

A romantic photograph of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a blue denim jacket and light-colored pants. The man is shirtless and has dark hair and a beard. They are in a close embrace, with the man's eyes closed and the woman's eyes looking towards him. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape.

wrecked
roommates
book two

Forbidden
lyrics

KELSIE RAE

FORBIDDEN LYRICS

A WRECKED ROOMMATES NOVEL

KELSIE RAE

TWISTY PINES PUBLISHING, LLC

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CHAPTER ONE

DOVE

A bead of sweat clings to my brow as I reach across the table and wipe it down with the damp rag. When something grazes my bum, I jerk upright, my spine a steel rod, before twisting around.

“Can I help you?” I squeak, unsure whether or not the creepy stranger hears me over the speakers. SeaBird, the bar where I work, isn’t exactly the place you go to have a quiet chat, especially when Broken Vows is on stage. I don’t recognize the song echoing through the room, though, so they must be taking a break.

“Fender,” the stranger returns. “Is he here?”

I peek around the guy’s giant body in search of the band’s lead singer but find the stage empty. I shake my head. “I, uh, I’m not sure. Sorry. Can I get you something to drink?”

And will you stop staring at me like that?

“Only if you’re on the menu.” His mouth quirks up on one side as he scans me up and down, making my skin crawl.

“You’re new,” he notes.

“I started a little while ago,” I hedge before side-stepping to my right. He follows the movement and inches closer.

With a gulp, I stutter, “A-are you sure you don’t want a drink? I can go grab one for you...”

His massive frame crowds me against the table, its sharp edge digging into my lower back as I try to keep from cowering, but it feels impossible.

“When do you get off work?” he demands.

“I’m, uh...” I twist the rag in my hand. “I’m here all night.”

“Maybe I’ll stick around then. Watching you bend over that table was the

highlight of my evening.”

Zeroing in on a peanut lying on the concrete floor beneath my feet, I try to ignore the way his gaze rolls over me like hot tar—like I’ve been burned.

“I’m, uh, I’m not sure my boyfriend would appreciate that,” I choke out.

“Boyfriend, huh? Who’s the lucky bastard?”

My eyes widen with panic before the first name that comes to mind tumbles out of me. “Gibson. He works here. He’s actually—”

“I know Gibbs.” He scans me up and down again as if I’m a piece of meat at the butcher’s. “And I gotta give you props. You’re rocking the whole innocent vanilla waitress like a champ.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you and Gibbs are a thing, that means you and Milo are, too.”

Confused, my mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water.

What the heck is he talking about?

Milo and Gibson are friends, but I’ve never gotten the vibe they’re anything else, and unless my gay-dar is broken, they’re both *very* straight.

He chuckles before toying with the ends of my hair, his knuckle brushing along the top of my breast, but I’m too frozen—too shocked—to move.

What. Is. Happening?

“You into sharing, babe?” he murmurs, his voice low and husky.

I shy away from his touch and push my hair behind my shoulder. “I-if you don’t want anything to drink, I should probably get back to work—”

“You should give me your number.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I remind him, my voice shaky.

“One you’d be smart to stay away from.”

My brows furrow as I pull my lips into a thin line.

He laughs dryly, though I’m not sure what he finds so amusing. Personally, I’m about to vomit all over the floor if this conversation goes on much longer.

“He’s dangerous,” he informs me as if we’re talking about the weather.

“Huh?”

“Your boyfriend. He’s dangerous. You’d be smart to stay away from him.”

I gulp but stay quiet, praying he’ll grow bored of our conversation and leave me alone, but I’m afraid that’s wishful thinking.

“Do you know what happened to his last girlfriend? Em?” he asks, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at him. “She disappeared. Vanished

into thin air. I'd hate for that to happen to you too. I've always been a sucker for an innocent girl who likes kink."

"Hey, Dove!" Reese interrupts, her voice light and chipper, though her eyes are anything but. She's another waitress at SeaBird and is slowly turning out to be one of my good friends, too, especially now that she just saved me from Mr. Creeper.

"Everything okay here?" she asks.

I gulp again and look up at the mystery man who can't be more than five or six years older than me yet still makes me feel like a little kid.

"No problem," the stranger answers for me. "Right, *Dove*?" He emphasizes my name like it's a secret password that gives him permission to speak with me when all I want to do is run and hide. "I was just leaving."

He steps around me but still manages to make me feel small and insignificant as he does so. Reese's upper lip curls in disgust as she watches him leave. But not before he gives me one last knowing look as he walks out the door.

Whoever he was, I hope I never see him again.

"You okay?" Reese asks once he's out of sight.

Blinking slowly, I try to wrangle in my emotions, but it feels impossible.

"Uh, yes. Yes, I'm fine," I lie.

"What was that about?"

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

With a jerky nod, I wring the dishrag between my hands like it's a lifeline. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. What happened, Dove? Who was that?"

"I-I don't know. He was looking for Fender."

"And?"

"And I told him that I didn't know where he was."

"Okay?" She frowns. "Is that it?"

With a deep breath, I shake my head. "No. Then he started asking me how long I'd worked here and if I'd be interested in..."—I clear my throat, hating the way my cheeks heat—"in hooking up later. I lied and told him I had a boyfriend, thinking maybe that would get him to back off."

Surprised, Reese points out, "That's a good idea, actually—"

"It didn't work. So, I told him that Gibson was my boyfriend and that he'd be back any minute and wouldn't appreciate him talking to me. I know

it's the furthest thing from the truth and that Gibson hates me, but it just popped into my head, and—"

"Seriously, Dove." She grabs my wrist to keep it from shaking. "I think that was a brilliant idea."

Again, I shake my head. "He knows him. Gibson. Supposedly, anyway."

"Oh."

"Yeah." I give her a tight smile. "That's not the part that was weird, though."

"What do you mean?"

I hesitate, replaying the conversation in my head to confirm I didn't imagine the whole thing. But it happened so fast. Honestly, I'm not even sure anymore.

"He said that if Gibson and I were a thing, then I must be having... relations with his friend, Milo, too," I admit.

"Oh." Reese's lips purse as if she's tasted something sour. "Yeah...I heard they're into sharing."

"That's a thing?" I squeak.

With an awkward laugh, she shrugs. "Supposedly. Is that why you're spooked? With your history and all, I'd get it. That probably sounds terrible. For two guys to—"

"That wasn't it," I mutter. Part of me hates the fact that she knows I'm a virgin and was raised in a crazy religious household with parents who never even uttered the s-word, let alone gave us the talk about the birds and the bees. Not that I don't know what sex is, but still. That's not the point.

I shake off my inner monologue and continue. "I mean, it sounded weird, but who am I to judge? No. He..." I pause, again, and look over at the bar where a very oblivious Gibson is mixing drinks. "H-he warned me about something."

"Huh?"

"He just said that if I was smart, I'd stay away from Gibbs. And Milo."

"Why?" Reese asks, just as confused as I am.

"Because their last girlfriend disappeared after they broke up, and it would be a shame if the same thing happened to me."

"He said *what*?" Reese screeches.

"I know," I rush out. "It sounds crazy, right?"

"Definitely crazy. I know Gibson, Dove. And I know Milo," she adds. He's her older brother. "Whatever bullshit that guy was spewing, it was

exactly that. *Bullshit.*”

“You’re right. You’re right,” I repeat, though it does nothing to soothe my nerves. “It was just...the way he said, ya know? Like he knew something. But you’re right. He was probably just being a jerk.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what he was being—”

“Do you know anyone named Em?” I interrupt. “Emma? Emily? Something like that?”

With a frown, Reese shakes her head. “Sorry. I don’t. But if it makes you feel better, you could always ask Gibbs.”

With a dry laugh, I roll my eyes then tuck my hair behind my ear. “No, thank you. That would be...weird. He hates me, remember? But you’re right. It doesn’t matter. We aren’t even dating,” I remind myself. “He’s my coworker. I just made that up to get that guy to leave me alone. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

“You sure?” Reese asks.

I nod. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Okay,” she mutters, though she doesn’t look very convinced. “We still on for tomorrow night?”

“Yes. Definitely,” I repeat, a little more sure this time. I’d give anything to get out of my stifling apartment and away from my grumpy, pregnant sister for reasons other than work. The girls’ night Reese suggested earlier tonight before our boss got mad at us for slacking sounds pretty dang perfect.

“Let’s get back to work before we get yelled at again,” I add. “And thanks for saving me.”

“Anytime.”

CHAPTER TWO

DOVE

After checking my phone to confirm I have the correct address, I pull into the driveway, turn off my car, and head to Reese's front door. The place is super nice. And pretty big too. She didn't mention how many roommates she had when she invited me over, but it must be a lot if she's able to help pay for this place with her waitressing wages.

But she isn't giving ninety percent of it to her pregnant sister, so what do I know?

Wiping my sweaty palms against my dark jeans, I take a deep breath and tap my knuckles against the door.

And I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

"Get the door!" someone yells from the other side. My pulse spikes, and I glance behind me toward the driveway, tempted to escape. But I keep my feet in place.

Reese is nice. It would be good to make some friends. You can do this, I remind myself.

Heavy footsteps follow the muffled request from a moment before. They thud against the floor, making my pulse rise with every chaotic step before the door opens with a soft creak to reveal a burly tattoo artist named Milo.

The Milo.

"Hey." Reese's brother has been to the bar a few times since I started working there, but it doesn't stop me from being startled by his gruff beauty despite the creeper's warnings that've been haunting me ever since. Mussed hair. Tattoos etched into his right arm. And the dimples? Curse those

dimples. They've always been kryptonite to the Walker sisters.

Never trust a man with dimples, my sister would tell me. He'll own your heart and break it with a single smirk.

Thankfully, his dimples are overshadowed by the invisible *my-middle-name-is-trouble* sign stamped across his forehead. Besides, I have too much on my plate to tempt fate by crushing on the guy.

Still, he is pretty to look at.

"Can I help you?" He smirks, clearly amused by my awkward silence and the fact that I totally got caught checking him out.

Good one, Dovey.

"Oh, um..." I hesitate, trying not to crumble under his direct attention. Talking to guys has never been my forte. I always left that particular attribute to my sister, Madelyn. Then again, look where that got her. Pregnant and alone.

He clears his throat—a not-so-subtle attempt to keep me focused.

Oh. Right.

"Reese?" I squeak, avoiding his gaze. "Is Reese home?"

Another smirk. This one's more potent than the last. My knees threaten to give out on me before he lifts his chin and opens the door the rest of the way to let me inside. "She's in the kitchen."

"Oh. Thanks."

After stepping inside, I rock back on my heels and wait for better directions. I have no idea where the kitchen is, and I'm not about to wander off in a stranger's house.

My mother taught her daughters a few more manners than that.

My nose wrinkles at the smell of something burning as I assess the clean foyer and exposed brick walls along with the warm brown carpet that looks freshly vacuumed. There's a large entertainment room, complete with a giant television hanging on the wall, and a worn leather couch on my right, while a set of stairs hug the left-hand side of the space.

A soft melody whispers from the second floor, begging me to follow it, but I keep my feet planted and turn back to Reese's brother because, ya know, *manners*.

"I'm Dove, by the way. We met—"

"I know. Milo."

"Yes. I remember. Hi."

The prickly bear shifts his gaze from me to a hallway on the right of the

stairs. “Kitchen’s over there.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I slip off my shoes, set them next to the front door, and look up to find Milo inspecting me, making me feel like I belong under a microscope.

“What are you doing?” he grunts.

“Um.” I tuck my hair behind my ear. “Taking off my shoes? Isn’t that the polite thing to do when you walk into someone’s house?”

With another crooked smirk—curse those dimples—he nods. “All right, then. Don’t let Reese burn the house down.”

“Is that where the smell is coming from?”

Always so serious, his gruff laugh is basically the equivalent to an Academy Award for comedians and makes my heart pick up its pace as he grabs a leather jacket from a coat rack. He slides his arms into it before searching its pockets for a small set of keys that likely belong to the motorcycle parked out front.

“Good luck with that,” he returns. “See you around, Dove.”

He steps out the door, and I’m left gawking at the bad boy who screams sex and bad ideas louder than a siren. The stranger’s warning from the night before echoes through my head again, but I shake it off.

Reese is right. There probably isn’t even an ex named Em, let alone one who disappeared out of the blue after a bad break-up. That doesn’t happen in real life. He was simply trying to freak me out.

And it worked.

I scatter the completely inappropriate thoughts about my friend’s older brother with a quick shake of my head and mosey down the hall toward the kitchen—and the scent of burnt sugar—before stumbling upon a scene I highly doubt I was supposed to see. Unless it’s normal to be pinned up against the cupboards by a guy without a shirt? Again, not exactly my forte.

My heels dig into the floor as I screech to a halt. “Crap. Sorry. I’ll just...”

After shoving the hot guy away, Reese’s hand flies to her chest. “Hey, Dove.”

“Hi.” I wave before wrinkling my nose, the scent getting stronger. “What’s that smell?”

She rolls her eyes before turning to the stove. “Dammit, River! I burnt the caramel again.”

“Caramel?” Striding over to the stove, I assess the black sludge at the bottom of the pot. “*That’s* supposed to be caramel?”

“Well, it was,” Reese defends.

“And how ‘bout those over there?” I point to the two other pots in the sink.

Reese’s friend, River, chuckles under his breath. “Told ya, Floozy. Have fun on your girls’ night.”

“And where are you going?” she asks, trying to keep her tone light and airy, but it comes out with an edge that screams restrained curiosity.

“I already told you,” he answers. “Out.”

“You told Milo you have a date,” she argues. The poor thing is oozing jealousy from every pore as she looks up at him with a vulnerability that nearly breaks me. I shouldn’t be here. Not for this.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I interrupt, desperate to give them an ounce of privacy while they figure out whatever the heck is going on between them.

“The one on this floor is clogged,” Reese replies, a fake smile plastered on her face. “And they’re all waiting for someone else to fix it like a bunch of pansies, but if you go to the top of the stairs and turn left, it’ll be the first door on your right.”

“Left and then a right. Got it.” Holding my breath, I tiptoe down the hallway and up the stairs while trying not to touch something because, like I said, my mother would knock me upside the head if she thought I was snooping in someone else’s house.

But I’m not.

I’m simply giving the lovebirds a bit of privacy.

You’re welcome, Reese.

As I reach the top of the stairs, that same haunting melody rolls over me, and I pause to appreciate it. It almost sounds familiar. Yet...*not*.

Curious, I inch closer before stopping at a partially closed door on my left. The soft strum of a guitar is accompanied by a quiet, gritty voice that makes my knees weak. Resting my head against the wall, I let the slow cadence roll over me and squeeze my eyes shut.

It’s so beautiful.

*“Dark skies and lonely nights.
The smell of your skin still clings to mine.
But you’re gone, babe.
Never comin’ back, babe.
‘Cause you were never mine.*

*You're just a ghost from before
And we'll never be more.
Never be more. Never be more."*

My heart breaks as the rhythm slows down to a haunting silence that makes me crave the next verse as much as the singer craves his mystery girl. But we're both left wanting.

With a quiet breath, I shake the spell that'd been cast on me, pushing myself up and taking a step toward the bathroom. When the floor creaks beneath my feet, I freeze.

"Reese?" the singer calls.

Crap.

"Reese?"

Crap. Crap. Crap.

"Oh, um, Reese isn't here right now," I return awkwardly. Through the crack in the door, I see a guy sitting cross-legged on the floor with an acoustic guitar cradled in his lap, but he's leaning against his bed, so his face isn't in view.

Until he leans forward and sees me with a deer-in-the-headlights expression. My jaw drops.

"Gibbs?" I squeak.

Please don't kill me.

"Dove?" His confusion turns into a glare. "What are you doing here?"

Ignoring his question, I return it with one of my own. "You're a musician?"

"On occasion," he grits out.

"On occasion?" A breath of laughter escapes me. If we were discussing any other topic, I'd already be gone. But music? It's my passion. My weakness. It's the one thing that got me through my childhood. The one thing I love. And the man in front of me plays like he owns it.

"What are you doing here?" he repeats, his voice nothing but a growl.

"Reese invited me. But what's that supposed to mean? You're only a musician on *occasion*?"

"It means that I play when I'm home."

"When you're home? That's it?"

"Is that a problem?" he challenges.

"No, it's..." I bite my lip, desperate to run away, though my curiosity

keeps my feet planted. “You’re really talented. You should be playing in front of people with a voice like that.”

Ignoring my compliment, he twists the tuning peg on his guitar, clearly dismissing me, but another question tumbles out of me nonetheless. “Why do I recognize that song?”

“Because you’ve heard it before,” he grumbles, clearly even more annoyed with my presence than usual. And that’s saying something. I don’t get it. He’s always friendly to every other person on the planet except me. Maybe he’d be nicer if I got the hint and left him alone.

Am I really this dense?

“Oh?” I push, unable to help myself.

“Broken Vows played it at SeaBird the other night. I’m making a few adjustments.”

Adjustments? Why?

“For fun?” I press. “Or...?”

I thought I was the only one quirky enough to mess with lyrics, melodies, and harmonizing.

With another sigh, he pinches the bridge of his nose. “My brother’s the face of the band, but I write the music.”

“Wait.” Convinced I heard him wrong, I point to the guitar in his lap. “You wrote that?”

“Don’t look so surprised, Dove.”

I do my best to school my features, but it’s a losing battle. “Sorry. I just...”

“Just what?”

“I guess I’m a little surprised,” I admit.

“Why’s that?”

“They’re really good.”

He cocks his head. “And that’s surprising?”

“No. It’s...”—I take a deep breath—“it kind of felt like I was pulling teeth to get you to admit that you’re the master behind the music.”

“I don’t stick my nose in your business, Dove. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t stick yours in mine.” The venom in his words burns like a snake bite as his face transforms from his usual laid-back persona to a defensive stranger.

Mouth gaping and feeling like I’ve been slapped, I search for something to say but come up empty.

I need to get out of here.

“I, uh, I’m sorry. I’ll…” I turn toward the bathroom, then change my mind and dig up the courage to face him again. His eyes are hard as he studies me carefully. I’d give anything to know what he’s thinking, but I’m not about to push my luck and ask.

Taking another deep breath, I tell him the truth. “You’re really talented, Gibbs. I’m sorry that I overstepped my bounds, and I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but I think you have something. And it’s something special. I don’t know what it is, but it took me less than ten seconds to hear it. You shouldn’t be ashamed of it. You should embrace it.” I turn around to disappear like a bat out of Hell when his deep, gritty voice stops me.

“Dove.”

Sucking my lips into my mouth, I look over my shoulder but stay silent.

“I’m an ass.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine.”

“I’m used to it—”

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” he admits, running his hand across his face. “I guess I’m private about my music.”

Uncomfortable with the amicable stranger in front of me, I rock back on my heels and point out, “You’re allowed to be. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“You were curious. They all are once they find out my connection to the band.”

I don’t know why his comment bothers me or who *they* are, but I bristle as I realize he’s lumped me in with them. It makes me feel like I’m simply another girl. Another fan in a sea of people.

And I don’t like it.

“Who’s *they*?” I murmur, unable to hide my curiosity.

“Anyone who hears me play. I’m not the face of the band because I don’t want to be. Fender—the lead singer of Broken Vows—is my half-brother. We agreed early on that if we were going to pursue a musical career together, I’d keep to the shadows. It works for us. He craves the limelight, the attention, the girls. And I simply want the music on paper instead of inside my head.”

My eyes widen in surprise. That’s insane. Not that there’s anything wrong with wanting a shred of privacy, and I’m sure being a rockstar isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. But performing? Singing in front of others? The lights, the stage, the adrenaline? I can’t imagine someone like him wanting to stay away

from that kind of life. I've seen him at work. Heck, I've been swayed by his charisma myself, and that's without any effort on his part. At. *All*. He could have the crowds eating from the palm of his hand if he wanted. Not that Fender isn't freakishly talented, too, but both of them? On stage together? It doesn't make any sense.

"You're not tempted by fame?" I press, trying to understand him.

He shakes his head. "My father was tempted by it, and it ruined his life. I refuse to let that happen to me."

"Oh," I utter, finally understanding. At least somewhat, anyway. He's scared.

Rubbing his hand over his face, Gibson adds, "He spent decades chasing his dream when the truth is simple. He was a dime a dozen."

"And you think you're like him?" I whisper, still blown away that we're having a conversation that doesn't involve daggers right now. "A dime a dozen?"

He stays quiet as he looks me up and down. Like I'm a fly that somehow snuck in when the door was open for too long, and his patience has run out.

It's official. I've lost my footing on whatever tightrope I'd been walking as soon as I heard him sing. It's time to get out of here. But I can't move. I'm paralyzed. Mesmerized. By every muscle in his body. Jaw clenching, he grabs the neck of his guitar and stands to his full height, striding closer until he practically towers over me. All muscle. And olive skin. And dark hair. And hazel eyes. I swallow thickly as he crowds my space. But I don't move an inch. There isn't anywhere else for me to go. Setting his guitar in its stand next to the door, he mutters, "I think that's enough chatting for one day. Run along, Dove."

He backs away and—as if in slow motion—closes the door in my face, making me flinch when it clicks into place.

Okay, then.

CHAPTER THREE

“**Y**ou’re late,” Ashton accuses.

“I know. I’m sorry—”

“Get your stuff in your locker, and come back out. As you can see”—he motions to the crowd of people packed into the bar like sardines—“it’s a busy night.”

“Of course. I’ll be right back.”

As I weave between the sea of people, I keep my head down and get bumped from shoulder to shoulder before popping out the other side near the back of the building. I’ve never seen the place like this. Sure, SeaBird is always busy, but this is something else entirely.

My hands shake as I twist the combination into the padlock before shoving my purse inside my locker. With a deep breath, I close my eyes and take a second to center myself. Right now, I’m a frazzled mess. And shaky nerves combined with trays of alcohol and way too many customers packed into a tiny building is a recipe for disaster.

I’ve already dealt with one of those today.

Running my fingers through my hair, I slowly let the oxygen out of my lungs, prepping for the chaos waiting for me at the bar.

Okay. I can do this.

I tie a black apron around my black shorts and T-shirt, grateful for the lack of a name tag attached to it. Without it, I’m nothing more than another face in a sea of people. And the less likely I am to stand out, the better.

Because standing out? Well, that’s not my forte, either.

My feet skitter across the polished concrete floors as I rush back to the front of the bar and sneak a rag from behind the lacquered countertop while

hating the fact that I'm searching for him.

Gibson.

My damn Kryptonite, though he has no idea.

It's just a crush, I remind myself.

A very stupid, very unwarranted crush. Especially when I know for a fact that the guy hates me. It isn't a big deal. I've had loads of crushes. And Gibbs isn't any different. If I were smarter, I'd remember that random stranger's warning about Gibson's ex. I'd remember the venom on Gibson's tongue any time he speaks to me. I'd remember how small and inconsequential he makes me feel, even though he's a complete gentleman to everyone else around him.

Instead, all I hear is his voice humming lyrics under his breath as his fingers strum against his guitar strings. The way he was lost in his music. The way he strode toward me before closing the door in my face.

Puffing out my cheeks, I force out the air and head to one of the nearest, recently vacated tables as a familiar melody echoes off the walls. Broken Vows is playing on the stage. Again.

They're good.

Really good.

And this song is something else, even when Gibson isn't the one singing it. I hum along, getting lost in the lyrics, the vibrations, the guitar riff while trying to focus on wiping the crumbs off the table.

My one vice has always been music. Whether it's hymns, country music, or even rap when I could get my hands on it. The power in a song or a melody is endless. It's consuming. And I've found that the world doesn't look so bad when I have lyrics streaming through my head on an endless loop of beauty.

Because that's what music is.

It's beautiful.

And it only fanned the flames of my crush when I realized that Gibbs was the mastermind behind Broken Vows' success.

I lick my lips and search the premises again.

We haven't spoken. Not since our little run-in at his house. I think I upset him. I shouldn't have pried. But I couldn't help it. To hide a talent like that? It's inconceivable.

When my gaze lands on him behind the bar, I freeze. His signature smirk is firmly in place as he leans against the bartop and says something to one of the customers. She's gorgeous. Tall. Curvy. Dark hair. Eyes lined with

makeup.

She's the opposite of me in every way imaginable. Confident. Comfortable in her own skin. And willing to go home with him tonight if her body language is anything to go by.

Gibbs' eyes flare with interest as he sets a freshly made cocktail on the counter and pushes it toward her. Their fingers brush against each other at the last second.

A lump forms in my throat before I swallow it back and pick up my tray of half-finished drinks. Turning around, my face smashes against a very tall, very skinny woman that looks like Barbie. Liquid spills everywhere, followed by glass shattering as it crashes against the floor.

"Watch where you're going, bitch!" the angry barbie yells.

My face flames. "I'm so sorry—"

"Sorry's not gonna get this shit out of my dress." The girl looks like she stepped out of a Victoria's Secret catalog, but her upper lip is curled in revulsion, twisting her flawless features into something out of a horror movie. Disgusted, she looks me up and down and motions to her skin-tight dress. "Do you have any idea how much this thing costs?"

"I'm sorry," I repeat, though it comes out as a quiet squeak. Like I'm nothing but a mouse.

She grabs my biceps and squeezes, leaving crescent-shaped indents in the shape of her manicured fingernails as she leans closer to me. Her minty breath fans across my face and leaves my stomach churning. "You clumsy. Little. *Bitch*. You're gonna pay for this."

"I-I'm so sorry—"

"Get your hands off her," Gibson orders, his tone brooking no argument. The girl's grasp disappears almost instantly, and her breath hitches at the authority in his voice before he steps between us, daring her to piss him off any more than she already has.

She shakes her head and snaps herself out of the Gibson-induced haze from his close proximity, motioning to her barely-there dark red dress. "She spilled shit all over me!"

"And we would've happily reimbursed you to get it cleaned as well as offering free drinks for the rest of the night until you touched her."

The woman scoffs. "Excuse me? She was staring at you like some crazy stalker before she bumped into me. How is this my fault? Aren't you going to take care of this shit?" Her frustrated gaze lands on me, turning darker and

darker with each passing second.

Gibson shifts his weight, sandwiching himself between me and the woman who wants to strangle me until all I can see is the black fabric of his T-shirt stretched along his muscled back.

“I *am* taking care of this shit,” Gibbs informs her. “Now, get out of this bar.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” she screeches. “It’s that bitch’s fault, and you’re blaming me? I’ve done nothing wrong. If anything, you should be thanking me for putting her in her place. It’s not like she has a chance with someone like *you*.” The bouncers from the front flank Gibson’s sides as his spine straightens. Although, I’m not sure if it’s because of the fact that she pointed out I was stalking him at work or if it’s because there are way too many people invested in this confrontation right now. Regardless, this is bad news, and it’s all my fault.

“What’s your address?” I ask, shifting my weight from one foot to the other in hopes of making eye contact with her. “I’ll send you a check to get your dress cleaned or maybe a replacement,” I ramble. Anything to end this conversation as quickly as possible.

“That won’t be necessary,” Gibson growls over his shoulder.

“It’s not like you could afford a dress like this anyway,” she spits. “However, I’d love to speak to your manager—”

“Again. That won’t be necessary,” Gibson growls. “Get out of SeaBird. And don’t come back.”

“Excuse me? Who the hell—”

Gibbs steps closer to her, causing the argument to die on her lips. I can feel the tension in his muscles. The silent suggestion to choose her next words carefully, or she might regret it. The underlying tension is a stark reminder that I don’t know Gibson. Not really. But I do appreciate his help.

Lifting her chin, Barbie squeezes her sparkly black clutch in her hand, turns on her heel, and marches toward the exit. My pulse is racing as I watch her disappear out the front door. But even after she’s gone, I feel like an elephant is sitting on my chest. Like I can’t breathe. Like I’m on the verge of a panic attack.

I’m embarrassed. On edge. Confused. And so many other emotions that I feel like I might be sick. I can’t believe I’m such an idiot. I might get fired for this. And now, Gibson knows I was staring at him and was being a total creeper. Heck, now the entire *bar* knows I was staring at him and being a

total creeper. I want to cry. I want to run away. I want to curl into a ball and disappear.

But I can't.

I need this job. I need it for my sister. I need it to pay the bills. I need it for my own sanity.

My eyelids flutter as I attempt to get a handle on my anxiety when Gibson turns around and faces me.

"You okay?" he murmurs.

I force myself to nod.

"You sure?"

Another nod, though my gaze stays firmly on the ground, glazed over and unfocused.

"Hey." He lifts my chin, forcing me to look in his hazel eyes framed with dark lashes that any girl would kill for. "You okay?"

I swallow thickly. "Y-yes."

"You sure?" he repeats.

I nod and lie, "I'm fine."

"Go take a break—"

"I just got here."

"And I don't give a shit. Go take a break."

I shake my head. "If I take a break, I'll have a breakdown, and I'd like to hold that off until I get home. I'm fine, Gibbs. Promise."

His usually cool gaze is sharp but warm as it bounces around my face, assessing me carefully. "I'll be at the bar." His warm fingertips disappear from my chin, and he drops his hand to his side. "If you need anything—"

"Find Ashton. I know."

"Come get me. Understand?"

My breath catches in my lungs as I peek up at him. He never wants me to get him. I either deal with Sammie, the other bartender, or talk with Ashton, my manager. But coming to Gibson? That's always been a no-go.

"Y-you sure?" I question.

He gives me a single nod and turns toward the bar.

"Hey, Gibbs?" I call out.

With a sigh, he faces me again, folding his arms. The dark material of his shirt stretches across his biceps. "Yeah?"

"How much was her tab? I'll cover—"

"Stop," he orders.

“It’s my fault—”

“Stop,” he repeats sharply, stepping closer until the toes of his shoes almost touch my worn sneakers.

My mouth snaps shut.

“That was not your fault.”

“But I spilled—”

“On accident,” he spits. “The girl was a bitch who not only threw a fit like a kid but decided to embarrass you because she felt like she could. Like I already told her, if she hadn’t acted like a spoiled brat, she would’ve gotten free drinks and a free shirt. But after the shit she pulled, she’s banned for life. We all make mistakes, Dove. But that”—he points toward the door that the brat recently disappeared through—“was unacceptable. You did *nothing* wrong. We clear?”

Like a bobblehead, I nod. Again. Because apparently, that’s all I can do when Gibson is around.

“Good. If you need anything, I’ll be at the bar.” As he weaves through the crowd, his back muscles bunch and flex with every movement.

He stood up for me.

He *saved* me.

Why did he save me?

Why does he care?

Reese has always been adamant that he’s a complete gentleman, but I’ve never really seen it before tonight. And now, I feel more confused than ever.

As I watch him approach the bar, a bitter taste floods my mouth. His little friend from before flutters over to him like a stupid peacock and drags her dark red manicured fingertips along his bicep—the same one I’d been noticing moments before—while gushing over his heroics. Gibson smiles and waves her off. Like saving me wasn’t a big deal. That he’d do it for anyone. And that almost makes it hurt worse.

Because he *would* do it for anyone.

Which means I’m no one special.

I turn around, clear my throat, and get back to work.

CHAPTER FOUR

No. *No, no, no, no.*

I search through my purse for my keys, then rest my head against the cool metal locker above mine. This can't be happening. Not after the crappy day I've had. I just want to go home. I want to sleep. I want to forget tonight and all the conflicting emotions that've been wreaking havoc on my nerves. I want—

"Hey, you okay?" a familiar voice asks from the entrance to the breakroom.

I jump and turn around. "Oh. H-hey, Gibbs."

"You okay in here?" he repeats, scanning the empty space. Everyone else has already left for the night.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pray for him to go away, too, and mutter, "Yup."

Annoyed, he strides closer. "You were supposed to go home fifteen minutes ago. I'm closing up. The doors are already locked—"

"I know." I dig through my purse once more, his annoyance fanning my anxiety like a freaking wildfire. "My keys. I can't find them."

He stops short and rocks back on his heels. "Oh."

"Yeah. Thankfully, I have my phone, so I'll, uh...I'll check the bus schedule or something. It still runs this late at night, right?"

With a sigh, he squats next to me and glances inside my locker. "Your keys have to be around here somewhere. I'll help you look."

"Seriously. Don't worry about it. The fob on my key doesn't work, so I usually push the lock button on the door before closing it. Unfortunately, it was kind of chaotic when I got here, so I think I locked them inside. I'll take

the bus and pick up my car tomorrow. It's fine."

He studies me carefully, his nostrils flaring before he stands back up to his full height. With his keys and phone in hand, he tilts his head toward the exit. "Come on. I'll give you a ride."

"Oh. No, you don't have to do that—"

"You're not taking the bus at two in the morning."

"It's fine—"

"Bullshit. Now, stop arguing. Come on."

Bunching the hem of my shirt into my hands in hopes of it drying my sweaty palms, I tug down the cotton material, hook my purse over my shoulder, and follow him outside. The air is cool but still holds a bit of warmth from earlier today. However, it doesn't stop my skin from pebbling with awareness.

Because he's close. Too close for comfort, really. A thirty-second conversation here and there is one thing. But a twenty-minute car ride? I'm not sure I can handle it.

The lights on his old car flicker as he unlocks the doors before he rounds the corner to the passenger side and opens it for me.

I peek over at him and smile tightly. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

The cab of his car is quiet but stifling as he turns on the ignition and pulls out his phone. "What's your address?"

"It's an old apartment complex on Heath Drive," I tell him.

"With the red brick?"

"Yes?" I return, though it comes out like a question. How does he know what it looks like?

He sets his phone in the cupholder between us, then pulls out of his parking spot. "I know the place."

"Okay." I settle into the worn leather seat and fold my arms as we fly down the street. This is awkward. What am I supposed to say to him? He probably thinks I'm an idiot for locking my keys in my car. I mean, who does that?

Tucking my hands beneath my bare thighs, I bite my lip and stare out the windshield.

This is so awkward.

After a couple minutes, his voice breaks the silence. "Do you have a spare?"

Confused, I tear my gaze away from the windshield and look over at him.
“What?”

“A spare set of keys,” he clarifies.

“Oh. Um...yes. It’s at my sister’s apartment. *My* apartment.”

“You live with your sister?”

“Yes.”

He nods. “Does she ever come into SeaBird?”

I shake my head. “Not really.”

“You’re chatty tonight,” he notes. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was teasing me, but it’s Gibson Hayes. The guy hates me.

When I stay quiet, he adds, “Last time you were at my place, I couldn’t get you to shut up.”

With a grimace, I drop my gaze down to my lap and toy with the strap on my black purse. “Sorry.”

“I’m kidding,” he returns. “Seriously. You okay?”

“Yeah.” I sigh and shrug one shoulder. “Just a long day, I guess.”

“You were late for work.”

Again, I peek over at him, surprised. “You noticed?”

“You don’t seem like someone who would lose their keys, either.”

My lips press into a thin line, but I don’t know what he wants me to say. I’m not someone who loses their keys. I’m too OCD for that. Too careful. Too much of an overthinker to let a tiny detail like where my keys are slip my mind. But today’s been rough, and I’m feeling the effects.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he adds, merging onto the freeway while surprising me with his curiosity.

I glance over at him, then stare back out the windshield. I don’t know where to look. I don’t know how to act. I don’t know how to do *anything*. Not when he’s around. Not when my nerves are a frazzled mess like they are right now.

But maybe *not* being silent would be a good start.

“It’s fine,” I breathe out. “And you’re right. I’m not usually one to lose my keys, and I pride myself on being reliable. And punctual. But my sister needed help with her IV, which she decided to need at the last second, which made me late for work and flustered. And therefore, I locked my keys in the car. And spilled my tray all over a customer. And...yeah. You get the idea. Between it all, my life is a mess, but at least Ashton is pretty laid-back and didn’t yell at me. So, there’s that,” I point out, trying to see the bright side of

a crappy day. Gibson would've been the bright side if it weren't for the stupid girl with her stupid gorgeous hair and nails and her stupid boobs that he couldn't stop staring at. But hey... Who am I to complain?

"Ashton's a good manager," he notes, bringing me back to the present.

"Yes, he is."

"Is your sister okay, though? You mentioned an IV?"

"She's pregnant and hasn't been able to keep anything down in months. The doctors were worried about her, and we got sick of driving to the ER every few days for fluids, so they sent everything home with us. Usually, it's fine. But because she's stubborn, she likes to wait until the last minute to finally give in and hook herself up to the IV, which means she felt shaky and nauseated and couldn't focus for the life of her. That's where I came in. Unfortunately, she lied and said she was feeling okay, but as I was walking out the door, she started puking—"

"Which means she *wasn't* feeling okay," he surmises.

"Exactly. So, I had to help her get all set up with it. Which is why I was late. And flustered."

"That *does* sound stressful," he murmurs, taking my word vomit like a champ. Poor guy. He probably didn't know what he was getting into when he offered to drive me home, but at least I'm not walking by myself to the bus station in the middle of the night.

"Is the father involved?"

I shake my head. "Not in the slightest."

He stays quiet, but I don't miss the way his knuckles tighten around the steering wheel or how tight his jaw looks as the streetlights reflect off his chiseled features. He's not the only one who's frustrated when it comes to Maddie's secret lover. The fact that she showed up on my parents' porch pregnant and alone was all the information I needed to confirm my worst fear. He's a deadbeat jerk, and that isn't Maddie's fault. Why should she have to pay for their consequences alone?

"I get it," Gibson mumbles after another minute. "My dad wasn't exactly involved, either."

Surprised he brought him up, especially after our conversation at his house where I could practically see the steam coming from his ears at the mere mention of his father, I lick my lips and try to tread lightly.

"I may have pieced that together."

"Figured." He chuckles dryly but doesn't tell me anything else. Which is

fine. Totally fine. He's allowed to have his privacy like I'm allowed to have mine. But the silence? Yeah, the silence is threatening to swallow me whole again, and I'm not ready for that. Especially now that we've finally started chatting like two normal human beings.

"Soooo," I drag out the word, tapping my hand against my upper thigh in rhythm with my racing heartbeat. "What's new with the band? Anything fun and exciting?"

He gives me the side-eye. "Not much."

"Aw, so you're only chatty when we're discussing *my* life. Noted," I quip.

After rolling his eyes, he mutters, "I'm working on a new song."

"And?"

"And it's going okay," he hedges.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. He's cute when he's sheepish. And for a guy who radiates confidence and surety, it's fascinating to watch him squirm.

"Just okay?" I press.

"There're a few kinks I'm trying to figure out."

"Like what?"

"So, you're allowed to be nosy when we're talking about me?" he challenges.

"You and music," I clarify, a shameless grin plastered across my face.

And for some reason, he humors me with an answer. "Fine. I have two versions of the song in my head, but they're from two different perspectives. It feels weird to have them both sung by Fen on the track. Plus, it's impossible at a live show. And the live shows are where we make our money, which means I'm trying to figure out a workaround."

Fen. The lead singer and guitarist. Also known as Fender, who happens to be Gibson's half-brother, though I'm not sure if that's common knowledge. I definitely didn't know about it until Gibson brought it up the other night at his house. Still, it feels surreal to have him talking to me about anything, let alone music, and I don't want to ruin it by saying something I shouldn't.

"Have you considered singing it with him?" I offer, carefully.

He laughs and shakes his head. "Wouldn't work. And before you tell me that I belong on the stage, I've heard it a hundred times, and that's not why it wouldn't work. The melody only works if it's higher. And the lyrics I came up with are from a woman's perspective," he adds. "If we were bigger, I'd

probably find someone to collaborate with, but most people don't want to work with an up-and-coming band. They want to work with an established one."

"Hmm," I hum, crossing my arms while biting my tongue. We're in dangerous territory right now. Not because I'm touchy about talking about it, but because he is. I already feel like I have to walk on eggshells enough around him. No need to poke the bear. Not when he's my ride home.

His knuckles tighten around the steering wheel, though he doesn't look at me as he orders, "Spit it out, Dove."

"You sure? It's about music, and—"

"Tell me."

"Fine," I growl under my breath. "I'm simply curious if you understand how up-and-coming Broken Vows really is. Have you even looked at your account on Spotify or anything? You have hundreds of thousands of listens. I mean, have you ever looked around when the band is playing at SeaBird? You guys are doing really well."

"What's your point?"

"My point is that you might be surprised at who you could collaborate with if you put some feelers out. Just a thought."

Again, he glances over at me before pulling into the apartment complex. "Which building are you in?"

"It's coming up in a second. Keep going straight."

"Okay." As he follows my order down the narrow, winding parking lot littered with old buildings, he offers, "Why don't you go grab your spare keys? I can drive you back to SeaBird tonight so you can pick up your car."

My eyes widen in surprise before I wave him off. "Oh, you don't have to do that. I'll figure it out tomorrow." I point to the building on the right. "And it's this one."

His forehead wrinkles as he parks near the sidewalk, staring at the building like it's haunted.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"What's your sister's name again?"

"Madelyn. Why?"

"I used to know a girl who lived here, but she moved a little while ago," he mumbles, tearing his gaze away from the entrance before looking over at me. His face is shadowed, but I can still see the wariness in his features. Or maybe I can feel it. I'm not sure, but I feel like I'm in the middle of a

minefield with no idea how to walk out of it unscathed.

“Oh?” I offer, carefully.

“Yeah. Has your sister lived here long?”

“As far as I know. We aren’t exactly close, though, so I’m not sure. Why do you ask?”

“Maybe your sister knew her.”

“I can ask her if you’d like. What was her name?”

“Emma.” He says the name with a reverence that makes my chest tighten. Or maybe it’s regret. Regardless, I flinch back slightly.

Emma.

The name’s been haunting me for weeks. It belongs to the ex who disappeared. The ex who used to sleep with Gibson *and* Milo. The ex who apparently used to live in my sister’s building. Which happens to now be *my* building too.

Greeeaat.

“Okay. Um.” I swallow my nerves, hoping he doesn’t notice the tightness in my muscles or the way my face is probably as white as a ghost. “I’ll have to ask my sister if she knew her. Thanks for the ride.”

I grab the door handle, desperate to wake up from my daydream that somehow turned into reality before transforming into a nightmare at the mere mention of a stranger when Gibson’s smooth voice stops me.

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yes? Why do you ask?”

“What time?”

“Six.”

He nods. “I’ll be here at 5:30.”

“Wait. What?”

“You can ride with me.”

I shake my head. “I know where you live. And it’s on the opposite side of town—”

“You’re not taking the bus. What apartment are you in?”

Confused but too drained to argue, I tell him, “206B.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“But...” I chew on my lower lip and squeeze my purse tighter. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be a burden—”

“See you tomorrow, Dove,” he tells me, his tone brooking no argument.

I climb out of his car, closing the door behind me and making my way up

the cracked sidewalk to the front of the building. I can feel him watching me every step of the way, and I can't help but peek over my shoulder when I reach the bottom steps. Only his silhouette comes into view behind the steering wheel. But he doesn't pull away from the curb. With an awkward wave, I turn back to the stairs and make my way to the second floor before realizing that I don't have the apartment key.

Crap.

Cringing, I tap my knuckles against the door.

Then I wait.

And wait.

A minute later, it opens with a loud squeak.

With hollow cheeks and messy hair, Maddie glares at me. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Sorry. I locked my keys in my car."

The wrinkles etched into her forehead smooth out almost instantly. "Oh. You okay?"

"Yeah."

She opens the door fully and lets me inside. "How'd you get home? Did you take the bus or something?"

"No. A coworker drove me home. Speaking of which, do you know an Emma? Apparently, she used to live in the building."

Maddie's expression hardens. "Why do you ask?"

"My coworker knew a girl who lived in our building named Emma."

"Which coworker? Is it the Reese girl you mentioned earlier?"

"No. His name is—"

"Excuse me?"

With a frown, I ask, "What?"

"You said *his*."

"Oh. He's a male coworker," I explain.

"A *guy*? What's his name?" she demands, her gaze narrowing in suspicion. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I just got caught red-handed. Which has never happened before. I'm too much of a rule follower to do anything that would get me in trouble unless you count listening to Eminem on the radio without anyone else in the car.

But still.

"Why are you acting weird?" I ask.

"Answer the question, Dove."

“Okaaaay. His name is Gibson—”

“You need to stay away from him,” she interrupts, nostrils flaring.

I flinch back. “What? Why?”

“Because he’s bad news.”

The panic in her voice makes me pause. Maddie’s never anxious. Heck, she’s never even concerned. She’s stubborn. Impulsive. And prickly on a good day. But never anxious. The realization makes my heart rate tick up a notch.

“W-what kind of bad news, Mads?”

“I was friends with Em, okay?” she seethes, her entire body shaking. “She told me plenty of stories about the guy, and he’s bad news. Stay. Away.” There’s something about the way she says it. The wide eyes. The shallow breathing. The fear that feels so misplaced, I’m left reeling.

It doesn’t make sense. Other than the offhand comment by the guy at SeaBird, Gibson has never been anything but a stand-up guy. And tonight, he proved it firsthand, even though I know for a fact that he’s never liked me.

I shake my head. “W-what are you talking about, Mads? He’s only ever been a nice, stand-up guy—”

“You can’t be serious,” she spits, her fear morphing into anger in the blink of an eye. All right. Maybe I’m stretching the truth a little bit. But he protected me from the jerk at work. He went out of his way and drove me home tonight. Those actions have to count for something.

After setting my purse on the Formica countertop in the kitchen, my shoulders hunch from exhaustion. “Maddie—”

“No. Listen. For me, you need to stay away from him. Okay? I know we’re not close and that you don’t give a shit how I feel—”

“Excuse me?” I breathe, feeling like I’ve been slapped. “You can’t be serious right now.”

Her expression falls. “That’s not what I meant—”

“Bull crap. I moved here to be with you. I moved here because I care about you. I cut off our parents to help take care of you. Remember?”

“I never asked you to—”

“Of course, you didn’t. Heaven forbid you admit that you screwed up and need someone’s help. Am I right?”

Her hand shakes as she presses it against her mouth. But she stays quiet. Because she knows I’m right, no matter how much she hates me for voicing it out loud. She screwed up and slept with a jerk who got her pregnant and

refused to step up and help her raise the kid. So it's left to me. The perfect little sister whom she despises.

"I'm going to bed," I grumble, my anger transforming into defeat in the blink of an eye. "I'm sorry I woke you."

As I walk down the hall, her quiet voice stops me. "Stay away from him, Dove. He'll break you."

I resume walking and close the door behind me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Checking the time on my phone, I read 5:23 pm and rush to the restroom to use it as quickly as I can. The sooner I can get out to the curb, the sooner I can be at ease. After Maddie's warning the night before, we've been ignoring each other. Not that it's really anything out of the ordinary, but I'm not about to poke the pregnant bear again.

However, it hasn't stopped me from being on edge all day. I've been cursing myself for not having asked Gibbs for his phone number. If I had it, I could tell him not to bother coming. Not because I actually believe Maddie's lie, but because I don't want a confrontation.

And if I'm out on the curb, I'll be able to prevent Gibbs from coming to the door, which might even prevent the subsequent fallout if Mads ever meets her friend's ex face-to-face.

But nope. I had to pee.

Stupid bladder.

As I turn off the faucet, a knock at the front door makes my anxiety spike, my attention darting to the time on my phone. He's early.

"I got it," I yell, wrenching open the bathroom door. But it's too late. Madelyn is as pale as a sheet with her shoulder pressed against the door's jamb. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's the only thing keeping her up.

"Hey!" I rush toward them, trying to keep my pace from appearing frantic, even though I'm seconds from having a panic attack as I wrench my purse from the counter and hook it over my shoulder.

"Sorry. I was finishing up with something. Gibbs, I see you've met my sister, Maddie. Maddie, this is my coworker, Gibbs."

Swaying slightly on her feet, Maddie keeps staring at Gibson like he's a

ghost. In fact, I'm not even sure whether or not she heard a single word of my introduction.

"Mads?" I prod.

"Nice to meet you," she breathes out, her voice nothing but a whisper.

Gibson's hardened gaze bounces from Maddie, to me, and back again. The cords in his neck are tight, and his jaw looks like it's been chiseled from granite. But he doesn't say a word, which makes him look like a total jerk and leaves me more confused than ever.

What in the world is going on?

"Is something wrong?" I ask, my heart pounding.

Gibson's fists tighten at his sides as he grits out, "I'll meet you at the car." Then he turns on his heel and disappears down the hall without bothering to see if I'll follow.

Once he's out of sight, I glare at Mads. "What did you say to him?"

With glazed eyes, she shakes her head and squeezes the door handle with all her strength. I glance to where Gibbs disappeared before turning back to my sister, my frustration fizzling as I take in her spooked expression.

"He's giving me a ride to work since my car was left overnight," I explain, my tone softer this time. "It's not a big deal. I promise. Try to get some rest, okay?"

She gives me a jerky nod and steps aside, giving me plenty of space to exit but doesn't say a word.

"Love you," I add.

As if my declaration has awoken her from a deep sleep, she blinks slowly before holding my gaze. "Stay away from him, Dovey."

I exhale slowly, desperate to shake her. To make her see how much her depression and bossy older sister routine are affecting our relationship. To wake her up from whatever daze she's been living in since her ex broke her heart. To make her understand that I'm here for her. That she can trust me. That I'm not going anywhere. But I don't bother. It'll just wind up being a waste of time.

"Bye, Mads," I mutter.

I turn on my heel and race down the stairs, not only running away from my apartment but also from my crappy relationship with my sister that I can't seem to fix no matter how hard I try.

What did she say to Gibbs in the two seconds it took me to reach the front door? What did he do to Emma to make Maddie so freaking defensive around

him? And why doesn't she trust me enough to make my own decisions?

Flustered, I tuck my hair behind my ear and take another slow, cleansing breath, preparing for a twenty-minute drive with Gibson when I already feel like a frazzled mess. The guy who's not only my coworker and crush, but apparently, he's also my sister's nemesis.

Greeaat.

When I reach the sidewalk, I find his old beater parked out front with Gibbs behind the wheel staring blankly in front of him.

The hinges creak as I open the passenger door and slip inside. "Hey. Sorry. I was going to be out front, but you were early."

"It's fine," he grits out, though he doesn't look at me as he shoves his car into drive.

"I'm sorry if my sister was acting weird or if she said anything—"

"How long has your sister lived here?" he demands, cutting me off before slamming on the brakes and giving me his full attention.

I jerk back at the sharpness in his tone and the animosity in his gaze. I might not know him that well, but I've never seen him so tense before. I feel like I can almost see the smoke coming from his ears, but it isn't as amusing as the cartoons make it out to be. And I don't like it. At all.

"I-I don't know," I answer once I've found my voice. "We weren't really on talking terms until a few months ago. I asked her about your friend, Emma, though."

The name sparks recognition in his heated gaze. "And?"

"And it's probably the reason she was acting weird today. Apparently, Emma told her some stuff about you that made Maddie a little leery of us working together."

With a dry laugh, he shakes his head. "What kind of stuff, Dove? What bullshit is she spewing now?"

"S-she didn't say. Were you...?" I bite my lip and peek over at him.

"What is it?"

"Were you dating her, though?"

"Em?" he spits.

"Yes."

Tongue in cheek, he lets the question roll over him for a few seconds. "Something like that," he mumbles.

"Well, it sounds like Em must've taken the breakup badly."

He scoffs. "She ended it. Not us."

“Us?” I prod, hating the jealousy swirling in my lower gut, yet unable to help my curiosity. This is insane. Absolutely. One-hundred-percent. Insane.

“Milo and me,” he clarifies.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Sure, both the guy at the bar and Reese mentioned it, but hearing about Gibson’s voracious sexual appetite firsthand is an entirely different experience. I’ll never be enough for a guy like Gibbs. Not when I’m *me*. The girl who’s never even been with one guy, let alone two. Not that I’d want to. It sounds like a lot of work, but what do I know?

The thought is sobering, and like a little pinprick, it pops the fantasy that had begun to take root no matter how hard I tried to curb it. Me and him? The innocent virgin who looks at sex like it’s an emotional and loving interaction next to the guy who obviously does it with multiple people simply to get off?

It would never work.

“We used to share,” Gibson admits. “Until things got messy with Em.”

“What kind of messy?” I ask, fisting the sleeves of my black long-sleeve shirt as if it’s a lifeline. My stupid curiosity and completely irrational jealousy are wreaking havoc on my emotions. But I can’t help it. I want to know what happened to her.

No, I *need* to know.

Especially when he’s so freaking angry and my sister’s acting like a crazy person at the mere mention of him. It doesn’t make sense.

Scratching the scruff along his jaw, he rasps, “I thought it was only sex. But it was more than that for Milo. He got jealous and lost his shit on Em. So she left.” He slips on his aviators, pulling away from the curb. “Or at least, I thought she did.”

“Maddie said Em left, too,” I return, trying to put him at ease. “But they must’ve been close for her to be so protective of me.”

His face is pinched with frustration as he demands, “What do you mean?”

“Maddie told me to stay away from you.”

He scoffs. “Of course, she did. Tell me something, Dove. How far along is your sister?”

Whiplashed, I stutter, “W-what?”

“Your sister. How far along is she?”

“Oh. Um. She just hit twenty weeks.”

He stays silent, but I can almost see the wheels turning in his head. “And the father? You said he knows?”

“I think so. We don’t really talk about him. I’d be surprised if he didn’t, though.”

“Why’s that?” he growls.

“Because she came back to my parents and asked for their help when she found out she was pregnant. They weren’t exactly on good terms, and the fact that she asked for their help means that she tried every other avenue before knocking on their door.”

Like a lie detector, his stare is laser-focused as he looks over at me while the buildings continue to blur past us. “You sure?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

Grip tight on the steering wheel, he turns his attention back to the road. “Just curious. What happened when she came to your parents?”

“They lost their minds.” I laugh, though there isn’t any humor in it. “We grew up in a very religious home. There’s no alcohol. No drugs. No sex before marriage. Nothing. So when she showed up pregnant after over a year of no communication, asking for their help and support? Well, I’m sure you can imagine how that went down.”

“And where were you in all of this?” he prods.

“With my parents. Madelyn was always the troublemaker. The rule breaker. The black sheep, if you will. And I fell into the role of being the perfect little daughter. When you’re young, it’s hard to see that your parents could do anything wrong, ya know? So, in my mind, Madelyn deserved to be grounded and to have ridiculous repercussions for pretty minor offenses in the big scheme of things. But it pushed her away. And because I could see what *not* to do, I did the opposite. I stuck around. I got perfect grades. I never touched alcohol, or smoked weed, or even kissed a guy.”

“And did it help your relationship with your parents?”

“Nope. My relationship with them was as rocky as Madelyn’s but in a different way.”

“So, if you were the perfect child, how’d you end up with”—he swallows thickly, his expression souring—“*Madelyn?*”

“When she showed up pregnant and alone on my parents’ doorstep, I was reminded of how strict my mom and dad were with their punishments. I realized that if I didn’t step up, I’d never see my sister again. Or my niece or nephew,” I add. “And the idea of that almost broke me. So, I chased after her, promised not to be judgmental, and have been taking care of her ever since.”

He looks over at me again, his gaze narrowing as he takes me in from

head to toe with a fresh perspective, though I'm not sure whether or not it's a good one. I probably look weak for accepting my parents' behavior for so many years. I probably look naive for living under their roof without really experiencing life at all. But at least I've learned from my past, and I'm trying to change my future. That has to count for something, right?

Still, those hazel eyes are killing me. Because I care what he thinks. Even though I'd never admit it out loud—heck, I can barely admit it to myself—I care.

Squirming in my seat, I untuck my hair from behind my ear and use it as a barrier from his scrutiny before crossing my arms and staring out the window. I want to beg him to stop looking at me like this. Like I matter. Like he sees me. Like he's curious about me, the same way I've been curious about him since the first day we met. But that would mean admitting that I've been curious, and I'd rather keep living in denial, thank you very much.

“That's...selfless of you,” he decides after a few seconds.

I shrug one shoulder, glancing over at him. “Someone had to be.”

“Has it helped your relationship?”

“Not really.” I laugh. “She's still mad at me and doesn't trust me.”

“Why not?”

“I'm pretty sure she's convinced that I'm a secret spy for my parents, even though they disowned me as soon as I walked out on them to help her with the baby. They're convinced that I'm becoming a”—I lift my fingers and do air quotes—“*harlot* like Maddie.”

“Ouch.” He chuckles.

“Exactly. Who are they to judge, ya know? Yes, she made a mistake and has to deal with the consequences, but isn't that what family's for? To help you when you're down?”

I can feel him staring at me again. Like I'm an enigma that he can't quite figure out. But I don't know what else he expects me to say. I love my sister. I love her unborn baby even though I haven't met him or her yet. And I'm going to help both of them. No matter what.

“I guess you're right,” he agrees, albeit grudgingly. “I'd do anything for my brother.”

“Exactly.”

“Does Madelyn appreciate your sacrifice, though?”

With a grimace, I refuse to give his question too much thought, terrified of the conclusion I'll come to if I do.

Instead, I release a shaky breath and reply, “I think so? *Hope* so?” I correct myself, though it still comes out as a question. “She’s just too stubborn to admit it yet.”

“Hmm,” he hums.

“That’s why I took the job at SeaBird, you know.”

“Why?”

“To prove to her that I’m sticking around. That I’m not judgmental. That I don’t think anything’s wrong with alcohol or”—I gulp and fidget with my seatbelt—“sex or anything else like that. As long as you’re being safe and not stupid, go for it, right?”

He smirks. “So, you’ve slept around?”

My cheeks feel like they’re on fire as I register his question before I point to my chest. “Who? Me?”

Chuckling dryly, he shakes his head and turns onto the freeway. “Yeah, you. Who else would I be talking about?”

“Uh...” *How the heck did we get on the topic of my sex life?* “No idea. And nope. No sleeping around for this girl.”

“Figured. But you’re missing out. It’s kinda fun.” He looks over at me again, giving me a playful wink that makes my ovaries want to burst. “How old are you, anyway?”

“I’m twenty-two. Why?”

“Because you reek of innocence.”

Convinced I’m going to die from embarrassment, an awkward laugh escapes me before I fold my arms and mutter, “Gee, thanks.”

“Trust me. It’s a compliment.”

“Didn’t sound like one,” I argue.

He laughs again and shakes his head. “You have no idea. But you’ve made me curious. If you’re not judgmental and are open to other lifestyles, why haven’t you tried anything?”

“I guess I haven’t done any of that stuff because...”

Why are we even talking about this? I’m so embarrassed I could puke. Right now. All over his dashboard. And he’d probably get a kick out of it.

Jerk face.

“Because why?” he prods.

“I, uh...I guess I’m still brainwashed on that front.”

This is so not a normal topic of conversation.

“What do you mean?” he asks, sobering slightly.

I peek over at him. It's his genuine curiosity that does me in. There isn't any malice or teasing anymore. Only real, unrestrained interest. And no one has ever been interested in me before.

I bite my lip and wring my hands in my lap, refusing to look at him. Again. Not when we're talking about my freaking sex life. Or lack thereof.

"I don't know. I guess I'm waiting for it to be with someone special. Which sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud. But when you're raised to wait until marriage...I guess I don't really know how to think any differently. Not that I'm going to wait, per se," I ramble. "I guess I haven't met the right guy yet."

"Huh," he grunts, piquing my curiosity enough to actually look over at him.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"We grew up *very* differently, Dove Walker."

"And how did you grow up?" I challenge, crossing my arms and twisting in my seat until I'm fully facing him. Now that the attention isn't on me, I'm all in for hearing about his past. Especially since he's always so guarded around me. I'd be an idiot not to take advantage of his candor right now.

And even though the jerk can see right through me, he gives me a smirk. "For starters, I was raised without a dad, as we've already discussed."

"I may have remembered that," I quip. "And your mom?"

"My mom did her best, but she wasn't really there, either."

"Where was she?"

"Working or dating shitty guys who didn't like the fact she had a son. She'd usually disappear for weeks on end before showing back up with an arm full of groceries and red eyes from crying after they broke up."

I frown. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Hell, I was having sex at fourteen in my living room with no one to call me out for it or to say I was too young."

"Fourteen?!" I squeak. My hand slaps against my mouth, and my eyes widen in shock as memories of my life at fourteen flash through my mind. "Seriously?"

He laughs, again, finding my reaction way too amusing for a guy who looked like he wanted to rip someone's head off five minutes ago. But still. At fourteen, I was in braces and only owned a sports bra so I could change in

PE class. I was flat as a board. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'd never even talked to a boy before, let alone was asked on a date by one.

"I didn't even really know what sex was at fourteen," I admit. "That's insane, Gibbs."

"What's insane is that a girl like you still has her cherry."

"Cherry?"

He scrubs his hand across his smirk. "Your virginity, Dove."

Oh.

Kill me. Kill me now.

I cannot believe we're talking about this. It's official. If shame were a sickness, I'd be dead on the floor.

Covering my face, I scrunch into the very back corner of my seat. "Gibbs!"

"It's not a bad thing," he teases mercilessly. "Do you know how many guys would kill to claim that from you?"

"Oh my gosh! Stop talking."

His laughter gets louder. "Seriously, Dove. You ever wanna get rid of that thing, let me know. I'll make an announcement, and the guys will flood SeaBird for miles."

I roll my eyes and peek at him through the cracks in my fingers. "Now you're being ridiculous."

He looks over at me, that same goofy grin softening as he considers me carefully. Again. As if he can't figure me out.

Well, ditto, Gibson Hayes. I can't seem to figure you out, either.

But that doesn't stop him from slowly peeling away every single protective layer I've gathered until all that's left is a very real, very innocent girl in his passenger seat.

"Trust me, Dove," he murmurs, his voice low and husky. "Just...trust me."

He pulls into SeaBird's parking lot and turns off his ignition. "Come on. Let's get inside."

"Okay." I reach for the door handle when he stops me.

"And thanks."

"For what?" I ask.

"For getting my mind off shit."

"What kind of crap?"

"Just..." He exhales and scrubs his hand over his face. "Heavy shit."

“Anything I can do to help?” I offer.

“You already did. Which is why I thanked you,” he reminds me, that same arrogant grin rising to the surface, taunting me as he pushes open the driver’s side door. It closes with a heavy thud and leaves me alone in the passenger seat of Gibson freaking Hayes’ car. Which is absolute insanity. I shake off the realization, climb out the passenger side, and smooth down my black T-shirt while attempting to ignore the stupid butterflies that made their appearance as soon as his cocky smirk did.

“Well, then,” I reply, the warm breeze kissing my cheeks. “Don’t mention it. And thank *you* for the ride.”

“Anytime. Let’s get inside.”

CHAPTER SIX

GIBSON

555.326.8092: It's Em. We need to talk.

B *ull-fucking-shit.*
I glare at my screen—the high from my conversation with Dove officially evaporating into thin air—before scanning the bar to find everyone content with their drinks and jabbing out my response.

Me: Apparently, I don't know an Em.

555.326.8092: Don't be an ass.

Me: Says the girl who faked her name, pretended to skip town, and wound up pregnant.

555.326.8092: Which is why I want to talk.

My blood is boiling as I search SeaBird again for Em's little sister. When I find her happily chatting with Reese, I ask the question I've been dreading since the moment I picked Dove up at her apartment. The apartment that happened to be two doors down from Em's old one.

How could I have been so blind?

With more force than necessary, I type out my message and press send before I can overthink it. Before I can stick my head in the sand and pretend that life can go back to normal even though one of my exes is *very* pregnant,

and the likelihood of me being the father isn't exactly as low as I'd like it to be.

Me: Am I the father, Em?

The little blue dots on my screen appear at least a dozen times before disappearing. Finally, my phone vibrates with another message.

555.326.8092: No.

Frustrated, I squeeze my phone and barely refrain from chucking it across the room. Of course, she'd only give me a one-word answer. She always knew how to get under my skin and drive me crazy. Apparently, that hasn't changed.

Me: Is Milo?

Five minutes tick by, each second slower than the last until I'm caught in a web of *what if*'s that could kill a man. Annoyed, I'm updating her contact info to pass the time when my phone vibrates in my hand with another message.

Em's New Number: No.

Me: Then who the hell is it?

Em's New Number: It's none of your business, Gibbs.

I scoff. Em was always a handful. Hell, she's the opposite of her little sister in every sense of the word. But right now, she's pissing me off. Nostrils flaring, I head over to Ashton, who's busy pouring shots for a bunch of frat kids from LAU.

"Hey, man. I gotta take a ten-minute break," I tell him.

"Sure thing."

The back door slams as I push it open and breathe in the fresh air, though

it does nothing to clear the chaotic thoughts swarming in my head since the moment I saw Em on the other side of Dove's door.

This is insane.

Pulling my phone back out of my pocket, I'm surprised the screen isn't cracked from clutching it too tightly. I type out my next message.

Me: Does Milo know you were fucking a third guy on the side? Because if I'm not the father, and he isn't the father, then...

Em's New Number: It doesn't matter.

Me: Pretty sure it does, Em. Or should I call you Maddie?

Em's New Number: You shouldn't call me anything. I changed my number for a reason.

Me: And yet, here you are. Texting me. What other lies are you hiding from your sister?

Em's New Number: Stay away from her.

Me: That's all you have to say to me? After all the shit you put Milo through, that's it?

Em's New Number: Don't you dare put this all on me.

Me: Does he know you're back?

Em's New Number: It doesn't matter.

Me: It would to him.

Em's New Number: Bullshit. He doesn't care about me.

Me: Now who's full of shit? He loved you, Em.

Em's New Number: It doesn't matter.

Me: Cuz you cheated on him and wound up pregnant with someone else's kid?

Em's New Number: It isn't cheating if we're not exclusive.

I laugh at the audacity this girl still has, even after all this time.

Me: Bullshit. You remember what our deal was. Yeah. We were just having fun, but if something wasn't working for one of us, we ended it. We were never supposed to go sleeping around. Especially without fucking protection. Do I need to get checked now?

Em's New Number: You're such an ass, Gibbs. I don't know what the hell my sister sees in you, but I suggest you stay away from her. She deserves more than a manwhore like you.

Me: First, we're just friends. And second, I'd be careful throwing stones right now. It's a little like the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think?

Em's New Number: Leave Dove alone. And don't say a word to Milo.

Me: He has a right to know.

Em's New Number: Bullshit.

Me: How are you sure it isn't either of ours?

Em's New Number: I just am.

Me: When are you due?

Em's New Number: It's none of your business. None of this is.

She's so infuriating!

My nostrils flare as I jam out my next response.

Me: Humor me.

Em's New Number: I don't owe you anything, Gibbs.

Me: Again, I call bullshit. You owe me an explanation.

My jaw tightens before I type another message right after it and hit send.

Me: And you owe Milo one too.

Em's New Number: Unfortunately, I don't have one for you. We're through, remember?

Me: How could I forget? But we're gonna need to do a paternity test when this is all said and done.

Em's New Number: You're joking, right?

Me: No. If the kid's mine, I refuse to be a deadbeat dad, and I know Milo would feel the same way.

Em's New Number: It's not yours.

Me: No offense, sweetheart. But you can't know that.

Those damn blue bubbles pop up again but disappear as quickly as I lean my back against the rough brick wall outside SeaBird. But I'm not going anywhere until she answers my questions.

Em's New Number: You can't tell him.

Me: Seems like you've left me no choice.

Em's New Number: I'm serious, Gibbs. Please. I'm begging you.

A glimpse of the girl I used to know peeks through the message and makes me pause. There's a vulnerability in her text. One that I know she doesn't share often. Resting my head against the building, I squeeze my eyes shut before fisting the phone with all of my strength.

Dammit, Em!

More pissed off than I've felt in a long-ass time, I type my response.

Me: He deserves to know. Either you do it, or I will. You have two weeks.

Em's New Number: Don't tell Dove, either.

Em's New Number: Please.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, staring at the screen in my other hand. Dove's name goes in and out of focus as I reread Em's message a dozen times. A better man would tell her. He'd keep his distance and wouldn't toy with the lines he's already drawn in the sand.

But I'm not a good guy.

I guess it's not in my blood.

Me: I won't.

I tuck my phone back into the front pocket of my worn jeans and head inside.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Off to work?” Maddie asks, her shoulder propped against the front door of her apartment. *Our* apartment.

I grab my purse from the kitchen counter and hook it over my arm. I’ve been going stir crazy since I got home from work yesterday, and I’m already desperate to get out of the house and away from the stifling reality that is my life. It’s lonely. Disconnected. And monotonous.

It doesn’t help that Maddie and I don’t talk. Especially when she’s mad at me for something as stupid as driving to work with her friend’s ex. It’s not like I’ve really talked to him since. But the truth is simple. She doesn’t trust me. She never has.

What’s the saying again? *Don’t let the father’s sins fall on the child?* Not that she’s ever read the Bible, but it’s clear she has no faith in me, no matter how much I’ve bent over backward to prove that I’m not going to abandon her. That I’m not going to do anything stupid. That I’m not going to stab her in the back like her baby’s father has by leaving her high and dry with a bun in the oven.

Then again, complaining about being cooped up in her apartment because she’s mad at me is a moot point. She’s too sick to go anywhere even if we *were* on good terms. Heck, the only thing she’s been able to keep down lately is peanut butter sandwiches on Wonder bread. And Reese is too busy hooking up with her roommate to keep me company during my time off, too. Which leaves me irritable, tense, insanely bored, and probably overly critical of Maddie.

I check the time on my phone and grimace when I see that I’ll be an hour early for my shift if I leave right now, but I’m too desperate to care.

“Yes,” I answer her. “I’m off to work.”

She licks her lips. “Anything new? At SeaBird? Anything fun and exciting?”

My gaze narrows. “Not since the last time you asked.”

Which was exactly thirty minutes ago.

“Okay. Well. Have fun.” Pushing herself away from the exit, she strides over to the kitchen and grabs the jar of peanut butter from the cabinet, clearly dismissing me as she returns to her usual, detached self.

Okay, then.

Ever since Gibson showed up at our place a couple weeks ago, she’s been acting differently. It’s like she’s distracted yet hyper-focused on everything I do and say. And I don’t know why.

As I twist the door handle, an idea hits me.

“Do you want to come?” I offer. “You can sit at the bar or a booth and listen to music or something. It must be lonely being cooped up in this apartment all the time.”

A flicker of fear flashes across her face before she gives me her back and grabs a spoon from the utensil drawer. “No thanks. I mean...what’s the fun of hanging out in a bar when you can’t drink, right?”

I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had alcohol, but I’m not about to point that out to her. She already thinks I’m a judgy prude—no need to fan the flames.

“You sure?” I ask. “I bet you could order a mean glass of ginger ale.”

She lifts the spoon to her lips, gifting me with a rare smile that gives me hope for our relationship. “Thanks for the invitation. But I think I’m good.”

“How have you been feeling?” I ask, not ready to end the conversation now that my sister has decided to actually have one with me.

She shrugs. “Meh.”

“The doctor said the nausea should get better any day now,” I remind her as she sticks the spoon into her mouth.

Her lips smack a second later before she argues, “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean he’ll take me off bedrest before the baby’s born. You know Mother’s history.”

Yes, I do. The doctors considered it a miracle that she birthed two healthy babies, but it wasn’t without its trials. She had seven miscarriages and two stillborns before Madelyn was born. And even then, Mads came eight weeks early and had to spend six weeks in the NICU before she could go home. Before I was born, my mom had another three miscarriages. I followed in my

sister's footsteps by spending my first seven weeks in the hospital as a preemie.

Part of me wonders if that's why our parents held us both to such extreme expectations. They considered us miracles. And miracles should've been perfect. Except we weren't.

"Speaking of medical stuff," I add. "Have you figured out health insurance yet?"

She frowns and takes another lick of peanut butter. "Nope."

"Can I help at all?"

"I'll figure it out."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"How?" I prod. I don't want to be the bad guy, but burying her head in the sand isn't exactly a solid strategy.

"I'm not stupid, Dove—"

"I never said you were stupid—"

"You should get to work," she reminds me, shutting off right before my eyes.

And just like that, the sister I know and love is gone, replaced by a stranger who demands to keep me at arm's length.

Shoulders hunched, I pull open the door, trying to fight off my annoyance as I reply, "Okay. Love you."

I leave feeling guilty for a mistake that was never mine but unable to help my Mama Bear instinct that only wants my sister to be happy. And financially stable. And not so alone.



WITH A TWIST OF MY WRIST, I PULL OPEN THE BACK DOOR TO SEABIRD WHILE praying that no one will notice how early I am for my shift. The usual chaos that I've grown accustomed to is absent. I'm early, but I didn't think I was *this* early. Carefully, I close the door behind me, head to the breakroom, and tuck my things into my locker before making my way to the small kitchen. Other than a giant stack of dirty dishes from yesterday, it's empty.

SeaBird doesn't offer many full-blown meals, but appetizers are a big hit. Unfortunately, the cook usually leaves the plates, utensils, and glasses for

tomorrow's problems instead of cleaning them in preparation for the next day. He's a grumpy old man who's about as stubborn as my sister, but he would probably appreciate a little help, and I might as well make myself useful.

Rolling up my proverbial sleeves, I get right to work.

Once the plates, utensils, and cups are loaded into the giant dishwasher, it rumbles to life as I stare at the pots and pans still littering the otherwise empty sink.

Man, that's a lot of dishes.

Grateful I'm wearing a tank top so my sleeves don't get wet, I flip on the faucet and sprinkle the dirty pots and pans with dish soap. Bubbles form a few seconds later, leaving the liquid frothy as the scent of lemons wafts through the air. The water is hot as I dip my hands in, scrubbing at the dirty dishes like my life depends on it. But it's almost peaceful. The quiet. The repetition. The feeling of accomplishment as I slowly move the pots from the dirty pile to the clean one. It's organized. Simple. Something I can cross off my list, which feels oddly satisfying. Soon, I'm lost in the monotony and start singing the song that's been stuck in my head since I heard Gibson singing it in his room all those nights ago.

*“Dark skies and lonely nights
Your hazel eyes still haunt my mind.
But you're not mine, babe.
Never gonna be mine, babe.”*

I close my eyes and let the lyrics wash over me as I rinse the soap from one of the skillet beneath the trickling water.

*“Cause you were meant to shine.
But what shakes me to my core
Is we'll never be more.
Never be more. Never be—”*

My note is cut short as a soft creak alerts me that I'm no longer alone. My head snaps toward the exit where a familiar silhouette greets me. I gasp. The nearly clean skillet slips through my fingers and splashes soapy water all over

the front of my shirt.

“Crap,” I mutter under my breath. Flicking off the faucet, I dry my hands on a paper towel and dab it against my soaked shirt as I try to calm the heck down. But my effort to slow my racing heart is useless. It’s too late. The adrenaline is already charging full speed ahead through my veins.

Gibson just caught me singing his song. *His* song. Can someone die from embarrassment? Because I’m about to curl into a ball and throw in the towel. Maybe he didn’t hear me. Maybe the trickling water was enough to drown out my voice. Maybe he hasn’t been standing there long enough to recognize the lyrics or the fact that I’d changed them, making them my own.

And maybe I really am a fool.

When I realize I’m fidgeting, I clear my throat and face my audience fully, refusing to give Gibson my back. It feels dangerous somehow. Like he might strike at any second, even though I know he would never hurt me. Not after he saved me from the bratty customer the other day. Still. When you’re caged in with a lion—no matter how domesticated he may appear—you can feel his power, and it isn’t something you take lightly.

“I’m sorry,” I start. “I got in early and figured that someone should probably clean the glasses—”

“You changed the lyrics,” Gibbs rasps with his shoulder pressed against the door jamb and his arms crossed over his broad chest. As if he has all the time in the world and was enjoying the show.

I bite my lip and try again. “I’m sorry—”

“For what? For changing shitty lyrics?”

“They’re not crappy lyrics,” I argue.

Like a lion on the hunt, he stalks closer, his muscles bunching and flexing beneath his black T-shirt and dark jeans that hang low on his hips.

“I like yours better,” he notes.

“I don’t.”

“Then why’d you change them?”

“B-because.”

His mouth ticks up on one side as he inches closer, crowding me against the kitchen counter. “That’s not an answer.”

“Um.” *Why does he smell so good?* “It’s just that...I guess I wasn’t personally connecting with the lyrics. How can I know what *the smell of her skin clinging to mine* smells like?”

“But you can relate to...” He pauses, searching his memories for the

lyrics I'd tweaked. "*Your hazel eyes still haunt my mind, right?*"

I gulp past the lump in my throat and peek up at him, staring into those stupid hazel eyes that've been haunting me since the moment we first met. And now they're focused directly on me. My face. My lips. Heck, my freaking soul. No one looks at me like this. No one looks at me, period. I always thought I was made to blend in, but anytime he's around, I feel like I'm *seen*. Really, truly seen.

And I don't know how I feel about it.

My tongue darts out to moisten my lips as I fist the damp paper towel at my side, unable to tear my gaze away from his. He's way too close for comfort, yet I'm still struggling to *not* lean closer.

What is wrong with me?

"Y-yes," I whisper. "I might be able to relate to that one."

His mouth quirks up on one side, but he lets the lyrics go and murmurs, "You have a beautiful voice."

I shrug off the compliment. "Thanks."

"Where'd you learn to sing?"

"Where?" I question.

He nods.

"Um. Church choir?"

His deep chuckle does weird things to my insides, especially when we're standing this close as he asks, "Is that a question?"

"I... Maybe?" I laugh before clarifying, "I guess I've always been singing. At home, in the car, during church, in the shower... Always. So when you asked where I learned to sing, I guess it stumped me."

"I assume you've sung for other people?"

"Only church," I answer before turning the tables. "Have *you* ever played in front of other people? Being the mastermind of Broken Vows and all..."

"I don't play for the crowds."

"Then why do you play?"

"Why do you sing even when no one's listening?" he counters, his tall frame towering over me.

He's too close. I can see the stubble on his cheeks. The way his jaw flexes every time I ask him a question instead of answering one of his. The way his eyes darken anytime they drop down to my lips. I can see it all. And I like it. A lot. The heat from his body warming mine. The way he's managing to make me feel small yet protected. The fierce intensity emanating from every

single one of his pores any time we discuss music. It calls to my soul, making me feel like I'm not alone. Like it's okay to be passionate about something other than religion. Like there's nothing wrong with me.

"Not gonna answer my question?" he prods.

Oh. Right.

My eyelids flutter, though I don't meet his gaze a second time. Not when I feel like I'm baring my soul to the guy. If I do, I'll be lost. And this stupid crush is already getting way too out of hand. He's my coworker. My friend. And that's all he'll ever be.

"I guess I can't help but sing," I reply. "Even when no one's listening. It's like breathing. I have to."

"Looks like you answered your own question."

"Writing music and singing it aren't exactly the same things," I argue, daring to look up at him.

With an arrogant smirk, he counters, "You might be surprised."

"Hmm," I hum, unconvinced.

"Hmm?" he mimics, clearly more amused than I am.

"Tell me," I plead. "I want to know."

"Why?"

"Because you fascinate me."

"And why's that?" he prods, the toe of his black shoes kissing mine on the polished concrete floor.

He's too close.

"I-I don't know," I whisper, shaken from a simple touch of shoes. How can I be oh so aware of a single person? It isn't fair.

"Now who's deflecting?" His breath fans across my cheeks. "I'll make you a deal. You tell me why I'm so fascinating, and I'll tell you why I write music. Agreed?"

With a nod, I rub my hands against my worn jean shorts while making sure I don't accidentally graze his front. *That* wouldn't be awkward at all.

He lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him and stay focused on the conversation at hand instead of what's in his pants.

Oh, crap. Now I'm picturing it.

"Tell me," he demands.

"You fascinate me because..." Chewing on the inside of my cheek, the words roll around in my head, but I'm too embarrassed to spit them out.

Because you're gorgeous. And kind. And a little quiet but sharp and

thoughtful. You're friendly but firm. Logical and talented. You were meant to be center stage, yet you fight it. Honestly, I've never met someone so fascinating in my entire life.

"Because...?" he prods, forcing me back to the present.

I clear my throat. "I guess I've never met someone who hates the limelight so much that they don't even acknowledge their success in the first place. And that's fascinating to me. Don't get me wrong; I know what stage fright is, and I hate being the center of attention more than you can imagine. But your lyrics, your music... I don't think you understand how many people you've affected with it. And if it isn't because you want to share your talents, I want to know why you bother to write it in the first place."

He hesitates, grabs the back of his neck, and squeezes it until the tips of his fingers turn white from the pressure.

"I went first," I remind him. "Now, it's your turn."

That same devilish smirk greets me before a resigned Gibson drops his hand to his side. "For me, I guess writing music is... It's more like poison. If I don't get it out of my system and down on paper, I get pissed off and depressed." He laughs as his analysis goes a step further. "Hell, I can't even live in my head when the music gets too loud. Getting it down on paper balances me out."

"As long as no one knows it's you," I point out.

"I'm not hiding it—"

"Yeah, but you're not exactly screaming it from the rooftops, either. Do you ever go on tour with them? Or attend their practices? Anything? I'm pretty sure your name isn't even mentioned on Wikipedia, or at least it wasn't the last time I checked. Am I right?"

He stays silent, studying me. Like I hit a nerve, and he isn't sure how to respond. I squirm from the intensity that takes in every inch of my skin before he dips his chin a little, coming to some kind of conclusion, though I have no idea what it is.

"Get back to work, Dovey. Those dishes won't clean themselves."

Then he steps away from me and heads to the exit.

"Wait!" I call out, surprising myself.

He stops but doesn't turn around.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or change any of your lyrics that were already perfect—"

"Stop apologizing," he orders, his hackles rising.

“I’m serious, Gibson—”

“Stop.”

My mouth snaps shut.

Facing me again, his expression stone cold, he rasps, “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Liar, I want to say, but I keep my lips pressed into a thin line, though I’m afraid it does nothing to hide my insecurities. I can feel them simmering just beneath the surface, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he could see them as clear as day. Which only makes it worse.

With a sigh, he scrubs his hand over his face. “You’re allowed to sing my lyrics, okay? I’m not mad at you.”

“Why do I feel like you are?” I whisper.

And why do I care so freaking much?

“I’m not mad,” he reiterates.

Lips pursed, I murmur, “Then what are you?”

“Honestly?” He laughs, but there isn’t any humor in it. “I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. I guess I feel like you shot a heavy dose of poison into my bloodstream.”

“How?”

“Your voice. Your lyrics. I want to go home so I can mess with them a little more. You seem to have that effect on me,” he notes.

“Like poison?” My tone is laced with offense and amusement at the same time, but the vice around my chest eases. At least he feels *something* when I’m around, though I doubt it holds a candle to the pull I feel whenever he’s near.

He smirks. “Something like that.”

Then he turns on his heel and leaves me more confused than anything else.

What the heck was that about?

CHAPTER EIGHT

DOVE

The rain is coming down in torrents as I cover my head and rush into SeaBird. I shouldn't be here. It's my night off. But as soon as Maddie heard me playing Broken Vows on Spotify, she stormed into my room and threw a fit, ordering me to never listen to them again.

So what did I do? I calmly grabbed my keys, went to my car, and turned up my volume to full blast before finding myself in SeaBird's parking lot.

Because that's exactly what a girl wants to do on her night off.

Hang out at *work*.

I sigh and yank open the front door.

"It's your night off," Ashton informs me, his arms crossed over his broad chest as soon as he sees me.

"I heard Broken Vows is playing."

"They should be. If Fender would get his ass here already," Ashton grumbles.

I cringe. "Anything I can do?"

The microphone crackles with a familiar voice. "Hey, everyone! Let's get this shit started." Fender's fingers fly across his guitar strings as he opens with one of their most challenging songs.

My attention flicks back to Ashton. "Speak of the devil."

He shakes his head. "He's lucky his band's good and his brother keeps him in line most of the time. I'm gonna go make sure the bar's stocked. Have fun, yeah?"

I nod. "I will."

The place is packed and practically vibrates with energy as the crowd raises their glasses and sings along to Fender's lyrics. Well, technically, I

guess they're Gibson's, but Fender's owning them on stage right now, and if Gibson's okay with it, I guess I should be, too. I head to the bar, refusing to acknowledge my disappointment when I find Sammie behind it instead of the man who's been haunting me for far too long.

"Hey, Sam!" I greet her.

"What are you doing here? I thought it was your night off."

"Figured I'd come listen to the band," I tell her.

Satisfied, she returns, "What can I get you?"

"Just a Coke, please."

"No rum?"

I shake my head. "I'm good. Thanks!"

"Coming right up."

The familiar energy transforms from light and carefree to heavy with tension a few moments later, though I have no idea why. But I can feel it. Like some strange sixth sense. One that makes me oh so aware of my surroundings, leaving me itchy and on edge. My spine straightens as I scan the crowded space for the culprit, praying it isn't the stranger from all those weeks ago. When my gaze lands on Gibbs and his friend Jake going head to head with one of the customers, my breath hitches.

Gibson's face is red with anger, his jaw tight and his neck muscles more like ropes as his upper lip curls with disgust while he glares at the customer with so much wrath I'm surprised the stranger hasn't shrunk into a ball or taken off running in the opposite direction. Next to him, Reese covers her mouth, her eyes welling with unshed tears and her entire body trembling with fear. But I can't hear what's being said, and it makes me feel helpless.

What's going on?

My drink forgotten, I squeeze between sweaty bodies and sidle up next to her as the bouncers from the door drag the guy away who'd been in a pissing match with Gibbs and Jake.

"Hey, what's going on?" I squeak, practically suffocating from all the testosterone in the room.

Reese jumps and clutches her chest. "Where the hell did you come from? I thought you weren't working today?"

I grimace. "I wasn't, but my sister was particularly grouchy, so I decided to give her some space and come listen to the band instead of tiptoeing around our apartment all night. I'm glad I did," I add as I take in her pale complexion. "Is everything okay? You look spooked."

“That’s my ex.” Her gaze darts to the exit. “He’s been...”

“Stalking her,” Gibbs finishes, his entire frame vibrating with pent-up anger. “He’s been stalking her. But the cops can’t arrest him for showing up in a bar when he hasn’t been served the restraining order yet. Ashton called a minute ago to let them know where Ian is, but other than that, there’s not much we can do right now.”

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and he takes it out before giving us his back. He answers it in a hushed voice, leaving me just as clueless—just as lost—as before. I have no idea who’s calling or why I even care. We’re *only* friends. Heck, I’m not sure if we’re even really *friends*. More like acquaintances. Which is depressing considering how much space he’s taken up in my thoughts lately. But semantics don’t seem to matter right now, and it takes everything inside of me to stay in place when all I want to do is diffuse the anger radiating from every square inch of his tense frame.

There are more important things right now, though. Like the fact that Reese has a freaking stalker, and I had no idea. She’d mentioned an ex, but this? This is insane.

“What can I do, Reese?” Jake—her roommate and brother’s best friend—begs, looking about as helpless as I feel. “How can I help?”

“I just want to go home,” Reese whispers, rubbing her hands along her bare arms.

My need to protect her and make everything better is so overwhelming that I pull her into a quick hug. “I’ll cover your shift.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she replies, staring at her scuffed sneakers like they’re the most fascinating things in the world. Still numb. Still lost in whatever crappy storm she’s trying to climb out of.

“I want to,” I lie. “Besides, I might as well get paid if I’m here to listen to the band, right? Go and get some rest. It looks like you need it.”

She purses her lips. “Gee, thanks.”

Grateful to see a glimpse of my sarcastic friend instead of the ghost standing in front of me, I laugh lightly, nudging her toward the exit. “Seriously. Go.”

“I’ll take you.” Jake’s arm snakes around her shoulder, and she leans into his touch when a stoic Gibbs disconnects his call and turns to us.

“What’s wrong?” Reese asks, her voice trembling as she takes in his bleak expression.

“River’s outside.”

“River?” she rasps.

She’s had a thing for him for a long time, but her brother laid down the law when she and River first met. He explicitly ordered Riv to stay away from her. And it broke her heart. However, they’ve been sneaking around behind his back for a while now.

The question is... How do Gibbs and Jake know that?

And if they didn’t, they do now. Reese looks like she’s two seconds from breaking down the front door to get to him. I don’t blame her. She loves him. I could see it from the first moment I saw them together in this very bar. And right now, she’s scared, tired, overwhelmed, and needs her other half. Her River.

“Yeah.” Gibbs sighs. “He may have pissed off Ian when the bouncers threw him outside. Apparently, there weren’t any fists thrown or anything, but he wanted to give us a heads-up that he’s here.”

“But what’s he doing here?” Reese asks. “Milo said—”

“That he couldn’t step foot *inside* SeaBird. He didn’t mention being outside,” an amused Gibson clarifies.

Well, I guess that answers my question.

Milo definitely knows. And it appears that he’s drawn another line or two in the sand. But this time, River listened to his rules.

Props, buddy.

“It’s your call, though, Jake,” Gibbs tells him. “If you want to take her instead of handing her off to Riv, you can use my car. But he sounded pretty distraught after seeing Ian thrown out on his ass and would like to see Reese to make sure she’s okay.”

Confused, I peek at Jake and Reese, who is holding her breath.

Why would Jake care what River and Reese do?

He’s not her keeper. I stick a pin in the thought and wait for the rest of the chaos to play out in front of me.

“River’s never distraught,” Jake mutters after a few tense seconds.

“Yeah, well, tonight he is,” Gibson replies. “Might be good for him to spend a few minutes with Reese after everything that went down, don’t you think?”

My attention shifts from one person to the next, desperate to figure out what the heck is going on while fighting my guilt for sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong.

“Please, Jake?” Reese pleads, her request laced with a desperation that

almost breaks me.

What. Is. Going. On?

He exhales and pinches the bridge of his nose, mulling it over as Reese waits with bated breath.

“Let me walk you out,” he finally decides, clearly defeated.

“Thank you,” she breathes out.

With his hand pressed to her lower back, Jake guides Reese through the crowded bar, and they disappear through the exit.

Once they’re out of sight, I ask, “What was that about?”

Gibson glances over at me. “It’s complicated.”

Yeah, I figured that part out.

Arms folded, I rock back on my heels while trying to rein in my curiosity, but it’s pretty much impossible. “She’s one of my best friends, Gibbs. Is she... Is she going to be okay?”

He sighs and looks back at the exit. “I hope so.”

“I-is Milo okay?” I press.

Cocking his head, he demands, “Why do you ask?”

“Because you made it sound like he knows about Reese and Riv.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “Wait. *You* know about that?”

“Maaaaybe?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling at his offended expression. “No offense, but why would I tell you something that has nothing to do with you?”

Frowning, he prods, “And if the secret *did* have something to do with me? Would you tell me then?”

I open my mouth but close it quickly.

Would I?

I guess it depends on the secret.

After a few seconds, I reply, “I think so?”

“You *think*?” he challenges, clearly unsatisfied.

Cringing, I shrug one shoulder. “I guess it depends.”

“On what, exactly?”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest, making me feel like I’m being interrogated under completely hypothetical circumstances. And I shouldn’t find it as amusing as I do.

“Well...” I tap my chin, considering the hypothetical circumstances with

a fine-toothed comb. “Would it hurt you if you knew? Is it something that would be better if it was kept hidden? Is it something that you need to know to protect yourself? There are a lot of secrets out there, Gibbs. And some are best left in the dark.”

“Hmm.” He doesn’t bother to argue as he assesses me with a narrowed gaze. However, I’m not sure he agrees, either. Seems to me that not everything is quite as black and white as he’d initially assumed. Hypothetically, of course.

“Hmm,” I mimic him. “How ‘bout you? Do you keep secrets?”

“That’s—” His phone vibrates with a text in his hand, cutting off his response as he looks down at the screen. “It’s from Reese,” he mumbles, scanning the message before the blood drains from his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I gotta go.”

“Gibbs—”

“I gotta go,” he repeats, sliding his phone back into his pocket. “I’ll call you with an update.”

“You don’t have my number—”

“Get mine from Ashton. Text me.” Rushing toward the bar, he adds, “I’ll keep you updated.” He shoves Jake out of the seat he’d collapsed into as soon as he’d handed Reese off to Riv at SeaBird’s entrance. They both crash into a helpless customer before apologizing over their shoulders as they fly out the front door.

What just happened?

“Everything okay?” Ashton asks, sidling up next to me.

I glance over at him. “I-I don’t know. I don’t think so. He got a text from Reese and booked it.”

“What happened? Is she okay?”

“I-I don’t know,” I repeat, feeling helpless. Useless. And way too out of my element right now.

“Are you okay?” he questions.

I have no idea.

There are too many emotions filtering through me. I felt like I went from zero to sixty in two seconds and started to come down when Gibson and I were flirting before my nerves were ratcheted right back up again when he left. But Ashton doesn’t need to worry about me right now. I’ll be fine, but I need to know that Reese is okay.

Please let her be okay.

With a deep breath, I force myself to nod. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. Can I have Gibson’s number? He promised to keep me updated.”

“Sure thing.” He pulls out his phone, rattling off the numbers as I type them into my cell.

“Keep me updated, too,” he orders.

“I will.”

He leaves, and my hands shake as I type out a text.

**Me: Hey, Gibson. This is Dove. What’s going on? Is Reese okay?
PLEASE keep me updated.**

I stare at the screen, begging him to respond, but he doesn’t.

Not yet.

And it only fans my anxiety.

Please be okay.

CHAPTER NINE

DOVE

I wake up to my phone buzzing against my Ikea nightstand. Blinking away my sleepiness, I slide my thumb across the screen without bothering to see who's calling me in the middle of the night.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me," Gibbs returns.

"Hey," I croak.

"Shit, did I wake you?"

I smile as I check the time on my alarm clock. "It's three in the morning."

Pause.

"Shit," he repeats under his breath.

With a light laugh, I roll onto my side and press the phone to my other ear. "It's fine. You never texted back."

"I know. Sorry." He pauses, then sighs. "It's been chaos."

"What's going on? You freaked me out leaving like that."

"Sorry," he repeats, his voice thick with remorse. "There was an accident."

I sit up in bed, my earlier amusement vanishing into thin air. "What kind of accident?"

"A car accident. Reese is okay. Broken wrist and a couple of bruised ribs."

"And River? Was he in the car with her?"

"Yeah. He uh"—Gibbs clears his throat—"he was burned pretty badly."

Pulling my knees to my chest, I cover my mouth and rock back and forth as the severity of his words settles into my bones. Burns? From a car wreck? I can't even imagine how terrifying that would be. To experience firsthand

and to witness.

My chest tightens until I feel like I can't breathe.

This can't be happening.

"H-how bad?" I whisper.

"Bad enough to need surgery to remove the damaged skin."

My lower lip quivers, but I stay quiet. This isn't about me. I'm not the one who should need comfort right now. I need to be the strong one. The one Reese can rely on. Who Gibson can rely on. They're his best friends. He must be going through hell right now.

"Gibson..." I bite my thumbnail, praying for strength. "I'm so sorry."

"We don't know the details yet," he continues, sounding numb. Defeated. "I'm driving home from the hospital right now. We're gonna try to take shifts for the next little while."

His helplessness is crippling. I can hear it in his voice. And I can't blame him. This is awful. River, Milo, Gibbs, and Jake spend almost every minute together outside of SeaBird. They're family. Honestly, they're stronger than family. Their bond is one of the most incredible things I've ever witnessed, putting my relationship with my sister to shame. Not that it's difficult, considering our circumstances, but still. I've always been jealous of a bond like that. Unconditional. Stronger than steel. But there's another side of the coin that comes with a relationship like that.

When one of them is hurting, they all are.

And right now, Gibbs is hurting. Bad.

"What can I do to help?" I ask softly.

His exhale is heavy, sounding louder than a freaking fog horn in my otherwise silent room before he admits, "I don't know. They were throwing around terms like rehab and skin grafts, but I don't know. I...I don't know," he rambles.

"It's going to be okay," I assure him, though I have no idea if it's true. I don't know enough about skin grafts or rehab or burns in general to make a promise like that, but I'd give anything to make him feel better. To make him feel safe. To put him at ease. To give him a moment of peace. Right now, all I hear is exhaustion. And frustration. And a resignation that's heartbreaking.

Another long, slow exhale reverberates through my cell. "Yesterday was a clusterfuck, Dove. Milo found out about Reese and River, and they got into a fight. Jake found out that the girl he was in love with was sleeping with someone else. Then Reese had someone break into her room—"

“What?”

“I told you,” he murmurs, sounding drained. “It was a mess. And now, with the hospital, I...I don’t know what to do. I’m exhausted, but I don’t think I can sleep. I can’t get my brain to shut off. There’s too much chaos—”

“You should write about it. A song to express yourself. That’s what it does, doesn’t it? Calms the storm of emotions inside of you?”

Another sigh escapes him, and it almost breaks me. “I don’t know if I can even focus on that much right now, Dove.”

“Can I help?” I offer, desperate to fix *something*. I hate feeling helpless. Like my hands are tied. Like I’m out of control. And right now, Gibbs is spiraling, and I don’t know how to help him.

“Maybe I can come over. And...I don’t know?” I ramble. “Do something?”

My face pinches with regret as his silence greets me through my cell. No *Great idea, Dove*, or *That’s a brilliant idea, Dove*.

Only...silence.

I screwed up. I shouldn’t have offered to come over, and I definitely shouldn’t have brought up music when I know how touchy he is about it.

What was I thinking?

This was a terrible idea.

Biting my lip, I rush out, “I don’t have to—”

“Okay.” His voice is quiet. Resigned.

“Wait.” Convinced I’ve heard him wrong, I pull my phone away from my ear and look at the screen before clarifying, “You *want* me to come?”

“Yeah,” he breathes out. It isn’t exactly convincing.

“You sure?” I ask.

“The front door will be open. Let yourself in.”

The call disconnects, and I grab the first outfit from my closet without even registering its color as I slip it over my head.

I’ve always prided myself on being reliable. And right now, Gibbs needs me.

CHAPTER TEN

DOVE

The haunting melody echoes from the second floor as I close the front door behind me. The place is pitch black except for a single light glowing at the top of the stairs. It only adds to the eeriness, leaving goosebumps along my arms.

“Gibson?” I call out, but the music doesn’t stop.

With a deep breath, I slip off my sneakers, tiptoe up the stairs, and peek through the cracked door to Gibson’s room. He’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, cradling his guitar in his lap, with his dark hair a mess and a pen hanging from one side of his mouth. But he doesn’t notice me. He’s too enveloped in the song. The melody. The poison as it seeps from his veins onto paper, one note at a time.

His fingers strum a few more chords before his brows pinch in concentration, and he tries the same set of notes in a different octave. Satisfied, he stops playing and takes the pen from his mouth before jotting down the sequence on a pad of paper lying on the floor.

I feel like I’m intruding on something special. Intimate. But I’m too mesmerized to leave. He’s beautiful like this. Wounded. Vulnerable. But brave, too, as he faces the monsters in his head and fights them the only way he knows how.

And in this moment, I see him. The real him. With all his demons, all his strengths, on full display. And I’ve never been more attracted to someone in my entire life. More desperate to close the distance between us. To peel away a few more of his protective layers the same way he’s managed to shed mine.

“I can feel you watching me,” he mutters, though he doesn’t bother to look up at me.

Crap.

I clear my throat. “Hey.”

“You can come in.”

I push the door open quietly and inch into his room while ignoring the overwhelming feeling that I’m trespassing. Because I am. I invited myself here. I practically forced my way in.

I should leave—

“Take a seat,” he orders, dipping his chin toward the carpet beside him.

Without a word, I do as I’m told and kneel down. “Any updates?”

“Riv woke up. Reese is staying with him in his room. Milo feels like shit. Aaaand, that’s about it.” He strums his guitar again. “Tell me what you think about this.”

He plays back his song from the beginning, each note building on the last until the chorus hits like a sledgehammer of emotion, leaving me breathless.

He stops and looks at me with bags under his eyes. “What do you think?”

I think it’s amazing. Gorgeous. Gut-wrenching. I think it’s beauty and pain rolled into a cataclysmic explosion of heartbreak. And that’s *without* lyrics. Without drums. Or Fender’s flair. It’s...

“That bad?” he jokes, taking my silence as confirmation that I hate it.

He has no idea.

Looking up at me with those stupid hazel eyes that are glazed with vulnerability, though I know he’d never admit it, he waits for me to agree with him. To tell him it’s crap when it’s the opposite.

“I think it’s good,” I tell him, trying to keep my emotions in check when all I want to do is pull him into a hug.

“Thanks.”

“What are your thoughts for the vocals?” I ask.

“I can’t decide.”

“Hmm.” I purse my lips, scoot a little closer, and lean my back against the side of his bed, ignoring the onslaught of butterflies attacking me from our *almost* touching knees.

Get a grip, Dove.

“Play it again,” I order him.

So, he does.

Closing my eyes, I get lost in the smooth but sad melody, slowly humming along until a break in the rhythm pushes me to hit a higher string of notes instead of the low ones he’s been messing with.

The playing stops.

I open my eyes and peek over at him to find his heated gaze staring back at me.

“W-what? Bad idea?” I whisper, my cheeks feeling like they’re on fire.

His attention drops to my mouth before dipping to the guitar in his lap. “No. Let’s try it again.”

The familiar chords echo throughout his bedroom, and I close my eyes again, getting lost in the melody he’s created while adding my own harmonic element that I hope adds to the emotion he’s trying to convey.

And it’s beautiful. Or at least, I think it is. Then again, what do I know? I’m a newbie when it comes to this kind of thing. But it doesn’t stop me from singing, and only spurs Gibson’s playing, his low husky voice humming along during the verses until the last note is strummed and vibrates throughout the otherwise silent room.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think it’s good.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He smiles softly. “Now, we need lyrics.”

“That’s your job,” I remind him.

“After hearing your version at SeaBird the other day, I think that’s debatable.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re giving me too much credit.”

“And I think you’ve never gotten enough credit,” he counters. “You’re used to blending in, aren’t you, Dove Walker?”

I shrug one shoulder and tuck my white-blond hair behind my ear without bothering to answer him because what am I supposed to say to that?

Of course, I’m used to blending in. I’m Dove Walker. I’m the chorus singing, rule-following little sister to the infamous, hell-raising, gorgeous Madelyn Walker. A girl like me doesn’t stand out. I never have, and I never will. It’s simply a fact.

“Why is that?” he wonders aloud. “Are you naturally this shy, or was it pounded into you as a kid? What with the religious zealots and all that.”

Again, I shrug, uncomfortable with all of his attention that’s laser-focused on lil’ ol’ me.

“You should play the song again,” I suggest.

He tilts his head to one side and nods. “Only if you sing for me.”

I’ll agree to anything if he’ll stop looking at me like this. Like I matter.

Like he sees me. Like I've piqued his curiosity the same way he piqued mine all those weeks ago.

I fidget with the sleeve of my baby blue hoodie that I'd thrown over my head before speeding over here, avoiding his gaze like it's the plague before I give him a subtle nod. "Okay."

"What song do you want me to play?" he asks.

"Anything."

"Singer gets to choose."

"Um..." I peek over at him. "But you have to play it—"

"So? Don't underestimate my guitar skills, Dove. I might not be Fen, but I do know how to put my fingers to good use." He winks.

With a light laugh, I challenge, "Cocky much?"

"Pick a song," he orders, not giving me an inch.

"Fine. Do you know anything by Taylor Swift?"

He scoffs. "Do I know anything by Taylor Swift."

The intro to "The 1" vibrates from the guitar strings, and I close my eyes and start to sing. At first, I'm quiet, my voice nothing but a whisper. But I can't help it. I can feel his eyes on me. Taking in every inch of exposed skin. Peeling back my layers, one by one, until the real me is all that's left.

My nerves settle as he slowly transitions to "Lover" before the other even has a chance to finish. Like he can tell that I'll throw in the towel as soon as it ends. Like he knows my thoughts before I even have a chance to dissect them myself. Over and over, he strums the guitar, and I'm left keeping up with him until my throat is raw, and I'm convinced his fingers are too.

With a final stroke of the strings a little while later, he stops. "Do you need some water?"

I smile. "How could you tell?"

"Just a hunch." He reaches onto his nightstand and grabs a black refillable water bottle that's still half full and offers it to me.

"Thanks." The cold metal presses against my lips, and I take a long pull while trying to ignore the fact that his mouth has been on this very bottle.

I shouldn't find something as trivial as drinking from the same canteen intimate, but I do.

I so do.

Again, I can feel him watching me. Studying me as I swallow the icy cold liquid. Like I'm an enigma when I'm the opposite. I'm nothing but an ordinary girl with a crush on a guy who can have any woman he wants. A

guy who hasn't made a move on me, when I know this wouldn't be his first rodeo, even though it would very clearly be mine.

The question is... *Why?*

When I first showed up for my job at SeaBird, he insinuated that I looked like an average girl. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to write home about. But when he looks at me like he is right now, a small part of me wonders if he was lying.

Or maybe I'm crazy.

"Thanks again," I murmur, wiping a bit of moisture from my lips with my thumb.

He grabs the bottle from my grasp and takes a swig, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallows. The butterflies in my stomach go haywire at the sight before I force myself to look away and fidget with the sleeves of my sweatshirt. Again.

I'm acting ridiculous.

A few seconds later, he stretches his arms over his head and lets out a yawn. "We've been going at this for hours."

"We have?" I blink slowly and check the time on my phone. He's right. But I'd been so lost in the moment that I hadn't noticed.

"You succeeded, by the way," he adds.

I flick my gaze from my phone and back up to his warm, penetrating eyes. "I succeeded in what?"

"Distracting me."

"Pretty sure it was the music that did the trick," I counter.

"Yeah, but it sounds prettier when it comes from those lips."

I suck said lower lip into my mouth, praying to keep the blood from rushing to my face at his compliment, but it's no use. My cheeks are burning up. And it's all because he gave me an offhanded compliment. One that he's probably given a dozen times to a dozen different women.

Could I be any more pathetic?

His calloused palm tickles my skin as he cups my cheek and brushes his fingers back and forth along my pale complexion without any regard to how his simple touch is wrecking me.

"Do you always blush this much?" he murmurs.

"If I say yes, will you make fun of me?"

His chuckle is throaty and deep, threatening to destroy me. "No, but I might be jealous."

My breath hitches.

Jealous?

Gibson?

Pretty sure he doesn't know the meaning of the word. Why would he when he can have any girl he wants?

"And why would you be jealous?" I wonder, unable to hide my curiosity.

He licks his lips and leans closer. Closer than a friend should lean. Closer than anyone should lean unless they have not-so-innocent intentions. And for the first time in my life, I'm all for them. The not-so-innocent intentions. The tension before the final snap. The moment where he finally puts me out of my misery, and we kiss.

Holy crap! I might actually kiss Gibson Hayes.

His smile is cocky as if he can read my mind as his calloused thumb gently brushes over my cheekbone a second time, sending tingles down the nape of my neck. It takes everything inside of me to not lean closer to him. To not close the final inch of distance that separates us. To not take what I've been craving since the moment we first met.

His breath fans across my cheeks as he whispers, "Maybe I wanna be the *only* one who makes you—"

My phone dings in my lap, and I flinch in surprise. Maddie's name flashes across the screen.

Mads: Where the hell are you? You can't just up and leave in the middle of the night, Dove.

Annoyed, I flip the phone face down in my lap without bothering to reply, then peek up at Gibbs. "Sorry. My sister texted. What were you going to say?"

The warmth in his gaze disappears, transforming into indifference before he drops his hand back to his side. As if the spell's been broken. As if I imagined the whole thing. As if I'm going crazy if I honestly believed he was going to kiss me.

"Nothing." He pushes himself to his feet, sets the guitar on its stand near the door, and turns back to me.

"Thanks for coming today. You're a good friend," he decides.

My heart plummets to my stomach.

Friend.

Pretty sure I've never hated a word more in my entire life.

Frozen in place, I try to steady my breathing, but it feels like the ground has completely fallen from beneath me. Am I really that naive? That crazy? That desperate to think he was actually going to kiss me?

Disappointment swells in my lower gut at the cold reminder of where Gibson and I stand, no matter how confusing his actions have been lately. Sure, I offered to come over, but he's the one that accepted it and left his front door open. He's the one who wanted to hear me sing. The one who offered his water bottle for me to drink from.

But he's also the one who hasn't kissed me, no matter how many opportunities he's had tonight.

"You okay?" he asks, staring at me like I belong in a freaking zoo. Because I haven't moved an inch. I'm still on the stupid floor in his stupid bedroom after getting lost in my stupid emotions and stupid insecurities.

Snap out of it, Dove!

I clear my throat and force myself to my feet. "Yes. I'm fine. And anytime. I'm glad I could help. I should probably get going."

"Okay. I'll see you later, right?"

"Yes." I step around him and head for the door, desperate to escape my embarrassment, even when I know I'll be drowning in it for the foreseeable future. "And good luck with those lyrics," I add over my shoulder, taking the stairs two at a time.

I need to get out of here.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DOVE

“Hello?” Reese answers. I’ve wanted to call her since I found out about the accident, but I didn’t want to be a burden and stress her out until she had time to let her situation settle for a bit. Then again, I’m crappy at relationships in general, so...

“Hey, Reese,” I reply, pinning my phone between my shoulder and ear as I get ready for work.

“Hey, Dove.” Her voice is scratchy. Almost hollow. Like she’s so overwhelmed that she can barely tell what’s up and what’s down anymore.

“Hey,” I repeat. “Gibson told me about the accident. How are you? I wanted to stop by the hospital but figured you had enough on your plate right now without having to worry about me, so I figured a call might be better. Are you doing okay? How’s your wrist? How’s Riv?”

“It’s...it’s fine, I guess. Riv is okay. He’s...” She sniffs. “He’s still doped up on pain meds, but he’s coherent enough to know what’s going on, so that’s good. The doctors say it’s going to be a long road to recovery, but... we’ll get through it.”

“I know you will. I already spoke with Ashton and told him to give me your hours. I’m happy to help with whatever I can until you’re ready to come back. Focus on you and Riv right now, okay?”

“Thank you. And yeah. We will.”

“Good. Can I bring you caramel popcorn or anything?”

Her laugh is pathetic at best but still eases the ache in my chest. “I think I’m okay for now. Thank you, though. You seriously are the best. How are you? You said you talked to Gibbs?”

“Yeah.”

“And how’s that going? Any flirty news?”

The girl’s been dying for us to hook up since the moment Gibson and I met. But she doesn’t get it. He isn’t interested, which he made abundantly clear all over again last night.

I frown, refusing to get lost in the memory. “Not really. I thought we might’ve had a moment, but...”

“But what?” she prods.

“It’s nothing. Besides, you have enough on your plate right now without listening to my super anti-climactic drama.”

“Trust me, Dove. I could use the distraction. So, please give me all the anti-climactic details, will ya?”

With a sigh, I flick off the bathroom lights and head to my car without bothering to say goodbye to Maddie. She doesn’t want to talk to me anyway.

“Seriously. There’s not much,” I mutter, my shoes scuffing against the metal stairs as I make my way to the parking lot. “He was freaked out about the accident, so I suggested that he should write a new song to get his emotions out, and he invited me over to listen to him play. We ended up spending most of the night and into the morning together, and I thought he was going to kiss me. But...” I shake my head and unlock the driver’s side door of my car.

“But what?”

“He said I was a good *friend*.” I emphasize the last word like it’s a curse.

“A good friend? That’s it?”

I nod even though she can’t see me. “Yup. A good *friend*. That’s it.”

“Well, that sucks.”

I laugh. “Pretty much.”

“But he almost kissed you?”

“I mean... I thought he was going to?” I shake my head and roll my eyes, trying to keep my self-deprecation in check when it’s already been going haywire since I left his house. “But maybe I’m crazy,” I continue. “I’m a sheltered twenty-two-year-old, remember? How am I supposed to know what it feels like before a guy goes in for a kiss?”

“You might be sheltered, but you’re not dumb,” she argues. “I’m sure you didn’t imagine it, Dove. I wouldn’t stress, though. Maybe he was nervous.”

“Nervous? Gibson? Why would he be nervous? I’ve seen him kiss random chicks at bachelorette parties at SeaBird without batting an eye. And we both know he’s into threesomes, so it’s not like a simple kiss would be

that nerve-wracking, either.”

Acid churns in my stomach as the realization slips past my lips. He’s into threesomes. *Threesomes*. Why in the world would he *ever* be interested in a girl like me?

“Touché,” Reese concedes, albeit grudgingly. “Hmm... Maybe it’s because you’re different to him—”

“And maybe it’s because I’m imagining things. Besides, I can’t dissect what I hope he’s thinking or feeling. I can only acknowledge what he’s actually said to me, and that’s pretty straightforward. I’m a good friend. That’s it. And honestly? I should probably be grateful. At least he doesn’t hate me anymore.”

“He never hated you, Dove. And even though I can vouch for you on the friendship front that you are indeed a good friend, I still don’t understand how putting you in that particular box makes sense to him.”

“Neither do I, but I don’t see any other conclusions rising to the surface, so that’s what I’m going to have to go with. And I definitely don’t want to get my hopes up.” Slouching in defeat, I turn onto the main road and try not to overthink everything, even though it feels impossible. There’s too much conflicting evidence. I don’t know what to think anymore. Or what to feel. Or what to hope for. I hate it.

“Look at the bright side. At least now, you’re admitting you like him,” she points out.

I snort. “Like that’s going to get me anywhere—”

“Hey, the doctor’s here,” Reese whispers into the phone. “I gotta go. Thanks for covering for me at work and for the epic distraction. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sounds good. Bye, Reese.”

“See ya, Dove.”

The call goes dead, and I set my phone in the cupholder in the center console before driving the rest of the way to work with way too many thoughts floating through my head faster than the rush hour traffic.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask as Gibson glares at his cell. SeaBird is packed like always, but there’s a certain buzz simmering beneath the surface that’s heavy with anticipation. And it’s only grown as the night has gone on.

He punches his fingers against the screen, lifts it to his ear, and seethes, “Broken Vows is supposed to be playing right now, but Fender’s missing.”

I look over at the stage to see the rest of the band set up and ready to go, with the exception of a certain singer.

“He’s late sometimes, isn’t he? Not a big—”

“It’s a big deal,” Gibbs growls. “There’s a rep who was scheduled to stop in and see us play. But Fen isn’t here to actually put on the show. If he screws this up for the band...” His voice trails off as he hangs up the call before pressing Fender’s number again.

Crap.

That *is* a problem. Frowning, I search the crowd in hopes of finding Fen, but he’s nowhere to be seen.

“Why don’t you get up there?” I ask. “You know the music. You know how to sing—”

“I gotta find Fen.”

I bite my lip and scan the restless crowd. Again. Their energy is starting to match the man’s beside me.

“Where is he?” I ask. “Maybe I can go get him while you sing.”

His gaze snaps to mine as he hangs up the call again. “I need you to get on stage.”

My jaw drops. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I need you to get on stage and sing. You can be the opening act while I go find Fender. We can pretend this was the plan all along. It could work.”

This can't be happening.

There's no way he actually expects me to sing in front of all of these people while he searches for the face of Broken Vows. He must be crazy.

“You're joking, right?” I ask, my gaze darting from his to the restless crowd scattered around the bar.

“I'm not joking.” Gibbs grabs my hand and drags me toward the stage while I try to digest his comment, convinced I've heard him wrong. I can't sing for him. I can barely string a sentence together when I ask for people's beverage requests. This is absolute insanity. The pen I'd been using to take orders slips from my grasp and clatters to the ground as he practically carries me to the side steps that lead to the raised platform.

“I-I can't do this,” I tell him, snapping myself out of my daze. I yank my arm out of his grip, trying to keep my knees from buckling at the severity in his gaze. The disappointment. The desperation. The hope that I'll change my mind. All of it flashes in his hazel irises before he grabs my hips and pushes me against the back wall, shielding me from the crowd with his massive frame.

Then he drops his voice low. “I need you to do this for me, Dove.” His fingers flex into my hip bones, but it only makes me crave his touch more. “I need you. *Please.*”

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to ignore the way my heart is galloping in my chest. “I don't sing for people, Gibbs. Not like this.”

“You sang for your church. You sang for me—”

“It's different—”

“Please,” he begs. “I'll be maybe ten minutes. That's three songs, tops.”

Fear swells in my veins as I open my eyes and lick my lips.

He can't be serious.

“Gibbs—”

“Please,” he pleads, his thumb rubbing back and forth along my bare skin from where my shirt has ridden up.

“You don't understand—”

“Trust me, Dove. I understand better than anyone, but I need you right now. This performance could make or break Broken Vows' career, and I can't do this alone. I need you.”

I need you.

I take a deep breath, feeling like I'm going to drown if I stare into his dark eyes any longer. I can't do this. But I also can't let him down. So, where the heck does that leave me?

It leaves me screwed.

Very screwed.

With a jerky nod, I choke out, "You have ten minutes, Gibson."

"Thank you."

His touch disappears, followed by his muscular frame as he weaves between the crowd toward the exit. My knees threaten to give out, but I force myself to keep my head held high, approaching the stage with as much confidence as I can muster.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

The large crowd quiets, and I take the small handful of stairs one at a time before reaching the top and turning to the band.

"Hey, guys," I whisper, keeping my voice low so only they can hear me.

"Where the hell is Fender?" Stoker, the bassist, growls. We've never really been introduced, but I could spot him from a mile away. The guy is skinny with tattoos covering almost every inch of his skin except his face, and he loves to wear nothing but a pair of skinny jeans for every performance. The fact that he's growling at me is beyond terrifying, but I don't blame him for being upset. I wanna know where Fender is too.

"Dove?" Phoenix, the burly redhead, and Broken Vows' drummer, prods, twirling his drumsticks between his fingers.

I clear my throat. "Gibson's finding him. We're going to play "Never Mine," and I'm going to sing it until they get back."

"You're gonna sing?" Phoenix challenges.

I gulp and rub my sweaty palms along my black jeans. "It'll be fine—"

"Bullshit—"

"It'll be fine because it *has* to be," I seethe before taking a deep, calming breath. "Let's show the crowd this is...*all* part of the plan."

Stoker rolls his eyes and growls, "I'm gonna kill Fen after this," but sets his bass down and reaches for a pearly white Fender guitar before tossing the bright green strap over his neck. He strums the strings, playing the beginning notes of "Never Mine" without missing a beat as he steps toward his microphone and tells the crowd, "We have a special treat for you tonight. Let's show her some love!"

Phoenix hits his foot against the bass drum pedal in rhythm to Stoker's

strumming, still twirling his drumsticks between his fingers, and I turn around to face the crowd.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

This is so much scarier than I thought it would be. There are so many people. Everyone's staring at me. Everyone. Sammie behind the bar. Ashton. And every Tom, Dick, and Harry that are shoulder to shoulder in front of the stage. My mouth forms a tiny 'o' as I let out a slow breath and reach for the microphone, praying I don't drop the stupid thing and make a fool out of myself in front of a bunch of strangers, let alone friends.

Then again, I doubt I'll have to drop the mic to accomplish that one.

The lights are blinding, and a bead of sweat rolls down my spine as I try to get my nerves under control, but it's a losing battle. It's official. I'm freaking out.

Come on, Dove. You can do this.

With a fake smile pasted across my face, I lift the microphone to my mouth and try to keep my breathing steady as I let the words flow through me as if no one's watching.

*“Dark skies and lonely nights.
Your hazel eyes still haunt my mind.”*

My voice is quiet. Maybe even a little squeaky. But at least it's something. At least I'm putting on a show. At least they'll have something to talk about after this is all said and done, right?

I squeeze my eyes shut and continue singing.

*“But you're not mine, babe.
Never gonna be mine, babe.”*
A low, familiar voice joins mine.
“Cause you were meant to shine.”

My voice gets caught in my throat as my eyes snap open, and I see Gibson. With a microphone. And a freaking guitar strapped to him. Singing. With me.

“Cause you were never mine.

You're just a ghost from before."

He lifts his chin, silently encouraging me to continue.
I lick my lips and keep singing as he does the same.

*"And we'll never be more.
Never be more. Never be more."*

We sing the rest of the song, taking turns and stumbling once or twice as we try to catch our groove, but it's still magnetic and pulls me closer and closer to Gibson while the crowd stays silent, watching our performance. The look in his eyes. The slight tilt of his mouth. The low grit in his voice. The way his guitar hangs low on his back as he grips the microphone like his life depends on it, letting Stoker take the lead guitar part so he can focus on singing. All of it is hypnotic. Addictive. And leaves me craving more, exactly like the rest of the crowd who is hanging on his every word.

By the end of the song, one thing is very clear. There's no going back after tonight. Not when he puts on a show like this. Not when he has the audience eating out of the palm of his hand. But it confirms my suspicion. He was made for the limelight. The lights. The music. The stage. It's a heady concoction, and I know I'm not the only one who notices.

When Gibbs and Stoker play the final chord, the audience screams, and Fender jumps on stage, cheering louder than anyone else.

"Did you see that?! Did you freaking see that?! Let's give these two another round of applause!"

Gibson's palm touches my lower back as he leads me off the stage and down the stairs before tangling our fingers together while the crowd cheers at the top of their lungs. I can feel everyone's eyes on us. Watching us. Drawing their own conclusions as to who we really are and what type of relationship we might have. Honestly, I'm starting to wonder the same thing, but I keep my mouth shut and follow him outside.

As soon as the cool night air kisses my cheeks, I ask, "How'd you get back so soon?"

"I caught Fender as he was walking into the place. Then I saw you on stage, and..."

"Figured I needed saving?" I offer, still reeling from the entire ordeal.

He laughs. "You were incredible, Dove."

"Bull crap. I was terrified," I correct him. "But thank you for joining me up there. Seriously. I was seconds from dying of embarrassment. You saved me."

"I dunno about that," he hedges, squeezing the back of his neck.

"I do. Especially when I know what kind of sacrifice that was for you."

Embarrassed, he scratches at the scruff of his jaw. "It's not a big deal, Dove."

I shake my head. "Again, I call bull crap. I know how much you wanted to stay out of the spotlight, but you stepped into it for me. So, thank you."

He sucks his lower lip into his mouth and looks down at me with hooded eyes. "You're welcome, Dovey."

We're only friends, I remind myself, tearing my gaze away from his before tilting my head up at the dark night sky. "So, do you think we pulled it off? Did you see the music guy?"

Another chuckle escapes him. "When I was on stage, I saw the rep, but I couldn't read his face. I don't know what he was thinking or if we pulled it off."

"When will we know?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "If he reaches out to us."

"Do you have a manager?"

"We did, but we got rid of him a few months ago. I've been juggling the manager hat ever since, and as you can see, I dropped the ball this time. After everything happened with Reese and Riv, I spaced on the date that he was coming."

"And what happens if you don't get it? If he doesn't reach out?"

"We miss a pretty big opportunity. There's a tour for Organized Chaos coming up. The original opening band had to bail, and they're looking for a new one to take its place. They wanted to see how the band performed live, but I have no idea how it went in there."

"The crowd seemed to like it."

"They were mesmerized with you," he notes, that same dark gaze taunting the butterflies in my stomach.

I bite my lip before correcting him, "They were mesmerized with *you*. Before you got up there, I was a squeaky mess."

"Trust me. You weren't. You did amazing. And if we land this tour, it'll be because of you."

He inches closer, but I keep my feet firmly planted in place. Even though my fight or flight instinct is hitting me at full force, I refuse to let him see what he does to me. His presence. His voice. His eyes. If I don't learn to control myself around him, I'll be like every other girl he's ever met. And I don't want to be like the rest of them. I want to be me.

Dove Walker.

The girl he gets on stage for.

Then again, we're *friends*.

But friends don't stand this close.

Or at least mine never have. I've never been friends with a guy, though, so what do I know?

The heat from his body warms mine from head to toe, and I lift my chin to look up at him. He's so damn handsome and so far out of my league it isn't even funny. My fingers itch to touch the divot etched into his chin, but I restrain myself, fisting them at my sides despite dying to know what it feels like. What *he* feels like.

Licking my lips, I silently beg him to put me out of my misery. To let me taste him the way I've dreamt of doing for months. Even though he's made his intentions clear. Even though he's told me we're nothing more than friends. Even though he's never made a move, no matter how obvious I've been in regards to my feelings. I want him. Plain and simple. And I'm not sure I'll survive if he doesn't show me that he wants the same thing.

A loud thunk against the wall makes me jump as the back door of SeaBird slams open. A man around forty, with short salt and pepper flecked hair and a charcoal tailored suit appears, lifting his chin when he spots us. "You Gibbs?"

"Yeah. Nice to meet you." Gibbs offers his hand, and the guy shakes it.

"Hawthorne. You guys put on quite the show in there."

"Thanks," Gibson returns. "Glad you could make it."

"Me too. You gonna introduce me to your girlfriend?" Hawthorne asks.

Gibson glances over at me and clears his throat. "She's not..." he starts to correct Hawthorne's assumption. His words hang in the air for an awkward moment before he continues. "Uh, Dove, this is Hawthorne. Hawthorne, Dove Walker."

"Nice to meet you." His hand is warm and soft as he shakes mine. "You with the band, sweetheart?"

I shake my head. "No. Just stepping in."

He frowns, then tsks, “That’s what I was afraid of.”

My brows wrinkle as I look over at Gibson, who appears to be as confused as I am.

What the heck is that supposed to mean?

“We need a band who takes touring seriously,” Hawthorne explains. “If your singer is late to shows like this, how can you guarantee he won’t be late on tour?”

Panicked, Gibson replies, “He won’t. I promise. He didn’t know you were coming tonight—”

“That shouldn’t matter. I only deal with musicians who put their music first. Obviously, your main man doesn’t—”

“That’s not true,” I argue. “I begged for a chance to sing. He was being generous—”

Hawthorne smiles patiently, though it shakes my confidence more. “You’re a terrible liar, Dove Walker. But I appreciate your willingness to help out a friend. If you ever decide to pursue a career in music, let me know.” He fishes a card from his suit pocket, handing it to me.

“I’m really sorry we couldn’t work something out,” he adds, turning to Gibson. “Broken Vows is really talented, and your singer has a way with the crowd, but until he takes the biz seriously, you guys are gonna be stuck playing shows like the one tonight. Good luck.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DOVE

The place closed a while ago, but I stayed to help clean up. Or at least that's what I tell myself. Facing the truth is a little too pathetic, even for me. I stayed for Gibson. I stayed in case he needs comfort after a night like tonight. In case he needs someone to talk to. In case he needs *me*.

A light scoff escapes me as I dry my hands on a paper towel, not even bothering to admire the tall tower of clean dishes I helped take care of while waiting for Gibson to reappear.

He disappeared into the storage room thirty minutes ago with Fender in search of privacy. They've been arguing ever since. My stomach fills with dread as I inch closer to the cracked door.

This has to stop.

I don't do confrontation. I don't do arguing or finger-pointing. I don't do fights. And it kills me to have to witness it firsthand. But the idea of Gibson rehashing the same crappy night over and over again is too much to bear.

Chewing on my lower lip, I raise my hand to knock, but the door is already open a few inches. Both Fender and Gibson are on their feet, their hair sticking out in multiple directions as if they've been tugging on the roots with frustration at least a few times during their heated conversation. It looks like they might be worn out. Defeated. But they aren't even close to throwing in the towel yet. Nope. They're both too stubborn for that.

With his head held high, Fender spits, "We need him, Sonny—"

"That's bullshit, Fen, and you know it," Gibson growls, pacing the small closet. "We do not need his sorry ass or his handouts."

"After the shitshow today, I beg to differ. We need a manager who doesn't mess up nights like tonight."

“You’re joking, right?” Gibson sneers before turning on his heel to face his brother fully. “This isn’t on me. You screwed up, Fen. Regardless of whether or not Hawthorne showed, you should’ve been on time to play the gig. That’s on you. Not me.”

“Bull—”

“Don’t argue with me, Fen. Not on this,” Gibson seethes, his voice low and throaty. “Not on this.”

Fender’s face is red with rage, his fists tight at his sides, clearly ready for a knock-down, drag-out fight with his own flesh and blood before he stops. And every fiber of anger and frustration that’s directed at Gibson flips into a self-loathing so potent, I want to cry.

His chin drops to his chest, and he collapses onto the closest crate resting on the floor.

“You’re right.” He sighs, scrubbing his hand over his face. “I know you’re right. But the pressure... It’s too much sometimes—”

“Then you aren’t made for this,” Gibson tells him. His tone is more gentle than before, but it still stings. “And do you honestly think our dad is a good fit for that job? Manager? That’s bullshit.”

“Maybe not the manager, but *something*. He wants to help—”

“You’ve hit your head one too many times if you really believe that. He already let us down enough as kids. Why do you think the music business would be any different?”

Gibson paces in front of a tidy array of beer bottles while Fender rests his head in his hands.

“He’s changed—”

“Don’t give me that shit.”

“He has—”

“He’s fooling you,” Gibbs spits, his fury radiating off him in waves. I’ve always known his father was a touchy subject, but witnessing it firsthand is harder than I imagined. He’s lashing out because he’s hurting, and it’s killing me.

“What can he do, Sonny? Huh?” Fen pushes. “What can he do to make it up to you?”

“He can leave us the hell alone.”

Fender shakes his head. “You mean he should leave *you* the hell alone. You don’t control me, man. I’m allowed to meet our dad for lunch.”

“Don’t act all high and mighty because you’re trying to cultivate a fake-

assed relationship with our sperm donor. Especially when you're only kissing his ass so that he can take us to the next level. We don't need him."

"You're wrong," Fender argues, his face tinged with red all over again, though I can't decide if it's from the alcohol he's been nursing all night or the fresh dose of frustration thrumming through his veins. He pushes himself back to his feet and strides closer to Gibbs. "If you want this band to survive, we need a manager. And we need his connections. Especially after tonight. Come on, man. You know what a big deal this is. Three Fingers dropping out of the tour at the last minute is huge. We could tour—"

"I'm not interested in touring the country," Gibbs interrupts.

Slamming his fist against his chest, Fender spits, "Well, I am."

"Why? So you can snort some more coke and get lost in all the pussy you can dream of?"

"Sounds like a solid summer to me."

Gibbs scoffs, running his hand over his face roughly. "It doesn't even matter anymore. We screwed up tonight. We pissed off Hawthorne. We didn't get the invite. Get that through your thick skull."

"Dad can fix it. I know he can. If you'd—"

"I'm not letting him help us," Gibbs seethes.

"Then you're screwing the band over!"

"*You* screwed the band over, Fen. Not me."

"So let me make it right," Fender begs. "He can call Hawthorne. He can explain the circumstances with Riv and why we forgot about the show. He can convince Hawthorne to give Broken Vows another chance. Come on, Sonny. I'll make the call. You won't even have to talk to him. Let me do this."

The glare on Gibbs' face chills me to the bone as his silence is charged with fury. I've never seen so much rage in a human being before. So much hurt and frustration directed at a single person. His father. The one person who's supposed to make you feel safe and protected, and he's provided nothing but the opposite for a little boy who grew into the man in front of me.

Maddie's warning flitters through my mind, begging me to stay away from him. But my feet remain planted. I can't leave. Not yet. Not when he needs me.

"Please," Fender pushes, his voice nothing but a whisper.

"He can call Hawthorne, but that's it," Gibson murmurs, giving in, though his corded muscles are just as tight and as ready to spring into action

as before.

“Okay.”

“I don’t want him here, though,” Gibbs clarifies. “And I sure as hell don’t want him to be the band’s manager. *Ever*. I don’t care what kind of bullshit connections the bastard may have. As far as I’m concerned, Donny Hayes is dead to me. We clear?”

My breath hitches as I register the name.

Donny Hayes?

How?

The guy is right up there with the freaking Beatles in the music industry. But that’s not possible. It doesn’t make any sense. Not after everything Gibson told me about his father and how much of a loser he is. I don’t understand.

Both heads snap in my direction, and the blood drains from my face. Their scrutiny acts like tiny needles pricking every inch of exposed skin on my body, but I can’t run and hide. It’s too late. They know I’m here. They know I heard.

“What are you doing here?” Gibson growls, his fury palpable and now directed at me.

My terror spikes, and I open my mouth to defend myself but close it just as quickly.

There’s no excuse. I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t have been listening. This had nothing to do with me. I need to get out of here. But I can’t move. I’m paralyzed. Not in fear. In shame.

This is Gibson’s secret. And he had a right to keep it to himself. But I stuck my nose where it doesn’t belong, and now, I’ve ruined everything.

“I’ll give him a call,” Fender mutters. He strides out of the room and steps around me at the last second, disappearing down the hall and out the back door while leaving me desperate for air. Because right now? I feel like I can’t breathe. Not when Gibson is looking at me like this. With disdain. And frustration. And maybe a little bit of hurt too. That I would betray him like this. That I would eavesdrop on a private conversation.

What is wrong with me?

“What did you hear?” Gibson snaps.

I shake my head and hide my hands behind my back, tangling my trembling fingers together and squeezing with all my strength. “Nothing.”

“Good girls don’t lie.” He steps closer to my frozen body in the middle of

the dark hallway. Everyone else has already left. “Tell me the truth.”

I swallow and lick my lips but stay quiet as I take in his stone-cold expression glinting in the fluorescent light hanging in the storage room.

“Did you hear his name?” he demands.

“What name?” I lie, my lower lip quivering.

He quirks his brow and closes another two feet of distance between us. “Hawthorne was right. You’re a terrible liar.”

I grimace.

“Do you know who Donny Hayes is?”

Of course, I know who Donny Hayes is. *Everyone* knows who Donny Hayes is.

He takes another step toward me.

Again, I gulp but don’t bother to answer him.

Still, Gibbs reads me like a book and closes the last bit of distance between us, meeting me in the dim hallway. The darkness does weird things to me. Shrouding us both in shadows while managing to make my senses dull yet hyper-focused at the same time. He’s close. Too close. And even after my sister’s warnings—heck, after the *stranger’s* warning in the bar all those nights ago—I can’t make myself move. If anything, I’m fighting my instincts to lean into him. To wrap my arms around him and make him feel better.

Which is a terrible idea.

He’s pissed at me right now.

And I don’t blame him.

I screwed up—big time.

My chest rises and falls in an unsteady rhythm as I try to catch my breath without committing his mouth-watering scent to memory.

How can he smell so good?

“Answer the question,” he pushes.

“You said I’m a bad liar—”

“Then I suggest you tell me the truth.”

His hazel eyes are more green than brown, swirling with restraint as he towers over me, demanding my response without even needing to utter a single word.

I’ve never seen him like this. Like a coiled snake ready to strike at any second. And I know I’m in dangerous territory. This is the man my sister was talking about. This is the man she warned me to stay away from. This is the man that a *stranger* warned me to stay away from, hinting that he was

involved with Emma's disappearance. And even though Madelyn has debunked that particular theory, right now, it holds more weight than ever.

But if that was the case, why am I not terrified?

"Answer me, Dove."

"Y-yes." I gulp. "Yes, I know who he is."

Gibson's fists clench at his sides before he grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. "I don't get angry often, Dove. But I need you to understand that my father is a trigger for me."

I nod.

Duh.

"And I need you to understand that I've spent my entire life keeping this secret from everyone but Fen. And I mean *everyone*, but Fen," he emphasizes. "Do you understand?"

Again, I nod.

"Can you promise to keep this secret?"

Dipping my chin in his firm grasp is difficult, but I manage to pull it off a third time.

"I need to hear you say it," he growls.

"Y-yes. Yes, I'll keep it a secret."

His eyes drop to my mouth before his calloused thumb scratches my chin softly as he rubs it back and forth, committing my promise to memory.

"Thank you," he murmurs.

The swirling green in his eyes is still present, but he doesn't let me go. Heck, they're practically glowing as he looks down at me with a fire that makes my chest feel too tight. Like I can't breathe. The intensity is almost uncomfortable, but I don't want it to end, either. If anything, I want to rise onto my tiptoes and put myself out of my misery.

My tongue darts between my lips before I whisper, "You're welcome."

His eyes flash, and his gaze drops down to my mouth. "You should stop looking at me like that, Dove."

"Like what?"

"Like you want me to kiss you."

"Oh," I breathe out, my curiosity battling my disappointment. Because he hasn't backed away from me. His fingers are still cupping my chin. His breath is still tickling my cheeks. His lips are still... They're still *right there*.

"What if I... What if I *do* want you to kiss me?" I question him, finding courage even though I'm positive this will blow up in my face, but I can't

take it anymore. The push. The pull. The hot. The cold. It's exhausting. And I'm tired of fighting it.

"Why'd you stay tonight?" he asks.

My forehead wrinkles as I register his question when it's very apparent he's avoiding mine.

"Y-you had a hard night."

"Do you stay when Ashton has a hard night? Or Sammie?"

"I stay when Reese has a hard night," I argue, though it falls flat. He can see through my lie as easily as I can. Yes, I would stay for Reese. But no, it's not the same. He knows it. And so do I.

"Do you look at Reese like this too?" he challenges, his touch branding my chin before it disappears.

My expression falls, and I fold my arms, digging my fingernails into my biceps while wishing I could disappear. I'm pretty sure I've never been more embarrassed in my entire life, and that's saying something. But it's funny. For a girl who hates being the center of attention, I sure do like it when he notices me. Or at least, I used to. Right now, I'd give anything to rewind the last thirty minutes and simply go home. Where it's safe. And my feelings aren't on the line. And I don't make a fool out of myself in front of the first guy I've liked in a long time.

"We're *friends*, Dove," he reminds me.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Yes. I know. You've made your stance abundantly clear."

"I'm not telling you this to hurt you." He drags his fingers from the part in my hair, across my forehead, over to my ear, and down my chin. Softly. Gently. As if committing it to memory. And because I'm a glutton for punishment, I let him.

"Then why *are* you telling me this?" I whisper, mesmerized by his touch while hating how weak I am to crave it so much.

"Because I don't want you to get the wrong idea." He sighs and lets his arm hang by his side. "I don't shit where I eat."

A dagger to the chest would be less painful than his words, but I hold in the pain, refusing to let him see how easily he hit the mark.

"You don't...*shit* where you eat? What does that even mean?"

He steps away, putting a few feet of distance between us, and I hate the feeling of loss that overwhelms me as soon as his warmth is replaced by the air-conditioned air.

“It means we work together. And I’m not gonna sleep with a coworker.”

“And that’s all I am to you? A coworker? Oh, wait. I’m your *friend*.”

“Dove—”

“Tell me I’m not crazy. That I’m not imagining things—”

“You don’t get it, Dove,” he growls, his frustration rising.

“So help me understand.”

“Your sister. She’s...” His nostrils flare, and his jaw clenches along with his hands at his sides.

“She’s what? What about her, Gibbs?”

“She’s friends with Em.”

“So?”

“So Em’s basically my ex, no matter how hard we tried to keep things casual. The fact that you’re connected to her—”

“I’m not connected to Em. I’m connected to Madelyn, who’s connected to Em.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he argues. “I’m not looking for anything serious, and you deserve someone who’s serious about you.”

Frustrated, I push my hair away from my face and seethe, “Then what *are* you looking for?”

“I’ve already told you. I’m looking for a friend.”

“You have friends—”

“Maybe I need another one. One who I can connect with through music. One who gets me in a way that no one’s ever really understood. One who knows my secret but doesn’t hold it against me or tries to tap into it for self-gain. That’s what I need right now. Can you be that for me?”

I shake my head, feeling like I’m seconds from unraveling. Like I’m about to burst at the seams. I’m embarrassed. Frustrated. Ashamed. Angry. And so many more emotions that I can’t even think straight. I want to shake him for making me feel this way. All tied up inside. But it isn’t his fault. It’s mine.

I’m a fool.

“Dove—”

“I gotta go, Gibbs.”

His grip is tight on my forearm as he reaches for me and keeps me in place when all I want to do is run and hide.

“Dove...”

I shrug out of his grasp but avoid his gaze. “It’s fine, okay? Yeah, I’ll be

your friend. I...I gotta go.”

And I get the hell out of there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DOVE

“Hello?” I answer, convinced Gibson butt-dialed me. It’s been a week since our little concert at SeaBird, and I’ve been avoiding him ever since. Not because we didn’t end things on a...not *entirely* terrible note, but now that I know where he stands—and that it isn’t exactly in line with my feelings—I feel *weird*. I shouldn’t have agreed to be nothing more than friends when I obviously still have feelings for the guy, but I don’t know how to rein them in. And I like Gibbs. I like hanging out with him. I like talking to him. I like singing with him.

I. Like. Him.

And now that I’ve agreed to be just friends, I need to figure out how to stop those feelings from rising to the surface anytime he’s around.

Rock, meet hard place.

“Hey, Dove,” Gibson greets me, though there’s an underlying tightness in his voice that piques my suspicion. “How are you?”

“Fine?” I head to the kitchen and grab a Coke from the fridge. It’s not like I need the caffeine anymore. Seeing Gibson’s name on the caller ID was more than enough to get my adrenaline going. But I’m feeling fidgety and need to do something with my hands if I have any hope of surviving this conversation, so... *Hello, Coke.*

“And you?” I ask after a few beats of silence.

“I’m good.”

“That’s good.”

He clears his throat. “So, Fender called. He was wondering if you’d be willing to meet at my place for something? We’re having a band meeting, and we wanted to talk.”

“A band meeting?” I lift the tab of my Coke, and it explodes all over the counter before I rush to the sink and let the carbonation fizz over my hand.

Crap.

“Uh, yeah,” he answers, sensing my hesitancy. Or maybe I’m sensing his. Regardless, something is definitely off, and it’s making me feel twitchy.

Setting the aluminum can in the bottom of the sink, I rinse my hand under the faucet and ask, “Why would he want me to be at a band meeting?”

“I’ll, uh, I’ll explain when you get here.”

I grab the towel hanging from the oven door and dry my hands before sopping up the spilled soda on the counter, not even caring that it’ll be a sticky mess that Future Dove will have to deal with tomorrow. There are too many questions running through my mind. I don’t know what he expects me to say after how we left things the other day.

Going to his house doesn’t exactly sound like my type of picnic right now, but declining his invitation will probably wind up keeping me up tonight.

Stupid rock and hard place. Stupid feelings and emotions. Stupid hot guys and their stupid voices. And stupid invitations. It’s all so...*stupid*.

“Dove? You still there?”

“Yeah. I, uh...”

“Please?” The word is low and gritty and hits me like a wrecking ball. It isn’t fair how much the guy owns me, even after he’s made his intentions with our relationship crystal clear. But I can’t help it. I want to please him. To make him happy. To *not* disappoint him the way I’ve always disappointed people.

Chewing on my thumbnail, I rest my hip against the counter and close my eyes. “What time?”

“Thirty minutes?”

I check the clock on the microwave. “Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Dove.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Click.

“Hey, who was that?” Maddie asks from the couch as an old episode of *Friends* plays on the television screen.

“No one,” I lie.

Her silence is stifling. Like she knows I’m hiding something from her. But how does she expect me to be honest when I know she’ll wind up biting

my head off for it?

With a sigh, I smooth down my white T-shirt, grateful to see it splatter-free from my soda. “Something came up, and I have to go. Do you need anything?”

“Nope.” She pops the ‘P’ at the end, then turns up the volume on the TV.
Subtle, Mads. Really subtle.

Grabbing the keys and my purse on the counter, I slip on a pair of flats next to the door and head to my car without a word.

She knows.

She *definitely* knows.

And she’s mad at me for it, which makes me feel like crap because I hate disappointing people. I hate the look in their eyes. The way they avoid my gaze like they can’t even look at me. The way their voice sounds numb. Indifferent. The way they can barely string two words together, clearly dismissing me for not living up to their expectations.

I hate all of it.

And it isn’t fair.

Em wasn’t my friend, so Madelyn has no right to be mad at me. Especially when Gibson has made it *very* clear that nothing will ever happen between us. So, why should I feel the need to tiptoe around my sister? I shouldn’t have to. But logic has never been something that Maddie takes into consideration when manning her emotions. She’s a grudge holder. And she won’t be letting this go anytime soon, regardless of whether or not I actually open up to her and explain that he’s already rejected me, and our friendship will never be anything more.

But if that’s the case, why do I feel so dang guilty?



“HEY,” FENDER GREETES ME, SWINGING OPEN THE DOOR WITH WAY TOO MUCH enthusiasm for a guy with a black eye.

“Oh.” I freeze. “Hi.”

Where did he get a black eye? And who gets a black eye these days, anyway? It looks like it hurts, all swollen and purple like that. I cringe, barely refraining from reaching out to touch the thing.

Ouch.

He taps his forefinger along his cheekbone beneath the damage, then bounces his eyebrows up and down. “You should see the other guy.”

“W-what happened?” I blurt out, my face pinched with sympathy.

“Honestly, I don’t even remember.” He laughs, opening the door the rest of the way, stepping aside. “Come on in.”

Once I’m in the entryway, I slip off my shoes and try to steady my breathing, but it feels impossible. I can feel Fen watching me. Not in a creepy way or anything. But there’s an open curiosity there. Like I’ve intrigued him, though I have no idea how.

Why am I here right now? And where the heck is Gibson?

Standing up, I fold my arms across my chest and smile tightly at him. “Is Gibson here?”

“We’re in the kitchen,” he returns, lifting his chin in its direction. “You hungry?”

“No thanks.”

“Thirsty or anything?”

“I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

“Sure thing.” We walk in silence down the hall to the bright kitchen where all the members of Broken Vows are scattered. Leaning against the fridge is Gibson, while Phoenix and Stoker are nursing beers at the cool granite island, their massive bodies making the barstools groan with their weight.

“Hey, Dove,” they all greet me as soon as I come into view.

I wave my hand awkwardly. “Hi.”

“Do you want a drink?” Gibson asks.

“I already asked her. She’s not thirsty,” Fender informs him. He shoves Stoker in the shoulder. “Get up, man. Give her a seat.”

“I’m okay,” I interject, but Stoker gets to his feet anyway.

The legs of the barstool scrape against the hardwood floor as Stoker drags it out a few inches and motions to it with a wave of his hand. “Here you go.”

“Um...” My knees wobble, but I force myself to walk over to him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Everyone’s watching me as I sit on the edge of the stool and twist the cotton fabric of my T-shirt in my hands like it’s a dirty dishrag.

Why am I here?

“Shall we get started?” Phoenix asks, tossing his arm over my neck like

we're best friends when we've only spoken once or twice in my entire life.

Gibson nods. "First, I'd like to apologize for screwing up last week. I should've texted and reminded everyone about Hawthorne, but I spaced it. That's on me."

A bunch of grunts echoes throughout the room.

"And I," Fender adds, stepping forward, "want to apologize for being an asshole and showing up late. I'm gonna do my best to keep Broken Vows a top priority from now on."

Another round of grunts.

"Which leads us to the real reason we're here," he continues. "As you all know, Three Fingers bailed at the last minute for the Organized Chaos tour, which is why we were all pissed that last week didn't work the way we wanted it to. However, a certain someone stepped in to sing for Hawthorne that night and saved our asses."

Three sets of eyes land on me again, making me want to squirm beneath their weight.

I gulp, avoiding everyone's gaze while staring at the swirls of gray and white in the speckled granite in front of me.

"Thanks, Dove," Fen murmurs.

"Seriously. You shocked the hell out of me," Stoker chimes in.

Phoenix laughs. "Me too. Who knew you could sing?"

"I-it's not a big deal," I interrupt. "Gibson told me to."

"And we're glad he did," Phoenix replies, nudging my shoulder. "You rocked it, Dove."

My cheeks feel like they're on fire as I press my cold fingers to them in hopes of keeping my blush at bay. "Uh...thanks."

"Get to the point, Fen," Gibson growls, clearly more tense than the rest of the group, though I can't decide if it's because of my presence or if it's because he can see how much their attention is making me uncomfortable and couldn't help but intervene.

Hoping it's the latter, I give him a tight smile of gratitude. He lifts his chin in response, then turns to his brother.

"The point is because of her, we've been invited to open for Organized Chaos while they're touring the East Coast this summer, and Hawthorne wants her to tour with us."

Their cheering rings in my ears as I attempt to register what the heck Fender just said, but it's no use. There's no way I heard him correctly.

Hawthorne wants me to tour with Broken Vows this summer?

What?!

Phoenix pulls me into an awkward side hug, nearly pulling me from my own stool while Stoker nods his approval with his skinny arms crossed over his chest. But Gibbs hasn't blinked. Hasn't moved an inch. Heck, he hasn't even twitched. And I can't decide if he's mad at me or if he's simply as confused as I am.

What the heck is happening right now?

"Phoenix, back the hell up and let her breathe," Gibson barks after a few tense seconds.

His touch disappears instantly before he pulls a pair of drumsticks from his back pocket and starts twirling them between his fingers while my spine straightens in my seat, though I'm still as lost as before.

"There was one more condition," Fender adds, his voice more solemn than before. "Sonny, man. We need you, too."

We need you too? For what? I want to scream, but I pull my lips into a thin line and stay quiet. I'm pretty sure I've never been more lost in my entire life.

Gibson scrubs his hand over his face, his shoulders hunching in defeat as he registers Fender's request. "I can't, man."

"You don't have a choice this time," Fender returns.

Gibson's fists tighten at his sides, glaring at Fen with more wrath than I ever thought possible. But he doesn't reply. And Fen doesn't push the subject. They stare at each other, their muscles coiled for action. The combination leaves me dizzy with questions as my gaze bounces back and forth between the two brothers.

So, Broken Vows got invited to go on tour, which is great, but why wouldn't Gibson want to tag along, even if it's only to stay behind the scenes? That sounds like an amazing opportunity, doesn't it? But he doesn't look happy. In fact, he looks pissed. Which I kind of get, but not really. And what do I have to do with it? It doesn't make any sense.

I feel like I've walked onto a stage in the middle of a three-act play, and I have no idea what's going on. But at least I'm not the only one. Apparently, Gibson wasn't fully aware of the scenario, either, if his tight jaw and narrowed gaze is anything to go by. The guy is freaking intimidating and looks like he's going to lose his crap at any second.

In fact, I have a feeling it's going to be in three, two—

“We’ll, uh, give you two some privacy,” Phoenix mutters before tucking his drumsticks into the back pocket of his jeans, stands up, and offers me his hand.

“No,” Gibson barks. “She stays.”

“But—”

“I need to talk with her.”

Phoenix’s hand drops to his side. “Okay. Come on, Stokes. Let’s go.”

The sound of their heavy boots echoes down the hall as they make their escape.

When the front door swings closed a few seconds later, Fender starts, “Sonny—”

“No.”

“You have to. It was one of Hawthorne’s requirements.”

“That I go? Why? I don’t do the tours, remember?”

“Yeah, well, I screwed up, and he’s convinced I need a babysitter to make it to the shows on time.”

“Then hire a damn babysitter, Fen. I’m not that guy.”

“I promised I wouldn’t miss a show, but he made it a stipulation, man. I need you. We’ll get you out of singing, okay? Let’s get the contract signed—”

“Singing?” Gibson bellows, charging toward his brother like a freaking bull. “Are you kidding me?”

“Look, it’s not my fault Hawthorne thought you and Dove had chemistry—”

“So, you were serious about that?” Gibson motions to the tiny girl in the corner of the kitchen. AKA *me*. “He wants her to come, too?”

“I told you—”

Gibson’s scoff cuts him off. “You told me Hawthorne liked her performance. You didn’t say she had to tag along.”

The fact they’re talking about me like I’m not even here makes me want to throw something at them, but I’m too invested in the conversation to do it. This is absolute insanity. Perspiration clings to the back of my neck as I tuck my hands under my thighs on the barstool and act like a fly on the wall.

“It wasn’t a firm stipulation,” Fen hedges, glancing over at me. “More like a strong suggestion. But yeah. He liked her. And I liked her, too. She has it, Gibbs. The spark.”

Gibson’s gaze finds mine. His jaw tightens as he takes me in. Every flaw.

Every insecurity. Every tiny detail that I keep hidden from the world is laid out on a silver platter with a single scrutinizing look. And I hate how easily he sees through me, especially when he's already rejected me for it.

His nostrils flare. He tears his attention from me and turns back to Fen. "She'll be eaten alive on tour."

Ouch.

"We'll keep an eye on her," Fender argues.

Another scoff escapes Gibbs as I fold my arms and rest my head against the kitchen wall, defeated.

"Says the guy who needs a babysitter," Gibson points out. "I thought you wanted me to invite her to the meeting so you could thank her for saving our sorry asses. I didn't think you would drag her into this."

"Yeah. Well. I am. I think having her on tour would set us apart—"

"Did you ever stop to ask what she wants?" Gibson growls. "Maybe she doesn't want to go—"

"And maybe we should ask her," Fender spits, his chest heaving with pent-up frustration.

They both turn to me. Waiting for me to say something. But I'm still so freaking lost.

"What do you want, Dove?" Gibson demands. His tone is sharp, though I can't decide if his frustration is with his brother or me.

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I lick my lips and whisper, "Okay. Let me get this straight. Hawthorne liked my performance at SeaBird. He initially said no to the tour because he thought Fen was too flakey but has decided to extend the offer on a certain set of conditions. Am I right so far?" I ask, holding Fender's gaze while avoiding Gibson's.

He nods.

"Okay," I repeat. "And those conditions are Gibson tagging along on tour to babysit Fender and to make sure he doesn't miss any shows. Right?"

"Yeah," Fen grits out, obviously offended at Hawthorne's proposition.

Unfortunately for him, I can definitely see Hawthorne's logic on the topic. I'm not sure Fen recognizes how much Gibson looks out for him and keeps him in check. Fender's a loose cannon, and it's only a matter of time until someone else gets caught in the crossfire. Not that I'd point it out to Fen, but still.

I clear my throat and continue. "And he also wants Gibson to sing on stage, but you think you can talk Hawthorne out of that one. Right?"

“Yeah,” Fen answers, though he’s a little more hesitant this time as his gaze darts to his brother.

Interesting.

“And then there’s me. Hawthorne is *suggesting*,” I emphasize, “that I tag along for the tour? And maybe sing?”

“Only a few songs,” Fen clarifies. “You’ll get to hang out with the band. See the sights. You’ll love it—”

“Stop trying to convince her,” Gibson growls. “Let her think about it.”

With his arms raised in surrender, Fender backs away a few feet. “Of course. She can think about it. And you can think about it too, all right? But let me know what you two decide so I can pass the info along to Dad.”

“Don’t call him that,” Gibson sneers.

“*Donny*. Let me know so I can pass the information along to Donny.”

“Why would you need to pass the information along to Donny instead of to Hawthorne himself?” Gibson demands, his gaze narrowed in suspicion.

“Because I made a shit first impression, and Hawthorne doesn’t want to talk to me. Honestly, from what I understood, the only leverage Donny could use was you and Dove after Hawthorne mentioned that he liked you guys.” Fender leans against the sink opposite of the fridge and rubs his hand over his face, his shoulders hunching. “Let’s be honest here. He agreed to Broken Vows *because* of you guys. Without you, the band won’t be opening for Organized Chaos. It’s that simple.”

And just like that, the weight of Fender’s future—and Stoker’s, and Phoenix’s, and Gibson’s—falls on my shoulders. There’s already enough pressure on me. So much pressure that sometimes I feel like I can’t breathe. But it’s a tour. With a huge band. Where I would get to travel. And try new food. And sing on a stage in front of people. Real people. And a stage that isn’t my car with the radio on full blast or my shower when no one’s watching. An actual stage. With a real audience. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

And I’m going to have to turn it down because of Maddie. And her mistake. Her obligation. Her baby.

Squeezing my eyes shut in search of strength, I fight off my disappointment, my own desires, and my own dreams. Then I look over at Fen and confide softly, “I can’t go on tour with you guys.”

“Why not?” Fender asks.

“My sister.”

He frowns. “What about her?”

“She’s pregnant. She needs me.”

“But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—”

“Get out of my house, Fen,” Gibson orders, his tone brooking no argument.

Fender argues, “I’m just saying—”

“We’ll talk later.”

“Fine.” But Fender’s feet stay planted in place as he points his forefinger at Gibbs. “You in?”

Gibbs hesitates, his attention shifting to mine before returning to his brother.

“We’ll talk later,” he repeats, softer this time.

Satisfied, Fender lifts his chin at me. “You got the spark, Dove. Don’t let your sister hold you back from shining, yeah?”

But he doesn’t get it. It’s not like she wants to hold me back. Honestly, if she knew about this opportunity, she’d probably shove me out the door and make me go. But I can’t do that to her. She’s going to need help. She’s going to need support. She’s going to need someone to step in and walk her through parenthood. And if the father won’t do it, it’s up to me.

When Fender realizes I’m not going to answer him, he dips his chin and heads to the front door, leaving me all alone with a guy who I can’t quite put my finger on. Especially after the last time we were together. Thankfully, the gigantic bomb that Fender threw in my lap right now is enough of a distraction, and I’m too exhausted to address the giant elephant in the room that’s my attraction to Gibbs.

With my head in my hands, I fight the urge to laugh and to cry at the same time. This is insane. There’s no way I can actually do this. The logistics don’t work.

“What are you thinking?” Gibbs murmurs after a few minutes. The barstool next to mine creaks slightly as he sits down and rests his elbows on the countertop in front of us.

“I’m thinking this is crazy,” I answer honestly, setting aside my own feelings and insecurities in regards to the sexy musician beside me to focus on the other giant mess-slash-opportunity that has now fallen in my lap.

“It is,” he agrees.

“And that I hate disappointing people.”

His chuckle is low and soft but still sends tingles racing down my spine

as he nudges my shoulder with his. “Who are you afraid of disappointing?”

“My sister if I leave. Although, she might actually like being alone,” I point out, thinking aloud. “I’m not sure how much she enjoys me living with her. But she also needs me, no matter how much she hates to admit it. And if I stay, I don’t want to disappoint Hawthorne, or Fen, or Phoenix, or Stoker, or…” I swallow and peek over at Gibbs. “Or you.”

“Why do you think you’d disappoint me?”

“I don’t know? Honestly, you’re still a toss-up. I can’t decide what you want me to do.”

“Why does my opinion matter?”

Because I like you even though you’ve made it abundantly clear that nothing will ever happen between us.

I bite my lip and search for a different excuse. Something that won’t make me feel so pathetic and needy. When I find one, I admit, “I wouldn’t have gotten on that stage if you hadn’t made me. And I don’t want it to feel like I’m using you or the band.”

“You’re not using the band—”

“I know that, but I also remember you mentioning that whenever people find out you’re involved with Broken Vows, they try to take advantage of you.”

“This is different.”

“I know, but it still makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“I asked you to stall, Dove. You weren’t taking advantage of me or the opportunity. You were taking one for the team. And you knocked it out of the park.”

“Still,” I argue. “I think you should have a say in how I move forward with this.”

“Bullshit. You’re a big girl. You can make your own decisions.”

“This is all new to me, and I don’t know what you want me to do,” I admit.

“It shouldn’t matter what I want. What does Dove want?”

You.

I tear my gaze away from him and focus on the tiny flecks of white and gold in the swirling granite. The idea of being close to him but not being able to have him? That sounds like torture. Or is it simply another excuse to not go after what I want? Honestly, I don’t even know anymore. I feel just as lost—just as helpless—as before.

“Can I think about it?” I ask.

“Sure. Just let me know.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “So, tell me. What are *you* going to do? Are you really going to go?”

He shakes his head and tangles his fingers into his wavy dark hair. “I don’t know. I don’t want to let them down.”

“Neither do I.”

“You won’t,” he tells me, setting his hand on mine. “I promise.”

“And you won’t, either. Even if you don’t go. Even if you tell Fender that he has to deal with the repercussions on his own. That’s on him. Not you.”

“It’s funny how decisive and confident you can be when it’s about others,” he notes, the heat from his hand still warming mine.

With a groan, I pull away from him and rest my head in my hands. “I know. My own life is a mess, yet the outside perspective feels so much easier to grasp. Go figure, right?” I sigh, looking over at him. “Tell me something. Why *don’t* you want to go? What’s really holding you back?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.”

“My, uh, my dad,” he admits sheepishly.

“Oh.” After being rejected the other night, I didn’t really have a chance to ask him any questions about his father, but now that he’s brought it up, I can’t help my curiosity. I bite my lip to keep from prying, but he senses my interest nonetheless and rolls his eyes. “Spit it out, Dove. Ask your question.”

“Well...why hide it? Your relationship with him? In your room, you made him sound like...”

“Like he’s a shitty father who’s a dime a dozen?” he finishes for me. “That’s ‘cause he is. The bastard knocked up my mom and left her to become a superstar. And even then, he only made it big because he ended up doing drugs with the right guy at the right time. So, yeah. He’s a dime a dozen. I don’t need him, and I don’t want to be anything like him, either. He might be a rock god, but the rest of his life is a mess. The idea of turning into anything like him is...” He grits his teeth and squeezes his hands into tight fists but doesn’t finish his sentence. I’m not sure that he can.

I set my hand on top of his, rubbing my thumb back and forth along his white knuckles, wishing I could ease a bit of the heartache and the chip on his shoulder that he obviously carries around.

“I don’t know your dad,” I start. “But I think you’ve turned out to be a

pretty good guy so far. Both musically and personally.”

“Thanks, Dove.” His attention drops to my mouth before jumping back up to my curious eyes as the tension builds around us like a damn thunderstorm. It’s heavy and thick, and it could break at any second. Like how I’m close to breaking if he keeps looking at me like that.

“You’re a good friend,” he murmurs.

My phone vibrates against the counter, popping the tension like a needle against a balloon while making me jump as quickly.

Maddie’s name flashes on the screen. And I look up to find Gibson staring at it as if he’s seen a ghost.

“Let me just—”

“It’s fine.” He clears his throat and moves his hand out from under mine. “Let me know what you decide about the tour.”

I sigh. “Okay.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GIBSON

“**H**ave you seen Jake?” Milo asks as I grab a protein shake from the fridge.

I twist off the cap before answering, “I haven’t seen Jake since the shit with Reese and Riv went down. He’s probably at the library catching up on his thesis.”

Milo shakes his head and squeezes the back of his neck but stays quiet.

“Something going on?” I ask.

“Did you know he was in love with Reese?”

Tilting my head to one side, I consider his question for a few seconds. “I had my hunches. But it was obvious Reese had a thing for one roommate, and it wasn’t him.”

He scrubs his hand over his face, but again, doesn’t comment.

“What’s going on with Jake?” I ask before taking a swig of my chocolate-flavored protein.

Jake and Milo have been inseparable since they were kids, even though they’re opposites in almost every sense of the word. But if Milo’s worried about him, something is definitely up.

The barstool scrapes against the ground before Milo collapses into it.

“He’s acting...weird,” he mutters for lack of a better word.

“What kind of weird?”

“Erratic. Like he doesn’t give a shit about anything. You haven’t noticed him acting weird?”

“I’ve noticed more women sneaking in and out of his room than usual, but that’s about it.”

“That’s not like him, though,” Milo mumbles, rubbing his tattooed hand

over his face.

The man's got a point. Jake has never been one for partying or late nights. The guy's sole focus has been college, his thesis, and a big internship opportunity when he graduates. Yeah, he might slip in the occasional one-night stand into his repertoire, but even that was few and far between before his fallout with Reese.

With a frown, I admit, "I figured he was working Reese out of his system."

"He hasn't been going to his classes, either. I know he doesn't need a damn babysitter, but if he fails, I'll feel like shit."

"Why?"

"It'll be my fault, Sonny."

I shake my head and finish the rest of my drink before tossing it in the recycling bin. "Bullshit. You know as well as I do that Jake and Reese would've never worked. Yeah, you laid down the rules and told him that Reese was untouchable, but it doesn't matter. Even if you hadn't, they never would've lasted. He needs someone who knocks him on his ass the same way Reese knocked River on his."

Milo grunts his agreement before scratching at the scruff on his jaw. "And what then? What happens when my best friend finds a girl and leaves me in the dust?"

"Best friend?" I challenge.

He rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean. Jake's never been one for the single life. What happens when he gets over Reese and settles down?"

"You and I continue enjoying the bachelor life until the end of time," I joke.

He laughs. "Speaking of which... How's the waitress?"

"Dove?" My amusement dissipates.

"Yeah."

"You know I don't shit where I eat. We work together," I growl, my annoyance spiking.

"In that case, can I shit where you eat?" Milo asks. "The girl's so innocent that she's caught plenty of attention. You should hear what a couple of my clients are saying at the tattoo shop."

"Not sure I wanna know," I growl. Milo's a good guy, and most of his clients are, too, but none of them are good enough for Dove. And the fact that they've been discussing her pisses me off.

He laughs again. Harder this time. “You like her?”

“I already told you that I don’t shit where I eat.”

“Yeah, but I know you better than that. Why did I see her pull out of the driveway thirty minutes ago?”

“She’s been invited to go on tour with the band.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Like as a groupie?” he asks, grinning shamelessly.

The idea makes my molars grind together. “No. Not as a groupie. As a singer. Fen didn’t show up on time for a gig that guy I was telling you about, Hawthorne, was at, and Dove stepped in until I could find him. When Hawthorne invited Broken Vows to tour with Organized Chaos, he suggested she tag along.”

“And Fen’s cool with that?” Milo asks, his eyes narrowing into tiny slits.

“You know Fen. He might love the attention, but he’s always believed there’s enough to go around. I think he’s happy we got an invitation at all after he screwed everything up.”

Milo nods but doesn’t look convinced. “You sure about that?”

“Yeah. Why?”

He shrugs. “I dunno. His entire life is that band. Sharing the spotlight might be more difficult for him than he thinks.”

“Maybe, but it’s already been done. Now, it’s up to her whether or not she wants to come.”

“Hmm,” he grumbles, but he doesn’t comment further.

“So, what’s new with you?” I ask. “We haven’t talked lately.”

“Life’s been busy,” he grunts.

“Yeah. Between River’s accident and rehab and our work schedules, it’s been crazy.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s the shop coming? Are you gonna have enough to buy it?”

He nods. “Yeah. I think so. As long as Jos doesn’t change his mind about selling it.”

Jos. Milo’s boss and mentor. Hell, he’s practically his father since Milo’s sperm donor is an abusive asshole who deserves to rot in Hell. But he’s been wishy-washy on selling. Like he can’t decide whether or not Milo’s ready when I’m pretty sure Milo’s work is the main thing keeping the tattoo parlor afloat.

“You think he’d change his mind?” I ask.

“I dunno.” He scrubs his hand over his face. “He keeps making excuses before pulling the trigger. Do you think he knows?”

I pause. “Nah, man. Besides, even if he did, he couldn’t blame you for what happened.”

“It’s Jos’ only rule. No getting arrested. It doesn’t matter what the circumstances were. I still got cuffed for assault. It’s not like he can sweep that under the rug and justify it to the other eight employees who know they’d be axed if they had any run-ins with the law.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Do you think she would’ve told anyone?” Milo wonders aloud, though there’s a bitterness in his words that makes me pause.

Em.

She was the only person Milo was able to get ahold of. Then again, part of me wonders if she’s the first person he called even though they hadn’t known each other for long. There was a real connection between them. I always felt like I was intruding. Like I was the common ground that they hoped would keep them from combusting.

Too bad it blew up in all our faces.

I shake my head and consider his question. “Nah, man. Em might’ve been a lot of things, but she understood the need for secrets.”

And she had plenty of her own.

His chin drops to his chest. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Tongue in cheek, I clear my throat and ask, “Have you, uh, have you heard from her at all?”

Milo frowns. “Why would I have heard from her?”

Apparently not.

“Just curious. Sammie said she saw someone who looked like her at the bar,” I lie, lifting my hands in surrender. The guy is tense on a good day, but if Em’s involved, he’s ready to go balls to the wall in under a second.

“She moved,” he reminds me.

Yeah. Two doors down from her old place. Probably because she needed the second bedroom for her future kid.

“So, you haven’t heard from her?” I push.

His tone is cold and indifferent yet holds a sharpness that reminds me to tread carefully. “Have *you* heard from her, Sonny?”

I swallow thickly but hold his gaze as I shake my head. “No.”

“Why are you asking?”

“No reason. I know you liked her—”

“I liked what was between her legs. We both did. But now it’s over. She left.”

She left because she was in love with you but thought you only wanted her for what was between her legs, and you were too stubborn to chase after her, I want to point out, but I bite my tongue. It won’t do me any good, anyway. And if he finds out she was sleeping with a third guy and wound up pregnant, it won’t be pretty. Then again, I’m not so sure she was telling the truth on that front. The girl’s a master at deception. And right now, I’m not sure what to believe.

But it isn’t my job to fill him in. It’s Em’s. But she’s always been selfish and preferred to run from her problems instead of facing them, so it wouldn’t surprise me if she decided to keep her situation to herself. The problem is that if she doesn’t tell him, I’ll have to. And no one wants to be the messenger for that shit.

“I gotta get back to work.” He sighs. “If you see Jake, tell him we need to talk.”

I nod. “I will.”

The barstool creaks under his weight as he pushes himself up before walking out the door. Once the sound of his motorcycle ceases from the driveway, I grab my phone and send the text I’ve been avoiding. Unfortunately, it looks like time’s up.

Me: Why haven’t you told Milo yet?

Em: Why haven’t you decided to leave my sister alone yet?

I shake my head, frustrated, then crack my neck and pray for patience. How the hell Em and Dove are sisters is beyond me. Dove is sweet. Innocent. Beautiful in a classy way that’s managed to wreak havoc on my imagination any time I’m alone. And when we’re together. Honestly, she’s managed to stick inside my head since the moment we first met.

And there’s Em. Stubborn. Sexy. Tells you what she thinks without giving a shit whether or not you’ll agree with her. But she’s selfish and only thinks of herself. Doesn’t bother to ask how you’re feeling because she

doesn't care.

And right now, I want to smack her for it.

Me: This isn't about me and Dove. This is about you and your unborn child.

Em: Exactly. MY unborn child. It has nothing to do with you or Milo, so it doesn't matter if he knows. What are you doing with my sister?

Look at that. Maybe she does care about someone other than herself. Or maybe she doesn't, and she's still thinking about number one and doesn't want things to get messy between Dove and me. Heaven forbid it might affect the precarious little lie she's shrouded herself in.

Me: We're strictly friends. I haven't crossed any lines or anything, even though it's none of your business.

Em: My sister IS my business, asshole. She's too good for you.

Me: I'm glad we finally both agree on something. Now, answer my question. Why the hell haven't you told Milo?

Em: There's nothing for me to tell him. We're through.

Me: You might be through with him, but you're pregnant, and there's a 33.3% chance that he's the dad. He deserves to know.

Em: He doesn't want to be a dad, remember? Maybe he wouldn't WANT to know. It's not like he cares, anyway.

Me: Doesn't matter. I've already told you that if you don't tell him, I will.

Em: Fine. But if you don't stay away from Dove, I'll tell her ALL the things you and I used to do to pass the time. Blackmail can go two ways,

Gibson.

Me: Like I said. Dove and I are just friends. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you'd be okay dumping gasoline on your relationship with your sister simply to get out of taking responsibility for something.

Em: You think the unborn child in my stomach is me NOT taking responsibility for something? That's rich, Gibbs. Bravo. You hit the nail on the head.

Aaaand, there's the guilt she's mastered tapping into.
I sigh and rub my hand over my face.

Me: I've already told you that I'll take responsibility if the kid's mine. When can we do a paternity test?

Em: And I've already told YOU that a paternity test won't be necessary.

She's so damn infuriating!
I take a deep breath, praying for patience when I know she's hurting, and type my response.

Me: Do you need anything, Em? Regardless of whether or not I'm the father, I'm here for you.

Em: What I need is for you to stay away from Dove.

Me: That's not gonna happen.

Em: Why the hell not?

Me: Because we're friends, and she doesn't deserve to pay for our shit by losing a friend or an opportunity like touring with Broken Vows.

Em: What the hell are you talking about?

**Me: You should ask Dove that question. Why don't you ever talk to her?
She says you're not close.**

Em: That's none of your business.

So why does it feel like it is?

Me: Fine.

Em: Fine.

Me: Don't forget to tell Milo.

I hit send with a little more force than necessary before shoving my phone into my pocket.

This is bullshit.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“**I**’m calling for an update,” I say as soon as the call goes through. I’ve been putting off calling Reese for days, thanks to my own insecurities and anxiety, but I miss her. And even though a tiny voice inside of me is yelling that I’m a clingy burden of a friend, if I want to maintain connections, I need to cultivate them instead of expecting the other person to do the heavy lifting all of the time.

*Greaaat. I’m starting to sound like a freaking self-help book.
Stupid insecurities.*

It’s been a long twenty-four hours since the band meeting, and I feel as lost as ever. My attention slides toward my closed bedroom door as I lay on my bed, guilt gnawing at my lower gut. I could always try talking to Madelyn about my little predicament, but she isn’t exactly unbiased. The girl loathes Gibson like he’s the Devil himself, which only makes me more curious about what the heck happened between him and Em.

Then again, maybe I don’t want to know. Seeing him flirt with random girls at work is rough enough. I don’t need my sister to air out all of his dirty laundry about a bad breakup with her friend.

No, thank you.

Besides, she’s been acting weird ever since yesterday. She won’t talk to me. Won’t look at me. It’s like I don’t even exist. And it hurts. Which is why I’m calling Reese. I’d give anything to talk to someone who actually values me.

I can hear the smile in Reese’s voice as she returns, “Hey, Dove. River’s doing good. He has all the nurses wrapped around his finger and is healing well. It’s hard and slow, and he definitely still has a long way to go, but he’s

really good.”

“And you two? Are you two good?” I prod.

She sighs wistfully. “We’re great. It’s weird that it feels so right.” Her laugh rings through the speaker. “And it’s weird that I just said that. But they aren’t kidding. When you know, you know.”

“See? I told ya he’d be worth it,” I remind her. When she opened up about her secret relationship with River, I told her to jump in with two feet and that everything would work out. And by some miracle, I was right.

“Har, har. How are things with you?” Reese asks. “Gibson mentioned that you two have been hanging out a little bit.”

“Maybe.”

“And?”

“And nothing. We’re *friends*. Or at least that’s what he tells me.”

“That didn’t sound bitter at all,” she notes, her voice thick with sarcasm. “I heard you sang with the band, though. And that he, kinda, sorta joined you on stage.”

I can feel a blush creep into my cheeks at the memory alone. “Maaaaybe.”

“And how’d it go?”

“Good enough to be invited on tour with them,” I mutter under my breath before rolling onto my side.

“What?!”

“I know.”

“Dove, that’s amazing!”

“It’s *something*.”

“It’s amazing,” she corrects me. “Seriously. Are you going to go?”

Shoving my hair away from my face, I look up at the popcorn ceiling and ask myself the same question that’s been running through my mind since they offered. The truth is simple. I have no idea what to do, and I hate it. The indecision. The complexity of the situation. It isn’t black and white. It’s the opposite. There’s so much gray that I barely even know what’s up and what’s down anymore.

“Your silence is very telling, ya know,” she mentions, bringing me back from the swirling mess of indecision that’s been plaguing me.

With a sigh, I admit, “I don’t know what to do, Reese. Let’s stick a pin in the whole, *my sister’s pregnant and needs help* argument and focus on the other snag in the opportunity.”

“And what snag is that?” Reese prods.

“Gibson. The idea of touring with him—”

“Wait. He would be there too?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought he didn’t usually tag along on the tours.”

“The bigwig who sent over the invitation to the band insisted he be there to babysit Fender to make sure he’s where he needs to be.”

“Ouch,” Reese utters. “That’s gotta be a sore spot for Fen.”

“Honestly, I think he’s just grateful for the opportunity.”

“That makes sense. But why are you nervous about touring with Gibbs?”

“Because it’s Gibbs,” I answer vaguely.

“And that’s a bad thing? I thought you liked him—”

“I *do* like him. And that’s the problem. I keep thinking he’s attracted to me and that he’ll kiss me at random moments. But then he doesn’t, and he resets the whole friendship boundary like I’m the one toying with the line when in reality, I feel like I’m being treated like a yo-yo. Does that make sense? I mean, who does that?” I ramble.

“River was the same way. He was so wishy-washy because he didn’t want to break Milo’s trust, but he also felt the same pull I did. And even though it was hella risky and could’ve turned out to be a giant mess, it worked out. Maybe this thing between you and Gibson will work out too.”

“Maybe,” I hedge, my voice laced with doubt. “I don’t know, though. Sometimes I feel like something is holding him back from giving me a real shot. Not that I even want a real shot. Honestly, I don’t know what I want. But it feels different with him. *I* feel different with him.”

“Hmm,” she hums. “A wise woman once asked me a very simple question, and I’m going to do the same for you.”

I roll my eyes, knowing exactly where she’s taking this conversation. “It’s different, Reese—”

“It really isn’t. When you’re around him, does he make you happy?”

“He makes me frustrated.”

“Dove,” she scolds. “Answer me for real.”

“He *does* make me frustrated,” I counter.

“Aaaand?”

“Hmph.” I stick my lower lip out for good measure before admitting the truth, albeit grudgingly. “Yes. He makes me happy.”

“Then that’s all you can ask for. I say you go on tour. Live a little. Have

fun.”

“And what about my sister’s pregnancy? She needs me.”

“Hmm. When are you supposed to leave for the tour?”

“In a month-ish? I think? Honestly, I could barely focus on the information Fender was giving at the band meeting that I might’ve missed a few details. Gibbs even sent a text, but I’ve been avoiding actually reading it.”

“Because *that’s* a healthy response,” she quips.

I snort. “Don’t judge. It’s complicated.”

“I get it. Trust me. Do you know how long you’ll be gone?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I answer. “Again, the details are a bit fuzzy. But I think it’s only for two months since the main band is already on tour, and we’re just catching up with them, but we’ll be back by the end of the summer.”

“And when is your sister due?”

“Second week in September.”

“Which means that would work, right?”

“If she went to her due date, but our family is known for having early babies. I could miss it.”

“If she starts showing signs of labor, she can call you, and you can get a plane ticket. You’ll be fine—”

“You don’t know that,” I argue, throwing my forearm over my eyes as if hiding from my problems would make them go away. If only it were that easy.

“I most definitely do,” Reese murmurs, refusing to let me wallow in my indecision any longer. “Plus, you used to always talk about how your life was relatively boring and that you wanted to live vicariously through me and all my man drama. Now, you can live it on your own.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“I’m simply saying that you shouldn’t put your life on hold because your sister got knocked up—”

“Reese—”

“You know what I mean. And there isn’t any judgment from me or anything for her decisions, but they were still *her* decisions. You shouldn’t have to throw away your hopes and dreams and happiness all because of her.”

“It’s not that easy, Reese. She needs me.”

“I’m not saying you should kick her to the curb or leave her high and dry. You can be a supportive sister while still living your own dreams and making the most out of your own life, Dove.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I mumble under my breath, my gaze flicking toward the closed door again.

“All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be tied down solely because your sister’s life got turned upside down. Think about it, okay?”

“Fine. I’ll think about it.”

“Good.”

“Say hi to River for me,” I add, even though we weren’t that close. But if he’s important to Reese, he’s important to me.

“I will,” Reese replies. “And Dove?”

“Yeah?”

“For what it’s worth, I think you make Gibson happy too. Especially if you were able to get him on stage in front of a bunch of people. He’d be lucky to have you.”

If only he wanted me.

Digging my teeth into my lower lip, I let out another sigh and pull my knees to my chest as the familiar senses of indecision and inadequacy overwhelm me.

“Dove? You still there?”

“Yeah,” I breathe out. “I’m here. Sorry. I guess you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make the water any murkier—”

“You haven’t. To be honest, I don’t think it could get any murkier—”

“How about I make it easy for you? In twenty years, when you look back at your life, will you regret saying no to touring with a huge up-and-coming band for one summer?”

My chest tightens, but I stay silent. The idea of turning down this opportunity crushes me. The sights. The crowds. The songs. The thought of missing any of it makes me want to cry.

But the idea of leaving Maddie alone makes me want to cry, too. I can’t let her go through the rest of her pregnancy alone. Who’s going to buy her peanut butter or Wonder bread? Who’s going to remind her of her doctor appointments? She’s barely left the house since I moved in.

But she has been feeling better. At least somewhat, anyway. We haven’t had to use any IVs in a few weeks, and at her last appointment, the doctor

said everything was going smoothly. That's something, at least.

Maybe I *could* make it work.

"Just think about it," Reese prods, bringing me back to the present. "I gotta get going, but thanks for calling, Dove. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too," I murmur. "If you need anything, I'm here for you, okay?"

"Ditto. Bye, Dove."

"See ya."

I hang up and tap the corner of my phone against my chin as a sea of questions threatens to pull me under.

Maybe she's right. Maybe I should take the leap instead of overthinking everything. Maybe I should let Maddie deal with her own repercussions for a little while. It's not like I'll be gone for the birth. Besides, she might like the space for a bit. Maybe.

What do I have to lose?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As I wipe the sticky cocktail from the table with my damp, white rag, a familiar voice stops me. “Hey, can I have your number?”

I glance behind me. “Oh. Hey, Fen. What?”

“Sonny’s refusing to give me your number because he doesn’t want you to feel any pressure about the tour.”

My mouth quirks up on one side. “So, you’ve decided to bombard me at work while he was in the back?”

“Like a ninja, yes.”

“Smooth,” I quip, my gaze catching on a handful of girls sitting a few tables away. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they’re drooling over Fender’s rockstar persona that he wears like a fitted glove. The daggers they’re throwing my way aren’t helping.

“Ignore them,” he mutters, leaning closer with his head cocked and his entire body oozing charisma from every pore. “I don’t want your number to persuade you. I want to invite you to a killer party to persuade you.”

“I don’t go to parties.”

Pretty sure I’ve never been invited to one, a tiny voice inside of me adds. I shake my head and push the thought aside.

“You should,” Fender presses. “Because these things are fun, and fun is good.”

“Did you just quote Dr. Seuss?” I laugh.

“Maybe. *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* is a classic.”

Another laugh escapes me.

Who is this guy?

His eyes aren’t glazed, and he doesn’t reek of alcohol, which makes me

wonder if this is one of the first times I've seen him *really* sober.

"That, it is," I agree after a few seconds, way more amused than I should be at closing time.

"So, are you willing to take Dr. Seuss's advice and have some fun with the band?"

"Aww, there's the pressure Gibson was referring to."

An unflustered Fender points out, "That's not an answer. Come on. It'll be fun. It's only about an hour's drive from here at a friend's place. I can pick you up if you want."

"As in...a date?" I ask, my voice quiet and shaky.

Fender rakes his fingers through his long, wavy hair and gives me a mischievous smile as he steps even closer to me. My butt bumps against the table I'd been wiping off, and my spine straightens.

"Pretty sure my brother would kill me if I asked you out," he concedes. His gaze slides down my body. "But what a way to go."

The rag slips from my fingers and lands with a heavy plop against the stained concrete floor. He bends down and picks it up for me.

"Don't worry, Dovey. I know your secret." He hands the rag back to me.

"A-and what secret is that?" I ask, my attention darting back to the table of girls plotting my death a few feet away.

"That you have a thing for my brother even though he's too much of a bastard to get his head out of his ass and do something about it." He brushes my hair away from my face. "Come with me to the party tomorrow night. As friends."

"Fen," Gibson barks.

My head snaps in his direction. Sitting on the bartop is a crate box full of hard liquor that he'd brought up from the back. And now he's stalking over to us like a damn lion. Tall. Proud. And thoroughly pissed off.

"Told ya he'd kill me," Fen breathes out for only me to hear. Then he raises his voice and adds, "Hey, Sonny. I was looking for you."

"What do you want?"

"Dovey and I were discussing that party I was telling you about. You sure you still don't want to come?"

His eyes narrow into tiny slits. "She's not going to that party."

"Yeah, she is." Fender tosses his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. "Isn't that right, Dovey?"

If looks could kill, Fender would be curled up on the floor, and I'd be

lying next to him.

Gibson glares and crosses his arms. "You're not going."

"Why not?" I ask, my temper flaring. I've already gotten out of one controlling relationship with my parents. I'm not about to step into another one.

"Because it's not your scene," Gibson informs me.

"H-how do you know what is or isn't my scene?"

Brow arched, an arrogant Gibson drops his gaze to my feet and drags his attention up my dark jeans and black T-shirt before meeting my cold stare with his own.

But he doesn't say a word.

And that almost makes it hurt worse.

I've never felt more uncomfortable in my own skin before. Like I'm the ugly step-child in the perfect family. The unmatched sock in a pile of laundry. The lone Tupperware top that you want to throw away but hold onto *just in case*.

Yeah. His message is loud and clear.

A party isn't my scene because I'm not pretty enough. Not curvy enough. Not dolled-up enough. I'm average. And average girls don't go to killer parties with bands. They don't attract sexy bartenders. They don't do anything but blend into the background, which is exactly what I want to do right now.

Numb, I fold my arms and drop my gaze to the ground, but the moment triggers Fender in a way I never would've expected. "Seems my brother doesn't know you quite as well as I do, huh, babe? Come on." He kisses my temple. "Let's get you home."

I can feel Gibson's gaze on me as we walk past him, Fender's arm still tightly wrapped around me in protection, but I can't figure out why he'd put his head on the proverbial guillotine. Or what this could mean for the band, the tour, heck, even my current job at SeaBird.

When we reach my car, I glance at SeaBird's exit, turn to Fen, and whisper, "Why did you do that?"

Shameless, he grins and squeezes the back of his neck. "Well, at first, it was because I wasn't in the mood to be stalked by those clingy girls at the back table who were watching us. I figured if they thought I was interested in you, they'd leave me alone for the night. When Sonny entered the scene, I figured I'd kill two birds with one stone. No offense, but my brother's a

stubborn ass who likes to put people in boxes.”

“Boxes?” I tilt my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that once he’s made a decision about something or someone, he puts them in a box with a shiny red label and moves on with life. Like our dad. Me. You. Hell, everyone. And getting him to change his mind about those labels or to change the actual labels themselves for that matter, is almost impossible.”

“And what has he labeled us?”

“Well.” Leaning against the front door of my car, he raises his hand and ticks them off the list one by one. “My dad’s label is selfish asshole who can’t be trusted. Mine is unreliable, self-absorbed broken baby brother who needs protecting. And yours is innocent, untouchable angel who can’t be soiled.” His mouth quirks. “Some are more fitting than others.”

“So what did kissing me prove?”

“That maybe he should consider relabeling a few of us.” Leaning closer, he adds, “And when I say us, I mean you. I’m still unreliable, self-absorbed, and very broken.” He winks. “But you... Well, let’s just say that you won’t stay innocent forever. If he doesn’t get the balls to touch you, someone else will. A friend of mine is going to be at your place at five tomorrow. That’ll be enough time to get you ready for the party.”

“What friend? And you don’t know where I live.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Shit. I forgot you don’t live with Sonny. I’m staying at my friend’s place, so we can’t really do your fairy godmother makeover there. Hmm...” Clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, he asks, “What’s your address? I’ll have Trish meet you there.”

“M-my address?” I point to my chest.

“Is that a problem?”

My face scrunches.

Crap.

If Fender’s friend comes to my apartment, I won’t be able to hide the party from Maddie. Then again, if I actually go through with the tour, it’s only a matter of time before she finds out that I’m definitely branching out and going to parties, making friends, and apparently, having makeovers too.

With a deep breath, I lift my chin and answer, “Nope. No problem. My number is 555-843-4094.”

He pulls out his phone and punches in the numbers. “Perfect. Just sent you a text. Send me your address, and I’ll pass it along to Trish. She does hair

and shit and will get you ready to blend into the *scene*.” He rolls his eyes.

“Are you...?” I gulp, not nearly as amused by the situation as he is. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

He bounces his eyebrows up and down. “Trust me. By the time she’s done with you, Gibson will either have an aneurysm or an orgasm when he finally snaps. The choice is up to him. See you tomorrow.” The front door of my car squeals in protest, desperate for some freaking oil as Fen pulls it open and allows me to slip behind the steering wheel.

With a solid thud, he closes the door and waves at me until I start the engine and pull out of the parking lot while trying to figure out what it is, exactly, that I’ve agreed to.

A party? Me? The mousy little girl who sang in her church choir?

And a makeover? Led by Fen’s friend? Should I be worried?

There are so many unknowns and so many changes happening so dang quickly that I’m starting to feel dizzy. But if I don’t go, if I don’t follow through and have fun, will I regret it?

I think I will.

I squeeze the steering wheel a little tighter as a single thought rolls through my mind.

This is going to be interesting.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Knock. Knock.

I rush to the door and answer it with shaking hands. Maddie's holed up in her room, still not speaking to me, though I have no idea why, but I'm grateful for the privacy.

We'll see how long it lasts.

"Hi," I greet the stranger, folding my arms to keep from awkwardly waving at her. With chocolate brown eyes, straight black hair parted down the middle, and almond-shaped eyes rimmed in black liner, Fen's friend is gorgeous.

Her smile is genuine as she assesses me openly. "Fen's right. You're gonna knock his brother on his ass."

My eyes almost bug out of my head as I glance behind my shoulder, breathing a sigh of relief to find Madelyn still holed up in her room. Biting my lip, I step into the hall and close the door behind me.

"So, my sister doesn't exactly know about Fen or his brother or anything else for that matter. Is there any way we can keep it quiet?"

"Sure thing. I'll just say I'm going to beauty school, and you're nice enough to be my guinea pig."

"Wow." I pause. "That's actually perfect."

She taps her perfectly manicured finger against her temple. "I'm a thinker. Come on."

With a giant bag hanging off her shoulder and another one folded over her forearm, she follows me into my tiny apartment and down the short hall to my bathroom before setting up shop.

"Did you shower, wash your hair, and shave like he told you to?" she

orders, not wasting any time as she loops the black dress bag's hanger over the shower curtain rod.

I nod and rock back on my heels, trying not to hyperventilate. "Yup. I followed all the instructions in Fender's text to a T."

Except for the part about birth control and lady bits because...*boundaries*.

"Perfect." She holds up her finger, silently telling me to wait here before disappearing down the hall and returning with a chair from the kitchen. "Take a seat."

The array of hair and makeup products scattered on top of the counter is mind-blowing as she reaches for one after the other, explaining what each of them does and why they're necessary.

Like a dry sponge, I soak up every little tidbit, grateful for her patience and kindness while blown away at how little I really know about self-care.

"Your hair is gorgeous," she tells me, brushing it away from my freshly scrubbed and moisturized face. "I think waves would be fun. Maybe a boho braid on one side?"

I shrug one shoulder and meet her gaze in the mirror. "Whatever you think will make me blend in."

"Blend in? Girl, you were made to stand out! Do you have any idea how many girls would kill for natural highlights like this?" She lifts a few strands of my hair, letting the fluorescent light in the bathroom bounce off my white-blond locks to prove her point. "And the color? It's gorgeous."

Fighting off my blush, I mutter, "You're being too kind."

"Uh, trust me when I say I'm not. But what do you say if we add a little *rocker* to it?" She winks, fanning my curiosity and hesitancy at the same time. This girl is way too mischievous for my own good.

"As in?" I prod.

"What's your favorite color? Pink? Blue? Green? Ooo, we could do rainbow—"

"In my hair?" I screech.

She nods, her eyes brightening with excitement. "Only a streak or two. Nothing crazy, I promise. Like I said. Your natural color is gorgeous. This would simply make it pop."

I bite my lip, turn to the mirror, and take in my own reflection. The average girl with an average dusting of freckles, average lips, average eyes, average *everything*.

And I'm tired of being average.

After a few seconds, my gaze meets Trish's through the reflection again, and I nod. "I'm all yours, Trish. Go for it."

"Yay!"

We continue chatting about everything from how old we both are to how we ended up meeting Fender when my phone vibrates with a notification.

Gibbs: Hey. Do you want to come help me with a song tonight?

With a frown, I reread his message a few more times. Help him with a song? He's never asked me to help him with a song. Which means something's up. He's digging for information, but I can't decide why.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I type my response.

Me: I can't. I'm going to the party Fender invited me to. But maybe tomorrow night?

Gibbs: I can do tomorrow.

Me: Okay.

I tuck my phone back into my lap when it vibrates another time.

Gibbs: But as for tonight, it's a bad idea, Dove. Trust me.

I roll my eyes and stare at the message as Trish twirls my hair around her curling rod.

Of course, he would say that.

Why would tonight be a bad idea? It's a party, for Pete's sake. I should be allowed to go to it without someone giving me crap.

He's so frustrating. And *confusing*. He shouldn't be allowed to mess with my head like this, so why am I letting him? I'm tired of being the stupid yo-yo for him and his mind games. It's exhausting. And draining.

"What is it?" Trish asks.

"Gibson texted me."

"And?"

“And he says tonight is a bad idea.”

Trish snorts. “Of course, he thinks it’s a bad idea. He thinks Fender wants to get into your pants.”

“He doesn’t, though, right?” I ask, grimacing. “I mean, that’s what he told me. I assume he’s only trying to help me out with this whole shenanigan, but I also thought Gibson had a thing for me, and that never panned out, either. So. Ya know. Just a hunch, but I’m pretty sure my guy radar is broken.”

She shakes her head. “Your guy radar isn’t broken, but you did pick a stubborn one. Or at least that’s what Fender tells me. I’ve never met his brother. But you’re safe from Fender’s affections. Despite how much of a mess he can be sometimes, he wouldn’t stab Gibson in the back like that, and he also knows he’s too toxic for a girl like you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She sets down the curling rod and grabs the texture spray. “We all have our shit, right?”

I nod.

“Well, Fender knows you wouldn’t want to deal with his. He’s sporadic. Short-tempered. Addicted to drugs and alcohol. He’s...” She frowns. “He’s a mess, hun.”

“We’re all messes, though. Aren’t we?”

“In our own ways,” she agrees. “But maybe one day he’ll find a girl who thinks he’s worth the heartache. Because loving a man like that is bound to end in it.” She sighs and runs her fingers through my hair, breaking apart the curls until they’re messy waves with a few streaks of hot pink playing peek-a-boo through my natural blonde color. It’s gorgeous. And different. And so *not* me, but I kind of love it.

“So,” she continues, shaking off whatever somberness had snuck its way into the bathroom at the mere mention of Fen. “Are you going to text him back?”

I blink away the haze from her heavy reflection and reread Gibson’s message. “Um... Should I?”

“Yes. You definitely should. And you should make him sweat.”

How the heck do I do that?

“Did Fen mention if Gibson’s still planning on skipping the party?” I ask.

“And let you out of his sight? Not a chance. He’ll be there, hun. I guarantee it. Now, spin around so I can start on your makeup.”

I do as I’m told, then send my response to Gibson.

Me: What's a bad idea?

Gibson: Don't play dumb, Dove.

I roll my eyes.

Me: I was kidding, Gibson. But Fender's right. If I'm going on tour with the band, I need to get used to stepping outside of my comfort zone, right? This seems like a good test run. Besides, I'm going with Fen. He'll keep an eye out for me.

Gibson: Look, I love Fen. He's my brother. But he's bad news for you, Dove. You need to stay away from him.

"What's he saying?" Trisha asks. "And close your eyes. I wanna get your eyeshadow on."

With my eyes tightly shut, I tell her, "He said that Fen is bad news for me and that I shouldn't go to the party."

"Ooo, sounds like he's jealous."

"Or he simply thinks that Fen is bad news for me, just like you do—"

"Fen isn't bad news for you. He's a good guy, but I'm not sure if he's *your* guy," she clarifies. "Actually, I know he isn't, but that's beside the point. The point is that Gibson has a thing for you and is jealous. Ask if he's going to the party tonight."

"But you said—"

"Ask. Him!"

I open my eyes and look down at my phone. I type my message before Trisha lacquers my upper lashes with black mascara, making them look longer and thicker than I've ever seen them.

Me: If you're so nervous about tonight, you should come. Fen and I are going to share an Uber. You're welcome to tag along if you'd like.

Gibson: I work tonight.

Head cocked, I reread the message.

“What’s wrong?” Trish asks.

“He said he’s working tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Pursing her lips, Trish grabs my phone out of my hands and snaps a photo of me.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I ask.

“Just a second,” she mutters, her fingers flying across the screen.

I reach for my phone, but she dodges out of my grasp and keeps typing.

“Trish. What are you doing?”

“I’m merely texting him. One second.”

“What are you saying?” I screech, my panic rising with every tap of her acrylic nails against the screen.

“Give me a sec.”

“Trish—”

“Here.” She hands me the phone, her lips pulled into a cocky grin as she waits for me to read it.

Holding my breath, I scan the message and take in the picture of me with messy, wavy hair, dark eye makeup that makes my irises practically glow, and a pale gloss along my lips that keeps me right on the edge of sexy yet innocent.

“Y-you sent this?” I breathe out.

“Told ya that you’re gorgeous. Has he responded yet?”

I shake my head and reread the message she sent to him while pretending to be me.

Me: That sucks. I was hoping to see you. But I guess I’ll have to get your opinion through text. Do I look like I could be a rockstar now? I’m debating on the leather skirt and might go for jeans, but I haven’t decided yet.

“Leather skirt?” I squeak, peeking up at her from my phone. “I don’t own a leather skirt. I don’t own leather *anything*.”

Trish laughs as she reaches for the bag hooked on the shower rail. “I may have brought a few options.”

My phone vibrates, and I unlock it with sweaty palms.

Gibson: You're not wearing a leather skirt. And you should wash off the eyeliner.

“He told me to wash off the eyeliner,” I inform Trish.

She laughs. “Of course, he did. Tell him that you think Fen will like it.”

“Trish—”

“Just do it. Trust me.”

I take a deep breath and do as I'm told. Again. Because apparently, I'm a pushover.

Me: I think Fen will like it. The liner and the skirt. So I'm wearing both.

Gibson: This isn't you.

Me: Maybe it is. Maybe you shouldn't put me in a box, and you should let me decide what I want instead of assuming you know what's best for me.

Gibson: Dove...

Me: Have fun at work. I'll miss you.

I turn off my phone and set it face down on the counter.

“What'd he say?” Trish presses.

“That this isn't me.” I wave my hand up and down my body.

“And what do you think?”

“That I should be allowed to decide that for myself. And right now, I like the new me.” I turn to the mirror and take in my foreign reflection. She didn't cake on much concealer, allowing the freckles along the bridge of my nose to still shine back at me. But combined with the dark eye makeup and clear lip gloss, I feel like me. Only prettier. More defined. More striking. Like I stand out. But subtly. I lift my chin and muster up as much confidence as I can. “I like feeling attractive. And there isn't anything wrong with that,” I add, though I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

“You're right, Dove. There isn't. Now, let's get you in this skirt and see if it fits.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Okay.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DOVE

The music is blaring throughout the gigantic house as we step over the threshold. There are red solo cups scattered along the tables and bodies gyrating to the beat with their hands in the air. When the smell of sweat and Febreeze tickles my nostrils, my nose wrinkles, and Fen chuckles next to me.

“Let me get you a drink.”

“Oh, you don’t need to—”

“Hey, Dove!” Phoenix shouts, barrelling toward us before wrapping his arms around my waist and twirling me like I’m his own personal rag doll. “You look hot!”

I laugh and clutch at his shoulders to keep myself steady as he puts me back on my feet. “Why, thank you.”

“You call Trish?” he asks Fen.

Fender nods.

“Why didn’t you invite her?”

“She’s busy, man.”

Phoenix rolls his eyes and leans closer, his breath laced with alcohol as he whispers loudly, “Fen and Trish like to bang but pretend they don’t bump uglies when other people are around. They don’t know that we can see right through them. Right, Stokes?”

Stoker sidles up next to him with a beer in his hand. He smirks knowingly but doesn’t deny it.

“Assholes,” Fender mutters. “Come on, Dovey. Let’s get you a drink.”

“Dovey,” Phoenix murmurs, studying me with unfocused eyes. “I like it. Fen’s right. Let’s get you a drink.”

Like a bunch of sardines packed in a can, we make our way down the hall toward the kitchen, where a makeshift bar is set up. Mixers of all different kinds are sitting on one side of the island while the other half is filled with fancy liquor bottles and local beers.

“What’s your poison?” Fender yells over the music.

With a shrug, I chew on my lower lip and scan the options.

“No preference?” Phoenix asks as Fender goes about pouring straight tequila in one of the clean cups.

At least I hope it’s clean.

I shake my head, feeling so outside of my comfort zone that it’s not even funny.

After splashing some rum and Coke together in a cup, Phoenix hands it to me. “Here.” He makes another one for himself.

Fender shoots his whole drink, chugging his tequila straight before slamming the red cup on the counter and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His smile is lazy as he turns to me and says, “Ah, that’s the stuff.” Then his attention catches on a gorgeous redhead with dark lipstick and cat eyes who’s been staring at him since we walked in a few minutes ago.

His grin widens. “I’ll, uh, I’ll be back in ten. You good, Dove?”

The guy doesn’t even bother to look at me. He’s too distracted by the girl making sex eyes at him from across the room.

“Yes,” I answer, though I don’t even see the point. He’s so laser-focused right now that I’m surprised he even hears me.

“Good,” Fen decides. “Don’t go too far.”

I watch him weave through the crowd when Stoker slaps Phoenix on the shoulder. “Hey. Becca and Skylar wanted to chat about...shit.”

I almost snort but hold it in.

Subtle, Stoker. Really subtle.

“Come on,” he prods.

Phoenix turns to me. “You good?”

I nod. “Yeah. Sure. I’ll be right here.”

“All right. If you need anything, come find us. Fen’ll be back in a few.”

And they leave me too.

Which is great.

Juuuust great.

A fresh wave of loneliness settles in the pit of my stomach, mingling with the rum and Coke until I’m well aware of how pathetic I look. This is a party.

Parties are supposed to be fun. So, why am I not having any?

I bite my lip, swirling the contents in my cup, eyeing it warily before I bring it to my lips and take a sip. My expression sours.

Not bad. Not great.

Hmm...

“So, what do you think?” an unfamiliar voice asks from behind me. I nearly jump out of my skin before turning on my heel to face the stranger.

My blood runs cold.

I recognize him instantly, even though it’s been a while since he walked into SeaBird and scared the crap out of me. Same dark eyes. Same dark hair. Same over-the-top arrogance wafting off him like a heavy cologne.

My nose wrinkles with distaste.

He’d warned me to stay away from Gibson. He’d mentioned Em’s disappearance, trying to scare me. He made me question my sanity for weeks. Yet, here he is in the flesh.

I still don’t understand why he’d bother to lie to me like that, insinuating something terrible happened to an innocent girl when I know for a fact that she’s okay. Heartbroken but okay. If she wasn’t, Madelyn would’ve told me. We might have our own issues, but if my safety was at risk by hanging around Gibson, she wouldn’t stand for it.

Which means the man in front of me is the dangerous one. The liar. The guy who can’t be trusted.

Anxious, I scan the open floor plan for a familiar face, but all I see is a sea of strangers.

“Cat got your tongue, babe?” he asks, his head cocked as he scans me from head to toe.

Praying he doesn’t recognize me, I untuck my hair from behind my ear and give him a tight smile. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hey.” The guy looks me up and down. Again. His lips stretch into a satisfied grin as he scratches his chiseled jaw. Feeling exposed—and like a piece of meat at the grocery store—I cross my arms and try to blend into the white cabinets, though I know it won’t work. It seems I’ve caught this guy’s attention, and I have no idea how to escape it.

Where is everyone?

I look around his massive frame in search of Fender. Or Phoenix. Or heck, even Stoker will do. But there isn’t a single familiar face in sight.

“You’re new,” the stranger mentions, distracting me from my search.

“New?”

“To the scene. How’d you get here?”

“H-here?” I stutter, suddenly feeling guilty, though I have no idea why.

His smile widens. “Yeah. Here. This is my place. At least it will be. I’m buying it.”

“Oh. It’s...” Once more, I look around the giant mansion littered with gyrating bodies and booze. “Nice.”

He chuckles. “Thanks. You want me to freshen up your drink?”

I look down at the dark liquid and swirl it in my cup. The ice clinks against the plastic but isn’t enough to snap me out of my daze.

“Here.” He reaches for the cup, but I hug it to my chest.

“I think I’m okay for now. Thank you, though.”

He steps closer.

My butt hits the cabinets behind me.

“You a musician?” he prods.

“A-a musician?” I repeat, feeling like an idiot the longer this conversation continues.

“Yeah. Is that a difficult question?”

“I, uh, I guess not. How could you tell?”

He lifts his arms and motions to the giant space that is his kingdom. Or will be. I don’t know. The guy’s just as aloof as he was when we first met.

“Most of the people here are in the music industry in one way or another. They’re either producers, musicians, *aspiring* musicians, or someone who wants to sleep with a musician. So tell me, babe, which one are you?”

I gulp. “I guess that would make me an...aspiring musician?”

Satisfied, his smile turns sinister as he brushes his hand along the hem of my skirt. The simple touch causes acid to creep up my throat before I swallow it back and shy away from him.

“Figured,” he grunts, not the least bit bothered that I subtly turned him down. Like the last time. “Tell me, what would you do to be given an opportunity to make it big?”

“W-what kind of opportunity?” I stutter, hating the way my skin feels like spiders are crawling along it.

I need to get out of here.

“The kind of opportunity that any of these assholes would kill for,” he murmurs, crowding me against the cabinet even more. My back arches slightly as the counter digs into my spine. He smells expensive. I turn my

head away from him as his hands grip the granite on either side of me, caging me in and making me feel trapped. Like we're the only ones in the room, and there's no escape.

"You see, my dad is a *very* famous rock star," he explains. "He listens to me. Why don't we go somewhere, and you can give me a private show?"

"A-a private show?"

"Yeah. Only you and me. Come on. It'll be fun—"

"Uh, I don't—"

The stranger is wrenched back by the collar of his two-hundred-dollar T-shirt, and I cover my mouth as my pulse skyrockets.

"Stay the hell away from her," Gibson growls, his chest puffed up and his fists tight at his sides.

Where the heck did he come from?

Hands raised in surrender, the stranger defends, "Whoa, man. Calm down. We were just chatting."

"That right?" Gibbs challenges, his frustration palpable.

"Yeah. Seems to me like you could use some shit to take the edge off." He lowers his hands to his sides. "Speaking of, have you seen Fen lately?"

Gibson's nostrils flare. "What did you give him?"

"I didn't give him anything," he returns, though his sinister smirk tells a different story and makes me dislike him even more.

"Fen said you wouldn't be here," Gibson growls.

"Fen was sorely mistaken. He's one of my best customers and hadn't contacted me in a while. It would've been rude of me not to check on him, don't you think? I'm surprised *you* came, though." He looks over at me and chuckles under his breath. "I thought I recognized you, *Dove*. Have you asked him about what happened to Em yet?"

"Dove," Gibson barks, but he doesn't look at me. He's too busy glaring daggers at the guy in front of us.

"Yes?" I answer him, sounding like a squeaky little mouse.

"Go find Fen."

"I wouldn't suggest that," the stranger interrupts. "He disappeared upstairs with a sexy little redhead a few minutes ago. Don't worry, though. I caught him before he closed the door and gave him a little party favor, so I'm afraid he might be a while. However, if you'd like me to look after Dove until he's finished, I'd be happy to help."

My gaze darts from Gibson to the stranger and back again. But my feet

stay firmly planted. There's a power struggle here—a fight for dominance.

And I feel like I'm the bait.

“Stay away from her, Marty,” Gibson seethes. “And stay away from Fen.”

“You're not the only protective older brother, Sonny. I'm allowed to have a relationship with my baby bro. Hell, Dad encourages it, remember?”

My breath hitches.

Older brother?

Dad?

There's a third sibling?

I dig my trimmed fingernails into my palms and bite my tongue to keep from screaming at them for answers. But this isn't the time. Not now. Not with how much fury is radiating from Gibson. No. Right now, we need to get out of here.

“As for her,” Gibson's brother tilts his head toward me. “I guess I shouldn't be surprised that she still wreaks of innocence even though she's dating you. You've never exactly had the balls to do anything at all. Tell me... Does she even know what an orgasm is? I'd be happy to show her. You're into sharing, right?”

Gibson's fist rams into the side of his brother's face, striking harder than a baseball bat. The sound embeds itself into my memory, along with the sight of Marty's head flinging backward. I cover my mouth as tears well in my eyes, though I have no idea why they're even there. I'm not the one who got hit in the face. I'm not the one who obviously has more family issues than I could've ever imagined. And I'm not the one who had it aired out in front of a coworker-slash-friend. My heart aches, and my hands itch to reach forward and pull Gibson into a hug, but I know he'd push me away. And that almost makes it hurt worse.

“Stay. The fuck. Away from her,” Gibson spits. “We clear?”

Marty smiles, his straight, white teeth stained with a bright red that makes him look like a deranged clown from a horror movie. “Of course, *brother*. Enjoy the party.”

He grabs a random cup from the counter and swishes its contents in his mouth before spitting the crimson-tinted liquid into the sink. My expression sours as I watch it swirl down the drain, leaving tiny red stains along the sides of the white porcelain. Not bothering to rinse it away, Marty leaves us alone in the kitchen and grabs a random girl from the dance floor before

smashing his mouth to hers.

“Come on.” Gibson grabs my wrist. “Let’s go.”

“W-where are we going?” I ask, my eyes wide and my pulse pounding.

Without bothering to answer, he tugs me behind him, weaving between the crowd, his grip tight on my forearm until the night air hits my heated skin. I breathe it in, desperate for the fresh air to clear the haze from my head, but I still feel like I’m spinning. Like my knees might give out. Like the adrenaline pulsing through my veins is a limited resource, and I’ll come crashing down at any second.

Gibson has another brother. A brother who also enjoys dealing drugs to Fender and likes to get under Gibson’s skin, though I have no idea why.

The animosity between them is thick, though. So thick that I felt like I couldn’t breathe in there. Even now, I feel like I can’t breathe. There was simply too much. Too many secrets. Too many unanswered questions. Too much testosterone.

Too much of everything.

With my head tilted up toward the night sky, I continue breathing deep, praying it’ll be enough to keep my nerves from fraying any further.

“What is this?” Gibson demands, wrenching the cup I’d forgotten about from my hand. The contents splash over the rim as he examines it further with his upper lip curled in disgust. “Did he make this for you? How much did you drink?”

Confused, I shake my head and push my hair away from my face. “W-what?”

My barely-touched rum and Coke drenches the expertly manicured lawn as he flips the cup upside down and throws it with all his strength.

“Who made it for you?” he demands. “Do you feel sick?”

Again, I shake my head, still lost. “N-no. Phoenix made it. Why?”

“You sure?” Cupping my cheeks, he runs his thumbs along each side of my head. He looks at me carefully, dissecting every minor detail while making me feel like I’m underneath a microscope. But it’s the fear that does me in. The panic in his eyes makes my stomach clench and fills me with a desperation to put him at ease.

“I feel fine. Shaken,” I clarify, leaning into his gentle caress. “But fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” The warmth from his hands seeps into my skin, and I hate how quickly it disarms me. It isn’t fair. With a simple touch, I feel like I can

finally breathe. Because he makes me feel safe when in reality, he's one of the only people that I know could break me.

I peek up at him, taking in the swirling gold and green in his gaze that hints at how close he is to unraveling.

Ditto, Gibbs.

My tongue darts between my lips and moistens them. Then I add, "And, yes. I'm sure Phoenix made it for me. I watched him do it. Why do you ask?"

"Because I wouldn't put it past Marty to drug it so he could take advantage of you."

The idea of being taken advantage of is sickening, but I force the feelings aside and blink slowly. There's too much going on to think about what could've happened. Right now, I need to focus on what *did*, and it wasn't pretty.

"Marty?" I murmur. "As in your brother?"

The warmth from his touch disappears as he takes a step back and starts pacing the front lawn with his fingers raking through his messy, dark hair. "Yeah. Martin. The third brother. And the oldest."

"I didn't know you had an older brother."

"Most don't. As you can see, we aren't exactly close. He's a spoiled, manipulative drug dealer who preys on the weak. Like Fen. And—"

"Me?" I choke out, hating how right he is. I should've never come to this party. I should've never dressed like this. Gibson was right. I don't belong here.

"I was gonna say like Donny Hayes," he corrects me. "He saw our dad's fame as an opportunity to cash in. And because my dad feels guilty for being a shitty father, he lets him."

"Oh." I feel like so much information has been thrown at me that it's hard to keep up. My brows furrow. "And his name is *Marty*?"

It's odd to have a name for the stranger who messed with my head all those weeks ago. Especially when the intensity he shrouds himself in makes you feel stupid for ever questioning anything he says. But apparently, I should've.

"Martin, yeah," Gibbs clarifies. "Dad thought he was clever. Martin, Gibson, and Fender. They're all guitar brands. Come on. I parked over here."

He leads me down the street as the stars twinkle in the sky above us. The sight eases a little more of my anxiety as I look up at them, soaking up the beauty like a dry sponge, desperate for it to wipe away the last thirty minutes

from my memory. But it's no use. I screwed up tonight. I know it. Gibson knows it, too.

Our silence is heavy but comfortable. The sound of my expensive shoes clicking against the sidewalk and the occasional scuff of his black boots accompany our journey down the street.

But he isn't talking to me.

And I don't know what to say.

I feel guilty for putting him in that situation. I feel guilty for being dressed the way I am. I feel guilty for dragging him away from his shift at SeaBird and for being used as ammunition by his jerk of a brother.

Honestly, I feel like crap. I don't know how to fix it.

With my arms folded in hopes of keeping the night chill at bay, I glance in his direction, then drop my chin to my chest. "I'm sorry—"

"You sure he didn't touch you?" Gibson interrupts. His voice is low and gritty and makes me pause.

"What?"

He tucks his hands into his dark jeans, rocking back on his heels, reminding me of a little kid. Vulnerable. Anxious.

The combination guts me.

"Don't make me say it again," he begs.

I shake my head and inch closer to him.

"He didn't touch me, Gibbs," I whisper. "Promise."

"You sure?"

My feet ache from the fancy shoes Trisha lent me as I close a bit more of the distance between us. "Why do you ask?"

"You shouldn't have worn the leather skirt."

Looking down at the dark, supple material covering my upper thighs, I sniff. "I know." My entire body shakes as I dig my fingers into my biceps and choke back tears. "You're right. I shouldn't have come. It's my fault that he came onto me. I should've known better—"

"That's not what I meant—"

"Then what did you mean?" I breathe out, my guilt weighing heavily on my shoulders. What happened inside could've gone south so quickly, and it terrifies me.

Tortured, Gibson shakes his head. "I meant that it's a lot harder to remind myself of our boundaries when you look like this. I can imagine the thoughts running through my brother's head when he saw you walk in, and it makes

me want to hurt him more. But none of that is your fault. Do you hear me?"

My lower lip trembles, but I stay silent.

"I'm serious, Dove. Even if he did touch you, or drug you, or any other despicable shit that I wouldn't put past my brother, you did *nothing* wrong in there. And the fact that he even made you question that..." His breathing turns ragged. "I want to kill him, Dove."

Again, his fists tighten, and he starts to pace, but I finally give in and reach for his wrist. He stops, his gaze landing on my small hand touching him before it snaps to mine.

"He doesn't matter," I soothe. "I'm right here. And I'm fine. I promise."

"He could've—"

"But he didn't. I'm fine," I remind him.

Gibbs shakes his head but doesn't bother to argue.

"Can I ask you something?" I whisper.

With a sigh, he looks defeated but answers me nonetheless. "What is it, Dove?"

"Why would you care how he was looking at me? Why would you care how *anyone* might look at me?" I lift his hand and inspect the damage from his sucker punch. His knuckles are raw and angry, making my guilt flare up all over again as I wait for his response.

This is all my fault.

"Because they shouldn't be allowed to," he rasps. "They don't deserve you, either."

His breath tickles the top of my head before I peek up at him and find him staring down at me with a reverence that almost brings me to my knees.

"Either?" I question. "Who doesn't deserve me, Gibson?"

Jaw clenching, he shakes his head and tears his gaze from mine as if he can't even look at me.

"Get in the car, Dove."

"Will you stop deflecting?" I beg. "Who doesn't deserve me?"

Tortured, he looks down at me again. "I'm not good for you, Dove."

"Says who?"

"Says everyone who's ever met us."

"And you care what they think?"

"You deserve better than a one-night stand."

"How do you know what I deserve?" I challenge him.

"Dove—"

“Maybe I deserve to live a little. Maybe I deserve to be *wanted*. Did you ever think of that?”

His eyes widen in surprise. But it’s the hurt that really gets me. Like I’ve slapped him by stating the obvious. Because it *is* obvious he doesn’t want me. Since the moment I started working at SeaBird, he’s been distant. Cold. Only recently have we started to actually connect. Even now, I’m afraid that it’s simply because Fender wants me to tour with them. And any time we’ve danced along the edge of the cliff I’m desperate to jump from, he’s always pushed me back to safety under the guise of friendship.

It’s bullshit.

Absolute. Total. *Bullshit*.

And this high and mighty *doesn’t deserve me* crap that he’s spouting right now?

That’s bullshit too.

“You think I don’t want you?” he murmurs.

“I think you’ve set up imaginary boundaries and have put me in a neat little box that says *don’t touch* without even bothering to ask me what I want,” I spit. “Am I wrong?”

He shakes his head. “You don’t know what you want—”

“Oh, I don’t? Why not? Because I’m sweet, innocent little Dovey? Maybe I don’t want to be sweet anymore. Maybe I don’t want to be innocent. Maybe I want you to stop putting up stupid barriers and stupid red tape around what I can and can’t do.” My chest heaves from pent-up frustration. Or maybe I’m finally unraveling after what the heck happened inside with Marty. Regardless, I’m tired of it. All of it. The assumptions. The boundaries. The regret of being too much of a coward to go after what I want.

It’s all bullshit.

Gibson grabs my face, forcing me to hold his heated stare. “You don’t get it, Dove. I’m trying to protect you—”

“Then stop!” I shout, finally snapping. “My parents used to say they were protecting me, Gibson. And it was a load of bullshit they were spewing to control me. And I’m sick of it. Maybe I don’t want you to protect me. Maybe I want you to *use* me. *Kiss* me. Get under my skin. Chew me up and spit me out. I’m tired of being protected. I’m tired of being the stupid, sheltered girl that no one wants to—”

His mouth slams on mine as he swallows my protest whole.

I gasp, my heart still pounding a million beats per minute as he glides his

tongue along the seam of my lips before forcing his way into my mouth. Squeezing my eyes shut, I claw at his T-shirt like I can't get close enough. Like I'm on the edge of that stupid cliff and am ready to leap. To fall. To feel alive for an instant, even if I know the fallout will break me.

Because for once, he isn't pushing me away. He's pulling me closer. And I can't get enough of him.

His fingers dig into my upper thighs, branding me with their force as he picks me up and carries me around the corner of the nearest house. I hook my legs around his waist and let him take me to a secluded spot where the streetlight refuses to touch. There's a low half-wall made of brick that separates the houses. Perfectly trimmed hedges line it, adding to the private ambiance radiating from our little nook between yards.

Unfortunately, I'm too distracted by his kiss to appreciate it. Honestly, we could be in the middle of the dance floor at Marty's future house, and I wouldn't give a crap. As long as Gibson Hayes keeps kissing me, I'll be a happy camper.

Holy crap.

I'm kissing Gibson Hayes.

And he's kissing me back.

Finally.

With my fingers tangled in his dark, messy hair, I slip my tongue between his lips and moan when his unique flavor teases my tastebuds. He tastes like peppermint. Delicious. Refreshing. And so freaking crave-worthy. I tilt my head to the side and taste him again, committing the moment to memory. I've been craving him since the second we met, and now that I've had a taste, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to go back to only being friends.

I want more.

No. I need it.

"You want me to use you?" He growls against my throat before setting me down on the half-wall. The rough brick scratches my sensitive thighs but only spurs me on.

I reach for his belt buckle and tug him closer. "Yes."

"You want me to take your innocence?" He shoves my skirt up a few more inches until it bunches around my waist.

"Yes," I breathe, my fingers slipping beneath the hem of his shirt.

He bites my neck. "You want me to chew you up and spit you out?"

I throw my head back and give him better access to my throat. "Yes."

“No matter the consequences?” His teeth scrape along my flesh before he sucks hard.

My eyes roll back in my head, and I spread my legs open, desperate for friction. For him. For whatever he’s willing to give me.

“You should stop talking,” I suggest.

He laughs darkly, then slides his hand between my thighs and thumbs at the thin cotton fabric covering my sex.

“Not one for dirty talk?” he challenges.

“I wouldn’t know.” I roll my hips into him and moan softly. “But you should keep doing that.”

He adds a little more pressure to my core. “Like this?”

“Yes,” I breathe out. My fingers dig into his wrist as he continues his delicious torture. I’ve never touched myself. I’ve never let anyone else touch me, either. But if this is what it’s like, I’m thinking my sister wasn’t quite as dumb as my parents made her out to be.

“You want me to make you feel good?” he murmurs, his tone softer this time while keeping up the same torturous rhythm.

I nod and try to catch my breath, but it’s a wasted effort. Even thinking straight right now is way too much work. All I can do is feel. His fingers toying with my entrance. His wrist tight and steady beneath my hand. His breath brushing against my throat before being replaced by his lips. His teeth. His tongue.

“Gibson.”

“Trust me,” he orders. It isn’t a request, but I’m not sure I’m coherent enough to reply anyway.

Sliding down to his knees, he grips my thighs and spreads me wider before looking up at me with so much heat I’m surprised I don’t burn up on the spot. I bite my lip and try to push away the anxiety pulsing through my veins. I might want this, but there’s a quiet voice inside my head that’s reminding me about what happens when you jump off a cliff.

You fall.

And gravity isn’t always forgiving.

With his gaze on mine, he leans forward and runs his nose along my core. I hold my breath but don’t shy away from him. The heat. The slight pressure. It’s enough to drive a girl crazy, and he hasn’t even really touched me. Pushing my underwear to the side, that same dark swirling need shines up at me in his hazel eyes.

This man might be the death of me.

But what a way to go.

My hips buck on their own, desperate to get closer to him as his tongue slides into me. I squeeze my eyes shut, my shame battling lust. But still, I don't shy away from him. I'm too turned on to think straight. And I want this. I want him. So much that it hurts.

"Watch me," he growls, his voice low and throaty. My eyes snap open. A satisfied Gibson hums his approval, sending tiny vibrations pulsing through me as a slight sweat breaks out along my skin. He presses his thumb above my entrance as his tongue continues to push into me. Slowly at first before picking up his pace as the flutters of pleasure quicken.

"I'm going to..." I swallow and throw my head back, tangling my fingers in his hair as he sucks on my nub and pushes two fingers inside of me. It's official. I've never felt so good in my entire life.

"I'm gonna come," I breathe. "I'm gonna come."

He adds a little more pressure, pumping his fingers in and out in rhythm with his mouth and pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

I'm so close.

"Gibson," I mouth, my voice absent.

Then he bites, and a silent scream rips out of me. My fingers scrape against the brick wall as I try to keep myself from falling off the other side, but Gibson's firm grip holds me in place, allowing me to let go. So, I do. Like a firework, I explode, tingles spreading from my core and out to my fingers and toes as wave after wave of euphoria crashes into me.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

Heart racing, I try to savor the feeling, but it still ends far too quickly and leaves me desperate for more. More orgasms. More touching. More Gibson—if he isn't done with me yet.

When the prickles that started at my sex and spread to my limbs begin to subside, I catch my breath and look down at him. His smile is cocky as he licks his lips, his chin glistening in the pale moonlight before he stands up and cups the ridge in his pants.

I gulp.

There's a ridge.

In his pants.

And I kind of want to touch it.

I've never been in this situation before. I don't know what to do. Or what

to say. Or how he might expect me to reciprocate. I open my mouth but shut it just as quickly.

That same arrogant grin toys with me as he towers over me and nudges himself between my thighs. “Dove—”

His phone blares, and he drops his head back in disappointment before digging it out of his pocket.

“It’s Fen,” he mutters to me. Answering the call, he barks, “Where are you?”

“Dove. She’s gone.” Fender’s voice is muffled but panicked.

Gibson looks down at me, his eyes flinty and dark, though I’m not sure if it’s because of what we did or if it’s because he’s pissed at his brother for being so careless.

“I only left her for like ten minutes, man,” Fen continues. “No one’s seen her. She’s not where I left her, Sonny—”

“I have her.”

“You came? Sonny, I swear—”

“You’re a selfish asshole, Fen,” Gibson growls.

“Look, I made a mistake—”

“You can screw up your life all you want, Fen, but when you promise to look after someone, you don’t bring them to your dealer’s future house and disappear to get high and hook up with someone. That’s a new low. Even for you.”

“Sonny—”

He shakes his head, his frustration coming back with a vengeance as he squeezes the back of his neck and seethes, “I don’t want to hear your excuses right now, Fen.”

“But where is she? Let me talk to her—”

“Get a ride with Phoenix tonight.”

Gibson ends the call, but his screen lights up with another message before he has a chance to slip his phone back into his pocket.

It’s from Em.

Em’s New Number, to be exact.

My breath hitches and a sharp pain hits me square in the chest as I stare at the familiar name as if I’ve seen a ghost.

“Shit,” Gibson curses under his breath, not bothering to read the message before shoving his phone back into his jeans.

I’m too stunned to move. To breathe. To do anything at all except stare

blankly at where his phone used to be.

At least she's not dead, I remind myself, battling the urge to laugh and to cry at the same time. This is insane. Why would Em be texting him? How long have they been texting? When did they even end things in the first place? Am I the side piece? Is he still dating her? After what we just did?

I cover my mouth and try not to curl into a ball as the realization hits me.

What did I do?

Tortured, Gibson murmurs, "Dove..."

"It's fine," I choke out. "I told you to use me, remember? Are you...?" I look down at his crotch and bite my lip to keep it from quivering. "Are you good to go? Do I need to reciprocate or anything?"

I can feel his frustration tainting the air as he shakes his head in a twisted concoction of anger and defeat before he sighs and drops his chin to his chest.

"Come on, Dove. Let's get you home."

On shaky legs, I try to stand up but nearly collapse as my high heels sink into the grass beneath my feet. Cheeks burning, I struggle to regain my balance and feel like a helpless baby deer who can't walk straight.

Apparently, getting emotionally sucker-punched after an orgasm will do that to a girl.

Gibbs grabs my hips to keep me steady, pulling my skirt down to cover my exposed butt as I bite back the urge to cry.

This is hands down the most embarrassing moment of my life, and I'd kill to be anywhere but here. That's not how life works, though. And there are consequences to my actions. To leaping off a cliff without caring about the fallout. Now, I have to deal with them.

But I was right about one thing.

Gravity's a bitch.

Once my skirt is situated, Gibson guides me back to the street but doesn't say a word. He opens the passenger door, the hinges groaning in protest, and I climb inside his beat-up car. After buckling, I curl into the corner of my seat as he gets behind the wheel and starts the engine without bothering to say a single freaking word.

No explanation.

No apology.

Heck, not even a lecture about how stupid I am for coming to this party in the first place.

Only silence.

Pure. Suffocating. Silence.
So this is what it's like to feel used.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“**W**here the hell were you?” Maddie demands as soon as I open the door. I close it behind me and set my purse on the counter but stay quiet. I figured she’d be asleep by the time I got home. Go figure that fate would continue to pile on the crap tonight.

I can’t do this right now. I want nothing more than to climb into bed and pretend this night never happened.

“Can we talk about this tomorrow?” I mumble under my breath, my gaze glued to the floor as I try to slip past her.

“Is this...?” She grabs my chin and forces me to tilt my head, giving her a better view of my throat. “Is this a hickey, Dove?”

I jerk away from her. “It’s nothing—”

“Where were you? And who the hell put that thing on your neck?”

The tang of blood explodes in my mouth from biting the inside of my cheek too hard. But I can’t hold it in any longer. Not when she’s giving me that look. The look that says she’s better than me. That she’s disappointed in me. That she deserves an answer for her ludicrous question, even though it’s *none* of her business.

“I’m sorry. Since when are you my mother?” I snap, but she doesn’t miss a beat.

“Since the moment you stopped caring about telling me where you’re going or who you’re going with. If you’re going to live under my—”

“So help me, Maddie, if you finish that sentence with *roof*, I’m going to lose it.”

Her mouth snaps shut, but her glare is still firmly in place.

“Can we please do this later?” I beg.

“Who gave you the hickey?” she demands—again—her tone lacking any patience or understanding. The irony isn’t lost on me.

“No offense, Maddie, but I’m not sure you really have a leg to stand on when it comes to hickeys or staying out late or giving an explanation on anything at all, for that matter.”

Her nostrils flare as a flash of hurt sparks across her features before she covers it with determination. “We’re sisters—”

“Then why do you treat me like crap?” I spit. “Why do you keep me in the dark? Why do you *only* talk to me when you have a bone to pick? That’s bull crap, and you know it. I moved here to be close to you. I moved here to help take care of you. I moved here—”

“I never asked you to move here!” she yells, finally boiling over. “You’re ruining everything!”

As if I’ve been slapped, I freeze and swallow back the lump in my throat, convinced I heard her wrong yet positive I didn’t.

Is that what she really thinks? How could I be so blind?

With my arms folded across my chest, I dig my nails into my forearms, praying the bite of pain will be enough to keep my tears at bay. As soon as I get to my room, I can let go, but not yet.

Not yet.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m moving out, huh?” I confess, holding her heated stare with my own.

A flash of fear greets me before being replaced with indifference. That same stupid indifference that’s been her constant companion ever since I moved in with her.

She folds her arms, her round belly acting like a shelf. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve been asked to tour the East Coast with a band.”

“What band?”

“Does it matter?” I counter.

“Yes.”

Of course, it does.

I roll my eyes. “Fine. Broken Vows.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not allowed.”

“And like we’ve previously discussed tonight, you’re not my mother.”

“Why would you go on tour with Broken Vows? Are you touring like...” She hesitates, her bitterness taking a backseat to her curiosity as she purses her lips and probes, “As a groupie?”

I laugh and shake my head. “No, but it’s good to know that a single hickey has managed to warp your perspective of your sweet, innocent, naive little sister so quickly.”

Shoulders hunched, she takes a step toward me, but I lift my hand and stop her.

“Dove—”

“I would get to sing. And no, I didn’t sleep my way into the gig, if that’s what you’re going to ask. It just...fell in my lap. I wasn’t going to take it. I didn’t want to leave you. But since I don’t want to ruin anything else—”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“That’s exactly what you meant, Mads.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she lets out a long, slow breath. Like she doesn’t know what to say. Heaven forbid she actually apologize. But she wouldn’t be Madelyn Walker if she didn’t let her pride get in the way of every single interaction we ever have, so why start now?

Still, even with her chin lifted in contempt and her eyes narrowed into tiny slits, I can see past her façade. Past the lies she tells herself that she needs to be strong. That she needs to protect herself from relationships. That she’ll only get hurt.

“I get it, Mads. I might be your sister, but I was also your parents’ little minion for years.” With the back of my hand, I wipe beneath my nose and release a shaky breath. “Funny how you’re so terrified of judgment yet so quick to jump to your own conclusions.”

“Dove—”

“It’s fine. I’m exhausted, and I’m going to bed.” I sniff, blinking back tears as I step around her and down the hall before murmuring, “Goodnight.”

She doesn’t chase me.

She doesn’t say a thing.

She simply lets me go.

And even though I’m not surprised, I could’ve really used my sister tonight. Someone who could’ve promised that everything would be all right. That I’m more than a good time. That Gibson’s crazy for not grabbing onto me with both hands.

But I’m a naive fool who received exactly what I asked for.

And now, I need sleep. Maybe it'll make my future seem a little less bleak. Especially if I'm honestly going on tour with him and will have front row seats to the many conquests that will be knocking on his door. I can't blame them. I knocked too.

Then I got knocked on my butt. And I don't know how to get up again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GIBSON

I screwed up.
I touched her.
I soiled her.
I *used* her.
I chewed her up and spit her out.
I did what I promised myself I never would.
I crossed the line with Dove Walker.
And I want to regret it.
But the only thing I regret is that I touched her sister first.
Before I met Dove.
Before I knew how freaking devastated she would be if she ever found out about my past.
Before I knew what real attraction was.
What real *feelings* were.
I've never felt this way about anyone in my entire life.
And I can't do anything about it.
But the worst part is that I'm too much of a coward to own up to it and tell her the truth.
I can't hurt her like that.
She deserves more.
So much more.
So, where does it leave me?
Fucked.
Royally fucked.
I slam my hand against the steering wheel before shoving my car into

park and heading inside my house as the familiar poison I've grown accustomed to settles in my veins.

I need my damn guitar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Hey,” a voice calls.
I roll my eyes and look over my shoulder.
“Shouldn’t you be on stage?” I snap.

Fender smiles tightly, squeezing the back of his neck while looking *super* uncomfortable that he’s talking to me.

Ditto, Fen.

“We’re on break,” he informs me after a few seconds.

Of course, he is.

“What do you want, Fender?” I ask, scrubbing at the poor lacquered table as if it’s offended me.

“I want to apologize.”

Gaze narrowed, I drop the damp dishrag onto the table I’d been wiping and turn to face him fully. Then I cross my arms and wait.

Sheepish, he hooks his thumbs in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “I was an ass. I shouldn’t have ditched you.”

Silence.

“That’s it?” I finally ask a few awkward moments later. “No excuses?”

A breath of laughter escapes him, though there isn’t any humor in it. “There isn’t an excuse that would justify what I did, Dove. I was selfish. I thought I was strong enough to face my addiction on my own, but as soon as I walked into that house, I got the itch. And instead of fighting it, I ditched you to find a solid distraction before Marty found me and slipped me a hit. I assumed you’d be fine. And even if you were, it was still messed up to leave you in a random house with a bunch of strangers. I messed up,” he reiterates, his voice more serious than I’ve ever heard it. “And I’m going to take that

shit more seriously from now on. Not only for me. But for the band.”

The sincerity in his gaze is promising, and I wish I could believe him. But it isn't my job to make him face reality. It's my job to support him and pray that I'm wrong.

“I think that's a good idea,” I murmur. “To take your addiction seriously.”

“That's the plan.”

“Good. And if there's anything I can do to help, let me know, okay?”

“Sure thing, Dove.”

“Good,” I repeat with a soft smile.

“So...” He grimaces and leans closer to me. “Are you still coming?”

I pick up the damp rag from the table and ask myself the same question. Again.

Even though I'd already told Maddie I was going in the heat of the moment, now that I've calmed down, I feel...helpless. Like I'm at a crossroads with no idea which path to take or what's best for me, let alone what's best for Fender, or Gibson, or Maddie, or her unborn baby.

Indecisiveness gnaws at my stomach as I shrug one shoulder. “I have no idea, Fen.”

“Is it because I screwed up?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, hating how my attention shifts over to the bar before I can help myself. Just like every other two minutes since I walked into SeaBird for my shift.

“Ooooh.” As if a cartoon light bulb has gone off above his head, Fender drops his voice low and asks, “So, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

I turn back to an amused Fen who smirks back at me. “You're a terrible liar.”

“I may have been told that a time or two,” I admit grudgingly before I go back to scrubbing the already cleaned table. “Guess all my lying skills got passed off in my sister's genes and skipped mine.”

He laughs. “It's probably a good thing. My brother hates liars.”

“I don't care what your brother likes or hates,” I huff, giving the bar my back. Maybe it'll keep me from looking over at him again.

“Was that lie for me or you?” Fen asks, unconvinced.

“You should probably get back on stage.”

“Nah. This is much more interesting,” he chuckles. “You should let me

help. I know my brother better than anyone.”

“Both of them? Tell me; was it Martin who got you hooked on drugs, or did you find those all on your own?” I pry, desperate to change the subject.

Fender pulls back, his earlier amusement dissipating instantly while making it very clear that I crossed a line. “You’re full of Hayes family secrets, aren’t you?”

Crap.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize, my throat closing with guilt as I drop the stupid rag back to the table. “That was uncalled for.”

“I was prying at your weakness first. I guess it’s only fair I took a blow too,” he mutters. “I gotta get back on stage.” He steps toward the bottom stairs that lead to the stage, but I get in front of him.

“Wait.”

Jaw tight, he keeps his feet planted and looks down at me. “We’re good, Dovey.”

“No, we’re not. I’m sorry, Fen. Seriously. I’m not one who lashes out. Not usually. That was uncalled for. Obviously, I care what your brother likes and hates because he’s turned me into an insane person who questions every single thing she says or does in hopes of catching his attention, and I didn’t want to admit that *very* pathetic truth out loud, so I lashed out—”

“You don’t have to explain—”

“After the party, we...had a moment,” I blurt out, revealing my secret in exchange for the one I rubbed his nose in. “And even though I asked for it, and I pretended that it wouldn’t mean anything to me, he got a text from his ex right after, and it hurt. That’s what happened. That’s why I don’t know what to do or how to feel or if going on tour with him is a good idea. It has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me and my own insecurities. I’m a mess, Fen.”

With his head cocked, he studies me carefully. Like he thinks I’m delusional but doesn’t want to offend me.

“Which ex, Dovey?”

The fact that there’s more than one makes me want to puke, but I whisper, “Em.”

“He’s still texting Em?” Fen demands, his brows reaching for his hairline.

I nod, nearly choking on the constant lump in the back of my throat that manages to sneak up on me anytime I think of Gibbs or that stupid text that haunts me like a freaking nightmare.

What did it say?

Was he going to meet up with her or something?

And why do I even care?

Scrubbing his hand over his face, Fen curses under his breath, then stares back at me for a few seconds as if at war with himself.

“What is it, Fen?”

“Em was toxic. She wasn’t a bad person, but she definitely knew how to mess with a guy’s head, I guess. But you don’t have to worry about Sonny. Not where Em’s concerned.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because he was in it for the sex. Milo’s the one who fell for her.”

“If that was true, Gibson wouldn’t be texting her anymore,” I argue.

“Trust me, Dovey. If Sonny was texting her, there’s a reason, and it isn’t because he’s interested in hooking up again.”

A spark of hope flashes inside of me, but I try to rein it in. “H-how do you know?”

“Because he’s been too into the new girl at his work.”

And just like that, the hope fizzles out again. Blinking back tears, I shake my head. “I don’t know how true that is. Especially now that he’s gotten what he wanted.”

Fen lifts his chin, his gaze darting over to something behind me before quickly returning to me. “Wanna bet?”

“Hey, Dove,” Gibson murmurs behind me. My eyes widen in shock, and I straighten my spine, but my reaction fans Fender’s amusement.

“Hey, Sonny,” he answers for me. “Dove and I were chatting about the tour.”

“You’re still going?” Gibbs asks, his question directed at me even though I’ve refused to look at him. I’m not sure I can. But I don’t want to be a coward, either. And I don’t want him to see how much he’s affected me. How much he’s *hurt* me.

I swallow thickly, forcing myself to face him, though I keep my gaze glued to the ground.

Baby steps.

“I was thinking about it,” I admit, my voice nothing but a whisper.

“She wasn’t thinking about it. She’s already decided. Right, Dove?” Fen interjects like a solid nosey younger brother.

I bristle before peeking up at Gibson. My knees go weak almost instantly,

and my annoyance at Fen's remark transforms into more hurt. More pain. More embarrassment. But I don't know what to say.

"Are you?" Gibson prods.

"I..."

"Dove..." Fen reprimands, his voice daring me to argue.

I shoot him a glare, then turn back to Gibson. "Would you be angry if I said yes?"

The bags under his eyes make my chest ache before he rubs his hands over his face. "No, Dove. I wouldn't be angry. You didn't come over for the writing session."

"I didn't know I was still invited."

He sighs, stepping closer and dropping his voice low. "Can we... Can we talk?"

"I'm gonna get back on stage," Fender informs us. He slaps his hand against Gibson's shoulder with a little more force than necessary before skipping up the stairs, looking lighter than before. Like maybe my mess of a life is a good enough distraction from his, and I kind of hate him for it.

Lucky jerk.

"I should probably get back to work," I mutter before reaching for the same damp towel that's still where I left it.

"Sammie's covering for me, and you haven't taken a break yet."

Surprised, I tilt my head to one side. "You noticed?"

He scoffs. "You have no idea. Can you give me five minutes? Please?"

I stay quiet, and he takes full advantage of my indecision by pressing his hand to my lower back. "Come on."

We make our way down the hall and through the back exit that opens into a small alley. It's empty, and I'm not sure about our lack of buffers out here.

He was right. We shouldn't have crossed that stupid line. I should've been happy with the label he'd placed on us. I shouldn't have pressured him. We shouldn't have kissed. I should've—

"Dove." He says my name like a plea. A prayer. With a reverence that shouldn't make my body hum with anticipation, especially after everything he put me through, but it still does.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," I mumble, rubbing my hands up and down my bare arms. The moon is still shining, casting shadows along his chiseled features. It makes him look more handsome. More untouchable.

He steps closer, and a piece of gravel skitters across the asphalt. My focus

zeroes in on it.

If only I could skitter away from this situation, too.

“Dove. Listen to me, okay?”

I shake my head but stay quiet.

He tries again. “Dove, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. I told you to use me—”

“I wasn’t using you.”

“I told you to chew me up and spit me back out,” I argue, still avoiding his gaze. “I asked for it. Honestly, I begged you to. I was stupid. I should’ve known—”

He grabs my chin and forces me to look up at him. “I had no intention of using you for sex, Dove.”

Then why did you? I want to ask, but I bite my tongue.

His dark gaze bounces around my face, taking in every minor detail before coming to some kind of conclusion, though I have no idea what it is.

“Listen,” he starts. “About Em—”

“I don’t want to know.”

“It’s not what you think, Dove.”

With my eyes squeezed shut, I grab his wrist that’s holding my chin hostage, but he doesn’t budge.

“Seriously. I don’t want to know, Gibbs. Not even after your brother’s warning in the bar all those weeks ago. Not after him bringing up Em again at the party. I’m just...done.”

“What do you mean, *at the bar?*” he growls.

“He came in looking for Fen a few weeks ago.”

“Who? Marty?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “He warned me to stay away from you. That Em disappeared after you broke up with her. After you and Milo broke up with her,” I clarify, my voice cracking. “How could I have been so stupid to think that me, an innocent little virgin, could hold your interest? Of course, you were still hooking up with Em. But at least she’s not dead, right? That’s what your brother made it sound like, so there’s *that*.”

“Look at me, Dove.”

“I can’t right now,” I choke out.

“Please?” His voice is raw. Gritty. Like he’s gargled broken glass. Like he feels as tortured as I do.

My lower lip quivers, and I shake my head, keeping my eyes tightly

closed.

This is insane. I shouldn't care. I *know* I shouldn't. But I can't help it. My heart gallops in my tight chest.

His lips brush against mine. The movement is soft. Gentle. Heck, it's not even a touch. It's like a breath. A tease. A caress that I can feel deep in my soul. And it hurts. It hurts so much. I know I should pull away. That I should tell him to leave me alone. But I can't. I'm too desperate to steal another sample of the man in front of me to see if he tastes as good as I remember. So good that I forget to pull away.

No.

Instead, I simply stand there and savor the moment. Like an addict. A very *desperate* addict.

My annoyance with Fender dissipates almost instantly as the realization hits me. If this is what he feels every time he takes a hit, I get it. I get the pull. The rush. The need.

I'm not strong enough to push Gibson away. The fact that I haven't grabbed his face and forced my tongue into his mouth is a freaking miracle.

Until I see Em's name flash through my mind.

A whimper escapes me.

Sensing my hesitancy, the brush of his lips disappears, but he doesn't pull away. Not fully.

With his forehead resting against mine, Gibson murmurs, "I'm sorry, Dovey. I'm so sorry."

"You don't owe me anything," I whisper, though I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

"Yeah, I do. I just...I don't know what to tell you."

I laugh. But it's pained and forced.

Of course, he doesn't know what to tell me.

What do you tell a girl who has some major feelings for you that you're still in contact with your ex while refusing to tell her why?

His nostrils flare as he searches for the right words. And because I'm a fool, I wait for him to find them.

"It's complicated," he mutters after a few seconds. "I know that's a bullshit excuse, but I promise that Em and I are more of a nuisance to each other than anything else right now."

The knife lodged in my chest twists at his non-answer.

"You don't have to lie to me, Gibbs."

“I’m not lying. I promise.”

“Then who is she?”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down in his throat. “She’s no one, Dove.”

“Don’t lie,” I beg.

“Do you know what I’d give to leave Em in the past? So I could focus on...” His voice trails off as his face contorts in pain.

“Focus on what, Gibbs?” I urge, my pulse racing.

“I shouldn’t have touched you the other night.”

My heart plummets to the pit of my stomach, and I refrain from rubbing at the ache in my chest where it’s supposed to be. Why does it feel like we’re always taking one step forward and two steps back? Why does he have to make everything so damn hard?

“Oh,” I breathe out.

“I took advantage of you.”

“I told you to—”

“You didn’t know what you were getting yourself into.”

I roll my eyes as another heavy dose of self-deprecation settles into my bones. “I might be innocent, Gibbs, but I’m not stupid.”

“No. You’re smart. And beautiful. And for some reason, you decided to give me the time of day, and I took full advantage of it. Even though I knew you’d regret it the next day. I lied to myself that night. I thought I could keep this casual. Hell, I broke my only rule.”

“What rule?”

“No shitting where I eat, remember?” His breath of laughter fans across my cheeks. “But I did it anyway. Do you wanna know why, Dove?”

I sniff. “Because I begged you to.”

“No. It’s because I’ve been looking for an excuse to touch you since the moment we met, and when it fell in my lap, I couldn’t control myself. But I can’t promise you a relationship or a commitment.”

“I haven’t asked you for them—”

“Yeah, but they’re what you deserve. And the fact that I can’t give you what you deserve... It sucks, Dovey.”

“Why can’t you give me those things?” I whisper. He’s doing it again. Placing red tape and bold labels on our relationship, and I don’t know how to make him stop.

“My dad,” he reminds me, his tone laced with regret. “My dad was an ass who had a girl in every city. And each of them ate the shit up. They thought

they were the only ones. That they'd managed to tie down the rockstar. But guess what? It was all a bunch of bullshit. I have two half-brothers, maybe more for all I know, and none of us knew about each other until I was in middle school." He scrubs his hand over his face roughly as if lost in the memories. "Middle school, Dove. Do you know how much that's messed with my head?"

I reach for his arm, desperate to soften the worry lines etched into his handsome features. Desperate to hold the little boy he once was and promise him that he'd get through the crappy hand he was dealt. Desperate to hold Gibson Hayes and convince him that he doesn't have to live in his father's shadow.

My voice is scratchy as I clear my throat, squeezing his bicep softly. To show that I'm here. That I'm not going anywhere. "You're not like him—"

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do—"

"How? Even *I* don't know that shit. And I refuse to let you be the guinea pig while I figure it out."

The finality in his voice acts like another twist of the proverbial knife in my chest. Like I've been thrown into a fighting ring with my arms tied behind my back. Like I've already lost.

My hand drops to my side as I stare at the ground beneath our feet. "So... What now? What do you want from me?"

"I've been asking myself that same question, Dove." A quiet scoff escapes him before he explains, "I've been trying to convince myself to stay away from you again. I spent hours on my guitar until blisters formed on my fingertips. But do you want to know the funny part?"

He tilts my chin up, forcing me to look at him.

"What?" I rasp.

"The only inspiration I could find was you."

I suck my quivering lip into my mouth before he pulls it free with his thumb.

"What do you want from me, Gibbs?"

"I want you to let me touch you and *only* you. I want you to let me have a piece of you until a worthy man comes along and treats you the way you deserve."

"And that's not you?" I choke out.

He shakes his head. "It can't be. A girl like you deserves the knight in

shining armor, not the bloody bard.”

A laugh bubbles out of me, though it comes out as more of a whimper than anything else. “Is that all you think you are? The *bard*?”

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “In your fairytale, I’m afraid so. And you deserve that fairytale, Dove. Trust me.” The warmth in his gaze almost beats his resignation as it bounces around my face before he adds, “But I want to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For letting me taste you. I know how much it means to give a piece of yourself to me the way you did.”

Blushing, I roll my eyes. “It’s not—”

“Don’t lie.” He pinches my chin, forcing me to look at him again even though my embarrassment is threatening to swallow me whole. “You’re terrible at it, remember? It *was* a big deal—”

“Gibbs—”

“Dove—”

“Gibbs,” I repeat, begging him to let me off the hook so I can keep an ounce of my pride. Being a virgin at twenty-two—especially when surrounded by people who weren’t raised with the same beliefs—is embarrassing. No, it’s more than embarrassing. It’s like I have a giant red ‘V’ sewn onto my shirt, and the guy that I really like gets to see it firsthand.

“Let me finish,” he scolds. “Do you wanna know the crazy part, Dove Walker?”

I bite my lip but don’t answer him.

His thumb drags against the plump flesh before he pulls my lip free. Again. Like we’re in a twisted round of *déjà vu*, though I’m not sure I want to wake up. Especially if he keeps looking at me like this. Like I really do belong in a fairytale. Like I’m precious. And desirable. And not a complete idiot for still having my stupid V-card when he lost his at fourteen.

“It was a big deal to me too,” he murmurs.

The sincerity in his voice makes my stomach do a flip and gives me a hope that’s dangerous. Terrifying, actually. Because if it takes hold again, and I let myself fall for the man in front of me, I may not survive the aftermath.

“Do you mean that?” I whisper.

He nods, a soft smile etched across his handsome face. “Yeah. I do.”

“But what about Em? And Milo? And threesomes? I’m not a threesome

type of girl—”

“Em and I are through. Trust me. And Milo and I aren’t pursuing that lifestyle right now, either. We decided it’s safer for our friendship to keep those boundaries intact. But even if we were, it wouldn’t matter. You’re the only one I want. And I’m not willing to share you.”

“For now,” I clarify.

“For as long as you’ll have me.” He leans forward and presses a soft, slow kiss to my lips. My thoughts scatter instantly.

Sneaky jerk.

“Speaking of bards,” he adds when he pulls away. “I wrote you a song.”

“A song?”

“Yeah.”

“You wrote *me* a song?” I repeat, trying to keep from swooning, though he’s making it difficult.

“Yeah. Someone ditched me during our writing session the other night,” he quips. “But I was still feeling inspired. Will you come over and let me play it for you?”

“When?”

“After work?” he suggests. “Or we can try for another night. I’ll do whatever you want, Dovey.”

It’ll be two in the morning by the time we make it to his place. And I’m not exactly a night owl. Which means that if I agree, then I agree to more than a song. I agree to a commitment under the guise of casual sex, even if he’d never admit it.

“You don’t have to,” he adds, sensing my hesitancy. “And we don’t have to do anything.”

He doesn’t get it, though. I’m not hesitating about whether or not I want him. I’m hesitating about whether or not my own self-preservation is worth losing the one person who’s ever mattered to me in that way.

And he does matter to me—more than I’d like to admit.

After a few seconds, I nod and realize the truth.

I’m not the princess in this story. No. I’m the fool.

But I don’t care.

“I’d love to.”

He smiles. “Good.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“So, do you play?” Gibson asks, grabbing the cherry-colored acoustic guitar from its stand near his bedroom door.

I shake my head. “Only the piano.”

“I have a keyboard in the closet if you want me to grab it.” He flips on the lamp on his nightstand. It paints the room in a warm, cozy glow without breaking the comfortable ambience. It also makes his shadow dance along the dark wall as he waits for me to answer him.

“Oh. Uh, no, thank you,” I reply. “I’d rather hear you sing.”

He smiles, a slight blush touching his stubble-covered cheeks. “You’re making me second-guess inviting you over here.”

“Because I like it when you sing?”

With a dry laugh, he counters, “Because I offered to sing to you in the first place.”

“Oh, so you’re saying that you *don’t* lure all your women into your room and serenade them until their underwear falls off?”

“You think I need to pull out my voice to get women to fall into my bed?” he challenges, quirking one brow as a cocky smirk graces his features.

I snort and try to hide my discomfort at the idea of him with other women before eyeing his bed warily.

Swallowing thickly, I sit cross-legged on the floor instead. “Touché. I’m glad to see you’ve nailed down your moves without needing to pull out the big guns.”

“I’ve never needed or *wanted* to pull out the big guns before,” he counters. “Not until you.”

My face heats. I’m hoping he doesn’t notice as he sits down next to me

and rests his back against the side of the bed, cradling the guitar in his lap.

“So...” I drag out the word. “About that song.”

His chuckle is deep and throaty before he glances at me and murmurs, “You’ll have to cut me some slack if I miss any notes, all right?”

“And why would you miss any notes?”

“Maybe you make me nervous,” he quips, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

I lick my lips. “Maybe the feeling’s mutual.”

“Then I think we can both cut each other some slack, huh?”

I laugh. “I guess so. Now, start playing, or I might walk right out of here.”

That same warm chuckle rolls over me before he starts plucking at the strings. Hyper-focused, he twists the tuning keys, tries again, and nods when the strings vibrate in the correct key.

“Here we go,” he breathes out.

*“Cool, dark nights.
Me lost between your thighs.
Feels like a dream.
Like maybe you’re all I need.
But I don’t do this.
Not usually.
I don’t want this.
Not usually.
But you make me
Make me
Want you.
Just you.”*

His voice is low and raspy but hits me in all the right places as he takes another breath, picks at the strings for a few counts, and goes back to strumming chords. The rhythm seems familiar, though I’m sure I’ve never heard it before. Like he knows how to tap into my soul. Like he knows what I want—what his fans want—before they even realize it.

I close my eyes and rest my head on his shoulder as he dives into the next verse.

*“Lost in the memory.
Of you and me.
Always just out of reach.
And I’m not one to preach.
But I don’t do this.
Not usually.
I don’t want this.
Not usually.
But you make me
Make me
Want you.
Just you.
But I do.
Want you.
Even if it’s just a little while.*

*We can’t run from our pasts.
But I want you to stay.
Be with me.
Let me steal your time.
Until the right man comes
And takes what’s mine.
I don’t want this.
Not usually.
But you make me
Make me
Want you.
Just you.
Say you want me too.”*

HE PLAYS THE OUTRO, THE TEMPO SLOWING DOWN AND LEAVING ME WANTING more before I lift my head and look up at him.

“What’d you think?” he murmurs, that same vulnerability I’ve grown accustomed to whenever he plays shining down at me.

“I think it was pretty close to perfect.”

“You *think*?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“What would you change?”

“I think you should make it a duet.”

He quirks his brow. “Oh, really?”

“Mm-hmm. I think after the second bridge, you should hear the girl’s side of the story.”

Smirking, he goes back to the beginning of the song and strums the intro before challenging, “Let’s see whatcha got.”

I close my eyes and try to ignore the butterflies that swell in my stomach as I feel his gaze on the side of my face before he dives into the first verse. His voice is a little stronger and more confident as every note passes before he plucks out the second riff and lets me take the lead.

I stumble over the first few lines but find my rhythm by the end of it. And when his voice harmonizes with mine by the third chorus, I open my eyes and turn into a puddle on the floor.

Curse those hazel eyes.

And that voice.

And those lips.

He strokes the last few chords and leans into me, pressing his mouth to mine. The stubble along his cheek tickles my fingertips as I cup his face and open up to him in a way that I never thought possible. Sex is one thing. But the emotional connection I feel after singing with him is almost too much, yet not nearly enough.

I scoot onto my knees as he sets his guitar on the ground next to us before tugging me into his lap. With my legs on both sides of his thighs, I tangle my fingers in his hair and breathe him in. Like he’s my air. My oxygen. My everything. His calloused hands brush along my lower back beneath my shirt, causing tingles to race along my spine. But I love it. The slight tremble in his hands. The staggered breathing. The little details that hint he’s nervous. Not because he hasn’t done this a hundred times, but because he hasn’t done this with *me*. And that makes all the difference.

Slowly, he inches up my back, palming my sides and rib cage like I’m a ghost and might disappear at any instant, but it only spurs me on.

I want this.

I want him.

Even if he's willing to take it slow. Even if he doesn't want to pressure me. I refuse to waste a single moment with him because I don't know when it'll be my last.

Tearing my mouth from his, I order, "Take off your shirt."

"Dove—"

"Stop talking."

"I didn't invite you over here for sex, Dove—"

I shut him up with my mouth and tug at the hem of his shirt, but it gets stuck beneath his armpits.

"Slow down," he whispers.

"I don't want to slow down." I reach for his shirt again, but he stops me.

"I don't want you to feel guilty for anything that happens between us."

"Why would I feel guilty?"

"Because I broke down and called Reese after the other night," he admits, looking guiltier than a sinner in church.

I flinch back a few inches, my confident mask slipping away to reveal my embarrassment and vulnerability. "What do you mean?"

"I knew you were a virgin, but I didn't know the why behind it. I figured you hadn't had the chance to...explore things sexually and figured I could be the lucky bastard to help you."

Kill me now.

Ignoring the heat in my cheeks, I mutter, "Gibbs—"

"I know about your parents, Dove. I know about your past. I know what sex means to you."

"Gibbs—"

"I don't want to rush you, Dovey."

"If we had sex right now, would it mean something to you, Gibson? Would I mean something to you? You said in the alley at work that our last... moment...meant something. Would this be any different?"

His grip tightens around my ribcage. "No, Dove. It wouldn't be any different."

"Then let me give this to you."

Conflicted, his jaw tightens. "Dove—"

"I'm sure, Gibson. Even though you can't commit to me. Even though you think you're only the bard in this story, you're special to me. You mean

something to me. And when we sing together, I feel connected to you in a way that I never imagined.”

He hesitates, that same pained expression etched into his features as his gaze bounces around my face, searching for my sincerity.

He chokes out, “So do I, Dovey.”

“Then you know that if a simple song was able to build that connection emotionally, making love”—I shake my head and correct myself—“having sex would hopefully build a similar connection physically. Wouldn’t it?”

“Dove—”

“I want to feel that with you.”

“Dove—”

“Stop arguing,” I beg, my voice laced with amusement, and embarrassment, and every other emotion in between.

Who would’ve thought I’d have to beg to get rid of this stupid V-card?

“You’re sure?” he asks, carefully.

“Positive.”

“If you change your mind—”

“I won’t change my mind, Gibbs.”

“But if you do—”

“I’ll tell you, and we’ll stop.”

He tucks a few strands of hair behind my ear, still at war with himself.

“Gibson, I’m fine. I want this—”

“Promise you won’t regret me in the morning,” he orders, that same familiar vulnerability making my stomach clench. With anticipation. Affection. And a trust that’s so deep it almost hurts.

I lick my lips, leaning in for another kiss. This one is softer. Slower. But just as passionate.

He groans as I pull away and whisper, “I promise.”

“Okay.”

With one swift movement, he grabs the collar of his shirt, yanks it over his head, and tosses it on top of his guitar before he’s on me. Hands. Lips. Teeth. He’s everywhere. And I soak it up, grinding against him as that same familiar need builds inside of me until I can’t even think straight. My shirt joins his a few minutes later, followed by my bra, before he palms my breasts, squeezing them roughly, which only spurs me on.

“You sure know how to work a girl up,” I tease, my nerves getting the best of me as his mouth trails down my neck, and he takes a nipple into his

mouth.

He swirls the tiny bud with his tongue before sucking harder. And it feels so good. I throw my head back and moan, tangling my fingers in his hair to keep him in place.

Toying with the button on my jeans, he continues his torture while patiently waiting for me to give him consent to take this to the next level. Again.

But I appreciate it. His patience. His understanding. His thoughtfulness.

“Yes,” I encourage on another moan. “Keep going.”

Pop.

He unbuttons my jeans and slips his hand into my underwear. Teasing me. Tempting me. Bringing me closer to release with a few well-placed pressure points that cause my core to clench with need.

But I’m empty.

And desperate.

“Gibson,” I breathe out, squirming against him. I need more. I need *him*.

He captures my mouth with his, curving his finger and slipping it inside of me. With a gasp, I lift myself a few inches off his lap so he has a bit more room to move. Heck, I’ll do anything if it’ll get him to keep going. To keep touching me. To keep pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

Slowly, he pumps his finger in and out a few times before adding a second. Stretching me. Filling me. Prepping me for the main event that I’m craving more than my next breath. Because this feels right. So right that I should be terrified, but I’m not. Because it’s Gibson Hayes. And even though he isn’t mine, I can pretend that he is. For a little while.

I bite my lip and ride his fingers as he presses his thumb against my clit. The pressure is perfect, and I almost collapse back into his lap, but he keeps me in place and presses open-mouthed kisses along my shoulders and chest, making me flutter against his fingers.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

I throw my head back and shudder as the orgasm rushes through me. Hooking his arm around my waist, he holds me in place and waits for me to come down before pulling his hand from my underwear. Then he licks his fingers and smiles, his eyes glazed with lust.

“Gibson,” I breathe out, still catching my breath.

“Yeah, Dovey?” he quips, cocky as ever, before picking me up and throwing me onto the mattress. He grabs his belt buckle and pauses. “We can stop—”

“Take off your pants right now, Gibson.” I grab my own and rip them the rest of the way off, leaving myself bare in front of him. Not only physically, but emotionally too. I want him. *Need* him. More than my next breath.

With a deep chuckle, he does as he’s told and pushes them down his legs while I press my thighs together at the sight.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

His thick erection almost touches his belly button, bouncing slightly as he pulls open the nightstand drawer and retrieves a foil packet. Ripping it with his teeth, he rolls it onto his cock before settling between my legs.

“You’re sure?”

I hook my ankles around his waist. “Positive. Now, stop asking questions.” Slamming my mouth to his, I kiss him, savoring the flavor of mint on his tongue as he reaches between our tangled bodies and lines us up.

This is it.

Holy crap.

This is it.

I feel like I’m in a dream.

Like I’m going to wake up any second, which only spurs me on, fanning my desperation until I’m a squirming mess beneath him.

“Come on, Gibbs. Please,” I beg.

The head of his cock presses against my entrance, toying with me until my hips move on their own accord, meeting him move for move. I need him to put me out of my misery. To stretch me. To fill me. To make me his, even though he’ll never be mine.

“You ready?” he rasps.

“Am I not making it clear—”

With a quick thrust, my jaw drops, and I let out a silent scream.

Shit!

He presses his forehead to mine but doesn’t move a muscle, letting me acclimate to the intrusion. Giving me a second to breathe. To let my muscles relax.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

“You okay?” he murmurs, kissing me again.

I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe out slowly. Or try to. He isn't exactly small. Then again, I have nothing to compare him to except a tampon, so...

"Dovey?"

"I'm okay," I whisper after a few seconds. I swirl my hips slowly and force myself to relax even though I feel like I got stabbed with a dick. A very hard, very thick dick.

Oh my gosh, I'm really doing this.

"You sure?" he prods, his brows pinched with concern. Or maybe it's concentration. Because he still isn't moving. He's waiting for me to give him the okay even though I know it must be killing him. And it makes me fall a little more.

How can he not see how perfect he is? How gentle he is? How sweet, and thoughtful, and handsome, and...perfect?

With a nod, I lick my lips. "Y-yes."

"Okay."

Brushing a few hairs away from my forehead, he props himself up on his elbows and pulls out a few inches before pushing back into me. Slowly at first. As if I'm a fragile doll, and he doesn't want to hurt me. As if I'm someone precious. Someone worth worshipping.

My heart swells until I'm sure it'll burst at any second.

I snake my arms around his neck and pull him closer, causing our chests to press against each other as I pepper wet kisses against his lips and corded neck. The slight tang of salt clings to his skin from exertion, and I savor it.

He tastes so good.

He *feels* so good.

He's everything.

And the fact that I get to share this moment with him? It's beautiful. I don't want it to end. Heck, I could stay here forever. With him. The realization is both terrifying and overwhelming. But comforting too.

Because even if we don't last forever, I know that I'll never regret this moment. This feeling. This person. Gibson Hayes. Because he sees me. The real me. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

After a few minutes, the familiar pleasure I've grown accustomed to around Gibson starts to build again, and I match his pace with my own.

Thrust for thrust.

Kiss for kiss.

Touch for touch.

We exchange every little movement with our own until I'm positive I'll come again at any second, and I catch myself chasing it. Faster. Harder. But it stays just out of reach. Taunting me as it builds with every thrust until I'm positive I'm going to explode. My breathing turns ragged, and my skin feels like it's stretched too thin, but I need more.

"Gibbs—"

"Sh," he whispers against my lips before pushing his tongue into my mouth and matching the rhythm of his hips. Over and over again. Taking me. Claiming me. Owning me.

And I fall over the edge.

No, I crash over it and into oblivion.

A scream slips out of me, and he bites my neck as he follows suit, his cock pulsing inside of me, causing my sex to flutter with absolute bliss.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

I had sex. No, I *made love*. Because that's what it was. For me, at least. It was more than a penis entering a vagina. It was a connection of body and soul. It was the final barrier I've kept between us crumbling to the ground. Sure, he might still have a few standing, but not me. And even though it's terrifying to think about, I'm okay with it. With him owning me for as long as he'll have me. Because the truth is simple. I've fallen. Hard. And I'll treasure this night for as long as I live.

His tongue darts out of his lips, and he licks at the love bite on my neck, soothing the slight ache before he pulls out of me and rolls onto his side. After tying a knot in the condom, he tosses it in the garbage and settles beside me.

There's a comfortable silence in the room, and I don't want to break it, so I close my eyes and simply savor the moment. The sweet ache from his touch. The slight beard burns along my skin from his scruff. The tired muscles I didn't even know I had from holding myself up as he fingered me. It's surreal. But I'm on cloud nine, and Gibson put me there.

He drags his fingers along my bare arm, causing goosebumps to spread across my skin before he murmurs, "Thank you."

I peek up at him. "For what?"

"For giving me that piece of yourself."

I burrow further against his chest, hiding my blush against his sweaty skin.

How does he still smell good? Aren't guys supposed to smell gross?

But even sweaty from our activities, he smells like citrus and the forest. I love it.

“You should stay the night,” he suggests, his chest rumbling beneath my ear.

I yawn and close my eyes.

With a quiet laugh, he drops a kiss to the top of my head before settling back onto the mattress. “I’ll take that as a yes. Goodnight, Dovey.”

“Goodnight, Gibbs.”

In this moment—heck, this entire night—I realize that I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. And I don’t want it to end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“J uice?” Gibson asks as he rummages through the fridge.

“Yes, please.” Legs swinging from the barstool tucked in his kitchen, I rest my chin in my hands with my elbows on the granite island and try to shake the surreal feeling from my bones. But it feels impossible. Like I’m still living in the dream from last night. By some miracle, it didn’t end when I woke up. Nope. Instead, he offered to cook me breakfast like a gentleman.

And he thinks he’s not Prince Charming.

Gibson’s phone vibrates against the counter, and a sick sense of déjà vu settles in my stomach. I hold my breath as I glance at the screen. When Fender’s name comes into view, my pulse steadies.

“Your brother’s calling,” I tell Gibson as he grabs two glasses from the cabinet and adds them to our delicious spread of breakfast. Eggs. Bacon. Coffee. Blueberry pancakes. And juice. ‘Cause he’s trying to kill me with his sweetness.

And what a way to go.

“Will you answer it for me?” he asks.

My lips part as my attention darts from Gibson and back to his phone.

“Y-you want me to answer it?”

He laughs. “Is that a problem?”

“If I do...”

“He’ll know we hooked up. He’s gonna know anyway when we tour together,” he reminds me.

Good point.

Ignoring the way my hands tremble, I answer the phone, push the little

speaker button so Gibson can hear, and set it back on the counter face-up.

“Hey, Fen,” I greet him, my tone light.

“Dovey?”

“Yes. Hi. Sorry, Gibson is”—I watch him flip a pancake like a sexy chef—“a little busy at the moment.”

Fender’s laugh crackles through the speakers as he pieces together the situation, finding way too much hilarity in our conversation for this early in the morning. I cover my face and try to hide my embarrassment, but it’s no use. Cheeks flaming, I join in and laugh too.

Oh my gosh. He totally knows I had sex with his brother last night.

But it feels good. To not take the moment so seriously. To be present without stressing about the future and how much it’s going to hurt when my *whatever-this-is* with Gibson doesn’t work out. For now, it’s pretty awesome. Heck, I even get blueberry pancakes and toe-curling orgasms out of the deal.

Yes, please.

“Stop laughing, asshole,” Gibson yells, making sure he’s heard over his brother’s roaring amusement. “You’re embarrassing her.”

“Sorry,” he apologizes. *He’s not sorry.* “It’s priceless.” He laughs even harder before trying to catch his breath. “Hey, Dovey?”

“Yes?” I groan.

“He treat you right? Make it good for ya?”

“Fender!” I screech.

More laughter. “Trisha’s gonna ask me, Dove! I gotta get the details!”

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard, and I rub at them in tiny circles as I try to get a handle on myself, but it feels impossible. This is the most insane conversation I’ve ever had.

Who the heck asks someone this?

I look up at Gibbs and motion to the phone while silently mouthing, “What am I supposed to say?”

Spatula in hand, a curious Gibson crosses his arms and gives me a pointed stare. Refusing to come to my rescue. And anxiously waiting for my response.

Jerk face.

“You boys are ridiculous,” I tell them.

“Scale of one to ten. Give it to me on a scale of one to ten,” Fen suggests.

Gibson quirks his brow. “Yeah, Dovey. How was it on a scale of one to ten?” His eyes shine with mirth, daring me to lie. To tell him it wasn’t

absolutely panty-melting, and mind-blowing, and every other positive adjective in the world. My heart melts, and a fresh wave of butterflies attacks my stomach.

And he thinks he's the bard.

I roll my eyes and cross my arms, mirroring his stance. "If I tell you, will you guys stop badgering me and get on with the reason why you called?"

Gibson's sexy smirk taunts me as Fender's voice echoes through the speakers. "Yes, Dove. I promise I'll get to the point of why I called if you answer the question."

"Scout's honor?" I press.

Fender snorts while Gibson lifts up his fingers and gives me the scout sign. "Scout's honor, babe."

"Fine. It was..."—I tap my finger against my chin—"a solid seven."

"Seven?" Gibson shouts. The sound swallows Fender's booming laughter. "That's barely a passing grade!"

He rushes over to me, his fingers digging into my sides. The spatula is long forgotten and clatters to the ground as he tortures me. Tickling my ribs until I'm gasping for air and begging for space, but he doesn't give in. He continues his assault like an evil mastermind.

Squirming on the barstool, seconds from falling off, I screech, "Okay! Okay! It was a ten! Perfect score! Never better! It's downhill from here—"

Gibson swallows my words with a deep kiss that makes me moan as I wrap my arms around his neck for balance, getting lost in his touch. His smell. The feel of his stubbled cheeks tickling me. And his taste. Like coffee and orange juice and perfection.

"All right enough of that," Fender orders, his voice crackling through the speaker. "I might be cool with you two bumpin' uglies, but I don't need to hear it firsthand."

Gibson groans but pulls away and presses a quick kiss to the tip of my nose. Then he grabs the spatula from the ground and tosses it in the sink before finding a fresh one in the drawer next to the stove, where the scent of burnt batter wafts through the air.

"The reason I called is because I want to make sure we're good to go for this weekend," Fender tells us.

Half the pancakes are overcooked and thrown into the garbage before Gibson gets back to work on our breakfast while I attempt to register what Fen just said. "Wait. This weekend?"

“Yeah. Our first show is on Sunday. We leave Friday morning.”

“Like *this* Friday morning?”

“Yeah.”

“How is it so soon?” I ask, my panic rising. “I thought the first show was July sixth.”

“No, the first show is June seventh,” Gibson explains as he sets two fully packed plates of deliciousness in front of me, rounding the island and plopping down next to me.

“How is that possible? I could’ve sworn it was 7/6 on the forms Fen sent over.”

“The band we’re traveling with is from the UK,” Fender explains. “Their dates are written differently. In the US, it’s month, then day, then year. In the UK, it’s day, then month, then year.”

Crap.

“It’s such short notice because the original opening band canceled, remember?” Gibson adds. “So, they needed someone who could jump on board quickly. Is that going to be a problem?”

I gulp but shake my head. “Nope. No problem, but I do need to run it by my sister.”

Fen suggests, “She can come if she wants—”

“No, she can’t,” Gibson rushes out.

I tilt my head toward him, and he grimaces. “Sorry. It’s...I don’t think she likes me very much.”

He’s not wrong.

If she knew I was here—that I’d slept with her friend’s ex—she’d kill me. And I already feel guilty enough, thank you very much.

With a frown, I push my food around my plate with my fork. “It’s fine. She wouldn’t want to come anyway. But I’ll be ready.”

“You sure?” Gibson asks, his tone softening.

I nod. “Yes. I’m sure. Except I gotta tell Ashton that I’m taking a leave of absence. And with everything going on with Reese—”

“He’ll be fine. Sammie might pretend she’s a loner, but she’s got plenty of friends in her classes who would kill for a job there. And when we get home, we’ll figure out how to get your hours back.”

“And your hours, too. Right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay.”

“We’re leaving pretty early Friday morning,” Fender interrupts. “Why don’t you guys sleep at the same place, and I’ll pick you up around six or so. Does that work for everyone?”

“Actually, I should probably stay at my apartment that night,” I return. “Spend some time with my sister.”

“Would she not be okay if Sonny stayed over too?” Fen asks.

I cringe. “Yeah, no. I don’t see that going well. But I can drive over to Gibson’s bright and early, and you can still pick us both up at the same place.”

“Nah. We can swing by,” Gibbs decides. “Your place is kinda on the way, anyway. No worries, Dovey.”

Liar.

I almost call him out but decide against it. After all, he’s bending over backward for me. And it’s kind of nice. Refreshing almost. Usually, it feels like *I’m* the one bending over backward.

“Perfect,” Fen replies. “I’ll see you guys later—”

“Hey, Fen?” Gibson calls.

“Yeah?”

“Have you seen Marty?”

Fen’s sigh speaks louder than words. “I told you I’d stay clean for the tour.”

“Still need to hear you say it, man,” Gibbs reminds him.

“I met Dad and Marty for lunch a couple days ago to talk about the tour and catch up.”

“Fen—”

“Look, I don’t want to hear it. You’re welcome to have a shitty relationship with family, but you can’t get pissed at me for wanting to salvage mine.”

“Marty’s an ass, Fen. The only reason he likes you around is because he’s your dealer—”

“Shut up, Sonny,” Fender mutters, but he isn’t angry. He’s defeated.

A frustrated Gibson squeezes the fork in his hand until his knuckles turn white, but I place my palm on top of his fist, praying he’ll calm down and simply breathe.

He looks down at my innocent touch, then lets out a slow exhale. “Just promise me you’re clean.”

“I’m clean, man. I won’t screw up this time.”

My heart cracks. Even I can hear the indecision in his voice. The tightrope he's forced to walk between what's right and what he wants.

It sucks.

"Love you, brother," Gibson rasps.

"Yeah. You too, Sonny."

The call goes dead, and the earlier excitement and happiness buzzing through my veins disappears right along with Fender's call.

"You okay?" I murmur, rubbing my fingers along the back of his clenched fist resting on top of the counter.

"Yeah," Gibbs lies.

"How can I help?"

He shakes his head. "You can't. Even *I* can't help. This bullshit excuse of me babysitting Fen on tour is exactly that. It's bullshit. Fender's a grown-ass man. He can do what he wants. I can't control him. And that's what sucks. He's been taught by our older brother that drugs are the norm for the music industry. That he needs them to fit in. To excel. To make connections."

"That sucks, Gibbs," I supply. I don't know what else to say.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, a defeated Gibson tells me, "He doesn't see how toxic Marty is, ya know? I can see Fen on the precipice of a cliff. He's so close to falling, losing everything, and joining Marty in his shitty life. But he could also leap off that cliff and fly. He could fucking soar. But no matter how much I believe in him, he has to believe in himself, and I can't make him. That's on Fen."

His turmoil is crippling, and I'm desperate to help carry its weight, but I don't know how. I can't imagine how he must feel. How much pressure he's putting on himself to keep Fender safe when he's right. That's out of his control. But if he does learn to let go, will it hurt his brother?

Probably.

And Fender doesn't deserve it, either. I get his weakness. His craving. His addiction. At least on some level. Because I have one too, and if I had to leave Gibson, it would kill me.

Heck, it will kill me one day. Because Gibson has made it clear. We aren't forever. He's just the bard.

I lick my lips and squeeze his hand again. "I'm sorry, Gibbs."

"It's not your fault."

"I know. But I hate seeing how much it hurts you. You love him."

"I love the shit out of my little brother," he admits. "But I get so damn

tired of keeping his head above water.”

“That’s not your job.”

“I know. But I can’t simply sit back and watch him drown.”

I rest my head on his shoulder, my breakfast forgotten. “He sounded optimistic on the phone.”

“That’s my baby brother for you. Always optimistic until he has a hard day. Then the world is falling apart, and the only thing that’ll fix it is drugs or alcohol.” He drops a kiss on my forehead. “But enough sad talk for one day. Have you told your sister yet?”

I grimace and peek up at him. “Maybe.”

“And?”

“And she’s pissed, but she can’t control me.”

He reaches for his cup of coffee and takes a sip from the steaming mug before eyeing me over the brim of it. “Does she know about us?”

“She saw the hickey you gave me on my neck last week, but I didn’t confirm her suspicion that it was you who bit me.”

He nods and opens his mouth to say something when the front door creaks open.

Who’s here?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I know. It’s absolutely insane. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it,” Reese murmurs, her phone pinned between her shoulder and ear as she fumbles with her purse. “Yeah, of course. And yes, I’ll be careful. We’ll talk soon.”

She hangs up her phone, sees me, and grins. “Dove!”

“Hey, Reese!” I’m on my feet in an instant as she races down the short hall and pulls me into a tight hug. “I’ve missed you!”

“Saaaame,” she returns, dragging out our hug the same way she drags out her response. “I have so much to tell you. Seriously—”

She stops short, pulling away from me. Her attention shifts to Gibson behind me and back to me before a Cheshire grin nearly splits her face in two.

“So, uh...” She wags her fingers between Gibson and me. “Is this a thing?”

My face blanches. “Oh. Um.” I look over my shoulder to find a very amused Gibson staring back at me, but he doesn’t say a word.

Which means he’s throwing me to the wolves.

Again.

Jerk face.

“It’s totally a thing, isn’t it?” Reese decides, not bothering to wait for my answer. “Yay! I’m so happy for you guys!” She pulls me into another hug, squeezing all the oxygen out of me with the strength of a pro wrestler.

“Seriously. How long has this been going on? Does River know? ‘Cause if he’s been hiding this from me, I’m gonna kill him.”

“It’s new,” I tell her, peeking over my shoulder again at Gibbs. “Very

new. And we're just hanging out, taking our time, that kind of thing. No labels. No commitments. Doing our own thing," I repeat. "Right, Gibbs?"

He strides over to me and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling my back to his front before resting his chin on my shoulder. And we fit. Perfectly. A little too perfectly for a bard and a fool, but I'm not about to tell him that.

Reese purses her lips as she watches our silent exchange before shoving her finger an inch from Gibson's nose. "You hurt her; I kill you. We clear, Sonny?"

"Pretty sure I'm the one who would get hurt," he mumbles. "But, yes. You've made yourself clear. Have you told Dove the good news yet?"

Her face lights up all over again. "I haven't had the chance. Like I said, it's been chaos. But River got a role in a huge movie production, and they want me to play his love interest as soon as he's healed up enough. Depending on how things shake out, we'll most likely start filming out of state in the next couple of months."

"Are you serious, Reese?" I squeal.

"I know! It's a dream, Dove. An absolute dream."

"I'm so happy for you!"

"And I'm happy for you—"

The front door slams, and we both jerk at the sound before a very inebriated Jake stumbles through it. When he sees us, he shakes his head and heads up the stairs instead of joining us in the kitchen.

The house goes quiet except for his unsteady footsteps creaking through the floor. Another door slams upstairs just as Milo comes through the front door.

Reese frowns, then asks, "Everything okay?"

Shaking his head, Milo stalks toward the fridge and wrenches it open before chugging an entire protein shake like it's a bottle of beer.

"Should I... Should I go talk to him?" Reese offers, her forehead wrinkled with concern.

Again, Milo shakes his head and leans his hip against the counter, scrubbing his hand over his face as his shoulders hunch in defeat.

"What happened?" Gibson questions.

"The bastard got arrested for having sex in public."

My jaw drops as Gibson mutters, "Shit."

"Yeah. And he had a presentation with his professor this morning but

missed it.”

“Because he was in jail,” Gibson concludes.

“Yeah.”

“This is all my fault,” Reese whispers, her voice so quiet I’m surprised any of us hear her.

Frustrated, Milo slams his hand against the counter. “That’s bullshit, Reese—”

“Don’t lie, Milo.” Her lower lip quivers. “Not when it’s the truth. He’s throwing his life away because of me. Because I chose Riv.”

“I’ll handle it,” Milo promises her. “He’ll get through this.”

“Give him time,” Gibson reminds her. His gaze meets Milo’s. A silent conversation passes between them before he adds, “It takes time to get over someone you love. He’ll find someone new. And he’ll be grateful that you chose Riv. Hell, he might even thank you for it one day.”

Reese bites her lip to keep it from trembling more, but it’s no use. She dabs at the corner of her eye and releases a shaky breath. “I hope you’re right. Maybe the space will be good. You know, since Riv and I will be gone for a while. I’ll miss you guys, though.”

“Miss you too, sis.” Milo pulls her into a quick hug, and Gibson squeezes me a little tighter, his arms still firmly wrapped around my waist as if he’s afraid to let me go. Like I might disappear.

I get it, though.

Love is fragile. And even though Gibson and I aren’t there yet, I can’t imagine having to let him go.

Please don’t make me let you go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DOVE

The week goes by in a blur of practicing with the band in the mornings, waitressing at SeaBird in the evenings, and spending my nights with Gibson. We've fallen into our own chaotic routine while preparing for the tour, and it's been absolutely perfect.

With one exception.

"Are you going with him?" Maddie's tone is numb. Defeated. And it makes me feel like crap. We haven't really spoken since our blow-up. Only a few words here and there but nothing deep. Nothing real. Nothing genuine.

She knows I'm leaving this morning, though. That she won't see me for a couple months. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that the reason she's even talking to me right now is because of the giant elephant in the room named Gibson.

Of course, she wants to address it minutes before I'm supposed to be picked up. Heaven forbid we had a real conversation the day before.

Reining in my annoyance, I zip up my duffle bag and turn to face her. The bags under her eyes add to my guilt as I take in her baby bump from under her baggy sleepshirt.

"I'm going with the whole band," I tell her.

"And Gibson."

Frustrated, I grab my bag and hook the strap over my shoulder. "Why do you hate him so much, Maddie? What did he do to Em that was so bad that you can't let it go even though it had nothing to do with you? Why can't you let me be happy?"

"Did you sleep with him, Dove? Is that where you've been sneaking off to after work every night this week?"

“You’re not allowed to be disappointed with me, Mads.” I sniffle and fight back my urge to cry. I hate disappointing people. Especially my own flesh and blood. The only flesh and blood that wants me anymore. And even she doesn’t want me around. She *needs* me around.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, approaching her as she leans against the doorjamb to my bedroom.

With her chin held high, she starts, “You don’t know what you’re doing, Dove—”

“Then why don’t you tell me, *Oh Wise One*? What am I doing that’s so wrong in your eyes that you can’t even look at me without being let down?”

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her more frustrated in my entire life as we stand chest to chest.

But she doesn’t answer my question. Instead, she pleads, “Don’t go, Dove. For *me*. Don’t go.”

“You can’t ask that of me. I’ll be back before your baby’s born. I’ll still send money—”

“I don’t care about the money. I care about you—”

I shake my head. “If you cared about me, you’d want me to go. You’d want me to go and enjoy the experience of a lifetime—”

“And I do,” she rushes out. “I do want you to enjoy the experience of a lifetime. With anyone but *him*.”

Him. She can barely say Gibson’s name, let alone hold a real conversation about him. And it hurts. Because I want her approval. I want her to like my *not-boyfriend*. I want him to be able to come over for Sunday brunch. I want to be able to talk to her without walking on eggshells.

Why does she have to make this so difficult?

Frustrated, I shove my messy hair away from my face and hike the strap of my duffle bag a little higher on my shoulder. “That isn’t fair, and you know it.”

“Dove—”

A quiet knock echoes from the front door.

“I have to go, Mads. I’ll call you, okay? My keys are on the counter in case you need them for anything. And don’t forget your doctor’s appointment next month.”

That same familiar numb expression takes over her gorgeous—albeit exhausted—features as she pushes herself off the doorjamb and gives me space to pass her. But she doesn’t hug me. She doesn’t say she loves me. She

stares blankly as I slip past her—that same disappointment radiating off her in waves.

And it kills me.

“Bye, Mads.”

Digging her teeth into her lower lip, she scans me from head to toe and returns, “Be careful, Dove.”

She gives me her back and disappears into her room, closing the door quietly behind her.

I fight the urge to chase after her and demand she gives me some freaking answers for her behavior before forcing myself to answer the front door. My body feels like it’s been filled with slurry concrete with every step.

“Hey,” I greet Gibson as soon as he comes into view.

“Hey,” he returns tightly, glancing over my shoulder as if searching for something. When he doesn’t find it, he breathes out a sigh and reaches for my duffle bag. “You ready to go?”

“Yes.”

“Did you say goodbye to your sister?”

“Yes.”

“Is she okay?” he murmurs, his voice laced with concern. I don’t know why I’m surprised by his thoughtfulness. But it still makes my chest tighten.

Why can’t Maddie give him a chance?

Whatever he did to Em, he’s changed. He’s not that person anymore. He would never hurt me.

I smile and rise onto my tiptoes before pressing a quick peck to his cheek.

“You’re amazing. You know that, right?”

He drops his chin to his chest. “You give me too much credit. Come on.”



THE RV IS OLD. AND RUNDOWN. BUT IT’S CLEAN, DESPITE BEING PACKED TO the brim with instruments, musicians, and enough junk food to last us six months even though we’ll only be gone for two. In the back of the vehicle are a pair of bunk beds and a tiny bathroom that feels like a shoebox. A full-sized nook with a mattress sits above the steering wheel, while a small couch and card table are set up in the center of the space. There’s also a tiny kitchen that’s bare-bones at best, but the boys seem content on surviving off junk

food and takeout, so it works.

And I kind of love the vibe of it all. The open road. The acoustic guitars resting on the beds. Gibson's notebook with his chicken scratch handwriting for whenever inspiration strikes.

It's cozy. Peaceful. And despite the guilt weighing heavily on my shoulders from leaving Mads, I'm excited for the journey that lies ahead.

I can't believe I'm really going on tour with Broken Vows.

Now that Stoker has relieved Fen of driving duty, we're back on the open road.

"All right, so I'm thinking we should play some of our new shit," Fender comments as he cracks his knuckles and flops down on the worn couch next to Gibson. He's been quiet since we left my apartment, though I don't know why, and I'm too terrified to ask him if something's wrong.

Do non-girlfriends ask those kinds of questions?

Do they even notice those kinds of things?

Pulling out a bag of Fire Cheetos, Phoenix pops one into his mouth and gives Fen a nod. "Agreed. Which ones do we wanna play? And how many songs does Dove want to sing?"

All eyes turn to me.

"Oh. Um..." I tuck my hair behind my ear and scoot a little closer to Gibbs. "Whatever you guys think, I guess? I'm just here when you need me." I'm still not used to being around so many guys at one time. And when they all look at me, hanging on my every word, it makes me sweat.

"What do you think, Sonny?" Phoenix asks him, munching on another Cheeto.

Gibson clears his throat and squeezes the back of his neck. "Dove and I have been working on a couple of new pieces that are written for a duet. I know we've been messing with some of our older songs this week during practice, but I feel like most of those were meant to be sung with one singer, not two. The new ones fit a duet better, but we haven't had a chance to practice them as much, so it's up to you guys. Whatever you think."

"All right. Let's hear 'em." Fender grabs the neck of his guitar resting beside the couch and hands it to Gibson.

As he takes the offered instrument, sets it in his lap, and starts strumming, he glances at me and suggests, "Let's start with your verse."

Clearing my throat, I close my eyes to block out their stares and try to get lost in the music. The beat. The rhythm. The melody that calls to my soul like

a siren.

*“Warm, dark eyes.
Hidden moments beneath the sky.
Feels like a dream.
Like maybe you’re all I need.
But I don’t do this.
Not usually.
I don’t need this.
Not usually.
But you make me
Make me
Want you.
Just you.”*

Gibson’s dark, gritty voice takes over after the chorus. I slap my hand against my thigh in rhythm to his strumming as I soak up his words as if they were meant for me, even though I’m terrified to acknowledge that they are.

*“Cool, dark nights.
Me lost between your thighs.
Feels like a dream.
Like maybe you’re all I need.
But I don’t do this.
Not usually.
I don’t want this.
Not usually.
But you make me”
“Make me,” I echo.
“Want you,” he follows.
“Just you,” we sing together.*

We finish the rest of the song, and the only sounds are our voices, the guitar, and the occasional rev of the RV’s engine as it eats up the distance to our destination. When the last chord is played, I open my eyes and find Gibson staring at me, his expression not quite as somber as before. Like

maybe there's hope for us after all.

Leaning over his guitar, he kisses me. Softly. Slowly. And with that same reverence that's remarkable.

Clapping and whistling ensue around us, the guys hooting and hollering as Fender pipes up and says, "All right, all right. That's enough, you two."

I lick my lips and untuck my hair from behind my ear to hide my blush as Phoenix licks his Cheeto fingers before tapping them against his cell.

"You okay if I post this, Sonny?" he asks.

"Did you record us?"

"Yeah. That okay? Figured it could create some buzz for the tour. Maybe help sell a few more tickets at the venues."

Gibson turns to me. "You okay if he posts the video?"

Indecision wars in my lower gut before I shove it aside. "I mean, they're going to hear me at one point anyway, right? But are *you* okay with it?" I ask Gibbs. "If Broken Vows fans see you on the video, it'll be hard to stay out of the limelight. SeaBird's little show was one thing, but this..." My voice trails off as I motion to Phoenix's phone.

Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, Gibbs pulls me into his side before his chest rumbles, "I think you were right, Dove. I might as well embrace it."

"And you're sure?" I murmur, peeking up at him.

With a nod, he drops a kiss to the crown of my head.

"Okay," I announce. "I say we post it. Might as well get some buzz for the tour, right?"

Satisfied, Gibson says, "Well, you heard the girl. Post away, I guess."

"Yes!" Phoenix shouts before he types on his screen for a few more seconds and slips his phone back into his pocket before pulling out his drumsticks from the back of his jeans, twirling them in his fingers as he announces, "It's done. Let's get some food."

"But you just"—I motion to the empty bag of Cheetos in front of him, shaking my head—"Food, it is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DOVE

The drive is long, and my back aches from sitting so much. But the time goes by relatively quickly, thanks to the band members. This isn't their first rodeo, and they're pretty hilarious together. Between telling stories of past adventures and dreaming about the potential doors this tour may open, we're all pretty high on life despite the hours on the road.

And I love it.

The camaraderie. The trust. The excitement. It's a heady concoction, and I haven't even stepped foot on a stage.

Fender and Gibson take turns playing their songs acoustically while I chime in every once in a while with new ideas that can potentially take the song to the next level. And when Gibson remembers the one he'd been working on when we first met was meant to be sung from two perspectives, he reminds me of a little kid on Christmas.

I fall asleep in Gibson's arms, crammed into a tiny twin-sized bunk bed as Stoker and Phoenix play poker beneath us, and Fender takes another turn behind the wheel.

It's memorable. And surreal. And kind of perfect, too.

I think I could get used to this.



“DUDE, HAVE YOU CHECKED TWITTER?” PHOENIX ASKS IN THE OTHERWISE quiet RV a few hours later. I rub my eyes before peeking over the edge of the bed.

It's Stoker's turn to drive again, and Fender was catching some shut-eye on the bed beneath ours.

"No, why?" He yawns.

"Because we're trending—"

"What?" Fender reaches for his phone. His jaw drops before he pulls up TikTok and YouTube. "Shit."

"What's wrong?" Gibson croaks beside me, his voice still rusty from sleep.

"Sonny, the video's trending."

"What video?"

"Of you and Dove. The new song. It has over 300,000 views."

"What?" I squeak.

"Yeah." With his nose in his phone, Fender keeps refreshing the app in disbelief. "Seriously...this is insane. You should read the comments. They love it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They, uh," he pauses. "They wanna know who the new faces of Broken Vows are." His phone starts playing a Blink-182 song, his screen lighting up as Fender glances up at us before answering it.

"Yeah?"

Silence.

"Hey."

Silence.

"You saw it?"

Silence.

"Yeah. They're pretty good, huh?"

Silence.

"Oh. Yeah. She's his...friend." He grimaces as the word slips past his lips, and he refuses to look at me even though I know exactly who he's talking about, but I don't know who he's talking *to*.

"Yeah, she'll be there," Fender continues, sitting up fully.

Silence.

"You want to..." He clears his throat. "You want to *come*?"

A stressed-out Fender runs his fingers through his hair as he listens to whatever the other person is saying on the line.

"I don't know if he'd be okay with that," he hedges.

I glance behind me to find Gibson stone-cold and close to fuming. Which

means he knows who's on the other end of Fender's call. And he isn't too pleased about it.

"Yeah, I know you want to show your support, but—"

Silence.

"Yeah, I know—"

Silence.

"Dad—"

Crap.

More silence.

"I'll talk to him and see what he says," Fender murmurs a few seconds later.

Silence.

"He's not a child. Pushing him on this—"

Silence.

"Let me talk to him, first. No, Dad—"

His head hangs low. "Yeah. Thanks. We're really excited."

Silence.

"See you soon."

He hangs up and stares blankly at the phone in his hand.

"What'd he say?" Gibson demands.

Still refusing to look at us, Fen drops his phone onto the seat cushion beside him, gets to his feet, and mutters, "He saw the video."

"And?"

"And he said it was really good."

A long pause follows his declaration, but I know the conversation is far from over. Gibson's too frustrated. Too anxious. Too pent up to let it go, and I don't blame him. He probably feels violated. Heck, I feel violated, and he isn't even my father.

My heart starts pounding, but I try to shake it off and focus on what's important right now. Gibson. And his dad. Who, apparently, liked the song. That's a good thing, right? Or at least, it would be if it weren't for Gibson's crappy relationship with the guy.

Poor Gibbs.

"Is that it?" he asks Fen, every muscle in his body poised and ready to strike even though there isn't a single physical threat in the RV. Just a psychological one. And it's wreaking havoc on him right before my eyes.

Fen's jaw is clenched as he scrapes his fingernails against it and looks up

at Gibson on the top bunk. “He, uh, he wants to come to a show—”

“No. Not a chance in Hell—”

“He knows the schedule, Sonny. Wouldn’t you rather have a heads-up instead of not knowing which venue he’ll be at?”

Phoenix disappears up front. Probably trying to give the boys some semblance of privacy despite the fact that we’re packed into the RV like a bunch of sardines. Still, I appreciate his effort. And if I could climb out of this bed and down to the main area without causing a ruckus, I would disappear too. But I can’t. Instead, I burrow into Gibson’s chest, trying to make myself smaller. Like maybe I can vanish, and no one will remember I’m still very much present for this conversation, all while knowing I shouldn’t be.

“I don’t want him at *any* of the venues,” Gibson growls, his arm tightening around me.

“Sonny—”

“This is why I didn’t want him to have anything to do with the tour. It’s bullshit.”

“He would’ve found out anyway. He cares about us—”

“If he cared about us, he wouldn’t have disappeared for over a decade,” Gibson spits.

“He was young and stupid, Sonny. He knows he messed up, but you won’t even let him apologize—”

“That’s because I don’t need his apology, Fen. And you shouldn’t, either. You’re better than that.”

“Am I?” Fen challenges, pacing the tiny main area like a caged beast. “As far as I can tell, Dad and I seem to be cut from the same cloth. I’ve screwed up so many times, I’ve lost count, yet you keep accepting my apologies. Why can’t you accept his?”

“Because he was supposed to be my father. He was supposed to be there for me—”

“He’s *trying* to be there for you, Sonny, but you won’t let him. How is that his fault?” Raking his fingers through his hair, Fen tugs on the roots and looks up at us.

“Stop. Okay? Just stop,” Gibson demands. “If he shows up at any of the shows, know that I’m walking out, and I won’t be back. We clear?”

“That isn’t fair, Son—”

“And I don’t give a shit.”

The RV pulls off the freeway at the next exit, proving that Phoenix is a genius and could read the rising tension as well as I could. Unfortunately, his efforts might be too late. A heavy silence encompasses the space. I'm left feeling awkward and grateful for the nearest gas station where I can climb out, walk around, and breathe. Not for me. But for Gibson.

Right now, he needs me.

Even if he doesn't admit it.

Even if he doesn't recognize it himself.

I can see it.

And I'm not going anywhere.

As soon as the RV pulls into a parking spot, Fen shoves the door open, slamming it behind him.

I flinch but stay quiet. Because honestly? I have no idea what to say or how the heck I can fix this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DOVE

“**H**e thinks we’re a happy family, Dove,” Gibson seethes, pacing the empty parking lot while wearing his fury like an expensive suit. “He thinks my dad’s a good guy. That he made a mistake. He thinks that Marty needs help and is as lost as him. He thinks there’s good in everyone. But it’s all bullshit, and he refuses to listen to me.”

With my arms at my sides, I watch him march back and forth, helpless to fix the situation yet desperate to do exactly that.

“I know, Gibbs,” I whisper. “I know.”

“I don’t want to get back on that damn RV.” He flips his arm toward the vehicle as if it’s offended him. “I don’t want to run into him. I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to do anything.”

“What *do* you want?” I ask. The parking lot is so electric with his pent-up frustration that I’m afraid we’ll both burn to the ground at any second. But I would be okay with it if it erased Gibson’s pain. His crappy past. If it gave him an ounce of peace. He deserves to feel peace. To be able to let go of his anger. To move on and not harbor such hateful feelings for a man who helped create him.

It isn’t fair.

Gibson pauses before striding over to me and pressing his forehead against mine. My breath catches, and I cup his cheek and let his stubble tickle my fingertips. The pain he’s feeling is contagious, but so is his desperation. And his vulnerability. I’d give anything to take away his pain. But I can’t. I can only be here. It doesn’t feel like enough, but it’s all I can do.

Closing his eyes, he breathes deep, then lets his oxygen out slowly. “I want you, Dove.”

“I’m right here. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“Tell me I’m right,” he pleads, soaking up my touch like the Sahara soaks up the sun. “That I’m not overreacting. That I’m being smart. Cautious. That I have a right to be wary of that asshole.”

“You have a right to be wary. You have a right to be cautious.”

“But I’m not right,” he surmises, pulling away from me. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

I shake my head and tangle my fingers with his. “I’m telling you that I don’t know your father, so I can’t give you my advice on the matter. But I *can* tell you that I think you’re right about your older brother. Marty’s bad news. The fact that Fen trusts him doesn’t exactly help my opinion of his judgment skills.”

Gibson scoffs. “Exactly—”

“But,” I continue, cutting him off and squeezing his fingers softly. “Marty’s sins shouldn’t affect your opinion of your father, either. Yes, he made a lot of mistakes while you were growing up, but haven’t we all made mistakes? And when we do, don’t you think we deserve the chance to apologize? And maybe explain ourselves? A child’s perspective is different from an adult’s.”

His head jerks back a couple of inches, but he doesn’t let go of my hand, and it gives me hope that I haven’t overstepped my bounds.

“That being said,” I rush out, “if you want nothing to do with him, I get it. If you want to walk back into the gas station and wait for an Uber to pick us up in the middle of nowhere and take us to the nearest airport, I’m here. If you want to get back on that RV and face your fears, I get that too. You have me, Gibbs. Whatever you want, I support you.”

His silence is terrifying, but I try to stay calm while I’m freaking out inside. He doesn’t need my nerves. He needs my patience. My level head. And my support.

After a few seconds, his pained voice almost breaks me. “I dunno what to do, Dove.”

“What’s your gut telling you?”

He laughs dryly and closes his eyes. “That I’m an asshole, but he made me that way.”

“You’re not an asshole, Gibbs.”

His eyes widen in surprise as he looks down at me and cocks his head. “Did you just swear?”

I snort. “When the occasion calls for it.”

With a soft smile, he puffs his chest out and grabs my chin. “Look at me, ruining you more and more, one day at a time.”

“You have no idea,” I quip, pressing a quick kiss to his lips.

When I pull away, his mouth is quirked up on one side, and the worry wrinkles around his eyes have softened. It makes my heart melt a little more. This man. He has no idea what he does to me. With a simple look or soft smile, I’m his. Even when we’re in a run-down gas station in the middle of nowhere. He owns me.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“For what?”

“For bringing me back from the edge.”

My brow arches. “Of what?”

“Of losing my shit more than I already did.”

With a grin, I pat his chest. “You’re allowed to be angry. But *try* not to take it out on Fen too much. He wants what’s best for you, remember?”

“Sometimes I forget that other people are looking out for me. But you’re right. I need to apologize.”

“Only if you want to.”

“Will you wait in the RV for me? I’ll find you after.”

“So, does that mean we’re not calling an Uber?”

He shrugs. “I still gotta see you shine on that stage.”

His leather jacket is soft beneath my fingertips as I grab the collar and tug him toward me.

With another quick peck, I murmur, “I’ll be waiting.”



Gibson

MY BROTHER’S HEAD IS IN HIS HANDS AS HE SITS ON A METAL BENCH OUTSIDE the gas station. He looks broken. And it’s because of me.

“Hey, Fen,” I mumble, my hands shoved in my pockets.

With bloodshot eyes, he glances up at me. “Look, I’m sorry—”

“Stop. I’m the one that’s sorry.”

Confused, his forehead wrinkles, but he scoots over a few inches and

gives me some room on the stupid bench.

“It must be a bitch playing the messenger all the time,” I continue, flopping down next to him and stretching out my legs. Fen snorts before crossing his arms.

“You have no idea,” he replies.

“That’s on me. I shouldn’t have gotten pissed at you.”

He sighs. “Look. I know Dad was a shitty father when we were young, Sonny. I had a similar experience, remember?”

“Exactly,” I return. “Which is why I don’t get why you’d want anything to do with him.”

“Honestly, I don’t know, either. The only reason I answered his call that first time was because I was drunk off my ass and didn’t know the can of shit I was opening when I clicked accept.”

“Seriously?”

When I found out Fen was talking to our dad, I was too pissed to ask questions. I told him I wanted nothing to do with it. And he respected my wishes. Didn’t push me. Didn’t even bring Donny Hayes up for months until their relationship was more stable. Until Fen thought he could fix mine.

“Yeah,” Fen answers dryly. “I lost my mind when I answered his call and rambled a bunch of shit, telling him that everything was his fault and I wanted him to die.”

My eyes widen. “Seriously?” I ask again.

“Yeah.” He nods, lost in the memory, sliding his hands up and down his thighs and shifting his weight on the bench to get more comfortable. “I hung up on him and expected that to be the end of it. Except, the next night he called again. And again. And again. Until I answered and did the exact same thing. I told him to go to Hell and that I was done. Over and over again. It happened for weeks. Every conversation would start out the same. I would call him out for being a shitty dad. He would apologize. I’d hang up. And the next night, he’d call again. And then slowly, after I finished rambling about how he screwed up his sons and he’d say he was sorry, the call would turn into an *actual* conversation, and my anger would get a little less overwhelming every time. We started really talking. About random shit. And I wasn’t pissed anymore. I actually looked forward to his calls. We talked about music. Bands. What I wanted to do with my life. His offer to help in any way he could. And when he did make the offer to help the band out that first time...I guess it didn’t sound like such a bad idea anymore.”

“When was this?” I rasp, almost jealous if it weren’t for the giant wall I’d built around myself when I found out I wasn’t Donny’s only kid all those years ago. Still, the reminder that Fen has a relationship with him while mine is shamefully pathetic leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

His eyes go hazy, and he stares into the distance, recounting the conversations before coming to some kind of conclusion. “Dad mentioned helping the band about a year ago, maybe? I dunno. Broken Vows was already formed. We were already gaining traction, and I knew you’d be pissed if I took him up on his offer.”

“So, you didn’t?”

“No. I didn’t. I knew how you felt about him. How you *still* feel about him,” he clarifies. “I wasn’t going to cross that line and ask for his help without your permission. Then, after I screwed up at SeaBird, well”—he scrubs his hand over his face—“I guess we both know how that played out.”

I pause to appreciate a few of the blanks that have been filled in, my respect for my father rising a few notches. I’ve never heard this story, but I *have* been on the other end of Fen’s benders. They’re no joke. If Donny Hayes could handle those and still bothered to call the next day, he deserves a damn award.

However, there’s still a massive elephant from our past that I want to know about.

“And what about Marty?” I ask, staring at the sun setting in the distance. “Why’d you connect with him?”

“Marty’s...Marty.” Fen laughs. “When I found out we had another brother who wanted to meet, of course, I didn’t turn it down. I knew what it was like to have a kick-ass older brother. Why wouldn’t I want another one? And yeah, he’s an ass and didn’t turn out to be like you, but he’s still blood. I know you don’t look at family the same way I do, but we all have our shit, right?”

“He was the one who introduced you to the hard stuff, Fen. You’re addicted to more shit than you can count, and it’s all his fault.”

“I’m handling it—”

“Bullshit,” I spit before attempting to rein in my temper. With a deep breath, I try again. “If you were handling it, I wouldn’t be here.”

He sighs, resting his elbows on his knees. “Listen. I want you here, Sonny. I really do. But despite Hawthorne’s recommendation, I don’t need a babysitter. I got this.”

It wasn't exactly a recommendation, I almost point out, but I bite my tongue before challenging him. "Do you?"

"Yes."

"And when something doesn't go according to plan? If someone writes a shitty review about a performance? If the energy isn't the way you want it to be while on stage? What will you do?"

"I'll suck it up."

Frustrated, I dig my fingers into my thighs and try to find an ounce of control. But it's freaking difficult. "You're missing my point. Just because we all have our shit doesn't mean it's okay to add *more* shit to someone else's plate. Marty's bringing you down. He's using you."

"For what? I don't have anything."

"You have a healthy relationship with Dad. You have a successful career without needing to call in any favors—"

"Except the one that got us this gig," Fen points out, his tone bitter.

"You made a mistake—"

"And so has Marty."

I grit my teeth, knowing I won't be able to convince Fen about Marty's true nature. Scratching my tight jaw, I count to ten and mutter, "I'm not going to give Marty a shot. He doesn't deserve it after the shit he's put you through. But I can't control what you do."

"Good. Because you're right. You can't. Even though you're my babysitter for this, I'm not a kid. I can handle my own shit when it comes to it."

I nod, trying to hide my disbelief with a fake confidence that makes me feel like a shitty brother. Because I don't believe him. He's a damn trainwreck. Just like me. Just like Milo. And Jake. And even River before he met Reese.

When did life get so messed up?

"I know, Fen." I sigh. "You got this. But you're right about Dad. I haven't been fair to him. Why don't you have him come to one of the shows, and we can...talk."

"You serious?" Fen asks. His brows practically reach his hairline as he looks at me, not even bothering to hide his surprise.

With a dry laugh, I agree, "Yeah."

"What made you change your mind?"

My attention shifts to the RV before Fen gives me a knowing nod.

“You like her?”

“We’re simply having fun,” I argue.

“You sure that’s all it is?”

“That’s all it can be.” An image of Em flashes through my mind before I shove it aside and shake myself out of it. “I don’t do relationships.”

“You *haven’t* done relationships. That doesn’t mean you don’t do them.”

“You know what I mean, Fen. Especially in this industry.”

“Just because Dad was shitty at relationships doesn’t mean you have to be. Although, it wouldn’t hurt if you stopped texting Em,” Fen points out, his tone laced with an annoyance that makes me pause.

Confused, I tear my gaze away from the RV and look back at him. “How the hell did you know about that?”

“Dove mentioned it. Why the hell are you still texting her? She left—”

“Did she, though?” I mumble under my breath.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

My upper lip curls in disgust, and a frustrated growl escapes me as I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees, mirroring my little brother’s stance. “You wanna know the real reason why Dove and I will never work?”

“Why?”

“Because her sister is Em.”

He jerks back. “*What?*”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“I dunno. We ran into each other when I picked up Dove for work forever ago.”

He leans back and squeezes his neck, searching for a solution, though I know he won’t find one.

I’m screwed. There’s no coming back from a lie like that.

“Does she know?” he asks after a few seconds.

“Of course not,” I scoff. “If Dove knew, she’d be gone.”

“And Em never told her?”

I shake my head. “They aren’t exactly close.”

“But I thought they lived together?”

“They do.”

“Is it for financial shit? Wait.” He pauses before the blood drains from his face. “Didn’t she say her sister’s—”

“Pregnant? Yeah.”

Jumping to the same conclusion I did, his body sags further into the uncomfortable bench. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you—”

“No.”

“How do you know?” Fen prods.

“Because Dove said that Em—who’s real name is Madelyn, by the way—told the real father about the baby, but he wants nothing to do with it. Since I was never told, and Milo was never told, there had to have been a third guy she was messing around with while still sleeping with us.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” I confirm.

“And you’re positive?”

“As positive as I can be. Em confirmed the same thing to me, which is why we’ve been texting on and off. But I dunno how to really know for sure without a DNA test.”

“So you’re gonna get one?”

“I have to, don’t I? I’m not gonna be a shitty father like ours was. I gotta at least find out. And when I do, Dove will know that I’ve slept with her sister and didn’t tell her about it.” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I let the severity of the situation settle into my bones. Saying it out loud makes it sound so much worse. It makes it real. It makes it clear that whatever delusional future I’d concocted between Dove and me is just that: delusional.

“She’ll never forgive me, Fen,” I breathe out.

“You don’t know that—”

“Yeah, I do. But it doesn’t matter, anyway. She deserves better than my sorry ass.” I bump his shoulder with mine, lifting my chin toward the RV. “Come on. We need to get on the road.”

He grabs the sleeve of my jacket to keep me in place. “You gotta tell her, man.”

“I can’t—”

“You have to. If Dove finds out by some other bullshit way—”

“I know,” I rasp, letting the harsh reality wash over me all over again. The idea of Dove finding out guts me. She’d never be able to understand that Em and I were purely physical. Hell, we got on each other’s nerves more often than not. If anything, I think the only reason she stuck around was because she had a thing for Milo and was too afraid to own up to her feelings.

It still doesn't change the fact that this won't work—Dove and me. No matter how many potential scenarios I play out, the truth is simple. I've slept with both Walker girls. And there's no erasing it.

Fender lets me go, gets to his feet, and offers his hand to help me up.

When I take it, he says, "You'll figure it out, Sonny."

I scoff and look back at the RV where the girl of my dreams is waiting for me.

"Yeah. I'm not so sure about that one. Come on." I take a step toward the parking lot, but he stops me.

"Hey, Sonny?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For being the big brother I've always needed. I know that you don't know what it's like to have a good one, but I think that's why I refuse to give up hope on Marty, ya know?"

My smile is tight as I toss my arm around his neck and pull him toward the RV. "I don't need an older brother, Fen. I have a pretty good little one."

He rolls his eyes but lets me pull him along. "Yeah, yeah. Enough of this mushy shit. Let's get going. We have a concert to perform."

Shit.

He's right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“**Y**ou nervous?” Gibson asks, his concerned gaze bouncing around my face like a pinball. “You look nervous.”

I glare back at him and try to ignore the stage crew buzzing around us like busy bees. It’s opening night for Broken Vows. And absolute chaos.

“Will you stop analyzing me for two seconds?” I grit out.

“Sorry.” He shoves his hands into his front pockets, but his amused smirk taunts me. “You look hot, though. I like the dark eye makeup.”

“Thank you. Trisha may have given me a tutorial or two the last time we got together. And why do you look as cool as a cucumber?” I demand, waving my hand up and down his toned body like an orchestra conductor.

He leans closer and drops his voice low. “Because I’m on babysitting duty and won’t be on stage tonight.”

I purse my lips, unconvinced. “Don’t you crave it, though? Even a little bit?”

“Being on stage?” he asks.

“Yeah. I’ve seen you perform, Gibbs. I’ve read the comments on the video from the RV. They love you. They want you. And you light up in front of them. There’s no way that’s an act. So, why don’t you want to perform in front of them? Is it really about your dad?”

His gaze narrows, warning me to be careful.

“I’m sorry. I just... You were made to shine, Gibson—”

“No. *You* were made to shine.” He brushes a few strands of hair away from my cheek, then toys with the ends of them right above my left breast. “You’re gonna do great tonight.”

I fold my arms and drop my gaze to the ground. I wish I had his confidence. Right now, I feel like I'm going to puke.

"I'm freaking out, Gibson," I admit.

"Don't." He lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him. "I also read the video comments, you know. They love you too."

"They love *us*," I clarify while attempting to block out the crew backstage who are working around us. It doesn't work.

"Fine, they love *us*, but that includes *you*, Dove Walker. You're gonna do great tonight."

My breathing picks up as I shake my head. "I feel like I'm about to be fed to the wolves. I've never sung to a crowd before, Gibson."

"You sang at SeaBird—"

"I *froze* at SeaBird. Remember?" I fist the sides of my dark tank top as another wave of anxiety threatens to get the best of me. "You had to get on stage and help me."

"What about church choir?" he mentions.

"Church choir was like fifty people. And I was singing with half of them. This"—I motion to the audience only one wall away who are already screaming at the top of their lungs—"is a little bit different."

A large guy with a headset on silently orders us to step out of the way, and we follow his request before Gibson turns back to me. "You're gonna do great, Dovey."

"What I'm going to do is puke," I tell him.

He laughs, pulling me into his chest, finding my mini-meltdown way more amusing than I do. He doesn't get it, though. I'm not strong. I'm not brave. I'm not confident. I'm terrified out of my freaking mind. The only things keeping me from collapsing into a heap on the ground are his strong arms holding me in place. Heck, I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for his support, trust, and confidence that I actually have the talent to pull this off.

But the idea of doing it alone?

Not so great.

He rubs his arms up and down the back of my dark tank top rhythmically as if his touch might ease my nerves but doesn't say a word. And even though I'd never admit it out loud, his silent comfort's kind of working.

Jerk face.

The rest of the band is already on stage and have played two songs in their set. Which means I'm supposed to go out there in about three minutes.

My stomach churns more violently, and I close my eyes, clutching Gibson's black T-shirt like my life depends on it.

"You're gonna do great, Dovey," he repeats, his tone a little more empathetic this time around. Like he can feel my nerves. My anxiety. My fear. My excitement. All of it. But he still doesn't get it. None of this matters if he isn't with me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, terrified of his rejection, I whisper, "Come out with me, Gibbs."

"Dove—"

"Please?" I peek up at him.

"Fen's going to sing with you."

"I don't want to sing with Fen. I want to sing with you. I want to be with you. Please?" I beg, still buried into his warm chest as if I belong there.

The cheering heightens as the last few notes are played. Then Fender's deep, booming voice echoes throughout the arena.

"And now, ladies and gents—" he starts, but I don't register a single word after.

Panicked, I look up at Gibson. "Come with me, Gibbs."

"Dove—"

"Please?" I repeat for what feels like the hundredth time.

Jaw tight and eyes shadowed from the harsh lighting, he tangles our fingers together and drags me on stage. My heart rate spikes as my flats slap against the dark painted floor.

Holy freaking crap.

He said yes.

He's out here.

With me.

Because of me.

For me.

The stage lights are blinding, but I keep my focus on our tangled hands, refusing to look at the audience. The crowd. The fans who are about to hear me sing. The people who are all warmed up from Broken Vows' previous songs and are ready for another round.

"Looks like we have a surprise guest," Fender announces, more amused than anything else. The crowd goes wild, and Fen chuckles into the microphone.

"Sounds like some of you might recognize him. Let's hear another round

of applause for our friends!”

Gibson stops me in front of a microphone stand and lifts his finger, telling me to stay put before sauntering over to Fender like he owns the place. They slap each other on their backs, then Fen continues, “I’m sure you’ve all been wondering who the mystery man from the RV is, and I’d like to introduce you to Gibson Hayes.”

“Woo!”

“Take your shirt off!”

“Can I lick you?!”

My jaw drops as a few sets of boobs grab my attention from the sea of people spread in front of us.

Uh, what the heck?!

Gibson’s deep chuckle echoes throughout the arena as he leans closer to Fender’s mic. “Ladies, while I appreciate your enthusiasm, I think my girlfriend over here”—he hooks his thumb toward me—“might usher me off stage if we don’t start playing.”

“And *I* might get jealous,” Fen adds, his voice booming throughout the stadium. “No one’s asked *me* to take my shirt off yet.”

“That’s ‘cause you do it without any of them needing to!” Phoenix interjects before drumming out *ba-da-bum-ch*.

Fender flips him off, and Gibson chuckles under his breath. Like he’s in his element. Like he belongs on this stage. And like he didn’t just call me his girlfriend in front of thousands of people.

Girlfriend.

Me.

Whether it was to get the girls to back the heck off or if he was serious, I’m not entirely sure. But I’m on cloud nine. Because he’s out here with me. He’s being the rock I need him to be so that I can face one of my biggest fears. He’s helping me *shine*.

I choke back a fresh wave of tears and take a deep breath. No one has ever wanted me to shine before. No one has ever sacrificed anything to help me be seen. But Gibson has. He’s doing it right now. And I just might love him for it.

“So, you gonna sing with us tonight, Gibson?” Fender asks, grabbing my attention.

The audience waits with bated breath.

Scratching his jaw, Gibson looks over at me. “I dunno, Dove. Am I gonna

sing with you tonight?”

Even though he looks confident and sexy as heck, I can feel the tension simmering beneath the surface. The fear. The anxiety. They match mine. But the part that turns my insides into knots is that he doesn't have to be out here. He wasn't part of the plan for tonight. He didn't even officially agree to be on stage at all, even though Hawthorne suggested it. He only agreed to babysit Fen. And he's been holding up that end of the deal like a champ. This, however, is completely spur of the moment, and now, he's entirely out of his element. But he's still doing it. For me. Because I asked him to. Because he wants to make me happy.

If there's ever a moment in my life when I know I'm loved, where I feel like I could burst into a million pieces of happiness, it would be right now. With the look in his eyes. The adoration. The affection. The sacrifice that he's making. It's all for me.

With a shy smile, I grab the microphone from its stand in front of me and stride over to him on shaky legs with my head held high. I can feel everyone watching me—some with glares of jealousy, others with open looks of appreciation. But most hold a weight of curiosity that spurs me on.

“You're definitely gonna sing,” I announce, my voice echoing through the speakers.

Another wave of crazy cheering ensues.

“It looks like I'll stick with guitar for the next song,” Fen quips. He steps aside, his bright orange Fender guitar strapped to his chest as he gives up the microphone—and the spotlight—for his older brother.

My respect for Fen almost bursts, and I force myself to stay in one place instead of tackling him with a hug of appreciation. Oblivious to my gratitude, he dives right in, plucking at the strings like the expert he is. The sound echoes throughout the arena, and the crowd quiets down as they wait for Gibson to take the spotlight. The way he was meant to.

Gibbs reaches for the microphone, his long fingers wrapping around the dark handle before he lets his arm hang at his side. Looking carefree. In his element. And ready to take on the world. Then he faces me and brings the microphone to his lips. And I melt as soon as his low, gritty voice starts singing. About love. About stolen moments. About someone always being just out of reach. And it's beautiful. And raw. And filled with so much emotion that my vocal cords feel like they've been shredded with razor blades as I remind myself to clear my throat before I join in for the second

verse.

The audience is silent. Whether it's because they're as mesmerized as I am by the musician in front of me, or they're upset that I'm siphoning a bit of their attention in the duet, I don't know. But they're invested in the song. The lyrics. The harmony. All of it.

Just like me.

Just like Gibson.

A sense of euphoria spreads from my chest and up my throat as I sing a little louder and let the lyrics wash over me. Gibson joins in as we both feed off each other. Each of us building on the opposite's emotions and enthusiasm until I'm afraid I might drown in it. The lights. The lyrics. The melody. But one thing is certain. I've never felt more alive in my entire life.

By the end of the song, my chest is heaving from exertion, and I try to catch my breath. It matches Gibson's as he stares down at me, his lips pulled into a soft smile before he grabs my hips and kisses the crap out of me. In front of everyone. As if we're alone. Lost in each other the way we've always been since the moment we first met. I laugh and wrap my arms around his shoulders, ignoring the hoots and hollers that surround us. Because I'm still high. From his kiss. His touch. The crowd. The song. I'm in awe.

Little white lights flash as the crowd takes pictures on their cell phones, but I don't even care. I'm not ashamed that Gibson's claiming me in front of everyone. If anything, I'm proud. And so damn lucky that it isn't even funny.

Fender steals Stoker's microphone, his voice crackling over the speakers as he jokes, "All right, you two. These guys might've come for a show, but they weren't looking for *this* kind. Shall we give them another song?"

"Yes!" the crowd roars, making my ears ring.

Gibson grins down at me. "What do you say, Dovey? Should we give them another song?"

I rise onto my tiptoes and give him another peck against his lips.

"Let's do it."



AFTER A FEW MORE SONGS, WE THANK THE CROWD BEFORE HEADING OFF-stage. My hair is damp with sweat from the killer workout, and I wipe my brow with the back of my hand as Organized Chaos preps for their turn in the

spotlight.

Their lead singer, Josh, lifts his chin when he sees us. “You guys rocked it out there.”

“Thanks.” My face is still bright red from exertion, and I pray that it hides my blush.

Josh *freaking* Butler complimented us!

It’s official. This is insane.

“Seriously. You and your man stole the show,” he tells me, a crooked smile painted across his handsome features.

My gaze shoots over to Fender, praying he didn’t hear Josh’s offhand compliment. Unfortunately, he looks pissed.

Crap.

Not the right thing to say, Josh.

“Uh, thanks,” I reply, my voice tight.

“We’re having a little get-together after the show,” he adds, oblivious to my discomfort. “You guys wanna come?”

I look at Gibson, Fen, Stoker, and Phoenix, but they’re all waiting for me to decide. Probably because my last experience at a party was less than stellar, and they want to make sure I’m on board before agreeing to anything. The realization makes me smile, easing the knot in my chest from Josh’s misplaced compliment. Maybe a party will distract Fender, anyway.

Clearing my throat, I turn back to the sexy, tattooed singer of Organized Chaos and nod. “Uh, yeah. Sure. That sounds great.”

“All right. See you guys after.”

He saunters onto the stage like he owns it. The audience screams their lungs out as the sexy bad boy starts bobbing his curly-haired head up and down in rhythm to the bassist’s opening riff to one of their latest hits.

“You guys, we killed it out there,” Phoenix announces, his voice overly enthusiastic as his gaze darts over to a very tense Fender.

“You’re right. We *all* killed it,” I emphasize. “That was incredible.”

“Yeah, it was okay,” Fen agrees, a little less enthused than before as he leans against the brick wall behind him.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I take in his tight muscles and clenched fists. He definitely heard Josh’s comment about stealing the show. And apparently, he’s not going to let it go.

“Here.” Gibson offers me a water bottle, and I chug half its contents, my skin still buzzing with adrenaline as I eye Fender warily, unsure what to say

or do.

Why do I feel like this is my fault?

“You gonna be all right at the party?” Gibson asks Fen, his voice quiet.

Arms folded, a serious Fen growls, “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Gibson cocks his head but doesn’t answer him. Because we all know the answer to that, no matter how hard Fender’s trying to act oblivious. After-parties get crazy. Or at least, I assume they do. I’m not *that* naive.

“Maybe you should stay back tonight,” Gibson offers carefully.

Bristling, Fen clenches his jaw. “You serious?”

“I just wanna make sure your head’s on straight. You always wanna chase the high after a show—”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Gibbs.”

Gibson sighs. “Fen—”

He pushes off from the wall. “I’m gonna go to the back room and chill until the show’s over.”

Gibson drops his chin to his chest as Fender storms down the hall, leaving us in his dust. I’m not sure why he’s surprised Gibson felt the need to check on him. It’s literally the reason he’s here. But I get it. No one wants a chaperone. Especially one that joined him on stage and stole the spotlight.

Hooking his thumb over his shoulder, Phoenix says, “I’m gonna go hang out too. We’ll meet you guys later, yeah?”

“Okay.” I wave goodbye at him and Stoker before playing with the hem of Gibson’s T-shirt to get his attention.

“Hey, you.”

“Am I an ass?” he rasps, still refusing to look at me.

I shake my head. “No. You have a right to be concerned. I haven’t known Fen long, and I can see how much he struggles with parties. And since his ego took a hit like that earlier...” I grimace and touch his forearm. “You’re definitely not an ass.”

“He’s pissing me off, though,” he seethes, pinning me with his heated stare. “Does he think I *want* to be his babysitter? I...”

“You want him to be safe,” I finish for him. “And happy. You’re a good big brother, Gibbs. And even though he might struggle to see it in these situations, he knows that. Let him cool down. We’ll all keep an eye on him tonight, okay?”

“You sure you wanna go?” he asks, holding my gaze.

I nod. “Yeah. Sure. Besides, I think keeping Fen away from the party will

only fuel his frustration.”

“Good point.”

“I’m not gonna do any drugs or anything, though,” I warn him. “Not that you’d ever pressure me to or anything. I just feel like I should set up those boundaries so that you never have to question them. Heck, I’ve never even been drunk before, so no, thank you.”

His eyes widen in surprise before his mouth quirks up on one side. “You’ve never been drunk?”

“I thought we’d already discussed this—”

“Yeah, but I kinda thought you were full of shit.”

“Well,” I huff, annoyed by his lack of trust. “I’m not.”

He grins but stays quiet, silently assessing me like I’m a dang animal at the zoo.

“Is this amusing to you?” I challenge, crossing my arms.

“A little.” His calloused fingers tickle my temple as he tucks my hair behind my ear. “I bet you’d be a fun drunk.”

With a laugh, I clutch at my chest. “Should I be offended?”

“No. One day, you’ll have to let me get you drunk.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. But not tonight.” He drops his hand to his side, his earlier amusement dissipating in the blink of an eye as the weight of Fen’s world falls on his shoulders. “Tonight, I’m gonna have to babysit Fender, and I don’t think I’ll be very fun if I’m stressed about him the whole time.”

“I wouldn’t want to get drunk the night before another big show, anyway. I’ve heard hangovers aren’t so great.”

He tosses his arm over my shoulder and guides me down the hall toward the back room. “Yeah, but they’re a rite of passage, Dovey girl. You gotta have at least one.” He drops a kiss to the crown of my head and adds, “But not tonight.”

“Nope. Not tonight.”

“Did you have fun, though?” he asks, glancing down at me as we weave between the stage crew.

“On stage?”

“Yeah.”

“Then yes. That was...” A wistful sigh escapes me. “That was insane. And awesome. How about you? Was it *that* terrible to be on stage with me?”

His deep chuckle makes my insides clench as he pushes me against the

wall outside the back room where the rest of our friends are hanging out. The air whooshes out of my lungs before I take in his heated gaze. It promises all sorts of naughty things he's managed to introduce me to since we started dating.

And I love it.

"What are you doing?" I ask innocently.

His hands skim along my hip bone before dragging up my bare arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake as he cages me in on both sides.

"Just talking about the performance," he notes, awakening every single nerve in my body with a simple touch.

"Is that right?"

"Mm-hmm," he hums before leaning closer and breathing me in. "And no. It wasn't terrible."

"Not terrible?" I laugh. "That's all you're gonna give me?"

"I'm still reeling that you actually got me out there," he admits, his warm breath tickling my neck before he sucks a piece of my flesh into his mouth.

I gulp and squeeze my eyes shut. "I-is that right?"

"Yeah. Fen's been trying for years, and so have Milo, Riv, and Jake. They'll be pissed they missed it."

"You can always perform with me again at SeaBird, ya know."

"As long as you're with me"—he kisses the corner of my mouth—"I'm game."

"For anything?"

His gaze darkens. "Possibly."

I grab his belt buckle and graze my fingers a little lower, palming him through his dark jeans as I look up and down the empty hallway.

"You're playing with fire, Dovey—"

"I've been playing with fire since the moment I walked in on you playing your guitar that first time."

With a low growl, he takes my lips and kisses me hard as I continue to palm him through his jeans. He's thick, and hard, and ready for me.

The same way I'm oh so ready for him.

"The show has at least thirty more minutes," I breathe out as soon as I find the discipline to pull my mouth away from his. "You sang for me today, my bard. And now, it's time to show my appreciation."

"Whatever you say, Princess."

I grab his hand and lead him to a utility closet that I'd accidentally

walked into when we first arrived. Then I show him exactly how appreciative I am of him saving me tonight. Because he might be my bard, but he was also my knight. The combination is an aphrodisiac on steroids, and I make him come in my mouth before he returns the favor. *Twice.*

I think I like being on tour.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Fender's still surly by the time the concert is over and demands he catch a ride with Phoenix and Stoker instead of tagging along with the *power couple*, as he puts it. I try not to be offended, but I can tell the comment stung Gibson more than he'd like to admit.

In the back of the Uber, he sends Fender another text to apologize for making him feel like a little kid, but Fen doesn't reply.

Of course, he doesn't.

Tucking his phone into his pocket, a defeated Gibbs watches the giant red-brick mansion approach but doesn't say a word.

"You okay?" I ask, reaching for his hand before squeezing it softly. "We don't have to go—"

"Fen's already here. Besides, there'll be parties at every stop. It's not like we could've hidden them from him, and it's a good opportunity to connect with Organized Chaos too." He shakes his head, returning my gentle squeeze with one of his own. "No. It's a good thing you said yes, Dove. I just gotta get my head in the right place. It'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. We'll keep tonight early-ish, though, okay? Not only for your sanity but for mine too."

"Okay." He squeezes my hand again. Like it's a lifeline. Like it's the one thing grounding him as he stares up at the massive house and perfectly manicured lawn with a wariness that matches my own. "Let's go."

From the long, winding driveway, the bass is thumping, making my ears ring, but it doesn't stop Gibbs from leading me up the front steps. Phoenix

and Stoker are off to one side chatting, but Fen is nowhere to be seen.

“Where is he?” Gibbs demands.

Phoenix lifts his hands in surrender. “He’s inside talking with a girl.”

Nostrils flaring, Gibson goes to storm inside, but Stoker steps in front of him. “Give him some space, man.”

“I need to talk with him—”

“Now’s probably not a good time,” Phoenix growls.

Gibson glares at Phoenix, then looks down at Stoker’s hand in the center of his chest.

“You need to back the hell up—”

“And you need to understand that your brother needs some space right now.”

“Come on, Stokes—”

“He’s right,” Phoenix interjects. “The internet exploded during the show about the new faces of Broken Vows.”

“So?” Gibson asks, as confused as I am.

Stoker mutters, “Fen wasn’t in the article.”

“Shit.” With a sigh, Gibson pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes.

I bite my lip and fight off my guilt for hurting Fender, even if it wasn’t intentional, but it’s impossible. He must be miserable right now, and I feel like it’s all my fault.

This sucks.

I can’t even imagine what he’s going through after hearing Josh’s offhand comment. Now, this?

“Fender’s the heart of the band,” I argue. “He has to know that, right?”

The guys stay quiet. Heck, they don’t even acknowledge me. They simply stare at each other, having a silent conversation no one else is privy to.

“He *has* to know that,” I repeat, though my confidence waivers with each passing second.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Gibson concedes after another few tense seconds.

Stoker nods. “Don’t mention it.”

He steps aside, and Gibson heads into the mansion in search of Fen while I trail behind. There aren’t as many red solo cups as the last party I attended, but plenty of glass bottles are scattered around. Most of the ornate furniture has been pushed along the walls to create space for a makeshift dance floor in

the center of the front room, but everywhere is littered with shadowed bodies in various positions and more gyrating bodies than I can even comprehend.

This is a small get-together?

A headache threatens to bloom at the base of my skull as I squint my eyes and look for Gibson's little brother, but I can't find him anywhere. There are too many people. Too many hallways. Too many secluded spots where anyone can blend in and disappear, which is exactly what I'm afraid Fender wants right now. Especially when he's mad at his brother. And me.

Where are you, Fen?

My heart is pounding as I pray to whatever god might be listening to give Fen the strength to fight his addiction and to trust Gibson when he apologizes for stealing the show tonight, even though it was far from intentional. Unfortunately, I have no idea if it'll be enough to talk Fen down from the edge. Or maybe I'm wrong—maybe we're all wrong—and he's okay. Maybe he isn't holding a grudge against us for stealing the spotlight. Maybe he's happy that Broken Vows made it into an article in the first place.

Yeah. And maybe pigs can fly.

The lighting is dim, probably to help set the mood and give the allure of privacy to hide everyone's debauchery, but it doesn't stop me from dissecting every single shadow and profile that comes into view.

"He has to be here somewhere," Gibson grumbles under his breath, his desperation matching my own.

The question is, where?

I squint my eyes and continue my search before my gaze lands on a familiar face in the sea of people.

Squeezing Gibson's hand, I lift my chin toward the large family room. "Is that him?"

Alone on a dark leather couch sits a familiar silhouette. One that I'm almost positive belongs to a certain singer and guitarist, though the female companion Stoker mentioned is missing.

And I'm not sure that's a good thing.

Gibson and I exchange worried glances before he pulls me toward Fen.

His eyes are bloodshot, and his usual smirk is absent as he stares in front of him, looking at nothing at all. It's obvious he's too lost in his thoughts and regrets to focus on anything, which makes him look numb and almost dead inside. Like the shell of a human being. One that's usually full of life and enthusiasm for the world around him. But not right now.

No.

This isn't Fender Hayes at all.

It's a stranger.

And the realization kills me.

Gibson clears his throat, but Fen doesn't move a muscle.

Is it too late? Has he already taken something? I want to ask, but I keep my lips pressed into a thin line. I've already done enough damage for one day.

"Hey, man—" Gibson starts.

"Leave me alone, Sonny."

"You weren't answering my texts."

"I don't need a babysitter—"

"I know. But if I need to reach you—"

"Look. I forgot my fucking phone. Add it to the list of shit I've screwed up in the last twenty-four hours, all right?" He finally looks up at Gibson, giving his older brother a front-row seat to the turmoil tearing him apart with each passing second. The betrayal clings to his defeated soul like a second skin and acts like a sucker punch to my gut as my attention shifts from one brother to the next.

This is all my fault.

Fender welcomed us on stage with open arms earlier tonight. And now, he feels like we stabbed him in the back because of it.

I drop my chin to my chest as shame fills every inch of my body. I should've never asked Gibson to join me on stage. I should've sucked it up and stuck with the original plan.

"I'm sorry," I start.

Gibbs shakes his head and digs into his dark jeans for his cell. "Take my phone. The code is 3-2-6-6-5-0."

"Why?"

"So I can reach you."

Fen scoffs but takes Gibson's offered phone anyway. "What? You're not gonna babysit me?"

"No, I'm not going to babysit you. You're a big boy, Fen. You know what you want, and it's bullshit that Hawthorne thinks I have any control over what you do."

"Good. Glad you're able to finally get that through your thick skull," Fender spits.

Gibson bristles but doesn't defend himself. "Keep my phone on you, okay? I want to be able to get a hold of you when it's time to go. We'll talk later tonight."

Fen's eyes narrow into thin slits as he studies him carefully. "Did you mean to do it, Sonny?"

With a slow exhale, Gibson shakes his head. "You know I didn't, Fen—"

"You sure about that?"

"Fen—"

"Why did you invite her on stage at SeaBird that first time?"

Gibson sighs, scrubbing at his clenched jaw as he fights for patience when I'm afraid it's a losing battle.

"Tell me," Fen demands. "I wanna know—"

"You already know the answer," Gibson growls, dropping his voice low. People are starting to stare. Heck, some have their phones whipped out and are already filming.

"Look, can we *please* talk about this later?" Gibson pleads.

Fen's attention shifts to the cell phones pointed in our direction before giving Gibson a grudging nod. "Fine."

"If you need me, text Dove."

Fender doesn't bother to respond as he pushes up from the couch and disappears into the other room, leaving nothing but his sizzling temper in his wake.

I've never seen him like that. So unhinged. So close to the edge. So close to throwing away everything he's worked for. But Gibson's right. He can't control Fender. And no matter how hard it is to watch him spiral, it's Fender's choice as to whether or not he actually will.

A beat of silence passes as the crowd shakes off the heavy tension they've witnessed and gets back to drinking their alcohol and grinding against each other like the party is a soon-to-be orgy.

"Is he going to be okay?" My quiet voice is barely loud enough to break through the thumping base that surrounds us.

Shaking his head, Gibson tightens his grip around my hand. "Come on. I need a drink."

We weave between the growing crowd to the back of the giant mansion before finding a bar lined with mixers, hard liquor, and beer bottles. Gibson reaches for one of the crystal glasses and pours himself a healthy shot, throwing it back. His expression sours for an instant before he pours another.

“Gibson—”

“I’m fine.” He sets the glass back down. “Do you want me to make you a drink?”

I shake my head.

“You sure?”

“I’m okay,” I mumble. “Thank you, though. Is Fender going to be okay?”

“Fender’s ego is fragile, Dove. He might put on a cocky façade, but he’s more like an abused puppy who wants to get adopted, ya know? He’s a good guy. But he puts too much pressure on himself to be perfect. To be the life of the party. The star of the show. And if what Phoenix and Stoker said is true, especially after Josh’s offhand comment, Fender’s ego took a hit tonight. And he doesn’t deserve that.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t. He’s been nothing but supportive of both of us. The fact that he even invited me to tag along on this tour is amazing.”

“He’s one of the most selfless people I’ve ever met. Until he isn’t. And then he’s a selfish bastard who will light his entire life on fire just to watch it burn.” He hangs his head.

“It’s not your fault, Gibbs—”

“Debatable,” he grumbles under his breath before reaching for another bottle of amber liquid.

Helpless, I watch him pour another shot and set my hand on top of his to prevent him from bringing it to his lips. When his gaze meets mine, he frowns and leaves the tiny glass on the counter. But it doesn’t erase the worried crinkles around his eyes. If anything, his decision to stay relatively sober only amplifies his anxiety. But if Fen gives in and gets into trouble, he’s going to need our help, and I can’t take care of both Hayes brothers by myself.

“He said he’d be good,” I remind Gibson, cupping his cheek.

He leans into my touch before sighing softly. “Yeah. He’ll be good until someone offers him something to help take the edge off. He might not go looking for trouble, Dovey, but it seems to find him anyway.”

I drop my hand to my side and dig my teeth into my lip as that same overwhelming sense of helplessness threatens to swallow me whole. Because he’s right. This entire thing was a terrible idea.

We should get out of here.

“So, what now?” I ask, peeking up at him.

“Now, we...”—Gibson shrugs one shoulder—“hang out and pretend that

everything's—"

"Hey, man!" a stranger calls, his swagger unsteady as he approaches us. "You guys killed it tonight! I'd never heard of you before, but damn. That was fucking epic, man! You had the crowd eating out of your hands."

Gibson smiles tightly. "Thanks. It was a good show."

"Yeah. Fucking epic, man!" He slaps Gibson on the shoulder, reaches for Gibson's untouched drink, and shoots the liquid down his throat before stumbling off.

Gibson gives me another tight smile as our last admirer is replaced with another one.

And another.

And another.

After a solid fifteen minutes of ass-kissing, Gibbs is practically vibrating with frustration when Phoenix appears out of nowhere. "Dude. Where the hell have you been? I've been calling—"

"Fen has my phone," Gibbs returns. "What's up?"

"Fen's dealer is here."

The blood drains from Gibson's face. "Marty's here?"

"Yeah, man. I saw him walk in about ten minutes ago, but I couldn't find you or Fen. I've been looking everywhere—"

"Where's Stokes?"

"He's looking too."

"Shit." Gibson shoves his hair away from his face, turning to me. "Stay here and keep your phone on you. I'll be back in a few."

He doesn't wait for me to reply and almost bumps into a couple making out in the hallway before he takes the stairs two at a time to the second floor. My phone vibrates in my hand as soon as he's out of sight, and I look down to find an onslaught of messages flooding my cell from Gibson's number.

One after the other.

Text after text.

Screenshot after screenshot.

Confused, I unlock my phone and start reading.

Em: It's Em. We need to talk.

Gibson: Apparently, I don't know an Em.

Em: Don't be an ass.

Gibson: Says the girl who faked her name, pretended to skip town, and wound up pregnant.

Em: Which is why I want to talk.

Gibson: Am I the father, Em?

Em: No.

Gibson: Is Milo?

Em: No.

Gibson: Then who the hell is it?

Em: It's none of your business, Gibbs.

Me: Does Milo know you were fucking a third guy on the side? Because if I'm not the father, and he isn't the father, then...

Em: It doesn't matter.

Gibson: Pretty sure it does, Em. Or should I call you Maddie?

I gasp and cover my mouth, my entire body feeling like a bottle of shaken soda that could explode at any second.

What. The. Hell. Is. Going. On?

Blinking back tears, I reread the first batch of texts another time, convinced this is some sick, twisted joke from Fen to get back at me for screwing up the concert. But he can't make this shit up. Which means...

No.

It's not possible.

Madelyn can't be Em.

My *sister* can't be Em.

I choke on the lump in my throat and try to concentrate on reading the rest of the screenshots that Fen sent from Gibson's phone, though it feels like dripping acid into my eyes. Like I'll never be able to erase the damage caused by a few simple screenshots, no matter how damning they are.

Em: You shouldn't call me anything. I changed my number for a reason.

Gibson: And yet, here you are. Texting me. What other lies are you hiding from your sister?

My heart cracks as I skip ahead in the conversation. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

Em: Don't tell Dove, either.

Em: Please.

Gibson: I won't.

A sob escapes me, and I drop my hand to my side.

They lied to me.

They *both* lied to me.

The room starts to spin until I'm so dizzy that I think I might puke. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to register the weight of their conversation, but it feels impossible.

This can't be real.

There's no way.

But no matter how hard it is to face the truth, the reality is pretty damn simple.

Gibson was sleeping with my older sister before we met. And he knew about it. But he didn't bother to tell me. In fact, he actively kept it a secret, turning me into the fool I was terrified I'd become if I fell for him. And I did fall. *Hard*. The betrayal hits me like a ton of bricks before another wave of reality piles on top of it. My sister is pregnant. And if she holds this much

contempt for Gibson, there's a big possibility that the father of my unborn niece or nephew could very well be the love of my life.

Shit!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

GIBSON

Meanwhile...

The bedroom door slams against the wall as I shove it open with all of my strength.

Where the hell is he?

My chest heaves from exertion and absolute rage before my attention lands on Fender passed out on an oversized bed with a needle in his arm.

“What the hell did you do?” I shout, ripping the needle from his flesh as I search for his pulse. Fen groans, his head lolls to one side, and his eyes are rolled up in his head. But he’s breathing. At least he’s fucking breathing.

My phone plops onto the bed next to Fen’s unconscious body. Confused, I turn around and find an amused Marty staring back at me.

“I think you did enough for the both of us,” he returns calmly.

Practically vibrating with fury, I tear my attention from Marty to an unconscious Fen before returning to my older asshole of a brother.

“Why do you do this to him?” I demand, seconds from losing my shit and tackling the bastard. I’ve put up with his shit for long enough. “Why do you bring him down like this?”

With his hands tucked in his pockets, he moseys from one side of the room to the other as if he has all the time in the world. As if he didn’t just hand a syringe full of poison to our kid brother and encourage him to inject it into his veins.

“He doesn’t come to me to bring him down, Sonny. You do that enough for the both of us.”

“I didn’t do anything—”

“You stole the spotlight,” Marty explains, that same calm lilt in his voice acting like gasoline on my rage. “The way that you *always* steal the spotlight.”

Confused, I grit my teeth and fist my hands at my sides. I’m done talking in code or the hypothetical bullshit he seems to get off on. “What the hell is your problem, Marty?”

“My problem is *you*. I’m glad that Fen can finally see it now.”

“I’ve never done anything to you—”

“You’ve had everything handed to you, Sonny.” He tsks. “Your talent. Your voice. Dad’s attention even though you shit on it. Hell, even women fall at your feet. First Em, then Dove.”

What the hell is he talking about?

“You’re joking. You know that, right?” I point out, watching him walk around the extravagant room as if he owns it.

Ignoring me, he cocks his head to the side. “She really is an innocent little thing, isn’t she? I saw her on stage tonight. Her upper thighs playing peekaboo for the crowd.” He licks his lips. “It was quite the show—”

My blood boils at the mere mention of Dove from his lips. Unable to control myself, I lunge for him, grabbing his collar and shoving him against the wall before he even has a chance to blink. His head ricochets forward, but his sinister smile is still etched across his ugly face as he stares back at me, daring me to hit him. To hurt him the same way he’s hurt Fender.

“You know, he told me about Dove and her relationship with our ex.”

My grip loosens for an instant, convinced I’ve heard him wrong. But the bastard doesn’t even bother to wiggle free. He’s too busy enjoying the view as my world falls apart.

“What did you just say?” I rasp.

“Who else do you think Em was fucking behind your back?” He grins. “Don’t worry, though. I haven’t touched your precious Dove. *Yet*. But now that she knows you may be her sister’s Baby Daddy, I might actually have a chance—”

I hit his jaw with all my might. Blood splatters from his mouth and onto the wall before he shoves me away. Rushing forward, he cocks his arm back and nails my eye socket, causing my vision to blur and my ears to ring. But I’m too fueled by our tangled pasts and Fender’s pain to feel the ache for long. I shake it off and lift my arms to protect my face as my need to kill Marty, check on Fender, and find Dovey combat each other for my attention.

But they're all messing with my head. Making it hard to focus. Making it hard to breathe.

I shake my head again, jabbing at Marty's nose as soon as I find an opening. A satisfying crunch echoes throughout the room when my fist connects with his nose before he falls to the ground. Clamoring after him, I straddle his waist and lift my knuckles to hit him again and again. To make him pay for the shit he's put me through. That he's put Fender through. And Em. And Dove. My precious Dove. The door swings open, and a set of hands yanks me off Marty's groaning form before another pair of footsteps scrambles to the bed.

"What the hell? Call an ambulance!" Stoker yells, his fingers on Fender's pulse and his eyes stricken with grief.

"Sonny, what happened?" Phoenix demands, his stern voice snapping me into action.

I stumble to my feet and race back to the bed.

"Fen. Fen." I slap his face softly, trying to make him respond as I take in his pale skin and the slight blue tint to his lips. He'd been breathing fine a few minutes before. "Fen. Fen, you gotta wake up. Fen—"

"Hello? We need an ambulance." I glance at Phoenix. He's pacing the room with a cell phone pressed to his ear, and his voice is hushed. He keeps talking, but I barely register a single word as I search for the asshole who started this mess. Hell, if I didn't know better, I'd say Marty orchestrated the whole thing. But he's gone. And I can't focus on him right now. Fen and Dove are the only people who matter.

And right now, Fender needs me more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DOVE

My phone buzzes, waking me up from a restless sleep as I press my head to the cool glass of the Greyhound Bus.
I let the call go to voicemail before a text comes through.

Gibson: Where are you? Fender's in the hospital. Please call me.

With a gasp, I dial his number and bring the phone to my ear.

“Hey,” Gibson answers one ring later.

“What happened?”

“Fen overdosed.” His voice is quiet. Pained. And laced with so much desperation, it cripples me.

“Is he... Is he okay?” I whisper.

“He's at the hospital. They gave him Naloxone on the way there and got him hooked up to an IV with a bunch of other shit to counter the drugs.”

“And?”

“They think he's gonna be okay.”

“Okay,” I breathe out. “Good.”

“Where are you, Dove?” he asks, carefully. Like he's walking a tightrope, and I may hang up at any second.

He's right.

On a sigh, I breathe out, “I have to go—”

“Wait, please—”

“Not right now, Gibbs—”

“I need you, Dove. I'm begging you—”

“I can’t,” I choke out.

“Please, Dove. Please come to the hospital.”

“I can’t do that, either. Not right now.”

“Can you just—” He stops and lets out a low groan. One that’s filled with frustration. And regret. And desperation.

The lump in my throat thickens until I’m afraid I might choke on it.

“I need to know you’re safe, Dove,” he murmurs. “Where are you?”

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“You’re a terrible liar, Dovey—”

“And yet, you wound up being an excellent one. I guess opposites really do attract, huh?”

His silence speaks louder than if he’d bothered to confirm the truth for me.

“Dove.” He pauses. “Will you please let me explain?”

“There’s nothing to explain,” I choke out, losing the battle over my emotions.

“Dove, I love you.”

I bite my lip and shake my head. The tears stream down my face in heavy rivulets before dripping off my chin, but I don’t bother to wipe them away.

I’m too broken to care.

“Did you love my sister too?” My voice cracks.

“Shit, Dove,” he rasps. “Your sister and me—”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. I’m so sorry—”

“I know,” I breathe out, squeezing my eyes shut to block out the dizzying onslaught of trees passing by. “I know you are. But sorry’s not enough right now.”

He exhales, long and slow as if it hurts. “I know, Dove. I know. But it kills me—”

“When did you know?” My breath catches before I swallow past the stupid lump in my throat. “I doubt she ever mentioned me,” I mutter. The same questions rattle around inside of me, begging for answers, though I’m not sure I want to know any of them. Still, they rise to the surface, demanding to be heard. “Is that why you never wanted to date me? I mean, you hated me as soon as we met. I pushed you—”

“That’s bullshit, Dove.”

“Is it? You were so cold. So distant. But I guess it makes sense after

everything that happened between you and Mads—”

“This has nothing to do with Em. I knew I wanted you as soon as I saw you walk into SeaBird looking lost and confused. Like you didn’t belong there but somehow fit perfectly. Just like how you don’t belong with me but managed to get under my skin anyway.”

“Stop,” I beg him, shaking my head back and forth in an attempt to quiet the tiny voice inside of me that agrees with him. We did fit. We fit *perfectly*.

But it’s all a lie.

He slept with Mads.

My sister.

“You never pushed me, Dove,” he argues. “Not into falling for you. But you’re right. At first, I tried to keep my distance because I don’t date coworkers. As soon as I found out you’d be working at SeaBird, I treated you like shit so that those barriers would be in place. And when I found out who your sister was...that was it. I knew I couldn’t cross that line with you. But I failed. That’s on me. Not you, okay? You’re fucking perfect, Dove. You got under my skin, and I don’t regret it. But I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I’m so sorry that my messed-up past got in the way of us. Of our future.”

“We don’t have a future,” I choke out.

“Dove—”

“Do you want to know the sucky part?” I cry, finally giving in to the pain. The hurt. The overwhelming agony as I acknowledge the shitty truth that I can’t ever erase no matter how hard I try. “I saw it. I saw our future. How it could all play out. Writing music together during the day. Making love at night. Blueberry pancakes in the morning. Fender walking into our little apartment unannounced. Maybe even a ring one day when you realized how perfect you are and that you’re not the bard but the knight in shining armor who saved me from being taken advantage of. From forgetting to think about myself every once in a while instead of always putting everyone else’s needs above my own.”

“Dove—”

“Let me finish,” I choke out, hastily wiping the tears from my cheeks. “I can’t stop thinking about you with her. Did you kiss her the way you kiss me? Did you hold her after making love to her—”

“It wasn’t making love with her, Dove. I know that sounds like a bullshit excuse, but it wasn’t. It was sex. Nothing more than a way to get off. It meant

nothing to either of us. Trust me. You knew I had a past—”

“But I didn’t know it was with my *sister*! My sister, who I’ve always come second to. My sister who’s always managed to take up all the attention in a room, leaving me tucked away in the corner with no one to talk to.” Again, I shake my head and battle the stupid insecurities plaguing every single one of my thoughts. But it’s no use. Clearly, they aren’t going anywhere. “I thought you saw me, Gibbs. The real me—”

“I did see you. I *do* see you,” he corrects. “I’d give anything to go back and save myself for you. To share every single moment with you. No past. No dirty secrets. Only us.”

“But you *can’t*.” My voice cracks again, and I bite my quivering lip. “You can’t erase the fact that my niece or nephew might be your baby. There’s no moving past this. There’s no letting go. There’s nothing but a shit hand that we both have to deal with.” I take in a deep, unsteady breath. “And it sucks.”

“Where are you, Dove?”

With red-rimmed eyes, I look out the window, the dark sky making the horizon almost impossible to see. “I’m on a bus.”

“What bus?”

“A Greyhound? I didn’t want to wait for a flight. If you could mail my things back to me, that’d be great.”

“Where are you going?”

A pathetic laugh escapes me as I wipe the moisture from my cheeks. Again. But it’s no use. Another tear stains them—one right after the other.

“I don’t even know,” I whimper. “I don’t want to go home. I don’t think I can face my sister without hating her even though it’s not her fault I fell for you. Heck, she *warned* me, and I didn’t listen. But I can’t go to my parents. They disowned me, and I really don’t think I can handle an *I-told-you-so* right now. Reese isn’t home, either. Even if she was, she lives with you. And if I have to walk past your room and see where w-we...”

“Sh...,” he croons. The sound is husky and low, reminding me of all the times he’d sing to me. With me.

Another piece of my heart breaks.

“You’re killing me, Dovey.”

“Ditto,” I choke out.

“What can I do to fix this?”

I can’t do this anymore.

“I, uh, I gotta go, Gibbs.”

“Come back, Dove.”

“I can’t.”

“Come to the hospital. I’m begging you—”

“I can’t,” I repeat.

“I need you, Dove. I need to hold you. With everything going on with Fen, then Em, and you—”

“I need to go—”

“Dove—”

“I can’t, Gibbs. I can’t do this.”

“Can we talk later?” he pleads. The sound is like another knife being added to the one already embedded in my chest.

Using the sleeve of my shirt, I wipe beneath my nose. “I-I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Dove—”

“I really hope Fen’s okay. And I’m really sorry about what happened to him.”

“I know.” His sigh is heavy. Weighted. Like he can’t breathe.

And neither can I.

“I’m really sorry, Dove—”

“Me too.”

Then I hang up the phone and cry. For what could’ve been. What could possibly happen if he’s the father of Madelyn’s baby. And what can’t *ever* happen because of his past and how closely it tangles with mine.

But none of those facts change the truth.

It isn’t fair.

None of it is.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

DOVE

My entire body feels like it's been injected with heavy concrete. Like each step takes every ounce of energy I have. Like all the muscles in my body have been overworked and overused in ways that'll take weeks to recuperate from. My eyes burn. My throat aches. My head hurts. And my chest... My chest feels like it's been stabbed a hundred times since I left the party. I don't have my keys. That would be way too convenient. The only things in my possession are my purse, my phone, and the clothes on my back. Which means I get to face my sister without a good night's sleep under my belt.

Lovely.

Standing in the breezeway, I rest my head against our apartment door, taking a few deep breaths before lifting my hand and tapping my knuckles against it with the energy of a slug.

Knock.

Knock.

I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

But there's no answer.

I try again before checking the time on my phone.

It's four in the morning. And almost twenty-four hours since my world fell apart. No wonder Maddie isn't answering the door. Only a lunatic would be up this early.

Chewing on my lower lip, I pull up her contact info and push the call button.

“Please tell me you’re the one banging on our door right now, and I’m not about to be murdered,” Mads says, bypassing a normal greeting entirely.

“It’s me.” My throat feels like I’ve swallowed sand.

The call goes dead before the door’s hinges creak a few seconds later.

“You woke me up,” she informs me, her hair piled on top of her head and her arms resting on her swollen stomach.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” The gap between the door and her widens as she steps aside and lets me enter. I can feel her stare. Her concerned look. Her worried brow.

“Are you all right?” she murmurs.

“Not now.”

“What happened?”

I lift my hand to cut her off. “Seriously, Mads. Not now.”

I trudge down the hall, my feet dragging against the worn carpet before I round the corner and collapse into bed. In clothes that are two days old. With makeup still caked on my face. And a stale taste of who-knows-what still lingering on my tongue.

The floor creaks behind me, but I don’t bother to lift my head. Instead, I cover it with a pillow and pray for sleep. For a chance to forget. For a chance to find peace even if it’s for no more than a few hours before reality crashes into me all over again.

Not now.



“HEY,” MADDIE CALLS, ROUSING ME FROM MY RESTLESS SLEEP. MY EYELIDS feel like weighted blankets as I blink slowly and roll onto my side.

“What do you want?” I croak.

“I made breakfast.”

I blink slowly, convinced I’ve heard her wrong as I warily scan her from head to toe. With a plate in one hand and a fork in the other, she waits for my response. Carefully. Anxiously. And nothing like the Maddie I’m accustomed to.

“You don’t cook,” I point out when the silence becomes too awkward.

“I did today. Can I come in?”

Pushing myself up, I press my back to the oak headboard behind me,

giving her a single, jerky nod. Besides, I need answers. I need them more than anything. And right now? She's the one who holds all of them.

Maddie waddles into the room, her stomach rounder than before I left. Her cheeks look fuller, too, like she's finally able to keep food down without supplements. But I'm not about to compliment her. Not right now. Not when I know that Gibson has touched her. Kissed her. That he thought she was gorgeous enough to have sex with.

He had sex with her.

I think I'm gonna be sick.

Eggs smothered in butter and syrup are balanced on a paper plate, and she hands it to me with a grimace.

"Sorry about the paper plate. The doctor told me to save my energy, and I felt like doing the dishes counted as too much work."

I grab the fork extended toward me. "I'm surprised it's not a peanut butter sandwich."

"Just because I can barely keep anything else down doesn't mean you have to put up with the same food every day, right?"

Her playful banter pisses me off more. As if we can pretend everything's all right when in reality, it's the furthest thing from it.

With the plate in my lap, I cut off a small piece of waffle and put it in my mouth. It turns to sawdust instantly, but I chew it anyway as she watches me with the most concerned expression I've ever seen on her. Like she's afraid I might know the truth. Like she knows I've been betrayed by my own flesh and blood, and she doesn't know what to do about it or how to fix it.

Fun fact, Madelyn. Neither do I.

It isn't her fault that the love of my life slept with her. Heck, she warned me to stay away from him. In her own screwed up sort of way, she even tried to protect me from getting hurt.

It's my fault I didn't listen.

Then again, it's not entirely my fault. Not when she kept so much from me. Not when she refused to let me in any aspect of her life, let alone the one we apparently shared that she failed to mention.

Unable to choke down another bite, I set my fork down on the plate and mutter, "Thanks."

The sentiment slips out of me even though I'm the furthest thing from grateful. Nope. I'm pissed. And hurt. And so damn lost and alone that I don't even know what to do with myself.

“You’re welcome,” she replies quietly.

Silence.

I avoid her gaze and look down at the soggy waffle in my lap, praying for the courage to face the giant elephant in the room. I’m still not sure I *can* address it. How am I even supposed to broach a subject like this?

Hey, I heard you had sex with my kind-of boyfriend and that he might be the father of your unborn baby. Small world, right? Any chance you felt like bringing it up and letting me in on the little coincidence?

A lump the size of Texas lodges in my throat.

This can’t be happening.

“What happened, Dove?” Maddie whispers, carefully sitting on the edge of my bed.

I squeeze my eyes shut—again—unable to look at her as the question I’ve been dying to ask slips out of me. “Who’s Em?”

Her breath hitches, but she doesn’t reply.

Jaw tight, I look up at her. “Who’s Em, Maddie?”

“Dove—”

“Answer the question.”

She gulps and tucks her freshly-washed hair behind her ear. “I wanted to tell you.”

“Bullshit,” I spit, holding her stare. My own flesh and blood. The one person whose shadow has always haunted me. Who’s shadow will *always* haunt me.

“Dove—”

“Bullshit,” I repeat, my anger growing with every passing second. “I saw the texts. You made him promise that he wouldn’t tell me about your guys’ relationship or whatever it was, so don’t lie to me and say that you wanted to tell me. ‘Cause that’s a load of crap, and we both know it. But it’s not like you talk to me anyway, so I guess I shouldn’t really have been that surprised, huh?”

“Listen—”

“No. You listen, Madelyn. I moved out here because I wanted to be closer to you. Because I wanted to salvage our crappy relationship. Because I care about you. But if you really want me gone and think I’m wasting my time by staying here, you need to tell me right now. Are we clear?”

“Dove—”

“Are. We. Clear?” I spit.

Her lower lip quivers before she pulls it between her teeth and bites down hard, turning her plump flesh white from the pressure. But it's the sheen in her eyes that does me in as she avoids my gaze. The hint that she cares. That she might actually want me here. That she might actually value our relationship, no matter how precarious it might be. That she might actually feel guilt for ruining any potential relationship Gibson and I could've ever had.

"Answer me, Maddie," I spit, refusing to back down.

She sniffs quietly, peeking over at me. "Yes. Yes, I want you here."

"Then you need to start being honest with me. From here on out, no more lies. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." My chest heaves with pent-up energy as I dive right in. "Why didn't you tell me? And I want the real answer."

"I tried to." When she takes in my glare, she defends, "Maybe not the *whole* story, but I did try to tell you to stay away from him."

"So it's my fault?" I seethe.

"No, I—"

"Why didn't you tell me you were Em? And why the hell were you Em in the first place?" I add, shaking my head back and forth. "It doesn't make any sense."

"You don't get it—"

"Of course I don't because you don't tell me *anything*. Help me understand," I demand.

"I..." She wrings her hands in her lap. "I was looking for a new start when I moved here, Dove. I was tired of being Madelyn or Maddie or Mads. I wanted to turn over a new leaf. I wanted to forget my past and all the shit I went through, disappointing Mom and Dad over and over again until my self-esteem couldn't get any lower. So, I called myself 'M.' As in the letter, not the name," she clarifies. "And it stuck."

I set my barely touched breakfast on the chipped nightstand before shoving my messy hair away from my face and tucking my knees to my chest.

"And Gibbs?" I choke out. "How long was your relationship with him?"

Her chin falls to her chest before she shakes her head. "It was hardly a relationship—"

"Answer the question," I order, trying to keep my voice from cracking,

though I have no idea whether or not I'm successful. This is just too much. No one should ever need to have this conversation, but how am I supposed to sweep it under the rug?

The single bite of Eggo sits like a stone in my stomach as I swallow back the bile that creeps up my throat.

"A few months," she returns quietly.

"Did you love him?"

She shakes her head. "Of course not—"

"Did he love you?"

"Dove—"

"Answer the question."

She inches her hand toward my leg but doesn't touch me. Why would she? She's impenetrable. She doesn't feel. She doesn't care about anyone but herself. Or maybe it's self-preservation. After all, if you're the first to leave, you can't be left. If you don't ever let anyone in, they'll never get close enough to hurt you.

If only I had the same discipline.

Staring at her hand an inch away from me, I clench my own into fists but stay silent.

"No, Dove," she murmurs after a few long seconds. "He never loved me."

With a jerky nod, I wipe away the single tear that has slipped past my defenses and let out a long, slow breath. "Why'd you end it? The relationship?"

"Like I said, it was hardly a relationship. It was more of an... arrangement."

I scoff and roll my watery eyes. "'Cause that makes it better."

"Dove—"

"Where'd you two meet?" I ask.

"I met him through his half-brother's friend, Marty."

The name makes me flinch back.

Fender's *friend*. Not brother. She doesn't know they're related. At least Gibson was honest about one thing. His relationship with Marty and Donny Hayes is far from public.

But still. It doesn't make sense.

"Wait." I pause, scrambling to piece together the information she's given me, though I have no idea how to make it fit. "You know Marty?"

"You know Marty?" she challenges. Her tone rises, and her eyes are wide

with panic. “Dove, I’m serious. Stay away from him. He’s nothing like Gibbs or Fender. He’s a bad guy. Like *really* bad. And I’m not just saying that to be a bitch—”

“I know,” I interrupt. “I won’t go near him.”

“Promise me,” she begs.

“I promise.”

Her worried gaze bounces around my face, searching for my sincerity before she takes a deep breath and nods. “Good.”

“So you...you met Gibbs through Marty?” I prompt, wrapping my arms around my knees.

“Yeah. Gibbs and Milo showed up to take Fen home after he got into a fight with one of Marty’s friends one night.”

“And you all...what? Jumped into bed together?” I surmise bitterly.

She rolls her eyes. “Gee, Dove, way to put it delicately.”

“Then tell me what it was like!” I demand, my frustration boiling over. “I’m sick of trying to understand where you’re coming from when every single response of yours is still as closed off and cryptic as before.”

“Look, it’s hard for me to talk about this—”

“And you think it isn’t hard for me?” I screech. “Maddie, I loved him!”

“I know, Dove.” She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “I know.”

“Why don’t you stop thinking about yourself and give me some freaking answers for once in your life? I’m done begging. I’m done catering to you. Talk to me, dammit! How did you become this person? How did you wind up in bed with two guys, one of whom ended up being the love of my life before he broke me? Huh? Tell. Me.”

My chest heaves, and my skin feels too tight for my body as my blood heats and races through my veins.

I can’t do this anymore.

With another sigh, she scoots closer to me, rests her back against the headboard, and crosses her ankles before lying her head on my shoulder like when we were kids. Before puberty. Before we understood our parents’ expectations or the cookie-cutter boxes they’d placed us in. Before she started to hate me for being the obedient child. Before our relationship fell apart.

And I hate how good it feels. To be close to her. To feel her open up, even if it’s only a little bit. This is all I ever wanted. Her trust. Funny how she had to break mine before she’d give me a chance to earn hers.

But that doesn't make this fair.

Still hurt, I keep my spine straight, but I don't shrug away from her. Instead, I wait. For her to finally give me the answers we both know I've deserved since Gibson showed up at our door.

"When I was finally out from under Mom and Dad's thumbs, I went a little crazy," she admits. "I made a ton of bad decisions. I experimented with drugs and threesomes. I was stupid. And careless. And I had no idea how big of an effect my stupidity would really have. But, yes. We just...jumped into bed together."

And there it is.

The truth.

Finally.

I sniff, trying to get my muscles to relax, though it feels impossible.

"Who's idea was it?" I whisper.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

Another sigh. "It was Milo's," she answers. "He approached me and asked if I'd be interested. I said yes."

"Do you regret it?"

"I regret a lot of things, Dove. But you know me. If I don't experience something, I don't learn from it. And that includes my successes as well as my failures. So no, I don't regret sleeping with them. I regret hurting them. I regret coming in between their friendship. And I regret blowing up on them when I said I couldn't do it anymore." She pauses as if lost in the memory. And I let her stay there. Giving her time to come to whatever conclusions—whatever closure—she might need even though she doesn't deserve my patience. Not after everything she kept from me.

"But I learned a lot too," she decides. "I learned that the fast life isn't all that it's cracked up to be. I learned that I want to settle down. That I want a real relationship outside of sex and alcohol. That I want a family some day." She presses her hand to her stomach, looking down at the life growing inside of her. "And I guess I got what I wanted, even if it happened a lot earlier than I anticipated, and it didn't wind up exactly how I planned."

"So, that's why you ended it? Because you didn't want *only* sex anymore?"

Her head bobs up and down against my shoulder. "I realized I was in love with Milo, but he didn't want the same thing."

“How can you be so sure?”

“Trust me. He made it *very* clear,” she mutters, sagging against me even more. As if the weight of the conversation is not only emotionally draining but also physically.

“Does he know you’re pregnant?” I ask.

“No.”

“Who’s the father, Mads?”

She snuffles before peeking up at me. Tiny droplets of moisture cling to her long lashes, but they don’t fall down her cheeks. The sight manages to eek past my anger and frustration. Maddie isn’t a crier. She’s the strong one. The unbreakable one. The steel to my glass. Forged from pain and stubbornness and maybe a little resentment, too, but she doesn’t cry. Not since we were little.

“You can tell me, Maddie,” I whisper.

Sitting up fully, she rests her head against the headboard and closes her eyes, that same defeat seeping from her bones. “I don’t know who the father is.”

“How can you *not* know?”

“Because I was using protection with all of them—”

“All of them?” I question, my brows furrowed. “Not *both* of them?”

Her mouth snaps shut, and her fingers dig into her thighs, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Talk to me,” I demand yet again. “It’s obvious this is killing you. Aren’t you sick of lying? Aren’t you sick of handling all of this on your own?” My fists tighten at my sides. “I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep trying to keep this relationship alive if you’re just going to continue shutting me down every time I try. Talk. To. Me. Or. Leave. My. Room.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t get it, Dove. It’s complicated—”

“Stop spouting that shit,” I grit out. “It’s complicated? Well, guess what, Maddie? Life is complicated. It’s kind of part of the deal, so stop using it as an excuse to keep me at arm’s length. Tell me the truth. If you wanted to slow down and make some changes, why were you sleeping with *three* guys at the same time? And who was the third guy?”

“Marty,” she breathes. Her upper lip curls in disgust.

Shiiiiit.

I cover my mouth, convinced I’ve heard her wrong.

“Y-you were sleeping with Marty?” I clarify.

“He was jealous,” she returns, her tone numb as if lost in the memory before blinking slowly and returning to the present. “Which is ridiculous. We weren’t ever an item. I wasn’t even interested in him. We were only hanging out. But when he found out Milo, Gibbs, and I were all hooking up, he got *pissed*.”

“So?”

“So...he had the power to ruin Milo’s life and all he’d been working for. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Still confused, I turn and face her fully. “So you...what? Slept with him?”

“I did a lot of stuff.” Her nostrils flare, and her face floods with shame. “But I did it to protect Milo.”

Milo. The catalyst. And the asshole who broke her heart and has no idea.

Chewing on the pad of my thumb, I mull it over for another few seconds. “Is it over? Your whatever it is with Marty?”

She nods. “It’s over. As soon as I ended things with Milo and Gibson, I convinced Marty to leave Milo and his tattoo shop alone. Or at least, so far, anyway. But if Marty finds out about the baby, I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“But he doesn’t know, right?”

“I’ve been laying low since I found out, so I don’t know how he would.” She rakes her fingers through her long, damp hair. “I wish he would disappear.”

“I don’t blame you,” I return, my tone softer than before. No matter how mad I am at her, having to deal with Marty isn’t exactly a walk in the park. I have no idea what he’s capable of. I’m pretty sure I don’t *want* to know. “Did Milo or Gibbs know you were involved with a third guy?”

“Milo doesn’t. And Gibbs probably thought I was lying when we were texting and I brought up a third guy. I never said who it was, and you can’t tell them. Not about Marty.”

“The lies need to stop—”

“And I agree with you. Just not about Marty. He’s bad news, Dove—”

“I know—”

“No, you don’t get it,” she argues. “I’d rather sell my soul than let him be involved in Peanut’s life.” She caresses her round stomach. “Not because I give a shit about myself, but because I care about my baby. I’m begging you, Dove. For *Peanut*, don’t tell anyone I was involved with Marty..”

I’ve met Marty, and she’s right. He’s bad news. *Really* bad news. His involvement in Peanut’s life would probably be the worst situation possible. I

can't do that to Maddie's baby, no matter how much it's hurt me to be kept in the dark over the past few months. My little niece or nephew deserves more than that.

Besides, it's a moot point.

"Gibbs and I aren't exactly on speaking terms right now, so you don't have to worry. I won't say anything to him."

"And that's my fault," she murmurs. "I'm sorry. For keeping you in the dark. For being too scared to come clean and admit the truth. Everything. And I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I need you to know that if I could go back and tell you the truth, I would. I really am so sorry."

We both lean back against the headboard before she nudges her shoulder against mine.

The ounce of normalcy from her blip of contact along with her sincere apology makes me pause, giving me hope for a future where we can get along and be open with each other without me having to demand it.

My heart may be shattered right now, but at least something good came out of it. An opportunity to finally reconnect with Mads, no matter how painful and eye-opening it's been.

"Can I ask you something, Dovey?"

My gaze narrows in suspicion as I look at her, but I take the bait nonetheless. "What?"

"I may have seen the video of you guys on the tour bus—"

"It was an RV."

She rolls her eyes. "Same thing. But you're missing my point. I know you think that because Gibbs and I were together *physically* that we shared something special. But it's not true."

Fighting the urge to plug my ears, I grumble, "No offense, Mads, but I don't believe you."

"You don't get it—"

"Trust me. I get it perfectly—"

"He never sang for me, Dove. He never sang for *anyone*. And the way he looked at you in the video? The way you looked at him? It was... It was something special."

I close my eyes and shake my head. "It doesn't matter—"

"I think it does."

"You don't get an opinion," I snap before regret pools in my stomach. With a deep breath, I mutter, "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that—"

“Yes, you did.” Her breathing is shallow as she turns and looks me in the eye. “And I don’t blame you. I’m a shitty sister, Dove.” She shrugs one shoulder. “I’ve always been a shitty sister. And even when I was a selfish bitch, you still managed to turn the other cheek and help me out.”

“Mads—”

“Let me finish. I need you to trust me on this,” she pleads. “What you and Gibson have? It was more than Gibson and I ever shared. It was different between me and him. Physical. Hell, it had so much red tape, I’m surprised we were even able to get the deed done.”

I know she’s kidding, but it doesn’t stop the stabbing sensation from flaring up in my chest.

She cringes and reaches forward, setting her hand on mine. “It was a bad joke. I’m sorry. I’m trying to explain that Gibson and I weren’t *anything*. He was basically a good dildo. The only reason I agreed to the whole thing was because of Milo. Because I wanted him even if it meant pushing my own limits. Especially now that I know it stabbed you in the back,” she adds with a grimace. “Gibson’s a good guy, Dovey. And he doesn’t want me. He’s *never* wanted me. He only wants you. I think you should give him another chance.”

With a pathetic laugh, I shake my head. “You don’t get it—”

“Yes, I do—”

“What happens a couple months down the road when Peanut’s born, Mads? We sneak in a paternity test before our date night?” I scoff and choke back tears. “You have to see how insane that is.”

“I don’t want to take a paternity test,” she argues.

“Madelyn.” I say her name like it’s a curse and fight the urge to shake her. “They have a right to know who the father is. You have to see that.”

“Yeah, but if Gibbs is the father, it ruins your life. If Marty’s the father, it ruins mine. And if Milo’s the father, it ruins his. Not exactly what I’d call a win-win situation.”

“Yeah, but sticking your head in the sand isn’t exactly going to get you anywhere, either.”

“What if he isn’t the father, though?” she counters.

I tilt my head to the side. “Who? Milo?”

“No. Gibbs. What if he isn’t the father? What if you pass on the love of your life because he *might* be a Baby Daddy but isn’t? Won’t you regret it for the rest of your life?”

“Who says he’s the love of my life?”

“You did.”

“I said I *loved* him,” I clarify. “Not love. Not after he lied to me.”

“Bullshit, Dove. Love doesn’t vanish that easily. Not when it’s the real deal. Trust me. I’ve tried. And even if you hadn’t admitted you love him, it was pretty clear in the video. And the fact that you gave him your virginity? I was raised under the same roof, Dove. I know what that means. I know you wouldn’t take that step lightly. You love him. And he loves you. Don’t let my mistake be the thing that keeps you apart.”

It sounds so simple. But it isn’t. It’s complicated. And messy. And terrifying. Because if I fell this quickly, what happens when it’s two months down the road and we find out he’s the father of my niece or nephew? How is that fair? How the hell would anyone expect me to handle that? It would never work. But if he isn’t the father, would I be able to get over him sleeping with Maddie? Honestly, I don’t know. The idea of them together is crippling. But the idea of me not being with Gibson is pretty damn crippling too.

I don’t know what to do.

“What if he *is* the father?” I whisper.

“Then we cross that bridge when we get there.” She leans back against the headboard, wraps her arm around me, and pulls me against her. Closing my eyes, I rest my head against her shoulder as she adds, “But you can’t end things yet. Not when you finally have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

I sniff and try to ignore my racing heart and the hopelessness that overwhelms me. “But how do I let his past go?”

“By recognizing that it’s his *past*. And you’re his future.”

She squeezes me tight as her words hit like a wrecking ball. Could I be his future? Would he even *want* me to be his future after I ditched him to deal with Fender on his own? He begged me to come back and stay with him, but I left. I left him all alone. To face his father. His sick brother. The band. Hawthorne. I cover my mouth as guilt threatens to swallow me whole. I feel terrible. I don’t know what to do. What to think. I feel like I don’t know anything anymore. But Maddie’s right about one thing. I love him—more than anything else in the world. And I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

Soaking up her warmth and comfort, I realize that I’m not the only one dealing with a lot of unknowns, especially after everything she’s told me this morning. And the fact that she’s been carrying all of this alone is

heartbreaking.

“And what about your future?” I ask.

“Me and my little peanut.” She rubs her free hand against her belly. And even though I can’t see her face, I can hear the smile in her voice. The awe. “That’s my future. I don’t need a man to take care of us. I have me. And I have you,” she adds. “I love you, Dovey. I know I’m crappy at showing it, but I’m going to work on that. And I know I haven’t said it, but I couldn’t have made it through this pregnancy without you. You seriously saved me. I’ll never be able to repay you for stepping in when no one else would.”

“Milo might’ve,” I correct her. “If he knew—”

“He can’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because he *can’t*,” she argues, her voice laced with pain.

Sitting up again, I lift my chin and face her before deciding, “I’ll make you a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“You promise to tell the father, whoever he is, and I promise”—I take a deep breath—“to *not* ruin my relationship with Gibbs before we even know whether or not he’s related to your little peanut. Deal?”

She purses her lips before gritting out, “Dove...”

“Deal?” I push.

She chews on her lower lip as her indecision threatens to consume her. I don’t blame her for taking a few seconds to consider the situation. I didn’t exactly offer an easy deal for either of us. Heck, I’m already starting to second guess myself here. But her baby deserves to have a father. Especially if he’s Gibson or Milo.

“Deal?” I repeat.

“Only if the deal doesn’t include Marty. He’s toxic, Dove—”

“Fine. You have to tell the father if it’s *not* Marty. Okay?”

She releases a staggered breath through the tiny ‘O’ of her lips and nods. “Deal. And Dove?”

“Yeah?”

“Are we okay?”

The hope mingling with regret in her eyes almost breaks me before I give her a watery smile.

“We will be.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

GIBSON

Knock. Knock.

My head snaps up.

In the doorway of Fender's hospital room stands a man I don't want to see. A man I *refused* to see until Dove's unique insight into my shitty upbringing. A man who was supposed to be someone I looked up to as a kid yet hated more than anything else in the world.

And now, he's here. In the mother-fucking-flesh.

"Can I come in?" Donny asks, his fingers toying with the Rolex on his wrist.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was nervous.

Good. He should be.

This is all his fault. He's been enabling Marty for years with his money, and it hurt someone I care about.

Fender's asleep. His steady breathing, combined with the rhythmic heart monitor, have been my own personal lullaby since the moment the doctors announced he was stable. Exhausted. But stable.

Still, Fen wouldn't want me to fight with Donny no matter how much I'm chomping at the bit to take my anger out on someone.

Letting my sperm donor stew in my silence, I take a few seconds to try to calm the hell down, but my heart doesn't stop racing.

Scratching my jaw, I ask, "Why are you here?"

"My son's in the hospital."

"That's funny. When I broke my arm in sixth grade, you were in Toronto."

He stays quiet but nods carefully, holding my stare.

“Which arm?” he finally asks.

“My left one.”

“Is that when you learned to play the guitar with your right?”

My eyes widen in surprise before I cover it with indifference. “I learned to play with my right when my mom couldn’t find a leftie at the pawnshop long before that.”

“I gave your mom money—”

“She ripped up the checks. Didn’t want anything to do with you after she found out you were cheating on her with at least half a dozen other women across the country. And to find out while watching MTV with your kid in her belly? Classy, Donald. Real classy.”

He nods but doesn’t bother to argue with me. “I was a shitty father—”

“You weren’t a father at all. You were a sperm donor. And even then, the only things you passed down to your sons were your drug addiction and an unhealthy obsession with music. So, ya know, thanks for that.”

Again, he nods, holding my stare, and takes my verbal punches without retaliating. Just like how Fender described their first interactions over the phone. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am.

It’s eerie how familiar it feels to see him face to face. Like I’m looking in a mirror. It makes me hate him more.

Tearing my gaze away from his, I look at Fender lying on the bed. His lips are slightly parted as he lets out a slow breath. We have the same Hayes nose. The same strong jaw. The same cleft chin. But if we didn’t own up to being related, I’m not sure anyone would ever know. He’s luckier, though. He got more of his mom’s traits than our dad’s. I, on the other hand, didn’t. And it’s never been clearer.

“I’m sorry,” Donny murmurs from the doorway.

I look back up at him but stay quiet.

“I was a selfish asshole who didn’t think about anyone but himself,” he continues. “That’s on me. And even though I’ve done a lot of shit in my life, my biggest regret has been and will *always* be missing your childhood. I should’ve been better. I should’ve been present. I should’ve been someone to look up to. But I wasn’t. You have every right to hate me. But right now, I’m here. Because my son is in the hospital. And I might not be able to fix my past mistakes, but I can change my future. I want to make sure he’s okay, but only if I have your permission.”

“Why?” I croak.

“Because Fender cares about you more than he’ll ever care about me.” His attention flicks from one son to the other, his eyes pleading for approval. “So, I’m asking you, Gibson. Hell, I’m begging. Can I *please* come in?”

Fen groans and rolls his head to one side before his eyelids flutter slightly.

I look down at his barely conscious body lying in the hospital bed and back at the infamous Donny Hayes who’s asking for something instead of demanding it. And it’s his humility that makes me give in. I lift my chin, giving him my silent permission.

His expensive sneakers scuff against the linoleum floor as he steps over the threshold and joins me in Fender’s room. The guy wears his punk rock persona like a second skin. But I can see how much he’s aged. The white streaks in his dark hair. The weathered skin beneath his well-kept tattoos. He isn’t the twenty-two-year-old touring the country that he once was. He’s different.

The realization is sobering, and the air is thick. Heavy. I feel like I can’t breathe. Like we’re too close. Like I’m seconds from being ripped apart by the monster underneath my childhood bed. Even though I know he’d never physically hurt me. Even though I know my own childhood imagination is partly to blame for my perception of him. But it doesn’t stop the pain or the fear of getting hurt.

With every step he takes, my fight or flight instinct threatens to kick in, but I shove it away. Fen needs me right now, and he’s starting to wake up.

“Sonny?” Fender croaks. His eyes are glassy as he pries his lids open.

I squeeze his limp hand lying haphazardly on the mattress while ignoring the chair on the opposite side of the bed that creaks as Donny collapses into it.

My throat is tight as I force out, “Hey, Fen.”

“W-what happened?”

“You, uh,” I grit my teeth. “You OD’d.”

His brows pinch. Whether from disappointment or pain, I’m not sure, but it still feels like a knife to the chest.

“It’s okay, man,” I tell him. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“I messed up,” he concludes, the fuzzy memories slowly rising to the surface.

“We all mess up sometimes.”

He stays quiet, his forehead wrinkled for a few more seconds before a

low, raspy groan escapes him. “The tour...”

“I don’t give a shit about the tour.”

I don’t give a shit about anything but Fender and Dove.

“Where’s my phone?” He tries to push himself up but is too weak to make any progress. “I’ll call—”

“I’ve already spoken with Hawthorne,” Dad interjects.

Confused, Fender rolls his head to the other side and finds his second guest. “Dad?”

“Hey, Fender.”

“W-what are you doing here?”

“You’re in the hospital, son. I’m here because I was worried about you.”

Blinking slowly, Fender frowns and repeats, “I screwed up, Dad.”

“Gibson’s right.” Donny lifts his chin toward me. “We’ve all screwed up in one way or another. You’ll get through this.”

“The tour...,” Fen starts again.

“Can be salvaged,” Dad informs him. “Like I said, I already spoke with Hawthorne.”

“What did he...?” Fen squeezes his eyes shut and tries to focus. “What did he say?”

“He has a few conditions to make the tour work, and I have to say that I agree with him.”

“Screw the tour,” I argue as Fen asks, “What conditions?”

Donny lifts his hands, silently begging for patience before explaining, “You need to go to rehab, son. There’s a great place in Utah that has an immediate opening. We can get you checked in as soon as you’re released from the hospital.”

“And the tour?” Fen prods.

“Will finish without you.”

My eyes widen in surprise while Fender’s frown deepens.

“H-how?” he asks.

Donny Hayes looks up at me, the familiar resemblance startling me all over again. “If Gibson and Dove Walker hold down the fort until you’re ready to come back and perform.”

Her name acts like a knife to my chest, making it hard to breathe. “I can’t—”

Fen interrupts me. “We worked too hard to throw it away now.”

Donny leans forward, resting his elbows on his thousand-dollar jeans.

“Most likely, you’ll miss the rest of this tour, Fender. But the band won’t take the hit.”

“I don’t deserve to be in the band. Not after the shit I pulled.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” I insist. “You’re the face of that band—”

“No, I’m not. You read the reviews. You heard what Josh said—”

“I’m not gonna argue with you on this, Fen—”

“Good. Because there’s nothing to argue. I’m done dragging the band down,” Fen announces.

“This is not the time to make brash decisions, Fender,” Donny scolds.

For once, I agree with him.

“And it’s not a permanent restructure of the band, either,” he continues. “Gibson’s right. You’re a key member of Broken Vows, but when one of the members needs a break to take care of themselves, we look for alternative solutions. Whether it’s taking a break as a whole, or hiring a replacement for a short period of time, or hell, even reevaluating the band’s structure to fit in a permanent new face or two if it’s the right decision. But that doesn’t mean you’re out of the band or that you don’t deserve to be part of it anymore. Understand?”

Fender’s jaw is tight, but he gives Donny a nod.

“Good. Look at it this way. Broken Vows can gain some more fans while you’re recovering, and you’ll be able to save your name in the business, as well. People appreciate when others own up to their shit, and that’s what you’re going to do. Your career isn’t over. Not by a long shot.”

“Regardless of my shitty situation, the band should be allowed to succeed,” Fender decides, his body melting back into the firm mattress as he looks up at me. “You guys should do it.”

“Wait,” I interrupt. “You guys don’t get it.”

“What’s wrong?” Donny asks.

“Dove and I broke up. She’s not coming back.”

Confused, Fen shakes his head as if it’ll brush away the final cobwebs and give him an explanation. Unfortunately, I’m not sure it works because he asks, “What? Why?”

“She found out about Em.” The words claw their way up my throat, leaving a trail of bile in their wake. I can’t believe I didn’t tell her. I can’t believe she left. I can’t believe I fucked everything up, and there’s no way to fix it.

I think I'm gonna be sick.

Still lost, Fen asks, "But...how'd she find out?"

"Marty sent her screenshots of my conversations with Em from my phone."

Fen cocks his head to one side before dropping his chin to his chest. "I had your phone."

"Yeah."

"I told him. I was pissed, and high, and—"

"It doesn't matter, Fen."

"Bullshit," he spits, his tone still weak. Then he yells, "Dammit!" His chest heaves with exertion as he looks back at me with red-rimmed eyes.

The guilt.

The shame.

The damn horror of his own actions that have finally caught up to him. Hell, they caught up to all of us. They're all swirling in his gaze. And it guts me.

"I fucked up," he rasps. "I didn't mean to. I don't know why I said it. I was jealous, Sonny. I was an ass. I'll never forgive myself—"

"It's okay—"

"You have to let me talk to her," he pleads. "To convince her to give you another chance."

I shake my head. "She's done with me, man."

"You don't know that—"

"She made it pretty clear. I should've never kissed her. I knew I'd slept with her sister, and I still pursued her. I still wanted her. I was a selfish asshole—"

"You're not a selfish asshole," Fen argues. "*I'm* a selfish asshole."

"Guess it runs in the family," I mutter, my attention darting over to our quiet father.

Fen ignores my not-so-subtle jab and continues his frantic plea. "You have to go talk to her. Even if she refuses to finish the tour with you. You guys have to make up. You *have* to."

Again, I shake my head. He doesn't get it. It's not going to happen. We're not going to make up. We're not going to be okay. But he doesn't need any more guilt on his shoulders. Not when he's already recovering from an overdose.

I rub my hand across my tired face and let out a long exhale. "Right now,

I need to be with you and make sure you're okay, Fen. Besides, Dove needs time to come to terms with shit."

"How long have I been out?" Fen asks.

"You've been in and out for about twenty-four hours."

"Then that's enough time to come to terms with shit," he argues. "Go see her. Go fight for her."

With another sigh, I rub my face. Again. "I can't leave you—"

"He won't be alone, Gibson," my dad interjects. "I'm not going anywhere."

It's the way he says it that makes me pause. The determination. The promise.

I believe him.

But it's not enough.

"Can I trust you to keep Marty away from him?"

Donny stays quiet, but his expression is stricken with guilt, and it spurs me on.

Waving my arm at my brother lying in a hospital bed, I spit, "Marty did this. You guys are both so blinded by your relationships with him that you don't see he's a poisonous snake who will bite you as soon as he decides it benefits him. Look what he did to Fen. Look what he did to me and Dove. He's poison. And I can't let him hurt the people I love anymore."

"I understand," Donny replies. "I'll make sure he keeps his distance."

"And if he doesn't?" I challenge.

"He loses my financial support."

I flinch back, convinced I've heard him wrong. "You'd pull his funds?"

"To protect my other sons? Yes," Donny promises. "I'm not naive, Gibson. I understand Marty has his own issues. But to push them on either of you? That's unacceptable, and it won't be tolerated."

My eyes narrow as I take in his somber expression. His tight posture. His determined stare.

"Good," I decide.

"Good," he repeats. "You can take my private jet. My driver's parked outside. He'll set everything up."

"I don't need your help—"

"So do it for Miss Walker. From what I gather, she needs you."

She doesn't need me. I'm the one who needs her. And I'm the selfish bastard who's able to admit it. Hell, I'll scream it from the rooftops if it'll

convince her to talk to me. But leaving my brother in a hospital room isn't exactly easy.

I sigh and turn to Fen. "You gonna be okay?"

He nods toward Donny. "He'll take care of me." His attention shifts to his lap, where the thin cotton sheets are bunched. "Listen, I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologize anymore, Fen. Focus on getting better."

"Only if you focus on fixing your shit with Dove and taking Broken Vows to the next level."

I snort and shake my head. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good. We'll talk soon, Sonny. I know how to reach you. And I'll make sure you know how to reach me," Fen adds. "Now, get out of here."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

DOVE

The loud knock at the front door sounds like a stupid bull trying to barrel into the family room of our apartment. But I'm too terrified to answer it.

No one knocks on our door. Even UPS and FedEx don't bother. They just leave our packages on the welcome mat. Which means that a certain someone is on the other side of the door. And that certain someone is stubborn as an ox—or a bull from the sound of it—and isn't going anywhere until I answer.

"You gonna get that?" Mads asks, leaning against the doorway to my room. I've been holed up in here for what feels like weeks. My desire to do *anything* is less than stellar. Even after our conversation, I haven't been able to find the enthusiasm to face life. Or it's problems.

So many problems.

"I can tell him to leave if you want," she offers carefully. "But you know my stance on—" She pauses and presses her hand to her stomach, her brows pinching as she lets out a slow, unsteady breath.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Fine. Braxton Hicks are a bitch." *Knock. Knock.* "You should talk to him, Dove."

"I'll handle it," I mutter.

Thump. Thump.

"Like...today?" she asks. "'Cause I'm pretty sure he might break down the door—"

His loud knock shakes the pictures on the walls.

She waves her hand toward the rattled frames. "Case in point. Besides, if you want me to hold up my end of the deal, you need to hold up yours,

remember?”

“I’ll handle it,” I repeat, forcing myself to my feet.

Chewing on my lower lip, I shift toward the door before opening it a few inches and peeking through the crack.

There he is. The man who’s been haunting me since I first laid eyes on him. The one who managed to get under my skin with a single smirk and hasn’t bothered to let me go ever since. The one who insisted he’s the bard and turned me into a fool. And now that we’re face to face, I’m not sure I can hold up my end of the bargain with Maddie. I’m not sure I can put his past aside and focus on our future. Because I have no idea what kind of future we can have or if he even still wants one with me.

I stay quiet and stare at him, waiting for him to say something that can put our relationship back together again, but I have no idea what would do the trick. Not when his potential baby is in my sister’s stomach.

When our gazes connect, he breathes out, “Dovey.” Like my name is a prayer. A plea. His eyes are bloodshot, and he looks exhausted, yet the combination only makes him look more appealing. As if I could be the one to fix the bags under his eyes or the frown etched into his handsome features.

I swallow thickly, tuck my hair behind my ear, and drop my gaze to the ground. “How’s Fen?”

A puff of air leaves his lungs, and he shrugs one shoulder. “I dunno. Okay, I guess. My dad came to the hospital.”

Shocked, I look back up at him.

“Yeah,” he mutters, reading my mind. “It went okay. He stepped in. Stepped up.”

“That’s good, Gibbs.”

“Yeah. He, uh.” Gibson squeezes the back of his neck. “He’s gonna help Fen check into a rehab place.”

“That’s good,” I repeat, my voice nothing but a whisper.

He nods, though I can still see his reservations. His fear from almost losing his brother. His need to make everything better despite it being out of his control. His hesitation to talk to me or let me in again after I abandoned him to deal with everything on his own. My arms itch to reach out and hold him, but I fold them across my chest instead.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come,” I whisper.

“It’s not your fault.”

It is, but I don’t argue with him. I pull my lips into a thin line and wait.

For him to say something. For us to make up, though I have no idea how. For things to go back to the way they were, even when I know it's impossible.

I don't know what he expects me to say. I don't know what he expects me to do. I feel lost. Helpless. And so damn broken without him that I'm not sure I'll survive this conversation.

"Can I... Can I come in?" he asks, looking down at me through his dark lashes that any woman would kill for.

"My sister's inside."

"I need to talk to her too."

Of course, he does.

I sniff but step aside and let him in.

"Thanks," he murmurs as he passes me, but he stops at the entryway, unsure what to do or where to go.

Good question, Gibbs. I have no idea.

I lick my lips and motion to the couch, praying he can't see the way I'm trembling like a freaking leaf right now. "You can, uh, take a seat. I'll go get Mads."

"I'm right here," Maddie interrupts, her hand on her swollen belly and her hair pulled into a messy bun on top of her head. She looks gorgeous in an effortless kind of way. But that's how she's always been. Even before she started dying her strawberry blonde hair that always made me jealous a dark chestnut. Even before she mastered eyeliner and I even knew what it was, she was—*is*—breathtaking. She's always been the one to shine. The one to stand out. The one that everyone noticed while I always blended into the background. I was always forgettable.

But not Mads.

Never Mads.

And I know Gibson must've thought the same thing. Because he slept with her.

For months.

Until she ended it.

Not him.

Her.

Would they still be together if it weren't for Maddie's feelings for Milo? Should they give things another try if the baby's his? Would I be able to handle it if they did?

My stomach churns with acid, but I swallow it back as I take a seat on the

floor opposite Gibson and wait to see which seat Maddie will choose. There's a chair tucked in the corner or the cushion next to Gibson's. She doesn't hesitate, sitting opposite Gibson and next to me in the wooden rocking chair before arranging the decorative pillow behind her back to get more comfortable.

And we sit.

In silence.

Our gazes shift from one person to the other in some messed up version of *Who Dunit*.

And I'm afraid I might choke on it.

The suffocating silence. The weighted looks. The knowledge that the love of my life knows what my sister looks like naked. That the baby inside her belly might be his. That I'll always be second to her. Because she was first. Just like always.

Why did I think Gibson would be any different?

"I can see it now," he mentions, his voice quiet yet still booming in the otherwise silent room. "The resemblance. When I first met Dove, I knew she looked familiar, but I couldn't place how or why. I can see it now."

"Is that why you came?" I ask. "To discuss our similarities?"

"No." *Silence*. "I guess not."

"Then why are you here?" I murmur.

"Because you both deserve an apology face-to-face." His gaze shifts from mine to Maddie's. "Em—Maddie—"

"You can still call me Em," she clarifies, shifting in her seat as her forehead wrinkles. Like she's distracted. Uncomfortable. Probably another Braxton Hicks, though I'm not sure.

"Em." Gibson clears his throat. "I'm sorry for how things played out. I'm sorry you've felt like you needed to handle this pregnancy on your own. I'm sorry I was an ass when we were texting and that I wasn't as sensitive as I should've been. I was scared to acknowledge that my life might be changing when this baby's born. I was scared that I might lose the one person I've ever loved because of my past, and I thought that sticking my head in the sand might fix it. But it's no excuse. And it wasn't a plausible solution, either."

Maddie nods but doesn't reply.

"I have a shitty relationship with my dad," he explains, "but if this child's mine, I want to be involved. I want to be a good father. I want to break the cycle of shitty parenthood and be there. Financially. Physically. Emotionally.

I wanna know my kid. And I want you to let me.”

Maddie’s lips are pulled into a thin line, her hands propped on top of her basketball belly, but still, she doesn’t say a word. She just stares blankly back at him. But can see past her façade. Her fear of the unknown. Her fear of letting someone in. Her fear of raising a child by herself, let alone with one of the three potential fathers.

“When can I take a paternity test?” he prods.

More silence.

“Madelyn wants to wait until after the baby’s born,” I answer for her. “That shouldn’t be for another two months or so, but Walker women are known for having their babies super early, so we’re taking it a day at a time.”

He nods. “Okay. And what about the third guy? Does he know?”

“There wasn’t a third guy,” I lie. “She didn’t know how to tell any of us the truth.”

His eyes widen in surprise as he turns to Maddie. “So, you weren’t sleeping with Marty?”

“W-what?” The mere mention of him shakes her out of the numb blanket she usually wraps around herself before she demands, “Why would you think I was sleeping with Marty?”

“He said—”

“He’s a liar, Gibson,” she spits, her surprise morphing into full-blown anger. “He was only trying to get under your skin. Do you honestly believe a single word that comes out of his lying mouth?”

My chest tightens as the lie slips past her lips. But I get why she’s saying it. Why she’s keeping the truth from everyone. She’s protecting her baby. And if I were in her shoes, I’m afraid that I’d do the same thing.

Marty’s bad news. The further he stays away from my sister and her unborn child, the better.

“Okay,” Gibson concedes, sensing Maddie’s revulsion. “So, it’s Milo or me. We can wait—”

“You can’t tell Milo,” Maddie interrupts. Then she bends forward and cradles her stomach, letting out a slow breath, distracted by another Braxton Hicks.

“We’ve already talked about this,” Gibson reminds her. “He has a right to know.”

“Only if your paternity test is negative,” she counters.

“I’ve lied long enough, Em.”

“Just a little bit longer,” she begs, her breathing ragged. “*Please*. And you’re not lying or keeping anything from him if the baby’s yours.”

“Yes, I am,” Gibson pushes. “He’s one of my best friends, Em. Whether or not I’m the father, I’m keeping something from him. Something *big*.”

With another shaky breath, she looks up at him and unfolds from her crouched position, the contraction passing. “But you know how much he doesn’t want to be a dad. You know how much he hates me. You know that this news will gut him—”

“It’ll gut him whether or not he’s the father,” Gibbs argues. “He has the right to deal with it before the baby’s born. To accept his potential future.”

“And how do you think he’s gonna deal with it, Gibbs? Huh? He’ll lose his mind—”

“He’ll step up, Em. He’s a good guy.”

Holding back tears, she chokes out, “He hates me—”

“He’ll suck it up for the kid.”

“I don’t want to be a charity case.”

“You don’t have a choice. This is life. This is what a consequence looks like.” His voice softens. “But you’re gonna be a good mom, Em. No matter who the father is, the baby’s gonna be loved. He or she is gonna be looked after. And probably spoiled rotten,” he adds, his mouth tilting up in a ghost of a smile. One that makes my insides tighten with jealousy. And maybe a little hope too. I want my niece or nephew to be spoiled. And loved. And to have a good father, no matter how much it hurts me.

Gibson will be a good father.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he assures her. “I promise.” His gaze shifts to mine. “I promise,” he repeats before looking back at my sister. His ex. “Em, can I have some privacy with Dove?”

“Sure.” She pushes herself up from the rocking chair. “Can I ask you something first?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t ever love me, right?”

He frowns. “I’m sorry, Em—”

“It’s okay,” she laughs. “I didn’t ever love you, either. But you love Dove. Don’t you?”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down before his attention zeroes in on me all over again. “More than anything.”

“I hope you stick around,” she announces. “Regardless of whether or not

my little peanut belongs to you. You guys have my blessing. Not that it matters. You guys are welcome to do whatever you want. But I think you two are pretty perfect for each other. You'd both be fools to throw it away."

"I'm not throwing anything away," Gibson argues.

But I stay quiet.

How am I throwing him away if he was never mine in the first place?

"He doesn't love me, Dove," Maddie tells me, reading my mind while pretending Gibson isn't sitting five feet away. "He never loved me. We were using each other for a good time. That's it."

With a shaky breath, I avoid everyone's gazes, staring blankly at the worn, brown carpet beneath my bum as I voice my greatest fear. "I can't compare myself to you anymore, Mads—"

"Then don't," she returns. "There's no comparison, anyway. Not for Gibbs."

I blink back tears and try not to lose my battle with my emotions in front of them, but it isn't easy. I'm close to breaking. Hell, I'm already broken and am holding myself together by sheer will. But I can feel it—the seams threatening to unravel. I want to run away and hide. But there is no hiding from this. It's too complicated. Too overwhelming. Too much in general.

"Look at it this way, Dove," she continues, hunching slightly before leaning against the wall and pressing her hand against her stomach. "If he had a child with someone else, would it make you love him any less?"

The question hits like a ton of bricks, and my breathing turns ragged. Because I don't think it would. I'd accept him and his past and his kids. I'd accept his flaws and his strengths without hesitation. They're part of him. And without his past, we might not have ever met. And I wouldn't be who I am today. I'd be just as lost, just as lonely as before.

The floors creak softly as Maddie waddles down the hall, closing her bedroom door behind her, blanketing us in privacy and a silence so loud that it makes my ears ring.

But I'm oh so aware of Gibson.

Even though my blurry gaze is focused on my hands in my lap, I can still see him moving toward me, making my skin prickle with awareness as he slides onto his butt. On the floor. Next to me.

With his back pressed to the second-hand entertainment center, he scoots closer, making my heart rate climb with every passing second.

"I love you, Dovey," he murmurs, his deep voice breaking the silence.

The knife in my chest twists, but I stay quiet, ignoring the heat that emanates from his body beside me and how much I want to lean into it. I'm desperate for his warmth. His touch. His comfort. But I stay upright and stare blankly in front of me. If I give in—if I look at him—the final barrier around my heart will crack. And I'm not sure I'll survive it.

“No matter what happens with everything, I'll still love you, Dovey. I'll still want you. I'll still choose you. *Only you. Always you.*”

His words imprint themselves on my soul, but I keep my head down and avoid his gaze. Because love might not be enough. Not right now. Not under these circumstances.

“Gibbs.” I take a shaky breath. “My niece or nephew deserves a father—”

“And he or she will get one no matter what,” he promises. “Especially now that I know there wasn't a third guy. But I need you to understand that becoming a father has nothing to do with my love for you. It might be hard, but I don't want to have to choose. I want us. I want you. I *need* you. And I know that's selfish,” he adds, his voice laced with self-deprecation. “To need you even when it hurts you. But I do. I need you right now, Dove. And I think you might need me too.”

“I can't live in her shadow,” I choke out, my eyes glassy.

He shakes his head and grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You don't get it, Dove. You've *never* lived in her shadow. She might be your sister, but you've always shined to me. So damn bright that it makes my eyes hurt sometimes,” he adds with a breath of laughter.

“Why is that so funny?” I question.

“Because you haven't shined for me alone.”

My brows pinch. “What do you mean?”

“They want you. They want *us*,” he corrects.

“What do you mean?” I repeat, feeling whiplashed.

“Fender's gonna be in rehab for the rest of the tour. They want us to finish it. You and me. Because you stole the show, Dovey. They saw what I see every time I look at you. And you've left them wanting more. You shined too damn bright.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as the memories—the feelings—of being on stage hit me from all sides. The rush. The lights. The absolute euphoria. It's something you can't find anywhere else. And I'll miss it almost as much as I'll miss Gibson if we don't get this worked out.

“I can't finish the tour,” I whisper.

“Why not?”

I shrug one shoulder but stay quiet. I don’t know what to say. It’s too complicated. Just like we are.

“If it’s because you don’t want to, then I fully support you. I’ll call Hawthorne right now, and I’ll tell him we’re out,” he declares, his thumb running along my jawline. “But if it’s because you’re scared, I’ll push you to do it. Not because I give a shit about Broken Vows, but because I give a shit about you. And you love being on stage, Dove. I can see it. They can see it. You were made to be up there. To sing. To steal the show. So why? Why can’t you finish?”

“My sister—”

“Will be fine. She’d tell you the same thing if she wasn’t in her room right now.”

“But you and I—”

“Will be fine too.”

I shake my head. “You sound so sure—”

“It’s because I am. Yeah, shit’s complicated. But life gets complicated. I want you. I need you. Regardless of whether or not I’m going to be a father. I love you, Dove Walker. And I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to fight for you.”

Crack.

The final barrier I’d kept in place to protect me finally crumbles, the sincerity in his gaze hitting me like a sledgehammer.

No one’s ever fought for me.

Until now.

As he rubs his thumb along my quivering bottom lip, a single tear drips down my cheek before I whisper, “I love you too, Gibson Hayes.”

He presses his lips to mine, dragging his tongue along the seam, and I open myself to him. My mouth. My heart. My soul. Until everything is laid bare in our kiss. Our regrets. Our hope. And most of all, our love.

With a simple kiss, a tiny seed of hope is planted. That everything is going to be okay. That we’ll be okay. That I might not be the fool after all. As long as we have each other.

A loud crash echoes from down the hall, making me jerk away from Gibson.

What was that?

“Mads?” I call out.

Silence.

“Mads? You okay?”

A low, muffled moan is all I hear in response.

Pushing to my feet, I rush down the hall, and Gibbs follows behind. Without bothering to knock, I shove the door open to find Maddie hunched over on her bed, broken glass scattered on the floor.

“Mads, what’s going on?” I demand.

“I’m fine,” she forces out between staggered breaths.

“Maddie—”

“It’s just Braxton Hicks. A rough one hit, and I knocked over my glass. I’m fine. Promise.”

I look at Gibson behind me, and he shakes his head warily. Like he doesn’t believe her, either.

With a deep breath, I turn back to my sister. “Where are your shoes?”

“I’m fine, Dove.”

Gibson rummages through her closet, grabbing a pair of running shoes without waiting for her permission. The glass crunches beneath his boots as he hands them off to her. “Do you need help putting them on?”

“You guys, I’m f—” Her face scrunches, and she lets out another low moan.

“Let’s go check, Mads. The doctor said to go to the hospital if you start having consistent contractions.”

“They’re not consistent.”

“Then I’m sure they’ll tell us that you’re fine, and we can grab some Taco Bell on the way home. Deal?”

She lifts her head toward the ceiling, her mouth forming a tiny ‘O’ as she tries to get a handle on the situation and the pain shooting across her lower abdomen.

“Come on, Mads—”

“I’m not ready,” she confesses, finally looking at me. The fear in her eyes is more telling than I know she’d like to admit.

She’s right.

She’s not ready.

In more ways than one.

“It’ll be okay,” I promise her. “Maybe the doctor will give you some kind of medication to slow the contractions. But we need to get there so we can get some answers and keep your little peanut safe, okay?”

She nods and slips the shoes onto her feet, her face contorting in pain as another contraction hits her, lasting a little over thirty seconds before it passes.

When it does, Gibson offers his hand to her, but she doesn't take it as she forces herself to her feet. Unoffended, he drops his hand back to his side and follows us out the front door.

"I'll drive," Gibson offers when we reach the sidewalk of the apartment complex.

Both Maddie and I climb into the back, and she closes her eyes before grabbing my hand and squeezing it with all her might.

"Which hospital?" Gibson asks as the engine revs to life.

"The one on Fifth and Second Streets," I answer.

Peeling out of the parking lot, the tires squeal against the dark pavement. His knuckles are white as he strangles the steering wheel and presses the gas a little harder, the speedometer ratcheting even higher.

Maddie's grip on my hand lessens, but she doesn't let go of me as the trees whir by us on each side of the car. With her head on my shoulder, she prepares for the next contraction that shouldn't be happening for another two months.

"It's going to be okay," I whisper.

"It's too early."

"You were early too, and look how you turned out," I remind her.

She laughs, but it sounds like more of a whimper than anything else. "Not exactly comforting right now, Dove."

I join in, resting my head on top of hers while battling my nerves over the fact that these are *clearly* not Braxton Hicks contractions. Which means Peanut's coming. Or something's wrong.

And just like that, all of my other problems with Gibson and Madelyn seem trivial. Because I'm going to be an aunt. And I need the little one to be okay.

I bite my lip and say a prayer to keep them safe and grip Maddie a little tighter.

"We got this, Mads."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

When we reach the hospital, they admit her instantly. They hook Maddie up to a bunch of machines that monitor the baby's heart rate as well as her own before checking her cervix to see how productive her contractions have been.

Gibson offered to stay in the waiting room, and Maddie agreed that it would be best if she could have some space. Me, however, she's kept by her side constantly, which is weird since convincing her to let me tag along to any of her doctor appointments has been a solid no-go throughout her entire pregnancy. But now that it's time to meet her little peanut, she's terrified of being alone.

And I don't blame her.

I'm not going anywhere.

Once the doctor finishes checking her, he pulls off his gloves and tosses them in the trash.

"You're dilated to a six, and the sac is bulging," Dr. Sheffler announces. "We'll do our best to postpone the delivery for as long as possible, but as soon as your water breaks, we have twenty-four hours to deliver. We're going to keep you here and keep a close eye on you. The nurse has already been administering the medicine that should help slow the contractions, but I'm going to be honest with you. I think this baby's coming within the next forty-eight hours."

My eyes bug out of my head as I register the possible timeline.

Forty-eight hours?

I look down at Maddie hooked up to a bunch of beeping machines. Looking helpless. And numb. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. We'd

taken every precaution, but the truth is that this entire situation is out of our hands. And that's terrifying.

"What's the likelihood of my baby making it?" Maddie asks, her face void of any expression.

"We have a level four Neonatal Intensive Care Unit on site."

"And what does that mean exactly?"

"It means they know how to take care of a preemie, Ms. Walker. We'll do everything we can to keep you and Baby safe. I promise."

"And the likelihood?" she pushes back. The fire I've grown accustomed to simmers just beneath the surface as Maddie stares Dr. Sheffler straight in the eye, daring him to tell her that her baby won't be okay.

This is the Maddie I know. The woman's fearless. And she's going to get through this. No matter what.

"There's a ninety-nine percent chance that your baby will be fine. Little," he clarifies, "but fine. If I had to guess, your baby will be in the NICU for around a month so we can monitor them and make sure they reach all of their milestones."

"What kind of milestones?" I ask.

"We have to make sure they can breathe on their own, have regular bowel movements and wet diapers, and can eat without any issues. But I really do think everything is going to be okay."

I sag against the edge of the hospital bed, trying to keep my hope in check but feeling relieved nonetheless. Ninety-nine percent. We can work with that.

Maddie gives him a jerky nod, registering his comment carefully to make sure she doesn't misinterpret anything.

"Okay," she breathes out. "Okay."

"Okay," he returns patiently.

"And when can we do a paternity test?" I ask.

Dr. Sheffler's gaze shifts from me to Maddie. Again, she nods, silently approving the question.

Clearing his throat, he answers, "As soon as the baby is stable. Do you already have a test?"

I shake my head. "No. I don't even know where I'd get one."

"We've worked with a few companies in the past. If it's all right with Ms. Walker, I can get you the contact information."

"Thank you," Maddie returns. "That would be great."

"All right. Any more questions?" he asks.

“Mads?” I prod, careful not to mess with her IV as I reach for her hand and squeeze it. “Do you have any other questions?”

She shakes her head, still pale. Still unable to let herself hope that everything’s going to be okay. And I get it. I’m only the *aunt*. I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for her. She’s the *mother*. It has to be eating her up inside. The unknown. The unpredictability. The harsh truth that this delivery is out of her control. Now, it’s a waiting game.

“I guess that’s it,” I answer, fighting to stay strong when all I really want to do is curl up next to Mads in her hospital bed and pretend that everything’s going to be okay when the reality is simple. We don’t know if it is. Not yet. Even with the odds of everything turning out well, anything can happen. I know it. And so does Maddie.

“Okay.” Dr. Sheffler dips his chin and gets to his feet. “The nurse will be keeping a close eye on you, but if you need anything, push the nurse’s button, and she’ll be right in.”

With a tight smile, I return, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He leaves us alone with nothing but the beeping machines and the hustle and bustle from the hallway to comfort us.

I try to let go of Maddie’s hand, but she holds on for dear life.

“How are you doing?” I ask.

Letting out a slow, long breath, she takes in the stupid beeping machines surrounding her before shrugging one shoulder. “The pain meds have helped a lot.”

“That’s good.”

“Yup.” She takes another deep breath, staring blankly at the wall behind me. Still nervous. Still lost.

“Do you want me to call Mom and Dad to let them know?” I offer, one-handedly fussing with the thin, white hospital sheets.

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay...” I grimace, desperate to fill the silence. “What are you thinking about?”

Another slow, long breath escapes her. Then she looks at me and raises her chin, determination seeping from every pore. “I want you to finish the tour.”

“What? Maddie—”

“I’m serious, Dove. I’m glad you’re here, and I can’t wait for you to meet my little peanut, but I need you to go.”

Ouch.

I shake my head, trying to understand where she’s coming from without letting myself be offended or hurt by her request.

But still.

Ouch.

“Why?” I whisper. I thought we’d moved past this. I thought we were closer. I thought I’d proved she could rely on me. It doesn’t make any sense, especially when she’s gripping my hand like it’s her only lifeline.

“I just do,” she answers, squeezing my hand one more time before letting me go. “I love you. And I love that you turned your world upside to come rescue me from my own decisions, but I need you to still live your life. I need you to go and have fun, and make mistakes, and be happy.”

“I can be happy at home, Mads—”

“Did you know why I was mad at you when you first moved in?” she asks.

I tilt my head to one side. “What do you mean?”

“I was mad because I felt guilty. That I’d screwed up and that I couldn’t handle the consequences on my own. I was *scared*, Dove. But you swooped in and saved the day.”

“And I’d do it again,” I argue. “Mads—”

“I know you would. That’s why you’re here. At this hospital. Because you *do* swoop in. You *do* save the day. And even though I’m more grateful than I can ever explain, I need you to go so that I can do this on my own.”

I shake my head. “I’m not going to leave you—”

“I need you to. After you meet her—or him—I need you to go. Not forever or anything. Just for the tour. I want you to have fun. I want you to live life instead of being tied down to consequences that were never yours to handle. Can you do that for me? Please?”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, my indecision wearing on me, I take in her pleading gaze and tuck my hair behind my ear.

She can’t ask that of me right now. Not when everything is precarious. Not when we’re walking a tightrope, and there are so many unknowns.

“What do you think the gender is?” I deflect, desperate to change the subject.

With her hand pressed to her swollen belly, she smiles. And it's the first peaceful one I've seen in months. "I see what you did there. We can talk about the tour later. But as for the gender...I have no idea. I know some people say that a mom has some crazy sixth sense that lets them know, but honestly? I'm clueless."

"Are you hoping for one or the other?"

She shakes her head. "No. I only want a healthy baby. Which is ironic when I think about how close I was to having an abortion. But the thought of not meeting this little soul..." She sniffs, wiping under her eyes. "I already love her... Or him," she adds with a light laugh.

The sound is like a balm to the constant ache in my chest ever since I found her on the floor in her room, shattered glass surrounding her. I'm pretty sure I'd never been more terrified in my entire life.

Please let everything turn out okay.

I smile back at her before asking, "Why didn't you ever find out the gender?"

"Honestly?"

I nod.

"I felt like if I knew the gender, it would make the baby's existence real. And I didn't want it to be real. Not at first."

"And now?"

She looks up at me and takes another slow, unsteady breath. "Now, I'm terrified. I'm not ready. But I also can't wait to hold him. Or *her*."

"Do you have any names picked out?"

Again, she shakes her head and rubs her hand over her belly, making the light blue fabric of her hospital gown bunch up before she smooths it out again.

"Nope," she answers. "Are you and Gibbs going to be okay?"

"I hope so. I *think* so. I love him. But I'm also terrified of what the paternity results are going to be."

She cringes. "You and me both."

"Do you want him to be the father?" I ask, my chest tightening. "If I wasn't in love with him. If I wasn't in the picture. Would you want him to be the dad?"

Her eyes widen in surprise before she takes a few seconds to really consider my question.

With a sad smile, she holds my gaze. "Gibson will be a great father one

day. I have no doubt in my mind that he would step up and do everything in his power to make the best life for his sons and daughters. But, no. I don't want to be tied down to anyone who doesn't love me. I don't want to have to worry about custody, and child support, and every other messy consequence that comes along with sharing a child when the parents don't love each other. Especially if it hurts the one person I *can* rely on." She gives me a watery smile before sobering. "Promise me that you won't let me stand in the way of your happiness."

"Mads—"

"I'm serious, Dove."

"That wasn't the deal—"

"Well, I'm making a new one. Promise me. Regardless of the results of that stupid test, promise me."

I hesitate for an instant before an image of Gibson comes to the forefront of my mind. Of all the moments we've shared, even though we haven't known each other for very long. The music. The late nights. Singing with each other on stage. He was my first, and I can't picture anyone else but him being my last.

"I promise," I whisper, the declaration as much for her benefit as it is for mine.

A genuine smile stretches across her face despite her current situation before she reaches for my hand and squeezes it one more time. Then she lets me go. "Good. Go see Gibson. Go figure out the paternity test shit. Go see if they can postpone the tour for another couple of days."

I roll my eyes. "Mads, I seriously don't care about the tour—"

"Which is why I'm making you go anyway. Because you should. I saw the videos of your performances, remember? You were made to be up there. This is my responsibility. My future." She rubs her hand up and down her stomach again. "*Yours* is in the waiting room. And I suggest you go remind him of that."

My future.

My Gibson.

My everything.

She's right. My feelings for him are the one thing that hasn't changed since everything went down, and I'm tired of fighting them.

Stretching my arms over my head, I stand up. "Do you want him in here for the delivery?"

She shakes her head. “No. And it’s not because I don’t want him to be part of it. But if he isn’t the father, and Milo turns out to be, that isn’t very fair, is it?”

“I guess not.” I bend down and drop a quick kiss on her forehead. “I love you, Maddie.”

“Love you too, Dove.”

“I’ll check on you in a few,” I promise.

She lifts her hand that has an IV taped to it. “Trust me. I’m not going anywhere.”



“HEY,” I GREET GIBSON.

The bags under his eyes have somehow managed to grow even more than when he first showed up on my doorstep a few hours ago.

“How is she?” he rasps, his elbows on his knees and his head hanging low. The waiting room is clean and quiet but still smells like antiseptic and cleaning supplies. It’s a stark reminder that we’re in a hospital and that things are far from okay.

“She’s all right. They’re trying to slow down her contractions, but the doctor thinks she’s going to have her baby within the next forty-eight hours.”

His face falls. “Shit.”

With a tight smile, I sit on the cushioned chair next to him. “Yeah. But they also said they think the baby’s going to be okay. He or she might have to spend some time in the NICU, but Maddie’s little peanut should be okay.”

“Good.” He grabs my hand and tugs it into his lap. “And us? Are we okay?”

The vulnerability in his voice makes my chest ache before I pull our tangled fingers to my lips and kiss the back of his hand. “Yeah, Gibbs. We’re okay.”

“No matter what?” he challenges, not officially calling out the giant elephant in the hospital waiting room but not shying away from it, either. And I appreciate it. His honesty. His determination. His desire to face our future head-on instead of sticking his head in the sand or avoiding it at all costs.

It’s exactly what I need. Life might get messy sometimes, but as long as

we promise to face it together, we'll get through it.

We have to.

I close my eyes and press another kiss to his tight knuckles. "Yeah, Gibson. No matter what."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

DOVE

The baby makes it sixteen hours.

Sixteen hours in the womb before demanding to make her debut. I'm drained—both emotionally and physically. But she's beautiful. And tiny. Three pounds and nine ounces, to be exact. Her lungs aren't fully developed, but she's handling her oxygen tube like a champ. The nurses have announced her as the happiest baby in the NICU, too. Pretty sure they're all enamored with her like we are. Her strawberry hair looks just like her mama's baby pictures, and those dimples? Curse those dimples. They're going to get her out of far too much trouble. I have no doubt.

I'm in love with her instantly.

As for the paternity test, it was surprisingly easy. A cotton swab along the inside of her cheek, and now it's off to the lab, ready to be tested and compared to Gibson's DNA. The company informed us that we should know the results in two to five days. Which means we're waiting, and it feels like a lifetime.

"Do you want to go see her again?" I ask Gibson in the waiting room at the hospital. He hasn't left my side since yesterday and looks as exhausted as I feel.

He shakes his head, shifting his weight from one foot to the other while giving the NICU's entrance his back. "If she isn't mine..." He scrapes his calloused hand across his face. "I don't want to get attached yet."

My heart cracks at the pain in his voice.

I'd been so selfish, only considering how messed up the situation is for me without considering how confusing it must be for Gibson. Like Shrodinger's cat, two potential futures are laid in front of him. One where

he's a father. And the other where he's...not.

"You okay?" I ask for what feels like the thousandth time since we brought Maddie to the hospital.

He shakes his head again, then sniffs and looks over at the doors that lead to the NICU. Doors we exited less than five minutes ago when he met Maddie's baby for the first time. He refused to hold her. But he held her hand. And he rubbed his thumb along her tiny knuckles as she grabbed onto his index finger like he was her rock. Her protector.

"What are you thinking about?" I'm unsure of what to do or how to act. It's not like there's a manual for these situations. I'm flying blind, and it's killing me.

Yes, Peanut is going to be okay, and Maddie is...Maddie. Physically, she's fine. But emotionally? Well, she'll figure it out because that's what she always does.

But Gibson? Will he be okay?

I have no idea.

"What if she isn't mine?" he rasps after a few seconds, his eyes red-rimmed and glassy. "How can I already love her, and I haven't even held her? I didn't want to be a dad. And now, the thought of leaving her..." An anguished sigh escapes him before he takes an unsteady step toward the exit. "Come on. Let's go to the car. I need to get out of here."

He grabs my hand, tangling our fingers together before rushing out the door like a bat out of Hell.

"It's going to be okay," I remind him, our feet slapping against the damp pavement as I rush to keep up with him.

He stays silent but opens the passenger door of his car and ushers me inside before closing it and rounding the front.

Once he's behind the wheel, he doesn't start the car and drops his chin to his chest.

"Tell me how I can help," I whisper, desperate to take an ounce of agony that's radiating from him.

"Do you want kids?"

My eyelids flutter as I register his words, but other than that, I don't move a muscle. I'm too shocked. The rockstar doesn't exactly scream father material, but deep down, I know he'd be an incredible one. Even Maddie could see how amazing he'd be. Honestly, I've already seen it firsthand in the way he looked over his shoulder as we left the hospital. The way his thoughts

are already focused solely on the tiny human who may or may not belong to him.

As for me? The answer is simple.

“Yes. Maybe not when I’m twenty-two,” I clarify with a shy smile, “but yes. Definitely.” I bite my lip to keep from asking him the same question, knowing it’ll hit too close to home right now. The fact he brought parenthood up in the first place is surprising enough.

He returns my smile with one of his own, but it’s pained and desperate. “Promise me that one day, no matter what, we can make our own kids. Our own family. And I won’t have to hold back from loving them. I won’t have to wait outside the delivery room, wondering if I’m gonna be a dad or not. I won’t have to think about split custody and where to fit a crib at my place. We’ll have a house. And a nursery. And a fucking rocking chair.”

With a light laugh, I lean over the center console and press a kiss to his unshaven cheek. “You’re really set on the whole rocking chair thing?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Nope.” I grin like a loon. “That actually sounds pretty perfect to me.”

His surprised gaze meets mine. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because that’s what I was thinking about in there. How much easier it would be if she were ours instead of Em’s. Not that I don’t think she’s going to be a great mom, but I couldn’t help but picture you.” He swallows thickly. “And I want that. I want that more than just about anything.”

My heart feels so full that it could burst at any second.

With a watery smile, I admit, “I want that too, Gibbs.”

“Promise me that no matter what that test says, you’re all in.”

All in.

On us. Our future. No matter the situation.

It’s a tall order.

But it’s one that I can’t imagine turning away from.

“I already promised—”

“I need to hear it again, Dove.”

I close my eyes, ignoring the bittersweet reality that he might already have a baby. And it isn’t mine. But it doesn’t change the truth. I *am* all in. And I’m not going anywhere.

Licking my lips, I peek over at him, the light sheen in his hazel eyes

making my stomach tighten with appreciation and a need so heavy that I'm afraid I might burst. "I promise—"

He captures my mouth with his, cups my chin, and bares his soul to me. His hurt. His pain. His anxiety. His hope. Everything. And I take all of it, bearing the weight and the helplessness of the situation while trying to lift him up the same way he's managed to lift me over and over since we first met.

And I know without a doubt that I'm not going anywhere. Come Hell or high water, Gibson's it for me. No matter what baggage comes with him. No matter how many sleepless nights he might cause. No matter how many airplanes or tour buses are in our future or how many Baby Mamas might pop up from his past. He's it for me. And I want that dream. The baby that's half him and half me. The baby that has his smile and my eyes. The baby that's obsessed with music, and singing, and little guitars.

I want it all.

With him.

No matter what.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“Hey, Mads. How’s she doing?” I ask, my phone pressed to my ear. The past four days have managed to move at a snail’s pace while still feeling like a whirlwind of chaos. But it’s the waiting and the unknown that’s been killing me.

I turn off the bathroom light and head to the kitchen for a drink of water, eager for the latest update on Peanut. As soon as Maddie was released, I drove her home. She turned right back around, anxious to see her mini-me as quickly as possible. But I get it. I’m only the aunt, and I’m already obsessed. Heck, I saw Peanut earlier today, and I already miss her like crazy. Which is why I’m calling Maddie—again—for an update.

“Good,” Maddie tells me. “The doctors are impressed with how fast she’s catching up. They don’t want me to get my hopes up, but they think she might be able to go home within the next twenty days or so. I’m going to come home and shower in a bit and pack another bag to stay at the hospital. They offered me a room, and I’m going to take them up on it.”

“That’s awesome, Maddie. I’m happy she’s doing so well.”

“Me too.” She drops her voice an octave. “Have you, uh, have you heard anything yet?”

Even though she can’t see me, I shake my head and stare at the empty glass in my hand before setting it back in the cabinet. I’m left parched and wanting but too distracted to do anything about it.

Waiting for the paternity results has been miserable. I don’t know what to do. What to think. What to hope for. I’m lost. But I can’t be lost right now. Gibson needs me. Maddie needs me. My niece needs me.

“They told Gibson it would be any day now,” I murmur after a beat of

silence before softly closing the cabinet's door. "He put your number on the contact info, too, though, so if they contact you—"

"I know, Dove. I was just curious, I guess. But if I hear anything first, I'll keep you updated."

"Thanks," I mumble, resting my forehead against the chipped white cabinet.

This is so hard.

"How's Gibson doing?" she asks. "He hasn't come to see her—"

"He doesn't want to get attached. But if the paternity results are positive, I'm pretty sure he'll ask the hospital for a second room until she comes home."

"And the tour?"

I push myself up and shake off the agonizing worry gnawing at my lower gut. "Organized Chaos had to find a replacement."

"That sucks, Dove—"

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't. I screwed everything up."

"You didn't let me finish," I scold, fidgeting with the yellow polka dot hand towel next to the kitchen sink. "When the lead singer heard about our situation, he reached out to Gibbs and mentioned another opportunity."

"What kind of opportunity?"

"One that involves more travel. Gibson has already talked to the rest of the guys about it. He had to be vague about the current situation because they know Milo, and we still don't know the results yet, but they're being pretty patient. Gibbs told Stoker and Phoenix that he'll have an answer by the end of the week about whether or not he can fill Fender's place until Fen gets out of rehab. But right now, we're stuck in pause mode, so..."

"I get it," she returns. "The hospital is getting anxious about the birth certificate too. I guess we'll have to play it by ear."

"I guess so. I'm meeting Gibbs at his house right now, though, so I have to go. Can I come by and hold Peanut again later tonight?"

"Sure thing. She misses Auntie."

"And I miss her," I admit. "I gotta soak up as many snuggles as I can just in case I have to leave for a bit. Have you thought of a name yet?"

"No." She groans. "I have no idea, Dove. Seriously."

"What's holding you back?"

"Don't hate me, but the last name is killing me. Should I choose Walker?"

Or do I go with Hayes or Anders? I don't know?"

With a grimace, I shift my phone to my other ear and rest my hip against the counter. "Crap. I didn't even think about that."

"See? Some first names fit with certain last names better than others. And then as soon as I let myself go down that road, I remind myself that I'm most definitely overthinking it, and I end up getting a naming block that leaves me worthless."

"You're not worthless," I laugh before seeing the time on the microwave. Pushing myself away from the counter, I grab my purse before adding, "But you *are* kind of adorable for putting so much thought into it."

"She's stuck with it forever, Dove. For-e-ver. That's a long time! And I'll need a good nickname to go with it, and don't even get me started on the spelling. Do you know there's like ten ways to spell Kelsie?"

"Are you thinking of naming her Kelsie?" I ask.

"No, but that's beside the point. There's i-e, and e-y, and e-a, and I saw one with a T in there somewhere. Who spells Kelsie with a T?"

"I have no idea, but you're kind of killing me with this," I laugh. Again. And it feels good. Foreign, almost. But good. "Have you, uh, called Mom or Dad and asked their opinion?"

"Nope." She sobers. "And I don't plan on it, so don't get any ideas. They disowned me, Dove. You don't exactly come back from that."

"Good point," I agree, albeit grudgingly. They're our *parents*, though. Doesn't Madelyn want them to know their granddaughter? Then again, they started it. They kicked her out, called her every name in the book, and reminded her to never call them again.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised she's keeping her distance. I mean, I am too, but it's different. I don't have any major life-changing events that I'm keeping from them. Well, other than possibly touring the country with a band. But still.

"Hey. Gibson's calling," she tells me.

I clear my throat. "Okay. I'll, uh, I'll talk to you later."

"Love you, Dove," she whispers before I can end the call.

I puff out my cheeks and pinch the bridge of my nose. "Love you too."

When I hang up, an incoming text message from Gibson that was sent a couple minutes ago catches my eye.

Gibson: Hey. You still coming over?

Another one followed right after it.

Gibson: I love you, okay?

That sounds promising.

Fighting the need to drive off into the distance, I open the driver's side door of my car and head to Gibson's without bothering to text him back. He's too busy talking to Maddie to read it, anyway. And I'm too anxious to hear the results face-to-face to put together a coherent response.

But whatever the outcome is, we'll get through it.

We have to.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

DOVE

“Oh. Hi,” I murmur as Jake comes into view. His hair is a disheveled mess and sticks up in every direction, and the bags under his eyes suggest that he should sleep for a week, but I keep my lips zipped from pointing that out to him.

“Dove, right?” he asks.

“Yes. Hi.” I wave awkwardly.

“Gibson’s in his room.” Keys in hand, Jake scoots past me toward the car parked out front.

“Lock the door on your way out,” he calls over his shoulder.

“Oh. Okay?”

“He was talking to me,” a high-pitched voice informs me from behind as I stand outside the entryway.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head as I take in her tube top that barely covers her giant breasts and the short mini skirt that shows the bottom half of her bum.

“Oh,” I repeat. “Hi. I’m Dove.”

A hot pink bubble of gum grows from her pursed lips before she wiggles her manicured fingers back at me.

Pop.

“Mal. Nice to meet you.”

“Are you Jake’s...girlfriend?” I grimace as the word slips past my lips.

With a very unladylike snort, she rolls her eyes. “Jake doesn’t *do* girlfriends. Just orgasms. Lots and *lots* of orgasms. Too-da-loo.” Her heels click-clack against the pavement as she walks down the short sidewalk and disappears out of sight.

“So much for locking up,” I mutter under my breath as I step over the threshold and let myself in. The door closes behind me with a soft click before I slide the lock into place, take a deep breath, and head to Gibson’s room.

Déjà vu hits like a sledgehammer as a familiar melody seeps through the cracked door like the first time I stumbled upon him all those nights ago. Playing music. Effortlessly connecting with me on a level I’d never expected. My chest aches at the memory, and I close my eyes, letting the moment wash over me, bathing me in hope for our future. No matter what it entails.

He stumbles over a few chords, bringing me back to the present. As I peek through the cracked door, a sense of peace washes over me, and my mouth pulls into a soft smile.

On the floor with his legs crossed sits Gibson, his acoustic guitar cradled in his lap. He strings a few more notes together, his brows pinched with concentration and a pencil hanging out the side of his mouth.

Sexy.

Effortless.

My heart beats faster.

As if he can feel my presence, he stops strumming and looks up at me but doesn’t say a word.

“Hey,” I whisper, pushing the door open a few more inches before resting my shoulder against the doorjamb.

He lifts his chin in greeting, then pulls the pencil from between his teeth and sets it on a worn notebook that’s filled with notes, lyrics, and more chicken scratch melodies than I could ever begin to come up with.

“Hey,” he returns.

“You okay?”

Rubbing his hand over his face, he shakes his head and pats the carpet beside him. My heart racing, I close the distance between us and slide to the ground.

“I take it they called?” I ask carefully.

He nods.

“And?”

“I’m not the father.”

The relief I expect never comes. Only a resigned sadness. Because his pain is my pain. And he’s hurting right now. For the potential relationship—the potential *daughter*—that slipped through his fingers. Like a dream. One

he just realized he wants.

Chewing on my lower lip, I rest my head against his shoulder, desperate to take away his pain even though I know it isn't possible. Not yet.

But it's okay to mourn.

To be sad.

To let go.

"I'm sorry, Gibson." My voice cracks.

He drops a kiss on my forehead but stays quiet and starts tinkering on his guitar once more. Like it's a lifeline. A coping mechanism. A drug.

Every few minutes, he scratches something in his notepad and gets right back to work. Writing. Creating. Feeling so deeply that the only way he can cope is to get his emotions out of his head and onto paper.

I'm not sure how much time passes before his low hum joins the guitar string's vibrations. I close my eyes and listen carefully, feeling like the luckiest girl alive to witness this moment and the vulnerability that emanates from every chord.

*"What could've been, should've been,
was never mine.*

*What could've been, would've been
with two pink lines.*

But I was wrong, baby girl.

You were gonna be my world, baby girl.

And you'll move on, baby girl.

You'll be loved from afar, baby girl.

And I'll always be here.

Always be here.

I was scared out of my mind.

Sure I'd never want that in my life.

Like a wisp of smoke, you're nothing but air

A broken dream. Now I'm left with despair.

You could've been, should've been

Would've been mine.

*I could've been, would've been
Should've been yours.
But you'll move on, baby girl.
You'll be loved from afar, baby girl.
And I'll always be here.
Always be here."*

THE LAST NOTES RING THROUGH THE AIR LIKE A SIREN, AND I WIPE BENEATH my eyes, choking on the ball of emotion lodged in my throat. At what could've been. Should've been. But all fell apart.

"I'm so sorry, babe," I whisper.

"Don't be." He kisses the crown of my head. "It was strange, ya know? To have this potential daughter, only to realize she belongs to my best friend—"

"What?!" a loud, booming voice interrupts from the doorway. Our attention snaps to the culprit.

And my jaw drops.

"H-hey, Milo," I squeak.

Shit.

CHAPTER FORTY

“Which best friend?” Milo growls. His entire body is practically vibrating from the doorway and is absolutely terrifying. With my back still pressed to the edge of Gibson’s bed, I gulp and pull my knees to my chest, wishing I could disappear. I don’t do confrontation, and I have a feeling that shit’s about to go down.

The guy is *pissed*.

Gibson pushes himself to his feet but keeps his hands raised in surrender as he approaches Milo one slow step at a time. “Hey, man—”

“Answer the question.”

Gibson’s gaze darts over to me, then back to his best friend. “Em. She, uh...”

“Tell me.” His voice is quiet. Calculated. And freaking lethal.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, Gibson mutters, “She was pregnant, man.”

“Was?” Milo’s face is red with rage as he finally loses the last bit of his self-control.

“She had a baby girl two days ago,” I tell him, scrambling to join Gibson near the door while terrified he’s about to get the crap kicked out of him. “She’s my sister, but I didn’t know she was the Em I’d heard about until recently. I found out while we were on tour, came home, and confronted her. She went into labor early, and... Yeah. The baby’s in the NICU, but she’s going to be okay.”

Not that he cares, but...

I snap my mouth shut to keep from rambling and grab the hem of

Gibson's soft blue T-shirt, rubbing it between my fingers.

Jaw tight and fists clenched, Milo turns his glare from me to Gibson, stepping closer to him until they're chest-to-chest. His tense energy taints the air around us until I'm afraid I'll choke on it.

"How long?" he growls. "How long have you known?"

Gibson grimaces. "It's complicated—"

"How. Long."

"Milo—"

"Answer the fucking question."

Looking sheepish and guilty as hell, Gibson grabs the back of his neck and squeezes. "I've known for a few months."

Milo cocks his arm back and punches Gibson in the jaw without waiting for further explanation. Gibson's head snaps to the side before he stumbles back a few steps. With a gasp, I cover my mouth.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

My mind races, trying to catch up with the mess of a situation that's exploding around me like a freaking grenade before I step in front of Milo and raise my chin to look him straight in the eye.

"It's not his fault," I tell him.

His glare is downright terrifying before he orders, "Stay out of this—"

"If you want to blame someone, blame yourself. My sister begged him not to tell you because she knew this is exactly how you would react."

As if he's been slapped, he flinches back a few inches, staring down at me with a pair of flinty eyes that are so cold, so sharp, I'm surprised I'm still left standing. But it's the silence that does me in. The determination combined with frustration. And a hint of fear, too.

"Where is she?" he growls after a few tense seconds.

"At the hospital."

"Which one?"

"On First—"

He's gone before I can finish the address.

My breathing is shallow as I turn around and find Gibson at my back, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth that's curved up in amusement.

"Crap. Are you okay?" I ask, closing the last bit of distance between us.

"I'm fine."

"Why are you smiling?"

"Because you just went up against a raging bull for me."

I roll my eyes and stand on my tiptoes to inspect the damage. There's some definite swelling, but I think he'll be okay.

"Why is that amusing?" I prod, carefully touching his bottom lip that's three times its usual size.

"Because you're tiny."

I quirk my brow. "And?"

"And you went head-to-head with Milo."

"And?"

"And I found it sexy as hell."

I snort, dropping my hand to my side. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe. But I'm also in love with you."

"And?" I repeat, unable to hide my smile or ignore the butterflies flapping away in my stomach anytime he says the L-word. Clearing my throat, I wave my hand toward the empty hallway. "Aren't we going to go after him?"

With a quick shake of his head, Gibson turns back to his bed and collapses onto it. Facing the ceiling, he cradles the back of his skull with his hands, looking right as rain. "Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because he had a right to know, and Em wasn't going to do it without a push. Might as well rip it off like a Band-Aid, right?"

"So you're cool with this?" I ask.

"I might've been a bit more tactful if I'd known he was home, but yeah. It's time they sort their shit. And it's time we sort ours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that my past is officially in the past, and I'm ready to move forward, Dovey. But only if you promise to move forward with me. I love you."

With a soft smile, I tease, "You mentioned that."

"Figured I should bring it up one more time since you didn't return the sentiment."

"Is someone feeling insecure?"

"With a girl who's way too far out of my league? Yes. Yes, I am."

I laugh then tuck myself against his side, resting my head on his warm pec while committing the familiar cadence of his heartbeat to memory.

After a few seconds, I challenge, "Even when said girl has already returned the sentiment?"

"Maybe I need to hear it again."

With another light laugh, I lift my head and push my white-blond hair over one shoulder before kissing his cheek. “I love you, Gibson Hayes, and I can’t wait to move forward with you.”

“And to give me babies,” he adds.

“You’re joking, right?”

His grin is contagious. “Maybe not right now, but one day. Yeah. I want that. And you already promised. No take-backs, Dovey.”

“No take-backs, Gibson,” I confirm. My heart swells like the Grinch’s in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. So much so that I’m close to bursting. With love. Lust. Adoration. Excitement. And maybe a little gratitude too. For his past and how it brought us together in the most unconventional way possible. But I wouldn’t change it for the world.

“I want forever with you,” I assert. “And that includes babies, and concerts, and everything else in between.”

“Good. But first, we’re gonna travel the world together.”

My eyes widen. “The world?”

“Mm-hmm,” he hums, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

“And how’s that?”

“Josh is still waiting for our answer, remember? He specifically requested we join him for their European tour, and now that I know I’m not a dad...” His fingers graze my cheek. “I think it’d be good for us to get away for a while. It might be good for Milo and Em to have their space so they can sort their shit out. You in?”

“With you? I’m up for anything.”

A low chuckle vibrates through his chest. “Well, when you put it that way...”

Then he kisses me, sealing our promise and our future with a kiss that beats our first, and our second, and every one after that. But it won’t beat our next one. Because with Gibson by my side, life just gets better and better.

EPILOGUE

DOVE

After shooting the entire shot of vodka, my nose wrinkles. I set the shot glass against the hood of the tour bus Hawthorne rented for us when we accepted the offer to tour Europe with Organized Chaos.

“It burns,” I choke out.

“It’s alcohol. It’s supposed to burn,” Gibson returns, a crooked grin plastered on his handsome face.

“And people like this?”

The cool night air tickles my bare thighs as we stand in the open field surrounding us. We’ve been on tour for three months, and while it’s been amazing and unforgettable, it’s been exhausting, too. I’ve been looking forward to a quiet night like tonight for weeks.

With a dry laugh, he pours me another shot of clear liquid. “You said you wanted to get shitfaced—”

“Only because you said it’s a rite of passage.”

“And it is.”

“But I don’t wanna puke—”

“Two shots won’t make you puke, Dovey. They’ll make you loose—”

I snort and roll my eyes. “‘Cause that’s what I need in my life. To get *more* loose around you.”

Another dry laugh escapes him. He nudges my drink closer to me. “Hey, it’s not my fault you can’t keep your hands off me. Now chop-chop, Dovey. Drink up.”

“Oh, so we’re in a hurry again? I thought this was our night off.” But I pick up the drink anyway and take a sip. My expression sours before I shoot the rest of its contents like a champ.

“Guess it’s just a force of habit now,” he notes as he brings the entire bottle to his mouth and swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. Leaning forward, I suck on the tan flesh, loving the low growl that it pulls from him.

The bottle dangles from his left hand as his right tangles in my hair. The slight tug against my scalp spurs me on before he pulls me away from him and connects our mouths in a toe-curling, panty-melting kiss.

“Mmm,” I hum, savoring the moment.

“I’ll never get over how good you taste,” he murmurs against my lips.

With a lazy smile, I grab the half-full bottle of vodka from his fingers and take another swig, not bothering to use the shot glass he’d rummaged for before Stoker and Phoenix left with Josh.

Which leaves us alone. Blissfully alone. For the first time in weeks.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Oh...the chaos of the tour and its lack of privacy.”

He grunts and plants a quick peck against my lips, grabbing my hips and lifting me onto the hood of the RV before joining me. The old vehicle creaks in protest before succumbing to our weight like a patient old mare who’s used to rolling with the punches. Once situated, Gibson grabs the bottle and drinks a bit more as I take in the gorgeous, quiet ambiance surrounding us.

“Are you having fun, though?” he questions. “On tour?”

I smile softly as the memories from the past three months wash over me. “I wouldn’t change it for the world, Gibbs.”

“Good.” He tangles our fingers together. “Because they want us to join them for the Asian portion of the tour now, too.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s...that’s insane, Gibson. It feels like a dream.”

He nods his agreement but doesn’t comment as he takes another few glugs of vodka.

“Tell me something,” I begin. “Would you do it all again? The tour? Everything?”

“Of course.” He leans closer, breathing me in.

“So you’re not mad I got you on that stage all those months ago?”

Dragging his nose along the column of my throat, he softly growls, “Nope.”

I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access to my sensitive skin.

“Or the fact that I most definitely eavesdropped in your house when I came to hang out with Reese that first time?”

His teeth scrape against my earlobe. “Nope.”

“How ‘bout the time I went to a party with Fen, and you had to come save me?”

With a low growl, he hooks his opposite hand around my waist and drags me a few inches closer to him. “Definitely not.”

“You sure?” I prod, my stupid insecurities getting the best of me.

“Look around, Dovey. If you weren’t there to push me all of those times, I would’ve never wound up here. Living my dream with the love of my life. Now, come here and kiss me. Drunk sex is fun.”

Laughing, I snake my arm around his neck and pull him closer. “You want to have sex out here? In the open?”

“Says the girl who let me eat her out between houses and blew me in a closet at our first concert.”

“Gibbs!” I screech, smacking his back.

His low chuckle makes my insides tighten before he lays me back on the hood of the bus and kisses me slowly, making me forget why I was outraged in the first place. As long as he keeps touching me, I’ll be a happy camper.

“So, that’s all it takes, huh?” he whispers, peppering kisses along every inch of exposed skin.

“Huh?” I ask, my mind hazy.

“A few well-placed kisses and you’re putty in my hands.”

“It’s the alcohol,” I lie, tilting my head to one side.

“Uh-huh. Sure.” His hand travels up to my breast before squeezing softly.

“And what’s your excuse for all the other times we’ve made love?”

Made love.

Swoon!

With a soft moan, I arch my back and peek up at him, my emotions wreaking havoc on my insides. The moon is high, casting a faint shadow that covers most of his handsome features. But I can still see his eyes and the love that shines back at me. A love that I never thought I was worthy of. A love that made it through one of the most crippling situations I could’ve ever imagined. A love that’s mine. All mine.

And so is he. For the rest of our lives. Through concerts and future babies. In sickness and in health. Forever.

“Love you, Dovey,” he murmurs as if reading my mind.

“Love you too, Gibbs.”
And I really do.



Chapter One

Madelyn

“EXCUSE ME, MS. WALKER,” THE NURSE INTERRUPTS. “THERE’S A gentleman in the waiting room who would like to speak with you.”

Confused, I look down at my new baby girl in my arms, then back at the nurse, convinced I’ve heard her wrong.

Who the hell would be here to see me?

I have no one.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“A man. He’s out front. Said he’d like to see you.”

I cock my head to the side. “Who?”

“He said he’s the father.” She drops her attention to Peanut. “Tall. Light hair. Lots of tattoos.”

Shit.

The blood drains from my face. “Oh. Umm...”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Would you like me to have him removed from the hospital, Miss Walker?” she suggests, reading me like a damn book. “Wouldn’t be the first time—”

“No. Umm...” My mind races, desperate to avoid the impending crash, when I know it isn’t possible. “I’ll uh, I’ll meet him in the waiting room.”

“You sure, honey? He looked a little...rough.”

I bite my tongue to keep from defending Milo—he definitely doesn’t deserve it— before I answer, “Yeah, I’m sure. Thank you, though.”

She steps closer and motions to my little Peanut. “Here. Let me take her for you. When you’re finished in the waiting room, we can see how she does with latching for her next feeding, alright?”

Barely registering anything she just said, I nod numbly, and offer Peanut

to her. My arms feel empty as soon as she's out of reach, but I keep my head held high as I walk down the short hall to the heavy security doors that lead to the main waiting area in the maternity ward.

I squeeze my hands into fists, staving off the panic attack that's bubbling just beneath the surface. I'm freaking out. Like, *total-mental-breakdown* freaking out. And I can't decide if it's because Milo finally knows about my baby or if it's because I delivered her almost two months early, and was told she'll be staying in the NICU for at least a few more weeks. Needless to say, I've been a mess ever since. I'm sore. I'm exhausted. And I feel more alone than ever before.

The experts always talk about the hormones during pregnancy, but for some reason, I feel like I missed the part where they mentioned them being a hundred times worse as soon as you actually deliver the baby.

Then again, most pregnant women aren't planning on raising a baby all by themselves, let alone having the father show up to the hospital when he definitely didn't know I was pregnant in the first place, so what do I know? Maybe this is normal. My racing heart. My sweaty palms. The tiny voice inside my head that's telling me I'm going to screw my daughter up. That I'm going to fail her as a mother. That I was wrong to keep her from Milo.

I let out a shaky breath and close my eyes. Just for a moment.

But maybe this is normal, you know? The mental breakdown.

It's funny. I almost let myself believe that if my baby has to stay at the hospital for a little while longer, then maybe my secret could, too.

The scent of cleaning supplies used to burn my nostrils, but as I stare at the heavy closed doors separating me from the man who broke my heart, I realize it's almost familiar now. Hell, it's almost comforting. Because I know my baby girl is being watched over by someone who knows what they're doing instead of the trainwreck mother that she'll have to deal with as soon as she gets the okay to come home.

And I *am* a trainwreck.

I don't deserve to be a mother. Especially not to someone so innocent—so tiny and perfect—as my little Peanut.

I shake off the thought, attempting to focus on the current screwed up situation that's sitting in the waiting room.

Who told him?

How did he find me?

My hands tremble as I wash them at the small row of sinks on the right

hand side of the heavy doors. Once they're dried, the door buzzes, and opens to reveal a very frustrated, very sexy Milo pacing the waiting area like a pissed-off bull.

I haven't seen him since everything fell apart, and the sight is like a sucker punch to the gut.

I can't do this.

"Where is she?" he growls as soon as he sees me.

I step over the threshold, and raise my hands, praying it'll placate him. "Milo—"

"I wanna see her."

"Milo, she's..." I look over my shoulder at the automatic doors leading to the NICU that have already locked behind me. "She was early. I can't take her home yet."

"I wanna see her," he repeats, his tone brooking no argument. But there's a desperation in his request that peeks through the anger and frustration that's directed at me. A need to see her. His baby girl. His blood. My heart cracks as I rein in my hope for any kind of positive future we could've had in another life. But after everything we've been through, everything we've said that we can't take back, everything I *haven't* said that I should've...there's no coming back from that. I can't let myself daydream about what could've been anymore. It'll only lead to more heartbreak. More pain. And I refuse to wallow in self-pity any longer. I have a baby who needs me.

"Let me see her," he demands.

I drop my chin to my chest, shame filling every single tiny crevice in my body. That I kept her from him. That I still can't look him in the eye without remembering how terrible—how selfish—I've been. But this isn't easy. He has no idea what I've been through. To protect him. To protect her. To stay out of his life the way he ordered me to.

It isn't *fair*.

None of this is.

"Come on," I mutter, giving him my back before lifting my barcode printed wristband to the scanner near the NICU doors.

A voice crackles through the speaker. "Hey, Ms. Walker. You both coming in?"

I give the camera located next to the barcode scanner a nod. "Yes. He's with me. Thank you."

Buzz.

The door unlocks and swings open. In silence, I step over the threshold, not bothering to see if Milo's following, though the soft scuff of his black boots against the linoleum floor is enough evidence that I'm not alone. That he's here. And it's obvious he isn't going anywhere.

Again, I wash my hands at the sink with a little yellow sponge and white scrubber, making sure my hands are germ-free for all the little babies in the unit while praying he doesn't notice the way they're still trembling.

I think I'm going to be sick.

Milo follows my lead, towering beside me as he squirts some foamy soap over his inked hands, scrubbing away for a solid thirty seconds before rinsing them in the water.

Memories of his hands on my body, skimming my bare skin, his voice murmuring in my ear, low and husky. The heat from his chest brushing against mine as he'd push into me. Owinging me. Claiming me. Branding me. Over and over again—

A loud rip makes me flinch as he reaches for the paper towel dispenser and rips it away from the roll before drying his hands and tossing it in the trash.

I can't do this.

My hands are fisted at my sides. The slight sting of pain from my fingernails biting into my palms grounds me as he stares at me. But he doesn't say a word. Then again, he doesn't need to. His gaze is full of a thick hatred that makes me feel like I'm drowning, wrenching me back to the night he broke my heart. The night I promised myself I'd never see him again. Not just for my sake, but for his.

"Where is she?" he growls.

Without a word, I turn on my heel, forcing my legs to move and walk the short distance to Peanut's room.

"Hey, Ms. Walker," the same nurse greets me.

Sarah, I think?

Honestly, I've dealt with so many that it's all a blur.

"Hi," I return. "This is Milo."

"Nice to meet you," she offers carefully, my little bundle pressed to her chest.

He grunts, barely acknowledging her. He's too busy staring at Peanut in her arms. Like he's seen a ghost. Or an angel. Or hell, maybe an alien. Regardless, he's quiet and it's making things... awkward.

Sarah's attention shifts back to me, and she lifts her brows, silently asking if I'm alright.

"We're good," I lie, when it's the furthest thing from the truth. I mean, yes we're fine physically, Milo would never hurt me, and he sure as hell would never touch an innocent child. But emotionally? That's a different story. He wrecked me beyond repair. And now he's here. Looking at the baby in the nurse's arms who may or may not belong to him, though I'm too terrified to find out.

Sarah's expression softens before she looks back at Milo with a less guarded, more open smile. "Okay. And you both already washed your hands?"

"Yes," I answer.

"Perfect. Let me give her back to you. I'm going to give a few other babies some lovin'. If you need anything, you know the drill."

I take Peanut from Sarah, organizing her nasal tube carefully over one arm so it doesn't tug or pull at an awkward angle that could hurt her. Then, we both settle into a small rocking chair in the corner of the room. Machines are littered throughout the small space but the room feels even tinier with Milo's massive presence, sucking all the energy, all the oxygen from it.

And I don't know what to do. What to say. How to act. I'm flying blind here. Then again, I've been doing that my whole life so....

The pink blanket looks like it's swallowing Peanut whole, so I fuss with the soft material, trying to appear busy and unaffected by a certain someone, when in reality, I'm still freaking out.

I can feel him watching me. Studying me. Analyzing me. Analyzing Peanut. Analyzing the entire situation. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's probably trying to figure out how to get out of this without having to pay child-support.

But that isn't fair. Because even though he said that he wanted nothing to do with me when we ended things, he's here.

Why are you here?

My skin feels itchy and my breathing feels forced as I look up at him, praying he won't see past the barriers I've spent my entire life building around myself. Yet, it's the same one he managed to catapult past the first time we met before he ruined me and left me all alone. On my own. With a baby in my belly and a broken heart that would never be healed.

"This is her," I mutter.

His boots scuff against the floor as he shifts closer to us before looking down at Peanut.

“What’s her name?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

He scoffs. “Of course you haven’t.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, looking up at him again. The guy’s tall. Around six foot two. He always had a way of making me feel small. Delicate. Precious. But right now, I feel like I’m seconds from getting squashed under his boot.

“You’ve always been indecisive, remember?” he spits, hinting at one of our last conversations before everything fell apart.

I grit my teeth and glare back at him. “I *was* decisive, remember?”

“Like when you were sleeping with me and Sonny, ‘cause you couldn’t decide who you wanted more?”

My jaw drops. “You’re the one that wanted me to sleep with you and your best friend in the first place. You approached me—”

“Bullshit. You were flirting with him all night—”

“Are you kidding me right now?” I seethe. Peanut whimpers against me, her little lips pulling into a frown from our rising voices. As I look down at her, the anger burning inside of me is doused almost instantly. I can’t do this. Not in front of her.

With a deep, staggered breath, I rock her softly and drop my voice low. “It doesn’t matter, okay? You made it very clear that we’re through, and that’s—”

“I made it clear?” he challenges. A dark laugh escapes him. “Whatever, Em. Or is it Madelyn?” He scratches at his chin, condescension oozing from every pore.

“Can we...*not* do this?” I ask, ignoring the stares coming from the nurse’s desk. He’s gonna get thrown out of here if he can’t keep his anger in check. We both will.

“You don’t think I deserve an explanation?” he growls.

“Yes, you deserve an explanation, okay? But can’t it wait? Please? When we don’t have an audience standing fifteen feet away from us who look more than ready to throw us out right now? When I’m not freaking out over the well-being of my baby, and the fact that she’s in the freaking hospital? Please?”

His nostrils flare as he looks down at me, that same intensity rolling off him in waves. “Fine.”

A weighted silence settles around us, along with the occasional squeak from Peanut and the constant machines pulsing around the NICU as I fuss with Peanut's blanket again. But I'm afraid if I break the quiet with my voice, it'll only cause another fight, and I'm so sick of fighting.

My hands—hell, my entire body—shakes as I peek up at him again, and extend the proverbial olive branch. “Do you want to hold her?”

Indecision paints his handsome features before he tears his gaze from mine and looks at Peanut. As if in slow motion, his big, burly hand rises. He runs his calloused finger along her soft, silky cheek, barely grazing the tube attached to her button nose before brushing against her strawberry-blonde peach fuzz.

And just like that, my frustration, my anger, all of it vanishes into thin air. Like wisps of smoke swirling with fresh, clean oxygen. Yeah, our past still tainted the moment, but maybe it's still manageable. Maybe he'll accept her as his own. Maybe she won't be a burden to him, no matter how clear he's made it that I'm one.

“You can hold her,” I offer again.

“No.” He drops his hand back to his side. “I don't want to hold her.

“You sure?” I ask. “I can show you how—”

“You're moving in with me.”

“What?” I shake my head, convinced I heard him wrong while trying to process how the hell we got from *do you want to hold her* to *you're moving in with me*.

“Milo, you can't be serious—”

“Will you just...”—his fists tighten at his sides—“listen to me? For once in your damn life?”

A lump the size of Texas gets caught in my throat, but I swallow it back. “I don't need you—”

“That's not true anymore,” he growls, his gaze dropping to the bundled baby in my arms. “Where are your keys?”

Panicked, I stutter, “W-what? Why?”

“I'll get your shit packed at your place while you stay here with her.”

I blink slowly, convinced I'm in the *Twilight Zone*, and have no idea how to escape it. “Milo, I'm not moving in with you.”

“You don't have a choice.”

“That's bullshit, and you know it.”

He shakes his head, a low chuckle vibrating up his throat that sends chills

down my spine. “Wanna talk bullshit? We had a good thing going, and you left. Now you have a damn kid that I’m supposed to take care of—”

“You’re not supposed to do *anything*. I don’t want your help—”

“But you need it, don’t you. How the hell do you expect to take care of a kid on your own?”

“I’ll figure it out—”

He scoffs. “Since that worked so well for you in the past. Reese and Riv are filming. Sonny and Dove are going on another tour. We have the room—”

“I’m not going to play house with you,” I argue.

“And I don’t give a shit. If it’s not Sonny’s, then it’s my kid. Unless there was a third asshole you were screwing while we were together?” He folds his arms across his broad chest and waits for me to deny it.

My stomach tightens into a knot of regret and disgust. For the things I went through to protect the man in front of me, though I have no doubt he’d throw it all back in my face if he knew about any of it.

Which is why he can never find out. Not just for my protection, but for Peanut’s too.

I swallow thickly, and shake my head. “No. There wasn’t a third asshole I was screwing while we were together.”

“Then I guess I’m the father, huh. It’s not exactly hard math.” He lifts his hand, palm facing up. “Now give me your keys.”

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Dear Reader,

I want to thank you guys from the bottom of my heart for taking a chance on Forbidden Lyrics, and for giving me the opportunity to share this story with you. I couldn't do this without you!

I would also be very grateful if you could take the time to leave a review. It's amazing how such a little thing like a review can be such a huge help to an author!

Thank you so much!!!

-Kelsie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelsie is a sucker for a love story with all the feels. When she's not chasing words for her next book, you will probably find her reading or, more likely, hanging out with her husband and playing with her three kiddos who love to drive her crazy.

She adores photography, baking, her two pups, and her cat who thinks she's a dog. Now that she's actively pursuing her writing dreams, she's set her sights on someday finding the self-discipline to not binge-watch an entire series on Netflix in one sitting.

If you'd like to connect with Kelsie, follow her on [Facebook](#), sign up for her [newsletter](#), or join [Kelsie Rae's Reader Group](#) to stay up to date on new releases, exclusive content, giveaways, and her crazy publishing journey.



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