



CRUEL PROMISES



SAINTS & SINNERS SERIES BOOK TWO

TORIFOX

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T O R I F O X

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MARLEY

“Which one?”

I look away from the rose bush I was pruning and look up at Willow who is holding up two dresses. One is a leather dress with studded spaghetti straps that looks like it will be skintight. The other is a half-sheer red number that I am not even sure would cover her ass.

I shove my gardening shears into the pockets of my overalls. “The leather one. I don’t think the red one can even be considered a dress.”

She smirks at me. “Trust me, it passes.”

“It’s see-through.”

She laughs. “That’s why you pair it with a sexy lace bra underneath.”

I look at the two dresses, not wanting her to wear either. “You are hanging out with your cousin too much.”

She pouts. “I am just getting used to being twenty-one and having fun. And she is fun to hang out with. And I like her friends.”

I fold my arms over my chest. I might be a bit conservative, but I know when people are bad news and her cousin is the epitome of bad decisions. “The one time I met her, she wouldn’t stop criticizing me over the clothes I was wearing.”

“You were wearing a muumuu.”

“It wasn’t a muumuu. It was a dress. I got it at Target.”

“Fine, it was *Little House on the Prairie* then.”

I shake my head at her and pull my shears out of my pocket and go back to my rose bush, deadheading and pruning.

“Will you just pick a dress?”

I sigh and turn back to her. “The leather one.”

Her smile widens. “Perfect. It will look so good on you.”

“What?” I shriek, nearly cutting off a new bloom.

“Yeah, we’re going out.”

I shake my head at her. “No, going out is like seeing a movie and getting dinner at Red Lobster.” I point at the dress. “That is not suitable for either.”

“Oh come on, Marley. You’ve been keeping yourself caged up in this damn house for a month. You need to get out. Get over Ken and live a little.”

I set my shears down on the garden bed. “First off, his name isn’t Ken. It’s Kent.”

“He looks like a Ken doll.”

“Whatever. And I am over him.”

Willow pushes the dresses into a tote bag and steps closer to me, brushing my overgrown bangs out of my eyes. “Every time I come over, you are in this garden hacking away at your plants.”

“This garden takes a lot of work,” I say as I brush her hand away from my face.

“You are burying yourself in this garden and hiding your misery. I can see it all over your face. Kent was a jackass. He never should have treated you the way he did.”

“Yeah, well I am doing just fine.”

“Fine, keep lying to yourself about that, but I am taking you out tonight.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday. I have church.”

She groans. “Have you ever missed a day of church in your life?”

I shrug. I’ve missed a few. Mostly because I was sick or was volunteering somewhere. But my dad is the pastor of our church. It’s kind of a thing that I have to be there.

“Marley, you are almost twenty-one. You have lived at home your whole life. You just said your idea of going out was going to Red Lobster. You’ve never been to a party or snuck into a bar. You need to live a little. You are wasting away. I know you aren’t happy.”

I frown at her. “I am happy. I don’t need to be like you, Willow. You went to college, you had fun, you got to act crazy. My life is here with my family.”

Willow and I have been friends since I was eight and she was nine. Her family moved in across the street. We were a grade apart, but she was always nice to me. Plus, she used to go to church with us. But things changed when she moved away and went to college. She is only back home now to save money so she can get her own place, and I am happy to have my friend back, even if we are different. She is really the only one I have. I’ve never been outgoing or made friends easily. Even with the church groups. I’ve always been a loner and a book nerd, and I am fine with that. I read scripture when I want but usually divulge myself in fantasy novels. While my mornings are spent in my garden, tending to the hundreds of plants my mom and I grow.

“So you are just going to live at home, marry some guy your parents approve of, pop out a few kids and never experience life?”

My jaw clenches. “You know, some people would say that is life experience enough.”

“Oh come on, Marley. Remember the girl that was so obsessed with her fantasy and adventure books and wanted to travel the world to find exotic places?”

That was me. But I grew up. “That’s a dream, not reality.”

“Look,” she says, grabbing my hand and squeezing. “I just want you to experience something different for once. Do something wild. Have fun. Think of it as a way to get over the Ken doll.”

“I’m ov—”

“No you aren’t.”

I groan. “Fine. You’re right. I’m not over him, but those things take time.”

“Or going to a party and getting crazy could help.”

I roll my eyes at her. “I’m not you. Besides, I’m socially awkward and unimpressive. No one wants me at their party.”

“I want you there.”

I sigh as I look at her, pouting. Maybe I should do something out of the norm. Maybe it will kick me out of this funk I’m in. Plus, I hate turning her down every time she asks me to do something I wouldn’t normally do. “Fine.”

She squeals as she jumps up and down. “I’m so excited!”

I laugh but feel suddenly nervous. I don’t even know what I am agreeing to. “So what are we doing?”

She jumps up and down and pulls the black leather dress out of her tote bag. “You are going to wear this. I am going to do your makeup and hair and make you feel like a sexy vixen, and then we are going to see Saints & Sinners.”

“Who?”

Her jaw drops open. “Are you serious?”

I laugh at her as I grab the dress out of her hand. “I’m kidding. I know who they are. You talk about them enough since it is your cousin’s band.” I hold the dress up. “I’ve never been to a rock concert.”

“Have you ever been to a concert?” She chuckles.

I shake my head. “No.”

“Wait, even while I was gone at school, you never once went to one?”

“Who would I have gone with?”

“This is going to be life changing.”

“Doubtful.” I look at the dress. “And I really need to wear this? I have plenty of things I could wear.”

“No. We are doing this my way. I want you to do something reckless for once.” She snatches the dress out of my hand and shoves it back in her bag.

“This sounds like a bad idea.”

She puts her arm on my shoulder. “Hey, I’ll be there. I’ll make sure you’re comfortable. Besides, I already told Charlie that you would be there and she said she would make sure you are safe.”

“Safe? Why wouldn’t I be—”

She holds her hands up. “I don’t mean that it’s dangerous. I just mean she said she would make sure that you are comfortable if things get wild. She owns the bar they are playing at.”

“I’m not twenty-one.”

“Good thing Saylor is friends with the owner then.”

“What am I going to tell my parents?”

“Okay, first off, you are twenty years old, they shouldn’t have a say in what you do. Second, I know how overprotective they are. Just say you are sleeping at my house. Girls’ night in.”

I bite my lip as I look up at my house and see my mom in a window painting in our studio. Maybe I do need this. It could be fun. I think about Kent and how he broke up with me a few days after taking my virginity. I think about all the times I said no to doing something out of my comfort zone because I was scared. I turn back to Willow. “Okay.”

She squeals again. “This is going to be so much fun!”

I look in the sun visor mirror as Willow drives us to New Orleans. She coated my eyes in black liner. I never wear this much makeup and I would never admit this out loud, but I like it. It makes my hazel eyes pop. I'm wearing red lipstick, and I don't think I have ever touched red lipstick in my life. But I feel edgy, dangerous. Like a bad girl. Something I have never been.

This dress that I am wearing, I can't believe I left the house in it. It's short and tight and not very comfortable. But I don't look like the girl who cried over her ex-boyfriend this morning. I look like someone who is confident in their shoes. Speaking of shoes, she let me wear her Doc Martens after arguing with me about some spiked heels she wanted me to wear. I wanted to wear something I knew I would be able to walk in.

"You look hot, Mar."

I look over at Willow as she catches me staring at myself in the mirror. "You think so? I don't look like I'm trying too hard?"

She shakes her head. "No one knows who you are. Remember that. Walk and talk with confidence. Everyone will think this is how you normally dress. They won't know the difference."

I purse my lips. "Easier said than done."

"I know. But I promise you, it will all be okay."

I give her a weak smile and flip the visor back up.

"Now, no more talking, the book is getting to a good part." She cranks up the audiobook she is listening to and my cheeks flame as I start to pay attention. It's a romance novel and it just got to a sex scene.

"Oh my gosh." My eyes go wide as the narrator talks about choking a woman during sex. "A man would never do that."

Willow snorts. "Not from the stories I've heard."

I look over at her, still in shock from what we were listening to. "Like in the books, you mean?"

She laughs and shakes her head. “You hang out around my cousin and her friends, you hear some pretty crazy shit.”

“You mean the people we are going to hang out with tonight? And does that mean, Wilder... you know?”

“Eww. I do not want to think about my cousin’s sex life.”

“You brought it up!” I screech.

She blows a raspberry. “Well I have no idea what Wilder is like. And I don’t want to think about that. But Silas has a loud-ass mouth. I try to avoid them when they are talking about it. But I hear the stories filtered down through Saylor.”

I shiver. “I just really didn’t think people did this in real life. Or that books even talked about it. When did you start reading these?”

“In college. I told you to read them.”

“I didn’t know this happened in them. I thought... well, I didn’t know what I thought. But I was not going to be caught with one at home. You know how my dad is. He’s already reeling over the fact I had sex with Kent.”

“How the hell did he find out?”

“Mom figured it out. And she told him,” I say, dropping my head.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asks as she reaches over and grabs my hand.

I shrug. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. That’s why I’ve been spending more time at the church.”

She squeezes my hand. “I get the whole saving yourself for your husband thing and I know that meant a lot to your parents. But that was never you, Marley. You were always curious about sex.”

My cheeks flame. “I know. But only you know that!”

“Well, I am glad you snuck out because I know your dad would be pissed as hell right now if he knew I was sneaking you into a bar to see a rock band and then going to one of their houses afterward for a party.”

“What?” I rip my hand out of hers.

She gives me a weak smile. “Did I forget to mention that part?”

“Willow! I have church in the morning. I have to help with the lunch afterward. If I miss this, I am going to be in so much trouble.”

“You’re twenty years old.”

“And my dad, who is a pastor, whose house I still live in, just found out I lost my virginity instead of waiting until marriage! If I miss church, I am going to be in so much trouble.”

A huge grin takes up her face. “Look at you becoming a rebel.”

“Hardly,” I scoff.

“I’ll make sure you are home for church in the morning.”

I settle back in my seat. “Thank you.”

She glances over at me. “You are becoming a rebel though.”

I laugh and shake my head as I look at the view of New Orleans.

MARLEY

I stand in a corner at Talisman with my arms wrapped around my chest. I feel so out of place and nothing has even started yet. The bar is closed until they open the doors to ticket holders, and there are only about thirty people currently in here, but I have no idea who any of these people are. They are all older than me. Piercings and tattoos decorate their skin. I feel like a complete fraud wearing red lipstick and a leather dress.

Willow went to grab me something to drink ten minutes ago but got caught up in a conversation with her cousin, Saylor. We only met once and I know the girl doesn't like me. She is a wild child. She has on tie-dyed pants that flare out at the bottom and a crop top. Her high cheekbones and piercing eyes intimidate me. She is not afraid to speak her mind and I am sure she is asking Willow why she brought me. Her judgmental eyes keep glancing over to me.

I look away just as the band comes out of the back of the venue and into the bar area. I've heard them a few times and seen them in magazines but seeing them in person has me catching my breath. They exude power or something close to power. They have a presence about them that makes me inch farther into the wall.

Charlie, the owner of Talisman that Willow introduced to me briefly, walks around the bar and up to one of the guys, whispering something in his ear. He runs a hand down her waist, but she pulls it off. She presses her hand into his chest, then walks away and I don't miss the way he watches her.

He's gorgeous. Tall and lean but just thick enough with muscle. Black hair that is long on top and shorter on the sides falls into his face. He is shirtless and completely covered in tattoos. I never thought I would find tattoos attractive, but I guess I just never saw them on the right person.

A man with blond hair in a man bun smacks the guy on the back before heading over to the bar. I think that's Willow's cousin. She pointed all the band members out to me once a few years ago, and I can see the similarities between him and Saylor.

Two more guys walk out, talking to a small pixie of a woman with caramel skin peeking out around her tattoos. I can only guess more guys from the band. They were finishing up a sound check when we got here twenty minutes ago. One more guy walks out, fist-bumping someone in a booth. His long wavy hair hits just past his shoulders, and tattoos cover his thick arms. He smiles at the man and even though I can only see half his face, I can tell it's a mesmerizing smile, with a dimple on the right side of his cheek that makes him look a bit less intimidating. I need to chastise myself for finding it attractive.

I realize I'm staring at him and quickly look back to the bar to see Willow and Saylor following my gaze. Saylor smirks at me, then grabs a drink off the bar and skips over to me.

"Hi Marlene."

"It's Marley."

She smacks her forehead. "Silly me."

"Don't be a bitch," Willow says as she hands me a drink. "I got you a vodka and Sprite."

I smile at her and grab it, taking a huge drink. "Thanks."

"You drink?" Saylor asks.

Willow shoots her a glare, but I put my hand up to stop her. "Yes, Saylor, I drink. On occasion. Usually wine. But sometimes, on a bad day, I drink vodka."

“I guess it’s been a year and a half since I’ve seen you,” she says.

“Yeah.”

She takes a sip of her drink and takes me in. “I didn’t think I would ever see you in something like this.”

I laugh. “Me either. But Willow forced me to wear it.”

“Did your boyfriend really take your V-card and then dump you?” Saylor asks me.

My eyes bulge out as I look around to make sure no one heard her before turning to Willow. “What the heck, Wil?”

“Oops. I kind of told her last week.”

Saylor wraps an arm around my stiff shoulders. “Well, you deserve to let loose then. I don’t really drink at all, but I think you need a shot.”

“I think that’s a bad idea,” I say. “And aren’t you drinking?”

She shakes her head and lifts her glass. “Just water.”

“Maybe shots later,” Willow says. “I don’t want her to pass out before the show.”

“Oh my god, I am not that much of a lightweight.”

She nudges my shoulder. “I’m kidding.”

Saylor smiles at me and I scrunch my brow at her devious look.

“Have you ever smoked pot?”

“Umm once. It didn’t really do anything.”

“You never told me that!” Willow shouts.

“It was in high school when I had a crush on Sean.”

Willow looks at me like she can’t believe a word I’m saying.

Saylor grabs my hand. “Well then, it must not have been very good weed. Let’s go.”

I give Willow a look just as Saylor pulls me toward the back. I look behind me to see Willow squeezing past a few people to catch up.

“Wilder.” Saylor nods at her brother and comes to a stop, causing me to trip over my feet and into a man sitting in a high-top chair.

Thick hands grip my waist as I try to right myself. “You okay?”

I nod as I look up to meet piercing blue eyes. Not light blue like an ocean, but a deep dark blue, like the night sky just before the stars wake up.

“You sure about that? Because if you are hanging out with Saylor, that usually means bad news.”

Willow snorts from behind us just as Saylor whips around. “Fuck off, Silas.”

He smiles at her with that dazzling smile I saw earlier. Perfectly straight white teeth, full lips, and two dimples peeking out over his short beard. “You love me.”

“You think everyone loves you and I can assure you, they don’t.”

He runs his hand along his chin. “You sure about that? Because the last five chicks I’ve fucked all claimed to love me.”

“Such a slut,” she jokes.

He winks at her and I feel a pang of jealousy. I don’t know why. I don’t even know him. Only that his name is Silas and I am pretty sure he is in the band.

Saylor turns to her brother, who starts talking to her, and Silas takes me in. I feel my chest turn red as his eyes peruse my body and I wonder if he can tell I’m a total fraud in a leather dress and combat boots.

“I’m Silas,” he says to me, sticking out his hand.

I stutter as I try to answer, but Willow slaps his hand away.

“Not happening.”

He drops his hand away and looks away from me. “And why is that?”

“You know why.”

He smirks at her then picks up a drink off the table and finishes it. “No fun.”

I once again feel awkward. Everyone here knows each other. Has some sort of connection and I stick out like a sore thumb.

“Alright, let’s go,” Saylor says as she once again grabs my hand and pulls me toward the back.

I am pleasantly blissed. My worries drifting away as I sway to the music of Saints & Sinners’ first song. Whatever weed Saylor had was nothing like what I smoked in high school when I had a crush on a skater boy. I thought I was such a rebel back then. He was the kid with the lip piercing and the messy brown hair with faded-black dye in it. I was so surprised when he gave me the time of day. I was so nervous my parents were going to find out I smoked weed behind a Wendy’s after school. Turns out Sean just had a bet to see if he could take the pastor’s daughter’s virginity. He lost. But not before I got my first kiss. It wasn’t even that great. Too much tongue that tasted like weed and cigarettes.

“Isn’t this fun?” Willow shouts over the loud beat of the music.

“I never would have thought I would do this, but I love it.”

She laughs. “You are just high.”

“And I love it.” I smile at her and it looks like a weight falls from her shoulders. I didn’t realize she was so nervous about bringing me out here. Or maybe she is just happy that I am not letting the last month take over my thoughts.

We dance and scream as the concert continues. The band has an energy to them that I can tell the whole crowd feels.

The way the singer mesmerizes the crowd with his changing of vocals to screams. His shirtless body on display, his tattoos as loud as the music coming from the speakers. Every now and then, I flit my eyes over to Silas. Saylor warned me to stay away from him because he is a manwhore. She says that if I show any interest in him, he will seduce me. Would that really be such a bad thing? This is my night to be reckless. Be the girl I never let myself be.

Maybe he will seduce me... but I doubt it. I'm me. The church girl. The mousy-looking girl with brown hair, small boobs, and no curves. I'm the kind of girl that no one pays attention to. The one that gets bumped into in a crowd. The only people who ever pay me any mind are the ladies at church when I help out with the afternoon lunches. I was even surprised when Kent gave me the time of day. I've known him for years. He volunteered at the church as much as I did. Except he had friends where I didn't have any. We dated for six months before I finally gave in to him. I never thought he pressured me into sex. It just seemed to come naturally when he told me he loved me. Except that was a lie I fell for.

"There you guys are!" Saylor shouts from behind us. She wraps her arms around our shoulders. "Want to get backstage before it gets too wild in here? The last half of their shows are always crazy."

Willow looks over at me and I nod.

We start to walk toward the backstage entrance when Saylor stops abruptly. Jax Knight is talking on stage about their new album *charlotte* and something about black hearts. A smile crosses Saylor's face and I wonder what it's about.

She waves her badge to the bouncer and he lets all of us through. The music is slightly less loud back here, but the beat of the bass is more intense, I can feel it down to my toes. I stand next to Saylor; her eyes flick over to Charlie as Jax finishes the song, and I think I get it. Charlie must be Charlotte. There is a look of love in her eyes, tears on the verge of falling. She is in love with him and I'm guessing he is in love with her. I just don't think many people know.

I can see glimpses of the crowd from the side of the stage and Saylor was right. It is crazy out there, things I couldn't see from the back of the room. A mosh pit is centered in front of the stage, a bunch of sweaty people pushing and shoving each other in a circle. Girls with hearts in their eyes leaning against a barricade. A few people crowd-surfing over the raging crowd.

I take it all in. Something so different than I have ever experienced. But at the same time, I find myself enjoying it far more than I ever thought I would. I look over at Willow as she hands me a new drink. She twines her arm around my bicep and squeezes.

“I told you you'd have fun.”

“I don't remember that being how the conversation went.”

She raises a brow at me. “Well this is a lot better than Red Lobster.”

I lean in toward her ear so she can hear me as the music gets louder. “I don't know, cheddar bay biscuits are pretty good.”

“Shut up and drink your vodka!” She laughs as she says it and rests her head on my shoulder.

This is definitely better than Red Lobster. As I let the music thrum through me and the vodka warm my soul, I feel like maybe I do fit in a bit. That I don't feel like such an outcast.

I look toward the stage, my eyes hitting Silas. He's staring right at me. I feel my breath catch as that sinful gaze eats me alive. He winks at me, then walks to the front of the stage, pumping up the crowd.

MARLEY

I stand against a wall in this giant house. I hate to admit it's my first party, but it is unless you count church parties. My high is wearing off and I haven't had a drink in an hour. I'm starting to feel like a hermit again. The poser in the corner.

Saylor said this was Silas's house. It's a beautiful Greek revival in the Garden District. He's taken his style and remodeled the house, keeping it a mix of 1920s charm mixed with Gothic decor. The entire backyard was designed for parties. A huge pool with changing LED lights, a firepit, an outdoor kitchen, and multiple sitting areas. All that's missing is a garden. At least in my mind.

A few people nod at me as they pass. Willow went looking for a bathroom and I think she got distracted again. It's been nearly ten minutes. Saylor disappeared the second we got here and I don't know anyone else.

I wait about five more minutes for Willow before deciding to wander around the house. Most people don't pay me any mind. I feel out of place. I don't know how to randomly talk to strangers, it was never built in my DNA.

I make my way down the front hall and hear the beats of hip-hop music coming from the front room. I'm guessing this was once a formal parlor room that's been converted into a lounge. An ornate wooden bar sits along the back wall. Wingback chairs and velvet couches fill up the space around it. Black velvet draperies block out the windows that face the street. Charlie is sitting on Jax's lap and he is whispering into

her ear. Silas is behind the bar making a drink and I can't help but study him. The way his muscles flex as he lifts a bottle of tequila. I watch his tongue glide across his lips as he mixes in some other ingredient. I wonder what it would be like to kiss those lips, to feel that tongue on mine.

What the hell am I even thinking?

I look away from Silas quickly and find Charlie looking over at me. I suddenly feel like I'm interrupting an intimate moment between her and Jax, even though I was too busy looking at Silas.

"Sorry... I just—"

"Marley, right?"

I nod.

"Come in. You weren't interrupting anything. This asshole just pulled me onto his lap and was trying to seduce me."

I give her a short smile.

"Willow said you don't go to many parties. This is probably the best room in the house. Better than the backyard where all the groupies are no doubt getting naked in the pool."

I must make a face because both Jax and Silas start laughing. Silas walks the drink he was making over to Charlie, then heads back behind the bar.

"Come here, troublemaker, I'll make you a drink," Silas says as he beckons me over with his hand.

I walk over to the bar and lean against it. "I'm not a troublemaker."

He smirks at me and I try not to let my body be affected by it. By that dimple on his cheek. He is not the kind of man I should be around, and not because he is a rock star.

"You have been hanging out with Saylor tonight. She is trouble. Ergo, anyone who hangs out with her is also trouble."

"If you knew me, you would know I am on the opposite end of the spectrum as trouble."

He leans forward, his hand gripping the edge of the bar as he gets within inches of my face. “Maybe I want to know you.”

“Maybe you don’t want to keep your balls, Silas, because you aren’t getting to know her that way,” Saylor says as she joins us in the room.

A deep laugh falls from his mouth and I can feel butterflies in my stomach.

“I’d rather keep my balls.” His gaze flits back to me and I don’t miss the way he takes me in again. “So what are you drinking?”

“I’ll have a vodka and Sprite.”

He mixes up my drink and sets it in front of me. Then puts a cherry on top as he winks at me. I turn away from him and lean against the bar as Willow walks into the room.

“There you are. I was looking for you.”

“You took like twenty minutes to find a bathroom.”

She shrugs. “I ran into some people and started talking.”

“I figured as much. But I found my way in here.”

She walks over to me and asks Silas to make her a drink. “It’s probably best you’re in here. Wilder and Knox are outside judging a naked cannonball contest.”

“Eww, my brother is such a perv,” Saylor says. “I’m sorry we’re related.”

Willow bumps her shoulder into Saylor. “But at least we are related. I just pretend Wilder isn’t my cousin.”

“I wish I could pretend he wasn’t my brother half the time.” Saylor leans forward so I can see her past Willow. “Hey, you said we could do shots earlier. Wipe that asshole from your memory.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry, I try to keep him as far out of my mind as possible.”

Saylor turns around and shouts at Silas. “Tequila shots!”

“Oh boy.” I hear Charlie mutter. She walks over to me and leans against the bar. “Saylor gets wild with the tequila. So maybe casually back away from her.”

I laugh just as Saylor says, “I heard that.”

I turn around and face Silas as he lines up six shot glasses on the bar top and pours tequila down the line. He sets a saltshaker on the bar and puts limes on top of three of the shot glasses. “In case you need training wheels,” he says to me.

I look over at Willow and raise a brow.

“Have you never done a tequila shot?” she asks me.

“You know I stick to vodka.”

“I’ll show her,” Silas says.

“No you won’t.” Charlie glares at him.

I glance up at him and he is staring right at me and I can’t help the flush that takes over my chest and creeps up my neck.

“I’ll show you,” Saylor says. “I hate tequila unless it’s in a margarita. So I have no problem having the training wheels.”

I watch as she licks her hand and shakes the salt on. “So you lick the salt, take the shot, then suck on the lime.”

“You can lick the salt off me,” Silas chimes in.

This time it’s Jax who speaks up as he stands with his chest pressed into Charlie’s back. “Maybe you should go judge the naked cannonball contest instead of trying too hard to get this one.” He nods over at me.

“Let’s just take the damn shots,” Willow says.

She puts the salt on her hand and I do the same. I’m surprised when I see Silas do it too. Charlie and Jax just hold up their shot glasses as they wait for us. I lick the salt off my hand and make the mistake of looking at Silas, whose eyes are once again on me. I don’t miss the overly sexual way he licks the salt and I roll my eyes at him. I pick up my shot glass and cheers everyone and toss it back. The burn makes me nearly gag, so I suck on the lime so I don’t embarrass myself.

“Well I am going to go inspect this cannonball contest and make sure no one is having sex in my pool,” Silas announces as he grabs a beer bottle and heads out of the room.

“I’m actually slightly intrigued by this,” Charlie laughs as she pulls on Jax’s hand and drags him out of the room.

“Wanna smoke some more?” Saylor asks me.

“Sure.”

The three of us head outside and sit in one of the unoccupied lounge areas. I keep my back to the pool and the obnoxious laughter. Not wanting to see what’s going on or get any more weird pangs of jealousy over Silas.

Two ladies walk over to us and sit on the couch across from me. “Hey guys, how’s the party so far?”

Saylor nods her head to the pool as she rolls a joint. “As one would expect.”

“At least there hasn’t been any sex in the pool yet.”

“Yeah, I don’t want Silas to end the party because of it.”

“I’m taking it he doesn’t like when people have sex in his pool?” I ask.

Saylor snorts. “He is such a manwhore and throws massive parties, but his one caveat is no sex in the pool.”

“I’m Riot, by the way,” one of the ladies says to me. I remember seeing her talking to the guys earlier. She is a tiny woman, but I can tell she has a lot of power over the guys. “This is Janae.”

I wave at the two of them. Janae is beautiful, with long silver and black dreadlocks pulled up into a ponytail. Her hands are adorned by a ton of rings and she has a witchy vibe about her.

Saylor must see me taking her in because she lights up the joint, then whispers in my ear. “She’s a voodoo priestess.”

My eyes go wide as I look back at Janae.

“I’m not a voodoo priestess. Saylor just likes to tell everyone that.”

“She has a magic shop,” Saylor adds.

“That I do, but that doesn’t make me a priestess.” She laughs. “I don’t even know why I let you hang out there.”

“Because you are teaching me your magical ways.”

I laugh just as Saylor hands me the joint and Riot snorts. “I am surprised Wilder hasn’t banned you from hanging out with her.”

“He’s tried,” Saylor says. “But he can’t keep me away from her.”

“He is more afraid I am going to use some voodoo magic on him to make him fall in love with me,” Janae teases.

“I don’t think anything will ever make that man fall in love,” Riot adds.

Willow fills me in that Saylor always has tarot cards with her and is always offering to do readings. She isn’t the best but everyone lets her have her fun.

I pull another drag from the joint when thick arms wrap around me from behind. The smell of earth and leather penetrate my nose and I know it’s Silas.

“Can I have a hit of that?” he asks.

I turn my head to look at him and he is so close, our faces within inches of each other. I go to hand it to him, but he pulls my wrist toward his mouth, making me hold the joint while he takes a drag, his lips grazing my fingers.

“Thanks, trouble.”

He is gone just as fast as he came. I turn to look at everyone else and they are all staring at me.

“Girl, you are going to be in so much trouble,” Willow says.

“Why?”

She just shakes her head.

“I don’t think there is going to be anything that will stop him from fucking you tonight,” Saylor says.

I shake my head. “I have no intention of doing that.”

Saylor shrugs as she pulls the joint out of my hand. “Maybe you should. Nothing makes you get over a dick more than getting under another dick.”

Riot scoffs. “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Well you should try it too.”

I watch Riot as her face falls, then she excuses herself and walks into the house.

Janae gets up and punches Saylor in the arm. “That was a bitchy thing to say.”

Janae storms off after Riot. I look over at Willow, but she just shakes her head.

“How about a reading?” Saylor asks.

“Sure,” Willow answers.

I finish off my drink and stand up. “I’m going to grab another drink. Anyone want anything?”

“I’ll go with you,” Willow says.

“No, it’s fine. Get your reading.”

I head into the house and make my way into the kitchen, where the rest of the booze is. I can’t find any Sprite, so I head to the parlor room, knowing there is some there.

I open the door and find the room empty, hip-hop music still playing through the speakers. I make my way behind the bar and find a mini-fridge with a variety of mixers. I pour a new drink and pop a cherry on top. When I look up, I see Silas standing in the doorway.

“You know this room is off-limits. It’s only for me and whoever I invite in here.”

“I was in here earlier.”

He walks in and shuts the door behind him, causing warning bells to go off in my head. “Charlie invited you in.”

“Well, I am sorry if I wasn’t invited by you. I’ll leave.”

I go to walk out behind the bar, but he blocks me. “No need. I suppose you can be here. Want to grab me a drink?”

I step backward to get him out of my space and bend over to grab a beer I saw him drinking earlier.

“Thanks, trouble.”

I roll my eyes. “You can stop calling me that. If you knew anything about me, you would know I am far from trouble.”

“So are you going to tell me about you?” he asks as he steps closer into my space, backing me against the bar.

I shake my head.

“Do I make you nervous?” he asks.

I bite my lip and nod.

His fingers graze my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “I won’t hurt you.”

I scoff at that and try to get past him, but he cages me in.

“Who was that asshole Saylor was talking about?”

“No one.” My words are quiet.

“Must have been someone.”

I look up into his sapphire eyes and force myself not to get lost in his gaze. “Just my ex.”

He moves one of his arms and, ever so slowly, traces circles on my hip. “Mmm, and what did he do?”

“Acted like an asshole.”

He chuckles as he leans into me, I can feel his breath on my throat. “I see I’m not going to get much out of you. Nothing about who you are or your ex. But I do know of a great way to get over an ex.”

I shiver as his lips kiss my throat, leaving a trail of heat up my neck as he sucks my ear into his mouth. His arm wraps around me, gripping my ass.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I just—” my words stop as his hand slides under my dress, his fingers lightly grazing my core.

“You were saying?” he asks quietly into my ear.

I let out a soft moan as he presses his fingers harder against my center. “I don’t know you... and... this is probably a bad idea.” My words come out slightly breathless.

He chuckles into my neck and I can feel the vibrations all the way down my body to where his fingers are softly petting. “I like bad ideas.”

My hands have a mind of their own as I wrap them around his back. I know I shouldn’t be doing this. But I feel this pull to him, maybe it’s his smell of leather and earth or the way his deep voice makes my toes curl. I run my fingers through his thick hair.

“Such a troublemaker,” he says against my lips.

“I’m not a trouble—”

I can’t finish my sentence because his lips are suddenly on mine. I freeze, both my mouth and my hands, as he gently kisses my lips. There is no force behind it, just a slow, sensual dance. Like a first meeting.

His hand drops from under my dress and he pulls me into him, so there is no space between our bodies. The feel of his heat against me, of his hard body pressing into every inch of me, flips a switch. I don’t even know this man, but I want to touch him, kiss him, lick every inch of his body. My hands grip his hair and he takes that as a sign as his lips become more needy, more intense. I moan as his hands grip my ass, giving him access to my mouth. Our tongues dance as we explore each other.

My own hands pull him in closer. He grunts as I do it and suddenly, he is lifting me on to the bar. My legs spread open so he can slide between them. His lips leave mine as they trail down my neck, continuing farther down as he reaches my cleavage. He isn’t entirely gentle, not like when he first

pressed his lips to mine. No, this man is taking whatever I'll give him and then some.

His teeth graze along the top of my breasts, his tongue soothing the small bite marks he leaves. I'm finding it difficult to sit still as he kisses me. I can feel his kisses in my core, sending shocks of pleasure through every inch of my body.

His hands slide up my thighs, his thumb grazing my center through my soaked panties. He slips it under the thin material as he drags it up through my slit.

I moan loudly, his touch something I've never felt before. With Kent, it was fast and to the point. He was in it for himself and never for me. He never brought me this pleasure in the three times we slept together before he dumped me.

His thumb glides over my clit and my body lights up, I'm visibly shaking. He chuckles against my skin as he makes his way up to my ear. "You are definitely trouble."

I pull his mouth back to mine as he starts to press harder into my clit, running small circles as he changes his pressure. I think I am about to have my first orgasm when we hear laughing on the other side of the door.

Silas pulls back from me quickly. His hands are at my waist, helping me off the bar before depositing me in front of my drink.

"Later," he whispers into my ear as he steps away and takes a long swig of his beer.

He leans against the wall as I stand speechless behind the bar, just as Saylor, Willow, and Janae come laughing into the room.

"There you are!" Willow shouts and I know she is definitely drunk. "You were taking so long to make a drink and then I couldn't find you."

"There was no Sprite in the kitchen."

"Well we decided to come in here anyway. It started to rain."

"So the party is moving inside?" Silas asks.

Willow jumps. Clearly no one saw him standing there. “I didn’t know you were in here. And yeah, most people are coming inside. Though some are still outside.”

“Well I guess we are partying in here,” he says as he walks over to the bar and grabs a remote off the top, turning up the music.

“Let’s dance!” Willow shouts just as Jax and Charlie walk in the room.

I look over to Silas and he smirks at me as he sucks his thumb into his mouth. I know my cheeks are red as a tomato, so I down half my drink, knowing he is tasting me on his thumb. I set my drink on the bar and head over to Willow.

I dance for a few songs, laughing and having fun with the girls before Willow pulls me out of the room and down the hall to a bathroom.

“Oh my god, I think I’ve had too much tequila or vodka or whiskey.” She hiccups. “Too much of something. Even if I stop now, I don’t think I should drive us home.”

I lean against the wall as she finishes her business. “As long as we leave early in the morning, it’s fine. You’re having fun.”

She flushes the toilet and walks in a crooked line to the sink to wash her hands. “Are you having fun?”

I nod, not wanting to give anything away.

She raises a brow at me in the mirror. I shrug.

“Oh come on, Mar. There is something going on with you and Silas, isn’t there?”

“He likes to flirt.”

She dries her hands, then turns around and leans against the sink, folding her arms over her chest. “Is that all? Cause you looked a little hot and bothered when we walked in the room.”

“He... uh... just said some things to me,” I lie.

I don't think she believes me for a second. "Hmm. Well, you know I thought it was a bad idea, the two of you. Saylor agrees. Hell, I think most of the girls agree. But you deserve this. You are breaking out of your shell." She smiles at me.

"Yeah, a little bit. And I am having fun. I didn't think I would enjoy myself as much as I am."

She snorts. "Well yeah, if Silas had his tongue down your throat."

"Oh my gosh. That is not what—"

"You are literally the color of a tomato."

I glance over in the mirror and see I am completely flushed. "Could be the alc—"

She presses her finger into my chest. "Not the alcohol."

I sigh deeply and blow my bangs out of my face. "Okay fine, he kissed me!"

A giant smile takes up her face. "You dirty dog."

"It was just a kiss."

"That's how it starts."

"And that's all it will be," I answer. "It can't be more than that."

"Sure thing, Marley." She opens the bathroom door and starts to walk down the hall toward the room we were in earlier.

"What the heck, Willow?" I say as I pull back on her shoulder.

She laughs. "I'm not stopping you. I planned to, but I'm not. Have fun with him, Marley. Just remember to wrap it up."

I drop my face in my palms. "Not happening, Willow."

"Whatever you say," she singsongs before skipping back into the room.

She is definitely drunk because she would never be pushing me toward a stranger, much less a rock star.

When we get back into the room, I head over to the bar to grab a bottle of water, but I'm stopped by Silas's arm wrapping around my waist and pushing me into the wall.

He towers over me. His shoulder leans into the wall to not completely overwhelm my space but enough to make me slightly uncomfortable. I quickly glance around the room but see that no one is paying any attention to us. I didn't mind his unrelenting gaze when we were alone but surrounded by people, I feel uneasy. The impostor syndrome enveloping me.

His fingers are on my chin, directing me to look into his cobalt eyes. "We didn't get to finish what we started."

I push his hand away. "Because it shouldn't have started to begin with."

He chuckles deeply and it causes those damn butterflies to flutter in my stomach. The deep vibrations of his voice are enough to make me want to take my clothes off and that is not the girl I am.

"What do I need to do to convince you to spend the night with me?"

My eyes snap to him, slightly taken aback by his forwardness. "Nothing."

"That easy, huh?" he teases.

I shake my head. "No. Nothing. It's not happening."

"Why not?"

I look around the room again as his knuckles graze along my cleavage. "Because I am not that type of girl." I push his hand away.

He leans into me, his hand landing on the wall beside my head, so I am caged in. He leans down and whispers into my ear. "I think you are that type of girl, Marley. You just don't want to admit it. You want to be the girl that lets a man ravish you, dominate you. A man that fucks you so hard you see stars and you beg him to stop because the pleasure is too much. You wear this innocent girl act, hiding in the shadows, but that's not who you want to be. Because that girl wouldn't have

agreed to join her friend for a night out. Dressing up in a leather dress. Painting those sinful lips red. Going to a rock star's after-party. Making out with him when no one is looking."

The hand on the wall drops to my waist, his grip strong on my hip as I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, wanting to deny every single thing he is saying but knowing I can't.

"I can see past the act, Marley. I can see who you want to be. Because that girl was moaning as I ran my thumb along her clit. Pulling my mouth to hers with such ferocity I thought she was going to beg me to fuck her right then and there. That girl wanted me. Wanted the freedom that comes with having fun for a night. And I promise you, it will be the most fun you've had in a while."

I look up at him and I can see the desire in his eyes as he steps away from me. He smirks at me, that dimple showing up as he heads over to the bar and pours a drink, talking to someone at the bar.

I wish I could leave. Go home to the safety of my house, my room, my garden. The art studio I share with my mom. Anywhere but here because I don't trust myself here. Not with the power that man has over me.

I need air. Fresh air to calm my nerves and those wanton desires that are building in my core.

I slip out of the room unnoticed and make my way into the kitchen. I pour a strong drink as I nod at a few people who acknowledge me. The house is crowded so I can easily slip away without anyone paying attention to me. I walk through the open glass doors to the patio. The rain is still coming down, but I find a quiet, dark corner that's covered by a balcony above me.

I down my drink probably faster than I should, the buzz of the alcohol taking over. I'm so torn. Torn between being the pastor's daughter. The girl that needs to help her mom out with the church luncheon in the afternoon. The girl who still lives at home. Who tends to her garden and makes art from the flowers.

And torn from the girl I am right now. With a leather dress, black eyeliner, and red lips. The girl who made out with a rock star an hour ago. The girl who smoked weed and did shots like she didn't grow up being told that was the wrong thing to do.

My desires and my morals are pulling me in two different directions, and for once in my life, I am not sure what path to take. I always took the good path, the right path. I never crossed, strayed away, or walked the path that could lead to mistakes and bad decisions. But right now, I want to. Maybe it's the buzz of the alcohol or the high I still feel from Silas's kiss.

I'm startled from my thoughts when I hear two people laughing near me and then the unmistakable sound of a groan. I peek around the corner and see a woman with her legs wrapped around a man. He presses her into the side of the house as he makes love to her with abandon.

I wonder if that could be me. If I could let myself go and live freely like that.

I step backward, not wanting them to notice I was watching them for a brief second, then head back into the house. When I make it back into the lounge, Silas is nowhere in sight and I breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe I really don't want him. Maybe it was just the thrill that had me anticipating breaking the rules.

I don't see him for the rest of the night. I cut back on the vodka, drinking just enough to keep a light buzz. Willow is plastered and when she falls backward off a couch, I decide it's time for her to go to bed.

"Does Silas have somewhere we can sleep?" I ask Saylor.

She nods. "He has a handful of guestrooms in this obnoxious mansion. Come on, I'll help you bring her to one."

I wrap an arm around Willow, and Saylor does the same as we make our way to the grand staircase. We somehow manage to get her up the stairs and make a right down the hall. I've never carried a dead body and never plan to, but I swear that is what it feels like right now carrying Willow.

Saylor pushes open a door and I am half worried there will be some random people having sex. She must see the look on my face because she laughs.

“Silas has more rules than no sex in the pool. He doesn’t allow anyone upstairs either.”

I raise a brow at her as we lay Willow on the bed and I unbuckle the straps of her heels. “Seems like that’s hard to regulate.”

“Everyone loves these parties, and if anyone is caught up here, they are never invited back. Somehow, it works. The only people who use these rooms are the other guys in the band or family and close friends.”

“Good to know,” I say as I pull the blankets out from under Willow and wrap them around her.

“There is a bathroom across the hall, and I usually sleep in the room next to this one. So if you need anything, I should be there in an hour or so.”

“Thanks, Saylor.”

“No problem.” She walks toward the door. “Thanks for hanging out tonight. I know Willow really wanted you here. Besides, you aren’t as boring as I thought you were.”

“Gee, thanks.”

She laughs. “Good night, Marley.”

After she leaves, I go back to Willow and make sure she is still breathing. I see her phone on the floor and set it on the nightstand next to mine. I slip off the Doc Martens I have on and set them at the foot of the bed. I decide I should get us some bottled water for the morning and maybe see if there is any ibuprofen in the bathroom.

I step out of the room and shut the door behind me, then find Silas standing across from the door and I jump in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Is Willow okay?”

I nod. “Just drunk.”

“Were you going to sleep?”

“Yeah. Just wanted to grab some waters.” He takes a step toward me and I take a step back. “I should really get to sleep.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I nod, but I can see the need in his stare. Then I drop my eyes to his lips.

“Troublemaker,” he whispers as he closes the gap between us.

I don’t hesitate. I don’t doubt what I’m doing. I don’t think about the girl I should be. Instead, I grab his shirt and pull him into me as his hands grip my face, pulling my lips to his. This kiss is intense. Hard and fast. Like if we slow down, we know it won’t end the way we want.

He pushes me into the door and I catch my breath from the force. His lips trail down my throat and wrap around to my ear as his hands grope my body. “Don’t tell me to stop.”

I moan as he nibbles on the side of my neck and I know I am completely giving in to the curious side of me as I say, “Don’t stop.”

MARLEY

He picks me up, forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist. His lips never leave mine as he quickly walks us past the grand staircase and toward the other end of the house.

He pushes open a door and I know we are in his bedroom. He kicks the door shut behind him and then tosses me onto the bed. I can't help but giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’ve never been tossed on a bed.”

He chuckles as he messes with his phone, turning on music that must be connected to speakers throughout his room. “I’m sure there are many things you haven’t done that I plan on doing to you.”

“How do you know I haven’t done anything crazy?” I ask.

He pulls his shirt over his head as he walks toward the bed. I’m propped up on my elbows so I can see him and I literally might drool. He is perfection. Corded muscle and tattoos. Something I never thought I would be attracted to. But this night seems to be a night of things I would never do.

“For one, anyone into kinks wouldn’t call them something crazy. Second, I know you’re innocent. I might not know anything about you, but from the way everyone was trying to keep me away from you, I know it’s because they don’t want me to hurt you.”

I swallow at those words. “And are you going to hurt me?”

“Not in the way you think.”

I study him as he watches me. Almost like he is giving me an out. A chance to tell him no. But I don't care. I know this is only for a night. I know this means absolutely nothing. And that's what I want. What Willow has been telling me. I need to get over Kent and getting under Silas might just do the trick.

I sit up on the bed and reach for him. Looping my fingers into his belt loops and pulling him toward me. I unbutton his jeans and look up at him. “Show me.”

“Show you what?”

“What you said earlier. I want to see stars.”

He growls as he pulls me into him. Our mouths colliding. He fiddles with the zipper on the back of my dress before getting frustrated and I hear the fabric rip. He kneels over me, pulling the top of the dress down to expose my chest. His hands run over my bare breasts, pinching my nipples before he pulls my dress the rest of the way off, reaching behind him to get it off my ankles, then tossing it to the floor.

“Fuck, you're beautiful,” he mutters as he drops his mouth to a nipple. I squirm beneath him as he sucks and bites. I can already feel every inch of my body lighting on fire in a way I've never felt before.

His fingers find their way to the thong I have on, and with a quick tug, he rips the fabric. I gasp as he does it and I can feel him smile against my breast.

“Never had a man do that before?” he asks as his alcohol-laced kisses find their way back to my mouth.

“No,” I moan as he shoves a finger inside of me.

“Mmm. You are innocent and fucking tight as hell. I don't know if you'll even be able to take my dick.”

I can feel the flames lick up my body at his words and I know that he can probably see my flushed face even in the dark.

He pulls his finger out of me and runs it through my folds. I am so wet it's embarrassing. Kent never made me feel this

way before.

“Oh the things I want to do to you,” he murmurs along my jawline as his finger finds its way back inside of me. He adds a second digit and I groan at the feeling of fullness. I start to pump my hips in time with the thrusts of his fingers and he must like it because he bites down on my neck, sucking and biting and I am sure it’s going to leave a mark.

“Fuck, I can’t wait.”

He pulls back and stands quickly, shoving his jeans and briefs to the floor. I shut my legs, embarrassed to be so open for him.

“Keep them open. I want to see how wet I make you,” he commands.

I slowly spread my thighs.

“Bend your knees. Put your feet on the bed and show me that pretty pussy.”

My eyes go wide at his words and I know I am giving myself away. I know he knows everything he presumed about me is true.

“Wider.”

I spread my legs another inch apart, but it’s not enough for him because he growls and forces my legs apart. He stares at my center and the small tuft of hair on my mound. I watch him as he licks his lips like the sight of me is making him want to taste every inch of me.

I slowly drop my gaze away from his blue eyes, down his tattooed chest, past his pierced nipples and to his cock that he has gripped in his hand, pumping ever so slightly as he takes me in. That’s when I notice the jewelry adorning the tip. Two bars crossing through the head.

I gulp. That’s the only thing I can do because I don’t think he was lying about fitting inside of me. He is huge and those piercings scare the shit out of me.

“Prettiest fucking pussy. I am going to tear it apart.”

Now I know I am way out of my league. I try to sit up and close my legs, but the growl that comes out of his mouth has me frozen in place.

“Don’t even think about moving.”

“I... this is... I think—”

“I think I need a taste.” He moves so quickly I don’t have time to prepare myself and he presses his hand into my chest so I am flat on the bed and his head is between my thighs.

I fall apart as he swipes his tongue through my folds. Electricity rocking my body as I come all over his tongue.

He grins as he stands. “So sensitive. So delicious. I wonder how many times I can make you come with my dick.”

He stands up and rummages through his nightstand. I don’t move, too afraid of the consequences. But not of him. For some reason, I trust that he will take care of my body.

He slides a condom on and then crawls over me. His long hair tickles my chest as he kisses his way back up my neck. “Have you ever fucked someone with a pierced dick?”

I shake my head.

He sucks on my lip, pulling it and lightly biting. “I didn’t think so.”

He grabs his cock and runs it through my folds, the piercing causing my core to pulse with the lightest touch.

“They are only going to make this that much better. Now eyes on me.”

I didn’t realize I wasn’t even looking at him. My gaze focused on the ceiling. I meet his stare just as he presses inside of me.

“Fuck,” he moans. “So fucking tight. I’m barely inside you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and spread my thighs. I feel so full with just the tip of him and I don’t even know how I am going to take the rest. He slides in a little bit farther and I arch my back, my eyes closing on instinct.

“Eyes,” he mutters as he pushes in a little further.

I open my eyes and watch him watch me as he continues to press the rest of the way inside of me. I can't help but wince at how full I feel. After the first two times with Kent, it didn't hurt, but this is entirely different.

“Damn it,” he groans as he stills inside of me. His hand comes to my jaw, bringing my face back to him, forcing me to look at him. “Are you a fucking virgin?”

“What? No! I swear I'm not.”

“How many people have you fucked?”

Now I am embarrassed, so embarrassed that I don't answer him.

“Tell me,” he grits out.

I sigh. “Just one.” And when I see his face fall, I worry he is going to put a stop to this whole thing. “But don't stop. I want this. I promise. Stars, remember? I want to see stars.”

He chuckles as he pulls out a little. “Oh, baby, don't worry, I'm not stopping. This pussy is pure platinum. And trust me, you will see stars.”

I grip his shoulders in anticipation just as he thrusts the entire way in with one quick movement. I arch and groan, my eyes closing out of pure need as I moan so loud I don't even know who I am.

“That's right. Now hold on tight.”

His hands drop to my hips as he begins thrusting into me, his movements controlled as I get used to his size. The sighs and groans coming out of my mouth sound feral as he picks up his pace. I can feel the balls of the piercing rubbing against my walls, sending pleasure to every nerve in my body.

I grip him tighter, wrap my legs around his waist and start to meet his thrusts. Even through the slight pain of his utter size, I can feel the pleasure yearning to take over.

“You're so much trouble. So much fucking trouble,” he mutters as he drops his lips to my neck. His chest presses into

mine as he wraps an arm underneath me to pull me closer to him. This new angle sets me off, an orgasm taking over out of nowhere when I feel a different piece of metal hitting my clit. I didn't see it before, but he must be pierced near the base too.

“You like the feeling of my dick inside of you? Of my piercings rubbing you just the right way?”

I moan in response.

“Words,” he demands.

“Yes,” I groan

He picks up his pace and my arms fall away from him, gripping the sheets beside me as I become a mess of a woman. The sound of our bodies meeting drowns out the music around us. The slap of flesh, the sound of my wetness as he drives into me. His movements become rougher and I am screaming his name.

“Eyes.” Thrust. “On.” Thrust. “Me.”

I snap my eyes back to him just as he rotates his hips, causing me to see the stars he promised me. I can't help but close my eyes. I have lost all control of my body. This man has destroyed me, just like he said he would. He thrusts a few more times before he collapses on top of me.

“Goddamn.”

I don't even have words. Just groans escape my mouth until his lips land back on mine and he is kissing me so passionately I barely notice his dick coming back to life.

He pulls back, then stands, the loss of him making me needy. I close my thighs and rub them together, trying to find any friction I can.

He chuckles and I open my eyes to see him pulling off the condom, then walking to the en suite bathroom.

I try to sit up, but my body feels broken, used.

When he walks back in the room, he doesn't get dressed. He crawls onto the bed and pulls me up to the top. “You aren't

going anywhere tonight, trouble. I have even more plans for you.”

I blink my eyes open as a small sliver of light breaks across my face. I don't recognize where I am. I know these silk sheets aren't mine. I roll over and am met by a tattooed back and thick dark-brown hair.

Oh my gosh.

The night comes flooding back to me as I piece everything together. I was definitely buzzed last night. So much so I decided to sleep with the bass player of Saints & Sinners.

My entire body feels like it got hit by a train, and not because of alcohol. I know what that feels like. No, this is a delicious soreness throughout my thighs and core.

I had sex last night.

With a man I wasn't dating.

Or married to.

I definitely broke the promise to my mother that I wouldn't do it again until I was married. I lasted an entire month before I let some sexy, dirty-talking man take advantage of me.

We had sex three times last night. I remember all of it. Every delicious toe-curling orgasm. The way he tore me apart like he said he would.

It was rough and dirty. And just like what happened in that audiobook Willow was playing on the way here yesterday.

Oh no. Willow!

I sit up quickly, then slowly climb out of the bed, not wanting to wake up the man next to me. I don't really know how those one-night-stand talks go the next morning and I don't want to learn.

Not to mention by the amount of light flooding in through the windows, I know I am going to be late for church.

I find my dress on the ground and slide it on. I can't zip it because Silas broke the zipper, so I hold it closed while I look for my underwear. He ripped those too, so it's a lost cause wherever the hell they ended up.

I know I can't walk into the hall with this dress exposing half of me, so I grab the T-shirt he had on and slide it over me. It's bigger than the dress, so I slide the dress off and carry it as I tiptoe out of his room.

I try to remember what room we put Willow in last night, but by that point, I'd already had one too many drinks. I try one door but find it locked, then remember the bathroom was across the hall. Once I find that, I slip into the room to find her still asleep. The clock on the nightstand reads 7:34. There is no way I am going to make it back for my dad's sermon at nine.

I shake her awake and she groans, pulling the blankets over her face. "Go away."

"Willow, it's me. We have to go."

The sound of my voice must click something together in her mind because the sheets snap down to her chest and she looks at me with wide eyes. "Oh shit."

"Yeah, exactly."

"What time is it?"

"Seven thirty. If we leave quickly and there is no traffic, we might just make it back in time for me to get to church."

She nods as she sits up and rubs the sleep out of her eyes. "Shit, Marley. I am so sorry. How long have you been waiting for..."

She takes me in and I wonder what the hell she is staring at.

"Did you sleep with Silas?" she asks, her mind suddenly wide awake.

I can't deny it, not when she is the only person I can tell. I nod.

"Holy shit. Holy shit!"

“It’s not a big deal. Let’s just go. I am going to be in so much trouble.”

She takes me in again. “Why aren’t you wearing your dress?”

“It was uncomfortable,” I lie.

She snatches it out of my hand and finds the rip down the side of the dress at the seam of the zipper. “I’m sure it was if it was ripped off you.”

I brush my hair behind my ear. “Let’s just go, okay?”

Her eyes go wide. “You aren’t going to church.”

“Why?”

“Not like that.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Yeah, I know. I’ll change at your house.”

“Uh, no, that’s not it.” She stands up and wobbles on her feet and I hope she isn’t drunk so she can drive us home. I hate driving on the highway and I am not about to start now. She grabs my wrist and I wince as she pulls me in front of a floor-length mirror in the corner of the room.

“That’s why,” she says as she points at my neck.

My jaw drops as I take in my appearance. Not only do I have black liner smudged all around my eyes, but I have bruises mottling my neck. Some from kisses and some from fingers. My wrists don’t look much different.

“What the fuck happened?” she asks me.

I shrug. “It was sex.”

“Did you agree to it? Because those look a lot like he forced—”

I cut her off. “He didn’t force me to do anything I didn’t want to do.”

“You let him pin you down?”

I nod. Shame taking over.

“Did he wrap his hands around your throat?”

I nod again, trying to keep tears at bay. Something must be wrong with me if I agreed to it.

“Did you like it? Because if you didn’t, you could have told him no.”

I shake my head as a few tears break free. “I did like it,” I whisper.

“Hey,” she says as she brushes my bangs out of my face. “Oh my god, I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I am honestly just surprised. It’s okay to like it rough.”

I sniffle and manage to hold back the rest of my tears.

“Look at you. The church girl who wants the bad boy to tie her up.”

I look at her and see the mirth on her face.

She nudges my shoulder. “I’m kidding. Well, not really. I am sure you would like that too.”

“Umm, no.”

“You say that now.”

“Not happening. This was a one-time thing.”

She raises her brows at me. “Wow, look at you. They grow up so fast.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Can we just go?”

“Yeah, we need to since I am going to need to do one hell of a makeup job to cover up your sexcapades.”

I run my hands over my face. “Can we not talk about this?”

She laughs. “For now. But you know I am never going to let you live this down.”

“It’s your fault.”

“Sure is. And I cannot wait for you to tell whatever church boy you marry about your crazy night with a rock star.”

I groan.

“Your future kids will love the story.”

“You’re never going to speak of this,” I tell her as I grab the Docs and slip them on.

“Whatever you say, Marley.”

With that, we walk out of the house. Glad that I can put that mistake behind me.

MARLEY

TWO MONTHS LATER

“I swear I’m fine, it’s just a bug. Everyone is sick these days.”

Willow looks at me like I’ve grown horns. “You hang out with your parents and me. None of us are sick.”

“Well, there are a handful of people at the church who’ve come down with the flu.”

She pushes me into her bathroom. “And do those people also have morning sickness and missed periods?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

She points to the test in my hand that she bought me and is forcing me to take. “Only one way to find out.”

“You know I’ve been stressed with the whole Kent trying to get back into my life thing. That is probably why I missed a period.”

“Two?”

“It can happen! Besides, I’ve never had sex without a condom.”

She taps her foot on the ground as she crosses her arms. “Even with Silas?”

“Yes, even with him.”

“You were drunk.”

“I was tipsy,” I answer. “I remember that night. All three times, to be exact. He used a condom every time.”

“This is why you should be on birth control.”

“You know it makes me sick,” I attest.

She cackles. “And look where we are now.”

“I’m not pregnant.”

She grabs the door handle. “Just pee on the damn stick,” she shouts as she shuts the door.

I sigh and do as she says. If anything, to prove that I am right and she is wrong. I am not pregnant. There is no way. I was cautious. I know I was. This can’t happen to me. I am a good girl. I follow the rules. I don’t get in trouble. I do what I’m supposed to.

I am not the girl that gets pregnant out of wedlock.

I flush the toilet and set the stick on the counter before opening the door. Willow is leaning against the wall opposite her bathroom door.

She holds up her phone. “Five minutes.”

I blow out the breath I was holding, causing my bangs to blow out of my face. “It’s going to be negative.”

“Let’s hope.”

Both of us say nothing as we wait for the time to wind down. Time that seems to go on forever. When the alarm chimes, I bolt into the bathroom.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“Did you just swear? You never swear. Why did you...”

She doesn’t need to finish her sentence to know why I swore.

She stands next to me as we both look down at the two pink lines.

“I’m pregnant.”

SILAS

“Fuck, take more,” I moan as I grip the girl’s head, who is currently on her knees, sucking my dick.

She gags as I push myself farther into her mouth, controlling her as she sucks me hard. Her hands grip the back of my thighs as I thrust my hips into her face, my dick hitting the back of her throat. I feel my balls begin to tighten and pleasure starts to spread as I come down her throat. I don’t pull back, I watch as she coughs and chokes. But I like watching them choke. It’s always been one of my kinks. And the girls who offer to suck my dick know what they are getting into. I see her eyes watering as she swallows me down. Drool dripping from the side of her mouth.

I pull out when I’m milked dry and tuck my dick back into my jeans.

I walk over to the bathroom counter and do another line of blow as the girl wipes her eyes and mouth with a scratchy paper towel.

I pass her the bill I used to snort the drugs and let her have the rest of what I put on the counter.

“Are you coming over tonight, Silas?”

I look at her in the reflection of the mirror as she wipes her nose. Black liner is smudged under her eyes and her mouth is swollen from taking my cock, red lipstick smeared around her mouth.

“I have an early flight.”

She pouts. “I thought you said you were staying here for a few more days.”

I lied when I told her that. I wanted her to think she was going to get fucked. But I just wanted my dick sucked. I don’t even remember her name. Just another groupie that found us at this club in LA after another promotional show Riot set up for us.

“Manager texted me,” I say as I hold up my phone. “Plans changed.”

She turns and faces me, jumping up to sit on the bathroom sink. She spreads her legs, revealing a strip of pink lace under her dress. “We could be quick.”

I run my fingers over my lip, tempted to take the bait, but the only reason that blow job was decent was because I took over. “We’ve already been in here long enough.”

She frowns and slides her hand up her thigh. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” I head to the door and flip the lock before pulling it open slightly. “I’m sure Wilder would fuck you. Want me to send him in?”

Her jaw drops and I laugh as I walk away.

Wilder definitely wouldn’t fuck her.

Well maybe if I joined him. He does like a threesome.

Not that I ever have. That’s his and Knox’s thing. The furthest I’ve gone with them is watching.

I make it back to the VIP table we have on the top floor of the club and flop onto a couch next to Jackson.

“You have a good time?” He smirks at me.

“You’re just jealous we’ve been gone for a week and you can’t get your dick wet because Charlie is at home.”

He raises a brow at me. “That’s why phone sex exists.”

“Not the same, man,” I say as I grab a beer out of the bucket on the table in front of us. “I have no plans to tie

myself down with one pussy. I mean I am all for you and Charlie since you two were meant to be since we were two punk-ass kids in the hood. But my dick likes variety.”

He shakes his head as he leans back and props his feet on the table. “One day, man.”

“Oh don’t get all homebody on me. Even after Roan and Riot got married, when Knox was with Maggie, I never felt the need to get tied down.” Jackson goes to talk, but I cut him off. “And don’t even pretend you weren’t the same way. You knew since the day you met Charlie that it was just going to be the two of you. You just needed some pussy to pass the time before you finally let it happen.”

“You have a point.”

I smile at him. “I love when you tell me I’m right.”

“I didn’t say you were right. I said you had a point.”

I take a swig of my beer. “Semantics.”

“What are you two fucks doing?” Wilder asks as he walks into the room.

“Listening to Jackson pine over missing Charlie.” I joke.

Wilder laughs. “His arm is probably so tired. Bet when he can finally sink into her, he’s going to last a whole thirty seconds.”

Jackson flips him off.

“Where’s Knox and Roan?” Wilder asks as he grabs a beer out of the ice bucket.

“Roan is with Riot somewhere, probably arguing,” Jackson says. “And Knox went home.”

“What the fuck? Why didn’t he just offer to take my sister home so I didn’t have to?”

I snort before finishing off my beer.

“What?” Wilder asks me, confused.

“You really think he would put himself in that situation?”

Jackson looks over and laughs at me when Wilder raises a brow.

“What am I missing?”

I lean over and grab the whiskey bottle off the table and pour shots. “You do know Saylor still has a crush on Knox?”

Wilder clenches his jaw. “I am well aware of that. But he knows I will literally murder him if he were to lay a finger on her. I also know he has zero interest in her. She needs to get over that childhood crush.”

I shrug and pass off the shot glasses.

“Saylor can be rather convincing,” Jackson says.

“Knox won’t fall for her tricks.”

“We sure as hell hope not. There would be a lot of explaining to do when one band member is dead and the other in jail,” I laugh.

“Awfully convenient though that Knox left not long after you took her home,” Jackson says.

“Extremely convenient,” I add.

“Y’all fucking with me?” Wilder asks as he grabs the shot glass off the table I put in front of him.

Jackson and I look at each other and laugh.

“Fuck you both.”

“I’ll pass,” Jackson states as he grabs his shot glass from the table.

“To going home,” I say as I raise my shot glass to theirs.

“So weird that we are raising our glasses to that.”

Wilder nods. “Never thought we would finally feel safe being home again.”

Jackson remains silent and I know he did something to make it okay for us to be home in New Orleans. Something he hasn’t even told me. But I know something happened since I haven’t heard a word from Carter West in nearly two months. I am grateful I haven’t. It makes me worry about what Jackson

did to keep us from owing the kingpin of New Orleans any favors.

“To home,” Wilder says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Home.”

MARLEY

I pace around Willow's room as I watch her pack. As luck would have it, she found a job right when my world was falling apart. And she's moving to the city, leaving me here in the suburbs with my parents and a baby in my belly.

It was confirmed today. Willow took me to a doctor and was there when the doctor let me know I was pregnant. Nine weeks. Which means it has to be Silas's. Kent broke up with me almost a month before that. I even asked the doctor three times if she was sure of the day of conception. She let me know it could be off by a few days but definitely not a month.

Willow told me on the drive home I should tell my mom. I know she's right, but I also know she will tell my dad. And he was already pissed off enough when he found out I lost my virginity before marriage. He is not going to take it well that his only daughter is pregnant, just shy of twenty-one years old.

I can't do this.

I don't mean the baby. Well I can't do that either. I still live at home with my parents. I feel like I can barely take care of myself, let alone a mini-me.

But I can't tell my parents. I mean, I have to, but I just don't know how.

Hence why I am pacing around in Willow's room as she packs, barely listening to a word she says about whatever the heck she is talking about.

My mom is going to be kind and gentle about the whole thing. But I know my dad and he will be like he always is. He will hold back his anger but come at me with condescending and passive-aggressive remarks. If I wasn't having a baby, I'm sure he would throw me into a convent.

"Marley, my parents are literally going to make me pay to replace this carpet in my room if you keep pacing. I swear I can see the subfloor."

I roll my eyes at her. "Well, if your dad was a pastor and you just found out you were nine weeks pregnant, what the hell would you do?"

She purses her lips at me. "You have a point."

"Your parents are at least more forgiving than mine."

She grabs my arm and pulls me onto her bed next to her. "I know this sucks. And it's going to be hard, but you know you have to tell them. I'll go with you. I can't let you do this alone."

I crack my knuckles. "I'm just happy that my dad is away at a conference right now. Telling just my mom will be easier, right?"

Willow gives me a weak smile.

"That's reassuring."

She blows a raspberry. "I mean, your mom is definitely going to be easier, but I know she will call your dad right after."

"Hopefully not."

"She is going to ask you for a plan."

I pick at my nail beds. "Maybe I can move in with you."

Willow starts cackling and I turn to look at her as she falls back on the bed.

"Willow..."

She opens her eyes and looks at me, the smile falling from her face. "Oh shit. You were serious?"

“Yes.”

“You hate the city.”

“I never go to the city. Who says I hate it?” I lie. I definitely hate the city.

She sits back up and wraps an arm around me. “Hey, if you need to move in with me, you can. I would never tell you no. I just know it’s not you and it’s going to be hard to adapt, especially in a one bedroom. I mean, you can sleep on the couch, but I think as a pregnant woman, you do need to stay where you are comfortable. And I can assure you it won’t be in a one-bedroom apartment. Even if I can cram a daybed into the tiny office.”

I push my cuticles back, ripping at some skin, causing my finger to bleed. “You’re right. But at least I know you will be there when I need you.”

“If you can drive on a highway, then yes.”

“Ugh.” I fall back on the bed. “Why do you have to move?”

Willow lies next to me and grabs my hand. “You are going to get through this. I know you are.”

“I need to tell Silas.”

She shoots up so fast I think she is going to fall forward off the bed.

“Are you crazy?”

I sit up. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t tell some rock star you are pregnant with his kid. He is not going to believe you.”

“But he’s in your cousin’s band. There has to be something I can say.”

“No,” she shakes her head vehemently.

“Why?”

She groans. “Because I know you, Marley, and you won’t give up that baby and he will want you to. He’s a rock star.

He's slept with more people than you probably ever want to know about. And he is not going to want anything to do with you. He will fly you to whatever state will let you have an abortion and not even blink."

I frown. Deep down, I know she is right. I was his flavor for the night. He isn't a Kent. If it were Kent's, he would be down on one knee the second I told him.

That gives me an idea.

"What if I just pretend it's Kent's?"

Willow's face contorts into a look of shock and lunacy. "Are you crazy?" She feels my forehead. "Are those pregnancy hormones already changing you, my friend? You would never do that to someone."

I sigh. "Well, I have no idea what else to do, Wil. I can't do this alone."

"Hey," she says, grabbing my hand and squeezing. "I never said you would have to do this alone. You have me. Your parents will be there for you too. You know that. You will never be alone in this."

Tears start to fall down my cheeks and I don't even have the energy to hold them at bay.

"Mar," Willow says as she lifts my chin to look at her. "You don't have to tell them the whole truth. Baby steps. Start with the pregnancy thing. They will think it's Kent's. Then maybe ease into the whole 'I fucked a rock star and got knocked up' thing."

I snort.

"See, I made you laugh."

"I snorted."

"Same thing." She grips my hands harder. "You are never going to be alone in all of this. Trust me on that, Marley."

I nod. Even though I don't fully believe her.

“You need to breathe,” Willow tells me.

“Maybe if I pass out, I won’t have to tell her.”

“Uh, Mar, this is your mom. She will take you to a hospital and then find out you are pregnant from a doctor. She should probably hear it from your own mouth.”

I try to take deep breaths, but the anxiety is taking over. “I can’t do this.”

“Well, it’s too late. She just pulled into the driveway.”

I look out the front window and see Mom pulling grocery bags out of the trunk of her car. I bite my nails as I start to pace across the hardwood floor of the living room.

“She is going to walk in this door and know something is wrong.”

I look up at Willow as she leans against the doorframe to the kitchen with her arms folded across her chest. “Well, I mean, something is kind of wrong.”

She raises a brow at me.

“Not the baby.” I drop my hands to my stomach, still shocked that there is life growing inside of me. “There is nothing wrong with that. But this is exactly what they have been preaching to me my entire life. They were high school sweethearts, they met in youth group. They wanted the exact same thing for me. They hoped Kent was that for me. We would get married. I would have children and teach them the same lessons they taught me.”

“Oh, I know. But that is not your reality anymore.”

“I know. It just—”

“Willow!” my mom exclaims as she walks in through the side door of the kitchen. “How are you? Your mother told me you got a job downtown and are moving into the city.”

Willow nods. “Yes, Mrs. Cole. I’m so excited. Finally getting out of my parents’ house.”

“Big changes are in the air,” my mom chimes.

Willow snorts and I bite my lip so hard I can taste blood.

My mom peeks around Willow and looks at me. The line between her brows getting deeper. “What’s wrong, sweet pea?”

“I...umm.”

“Why don’t I help you get those groceries put away, Mrs. Cole?”

My mom looks at me curiously, then back to Willow. “You are too sweet.”

“Mom,” I manage to croak.

She looks at me with those kind eyes that I know are going to show nothing but disappointment soon.

“I’m pregnant.”

She blinks like she isn’t sure what I just said. I glance at Willow and she has a look of horror on her face. Which I get, I kind of just blurted it out before I even gave her a warning.

Willow steps closer to my mom and goes to put a hand on her shoulder, but Mom takes a step closer to me.

“I’m sorry, Marley. I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

I wring my hands out in front of me and blow the bangs out of my eyes. “I’m pregnant.”

Shock takes over Mom’s face as she makes the sign of the cross. “Marlene Annette Cole, by God’s grace, I hope this is a joke.”

I shake my head. “It’s not.”

“Mrs. Cole—” Willow tries to cut in.

“Willow, dear, I know that you are always here for support, but maybe you should go home.”

“Mom.”

Willow gives me a flat smile and takes a few steps back. I nod at her to leave and she mouths “sorry” before slipping out the back door.

“Have you told Kent?” Mom asks me.

I shake my head. I’m obviously not going to say, “No, he’s not the father.” I did kind of make a promise to my parents I wouldn’t sleep with anyone else until I was married. Honestly, I knew I would never stick to that. Not with how I’ve always been curious about sex. But never in a thousand years did I expect to have sex a month after Kent and get pregnant, and by a rock star, no less.

“You need to tell him.”

“I know.” Meaning I need to somehow talk to Silas.

“He’s a good choice for you. As a husband. And I know he will do the right thing.”

I nod.

“Your father is going to need to be told sooner rather than later, Marlene. I suggest you think of a way to break the news to him when he gets back.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. My mom has never been this cold with me.

She doesn’t say anything as she grabs a bottle of wine off the counter and takes the back staircase up to the art studio we share.

I slump down onto the couch behind me. How am I going to tell her the truth? That this is not Kent’s baby. That he won’t be my husband. And the man whose baby this is will want nothing to do with me. Won’t want me to have the baby. I’m sure he won’t even give me the time of day.

I never wanted to be this girl. Yet here I am. Twenty years old, pregnant, and alone.

I shouldn’t feel sorry for myself, but I do. What else am I supposed to feel? Happy? Excited? I am so far away from those things. I’m scared. Scared of what my parents will do.

Scared of what the future will bring. Scared of being a single mom. I can barely take care of myself.

I drop my hands to my stomach. It's still flat. No proof that there is life growing inside of me. I let my emotions take over as the tears fall. My anxiety goes through the roof, but I don't do anything to try and calm down. I just sit on the light-pink sofa in the living room, holding my stomach as tears fall onto my shirt.

The sound of my phone buzzing finally knocks me out of my stupor. I pull it out of my back pocket and see a text from Willow.

Willow: It's been an hour. I haven't heard from you. Are you still alive? Has she shipped you off to a reform school?

I can't even smile at Willow's text. Instead I lock my phone screen and put it back in my pocket and head into the kitchen.

The groceries Mom brought in are still sitting on the island. I can hear the faint sound of classical music upstairs, so I know she has to be painting. Or maybe just drowning herself in wine.

I pull the groceries out of the bag and put them away. I clean up the ice cream that melted from the container and through a hole in the grocery bag. I pour myself a glass of water and take a deep breath before heading up the stairs to face my mom.

She isn't painting. Instead, I find her curled on the floral-cushioned window seat, drinking straight from a bottle of red wine as she flips through a photo album of me as a child.

“You were a beautiful baby, Marley.”

I freeze in the doorway. She must have drunk most of the bottle if she is traveling down memory lane. At least she is back to calling me Marley.

“I wonder where I went wrong. I thought I taught you everything you should know. Maybe I was too strict on you and this was you rebelling against us.”

“Mom,” my voice breaks as more tears start to fall from my eyes.

She looks up at me and her eyes are just as red rimmed as mine. She shuts the book and sets the wine bottle down on a table and opens her arms.

I rush across the room, past my desk of crafting supplies and her easel and collapse into her arms. Her hug is fierce as she tightly wraps her arms around me. I bawl into her shoulder and she soothes me with soft sounds and sweet melodies as she runs her hands up and down my back.

“I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“Shh, why are you sorry?”

I sniffle into her shoulder. “I disappointed you. I broke your trust. I made a mistake.”

“Baby girl, we all make mistakes. And the only thing we can do is learn from them. But don’t ever think that having a baby is a mistake. It’s a gift.”

I know I am getting snot all over her shirt as I sob. “B—but I’m not married. I’m not engaged. I broke your trust about never having...” my words die off when I realize I almost said never having sex again. I clear my throat and finish the sentence with a lie. “About never having sex before marriage.”

“I know, but we’ve talked about that. You’ve been forgiven by us and God.”

I pull back from her and wipe my eyes. “I don’t even know how this happened.”

“Did you use protection? Be honest with me. I asked you before and you said yes.”

I nod. “I did. We did. I just...”

She grabs my hand and squeezes. “Sometimes it doesn’t work. And that’s always a risk. But we can’t live in the past and change what’s happened, we just need to move forward.”

I nod and wipe the back of my hand against my nose.

“We need to go to a doctor.”

“I did. This morning.”

“With Willow?”

I nod.

“I’m glad she was there.” She hands me a tissue. “So it’s confirmed then?”

“Yes.”

She sighs and I can hear the disappointment in it. “Well then, we need to plan for what’s to come. Figure out how to break it to your father. You need to tell Kent. We will have to plan a quick wedding. Of course you could always have the baby first and get married after. That would be okay in most circles these days. Have you been sick? Tired?”

I have no idea how she went from sad and tipsy to planning mode so quickly. And it’s not something I want to even think about. “I’ve been tired. Not really sick at all.”

She brushes her hand over my forehead, pushing my bangs out of my face before bringing her hand down to cup my cheek. “I love you, Marley. I do. And we will get through this. I will help you as much as I can.”

I nod.

“This is just a lot to take in.”

“Trust me. I know.”

“Do you know what you want to do? Where you want to live? If you want to move in with Kent? I know he just got a nice apartment over in—”

“I think I just want to take a nap.”

“You can’t just brush this aside.”

I groan. “I know, but it was just confirmed that I was pregnant. I’ve barely had time to process what this means for me, I don’t want to think about what it means for everyone else, Mom.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” She grabs the wine off the table behind her and takes a long sip. “Maybe we both need some

time to process.”

“Thank you,” I say as I stand and head toward the door.

“But don’t think you can put this off for too long.”

I nod and shut the door behind me. I should just go to my room and take a nap. Hope that sleep helps me figure out what I need to do. But I don’t. I leave and head back over to Willow’s.

I lie on my side in Willow’s bed. I slept over last night because I didn’t know what else to say to Mom. The sun is barely rising, just a faint hue of orange in the sky. But I was barely able to sleep. My mind going in a hundred different directions.

That’s why I’m lying in her bed, my fingers drawing circles over the printout the doctor gave me yesterday of my baby. Well it looks more like a bean. I thought maybe if I looked at my baby it would give me clarity on what I should do. But I feel just as lost as I did yesterday. Ever since I took that home pregnancy test a week ago.

“I can hear you thinking. And it’s only five thirty. Did you sleep at all?”

I roll over and find Willow on her back with one eye open as she looks at me. “Barely.”

She looks at the ultrasound in my hand and takes it from me. “Look at that. I cannot believe you have a baby inside of you.”

I take it back from her. “Trust me. I can’t either. And I can’t stop thinking about the fact I should tell Silas.”

She looks over at me. “We’ve gone over this. I don’t think you should tell him.”

“Well, what happens when my parents find out it’s not Kent’s, and they demand to know who the father is?”

“Lie. I don’t know! But you are not telling Silas. Besides, you don’t even know how to get a hold of him. And you can’t just show up at his front door.”

I lean back into the pillows. “Good thing my best friend is cousins with his bandmate then.”

“No. Nope. I am not calling up Wilder and telling him you need to talk to Silas.”

“Come on, Wil, I can’t move forward without doing it. I just need to tell him. I don’t care what he thinks. I just think he should know.”

“No offense because I know you aren’t the type, but he is going to think you are lying and after his money.”

I set the ultrasound picture on my stomach and rub my face. “Maybe, but you know I’m not. I’ll tell him I’m not. I just need to tell him.”

Willow groans. “This is a bad idea, Mar.”

“Well, it seems like I’m pretty good at making a lot of bad decisions lately, so why stop now?”

“Marley.”

I hear the sympathy in her tone and I just can’t deal with it. “Fine, if you won’t help me, then I will go there myself.”

“You’re going to drive?”

“Yes.”

“How about one less bad decision?”

I look over at her and can tell by the look on her face that she’s given in. “I’ll text Saylor. I am not texting Wilder because he will start asking me a ton of questions. Saylor usually knows what’s going on with the band. If they are even in town.”

“Thank you.”

“But none of this is happening anytime soon. I need at least three more hours of sleep.”

“Fine.”

“And try to get some sleep, Marley. It’s not good for the baby for you to be stressing yourself out more than you already are.”

“Okay.”

She rolls over and starts snoring. I don’t know how she can just fall asleep so quickly, but she’s always been able to. I try to take her advice. But sleep doesn’t come easy.

I rush through the gate that I found unlocked with tears in my eyes as I run to Willow’s car idling in the street.

“What the hell happened?” Willow asks me as I climb back into her car.

“He said to leave. He didn’t know who I was or how I got into his yard. He didn’t remember me at all, Willow. He said he never would have touched someone like me.”

“That motherfucker.” She seethes. “I can’t believe you talked me into this, but I am not going to let him treat you like that. I’m going to go stomp up there and let him know he’s an asshole.”

I reach out to her as she shuts the car off. “Don’t.”

“Marley, you don’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“Willow, I need to do this on my own. It’s fine.”

She scoffs. “Like hell it is!”

Before I can even stop her, she is running up to his front door and banging on it. I step out of the car but don’t move. I just decide I should wait for her to give me a sign.

SILAS

I'm lying on my couch in my living room. The rest of the guys and Riot are spread out around me as we wait for the label to call. We need to discuss plans for the tour that starts in June. The label is not too happy we decided to move back home and can't just come into the office whenever we are needed. But it's nice to be home. To be in the place where we started to make it big. Where the streets are filled with music and the best food on the planet. I feel more inspired here than I ever did in LA and I am more than happy we made the decision to stay here permanently.

My doorbell rings and I wonder who the hell could be here. My property is secure. After the time with the stalker that Jackson had, I decided to invest in a new fence around the property and a new state-of-the-art security system. No one can get through my gate without a code or ringing the buzzer on it, which sounds different than the doorbell. I grab my phone off the table and pull up the camera for the front door. A skinny brunette is standing there. How the hell did a fan get in through my gate?

“Did any of you leave the front gate unlocked?”

Wilder looks up at me curiously. “No, we all parked in the driveway.”

Fuck, another crazy fan. I don't know how the hell she jumped the fence. I look back at the camera again as I hear the doorbell ring. The girl looks slightly familiar, but I can't place

her. And she looks nervous with the way she is twisting her hands in front of her. And is she wearing overalls?

“Who’s at the door?” Roan asks.

I shake my head. “Some crazy fan must have jumped the fence.”

“Are they bleeding?” Riot asks. “That fence is sharp as hell.”

I ignore her comment and stand up.

“Want me to call the police?” Riot asks.

“No, I’ll take care of this.”

I head down the hall and take a deep breath before pulling open the front door.

She lifts her head when the door opens and I step outside, shutting it behind me. “I am giving you thirty seconds to get off my property before I call the police. I don’t want the publicity, but I also don’t want crazy fans trespassing on my property.”

Her voice is soft when she speaks, and once again, it sounds so familiar. “I’m not a crazy fan.”

“Do I know you?” I ask curiously.

She brushes her hair behind her ear. “Yeah. Umm, shoot. I don’t know how to say this. I thought it would be easier telling you than my mom.”

“Tell me what?” I fold my arms over my chest as I get impatient.

She sighs before blurting out words I never want to hear from any chick. “I’m pregnant.”

I actually laugh because she is not the type of girl I would ever fuck. Hell, she is wearing shorts that are overalls with a long-sleeve yellow floral shirt underneath. She has no makeup on her face. And the girls I fuck usually have a shit ton of eyeliner, too much perfume, and clothes that barely cover their tits and ass.

“Yeah, I think you have the wrong guy. It definitely wasn’t me. No offense, but I would never fuck you.”

Her jaw drops before she finds the words she’s looking for. “Well, I am not making it up. You did have sex with me. Here at your house during a party. That’s why I knew where you lived. And—”

I cut her off because I really don’t want to hear whatever lies she’s making up. “Look, even if I did fuck you, I always use protection.”

Except for that one time when the condom broke and I didn’t have the balls to tell the girl. I should have told her. Should have confirmed she was on birth control but I was too wrapped up in her to even think about asking.

“We did use protection.”

I laugh again as I grab the door handle behind me and open the door back up to head inside. “I don’t know what game you are playing at. If you think you can get some sort of money from me. But I would definitely remember fucking someone like you. You aren’t my type, will never be my type, and it would have taken a shit ton of alcohol for me to even think about touching you. So unless I was drunk as fuck, I promise you I never touched you. Now get your ass off my property before I call the cops and have you arrested.”

She tries to speak, but no words come out as I see tears forming in her eyes. She turns around and runs to the car idling outside my front gate.

I shut the door behind me and shake my head in confusion. That was weird as fuck. It’s not the first time some bitch tried to pretend she was pregnant. But definitely the first time they tried to look like some innocent, timid girl while doing it.

I try to think about who I could have fucked here at one of my parties, and unfortunately, there are a handful of girls that I could admit to. But not her. Even though she had something familiar about her.

I start to head back to the living room when pounding starts on my door.

“What the fuck now?”

I groan as I turn and open the door. “Willow?” I ask, surprised to see her on my doorstep.

“You’re an asshole.”

Okay, seriously, what is going on? “What are you talking about?”

I look off behind her and see the girl from earlier leaning against the car she ran to.

“You seriously don’t remember her?” she asks me with annoyance laced in her tone.

“Who?”

“Do I need to spell it out for you, or have all the drugs you’ve done gone to your head?”

I scratch the back of my neck as I look at her and see fire in her eyes. She reminds me of Saylor right now. And one Saylor is more than enough. “Look, I’m in the middle of a business meeting, I don’t have time for games. Just tell me straight up what’s going on.”

“That girl you just told you don’t remember, the girl you say you would never touch, is my friend. And I know you remember her.”

“I really don’t,” I say honestly.

“Your party two months ago,” Willow says like that should clear everything up.

I shrug. “Sorry, no bells are ringing in my head with that. You are going to have to be more specific.”

“For fuck’s sake, you really are an asshole.” She points to the girl. “Marley! The girl we all tried to keep you away from all night, but you wouldn’t stop trying to pursue her.”

Marley.

“That girl was not Marley. I would remember Marley.” Because I still think about that platinum pussy of hers. The best fucking lay I’ve had in a long time. “That girl looked like

she was ready to go teach preschool. That was not the vixen from that night.”

She laughs. “Oh my god, I can’t believe you just called her a vixen. But anyway, that’s her. That’s how she normally looks. Unlike when I dressed her up in my clothes and put makeup on her.”

That would be why she looked and sounded familiar. And it all clicks. I look over at her, leaning against the car, and I see it now. See the girl that made my dick so hard I thought I was going to come after thirty seconds inside of her. The girl that was gone the next morning when I woke up. The only time I ever wished someone was in my bed in the morning. Wished that I had gotten her number.

“Okay, but there is no way she’s—”

“Willow?” Wilder says from behind me.

Fuck.

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh just having a conversation with good ol’ Silas here and his amazing memory.”

He raises a brow at her, then looks at me. “The label is waiting.”

I nod. “I’ll be right there.”

He must take the hint to leave me and Willow alone since he heads back down the hall.

“Like I said I was in a meeting.”

Willow nods. “She deserves a conversation.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Um, you guys can wait in there,” I say as I point to the parlor room. “Or go around back and wait outside. I just need to get on this call.”

“Fine. You’re still an asshole.”

“I know.”

She storms off back to the car and I shut the door. Not sure what the hell is going on. Confused as hell. Is she really

pregnant? Marley was the girl when the condom broke. But she was so innocent. I knew she would flip out. And most girls are on the pill these days. And the chance of her getting pregnant was not something that crossed my mind when I tossed the condom and then went back into bed and couldn't keep my hands off her.

“Silas. Meeting. Now.” Riot scolds as she walks halfway down the hallway.

“Umm, yeah. I'm coming.”

I barely know what the hell was talked about in the meeting. Luckily, the guys carried the call, so I didn't have to contribute. My thoughts on Willow and Marley. It didn't help that if I leaned to the right enough from where I sat on the couch, I could see them both in the backyard.

Riot left right after the call ended, needing to go pick the kids up from Janae. Knox and Roan left together since Roan has been crashing with Knox until he finds a place to buy. Jackson and Wilder hang back and I know they want to talk to me, but I really don't have much to say until I find out what the hell is going on with the woman sitting outside.

“You okay?” Jackson asks me as I get up and walk toward the parlor room, in desperate need of a drink.

The two follow me down the hall. “Yeah, fine.”

“You didn't say a word on the call about your ideas for the tour. You had most of them last night when we figured everything out.”

I shrug.

“Why was my cousin here?” Wilder asks.

“Willow was here?” Jackson asks Wilder.

I don't say anything, and neither does Wilder. I just walk behind the bar and grab a beer, crack it open and swallow half of it down.

“I saw her in the backyard with her friend.”

“It’s nothing important.” My voice is cold.

Jackson looks at me, then over at Wilder. “How about we head out?”

Wilder looks away from me and nods at Jackson. “Yeah, sure. I guess he isn’t going to tell us shit.”

I mouth a “thank you” to Jackson. He’s my best friend and he knows me better than almost everyone, even the guys in the band. And he knows when I need to be alone.

I finish off my beer and toss it in the trash before saying a silent prayer to whatever god will listen before heading outside.

Marley bites her lip when she sees me approach them. And then I see it. The girl who has been in my head for the last two months. What I wouldn’t give to make her a regular fuck while I’m here.

“Hi,” Marley says meekly as I sit down on a chair across from the couch they are sharing.

“So you’re pregnant,” I say flatly. I don’t know why my walls are going up. This isn’t the man I am. But I never thought I would be in this situation either.

Marley nods. “I... I went to the doctor yesterday and she confirmed it.”

“And you’re sure it’s mine?” I don’t think this girl would lie. Hell, I thought she was a virgin when I fucked her and I know she only fucked one other guy, so it’s him or me. And from the little I know of her, she isn’t the type to lie about this.

“I don’t sleep around,” she says defensively.

“You freely spread your legs for me that night.” God, I’m being a dick.

“I—I...”

“Don’t be an asshole, Silas.” Willow shoots me a glare.

“Look, I’m sorry you got knocked up. I don’t really know how this could have happened since I wrap it up every time. But until I know that it’s mine, there isn’t anything I can do. I just ask you don’t go to the press.”

“I would never do that,” Marley says.

“Once I know it’s mine, I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Her face contorts into a look of surprise. “I don’t want your money. That’s not why—”

“Everyone wants my money,” I cut her off.

Willow sighs loudly and looks straight at me. “Silas, once again, stop being an ass.”

“I just wanted you to know. Honestly. I thought you deserved to know.”

I nod my head. “Good, I know. Now leave.”

“Silas!” Willow barks at me.

I turn toward her as I stand abruptly from my chair. “What?”

“You are being a total dick. Can’t you tell this is hard for her? That she’s scared. This is so much harder on her than you even realize. You don’t know her family. And you are treating her like some whore that gave you a blow job in the closet.”

I stare at Willow as she says something to Marley. Marley just nods her head and walks away.

“You going to give me a lecture now?”

Willow shakes her head. “No. I just want you to think about what you’ve said about her since she just did one of the scariest things ever. I didn’t even want her to come here. To tell you. But she insisted. Because she was raised by parents that taught her to be honest. And all she wanted was for you to know. She doesn’t expect anything from you. Hell, she is scared shitless of being a single mom, of her parents kicking her out. But she is strong and resilient and I know she will make it through this. But she deserves an apology for the words you said to her and the ones you said about her to me.”

I sigh and drop my head. “You don’t know me either, Willow. You don’t know how hard this is for me.”

“I don’t. But if it’s hard for you, then you know that she deserves to be treated better.” Willow pauses, and I think she may walk away but instead, she continues. “I doubt Marley will be around much. But you should make the effort to apologize.”

I don’t even get to say a word as Willow stomps off, following the path Marley took.

I fall back into the chair I was sitting in and stare off into the pool.

I’m going to be a dad.

And that is scary as fuck.

MARLEY

“So how’s city life?” I ask Willow through the phone as I set up the buffet tables for the afternoon luncheon at church.

“So much better than living at home,” she laughs into the phone.

“I bet,” I say as I look over at my dad talking to a few of the church members.

“Have you told your dad yet?”

I sigh as I walk away from the buffet table to a quiet area outside the church and sit on a secluded bench under an oak tree. “No. And I don’t know what to say. My mom has even kept her mouth shut. But I know he suspects something since she is treating me like a delicate flower.”

“So she has accepted it.”

I shrug, even though I know she can’t see me. “I guess. As much as she can.” I start picking at an invisible piece of lint on my dress. “But I hate lying to her. I hate that she thinks... well, you know. When she has no idea of the truth. About Silas.”

“I wish I knew what to tell you to do.” Willow’s tone is gentle. “But you really are stuck between a rock and a hard place, Mar. I think you need to tell your dad first. Then maybe break it to them that Silas is the father and not the Ken doll.”

I groan. “Do you know how hard it is to pretend that it’s his and at the same time keep him away? Mom always wants

to invite him over. I tell her he's busy or feign illness. I feel like I am twisted in so many lies right now."

"You are. But I also know this isn't easy. And you need to let out the truth one piece at a time."

I lean back on the bench. "I know. I'm going to tell him this week. I have to. I'm ten weeks, Wil, shouldn't I start showing soon?"

"Maybe. I'm not a pregnancy expert, but I think you have a few more weeks. But that doesn't mean you should wait to tell him."

"Why did this happen to me? And what's coming next? Doesn't everything happen in threes? First Kent, then this, what—"

"Don't go get superstitious on me," Willow cuts me off. "I already hear enough of it from Saylor. But I don't think so, babe. Maybe this is all a blessing."

My jaw drops open at that. "A blessing. I hardly think this is a bless—"

"Hey, Marley."

I nearly drop the phone when I see Kent standing in front of me. I have no idea when he got here or how much he heard since the path over here is behind the tree to my back.

"Oh, hi, Kent." I hold up my finger to him and go back to Willow. "I gotta go."

"Eww, is the Ken doll there?"

I snort. "Stop. I'll talk to you later."

We say our goodbyes and hang up the phone.

"What's a blessing?" Kent asks me as I slip my cell into my pocket.

I fight to roll my eyes. "Oh, nothing. Just some stuff going on with Willow."

He nods, then takes a seat next to me. "How have you been?"

“Peachy.”

He sighs as he turns to face me, laying an arm along the back of the bench. I scoot back to keep his hand from touching my shoulder. “Have you thought about what I asked you the other day?”

“You mean when you asked me out and said you were an idiot for breaking up with me?”

“I was an idiot.”

I fold my arms over my chest as I take him in. He really does look like a blond Ken doll. Perfectly white teeth, perfectly tanned skin, and perfectly styled hair. “Kent, you broke my heart. I felt used and unloved. You had sex with me, took my virginity, and then dumped me. And don’t think I didn’t see you going out on a date with Mallory the next week.”

“That was a mistake.”

“So was giving you my heart,” I stammer as I stand up and walk toward the pond in front of me.

“Marley, I am asking for your forgiveness over anything,” he says from behind me.

“I’ll give you my forgiveness because that is what the Bible teaches us, but I am not giving you another chance.” His arm lands on my shoulder and I turn abruptly, pushing him away. “I can’t do this with you, Kent.”

“We are good together, Marley. Even your parents think we should get married. Your mom thinks I need—”

“Hold up,” I say, putting my hands in front of me. “You talked to my parents about this? And why are you talking about marriage? It was never even brought up when we were together since we were only together six months!”

He runs a hand through his blond hair and it all stays perfectly in place. “Your mom told me that marriage is best for you since—”

There is no way my mother told him I was pregnant. “Since what?”

He shrugs. “She just said you’ve been sad lately and thinks it’s because you miss me.”

I cannot believe my mother told him that. I love my mom, but she has no right trying to finagle him back into my life all because I’m pregnant. Of course she thinks it’s his, so I guess it does make sense. “Trust me, I don’t miss you.”

“Can’t we start over? Just put the past behind us?”

“I don’t—” I can’t finish my sentence because a wave of nausea comes over me. I thought I was lucky and I wasn’t going to get morning sickness, but the last week it’s like a flip was switched. And it’s not just the morning. Randomly throughout the day, nausea hits me with a one-two punch.

I cover my mouth and start to jog back to the church.

“Marley!” Kent shouts.

I just shake my head as I pick up speed, heading into the church and into the nearest bathroom. I barely get the door locked before I am bending over the toilet, throwing up what little is in my stomach.

I rest my arm across the toilet seat and set my forehead on my forearm as I wait for the nausea to pass. I hate this. I hate everything about this. The lies. The secrets. The fact I feel so alone in everything.

When my stomach finally settles, I stand and flush the toilet. I head to the sink and splash water on my face, dabbing it with a paper towel as I look in the mirror.

I don’t even know who I am anymore. I feel so lost. I can barely even keep up with my Etsy store. Everything is weighing on me so much.

When I finally leave the bathroom, I find Kent leaning on the wall across from it.

“You okay?” he asks as he steps up to me, brushing hair away from my face.

“Fine. I just ate something this morning that must not have agreed with me.”

He cups my face, but I brush him away and take a step back. “I need to get back to the luncheon prep.”

“Marley...”

I look over my shoulder and see him standing where I left him. “I’m not doing this, Kent. I mean it.”

He doesn’t follow me and he doesn’t attend the luncheon. I spend the rest of my afternoon entertaining the church members, all the while the secrets I’m keeping weigh heavily on my soul.

Willow: Have you told him yet?

Marley: Calm down. I just set the table for dinner.

Willow: Is it weird I’m on my parents’ couch peeking through the blinds to see if you run out?

Marley: Do I really need to answer that?

Willow: Bitch.

Marley: One drink won’t hurt a baby, right?

Willow: Do I really need to answer that?

Marley: *eye roll emoji*

“Marley, get off your phone and come sit down to eat,” Mom yells from the dining room.

Marley: Well here it goes...

Willow: You got this.

I don’t even respond because I definitely don’t got this. My hands are sweating and I’m dizzy. I almost want to have a bout of nausea right now, so I don’t have to do this.

I grab my glass of water off the kitchen island and walk into the dining room, sitting down at my normal seat.

I keep quiet while I barely eat my dinner. Mom and Dad are talking about plans for the New Year’s Day luncheon in

two days. Another thing I need to help out with when all I want to do is crawl into bed and never get out of it.

I'm pushing peas around on my plate when Dad starts talking to me. It startles me so much that I drop my fork to the ground.

"Marley, are you okay? Your mother says you haven't been feeling well lately."

I shoot a glare over at Mom and she gestures with her head toward Dad and I know she wants me to tell him. But unlike her, where I just blurted it out. I can't do it with him. He has always supported me. When I was six and wanted to play softball, he bought me a glove and a bat and signed me up. When I was eleven and decided I wanted to play the violin, he found a place to rent one and a private tutor. When I told him I didn't want to go to college but to focus on my art and my garden, he agreed.

Even when I told him I went against the church and had sex with Kent, he eventually calmed down. But he's never been angry with me. Even when I practiced softball in the backyard and broke a window. Or when I got into a car accident on the highway and totaled his car. He was never angry.

But this. I think this is something entirely different. This can't be fixed. This can't be forgiven. This is new life. And there are no take backs.

"Marley?" he says again with his soothing, gentle voice.

I can't hold back the tears now. Not when he uses that voice.

"Sweetie," Mom's sweet voice sings.

I look up at Dad and I see the concern on his face. He reaches out and grabs my hand for reassurance. It breaks me knowing what's to come. I dig my nails into the fabric of my leggings. The pinch of my nails against my thigh giving me some comfort.

"I never meant for this to happen, Dad. And I wish I didn't have to tell you this. But it's inevitable. You need to know."

A deep line forms between his brows. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“I...I” I choke back on the words, my tears nearly a waterfall at this point. “I’m pregnant.”

My father drops my hand so quickly I can feel the wall going up between us.

“Pregnant?” he scoffs. “Really, Marlene? After all we taught you?”

“Peter,” Mom cuts in.

He ignores her and stands from the table. His anger is palpable. I drop my eyes and stare at the plate of cold food in front of me, unable to look him in the eyes.

“Marlene Annette Cole, you will look at me when I am talking to you.” His soft tone from earlier is completely gone. I’ve never heard him talk like this.

I wipe my palms across my face and dare to look up at him.

“How did this even happen? You made a promise to us when you let us know Kent took your virginity that you wouldn’t sleep with anyone until you were engaged to be married. And Kent hasn’t come to me to ask for your hand. There is no ring on that finger. So tell me how this happened.”

“Dad, I never meant it to. It was an accident. The condom must have broken.”

He slams his fist onto the table. “My only daughter, pregnant and unwed before she’s even twenty-one,” he mutters before looking over at his wife. “Did you know about this?”

I glance at Mom and see her nod.

“And you didn’t care to tell me?”

“Peter, you were at the conference when I found out. And I wasn’t going to tell you then. Then it was Christmas and everything was so hectic.”

Dad’s face goes red. “You mean to tell me you’ve known almost two weeks and haven’t said a thing?”

Mom throws her napkin onto her plate. “Can’t you see how much this is hurting Marley? She promised me she would tell you and I know it’s been killing her every day. But she finally gathered the courage. You shouldn’t be angry with her. You should be proud of her for being honest. For taking on this responsibility on her own.”

Dad shakes his head and walks over to the bar against the wall and pours a glass of scotch. “She shouldn’t be doing this on her own. That boy should be proposing. We should be planning a wedding.”

“One thing at a time. That is more stress on her that she shouldn’t have. You know what stress can do to a person. You remember how hard it was for me to keep a baby. I let her do this at her own pace, so she doesn’t have to live with what I went through for years.”

“That was an entirely different situation.”

“That shouldn’t matter,” Mom yells as she stands up.

“Kent knows better.”

“He doesn’t know,” I say quietly.

Mom sighs as Dad’s head snaps toward mine. “You haven’t told him?”

I shake my head.

“What are you thinking, Marlene? He should have been the first person you told!”

“Peter,” Mom cuts in again as my tears gain more strength. “They were broken up. He broke her heart. She hasn’t found a way to tell him yet.”

“Well she should be calling him right now and having him come over here so they can figure out what they plan on doing!”

“You can’t just expect her to get everything in order when things are so hard for her.”

“That’s exactly what she should be doing!”

My parents rarely argue and when they do, it lasts awhile. Usually with Mom sitting in her studio with a martini and Dad sitting in front of the TV with his scotch.

I slip out the side door of the dining room and they don't even notice.

I tiptoe through the living room and to the hall closet and grab the backpack I shoved in there earlier. I quietly open the front door and shut it gently. Then run across the street to Willow's parents' house.

Willow apparently quit peeking from the blinds and decided to sit on a rocking chair on her porch, waiting for me.

"Went that well?" she asks as I cross her front lawn.

"Let's just go."

"Are you moving in?" she jokes.

I actually laugh, a dam blocking my tears temporarily. "Not yet. But I am sure when they find out that Kent isn't the father and that some rock star is, it will be a different story."

"Oh, girl. You definitely will be sent to the convent then."

SILAS

“Dude, you are in a mood.”

I give Jackson a side-eye and then down the shot in front of me. We’re sitting at Talisman while Charlie bartends. Jackson said it was to keep her company, but I think he just wants to punch any guy that flirts with her.

“I would say girl problems, but we both know that is never your issue. Did you hear from West?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you, or are you gonna pretend that nothing is wrong?”

Fuck. This is Jackson. I don’t keep secrets from him. We’ve been best friends since we were in grade school. We’ve seen a lot of shit. We both lost our brothers. We’ve both walked that dark path.

“Remember Willow’s friend?”

Jackson shakes his head.

“That innocent girl that was at my party after we played here.”

“Oh yeah. I remember her now.”

“Well, she was the one that showed up at my house last week when we were meeting with the label.”

Jackson takes a swig of his beer. “What did she want? You seem distracted by the whole thing, but I didn’t want to bring

it up.”

I sigh, still struggling to believe this is true. “She’s pregnant.”

“What?” Jackson shouts. “How the hell did that even happen?”

I snort. “You need me to give you a biology lesson?”

“Fuck off.”

I shrug in response, not wanting to tell him I remember the condom breaking and did nothing about it.

“You sure it’s yours? I mean... she could just be a gold digger.”

I laugh. “Uh, no. She definitely isn’t that. And I know it’s mine. And I hate to admit it. But that girl only slept with one other guy before me. She’s so innocent, Jax. And I defiled her and ruined her life.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

I don’t tell him that I was a total asshole to her. Because I am still kicking myself for that. I just really had no idea how to react. This can change my entire life. It will change it.

We sit in silence for a few minutes and I know he’s itching to ask me more questions. But I don’t have answers. I pushed Marley away. And I don’t really have any plans of contacting her.

When it looks like he is about to ask me another question about it, I change the subject. “Have you heard from West recently?”

Jackson’s hand freezes as he pulls his beer from his lips. I know him well enough to know he’s keeping something from me.

“You still haven’t told me shit. And I know you didn’t tell Wilder, Roan, or Knox anything. They haven’t heard anything from West since we got back. Unless they aren’t telling us.”

Jackson glances over at Charlie, then back to me. “I took care of things.”

“What do you mean? I know you didn’t off Elijah like he asked you to.”

“I gave him the information he was looking for and more. Got us out of the debt I owed him.”

I study Jackson and know he isn’t going to say anything more. I have no idea what debt he owed Carter West, the kingpin of New Orleans, but whatever it was, he found a way to clear his debt. For now, at least.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask.

Jackson nods.

“Whatever happened to your stalker?”

Jackson winces, then glances quickly over at Charlie before looking back at me. “Don’t know. Just disappeared. Why?”

“Just weird shit has been going on. My gate’s been unlocked twice now. I get this weird feeling like someone is watching me.”

“Have you talked to Carter?” he asks me.

“Why would I do that?”

Jackson sighs, then drops his voice. “That’s why I owed him. Because he helped with mine.”

No wonder he said she just disappeared. West has a way of making that happen to people. “So you don’t think it’s the same one?”

Jackson shakes his head. “I can guarantee you it’s not.” He looks around the quiet bar we’re at. “I’ll tell you later.”

“What did you do, man?”

“Nothing. Not anything I asked for.”

“So that’s the debt you owed.”

He nods.

“West always finds a way to make those debts come back.”

Jackson glances at Charlie one more time. “I know.”

I sit on one of my outdoor sofas drowning in a cloud of weed that Saylor is smoking. She hands me the joint every now and then, but my mind is still focused on other things. After my conversation with Jackson yesterday, I wonder if I should contact West. But I don't want another debt to him. It took me long enough to clear the debt for the information on who killed my brother. And I have no solid evidence that I have a stalker or whatever the hell is going on. Just a few unlocked gates and a weird feeling.

Saylor practically shoves the joint in my face and I finally grab it, taking a large inhale.

“For someone having a party at their house on New Year's Eve, you seem less than thrilled.”

I glance over at her as I hand her back the joint. “A lot on my mind.”

She rolls the joint between her fingers. “Mmm, does it have anything to do with a certain church girl and her predicament?”

“How do you know?”

“Well, my brother said she was here the other day.”

“And how the hell would that tell you anything?”

She flips her cherry-red locks over her shoulder. “Relax. He doesn't know a thing.”

“Then how do you know?”

She takes another drag of her weed, delaying her answer on purpose. “Well, if you must know, Willow told me when I helped her move into her apartment here.”

“Oh.”

She takes a long sip of her water. “So what do you plan on doing about it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Really, Silas. I know you. I know how you are. How you act. How you were brought up. I know you never wanted kids. I know you pretty much do anything possible to avoid talking to the same girl twice unless you have them sign some fuck-buddy contract.”

I swallow a good amount of whiskey from my glass. “I don’t have a fuck-buddy contract.”

“Hmm. I’m surprised,” she jokes.

“Since you insist we talk about this. It was a shock to hear.”

“I bet.”

I rub my fingers along my beard. “I really don’t know what to think. She says she isn’t in it for the money and I wonder if that’s true. I don’t know her. From what I do know, she doesn’t seem the type. But how can I trust anyone these days?”

Saylor sighs. “Look, Silas. You can’t be a dick to her. She’s not cut out for that. I can’t even imagine what will happen when her dad finds out.”

“Why? Willow said the same thing.”

“You really don’t know about her family?”

I shake my head. I don’t know shit about her. Except that she was tight as fuck, her pussy was a goddamn vise, and she’s as quiet as a mouse until you fuck her.

“He’s a pastor. She was practically raised in the church.”

The color drains from my face. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Fuck,” I mutter as I stand up and down the rest of my whiskey.

“Silas.”

I throw the glass into the gas firepit in front of me, watching it shatter in the blue and orange flames. “This is the worst thing that could happen. The press will have a field day.”

“If the press finds out,” Saylor adds.

“You really think she was being serious about not going to the press?”

Saylor nods. “That girl wouldn’t hurt a fly. She has a big heart and forgives pretty much anyone, no matter how much they hurt her. Like that stupid asshole ex of hers.”

“What happened with him?” I ask softly, curiously.

Saylor chews on the side of her mouth and I give her a look, forcing her to talk. “He took her virginity, then broke up with her a few days later.”

“What?” I yell.

“Yeah, he’s a total douche.”

“Why would she date someone like that?”

Saylor sits back down on the couch and pulls a bowl out of her bag and starts to pack it with weed. “Like she knew he was going to do that.” She suppresses a laugh before continuing. “He’s a part of her church.”

Rage floods my veins like a roaring storm. What asshole does that? I lost my virginity to my high school girlfriend, but I didn’t dump her ass right after.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Silas. She’s a good girl. She won’t try to take your money or contact the press like half the whores you sleep with.”

I scowl.

“But that doesn’t mean I think you should ignore her. She has a good heart. Even I make fun of her a lot for her innocence, and she is always nice to me. She’s one of those people you can count on. Willow told me that. And she wouldn’t say that if it wasn’t true.”

“Okay.”

“So please... just don't hurt her. Maybe talk to her. Act civil.”

I walk away without giving her an answer.

I hear her scream my name behind me. “Silas, I mean it!”

I flip her off because she's Saylor and I've always treated her like a kid sister. I hear her yell “asshole” at me and I chuckle as I head inside to pour myself a large glass of whiskey.

MARLEY

I curl up into a ball on the couch in Willow's apartment. I've been here for two days. Mom called yesterday and asked if I was coming home, but I told her I needed a few days. She understood and let me know that Dad finally calmed down. But I just don't want to be there. I am so caught up in my thoughts and I don't want to ask questions or create a plan or even think about telling Kent something that isn't true. Which I know both my parents will force upon me. So instead, I am watching rom-coms and eating popcorn. Willow went out since she spent last night with me. I tried to get her to go out since it was New Year's Eve, but she wouldn't have it. She wanted to make sure I was okay.

At least I was able to force her out of the house tonight though. I hate feeling like a burden to her. I always have whenever it comes to her being social. I always feel like I hold her back. And it's not that I don't want to go, it's just that I have never felt comfortable in my own skin when I am in the outside world as I call it. I prefer to be home with my flowers and my art.

When *Pretty Woman* ends, I stretch my legs and walk around the apartment. I'm also craving freaking peanut butter chocolate swirl ice cream. It started a week ago. I think I've already eaten five pints in the last week. I walk into her kitchen and open the freezer up and remember I ate both pints last night.

I look over at the clock and see it's just past nine. I groan as I think about leaving her apartment alone at night. But she

is only two blocks away from a small convenience store.

I take a deep breath and slip on my Toms and grab the extra set of keys she gave me off the kitchen table.

I can do this.

I feel like a kid on the first day of school, anxious and intimidated. I just never liked the city. It's loud and bright. And the yards are all too small for a garden like mine. At least Willow lives in the Garden District, so it's a little bit less rambunctious than the Quarter or Frenchman.

A few people pass me on the street and say hello and it calms my nerves. I get to the corner of Magazine and Jackson. Magazine has quite a few more revelers than the quiet street that Willow lives on.

I wander down the chip aisle and grab a bag of pretzels. Because this baby loves salty and sweet and I am not complaining about it. I turn the corner to head to the freezer section and run into a hard chest.

"I'm sorry, excuse me," I say as I keep my eyes trained on my feet and not whoever I ran into.

"Marley?"

My head snaps up at the sound of his gravelly voice. Out of all the places in this city, I had to run into Silas.

"Hi." I clear my throat. "Um, bye." I go to step around him, but he blocks my path. Then looks down directly at my stomach. Not that there is anything to see. It's still as flat as it usually is and I'm wearing an oversized sweatshirt.

"Wait a second."

I look into those dark-blue eyes that seduced me two and a half months ago and those stupid butterflies take hold in my stomach. Or maybe it's nausea. Hopefully it's nausea.

"We should talk."

"Last time we talked, you told me to leave. Actually, you accused me of making everything up so I could take your money." The words come out louder than I expected.

Silas looks around to make sure no one heard me. “I was an asshole.”

“Yep. And I’m over it. Just leave me alone.” I once again try to get past him, but he grabs my arm, pulling me back toward him.

“I want to talk to you.”

“No thanks,” I say politely as I pull out of his loose grip on me.

“Marley, come on,” he groans.

I’m getting annoyed by him. I have no idea why he suddenly has any interest in me. “I’m surprised you remember my name.”

His eyes flare as he pushes me back into an endcap. “I remember a lot more than that.”

I squeeze my thighs together at his words as I remember the things he did to me that night. The way he pinned me down, spread my legs, wrapped his hands around my throat.

I clear my throat and sidestep away from him. “Well, it turns out it isn’t even yours.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m being honest,” I lie.

“I know you’re lying. Just come over to my house and talk,” he pleads.

“No.”

His voice deepens and his words come out like a command. “Marley, you’re coming with me.”

“No I’m not.” I storm off to the freezer section, emotions overwhelming me. I just wanted to be alone tonight. I didn’t want to talk to anyone, especially Silas. I need to do whatever I can to stay out of my head and he will do the exact opposite. I don’t need his cruel words. I already heard enough of them two weeks ago.

I scan the shelves looking for the ice cream I'm craving and I can't find it. And to make matters worse, my stupid emotions get all swirled like a tornado and my anger and annoyance turn to self-pity and sadness. Then of all the things I could do, I start crying.

This is why I don't leave the house. Now I am a crying mess in a grocery store. Stupid hormones.

"Hey," I hear Silas say behind me. I can't even face him now.

Then his hand is on my shoulder and it feels like fire, like I want him to consume me. Seriously, these hormones are going to kill me.

"Hey, don't cry. I'm sorry if I keep acting like a dick."

I shake my head. "It's not you. It's just these stupid hormones. And all I want is peanut butter chocolate ice cream and they don't have any. And I swear I just—"

He starts laughing.

"This isn't funny," I bite out.

"I know." He stops laughing and once again moves into my personal space. "But I have peanut butter chocolate ice cream at home. It's my favorite, that's why I'm laughing. And if you're craving it, it must be because..." He stops talking and brushes his hand through his long hair.

I know exactly what he was going to say. This apricot inside of me must be his if we are craving the same thing. "I'm not going home with you. I'll just go check another store."

His eyes gaze into mine and I really wish I was blind, so I didn't have to know how stupidly handsome he is. "You shouldn't walk alone at night."

"I made it here just fine."

"Marley, come on. Just come to my house. Let's talk. I'll let you eat my ice cream and then I'll drive you back to your place."

"I'm staying at Willow's."

“Then I’ll drive you there.”

I frown but then my stomach growls. I look up at him and he knows he won. “Fine.”

He smiles like he just won a battle and I guess he did. “Did you want anything else to eat?”

I shrug. I haven’t eaten much at all in the last couple weeks, which I know the doctor is going to get mad about. And the only thing I had today was the pancakes Willow made for breakfast and microwave popcorn.

He grabs the pretzels out of my hand that I forgot I was holding. “Well, I don’t really know what you should be eating. I can order us something. Or I probably have some frozen pizza at home.”

“Ice cream is fine,” I mutter.

“Okay.”

We stop at the cooler and he grabs a few energy drinks and Gatorades then heads up to the cash register. I don’t even stop him from buying the pretzels. I feel like I lost that fight when I caved to going to his house.

An SUV is sitting outside in a no -parking zone and I snort when he unlocks it and pulls the door open for me.

“You think that you don’t have to abide by the laws?” I ask as I nod at the sign.

He chuckles. “Everyone parks here to run into the store. I’ve never seen anyone get a ticket.”

I roll my eyes as he shuts the door. We drive in silence back to his house, which happens to be a couple blocks away from Willow’s apartment. I guess I never realized it. But as we drive past a few familiar houses, I know exactly where we are.

Silas hits a button on the roof of his car and a large black gate opens up to let us into the large parking area he has on the side of his house. Well, his mansion. The house is huge. Far too big for one person.

I jump out of the car and he rounds the front and directs me toward a tree-lined path that leads to a side door to his house. He punches in the code on the keypad and an alarm beeps a few times before shutting off.

He spins his keys around his finger as I follow him into his gourmet kitchen. He pulls out my pretzels and sets them on the island, then puts his drinks away before pulling out a container of ice cream from the freezer.

I take a seat at the island and open the pretzels as he sets the ice cream and a spoon in front of me. He leans back against the opposite counter and opens a Gatorade as I break up the pretzels and drop them in the ice cream.

“Now that I don’t do,” he says.

I shove a big spoonful of ice cream into my mouth and groan. “You’re missing out.”

“Am I?”

I nod as I take another huge bite. This ice cream is really hitting the spot.

He laughs and I go back to devouring the container while he messes around on his phone.

I eat the entire pint, scraping the bottom clean. I jump off my seat and put the spoon in the dishwasher and he pulls open a drawer that holds the trash can.

He grabs my hand and brings me over to his massive living room that overlooks the backyard. When I was here during his party, the furniture was moved. With it back in its proper place, this room is actually cozy and not as intimidating as it originally looked.

I sit on a plush white leather couch and sink into the buttery fabric. I figure Silas will sit in a chair across from me but instead, he sits on the same couch with just a few feet separating us.

“So,” he says.

I turn to face him and rest my cheek against the back of the couch. “You were the one that wanted to talk.”

“I know.” He scratches the back of his neck as he gathers his words. “It’s just hard to get the words out. I’m still kind of in shock over this.”

“Yeah, well you aren’t the one that is going to have to live with the shock for eighteen years.”

“Marley, I don’t want you to do this alone.”

I lift my cheek up off the couch and stare at him as my back goes straight. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“I had a lot of time to think about things over the last week.”

I scoff. “Yeah, I don’t see you as the type that would decide to just think this over.”

“Why?”

I spread my arms out to gesture at the space around us. “You’re a rock star. You live in a lavish mansion. You have girls surrounding you constantly. Why would you even be thinking about someone like me?”

“Marley,” he sighs. “Don’t ever talk about yourself that way.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t think about myself.”

He brushes his wavy locks behind his ear. “Look, I grew up in not the best homelife. And I know what it feels like to be alone. I don’t want that for you. I wouldn’t want that for anyone. Feeling abandoned is terrifying.”

“How do you even know I am doing this on my own?” I ask defensively.

“I don’t. But I am sure your family—”

“My family?” I practically shout. “What the heck do you even know about my family?”

He sucks his lower lip into his mouth and I know that he said more than he meant to.

“I get it now. You’re just acting like this because someone told you who I really am. Where I come from. I don’t need

your sympathy.” I stand abruptly from the couch.

He grabs my arm and pulls me back down. “It’s not sympathy,” he growls.

“I don’t believe you. If you didn’t know how I was raised, you wouldn’t be doing this now.”

He grabs my face to make sure I am looking him in the eyes as he talks. And I hate it. I hate being around him. Hate looking at him because it makes all those damn butterflies come to life. The butterflies that made me act crazy and end up in this predicament.

“No, I am doing this because I was a dick to you when you told me. And I need you to know that’s not how I am. Maybe to a lot of people, but you’re different, Marley. Ever since I first laid eyes on you in Talisman, I knew you were different. There was something about you that pulled at my strings. That made me want to get to know you. And yeah, we may have thought that night was a one-time thing. A fling. But fate had a different idea. And…” he pauses, searching my eyes like he is looking for something. I don’t know what, but I feel a connection right now. I feel those strings he was talking about, pulling us together.

He blinks a few times and breaks the connection. “I just don’t want you to feel alone. I want you to know you have somewhere to go if you ever need it.”

The doorbell rings and he says he’ll be right back. He walks down the hall to the front door and I watch him as he goes. His broad shoulders, his tall frame. I can remember everything about him. Everything about that night. The way his muscled body felt beneath my hands. The way his lips felt against mine, against my neck, my chest. The way he owned my body like it was his. I flush as I think about those piercings he has. I bite my lip as my thoughts go to wanting to feel him inside of me again.

Stop, Marley. It can’t happen again. No matter what your stupid body is feeling.

I take in the space instead to drown out my thoughts. The huge black brick fireplace that is probably rarely used extends up to the cathedral ceiling. The mix of black and white accents throughout the room. Clearly he had a designer do this.

I walk over to the glass doors that lead outside and take in the quiet of the night from his backyard. I swear it takes up at least four lots, almost like he bought half a block for the privacy.

The sound of plastic bags has me turning my head and I see him walk back in the living room with carryout.

“I said ice cream was fine.”

“Good. Because I was hungry and got food for myself.”

I eye him suspiciously. Especially when he opens the bags and sets out multiple take-out containers of food. Way more than enough for one person, even more than enough for two. He opens a few containers and it’s like the array of food is begging me to eat it. He ordered Mediterranean and the smell of the spices has me salivating.

He looks up at me and smirks, that dimple taking residence on his face. “You can have some if you want. Ordered way too much.”

I take a step closer to the coffee table holding all the food. I don’t want to give in, but then my stomach growls so loud.

“When was the last time you ate?” he asks me.

“I just had ice cream. You watched me eat it.”

“No, I mean a real meal.”

I shrug.

“I don’t want to be that guy, Mar, but you really should eat more than ice cream if you’re pregnant.”

I try not to think about how he called me Mar. Like only my close friends and family do. “I’m well aware. I just haven’t been hungry.”

He raises a brow at me. “Well, your stomach is hungry now. I would have been able to hear it if I was halfway across

the city.” He gestures me over with his hand. “Come on, sit. Eat.”

I give in and cross the room, dropping onto the couch next to him. I grab an olive out of a container and pop it into my mouth.

“Eat something substantial.”

“Please don’t boss me around.”

“From what I remember, you like it.”

My cheeks flush at his words and I grab a piece of pita and dip it into hummus and shove it in my face to keep from answering him.

“Is that chicken shawarma?” I mumble through the obnoxious amount of pita and hummus in my mouth.

“Sure is.”

I grab a fork off the table as I swallow down the hummus and swipe the container off the table, taking a huge bite as my eyes roll back in my head with the mix of spices dancing on my tongue.

Silas’s deep chuckle next to me makes me melt. I could listen to that laugh all day. I don’t know what it is about it, but it hits me so deep in the soul.

“I knew you were hungry.”

I ignore him momentarily as I shove more food in my mouth. We eat in silence for a while and I appreciate the fact he isn’t talking to me, asking questions, demanding answers. It’s comfortable. Something I haven’t truly felt in a long time and the thought hits me hard. Why do I suddenly feel comfortable with this man? Someone I barely know. Someone I spent a wild night with. Maybe it’s the hormones. Or the fact his cells are growing in my belly. I don’t know. And I don’t want to think about it. Because I know it’s something that can’t be.

“Do you need something to drink?” he asks, knocking me from my thoughts.

“Please,” I say as I swallow down another bite of amazing food. “A water is fine.”

He nods and gets up, heading to the kitchen, then bringing back two bottles of water.

“Thank you for this.” I gesture toward the food. “This is probably the first time in a long time I actually felt hungry besides any weird cravings I’ve had.”

He smiles at me and I hate it. I hate the fact I love those damn dimples. “What other cravings have you had?”

“Besides the ice cream and pretzels?”

He nods.

“Hmm. Not too many, but sometimes I really need Cool Ranch Doritos dipped in a ketchup-and-mayonnaise sauce. And I also have been craving fried pickles too.”

He laughs. “Well, I can definitely say neither of those are things I usually eat. Just the ice cream.”

I smile at him and hate myself for it. Hate that I’m enjoying his company, our conversation, his presence.

“Have you been getting any morning sickness?”

I snort. “Well, I wouldn’t call it morning sickness. More like ‘every time of the day when I want to get something done’ sickness.”

He gives me one of those smiles that has his dimples showing and I want to kiss him. I want to feel his short beard between my thighs. I want him to pin me down to the bed again.

Stop it, Marley. That isn’t happening.

“I’m sorry. I can’t imagine how that must feel.”

I shrug because I don’t know what to say. I run my hands up and down my arms, then look at the large art deco clock on his wall. “It’s late. I should go.”

I stand quickly, grabbing my phone off the coffee table before rounding the couch toward the hall that leads to the

front door.

“Let me drive you.”

I shake my head. “It’s just a few blocks. It’s not a big deal. I’ll be f—”

“I wasn’t asking.” His voice comes out commanding and it reminds me of that night.

I turn around and look at him even though I want to avoid those eyes. “I can walk.”

“Fine,” he acquiesces. “I’ll escort you.”

“Silas,” I groan.

He walks up to me and gets so close to my personal bubble I don’t know if I should run or pull him into me. His smell is intoxicating, his presence makes my knees weak. But none of that matters because it’s not reality.

“I’m walking you. It’s late. It’s not safe.”

I roll my eyes at his tone and I see his lip twitch when I do it. I almost want to laugh. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” he sighs. “Do you want some of the food to take with you?”

I shake my head. “No, Willow is driving me back to Covington tomorrow.”

He nods and heads toward the front door, grabbing a hoodie off the back of a chair at the island.

We walk in silence the three blocks to Willow’s house. Which thank goodness he came with me, or else I would have gotten lost.

I pull the keys Willow gave me out of my hoodie when we climb the two steps to her door.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

Silas steps into my space again and I feel all the air leave my body. He’s so close I can feel his body heat against mine and more flashes of that night pop into my mind.

His voice is quiet as he speaks. “Marley, I know you don’t know me and I know that my words probably mean shit. But I want to be there for you. As your friend. I want to get to know you. At least so we can maybe co-parent this baby. I never thought I would be a dad. I never wanted to be one. But I also know life is precious. So I am making a promise to you here and now that I will be there. And if you need me, all you have to do is call. And I’m not talking about when the baby is born. From here on out, if you need me, you are welcome to call me, talk to me, and hash out everything you are feeling. Hell, if you need to stay here with me, you are more than welcome to.”

I bite my lip as I take in the sincerity of his words. Or the fact he knows I may need a place to stay at some point. I can only guess he knows more about my situation than he is letting on. “You really mean that?”

He holds out his hand. “I’ll shake on it. I promise to be there for you and the baby. In whatever capacity you want me there.”

I don’t know why I am agreeing to this. Why I think he is being honest and truthful, but for some reason, my cruel heart thinks it’s a good idea to accept his promise. “Okay,” I respond on a shaky breath as I reach my hand out and shake his.

“Good, give me your phone.”

I hand it over and he types something into it. I can only guess it is his number.

He hands it back to me. “Now you can call me if you need me.”

“Okay.”

“Good night, Marley.” He retreats and I watch him as he walks away. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding, then look down at my phone. He texted his phone and saved his number as “Sexy Baby Daddy.” I snort as I open the door to Willow’s apartment.

She rushes to the couch as I walk in, the curtains to her front window swaying as she holds a magazine upside down.

“I... ugh, didn’t know you were home.”

She licks her finger and flips a page, clearly not paying attention to the magazine. She looks up at me. “Oh, I just got here a few minutes ago. Where did you go?”

“To the store.”

She looks me up and down and I realize I have no bag to prove I went to the store.

“I... um... I wanted ice cream, but they were out.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh, come on, I know you definitely just saw Silas outside.”

“Silas?”

“Are you that talented you can read a magazine upside down?”

She looks down at the *People* in her hand, then tosses it next to her. “Fine. You caught me. But what the hell happened?”

I shrug.

“Girl, you better spill.”

I set the keys in my hand down on the table next to the door. “It was nothing.”

She purses her lips. “Nothing? You were just talking to your baby daddy outside and he was all in your space.”

I crack my knuckles. “I ran into him at the corner store.”

“And?”

I flop down into the chair across from the couch. “They were out of ice cream and he just happened to have some at his house. So I went there. Since he practically dragged me out of the store and made me.”

Her eyes go wide. “And?”

“We talked. That’s it. I see that look in your eyes. He had ice cream at his house and he ordered us dinner. And we

talked.”

“About what?”

I try to put my thoughts into words because I don’t know what to tell her. I don’t really know how tonight happened. How I let it happen. “Things. Then he walked me home.”

She raises a brow at me. “That’s it?”

“He... well, he told me he wanted to be a part of the baby’s life. Said he would be there if I needed anything.”

“Shut up.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Well, I guess someone opened their mouth and told him what was going on. My only guess is you told Saylor, who told him, and now I feel... well, I don’t know how I feel.”

“Are you going to let him?” she asks as she leans forward.

“How can I not, Willow? He’s the father.”

“So does that mean you guys are going to try and have a relationship?”

I laugh. “Uh, no. We’re friends. That’s it.”

“Hmm.”

“I mean it, Wil. If I need anything, I will let him know.”

“So crazy you ran into him.”

“You’re telling me. I never expected that.” I quit picking at my nails and look up at her. “Did you know he lives a few blocks away?”

She nods. “I didn’t realize it when I first signed my lease. But when Saylor helped me move in, I remembered the area.”

“So you told Saylor?” I ask her accusingly.

She stands up and walks over to me and runs her hand through my hair. “I didn’t mean to. It just kind of came out. She already knew something was up because her brother told her what happened when you went to his house.”

“Oh.”

She grabs my hand as she squats in front of me. “It doesn’t make things worse if others know. Honestly, it gives you more people to rely on.”

“I guess.”

“And it apparently made the douche come around, so don’t worry about it.”

I pull my hand out of hers. “I have enough things to worry about.”

“You are going to get through this, Mar. And you are going to be an amazing mom.”

“I sure hope so.”

“I know it.”

SILAS

I'm lying on Jackson's couch in his living room, tossing a stress ball into the air while he talks to Charlie on the phone. We had band practice earlier and I didn't feel like going home to sit in my lonely house. I love my place, but it's too big when I am there alone. Hence, why I always have parties or have the guys over. I really should just build a recording studio on the first floor, so we have somewhere to practice and record that's all our own. But when we were living in LA, there wasn't really a point in having a recording studio here. Roan has one back at his house in LA and that was where we spent a lot of our time. But now that we have decided to move back home permanently, one of us should really do some remodeling.

Jackson snags the ball out of the air above my head and tosses it into the corner. "So how's the baby?" he snickers as he sits in a wingback chair in the corner.

"If I had that ball still, I would have thrown it at you."

"That's why I took it."

I run my hands over my face. "Everything is good. She's doing fine."

"So you've talked to her?"

I didn't tell him about my running into her a few days ago. "Yeah, I have."

"Wow, I didn't think I would ever see the day that you would be a father."

“Me neither.”

“So did you figure out what you are going to do?”

I stare at his ceiling as I find my words. I told Marley I would be there for her and it took everything in me to say that, to decide that. I never expected this. I never wanted this. I grew up with a drug-addicted mother who forgot about me and my brother, Nolan, more often than not. But we found a way to survive. Mostly because of Jackson’s older brother. Funny that the vice that destroyed my mom was the thing that made us money to get where we are.

But I always told myself I would never have a family. Never put a child through what I went through as a kid. Of course this was before we became the biggest rock band on the planet. But I still never wanted to bring a child into my life. I have done too many terrible things in the past. I know that something could catch up to me at any given point and then I would have to live with abandoning a child.

I glance over at Jackson and he is patiently waiting for me to talk. “I’m going to be there for Marley and the baby. In whatever capacity she’ll let me. Hell, the girl doesn’t care about money or fame or any of that shit. She literally just wanted me to know.”

“I still can’t believe you seduced her. Charlie says she is a church girl. Her dad’s a pastor.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait till they find out about this.”

“They don’t know?”

I shrug. “Marley didn’t say anything. But she seemed stressed and I’m guessing they don’t know.”

He plays with the label on his beer as he watches me. “So you saw her?”

I nod. “Ran into her the other day at a convenience store. Guess she was staying at Willow’s house. Who apparently moved in three blocks from me.”

“And she is okay with you being in her life?”

I laugh. “Hardly. But I didn’t give her an option. I know she’s wary of me and everything that encompasses our lifestyle. But she reluctantly agreed.”

“You better not be doing this just because you want to fuck her again.”

“You really think I would do that, Jackson?”

He raises a brow at me.

“Okay fine. I would do that. But no, not with her. She’s different. Fragile. I guess I just feel bad about the whole thing. It could have been prevented.”

“I thought you said you used a condom.”

Shit. I haven’t told anyone this. And I know I am never telling Marley. “Uhh, well, one of the times I fucked her that night, the condom broke. Barely. I didn’t think much of it because every girl these days is on birth control.”

Jackson laughs demonically. “Bro, you brought this on yourself then. Glad you are stepping up.”

I nod. “It’s the right thing to do. Besides, if she lets me fuck her again, I wouldn’t be heartbroken about it.”

“You’re an ass.”

“Grade A.”

After spending the night talking shit, drinking beers, and messing around with some new songs Jackson was working on, I finally head home.

I yawn as I press the button for the driveway gate. I hop out of my SUV and lock it behind me as I head to the side entry.

The motion sensor lights come on and I notice a piece of paper stuck to my door.

“What the fuck?”

I jog a few feet and grab the folded piece of lined notebook paper. My mind a swirl of confusion as I read the words.

I know what you did.

MARLEY

I'm pruning my rose bushes and collecting flowers for my artwork when I feel my phone vibrate in the pocket of my overalls.

I set down my sheers and strip off my gloves before pulling my phone out. I have a text from Silas and I can already feel my heart rate picking up.

Silas: I was craving peanut butter ice cream earlier. Clearly, I forgot that someone ate all of it.

I feel the blush hit my face. Then I look around to make sure Mom isn't near me. She's been out here helping me with the garden today. And despite my being honest with her about the baby, it's going to take a lot longer for me to be honest with her about the father.

Marley: It's eleven in the morning. Is that what rock stars eat for breakfast?

I watch the dots appear on the screen.

Silas: Among other things.

Marley: Like what?

Silas: Use that dirty imagination, trouble.

I lock my phone screen and shove it in my pocket just as I hear Mom coming around to this side of the garden. I nearly bury my face in thorns, trying to hide the flush of my skin from my mom. I know exactly what Silas was talking about. I

bite my lip as I think of him having me for breakfast, of finally feeling the pleasure of someone's mouth between my thighs.

“Marley, I was just heading in to make some lunch... are you okay, baby? You're flushed.”

I nod my head as I chop away at some dead stems. “Yeah, just a hot flash.”

“Maybe you should sit down. Take a break. Don't want to add stress to your—”

I turn around abruptly. “I'm fine. Really. I just need some water.”

She eyes me curiously, like she doesn't believe me. At least she has no idea that it's from Silas's words. She just assumes, as always, that it has to do with my *delicate* state.

I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket as she hands me a water bottle from the ground.

“Do you have any cravings for lunch?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, well I'll come grab you when I'm finished.”

I just nod my head before turning back to the rosebush. When I hear the back door close, I walk over to a small stone bench near the ivy archway and pull my phone out as I sit down.

Silas: Don't tell me I scared you off.

Silas: Or are you doing something else?

Silas: If it's something else then I definitely want some pictures.

My cheeks turn as red as my roses when I read his messages.

Marley: I was trimming back my rosebushes. Get your head out of the gutter.

Silas: Your bush you say?

I shake my head and laugh.

Marley: Fine. I walked into that one.

Silas: So you like to garden?

Marley: Yes, it's one of my hobbies. Ever since I was a little girl. I used to spend the weekends with my mom in her garden. Of course back then, it was nowhere near the size it is now.

Silas: How big is it?

I snap a picture from where I'm sitting and send it to him.

Marley: It's around a thousand square feet now.

Silas: Damn. That belongs in a magazine.

I feel those dang butterflies in my stomach at his words.

Marley: I take a lot of pride in it. I make art out of the flower cuttings.

Silas: Really? What kind of art?

Marley: Framed flat lays and some epoxy work. I've just started working with epoxy in the last six months so I feel like a beginner.

Silas: Do you sell your work?

Marley: Yeah on Etsy.

Silas: That's pretty cool, Marley. I'm guessing it keeps you out of trouble.

I roll my eyes at his text.

Marley: I only seem to get in trouble when I'm around you so maybe I need to stay away.

Silas: If you say so.

I hear my mom call my name from the back deck, so I slide my phone back in my pocket and head inside.

I'm lying in bed, bored. There is still tension between Dad and me, so I try to avoid him as much as possible. Of course,

tomorrow is Sunday, so there will be no avoiding him with the daily church festivities.

Somehow I find myself watching music videos of Saints & Sinners. Interviews, awards shows. I feel a slight obsession with Silas coming on and I know it's wrong. He isn't interested in me like that. Yes, he's a flirt, but there can never be anything between us. We come from two different worlds. But I find myself picking up my phone and texting him.

Marley: Tell me about your tattoos.

I flip onto my back and stare at the ceiling. Not sure if he will answer me. I don't know him well at all, but I can imagine on a Saturday night, he is probably out with the guys partying. I try to push the thought of him with other girls to the side. It shouldn't matter. I agreed to be his friend. Why would he want someone like me? I don't want him. It's just the stupid hormones, right?

I jump when I feel my phone vibrate on my stomach.

Silas: What about them?

Marley: I remember the tiger on your rib cage like it was ripping through skin.

Silas: Did you memorize my body that night?

I could punch him.

Marley: Forget I asked.

Silas: You know some people get tattoos because they thought it was a good idea at the time.

Marley: Is that what all of yours are?

Silas: Most.

Marley: Then which ones aren't?

The dots appear on the screen, then disappear before reappearing again. Like he changed his answer.

Silas: Maybe I'll just have to show you sometime.

Marley: I don't think you being shirtless around me is a good idea.

Oh my gosh, did I really just type that?

Silas: And why's that?

Marley: No reason.

He doesn't say anything immediately, so I type out more words to change the subject.

Marley: Sorry to bother you. I am sure you are busy. Saturday night and all. I'll leave you alone.

I drop my phone on the bed, but it vibrates immediately.

Silas: Hold up, trouble. For one, I'm lying on a floaty in my pool milking a beer. No parties for me. And two, don't change the subject like that.

I try to figure out what to say since I totally did change the subject, but he texts me before I can answer.

Silas: I'm shirtless right now.

Silas: Wanna see?

I start to type no, but then a picture comes through. And he's not just shirtless. He's completely nude in his pool. At least he had the decency to not have his dick in the picture. But the picture is from his chest down, his nipple piercings prominent as the camera loses focus as it travels down one leg. I bite my lip as I take in his chiseled form. He's thick with muscle. His thigh bulging off the side of the floaty. The vee below his abs looks so delicious I wish I could lick him.

Silas: Either you fell asleep or you're over there drooling at my fantastic figure.

Marley: Drooling in my sleep maybe. That picture did nothing for me but make me fall asleep.

Silas: Want me to take another? I'll make sure to move the camera more to the right.

Marley: Nope. All good.

Silas: Well I showed you mine so you need to show me yours.

Marley: What are you talking about? You showed me your stomach and leg.

Silas: And my chest. Don't forget about the chest. So I think it's only right you show me yours.

Marley: Not happening.

Silas: Oh come on.

Marley: Nope.

Silas: Party pooper.

I laugh and realize I've had a smile on my face this whole time. I decide to give in and send him a picture but not of what he's expecting.

I snap a shot of me lying in bed from the same angle he took his picture. But I'm fully clothed in a matching pair of faux silk pajamas with plants on them.

Silas: Not exactly what I wanted but I'll take what I can get.

I laugh out loud.

Marley: Good night, Casanova.

Silas: I'm not the flirt. That is all you.

I snort.

Marley: Were you looking in the mirror as you typed that?

Silas: You're trouble.

Marley: Hardly. Night.

Silas: Night, Mar.

I set my phone on the nightstand and slither under the blankets with a smile on my face. I am totally not crushing on Silas Ford.

SILAS

I lie in bed at my house in LA and stare at the ceiling. We've been here for three days and I'm already tired of the city. I never thought that would be the case. I wanted to get out of Louisiana for years, but we were always stuck. As kids, Jax, Roan, and I had shit. We practically grew up one step above being homeless. My mom was a deadbeat drug addict, Jax's mom ran off on him and his brothers and left them with his abusive father, and Roan tried to escape his house to get away from the constant comings and goings of men his mom had over to turn some money.

We all wanted out. We thought moving to New Orleans would give us that chance. But then we got deeper into the underworld than we'd planned. I lost Nolan, gunned down in the street by some punk-ass kid. We used music as our escape. To give us some kind of freedom we didn't feel we had. And somehow, it turned into this. This wild and crazy life we don't deserve. None of us do. Wilder may have come from money, but his is just as dirty as the man we owe our lives to. And despite Riot making us huge, we wouldn't be anywhere without the debts we owed Carter West. The money he gave us, the prices we paid.

My phone vibrates next to me. It's not late, only a few minutes past eight. Wilder and Knox were going out tonight, but I refrained. Just wasn't in the mood.

I read a text from a girl that I fuck on occasion but ignore it. I don't know how she even found out I was here. Unless she ran into Wilder and Knox.

I have a few other texts that I don't care about and then my thumb lands on Marley's name. Sweet Marley. I don't know what it is about her, but she's addicting. My new favorite drug. And I haven't even touched her since that night. But I want to. The craving is there, the itch in my veins. She gives me a high I've never felt before.

And after texting her the last couple weeks I realize she is not the shy, timid girl from the night of the after-party. Yes, she is innocent as hell, but she's also funny and sweet. Her humor is sarcastic and perfect. She can tease me as much as I can her. And the way she won't swear, not even in a text, makes me want to force it out of her.

So I do what I told myself not to do when I was here, I text her. Because despite this craving to touch her, taste her, devour her. I know I can't have her. Even if she is pregnant with my kid.

Silas: LA sucks.

I go to open a social media app, but the three dots are on the bottom of the screen, letting me know she's typing.

Marley: I thought you loved LA.

Silas: So did I but after being back home for five months I realized I definitely don't miss this shithole.

Marley: It can't be that bad.

Silas: Have you never been here?

Marley: I've only left the state of Louisiana three times. And two of those were for church camp.

Fuck, she kills me.

Silas: Where else did you go?

Marley: Disneyworld for my fifteenth birthday.

Silas: You need a real vacation.

Marley: Newsflash. I'm pregnant. Not happening. Besides I wouldn't even know where to go.

I decide that once she has this baby, I am taking her on vacation. Or maybe at least pay for one for her. She needs to live a little and I know being stuck in her parents' house is not helping her. I decide to change the subject.

Silas: How's the cravings going?

Marley: Don't even get me started.

Silas: What disgusting combination are you craving now?

Marley: Just because it's disgusting in your mind doesn't mean it's disgusting in mine!

Silas: Yeah right. I bet you find it as gross as I do. Our little lemon has some weird taste buds.

I blink at my text. This is the first time I actually acknowledged our baby. Yes, I asked about her pregnancy but never have I said the word ours. It's always been hers or mine.

It takes her a few minutes to respond. Probably just as in shock by my words as I am.

Marley: Fine. You win. Pickle juice and yellow cake. Plain yellow cake that I drizzle pickle juice on. I have no idea why I crave it and I want to gag as it goes down but for some reason I feel satisfied.

I gag reading that text.

Silas: I think I just threw up in my mouth.

Marley: I blame you for this.

I smile at her words.

Marley: But I have been craving buffalo wings like it's no one's business.

Silas: Now this is a serious question. Ranch or blue cheese?

Marley: Blue cheese. One hundred percent of the time. Ranch is for pizza.

I laugh out loud at that. Fuck. This girl. Why does she seem so perfect? She is perfect, but I know I can't have her. I

pull up a food delivery app and click away before responding to her.

Silas: Ding, ding, ding. You just won a prize.

Marley: For answering the question the way you wanted? Lucky me. And what is my prize.

I don't answer her. I just wait for her to text me, knowing she will be ecstatic when she does.

I get up and head to my kitchen to grab a glass of water when my front door opens. Knox and Wilder are clearly drunk as they stumble in with Roan and Jackson on their tails.

“Why the hell did I give you guys the code for my door?”

Jackson loops his arm around my neck. “Why the hell are you a pussy-ass bitch and decided to stay in tonight after we finished wrapping our video shoot?”

I pull his arm off me. “Because I was tired. And didn't feel like partying.”

Roan throws a bag at me and I catch it against my chest. I look down at the white powder, then up at him.

“Start partying, man.”

I set the bag on the counter and Wilder grabs it, getting to work on separating lines out for all of us but Knox.

“Why?” I ask, clearly confused.

Jackson pulls a beer out of my fridge and cracks it open. “Because you wanted to sleep, you weren't there when Riot called. Apparently, all of our promotional shows and appearances have been paying off.”

I raise a brow at him.

“The label let her know that our presales have already exceeded our last album. And are climbing quickly. Everyone is digging our new music.”

“We haven't even released a single yet.”

“Fans have posted videos of promotional shows. The two songs we've let them hear have apparently blown people

away.”

“No shit?” I say in surprise.

“Guess we really needed New Orleans,” Jackson replies.

Knox snorts. “Yeah, sure, that’s what it was. We know it was all Charlie.”

The grin on Jackson’s face is undeniable. He’s head over heels for that woman.

Wilder hands me a rolled-up bill. Fuck it. This is amazing news. Maybe I should party tonight. I snort a line and then pass the bill to Roan as Jax hands me a beer.

My phone vibrates on the counter and I glance down to see a text from Marley. I open it up and smile. It’s a selfie of her with a chicken wing in her hand and buffalo sauce on her face.

Marley: I’m in heaven. Thank you.

I can’t keep the grin off my face as I type out a text to her.

Silas: Got to keep that lemon fed.

Marley: The lemon is very appreciative.

Marley: I’m surprised you know what size the baby is.

Silas: I might have looked a few things up.

“Dude, who has you smiling like that?” Wilder asks me as he makes to grab my phone out of my hand.

I pull away just in time. I haven’t told any of the guys yet. I’m just not ready. I want this to be my secret for a while.

But then Knox comes up behind me and grabs my phone before I can stop him.

“Who’s Marley?”

Wilder gives me a curious look. “My cousin’s friend?”

“Baby?” Knox asks.

Shit.

I look over at Jackson and he just shrugs before downing half his beer. Then he sits on a chair at my island and makes

himself comfortable. Obviously waiting for me to tell the rest of the guys my secret.

“Did you knock up Marley?” Wilder asks me. A mixture of anger and concern on his face.

Roan laughs. “Silas a dad? Yeah right. That guy wraps his dick up three times before he fucks anyone. He would never have a kid. It’s his worst fear.”

I sigh before finally saying something. “Yeah. Well, it happened.”

“Wait, you’re really serious?” Knox asks me as he hands me back my phone.

“Yeah, I am. And I would be happy if you all kept this on lock, including Riot. I know she will have a conniption and I don’t want the press to find out. I don’t want that for Marley.”

“How did this happen?” Roan asks.

Wilder speaks up. “That’s why Willow and Marley were at your house that day. When we had the meeting with the label about the tour.”

I nod.

“It happened the night of the after-party when we played at Talisman? When you were all over her?”

I nod again.

“What the fuck were you thinking, man?”

“I wrapped it up,” I stammer. “Don’t suddenly get protective over her. You don’t know her.”

“And you do?”

“Yeah, I do.” I stand from my chair and stand face-to-face with him. I’m surprised at how overprotective he is being of his cousin’s friend.

Knox puts his hand on Wilder’s chest and he takes a step back. “Look, I don’t mean to be an ass. But that girl isn’t one of us. She isn’t like my sister or my cousin.”

“I know.”

“She’s innocent and—”

“I know her background. I know who her family is. But that doesn’t change a thing. She’s still pregnant. And I’ll still be there for her, regardless of what you all may think.”

Wilder puts his hands up. “Sorry, man. I just... I don’t want trouble. We’ve had enough of it.”

I run my hands through my hair and nod. “I know.”

Jackson claps his hands once, loudly. “Well, now that everyone knows Silas is gonna be a daddy, can we all just go back to celebrating us? The band. And what we’ve done.”

Knox raises his beer. “Please.”

Wilder and Roan look at Jackson and agree.

I’m glad they know, but I’m also pissed about Wilder’s reaction. I party with them for an hour before sneaking off to my room. All of them drunk enough to not notice my absence.

I lie in bed and open my phone and find five missed texts from Marley. I feel terrible. I ignored her for over an hour while we were in the middle of a conversation.

Marley: I’m shocked. I don’t think you know how much that means to me.

Marley: And thank you for the food.

Marley: Me and the lemon loved it.

Marley: Did you fall asleep? It’s not even late there. Or you decided to party...

Marley: Well I guess I’ll talk to you later.

I feel like a dick. She doesn’t trust me. Not that I’ve given her a reason to. She still thinks all I do is get trashed and party. I guess that’s the image I’ve given off for years. Which is mostly true. I’ve cut back in the last few years, only going out a few nights a week. But when we were young and started to make it, it was like every night was a goddamn party. Booze, drugs, and all the pussy we wanted. Don’t get me wrong. I still enjoy it all, but I guess I’m tired. I want a break from it all. Which is why I didn’t go out with the guys tonight. That damn

loneliness creeps in slowly, yet quickly at the same time. A dark cloud slowly swallowing me up and dragging me into the abyss. And even though I hate the loneliness, being around people in this mindset is even worse. Or I end up drinking until I black out, to hide my emotions, my fears and regrets from myself. Even though I know there is no hiding them. They are always there. Deep in my core, like a sleeping dragon, waiting to wake up and wreak havoc on my life.

I decide not to text her back. It's late there, after midnight. I don't want to disturb her and I don't want to drag her down with me either.

MARLEY

I run my hands down the fabric of my lavender dress. It's new. I bought it for this barbeque. I never buy new clothes for a date, yet here I am, wanting to look my best for Silas. And I don't even know why. We aren't anything. And this isn't even a date.

But he asked me a few days ago if I wanted to come over for a small barbeque. I asked Willow if she was going and she told me she would talk to Saylor. When she didn't even know about it, it gave me hope that it really would be a small gathering. Of course that doesn't mean that I'll be any less awkward than I usually am. In fact, with fewer people, it will probably be more obvious how awkward I am. But I wanted to spend more time with Silas. Ever since he had those wings delivered to me last week while he was in LA, the butterflies that are sometimes in my stomach around him doubled. And I just felt like I needed to see him. I haven't seen him since he told me he wanted to be there for me. And I feel like I should make an appearance since he is being so nice about this entire situation.

I swipe on some lip gloss and fluff my hair and take one last look in the mirror. I grab a sweater off the chair in my bedroom and rush down the stairs to wait for Willow in the driveway.

"Where are you off to?" Dad asks me as I rush past the entryway to the living room.

I stop and tuck my hair behind my ear. “Just off to hang out with Willow.”

He takes his glasses off his face and rubs his eyes. “Be careful, please.”

I’m surprised he doesn’t say anything else. Our relationship has been rocky ever since he found out I was pregnant, and I am sure once he finds out that Kent is not the father, he will completely disown me.

“Of course, Dad. Just a girls’ day and night.”

“She will have you home in time tomorrow to prep for the luncheon we have in the afternoon?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t miss it.”

He gives me a curt smile. “See you tomorrow.”

I nod and head out the door and see Willow pulling up just as I walk outside.

“You excited?” she asks me as I get into her car.

“Umm, no. Why would I be excited?”

She gives me a look that says I should know why. “You are seeing baby daddy. Sexy Silas. Rock god with the hot bod.”

“Please don’t ever say those things to me again.”

She cackles. “Oh come on. I know you are excited to see Silas. I mean, he had food delivered to you last week. He knows about the size of the baby. You totally want to see his dick again. Up close and personal.”

My cheeks flame and I cover my face with my hands.

“And you put on makeup and dressed up.”

“Fine. I am excited to see Silas. We’ve been talking a lot, and it’s been nice. I like him. As a *friend*,” I accentuate. “But at the same time, I feel awkward being around his friends. I’m still the odd man out. I don’t fit in with that crowd.”

“You’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it. And you look nice. I think that’s the shortest dress I’ve ever seen you wear.” She snickers.

I look down and the dress is nearly all the way up my thighs. I shimmy in the seat to pull it down.

She grabs my arm. “Stop. I didn’t mean to make you self-conscious. You really do look great. And I bet Silas will think so too.”

I don’t have words for her, so I just bite my lip and smile.

So much for this being a small party. What turned out as a small gathering of maybe twenty people has now turned into at least fifty as the sun sets.

I should have known that this would turn into a full-blown party. I managed to feel at ease enough in the beginning. I spent most of my time with Willow and Charlie, Jackson’s girlfriend. I didn’t talk to Silas much. But I am okay with that. He would send me a smile every now and then and even a text or two to ask if I needed anything.

I’m glad I am still not showing, or else I feel like I would have been the center of attention. Although I am pretty sure the entire band knows from the looks they have been giving me all day.

A cool breeze fills the air and I make my way inside to find my sweater. I left it in the parlor room since I know it’s off-limits to most people. I pass the hall that leads to the pool table when I see a girl pulling Silas into the bathroom. The same girl that was flirting with him since she got here a few hours ago. The one he kept pushing away. Except now, he seems to want her.

I feel an emptiness inside of me when I see it. Even though I shouldn’t. We aren’t together. Not in a relationship. Barely even friends, but it hurts, nonetheless.

Despite my better judgment, I walk down the hall after him. I stand outside the bathroom door. I remember using it when I was here the other day.

I bite my lip, contemplating if I should open the door. But that's not me. I just don't barge in on someone. And what if they are having sex? I mean, he is the type.

When I hear a giggle from the other side of the door, something comes over me. Something that Marley definitely wouldn't do but maybe this lemon turned peach is egging me on.

I turn the handle, surprised to find it unlocked. I hold my breath, thinking the worst. That I let my foolish heart want something I could never have. But I don't see Silas having sex with the girl. He is snorting a line of cocaine off the bathroom counter.

"Who are you?" the girl asks with a pompous attitude.

"I—ugh..."

Silas takes that moment to look up. When his eyes meet mine I lose it. I really do try not to cry, but hormones are a bitch and the tears fall.

"Marley."

I turn around and rush out of the bathroom. I smack hard into the chest of someone stumbling backward a foot.

He grabs my arm to steady me. "You okay?"

I nod and try to get past him, but the hand that landed on my waist slips down to my ass.

"You sure about that? You look upset. I could turn that frown—"

"Get your hands off her," Silas commands from behind me.

The guy doesn't move his hands. "This your plaything, Silas? We could share."

Silas pushes me away from the guy and punches him in the face. "Get the fuck out of my house, Neil."

"What the fuck, man?" Neil says.

I go to speak, but Silas grabs my arm and pulls me down the hall to another room. He pushes me inside what looks to be his office and shuts the door behind him and clicks the lock.

“Marley...” His voice is soft.

I fold my arms over my chest, tears still cresting my cheeks. “You can’t do drugs around the baby.”

His face falls like he just realized what he did. “Fuck. Shit. I’m sorry, Mar. I wasn’t thinking. I... I know I need to make lifestyle changes. I fucked up.”

I nod and sniffle. “Sorry, I shouldn’t tell you what to do and maybe since the baby isn’t here, you should be able to do what you want.” I wipe my eyes and pull my hands back to see them covered in mascara. “I’m just a mess.”

“No.”

I raise my hands in front of me. “Yes, I am.”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean you’re right. I shouldn’t be doing drugs.” He walks up to me and rubs his thumbs under my eyes. “And you’re not a mess. You’re pregnant. It’s okay for you to be overly emotional.”

I pull my head away from his hands and take a step back as those stupid butterflies make an appearance again.

“Come on,” he says as he grabs my hand and pulls me into an attached bathroom to the office. “I’m done.” He pulls a bag out of his pocket and dumps the white powder down the toilet.

“I can’t believe you did that.”

“Well, you’re right. I shouldn’t do this shit. I shouldn’t be doing it either way. It could ruin everything and my old ass doesn’t need more stimulants.”

“Thank you.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “So did you follow me into that bathroom?”

I chew on my lip. “Well... I just thought...”

“What?”

I shake my head. I am not going to tell him I wanted to know if he was with another girl. “Nothing.”

He eyes me curiously before changing the subject. “So are you having fun tonight?”

I shrug.

“What’s wrong?”

I walk out of the bathroom and lean against his desk. “I just thought it was supposed to be smaller is all. Don’t like being around a lot of people I don’t know.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Well, it was supposed to be small. But then word got out and it was kind of hard to stop it. I knew I shouldn’t have let Knox and Wilder invite this girl they’ve been fucking. She always brings more people with her.”

My eyes bulge. “Wait, what? Like in as at the same time?”

Silas laughs. “Yeah, Mar. At the same time.”

My cheeks turn maroon and I choose just not to say anything about it. I can’t even imagine what that’s like. And I hate that my inner self is curious about it.

“Well, I should get back to the party. Do you need anything?” he asks me as he turns to leave.

I shake my head.

“Okay. I’ll see you outside then.”

I nod as I watch him walk out and shut the door behind him. I’m glad he dumped the drugs but at the same time, I kind of hate myself for demanding that he stop. I have no say over him. He should be able to do what he wants. But I also know that I could never be with a man who does drugs like that.

I sit around for ten more minutes messing around on my phone when I get a text from Willow asking where I am. I leave Silas’s office and head into the kitchen and grab a water before wandering down to the parlor room and grabbing my sweater.

I find Willow outside near the firepit and sit next to her. Silas is across from us with Wilder and Saylor. I am barely paying attention to what anyone is saying. I keep seeing Silas glance at me and smile and it's driving me crazy. I know he is just being nice. Wants to be sure I am having a good time. I get that he wants me to be comfortable with his friends since I am going to have to be once I have the baby. I need to be able to trust him and everyone else with it. But deep down, I do wish he would kiss me again. Touch me again.

I dart my eyes away from him and sip on my water, looking at the dancing flames instead

A few hours pass and I'm getting tired. I want to leave, but Willow is having fun with Saylor and I hate to bug her. I could just walk back to her house. Or maybe I can just go upstairs and lie in one of the bedrooms.

I'm ready to tell Willow my plan when the girl that Silas was in the bathroom with sits on his lap. He's pushed her away all night, but suddenly he wraps his arm around her as she leans in and whispers in his ear.

I hate the jealousy that takes over. The pang in my heart that upsets me. He's drunk. I can tell by the haziness in his eyes and the way he laughs more than usual. I hate those damn dimples that have been showing all night, causing my heart rate to pick up.

"You're frowning," Willow says to me.

"I'm tired."

She raises a brow at me, then glances at Silas. "Is that all?"

I stand up abruptly. My voice angry when I speak. "Yes."

I storm off, not wanting to deal with her or anyone, really. I make my way to the front of the house. I'm only up three steps when I hear Silas's voice behind me.

"What's wrong?"

I take a deep breath, then turn to face him. "I'm just tired. I feel nauseous. I just want to go home, but since that isn't really an option, I am going to lie down."

He walks up a step. "I'll drive you home."

I shake my head. "You're drunk."

He shrugs. "All the guest rooms are taken."

"No big deal. I'll sleep in Saylor's room."

"Yeah, but it's loud."

"Well I don't have many other options."

He takes another step up the stairs. "You could sleep in my room."

I take a step backward to the next step to separate myself from his body heat. "It's going to be loud in your room too."

"Not as loud. I can turn the music on and it blocks out most of the noise."

I raise a brow at him. "Are you just trying to get me in your bed?"

He takes another step up the stairs and gets into my space. His hands land on my hips, then slowly slide down to my butt. "Maybe."

"Silas," I sigh.

He pulls his hands off me. "I'm kidding. It's just the most comfortable bed in the house."

"Oh."

"And I'll probably be up most of the night, so you can have it to yourself."

I frown as I think about that girl outside and wonder if that is the reason he will be up all night.

He grabs my hand as he passes by me on the stairs. "Come on. I'll get you all set up."

I try to pull my hand from his, but he grips tighter. The damn butterflies returning as I think about the fact I will be in his bedroom. The last time I was in here was when I got pregnant. When he screwed me six ways to Sunday. I flush as he opens the door and pulls me inside. He hits a few light switches, lighting the room in a dim glow.

I twist my fingers as he walks across the room, closing the black velvet floor-to-ceiling curtains. He picks up a tablet off a nightstand and turns it on, then looks at me. “You can take your shoes off and lie down. Unless you want to keep staring at me.”

I swallow and avert my eyes when he says it, then kick off my shoes.

“What do you want to listen to?”

I look up at him. “Um, I guess indie rock or something.”

“Not church music?”

I roll my eyes at him. “Just because I grew up in the church doesn’t mean I listen to Christian rock and preach the Bible.”

“Whatever you say,” he chuckles.

I prop my hand on my hip. “I’m serious. I actually have always listened to indie and emo music. I’m more interested in pop culture and plants than I am in the gospel. I used to sneak alcohol into the house as a teenager. And I even own two sex toys. Thank you very much.”

Silas’s mouth drops open and I realize I just told him I own vibrators. I can’t really avoid him, so I make myself busy by grabbing the covers and pulling them down before sliding into the bed.

I look over at him since he still hasn’t said a word and find him smirking.

“You, Marley, are one very interesting creature.”

“I’m glad I can entertain you. Just turn on some Bon Iver and I’ll be good.” I turn over, facing away from him and pull the covers up to my chin. Within seconds the entrancing sounds of Bon Iver take over and I close my eyes to the music, willing myself to fall asleep.

But I hear Silas’s steps around the room. I feel his presence near me. When I open my eyes, he is squatting in front of me. “Sleep tight, trouble.”

He leans forward and I think he is going to kiss me but instead, his lips land on my forehead. I hold my breath until he leaves, then let it out.

Being around him is so much harder than I thought it was going to be.

MARLEY

I wake up surrounded by warmth. Silas was right. His bed is comfortable as hell. His silk sheets keep me cool and feel so nice on my skin. His comforter must be giving me just the right amount of warmth.

Then I shift my hand and it hits skin. Warm, muscular skin. Skin that I know is Silas's abs.

I blink open my eyes and find my face pressed into his chest. His arm is wrapped around me, his hand gently resting on my lower back.

I should move. Roll over and get up. But instead, I find myself snuggling into him. I like his warmth, his smell, his comfort. I shouldn't. But those damn butterflies are at it again, controlling me when they shouldn't be.

"Good morning." Silas's voice is hoarse and sexy as all get-out.

I look up at him. "Morning. I didn't even hear you come in here. I would have left."

He smiles down at me and I am pretty sure my insides melt. "You were sound asleep and snoring."

I bite my lip. "Oh."

"I actually tried to wake you when Willow left, but you were clinging to my pillow so hard you wouldn't budge."

"No I wasn't."

"You were. I figured you thought it was me."

I roll my eyes at him as I twist away from him. “In your dreams.”

“You did murmur my name a few times.” His words are laced with humor.

I grab a pillow and go to smack him in the face, but he grabs me and pins me to the bed.

“Were you dreaming about this? Maybe that night we spent together.”

His lips graze my neck but never actually kiss me and all I can think about is that night with him.

“You are so much trouble, Marley.”

“I’m not trouble. I don’t know how many times I have to say it. Besides, it’s not my fault I was taking up your bed. Weren’t you the one that said you were going to be up all night?”

His green eyes look into mine with so much intensity, I clench my thighs together. “I did. But most people left around three. So I came to bed.”

“You didn’t spend time with that other girl?” I curse myself for asking. I don’t know why I care. Okay, I know why I care. But I shouldn’t be letting on about the pang of jealousy I feel around him.

“Are you jealous, Marley Cole?”

I shake my head. I wish I could crawl under the covers and hide, but he’s straddling me and has me pinned to the bed. I don’t have any other options.

“I think you are. Your cheeks are pink. And I can tell by the way you are biting that lip that you are.”

“I’m not.”

He chuckles as he drops his lips back to my neck. His beard tickling the sensitive skin. But he still doesn’t kiss me. “You don’t have to lie.”

“I’m not ly—”

“Liar.” He laughs into my neck and then his tongue trails along my jawline. “You don’t have to worry about Ashley. Nothing happened.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“Mmhmm. Okay, whatever you say. But you should know Ashley has never been in this bed, and she never will be. I like you in my bed too much.”

“Now who’s the liar,” I mutter.

He pulls back and stares into my eyes. “You think I’m lying?”

I nod.

“Trouble.” He grins before grinding himself into my center, his hard-on pressing into me just enough to make me shudder. “If I was lying, I wouldn’t be like this. Fuck, I want ___”

The sound of my phone ringing cuts him off. We both look over at the nightstand and he lets one of my wrists go to grab my phone. “It’s your mom.”

I push him off me after I grab my phone from him and he laughs as he falls next to me. “Hello?”

“Marley, I really hope that you are on your way home right now.”

“What do you mean?” I ask stupidly and then look at the clock on Silas’s nightstand and see it’s after ten.

“You told me you would be home and be at the church by ten to help set up for the fundraising luncheon. And it’s nearly ten thirty!”

“Oh my gosh, Mom, I am so sorry. I just woke up. I wasn’t feeling that well last night. I slept horribly and didn’t fall asleep until after five. I guess I forgot to set an alarm.”

“You know this event is a big deal for your father. You need to be here.”

“Mom, I know. I’ll have Willow take me home right now. She must still be sleeping, too since she hasn’t come out of her

room yet.”

“Well get here as soon as you can. Your father doesn’t know you are late since he is working on some things with the school right now.”

“Okay, okay. I will be there as soon as I can.”

“You’re changing, Marley. And I don’t like it.”

I wish I could punch something right now. I hate that my mom is so stuck in her ways. So resistant to change. “It’s life, Mom. Things change, people change. And sometimes I oversleep because of this baby. You know that.”

She sighs and I know she is upset but trying her best to keep it in. “Just get here as soon as possible, please.”

“I will,” I say into the phone with frustration, then hang up without saying goodbye. I immediately text Willow and ask her to drive me home.

“Liar, liar,” Silas says with a smirk.

“Shut up. I... she would kill me if she knew I was here.”

“Would she now?” he asks as he props himself up against the headboard.

I groan. “Yes.”

“And why is that?” he asks me with a smirk on his face as if he already knows.

I drop my head. “She doesn’t know you’re the father.”

“And how would your parents take it if they knew?”

I blow a raspberry and lean into the pillows. “Not well.”

“Not well?” he asks mockingly.

“It’s not funny,” I whine. “You don’t even know what it’s like. My parents lost it when they found out I had lost my virginity. The pregnancy was a thousand times worse. And they think it’s Kent’s.”

“The ex?”

I nod. “If I tell them that I had sex with some random guy, they would have me committed. But to find out I’m pregnant because of some random guy, that’s even worse.”

“I’m just some random guy?” he asks and I shrug. He rests his hands over his chest. “I’m wounded.”

I smack his arm and he pulls me into him.

“Silas,” I argue as I try to get away.

“Marley,” he whispers as he holds me to his side. “You know I’ll be there for you when you tell them.”

I give up my fight and relax into his side. My heart is ecstatic over his words, but my mind knows they can’t be true, knowing he won’t stick around. “Thank you, but you don’t need to do that. I—”

“You just let me know what you want.”

I sigh at his words. I hate that he is being so nice, so supportive. But I just don’t think it will last. Once this baby starts growing and some pretty girl catches his eye, he will forget about me and the promises he made.

Luckily my phone dings blocking the thoughts that were threatening tears.

Willow: Why didn’t you text me earlier? I can’t drive you now.

Marley: I just woke up.

Willow: Why don’t you have your boyfriend do it?

Marley: Really Wil?

She sends ten laughing emojis and I could kill her. I feel like she is doing this on purpose.

Willow: I’m kidding. Although he was adamant about you staying in his bed last night. Awfully peculiar you slept there and not in a guest room.

Marley: Silas’s bed is more comfortable.

Willow: Is that what kids these days are saying now?

Marley: Oh my gosh just stop. Nothing is going on between us.

Willow: Fine. But there is so much sexual tension between you two you could cut it with a knife.

I ignore her comment.

Marley: Can you just pick me up and take me home? Late for another stupid church thing.

Willow: Oh the punishments of having sex and getting pregnant. I would love to but no can do. Got called into the office.

Please be lying, Willow.

Marley: It's Saturday.

Willow: Tell me about it. I have a big project that needs to be finished and the department thought today of all days was a good day. I can barely think with this hangover I have.

Marley: Ugh. What am I supposed to do now?

Willow: ASK YOUR BOYFRIEND!

I groan and drop my phone on the bed. She is absolutely no help. I don't care if she got called in to work. She would figure something out, but nope, she is convinced me and Silas should be together.

"What's wrong?" Silas asks.

I turn to look at him, his face etched with concern. "Willow can't take me home."

"Why don't you drive? Do you not have a license?"

"I do. I just don't like the highway." I try to keep my answer as vague as possible.

"Why?"

I close my eyes, the images of that day flashing before my eyes. "I just don't."

"Well something must have made you hate driving over the lake."

“It’s stupid,” I respond, not wanting to tell him about the guilt I live with nearly every day.

“Hey,” he says as he grabs my arm. “I don’t think it’s stupid. We all have fears. I have plenty of them.”

I eye him curiously. “Really? What’s one of yours?”

He runs his hand through his hair and bites his lip before his cobalt eyes meet mine. “I lost my brother when I was eighteen. He was the only family I had. I loved him more than anything. I feel like it was my fault that he died, that if I had been a better brother, he would still be here. And now I am scared that anyone I love will die too.”

My heart aches at his words. I can see the pain and sadness cross his face when he thinks about it and I suddenly feel bad for making him tell me. And I know I need to tell him my fear too.

I swallow down my hesitation. “I got into an accident when I was sixteen. And ever since then, it gives me anxiety.”

“On the causeway?”

I nod. “I needed to pick something up in Metairie. So I took the causeway. I was sixteen. I had gotten my license a month before. I wasn’t paying attention and I went to pass a slow-moving car and didn’t see the car in my blind spot. I clipped the front of them, causing them to roll. I slammed into the side of the bridge. I lost consciousness when my head hit the steering wheel. But the man driving the other car didn’t make it.”

“Shit, Marley.”

“I almost died too. A piece of glass from my windshield sliced my leg open.”

Silas’s hand moves to my thigh and pushes up my dress, his fingers automatically tracing the scar on my inner thigh like he remembered seeing it before.

“I hate myself for feeling guilty. The man driving the other car was drunk. Witnesses say he merged into the left lane at the same time I did, but he didn’t brake. I was never charged

with anything. But I live with the guilt every day that I was the reason a man died.”

Silas’s grip tightens on my thigh. “You can’t live with that guilt, Mar. It will eat you alive.”

I look up at him. “I could say the same thing about you.”

He shrugs. “I guess we’re more alike than we thought.”

I give him a weak smile as his thumb runs up and down my scar. We stare at each other and I can only guess he feels the connection that I do. Like maybe we were meant to meet. Maybe there is something there. And it’s not just my cruel heart playing games with me.

He pulls his hand away from me and clears his throat. “I’ll take you home.”

“You don’t have to. I can grab an Uber or—”

His hand cups my cheek, his thumb landing over my mouth, shutting me up. “It wasn’t an option, Mar. I’ll take you. I have nothing else to do.”

I flatten my lips and nod. “Okay.”

We drive mostly in silence to the church. But it’s a comfortable silence. I don’t feel awkward at all with him. He hums along to the music and drums his hands on the dashboard and steering wheel as we drive. I can’t help but watch him as my heart opens up more to the thought of having him. I know he wants me. But I’m just not sure in what capacity. Am I just a fling? Something fun for the time being? Or does he really want more? I would be a fool to think this could be anything more than what it is. He may be the father of this baby, but that doesn’t mean he will always be there. He’s a rock star. He’s gone a lot, whether for touring or promotional things. A life together wouldn’t be possible. Not in the way I was raised, in the way I want a family to work.

His fingers graze mine where they rest on the center console. “What’s on your mind?”

I look over at him. “Nothing.”

He frowns.

“Everything. It’s like my mind never stops these days. Between thoughts of you and the baby and my parents and what everyone will think. I just get so lost in my thoughts most days and it feels like I’m lost in a storm at sea, waiting to drown.”

He pulls into the parking lot of Dad’s church and parks far enough away from the entrance to not draw attention. He unbuckles his seat belt and turns to face me, cupping my face with his hands. “Talk to me, please. Anytime your thoughts are racing and you feel like everything is going to fall apart, just call me. I—I know we don’t know each other well. But I know enough about loss and struggling and fighting for your future. I’ll be there for you, Mar. No questions asked.”

My heart clenches at his words and I feel myself slipping further into a hole I shouldn’t go down. “Thank you,” I mumble.

He leans forward and presses his lips to my forehead. I want to grab his face and press my lips to his. Feel him again the way he felt the night my life changed. But I know I’m not what he wants. He wants to be my friend, not my lover, not my future.

He pulls away and gives me a soft smile. “Have fun at church. Don’t commit any sins, trouble.”

I laugh and roll my eyes. “You know I’m only trouble when I’m around you.”

“Better keep it that way.”

I blush at his words as I open the door. “I’ll see you around.”

“Until next time, trouble.” He gives me that smile that makes my knees weak, both his dimples showing.

I shut the door and head across the parking lot. My heart beating faster than I want it to. My foolish, hopeless romantic heart wanting things it can't have.

I turn around and look back to see Silas waiting for me to walk into the church. He waves at me and I wave back, a smile hitting my face as I turn back around and head for the doors.

I stop in my tracks when I see Kent leaning against the brick wall of the church, his arms folded over his chest. I didn't even see him when we pulled into the parking lot, his body shadowed by the awning.

"Hey Kent."

He lifts a brow at me, anger on his face I've never seen before. "Who was that guy?"

"Huh?" I ask, confused.

"The guy that just dropped you off."

Did he have binoculars? How the heck did he even see us all the way across the parking lot? "Oh, he's just a friend."

"He looks like trouble."

"He's not."

"Your dad would never approve of you dating some guy with tattoos and long hair. Where did you find him anyway?"

Seriously, did he have binoculars? There is no way he could see that from all the way over here. "He's Willow's cousin's friend. And I'm not dating him."

"He kissed you," he growls.

I roll my eyes. "On the forehead. It was nothing. And I don't know why you are getting so worked up about this."

"He looks like bad news. He's going to get you into trouble."

Yeah, well he did knock me up.

"There is nothing wrong with him, Kent. He's actually a really nice guy."

"How did he afford a Bentley?"

My anger starts to grow as I feel a need to protect Silas. “Really? You are going to judge him for having a nice car?” He shoots me a look of disbelief. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe you. Fine. You want to know how he can afford a Bentley? And all the other cars he owns? And a multimillion-dollar house in the Garden District? It’s because he’s in Saints & Sinners. He’s a rock star. He isn’t bad news. He worked his butt off to get the things he has.”

Kent scoffs. “A rock star? Really, Marley? Your dad’s going to love that.”

I clench my fists, my anger nearly palpable. I want to punch Kent in the face. “I’m not dating him, Kent. We are literally friends. He had a barbeque at his house yesterday with the rest of the band and Willow and their friends. Willow was going to drive me home, but something came up at work, so he offered.”

“I don’t like this for you, Marley.”

“What? That I am friends with someone that doesn’t belong to this stupid church?”

He looks appalled I called the church stupid but I’m blaming it on my hormones. Even though I think it has a lot to do with the time I’ve been spending away from it. Breaking free of a life I felt chained to from the day I was born.

“And I don’t care what you don’t like for me, Kent. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that we aren’t getting back together. So I can do whatever the heck I want to do.”

“Including dressing like a whore?” he asks as he gestures to my outfit.

I have on yesterday’s clothes since I never made it back to Willow’s to change. But I threw my sweater on over my dress. It may be a little short for what I normally wear, but it still hits midthigh. “You’re unbelievable. I stop giving you the time of day and you turn on me. Just like when you broke up with me.”

I grab the handle of the door to the church, but Kent grabs my arm. “You’ve changed, Marley.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should blame yourself for that. Now let go of me.”

He drops his hand from my arm and I storm inside, pissed off.

SILAS

I watch Marley's sexy-ass sway as she walks toward the church. I am going to hell, there is no doubt about that. But I am pretty sure I will be sent to the worst circle with the way I cannot get this woman out of my mind. I almost kissed her this morning. I had her pinned down in my bed, my nose in her throat, and my goddamn dick hard as fuck. I wanted to rip that lavender-colored dress off her. The one that was teasing me all night. She has no idea how sexy she is. She's sexier now than she was the night we met, the night I fucked her so many times because my dick couldn't get enough.

When she first came to my door, when she came to tell me she was pregnant, she was so simple. She wasn't the type of girl I expected to show up on my doorstep. And now that I know her. Now that I get to see her more, I feel something I shouldn't. I don't deserve someone like her. Someone good, when I am bad. I'm a criminal, a thief. I made my way through high school and after by selling drugs and running errands for Carter West. It gave us the money we needed to make Saints & Sinners gain a spot on the map, but the things we did, the things I did, are not something a good girl like Marley should be around. Yet, I can't stop thinking about her. And whenever she is around me, I want to do nothing but grab her, rip her clothes off, and fuck her.

That's why I finally gave in to Ashley's flirting last night. Let her sit on my lap, kiss my neck, rub my dick through my jeans. It gave me a reason to keep my eyes off Marley. And I saw the disappointment in her eyes when I let Ashley touch

me. Hell, the look on her face when she found me in the bathroom with Ashley doing coke was enough to make me want to get on my knees and beg for her forgiveness. I even flushed my shit down the toilet for her. I am in way too deep with this futile crush.

Of course that didn't stop me from forcing her to sleep in my bed. Lying that there were no guest rooms available for her. And it nearly killed me watching her sleep when I came back in the room a few hours later. I know she thought I was going to fuck Ashley, I saw the sadness on her face when I practically tucked her into bed. And Ashley sure as shit tried to get in my pants, but I had Jackson push her into a cab before I went to bed. I pulled Marley into me after nearly an hour of watching her sleep and telling myself not to do it, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to feel her warmth pressed to me. I wanted to rest my palm against her stomach where our baby is growing. And I was pleasantly surprised when I woke up in the morning and she had rolled over, her arm across my stomach, her leg hooked over mine. It felt right in a way I know it shouldn't. But I liked it. I liked it so fucking much that I nearly fucked her.

I bite my lip and grip the steering wheel, trying to get the thoughts to dissipate, but as she turns around and finds me still sitting in the parking lot, I can't do it. She is killing me and she doesn't even know.

I watch as she turns back around and heads for the doors of the church, once she is safely under the awning, I pull away and head back to the city.

I lied when I told her I had nothing to do today. We have band practice and I am late for it. But I wouldn't change a thing. I'm glad I drove her because those forty extra minutes with her gave me hope that maybe I'm not too much of a fuckup for her.

I pull into the parking lot of the warehouse we now practice at in the Bywater. I grab a water bottle as I jump out of the car and lock it behind me. I enter the code for the door and walk down the soundproof hallway until I reach our designated space.

I open the door, and the guys are working on the set list for the tour.

“So glad you could make it,” Wilder teases.

“Fuck off.”

“You get her home safely and untouched?” he asks.

I run my finger and thumb along my jaw. “Depends on what you mean by untouched,” I joke.

He flips me off. Still not entirely okay with the fact I got her pregnant. “Asshole.”

I shrug.

“I thought you were fucking around with Ashley last night,” Roan says.

Jackson laughs. “He tried to use her to keep himself from being around Marley. Dick is head over heels for that pussy.”

“Fuck off,” I tell Jackson as I punch him in the arm. “I’m not head over heels. And just so you know, I didn’t even touch her last night.”

“Last night, yeah. But what about this morning?” Wilder asks.

“Or this morning,” I add in.

“Did Silas Ford really not touch a woman in his bed?” Knox jokes.

“Y’all need to stop ganging up on me. Shit.”

They all laugh and then start talking about the set list. We get it planned and spend the next few hours practicing and I manage to keep Marley off my mind. Mostly.

I swallow down the cold beer as I float in my pool, remembering the last time I was in here and the almost dick pic I sent to Marley. It was fun teasing her. And I know she enjoyed it just as much. I finish off my beer, slide off the raft

and swim over to the cooler I left on the side of the pool. I pop open a new beer and down half of it. My thoughts on Marley, as usual. No matter what I do, I can't seem to get her out of my damn head.

It's been a few days since she was here. And I want her in my bed again. But this time, I don't think I can keep my hands to myself. Well, let's be honest, I haven't. But I won't just tease her this time. No, the next time she is in my bed, there will be no stopping me from taking her again and again.

I grab the whiskey bottle next to the cooler and take a large swig. I thought getting drunk would keep her off my mind, but that's clearly not the case. I tried to get Jackson to hang out with me tonight but he was taking Charlie on a date. So I resorted to the next best thing. Booze.

I jump back on the floaty and grab my phone out of the built-in cup holder.

Silas: You know if you ever want to show up on my doorstep so you can sleep in my bed and cuddle with me you can.

I figure she's asleep since it's nearly midnight, but I see her texting me back.

Marley: Not happening.

Silas: But you seemed to enjoy it the other night. You wrapped your arms around me and snuggled into my chest.

Marley: I think that was your imagination.

Silas: You do remember waking up like that, don't you?

Marley: It seemed like you wanted to touch me so bad that night that you probably pulled me into you.

I laugh. I did do that, but it was her that wrapped her body around mine.

Silas: Believe what you want.

Silas: But if you do want to come over...

Marley: Oh my gosh, Silas. I am not coming over.

Silas: Maybe not tonight.

Marley: Maybe not ever if you keep asking.

I take a sip of my beer and smile.

Silas: My gate code is 5436. In case you want it.

Marley: You're ridiculous. It's not happening. Besides, you know I won't drive there.

Silas: I just meant in case you spend the night at Willow's. My bed has to be better than a pullout couch.

I smirk at my text and wish I could see her face. I know she is probably blushing, dropping her head so her hair hangs in her face so I can't see it.

Marley: For someone who seems to have no problem with women, you are trying awfully hard.

Silas: Is it working?

Marley: No.

Silas: Damn.

I reread her message and realize she called me out for my antics.

Silas: Wait did you just call me a manwhore?

Marley: (laughing emoji)

Marley: Took you long enough. Are you drunk?

Silas: It's possible.

Marley: I'll take that as a yes then.

Silas: I was bored.

Marley: Well you enjoy your night but I need to get to sleep.

I frown at her text. I was enjoying our conversation. I find myself enjoying our conversations more and more.

Marley: And don't make some comment about me sleeping in your bed.

I laugh out loud. I was ready to type something just like that.

Silas: Fine. I won't say anything more about it.

Marley: Good.

Silas: Tonight. Tomorrow may be a different story.

Marley: Tomorrow you will look at your phone and wonder why you asked me.

I may be drunk, but I don't think I'll regret texting with her.

Silas: Doubtful. But I will let you go. Good night, beautiful.

She doesn't respond to me and I wonder if it's because I called her beautiful. She doesn't take compliments well and I hate it. But I'm also not in a place where I should be calling her beautiful. She isn't mine. And while anyone could say that to her, we both know it has a different meaning from my mouth.

I toss my phone back in the cup holder and finish off my beer. I start to paddle over to the side of the pool to grab another one when I see a shadow dart between my cars under the carport.

How the hell did someone get past my gate again?

I pick up my phone and check my security app, but it's not showing anything. I climb out of the pool and make my way across the grass to the carport. I can't see anyone. I even check the handles of all the vehicles to make sure they're locked. I check under them, but no one is there.

There is no place to go from here. The path toward the house is wide open with a motion sensor floodlight. The carport backs up to the eight-foot spiked fence. There is nowhere to hide.

I make one more lap around the cars and even cross the area to the gate, but the floodlight comes on like it should. I scratch my head and wonder if I am seeing things. I'm slightly

hammered, so it could just be the alcohol. But something inside is telling me it's not.

MARLEY

I had a doctor's appointment yesterday and everything was fine. I'm at fourteen weeks. I asked if it was normal that I wasn't showing yet, and she let me know it was, but the next couple of weeks would probably change that.

I updated Silas, I'm not sure why. I know he wants to be in the kid's life, but it's not even born yet. He shouldn't care. But he does. He actually got mad that he couldn't be with me. He had to fly to New York for some promotional things. I was shocked when he told me he wished he were with me. He even asked when my next appointment was so he could make sure he was here for it.

I still don't know what to think or how to feel a day later. My mind is telling me to be smart about all this while my heart is jumping at the chance to spend more time with him. And I hate the constant battle. I can barely concentrate on anything.

I have a handful of specialty orders to make and ship to customers. And I'm working on some epoxy pieces right now. I've seen beautiful pyramids with flowers frozen in them by other artists and I want to make something similar.

I made molds of the different flowers I plan on setting in the epoxy. So it's like the flower is inside itself. They take a lot of time but so far, what I have made has turned out well. I decide to take pictures of them and put them up for sale just to see what the interest would be.

I yawn after spending a few hours doing that, ready to tackle the orders I need to pack, when I hear yelling coming

from downstairs. I have no idea what's going on. Mom was out having dinner with some girlfriends and got home just a bit ago. It's not common for my parents to fight and it has me curious enough to sneak down a few steps to find out what is going on.

I freeze when I hear their conversation.

"Did you know about this?"

"Peter, of course not. I would have told you. I would have sat down and talked with Marley. This sounds out of character. Are you sure it's true? Who told you?"

"Kent did when I ran into him earlier today."

"How does he know?" Mom asks. "Marley has been avoiding him."

My dad clears his throat. "He saw them kissing in the church parking lot when he dropped her off the other day. Didn't she tell you she had been with Willow?"

I sneak down a few more steps, trying to keep myself out of view.

I see Mom nod. "Yes, Willow was the one who picked her up."

"How long has this been going on then?" Dad's voice grows louder with every word.

Mom throws her hands in the air. "How am I supposed to know? She never lies to us."

Dad paces the living room. "Before. She never lied before. But now she seems to be lying all the time. Having sex with boys and hanging out with rock stars. She'll be an alcoholic or drug addict if she continues these behaviors."

Mom puts her hands on her hips and stares down Dad. "Peter, don't jump to conclusions without talking to her."

"She is just going to lie again!" he yells.

I clench my fists. Anger throbbing in my veins. Why is he so mad that I am doing something a twenty-year-old would do? He had to have known at some point I would give up

being the good girl, always doing what they say, living under their roof. I can't stay innocent and naive forever.

"You don't know that!" Mom yells back.

I can't take it anymore. I hate that they are fighting over me and the lies I told. Well, the information I've omitted.

I walk quietly into the living room, both their backs toward me, but then the hardwood floors creak.

"Marley," Mom says, surprised. I can see the flush in her cheeks and I'm not sure if it's from wine or anger.

Before I can even say anything, Dad cuts in. "Did some rock star drop you off at the church the other day?"

I nod my head.

"And how the hell did you end up in some rock star's car?"

I look back and forth between my parents. "I was at his house the day before." I pause and look at Mom. "And all night."

Mom's mouth drops open in shock and Dad's turns red with anger.

"What in God's name were you doing at a rock star's house?" he yells.

I swallow my fear and try to let the anger take over. They are being judgmental. Thinking just because Silas is some rock star that he is going to be a bad influence, going to change who I am. "He was having a party. Both Willow and I were invited since it is her cousin's band."

"You told me you were having a girls' night," Mom says,

"I lied," I respond quietly.

"Why?" she asks me.

"Because if I told you the truth, you would have told me no."

"You're damn right," Dad cuts in.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at him since I know that won't go over well. "I'm twenty years old, I should be able to make my own decisions about what I do or don't do."

"Not when you live under my roof!" he commands. "Next thing you know, you will be doing drugs. Did you drink at this party? You do remember you are pregnant."

I clench my fists. "I'm not an idiot, Dad. And I didn't forget I'm pregnant. I was just hanging out with friends."

"And kissing them?" he adds in.

"Oh my gosh. I wasn't kissing Silas. Kent made that up. He is trying to get back at me for not getting back together with him."

My dad looks at me sternly. "And why would Kent lie to me?"

"Because he's a dick," I blurt out before I can stop myself from saying it.

My dad sighs. "Marlene, you have been putting yourself in a lot of bad situations lately. First your virginity, then your pregnancy, and now this rumor about you and a rock star. You need to get your head straight. And the first step should be getting back together with Kent and finally telling him he is going to be a father."

"I'm not doing that."

"Marley," Mom sighs. "You need to."

I think I am losing my mind. All my secrets sitting on my tongue, ready to fall out at any moment. I knew the time would come, but I still don't feel ready, I'm still not sure about telling them the truth.

"I'm ending this now," Dad roars. "I'm calling Kent."

I watch in horror as he pulls out his cell phone. I reach for him and knock it out of his hand. "Dad, no!"

He looks at me in shock, not believing that I threw his phone to the ground. "What is going on—"

"He's not the father!" I yell.

“What?” Mom gasps while Dad’s face turns red with anger.

I bite my tongue in shock that I just yelled that out. That my parents can now see how much I’ve been lying to them.

“Marlene, you took an oath with me and with God that you would not give your body to another man until you were married.” Dad’s voice is eerily soft, the kind of voice you hear only when you know you are in big trouble and the gasket is about to blow.

“Yeah, well I’m an adult, and I make decisions based on what I want.”

Dad’s jaw clenches before he speaks. “Decisions based on what you want? You want to be an embarrassment to this family? Not following God’s path, getting pregnant, hanging out with rock stars. Who are you? You are not the daughter I raised.”

I lose it. I hate being sheltered. Hate being expected to do the right thing all the time. Hate not being good enough for my family because I make my own decisions. Words explode out of my mouth at a loud volume and I don’t care that I don’t hold them back. “If you can’t handle that I made bad choices or the fact I am friends with a rock star then I might as well tell you the whole truth and see how you like it.” I stand up straighter, not letting the fear of the truth take over. “That rock star who dropped me off. His name is Silas and he’s the father of this baby. Yes, your precious daughter had a one-night stand with a rock star and got knocked up.”

“Marley, that’s not a funny joke,” Mom says quietly.

“It’s not a joke! Kent and I broke up at the end of September. This baby is fourteen weeks. Do the math!”

“Marley,” Mom says my name again.

I look over at my father, waiting for the fallout. But he just stands in silence. “I don’t want to hear about it from you guys. I don’t want you to tell me to pray on it. Or spend more time in the church. Or find a way back to God’s path. I just want you to support me and my decisions.”

Dad finally speaks up. “He’s a rock star, Marley. You really think he is going to be there for the baby?”

“Why is everyone so judgmental? You don’t know him. You don’t know the stress this has put on him. But he’s accepted the fact. He is going to be in this baby’s life.”

“You mean to have your child surrounded by drugs and alcohol?” The grit is back in Dad’s voice. And I know the calm before the storm is just about over.

“No. That’s not it at all—”

“Marlene, we have supported you in this... but this is unacceptable,” Dad says with disappointment lacing his words.

“And I didn’t plan it. It was a mistake! Why can’t you just support me in this? It doesn’t matter who the father is.”

“Well, is he going to marry you?” Mom asks from the chair she’s collapsed into.

I almost want to bark out a laugh, but I hold it in. “Oh my gosh, no. I’m not getting married to someone just because I got pregnant.”

“You’ve been reading the Bible your entire life. You know that’s not how God wants it.”

I look over at Dad with defiance in my eyes. “Well you can believe your God, Dad. I’m just going to live my life.”

“Marley,” my mom shouts. “What has gotten into you?”

“I’m just tired of living according to you guys’ plans.”

My dad looks at me with a stern face. “It’s God’s plan.”

“Well then God was the one who decided I get pregnant.”

Dad’s voice goes back to shouting. “No, you were irresponsible.”

That’s probably true, but it doesn’t change the facts. “I’m twenty years old, Dad. I made a mistake. Isn’t that how people grow up?”

He shakes his head at me. His silence speaks volumes.

Instead, Mom speaks up. “Willow has changed. Hanging out with her has changed you. Hanging out with these rock stars. They don’t have the best reputation.”

“You don’t know them. Reputations can be deceiving.”

“Marley, we just need to figure out what your next step is. Maybe a lawyer. This man needs to pay child support.”

I look at Mom. “Are you serious right now? I just said he wants to be a part of the baby’s life.”

“For now,” Dad cuts in. “Until he sees how hard it is to be a parent.”

“He wouldn’t abandon this baby.”

“And how do you know that?”

I am not getting into what he told me. “I just do.”

“You are being naive again, Marlene.”

“No, I’m being real. I know him, I know—”

“You’ve known him for a few months. That doesn’t mean you know what will happen in the future.”

I groan in frustration, knowing this conversation is going nowhere. I stomp over to the kitchen and grab my keys off the bowl on the counter.

“Where are you going?” my dad shouts.

“Out.”

My mom walks up to me, but I hold my hand up to stop her. She sighs. “Be careful.”

I just nod and storm out of the house, getting into my car and pulling out of the driveway. I don’t even know where I am going. I just couldn’t be there anymore. I couldn’t let them tell me what decisions to make with my life. I know that Silas might not be there in the future, that maybe it all seems easy now. But I also know what he went through growing up. The neglect he got from his own family. I know he wouldn’t abandon this baby the way he felt abandoned.

But maybe my parents are right and I don't know him. What if it's all an act? But it can't be. He wouldn't have told me those things if he didn't mean them. And even though he is a rock star with a terrible reputation, he has never been that man to me. Well, besides the day I told him I was pregnant. But he was different after that. He kisses my forehead. He texts me nearly every day. He flirts with me. He wouldn't be doing all that if he just wanted to sleep with me again. Not when I am carrying his child.

I wipe tears from my eyes. I know Silas and I know his integrity. My parents don't know him. They were right to disagree with me, but it hurt. They treat me like a child and maybe I am one. I still live at home. I do everything they ask of me. But maybe it's time I stop. Grow up. I'm going to have a child of my own and I need to be able to support him or her.

But how am I going to do that? I need a real job. I might make decent money selling my art on Etsy, but that isn't enough to support me and a child. I need to find somewhere to live. I need so many things. Maybe my parents are right. Maybe I can't do this.

A car honks at me, causing me to jump out of my thoughts. It's then I realize where I am. I'm driving on the causeway into New Orleans. I sniffle as I wipe snot and tears from my face as my heart rate picks up. What was I thinking? I don't remember getting here. I don't remember leaving my neighborhood. My mind has been a disaster. I shouldn't even be driving.

Another car flashes their brights at me as they pass. That's when I notice I'm driving fifteen under the speed limit. I clear my head as best I can and grab my phone to dial Willow.

"Hey Marley," she answers.

Her voice makes the tears start again.

"What's wrong?"

"Th-they know."

"Who knows what?"

I wipe the tears from my eyes and go back to the death grip on my steering wheel. "Kent saw me with Silas the other day.

And he told my dad. They know the truth. I had to tell them. They know Silas is the father.”

“Oh shit.”

“I just don’t know what to do.” Another car zooms past me and honks.

“Are you driving? Did they kick you out?”

“No. I left. And I just got into my car and I don’t know how I ended up on the bridge.”

“Shit. Marley, I’m not home.”

“What?”

She mutters something to someone in the background. “I’m on a work trip.”

I knew that. “I forgot.”

“Well you can sleep at my house if you are almost to the city.”

“Okay.”

“I’m so sorry, Mar. I am at a business dinner and stepped out for your call. But I need to get back to it. Are you going to be okay?”

I whimper into the phone.

“Fuck, I wish I was there. I know this is hard. I’ll be home in two days. Stay at my place for as long as you need.”

“Thanks, Willow.”

We say our goodbyes just as I make it off the causeway. Somehow I make it to her house through the shaking and anxiety of driving. But when I pull my keys out of the ignition, I realize I grabbed the wrong set of keys. This is the backup set without her apartment key on it.

I groan and drop my head to the steering wheel. Why is this happening to me? Where the heck am I going to go now? I can’t go home. And not just because I don’t want to. I am pretty sure I may have a heart attack from the anxiety if I attempt to cross the causeway again. I could take the long way

around Lake Pontchartrain, but that's also something I don't want to do right now.

I close my eyes as I try to take deep breaths. Silas is only a few blocks away, but he's in New York for some publicity stuff. I wish I had Saylor's number.

Then I remember that Silas had given me a code to his gate a few days ago. I am pretty sure he was drunk texting me, his flirting way more intense than ever. I don't want to be rude and just go over there, but it's my only option. And he did tell me I could come over whenever I wanted, but I think that meant when he was there.

I start my car again and pull out onto the street. I make a few wrong turns but eventually find his massive property. I park across the street and take a deep breath before getting out of the car.

I chew on my lip as I cross the street and make it to his front gate. I find the code he gave me in his text and pray it actually works. When the gate beeps and I hear the click of the lock, I breathe a sigh of relief. The tears start again, a mix of happy tears I have a place to be and sad tears over the hot mess my life has turned into.

I use the same code for his front door and walk into his large, empty, dark home. An alarm sounds but shuts off within a few seconds. I find the panel on the wall and decide I should turn it on. I know his gate is secure, but for some reason, I don't like the idea of being in this house alone.

I wander into his kitchen and grab a bottle of water before lying down on the couch and pulling a blanket over me. I let my tears take over. Let my thoughts fill my head. I have no idea what I'm doing or what I'm going to do. I somehow manage to fall asleep in a state of overwhelming anxiety.

SILAS

I slam the door shut of the green room. Security doing a shitty job of keeping groupies away from us. Trust me, we all are down for a quick fuck sometimes, but we always promised we would never do it at a venue. We do have a post-stage ritual we've always done. And no one is allowed in the green room for it. Not Riot, not Charlie, not Saylor. It's just us guys as we make a toast to the ones we've lost and the crimes we committed to get where we are. We aren't proud of our pasts, but we can't forget what got us here.

After our ritual, I fall onto the couch. I'm exhausted as fuck. We flew out to New York City yesterday for some press with MTV, then we had an interview with a few magazines and a late-night dinner with the record executives based out here. Then this morning, we hit more television press, a late show recording, and finally, the promotional concert tonight. Luckily, it's short sets. Riot's idea, of course. But the fans go crazy for them. This is the third one we've done. They are in smaller venues and only hour-long sets. No crazy arena shows. They remind us of how we started and we love doing them. But after all the interviews, it's exhausting.

"Please don't tell me we need to make an appearance at any clubs tonight," Wilder mutters into his beer as Riot walks into the green room.

"Nah. You guys are off the hook. I know it was a crazy two days," she answers as she taps into her iPad. "I have confirmation your plane will leave tomorrow at two, so y'all

can sleep in and do whatever the hell you want tonight. But you all look like you want to crash.”

“I feel old,” Jackson groans. “I swear I hit thirty and now I can’t go at it all day long.”

I jerk my head at Roan and Knox who are sitting next to me. “If these assholes ever answered questions in the interviews, it might not take it out of the rest of us.”

Knox punches me in the arm as Roan talks. “Yeah well we are nowhere near as charming as you. In fact, I am pretty sure you were flirting with the host of the morning show this morning.”

I smirk at him. “She loved it.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out. A few texts are on my phone. But then I notice a notification about my security system from an hour ago.

I click on the app and see the gate and door were unlocked with a guest code I have. My spine stiffens, thinking it has to do with the weird shit that has been happening, but how the hell would some possible stalker get my gate code? They’ve never used it before.

I click on the camera screen and my heart drops from my chest when I see Marley unlocking my front door. Tears are on her cheeks and I can tell she’s upset, she’s visibly shaking. Immediately I wonder how the hell she got into the city. She hates driving across the bridge. In fact, it gives her anxiety. She told me as much last week. What happened to her when she was sixteen.

“Shit,” I mumble. If she is there, she must have driven. I pull up her number and call her, but she doesn’t answer. I know she’s at my house. She armed the system when she came in and hasn’t left.

“What’s up?” Jackson asks me.

“I need to go home.”

“Marley?” Jackson whispers to me and I nod.

I must say it loud enough that Riot looks up from her iPad. “We aren’t leaving until tomorrow. And the label won’t approve you using the plane.”

“Then I’ll buy a ticket on a domestic flight.”

She raises a brow at me as I stand from the couch, crossing the room to her. I tower over her five-foot frame, but she gives me a look that makes me feel like she’s the most powerful person in the room.

“Something is going on. You’ve been weird lately. And as your manager, I need to know.”

I sigh and run my hands through my hair. “You know I am always willing to let you in on my shit, Riot, but not this time.”

“Fine. If that’s how you want it to go. But I am sure your publicist would love to know what the hell it is you’re hiding. Because I sure as hell know something is going on and I have a feeling it involves that girl that came to your house during our meeting with the label. Willow’s friend. The same girl who was at your barbeque. Who you let sleep in your bed.”

I cannot hide anything from this woman. I swear she is clairvoyant.

Jackson comes up behind me. “How about I talk to you about what’s going on and you let Silas go home?”

Riot looks between the two of us and I know she won’t let me leave until I tell her. She looks around me at the other guys in the room and they all start playing with their phones. Obviously trying not to be the one to tell her.

“You all know whatever it is that Silas is hiding and you haven’t thought to tell me?”

Wilder chimes in. “You could ask my sister, she knows.”

“Silas Benjamin Ford, you better tell me what the hell is going on right now!” Riot’s voice commands the room and I feel myself shrinking backward.

I sigh, knowing I need to tell her before this somehow gets out to the public because I know she will make sure our PR

team does whatever they can to keep it under wraps.

“Marley is pregnant.”

Riot opens her mouth, then shuts it before speaking, clearly at a loss for words. “The quiet innocent daughter of a pastor? You knocked her up?”

I nod.

“Silas!” she shouts. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“He obviously was thinking with the wrong head,” Wilder jokes.

Riot shoots him a glare. “You all know?”

We nod in unison.

“And she hasn’t threatened to go to the press or—”

I cut her off. “She didn’t even want me in the kid’s life. She just wanted me to know.”

Riot purses her lips. “And what is happening now with you two?”

“We’re friends.” Jackson snorts next to me and I wish I could punch him in the face. “But something is wrong and I need to get home.”

Riot studies me for a few seconds, then nods. “I’ll see if I can arrange a private plane to get you home tonight. I don’t want you flying domestic. It could start rumors and I’m not in the mood to kill stupid rumors. But you better tell me everything that is going on soon. From the beginning.” With that, she huffs and walks out of the green room, dialing someone on her phone.

I run my hands over my face, waiting for someone to say something.

Of course it’s Wilder. “Well, that went better than expected.”

I flip him off then pace the room as I try to reach out to Marley again, but she isn’t answering my calls or texts. No one says anything to me for ten minutes as I think of anything

I can do to find out what's going on. Maybe Saylor can check on her.

“You think something is wrong with her?” Jackson asks me.

I shrug. “She showed up at my house, crying. So I don't know what to think. She wouldn't just show up there. She is hesitant about our friendship.” I glance down at my phone and still nothing. “Fuck it. I'm just going to the airport.”

Riot walks into the room as I say it. “You know you should be happy I have so many connections. I have a driver ready to take you to the airport. I have a friend whose private jet is here. He got it cleared to take off in two hours.”

“I could hug you, Riot.”

She holds up her hands. “Please don't touch me. I don't want to get some disease from you. Pray to God that girl doesn't.”

I hug her anyway, picking her up off the ground. “You love me, diseases and all.”

“Maybe don't say that out loud,” Knox chimes in.

I set Riot down and head out the door without another word.

It's nearly two in the morning when I finally get back to my house. I pull through the gate and park my Bentley before heading into the house.

I start to head toward the stairs when I hear soft snores coming from the couch. I find Marley curled into a ball on the cold leather, wrapped in a blanket that's more decorative than anything and not enough to keep her warm with the slight chill in the weather.

I peel the blanket off her and lift her into my arms. I head straight up the stairs and to my room. She murmurs and I think she is waking up, but her eyes stay closed. I set her down on

my bed and she blinks up at me, looking confused as she sits up.

“Hey,” I whisper.

She brushes her bangs out of her eyes and I see tears start to form.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I ask as I kneel on the floor and cup her face, wiping her tears away with my thumb.

“I’m so embarrassed. Sorry I just showed up. I just...” she trails off as she closes her eyes.

“Don’t be sorry you showed up. I gave you a code to my house for a reason.”

She snorts. “Yeah, for an entirely different reason.”

“You mean you didn’t come over here for my dick?” I tease.

She shakes her head and I can see the smile trying to break free on her face. I’m happy I can change her mood.

“What happened?”

She blows a raspberry. “All hell broke loose.”

“Shit.” I know that can mean only one thing. Her parents know.

“Yeah, well I guess Kent saw you drop me off last week at the church. And he made it seem like we were making out in the car. Well, he didn’t like it when I told him who you were and that we were just friends. I can only guess he was pissed that I was spending time with you and not him. And he told my dad. I’m guessing some kind of revenge because I kept turning him down.”

“So your dad thinks you’re dating a rock star?”

“Yes. Well, I told them we were friends, but then I told them the truth. That you’re the father and not Jesus-loving Kent. And then I just kind of blew up on them and told them I don’t believe in their God, and this is how my life was supposed to go, and I’m trying my best here and not trying to

fall apart. Then they said I was irresponsible and you needed to marry me or pay child support and that you wouldn't—"

"Hey, hey, hey," I cut off her rambling. "Don't listen to them. They may be your parents, but that doesn't mean they are always right. They don't see the clear picture, they just see it from your side." And they have no idea that I have feelings for their daughter that I shouldn't have.

She sniffles as I run my hands up and down her thighs. "Yeah, well it's hard to try to get them to understand, so I just left. And I had nowhere else to go. I didn't even know what I was doing. I just grabbed my keys and left. I didn't even know I was driving here until I was on the bridge. And then Willow told me she wasn't home and I didn't know where else to go. I'm sorry, I just wasn't thinking."

"I told you, you're always welcome here."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you meant it. Why would you want me here?"

I run my hands up to her hips and I don't even think she realizes I'm touching her. "Because I like your company, Marley."

"I'm not that exciting."

"You don't have to be exciting to be around me. Besides, I like your sarcasm and your inability to swear."

A smile breaks across her face this time and it does something to my heart.

"I can't believe you drove here."

A shiver runs down her body and I find her hands and squeeze them. "When I realized I was on the causeway, I freaked out. A few people might have honked at me and I was trying not to panic any more than I already was."

"But you made it here. In one piece. I would say that's progress."

She nods, then bites her lip. "I thought you were in New York."

“I was.”

“I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow.”

I smile, knowing she pays attention to every word I say. “That was the plan. But then I got the alert that you were here and I was worried. So I made sure I got back here as fast as I could.”

She snaps her olive-green eyes to me. “You didn’t have to change your plans because of me. I shouldn’t have even come here, but I grabbed the wrong keys and didn’t have keys to Willow’s house and I just... This is stupid. You were working and I—”

I pull her mouth to mine to shut her up. She has so much self-doubt and anxiety that she doesn’t see what’s right in front of her. That I came here for her.

She pulls away from me. “What are you doing?”

“Kissing you.”

“Why?” she asks softly.

I smirk at her. “Most people don’t ask why someone is kissing them.”

Her eyes search mine as her hands hold on to my wrists that are framing her face. “I thought we were just friends.”

“Yeah, I’d rather not be,” I say honestly before diving back into her perfect mouth. Her soft, plush lips that fit mine perfectly. I press my tongue past her lips and she finally stops resisting me. Her own lips kissing me back.

And I can’t get enough of her. I stand up without breaking our kiss and lift her up so she is lying on the bed. I press my weight into her as her arms wrap around my neck. I leave a trail of kisses down her neck before running up the other side, whispering all the things I’ve wanted to do to her since that night three months ago.

She moans into my ear. Her body pressing into mine. Her hips grinding against my raging hard-on. But I don’t want to fuck her tonight. I just want to show her I care. Show her that I mean every word I said. I don’t want us to be friends. I’m not

entirely sure what I want with her. But I don't want her to think she is just here for a good time. No, I want to explore every inch of her decadent body. I want to worship her. I want to give her so many firsts because I know she hasn't experienced a lot. And I don't just mean sexually.

Fuck, this girl does something to me. I've never wanted a relationship. Never wanted to be tied down because that shit never lasts. But she is doing something and she has no idea.

Her legs wrap around my hips and I chuckle against her mouth. "For someone who was just questioning me kissing them, you seem to be very into this."

She grinds her hips against mine again. "Blame the hormones."

"Mmm, I think I'm going to like these hormones."

She giggles and then presses her mouth back to mine.

We make out like teenagers for what seems like hours. Both of our lips are swollen when we finally slow down. Her eyes are drooping and I know she's tired. She's had a stressful day, and here I am making out with her until after three in the morning.

She yawns and covers her mouth. "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. It's just late and I'm tired."

I smile at her. "Then we should go to sleep."

"You mean..."

I know she probably thinks I want to fuck her, but I am perfectly content with what just happened. Although all bets are off tomorrow.

"I've been up since six a.m. I need about ten hours of sleep to recuperate from my day," I joke as I grab the waistband to her leggings and pull them off.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

I pull her sweatshirt off until she is just sitting in a bra and panties. "You really want to sleep in your clothes?" I ask her

as I stand and pull off my T-shirt, tossing it somewhere behind me.

She purses her lips, then goes to speak but just closes her mouth. I laugh as I head into my closet and strip off my jeans and find her a T-shirt to wear.

I walk out in my boxer briefs and I don't miss the way she is staring at me. Or should I say my semihard dick? I toss her the shirt. "This will be more comfortable."

She swallows and finally looks up at me. "Thank you."

I nearly laugh when she takes her bra off and tries to keep her chest covered. But I let her do her thing as she slips my T-shirt on over her head. I pull back the sheets and slip inside them. She follows suit, crawling up the bed and pushing the blankets down with her feet.

When her head hits the pillow, I pull her into me. Our mouths are inches apart and it takes everything inside of me not to pick up where we left off.

"Thank you," she says softly. "For everything you've done for me since I kinda messed up your life."

I rub my thumb over her lip before cupping her cheek. "It takes two people to make a baby. It's not your fault, Marley. It's just something that happened."

She nods as her eyes start to flutter closed. "I mean it though, Silas. Thank you. You—it means a lot to me."

I kiss her gently one more time before she falls asleep. I didn't miss how she corrected herself. Those words she was going to say playing over in my head.

You mean a lot to me.

I smile. My heart feels content. I can't take my eyes off her. She really is beautiful in the most simple of ways. Her large eyes and round cheeks. The freckles that speckle her nose. I spend the next few minutes counting the freckles on her cheeks as I slowly fall asleep too.

MARLEY

I wake up alone. And I wonder if last night was a dream. But when I run my hands over smooth silk sheets, when I feel my swollen lips. I know it's not.

Silas was a gentleman last night. Not the man who ravaged me at his party. And I liked that side of him. Liked feeling his lips on mine. The gentle way his hands explored my body. His comforting words.

I've been imagining kissing him for weeks and it finally happened.

I flip over onto my back and smile. Happiness and warmth fill my chest, overtaking that heart-wrenching pain from last night.

I get out of bed and use the bathroom, then decide to look for Silas. As I make my way to the stairs, I hear noise from the kitchen and the salivating smell of bacon.

I skip down the stairs, feeling giddy. I want to kick myself. Tell myself this is too good to be true. That whatever happened between me and Silas last night was just a fluke. But when I walk into the kitchen, the butterflies erupt in my stomach. His hair is knotted in a man bun on top of his head. He's shirtless and barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of gray sweats as he turns some bacon in a pan.

He looks up and sees me and a huge smile hits his face, those dimples popping out and I swear I feel my knees going weak.

“Hey, gorgeous.”

Yeah, I think I might just collapse.

He walks over to me and pulls me against him. His hands sliding under his T-shirt I put on last night and cupping my butt. “Did you sleep okay?”

I nod.

“Good.”

I can’t take my eyes off him. My hands slide up his biceps and make their way around his neck. “Thank you for letting me stay here.”

He laughs. “Well, I didn’t have much of a choice, considering you were already in my house.”

I feel the blush hit my cheeks as I glance away.

“But I liked the surprise.”

I look up at him and all I want to do is kiss him. Actually, I want more than that. I want to feel him touching and kissing every inch of me. I want to feel him inside of me, something he didn’t give me last night. I want to relive that night three months ago over and over. I want him to command me, pin me down, choke me.

I feel confidence I never had before as I stand on my tiptoes and bring my lips to his. And I’m not gentle. I’m rough as I attack his mouth, digging my fingers into his hair. He answers back by tugging me closer to him as one hand slides up my back. The other still on my butt as his fingers gently graze my core.

“Silas,” I mutter into his mouth.

He groans at my plea, and suddenly, he has me on top of the island. His mouth taking over, his control back. I scratch my fingernails down his chest and he pulls my hands away.

“You dirty girl. Here I was making you breakfast. Bacon, eggs, pancakes. But I can see you clearly want something else for breakfast.”

I lean into him and bite his lip, tugging it into my mouth. I don't know what it is about him, but he unleashes an entirely different person inside of me. Something I never knew I had in me. "Maybe I want you for breakfast."

He lets go of my wrists and grips my hips, dragging me to the edge of the counter. "Maybe I want you for breakfast too."

I kiss his neck, moving my lips to his chest. "I thought when you kissed me last night you would have..."

"Would have what?" he asks teasingly as his thumbs glide down the crease between my thighs and core.

"You know," I mumble.

He grips my chin, pulling it away from his chest. "Say it."

I bite my lip. "Have sex with me."

He chuckles as he brushes a kiss across my lips before moving his lips to my ear. His thumb slips under my panties and swipes through my core. "Marley, Marley, Marley. So sweet and innocent. The girl who doesn't swear." His thumb pushes inside of me just enough to tease. "I don't want to have sex with you. I don't think you want that either. Say what you really want me to do to you."

He pulls back and looks me in the eyes, his thumb between my thighs stills.

I swallow but keep my gaze fixed on his dark sky eyes. "I...I want you to f-fuck me."

"That's my girl."

Then his lips are back on mine, devouring me. I wrap my legs around his waist, wanting him as close as I can get him as I push his sweats down. I run my hand over his thick cock, my fingertips brushing against his piercings.

"You keep fucking doing that, I am going to bend you over this counter and fuck you so hard you'll have bruises on your hips for a week."

I moan at his words because that dirty girl inside of me, the one wanting to break free, wants that. So I grip him harder,

sliding my hand up and down his length.

“Fuck, Marley.” He pulls his mouth away from mine and lifts me off the counter enough to peel my underwear off. He presses my legs wide open and licks his lips. “I’ll get back to eating you later, I just need to be inside of you.”

I pull on his hips to bring him closer to me and he chuckles as I do it.

He brushes the head of his dick along my folds and I moan as the cool metal of his piercings hits my clit. “I need to get a condom.”

“Why?” I blurt out.

His gaze lands on mine.

“I’m already pregnant.”

His gaze turns devious. “Mmm, I think I like this side of you the best.”

“Me too,” I mutter.

He wraps a hand around my throat and kisses me with so much fervor my toes curl. His dick teases my entrance until I am begging him. “Silas, please.”

He chuckles against my lips as he lets go of my throat. “As you wish.”

His hand drops to my hip as his other hand grips his cock before slamming inside of me.

I scream at the intensity, at the slight pain of taking all of him so quickly. My head falls back and he licks up my neck. “Are you okay?”

I nod.

“Use your words.”

“Yes,” I let out on a gasp.

“I can’t go slow, Marley. I haven’t fucked someone bare in a long time.”

I nod.

“Tell me to stop if it’s too much.”

“Okay.” Although I don’t think I will. I want to feel him, all of him. I want to know what it’s like when he loses control.

He growls as he thrusts inside of me again, harder than the first time. Both his hands are on my hips now, pulling me into him with every thrust. I feel like a rag doll, unable to keep myself sitting up straight as he ravages me. I can feel his piercings inside of me, massaging me in the deepest of places. My whole body feels on fire as I fall back against the counter.

He drags my body down until my butt is hanging over the counter and he is holding me up with his arms, the angle making him hit even deeper inside of me. I don’t even feel the orgasm coming until it hits me and I am screaming his name.

“That’s right. Take it all, trouble.”

I mutter and groan incomprehensible words as he owns my body. His grip on my hips is hard, his movements rough, and just when I think he is about to come, he pulls out of me and lifts me off the counter before setting me on my feet and flipping me around.

His hand is on my chest, his fingers pinching my nipple through the T-shirt I have on. His hard cock slides between my ass cheeks as his lips meet my ear. “I wasn’t lying about those bruises.”

Then suddenly, his hand is on my back, pushing my chest into the counter as he slams into me from behind. He’s rough, my hips are definitely going to bruise from slamming into the marble. But at the same time, I feel like I am about to black out in pleasure.

He grips my hips hard before pumping into me one last time. I feel the warmth of his cum inside of me and I wiggle my ass against him. He drops his head to my back without pulling out. Just him sitting inside of me as I rest my cheek against the island.

I don’t know how long we stay like this. Both of us breathing hard. His lips kissing the skin where my shirt lifted up from his thrusts.

He eventually stands up, pulling out of me. I groan at the loss of him. Then he pulls me up and spins me around, his lips taking mine, kissing me savagely like he can't get enough.

When he finally pulls away, I'm breathless and my knees are weak again and I can feel his cum dripping down my thighs.

"I think I burned the bacon."

I glance over to the stove and see the crispy blackened pieces in the cast-iron pan. I look up at him. "It was worth it."

He smirks. "Fuck breakfast."

I'm about to ask him what he means and then I am suddenly thrown over his shoulder. He turns off the stovetop before carrying me out of the kitchen and upstairs.

I've been here for two days and we've done nothing but lie around, eat takeout, and make love. It's been complete bliss, nothing I ever felt with Kent and I wonder if I'm getting ahead of myself. If this is too good to be true.

I look over at Silas as he sleeps, his hair falling in his face, his scruff grown out a bit more than I am used to. The blanket over us is slipping down his hip and I can't help but lick my lips as I stare at the tip of his cock. I haven't tasted him yet. Well, I gave Kent a fair share of blow jobs, it was not something I ever enjoyed, but for some reason, with Silas, I know I would like it. I want to taste him, lick him, feel his cock so deep in my throat I choke.

I don't have time to act on my thoughts because his eyes open and he catches me looking at his hard dick.

"Do you do this every morning, or is today special?"

My cheeks turn red as I look away from him. Despite my newfound dirty girl inside of me, I haven't put my mouth to him and he hasn't put his mouth to me. Except for that quick lick the first time we had sex.

“Do you wanna suck my cock?” he asks with a straight face and it makes my face turn even redder. “Or should I finally have you for breakfast?”

I swallow hard at his words, but he takes no time slithering down the bed as he presses kisses to my bare stomach. He pushes my thighs apart and inhales and I quickly squeeze my legs together.

“You know, it would be much easier for me if you kept your legs open.” He smirks at me, that damn dimple popping out, and I throw my hands over my face to hide my embarrassment.

He crawls up my body and pulls my hands from my face. “What’s wrong, Mar?”

I shake my head, too embarrassed to say.

His hands glide down my body and over my breasts, squeezing them before his fingers find their way to my center. I squirm at his touch and clench my thighs even tighter.

He figures out my apprehension. I can see it in his eyes. He smiles at me before leaning down to kiss me. “Has no one ever gone down on you before?”

I suck my lower lip into my mouth and shake my head.

“Babe, you don’t need to be embarrassed. I remember that one taste I had of you and I don’t know why I’ve waited so long for more.” He runs his thumb along my bottom lip, pulling it out of my mouth. “Tell me to stop if it’s too much.”

I nod as he slides back down my body, leaving a trail of kisses as he goes. When he pushes my legs apart, I let him. He buries his nose between my folds and inhales and I want to pull him away, but I need to trust him.

He blows a cool breath across my folds before his tongue slides between them. I gasp at the feeling of him, it’s not like I remember from that first night. That was quick and over before I knew it. But this... this is something else entirely.

He licks and sucks, pulling my clit into his mouth so hard I can’t help but moan as my body lights on fire. His fingers

tease my entrance, pushing slightly in but never fully entering me. His tongue then meets his fingers, dancing at my entrance before he fully sticks his tongue inside of me, his fingers moving to my clit. I thrust my hips up at the sensation. I feel like I am floating on a cloud as his tongue works magic on me. I've never felt so weightless yet so on edge at the same time. His tongue glides back through my folds and circles my clit as his fingers dive into me, rough and hard, the complete opposite of his gentle tongue. My body feels like it's going to explode. I grab his hair and drag his mouth harder into me. His beard scratching the inside of my thighs. He chuckles against my clit and the vibrations hit every synapse in my body. I feel myself falling over the edge of pure bliss just as he bites down and sucks hard on my throbbing bud.

I scream so loud I am sure the neighbors can hear me. I ride his face. Every ounce of embarrassment leaves me as I squeeze every ounce of pleasure from this man as he devours me.

“Holy fuck, Silas. Fuck, fuck. Fuck.”

He pulls away as my legs fall open and my breathing is rapid, my chest rising and falling so fast. I look down at him between my legs and he looks up at me, smiling, his mouth and chin coated in my pleasure. “Bad girl. Swearing like that. And trying to ride my face. What has happened to you?”

I groan. “You did this to me.”

“Mmm. Maybe so. But I can't wait for you to ride my face for real next time.”

“What do you mean?” I ask breathlessly.

He just smiles at me and slides up my body, his hands cupping my face. “You'll find out,” he says just as his lips drop to mine, letting me taste the salty sweetness of myself on his tongue.

I grip his hair as he kisses me, and then suddenly, he slams inside of me. Hard and fast. I scream at the intrusion. But I take it. I take all of it. Because these moments with Silas are my favorite. When he lets go, when he isn't gentle. When he

isn't acting like the charming and flirtatious man he is in public and turns into the savage he is in these private moments.

I grip his arms and watch his face. His eyes are closed, but I can see the pleasure he feels written across his face. The way his mouth drops open just a bit with every thrust, the way his eyes pinch tighter when he twists slightly and hits a place inside of me with his piercings that causes me to clench.

I slide my hands up his arms and into his hair. My lips graze his neck, tasting the saltiness of his skin. I moan as the piercing at the top of his cock grinds into my clit. He opens his eyes and when his gaze meets mine, my entire body is ready to explode. His eyes are soft and tender, like there is a longing deep inside of him, like he needs me more than he knows. And I really hope it's true because I need him. I hate to admit it. But I do. I need his smile, his jokes, his charm. I need it all because it's the only thing keeping me afloat. And I pray the feeling is mutual.

His lips drop to mine and he kisses me with such intensity I explode around him. He follows soon after, then drops his forehead to mine. His hand cups my jaw and his thumb runs up and down my cheekbone. We don't say anything. Both feeling the connection we have between us. I feel tears start to form in my eyes as we stare at each other. I want to blame the hormones, but I know it's more than that.

"Marley," Silas whispers against my lips before capturing them with his own.

Eventually he pulls away and collapses next to me on the bed. I curl into him and he wraps an arm around me.

SILAS

Marley stayed here for a week. A week of firsts for her and for me. Never have I spent that much time with one girl. Not even my girlfriend in high school. One whole week of undivided attention with Marley. I had a couple of practices, but she spent the day at my house either reading or floating in the pool. But when I was home and it was just the two of us, we fucked like rabbits. On the kitchen island, the dining room table, the pool table, against the wall, in the shower. She seemed so happy and content, relaxed. She spent most of the time in one of my T-shirts. After a few days, I even got her to drop the underwear. It gave me easier access. Of course, I didn't even want to buy it for her to begin with, but she insisted I go to the store and pick her up a few items.

I couldn't believe that douchebag of an ex of hers never went down on her. Because once I did, I couldn't stop. I ate that pussy for breakfast every day and Marley was always ready for me, never shy about spreading her legs after the first time. One day she gave me a blow job in the shower and I nearly lost my mind. I thought I was going to have to teach her that too, but when she dropped to her knees in front of me after teasing my cock with her hand, she took as much of me down as she could in one long suck. I had to use the wall as support as she deep throated me, sucking and pulling so hard on my dick and playing with my balls I exploded down her throat before I even knew what was happening. And she took it all. She swallowed down every last drop, then looked up at me with those gorgeous green eyes as she stayed kneeling on the floor and my dick was instantly hard again. I hauled her up

and slammed her chest into the shower wall before fucking her from behind.

She told me she had to leave since she had orders to catch up on and was falling behind with her business. Not once did she talk to her parents. Ignoring all the calls. She did let them know she was safe and staying at a friend's through a text, but that was it. I wanted to take her home. Make sure the conversation with her parents went smoothly, but she insisted she could do it on her own. That it was probably better for me if I wasn't there.

She did text me that night and let me know she was okay. Her mom apologized for what was said and how worried she'd been. Her dad was a different story, still angry, but at least he was speaking with her.

And now I am dying to see her again, taste her again, fuck her again. She was going to come over this past weekend but then agreed to do some church thing. I couldn't blame her for staying home. After the revelations about our baby and who I am, she needed to do as much damage repair with her family as possible.

But her birthday is in a few days and there is no way in hell we aren't spending it together. And by that, I mean naked all day.

Silas: Good morning, beautiful.

I wait for her to text me back. She is usually awake by this time. I head into my gym and decide to get my workout in while I wait for her response.

Marley: Morning. How are you?

I smirk as I send my next text.

Silas: Starving.

Marley: Then go eat something.

Silas: Baby, the only thing I want for breakfast is not here right now.

I know she's blushing. She always does. And I was happy to see it didn't disappear when she got more comfortable with

sex.

Marley: You have a one track mind.

Silas: I just love your pussy that much.

Marley: You're crass.

Silas: I'm honest.

It takes her a few minutes to respond and when she does, she tells me she finally has a bump. I drop my weights and FaceTime her.

“Show me,” I tell her the second she answers.

“You are crazy. You can barely even see it, but I noticed. It took long enough to show up.”

She stands in front of the mirror in her room and flips the lens, then lifts her T-shirt. I can't tell from the front, but when she turns to the side, I can see the smallest bump protruding from her lower abdomen.

I can't help but smile as a few different emotions hit me. Shock, pride, fear, worry, regret. “That's our baby.”

She nods as she turns back to face the mirror, her free hand rubbing over her stomach. “It is.”

She has tears on her face and I wish I was there so I could touch her, hold her, comfort her.

“I guess I need to start buying new clothes now.”

“I told you the other day that your tits are getting bigger and you need new shirts.”

She laughs. “That is not at all what you said. You said my breasts were getting larger and I should walk around naked. I was the one that said I needed new shirts.”

I shrug. “Semantics.”

“You're ridiculous.”

I run my thumb along my lip as I watch her, getting an idea. “Lift your shirt higher.”

Her eyes snap up in the mirror. “Why?”

“Humor me.”

“Silas,” she groans.

I hold back a grin. “You have a baby bump now. I want to see if those tits got any bigger.”

She rolls her eyes at me, then sets the phone down. When she picks it back up, she is completely nude except for the cheeky panties she has on. Her nipples are hard as she faces the mirror, giving me the perfect view.

“Happy now?” she asks.

“Fuck no. Now I wish I was there so I could suck those rosy buds into my mouth while I slide my fingers between your thighs.”

She moans. “Please don’t talk about that, Silas.”

“Why?”

She bites her lip as her fingers trail between her breasts, causing my dick to stir. “Because I’ve been so horny the last few days. It just comes out of nowhere. I wake up wanting your head between my thighs. At lunch, I get the need to feel you inside of me. Before bed, I am literally dying with need. It’s unbearable.”

I smile at her. “Sounds awful. You could come over.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t. I am still catching up on orders from last week.”

“Well, will you come over here for your birthday on Friday?”

“You remember?”

I nod. “Of course I do.”

“Okay,” she says softly.

“Good. Now what are we going to do about you now?”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

I lick my lips as I take in her tits and the small baby bump. “Are you wet?”

She nods.

“Show me.”

She glances to what I imagine is her bedroom door, then slides her hand over her stomach and down between her legs. Her mouth parts slightly as she runs her fingers through her center. My hand finds its way into my shorts as she slowly rubs herself back and forth.

“Let me see.”

She pulls her hand out and holds two fingers up to the camera. I groan at the sight of her slickness coating her fingers.

“Taste them.”

“Silas,” her voice comes out scratchy and stern.

I give her a look of dominance. “Taste them,” I grit out.

She slowly lifts her fingers to her mouth and sucks them in. Her tongue flicks out between her pink lips as she tastes herself.

“How do you taste?”

“Salty.”

“Is that it?”

She shakes her head. “Musky.”

“Mmm. Now imagine it’s my mouth licking those fingers clean. Devouring them. Just like I would devour that pussy if I were there right now.”

She groans as her hand drops from her mouth and slides back down her body. I’m mesmerized as she slides them between her legs, my cock leaking precum at the sight.

“Lie on the bed,” I command. “Prop the phone up so I can see you touch yourself.”

I watch as she does exactly as I say, no objections. She grabs a pillow and I assume she uses it to prop the phone up. Then she peels her panties off. She surprises me when she turns around, bending down to pick them up, putting her

plump ass on display and giving me a peekaboo of her wet cunt.

She tosses her robin's-egg blue panties at the phone and I chuckle as they land over my view. I wait impatiently for her to pull them off and when she does, I am greeted by her pussy spread open in front of me.

“Fuck, Marley. I have turned you into a vixen.”

“I told you I'm horny all the time,” she groans as she slides her fingers into herself.

“Shit,” I murmur as I shove my shorts down and sit on a bench with my dick clasped firmly in my hand. I rub it up and down, pulling on it every so often as I watch Marley finger herself. I didn't think she would do it. And if she did, I thought I would need to give her instructions, but she is a pro, working her fingers just how she wants them.

She starts panting and I know she is close.

“Circle your clit,” I tell her as I feel my balls tightening.

She moves her fingers up and starts rubbing at the sensitive nub. She moans and says, “I wish this were you doing this.”

“Same, babe.”

I hear a soft sound that sounds like knocking and Marley suddenly sits up quickly, the phone falling to the side. I can still see her and her legs are still spread, her juices are running down her center and toward her ass.

“Yeah, Mom, I'll be down in a minute.”

I hear mumbling from the other side of the door.

“No, I'm fine. Don't worry about me.”

I chuckle, knowing her mom is on the other side of the door as she masturbates in front of me. This girl is something else.

She picks up the phone and looks at me, her face red with embarrassment. “Oh my gosh, I thought she was going to come in here.”

I am so close to coming, but I want to watch her do it before I do. “Well, she didn’t. Now finish yourself off, woman, so I can come.”

She bites her lip. “I don’t know if I can now.”

“Babe, I just had a front and center view of your pussy. I know you’re soaked. And so close to the edge. Just pretend it’s my tongue lapping you up, sucking on your clit, fucking you with my fingers.”

She groans and throws her head back as she drops her hand back between her thighs. She sets the camera back down. And I watch as she falls apart from her fingers and my dirty words. When she looks back at me in the camera, I drop my own, so she can see my engorged cock right as I explode. Streams of cum landing on the phone and all over my hand.

“Fuck, that was hot,” I tell her.

She smiles at me shyly in the camera. “I can’t wait to suck your dick again.”

And said dick twitches back to life. “I can’t wait to bury myself so deep inside of you that you think I’m going to break you in two.”

She moans, then glances up at her door. “Shit, my mom is calling for me again.”

“Did you just swear without it being because my dick was inside of you?”

She laughs. “Yeah, you are rubbing off on me too much.”

“I just want to be rubbing on you.”

She shakes her head with the most adorable smile on her face. “I’ll talk to you later, Silas.”

“Bye, trouble.”

She laughs as she hangs up the phone. My heart surges and it feels strange. This girl is doing something to me.

I walk across the stone path that leads to my brother's grave. I hate that he is out in Baton Rouge and not closer to New Orleans. But Baton Rouge was home when he was shot and killed. I remember his funeral. My mother was actually somewhat sober. She was a sobbing mess. Putting on a show like she actually cared that he was gone. But it was all a lie. She wanted the attention, she wanted people's money. The money friends gave us to pay for the funeral service she used for drugs. She probably fucked the funeral director to get a discounted rate on everything too, so more money could be pocketed by her.

The night of his funeral, I drove her home and the second we stepped through the front door, it was like the mask fell off. She yelled at me for not watching over him, for getting him into trouble, making him sell drugs. I wanted to laugh in her face. The only reason we sold drugs and ran errands for the local dealer was because we needed money for food and school. The checks she got for disability barely covered the rent after she used it all on her vices. And we were sick of losing power or having other utilities shut off. I tried to keep Nolan out of the drug game when Jackson and I got into it, but Nolan was always trying to be the better man. He was sick of seeing me work my ass off at the gas station and run drugs, all while trying to keep my grades up in school. I wanted out of where we lived and I knew I wouldn't get there by dropping out.

But one bad deal caused everything to fall apart. After he died, I didn't care about shit. I didn't care about graduating, about getting out of town. I drowned myself in liquor and drugs. Charlie was the one who got me straight again. She told me that I was just going to become like my mother or like her father or Jackson and Roan's parents if I continued. All of us came from shitty families and Charlie was always the one that knocked us upside the head to get our lives straight. Even after her mom married up and moved her to the affluent side of the city. She was still always around to make sure we didn't kill ourselves making poor choices.

Being here now at my brother's grave brings me back though. Back to the time before we were the biggest rock band

in the world. When we were just a group of punk kids.

I crack open the bottle of whiskey I brought with me and lean into the grass. “Cheers, Nolan. Happy birthday, buddy.” I take a large swig of whiskey, then a second for Nolan. “I can’t believe it’s been thirteen years. You know I wish you were still here. Still had someone to look after me more than I ever looked after you.”

I laugh, thinking of all the times Nolan was more of a big brother than I was. The way he always wanted more responsibility. “I got the guys in the band. We have a new album coming out in two months. You know it’s hard every day to know I’m living your dream. I tell you every time I’m here, but it never changes. I know you would love it. You were so talented on drums. I still think you would have been bigger than the greats. Just don’t tell Knox I told you that.

“I actually have something else to tell you too, buddy. I met a girl. Well, let me start from the beginning. I was the asshole that fucked her at a party and two months later, she comes knocking on my door telling me she’s pregnant. But she isn’t the type of girl you’re thinking of. Especially the kind that would show up on my doorstep looking for child support.

“She’s actually the daughter of a pastor. She wears overalls and oversized dresses that swallow her. She hardly ever wears makeup. She’s real, man. She’s the most real girl I’ve ever met. Not just someone who wants to be with me because of how I look or who I am. And we just get along. We can talk about things I haven’t been able to tell others. She knows about you. I’ve told her about Mom and growing up. And she doesn’t judge me. She’s too nice for her own good. But I can’t seem to let her go. I always want to talk to her. Shit, man, I never want to go out anymore if it means I can spend time with her. We are total opposites. But for some reason we both can’t seem to get enough of each other. And I’m not just talking about the sex. Fuck, the girl is innocent as hell, but she has no problem experimenting in the bedroom. So yeah, the sex is part of it. But when I’m having a shitty day, I text her and everything seems better.”

I run my hands over my face as I drink more whiskey. “I think I’m catching feelings for her. And you know I am not that kind of guy. But I can’t help myself. Not to mention I am always watching out for her and the baby. Me. Worried about my future kid. Hell, the idea of me having a kid sounds terrifying. But with her... god, man, I just know it’s right. And I don’t even know what to do. You know I’m not used to this stuff. I can’t talk to Roan since he is still messed up from the divorce with Riot from a year and a half ago. Jackson is head over heels in love with Charlie. Yeah, they are finally fucking together.

“I really just wish I could talk to you. You’d give me your younger-brother advice that would be better than any advice I ever gave you. And you would tell me what to do, how to act, how to be a gentleman with her. You would love her. And I know she would love you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I never cry. At least not around anyone. The only time I let myself cry is when I’m here at his grave. When no one is around to see me break down or fall apart.

I drown myself in more whiskey as I sit slumped against his headstone. I know Jackson will be here as soon as dusk hits. He always is. He knows well enough not to ask me to tag along. He knows I need this time alone. He also knows that I tend to get shit-faced while I’m here.

The sun begins to set and I light up a smoke. I’ve been cutting back as much as I can since I know Marley doesn’t like it. And with a baby, I want to set a good example. But the pull on the cigarette and the rush of tobacco sedates me in a way. Gives me a gentle rush that balances the alcohol and allows me to clear my mind of everything else but being here.

“You did a number on that bottle today.”

I open my eyes and see Jackson standing in front of me. I look down and find an empty bottle next to me and a half-lit cigarette in my hand. “Yeah, well, I have a lot on my mind today.”

Jax nods and then squats in front of Nolan's grave. He pulls a candle out of his pocket and lights it, just like he does every year. "Miss you, man. You know every single day we wish you were on stage with us." He bows his head as he places his hand on top of the tombstone.

I don't say anything and just let him have his moment with my brother. We were all so close. We all miss him. We send a prayer to him after every show. A ritual we've had since the beginning.

Jackson clears his throat. "Charlie's waiting. You ready to go?"

I nod. Jackson helps me up since I stumble just trying to get my feet on the ground. He grabs the empty liquor bottle and wraps an arm around my shoulder as he walks me to the parking lot.

Charlie is leaning against his jeep with a look of sorrow on her face. As soon as I'm close enough, she wraps her arms around me and cries softly into my shoulder.

"We all miss him," she says.

"I know."

She pats me on the arm and then heads to the driver's side of the jeep. "I'll see you at home, Jax."

Jackson gives her a kiss goodbye and then we both walk over to my Bentley. I hand him over the keys and slide into the passenger seat.

He drives us back to New Orleans in silence, just the sound of Jawbreaker's *Dear You* album on the stereo. Nolan's favorite record.

I stare out the window, my heart in a vise. I thought as the years passed, it would get easier. My guilt would go away. But it just grows stronger. Nolan never should have been the one to get shot that night, it was supposed to be me.

MARLEY

I get out of Willow's car and adjust the dress I have on. It's new. And nothing I would normally wear. A burgundy crushed velvet dress that is shorter than anything I would ever wear but also puts my much fuller breasts on display. I know Silas will love it. And I wanted to look special tonight since he planned a birthday dinner for me. Of course, I was too nervous to drive on the causeway yet again and made Willow come pick me up. Plus, I needed her advice on what to wear.

"Oh my god, Mar, you look fine," Willow says as she leans into the passenger seat and looks at me through the open door.

"I'm just nervous."

She smiles. "Why? That man has already defiled you in almost every damn way. And you talk to him daily. You have no reason to be nervous."

I lean into the car. "Yeah, but this is a date. And he is way out of my league. Have you seen him?"

She cackles. "Umm, yeah, I've seen him. And you guys are doing something at his house. So it's just going to be you two, so like every other day."

"But he, like, planned this whole thing, and I am worried I am going to act the wrong way around him and he's gonna be weirded out."

I know Willow is rolling her eyes behind her dark sunglasses. "You showed up at his house when he was gone and then spent a week there. You really think he is going to be

weirded out by you tonight?” I go to answer, but she holds up a finger. “The only thing he is going to find weird is if you act awkward the whole time, like he hasn’t had his finger up your ass.”

My cheeks turn the color of a tomato. “He hasn’t... we’ve never... that’s not going to happen.”

She snorts. “Remember that audiobook? Remember what I said after?”

I bite my lip because I know exactly what she is talking about. And the idea of Silas putting his dick anywhere near my ass scares me half to death.

“Right, so anyway, stop being nervous.”

“How can I not be now?” I shriek. “What if he thinks, for my birthday, I deserve to be railed in my butt?”

“Do you?”

I jump and hit my head on the doorframe of the car.

“Hey, Silas!” Willow says.

I slowly turn around but find myself unable to look him in the eyes.

He laughs as he cups my face and kisses me briefly. “Relax. I won’t be railing your ass tonight.”

“Or ever.”

He shrugs. “We’ll see about that.”

My eyes flare, but he just shakes his head.

“But you almost made the whole neighborhood eager to since your ass was almost hanging out from under your dress.”

Crap. I didn’t think about that as I was leaning into the car.

His thumb lands on my bottom lip, and he pulls it out of my mouth. “Don’t worry about anal.”

I literally cringe at the word.

“We can discuss that later.” He leans in and wraps an arm around my waist and gives me another kiss, this one enough to

make my toes curl. “Happy birthday, trouble.”

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips.

“Why don’t you two move the make-out fest inside? I have a date and need to go get ready.”

Silas chuckles as he lets me go and grabs the bag Willow is shoving out of the car.

“Have fun, you two. And happy birthday, Marley.”

I wave goodbye to her and Silas takes my hand, not letting me grab my overnight bag, as he leads me to the front door.

He opens it for me and then grabs my ass as he walks in behind.

“Hey,” I shout, but I am cut off by his lips on mine.

My overnight bag hits the floor with a thud as he drops it to cup my face. He pushes me back against the front door, lifting one of my legs to hook around his hip. I thread my fingers through his hair and kiss him like I had wanted to kiss him outside. I bite on his lip and he growls, pressing me even more into the door as he grinds his hips against mine. I can feel how hard he is and I want nothing more than for him to bang me against this door.

But the sounds of pans clanging in the kitchen have me freezing. “What was that?”

He groans into my ear. “The reason I can’t fuck you right now.”

I give him a questioning look, but he just pulls away and picks up my bag and sets it by the stairs. He grabs my hand and walks me toward the kitchen.

A man in a chef’s hat is cooking and the smell I recognized earlier hits me at full strength. “Mediterranean?”

He nods. “I hired a private chef to make you a birthday dinner and I know how much you loved that food I ordered the night I ran into you at the convenience store.”

“It’s my favorite,” I tell him.

“I know, I checked with Willow just to be sure.”

“You didn’t need to hire a private chef though. We could have gotten takeout.”

He runs his hands up my arms. “No way. You deserve a custom five-star meal. I made sure to hire only the best. Everyone should experience something like this at least once in their life.”

I press my hand into his chest. “Well, thank you.”

“We have about thirty minutes before it’s ready. Wait outside and I’ll be right out.”

He kisses me on the forehead before disappearing down the hall. I step through the open glass doors to the patio. Today is surprisingly warm, the sun’s rays beating down on my skin. I sit on one of the couches that overlooks the pool and the yard. I look around and see a table set up underneath the pergola with full place settings. He really did want me to have a special day.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the back of the couch. The sound of glasses clinking has me opening my eyes. Silas is setting down a bottle that looks like champagne and two champagne flutes.

“Silas, you know I can’t drink—”

“Relax, babe. It’s sparkling cider.”

“Oh.”

He smiles at me, those dimples popping out. “You think I would really serve you booze?”

I shake my head. “No.”

He pops open the bottle and pours two glasses, handing me one, then sitting next to me. “Happy birthday, trouble.”

I roll my eyes at him but keep my mouth shut as I knock my glass against his. I down over half the drink. It’s been so long since I’ve had sparkling cider and I love the sweet, bubbly taste of it as it dances across my tongue.

Silas pulls my feet onto his lap and pulls my sandals off my feet. He starts to massage them, causing me to groan.

“That feel good?”

I nod. “I’ve been so busy between the garden and my art. I feel like I’ve been on my feet twenty-four seven for a week straight.”

“Don’t overwork yourself.”

“I know. But honestly, it helps me not feel so stressed. I tune everything out when I’m working on my garden or making art. It eliminates my stress while I work and keeps me from thinking about all the problems in my life,” I tell him.

“I know what you mean. That’s how it is with music. When I first picked up an instrument, I hated it. It took so much work to learn chords and how to read music. But once I put in the work and practiced more and more, it no longer felt like a chore but a way to escape everything in my life.”

“What made you decide on playing bass?” I ask as his outstretched arm on the back of the couch plays with my hair.

“I didn’t think I was coordinated enough for drums, I can’t sing for shit, and those assholes Jax and Roan had already picked up guitars. Roan had been messing around with an old guitar he found at a resale shop since he was eight. When we all started listening to nineties grunge, we wanted to start a band. Honestly, we needed something to keep us out of trouble. We were fifteen and getting into trouble a lot.”

I snort. “You getting into trouble? I never would have guessed.”

Silas leans over and pinches my lips closed. “Don’t get smart with me, woman. The only reason I am so attracted to you is because you are just as much trouble.”

He lets go of my lips, and I snap my mouth, biting on his finger. He pulls it out from between my teeth and growls as he grabs my hips and pulls me onto his lap.

“You’re going to pay for that.”

I raise my brow. “Am I?”

He smirks at me. “You’ll find out later.”

I punch him in the shoulder and try to get off his lap, but he locks his hands behind my lower back, keeping me in place. He presses a chaste kiss to my lips and then continues his story.

“Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted.”

He glares at me, and I bob him on the nose. He tries to catch my finger with his teeth, but I am too quick for him.

“Since Roan already played guitar, it was down to me and Jackson. We flipped a coin. I lost.”

“You did not flip a coin to decide who was going to play guitar,” I say in disbelief.

“Ask him or Roan. They will both confirm. Although I did learn to play guitar anyway.”

My hands run over his chest, I can’t help but touch him. “What about Wilder and Knox? They didn’t fight over what to play?”

He shakes his head. “They grew up in New Orleans, not Baton Rouge. We didn’t meet them until we moved out here.” He pauses and I can see pain flash across his eyes. “Nolan was our drummer.”

“Your brother?”

He nods. “He was amazing. So talented at just fourteen. By the time he was seventeen, just before... well, there was no way he wouldn’t be a musician in a band. He blew everyone away with his talent.”

“What happened?” I ask, even though I know it has to be bad. I can tell from the pain on his face.

Silas looks away from me, and I can feel a wall going up between us.

“Hey.” I run my hands up to his face and into his hair, turning him back toward me.

“I’m not a good guy, Marley. I was even worse before. I did things to get by. It’s not the way you grew up.”

“I’m not some naive little girl. I know that a lot of people don’t grow up the way I did. I know people struggle to put food on the table nearly every day. And I know some people find other means to make money. So don’t look at me like I’m going to judge you, Silas.”

He grips my hands and pulls them from his head into his lap. “You have every right to judge me. But I appreciate you saying you won’t.”

“I mean it.”

He brings one of my hands to his lips and kisses my fingertips. “I told you my mother was a piece of shit. And cared more about the drugs and booze she fed her body than making sure her kids had food.”

I nod.

“We always found a way to scavenge food. When we were younger and Charlie still lived in our part of town, she would sneak extra food out of her house for us. But when she moved away, it got harder again. Jackson’s older brother worked his ass off to make sure his three younger brothers had food and school supplies. But we both saw him struggle. So we found a way to make cash easy. Selling weed. But that soon turned into harder stuff, Jackson’s older brother already in the game. And it was great for a while. We made enough money to buy groceries, pay the bills at the trailer, even buy secondhand instruments.

“I kept pushing Nolan away. I didn’t want him to succumb to what I was doing. But he didn’t want me to shoulder the burden. He was a part of the band. He was the only one of the four of us not involved. Even Jackson’s older brother was involved until he died of an overdose.”

My heart breaks even more hearing the way he grew up. The way I would never want anyone to grow up. Parents should be there for their kids. They should be making sure the bills are paid, there is food on the table, and buying them birthday presents and Christmas presents, even if it’s just something small.

“I knew sooner or later it would be inevitable. And Nolan would get involved. And he did. But I kept him out of the shady shit. I made sure it was just weed and maybe the occasional small bag of coke. Not the meth, not the heroin that I was pushing.”

I grab his hand and squeeze. I want him to know I’m not judging him.

“But he got involved in a bad deal. A deal that...” he pauses and shakes his head. “He was shot and killed. My baby brother. The one with all the potential. The straight *A* student, the amazing musician, the kindest guy in the world. He was killed and I wasn’t there to protect him.”

I can tell he is keeping certain parts out, but I don’t want to push him. I can tell this is hard enough for him. The way he closes his eyes, the way he grips my fingers tighter.

I’m still straddling his lap, so I rise to my knees, running my hands through his thick, wavy locks. “Thank you for sharing with me. But you need to know you can’t protect everyone. Sometimes life just sucks.”

His hand runs up my thigh, his calloused fingers brushing over my scar. “It’s part of me to feel like I need to protect everyone.” His eyes lift to mine. “Even you.”

“I’m doing perfectly fine on my own.”

“I know you are.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes and I bend down to kiss his lips just as his hands rise to my hips. But the sound of shuffling feet tears us apart.

“Excuse me, sir. Sorry to interrupt. But dinner is ready.”

Silas doesn’t take his eyes off me as he says to the chef, “We’ll be in in a minute.”

“Of course.”

I make to pull away from Silas, but one of his hands grips the back of my neck, pulling my mouth inches from his.

His breath brushes my lips as his words come out. “I won’t let anything happen to you. You or the baby.”

I want to ask what he could possibly mean because it almost came out as a warning. I just hope it’s a promise he can keep.

His lips kiss my forehead, and his hands cup my ass as he stands in one fluid motion. He sets me down on the ground and I bite my lip as I look up at him. He gives me a weak smile, then grabs my hand and brings me to the pergola.

The food is divine. I thought Mediterranean food was my favorite before. But it definitely has no competition after this dinner. Everything is juicy and delectable. Middle Eastern spices playing off all my taste buds as I devoured two plates of food. Silas couldn’t help but laugh at my ferocious appetite but then once again made a comment about my boobs and how much he likes what pregnancy is doing to them.

The chef walks out with a bowl in hand and a candle sticking out the top. “Happy birthday,” he says to me before turning back into the house.

I look at the giant bowl he set in front of me. Chocolate ice cream with a thick ribbon of peanut butter flowing through it. Chopped pretzels surround the scoops of ice cream and pieces of broken toffee and pistachio sit on top.

“I wanted you to have a gourmet version of your favorite treat.”

I look over at Silas and the hormones start to act up again as tears crest my eyes. I manage to blink them back in, but I can’t help the smile that overtakes my face. This man doesn’t forget a thing, and it makes me fall for him just a little bit more.

“Happy birthday. Make a wish, Marley.”

I look back at the dessert and close my eyes while I blow out the candle. My wish something that is probably never

going to happen but something I wish for, nonetheless.

I look back over at Silas and he has that look in his eyes like he would rather have me for dessert. So I pick up a spoon and dive into the masterpiece. Silas chuckles beside me as he picks up his own spoon and joins me in eating the massive bowl of ice cream in front of us.

“Is it as good as that first night?” he asks.

I look up at him to find a smirk on his face. “No, this is absolutely terrible.”

He throws his head back in laughter. “The whole meal?”

I smile and nod. “Yeah, why would you think I would want a private chef to make me a dinner?”

“I guess I’ll just have to make you dinner next time.” His face breaks into a smile, his dimples popping out. His hand lands on my thigh and slowly slides up underneath my skirt. “I just get very distracted around you.”

“Do you now?” I ask before sliding a big spoonful of ice cream between my lips.

“Mmhmm.” His fingers slide farther, so close to my core.

I try to keep a straight face as he pulls at the seam of my thong, but I know I probably look crazy as I battle my own need for Silas. So I shove a huge spoonful of ice cream into my mouth, half of it missing and falling off my chin onto my chest.

Silas laughs, a deep husky sound that just makes my thighs clench even more. He grabs both sides of my chair and pulls me close to him. I frown at the loss of his hand under my dress, but then his lips are on my chest, licking up the chocolate ice cream. A soft moan leaves my mouth as his hands grip my sides, his thumbs brushing the underside of my boobs as he cleans the ice cream off my chest. His tongue slides farther down my chest. He uses his teeth to pull the top of my dress down, exposing the black lace bra I bought for him tonight.

He groans in appreciation before he sucks my nipple into his mouth through the lace. He bites down and I feel it all the way to my core. I shift in my seat as he pulls away, his mouth moving up my neck before meeting my own lips to clean off the ice cream.

He is just about to kiss me when the chef interrupts us. Again.

“Mr. Ford, sorry to interrupt again. But I am all finished with the cleanup.”

Silas takes his gaze away from me and looks over my shoulder. “Thank you, Aman. I will be right there.”

Silas’s eyes move back to mine as he stands. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I bite my lip and watch him as he walks inside. My stomach flips, the butterflies going crazy. I don’t know what it is about him. A man that is nothing that I would ever expect to want, yet for some reason, I can never take my eyes off him.

His dark denim clings to his butt as he walks away. His T-shirt is tight around his fit back and biceps. The way his tattoos do something to my insides. His long wavy hair blows in the light breeze. He glances over his shoulder and sees me staring at him. Normally I would turn my head and be embarrassed over it, but I’m not. I hold his gaze as he smiles at me before turning his head to walk inside.

I push my chair away from the table and stand. Walking around and stretching my legs. I’ve been feeling restless the last few days and I don’t know if it’s anxiety since my relationship with Dad is still on the rocks or if it’s the baby.

I run my hands over the tiny bump as I walk over to the pool. I kick my sandals off and dip my toes into the warm water. I glance back at the glass doors to the house as an idea pops into my head. Something I would never do. But when I’m with Silas, I find myself doing a lot of things I never thought I would.

I pull my dress over my head and pray to God that the private chef is nowhere near the back doors. I unclasp my bra

and toss it aside before shimmying out of my thong. I quickly walk down the steps and into the warm water lit up with color-changing LED lights. I pull my hair up on top of my head and drop chin deep as I wade around.

A few minutes later, I hear Silas walking back outside, the clinking of glasses giving him away.

“I wondered where you wandered off to,” he says. He holds another bottle of sparkling cider and two champagne flutes.

I rest my forearms on the side of the pool, my chin pressing into them. “I thought a swim sounded fun.”

He notices my dress off to the side of the pool and then does a double take as he looks back at me. “Are you naked in my pool?”

I smile and nod. “I didn’t want to go upstairs to grab a swimsuit. Besides, from the pictures you have sent me, you are in here naked all the time. Not to mention the two parties I’ve been to, there were naked girls in the pool.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he says with his hands up. “I was merely asking a question.”

I purse my lips at him and he chuckles as he sets the bottle and glasses down on the edge of the pool.

“I do have to say, I like the surprise. Although I did want to see you in nothing but the black lace underwear you had on, spread across my bed.”

I tilt my head to the side, resting my cheek on my forearms. “I can always put it back on for you.”

“I don’t know, trouble. You’re already naked and I didn’t have to work at it. I think I like you this way more.”

I laugh as I push off the side of the pool, swimming backward but keeping the girls underwater. It takes Silas approximately three seconds to strip his clothes off before he jumps into the pool naked.

He swims toward me like a tiger on the prowl, but I keep moving backward, away from him.

“You can’t stay away from me,” he growls.

“I can try,” I tease as I change directions and swim past him to the other end of the pool.

A sinister chuckle falls from his mouth as he swims full speed toward me. I try to evade him, but it’s no use. His arm wraps under my body and around my hip. He pulls me into his chest, then lifts me halfway out of the pool and into the air. I squeal as a cool breeze hits my nipples.

“Silas!”

He pulls me back against his chest, his lips coming to my neck as he swims us over to the steps of the pool. He spins me around and sets me down. Proud of myself for not feeling the need to cover myself like I used to do with Silas. But I can see the way he appreciates my body, the look of lust overtaking his eyes. Then they drop to my stomach, the water just hitting below my tiny bump.

I start to feel self-conscious, but then his hands ever so gently glide over me, over our baby.

“Is she an avocado now?”

I swallow down the emotion that overtakes me and nod. “Yeah, just about.”

He leans down and presses the softest of kisses to my bump and I try not to swoon.

“Why did you say she?”

He lifts his gaze to mine. “I did?”

I nod.

“I guess I just feel like we are having a baby girl.”

I smile back at him. “Me too.”

We stare at each other, and then he crawls over me, capturing my lips. I moan against his mouth and press my hips against his as he presses the small of my back to bring me closer to him.

I can feel his length thick and hard against my stomach as he devours my mouth. I wrap a leg around his thigh, balancing as best I can on the stairs.

“Marley, Marley, Marley. So much trouble.”

“You started it,” I tell him.

He pulls back and raises his brow at me. “Me? You were the one naked in my pool.”

“I was just going for a swim,” I try to speak as nonchalantly as possible. “You were the one that decided to attack me.”

“With good reason. Do you even know how sexy you are? It takes all my self-control to keep my hands off you. When I have people over, I want nothing more than to claim you in front of them, but I don’t. So when you are naked in my pool, you better believe I am going to worship every inch of your body until you are screaming my name.”

I run a finger along his jawline. “I thought there was no sex allowed in this pool.”

“There isn’t. Unless it’s me.”

“Oh.” The word, barely a whisper, feeling defeated thinking about the other women he may have had sex with in here.

His fingers graze my chin. “But I’ve never found anyone worthy enough to christen the pool with.”

“Really?” I ask, my voice high pitched.

He chuckles as he brings his lips to my throat. “Yes, Marley and if I am not inside of you in the next two seconds —”

I don’t let him finish his sentence as I grab his dick and guide it to my entrance. He slides in all the way to the brink and I arch my back into him, letting out an intense groan.

“That’s it, baby. Take my cock. Feel how deep I can get inside of you, stretching you to the brink.”

I bite my lip as he pistons his hips. My nails grip his shoulders and I know they will leave marks. I grip on to him as he thrusts hard and deep. I shift as the stairs cut into my upper back and I wince.

“You okay? Am I hurting you?” he asks as he stops moving.

I shake my head. “No, the step is digging into my shoulders.”

“Shit. Here,” he says in response as he scoops me up and places me on the first step, which is larger than the rest. My nipples harden in the cool air. The water splashes gently across my center.

Silas grins when he takes in my nipples. “Mmm, this is by far a much better position.”

He leans down and sucks one hard peak into his mouth and I clutch his biceps as I let out a moan. He’s still inside of me, but he hasn’t started moving yet. But I can feel my pussy clenching around him as he sucks, pulls, and bites at my breasts. I grip his hair, pulling on it as the sparks flood through my body. I begin to thrust my hips and he chuckles against me.

“So needy, my little troublemaker.”

I pull on his hair hard, and he bites my nipple in response. “I need you.”

He hums against my breast before pulling away, his lips coming up to mine. “Baby, I can feel the way you need me. Your pussy is gripping my dick right now, but I just wanted to see how long you could last before I fuck you so hard you will never look at this pool again without blushing.”

I clench at his words, then unwrap my legs from his hips, dropping my thighs open for him. “Don’t keep me waiting, Silas.”

He chuckles against my throat. “But I like when you beg.”

I groan and drop my own hand between my legs to get some friction.

He sits back on his haunches and watches me play with my clit. Every now and then, he rotates his hips, giving me just a whisper of what I was asking him for. I thrust my hips up, but he just pulls back more until he is barely inside of me.

“Silas,” I plead.

He chuckles as he watches me squirm underneath him. “Say it, Marley. Beg for it.”

He pushes my hand away and pinches my clit with his fingers, and I groan. “Fuck, Silas. Just fuck me.”

“That’s my dirty girl.”

He grabs my ankles, making me fall back into the water, my head resting on the top step, my hair floating around my head. My eyes bulge when he puts both my legs over his shoulders, my knees resting on either side of his head. And then he thrusts into me so hard I swear I see stars. I scream at the intrusion but then meet him thrust for thrust. My nails dig into his forearms as he hits deeper than he ever has.

Only my head and shoulders are resting in the pool as he pounds into me. “Silas, oh god, don’t stop.”

“Never. I’ll never stop. Fuck, Marley, I can never get enough of you.”

I am so close to the edge when Silas folds my body nearly in half, his mouth landing on mine as he hits so deep inside of me I can’t even tell us apart. “Silas,” I scream as I come so hard.

He groans, falling with me. His cum fills me up. “Goddamn, Marley,” he groans into my throat.

I whimper, not from pain but from pure bliss. Silas leaves a trail of kisses down my neck and across my collarbone as he slowly sits up and pulls my legs from his shoulders.

“I guess we christened your pool,” I joke.

He looks at me with lust, then wraps his arms around my back, pulling me into his chest before pushing off the steps, walking deeper into the pool.

“This pool will be christened when your cum and mine leak out of you and spread throughout the water.”

I blush at his words.

“I want to have a party. I want everyone to be in this pool abiding by the rules I set. And then I want to think about how I break every single rule for you. I want us both to sit and watch as everyone splashes around, a knowing smirk on both of our faces about what we do in this pool.”

I capture his lips with mine and kiss him passionately, with need and lust. Needing him again even though I just had him. Even though I can feel a mixture of both of us inside of me, slowly leaking out of me. “Does that mean you want to do it again?”

He grips the back of my neck, looking into my eyes so intensely I can feel his gaze in every cell of my body. “I would fuck you all day, every day. In this pool. On the patio. In the kitchen. In every bedroom in this goddamn house. Too bad you live so far away.”

I twist a lock of his hair around my finger. “I could come here more often. I just need to bring some art supplies. So I can work.”

“Baby, I’ll turn one of the rooms into a studio for you if it means I get to see you more often.”

“Really?”

He nods. “Why can’t you see that I want you with me all the time?”

I shrug. “It just seems so surreal.”

“It’s not. This is what I want.”

I search his eyes and see nothing but sincerity.

“You want me?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I hover my lips over his. “I want you too.” Then I close the gap as I reach between us and stroke his cock, which is already hard again.

We spend hours in the pool. Then we spend hours in bed. He's made me an insatiable woman, but I don't care because when I'm with him, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

SILAS

My head is between Marley's thighs. I cannot get enough of this woman. Her smell, her taste, her touch. It feels like every one of my goddamn senses is on drugs around her. I have no idea why after all these years, I finally found someone that keeps my interest.

I suck hard on her clit and her hands land on my head, gripping the bun on my head as she moans.

"Silas, I thought I was dreaming."

I flick her clit with my tongue and scissor my fingers inside of her, then toss the covers off my head and climb up her body. "But the real thing is much better than a dream."

She looks me in the eyes, and I swear there is disbelief in her eyes. "I don't know. The dream was so good. Even better than waking up with your head between my legs."

I grab her wrists and pin them on either side of her head. "Oh really? What was I doing that made your dream so much better than reality?"

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth as a blush rises to her cheeks.

"You fucking vixen. What were you dreaming about?"

She struggles against me and I know it must be good if she doesn't even want to tell me. My cock throbs against her wet pussy, and I know she wants it, but I won't give it to her until she tells me.

I pull her arms above her head and hold them down with one hand as I grab my dick and run it through her warm folds. Her hips thrust to meet mine, but I just pull away and chuckle. “Nope. You don’t get this big-ass dick of pleasure until you tell me your dirty dreams.”

She snorts and starts laughing so hard. “Did you just call your dick a ‘big-ass dick of pleasure’? How the heck did you ever get so many women to sleep with you?”

I scrunch my face, then lean down and bite her nipple so hard she yelps. “It worked on you.”

“Mmm, I think that was the booze. And now, somehow, I’m stuck with you.”

“Oh really? You’re stuck with me? I’ll show you stuck with me.” I waste no time and thrust inside of her hard. I watch as her eyes widen from the quick intrusion. “If I could knock you up again, then I would.”

She giggles as she wraps her legs around me. I drop my lips to hers and she mumbles against them. “I think I found your weakness, Silas.”

“And what’s that?” I ask as I pull her leg up higher and change the angle of my thrusts.

“All I had to do was negate your charm, and I got what I wanted.”

I freeze midthrust when I realize she’s right. I was trying to hold back on her and she one-upped me. “You sneaky woman,” I say as I pound into her hard. “You are definitely not the girl I first met.”

“I am. But I just never let myself take what I wanted. Not until you.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. Her words hit me right in the chest and I know she’s it for me. This is the one girl that will always hold power over me and I will gladly give it to her every day, every hour, every second of our lives.

“Fuck me like you want to, Silas.”

My eyes dart to hers and I see the need in them. That she wants me to overtake her the way I did that first night. The way I haven't allowed myself to since then. I've been gentler with her, but now I know that's not what she wants. She wants me the way she met me.

So I don't hold back. I don't fear I need to be gentle with her or the baby. She is the type of woman who would tell me so. I grip under her knee and spread her open, pushing her leg up along her side until I see her wince from the position. I grab a pillow and slide it under her ass to make sure I hit the right angle and then I plow into her. I don't hold back even when she whimpers and cries. I know it's not in pain but in pleasure. She doesn't fight me, she just lets me take her the way I want.

I let go of the leg I have pushed up to her ribs and wrap my hand around her throat as I feel my balls tighten. I want her to feel every part of me inside of her. I want her to feel my balls as they slap against her ass. I want her to gasp for breath, knowing that it will only make everything more intense.

We are both so close. Her pussy is gripping me like a vise as I fuck her into oblivion. She mewls and groans, my name falling off her lips like a prayer. When I feel her come, I let go of her throat and wrists. She inhales deeply as her arms wrap around my neck. I lift her up and sit back, so she straddles me. She tries to meet my thrusts, but I can tell she is too spent, so I grip her hips and piston up into her, helping her ride me until I am exploding inside of her.

She falls against my chest and I fall backward, feeling just as spent as her. Her lips press to my neck, biting and sucking as my fingers caress her ass and thighs.

"You've been holding back on me," she mutters into my neck.

I let out a throaty chuckle. "Baby girl, you were holding back on me."

"Lies." She laughs into my neck.

I stroke her head, playing with her hair. My heart beating at a million miles a second. And I know at this moment, I'm

one-hundred-percent falling for her.

I press a kiss into her temple just as my door flies open.

“Silas, you are supposed to... oh my god.” Riot’s loud voice overtakes the room.

I immediately flip over, so Marley’s naked body is covered. I don’t give a shit if Riot sees my ass. She’s probably seen it a handful of times in the last ten years.

Then I hear the giggling of her two daughters behind her and I curse into Marley’s neck.

“I’ll be downstairs,” Riot mutters as she quickly shuts the door behind her.

Marley pushes me off her and sits up, resting on her elbows. “What was that all about?”

I glance over at the clock and see it’s after eleven in the morning. “Shit.”

“What?”

I grip the back of my neck. “I didn’t realize we slept so late.”

“We were up until sunrise.”

I look down at her and smile. “Best night of my life.”

She returns my grin. “Best birthday I’ve had.”

I drop my lips to hers and kiss her deeply before pulling away. “Unfortunately, that means I am late.”

“For what?”

“Some radio shit we are supposed to do today in New York.”

She frowns. “Oh.”

“You could come with us.” The words leave my mouth before I even realize what I’m saying.

“Silas.”

“It’s just tonight. We have the promo and then an appearance to make at a club. We fly back in the morning.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

My chest aches at her words. We haven’t talked about making this relationship public. Hell, we haven’t even really talked about our relationship at all. And there is a lot she needs to know. Dating me isn’t like dating her stupid ex. There are so many things that come with dating me, repercussions and expectations she needs to know about.

I nod though and accept her words. “I get it.”

She sits up and cups my face. “It doesn’t mean I don’t want this with you, Si, but I know that it will change everything. And I am not sure if I’m ready for that. For the publicity. Is it okay if it’s just me and you now? Before I have to share you with the world.”

I lean down and capture her lips, kissing her with reverence. “Baby, you don’t ever have to ask me that. We decide what’s best before letting anything go public with everything that happens between us, okay?”

She nods and presses a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Well, I’m guessing you’re late then.”

I run my hand through my hair. “Yeah, I was supposed to be ready at two. But I was very distracted.”

She runs a hand down my chest. “I’m sorry I’m such a distraction.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. I love being distracted by you.”

She flushes and I kiss her neck but stop when I hear Riot yelling up the stairs.

“You should probably go.”

“I wish I didn’t have to. I liked having you in my bed for the last two days.”

Marley yawns. “Yeah, two days where you kept me up all hours of the night.”

I stand up and pull her off the bed. I squeeze her ass as I press a soft kiss to her lips. “Do you need a ride home? I’ll get

a driver for you. Or you can stay here. I'll be home in less than twenty-four hours."

She shakes her head. "Tomorrow is Sunday. I should probably go to church, so my dad doesn't blow a gasket."

"Did you want me to get you a car?"

She shakes her head. "Willow can drive me."

"Okay."

Twenty minutes later, we are both walking down the stairs. An impatient Riot sitting in my living room with her kids. The rest of the guys are also here.

"Took you long enough," Jax says. "I thought we were going to need to leave without you."

"Fuck off," I tell him.

"Hey Marley," he says.

She gives them all a small wave, and she tries to move away from the grip I have around her shoulder but I don't let her.

"Okay, we are not that late. Just need to swing by Janae's house and drop the kids—" Riot is cut off as her phone rings.

"You don't have to be nervous," I whisper into Marley's ear.

She folds her face into my shoulder. "I'm not nervous. I'm just embarrassed that Riot walked in on us. And her kids were there!"

I grip her chin and force her to look into my eyes. "Trust me, her kids didn't see anything. And Riot won't say shit. I know she was happy it was you in my bed and not some random groupie."

Marley's hand trails up my chest and wraps around my neck. "That better not happen. Ever."

I smile at her as my heart skips a beat. "You trying to lock me down?" I tease.

She grabs my hand and runs it over her baby bump. “Kinda already happened. And I one-hundred-percent blame you. You were trying to lock me down.”

I bend down and suck her bottom lip into my mouth. “Best mistake ever.”

She giggles and kisses me back, and I wish we didn’t have a promotional event tonight. I want to scoop her up and take her back to bed.

“Okay, lovebirds. I already saw more than enough this morning. But we need to go. I need to get the kids over to my mom’s, which is going to take longer than expected.”

Roan clears his throat. “I thought Janae was watching the kids.”

I look over at him and see him watching the kids as they play in the backyard. They love their dad, but Roan is cautious around them. For reasons none of us know.

“She had an emergency at the store. A water leak or something, and she had to head in to work.”

“Your mom isn’t the most responsible when it comes to watching the kids.”

Riot throws her hands on her hips. “Don’t talk to me about responsibility with the kids, Roan. You know better than—”

“I’ll watch them,” Marley chimes in. No doubt she saw the beginning of an argument starting.

Riot looks over at her. “You don’t have to do that.”

Marley shrugs. “I love kids. Besides, I could use the practice,” she says as her hands drop to her stomach.

“They can stay here,” I add. “Is that okay, Mar?”

She looks up at me and nods.

“What about church tomorrow?” I ask her quietly.

“I’ll just have to skip it. This seems more important.”

“You are a lifesaver.” Riot opens the glass door to the backyard. “Girls, get in here.”

“You really are something else,” I whisper in Marley’s ear.

“I’m just doing the right thing.”

“Brixley. Lyric. Get in here right now. Change of plans.” Riot puts on her mom voice and both the girls run inside.

I watch as Marley walks toward the patio doors and kneels on the ground as the kids come in.

“Janae had something come up, so Marley is going to watch you today.” She looks over at Marley. “I can have Janae pick them up later tonight if you don’t want to stay overnight. But they have a room here.”

Marley smiles as the girls stand in front of her. “We can figure it out later.” She turns to the kids. “Hi there. I’m Marley.”

“Are you Uncle Silas’s girlfriend?” Brixley asks.

A blush hits Marley’s cheeks and I struggle to hold in a laugh.

“We are just good friends.”

Lyric cuts in. “But you were in his bedroom and Mommy and Daddy used to share a bedroom when they were married. So are you married?”

“Girls,” Riot sighs. “Stop with the twenty questions.”

Marley waves off Riot, then leans in toward the girls. She speaks in a whisper but loud enough that we can all still hear. “If you can keep a secret, then I’ll tell you.”

Both girls nod obnoxiously.

Marley leans in closer. “Your Uncle Silas is a grown man, but he doesn’t know how to tie his shoes.” The girls gasp. “I know it’s sad. So I was up there helping him.”

Brixley looks over at me. “Even I know how to tie my shoes and I’m only two.”

The guys are cracking up on the couch, Riot is breathing a sigh of relief, and I am thinking about a new way to punish my

little troublemaker. She doesn't know Riot and Roan's girls and those two will never let me live this down.

"My name is Marley."

"I'm Lyric and this is Brixley."

"Nice to meet you both. Since your mom and dad won't be around, I think we should have a pool party. What do you think?"

Both girls shriek at the top of their lungs and dash toward the stairs to their room they have here, where they keep some clothes.

Riot wraps Marley in a hug as she stands. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'll write down Janae's number. You can figure out if you want her to take them tonight."

"It's no problem," Marley says.

I feel a tightness in my chest. Watching her with those kids was something I haven't let myself think about. I didn't want to wonder what she would be like as a mom but seeing her now, I know she's going to be an amazing one.

"Alright, let's get a move on. Roan, can you get their backpacks out of the car?"

He nods and stomps out the front door. Wilder, Knox, and Jax follow.

Riot is giving relevant information to Marley just as the girls rush down the stairs with swimsuits in hand.

Riot gives both girls a hug and tells them to be good. I press a soft kiss to Marley's forehead and then head to the front door with Riot.

"You should keep her." Riot says to me. "Look how good she is with them."

I turn to look over my shoulder and see Marley laughing with the girls, chasing them around the living room. "I want to," I mumble.

"What?" Riot blurts.

I shut the door behind us. “Huh? I didn’t say anything.”

“Sure you didn’t,” Riot scoffs.

Marley acts like how a mom should. Unlike my mom. And those aren’t even her kids. But she volunteered to stay and watch them. She really is an amazing woman. And I know that she would never let her baby feel abandoned. Not like how Nolan and I felt as kids. And that just makes me want her more.

MARLEY

I wish I could have a glass of wine. Spending all day with Lyric and Brixley was great, but I am exhausted. I didn't think kids were that much work. And I've spent a fair enough amount of time around kids, but those two wore me out. I have no doubt it's because of their parents. Silas told me a few stories about Roan when they were kids. Even though he is pretty different now, I imagine his genes definitely played a part in their energy.

I put them down for a nap twenty minutes ago. But Janae messaged me and said she would be here soon. Thank goodness she said she picked up some dinner, or else I would probably pass out trying to cook spaghetti.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the back of the couch when I hear the door opening. I shoot up in a panic, worried. But then see Janae carrying in a bag of takeout.

"Hey, I didn't mean to scare you," she tells me.

"You didn't," I lie.

She sets the food on the kitchen island, then raises a brow at me. "You jumped off that couch like a cat that had water sprayed at them."

I make my way over to the kitchen. "Those kids are exhausting. I was falling asleep, is all." I shrug.

Janae pushes her silver and black braids over her shoulder. "Oh I know it. I don't know how Riot does it. She is literally a superwoman." She opens the take-out bag and sets two

containers on the counter. “Which is why I picked up food for you. The kids are picky as hell. Dino nuggies are all they eat. I figured if this was your first day with them, you would be exhausted.”

“Wow, thanks. You didn’t have to do that.” I tug on my braid. “We barely know each other.”

Janae looks down at my stomach, then back up at me. “Well, you are pregnant with Silas’s baby. Don’t worry, my lips are sealed. And the fact that you are in his house alone right now makes me think I’ll be seeing a lot of you.”

I purse my lips. “We aren’t really anything.”

“Okay, sure. But he would never let some bimbo he was fucking stay in his house. He usually kicks them out before they can even stay the night. And I only know that because I passed out here once and ran into one in the hall, she was crying because he kicked her out.”

I bite my lip. I hate hearing about his sexcapades, but I know he had them. I know how he used to be. And I only hope that is all in the past. I trust him. We’ve talked when he’s been away, but there is still a part of me that worries he may find some groupie because I’m not around.

Janae rests a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, I can see your mind spinning. Don’t worry about Silas. I’ve never seen him act this way with anyone before.” She looks at me curiously. “I could always do a reading for you. Or maybe make you a spell jar.” She starts digging around in her purse. “I think I even have some oils in here I can give you.”

I laugh as I hold up a hand. “It’s okay.”

She shakes her head as she pulls out a small glass bottle. “Here. Take this. It’s one of my oils, but it will help with anxiety and negative thoughts. It has amethyst and lepidolite in it, along with some jasmine, sage, and lavender. I can make you a specific one for pregnancy too.”

I take the bottle from her as she shoves it in my hand. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. You can always swing by my shop, and I can customize things just for you. Some teas and candles, perhaps.”

I don't want to say no, even though I'm not sure I believe in all of this, but I know Saylor loves hanging out there. “Sure.”

“Great! You have my number, so whenever you are here and Silas is being an annoying fuck, just text me.”

I laugh. “Thanks, Janae.”

The sound of pounding footsteps jolts us from our conversation as the girls run down the stairs. Both screaming Janae's name at the same time.

“Well it looks like I get to deal with these rascals now,” Janae says as she picks up Brixley.

“Thanks for coming by and grabbing them. I had fun with them today.”

She shakes her head. “No, you are a godsend. I have no problem watching Riot's kids. They are my favorite but not in my shop. I made that mistake once. What a disaster.”

“Well I am glad I was able to help out both you and Riot today.” I grab the kids' backpacks off the couch and walk Janae to the door.

“Remember, any time you want to stop by my shop, I'll be there for you.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

She gives me a quick hug then walks out the door with Brixley in her arms and Lyric holding her hand, two backpacks slung on her shoulders. I watch them as they make it to the front gate and out to her car.

I'm just about to shut the door when I see a shadow hovering near the gate. I squint, thinking I am seeing things, but when it shifts, I can tell it's definitely a person. They don't move and a chill goes down my spine. I try to talk myself out of it being anything weird. Janae didn't seem to notice. Maybe

it's just a person walking their dog, waiting for them to do their business.

I decide that's definitely what it is and shut the door behind me, making sure to lock the dead bolt. I walk into the kitchen yawning and sit at the island to eat some of the food Janae brought me.

I nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a tapping noise against the front door. It doesn't sound like a knock, more like a stick lightly hitting the door.

"It's the wind," I tell myself. "Or an animal."

I eat a few more bites of food and drop my fork to the ground when the motion sensor lights come on in the backyard. I run to the glass doors and double-check they are locked. I look outside and see nothing. Again, maybe it was an animal.

Really, Marley, a cat isn't going to set off the motion lights.

I try to shake the goose bumps from me as I head to set the alarm, knowing it will give me peace of mind. I quickly put away my dinner, my appetite disappearing from the strange feeling in my gut.

I grab the oil Janae gave me and head up the stairs, shutting myself in Silas's room. I don't turn the lights on at first as I look out the windows over the backyard but don't see anything.

"You are making yourself crazy."

I take a deep breath and head to the bathroom, stripping off my clothes and sliding into one of Silas's T-shirts. His signature scent of earth and leather calming me.

I head to the bed and slide under the cool silk sheets. I grab Janae's oil and put a dab on each wrist. I'm not going to lie, it smells divine.

I pull the blankets up to my chin and manage to fall asleep somehow.

I wake up early the next day and call an Uber to get me home. I know that Silas would drive me when he gets back, but I wouldn't make it to church. And I don't want one more thing to annoy Dad. He was already leery of me sleeping at Silas's for two nights. I'm sure my parents know that something is going on between us, but I haven't said anything. And they haven't made any comments either. Maybe we are both just hoping the other ignores the situation for as long as possible. But I know sooner rather than later, they are going to demand they meet the man that got me pregnant.

I head down the stairs and grab my purse when the Uber lets me know it's here. I set the alarm and head out the front door. When I turn to hit the lock button on the keypad, a note is taped to the front door.

A chill goes down my spine. I wasn't hearing things last night. There really was someone at the front door.

I grab the note and make a dash for the cab, making sure the front gate is locked as I leave. Maybe Janae didn't close it all the way and someone did get into the backyard last night too.

I slip into the Uber and open the note with shaky hands.

You can't hide your secrets forever.

I drop the note and curse loud enough for the Uber driver to ask me if I'm okay. I just nod and grab my phone to text Silas.

Marley: Can you call me when you have a chance?

I clutch my phone tightly in my hand all the way home as I wait impatiently for Silas to call.

When my phone finally vibrates, I sigh in relief. Except it's not Silas, it's Willow.

Willow: Have you been on the internet at all today?

Marley: Umm no. Why?

Willow: No reason.

I groan and dial her number. “What’s going on?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have answered the phone.”

“What the hell, Willow?”

She gasps. “Did you just swear?”

My frustration grows as she avoids my questions. “Please just tell me.”

“Ugh. Fine. But I’m only telling you this because I didn’t want you to hear it from someone else first.”

My stomach drops. Worry creeping into my gut.

“Some stuff just popped up in a tabloid.”

“About us? How is that possible? We haven’t—”

“No, Mar. It’s about Silas but not about you.”

I pull my earbuds out of my bag and slide them in so I can talk to her while I pull up a tabloid website. I want to puke and scream at the same time as I see the headline.

The men of Saints & Sinners threw a party at Silver in NYC last night.

And from the looks of it, things got wild.

I don’t even read the article. I just look at the pictures the paparazzi took. Silas sits leaning back on a couch with a girl straddling his lap in a dress so small they need to blur out her butt in the photo. Her lips are on his neck and he’s smiling.

The next picture is of him dancing with her, his hands all over her body. Then another of him pulling her out of the club.

Tears start to leak from my eyes and I sniffle, trying to keep everything in.

“Mar,” Willow says quietly.

I dig through my purse for a tissue. “It’s fine, Willow. I’m fine. I—I should have known this would happen.”

I click on another article and find more pictures of him with Wilder and Knox. All three with their hands on another

girl. Eventually it just turns into pictures of them without Silas and just Wilder and Knox getting intimate with another girl.

“You know, sometimes the paps make things out to be something other than it really is,” Willow says with a calm voice, no doubt trying to comfort me.

I don’t say anything as my tears get worse. Is this all because I told him I wasn’t ready to make our relationship public? Did he want to prove a point to me?

“Marley, where are you?”

I sniffle into the phone. “I’m on my way home from his house.”

“Why were you there if he was in New York?”

I hiccup as I try to catch my breath. “I—I was watching Riot’s kids.” Anxiety starts to set in more so than before, my chest feeling like it’s going to cave in. “Why am I so s-stupid, Willow? Why did I think that his words meant anything?”

She sighs into the phone. “You need to talk to him.”

As if on cue, my phone shows another call coming through. “He’s calling me right now.”

“Answer it.”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

I hiccup again. “I just can’t, okay?”

“You want me to come over? Or you can have the Uber driver pull over and I’ll come get you and take you home.”

“Yeah okay. I’m in Metairie. I’ll ask him to stop.”

The man is nice enough to let me know to just change my destination and I direct him to the mall near the causeway.

“Meet me at Lakeside?” I tell her.

“I’m already in the car.”

My phone starts vibrating again. “He’s called me three times.”

“You won’t find anything out if you don’t answer.”

“I’d rather talk to you.”

I hear her yelling at traffic in the background. “Well I can’t give you answers.”

“But you always make me feel better.”

“We’ll pick up ice cream and whatever junk food you want. Need me to call your mom and tell her you can’t make it to church because you feel sick?”

I groan. I don’t want to deal with my parents on top of all of this.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“What now? Are there more articles?”

“No, thankfully. But Riot’s calling me now.”

My driver pulls into a parking spot near the back of the mall parking lot. “You want me to wait here for your friend?”

I shake my head. “No, I’ll just wait by the entrance. Thank you though.”

I go to get out, but he tells me no and drives me to the front of the mall. “I couldn’t help but overhear some of that conversation, miss. Men can be real assholes sometimes. But conversations usually help. I hope your day gets better.”

“Thank you,” I tell him as I climb out of the car.

I sit and wait on a bench with Willow muttering words into my ear. I’m barely listening. My stomach is churning, but I haven’t eaten anything since those few bites of pasta last night. My heart feels heavy and my mind is spinning. Between the note on Silas’s door, his actions last night, and the thought of dealing with my parents, I want nothing more than to crawl into a hole and hide.

Pain lances across my belly and I start to freak out even more. Is the stress I’m feeling right now hurting the baby? A million thoughts spin through my mind as I wait for Willow.

Am I okay?

Is the baby okay?

Did Silas ever feel anything for me?

Was everything we shared a lie?

Tears stream down my face and I don't even notice Willow pull up to the curb until I feel her arms wrapped around me.

“Baby girl. Hey, it's going to be okay. I know it doesn't seem that way right now, but you'll get through this. We'll find out the truth.”

I sniffle as I look up at her. “What if it's all true? What if he really did take some girl home?”

She brushes my bangs out of my face. “Then I'll punch him in the throat.”

I give her a weak smile as she pulls me to my feet and grabs the overnight bag sitting on the ground next to me. “Let's get you home.”

I've spent the last two hours lying in bed. My face is swollen from crying, but I can't seem to cry any more tears. I was thankful my parents weren't home to see me breaking down. I know they would just make some comments about my mistakes.

Willow called my doctor as soon as we got to my house. She said not to worry about the pain unless it gets worse and lasts more than a few hours. Luckily, the pain subsided and I hope it was only due to stress and not that something was wrong. Despite everything I am feeling, the heartbreak, the anger, the fear. I can't lose my baby on top of all this too. Even if Silas doesn't want to be a part of its life.

I roll over to find Willow sitting in the chair next to my bedroom window.

“You know he will be home soon.”

I nod.

“And he’s going to do everything he can to talk to you.” She pulls my phone out of her pocket that I reluctantly gave her after she demanded I not look at it anymore. “He’s called at least ten times. But it’s been quiet for a bit. I can only guess the band is flying back home now.”

I nod.

“Do you need me to get you anything right now?”

I sit up and stretch my back. “No. I think I just want to go spend some time in the garden.”

“Okay, Mar.”

Willow walks over to me and gives me a bear hug before helping me off the bed. “Are you still in pain?”

I shake my head. “No, it went away once I had lain down.”

“Good. The doctor was probably right. It’s just stress. So gardening should help relax you a bit.”

I strip off the clothes I have on and change into my overalls that I wear while working in the garden.

Willow grabs a book from my bookshelf, and we make our way outside. She lies down on my reading bench while I grab my pruning shears and take care of the roses that have become overgrown. I’ve gotten lazy with my garden the last few weeks. My mind a whirlwind, getting caught up in the storm known as Silas. I thought everything was good with us. I was ready to commit to us being in a relationship. And now I feel trapped in a hurricane, fighting my way to get out of the path of the storm but just drowning in tears and misery instead.

My arm drags across a thorn, and I don’t even feel the pain. I just watch the blood drip down my arm and into the soil underneath my feet. The pain a poison ready to destroy everything from the ground up.

I wipe away a lone tear as I make my way down another path. Cutting lavender, sage, and white hydrangeas. Hoping a bouquet of flowers will soothe my soul. I let out a soft laugh as I realize the lavender and the sage were what Janae said was in that oil she gave me. Maybe she was onto something about

it calming anxiety because as I work through my garden, I feel the ache in my chest diminish as my mind focuses on the task at hand.

The loud roar of a motorcycle on my street startles me as I pick some black-eyed Susans.

“Oh hell no,” I hear Willow roar. Her voice nearly as loud as the motorcycle. “That motherfucker.”

I set down my basket of freshly picked flowers and make my way through the garden, following the sound of Willow’s cursing. I stay hidden behind a rosebush when I see Silas in my driveway. Willow stomps over to him as he pulls off his helmet and climbs off his motorcycle.

“She doesn’t want to see you, you asshole!”

Silas holds his hands up. “Whoa, Wil, I just came here to explain myself.”

She scoffs. “Pictures are worth a thousand words.”

“I’m well aware of that. My life has been under the lens of paps for nearly ten years.”

“You made promises to her.”

I watch as he runs a hand through his hair, sorrow written all over his face. “And I have every intention of keeping those promises.”

“You have a funny way of showing that, you cruel bastard,” Willow screams.

He sighs deeply. “Look, I just need to talk to her.”

“She doesn’t want to see you.”

“I’m glad she has you to be her watchdog, but I want to hear those words from her mouth.”

I gasp as Willow slaps him across the face. “I’m not a watchdog and she isn’t some girl you just get to fuck around on.”

“I wouldn’t do that to her. I need her to hear it from me.”

Willow props her hands on her hips. “To hear what? An apology because you couldn’t keep your dick in your pants for one night.”

“Those pictures weren’t even from last night,” he says with a slightly raised tone.

I know he is trying to keep his cool. Willow is acting like a witch. But I’m glad she is. I don’t think I have it in my heart to cuss him out.

A demeaning laugh falls from her lips. “Sure. That’s straight out of every cheater’s playbook.”

“You really think if I was that much of an asshole I would have had someone bring my bike to the airport so I could get here as soon as possible? Shit, I probably should have gotten six traffic violations with the way I rode. But I needed to see her. I need to hold her. I need her to know the truth.”

“Well, I’m glad you know how to evade the law. I’ll add it to your list of honorable traits.”

I snort when she says that.

He runs a hand over his face. “Please, Willow. I don’t want to hurt her. I know she’s upset. She would never not answer my calls. Especially after she told me to call her.”

The note I found on his door this morning finally comes back to the surface of my mind. That’s the reason I wanted to talk. Not because of the tabloids. I forgot about the stupid note when I saw his hands on that girl.

“Well, you should have thought about that before you had your hands all over some groupie. You should probably get tested.”

I walk out of the path blocking me from his view, tired of hearing her yell at him. It’s just making me more stressed. “It’s fine, Willow.”

“No, it’s not.” She turns to me.

But then Silas is dropping his helmet to the ground and running toward me.

“Silas, I told you to stay away from her!”

His hands grip my face and his lips are on mine and I can't find the courage to pull away from him. Even after the tears start to fall from my eyes again.

He pulls away from me just slightly. His thumbs wiping away my tears. “I would never do this to you, baby. You know that.”

“Then why would you let this happen?” I cry.

“Nothing happened. I'm not lying about that. You wouldn't answer my calls and I knew you had seen the articles. All I wanted was to get to you as soon as possible, so I could explain everything. None of it's true. I can prove that to you.”

“How?” I whisper.

“Riot has pictures of us from last night. You'll be able to see those photos aren't from then.”

I shake my head as I pull away from him. “I don't know if I can believe you.”

He steps into my personal space but keeps his hands off me. “Why? After everything we've told each other, why won't you believe this?”

I don't want to admit it reminds me of Kent and how he left me for some other girl after taking my virginity. I try to find words to say, but then a searing pain crosses my abdomen again and I grip my stomach.

“Mar, what's wrong? Are you okay?” He drops to his knees and grips my hands on my stomach, then gently runs his hands over my baby bump. “Shit, something is wrong. Did I do this? How can I fix this? Let me take you to the hospital.”

“N-no the doctor said not to worry.”

“The doctor?” he asks. “How long has this been going on?”

Willow walks up behind him, concern etched on her face. “That was hours ago, Mar. Maybe you should go.”

I blink away my tears. “Will you take me?” I ask her.

Willow looks between me and Silas. “Yes.”

Silas stands abruptly, pulling me into him. “No,” he commands. “I’m taking you.”

“She’s not riding on a bike,” Willow shouts.

“Obviously. I’ll drive her car.”

Willow looks over at me. “Are you okay with this?”

I nod. Even though I’m not sure. I don’t know if I want to be around Silas, but I also don’t want him to not be with me if something is wrong. This is his baby too.

“Do you want me to go with you?” she asks.

I bite my lip as I look up at Silas and see the pain in his eyes. I look back over at Willow. “No. It’s fine. I’ll call you when we get back.”

I know she doesn’t like my answer, but she just nods her head. “Fine. I’ll go grab your keys.”

I watch her as she storms inside my house. Nerves transcend my body as I think of being alone with Silas. I want to know the truth, but I’m also scared of what the truth may be, even after he hinted that those pictures are lies.

His hands brush through my hair, and then he lifts my chin to meet his eyes. “Hey, I’m here for you. But I know you’re angry and sad and probably a hundred other emotions after seeing those pictures. I don’t want to be away from you right now. I want to touch you, hold you, make you more promises you probably won’t believe. So just tell me if it’s too much.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes and nod. “Okay.”

Willow comes out of the house with my car keys and hands them off to Silas. “If you break her heart, I’ll kill you.”

“I know,” he answers before taking my hand and leading me to my car.

He opens the door for me and helps me in the front seat. Before he can shut the door, Willow is pushing him out of the

way.

“Call me as soon as you know what’s going on. I’ll be here, okay?”

“Thanks, Wil.”

She shuts the door and Silas pulls out of the driveway and heads toward the hospital.

After an ultrasound and a few routine checks, everything checks out. It looked like a weight was lifted off Silas’s chest when the doctor let me know I was probably just dehydrated mixed with stress, it was just Braxton Hicks contractions. She assured me that some Tylenol, a warm bath, and rest would make them go away. And to find ways to relax when I am feeling stressed.

Of course, Silas didn’t leave my side the entire time we were at the hospital. His hand was a permanent fixture in mine. And I hate to admit I found it comforting.

But as we pull back into my driveway, I feel the stress coming back. I grip his hand hard when I see my parents are home.

“Can we just turn around and go to your place?” I ask him desperately. Even though we still have a lot to talk about, the thought of my parents meeting this six-two, tattooed rock star and father of their only daughter’s child has me feeling more stressed than I want or my doctor would want.

Silas brings my hand to his lips and kisses it, letting out a soft chuckle. “Babe, this is inevitable. I think I need to meet your parents. Then after that, we can go to my place. I’ll draw you a bubble bath, give you a massage, and help you relax.”

“And tell me the truth?”

He winces. “Yeah, babe. I would do it now, but I think you need to talk to your parents first.”

I shake my head. “No, I can’t have that on my mind too. Please just tell me. I can’t keep having this on my mind.”

“Breathe,” Silas whispers into my ear before laying a kiss on my jawline. “You need to breathe, baby.”

I nod, then look at my house and see Dad standing in the living room window.

“CliffsNotes version. And I hope it’s enough for you to believe me. I can show you proof later. But I need you to know I would never cheat on you. Or hurt you intentionally. Hell, I don’t want to hurt you unintentionally, but that’s inevitable, and I’ve already done it more times than I want to admit.”

I turn in the seat and face him. I pick at my fingernails, waiting to hear words that will make me feel better.

“Those pictures were from Silver nightclub but from two years ago. I honestly have no idea why they resurfaced or why the tabloids would start that story.” He pulls his phone out and shows me a picture. “This was us at the radio station.” He flips to the next picture. “And here we are, entering the club later in the night. Do you see what I’m wearing?”

I study the pictures and see that all the guys have the same clothes on in both.

“Now look at this picture with the girl.”

I pinch my eyes shut because my heart hurts seeing him with anyone else. But when I open my eyes, I see more than I paid attention to this morning. Not only does he have different clothes on, but in the one picture of his hands on the girl’s butt, he only has one hand tattooed. And both of his are tattooed now.

“Do you believe me?” he asks.

I sigh and then point at his hands. “I didn’t see that before. I was blinded by my anger.”

He cups my cheek. “I didn’t even think about the tattoos.”

“What about the picture with you, Wilder, and Knox with that one girl?” I pull my phone out and pull the picture up. That’s when I notice they are all wearing the same clothes

from the first pictures he showed me. “Your clothes are the same.”

“And that is the longer story. Wilder and Knox will back me up. Riot too, and I know you will take her word over the others. But that girl was trying to make a move on me. I was adamant that I wasn’t interested. I’m sure there are more pictures the paps didn’t release of Riot getting in her face after Knox and Wilder couldn’t pull her off me.”

“Oh.” That makes sense and my heart wants to believe him. But then I pull up the picture of her with just the other two guys. “What about this then?”

“That’s Wilder and Knox for you. They like to share. And they promised her a good time if she left me alone.”

My cheeks flame. “As in... ohh.” Images of the dream I had yesterday flood my brain, but I shut them off as quick as they come so Silas doesn’t ask questions.

He chuckles into my ear. “We’ll talk about that later.”

I nod aggressively.

“Do you believe me? Are we okay?”

I look over at him and grip his hand. I may be naive in believing him right now, but those pictures he showed me and the way he acted today, how can I not believe him?

“Yes,” I say quietly.

“Hey, I’ll make this up to you. I never want to hurt you. Or our baby. I’m sorry about the pictures and—”

I cut him off. “I need to get used to it. This is your life, Silas. And I know that there will always be drama.”

“I don’t want there to be.”

“I know.”

His gaze flickers away from mine and I follow it to see my dad standing on the front porch with his arms folded across his chest. A stern look on his face.

“Well, I guess it’s time for an interrogation.” I laugh.

“Do that again.”

“What?” I ask him.

“Laugh. I haven’t heard it all day and I know that laugh means we’re okay.”

Butterflies I thought I wouldn’t feel again take flight in my stomach. Instead of laughing, I lean in and kiss him.

SILAS

After the shit show of dealing with paps and tabloids this morning, I didn't think my day would end with meeting Marley's parents. But I guess this is inevitable.

She grips my hand as we walk across the path to her front porch. I don't know if she is doing it to center herself or to help center me. I know her dad already has a distaste for me. But meeting me in person is an entirely different thing.

"You're sweating," she tells me.

"I'm worried your dad's gonna murder me for knocking up his only daughter," I whisper.

She laughs. "Nah, you're safe. He may send you to church though."

I chuckle as we walk up the steps.

"Hi Dad. This is—"

The front door swings open, and a woman that looks almost identical to Marley comes running out. "Are you okay?" she asks as she pulls her away from me and into her arms.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine. Just stress and dehydration."

Her mom pulls back and cups Marley's cheeks. "I was so worried when Willow was here and told us you went to the hospital. Why didn't you text me?"

Marley frowns. "I'm sorry. I was just so overwhelmed and worried something was wrong."

Her mom wraps her back up in a hug and then glances up at me before letting Marley go.

“You must be Silas,” she says.

I nod and before I know it, she is wrapping me in a hug. I freeze. My mom never hugged me like this and I never really had a mother figure. Marley gives me a soft smile. I let go of my anxiety and wrap my arms around her mom.

“Thank you for taking care of my baby girl today,” she whispers.

I pull back. “I always will.”

“You are a good man.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I joke.

Marley’s dad clears his throat. “That I can agree with you on.”

“Dad,” Marley whines.

“Peter, you know we needed to meet him eventually. Don’t be disrespectful,” her mom gives her dad a stern look.

Marley walks over to me and wraps her hand around my forearm. “This is my dad, Peter, and my mom, Marissa.”

“Nice to meet you both. I wish it were under different circumstances.” I reach out my hand to shake Peter’s and he actually shakes mine.

“Well, Marissa has dinner in the oven. We should move this party inside. Do you drink scotch or whiskey, Silas?”

My mouth drops open at his friendliness, I’m literally speechless.

“Whiskey,” Marley answers for me. “He likes whiskey.”

Her mom smiles at me. Maybe this isn’t going to be as bad as I thought it would be.

It's been three weeks since the incident with the tabloid. And everything is going great with Marley. Riot took her out for lunch one day and went over everything. I was nervous about how it was going to go, but when Marley got back to my house, she dropped to her knees in front of me and gave me the best blow job of my life.

And since then, Marley has been spending more and more time at my house. She even started driving herself here, which is a big deal for her and her anxiety. Her parents encouraged her to spend more time with me as well. I still have no idea how meeting them went so well. Her dad asked me nearly a hundred questions, but he seemed to accept that what is happening between Marley and me is not a fling. Her mom was over the moon with me. She even told me I was nothing like she expected. Apparently, she had looked up a lot about me.

And tonight, I even convinced Marley that it was time to take her out for a real date. Luckily, there is less chance of having our photo taken in New Orleans compared to New York or LA, so she agreed. Baby steps. Even though we both know we need to say something soon. I don't want to keep hiding her and I don't want her name slandered when the press finally finds out she is pregnant.

And her baby bump isn't tiny anymore. In the last week, it's grown nearly every day. She's just about five months now. And with every passing day, I get more excited about our future. I never thought I would be like this, but it feels good. I feel like an entirely different man. And I don't hate it. I'm excited about the future. Even her parents are warming up to me.

I walk into the bathroom and stop in my tracks. Marley is applying a layer of gloss to her lips, but that's not what stops me in my tracks. She looks drop-dead gorgeous in a sparkling long-sleeve burgundy cocktail dress. The top is a bustier putting her full tits on display but in a tasteful way. The dress hits her midthigh and is somewhat loose fitting, but tight enough you can see our baby. Her hair hangs down her back in loose waves and her skin glows, not from makeup but from

pregnancy. I swear she gets more gorgeous every day. She is even wearing heels. She never wears them and they only make her legs look more toned. Her daily swims in the pool giving her an amazing physique.

I stand behind her, and she looks up at me in the mirror and smiles. “Hi.”

I wrap my arms around her belly and kiss her neck. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.”

She spins around and wraps her arms around my neck. “You don’t look so bad yourself,” she teases. “I like you dressed up.”

I raise a brow at her. “I thought you liked me naked?”

She smiles as her hands glide down my chest and over my abs. “Mmm. I do. But that’s for my eyes only.”

“You know it,” I mumble as I capture her lips for a quick kiss.

I pull away and pull a box out of my pocket. “I got you something. For... uh... our first official date.”

“Are you nervous?” she asks me with a hint of humor in her eyes.

I shrug.

“It’s okay. I’m kinda nervous too.”

I break out in a grin, my dimples on full display for her. “That makes me feel better. I’ve actually never taken a girl out on a date before.”

“You’ve taken girls to awards shows.”

“How do you know?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Um, I looked it up.”

I run my thumb over her bottom lip. “That was for appearances. This is brand new to me.”

Her fingers land on the box in my hands. “You didn’t need to get me anything.”

“I wanted to.”

She smiles at me, and I swear my heart inflates so large it's going to explode out of my chest. Every day that goes by, I fall more for this girl. I've never been in love before. And I'm not sure if this is what love feels like, but it's pretty damn close.

She opens the box and gasps when she sees the earrings I got her. Willow went with me to make sure I picked out the right style for her. And Willow was impressed I knew just what Marley would love without needing her help.

“Are these diamonds?” she asks as her fingers trace over the dainty drop earrings with flower-shaped diamonds at the end.

I chuckle. “Yeah, babe.”

“This is too much.”

“No, it's not.”

She shakes her head. “No, these had to have cost—”

I put my finger over her lips. “That doesn't matter, okay? They reminded me of you, and I knew you needed to have them.”

She bites down on her lip after I pull my hand away. “Okay.”

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding as she turns around and sets the box on the bathroom counter. I watch as she slides the earrings on. They are perfect for her. She spins around and practically jumps in my arms as her lips land on mine. I pick her up and set her on the counter. A quick kiss turning into a lot more than I planned. Her legs wrap around my hips and I can't help but break away and look down, knowing that dress rode up to her hips.

She's been getting more daring with lingerie over the last two weeks. I have no idea who's been taking her shopping, but I'm not complaining. White lace peeks out between her thighs and I groan as I pull out of her grip.

“If we don't stop now, we are never going to make it to Gautreau's.”

She frowns, but then her stomach growls. “Ugh, fine, but you only win because baby banana is starving.”

I laugh as I pull her off the counter and adjust her dress. I follow her out of the bathroom, only because I’m a dude and I need to see that ass sway in that dress. She really is going to kill me tonight.

“Let me just grab my clutch.”

I watch her and tell my dick to calm down before I say screw dinner and fuck her in nothing but those heels. She switches a few things out of her purse and puts them into a smaller bag. A piece of paper flutters to the ground, but she doesn’t notice, so I walk over and pick it up for her.

My eyes glance over the words, the handwriting. “Where did this come from?” I ask her harsher than I mean to. Fear creeps up my spine that she was the one leaving the notes.

She looks up at me, confused, and then sees the note in my hand. “I forgot about that.”

“Did you write this?” I grind out.

Her face pulls back, aghast. “What? No. I-I actually forgot about that. I found it on your door a few weeks ago.”

My heart drops to my stomach. I know she’s telling the truth. I know so much about her these days. But worry overtakes me that she was here when a note was left.

“When?” I ask.

“The day the tabloid thing happened. Remember when I texted you to call me? It was because of that. But then I forgot when everything else happened.”

I rush up to her and wrap my arms around her. “You were alone when you found it?”

She nods. “Is... what’s going on, Si?”

I kiss her forehead. “Tell me everything that happened.”

She frowns at me but then tells me how she thought she saw someone lingering at the gate when Janae took the kids home the night she watched them. And how the motion sensor

light went off in the backyard, the soft knocking sound on the front door.

Dread overtakes me as anxiety sets in. What if something happened to her? I knew I should have taken care of this sooner instead of brushing it under the table.

“Silas?”

I shake my head at her and pull away. “I need to make a call real quick before we leave.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Carter West, the last person I want to call, as I make my way downstairs into my office.

We are sitting upstairs in the private party room of Gautreau’s. I knew sitting in the main dining room would draw too much attention to us, so I rented out the entire upstairs. I saw the relief on Marley’s face when they brought us up here. Of course, that was after she hounded me on the short drive over about the note. I knew I couldn’t lie to her. So I told her about the other notes and the lurking I’d seen. I told her about how Jackson had a stalker a couple years ago. I left out the part about me calling West since I don’t want her dragged into that. Or her knowing about my relationship with the kingpin of New Orleans.

She relaxed after I told her everything and thanked me for sharing. She also let me know that if we were going to have a real relationship, I couldn’t keep secrets from her. And if I did, she said there would be no sex. I couldn’t help but laugh at that since she is more insatiable these days than I am. Pregnancy hormones are tiring my dick out.

“Oh my gosh, this is the best thing I ever put in my mouth.”

And thoughts of sex come right back to my brain. “I’d have to disagree with that, trouble. I’m pretty sure my—”

“Do not say your big-ass dick of pleasure, please.”

I laugh out loud. “But we both know that’s your favorite thing to put in your mouth.”

She raises a brow at me as I take a sip of my whiskey. “I never said it tasted good.”

I nearly spit out my beer as she continues.

“I enjoy your dick in my mouth. But it doesn’t make my taste buds explode like this dinner does.”

I smirk at her. “But it does explode in your mouth.”

She swallows another bite of food. “If it was up to me, that would never happen again.”

“Is it not up to you?”

She shrugs as she licks her lips and I can’t help but watch her tongue. “I said it wasn’t up to me, but I know you, Romeo. And you enjoy pushing me to my knees and shoving that dick inside my mouth.”

I instantly go hard just as the sound of broken glass comes from the corner of the room.

A server apologizes before running out the side door.

“Oh my god,” she mutters as she buries her face in her hands.

I bust out laughing. I love that she was able to talk dirty in public and the fact someone heard makes the entire situation even funnier.

“You know,” I tell her. “This tablecloth hits the floor. You could always crawl under the table and I can shove my cock down your throat.”

She balls up her napkin and throws it at my face. “Oh my gosh, Silas. I didn’t know anyone was in here. And there will be no table head.”

I stand up and walk over to her, setting her napkin back on her lap. I bend down and press a chaste kiss to her forehead. “Babe, that was classic. And don’t worry. I pay them enough, no one will say anything about what you said.”

She rolls her eyes at me, then pushes me away. I sit back in my seat and enjoy the rest of dinner with her. All talk of cock ended for the time being.

As we make our way outside, the hostess asks if she can take a picture with me and I allow it. Then ask her if she will take a picture of me and Marley. She obliges and I'm happy we have a picture to remember our first official date.

I hold Marley's hand as we walk to the Bentley. My eyes focused on her and not in front of me. But the sound of a voice has me stopping in my tracks and pushing Marley behind me.

"Silas Ford. It's been a while. Seven or eight months." Carter West nods to Marley behind me. "I see a lot can change in that amount of time too."

I grip Marley's hand behind my back, hoping she understands to stay there. "When I called you, I told you the situation. I told you I didn't want to meet in person."

Carter pulls a smoke out of his jacket pocket and lights it up, taking a long drag before speaking. "You did. But this is my city and my rules. You ask for my help, then I do what I deem appropriate."

I feel Marley tense behind me.

"Now you have an issue going on. I'll look into it. But I also heard that you weren't living alone. I can see why. She is a pretty little thing."

"She has nothing to do with this, West."

He tilts his head side to side. "Perhaps. But I do like to know all the pieces of a puzzle before I put it together."

I sigh as I spin around and lean into Marley's ear. "He's an old friend. He can help with whatever is going on with the notes."

I can feel her shaking as she speaks. "Who is he?"

"He's protection. That's it."

She nods, but I know she doesn't believe me. West has a presence about him that screams power.

I turn back around and pull Marley next to me. “This is my girlfriend, Marley.”

Carter tosses his cigarette on the ground and blows out the smoke, walking through it as he steps in front of us. “Pleasure to meet you, Marley,” he says, holding his hand out.

She delicately places her hand in his and he brings it to his lips, kissing the back of her hand. I clench my jaw and try to keep my cool.

“My name is Carter. An old friend of Silas’s. We go way back, don’t we?” Carter looks over at me as he asks.

I nod.

“Well, Miss?”

“Cole,” Marley says quietly. “Marley Cole.”

“Miss Cole, it was a pleasure to meet you tonight. I just wanted to assure you that I will make sure you are both safe.” He grins and I swear the devil shines out from his eyes. “By whatever means necessary.”

Marley grabs my arm and grips it tightly.

“Well, I hope you two enjoy the rest of your evening. Well wishes to both of you and your baby. I’ll be in touch, Silas.” He turns and walks across the street. One of his men holds open the door of his car for him as he slides into the back seat.

I quickly usher Marley into my car. I can feel the fear radiating off her, but she stays quiet the entire ride home.

When we get home, I quickly lock the door behind us and set the alarm. Marley remains quiet as she walks upstairs, me not far behind her. She undresses and slides on one of my shirts. She sets the earrings back in the box, then washes her face and brushes her teeth.

I want to say something, but I’m not sure what. I know she knows that West is more than just some bodyguard.

I watch as she climbs into bed and turns off the bedside light. I quickly follow suit and slide into bed. I want to reach

for her, but I can tell she is thinking. And I'm not sure if it's a good or bad thing.

But after a few minutes, she rolls over and wraps her body around mine.

This is not how I wanted this night to end, but at least she is in my arms.

MARLEY

I wake up to find Silas staring up at the ceiling, his fingers gently trailing up and down my back from where I am curled into him. He must feel me shift because he looks down at me and frowns.

“What’s wrong?”

He sighs and shifts his gaze back to the ceiling. “I feel like I ruined our date last night.”

I sit up and stare at him. “Why?”

He pinches his fingers between his eyes. “I never wanted you to meet Carter West.”

“Oh.”

I know Silas has a past. He’s told me as much. But I also know he wants to keep his past in the past. I knew last night he was lying when he said Carter was protection. The man had an aura to him that screamed power. And he scared me to death. I know he isn’t just some bodyguard. And I could tell from Silas’s energy last night he was not expecting Carter to show up. And I wasn’t sure how I felt, how much I wanted to know.

“He’s a part of my past.”

“I know.”

“I... he’s not someone I want around you.”

“Was that who you called after you found the note I had?”

He nods.

“Silas, you know I will never judge you.”

He sighs. “You say that now. But not when you know the truth.”

I see he is shutting down. So I straddle him and make him talk to me. “You sold drugs, and your brother was killed. What other truth can there be?”

“Marley,” he exhales. “That man last night wasn’t just any dealer. He runs this city.”

“Like a crime lord?” I ask.

Silas nods. “And me calling him last night means I’ll owe him a favor. I don’t want to owe him any more favors. Not after what I’ve had to do in the past.”

“Sometimes you need to let the past go, Si.”

Sadness creeps over Silas’s face. “It wasn’t supposed to be him that night. Not Nolan,” he says quietly. “I was supposed to be the one doing that deal. But I was too busy getting high on the drugs I was supposed to be selling and Nolan ran the errand. He showed up for the bad deal. He was the one who got killed so another drug lord could take the load. I was the one that was supposed to be there. I was the one who was supposed to die. But here I am. And my brother isn’t here because I was too much of a fuckup.”

“Oh, Silas.” My heart breaks for him because I understand his guilt more than before. I lean down and press my lips to his chest over his heart. “You can’t blame yourself for that. Nolan made the decision to go. He could have stayed behind and waited for you.”

“I told him not to go, but he didn’t listen.” He turns his head to the side and stares off. “I had a bad feeling, but I was so high. And I didn’t fight him to stay behind.”

“You can’t keep beating yourself up over that.”

He shakes his head. “I know. But now you are being threatened. I can’t let anything happen to you or our baby. I can’t lose you like I lost him.”

“You’re not going to lose me, Silas. And we don’t know if I’m being threatened. I just happened to be here when that note was left.”

“Whoever it is must know about you though. You are here enough.”

I shrug. “Well, Carter is looking into it.”

“Don’t be so casual about that,” he grits. “Carter looking into it could mean I go back to work for him.”

“Can’t you just pay him off?”

“The last thing he needs is more money. He likes to work in favors. Especially when it comes to people like me or any of the guys. We have power too. Not the same as him. And he would love to exploit it.”

“Oh.”

“When Nolan was killed, I asked him to find out who killed him. So I could get my revenge.”

I run my fingers over his abs. Over the tattoos that seem to have a lot more meaning as he opens up about his past more. “And did you?”

He grips my hands, causing me to meet his gaze. “Would you look at me differently if I said I killed someone?”

I let out a deep breath as I ponder that. I know the man underneath me. He’s not the same guy he’s telling me about from his past. I know he’s changed. But I also know falling back into old ways is easy. But my heart doesn’t want to let him go, even if he needs to do things that are morally gray. And the way I feel about him, the way my heart wants to be fully open to him. I really don’t think I would care.

“Marley?” My name on his lips is pleading.

I meet his gaze. “No.”

“No?”

“I don’t care what you did in your past to survive. Whether you killed someone or not, I won’t judge you. I never will.” I lay my hand over his chest. “Because I know the man in here

would only do something like that to protect the ones he loves.”

He grips my hips and pulls me up so I am sitting just below his chest. “I never killed anyone. But I was willing to. All I needed was that name from Carter. But he put us through hell and was reluctant to give it to us.”

“So you never found the guy that killed your brother?”

He shakes his head. “I did. Eventually.”

“And you let him go?” I ask curiously.

“He suffered at the hands of someone else.”

I want to ask more. I can only guess his words mean someone else killed him. And I know any time I’m with the guys, I’m going to try and figure out who. “What if it was me? What if I was in danger? Would you kill someone to save me?”

“Do I really need to answer that, Mar? Don’t you know?”

I smile at him. “Let’s hope it never has to happen.”

“Why are you so perfect?”

I snort. “I’m not. But thanks for thinking I am.”

His hands make their way up my shirt. “I just told you I would kill someone to protect you. That I was willing to kill who murdered my brother. And you just shrug and say okay.”

“You’re the one that’s always calling me trouble.”

He pulls my neck down so our lips meet. “You are trouble. But in the best way.”

I giggle against his lips and go to kiss him, but his stupid phone chimes with a text.

“Ugh,” he says as he drops his hands from my body.

“Ignore it,” I say as I grind my hips into his chest.

“Such trouble,” he teases but grabs his phone anyway. “Well, that didn’t take long.”

“What?”

He shows me his phone with a text from Riot saying the cat's out of the bag with a link to an article. I slide off him and reach over to grab my own phone.

I find the same message from Riot and click the link. There is a picture of Silas and me from last night. The angle I'm standing makes my baby bump prominent. But I don't even care. Because while I may be looking forward, no doubt at Silas's phone when he had the hostess take our picture, Silas is focused on me. His eyes filled with lust and love.

I glance over at him and I wonder if he does love me. Because every day I fall more and more.

I look back at my phone and read the article.

Womanizing bass player from Saints & Sinners looks like he may have finally settled down.

Silas Ford is known for being a flirt that can charm the panties off anyone. But it looks like the reason we haven't seen him out and about recently is because he's been keeping a secret. Looks like he has decided to tie himself down with a mystery woman. Sorry ladies, but he seems to be off the market now and soon to be a father.

“Off the market now?” I ask him.

He grabs me and rolls on top of me as he tosses both of our phones to the floor. “Baby, I've been off the market for a long time.”

MARLEY

The last month has gone by in a blur. I've moved half my art studio into Silas's house since I find myself here more often than not. I do go home to go to church and take care of my garden since I need to grab flowers for my art.

Silas and I pretty much spend all our time together. Luckily, they haven't had to do much traveling since their album comes out at the end of the month. He let me know they will go to New York and LA to do late-night talk shows. But then he will be home until he leaves for a tour at the end of May and for a week of practices before the tour starts in June. It's good for the baby that he's around and the way he treats me is beyond anything I expected. The first time the baby kicked, he almost cried. We decided to find out tomorrow at my doctor's appointment what we are having.

Silas wants to start building the nursery, so it's done before he leaves. Of course, he's talking about in his house. We haven't really discussed the plan after the baby is born. And I worry everything will change. Is he really going to want me around once he finds out how much work a baby is? Not to mention they will be in the middle of a tour, and I can't bring a newborn on tour. Not that he asked for me to do that. But then I will be alone in his huge house.

I shake my thoughts as I pull into the church parking lot. It's Easter. I feigned illness this morning, so I didn't have to finish setting up for the luncheon. Which it's not really feigning illness when I am tired all the time and my feet and back hurt. This baby is growing so fast now and my body

cannot keep up. One of the reasons I am grateful for Silas, he treats me like a queen. I never would have expected him to be the kind of person to run me bubble baths or massage my feet nightly, but he does. He makes it hard not to fall in love with him. But I know I need to be cautious. I don't want my heart broken.

I climb out of my car and lock it. I see Kent in the parking lot and I take a deep breath, hoping I can find a way to avoid him. Luckily, someone stops him on his way over to me and I make it through the side entrance of the church.

Mom lets me hang out in one of the classrooms until it's time for service. I don't want to socialize with everyone until absolutely necessary. My entire extended family is going to be at the luncheon and I just don't want to play twenty questions until then. Mom and Dad haven't told them about Silas, but I know a few nosy cousins have been dying to find out. I'm sure some think it's Kent's and knowing him, he probably hasn't denied it.

Ugh, I really do not want to deal with him at all today.

I text Silas hoping to pass the time, but he hasn't answered any of my messages. I think he said he had practice this morning.

"Food delivery," Mom says as she walks into the room.

"You didn't have to get me anything."

She smiles at me. "Oh, I didn't."

I snatch the bag out of her hand and read the note on the delivery receipt. I look up at Mom. "Please don't tell me you read this."

She puts her hands in the air as she backs away. "I'm going to pretend I didn't."

I feel heat hit my cheeks. She definitely knew what Silas implied on the note about making sure I got my second favorite breakfast because he wasn't around for the first.

"That man is head over heels for you, Marley."

I ignore her and open up the food container to find French toast from mine and Silas's favorite place in New Orleans. I don't even know how much money he spent to have this delivered here. And it's still warm.

"Are you in love with him?" she asks me.

I shove a forkful of French toast into my mouth and groan.

She laughs. "Fine, then avoid the question. Service starts in fifteen minutes."

I nod and give her a thumbs-up.

I stand by a window, looking out at the outdoor luncheon. I'm avoiding my family at all costs. Two of my cousins tried to find out who got me pregnant in the thirty seconds I gave myself to sit in a pew before Dad started his service. Mom told me to come outside whenever I was ready and just to bring out plates and extra silverware to make it look like I was helping out. Of course, I don't think she meant to wait until everyone was about to leave and I almost want to.

"Are you hiding?"

I spin around so quickly I nearly lose my balance, but Silas's hands land on my hips to catch me.

"What are you doing here?" I shriek as quietly as I can.

"I know this is a big deal to you and your family, so I decided to come out."

I look around his large frame to make sure no one has suddenly appeared in this small alcove. "Yeah, but I'm not ready for you to meet them."

"I already have."

I roll my eyes at him. "You know that's not what I meant. The whole family. My uncles and aunts, my cousins, my grandparents. They are already being so nosy."

"You know, someday they will have to."

“Well yeah. But now isn’t the time. I was thinking maybe after the baby is born or after your tour. Or maybe when she turns fifteen.”

He chuckles and steps more into my space, bending down to whisper in her ear. “Then they may have a lot of kids they need to meet.”

I pull back from him, shocked. He just grins at me with a goofy smile, his stupid dimples popping out and I know he did it on purpose since he knows it makes my knees weak. He pushes me deeper into the alcove, his lips finding my neck.

“What are you doing? We’re in a church!”

“Kinky.”

“Oh my god, Silas. You can’t do this here.”

He chuckles against my neck. “Did you just say the Lord’s name in vain in a church?”

I groan. “I could kick you right now.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I push at him and try to get away, but he picks me up, wrapping my legs around his hips, then pulls the curtain shut that blocks off the alcove.

“Did you enjoy your breakfast?” he asks, changing the subject.

My hand lands on his chest to keep him from trying to kiss me again. “It was delicious.”

“Good.”

“You know my dad will be mad you weren’t at his sermon.”

He cups my jaw as he presses me more into the wall to keep me wrapped around him. “I was.”

“What?” I say louder than I intend to.

“I was sitting in the last pew.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t go up in flames when you walked in here,” I tease him.

“Har har.”

I smile at him and he leans in and kisses me, but this time, I don't stop him. I want his lips on mine. I always do.

He drops a hand to rub over my stomach. “I want this with you, Marley. All of it. The family. The dog. The picket fence. But that shit better be black. I'm not really a white picket fence guy.”

I laugh as I pull his mouth back to mine. My heart ready to explode.

“I'm sure Marley is here somewhere. I think she came in here to grab some extra plates.”

I freeze at the sound of someone walking past us. Then manage to get out of Silas's grip so I can drop my feet to the floor.

Silas bites his lip as he watches me. “You scared someone will find us?”

I nod.

“But baby, you look so sexy right now with the way your hair is messed up from my hands, your lip gloss smeared.”

I put my hand over his mouth to shut him up since I am not sure who is around or where they are going. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He smirks. “I already know I'm going to hell, so I may as well do what I want.”

Before I can ask him what he means, I feel his hand sliding under my dress.

“What are you doing?”

He leans into my ear. “Committing a sin.”

“Silas,” I whisper-yell at him.

He brushes his fingers over my clit and I can't help but let out a moan.

“Did you hear something?” the voice from earlier asks.

I clamp my hand over my mouth so I stay quiet. But Silas doesn't stop, he slides his finger inside of me and I dig my nails into his forearms. Then my stupid body revolts against my mind and I start riding his hand because it feels so good. He pulls his hand away from my mouth and kisses me, swallowing my moans.

I come all over his hand and he pulls away as I watch him lick his fingers off one by one without pulling his eyes from mine.

I grab his hand and suck his last finger into my mouth.

“Fuck, Mar.”

I don't know what's come over me, but I suddenly don't care that we are in my father's church. I quickly peek out of the curtain and find the hallway clear. I send a silent prayer to a God that definitely doesn't want to see what I'm about to do.

Then I drop to my knees.

“Marley.” His hands land on mine as they unbutton his pants.

“Maybe I want to sin too.”

He lets go of my hands. “Fuck, you are such a troublemaker.”

I pull his pants down enough so I can pull his hard cock out of his briefs. I run my fingers along his piercing at the base of his dick before licking up the side and tonguing the magic cross at the head.

“Shit,” he mutters as he falls forward, bracing his hands on the wall.

I circle my tongue around his head, swallowing down the precum leaking out. Then I slowly suck him into my mouth, hollowing out my cheeks and taking him as deep as I can go.

One of his hands lands in my hair and I know if I don't start moving, he will do it for me. I slide my hand up and down his thickness as I suck him deep into my mouth.

“Goddammit, Mar,” he chokes out as I deep throat him.

Then I get the idea to hum a church hymn. I know he won't know it but the thought of me humming it turns me on.

Silas curses from the vibrations along his cock and then he loses all control as he fucks my face. And I let him. I know he likes the power, and he knows I like when he controls me. I don't quit humming, not even when he explodes down the back of my throat, when he has me choking, when his cum leaks from the sides of my mouth. I only stop when he pulls out.

He lifts me up and his mouth is on mine, kissing me with such fervor I think I might collapse.

Eventually he pulls back and tucks himself back into his briefs and pulls his pants up. "I was so close to fucking you, but that humming... shit, I couldn't hold back."

I smile at him as I run my hands through my hair. "I've never felt dirtier in my life."

He swipes his thumb across my lip. "Your lips are swollen."

"I'm soaked again."

His forehead falls to mine. "Don't tell me that, Mar."

I kiss him briefly, then pull open the curtain. "Figured you would want to know you left me wanting."

I walk down the hall, only making it about three steps before he wraps his arms around me from behind. "You little minx. I'm punishing you tonight."

I look up into his eyes. "I can't wait."

We make our way toward the entrance of the church when we run into Kent. "Great," I mutter.

Kent takes one look at me before flitting his eyes over to Silas. "I thought you said he wasn't your boyfriend."

"I lied."

"He's not good enough for you, Mar."

Silas pulls me into his side possessively. “This must be the asshole who took your virginity. Seems like a real winner.”

Kent looks at Silas like he’s the dirt on his shoe. “I wasn’t asking for your opinion.”

“And I wasn’t asking for your permission to have an opinion. You think you’re good enough for her? You’re the asshole who fucked her, took her virginity, then dumped her ass so you could date someone else.”

“That was a mistake.”

I can feel Silas tensing up next to me. “Silas,” I say, trying to get him to pay attention to me and not the douche.

“Well I’m glad you did it since now I get the girl and the family you probably wish was yours. I know you are still pining after her.”

Kent ignores his dig and turns toward me. “So he’s the father of your kid you are having out of wedlock? You know the whole church is spreading rumors.”

“Oh my god,” I stammer. “I think it’s just you. Since no one else seems to have a problem with it.”

“You’ve destroyed your reputation, Marley. No one is going to want you when he’s done with you,” he spits.

“Who said I’ll ever be done with her?” Silas cuts in.

Kent looks him up and down. “Really, bro. You are a douche. I know all about you and how you treat women.”

“Well, *bro*,” Silas says, getting in his face. “I’ve never taken a girl’s V-card, then dumped her ass.”

Kent snorts. “You must have poor taste in women because her virginity wasn’t even worth it.”

Before I can stop Silas, he is punching Kent in the face so hard he falls to the ground gripping his nose.

“Is this the man you want, Marlene? Someone who fights his way out of a conversation?” Kent’s words are muffled through his hands on his face.

“It’s called standing up for someone you care about. Unlike you,” I tell him.

Kent scoffs. “You’re an idiot.”

“No, Kent, you are.”

“You’re ruining your life.”

I pull Silas back. I know he wants to punch Kent again. Instead, I blurt out the first words that come to my head. “Get fucked.”

Silas whips his head at me and I just shrug. “Let’s go, Si. This fucker can cry while he wishes it was him fucking me in the church and not you.”

“Are you serious?” Kent asks me. I can almost hear a hint of jealousy in his voice.

I don’t answer him and decide to kick him while he’s down. I hit him right in the balls and turn to walk away. Silas laughs as he follows me toward the door.

“Fuck, woman, I love you,” Silas says.

I pull him outside and push him into the side of the building, not caring that half the congregation is probably watching us. “Do you?”

“Huh?” he asks, confused.

“Love me?” I ask, praying that he means it and didn’t just say it.

His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me into him. “Yeah, Marley. I do love you. Fuck. I’ve been in love with you for months.”

I don’t say it back. I’m still too scared to. Instead, I press my lips into his, showing him I love him too, even if I can’t say the words.

SILAS

Someone is knocking at my hotel room door and it's pissing me off.

"Maybe you should answer that," Marley tells me.

"Like fuck I am." She is naked on FaceTime. Why the hell would I entertain whoever's at my door?

"It's annoying."

I stare into the phone. We were just about to get to the good part. Her fingers within inches of that sweet pussy. "The only thing that would make me answer that door right now is if it were you on the other side."

Marley frowns. "I wish it was. You've been gone for almost a week."

"Babe, the album drops tomorrow and then I'll be home three days after that."

She adjusts on the bed, covering herself up. "I wish I went with you."

I groan as she pulls the blankets up. "I wish you were here too. I wish you weren't alone in my house right now."

"I know. But the doctor said I shouldn't fly."

Fuck that doctor. I wanted her to get a second opinion. But she didn't. When Marley had her last appointment, she was told she couldn't travel with us. She's seven months pregnant and she's been having Braxton Hicks. Her blood pressure is also high, and the doctor advised her to rest as much as

possible from here on out. She closed her Etsy store temporarily and has been spending most of her time in my bed or the pool. Willow is at my house more than I would like since it means I can't fuck Marley anywhere and everywhere, but I also worry that my dick is going to harm her too. Since it's tough for me to hold back at times.

"It's only a few more days. Then I'll be here waiting for you."

"Good."

"Naked," she says with a smirk.

My dick twitches. "Even better."

She yawns. "I'm sorry I stopped. But I'm also really tired."

"Don't apologize to me. Did you take your vitamins?"

She purses her lips. "Yes, Daddy."

And there goes my cock to full mast. "Don't fuck with me like that, troublemaker."

She laughs a soft, airy laugh and my heart squeezes. "It's so easy though."

"Well, I'll let you get some rest."

She blows me a kiss. "Night, Si."

"Night, baby. Love you."

She hangs up the phone. She still hasn't told me she loves me back yet, but I can sense her hesitation. I don't doubt that she has deep-seated feelings for me, but I think she's worried that I'll want to leave her once the baby is born. In fact, I know so since I overheard her conversation with Willow one day. She thinks I will get too tired of the work of a newborn, that my time on tour will separate us and she will be alone. And she doesn't want to deal with the heartbreak.

I hate to admit that it will be hard to be on tour while she is nursing our baby. And I wish I could be home or that she could be with me. But we both know it's not an option. Maybe if our baby girl was a year old, she would be fine on the tour, but a hard rock tour is not the place for a newborn.

I close my eyes just when another knock hits my door. “For fuck’s sake,” I mutter. “Who is it?”

“We were going down to grab a drink, Silas. Calm your tits. I’m guessing no phone sex for you tonight,” Jackson chuckles through the door.

“Fucker.” I get out of bed and pull on some jeans before heading to the door. I pull it open, and Jax has an envelope in his hand and a concerned look. “You been standing outside this whole time?”

He gives me a confused look. “What do you mean? I just got here.”

“You didn’t knock earlier?”

He shakes his head. “Not unless Wilder stopped by.” He lifts the envelope in his hand. “What the hell is this?”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, so I rip it from his hand. A note falls to the floor. I bend to pick it up just as Jax says, “How long have you been getting these?”

I don’t answer him as I read the note.

Does she know what you’ve done? What you’ve taken from others? She can be disposed of just as easily. Just as easily as you got rid of Randy.

What the fuck?

I look in the envelope and pull out a dozen pictures. Some of me and Marley. Others of her alone. And not just at my house but at hers. And one of those pictures is from today. She sent me a selfie of her in a yellow dress. A brand-new yellow dress she bought yesterday with Willow.

“Shit.”

“What’s going on, man?” Jackson asks me as he follows me back into my room.

I toss the envelope to him. I pace the room as he looks at the pictures, he clearly already read the note, I know that’s why he gave me that look when I came to the door.

“What the fuck, man? Randy? That was years ago.”

“I know.”

“And you didn’t even do it.”

I stop my pacing and stare him down. “I am well aware I wasn’t the one that killed him.” I run my hands through my hair. “You think we should grab Wilder?”

Jackson shrugs. “If whoever is threatening you and now Marley thinks you killed him, then they have no idea it was Wilder that pulled the trigger.”

“Fuck,” I yell as I punch my fist into the wall.

“And now you are going to have Riot on us.”

I glare at him, then pick up my phone. “I need West to figure this shit out ASAP.”

Jackson tosses the envelope on the bed and sits in the desk chair of my hotel room. “Did you already reach out to him?”

I nod. “A month or so ago. But nothing has come up. Nothing has happened since then. He hasn’t told me shit, but what else is new? But I figured his presence was enough to keep someone away.”

Jackson rubs the back of his neck. “I hate to say it, but maybe you should call him.” He points to the photos. “I don’t want anything to happen to her and that right there is a threat.”

I nod. “I know.”

“You love her, don’t you?”

I glance up at Jackson. I haven’t told anyone I’ve said those words to her. “Yeah, man. I do.”

“Then make the call, Si. I know you don’t want to. But you already owe him.”

“She’s at my house. She has to be safe there.”

Jackson raises his brow at me. “And you think she isn’t going to leave at all?”

He had a point. She goes to Willow’s every other day. “Fuck,” I yell. I open my phone and call West, knowing I am selling my soul more so than before.

MARLEY

I yawn as I move Willow's head from my shoulder and stand. We had a girls' night which consisted of rom-coms and too much ice cream. I was tired of sitting alone in Silas's big house. Willow offered to come over, but I told her I needed the comfort of her small apartment. I think she just wanted to hang out in the mansion so she'd have space, but since I'm the one that's pregnant, I won. I know, I pulled that card.

I stretch my bag and glide my hands over my protruding belly. I can't believe I'm seven months pregnant. But my body sure feels it. I hate that I wasn't able to go with Silas for his album release. But the doctor says I need to be on bed rest. My blood pressure has been high, and she's worried about too much stress on the baby. Mom's been worried too, since she had the same issue early on in her pregnancies that caused her multiple miscarriages.

A pain crosses my lower abdomen, but I ignore it. They've been happening daily, and they hurt like hell, but the doctor can't find anything wrong. She thinks it's just the baby shifting. Which I agree with since this little girl is constantly moving.

"Are you leaving?" Willow asks as she blinks open her eyes.

I nod. "Silas set up a video call in the morning with some fancy baby store in New York. But it's super early since he needed to schedule it with his busy schedule for the day. Mom is coming down too."

Willow's eyes go wide. "Your mom is going to Silas's house? Has she ever come down? I don't remember you ever telling me."

I shake my head. "No because we haven't even discussed what to do after the baby is born."

Willows scoffs. "You mean he hasn't officially asked you to move in, but it's inevitable. He's building a freaking nursery in that house. He's head over heels in love with you. And he's stubborn as fuck since he hasn't said the words because he just knows you'll move in."

I purse my lips as she talks because I know she's right and I have nothing to say in my defense. I practically already live there.

"Have you even told him you love him yet? I hear him say it to you all the time."

My chest aches. I haven't said it yet. Fear creeps up my spine every time I go to say it and I chicken out. But also because I'm not entirely sure he means it.

Willow walks up to me and grabs my hand. "I know you love him."

I shake my head. "I don't know if I do."

"Why? What could possibly keep you from loving him?"

I feel the dam break as I tell her something I never wanted to admit out loud. "Because I don't think he really loves me."

"What?" Willow's eyes go wide at my candor.

I blow a raspberry as I sit back down on the couch. "He told me once he was too afraid to let someone into his heart. Why would I think I am any different, Wil? I think he thinks he loves me, but it's just hormones and pheromones and this baby. But once she's born... I don't think it will feel like it does now."

Willow falls onto the couch next to me and wraps her arms around me. "When did he tell you that? Because I don't think that's the case. I see the way he looks at you. Like you are the

brightest star in the sky. It doesn't matter how crowded a room gets, he always finds you first."

I frown. "It's just a feeling I have."

"Well you need to take that feeling and burn it. Stop with the self-doubt, Mar. That man loves you."

I just shrug because I know there is nothing I can say that will make her understand what goes through my head on a daily basis. I know Silas has feelings for me, strong feelings, but I still think it's lust. It doesn't matter that we get along on a physical and emotional level. The doubt is there that it's not real, that none of this is real, and soon, the fairy tale will fade away.

"I should go."

Willow gives me a sad look but nods. "Want me to walk back with you?"

I shake my head. Mostly because I want to be alone with my thoughts right now. "No, it's fine. It's only three blocks."

"You know he would rather I walk you."

"Yeah, well, he isn't here right now to decide that," I snap. I have no idea why I am getting so angry.

"Jeez, okay. Just text me when you get home, okay?"

I squeeze her hand and nod.

"I love you, Marley. Remember that you deserve that love."

I give her a weak smile as I head out her front door. I don't know why I suddenly feel like a dark cloud has come over me. Maybe it's because Silas is gone and I know that will be our life. Him gone all the time. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Because that is not the life I want. I want a husband. Someone who comes home every day. Someone who holds me every night. And I'll never have that with Silas. And while he's gone, I fear he may find someone he can open up to more, laugh with more, love more.

I wish I could shake my depressing thoughts, but they've been getting worse by the day. Is prepartum depression a thing?

I sigh as I wait to cross the street. My thoughts devouring any ounce of hope I had. But suddenly, I get hit with a sense of fear. I turn my head quickly, feeling like someone is behind me or following me, but all I see is a couple drunk girls laughing across the street.

Maybe I'm just losing it.

I make it back to Silas's house and enter my gate code just as a sharp pain cuts across my belly. This is the worst one I've ever felt. I lean over in pain, squeezing my eyes shut and clenching my jaw as I wait for the feeling to pass. It doesn't. And then I start to panic as I feel wetness on my thighs.

Maybe it was my water breaking. Maybe I am going into early labor. But she's only seven months. I can't have her now.

I grip the gate as a wave of dizziness passes over me, another shooting pain in my belly. Something is wrong. It has to be.

I slide my hand to the wetness I feel on my thighs and start to panic when I see red on my fingers. I'm bleeding. Oh god. Something is wrong. I need to call Silas. I need to call Mom. I need help.

So many thoughts pass through my mind of what I should be doing but the pain becomes unbearable and I collapse to my knees. I scream as I fall or at least I think I do. The dizziness is getting worse and I struggle to stay on my knees.

I turn to sit and practically collapse from the shooting pain.

I think I hear voices around me, but I can't tell over the agony. I feel my body falling backward and I'm glad I was already on the ground or else the fall would surely do something to the baby.

My vision fades in and out. The pain taking over every inch of my body.

I think there is a man behind me, cradling my head.

I think I can hear the sound of another man as he makes a phone call.

But I can't make out who or what is going on because all I can think about is our little girl and I'm so scared something is very, very wrong. I cradle my stomach, the hurt worse than it's ever been as I slowly drift off.

SILAS

I park my Bentley outside the hospital doors, not even caring if it gets towed. I need to get to Marley. The call from her mom at midnight last night was not the one I wanted to hear. Her voice sounded broken and I still have no idea what's going on. I just know something is wrong.

"I need to see Marley Cole," I tell the girl at the reception desk.

She looks at me with shock on her face and I know she must recognize me. She stutters as she answers. "Um... I-let me j-just c-check what r-room..."

I slam my fist on the counter. "Quickly."

She jumps. "Yes, sir, Mr. Ford."

I know she must be a fan, but I don't care about being rude or demanding at all right now. I just need to get to Marley.

"She's in ICU, third floor. You need a visitor—"

I don't let the girl finish. I just dart to the sign for the stairs and run up them as fast as I can. I don't give a shit if I need a visitor's pass or what room she's in. I know I'll find her.

And why the fuck is she in ICU? No one told me that. Her mom called and said I needed to get here right away but wouldn't give me any other information.

I nearly pull the door off the hinges when I get to the third floor. I start rushing down the hall, looking at names on patients' doors, when a nurse stops me and directs me to the

waiting room. I was ready to just brush her off, but she told me Marley wasn't in her room currently.

I can tell something is wrong when I make it to the waiting room. Willow is crying. Marley's parents look sad, tears on her mother's face. And fucking Carter West is standing there with them, his normally pristine suit splattered with blood.

"Silas," Marissa cries when she sees me, rushing to her feet to wrap her arms around me. I welcome her into my arms, wrapping my own around her. "I'm so sorry."

"What's going on?" I ask her.

She pulls away and wipes fresh tears from her eyes. Peter walks up to hold his wife's hand. "She lost the baby, Silas. Your baby," she cries.

My mind freezes at her words. Our baby is gone? I stand in shock for a few minutes, unable to fully grasp the words that fell from her mouth.

"Our baby girl?" I whisper.

Peter nods his head and I feel loss like I've never felt before. Searing pain rips my chest apart, sending flames down my limbs as the reality of the situation hits me.

I don't let the overwhelming sadness take over. I let it turn to anger.

I turn to Carter, my vision flooded with red. "What the fuck happened?"

"Calm down, son," Marley's father says to me.

I ignore him and step up to Carter, surprised as shit that he's here. "You said you would protect her."

His face is stoic, and I want to rip his skin from his bones. "I did. I made sure she was safe."

"She lost our baby," I grit.

"And that had nothing to do with the threats you received." Carter's words are soft and in control, unlike the rage flying through me.

“Silas,” Willow snaps.

I look at her and see her eyes flick to Marley’s parents. I look over at them and see the horror on their faces.

“What threats?” her dad asks.

Fuck. “It’s nothing,” I say, even though I know he won’t believe me.

“Don’t tell me it’s nothing.” His voice is thick with venom. “My daughter’s life was threatened?”

I shake my head. “No... I—”

Carter cuts in, saving me from explaining. “This has nothing to do with that.”

My gaze cuts to Carter. “What do you mean?”

“She had complications, Silas. She started cramping and went into shock. Your baby was...” He doesn’t finish the sentence, and for the first time in the years I’ve known Carter West, I’ve never seen him lose his stoic face, his calmness. His face breaks, a horrendous frown taking over.

“Stillborn.” Willow’s voice is so quiet I almost don’t even hear her. But I do.

I see red. Rage flooding my system. I pick up one of the chairs in the waiting room and slam it against the wall.

Stillborn. Our baby suffered.

I turn to Carter, letting my dark thoughts fade. “What the hell were you doing here then, West?”

“I was keeping her under my eye like I promised you. She was walking home from Willow’s house.”

Willow takes a cautious step toward me. “If he hadn’t been there, Silas, we might have lost her too.”

I collapse to the ground, anger turning into a deep sadness. I need to see her. I need to know my girl is okay.

I stand abruptly. “What room?” I growl.

“She isn’t in her room,” Marissa tells me. Even though the nurse already told me that. “The doctor said he would come

get us when she was back.”

“Is she okay?” I ask through my clenched jaw.

Marissa sighs and I clench my knuckles so hard I can feel my skin threatening to break. “She should be. She lost a lot of blood. They had to do a transfusion. It’s why she’s in the ICU. She hemorrhaged.”

I nod, trying to take it all in as I slump against the wall when a doctor walks in.

“Mr. and Mrs. Cole, she’s back in her room.”

I look over at the doctor. “Is she going to be okay?”

He nods, and relief floods my system. “We were able to stop the bleeding earlier. The ultrasounds and MRI show she will be fine. Physically. Emotionally is going to be another topic we’ll need to discuss.”

“Can I see her?”

“Excuse me, sir, we haven’t met and only immediate fam
—”

“That was my baby,” I growl.

The doctor’s face falls, and I can see the sympathy etched all over it. “Just two at a time though.”

Peter tells Marissa to go, and she loops her arm around mine as we walk the hall in silence to Marley’s room.

Marley looks like she’s asleep, the color drained from her face. Marley’s mom pushes me forward, and I rush to her side. I collapse to my knees next to the bed as I grab her hand. Her eyes flutter open and then closed.

“Hey, trouble, it’s me.” I press my lips to her hand and squeeze it for reassurance.

She twines her fingers with mine just as a whimper falls from her lips. When I look at her face, tears start falling from her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Don’t be sorry, baby. This wasn’t your fault. Things happen. And I don’t know why this happened, but it did. But

we're strong. We'll get through this. I love you.”

She doesn't agree with me or say any words back. She just cries until she eventually falls asleep.

MARLEY

I t's been two weeks since I lost our little girl. Two weeks of feeling empty and lost and confused. It kills me even more that I can't explain it to Silas. I can't tell him what I feel. What is killing me on the inside. I've spent so much time in his bed. In a bed I don't even feel like I can call ours anymore.

Silas has no idea how much I blame myself for all of this. Maybe if I had been less stressed. Maybe if I had told my parents the truth earlier. Maybe if I didn't think what we had wasn't real. Maybe then we would still have her. We would be lying in bed right now, feeling her kick against my stomach. We would be laughing and making love. We would be us.

Instead, I am a shell of myself. Hiding in a darkened room. Silas has had to physically move me around the house, or else I would never leave the comfort of the black silk sheets.

And I know he is in as much pain as I am. He tries to talk us through it, but I have no words in the aftermath of it all.

I still feel like I am lying on the path to the front door. My body half in his gate. The blood flowing from my body. I feel happy there. Happy when I still had her. Even when I could feel her dying inside of me.

I hate that I can't talk to him. Can't express my pain. But what am I supposed to say?

We put her to rest a week ago, and I was silent the whole time. All I could do was stare at that tiny coffin. All hope of our baby girl gone. I think I died with her that day. Let my soul be buried six feet deep.

Taylor Grace Ford.

Our daughter.

One who will never see her momma smile. One who will never have her daddy hold her.

And I know she would have had his dimples. His smile.

She would have been his whole world.

Our whole world.

And now all I have are a few ultrasound pictures and a piece of paper letting me know she ever existed at all.

“Hey,” Silas whispers as he rolls over in bed, wrapping an arm around me. I haven’t slept curled into him since I lost her. I don’t want to feel what it’s like to not have my belly against his hips. “Baby, I know you’re awake. Come on, talk to me. It’s killing me that you won’t let me know what’s going on.”

I bite hard on my lip, holding back tears. Because I feel like I didn’t just lose Taylor Grace, I lost him too. And I don’t think I can get him back. Because I am not the girl he fell for. I’m a ghost haunting this place.

“I don’t want us like this, Marley. I want what we had. And I can’t get that back without you fighting for this too.”

A tear falls from my eyes at his words. He wants something we can never have again. We only had what we had because of our little girl. And I can’t fight for something I blame myself for.

“I leave in a couple days, and I think you should come on tour with us. Get you out of this place. See something new. We have our own buses. I’ll be there for you every day. It could help you.”

I clench my jaw. Why doesn’t he understand that nothing can help this hollowness in my chest? I have nothing now. Everything I lived for was in that little girl and she’s gone.

“Everyone is worried about you. It would be good for you to surround yourself with people who care about you besides me. It might help take away your pain.”

“I want the pain,” I whisper. “That’s the only way I know she was real.”

He sighs and drops his head to my shoulder. “Baby, you need to feel more than pain.”

I know I do. But I don’t want to. That’s the problem and I can’t tell him. I don’t want to feel anything other than this drowning in my soul.

I don’t say anything and I know it’s hurting him. But eventually, he rolls back over and leaves me alone.

I don’t understand how he wants to fight for me. How he can still love me. How could he after I lost our baby? He says he does, but all I can think about are those thoughts that were breaking me down before all of this. That he was in love with the idea of me and not with me.

It’s funny to think I was so confused and lost and broken after my accident five years ago. The guilt that ate me alive for being the cause of someone dying. I thought I was trapped in the worst storm ever back then. But I was a fool. This loss, this pain. It’s worse than anything I ever felt. That hurricane before was a joke. Now I’m stuck in a Category 5, chained to a house that will never be. A house of cards falling apart in the wind, the cards disintegrating in the torrential rain. My entire soul is breaking and I willingly give in to the eye of the storm.

SILAS

I roll over and reach out for Marley. Every day I want to scream at the top of my lungs for her to come back to me. But she is so lost in her own thoughts she's drowning and I don't know how to save her.

I'm met with cool sheets between my fingers and a spark of hope has me throwing the sheets off. We lost our baby girl over three weeks ago. We had to bury her before she even had a chance to live. I know how hard it is on Marley, how much blame she must be putting on herself. Because I did the same thing with Nolan. I still do. I understand that pain and the blame never really go away. I know that depression can eat you alive until you feel like a ghost of your real self.

But I don't want Marley to turn into something that just haunts this house at night. I want her to heal. I want her to understand I am here for her. Every goddamn day.

I get out of bed and see the bathroom lights are off so I hit the button on the remote for the curtains. The pool was always her favorite place before and maybe she is out there now. I'm blinded by the brightness of the day. We haven't opened these curtains in weeks.

I throw on a pair of sweats and head down the stairs. I'm hoping to find her in the kitchen with that big, beautiful smile on her face, but she isn't in there.

I check the parlor room, the office, every damn bedroom in this oversized house, and she is nowhere.

I walk around the block, hoping she took a walk, but I should have known better. The alarm was set.

That's when I pull up my phone and look at the activity in the alarm app. She left at four in the morning, a small duffel bag in her hand.

"Fuck," I yell. I try to keep it together, but I feel like my world is falling apart.

I text her parents, asking if Marley is there, but I get nothing back.

I call Willow, but she doesn't pick up.

Fuck it. I run out the front door and jog to Willow's house. I don't give a shit who sees me. I just need to see if Marley is alright. She had to have come here. Where else would she go?

I pound on Willow's door for what feels like ten minutes before she finally answers.

"What the hell, Silas?" she says as she rubs her eyes. "Way to wake someone up on a Saturday morning."

"Is she here?" I ask as I push her aside and walk into her apartment. In my mind, I can see Marley sitting on her couch, eating microwave popcorn and chocolate ice cream.

"She isn't here."

I spin around. "You talked to her?"

She shakes her head. "No. But... if you're here, I can only guess she left."

I stomp over to Willow and grab her shoulders. "What do you mean she left?"

She sighs. "God, it's too fucking early for this. I need a drink."

"Tell me, Willow."

She grabs a bottle of whiskey off an old midcentury modern bar cart and takes a swig. "I don't know anything. Okay? I just know she was hurting. And if you're standing

here in a pair of flip-flops and sweatpants, I can only guess she's gone."

"What else?"

She raises her brows at me. "What do you mean 'what else?'"

I fold my arms over my chest. "You must know something."

She sighs and leans against the wall. "Fine. She wasn't sure you really loved her."

"What?" I shout.

"Jesus, people are trying to sleep, Silas."

I look over at the clock and realize for the first time it's only seven in the morning. "What did she tell you?"

"The night the baby... that night she was worried you only thought you loved her because of the baby. That if the baby wasn't in the picture, you would leave her."

"You know..." I pace her living room, anger beginning to make my blood boil. "You know that's not true."

She nods. "I know. And I tried to tell her that, but she just wouldn't have it."

I try to take deep breaths, but the heartbreak and anger are too strong for it to calm me. "I love her," I grit out.

Willow holds her hands up. "You don't need to tell me. I know you do. I know how much you do. I can see it every time you look at her. But for some reason, she wouldn't believe me."

I slouch and walk over to Willow, grabbing the whiskey from her. "Where would she go?"

She shrugs. "I would guess her parents' house."

It's at the time she says it that I get a text from Marley's mom telling me she isn't there. I show my phone to Willow as I swallow down a large gulp of whiskey.

"Is there any other place you think she would go?"

Willow shakes her head as sadness and fear cross her features. “No. She has never done anything like this before. And I never thought she would.”

SILAS

ONE MONTH LATER

I throw an empty beer bottle at the wall instead of into the trash can. Then proceed to kick the wall until I can feel my toes turning blue in my steel-toed boots. I know my attitude is shit. And I should be more considerate at these venues, but I don't have the willpower in me anymore.

The guys have been avoiding me, which is probably for the best. I've been a drunk asshole for the first month of this tour. I barely even make it to meet and greets, and when I do, I'm usually hammered.

"You know, there are more ways to take out your anger than breaking glass any chance you get."

I look over my shoulder and see Saylor sitting in the green room on her laptop. "I didn't know you were in here."

"Would it have made a difference?"

I shrug. 'Cause I sure as shit know it wouldn't.

"We can always do something more fun. Especially because I don't want to hear Riot bitch about another fee for destroying shit. There's a rage room down the street. They're open for another hour."

I snort. "I don't think an hour is enough time to get my rage out."

"Better than destroying this place," she says sarcastically.

"Fuck off."

Normally I don't mind having Saylor around, but she has been pissing me off the last two weeks she's been on tour with us. She isn't supposed to be here. But those threats I was getting, turns out Wilder was getting them too. And once a threat was made on Saylor's life, he told her to pack her shit and go on tour with us. I wish I had the energy to care about those threats but I don't. And West hasn't helped. He hasn't even contacted me to pay the debt since I punched him in the face at the hospital. I don't care if it wasn't his fault for what happened to Marley. I still feel like he could have changed what happened.

"God, you're so scary and intimidating. Let me run out of here with my tail between my legs."

I roll my eyes and clench my fist. I love the girl, but she never knows when to shut up. "Just leave me alone, Saylor."

"I don't think I will," she says as I hear her laptop close. She walks around and sits on the coffee table in front of me, lighting up a joint.

I scoff because I'm sure Riot will give her shit if she finds out she was smoking in here. She takes a drag, then passes it to me, and I rip it out of her hands.

"She'll come back. I don't know when but she will. She loves you, Silas. She is just hurting right now."

"And you think I'm not?"

"I never said that," she answers with her hands held up in front of her. "But some people handle loss differently than others. And I know for a fact you handle it by getting shit-faced. She must handle it by running."

"She's never run before."

"And how do you know this isn't her normal fight or flight? This has never happened to her before."

She has a point.

"I mean, when shit happened to me, I disappeared and lived with our aunt for almost a year."

I nod. I have no idea what happened to that girl when she was sixteen, but she did run away for a while.

“So you need to get your shit together and stop being an asshole. You have fans that want to meet you, and since you’re here right now, I know for a fact you left the meet and greet earlier.”

“Just get to your point.”

She sighs and pulls the joint from my hand. “Maybe cut back on the booze and the attitude. I know what you’re doing for her back home and I think it’s so romantic. Maybe keep it up. I don’t think she’ll be gone forever.”

“And what if she is?”

“Then you need to learn to move on.”

“How is everything?” Marley’s mom asks me through the phone.

“I would be lying if I said it was just dandy.”

“We wish we would hear from her too, you know.”

“You really think I don’t know that? I can’t believe she abandoned you too.”

“Sometimes people do things we don’t always understand. But all we can do is forgive them and move on.”

“It’s easier to say than to believe. Not to mention she’s your daughter. She’ll come back to you eventually.”

Marissa laughs. “And you are the love of her life. Don’t forget that, Silas.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“What makes you say that?”

I never told her mom that she never said it back to me. After all the conversations we’ve had, I always leave that part out. But I’m grateful for her mom. After that conversation

with Saylor two weeks ago, I've tried to get my shit together. And reaching out to her parents for something other than a status update was one of my steps.

I run my hands through my hair before I tell her the truth. "She never said it back to me."

"I know you aren't a man of God, Silas. But God taught his children that you don't always have to say the words for them to be true. She may not have told you she loves you, but it's her actions you need to look at. Was there ever a time you didn't believe those words to be true?" she asks me.

I think back to all the times I said it to her, and I remember the spark in her eyes. I remember the hesitation she would have when I thought she was about to say it. I know it was fear eating at her that kept those words out of her mouth. From what happened in her past, she was scared that what she thought was real wasn't. But I know just as well as she did, it was all real.

"I'm taking your silence as understanding." I can tell Marissa is smiling into the phone. "Now tell me about the garden. What progress has been made?"

I smile for the first time in a long time and explain to her exactly what I've been doing.

SILAS

I slam the door to my tour bus. Thankful as fuck we didn't have a show, and the guys didn't force me to go out after a radio interview we had tonight. Not today of all days. I'm glad they know. And mostly everyone kept out of my business today, even Riot.

I lean against the bus door and close my eyes. It's July twenty-second. Taylor Grace was supposed to be born today. I should be listening to her cries as she comes into this world. Instead, the only cries I continue to hear on a daily basis are Marley's as she mourned the loss of what should've been.

"Hey."

"God, I'm even hallucinating now," I mutter as I rub my eyes.

I sigh, taking a deep breath in as I look down and climb the two steps into the bus. "Shit," I yell when I see a woman standing inside. She has a sleek jet-black bob and tight leather pants on. Her hazel eyes are rimmed in dark liner, and her lips are painted crimson.

"Marley."

"Hi."

I don't waste any time. And I don't care if she doesn't want this or me. I rush right up to her and cup her face, pulling her lips to mine. "God, I missed you."

"I missed you too."

I crash my lips to hers, but she doesn't kiss me back. Her lacy-fingerless-glove-covered hands land on my chest and she pushes me away a few inches.

"Silas," she sighs. "I only came here because..." She trails off, but she doesn't need to finish her sentence.

"I know." I choke back tears as I say the words.

"I miss her every day," she whispers as she steps back into my space.

Her arms wrap around me, and she rests her head against my chest. My heart rate picks up with how close she is to me. God, I want her more than anything. But I know I'm not what she wants anymore.

Fate has a cruel way of flipping the tables.

We stand with our arms wrapped around each other for I don't know how long until I feel her tears on my shirt. She's silent as she cries, but I can feel her pain deep into my bones.

I kiss the top of her head. "She should be here with us today." Marley snuffles as I speak. "I woke up in tears this morning. So brokenhearted over our little girl."

She whimpers against my chest as I admit how I feel. How I feel every single day without her here.

"I always picture her with your smile and your dimples," she mumbles into my chest.

"And your eyes," I answer back. "Beautiful big green-and-brown eyes."

Marley starts to pull back from me, and I let her. I can't hold her like I used to. Because I don't even know what we are anymore. I guess just two brokenhearted people.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

She shakes her head. "No, I... I shouldn't stay. I should go."

I let out a loud sigh and I know she can feel my annoyance. "Where have you been, Mar?"

She looks away from me and then starts wandering around the tight space of my tour bus. “Around.”

I fold my arms over my chest as I lean against the side of the couch. “Around? What the hell does that even mean? You dyed your hair. You’re wearing clothes like you wore on that first night I met you. Is this some joke?”

She spins and looks at me, shaking her head. Then pulls on her hair, pulling off the jet-black wig. “I wasn’t sure if I was going to get past security.”

“So you dressed like that?” I gesture toward her.

“I just thought... well, if I looked like a groupie—”

I cut her off with a short laugh. “Babe, you don’t look like a groupie.” I can’t hold back my laughter now. “You look like an emo kid from the early aughts.”

She rolls her eyes and throws her wig at me and then the ridiculous half gloves she’s wearing. “I had to try something. Luckily, I was able to get a hold of Riot.”

“She let you on the bus?” I ask with a raised brow.

Marley nods.

“That explains why I got out of the club appearance tonight.”

“Well, I should—”

I hold out a hand, blocking her path. “Don’t tell me you think you should leave. Because you shouldn’t. We both need each other tonight. And I’m not saying to fuck. Just... just spend the night with me, please. Lie next to me. Keep me company on a day that hurts more than most.”

“Fine.”

I’m surprised she agrees. I walk past her, my hand brushing her thigh unintentionally as I do. But I don’t miss the way her breath catches at the slightest touch from me.

I pull off my shirt as I walk into the bedroom at the back of the bus and kick off my shoes. I flop onto the bed.

Marley stands in the doorway, frozen. “Umm, can you put on a shirt?”

Good to know I still affect her. “No.”

“Whatever.”

I watch her as she struggles to kick off the Docs she’s wearing and I need to will my dick to not stand at attention. Marley has always been attractive, but now there is something else about her. Maybe the way her ass looks just a bit plumper or the way her tits definitely didn’t get much smaller. But she also has confidence now, which I don’t remember. And maybe she found that when she ran off.

It still hurts to this day that she left without a single word or a note or anything to let anyone know what she was doing. But I can’t be mad because she’s here now on the day I need her the most.

She lies down on the bed on the very edge, as far away from me as possible and I can’t help but laugh. “I’m not going to bite you.”

“Yeah, well, you’re shirtless and I don’t trust you.”

“Me?” I ask. “What the hell have I ever done?”

“Need I remind you that you kept trying to seduce me all night at that party even after everyone told you to leave me alone?”

I roll onto my side and look at her. My hand itching to fix her bangs that are all messed up from the wig she was wearing. “Yet I remember you pouncing on me like a cat in heat.”

“I think your memory’s skewed.”

I smirk at her. “Whatever you say, trouble.”

Hearing that nickname causes her to wince, like it brings back too many memories.

“Silas,” she sighs. “I’m sorry for walking out the way I did.”

I pick at the comforter, holding back the words I want to say. I choose to say something different. “You should call your parents. They are worried as fuck.”

“They know I’m here.”

“What?” I say, shocked as I meet her gaze again.

“I saw them last week. I actually asked my mom if she thought I should find you. And she told me I was an idiot not to.”

“You broke my heart, Marley.”

She closes her eyes. “I know.”

“I was already heartbroken and lost over Taylor Grace, and then you walked out. Fuck, I was so worried. I’ve been worried. Wondering if something happened to you. If those threats ever came to fruition and I would never see you again.”

“Whatever happened?”

“Nothing really. Turns out Wilder started getting notes too. Saylor’s life was threatened. Her annoying ass is on tour with us now.”

Marley smiles at that. “I’m sure you are enjoying her company.”

“Depends on the day.”

We both smile at each other until our silence becomes awkward. And I can’t not ask her. I need to know.

I clear my throat. “Why did you leave?”

She goes to get up, but I grab her arm and pull her into me.

“Marley, you can’t just run away from me again. I want to know what I did. What happened? I was so in love with you. I still am in love with you. But when you look at me a certain way, it tears me in two. Like, I know this is all temporary. That we can’t be together.”

“We can’t be together, Silas. The only thing that was keeping us tied to each other was her and now she’s gone. What do we have left?”

I pull her even closer to me, and she doesn't fight me. It gives me some sort of hope for us. "She wasn't the only thing keeping us together, Mar. You know that. This thing between us started with the spark we have and then it led to more. But don't tell me there weren't feelings there."

She sighs, then reaches a hand out to my face. "We're ten years apart. This will never work. You'll end up resenting me for losing the baby. I'll get mad at you when you sleep with some groupie on tour. We made a promise to each other to be there when we had something to share. But that's gone. Our baby is gone. This is the end, Silas. There is no us. There never really was. Just two people who were connected by the soul of another. But that thread was snapped. And we need to go our separate ways. I only came here because it was supposed to be her due date. But I can't stay. I need to find myself. Find what it's like to be loved for me and not for—"

"Don't even think about finishing that fucking sentence, Marley. You know damn well I loved you. That I still love you. And there is a good chance I will love you until the end of my days whether you're in my arms or not."

Tears begin to fall from her eyes again. "I just don't know if I can do this, Silas. I don't know if I can forgive myself for hurting you."

I pull her into me so we are flush against each other. "I never once blamed you for what happened. That's life. Those things happen. Was I mad, angry, and wanted to tear apart the world to get her back? A hundred percent. But not one thread in my being thought it was your fault, so stop making yourself the villain."

Her warm breath hiccups against my chest and I can tell she wants to continue fighting me, but I don't let her. I just hold her. Both of us crying. Both of us missing who we never got to meet. Who we never got to hold. But right now, in this moment, I have the one person who can heal my soul.

I wake up the next morning and immediately feel the emptiness in my arms. We fell asleep together last night and I hate knowing that when I reach out next to me, she'll be gone. Yet another goodbye I won't get.

But when my arm reaches over, it lands on her hip. My eyes fly open so fast, surprised she is still lying in my bed.

“Good morning.”

I take her in, and she is still in her clothes from yesterday. Eyeliner smudged on her face from crying. Her red lipstick is partially faded. But she doesn't have her shoes on. She woke up just as she fell asleep.

“I-I'm sorry, Silas. I know you don't want to hear me apologize anymore, but I have to. Because I know what I did was wrong. You deserve more than I ever gave you.” She shifts in the bed and sits up, scooting closer to me. “We both made promises, and I broke mine. Every single one of them. I'm such an idiot. I never should have left, but I needed to find myself. And you... you never broke one single promise. You gave me everything and then more and I'm the one who took you for granted and left. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

She presses her palms into her eyes, and I can hear her starting to cry again. “I was up half the night because of the pain I live with every day. Not just for losing our baby girl but for pushing you away and losing you too. And I don't want that anymore. I don't not want you in my life. These last few months wrecked me. Emotionally, physically. For so many days, I thought I was going to die from a broken heart. Because when I walked away from you, I broke my own heart.”

She sniffles and wipes her hands on her black T-shirt. “I love you, Silas. God, I love you so much. You own my fucking heart. Yeah, I swore, and I'll do it over and over again because I don't think there is a better way to express my love for you. I thought if I ran, it would go away, but it only made me yearn for you more.”

I stare at her in shock. These are the words I've wanted to hear her say for so long.

“I fucking love you, Silas Ford. I love—”

I pull her into me and press my lips into hers. “I love you too, Marley Cole. And I don’t ever want to stop.”

I pull her over me until she’s straddling me. “Stay,” I tell her.

“I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

I pull her back down to meet my mouth and I can’t help but groan as she grinds her hips into my growing erection.

“Stay,” I tell her again.

“I will.”

“Forever.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Si. You’ve got me tied to you from now on.”

“Good, because if you decided to leave, I think I might just have to tie you to this bed.”

She pulls away from me and smirks. “You still could.”

I smile at her. “You little troublemaker.”

She pulls her shirt over her head. “Maybe you should punish me.”

I can’t help but laugh as I grab her hips and toss her onto the bed, landing on top of her. “I’m going to punish you for a long time.”

“As long as you tell me you love me after.”

I drop my lips to hers. “Baby, I’ll tell you I love you before, during, and after. There is no other choice.”

She wraps her legs around my hips. “Then I think I’ll have to stay.”

EPILOGUE

MARLEY

Three Years Later

I'm in the garden that Silas built for me, clipping roses for a few vases in the house. When we finally made it home after two and a half months on tour, I was shocked to find the masterpiece he had built for me. He told me it was to hopefully win me back. But he never lost me back then. I just lost myself.

I hurt Silas all those years ago more than I thought. And I've been making up for it ever since. I was an idiot to think he didn't really love me then because now I know he loves me more than ever before.

I drop my hand to my stomach and rub my swollen belly. I never would have thought four years ago when I put on Willow's leather dress that I would be living in this house. Married to a rock star and pregnant with his kid. But I guess God has a path for all of us.

"Momma, Momma. Looksie, whats I found!"

I turn around and see Nolan running toward me. Our precious two-year-old boy. Apparently we didn't learn the first time about sex without condoms. Of course, we fucked each other pretty much every second Silas wasn't on stage that first month, so who knows when I actually got pregnant. But we are both convinced it was the first time. That morning when I finally decided not to run again and admitted I loved him. I wouldn't have asked for anything different. And now we're having twins. A big family like I always wanted. The one Silas has been begging me for. After Nolan was born, he asked when he could knock me up again. I told him he had to wait. So he gave me an entire year and a half. Although now he is saying he isn't waiting that long for more.

It's crazy how we both changed each other. How he's become the family man he never thought he would be. And I've stepped out of the box I grew up in. But I would never blame my parents for my naivete. In fact, they were the ones who pushed me to be with Silas.

When I left that morning three years ago, I thought I was just going to go home and fall back into my old pattern. But then I saw an ad for Miami and I decided on a whim to travel. I saw New York, Charleston, and Savannah too. I learned so many things about myself. I slowly realized I wasn't to blame for losing Taylor Grace. But mostly, I learned how much I missed the one man who meant more to me than anything. When I finally went home after weeks of traveling, my parents told me to find him and to be with him. I had no idea that they had been talking weekly. That Dad was falling in love with him too, in only the way a father could love their future son-in-law.

It took us a long time to heal. Losing a baby is never easy. And Mom was there to help us both after the handful of miscarriages she went through.

I bend down as best I can at six months pregnant to pick up my son. He wraps his legs around me and holds out his hand.

“What is that?”

He giggles and buries his head in my shoulder.

I pull the diamond necklace out of his hand and inspect the gorgeous floral design just as Silas rounds a corner.

“You let our son run around with a diamond necklace!”

Silas chuckles, his dimples popping out as he smiles at me. “I have no idea what you're talking about. He found it in the dirt.”

“Yeah, okay, Romeo.”

Silas walks up to me, grabs the necklace out of my hand, and hangs it around my neck. “His momma is so good at picking flowers, turns out Nolan is just as good.”

“You're ridiculous.”

“Nah, I'm just in love.”

His hand lands on my stomach just as the twins both kick. He presses a kiss to my cheek and wraps his other hand around Nolan.

Our family. In our garden.

I couldn't ask for anything more.

Remember Marley's dream? Want to know what it was about?

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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 Taylor Swift as she drinks champagne. Tori is living her best life in the magic of New Orleans with her dog.

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