. “I am not your girl, Eli, but I don’t want the two of you causing trouble up here. If you can behave yourself, then you can stay or else I will kick you out,” I tell him.

Eli smirks at me, and I ignore him and pull Jackson into the stairwell.

“What the fuck, Charlie? That man abused you and you are just going to let him stay?”

“If we kick him out, he is just going to start rumors.”

“This is stupid.”

“If he causes a fight with anyone else, you can kick him out.”

He storms off and I know he is pissed at me. I’m not even sure why I agreed to let Eli stay. I know it would look worse if we kick him out. And he would try to take it out on me somehow.

I head downstairs and into the kitchen to pour myself another drink.

“I’m sorry about that.”

I look up and see Jonah, one of the guys in Eli’s band. “I tried to get him not to come out. I know he was an ass to you. I told him to stop fucking around on you multiple times. But he promised he would behave.”

I take a sip of my tequila, soda, and lime, and nod. “Yeah, well, he hates the idea of Jackson and me being friends.”

“He just hates Jackson.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Jealousy is a bitch.”

“He doesn’t work hard enough to get to Saints & Sinners status. We wish we could get there but you need to be a team when you’re a band. He thinks there is an easier way than hard work.”

“Well, he’s an idiot.”

Jonah nods. “So you and Jackson, huh?”

“What?” I ask as the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Aren’t you two dating?”

I shake my head. “Um no. Still just friends.”

“He’s protective of you.”

“Yeah, well, when you know someone since the age of seven, that can happen.”

“Hmm,” Jonah crosses his arms over his chest.

Saylor comes into the kitchen and saves me from the awkward conversation. “There you are. I thought you were getting the tequila!”

“I was. Just talking to Jonah.”

Jonah gives Saylor a once-over. And I suddenly have the need to pull her away from him. I never got vibes like that from Jonah before but right now, he is feeling as wrong as Elijah does.

“Let’s go find Janae,” I tell her as I grab my drink and a bottle of tequila.

I am drunk. I giggle as I say that to myself.

I really want to find Jackson. I move through the crowd of people on the roof but can’t find him anywhere. I head down the stairs and look for him in the penthouse. I find him talking to his producer, Rico, in the living room. There aren’t many people down here, most are drunk, so I sidle up to him and wrap an arm around his waist.

He looks down at me and smiles at me with eyes just as hazy as mine probably are. “Hey, babe.”

“Hi.”

“What do you want?”

I lean up on my tiptoes and whisper in his ear. “You.” When I pull away, he is smiling down at me.

“I am taking that as my cue to leave you two alone,” Rico says.

He walks away, and I grab Jackson’s hand, pulling him toward his room. He fumbles in his pocket for the key since he locked the door to keep people out of there.

He looks around, but no one is paying us any attention. He pushes me inside and slams the door behind him, turning the lock.

“Have you been a bad girl?” he asks me.

I shrug. “What constitutes bad?”

He pulls me into him and kisses me like he hasn’t had my lips in weeks. I lean into him, pushing him against the door.

I pull away from his grip and drop to my knees.

“You have been bad.”

I nod.

“Do you need to be punished?”

My hands go to the button on his jeans. “Yes.”

He groans as I pull his stiff length out of his pants. I lick the tip of his dick, teasing him with quick licks.

“Charlie.” His voice is stern.

I sit back on my legs and look up at him with a pout.

“You know that’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?” I ask him sweetly.

“Minx.”

I run my hand up the inside of his thigh and brush my hand ever so lightly over his length.

He pushes his jeans down until they hit his ankles. "Put me in your mouth."

I sit up, leaning forward and just barely slide the tip in, sucking lightly before letting go.

"Charlie." His voice is harsher.

"I'm not sure what you want." I tease him as I feel my own need pulsing between my thighs.

"You really are being bad."

"Maybe you need to show me," I say right before circling his tip with my tongue and scraping my teeth over his head.

"Fuck," he yells as he grabs my face and pushes himself all the way down my throat until I gag.

I grip his thighs as I let him fuck my face, hollowing out my cheeks and letting him slide as deep as he can. I can't help but play with the barbells on his dick as he slides in and out of me. I have the growing need to touch myself but I want this to be all about him.

It doesn't take him long before he is screaming my name, his hot release coating my throat.

He pulls me up to my feet then kisses the hell out of me. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling our bodies together as tight as we can make them.

He pulls away. "Your turn."

I shake my head. "You'll get me later."

"Is that so?"

I bite my lip and nod. "I will be dripping for you by then."

"Fuck." His hand drops between my thighs and he rubs my core through my jeans. "I can already tell you're soaked."

"Imagine me in a few hours."

He kisses me again, then steps back and pulls his pants up. "I can't wait." He heads for the door, waiting for me.

“I have to pee.”

“You better keep that pussy wet for me.”

I smile at him. “I will.”

“Lock the door behind me.”

“I’ll be a minute. It’s fine.”

“Charlie.”

“Okay, okay. Locking the door.”

“See you upstairs.”

I watch him walk away, shutting the door behind him. I ignore his warning because no one saw us come in here and I know I will take all of one minute to pee.

I head to the bathroom and take care of business. Then walk back out into the bedroom.

But I’m not alone. Elijah is standing in the doorframe.

“What are you doing in here?” I ask him.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he says. “You were in here with Jackson.”

I don’t say anything and try to skirt past him but he grabs me and shoves me against the wall next to the door.

“Are you fucking him? Were you fucking him this whole time, you whore?”

I can see the glassiness in his eyes and know he’s fucked up.

“No, I came in here to use a clean bathroom.”

He runs his fingers over my lips while he uses his hips to pin me against the wall. “These look freshly fucked.”

“Just get off me, Eli.”

“No,” he says with force as he slams me against the wall.

“What are you going to do? You know you’ll get your ass kicked for touching me. All the guys in the band have no problem beating you up.”

“Shut up,” he growls as he rips my T-shirt, exposing my braless chest. “Did he touch these?”

Eli runs his finger over my nipple and I shiver. “Stop.”

“Or did he put his hands in these pants?” he asks as his fingers graze the top of my jeans. “You aren’t so tough now, are you, Charlie?”

I try to push against him, but my drunk ass can’t coordinate my limbs.

“And I know someone who isn’t going to be very happy that you are fucking Jackson.”

“Get off me,” I grit through my teeth.

He laughs as he takes a nipple and pinches it hard, causing me to scream.

“I like it when you fight me.”

I finally notice he left the bedroom door open. I twist my knee and break free enough to weakly kick him in the balls at the same time I scream.

“Bitch,” he yells at the same time I see Silas in the doorway.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I breathe a sigh of relief when I see him. He turns and says something to someone behind him then he and Knox walk into the room.

I scramble away from them, Eli holding my ripped shirt to my chest.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Silas screams at Eli as he stands over him. “You trying to fuck with her? Force yourself on her? Only pussies do that shit.”

Knox picks him up off the ground, holding him up in front of Silas. Silas punches him hard in the jaw, shaking off his hand then taking a left hook to Elijah’s stomach. “Don’t touch her ever again, you prick.”

I see Jackson in the doorway, he takes a second to figure out what's going on but then rushes toward me, pulling me into his arms.

“Get him out of my house,” he tells Silas and Knox.

They pull him out of the bedroom, someone shutting Jackson and me in the room. He picks me up and carries me to the bed.

“Are you okay?”

I shiver, my body visibly shaking. I dealt with Elijah's rage a lot. But something about this felt different. I was scared of him for the first time. Memories of Richard taking his anger out on me flood to the surface. I bury my head in Jackson's chest and he cradles me there until I fall asleep.

CHARLIE

The Saints & Sinners concert is in two days. I've been busy all week making sure everything is in order for it because I know it's going to be crazy. I'm not sure what I was thinking of having them play here. The logistics have been crazy and Riot has been helping me out. They've always been my boys. Sometimes it's hard to remember that they are famous rock stars with an international fan base. And that maybe having such a huge band play at a four-hundred-capacity venue wasn't the smartest decision. But I need to pull this off for them.

A knock on my door startles me as I sit on hold with the city to get some last-minute paperwork figured out. Jackson walks in and I smile at him. He has been there for me since the incident last week with Elijah. He forced me to talk about it the next day to get the anger and sadness out of me before I let it build up. I told him how scared I was, how it reminded me of the first time Richard assaulted me. I blamed the alcohol since any other time Eli was abusive, I never had that reaction. Jackson said it was a lame excuse and I know it was. I have no idea why I reacted the way I did. Maybe the years of repressed memories exploded to the surface. I can't really be sure. All I know is that Jackson has been by my side through all of it.

He sits on the love seat in the corner of my office and waits for me as I finish up my call. When I finally hang up the phone, I walk over and sit next to him.

"Are you excited for Saturday?" he asks me.

“I don’t know if that’s the right word. I’m sure when the day comes, I will be, but right now, I am worried shit is going to hit the fan.”

“You got this, babe.”

I run my fingers over his fingers, over the rings that adorn his hands. “What about you? Are you excited?”

“Yeah.” He smiles as he says it and it reminds me of him as a kid. “We all are. This bar has always been a special place for us.”

“I still remember that first time you walked in here. I was speechless.”

“That was definitely fate saying we needed to be together.”

“And now look at us,” I whisper.

He leans in and kisses me, a long sensual kiss that has my toes curling. He pulls away and leans his forehead against mine. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Will you let me pay the loan off on this place, Charlie? I don’t want you to have to worry about money.”

“I don’t have one,” I say quietly.

He pulls away from me. “How? This place had to cost millions.”

I hate telling him this. Hate that I had to touch Richard’s dirty money. But I knew I couldn’t get this place without him. “I blackmailed Richard into giving me the money or else I was going to tell everyone about his penchant for underage girls.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Anger rolls off his lips.

“I didn’t have a choice. There was no other way I was going to get this place. And I knew Richard had the money and the influence. He never would have given me the money if I didn’t threaten him. And trust me, I hate that I feel like I owe him for this and I know a time will come when he wants to cash in on his favor for doing this for me. But it’s worth it. I love this place, Jax. It’s my home.”

“Fuck, Charlie.”

I push up off the couch and walk away from him. “You can’t be mad that I did what I needed to find my place in the world.”

“That’s not why I’m mad, Charlie. I-I wish I never pushed you away. I wish I could have told you exactly what happened.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you ever wonder why Richard stopped raping you?”

My heart drops to my stomach. I realize at this moment that Jackson did something to make it stop. “I just thought he stopped because I was nearly eighteen.”

Jackson shakes his head. “I got into a fight with him one night. I told him to stop touching you. He laughed in my face. Then I told him I knew what he was doing out in my neighborhood. That I knew he was tied up in some shady shit. That he was involved with one of the gang members I sold drugs for. He told me that no one would believe me. And that I would end up in jail, not him. I said I would keep my mouth shut about whatever the hell he was doing there if he kept his hands off you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because that was only part of our agreement. I got him to stop raping you if I stayed away from you. So I gave up being with you so you could have your freedom from him.”

Frustration takes over my voice. “You could have just told me, Jackson.”

“No, because we couldn’t pretend not to be friends, I had to make you not want to talk to me. It wasn’t just us dating, he didn’t want me around you because he thought it would expose him. So I had to stop being your friend. I would have done anything for you, Charlie. And that included never talking to you again so you didn’t have to go through the abuse.”

“So you fucked Ashley to make me hate you?” I ask on a laugh.

He nods. “I wish I didn’t. I wish—”

“I don’t care anymore,” I tell him. And it’s the truth. I got over that years ago.

“Really?”

I nod. “It broke my heart back then. I thought I loved you. And you nearly tore me in two. But I learned to get past it. I knew it was part of life. And I obviously haven’t held it against you since then.”

“It was the worst sex of my life. And I have had some bad sex.” He chuckles.

I snort. “I remember her saying it was the best sex of hers.”

He grabs my hand. “I loved you back then, you know. I still love you.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Because I know he thinks he just loved me as a friend. But I wanted it to be more. So much more. I was in love with him for years.

He presses his lips to mine in a gentle kiss. “I mean it Charlie, I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

I pull back to look into those whiskey eyes, looking at the love written all over his face. “I love you too, Jackson. Even when I didn’t want to. I always have.”

He cups my face and presses his lips back to mine. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and deepen the kiss. My black heart coming to life. The only time it ever does is with him.

I pull away from him. “What about Richard? If he finds out we’re together.”

“About a year after we started talking again, he threatened me. But I let him know I was going to be your friend no matter what.”

“And now?”

“If he knew we were together now, boyfriend and girlfriend, he would expose my secrets. That’s why I didn’t want anyone to know about us.”

“What secrets?”

“You know I’m not a good guy. You know I’ve been caught up in some bad shit.”

“What did you do, Jackson?”

He pulls away from me and runs his hands through his hair. “I’ve been tied up with the kingpin of this city since Silas, Roan, and I moved here. Since before we moved here. You know how much trouble we got into as teenagers. Stealing shit, selling drugs. Well, we crossed the wrong person. And ever since then, he’s made sure to keep a leash on us.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” I ask him.

“He asks favors of us. He could expose us too. For the shit we did. It could throw us in jail. Destroy the band. So we do what he asks.”

“What the fuck, Jackson?” I yell. “Are you kidding me?”

“Look, I know that this changes things. I never wanted to tell you about our tie to Carter West. But if we are going to be together, you need to know. I just hope it doesn’t change things.”

I study him as I digest everything he told me. Things falling into place. The way he would change the subject when I brought things up. But he is still Jackson Knightley. My Jackson, nothing changes that.

“So we just need to worry about Richard?” I ask.

“Yeah. But I’ll figure it out. He can’t keep you from me again.”

JACKSON

“M om came to see me,” Ethan tells me.

I look up at him as I take a drag of my smoke.
“Seriously?”

He nods. “I was rather surprised when she knocked on my front door this morning.”

“Was she asking for money?”

“Of course she was. “

“I was really hoping she didn’t drag you into this.”

“Yeah, well after not seeing her since I was five years old, it was a bit of a shock.”

“She’s never come to you before?” I ask.

“Nah. This was the first time. And she wasn’t even on my doorstep two minutes before asking. I told her to fuck off and then slammed the door in her face.”

“I’m sorry, man.” I take one last drag of my smoke and toss it on the ground. We’re in the alley behind Talisman. The show is in a few hours. “I feel like I caused this by ignoring her.”

“You didn’t. It was inevitable. And it won’t stop. But we can ignore her. That’s all we really can do.”

“She probably knows I help you and Julian out.”

“Maybe. But you also know we hate it when you give us money.”

I chuckle. “Oh I know you do. But hey, it got you both out of that neighborhood.”

“That was all I really needed. What Julian needed after everything that happened.”

I lean against the brick wall of the building and fold my arms over my chest. “Yeah, well, you were too young to know what Julian and I did to put food on the table.”

“I might have been young, but I still know.”

“It’s in the past,” I lie to him.

“Well, I’m hoping Mom doesn’t show up tonight.”

I laugh. “She would need money for a ticket. And no one can even be in the bar tonight unless they have a ticket, so I think we’re good.”

“God, I can’t believe my brother is the lead singer of a band. Your voice isn’t even that good.”

“You’re the one who wanted to come see us.”

He laughs. “No, that was Sarah who wanted to see you. I am just accompanying her.”

“Whatever, man. Do you want my autograph?”

We’re both cracking up when Riot walks out the back door. “Hey, it’s time for sound check.”

I punch my brother in the arm. “Let’s go. You can listen to my crappy voice inside.”

Sweat drips down my bare chest as I breathe in heavily, letting the noise from the crowd soak into my veins. This is what I live for. The bright lights, the loud music, the fans. I take in their cheering as I feel their excitement covering every inch of my body. I smile as I open my eyes and look at them, at the four hundred lucky fans that got tickets to see us tonight.

I let the last notes of Roan's guitar ring out. I look down at the set list taped on the stage next to a monitor and see that we are playing a new song next. It's always scary putting out new music, not sure what the fans' reception will be like. But there is magic in playing new music.

"In case you all have been wondering what we've been doing the last two months in New Orleans besides bringing chaos to this city." A few people laugh and Silas shakes his head at me. "We just finished recording our new album, it's coming out in March. It's called *charlotte*."

I look off to the side of the stage and look at Charlie, my Charlotte. The one who changed my life for the better. The one I would do anything for. She smiles at me as the shock wears off her face from the name of the album.

"This is one of the songs on the album." I touch the black heart tattooed on my chest. "Someone told me once we were both born with black hearts. I never told her this tattoo was for her. That those words stuck with me for nearly twenty years. But when you meet someone with a black heart, sometimes the only one who can make it beat is someone who shares those black scars with you."

Roan starts the driving melody of the song then Silas joins in on bass.

"This song is called 'Black Hearts.'"

I'm a sweaty mess when I get off the stage but Charlie is there waiting for me, the smile on her face so large it makes my knees weak.

I want to marry this girl.

She wraps her arms around me, her lips landing on mine in one hell of a kiss. It's desperate and needy and I can feel her love pouring into me. I lift her up and make my way to the staircase to her office.

“You named the album after me?” she asks me as she pulls away.

“It never would have been finished if it weren’t for you. I needed you back in my life. I needed to see you every day. And being able to touch, kiss, and fuck you made me able to write the best damn album of my life. Your love, Charlie, that’s what made this album happen.”

“I love you so much,” she says before pressing her lips against mine.

I make it up two stairs when Riot’s voice stops me. “I know you want to fuck your girlfriend’s brains out, but you guys need to make an appearance in the bar. Talk with your fans. Get them excited for the album. Then you all can go to the after-party at Silas’s house and do whatever the hell you want. But we need the publicity first.”

I groan against Charlie’s neck but she just slides off me. “Riot’s right.”

“I hate when you guys agree with each other.”

“But before you go out there, put a shirt on.” Her hand slides down my chest and over the black heart. “This is mine.”

“Always.”

I give her a quick peck and then turn around and head to the greenroom and grab my shirt. Before I head to the bar, I tell Riot I am stepping out back for a smoke.

“I actually believe you since I just saw Charlie head out to the bar.”

“If I was going to fuck her, I would have told you. Besides, you already ruined that for the night.”

She flips me off and walks away as I slip outside.

I’m halfway through my smoke when I see Richard walking toward me in the alley. “Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

“Jackson, I would say it’s nice to see you again, but we both know that is a lie.”

I run my hand through my sweaty hair. “What do you want, Richard?”

“It seems like you just can’t keep your hands away from my family. We had a deal.”

I take a drag of my smoke and deliberately exhale in his face. “That was twelve years ago. And whatever you think you know, it’s not true. We’re just friends.”

“Elijah Nash seems to have a very different story about that.”

“Eli is a fuckup who has been jealous of me his whole life. He will say anything to screw me over. And why are you talking to Elijah anyway?” Even though I already suspect the truth. Information I gave to West yesterday after once again following Eli and finding him meeting with Richard.

“Too bad I have seen it with my own eyes. You couldn’t keep your hands off her less than ten minutes ago,” he says, deflecting the question I asked.

I swallow hard. How the hell was he even backstage to see what I did with Charlie?

“I still don’t want you involved with my family.”

“I’m not the troublemaker I was back in my teenage years. I think it scares you that you know I’m good for Charlie. That I can give her more than you ever could. You think you can just pass her off to some rich kid’s son and she will become the stepdaughter you want?”

“That marriage between her and Charles Hennington Buford is necessary.”

“For what, some business deal? What shady shit have you got yourself into now?” I ask him.

“Jackson, you think you are so smart, that you can outwit me. But you can’t. Because I know your secrets. I can destroy this band. You think I don’t know about the man Wilder killed? The errands you ran for Carter West. That man owns you all, you will forever be in his debt. And I am sure if I spill

a few secrets about what you've done for him, you will all end up dead."

I toss my smoke on the ground. "I am really not afraid of you."

"You know who Charles Buford is? What he does?"

I don't want to take the bait, but the way he is grinning at me has me curious. "I am sure you are going to tell me."

"He grooms women. His business is flourishing. There are many men that want a well-trained woman to live up to their needs."

"Is that what you've been doing to your wife when she doesn't do as you ask?"

He steps closer to me. "I don't see how that concerns you. But what should concern you is that I have a deal with Buford and his son, who is hopelessly in love with Charlotte for some odd reason even after Elijah Nash punched him in the face. But if Chaz doesn't get Charlotte, I have no problem making sure his father does."

"You would sell her?"

"She owes me millions for this place. I feel like it's a fair trade."

I can feel the color drain from my face. I feel sick. I could kill this man.

"Now if you let her go and I get my business deal with Buford, then you have nothing to worry about. She will be perfectly safe with his son."

"And if I don't let her go?"

"Then Buford will be sure to make sure she is his prize student. And he likes to use pain to teach a lesson."

I don't have a choice. I have to let her go. I know this man is telling the truth. And I can't put Charlotte in that kind of danger. Not again.

"One more night. I get one more night with her."

Richard smirks at me. “Fine.”

He walks away, and I take a deep breath. Once again, I am trapped in Richard’s grip. And I know I am going to hurt Charlotte for the last time. Because there will be no third chance for us after this.

I watch her dance around in the living room with Janae, Saylor, and Saylor’s cousin, Willow. The three of them laughing as they twerk to the hip-hop music blasting over the speaker. Silas is talking to some girl in the corner. She looks nervous and intimidated by his presence and I can’t help but laugh. I think it’s Willow’s friend. I have no doubt Silas plans on sleeping with her. He’s always liked the chase with one of the innocent ones.

I sip my whiskey, the burn a welcome presence as I recall my conversation with Richard. Knowing that tomorrow I need to break Charlie’s heart. She dances over to me, and I unclench my jaw and smile at her. I like her like this, when she is carefree, happy.

I push away the thoughts of the future and live in the moment with her. I have to since these will be our last.

So I spend the night doing just that. I dance with her, take shots with her, and when I take her home I make love to her so she knows exactly how I feel and hopefully these memories will take over the bad ones.

CHARLIE

I roll over in my bed and find it empty. I'm surprised Jackson is up early after the crazy night we had. He was acting different last night. Carefree. He openly let me touch him and kiss him in front of others. But I didn't question it because I hate hiding. I want everyone to know he's mine.

I stretch and feel all the places my body is deliciously sore from the hours we made love last night. I asked him to tie me up since he still hasn't fulfilled that fantasy of his but he told me we would do it later.

I stand up and pull on a T-shirt then walk into my kitchen to find Jackson with a pensive look on his face as he leans against my counter drinking coffee.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"We need to talk."

I look at him and know something is wrong. "What is it?"

"Richard threatened me last night. After we played."

"He was there?" A shiver runs through me at the thought.

He nods. "He saw us together. I tried to deny everything but Elijah told him about the party at my house. I don't want to do this, Charlie. But I could lose everything. And either way, in the end, I would lose you. There is never a solution that allows us to be together. We can't be together."

"So instead, you think you should just break my heart?" I ask him, not sad but angry. Angry that Richard is still

controlling both of us. Angry that I can't have what I want. Angry that I know this won't only break my heart but it will tear Jackson apart too.

"I'm going to break it either way."

"No, you don't get to break up with me over this. We're going to see Richard and tell him to fuck off."

"It's not that easy."

"He threatens to expose your secrets, then I can threaten that I will expose his."

"It won't work, Charlie. This is the only way. I have to save you and if that means leaving you, then that's what I have to do."

"I don't know how this will save me at all."

"You don't want to know what he threatened to do to you. Trust me, this is for the best." He tries to reach for me, but I take a step back. "I love you, Charlotte. You know that. And I will always love you. It just has to be from a distance now."

He starts to walk to the door, and I am frozen in place. I cannot believe this is happening again. I can't not have him in my life. He is my rock. My compass. He is my North Star that leads me home, he is my home. The man that brings out the best in me. I've loved him for far too long from the sidelines to let him go. Not without a fight.

I walk toward my foyer and see Jackson hesitating by the door like he isn't sure either. He has to know this is a mistake.

"No," I stammer. "You don't get to leave. You said you wouldn't leave me again. So do not walk out that door, Jackson." My voice commands every single word.

"What other choice do I have?"

"We're ending this once and for all. Fuck Richard. Fuck his need for power over both of us. This ends now." I take a step toward Jackson. "I will not let him destroy us. We both know we can destroy him. So let's take him down."

“And how do you think we could do that?” he asks with defeat.

“You said Elijah told him he saw us together. Well that means he is working for Richard. But I know for a fact that he was selling drugs for Carter West.”

His eyes light up. “There is a way, Charlie. But you won’t like it.”

I doubt that’s true. I step closer to him and grab his hand. “Does it mean I get to keep you?”

He nods and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me into him. He presses his lips to mine. “I love you, Charlotte. But this could be dangerous. For you too.”

“I don’t care, Jackson. As long as we don’t have to be miserable.”

“We will owe him a favor. Both of us. I’ll have to drag you into the dark.”

I cup his face, my fingers grazing over the stubble on his jaw. “It will be worth it to keep you.”

He knows I’m serious. He can see it in my eyes. He kisses me one more time and then steps away. “I need to make a call.”

I tap my foot against the barstool as I keep checking the time on my phone. Richard should be here any minute. I look over my shoulder at the man sitting in a velvet wingback chair in Jackson’s living room.

Carter West.

The man is intimidating as fuck. He’s tall and built and the way he fills out his three-piece suit is something you see on romance novel covers. He sits with one ankle crossed over his knee, his posture casual but emanating power. His black hair is slicked back, his piercing silver eyes intently staring off down the hall to the front door.

Somehow Jackson convinced Richard to come talk to him today at his penthouse. I really don't know why Richard agreed. Or what Jackson said to make him come out here. But it happened and now shit is about to go down.

Sitting on the coffee table is a gun. I highly doubt anyone is going to be shot in here but I know West is using it to intimidate. Even though the two suited men behind him are scary enough.

The doorbell rings and Jackson stands. He walks over to me and presses a kiss to my forehead. "It will all be fine."

I give him a weak smile because I am not sure what to expect. I glance over at Carter West again and wonder if this was a mistake. He's a powerful man, more powerful than Richard ever could be, and now I am going to owe him a favor. He must feel my stare on him because he looks over at me, a slight smirk on his face like he can tell I am scared shitless.

I hear the front door open and then the click of it shutting. Richard's voice carries down the hall and I hold my breath. I hate the man. I avoid him like the plague. I don't think I've seen him in two years and the thought of the man who raped me as a kid being in the same room as me makes me want to grab the gun on the table and shoot him myself.

I look at the gun and catch Carter's gaze. He gestures to it like he knows what I'm thinking and I quickly turn back toward the hall.

"You're lucky I was still in town or else I wouldn't have agreed to this meeting. But if you think you are trying to negotiate a way to keep my daughter—"

"Stepdaughter," Jackson corrects him.

"However you want to see it is fine. But if you think you can negotiate, you're wrong. A deal's a de—What the hell is he doing here?" Richard says when he walks into the living room and sees Carter West in the chair.

"Mr. Knightley was so kind to deliver you to me," West says, his voice like smoke.

“And why would that be? I’ve never even met you.”

“Ahh but you know who I am. Most people do. And most don’t talk back to me.”

“I’m not most people,” Richard says.

“You see, Mr. Knightley asked me a favor a few weeks ago. He had me look into you. Now I’ve heard of you around. My men always keeping me informed of things that are going on in my state. I have ears everywhere, Mr. LeBlanc. And I am aware of your measly plan to break into my drug business.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You have one of my runners on your payroll. But don’t worry, my men are taking care of Mr. Nash right now.”

I pale at that. I’m not stupid. I know exactly what he means by that. Eli is dead. Jackson walks over to me and squeezes my hand.

Carter uncrosses his legs and stands up to walk toward Richard. Richard is nearly as tall as Jackson but he seems small when Carter approaches him. No doubt he is scared of the man. “Let’s be honest, shall we, Mr. LeBlanc? I’ve always felt like honesty gets you much further than lies. And you never would have gotten anywhere with trying to cut into my business. You see, I run this city and this parish and well, since we are being honest, the entire state. So when someone steps on my toes and tries to steal my business from me, there is a price to pay.”

He snaps his fingers and one of his lackeys hands him his gun. He traces the barrel down Richard’s face and I can tell he is scared. I wouldn’t be surprised if he pees his pants. “I looked into you and your relationship with a Mr. Buford and I found some very interesting things. Grooming and selling women. Now that’s a business I would very much like to have. In fact, I do have that. But I am much classier in my role with it. Unlike the shit that you two do.”

My mouth gapes open at the admission. I had no idea what Richard was involved in but I clearly didn’t think that.

“Now tell me if I am doing my math correctly. That is two businesses of mine you seem to be dipping your toes into.”

Richard visibly swallows as Carter drags the gun down his chest and removes the safety when the barrel is hovering over Richard’s dick.

“I also hear you have a fetish for underage girls. As a provost at LSU, a highly regarded man, I don’t think that will go over very well with the staff or the students or the parents at the school.”

“W-what do you want?” Richard’s voice is shaky.

“That is a good question. What do I want?” He taps his finger on his chin. “I suppose I want you out of my hair. Out of my business. But I am just not sure I can trust you. I couldn’t trust Elijah. So that very much makes me not trust you.”

“We c-can cut a d-deal.”

Carter laughs in his face. “I don’t do deals. It’s my word above all others.”

“B-but—”

“I may have some use for you though.”

Richard looks up into the menacing green eyes of Carter. “Anything.”

Carter smirks, and it’s the most terrifying thing I’ve seen. “Maybe you can be of use to me.” He snaps his fingers and his lackeys move forward, grabbing Richard by either arm. “But first you need to pay for what you’ve done.”

Carter pistol whips Richard in the face, Richard’s knees giving out but the lackeys hold him up.

“Take him to the warehouse. I would like to have my fun with him.”

Richard starts screaming as he is dragged down the hall but then I hear a few grunts and then silence. The door clicks shut, and it’s just Carter, Jackson, and I.

Carter wipes the blood off the gun then places it back in his holster. He walks over to the coffee table and picks up the glass of whiskey Jackson gave him.

He swallows it and nods his head at Jackson. "I'll take this as a payment for your original debt. We'll be in touch, Mr. Knightley." His eyes slide over to me. "Miss Fortier."

Jackson and I don't say anything as Carter walks out of the penthouse. We both stand in silence for minutes. Both of us surprised at what just happened. Or maybe just me. I don't know Carter West, and for all I know, he could show up at my bar demanding something from me.

"W-what debt?" I stutter, finally breaking the silence between us.

"I don't want to tell you," Jackson says quietly.

I pull him toward me. "We agreed to no more secrets."

Jackson sighs then sits in the chair next to me. He rubs his hands over his face before talking. "I had him take care of a stalker."

"What?"

"It started over a year ago. I would get letters in the mail. I thought it was just some crazy fan. Then they threatened you. They had pictures of you at work, at your apartment. I had West ensure your safety. He did. Then when he caught the stalker, he killed her. At least, I think he did. That is blood on my hands I will never be clean of. But I don't regret it. Because you were safe, and that's all that matters."

"You don't know if he killed her. Maybe he didn't. I just handed over my stepfather to a known killer. I think I am just as guilty as you."

"You aren't mad at me?"

"You didn't ask him to pull the trigger."

He sweeps me into his arms, pulling me out of my chair. Kissing me with reverence. "I love you, Charlie. I love you so much."

“So does this mean everything is okay?”

He pulls back from me. “With Richard, yes. But West will always be around.”

“That’s a risk I can take.”

He pulls me closer to him. “There is nothing keeping us apart now.”

I smile at him and then he lifts me up and carries me to the bedroom.

EPILOGUE

Seven Months Later

I stand backstage watching Saints & Sinners play their opening night concert for their *charlotte* tour. The album was a hit, selling more records in a week than they ever had in the past. The songs are a story of our life. The heartache we went through when we were teenagers, the rekindling of our friendship eight years ago, and the love we found within each other recently.

My heart is full as I watch him play and see the passion he has on stage. I secretly love that he is mine, and I get to keep him. All those screaming girls that love him for his sex appeal have no idea that his heart is even better than his looks.

After the ordeal with Richard, I made Jackson tell me every damning thing he's done. And it was a lot. But it's like a weight was lifted from his chest when he was finally able to tell me everything. And I didn't judge him. I just listened. And I accepted him for who he was, just like I always have.

I'm ninety-nine percent positive Carter West killed Richard. No word from him since then. A missing person report was filed but nothing has happened. I think Mom was relieved when she filed it. Jackson and I told her some of the truth but kept most of it a secret. She did have love in her heart for Richard, and I didn't want her to know the worst parts of him, even though I think she already knew.

She's secretly dating Dad now. She thinks I don't know, but Dad told me. He couldn't keep the grin off his face when I

met him for lunch one day. And it's good for him. She makes him happy. Which has only helped his health. She even convinced him to go to rehab, and he completed a sixty-day program. They both stopped drinking and I am waiting for the day he decides to marry her again.

Riot bumps my shoulder, and I look over at her. "I won't stop you two from fucking after this."

I laugh. "Gee, thanks."

"Bastard hasn't let me live it down since that night at Talisman."

"Yeah, well, it was kind of rude. I really wanted to fuck his brains out." I point to him on stage as he swaggers from one end to the other. "Have you seen how sexy he is?"

"Yeah, okay, maybe to you."

I take a sip of the coffee I am drinking, wanting as much energy as I can have for after the show since Jackson already promised to ravish me tonight.

"Does that mug say what I think it says?"

I laugh. "Yeah, Janae got it for me."

I hold the mug out so she can read it. She laughs at the words, "I like my dicks how I like my ears. Pierced."

"That woman has too much of a fascination with dicks."

"It's unhealthy," I joke.

We are quiet for a few minutes as we watch the guys play. Riot's gaze fixed on Roan as per usual.

"How are things with Roan?"

She shrugs. "Same as usual. He still is too scared to be with the kids."

"You never told me what happened."

"I haven't told anyone and I never intend to."

I frown at her words. I can see the heartbreak on her face. I know she loves him but sometimes love isn't enough. I feel

even worse for Roan because I know how much he still loves her and his girls, even if he won't say it out loud.

"How long are you going to be on tour with them?" she asks me, changing the subject.

"Probably a week. I need to go to the bar every now and then to make sure it doesn't burn down."

"I think it's in good hands with Jessica."

"Yeah, well, when she convinced me I can run the admin from the road, I knew I had to be here with Jackson."

"Jax Knight, heartthrob extraordinaire." She laughs.

"He's still the asshole who would pull on my pigtails when we were seven."

"Oh, and I am sure he pulls on them still but for an entirely different reason."

I cackle. "One hundred percent."

When the show ends, Jackson pulls me into his sweaty, shirtless body, smothering my face and neck with kisses. "Come on. Be my groupie for the night."

"Is this some fantasy of yours?"

"Yeah, baby, we still have a ton of fantasies we haven't done."

I snort at him but take his hand as he pulls me to his bus. The best thing about them being so famous is they all have their own buses, so I don't have to worry about everyone hearing us together. Not to mention that when we are traveling at night, we get to sleep in a bed rather than bunks.

"I just want to shower really fast."

"Please do. You smell."

"You like it."

"Hardly."

"I do recall that concert we did in New York. You were so horny after watching me play you licked the sweat off my body before letting me fuck you in a bathroom."

“Yeah well, watching you on stage does something to me.”

He pulls me into him and cups my sex through my jeans. “Does that mean you’re wet for me right now?”

I kiss his lips then bite on his bottom lip and suck it into my mouth. “You’ll just have to wait to find out.”

He lifts me up suddenly and tosses me over his shoulder. “Fuck this shower.”

I giggle as he carries me into the bedroom at the back of the bus and ravishes me.

After we are both satisfied and equally sweaty, he runs his fingers over the black anatomical heart I had tattooed on the center of my chest. The one with the black scars running through it to match his own. I don’t know why I never put it together that the tattoo was for me. I’ve always believed our black hearts were made for each other. And they truly are.

“You know how much I love you, Charlie?”

I nod. “Yeah, I do.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure if you do. I can’t put it into words. I try to put it into songs. But it’s never enough. God, my heart beats so hard for you that sometimes I wish we never had to part from each other. I want to spend days wrapped around your body.”

“We’ve done that,” I tell him as I bop him on his nose.

“Fine, then I want to spend forever with you wrapped around me.”

“You have me forever, Jax. I think you know that.”

He kisses my lips then reaches over me to his nightstand drawer. “But I want the world to know.”

I raise my brow at him, confused.

Then he pulls me on top of him so I am straddling him. His fingers grazing the tattoo of his lyrics down my side. “My compass. My home.”

“I am.”

He smiles up at me then holds up a ring with a large black diamond on a silver band. I want to be surprised but I'm not. Because I knew this was inevitable. The two of us were always meant to be. My smile takes up my face as I stare into those golden eyes I love so much.

"My wife?" he asks.

I lean down and kiss him, smashing his hands between my body. "Yes," I mutter against his lips.

He flips me over and slides the ring onto my finger. "Good. Because this was one of my fantasies too."

His lips are back on mine and we spend the rest of the night living out a fantasy we both have.

Do you want to read one of Jackson's fantasies brought to life?

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Warning: it's spicy!

Want to know more about Riot and Roan?

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Remember how I wrote my last book in three weeks. Well, call me crazy because I wrote this one in two weeks. And I am never doing that again. Trust me. I don't even think I slept at all while I was writing this. But I finished it and you read it, so I hope you liked it.

This book was one I wanted to write for awhile but I kept pushing it back. But three years later, here we are. And I am glad I waited or else it wouldn't have turned out this way. I wanted to bring dark elements to this story but I didn't want to take away from the emotion and rawness of Charlie and Jackson. I know if I wrote this years ago when we first met Charlie, it would have been a completely different story. And this one sucked the life out of me. I struggled so hard. And it's not easy to be struggling when you are on a tight deadline. But then I dove into my head and brought out the grit and the angst and I think it came out better than anticipated. And I love the black scars on the black hearts of Charlie and Jackson. I have them too!

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To my husband, thank you for not talking to me. I appreciated it. But you can talk to me again now.

To my readers, it's time for another adventure. Thank you for always joining me!

And thank you to you, for giving me a chance, for taking a risk on an indie author. I hope you stick around!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tori Fox is the author of romantic suspense and contemporary romance with a little bit of angst and a whole lot of sexy. When she isn't writing, you can find her listening to true crime podcasts as she tends to her plants or singing along to pop songs as she drinks champagne. Tori lives above the clouds with her husband and dog in the Rocky Mountains.

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