

WEAR YOUR Heart ON YOUR Skin



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CHAPTER ONE

“Cassandra? Cassandra McKellan?”

I’ve never been one for dramatics, but I swear to God, if I hear my name one more time today, said in that shell-shocked, disbelieving tone, I’m going to scream bloody murder.

Before I answer I don’t bother to even pull my head from the freezer that’s holding what is surely the world’s tiniest, most generic selection of frozen pizzas.

“You know, I’ll never understand why everyone feels the need to tack on the last name like that. I mean, how many other Cassandras do you people know around here?”

There’s a split second of silence, followed by quiet, deep laughter.

I toss the cheap Red Barron box into the hand basket that’s been abandoned on the floor beside me, and exhale deeply

before straightening out. After I manage to quell the annoyance brewing inside of me, I lift my attention from the floor, and allow them to travel up the length of what feels like Prism County Resident #9032 who's managed to accost me in the short day and a half I've been back in town.

I can say with great certainty that there isn't much I've missed about this place. I haven't missed the small-town mentality, or the clear social divide that runs through the area along with the train tracks on the south of town. I haven't missed the lack of decent restaurants, or this tiny, podunk excuse for a grocery store that I'm standing in. And I certainly haven't missed the people, which could explain the attitude that I've been sporting all day long.

But, damn it, out of the few things that I *have* missed, his blue eyes are near the top of the list.

I reach them quickly, not having recognized the rest of him. The last time I saw him, the closest thing he had to a tattoo was left over bits of clay and paint that he'd somehow managed to smear across his forearms. Now those forearms, along with bits of the collar bone that I can see peeking out from underneath the fitted grey t-shirt he wears, are absolutely covered. With the exception of his hands, neck, and face, he's really more ink than anything else.

His eyes are the same though, and thank God for that. Just like the last time I saw him, the morning after Ivy's funeral all those years ago, there's not a single drop of pity in them. And right now, dealing with the least difficult, but difficult nonetheless, goodbye of my last remaining family member, those blue eyes are just about the most welcome thing that I've seen since crossing the South Carolina state line.

Ian Walker and I were never close in school, despite being in almost all of the same classes since kindergarten, but I may or may not have spent an inordinate amount of time studying those eyes instead of whatever text book I should have been focused on. I often argued with myself that he started the whole thing. Even for someone as imperceptive as I've been told I am, it was hard not to notice the way his eyes always found me across a crowded hallway, or to see his head peeking through the crack in the curtain that separated his mother's office from her classroom when I'd pick Ivy up from her after school program.

I never understood why he was always staring at me like that. I almost convinced myself that he felt sorry for me—poor little girl from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. That small-town mentality that I mentioned earlier was ingrained in me, and it was easy to think that he just looked down on me like everyone else did. The idea that he actually *pitied* me made me angrier than I liked to admit.

Then, in the tenth grade when my mom died, I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong. That was when I began to understand what pity truly looked like. It made my stomach roll and my insides shake with something just short of rage.

The way that Ian Walker looked at me was different. It made me *feel* different.

So I started paying attention.

To how he would rub the back of his neck nervously after turning in his Geometry tests. To the way one corner of his mouth would quirk up whenever the school secretary, Mrs. Bennett, would announce it was going to be another fantastic Friday during the morning announcements. To the way his eyelashes flared against his cheeks when he looked down and

how ridiculously unreal they seemed when the light would stream in through the window he sat by in the cafeteria.

So, while his penchant for doodling along the margins of his notes might have developed into something a little more extreme, the way his eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles is exactly the same as I remember.

It's a welcome sight.

“Well, there's just the one, but she's such a rare occurrence these days I guess everyone wants to make sure.”

I'm quiet for just a moment longer than what's considered polite and watch as his hand comes up to rest on the back of his neck. He runs his palm over the skin there and a messy, stray section of his sandy blond hair makes its way out from underneath the black beanie he's wearing. He moves to tuck it back into place and I can't help the grin that stretches over my face when I spot a half-finished game of tic-tac-toe on the inside of his wrist. Anyone who ever stepped foot into Mrs. Walker's art class saw their games on the old chalkboard she'd tacked up alongside the newer, larger whiteboard—a running score tallied along the bottom. It just never occurred to me that one day I'd see one inked onto his skin.

“You look different,” I blurt out, and immediately try my best to backtrack. Because, seriously, what was I thinking? “Not that it's a bad thing. I mean, not that you looked bad before ... I, I... It's not a bad kind of different.”

I'm seconds away from reopening that freezer door, locking myself inside, and dying a slow, slow death somewhere behind the Totinos pizza rolls.

“You look exactly the same,” he says, the smile evident in his voice. “And that’s definitely not a bad thing.”

I can practically feel the ugly, nervous laughter bubbling up in my throat right about the time that he must sense my discomfort, and changes the subject. Compliments have never been easy for me to accept or trust.

“It’s been a while. How’ve you been?”

It’s been nearly six years since I left this place. His words are an understatement to say the least.

“I’ve been alright, I guess. I’ve been *better*, of course.” I pause and adjust my grip on the hand basket before I let the next rush of words out of my mouth. I don’t want to open up a conversation that I’m not ready to have with the end of that last sentence. “I’ve been living out on the coast. It’s nice there, but I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t miss this place from time to time.”

There’s a beat of silence, despite the canned, instrumental version of some top forty hit being funneled through the store, that’s close to overwhelming. The way that he’s looking at me—mouth slightly open and eyes wide—doesn’t surprise me in the least. That’s probably the longest series of words he’s ever heard me string together. In high school, verbose I was not.

I fidget with the cracked plastic casing that wraps around the basket’s handle some more, and try to continue on like nothing’s out of the ordinary. As if everything about this scenario isn’t out of place.

It's a stretch.

“How about you? How've you been?”

I actually fucking bounce on my feet. Toe to heel, toe to heel. Like a toddler.

He smiles and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He doesn't look like a three-year-old while doing it, but it makes me feel a little better nonetheless.

“I'm good,” he says. There's no way he doesn't know what I'm doing back in town, but he doesn't seem to mind avoiding the subject. Just another thing that makes him (alright, maybe not just his blue eyes, but *him*) one of the few things that I've missed. “I've been good. I'm living in my parents' old place now. It's weird, living in the house I grew up in, but I don't know... I guess it's kind of comforting in a way?”

I'm confused. Mainly because it's so rare for anybody who's been in this town for as long as the Walkers to just up and move, but I guess his parents must have decided that with Ian and his brother gone, they no longer had the need for such a large home. Of course, that thought only leads me to the idea of the man in front of me being in need of such a large house. Images of little blond-haired babies and some gorgeous (obviously tattooed) woman invade my mind. I check his left hand for a ring before I can stop myself.

My stare must go on for a little too long. (Just like this conversation that I've done nothing but embarrass myself during.) At any rate, my cheeks heat and I can think of nothing better to do than take a step forward and gesture to his forearm. The forearm that is currently flexed tightly around a

twenty-pound bag of dog food, making every muscle in it and the rest of his arm stand out at attention.

The mental picture that I've carried for years, of a twenty-two year-old Ian Walker, standing in the parking lot of our old high school, a bag of what was probably clay for his mom's class over one shoulder, and another tucked underneath his arm, makes its way to the forefront of my mind. A knot grows in my throat and I cough around it. I have to speak before I get distracted again.

"Sorry, I was just..." I trail off, leaning closer to get a better view of the piece he has there. It really is beautiful now that I look at it. A ship wrecked against a rocky shore line, waves still crashing over the sides, with the form of a slender, dark-haired mermaid, no—a siren, her mouth still open in song, sprawled out along the rubble that leads upward over his elbow and bicep. "That's lovely."

I look up as he shifts the bag and I hope the suddenly shy look on his face doesn't mean I've managed to overstep any boundaries. It's gone as quickly as it came though, and replaced with his usual, easy smile.

"Thanks," he says, the grin never leaving his face. There's something comforting about the fact that he still smiles just as often as he used to. Just as easily. "If you ever plan on getting anything nautical themed done, Keiran, down at Studio 13, is the guy to go to."

I try to hold in my laughter, but it results in a pretty painful snort that forces me into an explanation.

"Yeah, Chris would kill me."

“Ah. Not a fan of tattoos?”

“More like insistent on being there when I actually get one.”

“Got it,” he says, backing up to grab a box of Fruity Pebbles from a shelf on the end cap, before continuing in a voice that comes out sounding more unsure than anything I’ve ever heard from his mouth. “So this Chris... Did he make the trip home with you?”

I laugh, nervously and inappropriately as ever, and he lifts an eyebrow in response. It’s hard to decide which is funnier to me—the fact this is starting to sound like a bad, made for TV movie, or that he’s used the word ‘home’ when I haven’t been able to identify anything with the term for years.

“Sorry. *Christina* was my roommate and, no, she didn’t come with me.”

“Oh,” he says simply, and the blush that paints his cheeks, in contrast with the heavy lines of ink that I can see swirling up over the dip of his collar bone, has got to be one of the cutest things I’ve ever seen. If the hand not carrying the dog food wasn’t occupied by the box of cereal he just picked up, I’m almost positive it would be rubbing at the back of his neck right about now.

“Yeah,” I say, trying for a small smile that I’m worried comes off as more of a grimace or weird sneer. I have to force my eyes from the artwork covering his skin and try my best to make eye contact without looking away. “It was nice running

into you, Ian. I should probably get going though. It's going to be *another fantastic Friday* after all."

One side of his mouth lifts up at my ridiculous impression and, for some reason, that tiny thing makes the stupid joke completely worthwhile. He turns his body toward mine as I go to pass by him, and speaks with nothing but sincerity.

"It was good to see you, too."

I'm at the register when I hear him call my name out for the second time. Placing my basket on the conveyor belt, I turn to face him. He's twisted away from me, in the process of laying his bag of dog food on the floor. I promptly lose focus on anything but what looks to be a series of swirls, all different colors and patterns, peeking out from underneath the cotton of his t-shirt. Reaching into the back pocket of his jeans, he pulls out his wallet and lifts a small card, black with raised, white font, in my direction. I turn it over in my hands, admiring the neat etching of a bird in one of the corners, but don't have time to read the words on it because he starts to speak again.

"I just wanted to say that if you need any help, or anything ... *with* anything, feel free to give me a call."

A sixteen-year-old Cassandra whose mom had just died would probably have thrown the card back in his face. She didn't need any help, thank you very much, and she had no problem letting you know it. A twenty-two-year-old Cassandra who had just lost her little sister would have given him a tight-lipped smile and said 'thanks, but no thanks'. Too tired to cause a scene.

A twenty-eight-year-old Cassandra who's spent the last six years trying her best to heal, though? The one who's about to

spend the rest of her day hoping her father recognizes her face at some point in the last few hours he'll spend inside the house he raised his family in...

I whisper a 'thank you' so quiet I'm sure it barely reaches his ears, and I attempt not to revel in the way his fingers felt as they brushed mine just seconds before. He smiles then, the gesture so bright that I feel myself mirror it, and then he's gone.

I tuck the card into the inner pocket of my purse and tell myself that I won't need it. That I've had my fix of those blue eyes, and can go on just fine knowing that he's out there and that the way he looks at me hasn't changed at all over of the years.

I tell myself these things as if I don't already know that I'm lying.

CHAPTER TWO

He's been staring out the bedroom window for hours now.

I should be used to it, really. After our mother died, Ivy and I would take turns bringing his dinner into the bedroom, making sure that he ate, getting him to and from the bathroom, and readying him for bed each day. It quickly became his new normal, and I'm certainly in no place to judge at the moment. I've been standing in virtually the same spot for the last four hours, watching him and wondering when I'll stop wishing for what used to be.

Somewhere, deep down, I'm almost positive that's what he's been doing for the last twelve years.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, I note the time and grudgingly step into the room. I kneel down beside his chair and the gentle smile he gives is almost enough to make me cry right here and now. The years between Mama and Ivy's deaths were filled with a quiet, catatonic kind of grief that I didn't understand, or have the patience for. There were, of course, days that were better than others—days when he would move from the spot by the window and maybe even manage a stilted conversation over a lunch thrown together just a few hours late

—lukewarm soup and sandwiches with the edges just a little too burnt.

I took care of Ivy though and, in her own, sweet, mild-mannered way, she managed to take care of me. I think Daddy, even in the state he was in, knew that. I also think that's why, after the fire, the fog that had settled over him seemed to lift. For a while, at least. With the two of us McKellan girls, we were okay—we had each other's back, and that was something he seemed to understand.

With Ivy gone though, it was like he suddenly came to the realization that there was no one left to take care of *me*.

And that was when the twenty-two year old me, the one who would have written off Ian Walker with a simple '*thanks, but no thanks*', had the exact same reaction to my father. The night of the funeral, my bags were packed, and by noon the next day, I had crossed the state line with no want to ever look back.

But here I am.

“Hey Daddy.” My voice comes out much softer than usual as I lean down to brush a strand of his greying blond hair from his eyes. The action hasn't been the most well-received at times over the last forty-eight hours, but he doesn't seem to mind so much at the moment. “We don't have much longer before we have to go. Is it okay if I sit with you?”

His face is blank, and his smile fades as he directs his attention back to the window.

“It’s weird being back here. It feels like hardly anything’s changed at all. I ... I didn’t realize there were actually some things that I missed...”

The lack of response is no surprise, but the fact that I feel the need to go on is.

“I ran into Ian Walker down at the market earlier. You know, the art teacher’s son? It was nice... He was nice. He’s always been like that though...”

“Melanie’s youngest?”

His voice, soft and slightly hoarse from disuse, startles me.

“I hope he took after his mother...” He trails off and a slow, steady grin I haven’t seen in a long, long time is coupled with a glint in his eye that’s been absent for even longer. “Everyone always knew that Martin was a miserable ass.”

His hand comes up to cover his mouth in a manner not unlike a child who’s just said something he knew he shouldn’t have. He starts to chuckle behind his palm, and I can’t help joining in. It’s true. Ian’s father is awful—always has been. Taking my reaction as a sign it’s okay to go on, he lowers his hand and continues.

“She deserved a lot better than him. She *deserved* to have what she really wanted.”

He pauses and fades away for a second. I wonder if this is how the conversation is going to end. I’m also confused by his

words, but this is the most I've been able to get out of him since I've been home, and can't help but hope for more.

He looks out the window for a few minutes before continuing with his line of thought.

“But, you know, so did I.”

His hands fold back into his lap and I know that's it.

I've never been much of a crier, but I bite my thumb until the skin is purple and fight back the tears I feel behind my eyes for almost half an hour. Until there's a knock on the front letting me know it's time to go.

I remember the man the center's sent over from high school, but if he recognizes me, he doesn't say anything. After packing Daddy's things into the trunk, I ride in the car with them over to the nicer of the two assisted living facilities the county has to offer. We may be from the poor part of town, and I might have had to sell my car and break my lease, but I'd sooner live there myself than let my father go to Cobb Memorial. Compared to one another, Social Circle Assisted Care Center makes me feel like much less of a disappointment as a daughter.

It doesn't take long to get his things set up once we arrive. One large suitcase, stuffed with clothes, along with another two boxes of personal care items, books, and pictures are all he really has room for here. I'm glad the room at least has a window for him to sit in front of. I place a picture of myself, taken maybe six months ago, on a shelf directly across from his bed. Rocking back on my heels, I tell myself that even if he can't remember my name at times, at least maybe it'll help him to recognize my face.

It's not long after, with nothing left to do, that I say my goodbyes for the evening. I promise to be back tomorrow, and the silence that follows is suffocating, if not expected.

I'm almost out the door, my fingers closed around the handle that I hear him.

“Say hello to Melanie for me, will you?”

He's not looking at me, but I nod anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

Not thirty seconds after the front door closes behind me, I dart right back outside. I'm quick, but the driver that brought me back to the house is quicker and already disappearing around the corner.

I wonder why I thought I would be okay here by myself. Why I didn't realize that the quiet would be nearly deafening, or how overwhelming the small, darkened rooms would feel once I was the only one in them. Gripping the front porch railing tight, I try to talk myself down.

My father's things are all but gone, taking what remains of my mother's along with them. I know the bedroom upstairs, the first one on the right, has been cleared of Ivy's belongings. Some of them I've brought back with me, packed safely away in the U-Haul parked in the driveway. Others were scattered amongst her friends not long after I left town, and I often wonder exactly who walked away with what. It doesn't matter now though.

I tell myself the house behind me isn't filled with ghosts, but right now I know I can't be here.

I need a drink.

I reach into my purse to retrieve my phone, but my fingers close around the card Ian handed me at the grocery store earlier instead.

It's simple—straight forward and to the point. I trace my thumb nail over his name, and dial the number with my other hand before I can talk myself out of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

It's been a while since I've found myself sitting in Massey's Bar and Grille, but judging by what I can see from my booth along the back wall, it doesn't look as if much has changed. Well, aside from the 'and Grille' tacked onto the name, that is. Six years ago the kitchen area in the back was more likely to house a completely sloshed Mr. Massey, slumped over on a rickety cot, than the actual appliances that I now see through the window behind the counter.

Wonder how long it took him to realize serving food would allow for him to be open on Sundays.

Nearing the bottom of my second drink, I glance toward the door for what must be the tenth time in as many minutes. I told myself I would wait until Ian joined me before ordering, but as soon as I walked through the door, I was glad I hadn't made the promise to him as well. The bar is hardly crowded, but the few people I do recognize are enough to set my nerves and mood even more on the edge. I make eye contact with Mr. Dixon, the dirty old perv who used to try to watch the girls' soccer team practice from his car parked in the gravel lot across the street from the school, and tip my glass back up again.

“Looks like I’ve got some catching up to do.”

The sound of the heavy-bottomed glass as it slams onto the table is a lot louder than I intend for it to be. He ignores it and slides into the seat across from me. The waitress makes her way over and I fail to hold back my snort when her hurried steps lead her two feet too close to the stool at the far end of the bar. It nearly topples to the floor, and I cover my mouth immediately. Ian bites the corner of his lip as he orders himself a rum and Coke and another of whatever I’m having. My first instinct is to tell him not to worry about it, but I swallow back the reply and instead offer to get the next round.

“I see that the ladies are still falling all over themselves around you.”

“I don’t know what high school you went to, Miss McKellan, but I barely even dated back then.”

“Please.” I wave a hand. “Gretchen Moore, Bethany Anderson, Ashley Matthews? Even Mrs. Bennett used to get all giggly around you.”

The worry that my words come across as just short of stalker status is immediate, but my two vodka cranberries were mixed with a heavy hand, so I try to play off the words with a shrug.

Maybe I should take advantage of the new kitchen feature... Something to soak up the excess alcohol couldn’t hurt. I stop thinking completely when he leans forward and starts to tick points off on his fingers.

“Gretchen was just a friend. Beth wanted to make her ex jealous. And Ashley, well, I’d rather not think about that one...” He pauses to thank our waitress for what has to be the quickest drink delivery known to man, and then sends a wink in my direction. “But Mrs. Bennett *still* gets giggly, thank you very much. She came into the shop a year or so ago, actually. Butterfly tattoo. Right on her ass cheek.”

I almost stab myself in the nose with the tiny straw in my drink. “You’re kidding me.”

He smiles and lifts the glass to his lips.

“I am,” he says, taking a sip. “It’s on her shoulder blade. Still, though. High school secretary, with her shirt off, babbling on about how much she enjoyed seeing me in the hallways each day? Not an experience I’d care to relive.”

I shudder, and the way that my vision shakes and seems to be a half-second behind the actual movement tells me that maybe I should slow down. There’s a rush of warmth that runs through me when his eyes meet mine across the table though, and I reach for my drink again anyway.

“So you’re a tattoo artist now?”

My voice is frank and Ian nods a little before cracking another smile.

“I am.”

“How’d that happen?” I really am curious. There’s a slight disconnect between the boy that I remember and the man

sitting in front of me now. If I'm honest with myself though, I'm not sure I'd care nearly as much about the backstory if it belonged to anyone else. No, I definitely wouldn't care if it were Josh Morris, or Griffin Holcomb, or even Chris Myers, someone I was actually friendly with back in school.

But Ian... Well, with Ian I actually listen as he explains to me what brought him to the path he's taken without trying desperately to think up some excuse to leave, or change the subject. There are times that I would probably *blame* the alcohol, and curse it for making me more talkative—asking questions, and actually responding to his—but as time trickles by tonight, I only want to thank it.

It's not until I order my fifth drink of the night (immediately after finishing the fourth) that he covers my hand with his own, and I have to take a moment to try and steady myself.

He nods toward the glass. "Everything okay?"

I pause for a second, looking from his hand on mine, back up to his eyes.

"It's been a long day. Moving my dad and all... I'm sure you heard about it. It seems like everyone around here knows the reason that I'm back in town." A nervous, unfamiliar sort of laughter bubbles out of me, and I cling to the only thing that I can think of to change the subject. "He doesn't talk much anymore, but he did mention your mother today. I didn't understand a lot of it, but he said to tell her he says hello."

Ian looks a little lost for a second, and I watch in silence as he unconsciously traces an index finger over the tattoo on the

inside of his wrist. Slowly, he takes another sip of his drink. He doesn't meet my gaze when he speaks.

“What kind of stuff was he saying?”

I don't answer immediately, and he glances up at me. There's a look in his eyes that I can't quite place, but feels familiar nonetheless. It makes my chest tighten and heart beat in an off rhythm way that has nothing to do with the alcohol, or how devastatingly handsome I'm barely ready to admit that he really is. So I tell him.

“That she's a good woman. He said that he hopes that you take after her and not your father. That she deserved better than him... That she deserved what she really wanted out of life.”

He laughs, exhaling deeply on the same breath. “You know that they dated back in high school, right? Your dad and my mom.”

I cock my head to the side, able to feel the skin between my eyebrows knit together. I hadn't known that, actually. My reaction is more than enough of an answer, and he continues.

“She wanted to marry him. But then he met your mom, and I guess the rest is history,” he says, squinting a little when the overhead lights in the room turn on. I didn't realize it was already so late. He drains the last little bit from his glass. “Your dad is right, though. She deserved a hell of a lot more than she ever got from my father. She passed away almost two years ago. He sold pretty much all of her things and moved farther south less than six months later. I had to fight him for the house.”

I want to say that I'm sorry. For his loss. For the fact that his father is a heartless bastard. Because I had no idea.

The word 'sorry' is overused though. You can only hear it so many times before you come to see just how meaningless it really is—before you realize it's something that people say when they don't know what else *to* say.

"Your mother was a wonderful person, Ian," I offer instead, watching as the bartender wipes down the bar. On the other side of the room one of the waitresses starts to stack chairs on top of the tables. I don't want to leave. I don't want to go back to that empty house, but more so, I don't want this to be the end of my time with him. "I might not have been around for the last six years, and we might not have ever really known each other back in high school, but your mom was always really nice to me and my sister. I think it's pretty obvious that you're a lot like her."

He offers, but doesn't insist on paying my tab as we get ready to leave. Maybe it's just the still pleasantly warm feeling that I have from the drinks, but it makes me like him even more. At least enough to lean against his side while trying to dig my wallet from the depths of my purse. After paying, I giggle a little when I find myself thinking that he smells almost as good as he looks.

He tilts his head down to look at me, an eyebrow slightly raised and a sweet dimple peeking out from his left cheek, but I just lift a palm to wave him off. It actually helps break up my staring, but I'm pretty sure my slow, stupid blinking isn't any better.

Somehow I manage to make it out the front door of the bar and to the curb without any assistance or incident. Even with what feels like a fairly clear head, I'm almost certain that my line of vision is at least half a foot to the left of where it actually should be. While not sloshed, or anywhere near the point of waking up in the morning, unable to remember anything I've said or done, a good chunk of my inhibition has definitely been lifted.

It's sticky and still when we step outside. I forgot how quiet it can be around here. It certainly doesn't make me look forward to the solitude going back to that house will bring me.

Turning quickly on my heels, my nose almost collides with Ian's shoulder. He brings his arms out to stop me though, and my cheek settles against the smooth planes of his chest. I don't bring attention to the sigh that leaves my lips, hoping he'll follow my lead and ignore it as well.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I don't give him time to say anything before words just come tumbling out of my own. "I don't want to go back to my place tonight."

His eyes widen in the split second that follows and I realize how that sounds.

"I mean, it's just... *Ugh*. It's so *empty* there now. I don't, I don't think that I can handle it right now."

His movements seem almost more unbelieving than hesitant as he places an arm around my waist and pulls me in, close against his side. Once his feet start to move though, his hold tightens and his fingers relax over the curve of my hip. Despite the hot night air, the warmth that his hand radiates through my shirt feels nice instead of oppressive. I wrap my arms around

his waist, moving along with him in an awkward sort of sideways shuffle.

“Well, come on then.” His voice is close to a whisper as it wafts down from where his chin is settled on top of my head. God, he really does smell good. “I’ve got beer back at my place. And it’s been feeling pretty empty there, too.”

The walk helps me sober up a bit. At the risk of him possibly letting me go though, I don’t tell that to Ian. When we separate, making our way through his front door, I feel the nerves start to bubble up, completely unwelcome, in my stomach. So when he asks whether or not I’d like a beer, I have no choice but to nod.

A few minutes later, we’re both settled on the couch in his living room. Only the light streaming in from the foyer and one dim lamp in the corner keep us from sitting in darkness. I can imagine a similar scene taking place in the house I left behind earlier tonight, but it doesn’t feel as desolate sitting here with him. And I don’t feel as lost.

“So, random question,” I start, pulling my legs up to my chest and angling my body in his direction. “Which tattoos are your least favorite to do?”

He half-way mirrors my position, bringing his right leg up closer to his chest, resting his thigh against the back of the couch. I struggle to pull my eyes away from the way the denim stretches over the muscles there. His hand falls lazily over his knee, loosely gripping the amber-colored bottle he’s already close to draining.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You know—tribal arm bands, hearts with the word ‘mom’ in the middle, Celtic crosses ... flowers and shit.”

He laughs and the sound is warm and easy, giving me the want and the courage to move closer. It has me unfolding my legs and leaning forward on my knees, my feet tucked underneath me. My cheek presses into the back cushion and I watch as he switches the bottle from one hand to the other. His eyes are the tiniest bit glassy, but even with the liquid courage flowing through his veins, he still seems uncertain when he threads his fingertips into my hair.

He forgets about the bottle in his hand and almost cracks himself in the face with it as he tries to bring his palm to the back of his neck. He bites into his bottom lip and his cheeks turn pink. It’s more endearing than possibly anything I’ve ever seen.

“I’ve never had the privilege of doing a ‘mom’ heart. Believe it, or not, I don’t think that I’ve gotten sick of doing one certain *type* of tattoo. At least not yet. I don’t know, it sometimes just feels like I have the ability to read a person, and help shape a tattoo that suits him... Even the ‘flowers and shit’, as you so eloquently put it, can still be interesting.”

“Well, let’s see it then,” I say, and pull away in order to sit up straight again.

He just blinks, so I nod down at his torso. “Saying that surely means that you have a flower tattoo somewhere on you.”

He protests, laughing and saying that he doesn't have any of the stereotypical examples that I named off.

"I want to see the others, then." I drain the rest of my beer and rest the bottle on the floor beside the sofa. "Don't be shy. There's no way you don't get asked about them on a daily basis."

I worry that I'm being too loud, too brash, too pushy. At least, I worry until he straightens up and starts to lift the hem of his shirt. I'm not much more than overheated and suddenly dry mouthed after that.

His voice is muffled and lost in the fabric as he pulls it over his face, so when the soft cotton passes over his head, I'm leaning much closer than before.

"Sorry," he says, and it's hard to look at anything other than the finely-sculpted, heavily-inked torso in front of me. He balls the shirt in his fist and drops it to the floor. "I had no idea that I was going to be doing any modeling tonight."

Draping his arms back over the side of the couch, he exposes more of his body to me. I know that if it weren't for the buzz of alcohol humming through my veins right now, I'd feel awkward as hell. Openly gawking at this boy—man—who I essentially grew up with *should* feel awkward. I take solace in the fact that I'm at least sober enough to realize this.

It's far too easy to get lost in the intricate designs and swirls of color that cover his skin. Without his shirt on, my eyes skitter from place to place, not sure where to land first. Random, haphazard paintbrush strokes make their way up his right side, eventually giving way to a small flock of birds, their outlines left unfilled. The style is indicative of an artist who he

earlier explained to me had inspired him to really pursue art as a career.

Each piece is entirely different, but somehow there's a sense of cohesion that brings it all together. There are stars, outlined in bold, strong colors and other pieces that while beautiful, are unable to hold my attention. Not like the two blue pinwheels with their silver centers, one on each side of his chest.

I wish that I didn't recognize them for what they are, that I didn't know what they stood for. I wish that the taste that they leave in my mouth wasn't so sour, and didn't remind me of my father's words from earlier in the day. I wish that the horrible memory of Mr. Walker and how Ian would come to school some days with his smile dimmed and his posture stiff, afraid to move in a way that would set off an uncomfortable wince, could be erased.

I wish that something that I'd suspected in only the vaguest fashion hadn't just been confirmed for me years later when there's nothing that can be done.

He squirms underneath my intense stare, and I cough a little. Wishing that I had more beer, anything to break up this antsy, uncomfortable feeling hanging in the air, I reach for Ian's. He grins at me over the bottle, and it gives me the push I need to continue my quiet exploration.

I can now see the shipwreck on his right arm actually extends up and over his shoulder. This close, I can make out the siren's silver eyes and the way that her dark hair tangles around her waist and extends into the air behind her. It's difficult to tell, with the random pieces inked intermittently across the area, but it looks as if her hair is what leads into and makes up the quote that covers the area below his collar bone.

“*The wait is long, my dream of you does not end,*” I read aloud, reaching my hand out to trace over the letters before I think better of it. I can feel the thrum of his heartbeat and swear the pulse beating in his neck is actually visible.

My eyes slip lower and suddenly I’m laughing so hard I can barely breathe.

“Is that... Is that a *cupcake*?”

His head falls back for just a second before he tilts it forward again, all of his features scrunching into a look that’s more adorable than I’m capable of handling. Prying the bottle from my hands, he swallows the last few gulps that it holds before dropping it to the carpet.

“It *is*.” He grins, clutching at the fingers I still have curled against his chest with his own. “Do you have something that you want to say about it?”

“Nope. It’s cute, it *suits* you,” I declare, my mind already jumping to another subject because I’m warm and tingly, and he’s beautiful, and damn it... “Alright, if you’re so good at it—at making sure the tattoo suits the person, what would you give me?”

“You?”

“Yes, me. What kind of tattoo would you give me?” I say, jumping off the couch to run toward the desk on the opposite side of the room. I turn back to look at him with a crooked grin on my face. “Don’t tell me that I have you stumped, Walker.”

He sits up taller, places his feet on the floor, and faces me.

“I might have an idea.”

“Show me.”

He lifts a brow, unsure of exactly where I’m going with this. I’m thankful my level of inebriation has been downgraded to more of a buzz, and I make my way back to the couch. Pulling a black, felt tip marker out from behind my back, I thrust the object into his hands.

“Draw it.”

He pushes himself off the couch, and the inches between us are exactly that—mere inches. I note his lack of shirt once again and think how if this was a cheesy romantic comedy (or more likely a skin-a-max flick), I would say something to the effect of feeling a bit overdressed right now. The thought makes the corners of my mouth tug upward.

I shiver a little as his hands come down on my shoulders, gently spinning my body and pressing me down to the couch. Within seconds, he’s kneeling on the floor alongside where I sit.

“Well, lay back then.”

I don’t question him.

“And lift your shirt.”

Again, I comply. I pull the hem up, my hip bones coming into view.

“Higher.”

My stomach is uncovered.

“Higher.”

I roll the cotton tank top until it grazes the edge of my bra, and look at him questioningly. He nods and uncaps the marker, not even hesitating as he draws the first long, thick line up over my side.

“Oh, shit!” I flinch, letting out an unseemly noise.

He laughs and positions his left arm across my hips to hold me down. I’ve got to give it to him, the steady hand that he draws with barely twitches.

“Quit squirming.” He grins.

“It tickles.”

He continues to lay out his design, but I’m too focused on the intensity on his face to pay it much mind.

“Well, I can promise you that an actual tattoo is going to be a little more intense than ticklish.”

“Pain I’m used to. I can deal with the pain.”

His eyes flit momentarily over to the burnt and scarred skin that covers the side he’s not drawing on. It’s marbled and ugly, but I’ve gotten so used to it that I forget it’s there most of the time. That fire took something much more important to me than unblemished skin.

“I know.”

I swallow hard, worried for a second that I’ve ruined whatever idea he’s been working on.

“But anyway... Carry on.”

The feel of the cool, felt tip moving across my torso is still too much though. I wriggle a little underneath its movements and he presses his forearm down harder, his elbow dipping in between legs to pin me to the cushions below.

There’s a silence I just can’t handle. My breathing is far too loud and troublesome.

“Why there? Why the side, and the ahh—” I squeal as he moves over a particularly ticklish spot. “... and the rib cage?”

“Well.” His tongue slips out of his mouth to trace over his bottom lip as he works. “You’re a private person. You wouldn’t want something like this be on display 24/7. I figure that it’s only right for this to be in a place that you can *choose* to show people.”

“Makes sense.” I nod, and it really does. “Why not somewhere else though? Like, I don’t know, my hip, maybe?”

“Because,” he states, dragging the marker up in one sure movement, letting the lines of whatever he’s drawing curve inward, over my stomach, and then up to just below the curve of my breast. “You, Cassandra McKellan, never do anything small.”

“Is that so?” I peek down, able to make out the trunk and branches of a stylized tree now.

“Oh yeah. I mean, you decided that you needed to get away from this place all those years ago? You picked up and moved without even looking behind you. Your dad gets sick? You leave the life that you’ve built and come back,” he muses.

He’s not wrong, but I get the feeling he’s a little embarrassed by the spiel he just went on. Truthfully, I don’t know what to say to any of it, so I just lie here and let the feeling of his hands working their way across my stomach distract me. A few moments later, he cocks his head to one side. The soft, black fabric of the beanie that he’s been wearing since this afternoon brushes against a tiny bit of thin material of my bra that’s exposed.

“There.”

I scooch up just far enough to give myself a better look at the finished product. The basic outline of the tree and its limbs takes up nearly the entire expanse of my side. It’s the vine winding up its trunk though, out and over the branch that follows the curve below my breast that really catches my

attention. Tiny leaves of ivy, one of the few plants I can actually recognize on sight, dot its length.

“You’ve thought about this a lot,” I say, barely touching my fingertip to one of the leaves over my ribs.

“I’ve thought about *you* a lot.”

I gulp, and then exhale deeply before I go on. “And what exactly have you thought about me?” I can’t decide whether the room’s been this hot all along, or if it’s a new development.

“Is this a conversation you really want to have right now?”

“I don’t see why not.” I shrug, shifting back into a lying position. I try to ignore the way his elbow feels, pressing down so very close to the dip between my legs, but the heat that is brewing deep in my belly doesn’t want to let me.

“You know, there were the generic things. Like how you were doing. Where you were living. If you were happy...”

He turns his attention back to the design on my stomach, biting the cap of the marker between his teeth before placing the tip to my skin once again. He starts to add shading and detail to the sketch. I can’t stop myself from wiggling and he looks up at me, lifting a brow at the way that I’ve somehow managed to work his elbow almost completely into the apex of my thighs. My already warm face grows even hotter.

“If you had a boyfriend.”

I laugh and my stomach constricts underneath his hand in a way that somehow feels more intimate than anything else so far. He starts to add more swirls of leaves that offshoot the branches and I shiver when his fingers brush against the swell of my breast. The ink is covering more and more skin, and I nudge the underwire of my bra up slightly, giving him more access to the flesh there.

He exhales slowly, and goosebumps break out over my stomach.

“If you ever thought about me.”

I want to tell him that I have, but the words are caught in my throat, along with all of the air from my lungs. The only thing I can think to do is reach for that stupid black beanie and pull it from his head. I like his hair—I always have. The way that it falls in waves over his forehead. How the ends are a lighter shade of blond, almost impossibly golden. And now, how it feels as I thread my fingers into it.

His pursed lips blow a burst of cool air over my skin. He follows the line of his design from my waistband up, attempting to dry the ink. I’d have to be blind not to see the way that his mouth draws nearer and nearer to my body the farther along he goes. And I’d also be an idiot to draw attention to it and chance making him stop.

I don’t find my voice again until his chin is resting on my torso and he looks up at me through his eyelashes.

“I did... More than I realized.”

My inhale is a sharp hiss through my teeth as he places a feather light kiss to my skin. He keeps his eyes locked with mine and, upon seeing my lack of resistance, repeats the action. His hair slips in and out of my fingers as he continues his path north and I close my eyes to revel in the sensation—both of his lips on my body and the silky strands in my hands. I feel the warmth of his open mouth a fraction of a second before it presses down onto the soft, exposed skin that's peeking out from underneath the cup of my bra.

My fingers tighten in his hair in a knee-jerk reaction, nails scraping against his scalp. He lets out a quiet moan that somehow goes straight to the slow, dull ache between my legs, and my hips buck upward before I can stop them. Not that I want to at this point. I don't want to stop anything.

He looks at me through his lashes again, and that's all it takes. We're suddenly a flurry of movements and limbs. His mouth lands just above the collar of my tank top, slipping sloppily toward the base of my neck, and then up to the hollow between my jaw and ear. All the while, it's like I have no control over my arms. Even with the heavy, weighed-down feeling from either the alcohol, or just the rush of endorphins from the man before me, I manage to bring him from his knees, up onto the couch, and to a spot hovering over my body.

His lips barely touch mine before I push lightly on his chest, moving him just far enough back so I can tear my shirt over my head. He drops his head back down, running his tongue along the crease of my lips, while simultaneously popping the front clasp of my bra. The strong, callused hands, along with the feel of his tongue, and the pressure from where I can't stop grinding myself against the leg he's slipped between mine, is overwhelming.

Thoughts of exactly how right this all feels burn through the haze of drunkenness for a bright second, and I clutch at his back. While I might not have always consciously wanted this, deep down, I know there's been something about Ian Walker that's pulled me in for years now.

“No idea... You have no idea, Cassandra.” He mumbles the words against my skin, and I melt back into the cushions, unable to focus on anything but the feel of our bodies as we move together.

My fingers fumble with his belt, but soon enough I have it undone and am pushing his worn jeans over his hips. I get them the rest of the way down hurriedly with my foot in a move I didn't know I was flexible enough to pull off. I'm so concentrated on my goal that I completely miss him easily popping the button of my pants. But there is *no* way that I could miss the fingers that work their way over the front of my panties, pushing the hem out of the way and dipping inside. It's close to mortifying just how wet I am, but any trace of embarrassment fades quickly when I hear and *feel* Ian's strangled voice against the column of my throat.

“*Fuck.*”

“Tell me about it,” I gasp out, and he laughs before latching on to my mouth again.

If we were completely sober, I'm positive this would be more than a series of hurried touches. Our clothes wouldn't be haphazardly tossed about the room, and we'd take the time to slow down and undress one another. Maybe the condom wrapper wouldn't be crumpled in a corner or wherever he throws it after finally managing to rip the damn thing open.

More time for exploration and less of such a blatant sense of urgency.

If I were completely sober though, there's no guarantee this would even be happening. And I want it to happen. Oh God, do I want this to happen.

He places his lips to my forehead. My eyes flutter closed and he brushes soft kisses over the delicate skin there as my hand closes around him, guiding him to my entrance. His mouth captures mine in a long, languid kiss as his body comes to rest, flush against my hips. It creates an interesting balance that, even through my muddled mind, leaves me feeling both wanted and cherished at the same time. Something that I'm not sure I've ever felt.

The muscles in my legs start to jelly and the one I have hooked behind his legs falls to the wayside. Ian's hand trails down its length, gripping at the back of my thigh and pulling it closer to his body as if he can't stand it being even that far away. The tips of his fingers spasm, digging deliciously into my thigh before inching their way farther up to where we're connected. His teeth latch lightly onto my nipple the exact same second his thumb finds my clit, and the slow and steady burn that's been building ignites into a full-blown inferno.

Not long after, Ian's body stiffens and then sags on top of mine. As his head falls to the crook of my neck, I turn—letting my lips run along the line of his cheek. He's smiling when he tilts his chin up to look at me, and I can't stop myself from taking hold of his face to bring him closer. Pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth and then his temple, I start to slip farther back into the arm of the couch.

The warmth and weight of him, pulled half on top of me, is nice, but I know that my bladder will hate me in the morning if

I don't move soon. There's a look of panic on Ian's face when I start to sit up—almost as if he's afraid that I'll leave as quickly as I barged back into this town and his life.

“I just need to use the bathroom,” I assure him, sliding out from underneath him and pushing to my feet.

I nearly fall over one of my sandals abandoned in the middle of the floor, ruining any attempt at a calm, cool, naked walk across the living room. I can only laugh at myself though, turning to face Ian when I realize I don't even know where the bathroom is. He smiles at me, his hair falling into his eyes, and extends one hand in the direction of the hallway.

By the time that I stagger my way back into the living room on still-buzzed sex legs, he's sitting up on one end of the couch with an apprehensive look on his face. I settle back down, my head hitting the cushion heavily. Reaching out to catch the crook of his elbow, I pull him down, covering my body back up with his.

His breath tickles my ear and I lift my shoulder, trapping his head there against my neck. I fall asleep with his arms around me and the sound of his laughter still in my mind.

I also wake up to his laughter, but it's definitely not his breath that's tickling my ear.

No, this is definitely a more ... slobbery kind of breathing. I jerk awake, clutching a soft throw blanket that came from who knows where against my chest. A little black ball of fur lets out a snort beside me and I look down at what is possibly the goofiest looking dog I have ever seen.

“Sorry,” Ian muses from where he lounges in the doorway. The light coming in from the sunlit kitchen catches on his bare shoulders, and I feel like I might swallow my tongue. He steps into the room and places a coffee mug on the table beside the couch. “He gets a little excited when there’s company.”

After last night, with what we shared both emotionally and physically, I shouldn’t be feeling so shy right now. But I’m pretty sure the last time a guy this hot saw me first thing in the morning was... *Never*. I can honestly say I’ve never been in this position.

He smiles down at me as he settles onto the arm of the couch, and I sit up a little straighter. The blanket slips an inch or two and I start to pull it back up. He stops me by running a finger along my collar bone, brushing my hair behind my shoulder.

His leg dangles beside me, and I wrap a hand around it, following the strong line of muscle in his calf with my fingertips. It takes about half a second before he tips my chin up. I smile at him and he leans down. I briefly think about my horrible morning breath, but as soon as he moves closer, running his nose along the length of mine, the thought is forgotten completely. He lays a soft kiss on my cheek and moves his mouth lower to take my bottom lip in between his.

I feel my nipples pebble against the soft chenille throw seconds before it falls away completely. His big hands frame the sides of my face, making me feel small and delicate. He threads his fingertips into the hair at my temples and goosebumps break out along my skin. Suddenly I’m scrambling to get closer and don’t even mind the way his knee presses into my hip as I wrap my arms around his neck. I just want his mouth on mine.

We both breathe hard when we finally pull away. I let out a little laugh because I just can't help it, and he smiles softly as he leans in once more to brush his lips over my shoulder.

“Goddamn, you're pretty.”

I fall back onto the couch and lift the fingers of his right hand to my mouth. I kiss the tips of his fingers and bite the inside of my cheek to contain the big, cheesy grin that threatens to pop out.

“You're not so bad yourself.”

He runs his hand over the back of his neck and his cheeks turn a pale shade of pink. So maybe it seems we're both not terribly adept at taking compliments. Another thing we have in common. That and the complete sense of ease we seem to have right now—despite the fact that we're both sitting here, half-naked. It doesn't feel awkward at all. It's ... it's *nice*.

Feeling comfortable in my own skin is something that I haven't experienced in a really long time. I've always felt too worn thin, or run ragged with the black cloud of stress looming overhead, or just too busy running period.

“So,” I start, glancing down to the still snorting, still wiggling mass to my right. The dog has already started burrowing into the abandoned blanket at my side. “You have a pug.”

“I do.”

He reaches over my lap to give the pup a scratch underneath his chin. I don't know why it surprises me. I didn't really give much thought to it when I saw him with the bag of dog food the day before, but I guess I pictured something bigger? Something that went along the tattoos and the muscles ... and the... Actually, the combination of the big, super cut, super cute, tattooed man in front of me and this goofy little dog is pretty hot.

“I'm surprised I didn't hear this little guy last night.”

He laughs. “Van Gogh is an old man. He sleeps like the dead until it's time for his breakfast.”

“Van Gogh?”

Ian slides off the arm of the couch and I scoot over as much as possible to make room. He picks the dog up, bed of blanket and all, and plops him onto his lap. I raise an eyebrow at the fact that I'm now left with even less covering my ink-smudged body. He raises an eyebrow right back and waggles it up and down like some dirty old man. I bump his shoulder with mine and nod down to the pup to get him on track again.

He lifts the black, velvety ears up over the dog's wrinkled forehead for me to inspect more closely. The right, while still there, is much shorter and kind of shriveled along the edges. I run the tip of my index finger along the scarred portion. Van Gogh cocks his head to the side and licks the palm of my hand. We never had pets growing up, but Chris had this tiny, yappy thing named Minnie that always seemed to like me better than it did her.

I scrunch his tiny face in between my hands and lay a kiss between his big, bug eyes before I rub his ear in between my

fingers again.

“I got him from the shelter. One of his litter mates had roughed him up a little. I guess I kind of felt a connection to the little fighter. Because of blood loss to the damaged portion of his ear, he had to lose a little piece of it. So yeah, Van Gogh.”

I kiss his cheek and my stomach tightens when I feel the scruff covering it. I remember the way that it felt against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs when I woke in the middle of the night with his head between my legs. An involuntary moan makes its way from my lips and I feel his lips tilt up in smile.

“So,” he starts, putting Van Gogh on the floor and pulling me into his lap. He kisses the base of my neck, and follows it with a line of gentle nips up to the hollow behind my ear. “I have to be at work in like, half an hour ... but I get off at 6:00. Can I see you again tonight?”

Hell, he can see me right now. And for the rest of the day. And the week, month, year if he keeps his lips on me. The thought should scare the shit out of me, but it doesn't. We don't feel like something that's just beginning, but rather something that's been in the making since the days of meeting his eyes across crowded hallways and auditoriums. Like something I've been waiting for. Something I've been missing.

I have a long day of sorting through things at the house, making decisions I've been avoiding, and checking in with my dad to make sure he's doing okay with his new surroundings. Knowing that Ian's waiting for me at the end of it is exactly what I need.

I shift on his lap and the low moan he lets out makes something in my stomach tighten and my thighs clench together.

“I want to take you out,” he murmurs, punctuating his words with another kiss.

I nod, damn near purring like a cat as he runs his teeth along the shell of my ear. “You can take me anywhere you want.”

My hand makes its way into his hair, lightly scratching his scalp, and as he lets out a hiss. I turn to face him, my lips seeking his immediately, and inhale sharply as he stands from the couch, taking me with him. My legs dangle in midair for a half second before he grips just below my ass, his long, thick fingers digging into the skin there. I feel him against me, hard and ready, and wrap myself around his waist like my life depends on it.

I know it's his house and all, but I'm honestly surprised how he's able to navigate the furniture, let alone stairs, with my hands buried in his hair and mouth attacking his own. I bounce against him with each step we take, the coarse hair leading down from his naval providing the most delicious friction on my most sensitive of places. By the time he deposits me in the middle of his bed, I'm open mouthed and panting. He's not in much better shape, his hair hanging in loose waves over one eye and a playful gleam in his eye. I swear, I could come from the smile he gives me alone.

I prop myself up the best I can, and reach for his hips to bring him closer. My thumbs run along the indentions there, and bite my lip to keep from moaning over just how goddamned beautiful he is. I follow the swirls of color with my fingertips until they disappear underneath the loose knit

pajama pants he wears and the muscles in his stomach tense just before he falls nearly on top of me.

He cages me in with an elbow on either side of my shoulders. He's so hard against me in exactly the right places that I can't help bucking my hips up into him. Hard. And thick. And long. And Jesus Christ... I hooked a leg around his waist again and bring him even closer.

His laughter rides a puff of air that lifts my bangs from my forehead, and I lean up to nip playfully at his chin. And his smile, I could get addicted to that smile. Right up there with those eyes that are pinning me to this bed almost as easily as his strong legs and torso.

"You're killing me here." He gasps as I continue to move beneath him.

"Well, if you have to be at work in half an hour." I grin, reaching between our bodies to take hold of him through his pajama bottoms. He groans and rocks into my palm, and the fact that I can do this to him is such a powerful feeling. "I can make it quick."

I run the nail of my index finger underneath the head of his dick through the thin fabric and watch him shudder.

"Well, maybe not too quick," he says, leaning down quickly to trap my nipple lightly between his teeth.

Instantly we're a mess. A tangle of limbs and lips and teeth. Giggly and writhing on top of his soft, grey comforter, condom wrapper thrown somewhere in the covers, with everything between us slick with sweat. His fingers snag on a

tangle in my hair and the quick shot of pain turns straight into pleasure, making me moan. So he thrusts deeply and does it again.

Eventually I'm on top of him, exploring every last one of his tattoos with my fingers and tongue. I bite at the letters underneath his collarbone and place open-mouthed kisses on the pinwheels covering his chest—all the while, finding the perfect amount of friction for my clit against his pubic bone. His palms take up the entire width of each side of my ass, molding to my flesh and spreading me in a way that's entirely too obscene and entirely too delicious at just the right time. I feel like I'm lighting up from the inside out.

“*Shit.*” Ian hisses, one hand sliding up to the base of my neck and pulling me into a searing kiss. I feel him pulse inside me, in rhythm with my inner muscles as they practically tremble around his cock.

“You know, *this*,” he says afterward, running a hand through my hair where it's splayed across his chest. “Was not exactly how I pictured this happening.”

I inhale at his touch, reaching for his hand and bringing it to lie on his chest where I can see it. I concentrate on the way his fingers, still stained with the ink that we managed to smear between our two bodies last night, look intertwined with my own. I'll be almost sorry to shower the stains off later. After a second, I prop my chin up on his sternum and bring my gaze up to his face. I slide a finger down the length of his nose, grinning at the black smudge I find there.

“So you've pictured this happening, have you?”

“Well, yes... But that's not what I meant.”

“And what did you mean?” My voice is low—sleepy sounding and barely audible.

“When I heard about your dad, and that you were coming back... I guess I always had this idea in my mind of how I would go about things with you if I ever got the chance.”

“I don’t know. I’d say it was a pretty good way of welcoming a girl home.”

Home.

There’s still a lot for me to work out. With my dad, the house, myself. It’ll take a while—I know that. But even with the slight buzz of our love making still running through my veins, laying here all tangled up in Ian Walker feels more like the meaning of the word than anything has in a long, long time.