



THE TRUTH ABOUT TOMORROW

Age is just a number

B. CELESTE

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The Truth about Tomorrow

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Warning

This book is a taboo age gap romance, with the heroine being sixteen throughout the bulk of the story.

*To my Momager Micaela Smeltzer:
You're the Kris to my Kim, sans fame and money, but whatever. We're still
awesome.*

PLAYLIST

Peer Pressure – James Bay ft. Julia Michaels
Bad Liar – Image Dragons
Sweet but Psycho – Ava Max
Dress – Taylor Swift
Young God – Halsey
Scars – I AM THEY
Love Me Anyway – Pink ft Chris Stapleton
Apologize – OneRepublic
Champion – Fall Out Boy
Ride – Chase Rice ft.

PROLOGUE

Charlie / 16

THE HANDS GRIPPING my waist are the wrong size. They're too eager, too desperate as they trail around my back and cup my butt. I don't like them. I even push them away. But they always come back, gripping, kneading, demanding.

He wouldn't do this to me.

His hands are perfect.

But he's not here anymore.

The music gets louder, but not enough to drown out the memories I have of him—the feel of soft kisses trailing down my naked back, or a hand brushing through my hair, or hushed murmurs promising me we'd be okay.

I can't do this.

Placing my hands over the stranger's, I try losing myself to the music. His groin to mine, our hips swaying. It's not enough though.

I need something else. Something more.

Just one more shot.

Just one more pill.

We used to promise each other one more day, because we knew it was wrong. Neither of us could give each other up. We were addicted.

"Charlie ..."

"Tomorrow."

BEFORE

TWO YEARS AGO

CHARLIE

ANOTHER NIGHT. Another night terror.

Did I scream as loudly as before? Was I quieter? The flicker of evanescent light glowing beneath my bedroom door tells me the answer, the soft creaks of footsteps nearing my room feeding my guilt.

I woke them again.

Two wraps at the door, followed by the silent knob turning until the wood clicks open and reveals a familiar scruffy face. "Charlie?"

He sounds tired, his tone licked with worry. They're getting worse, I think. The nightmares. Four this week. Three last. Maybe two the week before.

I lost track.

Mint eyes greet me even in the darkness, comforting me back into the reality I simply lull in since waking.

An apology is about to slip from my lips before I remember how much Everett hates hearing them from me.

Never be sorry for that, Charlie.

But I am sorry.

Everett and River Tucker adopted me not knowing the demons waiting until nightfall to come out and play. They hide in the shadows, under the bed, buried deep in my conscious until I'm trapped in my old bedroom.

That's where the terrors always start.

Shivering, I pull the black comforter up until half my face is hidden. He opens the door wider and walks into the room, his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants until he's next to my bed.

Kneeling down, he smiles. I try returning it but can't. Not when I see the bags under his eyes and the exhaustion seeping into the depths of his fair skin. The hallway light turns him yellow, casts a glow that reminds me of a

comic I read once in a paper where an angel comes and saves lonely children.

“Is River awake too?” My voice is as childlike as I feel right now, cowering under my blankets like a monster will pop out and get me.

It’s ridiculous.

It’s not, that annoying voice tells me.

His lips twitch. “She woke up a few minutes before we heard you.”

When he lies, his right brow twitches. Since he cut his hair in a short, professional style, I can see the telltale signs for when he tries making me feel better.

“You’re not a very good liar,” I mutter, resting my head back down onto my pillow.

He just chuckles.

Hefting a sigh, I cradle my head with the crook of my arm. “Maybe River is right. I should get help. They’re obviously not getting better.”

The night terrors were worse the first few weeks of me living here, waking me up multiple times a night, multiple days a week. I’m sure they felt like they adopted a newborn with the all the crying I did.

Then it got better. I got comfortable. I fell into a routine. Things seemed good. But good things don’t always last. It’s false hope to think a positive mindset can change bad luck, something I seem to carry with me.

“Do you want to see someone?” he asks, settling onto the floor.

We do this too often. Everett will sit by my bed, whether in a chair he pulls over or right on the carpet, and then we’ll talk until I fall back asleep. About school. About music. About friends that I don’t have but make up.

A teasing smirk stretches my lips. “I don’t think anyone *wants* to see a therapist, Everett. That’d be weird.”

He nudges my arm. “You got me there.”

Silence grows between us, nothing but our soft breaths fill the room. I count to ten, close my eyes for a few seconds, and sigh.

“I just want to get better.”

“Hey,” he whispers, “we’ll get you there. We just need to figure out what’s making you have these night terrors. If you think a therapist will help, then we’ll hire the best one around. Okay?”

Pressing my lips together, I contemplate how to answer. Do I tell him the truth? Tell him I saw a ghost? Not a real one, of course, but someone who has obviously haunted me since the day I saw his unkempt hair, beady eyes, and pale skin.

It wasn't him.

It couldn't be.

My mind wouldn't accept that though.

"Okay," I whisper.

"I'll stay here until you fall asleep."

I wonder if they regret me.

There are other foster kids they could have brought into their home and loved and cared for. Yet, they chose me. Got stuck with me—a fourteen-year-old nutcase.

My voice is quiet. "Thanks, Everett."

He settles his back against the side of my mattress, propping himself up with one knee bent so his arm can rest on it. "You never have to thank me for being here for you. It's what family does for each other."

I know that now.

"Until tomorrow, Charlie," he murmurs.

"Tomorrow," I agree.

CHARLIE

I SIT with four other girls at a round table in the lunch room, staring at the taunting sun outside the window. Only juniors and seniors can eat outside and enjoy the warmth that the brick prison keeps us from for eight hours. It isn't fair.

It's also not fair that the girls I sit with ignore me while they talk about prom. I'm amazed at their casual conversation over dresses that cost hundreds of dollars and equally as expensive hairstyles.

It isn't like I want to be included in the conversation. What would I have to say? Their hair is styled into cute updos while mine is stacked in a messy bun atop my head. Their nails are cut and colored and pristine, and mine have dirt caked under them with ragged edges from all the anxious chewing I do.

I'm not upset that they don't include me in their ridiculous talk of dates and dinners and spa days. I'm upset that they sat here as a last resort, a table they have no choice but to be at because all the others are full.

I can try harder than the small smile I give those who make eye contact with me. It's feeble at best, not very welcoming. But words don't come as easily with people who make judgements the second they see me.

What is it they see anyway? Mentally, I assess my natural beachy blonde waves—the silvery-white highlights that kiss my strands and flow down my back when my hair is down, the tan skin I get from spending so much time outdoors, and the abnormal color of my green eyes. There's nothing special about the way I look, especially not in a diverse crowd like Freemont High has.

Do the girls who stare know my clothes come from thrift stores by choice? Or that my gray Converse are so worn because I love them too much to wear my new ones? The fabric covering my body doesn't have fancy labels or big price tags because I prefer it that way.

Maybe I envy them a little for knowing how to be girly. I'm not a dress person and haven't worn a skirt since I was five. My face goes without makeup because I don't know how to wear it and I'm not sure who I'd be if I suddenly had dark lashes and painted cheeks.

River told me once that my full lips would pop with lipstick. Everett didn't like that much. He says I'm too young for makeup. At fourteen, he seems to say that a lot. Too young for parties. Too young for boys. Just ... too young.

To me, age is a number. Relative. Not because I want to wear makeup or go to parties or date boys, but because age is based on experience. Based on trial. Some of us are forced to grow up—old souls trapped in young bodies.

It's not so bad I guess.

People seem to underestimate you when you're young, like you can't possibly know what life is truly like under the guise of wide smiles and bubbly conversation. Behind every smile is a story, a secret, a desire nobody wants revealed.

I know that all too well.

My smile houses lots of secrets.

When the bell rings, I don't give the girls a second look as I toss my backpack over my shoulder and exit the cafeteria.

Passing the music room, I envy the person grazing the keyboard that I know sits by the window. It looks out at the courtyard and track. Beyond that is an outline of Bridgeport's cityscape, filled with tall buildings and busy traffic.

Unlike a lot of people who practice in the room, I enjoy the noise. I don't find it distracting, I find it inspiring. The yells of impatient people, the horns blaring, the occasional wafting scent of something yummy coming from the many restaurants—it feeds my muse.

Unfortunately, freshman don't get a music elective offered in our schedules. Freemont is limited like that, giving the upperclassman more opportunities to widen their scope for college applications. I think it's bullshit and haven't been shy about it.

In fact, I was sent to Principal VanDyke's office more than once for my "strongly worded complaints" over the topic. But freshman should get equal opportunity. Freemont is supposed to be fair, preaching that everyone is treated the same way when it isn't true.

I suppose VanDyke is especially hard on me because he's accustomed to

seeing me at this point. It isn't like I try to get sent there. I don't want to know that he has exactly nine pictures of random people scattered in his office, or that three and a half ceiling tiles are whiter than the other forty-two. I can recite the Emily Dickinson poem word for word that he has framed on the wall behind his oversized black office chair.

*I'M NOBODY! Who are you?
Are you Nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us! Don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know!*

*HOW DREARY TO BE SOMEBODY!
How public, like a Frog
To tell one's name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!*

I'M NOT a fan of reading, which kills Everett since he's a bookworm, but it seems like I could relate to Dickinson. Maybe I'll get to read more from her in English class. Asking Everett to lend me a book of her poetry would just give him false hope that he's converted me into a full-fledged book nerd.

Music. That's my passion. Specifically, creating it. Being the reason something is part of the world seems bigger than me, bigger than anyone. It's power, and I've never had that.

It's why I asked River if we could investigate another school. Bridgeport has two private academies that have god-awful plaid uniforms, but at least the chances of getting offered better classes is higher than Freemont. If getting my fingers onto a set of ivory, my butt onto a bench, and my heart in the right place, I'd wear the damn uniform. Knee high socks, shiny Mary Janes, and all.

River promised she'd do what she could to give me more options, but there hasn't been much luck based on the people she's spoken to on the board at the academies. I'm not worried she won't pull through, because she gave me her word. River just wants what's best for me, so she's weighing the options with Everett before a final decision is made.

After all, I'll be fifteen soon. Like the rest of the things they deem me *too young* for, traveling to a better school is top of their list. It didn't stop me

from giving them pamphlets I found in the guidance office of music schools that have programs I could only dream of being part of.

It isn't a farfetched goal. My playing skills may not be the best, but they're decent considering I taught myself how to play with little to go on. The grades I get, while not great, are good enough to get me considered for admission in almost all the schools I brought home to them.

Beethoven didn't let his hearing loss stop him from making life changing music, so I wouldn't let my circumstances stop me.

Sliding into my usual seat in math, I dig out my red notebook that has carvings of mindless doodles on the front along with a pencil, wondering what boring lecture will be covered today. The Pythagorean Theorem? It's probable. I think Mr. Nelson told us we were practicing it this week, which I could use.

He speaks in numbers. I speak in notes. Maybe that's why I failed my last quiz.

Mason Mills sits down beside me and my skin crawls with his nearness. The air around us suddenly smells like body spray and desperation. A bitter, unwanted mixture.

He never sits there, and his friends are snickering from two rows back. Mason is an arrogant jock, but I couldn't even tell you what he plays. I just see his varsity jacket with the school's patriotic colors and know he's one of the many who's stupid enough to believe they rule the school because he's part of the Patriot pride that comes along with being on a team.

"Charlie," he greets, poking me with the end of his pen. Who brings a pen to math class?

Instead of saying anything, I just stare. If he expects me to waste my breath on a conversation that will surely go down as one of the stupidest I've had, he's mistaken.

He leans closer to me, giving me a slimy smile showing slightly yellowed teeth that I want to smack off his face. "My friends and I were just talking about you. You're quiet. It makes us curious."

I remain silent.

He laughs in a boyish way that grates on my nerves. Math is bad enough without him pestering me. "You know, guys like a mystery. It's like a present we get to unwrap."

His boring brown eyes slide down my body. I'm nothing to look at, especially not in my frumpy bootcut jeans and oversized t-shirt. I'm

comfortable this way, invisible, blended.

A gag threatens to rise when I see his tongue dart across his bottom lip. I know what lust looks like—I've seen it before. Usually it's just on older guys with balding heads and beer guts with nothing better to do than hit on young foster kids.

I shudder.

"I bet you'd be a fun present to unwrap," he adds, shooting me a wink.

The brown hues he stares at me with are dull and void. There's no purpose behind them. No dreams or aspirations. I'm not even sure I see my reflection in them, like he's not even capable of giving me that.

I know a boy with pretty brown eyes. Chocolate, like the glaze of the Boston Creams I love so much.

Boy isn't really the right term for what Oliver James is. Twenty-nine is far from boyhood. He doesn't share the same gaze of immaturity that I see twinkling in Mason's eyes. His jokes aren't vile like the ones I hear from the guys I pass in the halls.

Everything about Oliver is the opposite of the lifeless idiots I deal with here. It's why I like him. Why I see an ally in him.

"Not interested," I finally say, turning my attention to the front of the room. The whiteboard already has today's practice questions written on it. I'd rather look through those than talk to Mason, and I really hate math.

When he doesn't go away, I grip my pencil tight in my fingers. The skin goes white at the tips, like I've seen River's knuckles do when she grips the steering wheel too tight when traffic is crazy in the center of the city.

She hates driving.

I hate Mason Mills.

"Oh, come on." He pokes me again.

Losing my temper, I grab his pen and toss it at his laughing friends. It hits one of them in the face, dangerously close to the eye. For all I care, it could have smacked him right in the pupil.

But, I throw it at the same time Mr. Nelson walks into the room to witness the almost-bullseye. If he were the gym teacher, maybe he'd be impressed. I hear archery is a lesson they teach to sophomores.

Nelson's disapproving stare tells me all I need to know before he even speaks in exasperation. "Charlie. You know better than to throw things, especially at other students. Pack up and head to the principal's office."

That earns me more snickers from peers, heating my cheeks. Prickles of

embarrassment gather at the back of my neck as I drop my shoulders and gather my things. Stuffing my notebook back into my backpack, I glare at Mason and stand.

I try thinking of the positives.

I'm getting out of math and get to spend time with Emily Dickinson.

I think about the poem.

Are you Nobody too?

The only time I'm Somebody seems to be when trouble calls.

As soon as I step into the office, Mrs. Ryker, the secretary, heaves a heavy sigh and points to a seat near VanDyke's closed door.

"So," I say, giving her a light smile as I settle onto the cushioned green chair, "did you ever finish that puzzle you started last weekend?"

LANDMARK CAFÉ IS PACKED with men in suits that look more expensive than what I imagine the mortgage is on our house. It's the after-work rush, but Everett doesn't pay it any attention as we wait for our drinks and pastries at the usual table we occupy during our outings.

The café is my second favorite place to go when I want to get lost. It's easy to people watch through the large windows lining the front of the building, showing off every unique person that resides in the city.

Everett's face is poised in a fatherly manner, something I've come to familiarize myself with since I moved in with them at thirteen. The tone of his eyes darkens in warning of a lecture that anyone can see from a mile away paired with the firm line of his lips.

"Before you say anything," I defend, squirming in my seat, "the boy I threw the pen at was egging on his friend to keep hitting on me when I told him to leave me alone."

It's probably not fair to justify my actions with something I know he would want to praise me for, but I don't want to disappoint him. I've been with the Tuckers for nearly two years. I've been called to the office six times in that time frame. One of them wasn't my fault, and VanDyke even apologized to me for it in a moment of great rarity. The other five times...

His palm rakes the side of his stubbled jaw, and I know he wants to tell me *good* or say that the guy deserved it. I also know he won't take that route no matter if he thinks so or not.

Shoulders squaring, he leans forward until his arms are resting on the edge of the tabletop. The fabric of his white button-down stretches over his

large arms, making him blend in way better than me in my casual school attire and rugged shoes.

“You can’t keep letting people get to you, Charlie. What do you think will happen when you push VanDyke too far?”

I give him a small smile. “He’ll quit?”

He wants to laugh based on his wavering lips, but refrains. “I know you want to attend a different school, but if you have a reputation at Freemont, it won’t help your case anywhere else. Think about that next time you do something that could get you into trouble.”

I don’t have anything to say because he’s right. If I want to try my hand at a school with a good music program, I need to make sure my record isn’t the length of a novel.

When our order is up, he goes to grab it. It gives me time to look around the room, absorbing conversations about business deals and marriages and scandals that I have no true interest in because I’m distracted. What if my reputation stops me from getting into a better school? What then?

I’ve lived too long wondering what it would be like to taste freedom just to see it ripped away because I have minor anger problems.

Well, maybe more than minor.

Everett slips back into his seat, passing me my hot chocolate and old-fashioned donut. He got one for himself too, which he ruins by dipping into his black coffee. Nose scrunched, I tear mine apart and start nibbling.

“For the record,” he says quietly, “I think it’s good you’re willing to stand up for yourself. Not everyone can.”

I want to tell him that some of us are given no choice in life. We can either succumb to the obstacles planted in front of us or climb over them until we make it out. Spending years fighting to survive makes it hard to stop, even when you find safety.

There’s always someone to prove wrong. Something to fight for.

“But you think I should stop.”

He leans back, eyes hardening. “Never stop wanting to fight for yourself, Charlie. Just choose your battles wisely.”

Aren’t all battles worth fighting?

His phone starts ringing in his pocket, so I think the conversation is over. But Everett pulls out his cell and hands it to me. Confusion sweeps over my features as I hesitantly reach out to accept it.

“If you won’t listen to me,” Everett presses, nodding toward the device,

“then listen to him.”

When my eyes lock on Ollie’s name, a big grin spreads on my face. Everett stands with his coffee and donut the same moment I press the *talk* button, waving in the opposite direction of the café to give me privacy.

“Ollie!” I press the phone to my ear and tune out the mindless chatter around me.

I haven’t spoken to Oliver in over a week. He Facetimed me and told me about some new business proposal that was due at work which would take up most of his time.

“Hey, kid.” There’s someone talking to him, muffling his voice. It sounds soft, higher pitched, feminine.

Frowning, I sink into my chair. If he has company right now, the call probably isn’t spontaneous like I’d prefer it to be. “Everett made you call, didn’t he?”

He chuckles lightly, and I don’t know if it’s at my distasteful tone or something the girl with him is saying. “He’s just worried.”

My jaw ticks. “There’s nothing to be worried about. I told him that the boy deserved me throwing a pen at him because he annoyed me. It isn’t like he got hurt!”

“It’s the principle of it, Charlie.”

I grumble under my breath.

Whenever Everett feels like he can’t get through to me, he makes Ollie step in. Both Everett and River see how I am with him. Sometimes I wonder if I make up our friendship in my head. Why would someone like him—older, experienced, and everything I’m not—want anything to do with a teenager who can’t keep her nose out of trouble?

I never fight him on thinking Ollie can help, because it’s more time I get to talk to him. He’s busy being a Marketing Executive at some fancy new world tech company in Chicago, so it isn’t like we speak too often.

The problem with Ollie scolding me about my actions is the silly feeling I get in my stomach. Guilt is something I feel all too well when I know I’ve let River and Everett down, but it’s not the same with Oliver. It’s embarrassment, like I know he expects more from me.

Like I’m letting down my best friend.

The frown on my face deepens as a hollow hole opens a little wider knowing how pathetic I sound. Oliver may be my best friend, but there’s no

way I'm his.

My shoulders slump. "I already told Everett I would behave, okay? You don't have to waste your time talking to me."

The voice in the background disappears, like he waved her away. "It's never a waste of time talking to you, Charlie. Are you all right?"

No. I'm upset. Selfish.

I know Ollie dates, if that's what you call what he does. I've overheard him and Everett talking about the girls, and sometimes he'll even vent to me while we chat. It's rare, and he usually apologizes and changes the subject like it's inappropriate to talk to me about things like that.

But that's what friends do, isn't it? They complain about people and vent about things nobody else will listen to. I may not know what friendship is like, but knowing Ollie gives me a clue.

"I'm fine." It's nothing more than a murmur, which earns me a sigh.

"Don't lie to me. What's going on, kid?"

I used to like it when he called me that. I've never heard him call anyone else a nickname before, so it usually makes me feel special. Right now, it feels condescending. Like I'm being stupid for no reason.

Nibbling on the inside of my cheek, I play with the pastry in front of me. "When are you coming to visit? It feels like forever since I've seen you in person."

"It's been four months, three days."

He's counted? I have too.

"Like I said. Forever."

His laugh is light and playful, making me crack a smile. I wish I could hear it in person, see the way his lips stretch and his right dimple pop. "I don't have plans right now, but I'm sure I'll make it over there soon enough."

I stay quiet, not knowing what to say.

"I miss you," he adds quietly, and there's a genuine quality to his voice that eases any doubt from my tense muscles.

I may not be his best friend, but knowing he misses me makes me feel loved. Silly, considering I know I am since joining the Tuckers. It's different knowing Ollie could love me in any way.

Family.

Friend.

I don't let my mind go anywhere else.

"I miss you, too." It's the easiest thing I've said, maybe the truest. The

feeling such simple words brings has me sinking into my chair. “I don’t have anyone to talk to here.”

“You have River and Everett.”

He doesn’t ask me about the girls from school I sometimes mention in our conversations. I think he knows I just name drop so he won’t feel bad for me, but he sees right through it.

“But there are some things I don’t want to talk to them about.” It’s not entirely true, because there isn’t much going on in my life that I feel the need to hold back from them.

“Like?”

Pressing my lips together, I shrug as if he can see me. “I don’t know. Boys?”

He makes a choking sound. “And you want to talk to *me* about boys?”

I giggle. “Maybe? I mean, what better person to talk to about boys than another boy? You could give me advice and stuff.”

Even through the phone I can feel his disinterest in the suggestion. “I’m going to have to pass on that, kid. There’s got to be way better people to talk about that sh—stuff with.”

I roll my eyes over him refusing to swear around me. He catches himself all the time and I tell him it doesn’t matter but he still won’t do it.

Shit.

Ass.

Hell.

See, Ollie? It isn’t hard.

He pauses for a moment, but I can tell he wants to add something, so I don’t bother cutting in. “You shouldn’t even be worried about boys anyway. You’re too young for boys.”

Fighting off a smile is hard. It makes me want to throw out a retort when anyone says that sort of thing, because it’s like I’m being told by my father that boys have cooties or some flesh-eating disease that I could catch if I get too close.

But with Ollie...

“Ask me why I threw the pen,” I press.

“Why did you throw the pen?”

“Because they kept hitting on me and I didn’t want them to.”

Unlike Everett, I know what he’ll say.

“Good. Keep doing that.”

Biting down on my lip so another giggle doesn't escape, I shift in my seat and search the room for Everett. He's talking to some salt and pepper-haired man in a tailored suit and their conversation looks intense.

I wonder what business lingo they're speaking in that I wouldn't understand. They're probably talking numbers, stats, charts. Maybe there's a merger, a new deal.

My lips weigh downward. "Sometimes I wish I lived there with you."

Ollie levels with me when we chat. He doesn't talk about business or computers or apps. I don't think he even likes the topics despite working with them so often. He's not his father, never tried to be, yet he's still in business. I don't know why, he won't say. Instead, we talk about music and dreams and life aspirations as if I can have them at my age.

His voice is soft. "You'd love it here."

"Maybe I'll live there someday."

He pauses. "Someday, kid."

Someday.

I hear that a lot.

Someday I'll get out of foster care.

Someday I'll find a family.

Someday I'll be happy.

Those somedays have all happened, which leaves me yearning for more. More today's, more tomorrows, more everything. With him, with Everett, with River.

"I should go," I sigh, not wanting to.

"We'll talk again soon."

"You should visit."

I hear the smile in his tone. "I'll see what I can do. Okay?"

I perk up. "You mean it?"

"Anything for you, kid."

The funny feeling in my stomach returns.

CHARLIE

How DOES that make you feel, Charlie?

Stupid, I want to tell her. I feel stupid for thinking sitting on a suede couch and being stared at by a white-haired woman with a notebook will help me. Does it help other people to be silently judged? Analyzed? Studied with blank eyes and pursed lips?

It's not likely.

I used to think only crazy people saw therapists. Does that make me crazy? I'm not quite straitjacket material, but I'm no saint either.

What's your earliest memory?

The time my mother locked me in my bedroom without any food or water because my parents had friends coming over. It was much later I realized "friends" is code for drug dealers. I guess not telling me their identity was some screwed-up way of protecting me.

When was the first time you felt happy?

When River chased me to the old factory I used to run away to when things got tough. It was the first time I realized I could trust someone. She could have called my social worker and gotten me into trouble. She didn't. River loves me.

Silence. That's what she's rewarded with after each question passes her thin lips. They remind me of Mrs. Larkin's from the school library. If she had big black glasses that sat at the end of her nose, they could be related. Twins, even.

I think she knows I'm answering in my head, because her head tilts after giving me a couple minutes of quiet time between questions. Her pen scribbles against the pad of paper resting on her lap, making me curious.

"What are you writing down?"

Her pen stops. "Just noting mannerisms."

My teeth bite down on my thumbnail.

Crack.

Too bad. They were starting to grow.

“Mannerisms?” I murmur around my thumb. I’m met by distant humor as her eyes pointedly connect with the finger in my mouth.

Blushing, I lower my hand to my lap.

Instead of watching her, I pick off lint from my black sweatshirt. I found it on top of the dryer one day a few months ago. Even washed, it smells like Ollie’s citrusy, musky scent. Orange and tangy and mouthwatering, that’s what he smells like. I’m not sure why I took it, but I did. Nobody has said anything since, and Oliver never wondered where it went.

Setting the notebook on a little wooden table beside the chair she sits in across from me, she gives me her full attention. “I don’t expect you to open up to me right away, Charlie. It takes time to build trust.”

Time. I wonder if she’s ever thought about how to measure that—the appropriate amount it would take before I’m sharing my little red demons that lurk around. Can she see them sitting on my shoulders? Pulling my hair? Taunting me? Will she address them when she figures them out? *If* she figures them out?

“What if I never open up?”

She shrugs. It’s a weird gesture for someone as put together as her—black pencil skirt and purple silk top, a matching black blazer draped over the back of her office chair. She’s wearing kitten heels that make her legs look longer even crossed at the knee. “Then maybe you’ll find someone else to open up to. A friend. A family member. Another therapist. I want to help you in any way I can, but that doesn’t mean it will happen.”

Her answer surprises me. It took weeks before Everett could find a therapist who was available, and he promised the best. I’m sure she makes decent money doing this.

I wonder what she’s jotted down so far.

Has trust issues.

Surprises when spoken kindly to.

Now *my* head tilts. “You wouldn’t be mad if I stopped coming to see you? That must be a lot of money you’re losing.”

Half of her lips quirk. It’s rude to ask about money, but I don’t care. “I don’t do this for the money. I do this to help people.”

River likes to help people too, and I trust her. Maybe even knew I could

love her like a mother, a sister, a friend—someone to depend on, from the very start. Could I do that here? Now? It's only our first session.

Drawing my knees up, I glance at the white clock taunting me from the wall. Twenty-five minutes left to go.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

I wonder what the next session will be like. Will she ask me about my most traumatic experience? Or maybe she'll go easy on me and ask about my foster homes.

Like Mr. Donovan's, where he'd let his wife beat us if we did something wrong. A toddler cried once because she couldn't have a cookie, and I took her beating because there was no way she'd survive otherwise. A split lip, two black eyes, one swollen so bad I couldn't see, and I was sure multiple cracked ribs. Maybe some broken.

I couldn't go to school for weeks, seven to be exact, because they didn't want people asking questions. I shouldn't hate school so much now, because it gives me a chance to be bored at mundane things.

Often, I wonder what I missed in those seven weeks. Learning the presidents? Long division? How to play volleyball? It's probably stupid to be upset I missed opportunities to be chosen last in gym or teased over getting an answer wrong in class. You never know what makes you feel normal until your chance to find out is taken away.

The school I'd gone to at the time told me I missed too many days, so I was put into a new district by the Donovan's. I was behind, struggling, and told I couldn't move on to fifth grade unless I passed all my tests. I managed to pass for one sole purpose: it was a year closer to escaping.

"Charlie?"

Blinking, my head snaps up to meet the therapist's. She has a name, but it feels too personal to use. I probably won't be back anyway, so why bother starting any relationship with her?

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you had any friends to talk to."

My immediate response is to say Ollie's name, but I bite my tongue. Will she think it's sad that I cling to a man twice my age? Would she make notes in her little book about him?

I settle on, "Yes."

Her head dips once. "Good. Do you go out with them? Shop? Walk? See movies?"

Ollie took me to the movies last time he visited. I begged him to let me see the new *Conjuring* movie. He told me I'd be too scared, but I promised I wouldn't be. He relented, buying us popcorn and sodas and candy despite saying I didn't need sugar.

Anything for you, kid.

Those words echo in my head.

He usually tells me that right before giving in to my pleas. River jokes that he's wrapped around my finger—that I can make him do anything I want.

It makes my chest full, my heart tug. I interpret it to mean happiness, empowerment. How many other girls can bring a grown man to his knees with one little smile?

"We see movies."

"Do you talk to them about this stuff?"

This stuff.

Ollie hasn't asked me about my life. It isn't because he doesn't care, but because he won't push. Having River come from a similar background was like practice for him. Our stories aren't always pretty, our memories not worth reliving if we don't have to.

He accepts that.

"No."

"Do you trust them?"

"Him," I whisper.

Another head tilt. "Him?"

"My friend."

She nods. "Do you trust him?"

"More than anything."

She grabs her notebook and pen, clicking it and putting the point to the paper. What is she going to write?

Has friend who's boy.

Evasive.

The pen doesn't move. "But you don't talk to him about yourself?"

I talk to Ollie about lots of things. Like the playlists I make for different moods I'm in. Or how much I think Hollywood redoing old movies is pointless. Or how I've always wanted to learn how to skateboard but am too scared to because I could fall.

"He knows me."

“All of you?”

Nobody wants to know all of me.

Silence.

The pen starts moving.

I can guess what she’s saying.

Shuts down easily.

Defensive of friendship.

Maybe *hopeless cause* even works its way into the scribbles of pristine script. She doesn’t look at me with enough emotion to tell me what she thinks. I guess that’s her job, to read people at a distance. It’d get messy otherwise.

Just like it’d get messy if Ollie knew about me. The *real* me. The me who used to cry for Daddy while he put powder up his nose. The me who used to go to school smelling like smoke and body odor because nobody cleaned my clothes or showed me how to bathe.

I don’t even want to know the real me.

She scares me.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Less than eight minutes.

I don’t want to talk about myself anymore. “What’s your favorite kind of music?”

She meets my eyes. “Classical.”

That was my guess. I bet she likes Bach and Beethoven. Maybe she does chores to Mozart and works overtime to Chopin.

“I love music,” I tell her, looking around the room. Everything is dark wood, dust free, and expensive looking. Her desk spans across a good portion of the side wall, but there’s no pictures of family anywhere.

Maybe she doesn’t have one. Maybe she’s married to her work. I guess it’s not hard to judge people—to make assumptions. I should be a therapist.

Licking my bottom lip, I turn back to her curious gaze. “I love the feeling I get when music starts pouring from the piano because of me. The feeling of ivory under my fingers knowing I can make thousands of sounds, thousands of compositions, isn’t like anything I can explain.”

The corners of her lips twitch upward in a ghost of a smile. It’s gone before I can even blink, but it gives me hope.

Maybe I’m not broken.

“You like to create.”

I nod.

“Do you play more than the piano?”

I remember the feeling of thin strings against my sore skin from the time I lost my pic. My fingers were red for days. “I like the guitar, but the piano is my favorite.”

“Why?”

Because the piano is underrated. It can be used in any genre, in any way. It creates the saddest sounds, speaking to the darkest souls, but it also can create the smoothest rhythms and lightest notes. The white keys compile the happy memories, and the black keys create the sad ones.

I’m not sure what love feels like, but I imagine it comes close to how I feel for the instrument I get to caress and control with nobody to stop me.

All she gets is, “I just do.”

The clock strikes noon.

I stand quickly, about ready to gather my bag when I realize I never brought it. River told me I wouldn’t need it. I think she still worries I’ll run off somewhere, like I could pack up my life into the tiny backpack I carry around.

My thumb jabs behind me. “There’s someone waiting for me outside. But it was...”

It was fun? River told me not to lie.

“Something,” I settle on, cringing at the way my questioning tone sounds.

To my surprise, she laughs. “I hope to see you again, Charlie. But I meant what I said. Opening up to someone is important, even if it isn’t me. Like your friend. The boy.”

The boy.

Not a boy.

I don’t tell her that. The last thing I need her to write down is *has Daddy issues*.

I try to stifle a giggle.

Her eyes widen. “What’s so funny?”

Nothing, doc.

Nothing at all.

THERE’S a boy with blond hair that plays piano every day before I do in the Community Center. He always wears nice clothes, like he comes from money, which makes me wonder why he comes here.

This is my space.

I have no claim over the room, except for a little carving I made on the bench. It's just a crooked C that looks more like an unintentional scrape than an initial.

But it's mine.

I bet he has long fingers like me. Perfect for piano playing. Sometimes I'll sit outside the room and listen to him play Chopin and Bach when the middle-aged woman, presumably his mom, is there. When she leaves, he switches to more contemporary pieces.

Last week was an Imagine Dragon's song that I looked up to listen to and play on repeat in my room while I did homework. I liked his version better—it was raw, rough, real.

He's getting ready to leave today, which makes me hide in the little alcove away from sight as he walks out the door. I'm not sure he wants people to listen, but I'm not sure I want to stop.

Do people listen to me?

I'm not very good—self-taught. I used to play the piano at school growing up, just loving the sounds it made. Then I slowly pieced notes together, pairing them in ways that created soft, soothing melodies. One time, I snuck onto the computer in one of my old group homes and looked up the different keys, printing off sheet music and studying it every night in the dark.

The blond boy is good. He probably takes lessons, like I want to do. I bet his mother thinks he's good and practices classical when she leaves to go shopping or do errands or wherever she thinks is more important.

Does he tell her he doesn't like that music? It's hard to impress parents sometimes, but easy to disappoint them. I know that well.

When it's safe, I take my place on the bench, brushing my fingertips against my carving. I'm not sure why, but it's tradition. Like I can't allow myself to play until I greet the first version of myself that put a pen to wood and made that little curve.

Music has been the one constant in my life that I have always depended on—long before I stole the blue iPod full of just about every song you could ever want. It's an escape to lose yourself in, a way to express yourself when words aren't enough.

River likes to paint for that reason. It's why she started a program for foster kids at Painter's Choice, an art studio next to the Community Center.

It's how I met her, how I'm here right now instead of locked inside a room hiding in a corner.

I read once that painter's paint pictures on canvas, while musicians paint on silence. It's always stuck with me. I don't know who said it and I'm not sure I care, because all that matters is the truth in it. I'm not an artist like River, but I can paint pretty pictures with dynamic tempos and arrangements. It's my own kind of art, I guess.

Pulling out the folded sheet of music from my pocket, I set it up on the stand and flatten out the wrinkles. I should probably use the folder Everett bought me to store music in, but I prefer it flawed like the notes it holds.

I'm learning Adele. I haven't quite mastered *Fire to Rain*, but *Someone Like You* is one I've gotten down after three straight weeks of practicing each section carefully.

I think about the boy as my fingers fly over the keys. Does he like Adele? I haven't heard him play her yet. He likes older rock—Queen, Aerosmith, Pink Floyd. He dissects the songs and reformulates them so they're gritty, and I want to ask him how.

I won't.

He doesn't know I listen.

I play the song two more times. I mess up the second chorus each time and get frustrated, mouthing the lyrics as I try to recreate something already powerful.

Power shouldn't have any influence on my love of certain songs when I choose them. Yet, I find myself selecting music that makes me feel stronger than I am. Do the women singing feel the same? Empowered? Courageous? Invincible?

One more time.

No mistakes.

I smile to myself and let my hands fall onto my lap. The keys are worn and faded, not quite the snow white I imagine they started out as but off-white, like cream. I'm not sure why, but I gravitate toward the flawed, the non-perfect.

I'm not perfect.

My palms go to either side of my hips on the bench, getting ready to push myself up. Under my left hand, I feel something jagged and pause for a moment to examine what it is.

The wood has been carved into; little splinters still jagged where the tiny

letter formed similar to mine.

It's a J.

It wasn't here yesterday when I came after school, or the day before that. Maybe someone this morning put it there. Or maybe...

The boy.

His name must start with J. Jake? Jason? I try remembering if I ever heard his mother call him anything but come up blank. She just tells him to practice and meet her when he's done.

My finger traces the marks he made, staring with my head tilted like it'll jump out and do something magical.

I laugh at myself.

Gathering my sheet music, I fold it back up into a little square and stuff it in the pocket of my shorts. I hear it crinkle as I walk out of the room, picking up my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder before leaving the Center.

Maybe I'll talk to the boy one of these days and tell him I like his songs. We could bond, even. I could teach him Adele and he could teach me Queen.

He could be a friend.

I don't have one of those here.

It makes me wonder what Ollie is doing right now. He's still at work, but he is probably making plans for after the day ends. With coworkers or maybe guy friends.

Girl friends.

I frown. I like being the only girl in Ollie's life, but I know that isn't realistic or fair. He's an adult with a social life. He's going to enjoy the company of whomever he wants.

Doesn't mean I have to like it.

I pull out my phone and shoot Ollie a text.

ME:

I miss you

MINUTES PASS. There's no reply.

I force my lips to stay neutral despite their wavering need to weigh down at the corners. Instead of letting disappointment settle into my chest, I pretend he texts me back to make myself feel better.

I miss you, too.

It doesn't help at all.

CHARLIE

DR. POLK'S favorite color is blue. She doesn't tell me what shade. Ocean? Crystal? It may not matter to her, but navy blue is different than baby blue. Details matter.

She thinks I ask her questions to distract her from the ones she asks me. I'm just curious. We spend a lot of time together, it's only fair I get to know her in some degree. Besides classical music and her favorite color, I find out she likes Chinese food. Lo Mein, especially. It reminds me of Ollie and his disgusting need to have milk when he gets takeout—sesame chicken, crispy wontons, and extra sticky rice.

Sometimes we'll talk about music. I tell her about new songs I'm learning on the piano and about the blond boy who plays. She asks me if I talk to him.

I never do.

She asks why.

I don't know.

She thinks it could be a good chance at gaining a friend, so I have someone to relate to. I think she thinks I'm lonely. Am I? Maybe.

Sometimes I think about making friends at school, but it's hard. The girls are too catty, too self-absorbed in their image and popularity. The blond boy doesn't go to Freemont. I've looked for him, asked the music teacher if she knows anyone like him. She doesn't.

I remember his clothes. He probably goes to Bridgeport or Rousseau Academy and wears khakis, button-downs, and vests. He seems like the type to wear polished shoes and gelled hair and who flirts with all the girls.

When Polk asks me what's holding me back from trying harder to get to know people, I'm not sure I have an answer. Not one she'd like.

Truth is, I don't plan to stay. Why make friends when I have every intention of finding something better? Like a music school or somewhere

with better classes and opportunities.

Not even she can fault me for wanting.

We've talked about it, school. I tell her about my conversations with River and Everett about the Chicago School of Music. She lets me rave about the reviews and the programs for teenagers on their campus and the chances I would have that Freemont limits me of. I'm determined to go there, to experience what it's like to compose and play and be around like-minded people. She'll write down my aspirations and who knows what else and I always ask her the same thing.

"Do you think I can do it?"

"Do you think you can?"

On and on it goes. A cycle of back and forth with no clear end. Of course I think I can do it, I always tell her that. Just not at Freemont. I need the chance to prove it.

In Chicago.

Our conversation always doubles back to the main reason I come to her, even when they stray to the simplest of questions. The nightmares.

How have the nightmares been?

Good, doc. I only get them three times a week now. The last time I woke up the neighbor screaming bloody murder. Everett had to bring him a steak the next day to apologize.

I wonder what he'll bring next time.

River makes great apple pie.

She says my sarcasm is a defense mechanism. Maybe I'm just sarcastic naturally, I want to tell her, but I don't. Something tells me that would only prove her point.

"A mechanism for what?"

That's what I ask instead, because I'm curious. She's been jotting down notes for a while and I'm surprised an entire pad hasn't been filled yet. This is our sixth session. A month and a half we've been at this never-ending conversation, and where has it gotten us?

Finally, her pen stops moving. "Have you ever heard of posttraumatic stress disorder?"

Blinking in surprise, I slowly nod. I heard about that in Social Studies when we covered certain wars in history. Soldiers get that after they see scary stuff overseas.

"It comes in different forms," she tells me, uncrossing her legs and then

re-crossing them with the other on top. “Studies have shown that youth who have experienced traumatic things early on in their lives grow up with symptoms of it without even knowing. Like nightmares, for instance.”

“And sarcasm?” I muse dryly.

“Like I said, it’s a defense.”

I don’t answer her.

She stares at me, her eyes the same shade of brown they always are. I wish they would give something away so I feel better. It’s like she can shut off her emotions and turn them back on when her patients are gone.

“I want you to consider something,” she presses lightly, a softness to her tone that isn’t necessarily uncommon but certainly not what I’m used to hearing during our sessions. “The conscious isn’t guarded when we sleep, so memories we repress can easily resurface. They’re brought on by things we may unconsciously relate to the experience that causes us to react negatively. A person. An object. A phrase. Now think long and hard about something you’re afraid of. The first thing that pops into your mind. What is it?”

This conversation.

It isn’t a sarcastic remark, but I’m afraid she’ll think so and consider me noncompliant. I agreed to continue with the sessions to show Everett and River I’m trying to help myself, to open up, to figure out what’s wrong. If they think I’m better, it’s a greater chance at going away.

“What is it, Charlie?” she repeats.

I wet my dry lips. “Talking.”

“Talking?”

“This conversation,” I whisper, evading her eyes. Mine travel to the little piece of dirt on her white rug and focus on it. “I’m afraid of this conversation.”

“Why?”

“Because...”

She’s quiet, giving me time to process.

“Because I don’t want to remember.”

Her head bobs once. That’s it. No comment, no *I told you so* look. It’s a simple acknowledgement and nothing more.

My heel taps on the floor as I look at the clock on the wall. We only have a few minutes, which means there’s not much more she’ll dive into today. She wouldn’t want to cut us off.

I’m safe until next week.

Or so I think.

She adjusts her notepad. "There are ways to help people with PTSD, Charlie. I can tell you about medications people go on, natural treatments people do."

"Medication?"

"I won't force you to go on them."

"Why not?"

She doesn't answer.

"Because of my parents?"

She has my file and I know she's read it. Any information she could gather to assess me she has looked over to get an idea of what she's in for. The touching, the violence. The men, the women. I told her I didn't care that she knew about me. I think I lied without realizing it.

"I'm not afraid of them."

"You shouldn't be," she agreed.

"I'm not afraid of becoming them."

She nods once.

Addicts tend to pass on habits. I grew up in a house where there were drugs. Maybe my mom even did some when she was pregnant with me. I overheard Amy, my old social worker, tell one of her coworkers that babies can be born high if their mothers are.

One time I snuck my file out of Amy's office while I waited for her to scold me about getting kicked out of a home. I used a paperclip to pick the lock on her filing cabinet just to get a better look.

Mother: Elizabeth Rose Reynolds.

Deceased. Overdose.

Addict.

Three felonies.

One misdemeanor.

Father: Henry Edward Reynolds.

Deceased. Overdose.

Addict.

Multiple unanswered warrants.

I think he died before the police could get ahold of him. That's the theory anyway. I wonder if he would be alive if they had taken him in. He could have gotten help. Then again, Mom had multiple arrests, and nothing changed.

“Everyone has addictions, you know,” I tell her, defensive in a whole new way. “It doesn’t have to be bad ones.”

Her hands lock together on her lap. “I suppose you’re right. What do you consider your addictions?”

I shrug casually. “Music. I’m addicted to lyrics and the beat of a well thought out song. I love the way it makes me feel, because you can feel any emotion in the world from songs. I’m addicted to donuts, especially the pink frosted kind. Not strawberry flavored, just dyed buttercream ones. I especially like the ones that have rainbow sprinkles, but I don’t know why.

“I’m addicted to family, to having one, to being part of one. I love how belonging makes me feel safe and secure. I love that the people who adopted me want what’s best for me, even if that means agreeing to let me go. I’m addicted to scary movies because of how stupid they are, they make me laugh. I’m addicted to movie theater popcorn, but only when it has extra butter. I think it’s stupid when people buy water at the theater instead of sodas or slushies. So, doc, I’m addicted to a lot of things. Addictions come in lots of different forms, so I’m not afraid of being one. I know I won’t be like my parents. I’m not afraid of taking pills.”

For a microsecond, surprise flickers across her tight expression. I absorb it with pride knowing I could make her look that way. Me, a fourteen-year-old to her fifty-something.

Finally, she pushes past whatever she’s thinking to pose the million-dollar question. “If it came down to medication to help with your nightmares, would you take it?”

The clock strikes noon.

“Sorry, doc. Times up.”

CHARLIE

MIDNIGHT STRIKES and my cell phone lights up with a text message. I'm wide awake, thinking about the pamphlets Polk gave me on PTSD. The diagnosis seems obvious even to me, I meet nearly all the criteria listed. The treatment information is less so, because half the things she wants me to try seem like they'd be more traumatic than just avoiding it altogether.

Unlocking my phone, I smile at the message.

OLLIE: Happy birthday, Charlie

I LOVE that he's the first person to wish me happy birthday. He prides himself on being the first every time. Like on Christmas Eve, when he texts me just before midnight to wish me a Merry Christmas, even if he's in the same city or staying over like last year.

ME:

You remembered

OLLIE REMEMBERS EVERYTHING. Sometimes it annoys me, because the things I say come back and bite me in the butt. But times like these, it makes me happy.

OLLIE:

You should be in bed

ME:

I am

OLLIE:
Sleeping

ME:
Not tired

LITTLE BUBBLES APPEAR at the bottom of the screen but disappear soon after. I frown, turning on my side to face the wall.

A few minutes pass.

I begin thinking about the Eye Movement Therapy packet I read up on before bed. Boring material, but not enough to make me sleepy. Why would I want to sit in an office for an hour watching someone move their fingers while I think about what happened to me?

My fingers glide across my keyboard.

ME:
Ollie?

OLLIE:
Sorry, had to take care of something

I'M afraid of asking what he had to take care of, so I don't. It's late, the probability of that *something* being another human being is too high for me to think about. Especially because that human being is most likely female.

OLLIE:
Nightmares?

IT'S EMBARRASSING that he knows about them. He told me he has trouble sleeping sometimes too, and that tea helps. He wouldn't tell me why he struggles sleeping, just that he has a lot going on. River made me some of the tea he suggested, but it was gross no matter what flavor.

ME:
Not this time

HE DOESN'T REPLY RIGHT AWAY.

OLLIE:
I can't sleep either.

FOR SOME REASON, I smile. Not because he can't sleep, but because he's telling me that. It's mundane, a conversation he probably has with a lot of people. But when he tells me things, I like to pretend I'm the only one who knows.

ME:
You should drink some of that nasty tea you like so much

I LOVE PICKING on him about things I think are gross. Like the French crullers he gets all the time, or the lemon water he buys at the diner with his cheesesteak sandwiches.

We go back and forth for a while, teasing each other about things nobody else knows. I don't tell anyone else that I secretly love Arianna Grande and make him swear he won't divulge the information to a soul.

Never, kid, he always swears.

Cross your heart?

Hope to cry.

The first time he told me that, I asked why he didn't say the normal phrase *hope to die*. He told me it was because crying meant there was more pain to be felt if the promise was broken, a reason to keep it. Dying meant no consequence was felt. I liked the sentiment so much I always smile when he says it.

After one in the morning, he tells me we should go to bed. I don't want to, but my lids *are* getting heavy. When he encourages me to go to Landmark Café for a special treat in the morning, I look forward to the sun rising, not so scared of the dark that separates me and the new day.

That night, I sleep like a baby.

THE BOY with blond hair is at the café. He isn't just getting coffee and a pastry like the other early birds but staring at the brown bag in my hand with *happy birthday, Charlie* written in black marker on both sides.

Ollie called ahead and told them to make me my favorite donuts. Old fashioned with pink frosting, extra rainbow sprinkles. They give me a large hot chocolate with whipped cream that has the same message written on the Styrofoam. He already paid for them.

The boy glances between the bag and me. "It's your birthday?" His voice is smooth, boyish. It's not raspy like Everett's or Ollie's. I guess that comes with age. Some of the foster fathers I've had also had husky voices, but I always thought it was from smoking.

Not sure what to say, I nod.

"Charlie, huh?" From this close, I see his eyes are blue. Not really memorable, but still pretty. If guys can be pretty.

His hair is styled to look messy, making it look longer on one side than the other, and his clothes are a little more casual than I'm used to seeing him in. It's a school day. No uniform.

"Yep."

He stuffs his hands in his pockets. He's tall, probably five-ten but definitely not six foot. His face has soft features like the teenage foster brothers I had growing up.

I nudge the floor with my sneaker. "I see you at the Community Center sometimes."

All the time.

Half his lips quirk up. "I see you too."

He does? I always hide from him when he's done playing. The alcove is my secret space to stay unseen until I'm alone.

Or so I thought.

Shifting the warm drink from one hand to the other, I give him a sheepish glance. "I liked what you played last week. It was different than your normal stuff. What was it?"

He blinks, brows pinching. I cringe, realizing I admitted to listening. Some people don't like that. Their time with music is theirs alone, and I get that.

"Sorry, I—"

"It's an original."

My lips part. "You write?" One head tilt. He doesn't say much. "Do you

want to sit down?" I nod toward a free table off to the side. Polk would be proud of me for asking. I'll have to remember to tell her about this next session.

He contemplates it. "Don't you have somewhere to be? School?"

I glance at the large black clock hanging over the coffee machine behind the counter. I have time before I need to be at Freemont.

"I have a few minutes."

Do you? I don't ask.

We sit down.

It's quiet, but not uncomfortable.

Crinkling the bag open, I pull out a donut. He watches me, and my cheeks pinken. There are plenty to share, so I hand it over to him.

He eyes it. "Pink?"

"It's just regular buttercream."

He takes it but doesn't eat it.

I yank out another one, setting it down on a napkin before opening my hot chocolate and blowing on the hot steam. The entire time he watches me, causing me to squirm.

"You didn't tell me your name."

He sets his donut down. "Jaxson."

Jaxson. "Cool."

I break apart my donut, but he doesn't do the same to his. Does he not like donuts? Or is it the pink that bothers him?

"Do you go to Freemont?"

"Homeschooled."

Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that.

"Why?"

His shoulders lift. "Just am."

Guess he doesn't like talking about himself either. I can relate, so I don't push. Instead, I eat my unhealthy breakfast and ignore him watching me for a while.

"Aren't you going to eat that?"

He eyes his donut.

"It'll go to waste just sitting there."

He smiles and takes a bite.

Satisfied, I smile. "Maybe we can play together at the Community Center. You know, if you want. I don't know too many songs, but I'm a fast learner."

"I know."

He knows?

"I listen too," he adds quietly.

Heat blossoms on my face. I'm not that good, especially compared to him. I don't want him thinking bad of me, because I don't have much experience.

"I'm still learning."

"I think you sound good."

I play with my cup.

"We should."

Looking back up at him, my brows furrow in. "We should what?"

He grins. "Play together."

"Oh." Really?

"Unless you just said that to be nice."

"What? No!" I sit back in the chair, dropping my shoulders a little. "I'm just not very good at this. You know, talking to people."

His grin turns into a lax smile. "I'm not either. Maybe that's why I like to watch you play. We're alike."

We are?

"I'll be there tomorrow," I tell him.

"Same time as usual." It's not a question, which means he really does listen. My body relaxes over the idea of finding a friend. Finally.

Everett and River will be happy.

Glancing at the clock, I refold the bag and stuff it into my backpack. We're not supposed to bring food into school unless it's for lunch, but I'll snack on it during study hall.

"I should go."

He watches me stand and throw my backpack over my shoulder. Not moving, he gives me a long look. There's nothing special in his eyes, just contentment.

Mine mirror it.

"See you tomorrow?" I press.

He nods. "I'll be there."

I shoot him a small wave with my freehand and start walking toward the door with what little hot chocolate I have left. Before I can walk out, I hear him call out, "Happy birthday, Charlie."

I frown. It's not his voice I want to hear tell me that in person. But there's

nothing I can do about that.

I push the thought away.

CHARLIE

RIVER HAD to bring me to the mall to get new bras. My boobs finally developed the same time my hips started feeling too snug in my skinny jeans. I told River I need to stop eating so many donuts.

You're just growing up, Charlie.

Everett doesn't like her saying that.

When I look in the dressing room mirror, I'm not familiar with what I see. My stomach is tan and toned, my legs are lean, and my hips have the slightest curve to them. Turning to the side, I examine my chest and butt, both bigger than I remember but not in a bad way.

I am growing up.

It makes me smile.

I get five new bras. 34B. River tells me I should get new jeans, which I frown at. Shopping at malls seems like a waste of money when I can go to a thrift store for the same thing at half the price.

Money shouldn't matter, Everett and River have told me that when they buy me things. But it does. Money means everything. It means power and authority. Control. To River, it means security. For me. For her. For their family. Us.

I'm part of them. I'm an us.

She smiles at me in such a maternal way that I follow her into two different stores until we both have bags hanging from our arms. Jeans, shorts, shirts, and sweaters. She tries getting me a new pair of Converse.

"Those are falling apart," she notes.

The gray cloth on the ends is so worn it start to show my socks beneath. At least the socks are cute. Blue with little pigs on them. River saw me looking at them one day a few months ago and got me two different pairs—pink and blue. I haven't worn the pink ones yet.

“But they’re comfy.”

I wonder if she cares that I have old shoes. Both she and Everett have bought me Vans and Chucks that I wear too, I just prefer these. They’re my favorite because Amy bought them for me in between homes. She told me they were a good-luck present.

Luck never seemed to come.

When I saw Ollie had the same pair the first day I met him at the house, it felt like more than luck. Fate, maybe, if fate exists. Who knew two pairs of shoes could mean so much?

“These are the only things from my past I want to keep,” I admit quietly, glancing at her from the corner of my eye. When I see her looking back, my eyes travel down to my shoes to avoid contact.

I don’t want to see the sympathy lingering in her golden eyes. She gets my situation better than anyone and tries not to react in a way that would upset me. She’s been there, has her own stories to tell about the system.

That doesn’t mean either of us wants people to feel bad, no matter what we experience. It doesn’t matter if people are in foster care or not, life doesn’t discriminate against the good, the bad, and the ugly.

“All right,” she finally replies, patting my hand, “no shoes then. How about we get some frozen yogurt before we leave?”

She knows I won’t say no to that.

River and I are cut from the same cloth, bearing some of the same scars and similar memories. I’m sure she wants to know what I’ve been through to understand me, but I’m afraid of admitting to her just how broken I feel when the past resurfaces.

I think about Polk and her theory.

Maybe I do need the extra help.

“Charlie?” River asks, brushing my arm with her hand. When I meet her eyes, I see warmth and comfort.

Love.

Forcing the thought away, I say, “I think I want to try the peanut butter flavor.”

She lets it go. For now.

I WATCH little specks of dust stir in the empty hallways as my shoes pad across the dirty linoleum toward the front doors. The soft echoes of distant conversations between teachers are all I’m met with since the last bell rang.

Friday should make me excited to go spend more time at the Community Center over the weekend. Jaxson and I sat together and listened to each other play the past two weeks. He showed me a few different songs I've never heard of and taught me the introductions to them.

I don't know his age or his last name or favorite color or movie. Instead, I've strung together multiple assumptions. He's probably fifteen like me, sixteen at most. He likes black even though it isn't a color, rock music, and as for his last name ... I haven't guessed yet.

Weekends aren't always fun for me. I don't get to wake up and follow River into the city on the days she works at the studio. They always start the same.

Therapy.

Another Saturday morning spent telling the doctor about my latest nightmare. I never see the man's face that lurks in the shadows, but don't need to. It's a gut feeling that tells me his identity, but my conscious leaves his features blank.

It makes me think about what Polk said about PTSD. The mind is weaker at night, but maybe mine still tries to fight. Like not showing me his face is sort of like protection. Right before he's revealed, I wake up.

It seems logical but doesn't make it any better when the screams tear into the night like a song awakening the silence.

Pushing open the school doors, I freeze mid-step where I descend the cement steps. Leaning against a silver Sedan by the front curb, in a pair of dark wash jeans that cling to long legs and a green tee that emphasizes large muscles, is the only person who can make me forget any anxiety over tomorrow's session.

"Ollie!" I'm sprinting toward him so fast he almost doesn't catch me when I launch myself at him. His arms wrap around my waist like mine do his neck, and I squeeze him until he's laughing and angling me away from his car.

Resting my feet back on the ground, I step away and brush fallen strands of hair behind my ear. "What are you doing here?"

He laughs and reaches toward my hair, grabbing something from one of the knotted strands. I blush when he pulls back a little piece of fringed paper. I fell asleep in science and woke up drooling on my notebook after my lab partner elbowed me awake before the bell rang.

That was an hour ago.

Sigh.

I rock back and forth on my feet, wishing I were wearing my Converse. He's wearing his. The laces are frayed at the ends and brown instead of white.

"I wanted to surprise you."

I grin, doing a little hop. The top of my head comes up to his chest, which didn't happen last time we saw each other. Does he notice I'm taller? Does he notice anything else?

The striped blue shirt I wear rests just off my shoulder, but it's fitted to hug my torso. It's new, just like the blue jeans I wear. One of the knees is ripped stylistically, same with a few scratched out patches along the opposite leg. A girl who doesn't normally talk to me told me I looked cute today.

"I don't normally like surprises," I remind him, because he knows this. Ollie makes me look forward to the unknown.

Polk would probably encourage our friendship if she knew that.

He slides the backpack off my shoulder and opens the passenger side door for me. I don't climb in but stare at him instead.

His brows pinch. "You okay?"

"Do you think our friendship is weird?"

He seems taken aback by the question, setting my bag down on the floor of the passenger side before focusing his attention on me. "Why do you ask?"

Sucking my bottom lip into my mouth, I nibble on it with my teeth for a second. "You're my best friend and the only person that makes me want to try new things. Dr. Polk keeps telling me I should make friends my own age."

When he shifts from one foot to the other, I note the discomfort in his distant dark eyes. It makes me frown because I don't understand why he looks that way. Like I did something wrong.

He clears his throat, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Did you tell her about me? Our friendship?"

My shoulders droop. "You do think it's weird, don't you?" Rejection laces my tone and eats at me. "I didn't tell her much. She just knows I have a friend named Ollie."

He steps forward, taking out one of his hands to nudge my shoulder. A playful smile eases his unsure expression from before, but it doesn't make me feel better.

"Hey," he comforts, "it's not that I think our friendship is weird. Other people may. There's quite an age difference between us. That's not very

conventional to society.”

I kick a pebble on the ground. “Who cares what people think?”

He doesn’t answer verbally, but his eyes glaze over. They say, *I do*.

“I just think it’d be a good idea if you didn’t really mention me to people like that.”

Like that. He makes it sound like being friends is a bad thing. It isn’t like I don’t get it. Society has lots of expectations these days. But he’s my only true friend and not being able to say so seems silly.

I stay quiet as I duck into the car, buckling in while he closes the door. My head stays down as he rounds the front and climbs in. Face heating, I glance up to see his eyes on me.

“Charlie...”

I settle into the seat. “Don’t worry, *Uncle Ollie*,” I murmur, staring out the window. “I won’t tell anyone about you.”

Not bothering to see if he looks as hurt as me, I let him drive us to Landmark Café. I deem the donuts he buys apology pastries. He tells me to find a spot for us to sit, and I want to ask him if he thinks it’ll be acceptable to be seen sitting together.

I bite my tongue.

While he waits for the order, I search the room for a two-person table. That’s when I see Jaxson sitting by himself in the corner. He doesn’t see me until I walk over to him, tapping his shoulder.

“Hey.”

He blinks. “Hi.”

I bounce on my heels. “How was your week? I know you mentioned having a biology test that you weren’t sure about.”

Making conversation with him is hard, but it’s a challenge I’m willing to take if it means brushing off the one I had with Ollie.

He glances around like he’s looking for someone. That’s when I notice the Freemont varsity jacket hanging from the back of the chair across from him.

“Oh, are you here with someone?”

Before he can answer, an unwelcome figure slides into the seat in question and it makes sense.

Mason Mills.

I give Jaxson a funny look, because he doesn’t seem like the type to hangout with a person like Mason. He’s reserved and talented and Mason is

the exact opposite.

“Charlie,” Mason greets, grinning. “I feel like I never see you these days. You spend too much time in the principal’s office.”

My eye twitches and I don’t grace him with a reply like he wants. Turning to Jaxson, I ask, “How do you guys know each other?”

It’s Mason who replies. “We’re cousins.”

Of course they are.

They don’t look alike. Everything about their features is on different ends of the spectrum. Dark and light. Soft and hard.

“How do *you* know my cousin?” Mason presses, leaning toward me. His finger reaches out to jab my side, but I draw back.

He doesn’t have a right to touch me.

No one does.

Jaxson shoots me a quick glance, like he doesn’t want me saying anything. I’m not sure why, but I let it slide because he looks uncomfortable. I would be too if I were related to Mason.

“I bumped into him once or twice.”

“Hmm.”

My jaw ticks. “Guess I should go.”

“So soon?” Mason prods in a sarcastic tone. He leans back so his arm rests on the top of his chair. “Do you have friends waiting around? You know, because I see you with so many people at school.”

My nostrils flare and part of me wants to eye Jaxson and ask for him to help. He just stays quiet, staring at a notebook in front of him.

A notebook full of music sheets.

I bet Mason doesn’t know that.

Doesn’t care.

My jaw ticks. “I guess I’ll see you around, Jaxson. Or not.”

Spinning on my heel, I catch Ollie walking toward me. Shouldering past him to a free table on the opposite end of the café, I plop down onto a seat and wait for him to join me.

He pulls out the opposite chair and sets down the bag of pastries between us. Passing me my hot chocolate, he eyes me and then glances over at the boys in the corner.

“Who are they?”

“No one.”

“You’re upset.”

My eyes travel back over to the corner despite wanting to ignore them. Mason isn't paying me any attention, but Jaxson is. I pretend I can see apology written on his face.

"Why is he staring at you?" There's a roughness to his tone that I don't like.

Teeth grinding, I turn my narrowed stare on him until he flinches back. "You want to know who he is? Jaxson is *supposed* to be my friend. We hang out and play music together. But I guess I can't call him my friend in public either."

"Charlie—"

"I'm sick of being people's dirty little secret," I cut him off, gripping my drink and standing up. My backpack is still in his car, but he'll drop it off later since I won't be collecting it now. "One day, somebody is going to be mine. Maybe then I'll see what's so great about it."

He stands. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"I'll drive you."

I stop at the door. "Don't bother."

"Charlie," he growls, following me out with the donuts in his hand and a hard expression stoning his features.

I'm a few steps away from him when he grabs my arm to halt me near his car.

I jerk away. "Be careful, Ollie." My eyes are void when they meet his. "People may talk if they see you touching me like that."

His lips part as I walk away.

Thankfully, he doesn't follow.

CHARLIE

THREE MONTHS. That's how long I've known Polk. Questioned her, doubted her. But twelve sessions are more than enough to realize the truth.

She's right.

"You didn't ask me how I feel," I state.

It takes her by surprise. I can tell by how her light brows arch on her forehead.

"Sad," I tell her rather than waiting. "And angry. Overwhelmed. Tired." I take a deep breath and pick at my black leggings. "The last nightmare was the worst yet. I didn't just wake up crying. I was shaking so bad I couldn't stop. My sheets were drenched in sweat. I *hit* Everett. H-he was just trying to help me, and I hit him."

The day before I'd seen a man smack a small child. Not in a violent way, more like scolding. But seeing his hand raise and fly downward had me remembering my father when he got upset over me not listening. One little movement made my brain switch into fight mode, even after the sunset some hours later.

Polk slides forward on her seat. "I'm sure he understands."

He does. "I don't deserve them. They don't deserve what I do to them. I want them to stop—the dreams. I want everyone to get a full night's sleep without waking up or staying awake worrying. I just want them to end."

She passes me a tissue and I don't know why until a single teardrop hits my thigh. Touching my damp cheeks, I gape like I don't know what's happening. Like tears are foreign.

They're not. Not at all.

"I want to try medication."

"What triggers them, Charlie?"

I blink. "Didn't you hear me?"

She nods once. "I want to know what triggers them."

I stare.

And stare.

A minute passes.

"What doesn't?" I whisper.

The smell of smoke. Not like a lingering scent, but the kind that's blown in your face. It hits you. The stranger probably meant no harm. Just another cigarette, another smoke break.

Men. Men with beady eyes that scream bad intentions. Balding. Looming. The kind that demand control with glances that last too long.

The dark. The dark with an uneasy silence attached. The one you can't expect the circumstances from because it's blinding.

"Charlie? You're pale."

Am I? I feel it. "I think I'm sick."

"What triggers them, Charlie?" she repeats.

More tears. A wave of nausea.

It's like she knows. Does she? "L-little things. Things that I can't control."

I hiccup. Twice. My lungs hurt.

Her face softens. "Many people fear things they can't control."

My lip quivers. "How do they stop?"

She folds her hands together. "They accept that control can't be contained in every situation, but their attitude can."

"You sound like those posters they hang up all over school," I tell her, voice hushed and burdened with heavy emotions. "You know, the ones with stupid sayings on sunset backgrounds."

Humor curves her lips. "Does that make them any less true?"

I don't answer.

We sit in silence for a while.

"What if it doesn't help?"

Her chair creaks. "What?"

"The medicine? What if I'm broken?"

More tears. She passes me another tissue. "You are not broken, Charlie. It takes time to handle traumatic events. To move on. That simply makes you human."

Ripping apart the damp tissue, I watch the little flakes fall onto my lap. Six tiny pieces. Two large chunks. It's soft in my hands, helpless under my

shaky fingers.

I drag in a deep breath. “What if something happens?”

She knows what my frail tone implies.

“It won’t. Like you said,” she reaches for my hand and squeezes it, “you’re not your parents, Charlie. You’re strong.”

But I shouldn’t have to be.

THE ANTIDEPRESSANTS MAKE ME TIRED. Week one was the worst, I spent most of my free time curled up on the couch watching movies or in bed listening to music.

I miss three days of school.

I don’t go to the Community Center.

Ollie is still in Bridgeport. He checks on me but pretends he doesn’t. Sometimes he’ll search around the kitchen like he forgot something. Once he grabbed a book from the little library Everett keeps.

He doesn’t like to read much.

Right now, he’s sitting on the armchair by the end of the couch. His eyes are on the television, but I don’t think he’s watching. I bet he thinks I’m still sleeping.

It gives me time to study him from where I lay curled under the fuzzy throw blanket. I’m warm and lazy and not sure what’s playing on the screen. I’m not sure I care.

His jaw is slack, his legs wide open in a comfortable position, and his hands rest on his stomach tangled together. I wonder what he’s thinking to look so far away. Something heavy, because his shoulders are squared instead of relaxed like the rest of him.

Oliver James is the perfect mixture of Bridgette and Robert, his parents. Olive skin, dark hair, darker eyes. He’s tall and lean and muscular. I’ve never seen him workout before but hear him talk about running. He makes it sound like an escape more than a hobby. The shirts he always wears shows off his arms and hugs his biceps.

He doesn’t dress like Everett though. They both work in the business industry, but Ollie isn’t the business attire type. He likes jeans and tees and long sleeve shirts. It’s why I don’t understand why he works for a company where he’s forced to wear dress shirts and slacks that make him look like he’s suffocating and miserable. Then again, I’m not old enough to understand that sometimes you do things you don’t want to.

I've stolen three different hoodies from him, so I'm not sure how many of those he has left. He always prefers casual to formal. I like the sweatshirts softness and scent, how they fit me like a baggy dress and make me smell like him.

I don't look away quick enough before his head turns toward me. When we lock eyes, his lips stretch into a warm smile.

My chest tingles.

My tummy flutters.

All because of a smile.

"Hey, you," he greets, picking up the remote and turning off the television. He angles his body toward me, resting his elbows on his knees. "How are you feeling?"

A tiny laugh bubbles from me. "You sound like my therapist."

He chuckles. "We both want what's best for your wellbeing. I suppose we're not that different."

I shake my head, forcing myself to sit up. My limbs are still tired, still heavy, so I falter and lean against the back of the couch cushion for balance.

How long have I been asleep? My cell screen is lit up on the corner of the coffee table in front of me. Three hours. Has Ollie been here the whole time?

"You don't get paid for it though." It feels weird to tease. I haven't had the energy lately, and last time we spoke didn't make me excited for another potential fight.

My lips twitch.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I murmur out a *nothing*.

He weaves his fingers together and stares at me for a moment. My hair is probably a mess, staticky and knotted and sticking up in weird directions. Last time I looked in the mirror, my green eyes were glazed over and there were bags under them.

"You're not my dirty secret," he says.

"How did you—"

"I know you, Charlie." He says it so simply, like there's nothing truer he could state. And it isn't like he's wrong. He knows lots of things about me.

Nibbling my inner cheek, I draw my knees up to my chest. The blanket falls off my lap, revealing the sleep shorts I'm wearing. "I shouldn't have gotten upset."

His eyes aren't on mine. They glance between my face and shorts, like

he's trying to figure something out.

"They have cupcakes on them." I tug on the hem, as if that's why he's looking.

His jaw twitches, then relaxes. "Donuts would be better suited for you."

Unlike his tight expression, his tone is light and playful. More like the Ollie I'm familiar with. Any other version of him is territory I don't think I'll get used to.

"I haven't found any pjs with donuts."

"I'll keep an eye out."

I grin. "You'd buy me pajamas?"

He shrugs. "Sure, kid. Why not?"

Kid. The nickname bothers me, but I don't tell him that. Instead, I brush it off and keep smiling because I don't want to argue about it.

"You never got your donuts last time," he informs me, as if I'd forgotten about storming off.

It's not true. He dropped them off at the house, along with my backpack. He never touched his, leaving all three inside for me.

A silent apology.

I forgive you, Ollie.

I'm not sure there's a day that I wouldn't.

"Feeling up to going out?"

"Out where?"

"Pop's. Landmark. Wherever."

"You really want to?"

He stands up and walks over to me, dropping down in the middle right beside where I sit. He pats my legs for me to drape them over his lap, so I do. His large palm flattens against my right shin, warm and comforting.

It feels good. Right.

Does he feel the same way?

I'm too afraid to ask.

"Yes, Charlie. I want to take you out to eat. Whether it's the diner, the café, somewhere different, it doesn't matter. We both need food, right? Fresh air may be good for you."

I nibble my bottom lip. "How long have you been here, Ollie?"

"A few hours."

"Why?"

He doesn't answer.

“Why?” I repeat.

“Because we’re friends,” he says softly. I smile. In an audible whisper, he adds, “You’re important to me, Charlie. You don’t deserve to be anybody’s dirty secret.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking about himself, Jaxson, or both. The point should come across the same, but it doesn’t. Being Jaxson’s friend would just make things easier. A companion to talk music with. Being Ollie’s is so much more.

He is the person I can tell my secrets to. The person I can rely on. He would buy me pajamas, donuts, and anything else I could want to make me happy. He would sit for hours while I slept just to make sure I’m okay.

If I lost Jaxson, I’d be disappointed.

If I lost Ollie, I would be devastated.

“I have to change.”

For a long moment, he doesn’t move. His palm stays on my leg and we just sit like that in comfortable silence. Just Charlie and Ollie, two friends who want to be there for each other. It’s a peaceful moment, one I wish we could stay in.

Just as I start to move my legs off his lap, he squeezes my shin. “Earlier you said that I was your best friend.”

You’re my only friend.

“You’re mine too.”

My eyes widen.

I don’t ask him about Everett or his high school buddies or coworkers. For some odd reason, he means it. Despite every single person he’s grown up with, met, and worked with, he chose me to be his best friend.

My heart does a happy dance.

I lean forward and press my lips to his cheek. Maybe I imagine it, but he shivers. Does he get the funny feeling in his chest too?

CHARLIE

It's quiet in the café for early afternoon, but I like it. It gives me time with Ollie to just eat and relax without any distractions. There aren't any businessmen from his father's and Everett's company here to pull him away in a conversation that I feel dumber just listening to, or high school girls giggling over some silly little piece of gossip they heard at school.

There's an old couple sitting next to the window holding hands. The bald man says something to make the silver-haired woman laugh. It's a light sound that makes it hard not to smile.

I don't realize I'm staring until Ollie's husky chuckle pulls me away from them.

"River used to do the same thing."

I grab my donut. "Do what?"

His face is somber and eased as he sips his coffee. "Watch couples. Old. Young. It didn't matter. She just loved watching people in love. Loved ... love."

Shifting in my seat, I pull apart my doughy dessert. I don't eat it, just feel it under my nimble fingers. "What about you? Do you love, love?"

He wets his lip. "Not really, kid. River and I have always been opposites like that. She's hopeful, a helpless romantic."

I frown. Does that mean he doesn't believe in love? Or just not the kind for him? That seems so sad. Lonely.

Popping one of the pieces into my mouth, I chew slowly to consider asking him what I want to know. I'm nervous over the answer. "Haven't you been in love? Or wanted to be?"

His shoulders lift. "It's human nature to want love, Charlie. Some people just have a hard time finding it."

The next chunk I pull apart stills halfway to my mouth. "Maybe those

people don't try hard enough."

Half of his lips quirk up like my response amuses him. "Maybe those people don't know what they're looking for."

Eyes narrowing, I drop my donut back onto the napkin and cross my arms. "*Maybe* those people don't want to accept what they already have."

He's silent. Lips parted, he blinks a few times and just sits there watching me. Our eyes stay locked in challenge. Unlike him, my gaze is confident. The corners of his lips twitch. Not up or down, just waver until they go slack.

We eat in silence after a few moments. We finish off our pastries and let the background noise of soft laughter and murmured conversation fill the gap lingering between us.

I wonder what he's thinking. His eyes are distant as they wander around the café, never really locking on me but lingering in my general direction every now and again like he wants to say something but won't.

His lack of reply is like a victory that I absorb as the time passes.

The front door opens to the café and Jaxson walks in. Part of me wants to sink into my seat since the last time we saw each other left me in a bitter mood. He sees me before I can hide and Ollie glances over his shoulder when he notices my tense posture.

When Jaxson walks over, Ollie's shoulders draw back. He stops right next to our table, hands stuffed into his pressed pants. They're beige and flawless, not a stain or wrinkle to be seen. He's wearing a jacket over what looks like a white button-down. I wonder if he just came from somewhere fancy, or if his mom makes him dress like that.

"Hey, Charlie."

"Hi."

Jaxson clears his throat and glances at Ollie from the corner of his eye. He doesn't look particularly uncomfortable, but he won't look Ollie directly in the eye either.

"I wanted to apologize for last time," he tells me, shifting from one foot to the other. "I haven't seen you around to say anything. You weren't at the Center."

"Yeah, I've been—"

"Sick," Ollie interjects.

My cheeks heat. "I was not."

Not really. Even if I was, it's not anyone's business.

Jaxson glances between us, then settles solely on me. "Oh. Well, are you

planning on going to the Center today?”

It's already going on two, so I doubt it.

My lips part, but Ollie cuts me off. “She isn't, thanks for asking.”

Shooting him a narrowed glare, I grind my teeth together. “I wasn't planning on it,” I reply to Jaxson, “but maybe I'll be up to it tomorrow.”

He smiles despite the bite to my tone. I'm not sure he sees the way Ollie looks at him or how I look at Ollie in the moment. “Want to practice? We should be able to get through another song.”

Ollie's hard eyes are set on my face. It burns but I pay him no attention. It makes me giddy, my tummy flipping to see him act like this. It may be childish, but I don't care.

“Sure.”

Jaxson pulls out his phone. “We should exchange numbers in case you don't feel up to coming. Or, you know, so we can make other plans.”

Other plans? Trying to figure out what he could mean, I accept his phone and stare at the blank fields he wants me to fill in. I don't let the hesitation cross my features.

It's Jaxson.

The boy who likes music.

The boy who teaches me things.

I type in my information.

When I finish, I hand it over. Ollie's eyes are still on me, full of disbelief, watching as I give it back to Jaxson.

“I'll text you so you have mine, okay?” He slips it back into his pocket. “Maybe we can hang out outside of the Center.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Ollie visibly freeze.

“Like see a movie,” Jaxson adds.

I blink. “Oh.”

I'm not sure what else to say. I don't like going to the movies with just anyone. Plus, Jaxson usually isn't this forward. I prefer him quiet like me, focused on music and the future.

He shrugs. “Just let me know.”

Slowly, I nod.

He accepts the response like he doesn't mind my uncertainty. I like it, that he doesn't expect an answer right away. It makes me feel better, calmer.

Waving at me, he gives Ollie a quick look before heading to the counter up front. Not once does he look back at us, at *me*.

I nibble on the donut in front of me while Ollie grips his drink a little too tight. His eyes are distant and glazed, like anger sits behind them. I could ask him what's wrong, could feed the tension, but he'll come out with it in time.

Until then, I finish my food and brush off the crumbs from my fingers and shirt. When Jaxson gets his order, I wiggle my fingers at him before he exits.

My phone buzzes not even a minute later.

UNKNOWN:

I'll let you choose the movie

SETTING the phone onto the table, I let myself smile. Not big or flashy, just small and comforting. A boy texted me.

Boys never text me.

"That him?" Ollie grumbles.

"Yes."

He sits back on his chair. "Why would you give him your number?"

My arms rest on the table, elbows hanging off the edge. "I don't see why I shouldn't have. We're friends."

"Friends? He upset you last time."

"So did you," I bite back, "but we still talk. What's the big deal? We talk about music and composing. He's nice."

"So do we."

I shake my head. "No, we talk about songs and what we like to listen to. It isn't the same, Ollie. Jaxson—"

"Shouldn't have asked you out," he cut me off, which only grinds me more. "You're too young, Charlie. Everett won't go for it."

Ask me out? I scoff. "He didn't ask me out. He was just being nice. I'm allowed to have friends, you know. You do."

His jaw ticks. "He asked you to the movies. If you can't see that as a date, you shouldn't be going."

I'm two seconds away from reminding him I never said yes but decide not to. "Maybe I want to go."

His fists clenches around his cup.

"Is it so wrong that I would say yes?" I press, pushing my own cup away. "Jaxson and I have a lot in common. We would have fun. We could talk about our dreams of being composers and producers and things you wouldn't get."

“You’re too young for that,” he repeats in a grave tone. “Teenage boys only go to the movies for one thing, Charlie. It doesn’t matter that he’s nice to you or that you have a lot in common. He’ll try something.”

Jaxson wouldn’t do that. “Stop acting like a jealous boyfriend. Last time I checked you had no say in my dating life.”

“*Dating life.*” He looks away from me, muttering something under his breath. “What’s the real reason you want to go?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy. You don’t like going to the movies very often. You think the chairs are uncomfortable, the food is too pricey, and half the movies they screen are overrated.”

I *do* say that. It doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy going if I want to see something bad enough. And the popcorn isn’t like any you can recreate from the stuff in stores. Plus, movies mean one on one time with Ollie, even if most of it is spent with only the film filling the quiet.

He waits for my reply.

I take a deep breath. “River and Everett need to see me try, okay? If I want to prove to them I can handle going away to school, I need to show I can be social and play nice. If having friends helps...”

Palming his jaw, he studies me. “You don’t have to go out with this guy to prove a point to them. That’s ridiculous.”

I want to yell at him. To cause a scene. I hate him not understanding how badly I want to leave Freemont, to pursue better opportunities. It isn’t like I don’t want to hangout with Jaxson, I just don’t want the pretenses to be misconstrued.

“This conversation is ridiculous.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m trying to get you to understand my perspective. I was a teenage boy once, remember?”

“Yeah,” I deadpan. “Eons ago.”

He glares. “*Anyway*, I know what they think. A dark theater means they can make moves. He might not think you’re just a friend. Get what I’m saying?”

I don’t answer.

“Tell me something,” he pries, easing into his chair and letting the tension in his muscles go. “Why Chicago? Why there for music school?”

Our eyes meet.

My throat dries. “Why *not* Chicago?”

My tone says what I won't.
You, Ollie. That's why.
“Don't go with him,” he says quietly.
My heart hurts.
Don't go to Chicago.
It's all I hear.
I tell Jaxson I'm free on Friday.

CHARLIE

I TOOK five dollars from my mother's purse once. She caught me before I could unlatch the deadbolt and sneak out of the house. I thought I could tiptoe out without her knowing but I was wrong. There was a turkey sandwich from the gas station down the street I wanted.

Mom grabbed my wrist and started yelling about how bad stealing was, especially from people you love.

Never take from your own, Charlotte.

I felt bad, like I did something horribly wrong. Hunger pains couldn't justify why I tried stealing from my mother, not even when I doubled over before she gave me a piece of bread with peanut butter on it.

The bread was stale.

The peanut butter tasted funny.

Before then, I thought it was one of the worst decisions I could have made. Like disappointing Mom meant letting down the person who was meant to be my biggest supporter.

Now I'm standing in the lobby of a busy theater, surrounded by three different lines of people waiting for tickets and food and cheap arcade games. Red velvet ropes separate the people who have paid for tickets and snacks and those waiting to be let into the different theaters.

There are girls huddled in the corner wearing short skirts and tight tanks and fancy shoes. The kind with strappy heels that make their legs look longer. It makes me glance down at my black jeans, oversized tee, and gray Converse and cringe.

Those girls are pretty. Their hair is down and sleek and soft-looking, like they spent a bunch of time on it. I put a brush through mine and left it hanging however it pleased. Part of it is tucked behind my ear, the rest rests down my back and other shoulder.

My guilt now isn't the same as it was when I stole the money. It's felt because Jaxson thinks this means more, because I never bothered to dress like the other girls, but worst of all, it's because I did it to spite Ollie. But if I didn't agree, I may never get closer to him.

Don't go with him, Charlie.

It's the only way.

It's our turn for tickets, and Jaxson orders two for the comedy I said I want to see. I prefer horror but I don't want to give him a reason to hold my hand like I need saving.

Ollie thinks I'm naïve. Sometimes I think it's better for people to think that, but not him. It makes me feel childish. Like in his eyes, I don't know what boys think.

But I do.

I know what boys think.

What men expect.

I know lots.

Too much.

Like the burning grip of an eager hand, or the wretched breath of one too many beers, and how the bed creaks when someone twice my size lays down on it. Expectations say that older people are supposed to care for the younger ones—to protect them. Expectations lie.

They hurt you the worst.

We get to concessions. Jaxson orders a large popcorn for us to share. No butter. I get a slushy. He gets a water.

He. Gets. A. Water.

Why Chicago?

For you, Ollie.

I follow him into the theater.

THERE'S something wrong with me. I think I've always known, but not how much until now. I've come to terms with it in the forty-eight minutes I've sat in this hard chair and watched the people around me.

Jaxson laughs at all the wrong parts. It's a pretty laugh, young and soft and light. He sits in the chair with one ankle resting on his opposite knee, looking relaxed and carefree. I'm tense and stiff and look at the screen but don't really see anything.

His hand touches mine fifty-two minutes in. It takes me by surprise, but

I'm too frozen to pull away from the touch. It's warm and clammy but not uncomfortable.

Foreign.

No one has ever held my hand before.

The corner of my eyes focuses on the way his hand cups mine. It's draped across mine, not woven like I imagine some of these couples' hands are. There are boys whose arms are around girls' shoulders. I'm glad that's not me.

Jaxson laughs again.

He uncaps his water with his freehand.

I watch him carefully, pretending I'm not. His face is eased as he watches the movie play out. It's nearing the end and I don't know what that means for us.

Will he gather our things and walk me home? It isn't a far walk, but it's dark. Everett only agreed to let us walk because it was still daylight and I had Jaxson. He told me to call when I was ready to be picked up.

I think he wanted to interrogate Jaxson, but he didn't. River probably talked him out of it. He only asked for Jaxson's last name, which I never even knew until now.

Jaxson Clark.

The Clark family must mean something to Everett because he asks how his father is. Jaxson says he's good. Everett says he's glad.

We left after that.

The credits roll and the lights turn on. My eyes take a moment to adjust, and I watch a few people in front of us grab their empty popcorn bags and drinks and stand up. Music plays and people talk and tease and laugh.

Jaxson shifts toward me.

He doesn't look relaxed anymore.

"What's wrong?" I ask, pulling my hand away from his. Resting it in my lap, I squirm under his gaze.

His cheek is drawn in by his teeth, like he's nibbling the inside. It makes him look nervous, which must mirror my own reflection. Nerves heat up my limbs, my hands tingling and fingers warm under his gaze.

"You didn't like the movie." It isn't a question, which makes the guilt I felt before become tenfold.

"It was fine," I lie.

The smile gracing his face makes me feel a little better. It loosens my

tight muscles until I'm comfortable in my seat.

There aren't many people left, I realize. I'm sure workers are going to come in here and start cleaning.

"We should go." I grab my bag from the ground and set it on my lap. My slushy cup has been empty since twenty minutes into the film. He finished our popcorn thirty-one minutes in. There wasn't enough butter.

Ollie used to get us separate bags with extra butter because there's no other way to have it. I would ask for candy and he would tell me no but then go out and buy me Twizzlers, Milk Duds, and Reese's Pieces halfway through, dropping them into my lap like there was no other way to shut me up. When I ran out of slushies, he would get me a refill. Never water.

"Hey," he whispers, nudging my arm.

"Yeah?"

We stare at each other for a moment, and his smile changes. It wavers and he looks sad as his eyes travel somewhere before coming back to meet mine. I don't get a chance to ask what's wrong again before his lips are suddenly on mine.

My body locks up as he tugs me toward him, his clammy hands now too clingy and controlling and sloppy.

Push him away, inner me screams.

Push. Push. Push.

I never pushed before, not when the scent of liquor was too overwhelming paired with the strength of rough palms and a heavy body. But I'm not there now.

Not there, not there, not there.

Somewhere close by I hear people laughing loudly. Guys. At least three of them. It pulls me away from my body's reaction of flight and has my fists clenched between us.

I hit his chest.

His hands tighten.

Something clicks near us.

More laughing.

I think someone catcalls.

My fists slam against his chest twice, taking him by surprise. He falls back, eyes wide, but he doesn't look like he won something.

He looks devastated.

Sad.

Apologetic.

“Aw, look at her,” one of the guys says from behind us.

Not just some random guy.

Mason.

“What, Charlie? Don’t be such a tease.”

Tease.

I want to vomit.

Suddenly, the ghost scent of cheep beer lingers in the air. *Do you know what happens to girls that tease?*

I’m not a tease.

They get what they deserve.

Nausea rises in my gut and I think I may get sick right here in front of the boys that watch. When I see their phones, I realize what the clicking was from.

They took pictures.

My eyes water.

Don’t cry.

Charlotte cried.

I’m not her anymore.

“Charlie—” Jaxson whispers.

But I bolt up and shove him as hard as I can until he falls backward. Mason and his friends all laugh and call after me as I dart around them and round the row of seats.

My hip slams into the corner of one of them and I cry out, letting tears dribble down my cheeks before quickly wiping them away.

A hand snakes out and stops me, yanking me back. I stumble into Mason’s chest as he and his friends rumble and egg him on.

“You cost me ten dollars, Charlie.”

Ten dollars?

“Guess you really are easy.”

I yank out of his grasp and run as fast as I can out of the theater and into the lobby. People barely dodge me as I work my way through the crowd, gripping my bag like my lifeline. My phone is inside, my Chapstick, and my wallet.

It could be used as a weapon if I swung hard enough. If someone chased me. If Jaxson tried explaining to me why he did what he did.

My lungs burn by the time I’m out of the building, heaving with sadness

and embarrassment and so much more. The guilt is gone. Drowned under everything else.

Charlotte Reynolds came out tonight.

She's weak. Scared.

I don't want to be either of those things.

Wiping my cheeks off on my wrist, I stop down the street so no one can watch me pathetically break down. I force myself to unlock my cell phone and suck in a few deep breaths. I try to sound fine when River picks up the phone.

I cry.

That night, I have another nightmare.

The faceless man calls me a tease before bending over me.

I don't wake up in time.

CHARLIE

PRETENDING to be okay has become my newest skill. I put on a smile and eat breakfast and answer questions that are thrown at me. My lips only waver a little when Jaxson's name is mentioned. I clean up my plate, grab my backpack, and go to school.

Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

Dr. Polk would probably tell me something really cheesy if she knew I was acting like everything was fine. Like Jaxson hadn't kissed me, and Mason hadn't taken pictures. She would say that it takes way more effort to pretend to be someone you're not than embrace who you are.

My smile is tight and distant whenever I lock eyes with people. River knows I'm not fine, but there's nothing I can say to deter her from the truth—the truth being that people like to use me and play me and act like I'm nothing.

I am Nobody.

Are you Nobody too?

I like to think I'm a simple person; a girl who loves music and laughing and joking and teasing. Simplicity works for me, which means complicated feelings don't. Anger and resentment and embarrassment only make things worse if you hold onto them. Like seeing Mason roam the halls making kissy faces at me. Or his friends taunting me with Jaxson's name and holding up one-dollar bills as if they're ready to throw them like I'm a stripper.

I'm a simple person who hides thousands of feelings behind the happiest smile, because anything less would make me weak. It would make my family sad and my therapist judgmental and Ollie ... well, I don't know what it would make him.

They would all tell me I'm human.

Humans are fueled by emotions. I guess there's no point in faulting

myself for being like millions of other people. But I don't want to be like anyone else. I want to be me.

Not Charlotte.

Not the foster girl.

Charlie—the girl with a boyish name who can be selfish and childish and so many other things. I'm okay with being her. I like her.

I sit in English class.

Mason is in here. He waltzes in with his usual posse and takes the seat a row over from me. They all watch me, waiting for the moment I snap and get sent away.

Holding my breath, I train my eyes on the whiteboard. Our homework assignment is written there, so I jot it down in my notebook to busy myself.

It's an Emily Dickinson assignment. I take it as a sign that everything will be okay, that things will get better. It makes me smile. Sort of.

Something hard smacks my desk. A phone. Not just a phone, but a phone with a picture lighting the screen. The other people littering the room laugh and look at their own cells when I glance around.

Do they see what I see? A blonde girl looking pale as a blond boy kisses her and holds her and takes away a piece of her soul that doesn't belong to him. I see it—the desperation, the fear. She's being sucked in like she always did.

Do they see the way her back is straight and her shoulders are tense, and her eyes are wide? They aren't closed like she enjoys it or wants more. They are full of confusion and shock that someone meant to be a friend could do this.

Someone whistles at me.

Mason pushes his phone closer.

“What, Blondie? No encore?”

My nostrils flare and my jaw ticks and I wonder where Ms. Perkins is. She should be in here by now, telling them to quiet down.

A finger flicks my arm. “He says you're not very good, by the way. Could use some practice.”

More kissy noises.

My teeth grind.

Where is Ms. Perkins?

More words are spoken but I don't hear a thing. Instead, I fight off the red filtering my vision and grab my bag in a vice grip before standing.

“Why do you always run?” Mason calls.

Why do you always run, Charlotte?

Bile burns the back of my throat.

Don't you love Mommy?

I make it to the trashcan just in time to empty the eggs and bacon I had for breakfast.

Someone starts gagging.

Mr. Perkins walks in. “Oh, my.”

Where were you? I want to scream.

She walks me to the nurse's office.

Another day free from Freemont.

RIVER BRINGS me chicken noodle soup. I tell her I'm not hungry and she says I need to eat. I take three sips of salty broth to appease her.

She walks away frowning, the soup staying on the edge of my desk in case I change my mind. I won't. I'll dump it somewhere before she comes back.

Night has set and I hear worried murmurs coming from down the hall. My name is spoken softly, but I don't try hard enough to hear what they say. They've tried talking to me all night, but I don't have the energy to lie.

To pretend.

Everett comes in just before nine o'clock and tells me goodnight. He asks if I need anything, but I tell him I'm fine.

He knows I'm not.

He brushes my hair.

And kisses my forehead.

And lingers.

He whispers, “I love you, Charlie.”

My throat feels thick. “I love you, too.”

The words come in automation. It isn't because I don't love him, I do. Love just scares me. I love what they've done for me. I love that he tries to protect me. But love is complicated and masked with thousands of other elements.

The door clicks closed behind him. I stay on my side facing the wall, masked in darkness. I welcome it, not caring about what could reach out in the shadows.

Monsters only exist in daylight anyway.

The room lights up and fills with my quiet ringtone. I debate on ignoring it because I know who it belongs to. Everett told Ollie to call me.

For once, I don't think Ollie will help.

But I pick up the phone anyway.

"I don't want to talk."

He's hesitant. "I know. But we should."

Why? I don't ask.

He'll tell me *I told you so*.

He'll say I should have listened.

"Charlie?"

"I'm here."

Another pause. "You okay?"

What do you think?

"Need me to come over?"

I manage to smile. It's empty. "You're back in Chicago, aren't you? Not really worth the travel."

"It would be."

Three simple words. Maybe given other circumstances, I would have let them soak in. Feed my heart. Make me happy.

They don't.

They don't even fill the void.

"I know I said I didn't want to hear about boys but..." He cusses quietly.

"If you want to talk about, you know, whatever, then we can."

My body jerks on my mattress like I've been shot. Cringing over his offer, I set my phone down on my bed.

He feels bad.

"I don't need your pity."

"Who says I'm pitying you?"

"Do you really want to hear about boys?"

He's silent.

"Exactly."

Drawing my knees up, I drape the blanket over my cool body. My lips tingle but not in a good way. The feeling in my gut comes back as a reminder that I didn't listen to it from the start.

Why don't I listen?

"Charlie?"

Seconds pass.

I'm crying. When did that start?

Gasping for little breaths doesn't come easy, so it sounds like I'm choking. On tears. On air. On anger.

He repeats my name.

"I-I..." Sniffing back tears and wiping my damp cheeks, I try collecting myself. Ollie doesn't need to hear me cry. That's embarrassing.

But not as embarrassing as the truth spilling from my lips. "I was j-just a stupid bet."

"What?" he growls, voice so low that I feel its cold, deathly grasp from here.

I close my eyes, letting my pillowcase absorb the fallen liquid. "I'm just Charlie."

His voice greets me in a hard tone. "You are not *just* anything. You're *the* Charlie. And you know what that punk is? An idiot. Because he had something good and was too stupid to see it before messing that up."

If it's supposed to make me feel better, it doesn't. I feel worse, because I never saw Jaxson Clark coming. Not once.

"Listen to me, Charlie, because this is important. You are strong, and funny, and way too good for somebody that can make you feel like that. If some asshole mistreated you all because of a bet—" He abruptly stops, and even through the phone I feel the chilling drop in temperature. "Did he do something to you?"

My throat tightens. Words are lodged there, with emotion and so many other things. Ways things could have gone differently. Emotions I'm sick of having.

Guilt.

Shame.

"It was just a kiss."

His breath catches. "A kiss?"

Didn't I just say that? I could paint him a verbal picture here and now. The way Jaxson's thin lips tried opening mine, or how his hands held my arms a little too rough. Maybe I could get River to draw him one and send it. What's Chicago's zip code?

Ollie probably kissed lots of girls at fifteen. My chest hurts worse from the thought.

"Shit, Charlie." His tone is much softer, and it surprises me. Not because he isn't soft, but because he's too wound up. "I'm sorry he took that from

you.”

Took what from me?

Oh.

“He wasn’t my first kiss.”

He should have been the first one that counted though. I suppose, in that sense, he did take something from me. A chance to choose. To feel wanted in a mutual respect.

Ollie is quiet for a moment. He wants to know when I had my first kiss. I’m only fifteen, with no history of hanging out with boys before. Was I fourteen? Thirteen? Twelve? Did boys still have cooties at eleven?

He doesn’t ask. I don’t let him.

“I’m tired,” I whisper.

“Charlie—”

I hang up, shoving the phone off the side of the bed until the thud it makes satisfies me. It’s probably cracked, maybe even broken.

Did I take my pill tonight?

I’ll have nightmares.

Ollie probably texted me.

Turns out, I don’t care.

CHARLIE

I'M SORRY.

I try remembering all the times I heard that phrase in my life. They can be counted on one hand. Three fingers. One being my middle.

Four now, I guess.

Amy told me she was sorry when the first foster home didn't work out. *It's not you, Charlie*, she had promised. *Their license didn't get renewed in time.*

Most of the time she couldn't apologize because it was my fault for being kicked out. When she found me with cigarette burns on the back of my hands her eyes got teary.

That was the second time.

I didn't know...

Social workers never seem to.

River told me she was sorry once.

I'm sorry you haven't gotten the love you deserve, Charlie. I hope we can fix that.

Unlike their apologies, I don't believe the fourth. Jaxson only apologized because he felt bad about getting caught. It was a way out for him, an excuse to make.

I'm sorry. Mason made me do it.

It's a cop-out. Mason doesn't make anybody do anything. He doesn't have that power, he isn't God. Yet, Jaxson kept insisting that it was blackmail—that he would tell Jaxson's mother about our little meet ups at the Center. His parents are strict, especially about who he's around when he plays. I could feel bad for him, but at least he has parents that want what's best for his future.

That isn't me.

Jaxson sent me three texts that were left unanswered before calling me. Another voicemail saying he didn't want to hurt me. I stared at the screen, at his name, until the call ended. He called again the next day.

No voicemail.

I think he gets it now. Talking to him is the last thing I want to do, and that says something. I don't want to go back to Freemont in the fall now that it's officially summer break. I don't want to go to therapy now that we have something to talk about.

Jaxson could have been my friend, but he ruined it. And why? Mason Mills is a lot of things, but not so powerful he makes people do his bidding. If he wanted me embarrassed, it worked. But I'm more than that now.

And that's thanks to Jaxson.

Maybe I should thank him. What he did is another foot out the door for me, a reason to leave one day. I owe a lot to River and Everett, but I don't love Bridgeport, the past that lingers, or the bad luck that finds me.

Now that break is here, it gives me time to do a whole lot of nothing. The Community Center is out during my usual time because Jaxson might be there, which means figuring out how to play without going.

Right now, I'm surrounded by the strong aroma of acrylic paint in Painter's Choice. I'm scraping dried chunks off the tabletops and cleaning for the end of the day. Usually, I'm sitting on a bench playing something pretty, filling empty space.

I itch to do that today but told myself not to risk running into Jaxson. He won't take away my love of music; just put it on hold for a little while.

River asks why I haven't played.

I tell her I haven't been in the mood.

"Want to take a break?" she asks, pulling out a stool at the table I'm scrubbing. It isn't clean yet, I want to point out, but bite my tongue and sit instead.

River wants to talk. I can see it in her eyes, so I indulge her. Maybe she'll tell me about some new program she's implementing at the studio. Or something to do with Everett at the company he works at.

No such luck. "What happened?"

I could blink and pretend I don't know what she's talking about, but it wouldn't fool her. River is smart, so is Everett. They know I hold back information and usually don't push. I think I'm giving them no other choice. I'm resisting too much.

“Ollie didn’t tell you?”

Her lips twitch upward. “His loyalty to you is stronger than you must think. He wouldn’t say a word when Everett tried asking what you said.”

Squirming on my stool, I chip at the leftover paint with my fingernail. It has been a week and a half since I spoke to Ollie about the kiss. In those ten days, Ollie hasn’t texted me once. He did call me two days ago saying he was proud of me for making honor roll, but nothing since.

“I can’t go, can I?” I ask her, still not making eye contact.

Her hand comes into view, peeling mine away from the paint on the table. “Look at me, Charlie. Please?”

I do.

Her hand cups the top of mine. “Everett and I have talked about Chicago for a while. Your grades are good, you haven’t gotten into any trouble, and the medicine ... well, it’s helping, right?”

She asks because I’ve only woken up a few times during the night in the past week. It was always the same, the squeal of my old bedroom door opening and then same horrible smell surrounding my little body. I cried rather than screamed the night I woke up. Maybe I’m finally accepting the past for the past, mourning the little girl who endured so much. Improvement—if that’s what you call it.

I haven’t fallen asleep during the day or been too tired to go to school. Though, sometimes I wish I were so I could stay home some more. Still, the medicine does seem to be working.

During our last session, Polk asked me how I felt. But it wasn’t the same as the normal inquiry.

How do you feel emotionally? I laughed and told her the happy pills are broken. She didn’t find it funny.

“I sleep better,” I admit. Not great, but better. Some nightmares don’t wake me up. Most of the time, they do, and I handle it. River came into my room once to see if I was okay. Everett checked on me throughout the night.

I pretended to sleep.

Slow breath in. Slow breath out.

He bought it.

“We don’t expect you to be fine all the time,” River says softly. “Everett and I just want to make sure you’re going to be okay if...”

My eyes widen and heart falters. “If?”

Her tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip in contemplation. She’s

stalling before telling me what my heart already knows she's going to say.

"Are you happy, Charlie?"

Drawing back in surprise, I blink. She waits for my response.

"I-I have no reason not to be," I whisper, glancing down at the table.

"But are you?" she inquires.

My throat is dry. "I love you guys."

Her fingers pull my hand toward her, pressing my hand between hers. My gaze lifts to find her staring at me with warm features. "We love you too. That's why we need to make sure you're happy. One isn't mutually exclusive of the other, Charlie."

"But it ... it should be, right? For me."

"Why?"

Again, I blink. "Because I found a family. I haven't had one of those in a long time, maybe not ever. Y-you know my parents weren't good people."

"They had their problems," she agrees lightly, "but that doesn't mean they didn't have their good moments I'm sure."

My shoulders lift and lower limply. Truth is, I don't remember many good moments that involve my parents. I was young when they died, and I got taken away. Mostly, I remember the tears and fear and indifference.

I still feel the indifference.

"I shouldn't want to leave," I tell her. "I have you and Everett and a home. I have..." *Ollie*. "...a place to play piano and to get all the pastries I want. Bridgeport should be my home."

Her palm squeezes mine. "Home is a feeling, not a place. Bridgeport doesn't have to be the place you settle down like Everett and I did. Look at Oliver. He's happier in Chicago."

Silence.

I'm not sure I believe that. *Ollie* says he likes Chicago, but never says he loves it. His eyes turn a dull shade of brown, like behind his gaze is a secret that wants to be let out.

Her thumb brushes the back of my hand in a small, comforting gesture. "Chicago has a lot of opportunities. The School of Music seems like a great place for you, even *Ollie* said so."

My spine straightens. "What?"

Her lips stretch upward at the corners. "I talked to him the other day about it when he asked how you were doing. You're family, Charlie. He wants you to be happy too."

Don't go with him, Charlie.

Why would he tell me not to go with Jaxson after I made the point that it was my ticket out of Bridgeport? To Chicago—to *him*? Why would he agree to help me now?

"I don't really understand Ollie."

She laughs. "He's not that hard to get, but I do think you guys are similar when it comes to expressing yourselves. He's reserved when it comes to talking about things."

He never has problem talking to me about things. That's why I like our dynamic. He does the talking and I listen. Or we tease each other and forget about our problems for a little while. He and I balance each other well.

"I want to be happy here, River."

But I'm not.

But I can't be.

"I love you," I repeat.

She stands up and draws me in for a quick hug, which isn't something she does often. I'm not huge on touching, and I don't think she is either. In the moment, I don't mind it because it's River. She's my family, a mother figure, a sister figure, a friend.

"Sometimes we have to acknowledge that the people we love are better off elsewhere," she says after a few moments of silence. "That doesn't mean we don't love the person we're letting go. In fact, I think it shows we love them more than anything."

I don't have to ask why.

When you love people, you sacrifice your feelings to give them what they need. I think that's what people don't understand about love; it hurts. It's not about a happily ever after you get when the story ends, it's about the sacrifice you make to get there.

They adopted me.

They love me.

Now they're willing to let me go.

"Will Amy allow this?" I doubt, realizing that there must be restrictions to moving. It isn't just about what I want, but what needs to be done.

"Well, that's where Oliver comes in."

My brows pinch.

"You're fifteen, which means you'll need a guardian to watch over you. Chicago isn't the place for teenage girls to wander around without anybody

looking out for them. Everett and I plan on visiting, but we can't do it often. And Oliver is right there..."

Oliver. "You want him to be my guardian?"

Her head tilts. "There's no way we can send you to Chicago otherwise, Charlie. We spoke to your old social worker and she said he'd need to have guardianship over you while you attend school."

I'm speechless.

Ollie as my guardian? I'm already surprised he said it was a good idea to let me go in the first place, especially because I thought he was against it. But does he want to be responsible for me?

"I'll be in his way."

"You won't be," she assures me, kneeling by my side. "Even if it was true, Oliver wouldn't mind. Like I've said before, you've got him wrapped around your finger. He agreed to taking over guardianship while you're there attending The School of Music."

That's when I realize something vital. Ollie doesn't apologize with words but with actions. The donuts, the hot chocolates, the offer to buy me pajamas, the responsibility of taking me in so I can attend a music school.

He said I'm his best friend too.

I think I may believe it.

I think I believe a lot more.

Still, I have trouble wrapping my head around this. Then it all really hits. "Does that mean I can go there?"

Now her smile is so wide it makes her eyes brighter than normal. "Everett and I were going to tell you together, but I wanted to see you smile. I feel like I haven't seen a real one in a while."

It starts to slip from my face when she shakes her head. "It's okay, you know. Nobody is happy all the time. But we want what's best for you, and Everett and I know that making you stay in Bridgeport isn't that."

I think about Ollie.

He's doing so much for me just like they are. Each of them is making sacrifices and changing their routine and it's for me. All for me.

Because they love me.

"Just do us a favor," she adds.

"Anything."

"Just give us the summer, okay?"

FOUR MONTHS LATER

OLLIE

I DON'T REMEMBER the name of the black-haired woman sleeping beside me in bed. It started with an R. Rhianna? Rachel? I recall the fruity mixed drink that lingered in her kisses and the way she worked me with her experienced hands.

Hell if I knew her name.

Sliding out of bed, I pull on the boxers from last night and make my way to the bathroom across the hall. Rhianna/Rachel doesn't stir despite me shutting the door a little harder than I mean to. Subconsciously, maybe that's my way of getting her up and gone. It isn't like she was a bad lay because she did everything I told her to and never once questioned it, but I've got things to do.

Before I can pour myself a cup of coffee after going about my morning routine, there's a knock at the front door of my apartment. Brows pinching, I set down my mug and look through the peephole.

"Shit," I murmur, seeing Charlie's long blonde hair through the hole.

Undoing the locks, I scrub a hand down my tired face and cringe over my lack of clothes. I don't want her staying in the hall where anyone can watch her. The building is safe as far as I know, but one could never be too sure when a pretty fifteen-year-old is involved. Plus, I promised my sister and her husband I would look out for her since she started at the Chicago School of Music. I take my guardianship seriously, no matter how much she pushes me on everything.

Like when she begged River and Everett to let her stay in a dorm room on the school's campus instead of with me like they preferred. Honestly, I liked the idea at the time. Having her living with me would have been difficult considering my late-night activities. But not as bad as her showing up whenever she wants when I have company. It's hard filtering out the women

I bring over before she can see.

Opening the door, I wave her inside. “Do I even want to know how you got here? It’s not even ten yet, Charlie. What’s going on?”

Her eyes widen a little when they meet my bare chest, quickly snapping away to the half-empty fruit bowl sitting in its usual spot on the counter. She walks that way, letting me close the door behind her.

Digging through the bowl, she makes the same face she always does at the contents inside—lips pinched, and eyes narrowed like the pears did something to offend her. “You should really keep donuts in here, you know?”

Lips twitching upward, I cross my arms over my chest. “In the fruit bowl?”

“The apartment.” Her tone is woven with her usual sarcasm, a language she speaks fluently in.

She isn’t facing me, but I’d bet good money she rolled her green eyes. She thinks they’re boring, generic. She doesn’t see the silver specks that make them gem-like, almost amblygonite. In some ways they remind me of Everett’s hues, just slightly different.

“If I knew you were coming,” I reply pointedly, “I would have made sure there were some waiting for you. Which brings us back to my main question. What are you doing here?”

Her lips part to answer just as a noise stirs from the direction of my bedroom. Charlie’s eyes widen a fraction before glancing at me, her gaze calculated as she takes in my state of undress.

“Oh.” She clears her throat as Rhianna/Rachel comes out in nothing but yesterdays faded 90’s grunge band t-shirt, which does little to cover necessary parts of her anatomy.

She gives Charlie a shocked look, having the decency to yank on the hem of the shirt to cover her a little better. “I didn’t realize we had company, Ollie Poo.”

Cringing at her horrible nickname for me, I glance over at Charlie to see her mouthing back *Ollie Poo* while shooting me a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me stare.

Wish I was, kid.

Rhianna/Rachel turns her focus to Charlie, examining her from the top of her loose blonde waves all the way down her white fitted tee, denim cutoffs, and worn gray Converse. She looks like she’s about to cruise the—

Fuck.

I agreed to take her to the History Museum today to celebrate her first month of classes being done. She's wanted to go since she got here, but our schedules hadn't lined up.

Before I can apologize, last night's hookup finally finishes assessing her. Any jealousy over another female being in my apartment washes from her made-up face. I don't remember all the makeup last night, but I was also three sheets to the wind and in the mood for a mindless screw. "Ollie Poo, is this your little sister? She's so ... cute."

Anyone who really knows Charlie knows that cute is not a word you use to describe her. Whether true or not, this chick just opened a can of worms.

"That's so funny," Charlie replies in a sugary sweet tone, giving Rhianna/Rachel a once-over that only I seem to know is dangerous. She turns and bats her lashes at me, which aren't caked with black gunk and outlined with brown liner unlike my hookup's were. "Did you hear that, Ollie Poo? Another one of your five cent hookers thinks I'm your sister." She turns back to Rhianna/Rachel feigning innocence. "Sweetie, if you think you're the only one lucky enough to have him peel your panties off with his teeth, you're wrong. Imagine what he does to me at night."

My eyes bulge. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

My hookup goes pale, which probably mirrors the expression on my face. Her lips part as she rushes into the bedroom and gathers her clothes, not bothering to change into them before side stepping me.

Reaching out, I try clearing whatever thoughts she must have of me, since it's obvious Charlie is much younger. "Rhianna, it's not what you think—"

"It's Tatiana!" she growls, slapping my hand away from her.

"Hear that, baby? It's *Tatiana*."

Tatiana blanches. "You two are gross."

She opens the door, but doesn't make it far before Charlie calls out, "Does it make it sicker that he's actually my uncle?"

I palm my face as the front door slams.

"Huh," Charlie muses. "Guess so."

Shaking my head, I look at Charlie like she's officially lost her mind. Why the hell would she say that? Ever since she got here, she's been all attitude and sass. I'm used to it in small doses, easy banters that make me chuckle like when I visited her in New York, but she's different now.

Her expression beams with pride, not caring what Tatiana must think of us.

“Was that really necessary?” Doubt drowns my tone as I go back for my mug and fill it to the top with coffee. I take a sip and set it back down on the edge of the counter between us.

She crosses her arms on her chest and arches one of her brows. “I don’t know, *Uncle Ollie*. Was forgetting about our plans necessary? Hmm?”

Ah. “You’re upset.”

“Consider me worried,” she corrects, sliding onto one of the stools tucked under the breakfast counter. “At this rate, your dick might fall off from all the strenuous activity you put it through.”

I practically choke on air, coughing up a lung at her casual demeanor. “Don’t talk like that! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

Her nose scrunches. “Why would you have a heart attack? Because I said the word dick, or because I’m talking about yours?”

Yep, she’s trying to kill me. “There will be no dick-talk whatsoever, get me?”

Usually, she goes easy on me when it comes to what we talk about. She’s mentioned that asshole Jaxson Clark once since moving here, but only to tell me she didn’t want to talk about him. Whenever I tell her we can, she says the same thing every single time.

He’s not worth the breath.

It kills me knowing she must think about him but bottles up whatever the fuck happened. She said he thought of her as a bet, and while she never came out with it, it hurt her. Everett spoke to the douches parents but got nothing from them, which only pissed Everett off more.

And me? I still want to punch the guy.

But punching teenage boys isn’t going to be good for me now that I’m twice their age. Does it make my fists stop twitching any less? No, especially not when Charlie is involved. I know she doesn’t need protecting, she’s proven herself worthy of taking care of herself, but there’s this heavy feeling in my chest that makes me feel the need to look out for her anyway.

“What if I have a question about—”

Covering my ears quickly, I belt out, “No. Nope. This is where I draw the line. I’m not your middle school health teacher. I’m not here to answer your questions about these things.”

I can hear her loud, bubbly laugh through the palms that cup my ears. Shaking my head, I rest my arms to my sides.

She slides off the stool, her Converse smacking the linoleum floor in a

thud. “Go put on some pants and take me to the museum like you promised. We don’t have all day.”

Eyeing her, I said, “Fine. But you can’t do what you just did with Tatiana. We could get in a lot of trouble if people start making accusations in public about us.”

She waves me off. “Whatever you say, Uncle Ollie.”

“And don’t call me that,” I grumble, turning to my bedroom.

The humor in her tone echoes as she calls out from behind me, “I’m sorry. Would you prefer it if I call you Ollie Poo?”

I’ve known since the day Charlie Tucker came into my life that she is going to be the death of me.

And I think she enjoys every second.

CHARLIE

REGRET TASTES like sour beer on a Friday night. The kind that accompanies bad techno music in a jam-packed house, with teenagers who think the worst thing in life is when the party ends. It smells like Axe body spray and marijuana and feels like an unmarked pill sliding down a dry throat.

It only has one look though.

Oliver James.

The six-four mountain of tan muscle can't be blamed for me falling into the crowd I did since moving to Chicago. I mean, I begged for this opportunity. River and Everett spent months weighing the positive and negatives before agreeing to let me come.

Ollie is the only reason they said yes.

When my old high school counselor at Freemont told me about the connection she had with a board member at the School of Music, it felt like the final sign. I love music, love the windy city, and in many ways, love Oliver James.

After all, Ollie was my first real friend following my adoption. Despite living in a different state, he never made me feel excluded every time he would visit his family in New York. He would tease me about my weird music playlists, the tears in the Converse identical to his, and my secret love for the color pink even though I'm a tom boy through and through.

He made me realize that love doesn't have to be consuming or complicated, it can be easy and innocent.

I do love Oliver James.

But I'm also starting to hate him.

Because he forgot me.

Because of the other girls.

Just ... because.

Beer sloshes over the side of my plastic cup when my overbearing friend and classmate Liam Tolbert crashes down beside me on the already crowded couch. His normally pretty crystal blue eyes are bloodshot, and he smells like he was just skunked, but the boyish grin he flashes me eases some of my annoyance.

“Sup, Barbie?”

I hate when he calls me that. “You smell like ass, Liam.”

He steals my beer, downing half of it. Honestly, I don’t care. It probably tastes like shit anyway, but I hold it for show like Liam taught me. I’ve lost count of how many he’s had, and he’s supposed to walk me back to the dorms soon.

“Don’t be like that.” He passes me my cup back, brushing sweaty strands of his curly ash-brown locks out of his eyes. He’s one of the few who can pull off the longer style, especially the way his hair curls in to frame his tapered face. It makes his baby blues pop, especially paired with his naturally tan skin.

I met Liam the first day of school here. He sat down in the seat next to me during orientation, told me his friends bet him he couldn’t get my number, and proceeded to list all the reasons why I should give him it. I don’t like bets much, but at least he told me he was in one from the start.

How can you say no to this face?

It was actually quite easy.

The rejection cost him fifteen dollars and a slice of pizza from a pizzeria called O’Malley’s down the street from campus. The fifteen dollars went to his friends. The pizza went to me. I needed compensation for my brutal first encounter at the new school.

During the pizza outing, we exchanged schedules, talked music, and joked about the bird lady with an impressive beak nose who led orientation. It was only then I let him have my number, walk me back to the dorm, and informed him we could be friends so long as he didn’t make it weird.

Don’t worry, Barbie. I’m usually into girls with bigger boobs anyway.

That remark probably should have gotten him a smack upside the head, but instead I decided we were going to be good friends. As annoying as he is, he’s safe. I realized that when he took me to a party and never pressured me to drink or smoke or do anything I didn’t want to. He pushed handsy guys away and made me laugh.

Just hold the beer so it looks like you're enjoying yourself. You're too serious.

Liam is the opposite of serious. In fact, sometimes I don't understand why he lives life so carelessly. He skateboards high and goes to class hungover and never seems to study for a single exam. Still, despite his ways, I like being around him.

Unlike Ollie, he understands music. We can talk about assignments and compilations and what instrument would be best suited for different songs. He also doesn't forget about me to play house with skanky women. I mean, who names their kid *Tatiana*?

Liam elbows me. "You look like somebody just peed in your—fuck. How does that go? It's a food. Man, I'm hungry."

Rolling my eyes, I set my drink down. "I can't believe you convinced me to come to this stupid party since we've got our presentation tomorrow. And it's Cheerios, dummy. Now, let's go before you start making stupid decisions."

He laughs and lets me pull him up. "It's not even eleven yet. Why don't you come hang with some of the guys and me downstairs? It isn't as crowded, and they've got beer pong."

My lips twitch. His friends are assholes and I've made no secret of thinking so. There's only one, Jake, I moderately like and it's because he seems closer to Liam than the rest. Not as annoying. "Not happening. I want to go home, and you promised you'd walk me."

He tilts his head back dramatically and groans. "Sometimes I wonder why we're friends."

Pulling him to the door, I shoot him a grin from over my shoulder. "I seem to recall it having to do with my charming personality."

"And tiny boobs," he adds.

"First off," I retort, "my boobs are *not* tiny. They just haven't fully developed, okay? Secondly, I don't see how the size of them has anything to do with why we're friends."

He jerks to halt on the front lawn. I nearly lose my balance before he steadies me, his big hands holding my arms. "Because, Barbie, attraction kills friendships. If I thought you had nice boobs, I'd want to screw you. You'd be singing *Side to Side* by Grande the next day."

Nose scrunching, I brush his hands off. "I can't believe you just referenced Ariana Grande. Now if you're done, can we go?"

He stumbles forward, laughing like a hyena over the invisible item he tripped over. He must be higher than I thought, which means it'll be *me* walking *him* home.

"You're lucky I like you, Tolbert," I grumble, steadying his heavy weight when he starts stumbling again.

His breath is rancid against my face as his lips brush a sloppy kiss against my cheek. It's innocent but gross. "Oh, please. You *love* me."

At the moment, that's questionable.

MY DORM ROOM feels like a prison cell. The boring beige brick walls, tile floors, and bland furniture set does nothing to brighten my already crappy day when I trudge back from a cringeworthy afternoon of classes.

River bought me a blue blanket that has a black vine design, along with fluffy matching pillows and rug. The cheap desk they gave me has chips on the corners from who knows what, and the shelf that sits on the back is barely strong enough to hold my Applied Mathematics for Musicians textbook, much less my folder for Collaborative Songwriting that I take with Liam and twenty other kids.

If Liam hadn't shown up hungover for our presentation, I might not have been in such a foul mood. But after getting a B- on something we could have easily aced had he just eaten something greasy this morning, we wouldn't have gotten a forty-minute lecture on underage drinking, making us miss lunch before rushing to our afternoon classes.

Hangry, I think that's the term I'd use for what I am right now.

The teachers for the youth program don't all teach the college classes for the kids we share the campus with. Two new buildings were built to accommodate the new students coming in specifically for the program, and the staff matched in numbers.

Just as I flop down onto my twin bed, a knock sounds from the door. I'm half tempted to ignore it and pretend I'm not here. It's probably Liam anyway, and he's the last person I want to see.

But the person doesn't go away.

Cursing, I peel myself out of bed and throw open the door, saying, "Liam, this better be good after the bullshi—"

Ollie's brows arch over my less than ladylike greeting. In his hands is an unmarked pink box, but the sweet smell of homemade buttercream frosting tells me what's inside.

He went to Ida's Bakery.

"What has Liam done now?" he inquires, stepping in without an invitation. He does this all the time, shows up when I'm in a bad mood like he knows I need to eat my feelings.

"How do you do that?" I shut my door.

He sits on the edge of my bed, taking up a good portion of it because of his size in comparison to the tiny twin mattress. "Do what?"

I wave my hand at him. "You always bring me dessert when I've had shitty days. Did you bug me or something?"

He snorts, flipping the box open and picking out a vanilla cupcake. Swiping his finger through the frosting and putting it in his mouth, he gives me a loose shrug.

Diving at him, I grab the box. "That better not be mine, buddy, or we're going to have a serious problem."

I won't be taunted by sugary goodness after my day from hell without a fight. It may not be a donut but it's still a sweet I'll devour.

He takes a huge bite out of the cupcake right after I notice it's the only one. Humor dancing in his tone, he says, "Look at me, I'm shaking in my shoes."

His eyes widen when I bolt at him, tackling him backward and making sure the cupcake is safe and sound in my waiting hands. I'm too focused on making sure crumbs don't get everywhere on my unmade bed to realize Ollie is frozen beneath me.

...because I'm straddling him. Like full on, legs on either side, sitting on his lap.

"Charlie—" He clears his raspy throat, keeping his body completely still. "I'm going to need you to get off me."

His voice sounds pained, which makes me flush over how stupid I was. I didn't mean to hurt him.

Quickly getting up, I set the cupcake on the edge of my desk. "I'm sorry, Ollie. I just wanted the cupcake and—"

He sits up, waving me off. "Don't worry about it, kid. Just, yeah, maybe don't do that again. 'Kay?"

Heat swarms my cheeks as I drag my attention to the cupcake, the chipped desk, anything but him. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

The sound of his hoarse laugh causes me to blink at him. He scoots to the edge of the bed so his legs are back over the side and Converse are flat on the

grubby tile. “You didn’t hurt me, Charlie. You don’t need to worry about that.”

I’m confused over why he sounded the way he did then, but I don’t ask. I know the look in his brown eyes that says he doesn’t want me to. So, I drop it.

“Um, so is the cupcake for me or did you just come here to taunt me with it?” Picking it back up, I swipe some of the frosting off the top like he did. The bite he took was half the dessert, making me frown.

He straightens his black t-shirt. “It’s for you, I just love messing with you. Plus, I thought we could go grab some dinner. I was thinking pizza over at O’Malley’s? Or maybe the new Fire and Ice Grill in the center of the city.”

The dinner invite washes away any ill feelings and bad mood leftover from today. “I hear Fire and Ice is really cool. They have an aquarium!”

He rolls his eyes. “What is with you and fish? I remember the time our entire family went to the Neptune and your face was glued to the shark tank.”

“They’re *sharks*,” I said in my best I-can’t-believe-you-don’t-see-how-awesome-that-is way.

He shakes his head and stands. “Your fascination with things that can hurt you is something I will never understand.”

My brows pinch over the odd statement. If we live life avoiding things that could hurt us, we aren’t really living at all. That’s like living with the lights on because we’re afraid of the dark, when we’re really afraid of what’s in it. Or being weary of spending time with people even though we’re afraid of being rejected. Fear is a four-letter word with talons that sink soul-deep when it grasps us. It’s weak and temporary unless we feed it.

Toying with the cupcake, I give him a loose shrug. “Getting hurt is part of life, Ollie. Plus, some things only hurt for a little while.”

He just stares at me with his dark eyes filled with admiration. I’ve seen it before when I told River about my own experiences in foster care over the summer. It’s the slightest eye crinkle, the tiniest head tilt that says *I’m proud of you for being strong*.

Nudging the floor with my shoe, I clear my throat. “Are we getting dinner or what? That half a cupcake won’t keep me from going she-hulk since your big mouth ate most of it.”

Snapping out of his thoughts, he scrubs a palm across his clean-shaven jaw. I’ve never seen him with stubble for more than a day, not that I think he’d look bad with it. It’s just not Ollie. Or, not what Ollie’s job likes

anyways.

“Yeah, kid. Let’s go.”

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest in offense. “Stop calling me a kid. I’m not five.”

His cheeks puff out as he nods. “Believe me, Charlie. I know you’re not a kid.”

For a split second, I think my eyes play tricks on me. His eyes slide down the front of my body, from the sloppy braid I put my hair into this morning, to my black and white striped shirt exposing a sliver of my trimmed stomach, destroyed blue jeans that show a fair amount of suntanned skin, all the way down to the worn gray Converse I love so much. The time it takes for him to travel back up feels like hours, when really, it’s seconds before our eyes are locking again.

His jaw ticks as he averts his gaze. “Yeah. Definitely not a kid.”

The pit of my stomach tingles with warmth. He says it like it’s a bad thing, but I take it as a compliment. It means he can tell I’m growing up—not just in age or looks, but in maturity. I want him to see that.

I want him to see *me*.

Grabbing my dorm keys and cell phone, I walk to the door and glance over my shoulder at him still perched by my bed. “Well?”

An easy grin washes away the unreadable expression darkening his face. “Alright, she-hulk. Let’s go.”

OLLIE

INTREPID IS a tech company that creates an array of new apps my generation would have never dreamed of using.

My generation. Fuck, that makes me feel old.

I never used to care about age. It's another number, another day of the year. Hell, I never gave much thought about the twenty-something kids that would come into the company pitching ideas and testing new designs. They were like me, excited about the world and everything it had to offer.

It wasn't until Charlie came into my life that I realized how much age matters. Like feeling her tiny, weightless body that's both toned and innocent on my lap. Or the way her lean thighs squeezed my hips or her chest brushed my own as she reached for the damn cupcake.

Age matters because Charlie is young.

Because I'm not.

It matters because my body loved how it felt to have her on top of mine, smiling, teasing, taunting. I loved it a little too much.

Knowing she worried about hurting me is still laughable. It makes me wonder what she's done and hasn't, what she's felt and has yet to. Does she know what it's like when a guy gets hard? What it means?

Thank fuck she didn't feel it.

The distractions over the girl I've come to be friends with over the past couple of years don't work. Mindless, wordless fucks or drinking, it doesn't matter. My mind and body think with two separate heads and it makes me feel sick knowing that Charlie can get my body to react the way she does.

Tossing my Styrofoam takeout box into the trash next to my desk, I drop my feet onto the floor and stand up.

Charlie is a good girl, someone who shouldn't be corrupted by somebody like me. I consider her a friend, a person to protect, part of the family.

Thinking of her like anything else is wrong on so many levels.

She's not a kid. Not with the way she thinks or looks at life. Whatever happened to her makes her wise beyond her years, but I'm not sure my admiration outweighs the murderous twitch over the endless possibilities she experienced.

Charlie doesn't act like River when River was first adopted. She's not closed off but the exact opposite. She's hopeful, and airy, a fighter in her own way. For the longest time, I've been suffocating for reasons I can't justify, but Charlie breathes air in me that keeps me going even on the days I want to throw in the towel. Whatever she's gone through, she refuses to let it win.

She inspires me.

Captivates me in ways she shouldn't.

Raking a hand through my hair, I realize how bad I need a haircut. I wanted to get one the other day but opted to stop at Ida's Bakery to get Charlie a cupcake instead. She's right, I always know when she's in a bad mood. It's a feeling, the slightest tightening in my chest like something is wrong.

I ignore the feeling, tell myself it's nothing. One day I won't be able to pretend anymore, and then where will I be?

Lost. That's what.

Erik pokes his head into my office. "Hey, man. Glen says there's going to be a marketing meeting at three in the usual room."

Fuck. That means one of the apps hasn't done as well as expected, which means Glen will be riding everybody's asses until he sees sales pick up.

"Will there be alcohol?" I retort.

He snickers. "Wouldn't that be nice."

Erik is a decent guy. Short but loud, lean but built, with the kind of personality you don't mind being around most of the time. He hasn't been around as long as me but knows his shit. The only downside to the dude is that he has a tendency to run his mouth, and a majority of what comes out makes me cringe.

Truth is, Erik is one of the few decent guys remaining here. When Intrepid started, old management made us believe we played a big part in something the world hadn't seen. They didn't make us wear stuffy suits or sit in cubicles because it was about interacting and learning how new technology could change the world. I may not be on the tech end of things, but I know how to sell shit. It's in my blood.

Then management had to get booted after the manager got caught with his dick in an intern. Apparently, there'd been many inappropriate relations behind closed doors. When they changed up who was in charge, everything around here turned into exactly what I wanted to avoid. I'm not a suit monkey who likes sitting behind a desk with a name plaque, but I stayed because it's all I've known for the past few years.

By the time four thirty rolls around, one intern has quit, one was fired, and Glen has steam coming out of his ears while inventing new curse words that I plan to remember for future use.

Erik and I walk out at the same time, him with his black messenger bag draped over his shoulder, me with a backpack hanging from mine. We talk about the weather, baseball season, his long-time girlfriend and the idea of proposing.

I like Erik because he doesn't ask me too many questions. He'll joke about my hookups sometimes, envying the bachelor life as if he isn't hopelessly in love with Lauren. I always laugh along with him, smirking like I'm proud of the notches in my belt.

I'm not. I haven't been in a long time.

Back in high school I would pride myself in the girls who wanted to meet up in the locker room or under the bleachers in the football field. Shit, I bragged about it to my buddies who gave me shit about my dick falling off.

Now, it's different. Women don't grab my attention for longer than a few hours. They never complain because they get off just as much as I do, but then start to expect shit they never should have. There's a reason I prefer women who listen to what I say, do what I want, and leave when I ask.

Being friends with someone who generally doesn't care about other peoples' personal lives is easier. Safer. It means living in the dark and hiding thoughts and feelings you shouldn't have in the shadows.

Does that make me the monster? I don't like the gut feeling I get over the answer—the truth of reality.

Only monsters have to hide in the dark.

JUST AS I walk through the front door of my place, my phone buzzes in my pocket. Pulling it out, an easy smile forms when I see River's name.

"Hey, Riv."

"Hey. Can you do me a huge favor?"

One brow arching, I lay my backpack on the stool. "Why do I feel like

this has something to do with Charlie?”

Whenever she calls asking about Charlie, she has a certain tone. Maternal, I guess. I’ve always thought River was a natural caretaker, the motherly type. When she told the family she wanted to adopt, we figured it’d be a baby, someone little and helpless that depended on her.

Charlie is none of those things.

“Well...”

Huffing out a sigh, I lean my hip against the counter. “What’s up, River?”

“The school called Everett today about a fight Charlie got into with someone. They didn’t give us the full details, but they did say this hasn’t been the first time she’s acted out. I’m worried. What if sending her there was a bad idea? What if—”

“Hey,” I assure her lightly, “it wasn’t a bad idea. Has Charlie ever done something bad without a purpose?”

She’s silent for a moment. “The counselor also said she’s been hanging out with a group of boys that tend to come to class in less than stellar shape.”

“What does that even—”

“Hungover, Oliver! High! If she gets caught, her social worker will be contacted, and it’ll be a mess. She’s impressionable.”

“She’s Charlie,” I reason. I know River means well, but her worry is clouding what she already knows about Charlie. “She won’t do something unless she wants to. Listen, if you’re asking me to check in on her more, I will. But I’m telling you, she must have had a good reason to get into that fight.”

When she started at The School of Music, I signed papers for them to contact me first if anything happened. Guardians are supposed to get the first-to-know, that’s what I was told when I left them my information. Parents get contacted each term unless there’s a problem, but it isn’t like they can drive to the school whenever Charlie acts out.

“She won’t answer my calls.”

Scrubbing my jaw, I nod absentmindedly. “I’ll see what I can do, Riv. Just take a deep breath, okay? You know she’s a good kid. Letting her come here is the best thing for her. She’s at a great school, has better opportunities, and ...” *Me.* She has me. “And she seems happy.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Thank you. I’m glad she has you, Ollie. I know how much she looks up to you. How much she loves you.”

My lips threaten to curve upward as I head toward the bedroom to change

out of my black slacks and blue button down. “She’s not so bad herself.”

River giggles. “Oh please. I know you love her. Sass and all, you two have had a bond since day one.”

That’s the problem.

Grabbing a pair of dark wash jeans and a green Henley from my dresser, I throw them onto the bed. My gray Converse stare at me from where they sit on the floor.

“Yeah,” I finally reply quietly, “I suppose we have.”

After we hang up, I undo my slacks all while thinking about the fifteen-year-old whose gotten under my skin. Bonds can be tricky. They can be innocent and remain the same or grow into something dangerous and uncontrollable. Based on the stiff nature of my cock remembering her straddling me, I realize how fucked I am.

Palming my eyes, I change, trying to ignore the bulge straining in my jeans. Instead of going to the dorms, I call one of the girls I’ve had a few flings with.

A distraction.

Charlie and I may have a bond, but it’s a distraction I need. A quick fuck. Someone to get me off so I can forget about the bullshit my brain conjures of a girl I most certainly should not be thinking of as anything other than family.

As my niece for Christ’s sake.

I just hope it’s enough.

CHARLIE

WHEELS ON PAVEMENT. That's all I hear. It's a grating sound that normally drives me mad when I'm trying to do homework in my dorm, but it's exactly what I need right now.

The skate park is the one place I go where I can just be. The school's student association raised money to do renovations to the quad so people had a place to skate that didn't require traveling into the city. I found it one night when I was feeling homesick and didn't want to be alone with my thoughts. The noise drowns them out—scraping boards on metal, cheering, flesh on gravel, groaning.

My thoughts can't be heard.

On days when I wish River and Everett were around to tell me it'll be all right I force myself to the park. I let the sun, or sometimes the moon, beam down on me and I close my eyes. My iPod is always with me, blasting anything from Elvis to Halsey in my ears.

Music lets me feel other people's emotions when I don't want to feel my own. Happiness. Sadness. Anger. Anything that I'm not feeling, just so I forget for a little while.

Right now, Adele is playing, and my eyes are closed as I lay in the shade by the oak tree off to the side. I'm not sure how long I've been here.

A body drops beside me and one of my earbuds is pulled away. There's only one person suicidal enough to mess with my music. I guess because he's sixteen, he thinks he's lived long enough not to care if I end him now.

"What do you want?" I grumble, side-eyeing Liam. He's sprawled next to me, one arm tucked behind his head like a pillow, grinning as he sees what I'm listening to.

"What? No Taylor Swift."

I blanch. "You're kidding right?"

He feigns innocence. “You mean you’re not a devoted Swiftie? Color me surprised. And here I thought you loved singing along to vengeful breakup songs.”

Grabbing my earbud, I put it back in my ear. “Just because you’re a closet Swiftie doesn’t mean I am. I have class.”

Even over the music, I hear his gasp. “If you say it any louder you’ll ruin my reputation.” His elbow jabs my side. “See what I did there? Reputation? Like her album?”

I don’t grace him with a reply.

He sits up, his body casting a shadow over me. His lips are tipped down as he watches my blank expression, giving me no choice but to pause my music.

“You’re still mad.” It’s not a question.

Sitting up too, I wind my earbuds around my device. “What do you think? The school knows all about your *reputation* and they told my parents. Now they’re constantly on my butt about saying no to drugs and alcohol.”

In their defense, they’ve always told me to stay away from that stuff. Not that they ever had to worry. I know what those things do to people—I saw it firsthand day after day.

He has the nerve to laugh, but quickly stops when I shoot him a deadly glare. It isn’t funny. Worrying River and Everett is the last thing I want to do. They trusted me to come here and I’m going to make them proud.

“It’s not that big a deal,” he reasons.

But he doesn’t know.

He doesn’t know my name is Charlotte.

He doesn’t know I’m adopted.

He knows nothing important about me.

I’m Charlie, fifteen, a lover of music, a girl who likes to mouth off and play by the rules. Well, for the most part. Liam thinks I’m a goody two shoes because I don’t drink or smoke pot or stay out past midnight on school nights. He thinks it’s adorable that I want to get good grades and keep my nose clean.

I wonder what he’d think of Charlotte. The little girl whose Mommy and Daddy died from overdoses and had no next of kin. Would he like her? Maybe he’d think she would be more fun. The girl who does drugs like her parents, who parties and hooks up with random people.

I could be that girl.

I'm not afraid of being like my parents.

I'm afraid of River and Everett being ashamed of who I turn out to be. Unlike some fosters, I remember the people who decided cocaine was more important than feeding their child.

There were countless days spent crying and hungry and wondering why Mommy wasn't coming to my room to comfort me. Or why Daddy would walk by me looking like death and not give me a second look when I reached my arms out to be picked up.

Some memories are unforgettable, and that's the problem. The select few you want to keep in your arsenal never outweigh the ones you wish you could burn until there's nothing left but ashes; ashes that nothing could ever rise from.

Turning my face away from him, I swipe some hair behind my ear. "It is a big deal, Liam. I don't expect you to understand. You've made it clear you don't care what your family thinks."

Not long ago when Liam was trying to get information out of me, he divulged that his parents are from the outskirts of the city and sent him here when his old school music teacher heard him playing around with mixed tracks in their school studio. He talks about his parents like he's indifferent, but I envy him. They knew he was good enough to come here and supported him for it. I want to tell him he should love them for it, not that he doesn't. People just don't say it enough—I love you.

A slight tap on my arm has me shifting my attention back to him. "Hey, it's cool. In fact, I think it's cute that you want to impress your family."

Scoffing over the word cute has his soft demeanor change back into his usual up-to-no-good self. I'm more comfortable with the smirk on his face than the friendly smile. It suits him better, doesn't make me nervous.

"I'm not cute."

"But you are," he teases.

Our attention is drawn to a boy who wipes out trying to grind on the rail in the center of the park. I cringe, Liam laughs. Thankfully, the guy seems okay.

When he peels himself back up and collects his board, there's no spectacle left to watch. It forces us back into conversation.

"Anyway," Liam presses, "not everyone has it in them to do something outside the box. It's fine."

My eyes narrow. Is he calling me boring?

“Is that so?”

He grins. “Yep.”

There’s challenge in his tone, one I tell myself to ignore. But what’s the harm? I’m not boring. At least, I never thought I was until hanging out with him and his friends. Sometimes their teasing makes me angry, other times it just embarrasses me. I don’t want it to do either of those things.

“I’m fun.”

“Uh huh.” He nods but isn’t convinced.

“I am!” I defend loudly, getting the closest skater’s attention. Blushing, I sink my gaze down to the grass. Grabbing a handful, I try making myself believe it.

I’m not, *not* fun.

“Then prove it.”

My brows pinch. “How?”

His head tilts, studying me. Brushing his chin with his fingers in contemplation, a wide smirk stretching his lips. “Do something nobody expects. I don’t know, like—”

Something inside me snaps. It isn’t anger, per se. Not really. It’s more like a point to prove. And, okay, maybe there is a little resentment over what happened with Jaxson in Bridgeport. My lips still feel his on them even when I push the thought away. I didn’t want to kiss him. I don’t really want to kiss Liam either, but at least it’s *my* choice this time.

I yank his shirt toward me until my lips are on his in a bruising kiss. It isn’t sweet or light or swoon worthy, but rough and fast and careless. When my tongue teases the seam of his lips, he groans into my mouth and opens up, taking over by weaving his hands through my hair and crushing our mouths together.

His tongue dominates my mouth and he tastes like smoke and Gatorade, the red kind that I always see him drinking. I draw back to try regaining control, biting down on his bottom lip and causing his fingers to twitch on my scalp. Angling my head, I deepen the kiss.

He grabs my hips and I swing one of my legs over his lap so I’m straddling him, sort of like I did with Ollie by accident. Then his fingers dig into my bare flesh where my shorts ride up, close to gripping my ass. When they start rounding my bottom, my name is growled from somewhere close by.

I jerk away, wide-eyed when I realize who the husky tone belongs to.

Ollie.

Part of me doesn't care—doesn't *want* to. I texted Ollie a bunch of times over the past few days and he never answered. When I called, he sent it straight to voicemail. My resentment isn't just reserved for Jaxson, I guess.

Liam is trying to catch his breath like me, but he doesn't let me get off his lap when I start to move. I gasp when I feel something hard twitch under me and realize what it is.

"Oh my God, Liam. You're—"

"Hard. Duh. A pretty girl is sitting on my dick," he muses, not caring that Oliver is probably storming over to us.

Ollie's been avoiding me. Why should I care what he thinks? He obviously doesn't give a crap what I do. Still, my gut tells me to stop letting Liam touch me like this. It doesn't mean anything and touching in any way should mean something to me. Especially now.

Liam's statement isn't lost on me. In fact, I feel my cheeks heat and wonder if they're red like I'm sure they are. "It isn't like all guys get hard when girls straddle them."

He gives me a *you're kidding, right?* stare that warms my face ten times more remembering me in Ollie's lap. It was innocent though. No touching or kissing or anything like I just did with Liam.

"Don't be stupid, Charlie." He shakes his head, finally releasing my hips to let me slide off him. "You're hot. You kiss like a porn star in training. And your ass is—"

Ollie appears next to us. "That's *enough*," he all but growls at Liam. His eyes pierce mine, making me cringe. What does he see? Swollen lips? Flushed cheeks? Heavy breathing?

Liam stands, crossing his arms over his chest. He's a good three or four inches shorter than Ollie, with nowhere near as much muscle. But he stands tall like he could take him if it came to that.

His head cocks. "What's it to you?"

Oliver steps forward, crowding Liam's space. It makes me cringe, seeing them standoff like some cheesy movie. "What happens to Charlie is my business, so watch how you speak to her. And for that matter, how you treat her in public."

Half of Liam's lips quirk up. "What, didn't like our little public display? I thought it was nice. What about you, Barbie?"

Both guys look at me, but in two very different ways. Liam is smirking,

knowing damn well I'm speechless. And Ollie ... he looks like he wants to kill someone. The verdict is still out on whether that person is me or Liam.

"Uh..." is all I can manage to squeak. I'm suddenly glad my hair is long, because I use it as a shield to hide my warm face.

Liam chuckles and Ollie turns his focus from me to my overconfident friend. "Shut the hell up and apologize."

His tone is so deadly that even Liam's eyes widen a fraction. "Over what? We were just messing around. It wasn't like I hurt her."

I jump in. "He didn't, Ollie. I—"

"Not now," he snarls.

Pressing my lips together, I glance between them helplessly. I've never seen Ollie so angry before.

Liam curses under his breath and turns to me when he realizes Ollie won't back down until he does. "I'm sorry. Now will you get your guard dog off me? Geez. Who is this dude anyway?"

"He's—"

"Her uncle," Ollie finishes for me. Surprise colors my face. He usually doesn't like telling people he's my uncle. We've never really labeled our relationship, just said we're family. Friends. It never mattered.

Why does it seem like it matters now?

Liam rakes a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, man. Charlie and I were just playing around. It won't happen again."

While I have no intention of making out with Liam again, the statement doesn't sit well with me.

"So what if it does?" I pipe up.

Liam gapes.

I shrug. "I can do what I want with whomever I want. Right, Uncle Ollie? You were my age once."

Oliver's face goes grim. "Exactly."

Waving it off, I focus solely on Liam. "I should probably get going, but you don't need to apologize. Especially because I was the one who initiated the kiss."

Internally, I grin when I see Ollie's fists clench at his sides. I'm not sure why it makes me so happy to see him unsettled by it, but it does. Liam doesn't seem as thrilled, especially not when Oliver looks like he wants to castrate him.

"Yeah, well, uh..." Liam looks between me and Oliver, rubbing the back

of his neck. "I'll see you in class, okay?"

Innocently, I wave him off. He doesn't waste time getting far away from us, which makes me smile. Liam acts all tough until he is face to face with confrontation. Then his baby muscles and can-do attitude turns into can't-do before he hightails it far away.

"What was that about?" I demand angrily, picking up my iPod from the ground.

He doesn't look amused either. "Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing."

I throw my hands up in the air. "We kissed, Ollie. It happens. You kiss lots of girls."

"I kiss *women*. And you weren't just kissing. His hands—"

"I know damn well where his hands were. I was there," I snap, storming away from him.

He wraps his palm around my arm, not hard, just enough to stop me. "The guy looked like he was ready to screw you right in plain sight, Charlie. That's not okay."

The idea alone has my skin crawling, but I don't let him see that. "What if I wanted that? Huh?"

He's silent.

Yanking my arm from his grip, I step away to put distance between us. "You're not my father, Oliver. And you never tell people you're my uncle, so don't bother playing the role when you see fit. Just because we were kissing doesn't mean anything else was going to happen, even if I wanted it to and especially not in broad daylight where anybody can see. I'm young, not stupid."

His jaw ticks. "That's debatable, kid."

"Stop—"

"I'll stop calling you that when you stop acting like one. Now, are you done throwing a temper tantrum or do you need a minute?"

Nostrils flaring, I consider calling him about thirty unique names. I decide not to waste my breath, because it wouldn't change anything.

"I haven't been a kid in a long time, Ollie, and I think you know that. So why don't you let me be a teenager and have some fun without making me feel like a slut?"

He pales and his lips part in surprise. "I never called you that."

"You implied it."

“I would never—”

“Just stop,” I cut him off tiredly. “We haven’t spoken in over a week, and I don’t want our first conversation to be a fight, okay? Let’s just drop this. I’m going home. I don’t care where you go, but I’m exhausted and want to take a nap before dinner.”

“Don’t you want to know why I’m here?” he calls out as I walk away.

Turning around, I continue walking backwards. He could be here because River asked him to. A girl had locked me out of the music room when her time was up and I got mad and kicked the door ... and called her names. Loudly. The school called River and she probably called Ollie.

I shake my head. “Not really. Maybe when you’re done avoiding me for no good reason, you can call me and explain. Until then, see you around.”

He throws his hands up in exasperation before I turn and give him my back. He doesn’t chase me or try to stop me again and I’m glad.

It’s always push and pull with us.

He pushes. I pull.

I wonder when the rope will snap.

OLLIE

THERE'S a pink polished skateboard resting against the wall by the door. It taunts me, calls me out for being a dick to the girl I'm supposed to watch over all because things got tough. And things shouldn't be complicated between me and anyone, least of all Charlie.

I've seen her at the park before, watching people skate. She told me a while ago she's always wanted to learn. This is meant to be a new beginning for her, so I figured it would be a good time to try.

Problem is, I lost my shit when I saw her yesterday with Liam Tolbert. She's mentioned him a few times. At first, I was happy to hear she made a friend. Not as much when I realized said friend was a boy. And despite her assuring me they weren't like that, they certainly looked like *something* since she was practically grinding on him.

I already fucked up my hand punching a car's hood that almost hit me on my way home from the park yesterday, but I suddenly want to put my fist through the wall just thinking about her body on his.

Charlie is young, sometimes I think too young, to be out by herself. I wouldn't let that initial opinion ruin her chances of coming here or getting a dorm, but it's a strong one to have after the shit I witnessed.

Raking my hand through my hair, I dig through my fridge for shit to eat. I was going to order takeout, but that would mean interacting with people. Nobody needs to deal with my moody ass, even the five seconds it takes to exchange money for food.

In hindsight, I can't blame Charlie for giving me attitude. Her texts that she sent earlier in the week are still on my phone, waiting to be answered.

CHARLIE:

I got an A on my PowerPoint

CHARLIE:

Campus pizza sucks

CHARLIE:

Ollie?

I WANTED to answer her but couldn't get myself to even congratulate her for passing the project she didn't think she could. She had been worried when she asked me to help her study for the topic it was on, which I told her was nonsense because she knew her shit when we went through it.

I could have said *I told you so*.

Instead, I said nothing.

What kind of pizza did she get on campus? I would have taken her to my favorite hole in the wall place on the outskirts of the town, where they have cold cheese pizza that you'll sell your soul for a third piece of. One slice is bigger than her face, she'd love it.

Turning my eye back to the skateboard, I slam the fridge closed and pick up my cell. The pizzeria in mind does delivery.

One large cold cheese pizza.

Morill Hall. Room 142.

Thirty minutes.

It isn't much, but it's a step in the right direction for us.

Thirty-eight minutes later, my phone buzzes in front of me on the counter. I drop my BLT onto the plate and smile at the screen.

CHARLIE:

I forgive you

I COULD TEXT HER BACK, but this text doesn't need to be replied to. She won't get upset with me for not answering, and I won't feel guilty for avoiding. The pizza says it all.

I'm sorry.

She knows that already and forgives me. I finish my dinner and stare at the skateboard.

THERE'S a small diner I found about a month after moving to Chicago. It reminds me of Pop's and all the times I'd gone with River or Everett. At first, I'd only go on occasion. Settling into the city had been a difficult transition, especially with a rising company trying to stand on its own two feet with new employees.

It wasn't until meeting Charlie and claiming Pop's as our little place that I found myself coming to Ambrosia Diner more often when I'd return from visiting them. It reminds me of the times I could tease Charlie about pointless things to get her to laugh or banter.

Ambrosia has become our new tradition since she moved here in August. I would pick her up from school despite her protest to walk, and we would argue about safety in a city three times as big—if not more—than Bridgeport. I would order the same cheesesteak sandwich and she would tell me how gross it was. She would switch between the fish fry and salad as if she had to watch what she ate.

Fried food will make me fat.

You don't need to worry about that.

I'm a teenage girl. It's my job to.

There's never any point reminding her she isn't like most teenage girls. Charlie isn't the self-conscious type when it comes to her looks. She loves having a style unique to her and never seems to care what anyone thinks of it. I admire that about her.

What I don't admire is the way she tries to act her age when I know her better than that. Like arguing over stupid things when she knows she's in the wrong or making commentary over pointless shit that wastes both our time.

Sometimes I wonder if she feels the need to draw back from the person she was forced to be—the person she had to grow up to be to survive. For that, I'll always have a soft spot that makes me overlook her bad days. Charlie is young, sure, but most of the time she doesn't act it. She has goals, and does whatever she has to, to make them happen.

Right now, I'm seeing a mix of the two versions of her. The way she's sitting with her knees propped against the edge of the table reminds me of how some teens would sit; casual, carefree. Yet, she's telling me about a meeting she had with a school advisor about potential colleges, focuses of study, and what it could do to her future.

She's a walking contradiction.

“I don’t see why people judge everyone so quickly,” she rants, tearing the napkin that was wrapped around her silverware into pieces. “I got that enough from Dr. Polk. I mean, who cares if I don’t have *one* specific career path? Film scoring and music production can work hand in hand, you know?”

I’ve been nodding along for the twenty minutes we’ve been here. She only stopped when the waitress came to get our drink order, then our food order. As soon as the middle-aged woman walked away, she’d start back up again.

She rolls one of the pieces up into a ball and flicks it at me. “If I told her I wanted to be a composer, she would have stopped pestering me. Lots of kids want to do that, but I don’t want to limit myself to *just* film scoring.”

“Of course not,” I agree. Honestly, I’m not caught up on the positions in the music industry. When I heard she was coming here for school, I did some research on the classes the youth program offered, not focusing so much on the career paths it geared them for. I know she loves playing piano, but won’t talk about the possibility of doing performances.

Her shoulders drop. “Sorry, I’m just irritated. I really like it there, but the counselor they assigned me is really annoying. She always wants in on my business.”

“Isn’t that their job?”

She rolls her eyes. “They’re supposed to help us, not judge us. If I wanted to feel bad about my choices, I’d see my new therapist more.”

My lips twitch at that. We haven’t spoken about her new therapist here in the city much. I think she’s still embarrassed about seeing one like she was in Bridgeport.

“How’s that going?” I press.

Her lips flatten.

“I get it,” I say. “You don’t like talking about it, but you agreed to go. I don’t expect you to tell me your deep, dark secrets. All I want to know is if it’s helping.”

The pieces of napkin are all she looks at as she gathers them up into a little pile. Her eyes dart behind me right before our food is deposited onto the table. It’ll be her excuse not to talk.

Think again, little girl.

“Charlie.”

Her nostrils flare. “Oliver.”

“If Dr. Griffin isn’t working, I’m sure you could switch to the therapist

offered through—”

“No!” Her outburst causes a few people to glare at us, making her wince and sink into the wooden bench seat. “I refuse to see a school therapist.”

“Why?”

She eyes me like I’m stupid for asking, but I want to hear it from her. “I don’t want anyone knowing. If they find out...”

I wait for her to finish, not giving her a chance to avoid this conversation. Before she moved, I spoke with River and Everett about their conditions. They relented about the dorm room as long as she had a single, but they still wanted her to go to therapy. So, I did some research and asked around until I found Dr. Griffin. She’s supposed to be one of the best Chicago has to offer.

“They’ll think I’m broken, Ollie.”

I inhale slowly, letting oxygen flood my lungs before gathering my response. “Do you ever think that maybe the people who go to therapy aren’t the broken ones at all, but the strong ones?”

She blinks.

I shift in my seat. “I think people who are willing to seek help have a lot more strength than they give themselves credit for. And who cares about what others think of them going to get it? There isn’t one person who doesn’t need guidance once in a while. Those who actually go are willing to fix things instead of pretending they’re fine. That’s strength.”

She doesn’t answer, just stares at her chef salad that looks more like an appetizer than dinner.

“So, Dr. Griffin?” I repeat.

Her eyes finally lift to meet mine. “She’s fine, Ollie. But until you’re one of those supposedly strong people who attend sessions to fix yourself, you won’t understand anything I have to say. Or, for that matter, what I feel.”

Frowning at her, I try thinking of a reply. She’s not wrong, I don’t understand. I won’t tell her I do or try to be on the same field as her. Our experiences aren’t the same. My eyes connect with the burns on her hands to emphasize that point in my brain.

Noticing my gaze, she draws her hands into her lap, out of my sight. “I don’t think I’ll ever agree with you. I’m not so sure being broken is such a bad thing sometimes.”

My brows arch. “Why is that?”

She picks up her fork. “Because how much lower can you get from there? Rock bottom is only so deep, Ollie.”

In that moment, I'm not sitting across from a fifteen-year-old anymore. The girl in front of me is patched up by old memories and haunting experiences, stitched together with cheap thread and a dirty needle. She exists in the present but lives in the past, trying to push past the bad shit to build her future without busting at the seams.

"We'll agree to disagree," is what I say.

She stuffs lettuce in her mouth to avoid replying. Avoidance. Something a lot of teenagers do.

But Charlie isn't a normal teenager.

Not by a long shot.

CHARLIE

THE CLASSROOMS here aren't the same as Freemont's, which is stupid. They hold the same furniture—desks, chairs, bookshelves, chalkboards, and whiteboards. We read and discuss and debate on topics, some I like better than others.

The School of Music is more freeing. Music echoes throughout the halls. Pianos, drums, people singing. It's the atmosphere that I love here, even if we still have to take some of the same boring classes Freemont would have required. People are what make the difference.

Liam is watching me draw pictures in my new notebook. This one is black. The spirals are undone and jagged at the ends from me bending and playing with them. I bought it for myself before coming here, a fresh start.

We're in Composition Writing, which uses elements that English Literature at Freemont would have, just focused on what we want to do with the future. That's another reason I like it here better. Freemont could have taught me how to write papers, balance checkbooks, and learn how to avoid wars, but this school can put me on top of a career I can mold into the life I want. Something Freemont, and Bridgeport, can't allow me.

I miss my family.

But I'm meant to be here.

Liam leans forward and glances at the dog I'm attempting to draw. He snorts, drawing the attention of a few people around us before they look back at the teacher.

"You drew a penis with eyes."

My eyes widen. "It's a puppy!"

He barks out a laugh, cupping his mouth hoping the teacher didn't hear. The scowl we get from the dark-haired man up front tells us that he heard just fine.

Glaring at Liam, I scribble the *dog* out with my pen and jerk the notebook away from him. He doesn't need to see anything else and get me in trouble again.

When class ends, we walk out together. It's lunch, which means raiding the dining hall before afternoon classes start. Liam tells me he wants cheese fries. I swear he lives off them and doesn't gain a pound.

He insists on buying for the both of us, so I find the cheapest premade sandwich and a bottle of water. Once everything is paid for, he guides us to a two-person table by the window.

His mouth is full when he leans back and stares at me. "What ever happened to your guard dog?"

Uncapping my water, I study the turkey on rye in front of me. It has provolone instead of the usual cheddar. I could do without the pickles though. "What would you order to drink at a movie theater?"

His fry stops halfway to his mouth as he arches his brows like I'm nuts. "Uh, I don't know. Soda?"

I sip my water and nod.

"So ... your guard dog?"

Rolling my eyes, I unwrap my lunch. "I assume you're talking about Oliver. And I don't know what you mean."

"He freaked out on me."

"Yeah, well..." I don't know what to say. There's no denying how he acted, and I have no real explanation to give him.

He shrugs and pops more fries into his mouth like he doesn't mind getting a non-answer. The nacho cheese sauce he drenched the starchy potatoes in is dripping all over the place, making me cringe just waiting to see it fall onto his crisp white tee.

The short sleeves of Liam's tee make me note that his arms are more muscular than most of the boys I have class with. He told me once he goes to the gym with his friend Jake a few times a week. He invited me to go but I've never been a fan of working out with people around.

Or working out ever.

"Mountain Dew," he says after we eat for a few moments in silence.

My head tilts.

"That's what I'd order at the theater."

I smile to myself.

We finish our lunch in comfortable silence before parting ways for

different classes. Afternoons are my favorite because I get to spend quality time in front of a piano. The teacher shows me how to write music and recreate it through the keys. An hour and a half every single day is dedicated to a melody I make.

Sometimes I try staying later to get more time to practice, but I have History of Composers at the end of the day I need to attend to gain my history credit. I've been late twice, and three times means they'll report it to my adviser, who will call Oliver.

Well, they're supposed to. I may have changed his number on their forms so they can't reach him. It was my way of saving the disappointment he'd feel when they called.

Thankfully, it hasn't been often. Twice, to be exact. Both times was Liam's fault, which I explained to River and promised Everett it wouldn't happen again. I won't need to make that promise a third time.

When I walk into my dorm building, I see a pink package resting on the floor in front of my door. It causes me to pause for a moment before smiling and squatting to pick up the familiar unmarked cardboard box that smells of sweetness and sugar highs.

Opening it, my lips stretch into a wide grin at the donuts resting inside. Just as I reach for one, a voice behind me makes me yelp.

"It's dangerous to eat food that you find on the floor," it says.

Not it. Ollie.

Turning with a donut in hand, I raise it up as if to toast him. "These boxes are your calling card. It's only dangerous if it's from a stranger according to my mom."

Part of me wants to cringe for referencing her so casually. Not River—my birth mom. I do that sometimes without thinking, because she'll always be part of my past. I guess she's like lots of moms to warn me about strangers. She would know how dangerous they are. She brought them into our home.

"Anyone could have left it."

Dropping the donut back into the box, I pull out my keys and unlock my door. "You're right. There's nothing stranger than an old man leaving donuts at my room."

Back turned, I picture his lips twitching at my comment. I chuckle lightly when I hear him grumble, but neither of us mentions anything while we walk inside.

Setting my bag on the ground and the box on my desk, I hear Ollie close

the door behind him. Inside the box are three donuts. There are always three.
Three donuts.

Three boxes of candy at the theater.

Three is our thing.

He doesn't make himself comfortable like usual, but hovers by the door. My back is still to him as I decide which donut to eat first. Two are plain with pink frosting, and one is chocolate coated in pink. He always chooses the ones with sprinkles even though he hates them. He always tells me they taste like cardboard, so I always ask how he knows what cardboard tastes like. Every single time, he eats them anyway. Secretly, I think he likes them.

I reach into the box and grab him one but freeze when I turn around and see what he's holding.

"What...?"

He grins. "You wanted to learn."

The skateboard is shiny and new and *pink*. Like brighter than bubble gum and lighter than neon. The wheels are black and there's something lining the rims.

My eyes narrow. "Are those flowers?"

His laugh is airy. "Don't act like you hate it. I know you, remember? You can pretend you're a tom boy all you want. Pink is your thing."

Pink was *Charlotte's* thing. Her room was pink—pink walls, pink bedding, and pink rug. Her favorite skirt was long and rose colored, with little hearts lining the hem. When her mother did her hair, she would use the fluffy pink scrunchie to keep it together.

I tell myself that red is my favorite color. It's bolder and brighter and stronger than pink. It's like pink reborn.

He holds out the board and waits for me to take it. Putting the donut back into the box, I shift and refocus on the present. Slowly, my fingers wrap around the edge and pull it toward me. Grazing the smooth middle, I think about my old foster brother.

Devon stole the brown skateboard he used. He wouldn't say from where because he didn't want me getting in trouble for knowing. He would tell me that skating felt like freedom.

What's freedom taste like?

Like flying, he would always say.

He taught the youngest boys how to skate when our foster parents were away. I would watch them from the front lawn as they practiced on the

sidewalk. One time, Devon fell showing him how to do a basic move. He scraped up his knee and ripped his pants, staining the denim with blood.

When our foster mother got home, she asked what happened and he said he fell raking the leaves. It was a smart save considering she assigned us all yard work to do while we were out of school for the summer.

He asked if I wanted to learn. *Don't you want to know what freedom tastes like, Charlie?*

I told him someday I would.

"Well?"

Snapping from my thoughts, I glance up at Ollie. He's waiting for my reaction which I realize I'm holding back by losing myself in the past like always.

"I can't believe you remembered," is what I come up with as I go back to examine the board in my hands.

He steps closer and taps the middle section. "This is the deck and griptape." Shifting the board in my hands so he's gripping the deck too, he points toward one end. "The nose," he gestures toward the opposite end, "and the tail."

Gaping at him as he turns it upside down, I listen as he lists each part. When he's done, he finally looks at me. The smile on his face falters for a moment and his brows twitch.

"What?"

"You know the parts?"

He shrugs. "I asked the guy in the shop I bought it from to show me what everything is."

To him it's no big deal. Maybe it's just ten minutes of his time with a stranger to understand the basics enough to show me. But it's more than that. It's dedication and friendship. Another way that says, *I'm here*.

My hand drops from the board knowing he has it, so I can wrap my arms around him for a hug. The board presses between us until he lowers it, wrapping his free arm around me and squeezing.

"Does this mean you like it?"

"I love it."

"Even though it's pink?"

Especially because it's pink.

I just nod.

He pulls back first, setting the board down on the ground in front of me.

Timidly, I put my sneaker onto it and roll it back and forth. Devon always talked about the wind on his face when he went out at night.

Frowning, I look up at him through my lashes. "I don't know how to ride. I don't suppose the guy taught you any moves?"

He chuckles. "No, but I know you can learn. Plus, you've been going to the skate park for how long? Surely you've seen how some of those guys do it."

Eyes narrowing a fraction, I ask, "Is that why you were there the other day? You know, when you saw—"

He holds up his hand. "I'd rather not relive those memories, thanks. Yes, I went there to surprise you."

I giggle before I can stop myself. "I think you were the one surprised."

His expression tightens. "That isn't funny, Charlie. I told you I don't want to talk about it."

Sighing, I brush it off. "Whatever. I think you're being stupid, but I'll drop it. Thank you for the skateboard. I'm still afraid of getting on it, but I'll try."

He nudges the board with his shoe. It isn't his Converse, but a pair of fancier dress shoes. In fact, he's not in his usual jeans and tee like what he wears when he stops by. His black slacks are slightly wrinkled, and the white button-down he wears is half untucked from the waistband, like he doesn't care how he looks.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

It's not his time to leave work.

"Took an early day."

I remember the donuts behind me and then glance down at the board. He came here to give me presents.

"What's that look for?" he questions, bumping my arm with his shoulder.

Drawing my lips in and contemplating my answer, I decide on the truth. Ollie doesn't deserve my lies.

"I guess I just don't quite get why you would come here," I admit, grabbing the donuts and sitting on the bed. I pat the spot next to me, but he remains where he is.

He clears his throat and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "It's not that hard to believe, is it? I wanted to check up on you and see how things are."

"You avoided me." He goes to answer, but I cut him off. "I forgive you,

but I'm just saying. You don't have to keep buying me things. The pizza was plenty."

He smirks. "Knew you'd love it."

I pick up a donut and hand it to him. "For the record, I'm glad you're here. I just know that you have a lot going on at work. You don't need to check in on me."

He accepts the dessert and takes a large bite, getting crumbs on my floor. "Maybe I missed you."

I like that he doesn't remind me he's my guardian or that it's his job to look out for me. He never makes me feel lesser because of our new dynamic.

I evade his eyes and start eating. "I am pretty easy to miss, being awesome and everything."

He snorts. "So humble."

Wiping sprinkles off my lip and setting the box down onto my mattress, I tuck my legs under me. "Anyway, what do you plan on doing the rest of the night?"

His head cocks to the side. "Have something in mind, kid?"

My lips twitch.

I'm not a kid.

Shaking it off, I nod. "Movie?"

He grins. "Extra butter on the popcorn?"

"Duh."

He nods toward the door. "Let's go."

LATE FALL ARRIVES and turns the rain showers into sixty-degree sunshine and breezy wind. People say Chicago gets a lot more tourists this time of year because nobody is forced to wear rain jackets and boots to protect themselves from the downpour.

I like when it rains. I can watch it from my dorm window and listen to it beat against the tin arch covering the front doors. It's like its own melody to lull me to sleep.

Sometimes I'll have music playing from my iPod, but it freezes too much to listen to for as long as I like. After having it for years, the idea of it breaking hurts. I've depended on the music it holds to get me through a lot. The day it completely stops working I'm not sure what I'll do.

Whenever I'm nervous, I run my hand down the crack in the screen to remind myself that even broken things survive. Ollie may not believe in

broken people, but I do. He hasn't experienced the burns, the stares, the touches. He doesn't understand.

I don't want him to. *Do I?*

It's been over a month since he gave me the skateboard. It sits in the corner of my room. I told him I brought it to the park, which isn't a lie ... mostly. I *did* bring it to the park one night when I needed fresh air. iPod in one hand, board in the other, I rested against the oak tree and listened to the traffic and other typical city noises outside of campus.

Not once have I gotten on the board. Turns out, just because I tuned out Charlotte doesn't mean I tuned out her fears. I'm still terrified of falling.

I told my new therapist that once. Dr. Griffin had smiled when I told her. She smiles too much, not like Polk. Polk didn't want to give anything away, which used to frustrate me. Griffin paints a fake expression on her face that tries to comfort people.

It just annoys me.

What's one of your fears?

Falling. I'm afraid of falling and not being able to find the strength to get back up. Once you're down, people like to keep a boot on your chest and watch you struggle. They laugh and wait to see how long it'll take you to fight back.

Sometimes you don't want to.

Most of the time you have no choice.

Polk would tell me that's the PTSD talking. Griffin knows about it, agrees with Polk, but doesn't bring it up as much. She focuses on how the medication makes me feel, if I sleep at night, and how I'm transitioning.

How have things been at your school?

Good. I talked to a girl today and told her I liked her shoes. It was a lie. They were ugly. But it was my attempt at being social because Liam never showed up for lunch. I found out after school he was off getting high with his friends in the loading dock. Shocker.

As for sleep ... that's another story. There isn't anybody around to wake me up and sit by my bed when I'm sweating and shaking and struggling to breathe after a nightmare. They don't happen as often because I started taking melatonin before bed to knock me out. I haven't told anybody yet because all they need to know is that I'm sleeping better.

The nights I don't take it and wake up in a cold sweat, I lay in bed picturing River stroking my hair or Everett telling me about bands he used to

love listening to, to distract me. He's not a music person, which is fair. I'm not a book person. We just make conversation for the sake of talking—for comfort.

Sometimes when I wake up, I want to text Ollie. He told me he'd be here in a second if I need him, but I refuse to. Needing people means being dependent on them. As much as I love Ollie, I don't want him to have that power over me.

Next week is break, which means River and Everett will be visiting. Secretly, I've been counting down the days. Ollie asks if I'm excited to see them, and I try playing it off. Inside, I'm screaming to get the kind of hugs only River can deliver. The kind that squeezes out the pain temporarily and fills the cracks with love.

In the past month and a half, Ollie and I have made movie outings a weekly event. Sometimes he chooses what to see, but mostly he leaves it up to me. I think it's because he knows I won't choose something cheesy and romantic, though I think he'd watch anything if I ask him to.

Anything for you, kid.

I asked him last week when we went out what else he does when I'm not bothering him.

You're never a bother, Charlie.

But I am. He's thirty and single and I take up a lot of his time. If he isn't taking me to the movies, he's picking me up and dropping me off for my therapy sessions. Sometimes he'll show up on Fridays before the work day ends to take me out to dinner.

He always gets weird when I bring up him dating. It isn't the same kind of reaction he has when I talk about boys. His lips don't pinch, his eyes don't look angry, and his shoulders don't tense. It's different, like asking him about girls is an off-limits conversation.

When he took me out for frozen yogurt after the movie ended, I told him I want to see him happy. He asked what he looked like if not happy, so I told him the truth. It was the same look I had in my eyes when I was trapped in my dorm or off under the oak tree in the park.

Lonely, I had told him.

I remember the way his eyes penetrated mine for a solid minute as we filled our cups with yogurt and loaded them with toppings. His is always boring vanilla and cookie crumbles. I try something new every week.

I'm not lonely now, am I?

I wanted to tell him he'd never be lonely as long as I'm around, but I didn't. Instead, I bit my tongue and acted like I didn't know how to answer. He wouldn't want to hear that anyway.

Before he dropped me off at my dorm that night, I told him he should have fun—date.

You should take a girl to the movies.

Didn't I just do that?

I mean a woman.

He stared at me with a tight smile on his face before nodding once. It isn't like he hasn't rubbed it in my face that he sees women and not girls. It's like he wants to get a point across. Even now, I still don't know what went through his head when I got out of the car and waved him goodbye.

Rolling down the window, he'd called my name. *Movies should be seen with people you already know and want to spend time with.*

His smile had changed into something softer when he wished me goodnight and drove off after I made it to the front door of my building.

What he said still makes me smile.

Ollie is the only person I want to see movies with. With him, the dark doesn't seem so bad. I never have to worry about unwanted touches or kisses or people lurking for the moment to pop out because of a bet. He would protect me if something like that happened, even though he knows better than anyone that I can protect myself.

Movies are only fun with you too, Ollie.

OLLIE

SEEING River and Everett walk hand in hand through the Art Institute with Charlie walking beside them has my chest pinching. It's not a new feeling, but a surprising one to have when I'm genuinely happy they're here.

I didn't lie to Charlie when I told her I didn't believe in love like River does. It has never been in my best interest to invest in working toward a family until I felt like the time was right. But that didn't change the green filter I had seeing the three of them laugh and poke at each other like a true family.

And Charlie, shit, she deserves this life. I know she loves being in Chicago, but her features have been lighter since we picked them up at the airport. She misses them. I do too.

The Art Institute is always a favorite with River, and they've added a few newer exhibits that Charlie researched before their plane landed. It's tradition to come in and walk around like I did with River before Charlie entered the picture.

Now, it's more than that. We'll always be a family, but I know those three have a stronger bond because of what they share. And it doesn't make me jealous that it exists, because bonds aren't always easy to withhold. Staring at Charlie as she laughs and nudges Everett's shoulder makes me see just how true that is.

My envy runs deeper than that, rooted by pure selfishness. Sometimes the people you want to embrace, to accept as your family in different ways, can't be accepted in that role. Life is a bitch that way, dealing you cards and watching them scatter across the floor when you realize you can't hold them all. Not forever.

For now, I have them here. River and Everett for at least the next few days, and Charlie... Well, who knows how long she'll stick around? I don't

like to dwell on it considering she has two years of school left. What matters is that she's happy. She's passing all her classes, she doesn't get into unwarranted trouble, and she's doing better.

"Ollie!" Charlie calls, jogging over to me and tugging on my shirt sleeve. "You walk so slow. Catch up."

Grinning, I let her pull me. "My old man legs can't handle all your energy."

Everett shakes his head where he and River stand off to the side as Charlie and I approach them. "If you're old, so am I."

"Well..."

He rolls his eyes and let's go of River's hand to match my steps as we keep walking through the building. River and Charlie are already a few feet ahead, arms linked as they point toward a painting off to the side.

"How have you been, man?" Everett asks. We haven't had a lot of time to talk since they got here, and we don't talk nearly as much as we used to now that he's married to River.

"Same as usual." I shrug. "You?"

He stops walking and tilts his chin to the side, walking away from the girls as they veer toward a display.

Everett studies Charlie for a moment before turning to me. "Remember that Clark kid that took Charlie to the movies?"

One of my brows quirks. "Yes."

There are too many times I think about Jaxson Clark when I see Charlie talking to Liam. She shut down after he took her to the movie and admitted what he'd done. Now the pain is gone, and as much as it pisses me off that Liam seems to help, I'm glad. From what River told me, she was a zombie throughout the summer until she moved here.

His arms cross on his chest. "His cousin put him up to it, some guy named Mason Mills. He's on a few different sports teams at Freemont."

My lips twitch in a mixture amusement and curiosity. "And you know this how? Did you blackmail somebody to get this information?"

He chuckles. "I know the right people to ask, is all. The Clark kid's dad happens to be a partner with the company, so I know what strings to pull. That doesn't matter. What matters is that those two idiots hurt Charlie."

I blink. What did he do?

"Everett, you're making me nervous."

He's always been a protective guy, and I get it. I felt the same about

River, especially after finding out he got involved with her when he was still with Isabel. Through it all, I know he will always protect the people he cares about most which means he must have pulled more than a few strings.

His expression doesn't give anything away, but I notice the flash of something prideful in his eyes. "Coach still reaches out to me once in a while, so we had a little chat about Mason Mills. Can't do much about the Clark kid because he's homeschooled. But Mills has been known to treat girls like shit, and apparently Charlie was a constant target."

My jaw ticks at the news. "Coach knew?"

"He heard some gossip, never knew if it was true until I brought up Mason Mills bugging her. He put two and two together. Long story short, he had enough evidence to bench Mills for the year."

Well, fuck. "That's..."

"He's lucky he wasn't expelled," he reasons, misinterpreting my lack of words. "The zero-tolerance policy for bullying is usually much more punishable, but I figured someone who's built on sports status will suffer just fine not being able to play."

Holding up my hands, I say, "I'm not thinking anything bad, man. In fact, I'm glad you stuck it to that asshole. I just wish there was something to be done for Jaxson."

The name alone makes Everett's features tighten. I want to tell him I get it, but I'm not sure he'd understand. He took on the father figure to Charlie, the protector. I don't have that same right or role.

"Don't worry about it," he replies casually, looking back over at his wife and daughter. "I'm just glad she won't have to deal with either of them again."

I want to point out that there will be summer break. Bridgeport isn't big enough to avoid people like them, especially considering the ties they all seem to have. But, that's a problem for next year when the time comes.

Before we can say anything else, Charlie glances over her shoulder and locks eyes with me. She reaches out her hand and gestures for me to come over.

Everett starts walking with me over to them. "I'm glad she has you, Oliver. I think Chicago is where she's meant to be, even if we miss her at home."

I don't have to tell him that she misses them too, because he already knows. So, I just spend the rest of the day with the people I care about and

absorb every second knowing that the people who hurt Charlie got what came to them.

When she smiles up at me, I crack.
That smile means more than it should.
It means the end of me.

THE REST of the week flies by as we hit up various tourist spots like we're visiting them for the first time. Most of them Charlie and I have gone to when time permits with our schedules, but it doesn't stop her from dragging Everett and River to her favorite areas and experiencing it all again.

Seeing her face light up when I buy us all tickets for the Mob Bus Tour has River laughing and Everett shaking his head as if he doesn't remember all the facts she can spout about Al Capone and other famous mobsters from history. I think the only television she watches are documentaries on murderers and museums, which is entertaining considering most teenagers are gaga over live concerts and cheesy sitcoms.

After our fourth day out in the city, Charlie and River went back to their hotel room and Everett and I stayed behind in the bar downstairs. Catching up with him was easy, it always had been. We could talk about sports, work, or throw it back to school before the world caught up with us.

Now our common ground expands further than just the most recent football game, or if the current president is going to screw over corporations with tax cuts. We have Charlie.

He wraps his hands around a bottle of beer and pulls it toward him. "Her birthday is less than five months away. Seems like we just adopted her, you know?"

I've got a scotch resting untouched on the counter in front of me.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls something out of the wallet he produces. My brows pinch when I see it's two small white pieces of paper.

"I got these after she mentioned they were coming to the city in the spring and noticed it was the week following her birthday," he told me, sliding tickets over. "We'd be short on time if I came to take her, and I don't like the idea of River coming on her own. We thought maybe you could, if you're interested."

The tickets are for an Imagine Dragons concert in March. They're good seats, too, near the front of the stage. I've been to a few shows around the city, but nothing that's been held in The House of Blues.

“She’s going to love these.” I pick one up and examine it, noting the time. It’ll be late by the time it’s over.

Like Everett, I know how much she likes the group. She doesn’t have a set genre she listens to; she embraces music in all forms. I think she said it helps her learn better when she’s forced to play various pieces in classes. She showed us what she’s learned of a Beethoven song her piano teacher is teaching her. She thinks she’s bad but won’t listen to us when we tell her it’s beautiful.

You’re supposed to say that, she had argued, brushing off our compliments. *That’s what family does.*

I want to point out that family tends to be the most honest people when it comes to dishing out opinions. We never want to see anyone hurt, but we never want to build people up based on nothing. Charlie is talented. She knows that, just doesn’t do well with people confirming it.

“Will you take her?” Everett asks, sipping his drink.

It draws me back to reality. “I’ll make sure I put in a request off at work, man. She’s going to love this present.”

He smiles. “I hope so.”

Sometimes I wonder what goes through his head when he thinks about his family. Shortly after he and River got married, they decided to adopt Charlie. He never talked about having a family, but that was because he’d spent years in a relationship that was going nowhere.

He’s always been a fierce protector, meant to have someone like Charlie in his life. He’s good for her, so I think her being here is harder on him than River. These tickets are a reminder that he knows what she likes and wants to make her happy. Maybe he doesn’t realize sending her to Chicago shows that in the deepest way possible.

After an hour, I head back to my place. Charlie has been staying with them instead of her dorms, getting a chance to spend time outside campus and with her family. They go to breakfast together and meet up with me later. She’ll text me with a location, usually a park or restaurant, and we’ll fill our days with tours and food until our feet hurt and stomachs are full.

Thinking about the week ending means going back to reality come Monday. Back to work for me, school for Charlie, and Everett and River will be back in New York living their lives. River teaches elementary art at Freemont and co-owns Painter’s Choice now, and I know being around kids makes her happy. It’ll only be a matter of time before they start having some

of their own.

I'm used to the back and forth, but Charlie isn't. When River mentioned how fast the break went, I noticed Charlie's eyes glazing over from the idea of a temporary goodbye.

I bought her three donuts to make her feel better, and she shot me a grateful smile knowing I saw the distant tears.

Just before I head to bed, my phone dings from my nightstand. Everett's name pops up when I hit the notification. Lips twitching downward, I draw my brows in and study it.

EVERETT:

Remember when you stormed in my office and threatened to punch me if I hurt River?

WETTING MY LIPS, I shoot him back a hesitant yes and wait for his reply. I'm not sure why he's texting me at ten o'clock at night, especially about something like this. It's too random to be a walk down memory lane.

My eyes widen when I see him answer with a photo we all took at the Lincoln Park Zoo. Charlie wanted to see the penguins, even though she's seen them at least three times before. Everett paid to have a family picture done before we left, and I never saw the outcome until this moment.

Lips pressed together, I swallow past the lump in my throat. I'm not looking down at Charlie like she's my best friend's daughter or my niece. My hand is pressed against her lower back and her arm is hooked around my waist like we're two pieces of a larger puzzle. I don't remember touching her like that, but I do remember tensing the moment her arm went around me.

It was friendly. That's all.

That's all.

So why does my face say something completely different as I look at the smiling blonde in torn jeans a loose sweater standing beside me like she belongs there.

Belongs with *me*.

EVERETT:

Don't think I won't extend the same warning to you, Oliver. You're protective of her, I get it. But even protection has lines.

MY MOUTH is drier than the Sahara Desert as I try collecting a response. I type out at least three different replies before backspacing them all and dropping onto my bed in a frustrated groan.

Everett isn't stupid. He knows what I won't admit—won't accept. That picture may show a close-knit family of four, but there are dynamics nobody can see woven into the colored image of us.

Charlie's big smile.

My focused eyes.

The way our bodies are angled.

I curse before scrolling through my phone and finding a name, any name, that could make me move past this. Whatever *this* is. Deep down, I know it's not that easy. Doesn't mean I can't fool myself into believing otherwise.

Before I select a woman, my phone buzzes. Dred fills my gut over the possibility of Everett's wrath. Even through text, I feel his cold warning.

Whether he's a hypocrite or not for warning me away, it doesn't stop guilt from flooding my chest.

CHARLIE:

Waffles at 8?

DOES Everett know she's texting me? I try letting them have at least one meal together before I intrude, but it's their last day in Chicago before flying out tomorrow afternoon. I want to tell her I'll be there, that I wouldn't miss our common argument over what proper toppings to put on waffles and pancakes.

OLLIE:

I'll meet you for lunch

NOT WAITING FOR HER ANSWER, I tap on the closest hookup I can find to help me get through the night. It's an excuse. I'll use her and she'll use me, and we'll walk away in the morning both satisfied.

She picks up on the second ring.

"Becca? It's Oliver..."

CHARLIE

THE PAVEMENT under the wheels of my board has me unsteady, but Liam promises not to let go. His hands rest casually on my hips as he walks us down the path, telling me what to do with my arms so I don't fall.

Just as we're about to go down the tiny decline, I start flailing, causing the board to kick out from under me. Liam grabs my waist and stops me from eating dirt before it's too late. Setting me on my feet, he gives me an exasperated look before turning to see the pink board roll away.

"You have to stop being afraid or you'll never do anything on this," he says, jogging over to grab my board before it gets too far.

My shoulders drop as I peel off the stupid black helmet he made me wear. It tugs on my hair and makes me feel silly. Nobody else wears one.

"I can't just turn it off."

He tucks the board under his arm when he comes back to me. "You can't just wheel around flat surfaces forever, Charlie. How long have I known you?"

Nibbling my inner cheek, I shrug. "I don't know, a few months?"

He nods once. "You've never been afraid of anything, so don't let this stop you. We all get hurt at least once while learning. It's no big deal."

It isn't getting hurt that I'm afraid of, but he doesn't need to know the inner workings of my mind. I'll leave that mystery for my therapist.

"One more time?" he presses, putting the board back down between us.

Sticking out my bottom lip, I consider it. If I tell him no, we'll just go back to our dorms. He'll probably hangout with his friends or find a party to go to. I'll put on some music and do homework.

I hold up one finger. "Once."

He grins and gestures toward my helmet. Grumbling, I hook it under my chin, and he adjusts a few strands of hair so they aren't in my face. It'd be

easier if I put it into a ponytail, but I left it down to feel the wind in the tresses when I move. *If I move.*

Ollie didn't buy me this to just ride around on the sidewalk, which means I need to trust Liam. It isn't like I don't. He hasn't even asked me to, but it still leaves me hesitant because a lot could go wrong.

Taking a deep breath, I step on again. His hands roam near my hips, not quite touching but close enough in case he needs to.

"Push off," he directs.

My eyes widen. "On my own?"

He laughs. "Yes. Do it."

Bossy prick.

Hesitantly, I kick off the ground lightly and start rolling. He showed me how to do the basics earlier, reminding me how to slow down for when we go down the slope. The decline is minimal, but as we near it, my heart hammers in my chest.

He's walking quickly beside me and telling me not to stop the closer I get. I want to close my eyes or yelp or ask for his help. Instead, I take a deep breath and go down the tiny hill, feeling my chest fill with something foreign and airy.

Then I'm laughing.

Liam is cheering me on and clapping from the sidelines. Raising my arms in victory turns out to be a bad idea, because my body veers to the side and I don't correct myself before falling.

Barely avoiding the bench with my head, I slam into the pavement shoulder first. Cringing, I sit up as Liam's frantic footsteps pound against the sidewalk. Rolling my shoulder, I wince at the pain shooting down my arm before my movements ease some of the shock.

"I'm good," I promise him.

He kneels, lowering my shirt collar to expose my sore skin. Normally, I'd smack anyone's hands away for doing something like that. I know he just wants to check though, so I examine the red mark that'll surely bruise.

"Shit, C. Sorry about that."

"We all fall once, right?"

We grin at each other and then he helps me up. I'm surprised when he squats and pats his back, glancing over his shoulder at me.

"Hop on, Barbie."

He wants me to climb on his back?

“Uh ... why?”

He sighs. “Because you’re injured, and I can’t in good conscience let you walk back to your room that way.”

I laugh and wrap my arms around his neck before jumping on. “It’s my shoulder that’s hurt not my feet, but whatever.”

He stands, gripping my calves and moving them to circle his waist for better support. “You’re right. I just wanted these sexy legs wrapped around me.”

Swatting the back of his head and shaking mine, I shift on his back. “You’re a pig. Do you know that?”

He pats my leg, probably with a prideful smile stretched across his face. “You know it.”

When we’re halfway up the pathway back to the dorms, I see Ollie’s dark hair and frozen figure staring back from the visitors parking lot. Liam’s steps falter a little when I squirm on his back, but he tightens his hold on me as if I’m about to fall again.

“I should get down,” I tell him.

“No.”

My shoulders draw back when we get closer to Ollie. His hands are stuffed in the pockets of his jeans and I notice his usual dimple is masked with a deadpan scowl.

Oh, boy.

Trying to make this look innocent is difficult with his accusing eyes lingering at the position of my legs. “Hey, Ollie. Liam was showing me how to skateboard.”

That doesn’t seem to ease the tension gripping his features. “And you’re on him because...?”

Blushing, I loosen my grip. “I fell.”

For a moment, his eyes lighten. I think it’s with worry, but it’s not enough to make the murder drain from his dark hues.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He starts to back away without answering me, jaw ticking, when I reach out and snag his shirt. He moves until my hand holds nothing but air. “I was just here to tell you I won’t be around tonight.”

He’s lying.

Liam cocks his head. “That couldn’t have been done over the phone?”

Ollie’s eyes pierce Liam’s. “I don’t expect you to understand.” His eyes

lift over Liam's shoulder at me. "I'll see you around."

"Wait!" He stops a few feet away. "It's movie night. Where are you going?"

He never cancels plans without a good reason, but he hasn't been acting himself since Everett and River left. He still texts me and asks how things are, but usually only when I engage the conversation first.

I can only imagine what Liam's face must look like, because Ollie keeps staring between us as if he wants to say more than he does.

Tongue wetting his bottom lip, he distances himself with a single sentence. "I've got a date tonight and we're going to the movies."

My lips part and stay that way as I watch him walk away without looking back. Chest hurting, I force my lips closed and stare anywhere but his fleeting form disappearing from sight.

Liam snorts, running his palms down my shins. "You didn't ask what he drinks at the movie theater."

A large Mountain Dew.

I shift again, tightening my legs around Liam's waist to remind myself where I am. It doesn't lessen the pain in my ribcage, but it stops me from expecting a familiar figure to pop back up and apologize. He never says he's sorry with words.

When Liam drops me off at my room, I lay on my bed in utter silence. There's not a song that can relate to what I feel right now anyway. So, this will do.

The sound of my heartbeat.

The sting of my tears.

The taste of jealousy.

He's not worth it, Charlie.

I fall asleep not believing that one bit.

CHARLIE

CHICAGO WINTERS AREN'T that different than what I experienced in Bridgeport. It's ten degrees, there's snow, and not even the old sweatshirt of Ollie's I wear seems to warm me up.

At least Dr. Griffin keeps her office toasty. It's the only reason I welcome therapy this afternoon, because walking around campus in this January weather to get to classes hasn't been fun. I still can't feel my nose.

Dr. Griffin is wearing a gray sweater dress and black stockings. She looks warm, but I can't imagine her walking in those black heels outside. There's ice and slush and the shoes look expensive. I bet they're one of those kinds with the red soles.

She's been staring at me for five minutes. I'm not sure when our relationship changed, but I think she got tired of pretending to be my friend. I told her I didn't like when she smiled like we were the same. We're not.

At least now she reminds me of Polk. I liked her, even though she annoyed me sometimes. Griffin just has a different way of trying to get answers out of me, and it works most of the time. Not because she's some magician with the right tricks, but because it gets tiring to hold everything in.

Two months ago, I told her about the sleeping meds. At first she wasn't happy. I got the basic *you need to make sure you can take certain supplements with your antidepressants before starting them*. After a twenty minute lecture, she told me the two medications weren't necessarily bad, but could cause sedation that would be hard to function with. Clearly, that hasn't been an issue.

She knows I still wake up sometimes, sweating and shaking from old memories. It's always the same—my old bedroom. The pink, the fluffy pillows, the darkness. He's there. He's always there. Lurking. Waiting. Faceless.

The first time she suggested I try different methods to help sleep, I laughed it off. Especially when one of them was sleeping naked. It's winter and my dorm room is freezing because of the cheap heater that I swear only works half the time.

Clothes can be suffocating, Charlie.

Clothes are just clothes, and I was skeptical for weeks until I'd woken up nearly vomiting from the way my body reacted to the memories that held me in the past. I peeled off my pajamas and stared at them laying helplessly on the floor.

I fell back asleep nude. At first, the scratchy comforter felt weird against my skin, but I put on music and let it drift me to sleep to distract me from how strange I felt.

I slept through the night without waking up sweating or shaking or crying again. I told Griffin I took sleeping pills that night, it could have been a coincidence. She dared me to stop taking them and try again.

Dares are challenges on crack.

I don't back down from them.

Needless to say, her odd method works better than I would have thought. She never let my doubt cloud her judgment of me, though pride lights up her eyes when she asks me how I'm sleeping before every session.

"You didn't answer the question," she reminds me after another long stretch of time.

What was the question again? I fidget with the end of my shirt sleeve, tugging it down despite it already being too long on my short arms. The cotton feels soft against me, so I've been focusing on that.

Her chair creaks when she moves. "How have things been going with your friend?"

My friend—Liam. I told her about Liam during our third session. She thinks he's good for me, but she doesn't know what he likes to do in his free time. I wonder if she thinks pot is bad or not. It could help. It helps a lot of people. He offers me some once in a while, but I never accept. One time, I almost held the joint, but my fingers felt all tingly and my stomach dropped.

Griffin knows about Ollie too, but only because he drops me off. As far as she knows, he's the person burdened with the crazy girl. She asks me about him sometimes in casual conversation.

If she were younger, I might be jealous.

"Liam and I went to Millennium Park the other day to go ice skating," is

what I answer with. I've been to Millennium plenty of times with Ollie. They have concerts there when it's nice and there's a huge garden that's beautiful when it blooms. He and I would take walks there and listen to music on the weekends right before movie nights.

When Liam said him and his friends were going ice skating, he told me I should tag along. Something about needing to work on balance since the weather isn't nice enough to skateboard. One of his friends joked that he only wanted me to go so he could keep his hands on me as he showed me how to skate. Jake told the guy to shut up and Liam insisted I should go because it'd be fun.

Honestly, it didn't bother me. I know Liam is harmless. He's a flirt and likes to get handsy, but it's always playful. We haven't kissed since the day Ollie busted us, and he's never tried anything. We're friends.

His company has become welcoming when classes aren't in session. Ollie and I still have movie nights, but only twice a month now. He's been busy with new projects at work. At first, I thought he was lying to me. Ever since the day he ditched on our movie night for some girl, I assumed he would keep doing it.

So, I showed up to Intrepid. One of his coworkers found me wandering around the lobby and asked if I was lost. When I told him who I was there to see, he grinned and took me up to his office.

Ollie was bent over his desk, hands in his hair, looking angry at the world. Files and papers were scattered around his desk and floor, and his shirt was completely untucked from his pants like he had given up on the day.

He wasn't lying.

He also wasn't happy that I was at his office or that his coworker, Erik, had brought me up. But when Erik asked if he preferred he left me wandering around by myself downstairs, Ollie ordered us delivery and told me he'd take me back to my dorm after he finished what he was working on.

I haven't bothered him since.

"You and Liam seem close," Griffin says next, folding her hands together. Unlike Polk, she doesn't keep a notebook with her at all times. It usually just sits on the corner of her desk in case she decides to write something down. I've seen her do it twice. Once when we talked about medication, another when we talked about Ollie.

"He's a good friend."

She nods once. "Have you considered being more than friends? It seems

like you spend an awful lot of time together.”

So do me and Ollie.

“Why would I think of him as more?”

“He teaches you new things.”

Ollie teaches me how annoying men are.

“My teachers teach me things too,” I point out, shifting in my chair. “One might say I spend a lot of time with them.”

Her lips curve upward. “You know that isn’t the same. Liam is your age. He seems nice, genuinely caring, and wants to show you his hobbies.”

Does smoking weed count?

She sighs lightly. “All I’m saying is that he could be good for you. You already spend time together and you like him.”

I blink. “Are you suggesting that I date Liam Tolbert because he’s my friend? No offense, doc, but I’m not in therapy for relationship advice.”

“Then let’s talk about why you are.”

My lips part. I just walked straight into that one. Based on the slight curve to her lips, she meant to do that. Tricky. Polk would be proud.

“Like?”

“Tell me about your parents, Charlie.”

Oxygen drains from my lungs in a single second. Can she see me turning blue? Does she care that my throat is suddenly closed off and forcing me to choke on the past?

My parents ... they weren’t good people. Maybe, once upon a time, they were. Amy tried telling me that people with addictions aren’t bad, they just have problems to work out. I think it was her way of making me feel better for knowing that drugs would always come before me.

I’m silent.

She stares some more. “Inevitably, the nightmares are triggered by something. Sleeping methods, medication, meditation, and an array of other things could help. But talking is the biggest step. So, I want you to talk about your parents. Like a steppingstone.”

My parents aren’t my steppingstone. They’re the boulder. A boulder that explodes into a million tiny pieces when someone steps on it.

She has my file and knows about their deaths, their arrests, their everything. But nobody knows as much as I do about them.

“What was your favorite memory with them, Charlie? Did they take you somewhere? Is there a toy they bought you that was your favorite? Perhaps a

favorite meal they made?”

A second ticks by.

Then another.

I laugh.

It's a choking, quick, sound that I'm not really sure I realize comes from me. But it does, because Griffin is watching me with raised brows. Her eyes are full of curiosity and I wonder if she thinks I'm really nuts now.

When I catch my breath, I stare her straight in the eyes with no emotion on my face to give away what I feel. “Peanut butter and jelly, the non-stale kind. Sometimes Mom would serve it with milk, but it was usually spoiled.”

She doesn't answer right away.

I don't let her. “Dad would order pizza a lot, but he'd pass out before eating even two slices. Mom always got angry because the pizza would go to waste or cost more money than she wanted to spend on food. You know, because it was money that could have gone toward drugs.”

Her lips part, but I hold up my hand. “I think you should hear this, doc. You want to know, don't you? You want to know how I would eat one meal a day if I was lucky? How I would hide in my closet when my parents' dealers came by? You want to know my favorite memory of them? When they *died*.” My voice cracks, but I push past it. “My favorite memory is being taken by child protective services as the coroner put them into black body bags. I never went to their funeral. I never had to see them ever again.”

Now her lips are parted and she's stunned speechless. Refusing to let tears well, I push up from my seat and throw my bag over my shoulder. We still have ten minutes, but I think we've both had enough for the day.

“You asked,” I whisper.

Walking toward the door, I'm about to reach for the handle when she calls out, “Wait a minute. Where are you going?”

To wait for Ollie.

To my dorm to cry.

Just ... away.

“See you next time, doc.”

“Charlie! Char—”

I slam the door.

She doesn't follow.

OLLIE

THERE'S a blonde running her hands down my arm as I finish off my scotch. The bar is dirty, there are peanuts scattered on the counter, and I'm itching to leave the smoke-infused dive before too much happens.

Her hair isn't the same shade of yellow I'm used to seeing. It's darker, dirtier, almost more brown than blonde. The shade of her eyes isn't green, but hazel—infused with green but nothing like the gems that watch me more than not. They don't think I notice, but I do.

A painted nail scrapes against my forearm. It's bright red, not pink. Though, the nails I've seen aren't usually painted at all. There is dirt under them nine times out of ten from all the time she spends outside, even in the cold weather.

The woman next to me invites me to her apartment down the road. It's tempting. But her skin isn't the right shade and her voice is too low, too familiar with these invitations. She purrs in my ear in confidence, there's no hesitation.

There shouldn't be any. Grown women don't need to be anything but confident, experienced, and happy. This one knows what she wants. Turns out, it isn't what I want.

"Not tonight, sweetheart," is what I say before she frowns and leans back. She doesn't look rejected, just disappointed. Frankly, she can turn to the guy at the end of the bar and find her luck there. He's been staring at her for the past twenty minutes. She won't go home alone tonight.

I don't mind it.

This time tomorrow I'll be taking Charlie to the Imagine Dragons concert. She's been talking about it for the past month. While I may not be excited for the music, seeing her smile when she texts me the countdown is worth the three hours we'll be there.

She knew about the tickets for a while, but it wasn't until her sixteenth birthday last week when she got them. I made sure she knew they were from Everett and River, so she would call them right away since they couldn't make it to Chicago to celebrate. I told them I'd take care of it, and I kept my word. We went out to eat, she ate her weight in ice cream cake, and we went to see a movie—double the candy and popcorn, since I've been skipping out on our normal movie nights.

It's easier that way.

Sometimes I have legitimate excuses. Glen has been trying to get new apps out in the world, which means marketing is pulling doubles to make sure they sell. Though, half of the time I make excuses to distance myself from the person Charlie is growing into.

She isn't like the thirteen-year-old I met. She may dress similar, but certainly doesn't fill the clothes out the same. Her jeans are tighter, shorts shorter, and shirts a mix of the two. Thankfully, the winter weather has her layered to keep her protected against the frigid air.

Not so thankfully, it doesn't matter. When she wears the sweatshirts that she stole from me over the years, it doesn't matter that they're twice the size on her. She can wear them as a dress, stick ripped jeans underneath, and still cause me to stare until I fucking hate myself for it.

And I do.

I hate myself.

Because Charlie is sixteen. She's young, inexperienced, and vulnerable. She's in Chicago to make something of herself, and I look at her like some sicko waiting for the sun to come out after summer rain. And when it does finally appear through the clouds ... shit.

Shit.

I should take home the blonde and just use her like I do the others. Fuck her the way I want, leave her satisfied knowing I'm buried deep inside her, and then leave when the deed is done. Thing is, my body knows the difference just as well as my brain. She isn't Charlie, and hell if I want to risk suddenly picturing her when my hand is in the woman's hair as she goes down—

Nope. Pushing up from the stool, I make sure my wallet and phone are secured in my pockets before heading out of the bar. I don't look back at the blonde or other lingering eyes no matter how hard I want to latch onto someone.

None of them will do.

One of them will have to eventually.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out with pinched lips when I see Charlie's name pop up. It's just after midnight and she has class in the morning.

OLLIE:

You should be sleeping

CHARLIE:

Bedtimes are for kids. I'm 16,
practically old now.

I SNORT UNATTRACTIVELY as I make my way down the dead sidewalk. There aren't many people out, which shouldn't surprise me. It's only Thursday night.

OLLIE:

Ok, Methuselah

CHARLIE:

Technically, I'm no longer half
your age.

MY BROWS ARCH at the random, but not untrue, statement. I won't be thirty-one for another couple of months. Still, it doesn't matter that she's another year older.

OLLIE:

Don't get carried away now

CHARLIE:

I'm just saying, I'm like an adult now

DON'T I WISH.

OLLIE:

You have class tomorrow

CHARLIE:

I could skip ...

OLLIE:

You're skipping one already. You're going to your others.

SHE DOESN'T TEXT BACK RIGHT AWAY.

CHARLIE:

Fine, DAD

I CHoke on air and close my eyes before commenting back.

OLLIE:

Never call me that again

CHARLIE:

Goodnight, Uncle Ollie

BLOWING OUT A BREATH, I tell myself that this is what I signed up for. I'm her guardian, the adult, the person in charge of her while she's away from Everett and River.

Uncle Ollie ... no.

Maybe by title, but it doesn't make things easier for me to compute. It certainly isn't any better than her calling me dad, which is about fifty shades of fucked up. She knows it, just doesn't know how much. Not in the same ways I do.

I tell her goodnight and finally reach my apartment. When I'm inside, I think about tomorrow night. It'll be loud, Charlie's first real concert. I've taken her to smaller gatherings at the park, but nothing like this. It makes me want to smile that I get to experience a first with her.

The *only* first with her.

I scrub my palms down my face before stripping down for bed and looking at my phone. Everett's warning is still clear as day under his name thread, sitting there as a reminder that I'm the uncle to a sassy, loud-mouthed sixteen-year-old.

Nothing else.

Never anything else.

"Fucked," I declare. "I'm fucked."

CHARLIE'S VOICE is raspy from the amount of singing she's been doing for the past two hours. Between that, the screaming, and the way she jumps with the other teens and college kids crammed in our section, we're both overheated.

She took off the concert tee I bought her that covered the tight patterned shirt she decided to wear tonight. I told her it was too cold for the outfit she sports—destroyed leggings that show too much skin, and a blue and white floral shirt that hugs her a little too well. She insisted she'd be fine because the March weather has been kind to us, but fifty degrees doesn't mean her parading around in torn clothes makes me happy.

When the song switches to something a little slower paced, one of the girls in a local college shirt turns to me and winks. I know then and there she's going to try something, and I'm proven right when her hands slide up my chest and wrap around my neck.

She smells like hard liquor, which doesn't surprise me. The oversized flask she's been passing around with the two other girls is full of tequila based on her breath. She's drunk, handsy, and probably will fall down at the rate she's going if she doesn't get some water and food in her.

"I'm Erin," she yells over the music, a little too close to my face.

I feel the back of my head burn and turn slightly to see Charlie frowning at me. Her eyes are full of hurt as they travel to the girl clinging to me, who can't be that much older than Charlie. Nineteen or twenty at best.

Unwinding her arms, I smile. "Oliver."

She doesn't get the hint. "My friends think you're hot, by the way. They told me I should get you to dance."

Her friends are watching the exchange, both shitfaced and giggling like school girls. I'm surprised when an arm tugs me away and wraps around mine.

"Sorry, Erika." Charlie curls into my side, and I'm too stunned to do

anything when her shoulder cuddles into me. “He isn’t available.”

My lips part as I stare down at her. It’s loud, but not loud enough to miss the jealousy ring in her tone clearly. It makes my mouth dry as Erin glances between us before shrugging and going back to her friends.

Charlie doesn’t move away. “You can’t go anywhere without some chick trying to take you home, can you?”

If it were anyone else asking, I may have found it funny. It isn’t entirely wrong, but not necessarily true either. I don’t step out of my apartment and have girls swarming me. Hell, half the time it takes at least one smile before they even give me a second glance.

But alcohol and adrenaline make people latch on, and the girls around us are buzzed and looking for trouble. These chicks just want me as a way to pass time. And maybe if Charlie wasn’t here, as in *not* in Chicago, I would consider indulging them.

Gently tugging my arm out of her grasp, I turn to block her from sight of the girls. “Don’t worry about it, Charlie. They’re drunk.”

She rolls her eyes. “As if that would stop them. You have that ... that *vibe* about you.”

I fight back laughing. “Vibe, huh?”

She shoves my shoulder. “Oh, shut up. I think she had it right, though. We should dance. I think they’re going to play one of my favorite songs next and you can’t *not* dance to it. It’s against the law.”

My lips twitch. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Charlie.”

She frowns. “Why not?”

She’s been getting bolder with me the past few months—small, lingering touches, long-lasting looks. I notice every single time, especially when her hand brushes mine. It leaves scorch marks. Invisible scars.

“I...” I cuss. “I’m not a good dancer.”

The music changes and she jumps, clapping like the rest of the crowd. She turns to me with a huge smile on her face and I know I’m in trouble.

“Just follow my lead. ‘Kay?”

I don’t have time to even process my answer before she puts her back to my front, my hands on her hips, and her ass to my groin.

Oh, fuck me sideways.

Not knowing what to do, my fingertips twitch into her hips as she sways to the music. It shouldn’t surprise me that she can dance, she lives and breathes music like it’s oxygen. She knows how to move to the rhythm like

she anticipates the beat. In fact, she moves a little *too* well, and that's what gets me.

I'm biting my lip every time her ass hits my dick, which is steadily getting harder the more she presses into me. Trying to control myself, I inhale and exhale as her movements get slower. My fingers dig into her hips and her hands cover mine like she welcomes it.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I peel myself away, making her turn around and frown at me. Maybe she doesn't get what she's doing, but I think she knows too well. If she kept going, the hard length tugging on the zipper of my jeans would be impossible to miss.

Swallowing, I keep my distance. "You should really stop." I note how rough my voice is, cracked and husky and needing. I kick myself for it, knowing that I'm weak for letting her hear how much she affects me.

It isn't just her looks or the way she moves that gets under my skin. She's a pretty girl, she can move her hips like someone who has danced for years, but she's also smart and caring and innocent. Half the time, I don't think she realizes what she does when she does it. It comes a little too naturally for her, which means she'll get into some serious trouble with guys.

My fists clench. "Just ... don't do that again, okay? Not with anyone."

The moment I see her lips waver into a knowing smile, I realize she knows exactly what she's doing right now. Son of a—

"What?" She bats her lashes. "We were just dancing, Ollie. It isn't a big deal. I dance all the time when I'm—"

Her eyes widen before pressing her lips together before she finishes her sentence. Mine narrow in accusation.

"When you're what?"

She's silent.

"Charlie," I warn.

Her shoulders drop. "Oh, come on. Like you never went to parties as a teenager. Liam takes me sometimes to have fun. It isn't—"

"*Liam*," I warn, "shouldn't be taking you anywhere, Charlie. I don't like him."

Her eyes roll. "No kidding. You don't make it a secret, you know. There's no reason not to. He's my friend, Ollie. He doesn't use me or pretend to be someone he's not. He takes me out and shows me how to skateboard and ice skate and be social when I don't want to be. My life would be boring

without him.”

You have me! I want to scream.

But she doesn't. At least, she hasn't recently. I've been burying myself with work and excuses to distance myself from her. Doing that makes me push her into Liam's arms.

“I'm glad you have ... friends,” I force myself to reply, “but that doesn't mean I have to like the guy. He's a teenage boy. He'll try using your friendship for shit.”

Her hands shoot to her hips. “Don't be stupid, Ollie. I wouldn't put myself in that situation unless I wanted to be. We kissed one time and never since. Neither of us wants to because we're *just friends*. I don't play games.”

No, you definitely do not.

She steps toward me, smiling. “I realized something really important. It's something you taught me a while ago, actually.”

I gulp, knowing whatever it is can't be good based on the way her eyes rake over me and her lips curve upward into a no-good smirk.

“What?” I rasp.

She flattens a palm on my chest. “If I want something bad enough, I need to be willing to work for it. You told me that not long after I was adopted. Remember?”

I told her that when she said she wanted to join a club in Freemont but wasn't sure she could get in. That was before Freemont decided only certain students could join electives or clubs. I meant what I said—she can do anything she wants if she works her ass off for it. Circumstances shouldn't get in the way of accomplishing anything.

But she isn't after a club or a school.

Hell, I'm not sure *what* she's after.

Carefully, I push her hand off me. “I think you should just focus on the concert, Charlie. And on school and doing well and your dreams. Just, shit —” I shove my fingers through my short hair. “Just don't read into anything.”

She looks at me for a long moment, not quite sad but not happy over my answer. There's disappointment lingering in her eyes. But what does she expect?

Sixteen, I remind myself.

“You're right,” she murmurs, stepping back and tucking a piece of hair behind one of her ears. “I'm just tired, I guess.”

No, you're not.

“Right.” I nod for good measure.

Neither of us believes that’s the reason she said it, and I feel bad for diminishing the confidence threading her words together. But the world is against us in all ways possible, and I have to accept that whether I like it or not.

When the concert ends and Charlie falls asleep in my car shortly after buckling in, I make a choice. I could take her to her dorm, but I don’t know where her key is. *Lie*. Plus, she would be better off at my place. *Lie*. I could watch after her and bring her back tomorrow when she wants to go home.

But where is home?

When I pull into the parking garage, carefully pick up her sleeping form to carry her inside, I answer my own question.

Home is with me.

CHARLIE

MY BODY FEELS weightless against a solid wall of warm muscle, and I snuggle into the citrusy musk wrapped around me until the person stiffens. Not just any person. Ollie.

Groggily, I crack my lids open and adjust to the dim lighting of the hall just as he reaches out to unlock the door with me still in his hold.

“What time is it?”

He kicks the door closed, throws his keys on the counter, and walks me into the darkened bedroom. I sigh when my back hits the soft mattress and curl into the soft blankets when he drapes them over me.

“Go to sleep.”

Even tired, I can hear him struggling. It’s my fault after everything I did tonight, not that I think he should feel bad. Sometimes I don’t know when to quit, but I just wanted to try to get him to understand that nobody should touch him like those girls did.

Nobody but *me*.

“Stay,” I whisper into the darkness.

I hear his choked breath. “No.”

Blindly, I reach out until I feel his hand. It jerks slightly but doesn’t move away when I link our fingers and tug him toward the bed.

“It’s your room.”

“The couch is—”

“Uncomfortable,” I cut him off knowingly. We’ve both fallen asleep watching movies on the leather sectional and it’s awful. I remember him saying he got a kink in his neck that didn’t go away for at least a week.

Moving over under the blankets, I pat the empty space next to me. I doubt he can see, yet I feel his burning gaze all the same.

“Please?” My voice is no more than a whisper, but his relenting sigh

makes me smile victoriously.

The bed dips with his weight and my heart thunders. I hear the sound of metal and realize what it's from before his quiet curse stops his actions.

"I ... usually don't sleep in jeans," he murmurs, clearing his throat. "I'll be right back. I need to change."

I'm not sure what comes over me, but I don't let my filter process the words before I'm blurting them out. "No! You can just sleep in whatever you usually do."

To my surprise, I'm rewarded with a dark chuckle. "That won't be happening."

I'm about to ask why when I realize what he probably means. The idea of him sleeping naked makes my body warm. Not with embarrassment but with something way different.

I don't tell him that I usually sleep nude too, because then he may decide to sleep on the couch. Then again, if my nightmare happens...

Swallowing, I nod once. "Oh."

There's some shuffling coming from where he sits, following by a soft *thud* of fabric on the floor. The bed dips again and my face burns like I'm being stared at.

"Do you want something to wear? My sweatpants will be too big for you, but I have some shirts that could work."

My mouth feels too dry as I think about sliding into his clothes. His shirts would be the same length as a dress would be on me. I own a few items of his clothes but nothing that he's offered me freely like this.

I force myself to answer. "I, uh, sure?"

Another chuckle.

He gets out of bed and walks over to the dresser. Nothing but the sound of drawers being opened, and clothes being taken out fill the room. It feels like forever before something is tossed on the bed beside me.

"My gym shorts would be too big, so I grabbed a pair of boxers and a shirt." His voice is quiet as he moves away, his footsteps nearing the door.

"I thought you were staying."

"Figured I'd let you change."

"It's dark. You can't see anything."

He doesn't say anything, so I take the opportunity to sit up and feel for the clothes. Pushing the blanket off me, I strip out of the shirt first and then slide out of my leggings. I've slept in them before, but I don't want to miss

the opportunity to wrap myself in his scent.

Trying to even my breathing so he doesn't know I'm anxious to be sitting in his bed in only my bra and boy short panties, I take my time unfolding his shirt and slipping it on. When my hand brushes the boxers, I bite my lip and toss them off the bed before I can convince myself it's a bad idea.

I've already pushed him enough tonight.

"I'm good now."

There's no response for a solid thirty seconds before I feel the bed dip next to me again. Holding my breath, I force myself to lay back down.

I think he's on his back like me, so I turn onto my side, facing him. "Thank you for tonight. The concert was a lot of fun."

My chest swells when I feel his hand cover mine where it rests between us. One of his fingers wraps around my pinky, almost like he's holding it in a silent promise. A promise of what? There are so many possibilities.

He squeezes once, lets his touch linger for a long moment, and then pulls back.

"Go to sleep, Charlie."

He hasn't called me kid in a while.

I smile before closing my eyes.

I'm woken some time later when my body is pulled into a firm chest. Holding my breath when the arm hooked around my midsection tightens, I count the seconds before it pulls away. It doesn't. Listening to Ollie's even breathing, I realize he's sleeping.

Wetting my bottom lip, I debate on what to do. If he wakes up when we're in this position, he'll freak out. Even though I don't mind this, him holding me, I know he'll feel differently. His reaction to me dancing with him was enough not to push any further because I can't risk losing him.

Carefully trying to wiggle my way out of his grasp, I start slowly lifting his arm, only to suck in a sharp breath when it tightens around me again. The same time his palm flattens against my stomach where his shirt has ridden up, his hips roll until something hard presses against my butt.

Oh my God.

The palm on my stomach doesn't rest there, but ever so slowly slides down until it's at the hem of my boy shorts. Biting hard on my lip, I feel the heat between my legs as one of his fingers slips under the elastic. He's still sleeping, not realizing what he's doing.

I tell myself to wake him up, but the need building inside me clamps my lips closed. Part of me wonders why I'm not afraid or worried or telling him to stop.

Another part of me knows.

Ollie's fingers dip under the waistband until they meet bare skin. I bite back a moan as he rolls his hips again, arousal fogging my judgment.

We shouldn't be doing this.

But that doesn't stop me from parting my legs ever so slightly as his hand moves lower. One of his fingers brushes my sex and my lips part in a silent moan. I'm wet already just from these little caresses and fist the sheets when he makes another pass.

His hips roll and a guttural groan escapes him, which only turns me on more. I can't help but put my hand on his and guide him further down until he's cupping me.

It feels good. Foreign. Not foreign enough to wake him up or tell him to quit touching me. In fact, it's the opposite. Ollie makes me feel too good, so much that I never want him to stop.

My legs shake as one finger enters me, his thumb playing with the bundle of nerves that seeks attention. His pace is slow, matching the thrust of his hips. Between his fingers and erection behind me, I'm panting until I'm on fire. When a second finger enters me, I gasp his name until all his movements freeze.

Oh no. No, no, n—

In a nanosecond, his fingers are gone and he's out of bed like it's on fire. "Jesus Christ. I'm so fucking sorry. I thought I was just dreaming."

His frantic eyes search mine in the dim morning light and his hands weave through his hair as he backs farther away from me.

His lips are drawn into a flat line as torture darkens his features. "Are you ... did I hurt you? Fuck, of course I hurt you. What I did—"

"Stop," I command. Pushing the blankets away from me, I meet his eyes. "You didn't hurt me, Ollie. I promise. I ..."

He's silent, studying, worrying.

"I didn't mind at all," I whisper.

He makes a choking sound. "Charlie..."

He turns, punches a hole into the wall, and growls out a *fuck* before leaving me alone in his bed.

Staying in the kneeled position on the mattress, I count to thirty before

slowly getting up. Adjusting the shirt so it's covering me, I quietly make my way out of the bedroom.

Ollie is in the kitchen, bent over the counter, gripping the edge until his hands are white. His face looks grim, so much that I can't help but hurt knowing what happened did that to him—I did that to him.

"Ollie?"

His body stiffens. "Please stay there."

I don't move from where I stand.

"Are you okay?"

His laugh is dark and dry, like he can't believe I'm asking such a stupid question. "No, Charlie. I'm not okay. And, frankly, you shouldn't be either."

"Stop," I demand.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Is he kidding me?

"What happened, Ollie?"

"I said—"

"I don't care," I all but hiss. "You act like you just committed murder. We need to talk about it."

He straightens abruptly and turns to me, eyes hollow, dark, and cold. Taking in the shirt that hits me mid-thigh, he curses and looks away again. I swear he says he wishes he *had* committed murder, as if that's better, under his breath.

Instead, he goes with, "I thought you were someone else."

Bullshit. I cross my arms. "I thought you said you were dreaming. Which is it?"

His jaw ticks. "Both, okay?"

No, not okay. "Stop lying. You knew it was me. Just admit it."

His head snaps up, eyes wide. For a millisecond, I think I'm wrong. Embarrassment floods me and doubt creeps into my conscience. It makes me feel like a silly little girl to think so much of him.

But I'm not wrong. I know Ollie, know how he feels. He doesn't have to tell me in words. It's the way he watches me like he can't look away no matter how much he wishes he could. He's consumed.

Addicted.

For that reason alone, I push past the doubt and naivety. "I'm sixteen, Oliver."

He throws his hands up. "*Exactly!* You're sixteen. A—"

I step forward. “Don’t you dare say it.”

“—kid. You’re young. It doesn’t matter who I thought was next to me. I ... I just—”

“It matters to *me*! It matters a whole lot.”

He slams his closed fists into the counter, the blows echoing in the kitchen and making me flinch. “Why? Why the hell does it matter? Why do you keep pushing this? You need to let it go, Charlie. It was a mistake. One I will be sure to fucking learn from.”

My heart cracks as he delivers the words, but not as bad as the dam does that holds back the reason it’s so important to me.

My chest aches so bad that I fear it’ll cave in. “I-It matters because there are people out there who don’t feel the way you do. They don’t think about the people they hurt when they act on things they want.”

If I close my eyes, I’ll feel the rough hands I’ve blocked from my mind. Hard and soft, like sandpaper sliding against silk. I don’t want my mind to take me there, to the places my therapist hasn’t dug into because I’ve buried it so far down it’s rooted into my soul.

My jaw quivers. “So, Ollie, it matters more than you can ever possibly know. I’m pushing because I want this—” I draw in a slow, shaky breath. “I won’t let it go because, for once, I want to choose. I *got* to choose. I could have stopped you. I didn’t.”

He looks like he’s about to be ill. I’m not sure over which part, so I hold my breath and study his expression. It’s painted with too much to pick apart. Before I know it, his ashen features turn to anger and I think he may put another hole in the wall.

His voice is dangerously low. “What happened to you, Charlie?”

Sandpaper on silk.

I blink.

Low husky assurances.

And blink again.

The smell of alcohol on his breath.

And a third time.

No.

This time when I step toward him, it’s a slow, calculated move. One that pulls me away from the past and back into the present. “That doesn’t matter right now.”

He snarls. “The hell it doesn’t. Those *people* took something from you.

They took your safety. Your comfort. You need to know, Charlie, that I would never do that to you. That's why this—" He gestures between us. "—whatever the fuck it is, can't happen. What would make me any better than them?"

His hand shakes violently, so I reach out hesitantly and hold it. When he doesn't pull away, I draw closer to him and steady his hand until it stops moving altogether. For a moment, I look past his nearly black eyes that stare me down.

"You give me a choice."

He sucks in a breath.

"I told you, Ollie," I add, getting so close my chest brushes his. "I didn't mind. And I know that I'm young, but age shouldn't matter. That isn't what this is about. It's about us."

"Us?" he scoffs in a hoarse tone.

I squeeze his hand. "I just want my choice back, Ollie. Don't you get it? Please let me choose. Let me choose this. Choose *you*. And maybe..." I run my tongue across my dry bottom lip to wet it. "...you'll choose me too."

His eyes lighten and a small breath escapes his lips. The fist my hand holds turns until his hand captures mine and he interweaves our fingers.

"You know," I press quietly, "I think there's a reason you don't call me kid anymore."

He chokes on air, a gargled noise strangling him with guilt and anger and so much more than either of us know. "It was easier that way."

I nibble my lip. "And now?"

He closes his eyes. "Now it feels like goddamn torture knowing I can't use that excuse anymore."

My chest flares. "Ollie," I whisper.

He cusses. "I'm going to hell."

Then he crushes his lips against mine.

OLLIE

JESUS CHRIST, what am I doing? Something tells me Mr. Walks on Water isn't going to offer much guidance except in the form of a large sign that says *step away from the minor!*

Thing is, I can't. Not now, not when I know the answer to a question I've told myself never to ask. Charlie tastes like sugar and mint. A combination that is not at all surprising considering the amount of sweets I feed her.

Her kisses are light, her plump lips soft, and her hands unsure but urging. She wants to hold me but doesn't know how.

My tongue teases the seam of her lips until she breathes in my taste. I bend lower to make up for the height difference, deepening the kiss by tangling our tongues together until she's groaning into my mouth.

Hands twitching to wrap around her waist, I draw back and lean my forehead against hers to catch my breath. "I'm not going to touch you, Charlie."

Like me, she's sucking in oxygen and staring up at me like I'm her fucking world. It makes my chest swell. "What do you mean?"

Fisting the shirt she wears, I say, "I won't touch you. You say you want to choose, then fine." Backing her up until we're at the door of my bedroom, I bend down and graze my lips against her jaw, up her cheek, and over to her ear. "I'm letting you have the power, Charlie. It's yours to do what you want with."

She doesn't know what this means. It isn't about crossing a line. It's about sacrificing everything—everything I am, everything I have, and everything in between.

I give it to her though.

Freely.

Willingly.

Her body racks with shivers and her breath catches as she grabs ahold of my shirt. “I-I...”

“Yes?” I muse.

She pauses for a split second, licking her lips. “What if I want you to touch me, Ollie? What if I choose that?”

My nose trails down her neck, taking in her sweet scent. I press a hot kiss right above her pulse. “For the record, this isn’t touching.” I back her up until the back of her knees are pressed against the side of the bed. “And this isn’t either.” I gently push her down until she’s laying against the mattress, her eyes wide as she looks up at me. “I can do a lot of non-touching, Charlie. But it can only be today, right now. You get a choice, but so do I.”

“What if I want more?”

Greedy little thing.

“Life is full of disappointment.”

With that, I raise the hem of her shirt and groan when I see the blue underwear underneath. She never put on my boxers last night. Her legs twitch as if to close, but I put a palm on one of her knees and push her legs open.

“Do you want this?” I ask huskily.

She nods.

“Words, Charlie.”

“Yes,” she breathes, “I want this.”

Those fucking words slay me.

They’re ones I shouldn’t ache to hear.

Ones that somebody never asked.

It makes me want to murder any motherfucker who put their hands on her the way I yearn to do.

Her eyes become hooded when I dip down and press a kiss against her lower stomach. Trailing my lips to the elastic of her underwear, I feel her shake under me.

Glancing up, I draw back. “If you don’t want to do any of this, we don’t have to. In fact, we shouldn’t.”

Tell me to stop, Charlie.

She sits up and shakes her head, reaching out to me. “I’m just ... I-I’m nervous.”

Reality slams into me. Her age doesn’t become the prime reason this is a bad idea so much as a slew of others.

“Christ, Charlie. Are you a vir—”

“No!” she blurts quickly, covering her red face with her palms. “I’m not *that*. Can’t I just be nervous because this is ... it’s intimate. And it’s *you*.”

My shoulders don’t ease because what she’s implying makes me want to definitely track down any male she’s encountered and chop his dick off.

Taking a deep breath, I straighten and stare down at her with a tight expression crossing my face. “Charlie, this is a big deal. I think—”

“Don’t,” she warns, reaching out and tugging on my wrist. “I didn’t just tell you those things to make you feel bad. I never used to have a choice until Everett and River adopted me. And then *you* came into my life, and *you* made me realize I can do whatever I want. *You* are what I want, Oliver. This moment. This chance. Today. Tomorrow. Just you.”

Jesus fuck.

If I was in my right mind, I would tell her we couldn’t have any of that—today, tomorrow, each other. There was too much against us for it to work.

When I don’t make an effort to do anything, she takes matters into her own hands and strips off the shirt. I stare at her toned body, bare to me in nothing but cotton panties and bra.

Beautiful. Forbidden. Mine.

“I’m so screwed,” I groan as she reaches behind her and unhooks her bra. Just as it falls, I close my eyes and palm my lids with the heels of my hands.

This is so fucked up and I need to walk away before I see too much—do too much. But her hands are on my chest, running up until they squeeze my shoulders. They’re taunting me, inviting me, beckoning me to her.

Then they’re gone, and I feel like I can breathe again.

Until they pull up my shirt.

By then, my willpower has disappeared for good. The warning made by Everett is a distant memory and I’m letting her take off my shirt and throw it somewhere on the floor with hers. When she goes for my boxers, I grab her wrists and shake my head.

“No,” I tell her, “you.”

Pushing her back on the bed, I take in her bare chest and realize her breasts are bigger than I would have imagined. My hands itch to caress them, to tease the tips, to bite the flesh. Instead, I kneel over her and take her lips with mine and thread our fingers together. Guiding her hands up my naked chest, I let her feel whatever she wants. Her hands are slow and unsure, and I love the way they run across my pecs and down my abs and rest just below my navel. My cock stirs in my boxers and I know she can feel it.

“You’re hard,” she states quietly.

I chuckle. “There’s a naked woman under me, it seems logical that he pays attention to something like that.”

She chokes out a laugh and meets my eyes. Hers are light and glassy, making the green look brighter. “He?”

I just grin.

To my surprise, she sits up on her elbows and kisses me. It’s timid at first, a shy gesture that grows when I open her lips with mine and tease her tongue.

She moans, her pelvis arching into my length until I fist the sheets on either side of her body. I peel away first, trailing kisses down her jaw and neck and nipping her skin as she grinds against me to get friction.

“Aren’t you going to touch me?” she pleads.

I croak out a *no* and feel her pace pick up like she’s trying to come this way. Clenching the sheets tighter, I lick down her collarbone until my mouth hovers over one of her breasts. Blowing on the tip, she makes a strangled noise and jolts the second my mouth covers her.

“Oh my God, Ollie.” Her hands grip my hair. She doesn’t push me away or pull me closer, just holds onto me as I work her breast in my mouth until she writhes under me.

I do the same to her other nipple, letting my mouth be the only thing that touches her. My hands stay in the sheets, gripping until I’m sure there will be rips when her pelvis starts grinding against my thigh that rests between hers.

She’s wet already, I can feel it on my bare leg. My cock turns into the hardest it has ever been as her heat slides up and down my skin, causing me to meet her rhythm and press my thigh against her until she gasps.

Her eyes are closed, and her chest is puffed out as she rides my leg, my thigh applying more pressure until she’s breathing out my name in almost-silent moans.

“That feels so good.” Her hands grip my arms and hold on as her legs begin to shake. I nip at one of her nipples and then the other until she yells my name and starts to spasm.

Her panties are soaked as they move against me, riding out the wave of her orgasm. I watch her come down from the high, eyes still closed, breath still uneven.

“Oh, God,” she finally says.

“Close enough,” I reply confidently.

Her eyes pop open like she forgets I’m here. There’s a rosy tint to her

cheeks that I can't figure out is caused by embarrassment or what happened.

Either way, I grin knowing I made her look like that—flushed, sated, happy. I'm about to move off her when she reaches down and slowly starts sliding off her panties.

Eyes wide, I watch the movement until her bare pussy is revealed. My throat feels thick with all the words stuffed in it as she drops the underwear on the floor.

Fuck. Me.

She may be young, but she sure as hell doesn't look it. Her body is tan and tone and curvy around the hips. It begs to be held and gripped and kissed. Every damn inch.

Eyes wide when she lifts up, I let her flip me onto my back and grab my boxers, sliding them down torturously slow. For the first time since I was a teenager, I'm anxious for someone to see me naked.

It has never mattered before what anyone thinks of me. It was a one and done deal. I welcomed the lack of care other women had for me because we both had the same end game.

But not Charlie.

The way she watches me has me undone. When my cock is out and my boxers are on the floor with the rest of our clothes, she takes me in from head to toe, spending an awful lot of time on a very happy part of me.

"You need to stop staring at it," I groan, scrubbing my face with one of my hands.

"Why?"

"Because it makes me want to come like a fucking twelve-year-old who just discovered masturbation and that would be embarrassing."

She turns bright red but laughs, sitting on her knees and running her hands over my thighs. Each time they come higher until her knuckles graze my length. I jerk up, holding my breath and wait to see what she does.

This is her moment. She can do what she wants, even if it completely ends me. And if I'm honest with myself, it will. I may even pray for it if it means not torturing myself with the consequences of the aftermath.

I nearly bite a hole through my lip when one of her hands finally reaches out and touches me. Tasting blood, I release the hold I have on my flesh and fight off shooting my load everywhere.

"Charlie," I croak, feeling her small, soft hand grip my rock-solid cock. She applies pressure just under the tip, driving my hips up until her hand is

full of my erection. “Fuck. I don’t even want to know how you know how to do that.”

She giggles as I cover my eyes with the crook of my elbow. I told her I wouldn’t touch her—told myself it wasn’t me driving this. Her hand feels too fucking good as she pumps me, my hips thrusting to meet her palm as she quickens the pace. I groan, biting down on my bottom lip as she leans forward and blows on the precum leaking from my cock.

“Charlie, don’t.” Her lips are dangerously close to an area she certainly shouldn’t be. “You need to stop.”

“I don’t want to, Ollie.” Her hand stills, still wrapped around me. “I want to make you feel good. Can’t I do that like you did me?”

Jesus. I want nothing more than to come right now, my balls demand it. But watching her curious expression, her teeth biting into her bottom lip, drives me mad.

Every single reason that this shouldn’t be happening slams into me like a freight train. She’s sixteen, she hasn’t had good experiences in the past with men, and I’m hungry. Hungry for her. For her body. For her mind. For her goddamn heart when I have no right to claim it.

I shake my head adamantly. “I can’t do this. You need to put your clothes back on and I need to take you home.”

I try getting up, but she flattens a palm on my chest and pushes me back. My eyes widen when she sits up, her perky tits on full display in front of me.

“No.” I hold my breath when she lifts a leg over me until she’s straddling my lap. Her center is so close to me that I can feel the heat, the arousal, beckoning me like it did my thigh only minutes ago.

Groaning again, I shake my head. “You don’t know what you’re asking. I meant what I said. I’m not touching you—”

“Fine,” she breathes, raising up. I think she’s about to listen and move off me when she grips my length and guides it to her core. “Then *I’ll* do the touching. Don’t you want to feel good, Ollie? Don’t you want *me* to touch *you*?”

Yes. “I shouldn’t.”

She lowers herself, my crown probing her tight entrance. We both make a sound as she sinks down slowly. I need to stop this before it’s too late, but she grips my shoulders and takes control to show me there’s no going back.

“You should, but you’re too good. You think this is wrong, but it isn’t. I want this, Ollie. I want you. And I’ve never ... I’ve never done it in this

position before. If you won't touch me, won't take control, then I will, because we both want this no matter what you say to convince yourself otherwise."

My lips part when she drops her hips, but she still can't take me fully inside her. She's hot, wet, and tight as fuck, and I jerk before I can stop myself, making her gasp and wince at the feeling of my big to her small.

My fists clench the sheets on either side. "I won't touch you, Charlie. You want to play with the big kids? It's on you."

I repeat that to myself silently as her fingertips dig into my shoulders. "What if I do it wrong? Go too slow? You won't help me even then?"

In any other circumstance I'd be the one making the commands, telling the girl what I want and giving it to her rough and hard until her voice cuts off from her moans. But not Charlie. Not now.

"No."

She lifts her hips and drops back down slowly, and I bite back the growl that wants to escape. My hands twitch to touch her skin, to figure out if she feels like silky heaven or lacy hell or some combination of the two that will end me in thousands of ways.

Her head tilts back as she repeats the movement, riding my cock in a torturously slow rhythm, still only able to take me halfway in. The friction causes me to twitch inside her, begging her to go faster.

She stares down at me and I can see that this position is hurting her. "You won't grip my hips? Or tell me how much you like how this feels?"

"Charlie," I warn in a hoarse voice. How the fuck does she know how to talk like this? How sexy it is to hear her taunt me while my cock slides in and out of her?

Through the pain, she smiles. "I just want to make sure I understand, Ollie."

"I won't touch you," I confirm.

She leans in and grazes our lips. Her hard nipples brush against my chest.

"Guess it's up to me then," she whispers, licking my bottom lip before nibbling it and picking up the pace.

She moans and holds onto my shoulders, her hips sliding against me until her head tips back. If she bites her lip any harder, I think it'll bleed like mine did.

"Charlie, fuck." She feels too good on top of me, but I can tell that this position isn't working for her. "You need to get used to my size before you

can ride me like this.”

The words feed the animal that’s beating down the bars of its cage. I hate myself for it, but not enough. Not if it means finishing this.

She pauses, nibbling her lip as she locks eyes with me. “Don’t I make you feel good?”

“Yes,” I promise her. “But I’m hurting you this way, and I told you I would never hurt you. Do you trust me?” *Do you trust me in the way I don’t trust myself around you?*

She nods.

My voice is hard. “Climb off me, get on your back, and spread your legs.”

Eyes wide and face flushed, she does as I say and lays back, watching me reposition myself over her. My forearms rest on either side of her head, my body slowly sinking down but not enough to make her handle my full weight.

“This is me not touching you,” I remind her, kissing her lips and using my hand to guide my cock back to her wet pussy.

She sucks in a breath as I sink into her slowly, letting my knuckle rub against her clit to ease her tense hips. Her muscles loosen and she squirms under me as I manage to slide in further, the bundle of nerves I play with making her wetter until she’s moaning.

“I’m going to pull out and then start moving again, okay?” I wait until she meets my eye and nods, giving me permission to do just as I say. With every thrust, I get further and further inside until I finally fist the sheets and jackknife my pelvis forward until my cock is in as far as it can go.

“Ollie!” she yells, digging her fingertips into my shoulders. She’ll leave marks, and I’ll wear them proudly knowing it’s the moment I buried myself inside her.

“Are you okay?” I ask, stroking her hair and pecking her with soft kisses.

“Yes. *God*, yes. I just feel ... full.”

She blushes, which makes me grin. I stay like that, letting her adjust to my size, before slowly kissing her until her tongue is demanding more from mine. Her body eases into mine as she wraps her arms around my neck.

“Please,” she whispers.

“You don’t need to beg, baby.”

I start moving slowly, feeling her tightness hug my cock the same way her arms hug my chest to hers. I’m biting back groans when she lifts her hips to meet my thrusts until I need to quicken the pace.

I kiss her, pulling her bottom lip with my teeth and then lick the red wound I leave behind. "You feel so good, Charlie. So goddamn good. I'm going to hate myself for giving in. For wanting you."

She shakes her head, squeezing her arms around me tighter like she's asking me to never leave. "Please don't hate yourself. This isn't about hate. It's the exact opposite."

She doesn't say the word.

I don't either.

The only thing that fills the room is the smell of sex and our breathy moans. Skin on skin, bodies joining where they certainly shouldn't be, is a melody we make between us.

I grip her leg and bend her knee, shifting it to her chest to get a better angle. In a long, desperate moan, she calls out my name as I drive into her deeper, harder.

"Hear that?" I move faster, listening to her body react to mine, her arousal, her choked pleas, her skin. "We're making music, Charlie. It's a song that will get stuck in your head. You'll replay it every night. Every. Fucking. Night. You and me, baby. We're the only two people who can create this. The only ones who know its sound."

"Yes."

Thrust.

"Yes."

Thrust.

"Ollie, oh my God. I'm going to come."

I grab her waist and flip us over so she's on top of me, my cock still buried hilt-deep. Her hands rests on my chest for balance and her hips straddle mine.

Eyes heated, I grab ahold of the sheets, so I don't grip her. "Ride me. Make yourself come on my cock."

She gasps over my words but listens to them without argument. Getting a rhythm down, she slides up and down my length and repeats my name the harder she rides me.

I want to squeeze her breasts.

Bite her skin.

Fuck her senseless.

But this is her time.

Her moment.

Her control.

She comes, screaming out my name, quaking on top of me and squeezing my dick so tight that I nearly come right there.

That's when I realize something vital.

"Fuck."

She collapses on top of me, a sweaty mess, and I groan barely managing to get her off me right before I shoot my load across her stomach.

The startled noise she makes drowns out the drum of my heartbeat knowing I just fucked my sixteen-year-old niece without a condom.

I cover my face.

She tries to tell me it's all right.

But it's not.

It's *not* fucking okay.

CHARLIE

HE's quiet as he cleans me with a warm washcloth. His lips are tight, like he's fighting an internal battle within himself. Based on the pinch of his brows and shade of his eyes, he's losing.

I reach out and stop him as he stands to bring the cloth back to the bathroom. We lock eyes and just stay like that for a moment. I get on my knees, let my hair fall over my chest, and squeeze his hand.

It's a silent gesture he knows all too well, because like him, I won't apologize with words. But I can tell he needs this—this peace offering. It's a comfort to know that I'm fine, that he's fine, and that what happened will be okay.

He brushes his hands through my hair, careful not to touch me. The torture resonating in his dark brown eyes has me wanting to take away his guilt in any way I possibly can. So, I ask him to take me home.

He lets me get dressed, grabbing his own clothes to pull on, before meeting me at the door. We don't stop for donuts or hot chocolate or breakfast. He drops me off at the front of my building without looking at me.

I open the car door.

Wait for a word. A reassurance.

I get neither.

"Thank you," I whisper.

For taking me to the concert.

For letting me choose.

For driving me home.

"You shouldn't thank me," he rasps.

I squeeze his forearm once and then climb out of the car. It's all I can think to do, stay quiet but let him know I'm here.

Making sure my key is ready to get inside as quickly as possible, I stop

when I hear him call out my name. Turning around, I lock eyes with his. They're dull and distant and full of guilt and anguish that weigh down my conscience. I did that to him.

Why are you always thinking of yourself, Charlotte?

Mom taught me what the word selfish is. I think I finally got what she meant. With Ollie, I took what I wanted. He may have let me have it, but I broke something inside him in the process.

I think he's squeezing the steering wheel with everything he has, like it grounds him. From here, I see the white in his skin from the grip. It's intense, but not like the intensity of his eyes as they keep me in place.

"What happened..." He glances away, smacks his hand against the dashboard, and rests his forehead against the wheel.

My hands shake at my sides. "I know," I assure him, throat thick. "But you shouldn't worry about it, Ollie. After all, you never touched me."

I back toward the door, watching him watch me with strained eyes. His jaw probably ticks like it does when he's mad. I'm just not sure if he's mad at me or himself or both.

He should be mad at me the most.

Why are you always thinking of yourself, Charlotte? Don't you know that upsets Mommy?

Yes, Mother.

Maybe that's why I did it.

Griffin has a gold trophy on the top of her bookshelf. There's a plaque attached but I don't know what it says. Probably some ritzy award for her scholarly advice or professionalism.

I tell her whoever wins the staring contest we're currently locked in should get the trophy. I'm sure there's a store that could engrave something new into the plaque.

Staring contest winner: Charlie Tucker.

"The weather is changing," I say, noting how neither of us is wrapped in layers or hunkered into our seats. The sweatshirts I live in are stuffed away in my dresser, partially because the sun has welcomed us with its presence, but also because I don't want Ollie's scent on me.

It hurts, because I want more.

More choices.

More bad decisions.

More Ollie.

He called the same day he dropped me off and said we needed to talk. I've never been broken up with before, but that's how it happens in movies. So, I told him that I understood, accepting the rejection before it came.

Instead, he asked if I was on the pill.

For a split second, my heart had stopped. Not because of the possibility of getting pregnant—I *was* on the pill. But neither of us thought about it before getting lost in the moment with each other.

I could have taken pride in the fact that he was as consumed with me as I was him. I've liked Ollie for a long time, crushed on him and felt silly for it. But never thought he could have felt the same. Anytime he looked at me was with nothing but a friendly smile, a short glance. At least ... at first.

The conversation ended badly when I told him I was on the pill, as though relief couldn't have smoothed over the idea that I was young and taking birth control. Explaining that River put me on it for my periods didn't seem to help, so I told him I needed to go and hung up.

He never called back.

He did, however, have donuts delivered to my dorm the next morning. Three of them, all coated in yummy pink frosting with sprinkles. I ate one for breakfast, one after lunch, and left one in the box.

The third is always for him.

Griffin doesn't comment on my weather remark. I want to tell her that's poor manners. Amy told me when people talk to you, you're supposed to grace them with an answer even if you don't want to or else it's considered rude.

"Do you think it's wrong to be happy?"

That gets her attention. "Why would it be wrong? Everyone deserves to be happy."

My head tilts to the side. "What if what makes us happy is wrong though?"

She blinks.

Once.

Twice.

A third time.

I win.

She never agreed to give me the trophy.

"What makes you happy, Charlie?"

Donuts make me happy.

Music makes me happy.

Ollie makes me happy—the way he kissed and licked and sucked and bit me. The way he watched me and fisted the sheets and gave me control made my heart swell until I thought it would explode.

Oliver James makes me feel everything.

My friend.

My adopted mother's brother.

My adopted father's best friend.

The man I can't have.

The man I *did* have.

"I think after everything that's happened, I should feel bad about being happy," I redirect, staring out the window. The sun is shining. I think it's supposed to be fifty-five today. "My parents are dead, and foster care sucked, and I haven't really cried over it. Mom told me tears mean weakness."

I'd seen Mom cry before. Dad yelled at her over something and she fell and started shaking. He said someone was coming over and that she needed to pull herself together. When she saw me watching, she got up, took me to my room, and said, *Tears are weakness, Charlotte. Don't let anyone see you cry.*

I used to try listening. Every time I felt like crying I'd fight it off. Like when I fell and scraped my hands and knees on the road. There was blood coming from the wounds that pebbles stuck into. I went to Mom with a wavering lip and blurry eyes and couldn't hold it in anymore before blubbering in the kitchen.

Or the time I fell out of the cherry tree in our front yard. There was a bird's nest I wanted to see inside of, but my foot slipped, and I cut my cheek open. I laid on the ground for a while before peeling myself up and going inside with tears down my cheeks.

Now, I don't hide it as much. I don't like crying. Who does? It reminds me of all the times I was the helpless girl named Charlotte, whose parents always criticized her.

I shrug, coming back to reality. "I want to be happy, but I think I should be careful. It doesn't always stick around, you know?"

"Like your parents?"

Like Oliver.

I nod.

She scoots forward in her chair. “I think it’s good that you’re happy after everything you’ve gone through. Don’t torture yourself for feeling anything because of what happened.”

What happened? Does she mean—

“The death of your parents is a very sad occurrence, Charlie. That doesn’t mean you have to guilt yourself for living your life just because they can’t. Regardless of their state of minds while using, they would have wanted you to be happy now. They loved you.”

I fight back the urge to snort at that. I’m not sure either of them would approve of what makes me happy—*who*. Then again, I heard Dad call Mom bad names like *whore* and *slut* when he was high. When I asked Amy what those words meant, she told me not to repeat them. The older I got, the more I understood what he had meant.

Maybe I’m like Mom after all.

Maybe she’d even be proud.

I shiver.

In some ways, I’m more like Mom than I want to admit. I take pills, prescribed, but still. I go after things I shouldn’t, take from people, and expect too much. Remembering what Polk told me about not being my parents stays in the front of my mind as a gentle reminder that I’m not Mom or Dad. I’m me. Charlie.

“What makes you happy?” she repeats.

Swallowing past my dry throat, I come up with an answer that won’t give too much away. It’s safe, not a total lie.

“People.”

She doesn’t say anything.

I press my lips together for a moment and wonder what Ollie is doing. Is he in a meeting? He told me he would pick me up for therapy like usual, but I was already walking. I lied and said Griffin had to cancel. He didn’t say so, but I think he was relieved.

We had sex four days ago. I can still feel him, the welcoming soreness, the way my body stretched, how my skin heated under his mouth. Goosebumps pebble my arms when I think about his weight on me, the way he tried making it hurt less.

He never once told me he regrets it.

He never told me it was a mistake.

I don’t think he believes it.

“Do you think lying is bad?” I ask next.

She hasn’t asked me nearly as much as I have her today. But I’m curious. Some people say lying is bad, but it can be good if it’s under the right circumstances.

“Depends, I suppose.”

I nod in agreement. “My social worker told me not to lie because it hurts people’s feelings. But I think it saves some from getting hurt too. Like if the truth came out, everything would be worse.”

“What are you referring to exactly?”

Sleeping with Oliver.

Still wanting to sleep with Oliver.

Falling for someone older than me.

“I stole an iPod once because the music on it made me escape reality,” I say, grabbing the device from my pocket. Despite the fact it barely works anymore, I carry it everywhere. “I told people I found it because it made me feel better knowing they wouldn’t confiscate it. I took it from the biological son of one of my old foster parents.”

Running my thumb over the chipped paint, I recall how hard I tried removing it with my fingernail so he couldn’t tell anyone it was his. It didn’t work and I got kicked out of the home. I told the couple I broke the iPod and hid it in their backyard, making sure it wasn’t on me when they searched.

When Amy took me back to her office to figure out the next steps, I pulled it out and put the earbuds in.

“My social worker was upset with me for taking it, obviously, but I promised her it was a gift. I like Amy, she was always nice to me. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“Do you think she knew the truth?”

Thinking about it, I gnaw on my inner cheek. Amy knew me better than anyone until Ollie came around. I guess it came with all the time we spent together by force, all because I couldn’t stay out of trouble.

Finally, I nod. “She knew.”

“Do you think lying is bad?”

I glance at my lap. “No.”

Her next question has me biting down on my thumbnail. “Do you think you accomplished not hurting your social worker’s feelings by lying to her about the iPod?”

It hurts to breathe. “No.”

“So,” she presses softly, “is lying to people really worth the hassle if it hurts them in the long run anyway?”

No, it isn't.

I tell myself to shake my head.

I can't.

In a whispered tone, I let the lie slip past my lips and into the room. “I don't know.”

“I don't think you believe that, Charlie.”

Silence is what she's rewarded with.

I think about Ollie again and his *not touching*. I recall his tongue and his teeth and his hands and his body. Trying not to squirm, I come up with a reply that isn't a lie at all.

“Some things are worth it.”

Some people is what I leave out.

OLLIE

IT HAS BEEN a day from hell. I've been to three different meetings, all which ended badly. Glen is pissed and left early to deal with *personal things*, the asshole he leaves in charge in his absence doesn't know shit about shit, and the new addition to the marketing team thinks he knows what's best for everyone because he's fresh out of graduate school with a dual master's in Social Marketing and Business.

My bachelor's may not hold the same candle to his degree, but it burns just the same when held against a flame. It's about attitude, and he has the wrong kind. He'll be gone by summer if he keeps it up, I'll make sure of it.

"I'm just saying, man," Erik drones, "the girl has it bad for you. I feel bad for her, you know?"

Until now, I haven't been listening to a word he's been saying since he dropped his ass in my office with a bag of pretzels from the breakroom vending machine. But hearing *girl* and *bad for her* in the same sentence perks my ears up until I'm no longer studying the slides in front of me.

I think of Charlie, the natural response slowly bleeding me out. It shouldn't be the first thing that comes to mind, since I haven't seen her in almost a week. Not that I haven't considered it since I dropped her off on campus last Saturday. A few times I had to force myself to put my keys down when I wanted to go to her room and ask how she is.

Do I want to hear she hates me?

It may be easier.

Clearing my throat, I lean back in the chair and rest my hands on my lap. "Sorry, who are we talking about?"

He rolls his eyes like he usually does when he realizes I've tuned him out. "Macey from the other side of four? You know, tall, leggy, brown hair? She gave you her number the other day and you barely batted an eye."

Ah. Macey with a y. That's how she introduced herself back in January when she was hired as an accountant for Intrepid. Glen put her name down wrong, so she reminds people there's no *i* at the end.

She's cute. A little too bubbly and bright-eyed, but that isn't a bad thing. It's just grating when she talks about her night out on the town at some clubs with her girlfriends like she's still in college. I have to hear her talk about the songs she danced to and the drinks guys bought her. It's like she wants me to be jealous.

I never have been.

"Macey isn't my type."

He laughs. It's a hearty sound, amused and not at all surprised by the statement. "I know. You got a thing for blondes."

My shoulders lock.

"I remember Dani." He bites his bottom lip in admiration and shakes his head. "I don't know why you ever stopped tapping that, man. She seemed like a firecracker in bed. Don't tell Lauren I said that though."

Yeah, because I talk to Lauren so much.

"She got clingy," I answer.

"And Grace?"

"Wanted something more."

"Did she ask you to marry her?"

I scoff. "No."

He repositions himself in the chair so he's sitting straighter. "Let me ask you this, man. You're going to be thirty-one soon. Don't you want to settle down?"

I gasp, my hand flying to my chest. "Erik, are you hitting on me? Glen made us sit through that lecture on sexual harassment in the workplace for a reason. Think about Lauren. Your *future*."

If he could reach something to throw at me, he would. Instead, he chuckles. "I'm just saying, most guys our age are looking to find a nice girl and put a ring on it."

And he thinks Macey is the girl for the job? I know her type. She would make my life a little too complicated, expecting too much from me. For the right girl, I'd take those expectations in a heartbeat. But she doesn't seem like the girl who would be willing to bend to my needs, much less the person who likes sitting in and watching movies and just relaxing rather than dragging me out.

Before Erik can say anything, because I know he wants to, his attention is drawn to a figure approaching the open door.

What the—

“Charlie?” Immediately, I stand up.

How the hell did she get here? It’s going on four thirty, and it’s a long walk from campus. Not to mention dangerous because of the traffic this time of day.

She’s holding a pink box that I know is from Ida’s Bakery. Her backpack is still draped across her back like she went right from her last class to the store before walking here. Her eyes trail between me and Erik from where she stands in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” I round my desk and stand just in front of it, feeling Erik’s eyes on my back as I stare down Charlie.

Her weight shifts from one foot to another as she glances down at the pastry box. “I brought donuts.”

Erik stands, walking over to her with an easy smile on his face. “Good to see you again, kid. Don’t mind this grumpy ass, he’s been in a mood all day.”

Internally, I cringe when he calls her kid. I also twitch knowing he remembers her from the last time she showed up unannounced. It wasn’t like it was years ago, but still. She shouldn’t have come here on her own then *or* now.

She flips open the box and pushes it toward him, silently offering whatever is inside. I don’t need to peek to know it’s probably something coated in pink frosting and sprinkles.

Erik has the nerve to wink at her as he pulls out one of the pastries. “Thanks. Maybe Oliver will feel better after some sugar. Talk some sense into him for me, will you?”

I can tell she’s confused as she steps aside to let him pass. He gives me a quick grin as he bites into his donut and walks back to his office down the hall.

Glancing at Charlie, I sigh and walk back to my chair, dropping onto it loudly. “What are you doing here? I’ve told you before that it isn’t safe to walk here on your own.”

“I was fine.”

“It’s still cold out.”

“I wore a jacket,” she argues, gesturing toward the poor excuse of blue fabric covering her arms.

She comes in and sets the box down onto my desk in front of me. “You want to know what I’m doing here? I’m here as a peace offering.”

My head cocks.

Tugging on her bag straps, she glances around my office like she did last time she was here. Nothing has changed besides a few different files scattered about my desk. I think there’s a cheesy poster on the wall Erik hung there as a joke. It lists good company qualities—loyalty, responsibility, respect. It makes me roll my eyes, but I leave it up because there’s nothing else covering the bare walls otherwise.

“We don’t need a peace offering.”

One of her brows draws up, but it doesn’t look like it’s in doubt.

“Why did you come here, Charlie?”

I still don’t look at the box sitting in front of me. The smell of fresh sugar and grease has my mouth watering, but I refrain from caving. She knows I have a sweet tooth, though nothing compared to hers. It’s something we share regardless.

“I...” She never struggles with her words unless her nerves get the better of her. Despite the shit she’s clearly gone through, she doesn’t let it win. “I love donuts. And I...”

Eyes wide, I hold my breath.

Don’t say it.

Her bottom lip shakes. “I wanted to share them with you,” she finishes, letting me draw a relaxing breath.

Finally, I open the pink box and stare.

No pink.

No sprinkles.

“I asked them for three,” she whispers, pushing the box of crullers closer to me.

Wetting my bottom lip, I study the remaining two. Whenever I order donuts for her, it’s always three. Not because I expect her to give me one, but because I know she will anyway.

Three donuts.

Three chances.

The more she eats, the longer I stay.

It’s an excuse.

Selfish.

“You don’t like these as much.”

“It’s not about me, Ollie.”

It should be. I want it to be.

I pick up one of the pastries and glance between it and her. She pulls the chair Erik sat in up to the front of my desk and sits, watching me eat the donut.

“Do you hate me, Ollie?”

Her voice is so quiet that it causes me to drop part of the donut and stare at her like she’s crazy.

But she’s not. She’s just hurt.

Unsure.

“I could never hate you, Charlie.”

Not like I hate myself.

She only nods.

“It would make me feel better if you didn’t walk here on your own,” I say, breaking apart the donut and stuffing half in my mouth.

There’s a moment of silence between us while she watches me, and it heats my blood. My movements slow when I realize her eyes watch me lick my fingertips, then lower as I rest my hand on the desk.

“I could call a cab next time.”

Is she kidding? “No way.”

She glares and I can’t help but fight off a smile when her lips pinch at the corners in irritation. “What am I supposed to do? You won’t let me walk or get rides. I wanted to surprise you because I don’t want us to be weird. I want —”

My nostrils flare.

She swallows. “It doesn’t matter what I want. Like I said, it isn’t about me. But things shouldn’t be weird between us. We’re friends.”

Oh, Charlie.

We’re so much more than that.

Instead of dwelling on that unspoken remark, I redirect the conversation. “How were classes today? Did you get time to practice?”

She likes to stay later to play the piano, but something tells me she skipped to make it here before I left for the day. I’m not sure if I’m flattered or annoyed. She should focus on her music, not me.

She shrugs.

I sigh, brushing crumbs off my desk. “I am glad to see you, Charlie. But you’re here for a reason—to play music. You shouldn’t be spending your

money or time on me.”

Her voice is quiet. “But I want to.”

Those fucking words.

I could tell her there’s a difference between want and need, point out that one weighs heavier than the other. Like how much I *want* her to say those words or how much I *want* her to be here.

It isn’t what she needs.

But it may be what I need.

Clearing my throat, I sit up and try figuring out what to say. Sometimes words aren’t enough. So, I settle on silence while I study her. She looks tired and I wonder if she’s sleeping.

“Have you been taking your medicine?”

It slips out before I can stop myself and I know I’m done for when her lips curve downward at the corners. She hates when I ask about it, but River mentioned when she first started them that she would forget a dose or two. Based on the bags under her eyes, it makes me worry that she hasn’t been taking them.

“Don’t ask me that,” she snaps.

“I’m just making sure that—”

“It’s not your concern, Ollie.”

I’m about to remind her that I’m her guardian when I bite my tongue to stop myself. There’s a lot I should do being in charge of her while she’s in Chicago, but I’ve already crossed more lines than I can count. Arguing with her now won’t do any good.

Relenting to her brazen gaze, I gather up the papers I was looking over before Erik and her stormed into my office and slip them into my desk.

“Come on,” I urge, standing up.

Without a word, she follows my lead.

TAKING Charlie back to campus should have been the first thing I did when I clocked out for the day. Not walk her downstairs, put her in my car, and take her to Ambrosia Diner. Nothing I do seems to be right when it comes to her.

Everyone needs food. It doesn’t have to be an excuse, it’s a reason. She never ate the donuts she brought because she said they were mine, and knowing Charlie, she hasn’t eaten since lunch at noon. As her guardian, it’s my job to take care of her.

We're at the counter today because our usual booth is taken by college kids. The place is swamped with men in suits, girls in short dresses, and everyone in between. I could have offered to get O'Malley's pizza, but this seemed like a better option.

She turns on her stool, her long legs draped over the sides. My mind reminds me of how they felt straddling my hips, but I force the thought away. It doesn't stop my dick from twitching in my slacks like it wants an encore.

"Let me guess," Charlie teases, "you're going to get a cheesesteak sandwich and fries with lemon water."

I like that we're back to this, easy banter. It's easier than acting like we're stuck in some never-ending cycle of what-ifs and walk arounds. She's Charlie, I'm Ollie. Two people with a secret.

I lean forward, resting my crossed arms on the edge of the counter. "Maybe I want something different this time."

Her brows pinch. "You never get anything else. It's like you're in love with the sandwich, Ollie. It's borderline creepy."

I snort and lean back when the waitress comes and ask for our drink orders. Charlie gets water, I get sweet tea. Fighting off a grin when I feel her eyes on me, I wait until the waitress saunters off to get our drinks before turning my focus back on her.

Her lips are wavering at the edges, fighting off a smile. "Okay, hot shot. So you ordered a different drink. Doesn't mean anything, you could still get the sandwich."

I meet her challenging gaze and pluck a menu off the counter where it rests. She hasn't looked at it once, which means she'll get the same salad that drives me nuts. I've always thought she was tiny but realized just how much she could benefit from a burger after seeing her displayed bare in front of me.

When the waitress comes back and sets our drinks down, she asks if we're ready to order. Instead of letting Charlie start like I usually do, I cut in. "We'll have two burgers, everything on them except pickles for hers. Medium well, fries for me and a side salad for her. She likes Italian dressing."

The waitress writes everything down, nods, and tells us it'll be about fifteen minutes before walking off to serve someone else.

Charlie is gaping at me when I turn the stool toward her.

"What?"

"You ordered me food."

I grin. "That I did."

She frowns and at first I worry that I upset her, but it doesn't seem to be the same kind of expression she wears when she's sad over something. "You didn't have her put pickles on mine."

Shrugging like it's nothing, I lean back slightly. "You don't like them. Why have her include them if you'll just pick them off?"

For what feels like the longest moment, she stares at me. It's a heavy look, digging to find something I'm not sure I'm uncomfortable with. I wonder what people see when they look over here and find this young girl watching me the way she is.

Do they see admiration? A crush? Something innocent? Nothing at all? I should turn my stool to face the back wall, study the signs and pictures for something to do. I don't.

I stare back at Charlie.

"I just didn't know you noticed."

I notice, Charlie.

Clearing my throat, I drum my hands against the counter. "The donuts were good. You should have had one with me."

She blinks. "Uh..."

The change of subject has her reeling, which makes a little crease appear between her brows. Maybe I'm biased, but I think it's cute, especially brought on by me.

"That's good," she settles with.

My playful expression shifts to seriousness when I see a girl around her age get catcalled by the college guys sitting at our booth off to the side. "Next time you want to see me, let me know and I'll pick you up."

Her jaw ticks. "You were working."

"I would have gotten you after."

Her eyes train on the glass ketchup bottle in front of her. "I figured you wouldn't want to see me after what happened."

"Charlie," I murmur.

"What? We need to talk."

I gesture around us, hoping she sees the crowd that I do. "Do you think here is the best spot for that?"

"You'll find an excuse not to talk otherwise," she accuses. Not talking about it is easier, because there's no reason to justify what happened. We'd both end up upset, so what's the point?

Pressing my lips together, I contemplate my answer. With Charlie, I don't like to bullshit. Sometimes, it's better that way though.

"Not today," I say plainly.

"Ollie—"

"Charlie," I warn in a low tone. My eyes drift to the people around us, seemingly not paying attention. "If we talk about it here, it won't go well. For the sake of my sanity, not today, okay?"

"Why won't it go well?"

Because I want you.

Because I shouldn't want you.

Because we're both fucked.

"Because it has been a long day, I'm hungry and tired, and I just want to spend some time with you without any serious conversation," I say instead, voice quiet as I read the dessert menu like it's the most intriguing thing I've ever seen.

Her eyes burn into the side of my face, so I swallow and dare a quick peek in her direction. The green in her hues is bright but distant, calculating.

My mouth dries and I wet my bottom lip as my heart speeds in the slightest way. "Plus, there's always tomorrow. We'll always have tomorrow, Charlie."

I can tell she doesn't believe me.

Maybe she only believes in today.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, needing to hear her say the words I already know the answer to. But it matters to me. After what happened, I need to know that hasn't changed even though everything else has.

Her eyes lock with mine. With no hesitation, she nods. "Yes."

I want to reach out and touch her hand, to hug her, to do everything I'm not allowed. But I don't do any of it because I know better than that.

"Then tomorrow, I promise."

I promise you as many tomorrows as I can get, Charlie.

One day, tomorrow will have to end.

The excuses.

The risks.

Everything.

"Promises," she muses dryly, shaking her head before pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

"What?"

The grin she pins me with is sultry, dangerous. Like an empty threat full of unspoken fun and risks. “Promises are the sweetest lies, Ollie.”

We eat dinner in silence.

CHARLIE

THE THING about tomorrow is that it comes by circumstance. Anyone can tell you they'll talk to you tomorrow, be with you tomorrow, or see you, but that doesn't make it true. When the *tomorrows* turn into *today's*, there's always an excuse not to do any of that—an avoidance.

We'll always have tomorrow.

If anyone can make me believe in fluffy words, it's Ollie. My heart even did a little dance when he uttered those words, the softest caress of a pretty promise. But at the end of the day, it all boils down to the truth. Not even he, the man I know would give me anything, could give me tomorrow, or the day after that, or the day after that. It's impossible.

Unlike the people who bite off more than they can chew, I know he believes it. Maybe tomorrow doesn't come at such a high price, like he's guaranteed it. When you live in foster care, see people come and go, whether freely, by force, or in body bags, you realize that isn't reality.

But I indulge him. I let him say anything he wants because calling him out won't do any good. I want to tell him that I don't regret what happened, that it wasn't a mistake, and so much more. I'm willing to risk that—risk losing him.

In some way, I think he knows. It's why he says we have tomorrow, as if it'll save our friendship another day. When really, it just chips away at what we *could* be the more he pretends that there's nothing between us.

Another day acting like this is good enough.

Another day believing that this is all we can have.

We only got a taste of the future though.

Our future.

He's afraid. I should be too. Is he worried of losing me like I am him? It's what he isn't saying that gives me hope.

Hope can be a bitch though.

Liam gives me a chance to forget all that during school hours, though not in a fun way. He can be annoying, especially when I won't answer his questions whenever he walks me to class or the dining hall, like why I'm so happy or keep smiling.

Right now, we're sitting in Mrs. Duvet's classroom working on the first rough draft of our final projects. He keeps staring at the music sheet on the desk in front of me, then back at his. He's been doing it for the past five minutes.

Covering my scribbled sheet with my arm, I glare. "Stop copying me. This is an original piece, moron. Work on your own."

The first three lines are full of black ink because my pencil is missing. There are smudges across the fourth line thanks to the side of my palm running across the ink. Frowning, I draw back and study what I've got.

Finals aren't for two months, but we need to submit our first draft for preapproval to show Duvet what we've learned so far. What notes create what sounds and how everything comes together. It's a rush.

Liam's paper has nothing but doodles in dark gray pencil covering the margins. *My* pencil. It's pink with white daisies, kind of hard to miss. Which means he went through my bag.

My jaw ticks as I grab the pencil back, which he protests. "I thought I told you to stop taking my stuff. Where's your backpack? You know, the thing that carries your materials so you stop stealing mine?"

He shoots me a wink. "Your stuff writes better. Plus, I think pink is my color, don't you?"

Does he think he's funny?

"Just do your own work."

I go back to mine, trying to ignore the way he's blatantly staring. When he's tired of me ignoring him, he scoots his desk closer to mine. The legs scrape loudly against the tile floor, but nobody seems to care because they all have earbuds in.

Liam brushes my arm with his. "I don't want to do this assignment," he whispers like it's a big secret.

There are boobs on his paper instead of notes, so I assumed as much. "No kidding? We need to hand these in next week. Shouldn't you at least try to write something?"

"I don't want to compose."

He wants to produce, but the classes he was interested in weren't open this term. So, he hacked into my phone to get my schedule and signed up for most of mine.

You're stuck with me, Barbie.

It isn't like I hate hanging out with Liam. He stopped getting me in trouble when I told him that I'd have to go back to New York if I couldn't keep my nose clean. I could have told him a lot but settled with the partial truth. That I never used to follow the rules until I found out how much I had to lose by coming here.

He respected that.

"I know," I tell him. "But you need to pass this class to move on to the one you want, right? It's not that hard. You know your stuff."

He grins cockily. "Damn straight."

Despite Liam partying, skipping classes, and getting high all the time, he gets good grades. Everyone who attends this youth program needs to keep a 3.0 grade average to stay enrolled. I just wish he tried harder, it's like all of this comes easy for him.

When class is over, I ask Liam if he wants to go to the music room together. There's a free period between now and my last class, and I want to fill it with practice. Since Jaxson, I haven't played with anyone my age. It's too personal to let anyone hear me, no matter the progress I've made.

But I'm practicing what Griffin preaches, as annoying as it may be. Liam is my friend; therefore, I should give him a chance to know me. *If you won't let me figure you out, the least you can do is let him try.*

There are pieces of me that nobody needs to know, but that doesn't mean they're completely hidden. At least, not as well as I'd like them to be. Griffin thinks the right person can help me move on from old memories by making new ones.

The problem is, Liam isn't the person for the job. Like asking him to come play. He doesn't know what that means to me, so he laughs like it's silly of me to ask.

"I'm thinking of going to Jake's," he tells me instead, his friend's name making me frown. "I think Amanda will be over there if you want to tag along."

Amanda is Jake's girl friend, two words. She's nice enough, but she wants to talk about manicures and hair dye more than music. That is, if her and Jake aren't swallowing each other's tongues.

Liam never cares because there's usually other girls there to keep him occupied. The few times it was just him and me when Jake and Amanda started getting handsy, he just played it off like it was no big deal even though I could see the look in his eyes that said otherwise.

Why do people do that? Anytime I see couples kissing or holding hands or touching in public, it makes me cringe—makes me angry.

Maybe it's jealousy. I don't dare ask Griffin her professional opinion, because she would ask why I want to know so bad.

So, I make up my answer.

Maybe I'm jealous that people aren't afraid to touch in public. Or to touch at all. Maybe it's because I can't touch the person I want to in front of others. Yeah. Griffin will have a lot to say about that.

Liam and I part ways after he fails to bug me into relenting. Instead of thinking about how much I envy people like Liam's friends, I lose myself in the music.

It's the only way to forget about Ollie's promise, to stop waiting for him to call or text. I told him what I thought about promises. I expect it to fall through.

Music will fill the silence.

Fill the void.

THERE'S one pill remaining in the orange plastic bottle, looking sad and lonely all on its own. Turning it over, I see the zero under prescriptions, and know I'll need to call my doctor or Griffin to get it refilled if I want to continue taking them.

When Polk put me on the antidepressants, I was too busy worrying about what people would think if they knew I was taking them to consider their benefits. She told me to try them for at least a month before I decided what to do. When River mentioned not having to come to my room as much, I realized that they helped more than I would have expected.

The pills may not be a cure to my PTSD, which Polk officially diagnosed me with after I admitted that my dreams always start in my childhood home, but they give Everett and River peace of mind.

I don't *like* taking them.

I don't *like* needing them.

But the first time Everett and River slept a full night without being woken up by me, I knew I couldn't go back. I may not have revealed much about

myself to Polk during our sessions, but I still went enough for her to realize what I needed to get help in some form.

Griffin likes to ask about my sleeping habits on the days I forget my medicine. It doesn't happen often, but it does impact how I feel the next day. Like when I spent the night at Ollie's. I never brought the bottle with me like he told me to. When he told me I'd forget otherwise, I told him in the kindest way possible to shove it.

Oliver reminding me to take my pills is the equivalent of Everett telling me to brush my teeth before bed, or River telling me to do my homework before I run off to play the piano.

Should I have listened? Yes.

Did I? Well ... why start now?

I don't like telling Griffin anything that digs up old memories, but sometimes it's easier than the topics she chooses. Like Ollie. I showed up with a smile on my face last time and she kept asking why I was so happy, like it was a crime. When I told her I was on happy pills for a reason, she didn't even smile.

Her newest remedy was something called a touch stone, a method used for people with PTSD to use to remind themselves where they are—not in the memory, not trapped. I wasn't exactly on board with carrying a rock with me, but she told me it didn't have to be an actual object.

It can be a person. A better memory.

She told me to close my eyes and think of the first time I felt true happiness. Polk had asked me something similar last year. I pictured River and the old abandoned factory. Now, the image is different.

I see Ollie at River and Everett's house the day I was being introduced to River's family. I picture him kneeling and telling me it would be all right, that Robert and Bridgette James would love me. I remember the feel of his arm wrapped around mine when he offered it to me to find my new parents.

Ollie means safety.

He means being cared for.

He means happiness.

Before you go to bed, remember the memory that makes you happy, hold onto it, and relive it. Let it be the last thing you think about.

I don't tell her that Ollie already is.

Maybe I never woke up during my night with Ollie because we were touching, cuddling. My brain couldn't drag me down to the pit it enjoys

seeing me suffer in because there wasn't a connection. The man couldn't get me there because Ollie was blocking him.

Dumping the pill into my open palm, I stare at it for a long moment. Griffin told me it's okay to take medicine, but not to rely on it without trying other ways. When I told her I already sleep naked, she cracked a ghost smile before reminding me about the touch stone.

Depending on memories isn't a fix-all though, just like depending on Ollie isn't. He can promise me the world, the stars, and tomorrow, but none of it will matter if the terrors take me away.

I swallow the pill.

OLLIE

SWEAT RUNS down my neck and hits the pavement that I leave behind me. It's been a while since I've run, especially this hard, but I need it. Now that the weather is nicer, it gives me a chance to break out of the apartment gym and get some fresh air.

Once upon a time, I'd spend most of my time outside. In Bridgeport, some guys and I would play ball until we got tired. Here, the few guys I chill with prefer going to bars for a couple drinks after work. I don't mind it once in a while, but I always make bad choices by the time the night is over.

Now that Erik is on my ass about finding the right woman to settle down with, I feel like I'm on a clock. If a guy who I've only known for a few years sees that I'm the only single dude in our group, what do my parents think? River?

My shoes propel me along the sidewalk, weaving past the few people who are out this early. The sun hasn't fully risen yet, which means it's still cool. It also means less chance of being stopped by people I know. I've never been much of a people person.

Wiping my wrist across my damp forehead, I think about River. She always tells me she wants me to be happy. Shortly after I moved here, she said she was sure I'd find the love of my life in the city. Does she wonder why I haven't after all this time?

She knows my exploits, my old ways from high school. I've never liked her being aware of the girls I went through then, and it's no different now. But if there's one thing I want her to know, it's that I'm not that guy anymore.

The reason why is one she'll never accept though.

I run faster.

Erik doesn't get that he opens a can of worms whenever he mentions me

getting out in the dating world. He thinks because he's ready to take the plunge, I should be too. He and Lauren have been together for years, longer than I've known the guy. They're both a year younger than me, sickeningly in love, and undoubtedly perfect for each other.

Last time I saw Lauren, she gave me a hug before she and Erik left and told me I'd find the same kind of love one day. Before I could shut myself up, I asked how I'd know.

You'll start doing stupid things and not caring about the consequences because all that matters is that person and every moment you share with them.

Until now, I'd let that little tidbit slip my mind. My brain wants to justify shit that it has no right to, making me picture a blonde-haired girl with wide green eyes that look at me with wonder and excitement.

When I was her age, I only cared about my friends, girls, and basketball. I never thought about where I'd go in the future or what I wanted to be. Outside of sports, I had no hobbies. The older I got the only sure thing in my life was my desire to travel, which is why I took a job in Chicago to begin with.

I'm not miserable here.

But I'm not truly happy either.

My eyes catch Wilcox's newsstand on the corner of West 28th and Sulfix. Teddy Wilcox, a seventy-something year old, has had it in his family for generations. Despite people convincing him print is dead, he still sets up every morning and waits for customers.

I'm always one.

"Mr. James," he greets, taking in my sweat-soaked shirt and black running shorts.

He knows I hate being called that because it sounds too much like my father. I'll always be Oliver, the boy who refused to take over his father's company—the boy who decided traveling meant more than staying close to family. Mom and Dad get it, though they latch on whenever I visit like they're on limited time.

I nod my head. "Teddy."

He shuffles for something behind the counter and passes it to me. Brows drawn, I wrap my hands around the magazine and chuckle when I see what it is.

"Thought you didn't get these." I stare at the Travel Magazine cover,

which is dated from a week ago. Primarily, Teddy sells local and national newspapers, but there are a few magazines he sells like Seventeen and Vogue.

He gives me a sly smirk. “Figured you mentioned it enough times I should take the hint. I only got the one, since you’re the only one who wants to get out of the city.”

He says it’s his age that gives him the wisdom to know what I haven’t said aloud. I’m restless, always have been and probably always will be. The first year and a half, I was so busy trying to build myself up at Intrepid that I didn’t have time to wonder if I liked it here. When new management came in and the company’s focus shifted, everything went to shit.

For the past eight months, things have gotten better because of Charlie. She’s given me a reason to stick around, to suck it up. My old worry was that she was coming here for the wrong reasons, that she would feel as trapped as I do. But seeing her face light up when she tells me about new music she’s learning says that this is her place.

“Maybe you’ll find somewhere to go in there,” he points out, gesturing toward the closed magazine in my hands.

Running my thumb against the image of Everest gracing the cover, I find myself shaking my head. “Can’t do that, man. I’ve got a reason to stay around for a while.”

The smirk on his face turns into a wide smile, soft and knowing. “Ah, I see. Got yourself a girl, huh?”

I don’t answer.

He shifts on the stool he’s sitting on, setting his feet on the low footrest on the bottom of the wooden legs. “You like this, girl?”

Jaw cemented, I nod.

“She like you?”

More than she should. “Yeah.”

He crosses his arms. “Who’s to say she wouldn’t go with you then? Take it from me, boy. If it’s worth it, make it happen.”

If I tell him she’s young, he may think too much into it—question me. I’m not sure I want to dive into that conversation which’ll surely wind me up in handcuffs. But curiosity gets me.

“Do you speak from personal experience? Got a wife I don’t know about, some grand story of true love and all that shit?”

He laughs, and for someone as lanky and fragile as him, it’s deep and

loud. “Last wife I had left me for our neighbor *William Fredrick* because he had money. Never much understood women myself, but that doesn’t mean the real deal isn’t out there.”

My brows shoot up. “You just never tried after that?”

“That was wife number three, boyo.”

Well, shit.

He shakes his head, an amused smile still spread across his wrinkled face. “Don’t overthink it too much. I always preferred being out here over being with them. You just need to put in the effort, show her she’s worth it.”

My jaw ticks. “What if you know she is but the timing is wrong?”

He shrugs. “You’re asking the wrong man, Mr. James. Suppose the best I can offer you is that magazine and a prayer. If the timing isn’t right now, what’s holding you back?”

From leaving or being with Charlie?

I’m not sure I have an answer for either.

“How much do I owe you for this?”

He waves me off. “Consider it a gift. Sounds like you have a lot of thinking to do, so maybe it’ll help.”

We shake hands like usual before I wave him goodbye and turn around to head back to my place. I’ve been at it for almost an hour, and the pent-up frustration of everything that’s happened over the past week has only dulled microscopically.

Rolling my shoulders back and peeling the shirt off my sticky skin to use as a rag, I push off the sidewalk into a slow jog until I need the speed, the wind in my face, and the noise to drown out my thoughts.

I’ve wanted to travel since I was a preteen. The freedom Penn State allowed me gave me time to stall until I realized staying in New York wasn’t an option. I would check out Travel Magazine for destination spots, figure out where to go and what to do.

Problem is, I realized that I couldn’t just up and leave. So, I started working for a tech company a few cities over from where I grew up until they bought out Intrepid here in Chicago. It seemed logical to accept the offer when they told me a Marketing Executive position was available. It was a new state, a new adventure.

As far as my family is concerned, I love it here. I love the culture, the opportunities, and the people that differ so greatly from Bridgeport. It’s what I want them to see, so they don’t worry about me.

When Charlie first told me that she wanted to come to Chicago, I worried she would feel the same way. It's why I tried convincing her to stay, regardless of how much I wanted her around for more than a couple days like my trips to New York. It didn't matter that having her here would give me something to do, to invest in, because it isn't about me.

But I see how her face lights up when she tells me about the new music she's learning or how different her homework assignments are. She enjoys school, genuinely seems to like the teachers, and has friends. I'm not meant to be here, but there's no doubt in my mind that Charlie is.

She's opened my eyes to a hell of a lot more now that we're around each other. I see a girl with dreams and aspirations that trump mine one thousand times over. I see someone who goes after what she wants even if it's wrong.

I should tell her that I'm wrong for her, that I can't be what she wants. But past those doe eyes is a barrier that hides a little girl who she believes to be broken. She won't let that version of herself breathe for long before she buries her beneath the surface, revealing the version of herself twice her age that has seen too much.

I want to make it better—to give her a choice and show her what it's like to be worshipped. But therein lies the fucking issue. I shouldn't want Charlie, and in many ways, I don't.

I *need* her.

To ground me.

To take away the life I trapped myself in.

To make it better.

One day, Charlie will realize I'm not good enough for her. She'll see a man who has no right to be broken, who is more lost than her.

One day, she'll understand that what she's asking for won't equal what she deserves. I can't hold her hand, touch her, kiss her, or tell her how beautiful she is in public. We can't have labels, or flirt, or have petty arguments that lead to so much more where people can witness what two people enamored with each other looks like.

Charlie and I can't be anything.

I need to tell her to stop thinking of me. I need to tell her we can't move forward.

But I'm a selfish man, with intentions that are anything but pure.

SHE'S SITTING in front of a piano with her long hair falling down her back

and her fingers caressing the ivory. I'm sure she thinks she's alone as her body sways to the slow melody she's creating. I recognize it from somewhere, yet don't. It's entirely her own version.

Standing with my shoulder against the doorframe and my leg crossed over the other, I watch as her attitude toward the song changes. The way she hits the keys turns rushed, angry, like she wants it to end. After a few more seconds, it shifts back to something soft and alluring until I'm left gaping.

I've never doubted her skills. In fact, I've wanted to watch her play for a while. She would make excuses about why I couldn't, so I respected that she wanted to keep playing to herself. Some things we shouldn't have to share with anybody. I don't get it, but I accept it.

When her hands still on the keys, the music fades into the room until there's nothing but silence.

Slowly, her hands drop onto her lap. As if she senses me, her head turns until our eyes lock across the room.

"That was ... wow."

From here, I see her cheeks pinken.

"Who was that?"

She turns her body toward me, her knee resting on the bench. "I Am They. It's called *Scars*."

Pushing off the door, I walk into the room with my hands in my pockets. "Does it have lyrics?"

She hums out a yes.

Stopping beside her, I run my hand against the edge of the piano. She watches me, her eyes curious as I slide my fingers to the key closest to me and press down. It rings loud in the room between us.

Moving to one side, she pats the empty spot beside her. "Come here."

My brows arch.

She smiles. "Trust me?"

Without words, I slide onto the bench.

She reaches out and takes my hands, positioning them onto the keys. "Put your pinky on this one, your thumb here, and your pointer finger right there."

I watch her settle my fingers in the correct form, swallowing the drum of my heartbeat that plays wildly inside me in the process. When she's satisfied, her hands fall away as she mimics the position on her end of the keys.

"Watch me," she instructs. I do, trying to figure out the pattern in which she moves her fingers to create the sounds coming from the taunting

instrument.

She does it again, slower. This time, when she tells me to go, she moves her hand to mine and taps the fingers I need to move in the pattern to recreate her sound.

It doesn't sound similar at all.

She laughs. "It took me a while to learn the keys. I would stare at a how-to paper for hours until I memorized which ones were where."

"How old were you?"

Her body tenses slightly, then eases when she takes a breath. "Nine or ten, I think. I was determined to learn how to play, so I would try reading over some music guides after bed when my foster parents were asleep."

She's never told me that before. "What made you want to learn so bad?"

Meeting my stare, she takes in a small breath and shrugs loosely. "I heard people play before and thought it would be cool to find out how to create things like they did. One time my social worker took me out with her to this little restaurant for lunch to talk to me about a group home she was scouting for placement. In the corner, there was a black piano with a teenager playing. She looked so happy, so peaceful. I think I latched onto that."

Nodding, I press on a few keys. I can see why someone younger would be intrigued. To control something massive and use it to your advantage must make anyone feel powerful.

"Anyway," she dismisses, "I learned a lot when I was able to sit down and play. The teachers here seem to be impressed with what I've managed to do."

"Do they know about your past?"

There's a long pause. "No. Not many people do for a reason, Ollie."

Taking a deep breath, I let my hands slip from the smooth ivory. "What would it take for you to tell someone? I doubt Griffin knows much despite her being there for you to talk to."

Ignoring the piano completely, she shifts her full attention on me. "I would only tell someone if I thought it would benefit either of us, but it doesn't. What I said at your apartment is all you needed to know."

The laugh bubbling from my lips is dry and unamused. "That's bullshit, Charlie. What you said at my apartment made me sick, but I let it go because I knew that's what you wanted."

"I still want that now."

"But I don't."

We stare.

Her eyes gaze down at the keys again, her fingertips brushing against them but not putting enough pressure to create sound. “The things you may have heard about foster care isn’t always accurate. Maybe you think that the people in charge of us for a little bit of money are the monsters to watch out for, but that’s not entirely true.”

My nostrils flare, but I remain quiet.

Her thumb hits a key, its light sound filling the void. “Our worst memories start at the very beginning of trauma, that’s what Polk told me back in New York. Sometimes they get better and sometimes they get worse. Kind of like learning to play a piano.”

She hits another key, this one slightly heavier than the last. “Imagine sitting down and focusing on a memory that’s impacted you all your life. The more you think about it, the more it consumes you. Some people use that and channel the energy, others can’t because it tears them apart.”

Another key sounds, this one nothing like the last two. It’s dark and deep and vibrates my chest as I watch her stare off. “Eventually, that memory manifests into other memories until you can’t stop thinking about them. You try to ignore them, to push past them, but it’s no use. If you’re lucky, you can find something to drown them out. A hobby. Music. Piano.”

Her second hand joins the first and she hits keys all at once, my soul feeling the darkness and depth behind each one. “So, Ollie, sometimes reliving those memories is like taking five steps backward after you finally make progress—after you learn the right notes. It’s not about you forgetting what happened but accepting that nothing will change. That’s why I love piano, to play, to control. Get it?”

She’s eerily quiet as she pins me with her eyes, which are not the bright shade they normally are. I’ve dulled them by pushing too far and realize this is only the first step in a downward spiral if we’re not careful.

“Show me how to play,” I say.

Her body leans back as her brows pinch with a dubious stare. “You want me to teach you how to play piano?”

I nod. “The song you played. I like it.”

She blinks, brushing her fingers through her hair. “It’s about learning to love people’s faults and pain for what they are. Beautiful.”

My head cocks. “Why is that?”

She wets her bottom lip. “I guess when you love someone, you don’t get

to choose which parts. You're getting every single piece of their being, scarred or not."

Her eyes trail to her hand, scarred with white and pink marks. My fingers graze over each one, causing her to suck in a breath and freeze as I caress the marred flesh. They're rougher than the rest of her hand, but part of her nonetheless.

Meeting her eyes, we stay like that for a few long moments. Neither of us says a thing or moves an inch. We just remain touching, staring, being there in one another's company.

Then I pull away. "What are the keys I need to learn for the song?"

She exhales then shows me the basics.

It's a silent admission between us.

Your scars are beautiful, Charlie.

CHARLIE

TEACHING OLLIE how to play the piano feels more intimate than what we'd physically done. The subtle movement of our hands, soft brushes of our shoulders, and piercing lock of our gazes makes the moment all-consuming. It feels like a sign, a silent assurance that what we feel is beyond one night's worth of risk. It's a lifetime.

We're making music, Charlie. We're the only two people who can create this. The only ones who know its sound.

Throat thick as we go through the song one more time, I feel his hot hand under my own. He's trying, listening, letting me guide him and touch him without pulling away.

There's no *not now*.

There's no *we shouldn't*.

He just lets it happen.

Maybe he doesn't want it to stop.

After the music fades into the room, we stay in the same position, skin on skin and eyes on eyes, breathing like we've been deprived.

"I hate that he teaches you how to skate."

Drawing back in surprise, I ask, "What are you talking about?"

His Adam's apple bobs. "Liam. I hate that he teaches you how to skate on the board I got you and I know that isn't fair to be pissed about. You deserve to learn, and I can't show you."

My fingers wrap around his and squeeze once in comfort. "The only reason I agreed to him teaching me is because I wanted to show you what I've learned. I love the board, Ollie."

His eyes are softer but still distant. "I can show you how to create a PowerPoint geared toward businessmen twice your age, make a three-point shot on a basketball court, and how to properly stretch before running. That's

it, Charlie. That's all I can offer you."

It hurts to swallow when I hear how void his tone is as he delivers that sad, untrue statement. He truly believes it. What he doesn't realize is that he offers me more than anybody else can.

Scooting closer so our thighs are pressed against each other, I interweave our fingers together and rest them on my thigh. "You can offer me so much more than that, Ollie. Don't you see that? You offer me friendship and protection and kindness. You give me a reason to be strong and fierce and determined. I want to prove myself to you, show you that I'm more than my past. Even if ... if sometimes I fail."

His fingers tighten around mine. "Don't say that. I never want you to think that you fail just because you let things from the past get the better of you. And I know it isn't fair of me to ask what happened back then like I have a right to know—"

"That's the thing," I cut him off. "You do. If anybody deserves to know about me, it's the one person who knows me better than anybody. The one person who I trust more than anyone else in the world. *You*."

My heart pounds a little too hard, causing my chest to ache as I draw in a heavy breath. "You have offered me *you*, Ollie. That's more than Liam or anyone can. Telling you about m-my parents and my childhood and the places I grew up isn't just hard, it will ruin everything. Because if I succumb to the girl I was then—" I choke on a nervous hiccup. "—I am terrified you won't like me anymore."

He curses and pulls away from my touch, but I don't have time to feel his rejection before he wraps me in his arms. The hug is tight, telling, like he's pouring every single emotion into the hold. His cheek rests on the top of my head and his palms rub circles into my back.

"It's okay," he whispers to me, his breath tickling my hair. Shivers roll down my spine as I wrap my arms around his midsection. I breathe in his scent, absorb his warmth, and let myself think this is where I'm meant to be.

Nuzzling my nose into his chest, I feel his arms twitch around me. Whether to pull me closer or away, I don't know. He does neither.

His head moves until I feel his lips brush the crown of my skull. "There isn't a day that I won't like you, Charlie. No matter what form you're in, or what's happened to you. I won't push you away or think differently of you. Want to know why?"

I grab a fistful of his shirt. "Why?"

“Because it’s you and me. Always.”

Closing my eyes, I let his words soak into my soul until they light it up from the dark pit it turned into from my admission. Regardless of who I am, I know he means every word. But Charlotte is nothing like Charlie. It’s why I hate her so much—for being weak. For never fighting back. For letting it happen over and over.

She listened to her mother.

She kept quiet.

She let them die.

The day the medics busted through the door after I dialed 911, Charlotte no longer existed. She might as well have been a lifeless corpse like my parents, except instead of drugs, it was the truth that killed her.

The woman wearing black and yellow had kneeled in front of me and asked what my name was with a soft smile on her face.

I told her Charlie.

It’s been Charlie ever since.

Fighting off tears, I draw back and look up at him through my lashes. “You don’t have to like me all the time, you know. Not all versions of ourselves are always great.”

He reaches out and brushes hair behind my ear, letting his hand cup my jaw and thumb caress my cheek for a moment. “I came by to see if you wanted to watch a movie with me tonight. Take a break from schoolwork and practice.”

My eyes flutter closed. “That sounds like a bad idea,” is what I think to say.

His low chuckle has me cracking my eyes open to meet the shine of brown mischief staring back at me. “I’m not sure I know any good ideas when you’re involved.”

Biting the inside of my lip to hide a smile, I find myself nodding. “I can go back to my room and get a movie. We could stay in.”

He lets go of my face and slides off the bench, offering me his hand. “You grab a movie and I’ll meet you at the front of your building. We’ll go back to my place. There’s more room.”

There are also less people.

Less people to judge.

Less people to make assumptions.

Less people to witness what will be our second bad decision.

But I don't mind.

Like Ollie said, there is no such thing as a good idea when it comes to us.

HIS APARTMENT IS dim from the low setting of lights as we eat our Chinese takeout on the couch. The coffee table is scattered with white cardboard boxes and fortune cookies, some empty and some broken apart for the paper tucked inside.

I grabbed *A Star is Born* and a few single packs of microwavable popcorn, not that it's as good as the real stuff. Ollie said we could swing by the theater and grab some, but I didn't want to go anywhere but his place.

Home.

I almost called it that when I told him to forget it, but bit my tongue. It shouldn't be a big deal, but it is. Though I'm not over often, I consider his apartment, modern blandness and all, my home. Not my dorm room, not the house I've lived in for the past few years, but here.

He makes the popcorn as I clean up our dinner, putting the leftovers in his fridge. I note the bottles of water, beer, and gallon of milk that sit on the top shelf. Besides that, there are eggs that I'm sure are nearly gone, premade bacon, tomatoes, and lettuce with an array of condiments stuffed in the side shelves.

"You really need more food," I tell him, closing the fridge and sliding onto the counter beside where he stands in front of the microwave.

He rolls his eyes. "You always say that."

"Because you never have any."

I'm convinced he eats delivery more times than not, yet he doesn't look like he eats anything other than lean meats and protein shakes.

He pats his stomach and grins. "Don't worry, Charlie. I get plenty of food."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not worried."

"Mmhm."

We're quiet as the seconds tick down on our popcorn. He hasn't seen the newest make of the movie yet, which I tell him needs to be remedied. Lady Gaga as a singer *and* an actress gives me life and cements my girl crush on her more.

He tells me he doesn't look forward to me swooning over Bradley Cooper, but I tell him he isn't my type.

Too old.

Ollie's lips twitched at that.

Once the popcorn is done, we're settled on his couch next to each other. The bowl of popcorn rests between us as he starts the movie, and I tell myself that's the only reason he's sitting so close. His couch is big enough for there to be space between us, yet there isn't.

It's the popcorn.

I smile.

It's not.

When we're thirty minutes into the movie, the popcorn is gone. I set the bowl on the table and wait for him to move. Move away, move toward me, something. He does nothing.

Wetting my lips, I focus on the screen. It's one of my favorite movies, even if it's sort of a chick flick. The original songs written are ones I play on repeat any chance I can, and I respect that they were all filmed live. This movie is a music kid's wet dream.

Forty-five minutes into the movie, my hand moves toward his leg. His knees are spread, and I love the way he dominates the space. He's comfortable and unassuming and it gives me the perfect chance to do what I want and see what he does.

I brush his knee.

His eyes turn to me, but he says nothing.

Becoming more confident, I run my hand up a little higher on his leg all while watching his eyes become hooded. He swallows, his throat bobbing, and I smile when I hear his breath change from the even rhythm it was to something faster.

"What are you doing, Charlie?"

"Making bad choices."

He's silent.

Raising up so I'm on my knees facing him, I graze my hands up his thigh and lick my bottom lip. He's watching me, eying my lips, so I smile sweetly and turn his chin toward the television.

"Watch the movie, Ollie. It's good."

He groans in protest.

I giggle and lean into him, lips grazing his jaw and breathing in his scent. He doesn't wear cologne or body spray, it's a natural allure that gives me goosebumps.

His breathing picks up when my lips go to his ear, nipping at his lobe. He

makes a choking noise and tries to turn his head.

“Uh-uh,” I scold, grinning. “The movie is just getting good. I wouldn’t want you to miss anything.”

Sitting up, I swing my leg over him and drop down so I’m sitting on his lap. His eyes are wide as he stares at me, glazed with yearning and desire and a fire that reflects the flames I’m staring back at him with.

“The movie,” I whisper, dipping down and pressing my lips against his neck.

“Fuck, Charlie.”

I lick his throat, tasting his salty skin and hold onto his shoulders. They’re muscular and broad and all man, tense but not in the way that tells me he doesn’t like it.

He likes it too much.

I know so by the bulge under me, twitching to break free from the jeans it’s trapped in. Sinking down onto it and moving, I continue kissing up his neck until I’m on the other side of his jaw from where I started.

The movie continues playing in the background, and I know exactly where it is. I’ve watched it at least ten times. I can mouth along to the characters’ conversations, sing every song, and recite every argument.

My teeth nip his jaw before swiping my tongue across the same area and moving upward toward his mouth. I kiss one corner, graze his lips, and then kiss the other side. Ever so slowly, my lips find their way back until we’re a breath away. If he starts talking, we’ll kiss. But I don’t give him that chance before I roll my hips and tilt my head back when I feel how hard he is.

“Charlie,” he growls.

Grinning, I nuzzle my nose into the crook of his neck and continue my attack. Lips trailing up his neck and jaw, they land on the fleshy part of his ear.

“You need to watch the movie, Ollie.”

Grinding down on him, his hips shoot up and a low groan hums from his parted lips. His eyes try staying on the screen behind me but flutter every so often. He’s trying to do as I say, but I can tell he’s losing his patience.

My hands trail down his arms, then up his chest. His heartbeat hammers against my palm, and I soak it in knowing I do that to him.

His hands are firmly on either side of him resting on the couch in closed fists. “Fuck, Charlie. I need to touch you.”

He tries capturing our lips, but I veer away. “I’m sorry, but I seem to

recall you saying that you refuse to touch me. So, hands to yourself, mister, and watch the movie. The characters' chemistry towards each other is almost too real, don't you think? The way Bradley's character touches Gaga's? How he takes her in and shows her she can do anything she wants? He makes her feel special."

My hips roll over his clothed erection, causing me to moan. Lips going everywhere but his, I let my teeth nip his skin leaving red marks every single place they touch.

His fists tighten at his sides before he grips my hips with a burning vice grip. "Fuck the no touching rule and fuck this movie."

Smirking, my lips hover over his. "I think fuck is your favorite word, Uncle Ollie."

His eyes flash black. "It's also my favorite hobby."

With that, he flips us so I'm on my back and he's hovering over me. Movie long forgotten, I meet him halfway as our lips collide with each other's, all tongue and teeth and desperation. He tastes like salt and butter and the milk he drinks with his Chinese food.

I yank him down, but the weight of him is too much and I freeze up. Trying to collect myself before he sees it is a failed attempt, because he raises on his arms and stares down at me in silent question.

"Sorry, I just..."

I don't need to finish the sentence.

He hooks an arm around my waist and has me straddling him in seconds. Tugging on my shirt, he sits up and claims my lips in a bruising kiss that sets me on fire. I lick his lips, tangle our tongues, and grind down on his hard length that presses into me. His solid abs constrict under his tee and I greedily tug on the material to get him to pull it off.

We separate long enough for him to peel it off and throw it somewhere on the floor. I grab the hem of mine and do the same, throwing it behind me and watch him watch me. His hands twitch on my hips as he eyes my chest, on full display in my nude-colored bra.

Chest raising and falling rapidly, I take his hands from my hips and slowly trail them toward my chest. His teeth dig into his bottom lip as he meets my eyes in question.

"Touch me," I whisper, rolling into him the same moment his palms envelope my breasts. The cotton bra puts too much between us and I need more.

He cusses under his breath and caresses my pebbled nipples with the pads of his thumbs, but my craving to have skin on skin contact makes me reach behind me and undo the clasps. The bra doesn't drop right away until I nod once and give him a pleading expression.

The bra joins our shirts.

His palms hold me just below my breasts, his knuckles grazing the underside until my head tilts back and my hips try getting the friction they need. My body is overheated despite being half naked and I want to tell him to touch me, to demand it, but I let him watch and caress and take his time.

His stare alone could make me come on the spot, the heat between my legs desperately pleading for attention.

Finally, he sits up on his elbows and kisses up my stomach, in between the valley of my breasts, until he's licking the tender flesh leading to one of my nipples. I clench his shoulders so hard I hear him hiss and almost apologize and pull away before he draws away from my chest.

"Don't move them."

"But I'm hurting you."

"Baby, you could hurt me any day."

Baby.

I kiss him this time, wrapping my arms around his neck and burying my fingers in his hair. It's not long and I yearn to tug and pull like I want him to do with mine. Riding his length faster the more our kiss becomes heated, I start making noises into his mouth until my hands go between us and start undoing his jeans.

"Charlie," he breathes, groaning when I get the button undone and zipper down. "Fuck, baby, I need a minute."

I grin and kiss him, drawing my hands away from his pants. His eyes are glazed over with lust, dark and inviting, and I want to see them roll back until he can't keep them open anymore.

"I want to touch you, Ollie."

He swallows.

"I want you to touch me."

My hands go to his face, stroking his jaw softly before kissing him just as lightly as my featherlight touch. Our kiss is sweet, not as demanding, but still hungry like we haven't gotten enough yet.

His hands go to my jeans, undoing them just as slowly as I did his. My breath catches when I hear the zipper, and I sit up to help him slide them

down my thighs. We're both staring at each other as I pull them off and toss them onto the floor, leaving me in nothing but cotton panties.

My lips dip into his neck and bite his flesh, sucking, nipping, licking the same time I start tugging his jeans down. He arches his hips to help me get them off and the act of stripping this beautiful, carved man has my heart doing laps in my chest until I'm panting.

I need him.

I need his touch.

I need his kiss.

I need his love.

Everything.

My hands touch every inch of hard muscle from his shoulder, biceps, forearms, down his chest and abs, and lower stomach. He kisses me, biting my bottom lip and moving my hair out of the way to suckle on the skin just above my pulse. When his tongue swipes my skin, I whisper his name in plea.

"I need you to touch me." I sound desperate but I'm too turned on to be embarrassed by it.

He doesn't make me wait long before his fingers are trailing down my stomach until they're at the edge of my panties. I think he's going to pull them off, but instead, he moves them to the side and starts playing with my clit.

I bite down on his bottom lip and cause him to growl, his kiss becoming frantic as his fingers make a pass down my slit to spread my arousal toward my bundle of nerves. My jaw trembles over his touch as I grind my pelvis into his hand, his fingers teasing my entrance.

"So fucking wet," he purrs into my mouth. I press into him again until he finally enters me with one finger, setting a slow pace in and out until I'm holding his face to mine and trying to get him to go faster by moving my hips.

Our breaths intermingle as he watches me ride his hand, a sexy smirk spreading across his face as he enters a second finger. I breathe out his name, our lips brushing in a ghost touch every single time I repeat it. It's a chant, a prayer, a buildup to something my body is screaming at me to get.

"Faster, please. Oh, God."

My hands move away from his face and down his torso until they reach his boxers. Dipping into the waistband, I grip his hard cock and squeeze.

“*Fuuuuck.*” His fingers falter which makes me whimper, but he quickly recovers when I start pumping him with my hand. He’s whispering something I can’t quite hear because I’m lost in my thoughts and sensations.

My thumb grazes the tip of his cock and trails the wetness down the side of his length before squeezing him tighter in my hand.

“Shit.” His head tilts back into the couch cushion as he pants random words, hooking his fingers in me until I’m about ready to come. My legs begin to shake on either side of him and my eyes close as the friction of his palm hits my clit harder and harder.

I yell out his name and stop moving my hand as I spasm around his fingers. Bending down and kissing his lips, I nibble on the bottom one and then sit up.

“Give me your hand,” he demands, pulling his fingers out of me gently. I let go of him and hold my hand out, watching him spit into the palm and then use the two fingers that were in me to coat his shaft.

He guides my hand back to him again, wrapping my fingers around him and then covering my hand with his to set a faster pace. His jaw quivers as I watch him grow and twitch in our hands. I swear he’s getting hot under my touch as he begins cursing like the devil saying a prayer.

“Gonna come, gonna come, gonna—”

He squeezes my hand against him until he jackknifes up and hot, sticky liquid coats our hands and my stomach. Looking down as he lets out a soft curse, I watch the liquid trail down to the elastic of my panties.

When I glance up, he’s staring at me trying to catch his breath. Unlike last time, he doesn’t move me off him or swear. We just stay like that, me on top of him, staring at what transpired between us.

Leaning down, I press a soft kiss to his lips and nuzzle my nose against his. He shifts his head and captures my lips, the come on my stomach spreading to his.

We breathe each other in, not quite kissing but not pulling away. Our lips touch like they have no energy to do anything else.

“Charlie...”

I lay on my side with his chest behind me and feel him move my hair and kiss down my neck and shoulders until goosebumps cover my skin. “Tomorrow, Ollie.”

He doesn’t argue.

OLLIE

MY BIRTHDAY IS in less than a month and River has been bugging me about what I want. I'm not a pain in the ass on purpose, I just have nothing I need from anyone.

Not anything they can give me easily.

As if on cue, my phone rings as I grab some food from the fridge for dinner. Seeing Everett's name on the screen has me slowing down, putting the uncooked package of chicken on the counter by the stove.

These days, we don't speak much. Since his text to me all those months ago, our communication has been even less. We're both busy with work, living our own lives. It's an excuse.

I'm good at excuses.

"Everett," I greet, putting the phone on speaker while I prep supper. Some pans come down and clatter against the floor, causing me to wince over the loud noise.

It's my own fault. The other night, Charlie needed help studying for an exam, so I offered to make her dinner and help her go through notes. Since my kitchen doesn't get used often for more than one meal, half the pots and pans stay piled under the counter.

"Bad time?" he asks as I shove the fallen items back into their place.

I remember a time when we were closer than a phone call every few months. We used to have things to talk about, but he's moved on with his life. I suppose I have too, having made the first move by leaving New York. He got River and I got ... nothing.

"What's up?" I keep my tone even as I cut the package of meat open.

Our conversations never used to feel forced, but now I find myself cringing every time I do talk to him. It isn't the same as when River calls. Then again, I don't think River suspects.

Lips twitching, I realize I have a reason to be on edge. I know damn well I shouldn't be doing what I am with Charlie, but I'm too far gone to see reason. Instead, I tell myself it'll work out. Subconsciously, I know better.

"...were thinking. You in?"

I silently curse. "Uh, you mind repeating that? Sorry, man. It's been a long day at work."

Every day feels like a long day.

I don't tell him that though.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

Everett cares. Not just because he married my sister, but because he's a good person. A friend, no matter how little we talk. It makes me feel like shit knowing what I'm doing behind his back.

Shaking my head, I brush it off. "Same shit, different day. I'm sure you get that, taking on more responsibility at Dad's company."

Robert James and Everett's late father went into the business together long before we came around, creating JT Corporation. Everett's risen to the top in his father's place, and essentially, in mine as well. I never wanted to go into the family business even if it meant more money. That means he gets sole control, and I don't envy him.

He blows out a breath. "Your father's been preparing me for his retirement. I think he's going to take the plunge soon. To say it's been stressful would be an understatement."

People see the last name James and only see the dollar signs attached to it. It's no different with the Tucker name that Everett, and now River and Charlie, bear. What people don't see is what that money can do to people. I've been raised to work for it, never flaunt it, and always consider others. Everett has made a name for himself and will support River and Charlie for the rest of their lives because of the multimillion-dollar company with all its successful partnerships in the business realm. But people treat us differently when they think we have something to offer.

There isn't one day I regret giving that kind of life up, even if my path hasn't been as easily identified. I only use the money I earn, regardless of the trust in my name. I could do anything that makes me happy. Pick up the magazine Teddy got me and choose a random destination.

Money doesn't equal happiness.

So, I stay in Chicago.

"Anyway," Everett sighs, "Bridgette wants to throw Robert a retirement

party this summer. A surprise, which I'm sure you know will go over well. She wanted me to see if you would consider coming. Charlie will be back for summer break, and we all think it'd be nice to have the family together."

Charlie has talked about doing a summer class, but clearly never mentioned it to them. It was something she said in passing the other day while we studied. I told her she needed a break, she told me she needed to graduate.

What's the rush? I'd asked her.

What isn't?

Charlie may not talk about it, but she hasn't figured out yet that she doesn't have to rush into anything anymore. She can just stay in the moment instead of worrying about the next what-if. I watched River live that way for a long time before she settled into Bridgeport and found her own life after being dictated by everyone else.

"Yeah," I finally answer, "I'm in."

There's no point in mentioning Charlie's possible summer course, because there may be a reason she doesn't want them to know. As much as I want her to stay, I want her to go back to her family more.

We talk about a few random things before he says he needs to go. River says something in the background, so I tell them both goodbye before hanging up.

After cooking in silence, eating in silence, and cleaning in silence, I realize something I've never much thought of before.

I hate the quiet.

WHEN I SHOW up at work on Friday, there's a small white envelope on my desk. Groaning when I see my name on the front in script, I drop my belongings down and pick it up. The card inside is nothing fancy, but something falls out and onto my keyboard which causes my brows to pinch.

"What the...?"

Picking it up and scanning the contents, my lips part in shock. It's a plane ticket and confirmation receipt for a European tour starting in July. Dropping it onto the desk, I open the card and notice the lack of name. All it says inside is *Happy Birthday*.

Walking out to reception, I hold up the card to Jan, the gray-haired woman who knows this place like the back of her hand. "Jan, do you know who left this in my office? Or when they left it?"

I was here late last night which means whoever it was probably left it early this morning. Only a few people were around when I went home, and nobody would have known to get me anything because I made sure my birthday wasn't on the block of break room celebrations.

Jan smiles. "It was delivered first thing this morning. She was adamant on making sure you had it before the weekend started. Wouldn't say why though, but I suspect it was to make you smile. She seemed like the type to want to make people happy, cutie that she was."

She? "Who was it?"

Jan gathers some papers and straightens them out without looking at me. "I hope you have a great day, Mr. James."

My jaw ticks. "It's Oliver."

She just grins.

Sighing, I walk back into my office and drop into my chair. Grabbing the ticket, I shake my head and examine the card. No signature, generic message, nothing personalized. Yet, this ticket couldn't have been cheap. I was sure of it.

Opening my desk drawer to set it inside, I freeze when I see a pink box resting at the bottom. It's smaller than the ones I'm used to seeing, so it fits perfectly among the files and other oddities I shoved there.

Picking it up, I glance around the room like someone is about to jump out at me. Not just someone, but a blonde-haired girl who obviously doesn't listen to me about coming here on her own.

Flipping the box open, I stare at the single cupcake resting inside with a candle in it. Vanilla cake, vanilla buttercream frosting. My favorite.

Lifting the card and ticket and then glancing back at the breakfast I'm about to devour with no shame, I grab my phone from my pants pocket.

OLLIE:

What did I tell you about coming here on your own, Charlie?

CHARLIE:

Happy birthday, old man

OLLIE:

The ticket?

CHARLIE:

I can't even afford gum right now. That was from River and Everett

SCRUBBING my jaw with my palm, I push away from the desk and settle my feet on the top, crossed at the ankles. There aren't many people who know how much I've wanted to travel, though I suppose it isn't a secret. Everett knew as much back in high school—he even told me he wasn't surprised I was moving to Chicago.

But that isn't the reason I'm holding this ticket—my gut says so. It's more than an old thought or a blind reach. Charlie did something.

OLLIE:

How'd they come up with this?

CHARLIE DOESN'T RESPOND RIGHT AWAY, and I wonder if it's because she's on her way to class. It isn't even eight yet, which means she got up early enough to sneak in here before school started.

CHARLIE:

You deserve the trip, Ollie

It's a non-answer that tells me more than she actually types out. She told them about where I wanted to go. Based on the locations listed on the tour receipt, there's nobody else who could have told them to get me this.

The tour covers the locations where *Harry Potter* filmed in both London and Scotland. Considering the movies are the only ones on my shelf at home, it shouldn't surprise me that she noticed.

OLLIE:

You could have gotten me the books

CHARLIE:

You don't like reading

OLLIE:

It's the thought that counts

CHARLIE:

Next time I'll tell them to get you a Muggle mug

I CHUCKLE, swiping some frosting off the top of my cupcake with my finger. My usual coffee and bagel are on the edge of my desk growing cold, but I don't care.

Unlike Everett and River, I've never been a huge fan of reading. Most people give me shit for loving the franchise as a film without reading the series, but Charlie doesn't. Like me, she doesn't read as often as Everett would like but she also doesn't care about it either. Music is her field of interest.

What the hell is mine?

The answer stares back at me in paper form. Traveling is my thing. Not having to settle behind a desk is my thing—not wearing suits or dress pants or listening to people bitch is one hundred percent my thing.

Charlie is my thing too.

OLLIE:

Thank you for the cupcake and card. Stop coming here by yourself though.

CHARLIE:

Who said I was alone?

EYEING THE TEXT, I set down the presents and walk back out to Jan's desk. "Was Charlie by herself when she came in?"

Jan sighs and turns her chair toward me, her glasses resting at the end of her nose. "No. She was with some boy about her age. Blond hair, or maybe brown? He drove her."

My jaw ticks.

Liam.

She doesn't seem to see my distaste for the guy. "They make a cute couple. I thought it was sweet that he brought her here to drop that stuff off for you."

“They’re not dating,” I inform her coolly, clearing my throat when her eyes widen. Flattening my shirt, I shake it off. “Trust me, her parents wouldn’t be happy if she started seeing anyone. She’s too young.”

Jan rolls her eyes. “She’s a teenager. Young love is the best kind to be in, don’t you think? It’s innocent and consuming.”

I don’t agree with the innocent part.

Consuming...

“Let the girl be,” she scolds. “She’s clearly happy with the boy, you would know it as soon as you saw her face.”

My mouth dries. “Her face?”

She nods once. “I swear, as soon as she stepped in here she couldn’t stop smiling. She’s a beauty, that one. Surely will be a heartbreaker.”

No fucking kidding.

Fighting the urge to grind my teeth, I thank her before closing my office door behind me. Most people won’t disturb me when it’s closed, not even Erik when he wants to vent. It’ll give me peace and quiet until more people flood the office space which I’ll gladly take advantage of while it lasts.

Taking the cupcake out of the box, I look at its misshapen topping from where I’ve already sampled it. Charlie knew I wouldn’t want anything else—not chocolate, red velvet, or cheesecake. It’s always vanilla.

Biting into it, I pick up the ticket and memorize the dates and times. Anyone could have seen the movies lying around and thought nothing of it. Plenty of hookups did.

Not Charlie.

She knew.

I should hate that.

But I don’t.

OLLIE

CHARLIE DOESN'T SEE me right away when she rolls to her dorm on her pink board, blonde hair flying behind her in the breeze. She looks at ease, sporting tight jeans and a loose tee with a pair of black Chucks on her feet.

Her backpack looks twice the size of her, probably full of textbooks. If the rest of the materials she needs are as big as the book she's brought to my apartment before, she's probably carrying twenty pounds in the black bag.

When she does see me, a big smile spreads across the face that does something to my chest. She waves and jumps off the board, letting it roll toward me where I'm leaning against the side of the building.

"What are you doing here?" She adjusts her bag and fixes her messy hair, combing her fingers through it before positioning it over one shoulder.

I hold something up, causing her eyes to narrow from the sun in them before grinning at the movie in my hands.

"*Harry Potter*?" The double feature in my hands causes her to smile.

"You've never seen it."

She takes the movie. "Never thought I'd like it," she admits, reading over the back. "I guess I could give it a try since it's practically your birthday."

I glance at my phone screen. "Not for another nine hours."

She rolls her eyes and pulls out her key card, guiding us inside. Her board is in my hand, my movie in hers. "Want to watch it here or go to your place?"

Any other girl who would say something like that would make my mind go to a very different place. But I just want her to experience the world I grew to love with no expectations.

"Here."

Here is safer.

Her brows furrow. "Really?"

Clearing my throat, I shrug. "There will be a lot of traffic right now. It's

better if we just hang here. I can order some food, or we can go to the dining hall or something.”

She pushes her door open and makes a face. “Dining hall food sucks. I vote pizza.” As soon as she’s inside, she drops her bag onto the floor with a loud *thump* before turning to me. “I get it, though. You’re all worried I’ll take advantage of you.”

My lips part. “That isn’t—”

She laughs. “Is it wrong that I kind of like that? I mean, it is. Assault is nothing to laugh about, obviously, but me? It seems fitting that you’d be afraid.”

Closing the door behind me, I set her board down on the floor. “What do you mean?”

She sits on the bed, untying her shoes slowly and not paying me any attention. “My dad used to hit me when he was high. Not a lot, just if I got on his nerves. Like when he would tell me not to come out of my room when his friends were over. I didn’t listen and this one guy kept telling me how pretty I was and trying to touch my hair. All I remember were his yellow teeth.”

I don’t know what to say, so I stand there and let her tell me what I’m not sure she’s told anyone.

“Sometimes I think he loved me. He didn’t want his friends hurting me, after all. Right? That’s got to be something. But...” She shrugs, dropping one shoe on the floor before moving onto the other. “Doesn’t mean his friends listened or he did anything about it when they ignored him.”

My heart bottoms out. “Charlie...”

The second shoe falls. “Don’t worry about it, Ollie. I just find it funny that after all these years, I’m the person you should fear.”

She has it all wrong. “I’m not afraid.”

She meets my eyes in doubt. “No?”

Walking over, I pick up the discarded movie from her bed. “You obviously know how much I love this movie. I tried reading the books but never found much interest in them. Guess I’m more of a visual guy.” I shrug. “Anyway, I don’t like watching these with people because they always have something to say. They’ll compare it to the books or tell me some stupid fact I don’t care about. I just want to watch something I love, you know? And watching it with you is what I want for my birthday.”

Her teeth bite down on her bottom lip. “I technically already got you a cupcake. Can this be like a part two of your gift from me?”

I grin. "Sure."

She gets off the bed and takes the movie from me, popping it into the player by her television across the room. Without a word, she collects the remotes and climbs onto the bed, hugging a pillow to her as she leans her back against the cement wall.

Patting the space next to her, she smiles at me in invitation. "If the birthday boy wants to watch movies, that's what we'll do. But you're totally paying for dinner."

I laugh and pull out my phone. "Cold cheese pizza?"

Her stomach growls.

Hopping onto the bed, I place an order for a large pie to be delivered to her room. She tells me about her day, I tell her about mine. There's no touching, no expectations.

The two times we've let the barrier fall from between us isn't mentioned. In the moment, we aren't the two people who know what the other tastes like. We're just us, and it's a present I can't get from anybody else.

When the pizza comes, I start the movie. Her eyes light up not long into it, making me smile as she experiences a world I've loved since childhood. After eating a few slices of pizza, she leans forward and watches the plot unravel. I think I spend more time watching her than I do the movie, but it's worth it.

By the time it ends, she gets up to put the second one in. Before settling onto the bed, she shuffles around a plastic bag on her desk and pulls out a bag of off brand popcorn.

"It's not as good as the real stuff," she says, hopping back into the place she was before.

Chuckling, I grab a handful and shove it into my mouth as she presses play. Halfway through, a third of the bag is gone and she sets it off to the side. Her eyes get heavy, but she tries fighting it. It isn't late, but the bags under her eyes tells me she didn't sleep well the night before.

When her body eases against mine, my heart picks up. Her breathing becomes slower as the movie nears its end, and when I look over, her eyes are closed.

"Charlie?" I whisper.

Carefully laying her down and pulling the blanket over her, I make sure the leftover food is out of her way so it doesn't spill everywhere. She makes a strangled noise that causes her nose to scrunch and brows to pinch as she

curls into the pillow.

Brushing hair behind her ear, her body moves toward mine. Knowing I should leave is one thing but making myself pack up and drive home is another.

Charlie says something, a name, a plea, nothing I can quite make out.

“It’s okay,” I hush, resting on my side and gently curling her into my body. “You’re dreaming, Charlie. It’s all right.”

Her body quickly eases into mine and her palm rests on my chest at the same time her nose nuzzles my pec. The warmth absorbing into me has my own muscles easing into the firm mattress.

This type of quiet I don’t mind as much. I hear the even drums of her heartbeat, soft breathing, and little noises as she absentmindedly cuddles closer to me. I hug her against me, arms wrapped around her until the talking stops, and don’t think about anything outside this room.

That was my first mistake.

I WAKE UP PRESSED against a warm body. My leg is between Charlie’s and the sun cascades on us in a welcoming embrace. She’s still sleeping soundly, her hands tucked under her chin against her pillow, and her breath eased.

Gently brushing hair out of her face, she stirs before turning and settling back in. My muscles ache as I sit up, careful not to wake her. Finding my phone behind me, I realize we’ve slept in later than I usually sleep.

I manage to climb off the bed and find my shoes. Ida’s Bakery will be open, so I can go grab breakfast for us before she wakes. Gathering my keys and slipping my phone into my pocket, I head toward the door and glance behind me to study Charlie’s sleeping form.

The way the sun hits her hair makes it look lighter and sleeping has her features carefree and unworried. Right now, she looks peaceful. Like nothing can get her.

Unlocking her door, I back out quietly and close the wood with a soft click. When I turn around, Liam is standing with wide eyes before studying the shoes I carry in my hands.

Cursing, I clear my throat. “Charlie is still sleeping. You should come back later.”

His jaw ticks. “Is she now?”

We stare at each other, me towering over him by at least half a foot. He doesn’t back down or seem to care. In fact, he sizes me up and steps forward.

Glancing between me and the door, he locks our gazes. “Who did you say you were to her again?”

I remain silent.

“Interesting,” he murmurs, shaking his head. He gestures toward my shoes. “I’ll be sure to let her know you had to leave.”

My nostrils flare. “Listen—”

“You should go, man.”

You should go before I say something.

He leaves that part out.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he adds, “Might want to put your shoes back on though. They just put gravel down outside to fill in the potholes from the plows. I’d hate to see you hurt yourself.”

Fists twitching, I drop my shoes and slide them on all while watching him. He eyes me through narrowed slits, judging me, assuming.

When I’m standing again, I step toward him and crowd his space. “Don’t assume the worst, kid. That shit will get you into trouble.”

His lips stretch into a knowing grin that I want to smack off his face. “Not as much as sneaking out of an underage girl’s dorm room, especially if she’s your niece.”

My teeth grind.

“I’ll see you around,” he says, shouldering past me toward Charlie’s door. He glances over his shoulder. “Or not.”

Knowing what’s best for me in the moment, I let the asshole win. Walking toward the door, I clench my keys in my hands and walk toward the visitor parking lot.

I want to ask him what he’s even doing there—what he expects from Charlie. There’s no jealousy in his features when he looks at me, but there’s certainly disgust. So what are his motives? Why show up there to begin with?

Blowing out a breath, I shake off the ill feeling over the exchange.

Nothing happened, I remind myself.

Not this time anyway.

Ironic, really, that a simple movie night will be the start of the end. The look in his eyes told me just that—I was screwed.

Even platonically, Charlie means something to him. If he says something, she could talk him down. Convince him otherwise. Lie.

When I climb into my car, I stare at the building and close my eyes. Slamming my palm against the top of the steering wheel, I let out a string of

curses before starting up the car and heading home.
I send a text to Charlie.

OLLIE:
Had to go

CHARLIE

I STILL SMELL Ollie on my pillowcase even after two days. It overwhelms my senses in the best way, caressing me to sleep and kissing me good morning. He didn't do either of those things when I woke up to an empty bed with warm sheets and a three-worded text on Saturday.

Liam had met me to go to the park but said he couldn't stay long. Something about meeting his parents that afternoon for a wedding they were traveling to.

When he walked me back to the dorm, he gave me a funny look and asked me if I had any plans for the week. He never used to ask me before, so the way he looked at me when he asked still has me wondering what was wrong.

During lunch, I poke at my salad and play with my phone in the dining hall. A girl asked to take the empty chair across from me that Liam usually sits at.

Setting down my fork, I scroll through my messages and tap on Ollie's name. He told me that he and Erik had plans Saturday night and couldn't talk. When I called on Sunday, he sounded sick.

Hungover, I think.

I don't know what drunk Ollie is like. One time I heard Everett talking to him over the phone about a drunken night he had with some handsy girl. I was fourteen at the time and got so angry I stormed out of the room I'd been eavesdropping in. River came to my room and asked if I was okay.

I told her I just didn't feel well.

I don't think she believed me.

He texted me yesterday saying he was sorry he couldn't talk the day before. When I told him it was fine he never replied. I kept telling myself he was busy.

Busy with work.

Busy with life.

Busy.

The more time we spend together, the more I realize that I shouldn't have to make excuses. When he would visit me in Bridgeport, he would surprise me and take me out and make me smile without it feeling wrong. Not even when we'd get into arguments about being friends, because it never truly felt anything but right.

CHARLIE:

Can we talk later?

SETTING my phone down and forcing myself to eat, I tune out the possibility of him not getting back to me. It's too early for him to be at lunch and I doubt he'll have his cell on him. Still, I want to see him.

After finishing, I throw my garbage away and head outside. The sun is shining, and the air is warm, which makes me hope at least one of my afternoon classes is in the quad in one of the stone ledges they made specifically for outdoor classrooms. The subtle noise helps me focus even though the teachers think it's distracting.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I take it out and smile at the message.

OLLIE:

Pick you up at five

KNOWING I'll get to see him makes my day go by quicker. I participate in two of the lectures and manage to get through one full playback of my song during practice without any mistakes. The teacher told me I must have been inspired today.

I smiled.

When five came around, I ditched my backpack and stayed in my blue jeans and beige sweater. It falls off one of my shoulders but it's still warm for the breeze we're getting.

When Ollie pulls up to the front entrance, I wave and slide into the passenger seat of his car. His smile is evident but tight, and he won't make

eye contact with me for long.

The drive off campus is quiet, so I conjure up tiny conversations even though neither of us is good at small talk. I ask about his day and he tells me it was fine. He asks me about mine and I tell him it was good.

He takes me to O'Malley's and orders a white pizza for us to share. I'm not sure why we don't get something he likes, because he says the white sauce and spinach is gross compared to the meat lovers he usually gets.

"How's the project you're working on?"

Last week he told me about some new app that he and Erik were working on the marketing for. It's supposed to be the next social media sensation, but they were struggling on ways to sell it that didn't sound like all the others.

Playing with the glass salt and pepper shakers on the red and white plaid tablecloth between us, he gives me a small shrug. "I think we've got it sorted out. Erik had a pretty good idea on what he thinks the audience it's geared to would want."

"And who would that be?"

He meets my eye. "Your generation."

The way he says it makes my eyes roll. Turning thirty-one must have made him bitter, because he says it with such disdain. "I don't even know what my generation would like. How does he?"

"He focus grouped it."

I just stare.

He chuckles. "He essentially did a test group using people in a certain age bracket to ask what they wanted to see. You know, what would make them buy the product."

"Aren't the apps free?"

"There are add-ons people buy."

"Oh."

He nods and brushes it off. "Anyway, it's not that exciting. Tell me about school. Classes. Anything new happen?"

He always does this to me. "Do you like your job?"

His brows furrow in. "What?"

I move the shakers away from him. "I was just curious, is all. You don't seem like you enjoy talking about it."

He sighs, leaning back in his chair. "It's a job. It pays the bills."

"But you should like it, right?"

"Not everyone does."

“Everett talks about work all the time to me and River,” I note, resting my arms on the edge of the table and watching him. “You can tell he likes it because he gets this look in his eyes. You don’t have that.”

He wets his lips and I can tell he wants to ask me what look that is. “Like I said, not everyone likes their job.”

“So why not get a new one?”

He doesn’t answer.

I’m not sure what he’s thinking, but the corners of his lips twitch like they want to curve downward. “All I’m saying is that it can’t be that hard, right? If it doesn’t make you happy then you should do something else. It isn’t like you don’t have the money in case you don’t find something right away.”

“Do you propose I quit?”

“I propose you do something else.”

He shakes his head and glances behind the counter at the people working on our order. It smells like pizza dough, tomato sauce, and chicken wings in here. My stomach growls.

“It’s not that easy, Charlie.”

“Why—”

“Listen,” he cuts me off gently, “I’m grateful you want me to be happy, but we don’t all get a choice in the matter. Work is fine. I don’t need anything more.”

Everett smiles with his eyes when he tells us about a new deal at his company. Even when he’s stressed, he makes sure to point out that something good always comes of it. More jobs, more raises, more reasons to go to work every day.

Ollie always looks sad, overwhelmed. When I try getting him to talk about it, he shuts down or changes the subject. If I deserve happiness like Griffin insists, so does he.

“I don’t agree,” I argue firmly. “If you don’t like something about your life, you can always do something to change it.”

Griffin would be proud of me. I may not be great at practicing what I preach, but I’m getting better. Like being bold enough to call out Ollie. Then again, that isn’t really different. I think it both irritates and impresses him until I push too far.

I shrug. “Like I did, I guess.”

“That’s different, Charlie.”

“Why?”

He eyes me skeptically. “You’re younger and have more opportunities. I moved here for this job and I’ve spent years perfecting it. I can’t just up and leave because I decide it isn’t what I want anymore.”

What do you want, Ollie?

Mentally, I compile a list of things I know he likes. It’s not very long because Ollie never focuses on himself when it comes to me. Instead of talking about places he wants to go, he’ll ask how I like Chicago and what new museum I want to visit. Instead of saying he wants to see a certain movie, he’ll ask what I’ve wanted to watch.

He’s selfless, putting me first rather than himself. But that can be tiring for anybody, and I don’t think that’s why he does it. I’m not sure even he knows what he wants.

“Who says you can’t?”

“I do.”

Our pizza comes out and gets set between us on the stand. Ollie passes me a plate and some napkins before using the spatula to get me a piece. Steam rolls off the stretchy cheese as I pull the plate toward me.

“You want to travel, right?”

He doesn’t look at me as he puts two slices of pizza onto his plate and carefully removes some fallen cheese from the side of the hot tray.

“Charlie, let it go.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

He levels with me, eyes dark. “Why?”

My lips part but nothing comes out. I want to say, *Because I care about you. Because I want to see you smile with your eyes. Because I don’t want to hold you back.*

I’m not stupid. The biggest reason he’s here is because of me. Erik told me when I first showed up at the office that Ollie hadn’t been around a lot of people in months, which lined up with my arrival to the city. I always liked being the only girl in his life, but not the only person.

Even I know he needs more than me.

“River thinks you love it here.”

He eats his pizza.

“So does Everett.”

He sets his pizza down.

“Why won’t you talk about it?”

His eye twitches as he grabs his water and takes a sip. “Because I don’t

want to.”

Jaw ticking at the impossible man in front of me, I pick at my own pizza. “My parents died from an overdose when I was little. I asked River not to tell you because I didn’t want you treating me different.”

He draws back, food forgotten.

“I don’t like it when people feel bad for me over stuff they can’t change. Like how they acted when they were high or coming down from one. It got ... well, bad. That doesn’t matter so much. Dr. Griffin said I deserve to be happy regardless of the bad stuff and that’s what I’m trying to get at. Everyone deserves that.”

“Our pasts aren’t the same.”

“True.” I pick up my pizza and take a big bite, taking my time to savor the garlicky flavor. “But I don’t think that means the outcome can’t be the same. Can you really tell me that just because you had a good upbringing and money that you don’t deserve to do something that makes you enjoy life?”

I’m met with silence.

“Can you admit that you’re happy with all the stuff you were given and have? Like Chicago? Does it make you happy like it does me? Or Erik? Or whoever you see smiling and laughing and enjoying the sights?”

His clicks his tongue.

I nod. “You shouldn’t have to stay here if you don’t want to. See, that’s what Griffin was trying to get me to understand. None of us has to do anything we don’t want. I spent a long time being someone who never got to decide. I mean, Griffin can be really annoying, but she knows what she’s talking about when it comes to this stuff.”

He manages to laugh softly, the smile on his face lightening his hard expression. “I imagine she’s meant to.”

“Maybe you should see her.”

His brows arch.

My cheeks blush. “You know, as a patient. Not ... anything else. As much as I don’t like talking to her about some stuff, she kind of puts things into perspective.”

He taps the table in contemplation. “You think I need to talk to her about something?”

I think you’re a lot like me.

But I don’t say that. “You told me a while ago that strong people get the help they need. Maybe you just need some help figuring out what to do. Even

if that means leaving Chicago.” *Don’t leave me, Ollie.* I swallow. “If it makes you happy, you should.”

He stares at his plate for a minute. “You have a thing about happiness, don’t you?”

Forcing a smile, I reply, “When you go so long without it, you try embracing as much as you can to keep that feeling.”

My thumb traces the little scars on my hand and I’m sure he watches me. I’m glad they’re the only ones he can see, because the ones engraved on my mind seem to be far bigger than even Griffin can cure.

His throat bobs. After a long moment, he meets my eyes. “I’m sorry to hear about your parents, Charlie.”

I’m not.

But I whisper, “Thank you.”

GRIFFIN’S CLOCK is three minutes slow. I’m not sure when that happened. Maybe she did it on purpose to keep me here longer.

“You look a bit pale today,” Griffin notes, settling into her usual chair.

I could thank her for the compliment, but I don’t even bother with that. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

It isn’t something I admit often because then she asks lots of questions. I try to avoid those the best I can. Not that it usually works.

“Do you know why?”

My mind doesn’t filter my words. “A guy, I guess.”

It’s not a guess.

She perks up. “Would this be Liam?”

My lips twitch in irritation. “Liam and I are just friends like I mentioned before. I don’t know why you think we’d be good together.”

“I just want to see you happy.”

“This guy makes me happy.”

She studies me. “Why does it seem like you’re anything but that then? Remember what we talked about, Charlie. It’s okay to be happy.”

After the conversation with Ollie the other day, I know that more than anything. “I think there’s something wrong with him.”

Her lips part. “What do you mean?”

I readjust in my spot. “He has everything I’ve always wanted but that doesn’t seem to make him happy. Whenever I try talking to him about stuff he shuts down.”

She doesn't say anything.

"What do you think it could be?"

"We're here to talk about you."

"But I want to talk about him."

She sighs. "Charlie, I'm not sure I could be of any help. A lot of people experience lulls in their adolescence. I'm sure the things you think he has aren't as grand as they seem. To him, perhaps they're a burden."

Ignoring her assumption of his age, I shake my head. Family isn't a burden. Neither is privilege or friendship.

"I don't think it's that."

She grabs her notebook. "Then what do you think it is?"

I've seen it before—the sadness. It isn't permanent, because I see Ollie smile and mean it. Like when we see a movie and he laughs at something the character says or when I crack a joke about someone we see on our ventures into the city. He isn't always shut off.

Mom wasn't either. Not always.

Not ... before.

"Depression," I whisper.

Griffin jots something down. "It's an interesting theory to consider."

I don't say anything.

"Your mother was depressed." It's not a question, but a statement that's pressing for a response. A reaction.

Feebly, I nod.

"Let's talk about it."

"I want to talk about my friend."

"I think the two are related," she replies.

My nose scrunches. "No, they're not."

"Not in the blood sense."

I don't follow.

She leans back. "I think there's a reason you're worried about him. Perhaps you're witnessing things you remember about your mother and want to make it better before he follows the same path."

Ollie would never do that.

"He's not like that."

"Your mother wasn't at first either."

I clam up.

She sets down her pen. "I really think you should talk about this, Charlie.

Your mother's addiction started from something that subconsciously I believe you're worried about."

Mom used to lay in bed a lot when I was little. There isn't a lot I remember of her before she started using because I was young when they died. There are little memories of her brushing hair behind my ear from her bed when I'd walk into her room after Dad said she was sleeping.

She slept a lot.

Depression runs in the family, I guess. That's what Amy said when they ran background on my parents. Mom started on antidepressants and sedated herself more often than not until she decided she needed other fixes. Opiates. Whatever would let her escape her mind.

Of course, I didn't know this at the time. When you're four and wondering why Mommy's nose is bleeding, you just want to make it better because Daddy wouldn't. He made it worse.

He made everything worse.

"He isn't like her."

Her head tips. "If he were depressed, would you worry that he might face the same challenges?"

It isn't like I'm suggesting he go on medication, just that he does something to get out of the place that's suppressing him. But if she wants my honest answer, she can have it.

"I'm not addicted," I point out.

"True."

"If medicine helps..." I shrug. "I don't think he even knows there's something wrong, just that nothing makes him happy anymore. I'm not even sure I can."

"Do you want to?"

"Of course." There's no hesitation.

"And why is that?"

Because I've always loved him. "He deserves to feel that for once and I think I'm holding him back."

Her brows pinch and I press my lips together. I hadn't meant to say it, that's admitting too much. But it's the truth and the truth hurts sometimes.

I'm the reason he isn't happy.

"I just want him to go," I tell her.

"Go where?"

"Somewhere else?"

“Why?”

“Because he wants to, but he won’t!”

Doesn’t she get it?

“Because of you?”

I nod.

“I’m not sure I’m following.”

Of course not. Why would she get that I’ve fallen for a man twice my age who’s supposed to be watching over me? Haven’t I been up front about that this whole time?

Shaking my head, I play with the hem of my shirt. “I care about him a lot. I want to believe that we can be together, but it doesn’t seem possible.”

“Why is that?”

Because he’s fifteen years older.

Because he’s my parents’ friend.

Because he’s technically my uncle.

“Just ... because,” I settle on.

She shakes her head. “No. I won’t allow that anymore. You always want to avoid conversations if they get too tough. I’m going to offer you some advice, okay? If you truly want to make this work with him, you need to admit what the problem is. What’s holding you back? Why can’t you allow yourself this?”

I look away, staring at the trophy on her shelf. My nostrils flare and I want to yell or else the anger swelling in my chest will bubble up and explode. Anger because I know I can’t have Ollie and anger because I can’t tell her why. It’s boiling under my skin the more I think about how unhappy he is and how selfish I am for wanting him when he shouldn’t be here.

“Time is what’s holding us back.”

“Time?”

I sigh, shoulders dropping. “I had a foster sister who started seeing a guy and got all messed up from it. She would sneak around to see him when we were supposed to be in bed. She always said she didn’t care if she got into trouble because he made her happy. They were in love, I guess.”

Sarah was pretty. She looked like me but with brown hair instead of blonde and she was taller and older. Guys always flocked to her, but she only ever had eyes for one. I’d get nervous when she would climb out our bedroom window to meet him places, because Ms. Gallow got mad when we disobeyed her. Sarah was the reason I got my first burn mark.

Where did she go, Charlie?
Don't think I won't hurt you.
I'll ask one more time.

I tell myself the burns were worth it. Not ratting out Sarah earned me three out of the five cigarette scars that grace the back of my hand. She always said how in love she was, so not tattling seemed like the best option regardless of punishment.

But Sarah wound up pregnant at sixteen and Ms. Gallow kicked her out of the house because she refused to have a baby around. I think Sarah went to a home for expectant teens. I found out a while later that the boy didn't even stick around.

Griffin draws me back in. "You don't think they loved each other?"

"I think *she* loved *him*."

She nods once.

"I don't even know the guy's name," I admit, drawing my legs into my chest. "She might have mentioned it, but I guess it wasn't important enough. Ms. Gallow used to tell me that dating meant trouble because we'd get pregnant and bring more problems into the world. I already had a bad view of guys to begin with, but watching Sarah get kicked out and Ms. Gallow bragging about how she was right about them not working makes me think it isn't worth it."

"What isn't? Boys?"

I just shrug.

"Happiness comes from your actions," she says simply. "If you don't give yourself the chance, you won't find it. Think about how far you've come. Given your past, would you think there'd come a day when you crushed on a boy? Even considered dating one? You're here worried about the wellbeing of someone you must really like to be willing to talk about your past to help me understand."

I wouldn't say I've been afraid of guys my whole life. In fact, the few men I've been around after being put into foster care would only ever look and make comments about me. They'd tell me how pretty I was getting and how I was changing into a woman the older I got. Still, none of them did anything that could get them into trouble.

The past she refers to is one most people wouldn't expect coming from a former foster kid. The few who accept that fosters aren't safe just expect the brunt of the trouble to be in the homes they're placed in. The abuse I

received, the ultimate neglect from people who should have loved me most, occurred behind the walls of my childhood home.

Thankfully, I don't remember much.

Turns out, it only takes one memory.

"Guys aren't ... him."

"Have you said his name?"

I close my eyes.

"It takes time. I understand."

"You don't," I grind out. "How could you? That's why I hate talking to people. They say stupid things like that as if they get what it's like to experience what I have."

She scoots forward. "You're right and I'm sorry. Like anybody who knows your story, it's human nature to feel bad and want to express that they're there for you. What he did to you is something that you will face for the rest of your life. But I want you to find a way to get past that and anything bad somebody has said about men. They're not all like that."

"I know," I whisper.

"This boy," she presses, "he's good?"

I nod.

"He's kind to you?"

Another nod.

"He respects you?"

"Yes."

She smiles. "Then it sounds like this person, whoever he is, is good for you. If he makes you want to push past your experiences and be happy, I'm glad. And I can try helping in any way I can with him, but I can only do so much without meeting him and diagnosing him myself."

I wet my lips and stare down at my hands when I conjure the words neither of us expects me to say. "His name was Henry Reynolds. He was my father."

Dead silence.

One tear.

One heartbeat.

"I'm proud of you, Charlie," Griffins says, grabbing my hand and squeezing it.

Why don't I feel proud of myself?

OLLIE

I'M on my usual run to clear my head when the sky opens up. It seems fitting, considering the shit mood I've been in all day. After spending a little too much time and money at a bar with Erik and a few other guys from work last night, I'm sporting a hangover, a bitter attitude towards life, and a multitude of unanswered text messages from River, Everett, and Charlie.

If I bring myself to terms with what I need to do, I would answer all their texts until the point is across. Instead, I've buried myself in work to distract myself from what happened with the shithead Charlie calls a friend. Since Charlie hasn't mentioned him saying a word about catching me leaving her room, I assume she doesn't know. Still, nothing I do will stop the inevitable coming from a mile away.

But I can stall it.

Tomorrow, Charlie.

Teddy's newsstand is open on the corner despite the steady downfall. I run over and take cover under the canopy that's protecting him and his papers.

He gives me a crooked glance, noting my drenched running clothes. "What are you doing out here in this, boy?"

I tip my chin toward him. "Could ask you the same. Not many people are going to stop and buy a paper just to risk it getting wet."

He grins. "You're here."

I shrug.

"Find a place to travel to yet?"

I watch the rain come down harder. "I got some tickets to leave the country this summer. Europe."

"Don't sound too thrilled over it."

I lean against the side of his stand, noting the way people jog from

buildings to cars. Too many people are afraid of getting wet. I always liked being out in the rain, it washed away all the bullshit that stuck to me.

“The girl going with you?”

I shake my head, brushing droplets off my face. “No, she’ll be back in New York for the summer. Won’t come back here until the fall.”

“Ah, a college girl. Family over there?”

One nod.

“You don’t want to go with her?”

Coming here was a mistake. Teddy likes to talk, to ask questions. It doesn’t come as a surprise but doesn’t make me want to stick around either.

“New York isn’t really my place.”

“Doesn’t seem like you have one.”

My lips twitch.

“You know,” he says, “we’re not that different, you and me. When I was your age, I was just as unsettled. Not really sure what there was for me besides this.”

I tell him I get it, that I had the choice to go into the family business and opted to leave it behind. He smiles like he’s proud, like he wouldn’t expect any different from me. The thing about Teddy is that he can see right through you. Sometimes I worry he sees too much, but it never deters him.

I shift away from the rain to him. “But you got married and never left here, right?”

He grins. “Served in the Vietnam War back in the day. Did a bit of traveling after it ended before coming back here. Saw some good things with the bad. Overseas wasn’t a great place to be when you were American.”

My brows drew in. “Why did you come back here if you felt unsettled? Your wife?”

“We all need somewhere to go.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

He laughs. “I’m too old to care now.” I can’t help but crack a grin. “If you want me to tell you what I think, I will. Not much of a therapist, but I’ll offer ya advice free of charge.”

Remembering what Charlie said, my lips twitch. “Seems like people think I need it.”

He studies me. “Some of us are lucky enough to know the difference between what we want and what we think we want. Most people just settle for comfort because they don’t think they can get any better. Sure, I could

have traveled more. But the things I saw back in the day made me realize that Chicago wasn't so bad. I suppose I settled for comfort because it was better than seeing life for what it really is.

"Now you," he prods, "have a chance to make that decision for yourself. Times are different now. I'm sure people are more welcoming. Your girl is going back to New York for a while, so why not extend your trip?"

Contemplating my answer, I realize he has a point. I've got time saved up since I rarely take time off work, which means I could go away for a while and let Erik handle shit while I'm gone. Then again, work helps me drown out the noise of my thoughts. What if traveling doesn't?

"Your parents support you?" he asks.

Blinking, I nod. "I'm not sure they get it, but they've always had my back. Even after I told my father I didn't want his spot in the company."

"Had to be hard for him."

"Probably," I admit.

"First step to a good life is support," he says, redirecting the conversation. "If you have it from your parents, you're already in a better boat than some. This girl, what does she think?"

Charlie never got the support she needed from the start but she's a better person than I will ever be. Stronger, wiser, purer. Maybe I worried about corrupting that at first, but I realize that's impossible. Nobody can ruin a soul like hers.

"She told me to go."

"Think she means it?"

That's the problem.

I know she does.

When I don't answer, he stands up and pulls something out of his pocket. The worn brown leather wallet looks like it has seen some use. He opens it and slides something yellow and tattered out.

He passes me a black and white picture. In it is a young man in uniform probably a few years younger than me standing next to a girl in a knee-length dress with a little cross emblem in the top corner who looks even younger. They're both smiling at whoever is taking the picture, arms wrapped around each other and looking like nothing matters.

"Her name was Olivia," he tells me, nodding toward the photograph. "She was a seventeen-year-old volunteer nurse who lied about her age to help the cause. Lively despite the blood and gore we both saw. Always made

people smile, especially me.

“After a few months of back and forth, I took her out to a little spot near camp. Still remember the way she laughed. It was the lightest sound, like bells. She talked about her family and her friends back home in Kansas. Her parents had a farm over there that she was supposed to be helping on before sneaking off with a group of girls and landing overseas. Never once regretted her decision, not even when she would see the bodies roll in.”

My lips twitch as I pass him back the picture, not wanting to damage it. If he carried it around with him all this time, it must be important.

“Can honestly say I loved that girl despite the odds. She was twelve years younger than me and had the world to look forward to. And me? I knew I’d wind up in Chicago again when the time came. She didn’t want to leave Kansas when the war was over. Planned on going back and getting her parents forgiveness before taking over things.”

My head cocks. “What happened?”

He smiles as he tucks the image back into his wallet. “She asked me to come home with her. Get married, have a family. The works.”

“You said you loved her.”

“I did,” he confirms, “but she wouldn’t consider moving to Chicago. Said there was no way her parents would let her marry an older man and move to a different state. Seemed like a controlling bunch, her family.”

Curiosity gets the better of me. “Did people criticize your age difference then? You know, like her family?”

He shakes his head. “Can’t say it was the biggest deal in the world. When we were stationed together, there was too much else going on for people to care. Maybe people would have if we made it, settled down. Or maybe it wouldn’t have mattered because it was real. Can’t be sure.”

“Was it?”

His brows quirk.

“Real,” I emphasize.

“I think so.”

“But you’re not together.”

“She wasn’t willing to support me,” he tells me earnestly. “Suppose I’m no different, not wanting to go to Kansas. Always been a city boy, myself.”

I understand the feeling well.

“I’m not sure I see how it was real then.”

“Ah,” he muses, nodding. “Love is raw, boy. It isn’t easy and it tests you

more than not. Just because it doesn't always work out doesn't mean it wasn't real."

"You sure about that?"

He winks. "Don't see me carrying a picture of my ex-wives, do you?"

I chuckle.

"Good luck to you, kid."

Sounds like I'll need it.

CHARLIE

MY BED DOESN'T SMELL like Ollie anymore. It probably shouldn't matter, except it was all I had left since we haven't been hanging out as much. I want to tell him what I talked to Griffin about.

I woke up the past two nights from the same nightmare. Last night was worse and I had no bit of citrus to lull me into oblivion and wipe the tears away.

It's the same ... but worse.

Worse because I remember.

Henry.

The door would creak open and his footsteps would fall heavily against the carpet. Halfway into my room was a weak spot in the wood that echoed when people stepped on it. I heard his rough breathing. Smelled the strong alcohol. Felt the bed dip.

He'd say my name.

Charlotte not Charlie.

That's how I know I'm dreaming.

Remembering.

Henry Reynolds brushed my hair back and skimmed my shoulder. He told me he loved me. Told me he would never hurt me.

But then he would.

He never showed his face.

I'm not sure he could.

When it was done, I'd lay in bed and cry even though Mom told me crying was for the weak. *Never let people see you cry, Charlotte.* I would cry over the pain and the fear and the creak in the floorboard when he would come back and tell me he loved me.

Fear left me wide awake, naked in bed, surrounded by nothing but the

smell of sweat. It was two in the morning and I wanted Ollie.

I texted. No response.

I called. No answer.

He told me once he'd be over in a heartbeat if I needed him.

He lied.

Henry lied too.

Now I'm sitting in class playing with the jagged end of the spiral notebook. The teacher is talking but I don't listen. I'm tired. My body is tired. My mind is tired.

Liam came back from his family trip and came right to my dorm. He looked around like he was trying to find something but ended up grabbing my board from the floor and telling me to skate to class with him like it was no big deal.

He's quiet beside me, watching as I press the pad of my thumb into the warped metal of my notebook.

"What's wrong?" he whispers.

He asked me that this morning when our boards hit the pavement. I told him nothing then. I say the same thing now.

For a while, he pretends to listen to the teacher. He doesn't write anything down because there's nothing in front of him. He still absorbs the information because I know he'll get an A on the quiz tomorrow.

He asks me what's wrong once more and I jab my finger into the spiral end until blood is drawn. For the rest of the period, he leaves me alone.

When class is over, he follows me out carrying both of our boards. I told him earlier I didn't want to skate because I didn't have the energy, but he kept insisting. He must have let it go since I've been a zombie for the past two periods we've had together.

I could use a sugar fix right now to give me a boost, which makes me think of Ida's Bakery and the yummy donuts I haven't had in a little while. Then again, it might not be a bad thing. My jeans are getting tight.

"What's on your mind, Barbie?"

"Donuts."

He snorts. "Why doesn't that surprise me? You eat way too many of those."

Is there truly a thing? "I'm going to have to disagree with you. Plus, donuts are the best things ever made. You're just lame."

He nudges my shoulder. "Says who?"

“Me and the rest of the population.”

He just shakes his head.

“And,” I defend, “I don’t buy most of the donuts I eat. I get them from Oliver, and it’d be rude to let them go to waste.”

His steps slow, causing me to glance over with pinched brows. He gives me a funny look before stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

“I don’t like him.”

At first, I’m not sure what to say. People pass us, not seeing the obvious tension building in Liam’s shoulders. “Funny, he says the same thing about you.”

His jaw ticks. “Yeah? When is that?”

“Just ... in passing.”

He stops walking and turns to me, cutting off two girls walking behind us. They glare as they walk by. “In passing or right before he leaves your dorm doing the walk of shame?”

My lips part.

“Yeah. I know.”

Know what? My heart starts racing so fast I think he may hear it. That was a week ago now, and he hasn’t said a thing. “It’s not ... we were watching movies.”

He doesn’t look like he buys it.

“Honest.” I step toward him, suddenly desperate and dizzy. “He brought over *Harry Potter* because I’ve never seen it. I ... w-we just fell asleep.”

He scoffs and narrows his eyes. “How am I supposed to believe that?”

My chest hurts. “You have no reason not to, Liam. When have I ever lied to you about anything?”

He shrugs. “When have you ever told me anything about you that doesn’t involve school?”

Looking down, I stare at the sidewalk knowing he’s right. He doesn’t have a reason to believe anything I say because I haven’t exactly been open with him. He’s told me his favorite color is blue and that he hates school and loves hip hop. I know his mom’s middle name is Mary and that his father’s family changed their last name a long time ago because of some scandal their great ancestors were part of. But what does he know about me?

He doesn’t know about therapy even though he drove me once. I told him to drop me off a block away in front of a clinic. He thought I had a doctor’s appointment, when really, I snuck out the back and walked to Griffin’s office.

He knows nothing of my medication or my birth parents or even my adopted ones.

He knows Ollie.

He knows my favorite pizza toppings.

He knows I live and breathe music.

There's nothing that I can tell him even now because it wouldn't matter. He'd think I have no other choice but to blurt fun facts at him like it's the first day of school again.

"What's going on with you two?"

Tears threaten to build in my eyes, but I blink them away. "Nothing. We just watched movies. I swear."

He glances away and starts walking without me. "You said you never lied. What the hell is this then, Charlie?"

Charlie. Not Barbie.

I catch up to him. "I don't know what you think you saw—"

He stops again and glares at me. "It isn't about what I think I saw. What I saw was a grown ass man leaving your dorm room early in the morning looking like he was walking out on another fuck session. Tell me I'm wrong."

Nausea sweeps through me. "You are."

"He's your uncle, right?"

Trying to even my breathing, I say, "I mean sort of. We're not ... he isn't technically related to me."

"Oh great. So, he's the creepy uncle."

"He isn't creepy!"

"He slept over in your room!" He kicks an empty beer can with his foot. "Jesus Christ, Charlie. I'm trying to get you to see how screwed up this is. You want to know how I know you're lying to me right now?"

I'm silent.

He steps forward. "Because you look terrified of admitting the truth. And guess what? It's the same damn look he gave me when he about bit my head off the day I caught him leaving."

My breathing becomes rapid until my head gets lighter. Swaying on my feet, I try to calm down before a panic attack bubbles up.

"You need to stop whatever it is."

"There's nothing—"

"Don't lie to me!" he yells.

I jerk back, stumbling until my tailbone hits the grass behind me. A few people stop walking and watch us. I just stare up at his angry features that seem to set the dark mood.

He threads his fingers through his ashy hair and lets out a heavy breath. "Maybe, maybe it was just a movie then. But don't tell me you don't at least want something more. The sick fuck clearly does and that's messed up."

"Don't call him that," I whisper brokenly.

"Jesus. What are you doing?"

"He's ... he's my best friend."

He hits his chest. "I'm your friend. You can't be friends with someone twice your age. Lean on me if you need someone, okay? I can be that person for you."

I shake my head.

No, you can't.

Brushing my hair out of my face, I tuck my knees into my chest. "It was just a movie. He's just looking out for me, okay? I'm sorry, but you can't be like he is to me."

He curses. "And what is that?"

Everything.

He kneels. "I'm not asking you for anything, Charlie. Just be my friend so I can get to know you. I'm not an idiot. You don't talk about yourself for a reason. But that doesn't mean you can't eventually."

His name is Henry Reynolds.

I want to ask him why he wants to be my friend. What's in it for him? He may have been a good one to me, but he's right. I haven't treated him with the same respect.

"Why me?"

His brows pinch.

"Why not just tell me to shove it?"

He snorts. "You're pretty to look at."

I roll my eyes. "Be real."

His lips quirk. "Listen," he sighs, "I don't have a lot of girl friends that I can just chill with and show shit to. You don't expect anything from me just like I don't expect anything from you."

There's no reason to question it because he's never asked anything from me. Not even after the kiss. I thought it was because of how Ollie acted but I think he just doesn't think about it like I don't. It happened and it's over.

I find myself nodding. “You know, I don’t have a lot of friends. Just you and Ollie. And I know you don’t like him, but you need to understand that he’s always been there for me and never seen me for something I’m not.”

His expression turns stoic again.

I suck in a deep breath. “You can’t say anything, Liam. If people assume something is going on, he can get into a lot of trouble. And he—” I hiccup. “—really is my best friend. He’s always believed in me and looked out for me. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him.”

He’s quiet for a long moment. I note how tight his jaw is and how his anger has turned into something else. He’s confused, lost like he doesn’t know what to do or think.

Finally, after what feels like forever, he gives me a short nod. “Fine. But you need to trust me more like I need to trust you. And right now, I don’t know who you are.”

My chest hurts.

“I’m Charlie.”

He stands and offers me a hand up. “I don’t really know who Charlie is, but I look forward to meeting her.”

Accepting his hand, he tugs me to my feet and gives me a small smile. It’s pained and doesn’t reach his blue eyes, but it’s better than nothing.

All he says is, “Tell him you need space for a while. Be real, Barbie. It’ll be better for the both of you if you don’t want people assuming shit.”

I blink and feel my heart drop.

He’s asking me to choose between him and Ollie. That’s not a decision I’m ready to make because I’ll lose him—Liam. He won’t like what I do or understand that it isn’t to hurt him.

I need Ollie.

My throat is thick. “Let’s go.”

He must think it’s an agreement.

I’m sorry, Liam.

THE PIANO KEYS are cool under my fingers, left untouched for some time today. I want to warm them, wear them down, and let the music take over the room. I want Ollie to tell me how beautiful I play, and for Liam to understand that music isn’t all I love.

I can feel someone behind me and know that I’m being watched. My heart speeds because I know who it is without turning around. Yet, I can’t get

myself to press the keys or start what I want to serenade him with. There's no Adele or I Am They or Bach slicing through the silence this time.

His footsteps come toward me and goosebumps pebble my arms. When he stops beside me like last time, I don't move over and offer him a spot. He stands there and watches me as I stare at the keys.

I'm lost.

"Charlie," Ollie says quietly.

My throat is thick. "Liam knows."

He's silent.

I force myself to look at him. "I don't know what to do. He's my friend, but you're..."

His eyes close as he scrubs a palm across his jaw. He stays like that for a long moment, with me just staring helplessly at him.

Then he says, "Will he say anything?"

I shake my head.

He nods. "Okay."

It's not the type of okay that tells me we're fine. It's a relieved kind, one that holds destruction in its wake. The way his eyes dull as they turn to the piano tells me more than I want.

"Ollie," my voice cracks, "tell me there will be tomorrow."

His jaw ticks. "Not sure I can, kid."

My heart drops. "Don't do that."

He stuffs his hands in his pockets. "I don't know what else to do, okay? I could tell you that there will be tomorrow, but do you really want me to lie to you?"

It's hard to swallow.

"Liam won't say anything," I promise.

He steps away. "He will if it continues."

I shake my head, but my argument never leaves my lips. We can't lie to each other. Even if it means escaping with some of my heart left.

Pulse pounding, I wet my lips. "Can I come over tonight?"

He squeezes his eyes closed and palms them. "Charlie—"

I reach out and grab his arm, drawing it toward me. He doesn't put up a fight, but his features are screaming at me to let go.

Not just of his arm.

"You said we don't get tomorrow."

He looks away. "We can't do this."

“It’s too late for that.”

His arm twitches but stays in my hand. I stand and look up at him, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip. After a few moments, he meets my eyes and we stay like that, just staring.

Standing on my tiptoes, I kiss the underside of his jaw. He jerks back, breath harbored and shakes his head.

“No. We—”

“We can,” I plea. Fisting his shirt in my hands, I back him up until we’re away from the piano. He lets me push him into the corner of the room, out of sight of the door and window.

His jaw is locked, and his body is tense, especially when my hands go to his chest. Nostrils flaring, he watches me run my palms down his stomach.

My lips caress his jaw and corner of his mouth. Tears well in my eyes when he doesn’t respond. I want him to grab my arms, wrap me close to his body, and kiss me like he means it.

“You want to kiss me,” I taunt, tugging on his shirt again. “It doesn’t matter that this is wrong, you wouldn’t have let anything happen if you didn’t want it. You don’t want to lie to me? Then admit that.”

He remains silent.

I smack his chest and hiss, “Admit that you want to kiss me, Oliver!”

His expression breaks as he hooks an arm around my waist and turns us so my back crashes against the wall.

“Is this what you want?” he growls, face bent down to lock eyes with me. I can feel his warm breath against my face as his angry eyes scope me out. “Do you really want me to admit how bad I want to kiss you? Because, guess what, Charlie? I want to do so much fucking more than that.”

He presses his body against mine and I can feel how hard he is already. His lips trail down the side of my face and dip into the crook of my neck before sucking on the skin and causing me to buck.

He pulls back, his breath tickling my skin. “Do you want this, Charlie? Everything that I want to do to you?”

With shaky hands, I grab his arms and squeeze the muscles. “Y-yes.”

He presses me harder into the wall with his hips and nips my neck and collarbone before working his way up to my mouth. Hovering just over my lips, his hands find mine and guide them down to the bulge under his jeans.

“Feel what you do to me?”

I’m speechless.

He puts pressure on my hand, making me cup him until he groans and rolls himself into my touch. “That feels good. Doesn’t it?”

I swallow.

He lets go and grabs the back of my thighs before lifting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he rolls his hips into me until heat radiates between my legs and up my body.

“I could fuck you right here, you know.” His voice isn’t the soft kind I’m used to, not playful or light or caring. It’s dangerous, a warning. A threat. “You probably want that, right? Anything to get me to admit that I don’t want this to end.”

“Ollie...” I don’t know what to say. I want him to prove he won’t let me go just because of Liam. I want us, him and me.

He grabs my shirt and starts lifting it, but I feel nauseous. “I’m just doing what you want me to,” he taunts, grazing his palms against my belly button. His hand is hot and rough and needy.

My jaw quivers. “I’m not sure we should do this here. What if someone sees?”

His lips curve into a dark smirk. “So what if they do? Then they’ll know that I want you, right?”

I blink.

His hand drops from my stomach and goes to my butt, cupping it in his big palms. “I think you want everyone to know what you mean to me, don’t you?”

Yes. No. Not like this.

“You could get into trouble,” I murmur, squeezing my arms around his neck. His nose dips into my throat as his tongue licks its way up to my ear.

“Do you really care?”

“Of course I do,” I whisper.

His fingertips dig into my butt and make me wince. “I don’t think you do or else you wouldn’t push me on this. You’d let me walk out of here and go home.”

I close my eyes when I realize what he’s doing. He’s proving a point—one I don’t want him to make. He’s trying to scare me and make me believe this is what’s best. It’s not.

I release my arms from his neck and cup his jaw. “You don’t scare me, Ollie. You would never hurt me on purpose.”

His eyes are black. “Doesn’t mean I won’t hurt you on accident. That’s

what will happen, Charlie.”

“I’m used to getting hurt.”

He takes my hand and caresses the scars with his thumb. “You shouldn’t be used to that. It kills me to think that you’re waiting for the day you’re hurt next, that you expect it.”

My thumb brushes his bottom lip. “I know I won’t have to with you. Don’t you get it by now? We’re meant for each other.”

He scoffs and looks away.

“I think we’re alike,” I press, pulling at his bottom lip. “We both want so much more than what we have and never want to settle. We’re both sad and trying to figure out how to make it work. Not just us, but life.”

His lips caress my cheek. “That doesn’t mean we’re good for each other. If anything, it makes us toxic. I can’t help you if I can’t help myself.”

“You could see Griffin.”

“I won’t see your therapist.”

“But I think—”

“It doesn’t matter what you think,” he cuts me off. “Be honest with yourself, Charlie. River and Everett wouldn’t approve of us even if I did get help. Griffin can’t help us make them understand.”

“They want both of us to be happy.”

His hands twitch on my bottom. “I don’t think that matters in this situation. You may not see what a big deal this is, but I do. I should have never let it happen regardless of what I wanted. You’re too young for me.”

“I’m not—”

His voice is hollow. “You can’t give me what I need. You’re not ready for what I like or what I want. This can’t go anywhere else.”

My chest rises and falls at a rapid rate as I cling to him. “That isn’t true. You know it isn’t. You’re just trying to push me away. If you just try talking to Griffin—”

He smacks a hand against the wall directly by my head, causing me to flinch. “If I wanted to fuck you against this wall, what would you do?”

I can’t conjure an answer.

His face gets closer. “If I set you down, told you to walk over to the piano and bend over for me to take you from behind, what would you do? Huh? Would you let me?”

“I...”

“What if I made you get on your knees for me, Charlie? What would you

do then? Would you listen like a good girl and pull my cock out of my pants? Hmm? Would you let me thread my fingers in your hair and pull while I fucked your mouth until tears ran down your face?"

Holy shit.

Heat increases behind my legs but it's paired with fear more than lust. Because he knows that I can't do any of that. He doesn't know about...

He draws back and shakes his head. "I know you. You're not ready for that. I would never force you to do something you're not comfortable with. You need control. But I do too, and I need to be the one who walks away from this situation before it all goes up in flames."

My chest burns where my heart rests, like he just set it on fire. Maybe it's too late for that, maybe we're already ignited—destined to burn for good.

He lets go of me and carefully sets my feet on the ground. Stepping back, he rakes his hands through his hair and glances at the piano.

"Play me a song."

Hands shaking, I study his hard features. His eyes are dull and void and hurting just like mine, because he doesn't want to do this. He wants to keep promising me tomorrows like we'll always have them.

I guess we will.

Just not together.

"Play me a song, Charlie," he pleads.

Tell me goodbye.

Let me walk out.

It's all I hear in his request.

On wobbly legs, I walk over to the piano and sit on the bench. Everything hurts, my fingers, my arms, my chest. Sniffing back tears that demand attention, I rest my fingers on the proper keys and start playing something soft.

It doesn't match the mood.

"Before you go to bed tonight," I whisper, staring only at the keys, "look up this song and listen to every word. Remember how I play it and ask yourself if this is worth it."

"If what is?" His voice is nothing but a whisper that sounds from next to me, but I block out his warmth and his scent and the way my mind remembers every way he held me and touched me and kissed me.

"Pretending like you're not going to hurt when you find out that I'm with somebody else," I reply emptily. "That you'll be fine with me flirting with

boys and touching other people because you let me go.”

I turn to him to see dark eyes and pinched lips like he’s already trying to fight off the jealousy. The anger.

He does something I don’t expect.

He touches me.

Glides his palm down my arm in a soft caress, inviting, challenging, telling me what he won’t just spit out. He cares. He doesn’t want to go. He doesn’t want this to end.

The song keeps going. “Ask yourself if you would ever risk as much with somebody else as you have with me. We both know that this is beyond us. It’s been brewing for a long time, but we’re both old enough to choose and that’s why we did it. You’re ending something that barely even started.”

He kneels, his hand finding my waist.

Then my pelvis.

My hips.

Slowly, so slowly, he trails his hands toward my inner thighs. I force myself to even my breathing, to show him I’m not affected. But I am and he knows it, especially when my eyes widen and fingers falter on the keys when he starts brushing his knuckles over my clothed center.

The heat. The burn. The anticipation.

It all builds as the song goes on. He doesn’t say anything, and neither do I. He keeps moving his hand, getting me wetter, causing me more pain than he knows. Not from the act, but from what will come after.

He pops the button of my shorts.

Slides down the zipper.

And dips a finger in.

I moan despite fighting it.

He groans without fighting it.

I focus on the song—how my fingers play the keys like his play me. I feel him work his way into my shorts, spreading my arousal, hitting my bundle of nerves. I feel my body catch on fire every time he teases my entrance with his finger before trailing back up to my clit and playing with it.

He’s going to leave.

This is his goodbye.

I pant when he cups me, the heel of his palm hitting my clit as he slowly works two fingers in and out of me.

The song. I focus on the song.

Not his fingers.
Not what they do to me.

He whispers my name.

I whisper his.

Over.

And over.

And over.

My legs jerk, my pelvis trying to ride out the sensations and chase it to the brink. I tell myself to hold onto it, the feeling, because once it's over that's it. He'll walk away.

He quickens his pace, his lips trailing across my jaw and then pressing just below my ear. He says something, but I don't know what.

I pretend he says sorry.

I pretend he says he loves me.

When it's too much, too much feeling and too much pain, I let myself go. I stop holding on and give him his goodbye but not without cursing him out as I ride his palm through my orgasm.

"Charlie..."

My breathing evens out but my head stays dizzy and my legs stay limp. I want to call him names. Yell. Scream. Hit.

"Tomorrow," I say instead, remembering all the lingering promises. The way we stalled and acted like we had a chance. I laugh dryly, realizing how pathetic I am. "Or not, I guess. I'm not sure I can keep up with you anymore."

After carefully zipping my shorts back up, he puts his hands in his pockets, studies me for a while, and then backs toward the door.

His eyes burn me.

His rejection scorns me.

His love scars me.

"Love Me Anyway," I call out brokenly, messing up one of the notes and not caring that I'm butchering something that should be beautiful in its own raw way. "That's what this is called."

Tell me you're sorry.

Tell me you're wrong.

Could you love me anyway, Ollie?

The door closes behind him.

OLLIE

THE SONG PLAYS ONCE BEFORE BED. After the last line, I close out of the browser, turn off the light, and lay in bed staring out the open window that lets in the moonlight. If she wanted an answer, she wouldn't get one from me.

Yes, I would.

But no, I won't.

I fall asleep to silence.

She calls me at two thirty in the morning and leaves a message crying. She tells me it's too much, the memory. There's no scent left. I'm not there.

There are missed texts and distressed messages. Reading through them and listening to her gasp for breath causes my chest to cave in. I could stop it...

But I won't.

CHARLIE:

I need you

CHARLIE:

Please, Ollie?

CHARLIE:

You said you'd come

I **FUCKING** break apart as I slide my finger over the power button of my cell to stop her name from flashing across the screen.

To stop hearing her pleas.

Her desperation.

I turn off my phone.
Lay on my side.
And force myself to go back to sleep.
I'm sorry, Charlie.

CHARLIE

THEY'RE SUPPOSED to get better. I looked it up at three o'clock when I refused to fall back asleep and fall victim to the creaking floor and bitter breath and unwanted touches. Saying his name was supposed to help. Instead, I was being punished for trying to move on like Griffin wanted.

I take a pill, swallow it with water, and stare at my phone screen as I read about Henry Reynolds.

His face is different than I remember. He looks innocent in the picture they used for his obituary. Sick but innocent. Pale, not like my complexion. But I have his nose, the shape of his eyes, the color of my hair.

The green eyes came from Mom, though hers were darker. Her skin was the same color as mine, though not in the picture they used. She looks ghastly, dying. Why did they use a bad picture of her and not of him? Do they think she was a bad mother for using when she had a child to care for? He did too.

They don't care about him.

Henry Reynolds, according to society, was a good man. I don't bother with the details about him, because the comments say enough.

He'll be missed.

A good man gone too soon.

Shame about his wife.

What about their daughter?

Yes, what about me? Did anyone think about what it might have been like to watch two people inject themselves with things beyond my understanding? Did they not see the way my father's eyes glazed over or skin paled or weight dropped once the drugs became more common?

He would be passed out more times than not in the morning. Did they not wonder why he didn't go into work? Or see the red-rimmed eyes from a bad

high? They chose not to see his guilt of what he did at night after his wife put their daughter to bed.

Henry Reynolds was not a good man.

He was a monster.

So was my mother because she didn't save me. She knew, I was sure, but she didn't save me. Because of the pills. Because she was tired. Because she didn't want to.

Ollie didn't want to either.

I need you.

You said you'd come.

He. Lied.

I skip classes because my body is too tired to conjure putting on clothes and brushing my hair and pretending to care. My chest hurts, my head hurts, and I want to sleep without dreams.

I take a sleeping pill.

I'm woken some time later by loud knocks and an obnoxious voice telling me to get up. It isn't the husky one that caresses my heart with a single word. It doesn't call me Charlie or tell me it has donuts or pizza or movies.

It calls me Barbie.

Liam.

Glancing at the clock, I realize it's already six at night. Blinking, I peel myself out of bed and grab the closest shirt and pair of shorts I can find before slipping them on and answering the door.

"You look like shit."

I don't answer.

He storms into my room and notices my scattered shoes and my unmade bed and the sheets that are half on half off the mattress. Eying the place skeptically, he finally turns to me and studies my presumably knotted hair and tired eyes and pinched lips.

"Didn't you wear that yesterday?"

"I was sleeping."

He stares.

"Naked," I murmur, walking past him and sitting on the edge of my bed. "I didn't exactly want to answer the door that way."

I look at my phone. No messages.

"I wouldn't have minded."

Again, I say nothing.

“Come on,” he urges, tipping his head toward the door. “Let’s get some food. There’s a party not far from here that we’re going to.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

My shoulders slump.

I could tell him I’m tired and need to sleep, but it seems evident I’ve been doing that all day. Maybe I could tell him I’m sick and he’d leave me alone. Or that I’m on my period because boys seem to think that’s gross.

But Liam ... he wouldn’t care.

He goes through my dresser and throws a pair of black shorts at me, then a red t-shirt that has some band logo on it that I found at a thrift store a while back, before going through my panties and choosing a black lace thong and matching bra. He grins like a fool and flings both items at me, not saying a word but telling me way more with his eyes.

He’s enjoying this.

Staring down at the clothes, I let out a heavy sigh and shake my head. “At least wait outside so I can change,” I relent, knowing he won’t take no for an answer when he looks this determined.

When the door closes behind him, I slide out of my clothes and put on the news ones. The black shorts are new. River found them online and thought of me, so she had then sent to my campus mailbox along with a few shirts that had music sayings on them.

The shorts hug my upper thighs and I wonder if she realized they’d be so short. My butt doesn’t hang out but if they were looser there’s no doubt it would. The pockets have decorative buttons that make no sense but somehow look good paired with my plain tee.

Liam pounds on my door. “Hustle, Barbie. We’ve got places to be.”

I don’t go to parties often, but none of them start this early. Even if we spend an hour at the dining hall eating, most people wouldn’t start showing up until at least nine when it’s dark out. Campus police try stopping hoards of people that congregate toward one area, especially before nightfall.

Slipping my I.D. into my back pocket and my phone in the other, I grab my pill bottle and dump one onto my palm. Even if I convince Liam to leave early, he’ll be drunk, and I’ll be left taking him home and being too tired to remember to take it by the time I drag myself back here.

I swallow it.

Liam walks me to the dining hall and tells me about what I missed. There

have only been a handful of times I haven't been to class, and they were all because I wasn't feeling well. I suppose today was no different, it just wasn't the same kind of illness.

I grab a chicken sandwich from the grab-and-go bar and a bottle of water. Liam piles junk food into his arms and then cuts me off in line to pay for all of our stuff. I could argue. I don't.

He asks if I'm feeling okay and I tell him yes, but my voice is void and unconvincing.

"Lover's quarrel?"

My eyes snap to his. "Don't."

He raises his hands. "Listen, I've seen girls all brokenhearted and shit and I'm just saying it's written all over your face. You did the right thing, C."

I want to ask him what the right thing is. How could he know what's right for me? Like he pointed out, he doesn't know me much less what could possibly be right in a world of fucked up scenarios.

"I'm adopted."

He blinks.

"My parents aren't my parents," I say absentmindedly, picking at the lettuce on my sandwich. "They took me in when I was thirteen and I've been with them since. Letting me come here was hard but they knew it was best. It was the right decision."

He doesn't say anything.

Glancing up at his soft eyes, I draw in a tiny breath. "Oliver is my adopted mother's brother. His family took her in around the same age and gave her the same chance they're giving me. River and Everett are two of the best people I could ever ask to know. I'm lucky. Oliver ... you may not like him, and I may not even like him much at the moment, but he has always been the person who stood by my side and made me smile and supported me through everything. Even when I was a pain in his ass with a silly crush and dreams bigger than me.

"I came here because of the school and to play music and to be near him. Anything that happened between us is on me because I kept pushing and pushing until I broke him and somewhere along the way ... me."

The bag of chips in front of him is long forgotten as he leans forward. "Shit, Charlie. I didn't know any of that." He glances down for a second before flicking my hand. "But I stand by what I said before. He's the adult, not you. You may think you pressured him into something and caused some

big demise between you, but that's on him."

"It's not."

"How old is he?"

I don't say.

"Old enough to know better," he answers for me plainly. "Knowing that he was there for you makes me hate the guy a little less, but it doesn't change anything. If you were older maybe it would have worked but that's not the case. Maybe you're latching onto him because he's been the only person you think you can rely on. That isn't true."

My nostrils twitch as I look away. "I already told you that you can't be him. Ollie isn't replaceable."

A chip hits my face. "Not asking for a marriage proposal, Barbie. Trust me. Just saying that you might be holding onto something you'll never have because you're letting your feelings get the better of you. Who knows? Maybe he's doing the same."

My brows pinch. How could Ollie be doing anything like that? Even if it were true, he hasn't been shy about being with other girls. If he latches onto anything, it's...

I blink.

Me.

"Ah," he muses, crunching down on his food. A knowing smirk crosses his face. "I'm right, aren't I? Your not so little lover boy is latching onto you because it's all he knows."

It isn't all he knows.

But it is all I've wanted him to.

I grumble, "Eat your stupid chips."

THE PARTY IS loud and smells like sweat and beer and body spray. A group of girls keep trying to get me to dance but I always pull away and tug on Liam's shirt to get him to help me.

Jake is here, keeping him occupied while I sit on the couch with two other people talking about some guy with dreamy eyes and a hot bod. It makes me want to roll my eyes or puke.

I'm holding a plastic cup like always. It's got to be warm by now because it's been in my hand for an hour. Some sloshed out during one of the attempts to pull me onto the living room floor. My hand is sticky.

Liam asks if I'll be all right for a minute while Jake pulls him away. My

throat gets thick and worry floods my chest, but I nod and force a smile.

Fine. I'll be fine.

Someone yells when the song changes and the room erupts into cheers. A group of girls start jumping and singing along and alcohol goes everywhere as they dance. I'm glad I don't have to clean the house because there are bottles everywhere and spilled drinks staining the carpet and garbage littering every shelf, table, and stand.

Someone takes Liam's spot and starts talking to me. He tells me he hasn't seen me around before, asks how old I am, and tells me about the program he's in. I nod and smile and pretend to care.

Then he says it.

He reaches his hand out and leans forward and says, "I'm Henry."

And I freeze.

And I stare at his hand.

And I stare at his face.

And then I down the entire cup of beer.

It's warm and gross and tastes bitter in my mouth, but I swallow it and force the cringe away. He smiles and asks if he can get me another one and I nod. Walking away, I watch him fill two cups before squeezing his way back to me.

My hands are sweaty.

My heart is thumping.

My pulse is racing.

I drink the second cup.

Where's Liam?

"What's your name?"

He's not him.

He doesn't look like him or talk like him or smell like him. Henry isn't *Henry*. But I'm too taken off guard to speak and everything suddenly hurts like I'm going to break down and fall apart in front of at least one hundred people crammed into this too-tiny space.

My throat closes off.

Where's Liam?

He steps toward me with a smile that isn't creepy or scary but warm and friendly. "It's okay, you know. I won't hurt you."

I won't hurt you, Charlotte.

You know I love you, right?

Bile threatens to rise.

The boy's brows pinch. "You okay?"

"Thirsty," I manage, smiling and darting toward the table of drinks. My hands shake as I try figuring out how to get another one. He comes and helps and doesn't say a word. He watches as I guzzle the cup and feel my stomach churn from the taste.

We find ourselves back on the couch as he tries guessing my name. I shake my head every time he gets it wrong and he plays along like my smile isn't forced and my eyes aren't pained.

My eyes search for Liam, but wherever Jake took him isn't in this room. There's no ashy hair or cocky grin or indication that the minute he said he'd be gone is over.

It's been ten.

The boy whose name I won't say passes me another drink that I didn't know he got up to get. He tells me I look uncomfortable. He tells me he can leave if I want.

Yes, leave.

I don't say a thing.

My eyes get heavy and my mind gets fuzzy and my hands start to shake. Blinking past the blurriness, I do a sweep around the room for Liam's face. Breathing feels like a chore as I try sucking in a breath and suddenly feel like I may be sick.

"You okay?" The boy's voice is distant.

I think I say Liam's name.

My body starts tilting.

Someone curses.

Where's Liam?

My phone is in my pocket but I'm too numb to reach for it and wonder if this is what it's like to be drunk.

I think about Ollie and what he would say if he knew I was here on a couch with strangers. Would he care that a boy was trying to get to know me? What would he do if he knew Liam left me alone?

Liam.

"Ollie," I slur.

Liam's gone.

Ollie's gone.

Distant voices say my name and I hear something fall down and I see the

boy's face in the field of vision of my peripheral. I think he swears and lifts his hands up in surrender.

My face is tipped up.

Blue eyes.

"Charlie?" His lips move and I know he's worried because it isn't Barbie that comes out based on the way his lips form the letters.

He asks if I'm okay.

He cusses when I blink slowly.

Tired. Why am I so tired?

My stomach hurts and I think I'm going to get sick but can't make myself do it. Liam holds onto me and lets me slump against his body as he frantically searches for something.

The hard object gracing my back pocket suddenly disappears and I know he's taken my phone. Where's his? He always carries it because he's always on it when he shouldn't be. Like when he plays games in class or texts his friends or online shops for new music.

He says I'll be okay.

He's getting help.

I might have nodded but I don't know. Nothing makes much sense right now and I just want to stay where I am. But after what feels like forever passes, a booming voice calls out my name and I'm being picked up and wrapped in citrus and curse words.

My eyes fight to crack open and reveal only the sight of dark brown eyes full of worry and anger and so many other things.

He says my name again.

He tells me he's here.

You said you'd come.

He didn't lie.

OLLIE

I'M PACING the waiting room and wondering if the people sitting can feel the breeze I'm creating, but not letting myself give a shit if it's a problem. An older couple are holding hands in the corner, watching me and whispering. It makes me think of when Charlie would watch people like them at the café.

Now she's behind the emergency room doors being seen by doctors while I wait for someone to tell me I can go back. Despite being a minor, they told me the department is swamped tonight and that I need to wait until they can get her into a room before I can see her.

It's been an hour.

I wonder what the old couple are saying about me. Do they think I'm overreacting? Do they feel bad? What did they think when they saw me burst through the doors with an unconscious sixteen-year-old in my arms who barely made a noise when two men took her from me and asked me what was wrong?

When I saw her name on my phone, I almost didn't answer but my gut told me something was wrong like all the other times I'd felt she was in a bad mood. Picking up only to hear the shithead's voice was when I was on high alert, especially when he told me she'd been drinking.

They asked me if she did drugs.

They asked me if she had been hurt.

How many drinks?

How long was she at the party?

When was the last time she ate?

On and on and I couldn't answer one fucking thing because her so called friend had left her alone and couldn't give me any information as I raced out of that house and to my running car. When he told me he was coming I did everything I could not to fucking punch the kid right there for leaving her

alone.

I put her in the front seat and sped off.

An hour and five minutes.

My hands go through my hair. It's gotten a little longer than it has been. Enough to tug when I run my fingers through it. I force myself to sit on the chair closest to the ER doors.

They open. I stand.

They close. I sit.

An hour and fifteen minutes.

The old woman walks over and sits beside me and I'm surprised when I feel her hand cover mine and squeeze. "The young lady will be okay. She's in good hands."

Emotion swarms my chest and threatens to flood my eyes because I don't think I believe her. I don't know what happened at the party or what had been done to her. Was she drugged? Did someone try harming her? Touching her?

I feel sick.

The woman squeezes my hand again before walking back to her husband and sitting.

The doors open. I stand.

"Mr. James?"

I rush to the graying nurse, who tells me to follow her to the back. My legs are longer and faster than hers, but I don't know where I'm going when I see a maze of pale blue curtains that separate the different hideaway holes of patients.

She pulls one back to reveal Charlie sleeping on the bed with a thin white blanket draped over her. An IV is in her arm and fluids are going in.

"The doctor will be with you shortly."

She doesn't tell me what's wrong.

Doesn't tell me she's all right.

Just leaves.

I instantly walk over to Charlie and brush hair out of her face. She looks pale. Her lips are parted, and her breathing is even and despite her skin tone she looks peaceful.

"You fucking scared me," I whisper, leaning down and brushing my lips against her forehead. "Never do that again."

I want to squeeze her. Shake her. Hug her. Instead, I grab the uncomfortable looking green chair from the corner of the room and move it

by her bed. Grabbing her hand, I thread our fingers together and just watch her sleep.

Twenty minutes later, a doctor with dark hair and glasses walks in. He tips his head and holds out his hand.

"I'm Dr. Chambers," he greets, pulling out the rolling stool from by the computer and sitting down.

"Oliver James."

"And you are...?"

I swallow. "Charlie's uncle."

He nods once. "First things first, she's going to be all right. We needed to get her some fluids and do some bloodwork to rule out any potential drugging. You said she was at a party?"

"Yes."

He looks at something on the computer, clicking a few times before turning to me. "The good news is there's no indication that she was slipped anything. Her blood isn't showing any signs of GHB or rohypnol, which are common date rape drugs. Is she on any medications? There are traces in her blood that indicate possible antidepressants?"

"Yeah, she takes them for PTSD."

He studies Charlie for a moment with a distant expression before nodding his head and then typing something. "Typically, we ask that patients taking antidepressants don't drink or that they drink in moderation, if they're of legal age of course. Some pills don't cause any side effects when mixed with alcohol, but others tend to cause extreme sedation, disorientation, dizziness, that sort of thing. Since there's no other indications in her bloodwork that show foul play, I would have to say that's what happened here."

Relief floods my system that she wasn't drugged, but it doesn't make me relieved that she's laying there not hearing any of this.

"She'll be okay though?"

"Without a doubt."

I blow out a breath. "Good. That's..." I glance at Charlie and close my eyes for a moment to collect myself. She'll be okay. That's what matters. "Is she staying overnight?"

"I'd prefer it," he answers, standing. "I want to get a call upstairs to get a room for her. Is there anyone you need to call? Her parents? Grandparents?"

I called Everett and River as soon as they took her away and explained what happened. It was nearing eleven when Everett told me he booked a

flight that would leave at midnight. They should be here early morning.

“Her parents are coming.”

He tips his head. “If you have any questions, ask the nurse. The room will probably be ready within the next hour. Because she’s a minor, she’s allowed to have someone stay with her. Hospital policy says only one parent or guardian can be in the room though.”

Until Everett and River get here, I have no intention of leaving her side. They can battle it out when the time comes.

I thank him and pay no attention to him leaving as I hold Charlie’s hand and stroke her scars with my thumb.

“Listened to the song the other day,” I tell her despite not having an audience. “Can’t say I loved it, Charlie. Or that I can promise you any of those things. That’s why I have to let you go. And this?” My voice cracks as I take in her still form on the firm mattress. “This is not how you deal with things. Got it?”

What do I expect? Her to agree. To tell me she’s sorry. Drawing in a sharp breath, I shake my head and lean back in the chair.

“I’m too young to die of a heart attack.”

I imagine she’d make an age joke. Tell me I’m getting old. Crack some joke that’d make me grumble and her giggle.

She doesn’t do any of that.

“Remember that song you played me?” I dig out my phone and put it on the edge of the bed. “The one about scars? Well, I liked that one because you were right. When you love someone, you love every piece of them no matter how ugly.”

I play the song and keep the volume low to respect the people around us. We just stay like that, the song filling the air around us, as I watch her chest rise and fall.

“Thing is,” I admit, “I don’t know why I’m so ugly. My parents are alive and well and have treated me with nothing but respect. I have money and good memories. Never once did I not have friends or support or opportunities. Still, I’m ugly and angry and miserable with the world. And that...”

I shift back in the chair, my hand twitching around hers. “That isn’t fair to you. You shouldn’t have to deal with that kind of bullshit because you’ve been through worse and came out a goddamn victor and I’m so proud of you. No matter what, you’ll remain my best friend. Somebody I respect and

admire.

“But that’s all, okay? There’s nothing else I can offer you right now. I can’t accept my scars or ugliness and I don’t expect you to either. So, you need to listen to me. You need to play music, and learn to compose, and tell your counselor at school exactly what your goals are. Go to fucking Julliard for college. Show everybody that you are not defined by your parents, your past, or even your present. The only person you need to impress is yourself. The only person you need to make happy is you. The rest of us? We don’t matter.”

I don’t matter.

“I’m going to do the same.” It’s a quiet addition to the rant that I’m speaking pointlessly on. Yet, it feels exactly like what I need to say.

The nurse comes in some time later with a man in a burgundy polo and black pants that says there’s a room ready for Charlie. I walk beside her bed as they wheel her to the elevators. There’s no talking, just the sound of rubber wheels against tile floors. Quiet murmuring, beeping machines, and shuffling of nurses fill the silence as Charlie is backed into a room of her own.

There’s a nurse waiting to tell me about the assistance button next to Charlie’s hand and that she’ll be at the desk if I need anything.

Shooting River a text with Charlie’s room number, I set my phone down and lean back in my chair. She won’t get it until after they land, which probably won’t be for another hour. My eyes follow the clock as the hands tick by until my eyes get tired and I’m over listening to the overnight nurses gossip about the new hot doctor and residents.

My eyes close for a little while until I’m woken by something soft and warm touching my arm. Cracking an eye open, I see Charlie staring at me.

I sit up.

She swallows. “You’re not ugly,” she whispers. “You matter, Ollie. And I’m ... I’m sorry that I let you down because you’re the last person I ever want to disappoint.”

My lips part in surprise that she heard any of that. “You can’t disappoint me.”

She sniffs, looking up at the ceiling. “I want to believe you but...”

But she doesn’t.

“It’s hard for me to say how I feel,” she says instead, still not looking at me. Her eyes move across the ceiling and I wonder if she’s counting the tiles. “But if I could, I’d let you know that I’ll always need you and even love you

and love ... it scares me.”

I want to ask her why.

Her hands rest on her stomach. “People who love you are supposed to protect you from everything, and I’ve never had that before. I’m afraid I never will because I always mess it up.”

“You don’t.”

She closes her eyes.

“This was me,” I assure her.

“You didn’t like the song?” she asks.

“No.”

“Because you can’t let anyone love me.”

Can’t. Won’t. Have to.

“I don’t want anyone else to love you.”

I wet my lips.

“Guess we both have to.”

I dip my head down.

Her hand reaches out and touches my arm again and this time I move until our hands are locked together and fingers are woven. The small palm locked with mine is tight and overheated and squeezing like she doesn’t want to let go but understands she has to.

“I’m not saying I’m in love with you, Ollie.”

I nod once.

She pauses. “I’m not saying I’m not.”

My throat bobs as I gather a deep breath to fill my lungs and chest. “I’m not saying I’m not in love with you either, Charlie.”

Lips pressing against the back of her hand, I hear a noise by the door. Glancing up, I’m met with two hard eyes that are glazed by worry, anger, and something darker. Deadly.

Oh, fuck.

Everett growls, “Get. Out.”

THE KNOCK at my front door shouldn’t come as a surprise, nor should the way it blasts open when I unlock it to let whoever in. The way Everett charges into my space, fists flying, anger raging, is something I have no energy to stop.

He could have made a scene at the hospital in front of Charlie and the night staff, but instead he told me to leave. The way he and River looked at

me ... I'm not sure I knew what to do other than listen.

I didn't look back when Charlie called out my name or when Everett told her I needed to go or when River just watched with parted lips and sad eyes.

I don't see the forceful shove coming and end up flying backwards into one of the bar stools until I lose my balance and land on the floor. The stool comes with me, the metal back smashing into the side of my head before crashing onto the floor in a loud thud.

Everett's fuming—eyes deadly, nostrils flaring. There's no reason for me to blame him, to fight back. So, I stay on the floor while he looms over me, looking like he's ready to use his dress shoe to kick my face in.

I would deserve it.

Every fucking hit.

Blood drips onto my arm, and I realize the edge of the bar stool must have cut me. I let myself bleed, not stopping it or asking for help.

"You deserve so much worse," he growls, and I want so bad to nod and tell him he's right.

When River runs into my apartment, her lips part in shock over the position she finds us in. Me bleeding on the floor, him standing over me looking like he wants to grab a knife from the set on the counter and chop off my dick.

She puts a hand on Everett's arm when he steps forward, stopping him. "It's Ollie," she whispers.

His eyes narrow as he turns to her. "You have to be fucking kidding me, right? I don't give a shit who he is, River!" She flinches at his loud voice but doesn't move her hand away.

He pulls out a phone, but it isn't his.

It's Charlie's.

He reads her desperate texts.

I need you.

The way he thumbs through the messages and then stares at me has me surprised he doesn't throw it at my face next. He wants to, his large hands twitches around the device. "I want him gone. I want him to pay. Do you not see how sick this is? How he looked at her?"

Swallowing, I force myself to stand. My head throbs and vision blurs, but I push past it to look between them. River looks unsure of what to do or say as she stares at me, then at her husband. She sees the truth in his anger, his resentment.

She's torn because of me.

Because I'm family.

Because Charlie is.

Because I love her.

Everett moves away from her and shoves me again, but I manage to catch myself on the edge of the counter before falling. "We trusted you with her, you sick fuck. You're her goddamn guardian for Christ's sake and *this* is what you do? To us? To *her*?"

He grabs my shirt in his fists and gets in my face. Flinching back, I wait for the hit. Our eyes are locked, the atmosphere around us thick with tension and unspoken words.

Charlie told him. Or maybe he guessed. Maybe he didn't have to because words were enough—all he needed to know.

I'm not saying I'm not in love with you.

"You should go to jail," he tells me, pushing me back. I stumble and wind up against the fridge, letting it support me.

My eyes dart to River. I'm not asking for her defense, just her understanding.

"You should rot," Everett continues, fists clenching and unclenching. "But River thinks that's too harsh." He laughs dryly, shaking his head and slamming his fist into my counter. "Not that long ago you came into my office and threatened me if I ever hurt your sister. You love her, but clearly not as much as we all thought or else you wouldn't have crossed such a fucked up line."

"Everett," River whispers.

He turns to her. "He's screwing a sixteen-year-old, River. Just because he's your brother doesn't mean he isn't disgusting. The texts? The way she watched him? How he watched her? How she goddamn broke and said it wasn't his fault? What would you do if a thirty-one-year old man came on to our baby? What would you think then?"

Baby? My throat feels thick as I meet River's glazed eyes. "You're...?"

Her head slowly nods. "Four weeks."

Emotion clogs my chest. "River, I would never do anything to hurt your family. I—"

"You already did!" Everett yells, getting in my line of sight and blocking River. "Just because Charlie isn't our biological daughter doesn't mean she isn't ours to protect. We never thought we'd have to protect her from you."

“Everett, stop,” River pleads.

I rake my hands through my hair, wincing when I brush the cut on my temple. Blood smears on my hand as I draw back, watching them watch me crumble.

Pregnant. River is pregnant.

Will they forgive me?

Can they?

I take a step forward. “You guys have to know how sorry I am for letting it get this out of hand. I never wanted to hurt you.”

Everett grinds his teeth before giving me a scathing glare that causes me to step back. “I can’t possibly believe that, can I? But you do which is pathetic. You threatened to kick my ass when I got involved with your sister when she was of *legal age* but you don’t think it’s fucked up that you got involved with *my daughter* at six-fucking-teen? If you didn’t want to hurt us, you would have drawn lines and pushed her away. Crushes happen, Oliver. But you’re the adult.”

I want to tell him I know.

I want to plead until they forgive me.

That won’t help though.

Words won’t do anything but feed this argument, which was a long time coming. It was coming since the day I saw the way her eyes watched me, to the first time she started finding ways to touch me more. It was coming since I woke up with my hand between her legs and her telling me she wanted more.

I’m the person who should have told her no from the very start. I created my own storm and can’t handle the rain, because that means Charlie going under shelter to protect herself from my damaging winds and downpour.

She’ll drown in me.

My eyes look everywhere but him and meeting River’s stabs me directly in the heart. She wants to tell me that Everett is right. I can see it in her eyes. They’re glassy with tears that say *how could you?*

My chest caves at the dissolve in her expression. She’s my sister, my family, and I let her down. Coming back from this may be impossible because Everett is right.

I’m sick for thinking being with Charlie wouldn’t blow up. I’m sick for wanting her and thinking I’d be good for her in any way. She wanted a choice, I wanted her to use me to work out what she needed to.

Closing my eyes, I struggle to swallow past the lump in my throat. “There is nothing I can tell either of you that would matter right now. Sorry isn’t good enough, I know that.”

Everett scoffs.

“But for the record,” my voice cracks as I open my eyes and look at them. “I care about her and her wellbeing. She belongs here. Chicago is where she’s going to flourish.”

Everett steps up to me until our shoes are touching but River grabs his arm and yanks him back. My breathing is labored as I watch her whisper something into his ear before he glares at me, lips twitching, and then leaves.

River puts her palms on her stomach. “I think you need to leave, Ollie.” Her voice is cracked, broken, shaky as she glances between her flat stomach and me. “I believe that you care for her, but you can’t. N-not in that way. Not right now.”

My hands shake as I step closer, but her palm rises to stop me from moving any closer. It splits me in half, but I obey. Helplessly, I watch her press her lips together as a single tear slides down her cheek.

I made River cry.

Fuck me.

“If you truly think Chicago is what’s best for her, then you need to leave her alone. Use the tickets we got you. Stay somewhere and see things like you’ve told us you wanted to when you were younger. I know you, Ollie. Maybe not...” She shakes her head and brushes hair out of her face. “... maybe not as well as I thought, but enough to know that you don’t give up on the things you care about most. You don’t have a choice right now, okay? What happened can’t be undone, so you need to figure out where to go because I’m not sure I’m c-comfortable with you around her right now.”

The strike of her words should make me drop to my knees, but I force myself to take every hit as it comes.

She moves her hands away from her stomach. “It’ll take some time to convince Everett that you’re not a bad person, but you hurt him more than anyone. He’s your friend. He—we—trusted you. I know that you would never do something to purposefully hurt anybody, but I can’t let this go.”

You need to leave.

If it were possible, those words had the power to rip out my heart. Their effect isn’t as bad as her not being comfortable around me, but they still bleed me dry like a hand ripping into my chest cavity. Never once did I think I

would hear River say them.

Letting out a deep breath, I find myself nodding and wetting my bottom lip. "I'm happy for you." My voice breaks. "You and Everett deserve the world, happiness."

Her hand twitches and I wonder if she wants to reach out and touch me. "You do too, Ollie."

But not with Charlie.

Another tear slides down her face that she does nothing to stop. Sniffing, she backs toward the open door. "If it's real, what you feel, then it'll have to wait. Maybe you can reconnect after ... some time apart. But I can't promise you it'll be the same for you and Everett."

Two years, that's what she's asking from me. To wait. To stop wanting a girl I can't have. To leave and not look back.

"And you?" I whisper.

"You're my brother," she tells me. "But I can't lie to you, Ollie. It's really hard to look at you right now. So, I'll need some time too."

I close my eyes.

I hear her footsteps go toward the door.

I let the tears fall when it closes behind her.

You need to leave.

You need to leave.

I'm gone.

AFTER

CHARLIE

THE HANDS GRIPPING my waist are the wrong size. They're too eager, too desperate as they trail around my back and cup my butt. I don't like them. I even push them away. But they always come back, gripping, kneading, demanding.

He wouldn't do this to me.

His hands are perfect.

But he's not here anymore.

The music gets louder, but not enough to drown out the memories I have of him—the feel of soft kisses trailing down my naked back, or a hand brushing through my hair, or hushed murmurs promising me we'd be okay.

I can't do this.

Placing my hands over the stranger's, I try losing myself to the music. His groin to mine, our hips swaying. It's not enough though.

We used to promise each other one more day, because we knew it was wrong. Neither of us could give each other up.

We were addicted.

"Charlie ..."

"Tomorrow."

What a fucking liar.

HE LEFT WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE. There were no texts or calls or notes or donuts waiting for me at my dorm room. There was nothing except hollow memories and feelings.

Oliver James became a ghost.

Nonexistent yet everywhere I look.

In the scowls of teachers.

The frowns of students.
In River and Everett's disappointment.
You can't disappoint me, he promised.
I can't say the same for him.

He haunts everybody in the last two weeks of classes. River and Everett had no choice but to trust me to finish them off on my own. I'm glad they had work to bury themselves in, because they wouldn't be around to question me or look at me like I'm a stranger.

Am I?

I leave my dorm and go to parties. Not for the booze but for the noise. The loud music that used to grate on me is now my salvation because sitting in my room surrounded by textbooks and homework does nothing but reminds me of all the times Ollie would help me study or stop by or talk to me about school.

The silence taunts me like I did him.

It makes me think of his hands.

This is me not touching you.

His heart.

We can't do this anymore.

So, I followed Liam and his friends to parties and let the drunken yelling and singing and rioting drown out what I'd done. Liam always found me, dragged me away, and ruined my chances of forgetting.

He doesn't feel bad for me. It took days after my return from the hospital to convince him I was fine. When he found out about the pills I was taking, he got angry over being so reckless, and then his worry manifested into anger. The lack of judgement from him over being on the antidepressants was only comforting until I realized he wasn't going to forgive me easily for drinking while on them.

Strike two, I suppose.

Before strike three occurs, I tell Liam about therapy. It's during a long walk back to my room from a party he told me not to go to.

It's dangerous to go alone.

But I'm never alone because he always shows up. My ghost is there too, shying me away from offered drinks and drugs. Sometimes I think the ghost is two different people whispering in my ears. Masculine and feminine. Man and woman. Two separate reminders that love doesn't mean anything.

Ollie and Mom.

The people that lied.

I lied too.

I lied when I told River and Everett that I would stay in my room after they left. Instead of keeping my nose clean, I kept it in everybody else's business because being buried in my own was too painful. I lied to them when I said I'd never do anything reckless to disappoint them.

I lied to Griffin when I told her that I was too sick to go to therapy on Wednesday. Liam could have driven me—he even offered. I was too afraid of what I might say.

I lied to myself. I always do.

When I say I'm fine.

When I say nothing matters.

When I say I'm afraid of love.

I'm not afraid of love.

I'm afraid of love leaving me—slipping through the crevices of my outstretched hand. It doesn't want to settle in the warmth of my flesh, being cradled and cared for. Love is a lot like me. It doesn't want to be tamed or controlled but would benefit from both.

Love is a bitch.

River texts me. Everett doesn't. She asks for updates on classes and exams and tells me he says hi. She's a liar too, but at least she means well when she does it.

Everett can't talk to me.

He doesn't know what to say.

Good. I don't either.

I'm not sorry.

The day before they flew back to New York, River walked into my room with me while Everett parked their rental car. My bed was still unmade, and clothes were scattered everywhere. The gray Converse she knows I love were by my bed, laces undone, cloth tattered, but placed carefully down unlike the other footwear kicked about the small space.

She helped me pack up some things I wouldn't need before finals in silence. I remember the look on her face when she saw the *Harry Potter* movies lined up by the television. I told her I wouldn't even watch them when she wanted me to take a chance on the book series.

Her brows had pinched when I told her the movies weren't mine.

I didn't have to say his name.

Her features eased because she knew.

When Everett had entered the room, we all fell into silence and packed up my things with the sound of our breathing taking over.

Before my last final, Liam asks me to meet him for lunch. When I walk up to the dining hall, I spot him in our usual seat by the window. He's with Jake. They don't see me. But I see them.

I see their hands lingering.

Their big smiles.

Their longing eyes.

I remember Liam's flushed cheeks when he ran to me after I collapsed at the party. He wasn't flushed from running to save me. He was flushed because of him. Jake.

It makes me curious—curious that maybe every view I have on people is a lie. Like how Liam always flirts but never makes a move because he's too scared. Or how Ollie loved me.

Lies. All of them.

After watching them through the window of the dining hall, I text him and say I can't make it. I'll be busy packing, is my excuse. Packing up a year's worth of Chicago memories to go back to even more in New York.

He replies twenty minutes after I send it. I'm already in my room, staring at the gray Converse and wondering why River didn't pack them when I told her she could. She left them behind for me.

She let me keep a memory of him.

I call her to pass time, but quickly learn it's a mistake. "Griffin said you missed your appointment on Wednesday."

I sit on the edge of my bed. "I didn't realize I had to go. After all, it seems like talking isn't important."

Everett won't talk about it.

River won't talk about it.

Why should I talk at all?

If she were here, she'd frown. "It's best if we let things go for right now. Until—"

"No." I shake my head, brushing loose hair behind my ear. "You guys used to tell me I could talk to you about anything. Did you mean that?"

She's quiet.

"I want to talk about Ollie."

She sighs. "I know you do, but Everett is taking this very hard. They were

best friends, Charlie. You have to understand that he feels betrayed in the ultimate way.”

“It’s not just Ollie’s fault.” My nose twitches at her silence. “He may be older, but I knew what I was doing, River. He didn’t force me or talk me into anything. It was practically the other way around.”

She makes a soft sound, not quite disbelief or disgust, but exasperation and confliction. I want her to understand and she’s trying but can’t.

“I think you and Everett know that it wasn’t entirely on him and that’s why you’re struggling with this.” I lick my lips and push myself off the bed, wondering what they must think of me now. “It’s okay, you know. If you hate me.”

Instantly, she snaps out of her head. “I don’t hate you, Charlie. Neither does Everett. We just don’t know what to say or think about this situation. Oliver is...”

“Your brother.”

“He’s my brother and I love him, but I can’t help but think he crossed a line that he won’t be able to come back from.”

My heart stops. “River,” I whisper.

“And that’s why it’s hard to talk about with you. He was my first ally too, Charlie. The look in your eyes says so much. You love him and I can’t accept that it’s the same kind of love I feel for him because I know better. You’ve always been enamored by Oliver. I just never thought this much. If I can’t forgive him, if Everett doesn’t, what will that mean for you? You’re young and have so much to look forward to in life. Believe me, Charlie, you have time to fall in love.”

Don’t fall in love now, she wants to say.

What if it’s too late?

Everett was in love with River while he was with another woman. They loved each other for a long time before anything happened, but people still disapproved because Everett never broke it off with his ex before it happened. People got over it. Oliver. The James’. Is the same acceptance possible for me and Ollie?

If not now, then when? Two years from now? Three? Five? I don’t want to think about what it would be like without his donut deliveries or surprise visits or quick irritations that make me want to smack him and then kiss him all in the span of seconds.

“I want to see Polk when I’m back.”

She seems surprised. “If you want that then we’ll make sure you’re scheduled in. It may not seem like it, but we want you to be happy. Oliver said...” There’s a pause. “He said that Griffin seemed to be helping you. Maybe it wasn’t really her that was doing the helping.”

Instead of answering, I shrug.

If she were here, I believe she’d hug me. She would squeeze me in her arms and then pull away while smiling the best she could. It may not be one I’m used to, but even full of pain, confusion, and hurt she would still try.

“He’s traveling like he’s wanted to,” she tells me softly.

In the weeks it’s been since I last saw him, I wondered where he was. I felt his absence, which Liam told me was stupid. Maybe he would get it if Jake left the city.

“Thank you for telling me.”

The same time the following day, I’m in my old bedroom remembering Chicago like it was nothing but a dream. Bland walls meet my eyes, along with a dark comforter and chipped pink skateboard. If it hadn’t been for Everett’s evading eyes and half-unpacked suitcases, I would think I made it up.

I wonder when the nightmares will start.

OLLIE

*JUNE 2019
Alnwick Castle*

CHARLIE—

I WAS thirteen when I realized I wanted to leave. My father always dreamt of teaching me the basics of JT Corporation, but I never found interest in learning the trade. He pushed me to learn how to balance checkbooks and deal with pushy businessmen because he wanted me to have a good future, stability.

I didn't see that then because I was eager to escape to green grass and stone castles when I wasn't playing ball with my friends. My father never got it. I never got him.

Now I do. He just wanted what was best for me. Like what Everett wants for you. Like what I want for you.

You told me about your parents' deaths and all I've thought about since was how lucky I was to have mine support me even when they didn't understand. Yet, I made my father out to be the reason I was unhappy when he didn't deserve the blame.

I was unhappy for reasons I didn't have justifications for. It wasn't his fault, or my mother's, or even mine. You want everyone to be happy, but some of us can't be.

Some of us find reasons not to be.

River gave me a chance to leave before I made everything worse for you. I could have said goodbye, Charlie, but I knew better. I'm old enough to know a lot of things, but especially that we're supposed to sacrifice things for

people we care about.

Like my father did for me.

Standing on the grounds I dreamt of escaping to when I was younger is an experience I never thought possible. Maybe I thought it would make me feel better if I had somewhere to look forward to, since the company wasn't it.

I'm thankful for River telling me to leave.

I'm grateful she let me keep the ticket.

There was a little boy on the tour with me who wore his black robe and carried a wand. His mother carried a broom that was twice his size, but he told everyone he would get it to move. He stood on the lawn and had his mom put it on the ground.

He tried getting it to lift while everyone watched with shy smiles. His mom looked helpless, his father was never spoken of, so I snuck behind him and waited until he made the command before stepping on the end until the other lifted into his hand.

I'd like to believe my father would have done the same for me. He may not have understood why I liked watching the movies and losing myself in a fantasy world, but he loved me.

Loves me.

I know you would do the same for the boy. It was worth the look on his face. Like witnessing you consume a world I've loved since I was thirteen ... since I was old enough to realize that I was meant to leave.

Hopefully you'll forgive me. Hopefully River and Everett will forgive me. But more importantly, I hope one day I'll forgive myself.

I only write this because someone told me it'd help. You'll never get this. You won't get any of them. Just know that I think of you. Always.

One day you'll understand.

Maybe one day I will as well.

*UNTIL TOMORROW,
Ollie*

CHARLIE

POLK'S HAIR is colored light brown. She's not wearing glasses but still has the same facial expressions—tight and slightly wrinkled at the corners of her eyes. They're an off brown, I realize, almost hazel.

I tell her about Dr. Griffin, how much her pretending to be my friend annoyed me. Polk doesn't even get a chance to greet me or ask how I am or tell me my hair is longer and my skin is clearer because I don't let her.

If she starts talking, she'll start scolding me with lectures I've already heard from River and Everett since things cooled down. *You shouldn't be drinking, Charlie. You can't take your pills with alcohol, Charlie. You can't distract yourself from school, Charlie.*

I won't mention Ollie to anyone because nothing good will come of it. I've learned as much when I tried saying his name at the house. Everett stormed out of the room before dinner was over, leaving a plate half full of food. River looked like she wanted to cry, so I told her I wouldn't push.

"I talked to Griffin, but it was a trade-off," I ramble, walking around her office and grazing my hand across her familiar desk. It's still dust free and still extravagant. I want to ask her why she needs one so large, so bulky. The desk back in my dorm was chipped and creaky but it did the job just fine. "You know, information for information. Advice and stuff about a friend."

She doesn't ask me what friend.

Griffin would have.

I stop and examine the plaque displays with her name on them. Doctor Helen Polk. Not once did I ask what Griffin's first name was.

"We talked about Henry," I whisper, moving away from the awards. Clearing my throat, I meet her curious eyes. "I'm not sure why I let her win. I don't like talking about him for obvious reasons. I just ... did."

It's been at least fifteen minutes of me talking nonstop and her watching

me walk around and touch odds and ends littering her office. A stack of blank papers, a notebook that I can only imagine is empty and waiting to be filled, a small gray statue of a cat. Not once has she cut in or asked a question or told me to sit down. She's studying me like she used to, reading my habits and mannerisms. It makes me want to bite my thumbnail.

Finally, she says, "It isn't a competition, Charlie. Nobody wins, least of all your therapist. It's about getting past layers that patients protect themselves with to dig into the truth."

What kind of truth does she expect from me? It isn't easy telling anyone about my birth parents. It's practically open heart surgery with no anesthetics.

That's what the truth is—surgery. It's painful and doesn't always cure a person. But maybe it makes them better, at least for a little while ... except me and Ollie.

I loved him in layers.

As a friend.

As family.

As more.

I don't think that's the kind of layers or truth she means though and certainly not what she would expect.

She remains in her seat, hands draped professionally on her lap. "If you spoke of Henry Reynolds, it's because you needed to in order to lessen some of the stress you were putting on your mind."

I shake my head. "The nightmares got worse. They were vivid and I remembered..." Swallowing my words, I let the silence consume the space between us.

The creaking floor echoes in my head.

Snapping out of it, I exhale softly. "It's why I took the pills. I think I took too many in a short amount of time and then I got really tired and Liam took me out and I just wanted to forget about what he did."

What Henry did.

What Ollie did.

What life has done to me.

"I thought saying his name was supposed to help me," I murmur, leaning against the bookshelf filled with old journals and books of titles and authors I've never heard of. They're probably textbooks to study and read to understand people like me.

For some reason, I think of Emily Dickinson. I doubt Polk has any of her

works anywhere in this office which makes me sad. I would read her if she did.

I'm nobody. Who are you?

Are you nobody, too?

Ollie had the power to make me feel like someone, just to rip it all away again. I'm back to being nobody, abandoned, unwanted.

Yes, I want to answer Dickinson. *I am.*

"It's about saying what he's done," she comments quietly from her spot. "Saying his name is a wonderful first step, but you're still burying his actions. Nothing about this journey is easy, but the more you pretend it didn't happen the worse your conscious will attack."

My jaw ticks.

"Consider it like a tree." She stands up and walks to the window, moving the curtain and pointing toward the tiny tree planted in the patch of grass by the road. "In order for it to grow, it needs to bury its roots deep into the soil. It feeds off the ground's nutrients to gain strength. Your memory is no different. It's manifesting the deeper you bury it, trying to root itself until it takes over."

Staring at the tree, I consider what that must look like—my mind. Are the roots tangled? Interwoven with problems that can't be uprooted when the time comes? I once wondered how she measured that. Time.

I still do.

I push myself away from her shelf and walk to the couch across from her. Plopping down, I tuck my knees into my chest and watch as she takes her seat once more. We stare for a moment, her eyes soft and patient and mine...

Who knows what mine are?

"You changed your hair," I note.

"You're changing the topic."

Blunt. I nod. "Maybe they're related. We both like change, I guess."

"You haven't changed much."

Trust me, I have.

"You think so?"

She shrugs. "You're still afraid to speak of what Henry did and what Elizabeth didn't do. You think it's easier to evade the tough topics, so you choose flight instead of fight. It's a natural human response."

"I'm not weak."

"I never said you were."

“I don’t run.”

She doesn’t speak.

“I don’t,” I argue. “I just...”

Her brows lift.

Okay, so maybe I do. “I knew someone who ran. He ran all the time. I thought maybe it was just a pastime for him but I think it was more. He was running from something.”

“Like you?”

Who knows what Ollie was running from? His life? He didn’t have it bad but that didn’t mean he considered it good either. He ran because it helped him forget whatever he didn’t want to remember or think about.

Is he running now? Is he hiking? Following some trail or climbing a mountain? Are there movies where he is? Is he cooking other people dinner? I ask myself lots of these questions before bed when I wonder if it’s sunny where he is even though I’m cascaded in darkness.

I look at her. “I don’t like to run.”

“You don’t have to.”

Teeth grinding, I settle into the couch cushion and look at the tree peeking through the opening of the curtain. “He didn’t either, but he still did it.”

“Running?”

I nod.

“Why do you think he did it?”

“Because he didn’t think he had a choice,” I theorize absentmindedly. “I’m not sure I gave him one when he started thinking of me as an obligation.”

I’m met with silence.

Peeling my eyes away from the tree, I meet hers again. “Henry didn’t think of me as anything. At least, I don’t think so. Not as a daughter or an obligation. Maybe Mom didn’t either.”

“I’m sure that isn—”

“Stop doing that.” I roll my eyes. “I barely knew them before they died, so don’t pretend like you did. They were bad parents and even worse people. At least he was. It isn’t like I care that he didn’t consider me anything. It doesn’t hurt as much.”

She readjusts, flattening out her skirt with her palms. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t love them.”

Her head tilts.

“How could I?”

“They were your parents,” she replies. “I suppose when you’re young, you don’t know any better.”

I lean forward. “But I don’t remember them beyond the few memories that like to taunt me. Not once do I remember a time when Mom hugged me or brushed away my tears or Dad taught me how to ride a bike or climb a tree. I don’t remember what it’s like to love them. There’s no feeling that indicates I should be hurt by what they did outside an obvious sense.”

She looks like she’s considering the answer, dissecting it. I want to tell her to have fun figuring out how to twist it, make me think differently. But the slightest twitch of her lips tells me she can’t.

I’m right.

“I don’t envy you, doc.”

“Oh?”

I tip my head. “It must be hard to hear about everyone’s problems and try making sense of them. I’m sure you have your own.”

No answer.

“Who do you see? A friend therapist?”

Silence.

“It’s okay. Everyone has issues.”

“You’re lashing out, Charlie.”

“I’m talking.”

“About me. We’re not here for that.”

“Everyone needs someone, right?”

Who does Ollie have right now?

I swallow.

She smiles emptily. “You’re absolutely right. But this isn’t my time, this is yours. Your parents have paid money for me to help you. Talking about myself won’t do that.”

Just because she has a point doesn’t mean I like it. Then again, I never liked disappointing River and Everett and that’s all I’ve done lately. It’s why I’m here, because they know therapy was helping.

My nostrils twitch. “I don’t want to keep messing up with people. That’s why I’m here. But it doesn’t make me want to admit anything that will bring back every memory full force.”

I glance at the clock.

Five minutes.

“Like how cold Mom’s skin was when I touched it in bed that morning,” I whisper, not seeing how Polk studies me. “Or the smell in the kitchen where I found Henry on the floor in a weird angle. I almost stepped on broken glass from where he went down. I think he shattered a plate. But it wasn’t just finding them like that, that makes me afraid. It’s...”

Say it.

“It’s what, Charlie?” she presses.

The clock stops moving.

“It’s not caring.”

The big hand shifts.

“It’s not caring that they were dead.”

The little hand ticks again.

“It’s admitting that I’m a monster for being relieved, when I didn’t really know what that meant at the time.” I nod and stare down at the tips of my worn gray Converse.

River put a patch on the end because there was a big hole and Everett said to just throw them away. She knew how much they mean so she fixed them instead. Can she patch me? Fix me?

That’s why I’m here, after all.

I may not have known what relief was like then, but I do now. I knew I felt relieved and happy and indifferent all at the same time. Maybe my birth parents should be proud I paid attention to the ads and infomercials I watched on the television when Mom was passed out and Henry was too high to teach me what 9-1-1 was or who to call in case something bad happened. I remember reaching for the phone and dialing those three numbers and listening to the voice on the other end tell me they were sending help.

I didn’t cry when they asked what was wrong or when I told them my parents were on the ground and cold and not breathing. They told me to remain calm, but I was calm. I was eerily calm. Because Henry wasn’t moving, which meant he couldn’t come into my bedroom at night. There’d be no opened door or creaking floor or telling me how much he loved me.

There was no love.

No. Love.

I love you, Charlotte.

“You’re not a monster, Charlie.”

I glance at the tree again.

What if I am?
Time is finally up.

OLLIE

JULY 2019

Royal Academy of Music Museum

CHARLIE—

THE PIANO IS the most complex instrument. Eighty-eight keys. Over twelve thousand parts. No wonder you like it so much.

I think about how you taught yourself, the story you told me about reading music in the dark. I can't imagine dedicating so much time to an unsure thing, yet you did it.

When I first picked up a basketball, I was seven. A boy from school said his older brother was going to try out for the team and taught him the basics—how to dribble, pass, shoot, rebound, and defend. Eventually, his brother taught us and we were addicted.

The NBA uses leather basketballs produced in Chicago by a company called Horween. My father told me that shortly after I announced I was moving to the city for work. He clapped me on the shoulder and told me all about the small operation that's been around longer than most in the area. He knew how much I loved basketball and showed his support in the best way he could.

I wonder what your parents would have thought of you playing. Every time I let my mind linger to long fingers on white and black keys, I pull myself away before I'm sucked in too deep. It never stops me from wondering though.

Maybe it doesn't matter. My point is that Robert James knew I loved basketball even though he didn't understand why I spent more time on the

court than behind a desk. He went to every game with my mother, gave money to the school for a better gym, and supported me.

There's a piano gallery here in London that you'd like. The tour guide says the earliest feature is from the seventeenth century. The way she spouts random facts about the instrument makes me think about you and all the documentaries you watch.

A boy about your age was performing while I was there. I stopped and watched his still figure and wondered if he felt as consumed as you do when he played. His version was methodical, practiced, like he bled making sure his hands hit the keys at the right time in the right order. Never once did he move or look at us or talk. I'm sure that's how he's meant to perform, but you never did.

You never liked following the rules.

The last song you played me follows me around everywhere I go. When I come back to my room and a group of girls listen to it on the balcony a flat over. When I open my phone and see the history of my searches and it's there in bold letters.

I went to a pub down the street from where I've been staying. I got a Scotch, sat at the end of the bar, and listened to the mindless chatter. I do it often enough because it helps me like music helps you. And when a pretty brunette sat down and asked me if I was there alone, I should have told her no.

I should have finished my drink and left. I should have done a lot of things, but I didn't. I talked to her, noticed the way her eyes were lined with a green nowhere near as soulful as yours, and felt my hand grip her thigh by the time I finished my third drink.

When she'd talk to me, I'd quiet her.

When she'd advance me, I'd stop her.

I couldn't hear her talk.

Couldn't let her make the moves.

I silenced her, Charlie, because she let me. I advanced her because I didn't want her to. She didn't care about control. She wanted one thing and that was it.

I shouldn't have.

So, I think about the song you played and think about the answer I couldn't give you then. Just because someone loves a person, doesn't mean it's the right kind.

*I shouldn't have left with her.
But I did.*

*UNTIL TOMORROW,
Ollie*

CHARLIE

THE OLD PIANO bench is gone, replaced with a shinier, polished new one in front of the Community Center piano. There are no carvings, initials, or chips. It's the first thing I notice.

The second thing is a blond-haired boy.

Jaxson Clark.

He's standing off to the side holding a bag loosely in his hands as he stares at me. It leaves my cheeks burning.

"Charlie," he says quietly, stepping forward. I expect myself to step back, but I remain where I am and just watch him.

My backpack is slung over my shoulder and it feels heavy, not enough to weigh down my feet. I don't feel the need to run or to yell or to do anything drastic. I'm here to play not be chased away by him.

"You're back." It's a dumb statement and I don't point out the obvious to him. Yes, I'm back. I'm standing here.

There's no reaction. No head nod, no words that leave my indifferent lips.

His shoulders drop. His hair is longer, borderline unkempt and I wonder what his mother thinks of it. "I know it's been a while, but I still feel bad about what happened. I shouldn't have let Mason blackmail me to do something like that."

Something like that, I want to scoff.

"It's not okay to just kiss people."

His voice is a whisper. "I know."

"Why'd he do that?"

This time, he doesn't answer.

I want to ask him if his mother still comes with him or if she's stopped bothering. Does she assume he plays the classics? That he's on his way to Julliard? Maybe he wants that too. I never got to know him before Mason

intervened and made it impossible to have a friend, a hope in Bridgeport.

Then again, it led me to Chicago.

He rubs his arm and shifts on his feet like he's uncomfortable. "I used to go to Freemont until Mason became head dick of the sports teams. He made my life hell and it messed with my studies, so my parents pulled me and homeschooled me instead. Our families never got along much. Mom wants me to practice piano like she used to before she married my father and gave up the dream, so she's strict about how I spend my time."

And who you spend it with.

"Let me guess, Julliard?"

"Or Berklee."

I roll my eyes.

He sighs. "It's important to her."

I should ask him what's important to him, but I don't. We might not be that different, wanting people to approve of us. We both want to make everyone proud. Doesn't mean I have to sympathize with him.

"Anyway, if she thought I wasn't on the fast track like she was when she was my age, she wouldn't let me come here. It's the only time I get out of the house and have my own space for a while."

But it's not his space, it's mine. It makes me want to grab a pen and carve my name into the bench to claim ownership—mark my territory.

Except, it's not my territory.

Did I mark Ollie? When I dug my nails into him, did the red moon-shaped marks stay in his skin? He told me to hurt him, he welcomed it. I think the pain grounded him, reminded him of what shouldn't be happening.

He marked me. Not physically.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

In ways that count.

Physical marks have been left before and mean nothing to me. The cigarette burns on my hand may be ugly, but their damage is nothing compared to my memories. Ollie's mark is deeper than that, rooted just like what Henry did. I welcome his marks, because they're different than everyone else's.

They're my gift from him.

Does he know he gave it?

"...that you would come back."

I blink.

He smiles wearily. “I, uh, asked around when you disappeared. Some people at Freemont mentioned you got into The School of Music and I thought it was cool. I think my mom even heard and wondered why she couldn’t send me there.”

“Why couldn’t she?” It isn’t like I want him there, I don’t. It’s my place. My city, my school, my happy spot. Well, it was.

“My dad would never allow it.”

His dad sounds like a douche.

I don’t say that either.

I’m not an expert on fathers.

Griffin once told me I need to filter myself. It isn’t like I purposefully say mean things ... usually. I don’t want to hurt people’s feelings if I can help it. Even people like Jaxson.

“That sucks, I guess.”

“Bridgeport isn’t so bad.”

“Your mom sounds controlling.”

He looks at me. “She knows how much I like to play and wants what’s best for me. Don’t all parents?”

No.

“Yours sent you to Chicago,” he points out, like our stories compare. “Everyone is a little controlling if it’s what’s best.”

He doesn’t get a reply.

He doesn’t deserve my story.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he looks away and mumbles something. “Point is, I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did. Mason is an ass and got what he deserved by being benched for his bullshit.”

Mason got benched? I’m sure that went over well considering he lives and breathes sports.

The surprise coloring my face has him nodding slowly. “Yeah, some angry dude talked to the coach and then started demanding answers.” He clears his throat. “He showed up to my house after. Your dad, I guess.”

My...

Everett.

He nudges the floor with his shoe. “He told me to stay away from you, which made my parents ask questions. Mason won, because Mom had me stay away from here until she decided my career meant more than...”

More than me—than some girl whose adopted dad comes to defend her when her feelings are hurt. Everett did that for me.

Glancing away, I stare at a painting that's been hanging on the wall since I started coming here. I bet if the frame is removed, the paint behind it will be brighter, cleaner.

"Anyway, I'm sorry." He heads toward the door, and I let him. I don't say anything until the front doors open.

Tipping my head back and groaning, I follow him outside and call out his name. He slows and stops, turning around and watching me with furrowed brows.

"I think what you did is dickish," I inform him honestly. "But I'm over it. So, you don't have to apologize or whatever."

His lips waver, like he wants to smile but won't let himself. Maybe he wants to beat himself up. I don't know why and don't care enough to ask.

He'll always be the boy with blond hair.

The could-have-been friend.

Maybe.

Instead of saying anything, he nods his head and gives me a small wave before walking away. Taking a deep breath, I feel relief flood my chest. I stopped caring about what Jaxson did after summer ended. Ollie helped me forget.

But Everett ... he defended me. I glance at tiny ants crawling around the sidewalk and smile to myself.

A car stops beside me on the curb, redirecting my attention from the ground.

Everett's jaw is tight. "Get in."

It's later in the afternoon, so he must be getting done with work. His tie is loose, his shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and he's looking behind him at Jaxson disappearing into the crowd of people.

"Charlie," he commands. "Car."

I want to tell him that I haven't even played yet but know better than to argue. I slide into the passenger seat and stare at the floor because it's better than seeing him disappointed. It's become a too-familiar expression on his face since I've been back.

"You shouldn't be with him," he informs me, gripping the wheel as he pulls back onto the road. His eyes are locked on the windshield.

When was the last time he looked happy when I was around? I don't

remember. He smiles when he comes home to River and touches her stomach. His face lightens when he wraps her into his arms and kisses her face.

But with me?

I don't remember.

I sigh. "Why not?"

He twists his fists around the wheel until it makes a sickening sound. "He upset you. Not to mention you're grounded after your escapades in Chicago."

Escapades? I frown at him. "Since when am I grounded?"

He keeps his eyes forward. "It was an unspoken agreement."

Between who? "Well, *I* didn't know."

"You know now."

Shouldn't the person being grounded know about it in advance? It isn't like I would have argued but they never locked me up in my room or told me I couldn't have dessert or watch tv or anything like that. He hasn't said a word about what happened and made sure to avoid any conversation that could lead to it—my *escapades*.

He turns onto our road after a few tense minutes. Our house comes into view. White siding, green grass, one tree out front. I don't know what it is, but it's pretty when it blooms in the spring. The house sits back and has a long driveway and there's nothing directly on either side.

Space. That's what they like.

After the car is parked, he unbuckles and looks at me expectantly to do the same. I match his stare. We keep doing this—having a contest. Who will win? Who will break first?

I get out of the car.

Everett is close behind me when I walk inside, the door closing loudly shortly after my shoes hit the hardwood of the entryway.

River smiles when she sees me but quickly loses it when she glances over my shoulder. Everett must still be stewing because the worry in her eyes dulls the brown, and she looks back at me with pinched brows.

"Did you know I was grounded?"

Her lips part.

Everett sighs behind me. "Charlie."

I turn around. "What? I clearly need to know my limitations. If I'm grounded, does that mean I can't leave the house? Do I have a bedtime? Am I allowed to go to therapy?"

His shoulders tighten.

It has been a month and a half since I've been back. Not once have I been locked up. They've never told me I couldn't do something, but I've made sure not to push them. I messed up enough and accept it. The looks on their faces have been punishment enough and I think they know it.

Everett drops his bag and keys on the table. "If I thought necessary, I'd say no to you going anywhere."

River frowns.

"Why?"

He doesn't answer.

"Why?" I demand, clenching my fists.

"If Dr. Polk was a guy, I'd say no."

I don't expect the answer and neither does River. She looks speechless and conflicted and not sure what to do or say to dispel the obvious argument brewing. Yet, she can only look between us, eyes darting and glossy.

"Tell me why, Everett."

River touches Everett's arm but he shakes it off and accepts the challenge in my tone. "You want to know why, Charlie? I wouldn't feel comfortable with you talking to a man after what happened."

There it is. "Because of me or him?"

No answer.

My teeth grind and irritation bubbles in the pit of my stomach. "Are you afraid of me doing something or the man?"

He looks away, at nothing in particular. The beige walls. The wood trim. The modern furniture visible through the open layout.

I won't let it go. I refuse. "Or is it because all men must have the same thoughts? Is that it?"

River steps forward. "Charlie..."

Everett says, "Enough."

"No."

He throws his hands up. "I don't want another man taking advantage—"

It's the conversation I've been pressing for, for nearly sixty days. "Oliver didn't take advantage of me!"

"He's thirty-one. That's exactly what he did. He knew what he was doing and didn't care that it was wrong. No sane man would get involved with a sixteen-year-old."

I move forward. "Age shouldn't matter."

“Are you kidding?” He studies me to see if I am or not. “I don’t care what you think. You’re too young to understand. Oliver is not right. Okay, Charlie? He’s not a good man.”

I snap. Whatever rope that was holding me together officially frayed. “How can you say that? You’ve known him your whole life. He’s your *friend*. When has he ever proven to you that he’s a bad person?”

He eyes me pointedly.

I scoff. “And don’t say now. He’s always had your back and River’s. All he’s ever wanted was to make people happy. Don’t pretend like he’s an awful person. He isn’t.”

He steps away but I don’t let him. So, I move toward him. “You know what bad people are? Drug users who neglect their children. Abusers who harm innocent people. *Rapists*.”

It’s silent.

Totally, utterly silent.

“If you want to label people, then you should label Henry Reynolds bad. Why not think about him touching young girls? Or how about when he’d let his friends catcall a five-year-old when they were high? Make comments that nobody should say, much less to someone so young. If you want bad, let’s talk about how Elizabeth Reynolds would turn a blind eye because all she wanted was to chase a high in order to escape. *Those people* are bad. Not Ollie. He’s my friend.

“He’s the guy who made me feel loved and protected and in control.” I rake my hand across the scars and remember how he did the same thing and made them feel beautiful, maybe the most beautiful part of me. “These don’t matter to me. What Henry did does. He left worse scars. What ... wh-what the assault did to me, even now, is what matters. He messed everything up, Everett. Look at me.”

Emotions choke me and I want to cry but hold back. I fight them and fight everything that pushes on the dam trying to get it to burst.

“I have nightmares. I see him lurking. I remember what it was like to hear him come into my room...”

River is crying.

Everett’s lips are parted.

“My father terrified me,” I whisper. “I never thought about it because it was easier than remembering the r-rape. Having Ollie in my life, despite everything wrong with me, never made me feel like I was somebody awful.

There was nothing to think about. Or worry about. Or fear.”

Someone touches my hand. River.

I don’t move away. “Ollie is just Ollie to me. Nothing more and nothing less.”

That’s why I love him.

That’s why I need him.

River wraps me in her arms.

Everett’s eyes glaze as he watches us.

He’s worried.

For me.

For his future child.

His son. His daughter.

His family.

I reach out and he takes my hand and squeezes once. It’s my way to tell him it’ll be okay. His family will be fine. He’ll protect them even if it’s hard.

But he doesn’t need to protect me.

There’s no reason to.

I sleep through the night.

OLLIE

JULY 2019

Snowdonia National Park

CHARLIE —

MY MOTHER CALLED and said the family stopped by for dinner. She made sure I knew I was missed but I have a feeling that wasn't entirely true. It'll be August soon and I haven't heard a word from Everett and have only gotten two texts from River.

For the record, I miss you.

It may not seem like it, but it's true. And the truth is shitty sometimes but I'm doing this for you. You deserve a father like Everett and a mother like River and a little sibling that I know is on the way. That's the life you would miss if I were still in the picture.

I start hiking tomorrow. I'll be traveling to National Parks and witnessing what everyone says is simple beauty. They've never met you though.

Some beauty is beautifully complicated.

I heard the song today.

I turned it off.

UNTIL TOMORROW,

Ollie

CHARLIE

PAINTER'S CHOICE should be a happy, familiar place. The smell of paint, the happy chatter, scattered artwork on the walls and easels. It reminds me of the time I'd sit by the window away from everyone and listen to music.

My iPod broke the day I got back to Bridgeport. It wouldn't turn on even when I charged it. It was fitting that the item I cherished stopped working as I settled back into a life that was my third chance to live.

Sighing, I brush off the thoughts as I push away from the window. Sometimes I would sit and wait for Everett to walk by, making faces at him through the glass or reaching out my hand expectedly for the pastries I knew he'd have. He hasn't been by since we got back and hasn't been to Landmark either.

I overheard him telling River he was worried he couldn't protect their baby. He didn't say he feared it would wind up like me, but I took it that way regardless.

He's still angry. At me. At Ollie.

They haven't spoken. I asked River. She texted him a couple times to see how he was but wouldn't tell me anything from their limited conversation. I knew better than to push the matter because she wouldn't tell me.

It's better this way, she said.

Better for who?

Better for Everett, I think.

She's worried about him. He's better than he was, looking at me a little longer, a little lighter. He won't say much besides inquiring how I spent my day. I tell him how long I spend at Painter's Choice. I tell him that I text Liam. I tell him I don't see Jaxson.

He's appeased.

Usually.

River is finishing something up in the office because it's almost time for us to leave before Melanie takes over. Her stomach is growing quickly, enough for me to notice in her profile as she reaches across the desk to grab something. People don't seem to notice because she wears baggy sweaters. I know what to look for.

She doesn't have to tell me how excited she is to be a mother. She'll love the baby with every fiber of her being, maybe more so if it were possible. I don't doubt it for a second and know Everett feels the same way. They're meant to be parents, meant to have something pure and precious and innocent.

They can't corrupt it.

Not like me.

Would I make a good mother someday? I never thought about it. Some girls in my old foster homes would talk about what they'd do differently. Like Sarah. Sarah was going to prove to everybody that she was going to give her baby the world, a world her own parents couldn't when they left her. Where is she now, I wonder? Is her baby okay?

River walks out of the office with a smile on her face. "Ready to go?"

I nod and follow her outside into the sunny afternoon, feeling the light breeze caress my hair. Closing my eyes, I absorb it before bumping into the back of River.

"Want to go to the café?"

We haven't been there since...

"Sure?" I wince when it comes out a question, but she doesn't mention it. We walk side by side down the street. She holds the door open for me and follows me in.

The cashier smiles. She's new, young. Probably a college student from the Community College not far from here. She greets us and asks what we want, and I get a hot chocolate and cruller all while River stares.

I hate crullers. Does she know that?

After she pays, we find a table and wait for our order. It's the same table Ollie and I always chose by the window, but I don't think she knows that either. We both sit and people watch quietly. It's comfortable, unassuming.

Finally, I say, "Why now?"

She knows what I mean. "We can't change what happened, right? Landmark Café will always be Ollie's place. But it's ours too."

Does she know how she sounds? He isn't dead, yet they treat him like he

is.

“Do you love him, River?”

“Of course.”

“Why not show it?”

“I am,” she whispers, shifting toward me. Her hand goes to her stomach, caressing the small bump. “Everett would have done something he couldn’t go back from if I hadn’t told Ollie to leave.”

She told him to leave?

I gape. “Would Everett really have done something to harm Ollie?”

“He loves you.”

“I love Ollie.”

She swallows. “I know.”

“I love Everett,” I add, glancing away. To me, it’s an unnecessary statement but one that I realize I don’t say often. “I don’t know if he loves me right now. Not like he used to.”

Her hand finds mine. “He’ll always love you, Charlie. You’re his daughter. He’s been so consumed in making sure that he’ll be the perfect father to you and our baby, but he has trouble accepting that he can’t control what other people do.”

“He doesn’t have to worry.” My shoulders drop. “I never wanted him to hate Ollie, River. I never wanted this. I just ... I meant what I said before. He’s my best friend and my biggest supporter. I need him.”

Her hand squeezes mine. “You don’t need him like that right now. I know it must feel like you do, but you have us. You have my parents. You have Liam, right? He’s your friend.”

I wet my lips and shrug.

“You’re so strong,” she says quietly, moving her hand away. “I want to see you realize you can be that even without him. You can have more than one friend. You can go to school and play music and hang out with people without him. You’ll survive, Charlie. You’ve survived your whole life.”

Survival isn’t about what you’ve gone through necessarily. It’s just about never giving up. I could have succumbed to pain in any form it came in, but I chose not to. River isn’t wrong, I have survived.

I’ve beaten every odd against me so far. That doesn’t mean I’ll beat this though. Time wears you down.

“What if this were you and Everett?”

“We spent time apart.”

“When you went to California,” I murmur, forgetting how many times Everett would walk by the studio as if she’d magically appear one day.

She nods. “Bridgette told me that distance makes the heart grow fonder. In your case, there’s no other choice. If you love him, I can’t dissuade you. But I also can’t allow you to be around him when you’re underage. If he feels the same way, he’ll leave you be until the time is right. Until people can’t punish him for how he feels.”

Would people not judge us even when I’m old enough to buy cigarettes or enroll in the army? Would they smile and tell us how cute we are when we walk down the sidewalk? In my gut, I know it isn’t going to be that simple.

Yet, I’m not sure I care. I’ve been judged my whole life anyway.

“What about Everett?”

“What about him?”

“What will he think when it works?”

When, not if. It isn’t about if Ollie loves me like I love him. We’ve always loved each other in some form. It’s why we never played the parts we should have—uncle and niece. It’s why I can’t call River Mom or Everett Dad. It was never going to be that kind of relationship between any of us even when it should have been.

“He’ll want to see me happy, right?”

She exhales softly.

“That’s what a loving father would do.”

Our order is called.

I stand. “He’ll have to accept it.”

It’s my final statement.

She doesn’t say a word.

POLK TELLS me I look older. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. I want to ask how old I look but she may think I care, like I want to look a certain age.

So, we talk about Elizabeth Reynolds instead.

Mom.

Not Mom.

“River is pregnant,” I tell her. It’s the first thing that comes out of my mouth. It shouldn’t be. It isn’t my story to tell. “She’s going to be a mother.”

Polk smiles. “That’s great.”

She doesn’t ask how it makes me feel and I’m sort of relieved. It doesn’t

make me feel unhappy. But I can't say I'm ecstatic either. I'm not jealous or angry or anything. I'm content knowing that's what they deserve.

"I still call Elizabeth Mom." I watch her head tilt and want to count how many times she'll do it during this conversation. "I don't know why I do it because she hasn't really been a mother to me. River has. But I can't call River Mom."

She leans back. "Do you know why?"

I could make something up—theorize. I don't have the energy to try figuring out how to explain that calling River Mom would make Ollie someone he shouldn't be. It makes him real. His role. Who he is to me.

So, I come up with, "Maybe I have more than daddy issues."

"Both your parents were responsible for what happened," she comments plainly. It doesn't come out dry or humorless like I expect. "It doesn't have to be one fault over another. They both could have done something to stop it."

It. The rape.

My nostrils flare. "I told them."

Head tilt number two.

I sink into the cushion. "I was having a fight with Everett and it just came out. But it felt ... good. Empowering, I guess."

"That's great, Charlie. Truly."

I expect her to ask what the fight was about, but she doesn't. Breathing in relief, I let my shoulders ease from their locked positions.

"I've been sleeping better."

She smiles for me to continue.

"There are times I wake up, but it isn't because I see Henry or hear the door open or anything. I'm not sweaty or crying or calling out for someone." I pause, contemplating the reality that she and Griffin might have been right this whole time. "I just ... I wake up because I'm used to it, I guess. I'm not saying I'm cured because I know there will be triggers, but I'm not as bad as I was either."

She stands up and walks over to her desk, collecting a file that looks all too familiar. When she sits back down, she opens it and scans the page in silence.

Does she know I'm staring? My skin burns when people look at me too long, it's a trigger. Like I'm being hunted. Studied for a purpose. It's stupid to think about now, because Henry never hunted me. He barely paid attention to me during the day.

But at night ... I was sitting prey.

She finally looks up. "When you first started coming to me, you didn't trust me enough to tell me anything about your past. I briefly looked at your file but not enough to gather all the information I needed because I wanted you to do that. I want all my patients to. I knew about your parents' deaths, that you found them, that you were assaulted. But it wasn't just about the experiences that you had to endure. It was about the feelings you had from them. The reactions.

"You see, I've had a theory since you stepped foot into this room and said your name was Charlie. According to the report documented the day you called the police, you told them that was your name. You reinvented yourself in ways that allowed barriers to protect you from everything that came next. That's natural instinct.

"My theory, though, is that you need to further your ability to remember. You were able to admit out loud what your father did to you. Not only that, but you told the two people who gave you a second chance. The next step may be easier or may be harder. It'll depend on your willingness to recuperate and become the person you need to be for yourself."

I blink.

I think that's the most Polk has ever said to me at once. It's mind boggling as I wrap my head around every word, absorbing every single one to formulate what she's getting at.

It doesn't come. "How do I do that?"

She flattens a palm across the top of the file. "By embracing Charlotte Reynolds, the girl you left behind in that house."

I'm pretty sure I stop breathing.

She notices but doesn't say a word.

Charlotte Reynolds doesn't exist.

Weak.

Tease.

Worthless.

Swallowing every word ever thrown at me, I force myself to inhale. It burns my lungs, but I've felt worse pain. "Why would I ever want to embrace her?"

Her smile is soft and endearing. "The way I see it, you blocked out a version of you who couldn't fight back. You tell people you're Charlie because you don't want to admit that you were anybody other than the witty

girl sitting in front of me. You're funny, charismatic when you want to be, and kind. You care about everybody before yourself. But you know what? Charlotte Reynolds never got a chance to prove to people she was strong. That version of you was too young to know she could have fought. I bet she even blamed herself. So, you locked her away. Punished both of you with old memories that leaked through the conscious whenever it could. With smells. With visuals. Anything that reminded you of the past."

Inside me, there are little bells going *ding, ding, ding*. I don't let her hear them though—don't let her see Charlotte ring them to get her attention.

"What's your favorite color?" she asks.

"Red."

She smiles. "Is it?"

Ollie would call me out.

Don't lie to yourself, Charlie.

Head tilt number three. "What's your favorite color, Charlie?"

My throat feels thick.

"R-red."

Bright red.

Blood red.

Just ... red.

"Charlotte," she says slowly, "what is your favorite color?"

My eyes tear up. The word is right there, Charlotte pushing it up my throat and toward my lips. I choke on the four letters as they rise and don't try to swallow them.

In the softest voice I've ever spoken in, I whisper, "Pink."

Polk tips her head once as if that's all she needs to hear. One word. Four letters. A recognition of the past. A first step.

Don't lie to yourself, Charlie.

I blink away tears.

I hear her shuffle papers before there's a soft *plop* against a hard surface. "Just because I want you to embrace Charlotte doesn't mean you can't be Charlie. You are both people, strong and independent. You've experienced pain and loss and have been mistreated beyond true comprehension by so many people. They want to help but can't. You need to help yourself first. Let Charlotte out."

I close my eyes to stop the tears from passing. There's one stuck to my eyelash, but I'm too afraid of reaching up and wiping it away. She'll know

what she's done.

She'll know I'm feeling.

Charlotte cried all the time.

OLLIE

August 2019
Van Gogh Museum
Charlie—

IT SEEMS like tradition can't be broken even when I'm 4,000 miles away. Everyone told me I had to go to the Van Gogh Museum when I arrived in Amsterdam. I was tempted not to, but it reminds me of you and River.

People's faces light up just the same as yours would when they point and discuss and try getting me to smile and grace them with smooth conversation. You would always find a way to pull me away before anybody expected me to say much.

I stayed in yesterday to catch up on sleep and ended up watching hours worth of shows highlighting weird relics in museums. I see the appeal now and regret not agreeing to watch any with you whenever you'd ask. Surprising, considering I rarely told you no.

The Dutch came up with the first donut. Did you know that? They called them oily cakes before some jackass in Manhattan designed them with a hole and changed the entire premise. There are bakeries around here that sell them, but you probably wouldn't like their lack of frosting and sprinkles. You should have seen their faces when I asked for one like you'd get.

I met an old woman who's staying in the apartment above the room I rented out. She told me she'd show me how to make them from scratch when she saw me coming home a few days in a row with a bag from the nearest bakery.

I wish I knew how things were going there. My parents try filling me in, but I don't think they're being updated like usual. Is it Everett or River that

thinks it's best that way? I have a feeling I know the answer.

My mother told me you were headed back to Chicago soon under the supervision of the Tolbert family. She asked me why I left so abruptly and wouldn't accept that I just needed to leave. She always knew I wanted to, but I think it's difficult for her to accept.

Trying to explain to my father why I quit my job wasn't easy. He wouldn't let me make excuses and saw past the few that did manage to slip into conversation. I always considered Robert James a difficult man, maybe even one that I never fully understood because he didn't get my interests.

We're too alike in that respect.

That's the problem.

He lives and breathes work, embraces a suit and tie, and loves spending time in an office. I prefer open countryside and fresh air and jeans and t-shirts that don't choke me when a monthly meeting is held. He and I are polar opposites when it comes to just about everything except our mutual stubbornness.

Nobody seems to know the real reason I left this time, and I have a feeling that's because of River. I won't forget the look on Everett's face—the pure hatred and betrayal that turned his eyes as dark as they came. He would have called the cops and I wouldn't have fought him or them if they came to get me.

Tomorrow I travel to the Anne Frank House. I wish I could tell Everett because I know he's read her diary. He told me a long time ago how much he wanted to visit and see where she lived and how she survived, but knew he probably wouldn't. It'll be a surreal experience and I probably wouldn't go if I hadn't remembered what he said.

She was strong like you, Charlie.

I think that's the real reason I'm going.

The trails here span across the flatlands. A man at a store I stopped at the other day told me a few spots to check out if I'm interested in exploring. He told me I didn't look like someone who was willing to go hiking and I realized I spent too much time trapped behind a desk. I was too clean, too put together.

It's ironic, I suppose.

The ones who act put together are usually the same people who don't know why they're falling apart.

You were right, Charlie.

I need help.

But I don't think I can get it.

I'm not sure I'll allow myself to.

*Remember what I said about people seeking help being the strongest?
I've always been weak.*

Unhappy for no reason.

Unsettled for no reason.

*There's little that makes me happy but not even this piece of paper will be
graced with the truth that you already know. I'm supposed to write down
everything but not sure I can put it to words.*

You're more than words, Charlie.

If you believe nothing else, believe that.

*UNTIL TOMORROW,
Ollie*

CHARLIE

MY NEW DORM is bigger than my old one. It has an extra bed and nobody to use it, but I make it up anyway because it looks less sad than the off-white, stained mattress staring at me. There's white on the walls, gray-blue on the sills, and a spatter of red, black, and white color in my new comforter and curtains that I picked out with River before coming back.

A new start. That's what she called it.

After my grounding, River and Everett sat down and talked about Chicago. Without a guardian, I wasn't allowed to go. While I knew I was in no position to argue with them, I did anyway. Going back to Freemont wasn't an option, which meant figuring something out where they could trust me.

They won't say it, but they don't just blame Ollie for the split between us. It's why even after two months, they couldn't speak the words that indicated I knew better. I apologized in any way I could, by being back when they told me and not interacting with people when they told me not to.

It's what Charlotte would have done.

Obedied.

When Liam had texted me during one of their many discussions over the topic, I took a chance and asked if his family could watch over me. They were local and visited Liam, so it wouldn't be out of their way to check in on me too while they were around.

Everett was happy over my friendship when he first heard about it, but maybe more so now. I think he's relieved that Liam is my age, even if he's still a boy. Some sort of threat. I know, deep down, he doesn't want to force me to stay in New York because he knows it isn't what I want.

But he doesn't want me making bad choices either. Not again. So, I tell them I won't. I promise them everything—to be good, to get good grades, and to stay out of trouble.

It isn't until I beg Polk to convince them it's what I need when they concede—Everett more than River. He fought everybody on the matter because he's afraid. Polk asked him why and he looked at me with so much pain in his eyes that I nearly broke down.

He's afraid of messing up.

But I'd be responsible, not him.

My choices aren't his.

Telling Polk that I need to go back to Chicago seemed like a big step for me. Not just me as in Charlie, but me as in Charlotte. How can I embrace her when she's suffocating in a city with no opportunity to grow?

Chicago gives me air.

Liam's parents spoke to Everett for an hour on the phone before the decision was officially made. I wouldn't have to suffocate in New York and that was because of Everett.

Because of Liam.

Not because of Ollie.

My throat closes with bitterness.

Embrace her, Charlie, Polk had told me during my last session with her. *The more excuses you let feed her suppression, the harder it'll be to fully heal.*

But Charlotte is way more broken than I thought, and anytime I would remember the past, a piece of the new me would be lost in her. She took too much, expected too much.

Charlotte is greedy.

Liam's room is on the second floor of Babcock Hall. He doesn't have a roommate because he decided not to come back for the new school year, which means he has clothes scattered everywhere and hopes that they don't place anyone else with him.

Over the summer, we talked at least once a week. If not a call, a text. A basic *are you alive* since he knew Everett and River found out about me and Ollie.

I've come to rely on him now more than ever, just like he told me to. I think it hurts his feelings because I have no other choice. The only other person I spoke to is somewhere across the world, hopefully being happy and doing what he's always wanted.

Are you happy, Ollie?

On the first week back, I ask Liam to drive me to Griffin's office for my

therapy session. He doesn't ask about it when I tell him the address or push me after he picks me up.

The second week back I tell him I'm not crazy. He just nods and says he knows and then tells me he'll be back when it's time.

On the third week back, I stare at the building at tell him I hate my birth parents. My nostrils flared and tears welled in my eyes and my brain and heart hurt from the bitter words.

I hate them, Liam.

He squeezed my hand.

One squeeze in the silence is what it took for me to realize that Liam is about more than goofing around and poor decisions. He's always been my friend, but I never thought of him as much of one despite all the times he'd take me out and force me to socialize and learn new things. He was always good for me even when I wasn't for him.

The fourth week I cry in front of him.

Griffin had asked me how it felt to finally open up to Everett and River about Henry. I told her it felt like somebody took a knife and sliced open my chest before putting me to sleep. The session had been rough, and I started yelling because it was better than crying but I couldn't hold it in when I climbed into Liam's car and he asked what was wrong.

He wraps his arms around me as I bury my face into his chest. "I don't want to think about the people who didn't love me enough or the people who love me so much that I could disappoint them. I don't want to love."

Loving people means expectations.

Loving people means getting hurt.

Some leave. Some stay.

You never know which you'll get.

I ask him if he loves somebody and feel his body tense. For a while, I don't think he'll answer. But a quiet yes escapes his lips and takes me by surprise.

Liam has more depth than I've given him credit for and for the past year I've underestimated him.

I ask him if he still loves her.

His eyes are grim when he tells me it isn't a girl. I remember the way Jake tugged on his hand at the party the night everything went downhill. Or how Liam and Jake were watching each other the day before I went back to New York for summer break.

Him. His friend.

“Do you still love him?” I sniff, peeling away from him and wiping the back of my hand across my damp cheeks. “Does he love you?”

We lock eyes. His are dark and hazy and I wonder what he’s thinking about. Nothing good, based on the shadows hanging below the thick lashes framing the distant orbs.

“Yeah.”

“Why do you look sad about it then? If you love each other, shouldn’t you be happy?”

He sinks back into his seat and keeps watching me like he’s trying to figure something out. “My parents don’t quite get it, okay? They know, but that doesn’t mean they know how to act.”

His parents see me once a week when they visit him. His mom gives me a hug and tells me how happy she is that I’m back. *Liam talks about you all the time.*

They take us out to dinner and gush about our youth and our dreams and our common interests. I never thought about it much because Mrs. Tolbert told me a while ago that she always wanted a daughter. It seemed doting on me was a way for her to have it.

That’s not right though.

She wants me to be with Liam.

“Oh.”

He nods. “Yeah. Oh.”

“Do they know him?”

He shakes his head.

“They’ve never met him?”

Another head shake.

“They should.”

He blinks.

I shift toward him. “Liam, they’re your parents. I’m not saying that all of them want their kids to be happy, but that’s how it should be. What if they see how you are with him and finally get it? What have you done to show them that I’m not going to be right for you?”

He’s silent for a moment. His brows lift and lips ease like he’s contemplating it. Good. I already know the answer anyway. He hasn’t done anything because he’s afraid.

Afraid like I am to be Charlotte.

He's afraid to be Liam.

"You told me you didn't know who Charlie is," I remind him quietly. "What if neither of us knows each other because we don't know ourselves? What then?"

Nothing.

I swallow. "If I'm Charlie and you're Liam, then we need to act it. Not just pretend we're unflawed and happy. That's not how it works, right? Your parents need to know the Liam you want them to."

Mine need to know Charlotte.

For a moment, I think he'll tell me I'm right. I think he'll say that I'm breaking through thanks to my therapists and that we're in this together.

Friends. We'll get through it as friends.

But what he says drains any hope that he'll agree it's a good idea. "Are you ready to go? We've got a presentation early tomorrow."

Liam never talks about school.

Liam never talks about a boy either.

We drive in silence.

FIRST SNOWFALL BRINGS out the single digit weather that calls for fluffy jackets and furry boots. My ears are covered by a blue knit hat that I found at the campus store when Liam went to get more school supplies. He told me I looked ridiculous with the large furry ball on the top of the hat.

Whenever I'm around his friends, my eyes sneak peeks at him and Jake. Their gazes linger and lips tip up, but it never lasts long. Nobody else seems to notice, so I go back to doing whatever I am before getting caught.

He told me that Jake wants to compose like me. *You guys would be good friends, Charlie.* It makes me want to know how they met, but he won't tell me. Are they longtime friends? Did they meet through school? A mutual friend? A party?

I tell him how I met Ollie. At a family barbecue in New York. I wore jeans and a zip-up hoodie, Ollie wore jeans and a plaid button-down shirt. We both wore gray Converse. Ollie told me I would be fine when I explained how nervous I was to meet his parents. I believed him because there was a look, a gentle softness in his eyes but also something else.

Something familiar.

Uncertainty.

That day I realized Oliver James is like me, lost and searching for the

right thing to bring him out of his head.

Liam tells me I shouldn't think about him. I, in turn, tell him he shouldn't think about Jake if he won't do anything about it. Neither of us wants to give in or admit what's good for us. So, we circle the topic.

I'll ask him about Jake.

He'll ask me about my parents.

I tell him they died from heroin.

He tells me Jake is a third year student.

I've never gotten to know the group of boys he hangs out with. They're all loud and obnoxious and annoying nine times out of ten. I ignore them and do my own thing if we're skating or going to grab food somewhere. But Liam likes Jake, loves him, and I want to know why. How does he know? How will it work?

When Liam catches me staring during class, he steals my pen and plays with it. He must have tons of my pens and pencils in his room, because he always walks off with them.

I ask him about our kiss last year.

He tells me he isn't gay.

I tell him I don't understand.

He tells me labels don't mean shit.

And I get that better than anyone.

After class, Liam and I part ways because he has an exam and I have a free period. I'll end up in front of a piano, fingers on the keys, thinking about the last time Ollie and I were left alone in the music room.

Nothing happened, but I wanted it to.

Nothing happened, because he said no.

He said *goodbye*.

I could play the song—*our* song.

Could you love me anyway, Ollie?

But it wouldn't get me anywhere.

Hear that Polk?

Charlotte is coming out to play.

I work on an original, letting my fingers graze the keys and play back the workings of my mind scattered and scribbled on the paper in front of me. It started out as a final project from last term that earned me an A. Ollie would be proud. He would want to hear this, the softness, the hardness, the drops and tempos. He wouldn't get it, but it wouldn't matter because he saw how

much I did.

Like me, he could get lost.

He used me, I realized.

He used me to lose himself in anything that wasn't his own misery. He used me to forget just like I used him and his body, his time, his attention.

We're users—addicted to the forbidden.

But we're not my parents.

We won't die from it.

OLLIE

November 2019

Paris, France

THE NOTRE DAME caught fire at over eight hundred and fifty years old but it's still standing. I call that resilience. Even after all that damage, it remains.

The lights on the Eiffel Tower at night are the same color of your hair when the sun shines on it.

The Palace of Versailles is surrounded by ornate statues that represent the likeness of performance statures you told me they taught you for when you play. I'm glad you never listened to your teachers about that. Your talent always shined better when you were yourself, not carved from expectation.

Last night I sat on the balcony of the hotel I'm staying at and listened to the street music below. There was a violinist and a woman singing but I didn't understand much. Even so, she sounded beautiful.

My new neighbor is a few years younger than me—English accent, blonde hair, bright blue eyes. She's paler and shorter than you, I think. I could find plenty of ways she doesn't compare but force myself to stop.

Her name is Emily. She says she's here soul searching and told me we could search together. Apparently I'm transparent. She reminds me of you in more than looks. She's got a degree in psychology and a license to practice that she insists on using on me, and I tell her it isn't the first time I've heard that.

She's nice. I find myself carrying easy conversation with her about her little village back in the United Kingdom, which struck up more talk over wine and dinner about everywhere I visited when I was there.

She asks me to talk about myself.

I find myself talking about you instead.

It's easier, that's what I tell myself.

Maybe I just enjoy the torture.

I'll be working my way toward Mont Blanc on the French border. The mountain peak is the highest in the Alps. Locals who have successfully done the hike have nothing but good stories and I need to experience it myself.

Emily insists that I can't outrun her questions forever, much less my problems because they'll always catch up to me. Instead of answering her, I tell her goodnight every time.

While I was walking home, I saw a pair of shoes that reminded me of you. Last time I saw your gray Converse they looked rough. They won't hold up for much longer. I told myself not to buy them since I wouldn't be able to give them to you myself.

I bought them anyway.

You'll like them, Charlie.

I spoke to River yesterday. She called and hung up and then called to apologize. I'm not sure either of us knew why she was sorry, just that she was.

Sorry for you, for me, for everything.

She told me you were doing well in school. The Tolberts' have done check-ins, your grades have been higher than normal, and you even composed a song to perform. If I could tell you how proud of you I am, I would. Just know that I am.

Maybe one day you'll get these. Every letter gets stuffed into my suitcase, taking up room that I should use for clothes and supplies. Yet, the papers seem vital. Like talking to you this way is the only way for me to justify what happened. If I didn't want to talk to you after I left what would that make us?

Nothing.

It would make us nothing.

River wants to see me. I'm sure Everett doesn't know and wouldn't agree to it and I can only imagine what she'd say after all these months apart. She won't even talk about Everett with me or say anything other than the fact he's fine.

They're all fine, Oliver. I promise.

It made me think about what you told me when I promised you tomorrow. It's stuck in my head, those five words.

Promises are the sweetest lies.

You were right all along.

I told River I don't stay long enough in one area for her to visit. She begged me not to push her away. But that isn't why I said it.

I need help.

I should talk to Emily.

UNTIL TOMORROW...

Ollie

CHARLIE

LIAM AND JAKE have become my newest obsession. Sometimes I'll see them walking together, shoving each other's arms and laughing. They eat lunch with me and banter and bicker and once I even saw Liam's face get all red.

I saw Mrs. Tolbert the other day. She dropped by to give Liam something, but found me instead. Liam had just left with Jake to go grab an early dinner, but I hadn't been hungry.

I told her he was happy.

All she said was, *I know*.

She wasn't sad about it.

She wasn't unhappy.

She just knew and left it at that.

So, I told her Jake was a good person.

Her eyes lightened.

Relief, I think.

She left me with the papers meant for Liam and gave me a hug. It was tighter than the ones she normally gave me, more like River's.

She was saying thank you.

You're welcome, Mrs. Tolbert.

Christmas break is next week. I have one more exam before then, a music performance. Liam has been helping me practice and telling me what he thinks I need to change. He doesn't always like sitting with me in the music room, but he does it anyway. For me.

I want to tell him I liked having Ollie in the room with me. Usually, I hated being watched. It made my skin crawl and my memories break free, and ruined the moment I wanted to create through music.

Liam in the room isn't the same.

He's quiet, usually only half paying attention. When he offers advice, it's heartfelt and critical and what I need. Ollie was just a member of the audience who'd get deterred by my notes. Liam tears them apart and helps me reconstruct them.

He told me last week that Jake's favorite color is gray, like the color of my shoes that I've been wearing whenever we're inside. Then he tells me I need to get rid of them because they're holey, ripped, and beyond repair. The soles are grungy and thin, the cloth is frayed and stained, and if I tried to wash them they'd probably fall apart for good.

I told him they stayed.

He told me I was ridiculous.

I asked about Jake again.

Jake loves sushi.

Liam loves Jake.

I love these shoes.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY Everett gets up and makes River and me a big breakfast. She's wanted cinnamon rolls for weeks, so there's a plate full of homemade ones coated in melted frosting in the middle of the table.

She's due in a week. Her stomach is big and moves when the baby kicks and it freaks me out and leaves me in awe at the same time because there's a human in there. River wants a boy. Everett wants a girl. The nursery is pale green and frilly and welcoming, and I bought the baby stuffed animals and clothes that litter the white changing table that matches the crib and dresser.

Whatever it'll be, it won't have to worry about not being hugged or praised or loved. The baby will know what a true home is and how much River and Everett are going to be there for him or her, even when they mess up. I'm proof of that, I suppose.

There's a plush honey badger in the corner of the crib, nestled against a white pillow and geometric white and green blanket. When I bought it, Everett asked why I decided on a badger. A documentary I watched said that honey badgers are the most fearless animal in the animal kingdom.

I told them I wanted their baby to be fearless. Everett wrapped me in his arms and kissed the top of my head.

He called me Little Badger.

It's how I know we'll be okay.

After helping them clean up the kitchen, we settle into the living room

where Everett distributes presents. River's parents are coming over for an early dinner, so he sets their gifts off to the side.

I know better than to ask where Ollie is this holiday. It's better not to let Robert and Bridgette James know there's anything going on, not that I think it's a secret. During every family dinner Robert gives Everett a funny look and Bridgette smiles sadly at River.

They know.

They just don't *know*.

Twenty minutes into cute exchanges and bubbly laughter, there's one gift left with a pink bow and silver wrapping. Not very Christmassy, which I tease them both for as River passes it to me.

There's no label, so I eye it before tearing the wrapping paper off, careful not to ruin the pretty bow. When I open the box, my lips part.

Pink Converse.

Blinking for a moment, I finally force my gaze upward at them. They're both staring, Everett's lips pursed, River smiling.

River says, "It isn't from us."

I swallow. "There's no note."

"Merry Christmas, Charlie."

My fingers graze the white laces carefully before pulling one of them out. Emotion clogs my eyes but I don't cry. I won't.

"They're beautiful."

Everett sighs. "They're bright, I'll give him that." He stands up and ruffles my hair before heading into the kitchen and leaving River and me alone.

I lick my lips. "Did he really...?"

"Yes."

My hold on the shoe tightens.

Don't cry.

"He said it's your favorite color."

I meet her eyes. "It is."

She hugs me as close as she can before her belly gets in the way and I feel the baby kick. I move back and put my hand near her belly button and feel a little foot.

My eyes water more.

Don't cry.

"You're going to be a great mom."

She kisses my cheek. “You’re going to be a great big sister.”

A tear falls and River catches it, wiping it away before squeezing my arm. She stands up to help Everett in the kitchen, waddling away and leaving me staring at the shoes in utter silence.

I stare at my phone, noticing a little notification I don’t remember seeing before. Then again, I haven’t gone through any of them since I woke up.

UNKNOWN:

Merry Christmas, Charlie.

IT SAYS it sent at 11:59 PM.

He’s always the first to text me.

OLLIE

*JANUARY 2020
Montpellier, France*

A new year means new resolutions. You used to tell me how stupid you thought it was to put pressure on yourself to perfect flaws. Secretly, I think you always made them anyway.

I made one.

To be forgiven.

I think it's a universal necessity to feel like forgiveness is given by people you hurt. Nobody wants to be hated, to be untrusted. Despite River's calls and texts becoming more frequent, there's still a hesitancy that tells me more than she will. I want to be forgiven by her, by Everett, by my parents. Mostly, I want to forgive myself. If I can't do that, how can I expect anyone else to?

Emily knows more than she should.

Five Scotches and two shots of whiskey made my lips loose and barriers malfunction. I remember the blissful weightlessness of my limbs, the airiness to my chest, and the way I tried wrapping my arm around her when she found my sorry ass at a bar.

I kept saying your name.

I remember the bartender's hair was blonde but the fake kind and not natural. She told me I nearly got kicked out when I called her out for dyeing it. Turns out I'm an asshole when I'm drunk. I'm sure I've been told that before and was too wasted to remember.

There were times with Erik I drank to forget. When he and Lauren couldn't keep their hands off each other. When they plotted to set me up with someone. Even before there was a you and me, there was always you, always

a feeling I couldn't scratch no matter what I did.

Women.

Alcohol.

Running.

Nothing fucking helped.

Nothing helps.

Emily keeps asking me about you. She wants to know everything about the girl with blonde hair. I tell her you're younger than me. I tell her I had to let you go.

She called me an idiot.

Good thing I'm not paying her, I'd probably have to find another therapist.

Emily has prodded me for answers every time I evade telling her about home. Bridgeport. Chicago. Wherever she can find pieces that put me back together. She wants to know when I'll go back. River asks me the same question and it's always the same answer.

Emily likes telling me about Castle Combe, the village she grew up in. It's her way of pulling out answers, tit for tat. It never usually works. I'll tell her about the building I worked in for the past few years. The noise of the city, even at the earliest hours when I ran. I tell her about Teddy's newsstand.

She asks about you wherever we go. I'll give her one thing, she's as persistent as you say Polk and Griffin are. I suppose it's their thing. To pry. To pull. To grip at old strings you want left alone. I've always respected you, Charlie, but I get you better now.

My mother called me to tell me all about the birth of Lucas James. I just about choked up when she told me how healthy and beautiful he was. I never thought about what it would be like to be an uncle over somebody so tiny, so helpless. I just expected it to be different.

Emily thinks I'm overreacting even though she doesn't know the whole story. She tells me she'd want to be there for her niece or nephew like it's that easy.

I think of you. Of course I do, right?

Because I'm sick.

Because I should have been there for you, like I want to be for Lucas.

Maybe the reason I can't come to terms with what happened is because I won't let myself. It makes me think about my resolution. I'm not sure I deserve my own forgiveness.

Emily wants to know what's holding me back from going home, but it isn't the right question. She should ask me where I think home is. I wouldn't tell her a destination.

Just a name.

The only certainty.

I think when Emily asks me questions, my mind instantly shuts down to protect the screwed-up thoughts it produces. It doesn't stop my thoughts from screaming though. In my mind, she knows everything there is to know about the girl who secretly loves pink and knows how to skateboard and can play a piano better than anyone I know. She knows how picky you are about movie rituals, and your love for all music.

When she asks about you, my thoughts tell her all she needs to know. Really, she just knows there's a girl. A girl with blonde hair.

A girl that I won't go home to mess up.

She tells me not to go back to Mont Blanc again because it's an excuse to ignore her questions.

She tells me to move on.

She tells me a lot of things.

I'm climbing again tomorrow.

UNTIL TOMORROW,

Ollie

CHARLIE

I'VE NEVER HAD a Valentine before. Last year I told Ollie he had to be mine and found heart shaped donuts waiting for me after class. They were my usual favorite, decorated with pink and red frosting and white sprinkles for the holiday.

This year I'm spending it with Griffin, who isn't dressed for the holiday. I received a text from the same unknown number at 11:59 PM last night. I won't save it under a name because then it becomes real. He becomes part of my life beyond a text before every holiday, and that means he could leave again.

Brushing off the thought, I study Griffin. She's in black slacks and a pale blue top that looks silky and new. Her heels are a little higher than normal and her hair is straight and flawless as it rests over her shoulders. Does she have a Valentine?

"Plans after work, doc?" I inquire, wrapping my hand around a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate that Liam got me before dropping me off. He says it's his present to me.

He and Jake have plans to get dinner after they pick me up. They said we'd have a friend date like I'm not the third wheel. I told them to forget about it and let me walk back to campus that way they can have alone time. Liam not so kindly told me to shut up and have dinner with them.

"Nothing exciting," is her causal reply.

I tell her about Liam and Jake. Liam's parents have accepted that they're together even if it's taking time to adjust. They're not rude about it, just unsure of what to say. At first, I think Liam wanted to strangle me for saying anything to his mom. He hugged me instead.

I try to stop pretending like it bothers me. Hugging Liam isn't like hugging River or his mother or Ollie. It never bothered me when people

touched me, but that's because few people ever tried. I know Liam. I know his motives. I know he won't hurt me.

But sometimes Charlotte forces her way into my mind and tells me to be cautious.

Remember the creaking floor.

As if I could forget.

I'm getting better about letting her in. I'm wearing the Pink Converse Ollie got me for Christmas. My old gray ones are in my room, resting under the spare bed. They stick out from the comforter looking sad. Liam tried throwing them out a few weeks ago, but I rescued them from the trash can and set them down with a sharp glare.

He tells me to throw them away.

They're still there.

"Lucas is doing well." River has two Valentines this year—Everett and my new little brother. She sends me pictures of him sleeping all the time. Sometimes she'll send me pictures of him playing with the badger in his crib, gnawing on the ear or cooing as he pets it.

She smiles. "I'm glad to hear. How about we dig a little deeper? How is it having a sibling?"

I find the question odd, even for her. I've had plenty of siblings over the years. None of them blood, just like Lucas. He's just not a foster brother like all the others. He means something more than a temporary roommate.

"It's fine."

"Just fine?"

She's reaching. "If you want me to tell you that I'm jealous of Lucas, I won't. He's exactly what we all need."

She doesn't ask why with words. Her eyes narrow in the slightest way, the *enlighten me* look as I've deemed it.

Sighing, I cross my arms. "I haven't been the person that they can be proud of. It made the summer difficult but Lucas..." I shrug, not knowing what to say. "He's innocent. He makes them happy which makes me happy."

She draws her shoulders back. "And what is the reason you think your relationship with them needs to have a buffer?"

"Lucas isn't a buffer."

"You said you needed him."

To fix us. Not distract us.

"I messed up."

“How?”

“By losing their trust.”

She nods like she understands. Maybe she does, it seems like a lot of people have problems disappointing others. With River and Everett pulling me away from the system, it means I have that much more to prove.

I swallow. “They’re too focused on Lucas right now to think about what I’ve done. It doesn’t make me jealous over him, it makes me grateful.”

She leans back and watches me. Her posture is eased and casual, not tight and wondering. She does that sometimes, talks with her body instead of her mouth.

She taps her fingers against the blank notepad on her lap. “Have you tried writing your thoughts down? Like a journal of sorts. Perhaps the things you feel you can’t speak about, you can write instead. I tell people often that it can help ease their minds of worry and doubt. If you feel guilty, write about it.”

“So ... a diary?”

She smiles. “It can be anything. I’ve told a few people that writing letters can help, even if they’re never sent. Write to people you feel you can’t talk to otherwise, or perhaps address someone that you’re conflicted about. You can even write to your parents.”

My parents? “Why would I do that?”

“It’s therapeutic,” she answers. “Some people find that writing down their thoughts and feelings helps them realize things they may not allow themselves to any other way. If you’re angry for a certain reason, or even grateful, putting it to words can emphasize the emotion that’s hidden.”

I shake my head. Writing down how angry I am at my parents won’t do any good. I don’t care if it’s helped others, it won’t do anything for me.

“Write a song.”

My lips part.

She nods once. “Journaling or letter writing may not be the medium your brain requires for you to reach depths of the unknown. I’m sure your teachers tell you to channel your feelings into the way you play and perform, right?”

Hesitantly, my head tips.

“Do the same thing now. For you.”

“For me?”

No answer.

Writing music has never been about my feelings, it’s about escaping

them. Listening to other people sing, play, perform is what I lose myself in every time. Writing my feelings would consume me on a level I'm not prepared for.

Polk would tell me to channel Charlotte. What would she do? She would avoid feeling anything to protect herself. Polk wouldn't like that, and neither would Griffin.

Charlotte didn't have any hobbies or talents. There was nothing special about her, so differentiating the two versions of us is difficult. Maybe even impossible.

"You could write to Oliver," she suggests, catching me off guard.

I blink.

She smiles.

I want to ask, *why would I do that?*

But her eyes tell me, *why wouldn't you?*

I HAVE a missed call from River. By the time I make it out of class, I also have two unread texts from her and one from Everett. It isn't like them to reach out this time of day.

On my way to my dorm, I call River back and have a heavy feeling settle into the pit of my stomach. It's happened before, right before I go to bed and have a nightmare. It's like a warning that something bad is going to happen.

River doesn't pick up. Her last text was from twenty minutes ago, so I try Everett. It rings three times before his rugged, out of breath voice greets me.

"There's been an accident."

I stop dead in my tracks. A guy stumbles into me, muttering profanities before walking around and casting me a scathing glare.

Panic seeps into my bones as I grip the phone tight in my hand. "Is Lucas okay? River? I can't get ahold of her."

Nausea sweeps through me as the possibilities overwhelm my mind. They never bother me during the day because they know I've packed my schedule with classes and practice to prepare for next year.

"It's Oliver."

Two words.

Two little words has my heart plummeting into the bottom of my chest. I try to swallow, to speak, but there's too much lodged into my throat as I process. The best I can do is part my lips and shake my head as if he can see, as if he knows that I don't understand.

“Something went wrong while he was mountain climbing and that’s all we know,” he explains, feeling my desperation on the other end of the phone. “River got a call about an hour ago from her parents who received a call from some hospital in France. He was able to pass along his contact information, but we don’t know his condition.”

I force myself to suck in a breath. “Is someone going to see him? Robert and Bridgette? River? You? Everett, somebody needs to see if he’s all right —”

“Robert and Bridgette have engagements they’re cancelling to get a flight, but they’re having complications. River is booking our flights, but I can’t tell you anything more than that.”

“But you’re going?”

“Yes.”

Tears burn my eyes as I propel myself toward my dorm. When it nears, I’m choking on emotion and gasping for breath and listening to Everett tell me it’ll be okay. But he doesn’t know if it will.

He can’t tell me that.

“We know that...” He pauses, clearing his throat as I unlock the front door with my I.D. badge. “...you care. I would have preferred waiting to tell you, but we didn’t want you to find out some other way.”

How would I find out? Besides a text every few months, I get nothing. No call. No email. No indication that he’ll tell me if something is wrong.

Unless ... something is wrong.

Horribly wrong.

“What if he doesn’t—”

“You can’t think like that.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

There’s a momentary pause. “Oliver has always been strong. I don’t doubt for a second that he’ll get past whatever obstacles he faces. Okay? You need to think positive.”

Everett is going to see Ollie. It seems monumental even though he acts like it’s nothing. We both know it means everything though, even if River is going with him.

“What about Lucas?”

There’s a lot of noise in the background, car horns, I think. “Bridgette is going to watch him so Robert can get a connecting flight to France. We’ll still beat him, but at least Oliver will have family there.”

I sniff back tears. "Is that what you are?"

Say it, Everett.

"Once upon a time he was my best friend," he replies slowly, tiredly. "But for even longer he's been family. Don't mistake this, Charlie. I haven't forgiven him. Might not ever. I just know that he needs me right now."

Making it to my room, I unlock the door and push it open. For some reason, my eyes lock on an empty spot under my spare bed. A spot that shouldn't be empty.

The shoes.

My jaw quivers. "You'll keep me updated, right? I know you don't ... I know that what I put you through makes you think differently of me, but you'll still tell me if he's okay, right? That he'll be fine?"

"Charlie," he says slowly, "I don't think differently of you. I love you like I loved you before I found out. I just ... have trouble understanding. I should be the last person to judge going after somebody I shouldn't, our circumstances are just different, and I worry."

"About me?"

"About getting caught up. Lost."

Ollie wouldn't let me get lost. The entire time I've known him he's pulled me from the depths of my mind and grounded me. He doesn't care if I'm Charlotte or Charlie or anybody else.

I force a smile. "I love you, Everett."

"Love you too, Little Badger."

When we hang up, I toss my phone on the bed and search under the spare one for the gray Converse that suddenly disappeared. They mean too much as is, but especially now. Their absence is a shot in the chest.

Gasping for air as I crawl around on my hands and knees throwing items behind me to see where they could have gone, I hear a voice at my door.

Liam stands there looking confused, his hands in his pockets as tears I didn't realize were falling stream down my face. He instantly frowns and closes the door behind him, walking over and dropping down.

"Breathe," he instructs. "What's up?"

"The shoes," I rasp. "They're gone."

He glances at the spot they once were and then back up at me. His top front teeth bite into his bottom lip and guilt crosses his boyish features.

I shove him backwards until he falls onto his tailbone. "What did you do to them, Liam?"

He raises his hands in surrender. “They’re just shoes. You’re holding onto something that isn’t functional anymore. I’ve seen your closet, Barbie. You have plenty to choose from.”

My fists tighten until my nails dig into the heels of my palms painfully. “They’re *not* just shoes! They’re more than that, Liam. How could you? I told you to stop going through my stuff! To leave me alone about it!”

“Charlie—”

“He had a pair just like them,” I cried, bitterly wiping at my cheeks before standing up and leaving him on the floor. “They were *our* thing and you got rid of them like it was nothing. What gives you the right to determine what’s functional and not anyway?”

He just shakes his head, speechless.

I sniff and wipe and cry some more until I’m choking on air. “What if he dies, Liam? Then what do I have? I’ll have memories and pretty words and nothing else.”

His blue eyes widen. “What do you mean? Charlie, why are you looking for the shoes? I was honestly just trying to help. Holding onto something like that isn’t healthy.”

I grab one of the *Harry Potter* movie cases and throw it against the door. It’s empty because I watched it last night. I’ve watched the series twice since he left me. But it feels good, to throw things. To hear them smack into a hard surface.

“Charlie,” he says again, slowly rising.

I shove him again. “What gives you the right? Answer me, Liam! How do you know what’s important and what’s not to somebody?”

His lips weigh down. “I don’t.”

My nostrils flare. “Exactly. You only think about Jake and yourself. What if I got rid of something that he gave you? Or something you two shared? What then?”

He’s silent.

“What. Then?”

“I’d be upset.”

I nod and move away from him.

“What happened?” he repeats.

“I don’t know,” I whisper brokenly, feeling myself crumble. My knees are weak, and my arms are numb, and my chest burns from the oxygen I can’t seem to soak in. “I don’t know because they don’t know. He got hurt, but

nobody can tell us anything. But what if that's it? What if there's no return for us?"

The shoes.

I need the shoes.

Liam gathers me in his arms and squeezes me in a bear hug. I feel his breath against the top of my head as he brushes his fingers through my hair.

My tears absorb into his shirt like they did when I broke down in his car after therapy all those months ago. He lets me use him like a tissue without judging me or saying a word besides what I need to hear.

"Why don't you hate me? I'm not a good friend. I'm jealous of you and Jake. I'm pissed that you got rid of my shoes when I told you not to. Why, Liam? Why doesn't Everett hate me? Why does he love me instead? I don't get it. I don't..."

He pulls away and tips my head up. "I know you're not really good at this whole friend thing, but it's okay. We're here for each other no matter what, and that's all you need to know."

"But we're fighting."

He shrugs. "Friends fight."

"But Everett..."

"Is family. Family never truly leaves."

What does that mean for Ollie?

CHARLIE

I TURN SEVENTEEN. There's no birthday text.

OLLIE

MINT EYES.

It's the first thing I see when I crack mine open. Green eyes and short, dirty blond hair and thin lips pressed in a firm line. He's watching me with little emotion. Progress, I suppose, since the last time.

"We need to stop meeting like this." It's a stupid thing to say considering the last time we saw each other in a hospital was under circumstances that were neither fun nor worth bringing up. It seems like the only thing my fuzzy mind can conjure.

He huffs and leans closer. "Looks like you'll survive."

I'm not sure if he's disappointed or glad, so I don't ask him to clarify. Pretty sure I wouldn't like the answer.

When I sit up, pain shoots through my side and a strangled groan escapes my lips. There's something attached to my arm—tubing and wires and needles piercing my skin. My leg is suspended in the air in a cast and sling, keeping it from moving.

Cursing, I hold my ribs as Everett stands and carefully lays me back. "Nurse said you have multiple broken ribs. You're busted up, man. Broken leg, broken collarbone, sprained wrist. It's going to take a lot of time to recuperate from this."

I wince when I blow out a breath.

He examines me, noting the large white cast covering my leg. "They pumped you with meds, so I don't know what it's going to be like when they wean you off them. Probably going to hurt like a bitch."

That time he makes sure I know he isn't displeased by the statement. It doesn't stop him from making sure I don't move too much when I readjust in the uncomfortable bed. I let him keep my shoulder down, his large palm forcing me to stay put.

The pain is there, reminding me of my last climb on Mont Blanc. I remember being halfway to the peak, hearing something loud, feeling the ground shake underneath me.

Then ... nothing.

Avalanche.

I swallow. "You're here."

He knows what I mean. He's here for me. In France. Even after everything that's happened.

"River is getting food," he tells me instead, dragging the white chair closer to the bed. He sits down and leans back, stretching his legs out to get comfortable.

He doesn't look any different. Same color hair, same light stubble. He used to stay clean-shaven for his ex because she preferred it, but River doesn't care.

"What about Lucas?"

River sends me pictures of my nephew. He's the perfect mixture of them. His eyes and her pale complexion. Her button nose and his thick lashes. Lucas's hair isn't blond or red, but somewhere in between. Mahogany. Unique, like a child of Everett and River should be. Nobody expects anything less.

"He's with your mom."

Mom.

"Robert's here too," he continues, gesturing toward the door. "He stepped out to take a call after the nurse came in to check in on you from the overnight."

Overnight? My eyes dart toward the small stand beside my bed, then to the walls to find a clock. They're bare besides posters and charts that I can't read between the medication, roaring headache, and language barrier.

Everett seems to know what I'm looking for. "You've been in and out of it for a few days, man. Four. Almost five. They needed to take you into surgery to make sure your bones were going to set right, then there were the scans and x-rays. They've kept you out of it to try getting your body to heal a little before letting you come to."

Five days? I'm not sure what to say. I don't remember waking up at all in the course of that time. If I've been in and out, none of it has stuck.

Closing my eyes, I recall soft touches and quiet murmurs. They all seem like a distant memory. A dream. Realistic but not.

The door opens and River walks in. She stops in her tracks when she sees me, her lips parted and the container in her hand nearly falling. She grips it tightly and quickly walks toward me, passing what I assume is food to Everett before stopping beside the bed.

Her hand is warm as it finds mine. She doesn't squeeze, just drapes it there and studies me carefully with her eyes glazed with tears and about thirty different emotions ranging from worry to anger.

"You should be with Lucas," I tell her, voice hoarse as I shift my palm so it encompasses hers. She's afraid to hurt me, so I tighten my fingers around her to assure her.

"I needed to know you were okay." Her voice cracks and it makes my chest hurt in a different way.

"I am. I will be."

She doesn't let any tears fall and it reminds me of Charlie's resilience. Looking over her shoulder, she locks eyes with Everett. I'm not sure what silent exchange passes between them, but he nods and stands before taking the container outside with him.

River turns back to me when the door clicks closed. She looks good. Great even. Her auburn hair is past her shoulders and her smile still holds hope and purity despite it wavering from worry and fear.

"I'm okay," I say again.

"You're hurt."

I try shrugging and regret it. Her bottom lip quivers as she squeezes my hand. I breathe through the pain, which only seems to create more. Instead of dwelling on it, I focus on her.

"Lucas is good?"

"He's a great baby," she says, smiling genuinely and breaking through some of the darkness that settled into her features. "I want to tell you all about him because I know you'll fall in love with him like we have. But that's not ... it isn't what we should talk about."

I could hold my breath. It would make my ribs hurt less and suspend the moment. Instead, I embrace the pain and feel the burn and watch as her lips turn neutral and eyes turn weary and something else. Something unsure.

"There were letters in your suitcase," she says quietly, a tone just above a whisper. She sits down in the chair Everett had occupied. "A girl saw us going into your room and seemed worried that you hadn't been back. Emily?"

My lips press together.

I'm not sure what her tone implies. I hear accusation in it, curiosity as to why a girl would worry about me not showing up. I want to tell her it isn't what she thinks, that it couldn't be because it wouldn't help.

I tried.

Tried taking back control.

Tried finding comfort elsewhere.

She looks away. "Anyway, Everett told her that you'd gotten hurt and were admitted. The hotel manager mentioned that you were supposed to check out that day, so we gathered all your things and the letters were right there..."

We're silent as her words fade into nothing. Her eyes pierce mine worse than her words do, the assumption sitting there for both of us to see. Whether or not she read them isn't the question. It's what she did with them.

"Who's Emily, Oliver?" She asks with such a foreign roughness that I wonder for a moment if I'm in the room with the girl Bridgette and Robert James adopted at thirteen, or the woman she's grown into—the mother.

I know the answer when she pins me with her eyes.

"She's just an acquaintance."

She doesn't look like she believes me. I tell her how we met, how she traveled with me a few times and got me to talk about Chicago after pestering me nonstop. Though tempted to leave out Charlie, I don't. I tell River what she wants to know because she'll call me out otherwise.

I swallow and stare at the thick white blanket covering the blue gown. "Someone told me that writing could help, so I did it. I wasn't going to send them, River. I told you I wouldn't bother her. I just..."

"I know."

Does she? "I needed an outlet. Something to hold on to until I figured it out. Until it was time."

Her eyes say, *time for what?*

I take a deep breath, forcing myself not to react to the way my ribs scream in resentment from the subtle movement. "It's been almost a week. I missed her birthday, didn't I?"

A nod.

"How is she?"

Is she happy?

Is she doing well in school?

Is she with Liam?

Are the Tolberts' treating her well?

"Is she...?" I don't know what to say, so I let the words die and hope she'll put me out of my misery.

She does. "She's not the girl any of us knew when you left. That's our fault, I suppose. But it isn't a bad thing. Her therapists have helped her in ways I'm not sure she quite grasps yet. She wears the shoes you got her almost every day. I've never seen her so emotional over anything. She loves them."

She loves you is tacked on silently.

At this rate, she'll be done with her second year and moving on to third. Seventeen. When I was seventeen I was telling the guys back home that I was going to apply to Penn State. Undecided, that was my major. I told Dad it was business but only decided to change it to that when I had no other choice or clue when the time came.

Business was all he prepped me for.

It was all I knew.

That was the first time I lied to my father. Does he know? He's always been perceptive. I'm not sure he can read the unreadable though. If I never knew who I was, how could he?

"You knew her favorite color."

I blink.

She sighs. "You knew that she only liked theater popcorn if they put five times the amount of butter on it than recommended, and how much she prefers Milk Duds over those cookie dough bites, and when I ordered a bottle of water I thought she was going to cry."

That makes me chuckle. "Nobody should order water at the theater."

She frowns. "So I learned."

I reach out and she meets my hand halfway, putting hers in mine. "When you go to the movies with her, you have to choose a place in the middle. She's afraid of being too far back but hates sitting in the front where it's loudest. If you get anything less than three boxes of candy, she'll sigh twenty minutes in and wonder if she chose the right kind because she may crave chocolate over licorice before the film ends."

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“When she practices music, she only likes people watching when she invites them. In her own way, she’s a perfectionist. She doesn’t like anyone seeing her flawed if she has time to master something. It doesn’t matter that she’s ... captivating when she loses herself in practice because it’s not her best form. Maybe that’s changed, you said she’s different.”

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“If you order her a sandwich of any kind, make sure there’s no pickles. She hates them but won’t say anything and then picks them off and makes faces when she tastes them on the bread or meat. She hates when people put ketchup on the fries instead of next to them, which I think is funny because she usually doesn’t care if she gets messy. And if ...”

The machine next to me picks up even faster, the incessant beeping wanting me to find ways to rip off whatever monitor is causing it.

I pause when I see the way River’s melded brown eyes are locked on me with parted lips. If she wants me to stop, she doesn’t say it. So, I find thoughts and finish the fast facts I know about Charlie Tucker.

“If you ask her about therapy, she’ll do anything she can to change the topic. Don’t let her though, River. It won’t help her if she shuts down. I was never good at that because I thought it was for the best. It’s not. If her therapists are helping, maybe we need to figure out how to reflect that too.”

With a short draw of breath and a tip of my head, I return my gaze to the blanket in front of me. My face burns with her gaze, but I don’t say a word or meet her eyes.

“Why did you tell me that?” The question comes after a minute of silence, cut through by only soft breathing and mild noises from the machine and people talking outside the room. Nurses. Patients. Families.

“You need to know those things.”

You need to know them because I won’t be around to guide you. To tell her to listen to you. To make sure you know her so she can’t convince you otherwise.

“Ollie...”

“Take care of her.”

Her fingers tighten around mine.

Pain increases inside me and I’m not sure if the medication is wearing off

or new sources of infliction are just making it worse. I close my eyes and think about anything else.

Every city, town, and village I've seen.

All the food I've tried.

The people.

Emily.

We're not even friends. Just acquaintances like I told River. She's someone who pesters me for answers and hasn't been shy about wanting something more, but not bold enough to go for it. Maybe she knows I won't let her get far.

Charlie wouldn't have let it stop her.

I'm glad she's not Charlie.

Not long after River kisses my cheek, the doctor comes in with a nurse and Everett. The man's English is easily understood as he tells me everything Everett already has. What I don't know is the extent of the therapy it'll take to get my strength back.

I almost laugh.

The therapy I need isn't the kind Charlie was hinting at when she told me I should see someone. Just like Emily wasn't the person she indicated I open up to. Yet, I do it all wrong. Listen to her all wrong.

When visiting hours are over, Everett squeezes my arm once and I know that it's the first step in a long road to forgiveness. His eyes are distant but catching up and I know it isn't for the benefit of Dad in the room.

Baby steps.

When it's just me and my thoughts, I make eye contact with the suitcase perched in the corner of the room. It's an hour before a nurse comes to check on my IV and vitals. I ask her to look in my suitcase and grab the letters.

In choppy English, she tells me there are no letters.

CHARLIE

It's the last day of classes.

Liam's family offers to take me out to dinner with them and Jake, but I tell them I need to pack and get ready for my flight. I don't leave until tomorrow afternoon. Two forty-five. I can't make myself go out to eat with them knowing there will be smiles and laughter and celebration.

His parents invite Jake to everything now. It makes me happy for him and Liam. It doesn't make me happy for me, and that's when I realize the two parts of me that I keep dormant and secluded merge.

I'm a jealous person.

Green.

Envious.

Happy enough to say I'm happy for them but not enough to truly feel it. Not when I have to watch them hold hands and kiss and flirt when I can't do the same. Liam knows.

Liam won't tell me what he did with my gray Converse.

River is back in New York with Lucas. She called me to say Ollie will take a while to recover, but that he'll be in good hands. She doesn't say he's in New York. I know he isn't—I can feel it in my gut.

Like how he knew when I was having bad days and would bring me donuts. Or take me to the diner. Or try getting me to laugh when I just wanted to snap at the world.

Instead of joining everybody out to celebrate another school year done, I curl up in bed and stare at the bottle of pills. I need to take my dose for the night. Maybe then I'll be happy.

I watch a documentary instead.

CHARLIE

I SEND HIM A BIRTHDAY TEXT. No reply.
Bridgette gets a Mother's Day call.
River gets a Mother's Day text.
Robert gets a Father's Day call.
Everett gets a Father's Day text.
I get nothing on July fourth.
Or Halloween.
Or Thanksgiving.
Or Christmas.
On New Year's ... I understand.

CHARLIE

I'M ANGRY. So angry that I lash out at Polk. I grab her tissue box and throw it against her desk and seethe as she watches me with eerie calmness.

She tells me to let it out.

I tell her to stop talking.

She tells me to explain what's wrong.

I tell her life.

I was neglected.

I was raped.

I was given away.

I was claimed.

I was loved.

But not by Oliver.

She stands up, picks up the tissues, and passes me one just in time for waterworks.

Polk tells me to sit.

I stand.

She tells me to talk.

I stay silent.

"Embrace her, Charlie."

"She's weak."

"She's you."

"I'm not weak."

"No," she agrees, "you're not."

CHARLIE

I PLAY FOR RIVER, Everett, and Lucas during winter break. I learned a popular nursery rhyme and listen to the playful giggles coming from the little boy behind me as the melody fills the Community Center room.

When I'm done, Everett shows Lucas how to clap and he starts doing it on his own while cooing. They're so in love with him, with their family. When I stare at them, I see a spot for me between them all.

My palm flattens against the bench.

There's a new C carved into it.

For Charlotte.

Not Charlie.

CHARLIE

THERE'S a blond-haired boy at Ambrosia Diner. He's tall and lanky with black rimmed glasses and messy hair. He dresses like Ollie used to, jeans and plaid. He's not wearing Converse though and I like him better for it.

Liam is in the bathroom when the boy with blond hair walks over to me. He smiles. It's a nice smile. White. Clean. Liam would nudge me and wiggle his eyebrows until I kicked him under the table, but he's not here.

The boy stops at the end. "Hey."

I force myself to greet him back.

"I'm Adam."

Adam suits him. He looks familiar, like I've seen him around. I think I've passed him on campus. He's older than me, but not by much. Two years? He can't be more than twenty.

Tell him your name.

Adam is tall. Probably a good five or six inches taller than me. He isn't broad though, like he may still grow into his body. Maybe he isn't twenty. Maybe he's younger. Nineteen? Eighteen?

I'll be eighteen soon.

I cut off the train of thought.

What's your name? Polk would ask.

I look down at my pink Converse, clicking the heels like if I tap them three times I'll be teleported back to my dorm.

He's still watching me.

Liam walks out of the bathroom.

Adam looks at Liam and back at me.

"Charlotte," I say.

Both guys stare at me.

Adam with a smile.

Liam in shock.

“But I prefer Charlie,” I add quietly.

He joins us for lunch.

CHARLIE

I TURN eighteen and he still doesn't come home.

I graduate from The School of Music and he still doesn't come home.

I move back to New York and he still doesn't come home.

There are no texts. Not for me.

Liam is in California with Jake. They both have part time jobs and a small apartment outside of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where they attend school. Both insist I visit, but I don't. I never liked the idea of California. Too warm. Too sunny.

After coming back to New York, I'm asked the same thing. What next? It's the same answer every time. Besides traveling and playing music, I don't know.

I used to know lots of things.

But not anymore.

I still wear my pink shoes.

I still talk to Liam.

I still see Polk.

But it isn't the same.

When I get home from Painter's Choice with River, there's something on my bed. It's a stack of papers tied with a red string and it's placed in the center of my comforter sticking out against the black.

Brows pinching, I walk over and pick it up, examining the worn and crinkled tones of white and yellow. There are words etched into them and I see my name.

I see my name in almost every one.

Glancing at my door, I wonder who put them there. Walking over and shutting it, I sit down on the edge of the bed and untie the string from around the bundle. Carefully taking the first paper, I hold my breath.

My eyes lock with a name.

A phrase.

An old hope.

Until tomorrow,

Ollie.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, glancing at the date. Setting it down, I pull out another. Then another. Then another. There are too many to count, spanning from when he left to right before my seventeenth birthday.

When he stopped talking to me.

When he made a point to exclude me.

I get up and palm my mouth and stare at the letters scattered unread on my bed. Backing up, I lock my door and tug on the hem of my shirt and stare at my shoes before walking back over. Toeing out of the pink Converse, I gather the courage to grab one and read it.

Then another.

Another.

Another.

Until I’m crying.

Until I’m wanting.

Until I’m remembering.

I wonder if he’s with Emily. Is she still following him? Still pressing for answers. Does she know him better than me now? Better than himself? Maybe she’s why he stopped talking to me, because he found someone better.

Someone older.

Someone wiser.

World traveled.

Experienced.

Capable.

Capable of what?

There’s a knock at my door. “Charlie?”

River. I hear the soft thuds of little feet running around the hall outside my room. She tells Lucas to stop before rapping her knuckles against the wood again.

“Are you okay?” No. “If you need anything...” Her words trail off and I know she knows. She put them in here. How long has she had them? They’re not post marked. There’s no address. There’s no stamp.

I swallow.

Her feet retreat and so do Lucas's.
He tells me I'd love the UK.
Country of music. Creation. Control.
I take a shallow breath.

OLLIE

MY BODY TOOK the better part of a year to heal from the fall between sitting around in the hospital, physical therapy, and a flat I stayed in with Emily when I couldn't stay by myself. I could have gone back to New York and accepted my parents' help, but I didn't want to. When Dad asked me why I couldn't, I told him I had a feeling I'd be better off staying away.

Truth is, I didn't realize how true that was when I said it. At the time, they were just words. Not necessarily lies, but smaller truths. He told me he'd get me on the first flight back if I changed my mind.

I didn't.

Physical therapy got my body back where it needed to be, not that I don't have days where the aches are nonexistent. My leg gets tender and my ribs still hurt from the memory of the fall. All the months spent in therapy got me talking to the right people though. A therapist, someone to talk my shit out with when the days stretched.

Weirdly, she helped.

She helped me realize that happiness doesn't come easily for some people. There's no reason, it's just a chemical imbalance that my brain struggles with. Clinical depression. I'm diagnosed a month into therapy. I see the good doc once a week after physical therapy. We talk about the incident. We talk about hobbies.

We don't talk about Charlie.

Shortly after starting physical therapy, I met an older man who shared stories of his own travels. He told me about his time in the Peace Corps stationed in Asia, doing work in the medical field to better local communities.

Eddy's and my therapy tended to be the same time every day, and eventually the few times a week we were called back when our bodies got

better from their various ailments. Every time we met up he would tell me what he learned while traveling. It wasn't about escaping for him, but about doing something for others.

It's a mutual benefit for the world travelers and for the people who get the help they need.

When I told him I wasn't sure I was the right person, he told me there was no wrong type of people if their heart was in the right place. I was usually the one that needed help, so the community's benefit might not be as grand if they were stuck with me.

He told me the best kind of therapy is what you get by being selfless. The way his gray eyes lit up when he said, *there's no feeling like it, kid*, had me looking up the opportunities when my treatment was nearing its end.

The therapist I saw told me it was a good opportunity to help those in need, focus my energy in people who needed positivity. So, after getting cleared and accepted, I spent time getting trained and prepped before spending six months in the Dominican Republic. There were no cell phones, limited gear, and only five other people with me.

I taught kids how to play basketball.

I spoke to a trained psychiatrist on site.

I felt something I hadn't in a long time.

Happiness.

Ease.

There were a few phone calls out to people when I wanted to wish someone a happy birthday or holiday, but nothing more. I told myself it was better not to write, because my pen would be accustomed to put a name that shouldn't grace its paper despite her age now.

It doesn't matter when I tell my brain not to think of Charlie. Curiosity gets the better of me. I wonder what she looks like, if she's taller, if she's leaner, if she's tanner. Did she cut her hair like she talked about once? Or is it longer? Is she seeing someone? Liam?

River told me she decided not to go to college, which surprised me. She never talked about it outright, but I knew she had plans. Those plans weren't something River or Charlie shared with me though, so I felt out of place to ask. The information on her whereabouts hasn't been offered in passing conversations, so I tell River I hope she and the family are well before hanging up.

Now I'm in Bristol, where Emily convinced me to visit. She said she had

plans she didn't think I'd want to miss, so I let her show me Castle Combe and admire the beauty she once told me about, then introduce me to the boy she met shortly after we went our separate ways.

He seems like a good guy. A little shorter than me, the same height as her. Big glasses, bigger smile, and gives her the kind of look that I've seen Everett give River.

When the sun starts setting, the three of us make our way to a small concert hall outside of Cardiff in Wales. It's not a long ride, and we make easy conversation. Emily does what she always has and asks me questions.

Is there a girl?

Am I happy?

Am I going back to the Republic?

Her boyfriend laughs and tells her to ease on the interrogation, but she takes it as a suggestion and asks me more.

I answer most of them.

No.

Yes.

And I haven't decided.

"It depends," I tell her, looking out the window of the transit we're riding.

I take in the scenery we pass by, feeling her gaze on my face like she's waiting for me to enlighten her.

Sighing, I meet her eyes. "If something better comes along, I may not go back. I considered having them assign me somewhere else."

Her eyes dance with mischief. "Good."

Her boyfriend shakes his head and pats her knee but doesn't say anything. Not knowing what to respond with, I don't either. Instead, I look back out the window until we get to our destination.

The concert hall is small but intimate. It makes me wish I'd worn something better than blue jeans and a white tee, with nothing but a red plaid shirt undone over it. Emily never mentioned it was something to dress up for, so I wore what I was comfortable in.

When we get inside and Emily hands a woman our tickets and we're seated, I notice how everyone else is dressed. Black slacks and white shirts and shined shoes. The women are in dresses and jewelry. Emily is in a dress but that isn't unusual for her, so I didn't bother questioning it.

Sinking into the seat, I give her the side eye. "You could have told me to wear something nicer. I don't exactly blend in."

I'm grateful for not having to put on my old business attire to go out, because formal isn't my style. It hasn't been for a long time. Still, I was raised to dress for the occasion. This isn't a jeans and tee event.

Waving her hand at me in dismissal, she settles into her seat. "You look perfectly fine, Oliver. Just get ready."

Get ready?

The room grows quiet.

Someone walks onto the stage. A girl.

A girl with blonde hair.

A girl with tan skin.

A girl whose eyes shine a gem-like shade of green that only the first row would be able to see.

She walks to the piano in the center of the stage. It's black and polished and grand. Not bigger than the one I've seen her play back in Chicago, or the one that sits in the Community Center in Bridgeport.

It just looks bigger because it's surrounded by nothing. Open space. Air. Waiting eyes. Anticipation.

The room isn't full but it's close. My eyes manage to peel away from her to scan the headcount, and I realize there's only a handful of seats left open.

Emily's hand squeezes mine.

She sits down at the piano.

I move forward on my seat.

Why aren't we closer?

Emily's hand moves away.

Her hands move to the keys.

I hold my breath.

Then she plays. Only then can I breathe. The notes are my oxygen that flood my lungs and my chest and my skull. The sound pierces my heart and my brain and my memory until I feel it all.

Every time I walked away.

Every time I told her no.

More importantly, when I told her yes.

Does she know I'm here?

I want to turn to Emily and ask but I don't—can't. My eyes are on the way her blonde hair cascades down her back in loose waves and how her slim body is straight with posture but not still like she was taught back in Chicago. She lets herself move when the tempo becomes faster and moves her

shoulders when it slows down.

She's not sixteen anymore.

Emily leans against me and rests her cheek on my shoulder. It's innocent, evokes no feelings or heart skips or stomach drops. Not like it would if the blonde behind the piano had leaned in and consumed me with her scent and closeness and warmth.

Charlie.

I swallow. "How..."

I only ever told her a name. A first name with nothing else attached. No, *she was the one that got away or the only person I can think of.*

Whether both were true didn't matter.

Then again, she didn't get away.

I pushed her.

She used to pull me back until I gave her no choice. No letter. No text. No call. There was no communication between her and I because I knew better. I always knew better.

Until better had to stop. Because she was better than me in every way possible. I didn't deserve her in my life no matter how bad I wanted her there, front and center letting me give her all the attention she wanted.

"River," Emily explains quietly. "I saw her the day she flew in. She mentioned letters and said something about Charlie. She didn't look upset just ... lost? Yeah, lost. I kept thinking about it until I connected the dots."

Charlie finishes the first song and moves on to another. It's softer, lighter, leaving the audience captivated.

I lean back as I watch her, blinking only when I have to, not wanting to miss a second of this. It's been a long time. She could have someone in her life that makes her happy.

Wetting my dry lips, I rest my hands in my lap. I'm wearing the same thing I did when we first met, sans gray Converse. "What does that say about me?"

"That you care."

I turn my head. "That I care?"

"That you love her. Even now."

I'll always love her.

It's why I see her everywhere. I saw her in the Dominican Republic when someone told me how they overcame the worst. I heard her in their music. She was everywhere because I've carried her with me even when I cut off

contact.

“Even after all this time,” she adds softly, as if to remind me that I’ve held on.

It isn’t about me though.

Has she held on?

I don’t want the answer to be yes.

But I also do.

And I’m not left wondering long when the second song ends, and a third song begins. It’s one I recognize well because I’ve played it to torture myself countless amounts of times.

“Does she know I’m here?” I rasp.

“No.”

No.

She’s playing our song.

Emily nudges my shoulder. “I can get us backstage. You know, in case you want to go back there after.”

Pressing my lips together, I contemplate what to do. How long will I wait? It’s not a coincidence we’re both here.

Then again...

She doesn’t know I’m here.

“Yeah,” I rasp. “Let’s go backstage.”

She squeaks.

Her boyfriend chuckles.

My heart races.

CHARLIE

I'M THIRTEEN AGAIN—SANS blue jeans and zip up hoodie. I wish I had my Converse on instead of these uncomfortable black ballet flats. They dig into my feet and will probably leave blisters.

I see the plaid first. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows like the first time I saw him. White tee. Blue jeans. His hair is darker and longer and his jaw is lined with stubble, not clean shaven like normal. His nose is crooked, like he broke it.

Did River tell me about that?

She never told me he'd be here.

There's a pretty girl next to him. She isn't paying attention to him though. Instead, she's staring at me with a big grin on her face that confuses me. She does a little hop on her feet and then starts toward me, tugging Ollie with her by his wrist. It's not his hand but it might as well be and my heart hurts seeing her have any contact with him.

I blink when they stop in front of me. I'm taller than her by at least an inch. It makes me feel a little better—like I have something on her if not beauty or his attention.

He isn't looking at her either.

I struggle to breathe when I realize he hasn't stopped looking at me since they showed up backstage. I'm not sure who let them back here and can't figure out if I care or not. I don't think I do.

"You look..." His voice is rougher than I remember, deeper. What does he see, I wonder? I've put on a little weight because I'm not outside as much. I spend a lot of time playing and practicing for shows that an old teacher from Chicago sets up for me through a program offered to new graduates.

My clothes fit a little tighter than they used to when I was sixteen, but River says I still look beautiful. When Liam saw me last at a small show in

Chicago that he traveled back for he told me that I look better—healthier, happier. What does happiness look like?

Don't worry, Barbie, Liam had promised before messing up my hair, *I'm still not into you.*

I asked him if it was because of my tiny boobs. He laughed and told me it was because he loved Jake.

“Beautiful,” Ollie finishes in an audible tone, as if he's not sure if he should say it when people are around.

I want to tell him I'm not sixteen anymore, but his response is automated like he can't allow himself to say anything without questioning it first. It shouldn't even matter to him anyway, thinking I'm beautiful.

Pointedly, I look at the pretty blonde girl beside him. Her hand is no longer on him but their arms brush in familiarity. They're close, I can tell that much.

Forcing my gaze upward, I take a deep breath and flatten the material of my white shirt down. It's a cotton tunic that I paired with black leggings and my flats. There's a thin black belt attached to the shirt that emphasizes the slight hourglass figure I grew into.

My cheeks heat as I watch him study my figure closely. I tell him he hasn't changed, but he has. He's not hiding his lingering eyes or wearing a dress shirt and pants and pretending he likes it.

The girl smiles. “I'll let you guys catch up, okay? Will and I are going to wait for you out in the lobby. Or ... not.” Her eyes go to me and I'm not sure why until Ollie clears his throat and rubs the back of his neck.

Oh.

My eyes must be telling because Ollie shakes his head. “I'll see you out there, Em.”

I want to sneer but I'm not sure *Em* is a threat. Not if this is the same girl he wrote about in the letters, that he talked to and hung out with. She's blonde like he mentioned, blue eyes, but she's prettier than he let on.

She leaves without introducing herself or looking back over her shoulder. I do see something flash on her features. Pride?

There's a little speck of dirt on the floor that I keep my gaze locked on. The tips of black Converse appear in my line of vision. They're new by the looks of it. The laces aren't stained, and the cloth isn't discolored.

“You're not wearing your gray ones.”

“Neither are you.”

I don't answer right away. "I don't have them anymore," I admit, finding the courage to slide my gaze up his body until we're watching each other.

I missed his eyes. Nobody has the color brown that he does. They're dark but not too dark unless he's angry or sad or something I've never quite grasped. Lustful? Loving? I'm not sure I know the difference between the two. His eyes give away his emotions when he tries not to show any at all. They're his betrayers but my biggest ally.

"What are you doing here, Oliver?"

"Oliver, huh?" There's a hint of amusement in his tone that doesn't last long because he hears my seriousness. "I got a call from my friend about checking out a concert together. I didn't know it was yours."

Embarrassment seeps into the back of my neck until heat creeps into my face. "It's just a performance, not a concert. The school helps alumni do shows across the world for experience. I wanted to do them here."

"Why?"

Because of you.

Because you loved it here.

I shrug.

"It was amazing, Charlie."

Grabbing a pamphlet from the nearby table, I pass it to him. The front has a piano on it and my name in large black script underneath.

Pianist Charlotte Tucker.

He studies it, running his thumb across the name and then tips his head up with inquisitive eyes. "Charlotte?"

"That's my name," is all I say.

"It sounds ... professional. Grown up."

I want to laugh because I'm no different than I was when he knew me. The only difference is the age tacked onto a fuller frame and better experiences. I've always told him I'm more grown up than he gave me credit for.

"Can't call me kid anymore."

His laugh is short and dry. "No, I certainly cannot. Though, I think I might. It seems to make your blood boil."

One of my brows quirks. "If you do that, I'll call you Uncle Ollie. We both know how much you love that title."

"I have Lucas now."

"You also have me," I blurt without thinking first. It isn't untrue, but it

isn't what I want to say. I'd prefer saying nothing at all, but he makes that impossible.

With Ollie, I have a point to prove.

He nods. "I've always had you."

I gape. My expression is doubtful, challenging. As if to ask him if he truly believes that or expects me to. I want to call him out, but choose to remain quiet.

He sets the pamphlet down. "Can we talk? Maybe somewhere private?"

"Aren't your ... friends waiting?" He called her a friend, right? Emily? The pretty girl who was shorter than me?

"They can wait."

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek.

"Just for a few minutes," he presses.

Old bitterness rises from the grave I buried it in when I understood he wasn't going to reach out anymore. "Are you sure you don't mean tomorrow? That was our thing."

He steps closer and I'm consumed by his citrusy scent like no time has passed. Goosebumps cover my arms as I fight off breathing him in like I want to. Like I used to do with the pillow he slept on until his scent wore off and I had nothing left of him.

"That song was our thing too," he replies, challenging me with a head tilt. My therapists did the same thing and I never caved to them.

But Ollie is ... Ollie.

"Come on." I turn around and lead him to a small room in the back that they gave me to relax in before the show. There's a small couch and coffee table, a minifridge with water and soda and a little dresser and mirror in case I wanted to play with my hair and makeup.

I did neither.

He shuts the door behind him.

Kicking my flats off, I sit down on one side of the couch and tuck my feet under me. He looks around, taking in what little there is to see, before eying the other side of the floral monstrosity I'm sitting on.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Don't be like that."

Don't be like—

"You don't be like that, asshole!" I blast, scoffing and shaking my head. "You don't think I have a right to be angry? It's been two years, Oliver! You

stopped talking to me. You stopped texting me. How am I supposed to feel?"

His tongue swipes across his bottom lip as he slowly walks over to me. He doesn't sit. I don't think he wants to yet.

Maybe he's afraid.

"You're different."

"Two years," I repeat.

He scrapes his palm across his jaw. "I don't expect you not to be angry, Charlie. Do you still go by that?"

My lips twitch. I'm tempted to tell him no, to show him that I'm somebody completely new thanks to him. But Charlotte is old and simply one piece of the puzzle.

"Yes."

He gestures toward the couch as if to ask to sit. When I make no move to tell him whether he can or not, he assumes it as an answer and occupies the other end.

"I missed you."

I don't answer.

"What I told you in the hospital..." He inhales quietly, his chest rising before slowly exhaling and letting it deflate. "I just wanted to see you have a shot. At this." He gestures around him. "I was afraid you wouldn't have a chance if you thought you had to choose."

Ironic that we talk about choices. I once asked him to give me one, to let me decide, and he did. In a lot of ways, it's what led us here. What I wanted destroyed us. Now there's a two-year void sitting in the empty space between us.

"And the letters?"

His eyes widen.

I shrug nonchalantly. "What did you want to accomplish with them? I read every single one, you know. Emily seems nice. She's prettier than you made her out to be."

"How did you—?"

"River."

His lips close.

"She loves us, you know," I inform him, as if he doesn't already know something so obvious. "I don't think she ever rooted against us, even when the odds weren't in our favor. Why else would she give me the letters?"

His voice comes out gruff. "When?"

“Not long after I turned eighteen.”

He closes his eyes.

“You said once upon a time that I got to choose, but then you took that away from me by choosing anything but us, Oliver.” Pain slices through the air and slashes him. “I’m not saying I don’t understand why you did it, but it doesn’t mean I’m okay with it. You didn’t want to be like Henry because you didn’t want to take away my choice. But you did.”

“Henry—”

“My father. The man who raped me.”

Air is sucked out of him, I can tell. His eyes widen for a split second and then narrow as his jaw locks and teeth grind. “You’re fucking *father* touched you? He—”

“Do you really want the details?”

“Of course not—”

“Because I remember them now,” I cut him off again. I won’t let him speak until I’m ready because this is my control again. My game. My turn. “I can remember every way he touched me and every word he used and every second of the assault. It was always the same whenever he would sneak into my room.”

“Charlie...”

“But you don’t want to hear that.”

Tension rises.

“It wouldn’t have been easy. Us.”

He shakes his head.

“But it would have been worth it.”

It sounds so final. Like goodbye. Maybe he interprets it to be exactly that, when really it’s just old, rusty words that needed to be said. Closure for part of our lives that we didn’t get. Especially me. He chose to leave. I just had to accept it.

“You wanted to talk. So talk.”

The anger over my blatant statement morphs into surprise. Sometimes he would look awed over my boldness, my ability to change subjects so easily no matter the topic. It irritated him when I evaded tough conversations, but that didn’t mean he didn’t understand or respect me for knowing when enough was enough.

I know that now more than ever.

He clicks his tongue and shakes his head like he isn’t sure what to say. “I

wanted to believe that if I left, you would forget. Seeing you in the hospital drove me insane because I knew I hurt you. I was the reason—”

“Pills and alcohol were the reason.” I won’t let him put blame on himself when it isn’t deserved. “You didn’t do that to me. I did it to myself. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Because of me,” he argues.

My jaw ticks. “Not everything has to be about you, Oliver. We’re responsible for our own decisions. You chose to leave. I chose to remember. It hurt. I did something stupid.”

I say it so plainly that even I wince at the dryness of my tone. My version of something stupid could have gotten me seriously hurt, but it was an accident. Not once have I had a drink since then. I still take my pills and find ways to cope when the bad days are weighing me down.

“My point is,” he sighs, knowing better than to fight me, “I made assumptions that I shouldn’t have about you. It doesn’t mean that I made the wrong choice though.”

We’re quiet for a moment and all I hear is the soft ticking from the white clock on the wall. Usually I can hear voices, eavesdrop on private conversations, but besides the clock, I hear nothing.

“You weren’t completely wrong.” My admission comes soft but reluctant. He waits for me to explain.

I lift my shoulders. “I wasn’t ready for you or what you wanted. There were a lot of things I had to handle that I’m still dealing with and always will. But I’m better than I was. The past will always be the past, but I don’t linger in it like I used to.”

The last time I saw Griffin in Chicago, she took her trophy off the top shelf and gave it to me. She said I earned it after finally telling my story—after all the admissions and realizations and hardships of coming to terms with my father raping me, and my mother turning to drugs to cope instead of saving me.

My parents were bad people. And that’s okay because I got Everett and River in return. It shouldn’t have been a tradeoff, but it’s one I’m grateful for.

The trophy sits on my dresser at home, with a post-it note saying *World’s Best Mental Patient* covering the engraved *Recognized Excellence in Psychiatry*.

River doesn’t get it.

Everett laughs.

Lucas likes it because it's shiny.

I take a deep breath and let it out while counting to three, something Polk showed me. I don't see her as often. Once or twice a month depending on how I feel. With the shows, I'm not around so I depend on the techniques she gave me to reign in my thoughts.

Like now.

"I've missed you too, Ollie."

His lips part.

"More than I should."

His eyes close.

"More than I wanted to."

He lets out a shaky breath.

"But I couldn't stop."

My words feed a hunger inside him because when he opens his eyes they see right through me. He feels the same. Always the same. I could ask if there were other girls, if he decided Emily was finally somebody he wanted, but I know better than to pry.

The way we lock eyes this time is different. It's a tell-all. I stand, pull on his hand, and yank him up. Confused, he lets me guide him to the door and I wonder what he thinks when I glance over my shoulder and see tense shoulders and pursed lips.

Does he think I'm kicking him out? Telling him to go because what he says isn't enough? I could do both of those things. I could hold a grudge and tell him I never want to see him after watching him walk away so many times.

But I don't.

Instead, I walk us out and across the hall. In an alcove surrounded by three long walls rests an old piano. It barely gets used from the dust on it, but the manager of the building says they'll bring it out if more than one pianist performs. I fell in love with the hidden space and untouched instrument when I wandered around exploring the building.

If we hide in the corner, shadowed by darkness, anyone who walked by wouldn't see us. They would see an unloved piano that deserves to be used and abused.

"You tried scaring me once," I tell him, letting go of his hand and running it across the top of the closed piano. "It was the same day you walked away from me. You told me I wasn't ready for you. Do you remember?"

I do.

I remember exactly what he said.

What he wanted.

Did he make it up?

I doubt it.

When I look at him again, he's stick-straight and I'm fairly sure not breathing. Based on the flare of his nostrils and darkening hues of his eyes, I'd say he remembers just fine.

Lust or love, I wonder, when I see the near blackness his brown eyes hold.

"So, Ollie. How do you want me?"

I step up to him, putting my palm flat on his chest. His heartbeat sings to me, racing, wanting, needing. He once told me that we make music together that only we can hear.

"On my knees or bent over the piano?"

He curses.

OLLIE

SHE'S TRYING to kill me.

On my knees or bent over the piano?

Jesus Christ.

I'm not sure what to do with her hand, because my mind tells me to gently push it away, but my body tells me to lower it to the hardness straining against my zipper. Just the thought of her mouth near my cock has me on fire and I need her.

"Charlie—"

She shakes her head. "We both need this, don't you think? I need to show you that I'm ready. You can't push me away anymore."

My free hand dives into her hair, threading in the strands as I tug her face closer to mine. I taste her breath, feel the warmth of its caress as I bend down and hover our lips in front of each other's.

"Good," I whisper, grazing our lips. "I don't want you to go anywhere."

She tries to kiss me, but I gently tug her back using the hand threaded in her hair. Her eyes widen but the way she bites her lips tells me she's okay with a little aggression.

"Knees."

Her lips tug at the corners before she steps back and gives me one long look. No words are exchanged when she lowers to her knees and glances up at me through her lashes. The green orbs slash through my chest and absorb into my heart and I feel fucking weak because I know what this means.

She's giving up control.

My hand finds the back of her head when she pops the button open on my jeans and slowly lowers the zipper. It's quiet, too quiet, as she slides my jeans down and runs her palms up my thighs.

Tilting my head back to rest against the wall, I tell myself this needs to

stop. When I told her that she wasn't ready for me, I'd meant every word. The kind of shit I liked wasn't always pretty. It was raw and rough and real. Things I figured she wouldn't be able to handle because half the time I couldn't either. I let my emotions get the better of sex, and they were unpredictable.

But here we are. A blonde goddess on her knees and kissing my inner thigh as her hands slide closer and closer to my hard dick. My boxers are tented and it's painful, so I fist her hair and draw her closer.

"You're ready?" I taunt, taking a page from her own book.

"Yes." Her breath caresses my erection and causes me to groan. My fingers twitch in her hair as she takes me out of my boxers and breathes on the tip.

And holy fuck if I don't almost come like I'm fucking twelve again. I tell myself it's normal considering I haven't slept around since the girl at the bar two years ago. Years. It's been two years. Every opportunity I had after that started and ended before anything could really happen. Kissing. Fondling. Groping. But none of them were her.

They needed to be her.

"Well," I prod, tugging her to me. Part of me doesn't want her to rush. But another part believes what she does—that we need this. She's not the sixteen-year-old who would taunt me until I came undone, or froze when I settled on top of her, or winced when the side of me that's natural in these situations came out.

I don't mind being soft and gentle. There will be plenty of times when I play that part. Now isn't that time.

Her lips wrap around the head of my cock, hot and warm and wet. I let out a silent moan, knowing we're still out in the open even if the space we occupy is tucked away. She stays like that, running the tip of her tongue across the head and making me squeeze her hair.

She whimpers and I let up, but she doesn't pull away. She takes me in deeper, letting her tongue work its magic against my length until I'm trying to think of anything else that would prevent me from blowing my load down her throat too soon.

"Fuck, Charlie." My other hand goes to the side of her head, not moving it just yet but holding her. She starts moving, taking me in and out of her mouth at a pace that's torture.

Fire runs through my groin and I latch onto her head a little harder and

guide her to move faster, taking me in deeper until I hear her gagging.

“Need to fuck your mouth,” I pant, tightening a fistful of hair and thrusting into her. She gags again and digs her fingers into my hips but doesn’t push me or hit me to let me know she’s had enough.

“Unhinge your jaw, baby,” I coax, moving my hand to the right side of her face and massaging the area where her jaw meets her ear. She loosens up and opens wider, allowing me to spear her throat the way I need to.

She makes noises that vibrates my dick. I cuss and I fuck her harder, feeling my head hit the back of her throat every time. I caress her hair, then grip it, then comb it out when the sensations become too much.

I don’t expect it when she moves her hands to cup my balls and roll them with her fingers. That’s all it takes before I’m thrusting harder than I did before and gripping her head close to me as I empty myself down the back of her throat and moan her name over and over until the orgasm dies down.

Letting go of her hair, I smooth it down and then watch as she moves back. Tears soak her cheeks and her face is tinted pink. I worry I hurt her or went too far, but she slowly rises and then presses her lips to mine until she’s parting them and taking back a fraction of the control I just showed her.

I can taste myself when she fights my tongue for dominance. The salt. The need. We’re give and take, push and pull, always have been and always will be. Maybe now more than ever because we get choices.

My phone goes off in my pocket, causing me to stiffen. She pulls away and reaches in my pocket herself, taking out the phone and holding it out for me.

Emily.

“I won’t be like River.”

I know what she means.

“You’re the only one,” I promise, kissing her cheek and leaning my forehead against hers. “She’s going to want to know if I’m leaving with them.”

She tips her head up and grazes our lips and nips my bottom one, sucking it into her mouth. I retract and press into her, my dick aching for round two in any form.

“Tell her you’re not going.”

I stare.

She stares.

Her hand lowers to my dick and grazes her knuckles along the side until

I'm jerking and biting my lip. "Are you sure?"

"Don't you get it, Ollie?" Her hand wraps around me and squeezes. "I've always been sure about you. Even if you weren't about me. About us. I believed."

I let out a raspy curse when she begins jerking me, my hips seeking more friction as I get a text from Emily. Reaching behind her and caging her body between me and the piano, I grip the edge of the closed lid as her hand picks up speed.

Charlie doesn't understand at all.

The *only* thing I've ever been sure of in life is her.

Always.

I tell Emily to leave.

HER HOTEL ISN'T FAR from the concert hall. She guides us in, locks her door, bats her lashes, and takes off her clothes. It's a smooth transition, a confident act, and I know that the girl standing in front of me isn't a girl at all.

She's curvier, sassier, and everything I would compare everybody else to. She's the girl with blonde hair, the girl with green eyes, and the girl who I have never once doubted was the person made for me.

Everything could stop us.

People.

Time.

Both of those things did.

She strips me of my shirt, I slip off my shoes and jeans, and then we're doing everything we shouldn't be and should be and can't be but are. We're complicated. Everything about who we are will come with a battle.

River.

Everett.

Myself.

"Stop thinking," she demands, sliding onto the bed and running her hands up my naked chest. Her fingers dip into the planes of muscle, tracing my pecs and abs and landing at the elastic of my boxers.

I watch her, completely enamored by her full chest and wide hips and narrow waist. "Two years have done you good, Charlie."

She lowers my boxers and lets them drop to the floor. I stand there, completely exposed to her and she stares like I'm an exhibit at an art

museum. Her fingers raise and play with my hips, trailing them upward to caress my lower stomach until my dick practically begs to be touched by those soft fingers.

My hand rises to cup her jaw, tipping her chin up so she can meet my eyes. “Do I even want to ask how you knew how to give head like that? Or will I want to murder somebody?”

She laughs, her eyes playful as she puts her hand on top of mine. “I read about stuff in books. Don’t tell Everett though. He’ll try making me read more.”

I choke on air. “You don’t have to worry about that. Something tells me he’ll have enough to think about when it comes to us.”

We’re both quiet, both naked, but the question is right there for us to see and feel. It taunts us in its own way, waiting to be touched and paid attention to.

“What now?” she whispers.

There it is.

What now?

What about River?

What about Everett?

What about us?

All questions that need to be answered.

I kneel so she can look down at me, our hands now off her face and in her lap. My thumb brushes her scars—the same ones that I think about from time to time when I realize that her strength is beyond mine.

“Do you want this?” I return with.

“I want you. Always.”

I lean in and peck her lips, letting my nose nuzzle hers. “This won’t be easy. It’s never going to be when people see the age difference or know our story.”

She moves away to meet my gaze. “It isn’t any of their business, Ollie. It never has been. I told you before that it’s about us. That’s all that matters.”

And once upon a time I told her that all that mattered was her. Not me. Not what I wanted. Not what I needed.

But I need her.

I love her.

“Charlie...”

She smiles knowingly. “Tomorrow?”

I shake my head, tugging her to me. Her pebbled nipples brush my chest as my arm hooks around her waist. I need her closer. Always closer.

I lick my lips. "No."

The truth about tomorrow is that it isn't enough. Tomorrow isn't guaranteed. It isn't promised. But it's a start. A step toward the someday that she's always believed we could have. Nothing can measure the time or value that having Charlie in my life brings. Certainly not one day.

"Every single day, baby."

Her eyes water.

"Ollie," she whispers in a tone that is saturated with so much emotion that I worry it'll break her. Her hands cup my face. "I love you. I've loved you in layers."

I realize what she means

As family when she was adopted.

As friends as she got older.

As more.

She's loved me when she shouldn't.

As someone she should hate.

As someone she could never hate.

"I love you so much." Her voice cracks and tears fall, and I brush them away with my lips before pulling her into my arms and wrapping her in comfort.

"Don't cry." My fingers find her hair and comb through her silky strands. Breathing her in, I kiss her neck where my lips are nuzzled and feel her shiver. "I love all versions of you whether you're Charlie or Charlotte or someone in between. More than words, baby. More than music. It'll never be enough."

She settles into my body, curling her own arms around me before her legs wrap around my waist. Gently placing her back against the mattress, I hover over her and kiss her softly.

I kiss her tears.

Her nose.

Her lips.

My fingers show her how much I care.

My body tells her how much I need her.

But my breath ... that's gone.

And when I enter her again, and again, and again, until we're both

desperately panting each other's names, I'm left with the cemented realization that there is no other place I can go that doesn't have Charlie.

Home.

I'm home.

EPILOGUE

Ollie

FAMILY HAS NEVER BEEN a hard concept to understand until you think you ruined the value of one. Trust, loyalty, respect—all things to cherish if you want to secure certain people in your life for good. Problem is, those elements mean something different for people you're in love with.

Love means risk.

Love means consequence.

What happens when one thing collides with the other in an either-or situation? That's why Charlie's knee is bouncing, why her shoulders are tense, and why she's staring at Everett in panic. She thinks she has to choose.

"Charlie," I murmur, squeezing her knee once. Her jean-clad leg stops moving. She peels her eyes off Everett and glances at me, pink lips turned downward until the corners crinkle into a frown. "Why don't you and River take Lucas into the kitchen for some ice cream?"

Her lips part in surprise.

River stands. "Good idea."

Charlie shakes her head. "Ollie—"

"I need to talk to Everett."

She hesitates before following River into the kitchen with a squirming little boy.

Everett settles into his chair, hard eyes on me, completely silent. I've had time to think about what I'd say—to formulate how this would go once he agreed to sit with us.

Instead, I lead with the very thing I should have filtered. "You're a hypocrite."

His jaw ticks. "Excuse me?"

I move forward on the couch, resting my elbows on my knees. "I fucked

up and can acknowledge that. What I did was wrong because of Charlie's age, but that isn't really what you're angry about."

"The hell it's—"

"You're a hypocrite for crucifying me over falling in love with someone I shouldn't have, but what about you? You went after River when you were still with Isabel. Remember her? She was the girl you were with for ten years, if memory serves."

His nostrils flare.

I shrug, not bothering to look anywhere other than his tight face. "I'm not saying I don't understand why you're pissed at me, Rhett. I'm pissed at me too for allowing it to happen before she was eighteen. But I don't regret anything, because like it or not, I love Charlie."

"Our situations don't compare." His voice is grim, offended, but underneath there is reluctant belief. He knows I'm right, he just doesn't want to admit it.

"No? We both went after people at the wrong time because we love them."

No answer.

I level with him. "We both risked relationships with every single person we know to have them. To *keep* them."

"Is that what she wants though?"

My eyes narrow.

"She's almost twenty," he points out. "She has the world to explore, a life to live. Don't try telling me she's begun living yet. You may think I'm the hypocritical asshole, and maybe I am, but Charlie is half your age and deserves to experience shit just like you and I did."

Charlie bursts into the room. "Why are you acting like this? You always tell me you want to see me happy, but the minute I tell you I am, you refuse to accept it."

I stand and reach out to her, my fingers gently caressing her tight fist until it loosens. She doesn't look at me but glares at Everett until he's sighing and standing too.

"It's about how this formed, Charlie."

"It formed with friendship."

"That isn't what I mean."

River is standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching us with a wary expression on her face. Lucas is focused on the bowl of ice cream in his

hands, unknowing of the tension filling the living room.

“It isn’t hard, Everett,” Charlie states.

He doesn’t say anything.

“Do you want me to be happy?”

His shoulders draw back. “Yes.”

“Do you forgive me?”

He wets his lips. “Yes.”

“Do you forgive Ollie?” His silence causes her to move away from me and toward him. “He and I both made the choice regardless of our ages. If you can forgive me, you can do the same for him. You were friends for a long time and family now. That doesn’t have to change, right?”

I wonder what’s going through Everett’s mind. His eyes are distant, his lips pinched in a straight line, and his body tense. Part of me knows where his thoughts are.

We’ll never be friends like we were.

But he’ll never be rid of me.

“You’re happy?” he asks quietly.

Charlie nods. “I’d be happier if you just accepted that this is happening. I love him, Everett. And I love you, River, and Lucas. I don’t want us to be torn apart because of what happened.”

Everett looks at me.

He’s pained.

Unforgiving.

But trying.

His eyes say, *we can’t be friends*.

Mine answer, *I know*.

He reaches out, so I meet him halfway. His palm engulfs mine, squeezing in warning, silently telling me not to screw this up any more than I already have.

He nods once.

We can’t be friends.

Charlie nuzzles into my side.

“Family,” Everett says.

One Year Later

THE THERAPIST I’m seeing looks like Teddy Wilcox from Chicago with

the personality and advice to match. We talk more like equals than we do anything else. He asks me about how I like coaching the local high school basketball team on the outskirts of Boston. I ask him how he likes volunteering at the children's hospital.

Charlie attends Massachusetts Institute of Technology majoring in Music with a minor in Psychology. She wants to be a Music Therapist. Something both Polk and Griffin found amusing when Charlie reached out to tell them after her acceptance.

Her nightmares got worse a few weeks before moving, and she reluctantly admitted she was nervous about living in Boston. It's where her mother lived, and parents met.

Shortly after the move, I got a job as a basketball coach at Lincoln High. Once in a while I'll sub for the gym teacher when he has to travel or can't make it in and find myself liking it. Teaching kids how to play reminds me of learning myself. Coaching them is even better.

Dr. Poland seems to think it has to do with control.

There's nothing wrong with it, son.

Yet, he told me that control should be relinquished in the right circumstances. Over the course of the few months I've seen him, I've tried explaining that I know that better than anyone.

I gave control to Charlie when she was younger because she needed it more than me.

I gave control to Everett in figuring out how any relationship between us would work.

Poland says what we control and what truly matters is separated by what we should focus on.

Self-discipline begins with the mastery of your thoughts. It's the difference between controlling what you think and what you do.

Charlie is right, therapists sound like inspirational posters on corkboards in every grocery store across America.

He's not wrong though.

There's a lot we can't control.

The past.

The present.

The future.

Relationships.

Friendships.

Family.

Poland asks me if I'm happy. It's a question I hear too often between him and Charlie. She worries I'll wake up one day and feel unsettled. That therapy won't help, and she won't either.

I remind her of something important.

She's my best friend.

And I love her.

I don't take medication for my depression despite Poland telling me it's an option to look into if needed. Seeing a therapist helps, coaching basketball helps, and being with Charlie does too. She doesn't think she makes a difference in my happiness, the very thing I struggle with daily, but she makes the biggest one of all.

Because she's my best friend.

And more importantly, I love her.

Three Years Later

THERE'S a movie festival in the park playing *Harry Potter* that I take Charlie to. She's in cutoff shorts and white tank, her hair kisses her shoulders in loose waves since she cut it last week, and a smile graces her lips when she sees the families gathered on blankets in front of the large screen.

A few feet away is a little girl in a black robe. In one hand is a wand, in the other is a broom. Her parents are talking, not realizing she's trying to make it move.

Charlie gets up.

Walks over.

And waits for the perfect moment.

The girl claps when the broom raises.

The parents smile.

And I fall deeper in love.

When Charlie walks back over and drops onto the blanket, I pass her the basket I made up for the occasion. She glances around inside before smiling bigger and pulling out a container of donuts.

She takes a bite and makes a face, her chewing becoming slower as she meets my eyes with uncertainly lingering in them.

I frown. "Don't like them?"

She sets it on her lap. "I..."

Shifting on the blanket, I grab the donut and inspect it. "I made these using the recipe I got while I was in Amsterdam."

Mildred, the woman I temporarily lived next to, showed me how to make oily cakes. She did most of the work, I just watched. But I wanted tonight to be special, a day away from Charlie's upcoming graduation and the stress of figuring out where to go from here, so I pulled the recipe out and made them like Millie had.

Her shoulders drop in relief, and just as I take a bite of the fried dough, she says, "Oh thank God. I thought it was because I was pregnant."

And I choke.

She wipes crumbs off her lap, cheeks pink like she hadn't meant to blurt out those words.

"Charlie," I rasp, donut scattered on the ground for the ants to enjoy.

She runs her palms down her thighs. "I was going to tell you, I just needed to figure out how. But the thought of not being able to eat donuts for a whole nine months..."

I reach out and tilt her chin up. "You're pregnant?"

She draws in her bottom lip and nods.

My heart swells. "You're pregnant."

She releases her bottom lip. "I'm not sure if that's a question or not, but I can try explaining in other ways if you need further clarification. Like play you a song or something. The article I read online said this could happen. Shock. Are you in shock? Do you need water?"

She starts digging through the basket for something to drink until her body stills. Her lips part as her hand slowly pulls something out.

A black box.

Velvet.

Small.

Square.

"Ollie?" she whispers.

My eyes water as I glance at her stomach, picturing what it'll look like as the baby grows. Will her skin glow? Will her hair shine brighter than it already does? Will it be a boy or girl?

"A baby," I manage to choke out.

She opens the box. "A ring."

Fuck. The ring. "I wanted to make tonight special. I just..." I stare at her, moving the basket from between us and pulling her into me. "You're really

pregnant?”

Her eyes are glazed as she looks between me and the box. “Were you going to propose?”

“Would you have said yes?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

A smile tugs on my lips. “A baby.”

“A marriage.”

I kiss her slowly, tasting her lips and hearing her breathing change until she moans into my mouth. Pulling away, I rest my forehead on hers and glance down at the way she holds the velvet box in her hands like it’s something she cherishes.

“Will you marry me?”

“On one condition.”

One of my brows rises as I draw back and stare, fully curious.

She grins. “Never make donuts again.”

I chuckle and take the box from her, pulling the ring out of it and sliding it onto her finger. She stares at it, her breathing heavy, her eyes watery, and hopefully her heart as full as mine.

She’s beautiful.

She’s forbidden.

She’s *mine*.

The thought alone makes me brush her hair behind her ear and kiss her like I mean it. Kids be damned, I need my future wife. Now.

“The movie,” she says into my mouth.

“Fuck the movie.”

“And fuck the no touching?”

I smirk. “Always so sassy.”

“Mmm.” She swipes her tongue across my bottom lip causing my cock to twitch in my jeans. “But you love it.”

I do.

Because she’s my best friend.

And I fucking love her.

That night I get a text from Everett.

Congratulations.

PREVIEW

Preview of The Truth about Heartbreak

River / Present / 23

The velvet caress of silk sheets against my bare skin leaves me hyperaware of what I've done. Early morning sunlight slips through the cracked blinds and kisses my exposed back, coating the room in soft pinks and yellows.

Steady, rhythmic breathing sounds from behind me. In, out. In, out. It's a melody that makes my muscles lock, too afraid to reacquaint my eyes with every dip and curve of chiseled muscle displayed inches away.

His natural musky scent wraps around me, overwhelming my senses until my heart thumps wildly in my chest. It doesn't take away the memories of lingering touches, gentle kisses, and an overpowering sense of belonging. And less than twelve hours ago, I belonged to Everett Tucker in ways I never thought possible in the ten years of knowing him.

His touches scorched me.

His kisses burned me.

And his body...

The mattress dips with the shift of his weight. I hold my breath, waiting to see if he's awake. When his soft snores echo in the half-empty room, I release the breath and white knuckle the sheets against my breasts. Carefully, I sit up and squeeze my eyes closed like it'll soften the blow of reality.

I wait for the pounding headache or quake of unavoidable nausea to punish me, but my conscience reminds me of what I already know. I wasn't drunk last night. What I've done can't be blamed on alcohol.

My hand drags across my bare neck until my heart thunders in pure panic over my missing possession. I swallow my anxiety when I catch the silver chain resting on the nightstand and remember the very moment he took it off

me.

Nothing but skin. That's what he said he wanted between us. I've only taken this necklace off to shower and sleep. It goes everywhere with me, the silver paint palette and brush charm sweeping over my heartbeat as a reminder that he cares. But in the moment I had him as more than a wish, a hope, a dream, he didn't want it lingering.

Nothing but skin.

My fingertips touch the newest charm, a cracked heart, and I suck in a short breath when the contact shocks me. Clenching the sheets tighter to me, I turn slightly to peek through my peripheral and see a tussle of dirty blond hair against my starch white pillowcase.

Look, my conscience taunts. Look at him.

Slivers of tan skin make their way into my sight as I shift, my gaze drifting up the mountain of hard muscles that form his toned biceps as they wrap around a pillow. Worrying my bottom lip, my heart somersaults in my chest when the curve of his square jaw comes into view. The sharp line of it is coated with early morning shadow that he'll shave despite preferring a thin layer of stubble.

He looks peaceful when he's sleeping; the hard edge he normally radiates eased to a lax slumber. From this angle, I can see the faded white scar that stretches from the bottom of his left ear along the curve of his throat, landing just above his pulse. You wouldn't know it's there unless you know the story, and he doesn't tell just anyone.

But I'm not just anyone.

Especially not now.

My throat tightens from the emotions lodging in the back of it as I scope out his sculpted body. He works hard for every muscle, spends countless hours in the gym or training at the fire department, and it shows. The man sleeping beside me has been a figment of my imagination that I've conjured thousands of times, but his body is a masterpiece I never could have perfected unless I saw it in person.

I absorb the memory of his body spread on my mattress, bare to me. Every vulnerability laying in a mess of sheets, open to pull apart and dissect and regret when the sun fully rises.

Less than twelve hours ago I belonged to the minty eyed boy I've loved since I was thirteen. But Everett Tucker isn't mine to love.

He stirs when I rise from bed.

“Everett,” I whisper brokenly, my heart shattering inside my chest. I can feel the pieces splintering apart as I choke out my final words. “We made a mistake.”

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SNEAK PEEK

There's a dead clump of caramel hair resting in the palm of my porcelain hand. I run my chipped yellow nails over the once-silky strands and stare long and hard at them like I can somehow reattach them.

Two months ago, I tried dyeing it. The evidence of my failed attempt taunts me, a mixture of brown and blonde undertones. It was a summertime project that Mama told me not to bother with. She insisted my hair was too brittle.

Like always, Mama was right.

Like always, I was too stubborn to listen.

Not only did my tender scalp burn from the dye, but my hair fell out minutes after applying the color. It left my blonde strands in patches that Mama helped me rinse out.

Wrapping the evidence of my abnormality tight in my grasp, I stare at my reflection in the large mirror that hangs over the vanity. I see paleness. Baggy, glassy green eyes. Narrowed cheekbones tinted pink—not from blush but from my body's war on itself.

I've filled out since starting new medicine last month. The doctor told me it should help regulate my system, so I stop losing weight. My cheekbones aren't as prominent anymore, nowhere near as hollow and sickly.

Usually I keep my head down while I go about my morning routine. It's easier than seeing the way my collarbones stick out and hair thinly frames my face. I hate seeing my reflection because I don't recognize the girl staring back.

Today I force myself to look. Dropping my fallen hair onto the granite countertop, I study what the mirror shows from the waist up. A sliver of my lean stomach peaks out from the blue tank top I sleep in. Travelling my gaze upward, I notice slim arms, narrow shoulders, all the way up to thin, pale lips.

Nothing about me is particularly beautiful, yet I still see Mama in my frailty.

For the longest time, she wouldn't look at me for more than a few seconds. Her eyes would find mine as she told me good morning or wished me a good day at school, but then would quickly go anywhere else. Grandma would pat my hand and tell me not to let it get to me. It wasn't that easy though.

When Mama looked at me, she saw Logan and the possibility of another early funeral. I was always going to be a reminder that her daughter was dead, and for all she knew, I was mere steps behind.

So, I called Dad.

Grandma told me I didn't have to move, but I knew it was for the best. I didn't want to know that Mama's eyes turned gold when she cried. They were always gold when I was around.

The mirror in front of me is bigger than the one in my old bathroom. Unlike that stained beige bathroom with chipped tiles, this bathroom is light gray with hardwood floors and all new appliances. Instead of a walk-in shower, I've got a large bathtub that could fit two sets of twins in it if necessary, and the amount of shelf space would have made Lo jealous.

A knock at my bedroom door pulls me away from my assessment. Brushing the loose hair into the white garbage can by the counter, I walk into the main room and hear Dad's voice on the other side of the door.

"Are you up, Emery?" His voice is gravelly and hesitant, a tone he's held since he helped unpack what little I brought with me from Mama's house to this one across the state.

Truthfully, I'm not sure why he agreed. I only ever heard from him on my birthday and Christmas and the conversation never lasted more than ten minutes if he could help it. He's remarried with a gorgeous wife who's the exact opposite of Mama in both looks and personality, and a stepson who's broody and evasive no matter how hard I try getting to know him.

His life here was perfect.

Until me.

I open the door and give him a sleepy smile, which he returns easily. He tries to make me comfortable. His wife, Cam, has been nothing but sweet and her son Kaiden, despite his usual avoidance, could be worse. They've been welcoming since I arrived a month and a half ago, giving me anything I needed. A new doctor, a chance to decorate my room how I want, and space. Lots of space.

Dad works at a pharmaceutical company. I don't remember much of him from when I was little, just the suits he wore and the way he would give Mama a chaste kiss if we were around or a simple nod if he thought we weren't looking.

"Cam has breakfast cooking." He rubs his arm, covered by a navy blazer, and gives me a weary look. "If you aren't up to going today..."

Today. The first day at a new school. It's my junior year even though I should be a senior like Kaiden. After missing too many classes from multiple hospital stays, I was held back.

"I'll be fine." It's a weak reassurance that neither of us truly believes. It isn't a lie though. I won't be walking into a shark cage bleeding, so it could be worse.

His gaze lingers, his eyes a light shade of brown with the same specks of emerald Mama told me I have. I don't see it though when I look in the mirror.

"Emery..."

I stand there, gripping the doorknob in my hand until my fingers hurt, waiting for him to say something.

He clears his throat. "Happy birthday."

Today. My eighteenth birthday.

The way Dad looks at me is like he's trying to see someone else. Maybe he wonders if Logan would have looked the same. It's been nine years since she passed, ten since he left.

What does he remember of her?

Instead of asking, I swallow my inquiry and force a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you."

He tips his head, pauses, and then turns to head back downstairs. Kaiden's room is down the hall from mine and he doesn't bother him. I wonder if he's already up and ready, an early riser. Sometimes I'll hear him leave his room late at night and watch him sneak out of the house.

I wonder where he goes. Or if Cam knows. Or if Dad does. It isn't my place to ask, so I never tattle.

It takes me fifteen minutes to throw on a pair of loose blue jeans with one of the knees ripped out and an oversized black sweater that falls off my shoulder. Running a brush through my hair and leaving it loose, I note that it's finally passing my shoulders again. Mama would probably be happy to hear that, she always loved when Lo and I kept our hair long.

Slipping into a beige pair of Toms that have pineapples all over them, I

grab my new black and white checkered backpack and head downstairs. Dad is finishing his breakfast because he has to leave for work, but Cam and Kaiden are both working on theirs.

Cam greets me with a gentle smile, Kaiden doesn't look at me at all, and Dad gives me a head nod before getting up and rinsing his plate off in the large stainless steel sink.

I'm playing with the scrambled eggs and bacon on my plate when Dad kisses Cam goodbye and tells Kaiden and I to have a good first day at school. Since I'm carless, Kaiden is supposed to drive us and show me where the office is since Dad couldn't get time off to bring me to the school early and show me around.

Cam tried getting Kaiden to take me last week, but I didn't want him to feel obligated, so I lied and told her it was fine. Truth is, my heart is pounding so hard in my chest from nerves that I worry I'll die from a heart attack long before my disease does me in. If the room gets any quieter, they'd probably hear it drum a tune.

I'm halfway done with my breakfast before I glance at the clock and then at Cam. She knows my worries and gives me a small smile before passing me a granola bar, money for lunch, and a signed piece of paper with Dad's name on the bottom.

For school records, she tells me.

Slipping everything into my bag, I ask Kaiden if he's ready. His response is nothing more than a grunt before he pushes away from the table, grabs his bag and car keys, and then gestures toward the front door.

He doesn't tell Cam goodbye.

She doesn't wish us a good day.

She just smiles sadly as we leave.

I want to ask Kaiden why he's so angry and won't talk. Cam seems like a nice woman, so I don't get why he acts so dismissive around her. I know better than to pry in other people's business. Then they'd pry into mine.

When we get to the school, I follow him inside and he simply points in the direction of the office, shoots me a sarcastic good luck over his shoulder, before disappearing into a crowd of people.

Happy birthday to me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with forbidden novels enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is The Truth about Heartbreak.

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