



Cinder & Secrets (Ink & Ashes #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: I had a lot of plans for my freshman year of college.

Falling for my roommate's older brother was definitely not one of them.

Not like I had a choice in the matter.

The second he walked in with that crooked smile and dark green eyes, I was a goner.

But River Parker doesn't exactly make it easy on me.

One minute he's acting like he's just as interested in me as I am in him, the next he's detached and indifferent.

And to make matters worse, the only person who could give me insight into the man who has completely consumed my every waking thought for months, is the one person he doesn't want me to tell... His sister—who happens to be one of my closest friends.

I'm stuck in this constant push and pull—unsure of where he truly stands—which only serves to complicate things further. Given that he lives in completely different state and that we've only ever actually been in the same room together once in the entire time we've been talking, I'd say things are already complicated enough.

But then his sister invites me to visit over summer break and even though I know it's a bad idea the instant she suggests it, I also know there isn't a chance in hell I could turn down the opportunity to see River again.

I thought I knew what I was getting myself into when I showed up at his parents' house without telling him, but nothing could have prepared me for his reaction when he walks in and sees me sitting at the table with his family—or for anything that happens after.

When you stand too close to the fire, you're bound to get burned. The only question that remains is, will it have been worth it? I guess sometimes, you simply have to endure the pain to find out.

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Charlotte

“Are you having fun?” I have to raise my voice over the loud thrum of music, studying River’s profile as he waits at the bar for our shots.

“I forgot how much I missed this,” he admits, meeting my eyes for the briefest moment before turning his attention back to the bartender.

River Parker is so much hotter than the picture his sister, Lyric, keeps of him on her desk in our shared dorm room. I mean, he’s good-looking in the picture too, but in person... A girl could really lose herself in those hunter-green eyes and crooked smile.

“Parties?” I wager a guess by what this is. Though party is putting it mildly, considering we’re in the middle of the largest soiree of the school year—a glow party put on by one of the fraternities.

“Being young,” he corrects.

“You talk like you’re forty.” I snort out a laugh, my throat hoarse from talking so loudly over the music all night.

“Might as well be.” He graces me with that lopsided smile I just referred to, the sight causing me to feel a little unbalanced on my feet. Then again, that might be the alcohol, the buzz radiating through every pore in my body.

“How old are you again?” I ask.

If I remember right, he's only in his early twenties.

"Twenty-three."

"Oh my God!" I mock. "You're soooo old." I smack his bicep playfully, not missing the hard cut of his muscle as I do.

"Things are different once you graduate college and have to start living in the real world." He shrugs. "Just wait. You'll see what I mean one day."

"Graduating college is no excuse to stop having fun," I disagree.

"Oh, I have plenty of fun." He throws me a sideways glance, the kind that makes my stomach hollow in the best sort of way, and I can't help but think how much I'd love to experience the version of fun he's talking about.

"Just not this kind of fun." He swirls his finger, gesturing to our surroundings.

"You seem to be having plenty of fun, just fine." I graze his paint-covered shirt with the tips of my fingers, not missing the way his eyes flare ever so slightly at the touch.

"Here ya go." The bartender makes an unfortunate appearance with our shots, drawing River's attention away.

Damn it.

I mean, it's not like anything was about to happen, but that sure as hell doesn't mean I didn't want it to.

Snap out of it, Char, I silently scold myself, reaching past River to snag four of the eight shots sitting on the bar in front of us.

Once River has the rest, I turn, following him back through the thick crowd to where we left my two roommates, Maisie and his sister, Lyric, on the dance floor.

“We got shots!” River announces as we approach, and I can’t help but smile at the two paint-splattered beauties in front of me.

“Two for you.” I hand Maisie two of the plastic shot glasses while River hands two of his to Lyric.

“Two?” Lyric looks at her brother like he’s lost his mind.

“As tightly wound as you are.” He smiles at his sister. “Trust me, sis, you need them.”

She inspects the liquid briefly before dumping the first shot down, her grimacing expression pinned on me as she lifts the second shot glass.

“What is this? Battery acid?” Her pretty face puckers in disgust.

“Oh, shut up and drink it.” I grin, pouring both shots into my mouth in quick succession.

“Cheers.” River knocks his shot glass against Lyric’s remaining one and she reluctantly drinks the second shot.

When River collects our cups and leaves to dispose of them, I have a momentary lapse where I almost tell Lyric how badly I would like to fuck her brother, but thankfully, even drunk, my brain recognizes that maybe it’s best if I keep that little piece of information to myself.

The minutes bleed together. The pulse of the music. The heat of the room. The burn

of the alcohol in my veins.

River is careful to keep a few inches between him and everyone else, keeping a steady eye on our surroundings like he's afraid someone might try to slip up on his sister.

I think it's cute—his overprotectiveness—even if it is misguided.

Lyric may look innocent, but she can handle her own. Of that, I'm sure.

It isn't until Maisie excuses herself, Lyric going with her to find the restroom, that I snake up a little closer, basically giving River no choice but to dance with me.

“Come on, old man. I know you can do better than that,” I openly complain when he doesn't so much as lay a single finger on me as we move.

Without a word, he reaches for me, his fingers biting into my hips as he pulls me closer.

“Is this better?” he asks, the warmth of his breath sliding across my face.

For a second, I forget how to form words.

“A little.” I snake my hands around his neck, pulling him closer until we're practically nose to nose, not a single inch of space between our bodies.

I hiss when the fingers at my hip dig in even deeper but not because it hurts—it doesn't—but because a wave of sudden and undeniable need washes over me and my entire body flushes with heat.

I lean in, with every intention of pressing my mouth to his, the draw to do it too

strong to stop myself, but just when our lips are about to make contact, River's hold on me vanishes in an instant.

"We should... Uh... We should go find my sister. She's been gone for a while." He runs a hand through his hair and I'm instantly jealous of that hand, wishing it were mine tangling in the messy, blond strands.

"Yeah, okay." I try to mask my disappointment. Disappointment that's quickly replaced with something else when he reaches behind him and takes my hand, pulling me through the crowd.

He's holding my hand. He's holding my hand. He's holding my hand. My inner voice chants over and over again like she can't quite believe it herself.

I'm even more surprised that he doesn't let go as we reach a clearing. If anything, his hold on my fingers tightens and I revel in the feeling.

I've been kissed by my fair share of guys. Fucked in every position imaginable on just about every surface known to man. But I can't say I've ever had someone hold my hand. The feeling is... exquisite, and honestly, a little disorienting.

Or maybe that's the alcohol. Though I highly doubt it.

It takes us a few minutes to spot Lyric, and once we do, I realize we may have stumbled upon something we shouldn't be interrupting.

Hoping to give her a little heads-up that we're there, I reluctantly pull my hand out of River's and bound toward her and a somewhat angry-looking Kai Elliot, a senior who has quite the reputation.

Oh my...

“There you are!”

Lyric turns as soon as she registers my voice.

I also don't miss the way Kai slinks away as soon as her attention is on me. Nor do I miss the disappointed look she tries and fails to hide. These two have been skirting around whatever is going on between them for a while now. A part of me wants to shake them both and say just fuck already!

“Who was that?” River asks, gesturing to the spot Kai occupied until only moments ago.

“Nobody. Just some guy.” Lyric does her best to brush it off as Maisie suddenly appears out of the crowd.

“Is it just me or does this party suck all of a sudden?” she slurs, her dark hair matted with sweat to the side of her face.

“Everything okay?” Lyric loops her arm through Maisie's, who seems unsteady on her feet.

My goodness, how much has the girl drunk? I've had just as much and I feel totally fine. Well, not totally. But fine enough.

“Boys suck.” She groans, and I don't have to guess who she's talking about. Macallan Stewart. Star football player. Sexy as hell but an absolute douchebag when it comes to women.

I don't even know why Maisie likes him so much, though a part of me feels like it's probably the thrill of the hunt. I doubt any man has ever made Maisie work for it, but Mac is really putting her through it right now. Dumbass.

“Girl, don’t I know it,” Lyric murmurs, having her own frustrating womanizer to deal with. Must be in the water. Hopefully, it doesn’t spread to me. Lord knows I don’t need that kind of drama in my life. “I’m ready if you are,” she tells Maisie.

“Do you mind if I stay?” I abruptly ask, nowhere near ready to leave, but kind of feeling like an asshole at the same time. I know how much misery loves company, but I have no desire to join them in their pouting.

“I’m not leaving you here alone.” Lyric shakes her head at me.

“I’ll stay.” River offers and it takes everything in my power to stifle my smile of victory. He doesn’t know it, but I was counting on him offering to do just that .

“You sure?” Lyric looks between the two of us.

“Yeah, this is probably the last time I’ll ever get to attend one of these. I can hang out and make sure Charlotte gets home safe.”

“Really?” I clap excitedly. “I mean, if that’s okay with you.” I give Lyric the biggest pretty-please smile.

“Okay,” she reluctantly agrees.

“You’re good to get home?” River asks.

“I know how to order an Uber,” she fires back.

“Text me as soon as you’re back at the dorm.”

“Yes, dad.”

“And don’t ever call me dad again.”

I would have laughed at that, but I’m too busy trying to figure out my play once Lyric is gone.

So no, I doubt she’d be thrilled if I hooked up with her brother. Then again, I don’t think she’d hate me for it either, and well, that’s good enough in my book. It’s been too long since I’ve gotten laid and even longer since I’ve wanted it as badly as I do when River even so much as looks at me.

“You ready?” Lyric turns toward Maisie, who nods.

“Yes, please.”

Arms linked, they make their way toward the exit.

River watches until they disappear outside, indecision weighing heavily in his expression.

“She’ll be fine,” I reassure him. “She’s tougher than she looks. Besides, no one is going to fuck with Maisie. Even drunk, she’d whoop someone’s ass if they tried.”

“I have no doubt.” He chuckles, turning back toward me. “Now what?”

“Now we dance.” I take his hand, tugging him back toward the dance floor.

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Charlotte

Eight Months Later

“What the actual fuck, Maisie.” I’m quick to cover my eyes the instant I realize why my roommate is currently on her knees.

As if having to deal with Lyric and Kai and their inability to keep their hands off each other even when they’re out in public isn’t bad enough, now apparently, I have to worry about coming home to find my other roommate doing something that makes me want to scrub my eyeballs with a toothbrush.

“Fuck.” The guy with his hand currently tangled in Maisie’s hair groans, not letting my interruption keep him from finishing.

I recognize him but can’t place him, and right now, the last thing I want to do is look back at him to figure it out.

“By all means, keep going.” I huff, holding one hand over my face and the other out as I try to feel my way toward my bunk without running into anything or seeing any more of the dude’s nether region or what Maisie was doing with it.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a prude by any stretch of the imagination. I’m just not much for voyeurism and as such, I wish Maisie would at least be kind enough to put something on the door to let me know not to enter.

“You can take your hand off your face now.” Maisie chuckles, followed by the clear

sound of a zipper being tugged up.

“Could you maybe do that somewhere else?” I ask, dropping my hand but still keeping my back to them just in case. Bending down, I pull my large duffel bag out from under my desk, already half packed.

It’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that freshman year is already over.

So much has happened in such a short time, and yet, it kinda feels like nothing has happened at all.

I’ve heard the expression blink and it’s over countless times in my life.

In fact, it’s one of my mother’s favorite things to say.

But this is the first time I actually feel it, like I turned around and the year had come to an end.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m excited to go home, to spend the summer with my family and old friends, but a part of me really does not want to leave.

So many memories happened in this room. I found my best friends in this room.

Two people I don’t know how I ever lived without.

Though if Maisie keeps this crap up, I might rethink rooming with her again next year.

I had hoped that all three of us would live together until graduation, but then Lyric had to go fall head over heels for the most unexpected person ever, and now I’m stuck with just Maisie since Lyric will be living off campus with Kai this fall.

Stuck with might be a bit harsh. Truth is, Maisie is like my spirit sister.

We're so much alike in so many ways, you'd think we were actually sisters.

But with that comes the other side of having too much in common, which is to say we bicker a lot.

Lyric has always been the mediator between us, and without her, we're likely to kill each other next year.

"It's not my fault you aren't getting any." I can hear the smile in her voice, but it still grates on me just the same. "Last time I checked, that was your own doing."

I spin around to give her a what-for, but my words die on my lips when she's pulled into the guy's chest and he swallows half of her face.

Looking up at the ceiling, I let out a heavy sigh.

"You'll call me as soon as you're home?" he grumbles, voice deep.

"I live like fifteen minutes away," Maisie reminds him. "Maybe you should be the one to call me when you get home."

"What time are you planning on leaving again?" I interrupt, letting my gaze drift back to the guy standing next to Maisie, still trying to place him.

"Soon. I'm just waiting on Kai. He's going to give me a ride back to the house."

"Is Lyric coming with him?"

"She better be. I told her I'd drive to North Carolina and kick her ass if she left

without saying goodbye. River is supposed to be picking her up sometime this afternoon, though I'm not entirely sure on the time."

"River?" The name catches in my throat, and just like every time I think about him, my heart kicks against my ribs like it's trying to break free.

River Parker.

The man who has consumed my every waking thought for months. Gorgeous. Smart. Funny. He is quite literally the perfect man—with one glaring flaw. He's Lyric's older brother.

Now, normally, I wouldn't care if a guy I liked was related to one of my friends, but in this case, I don't know, it feels like a brick wall that I'm not sure I'll ever be strong enough to scale.

Not to mention, he's proven to be the only man I've ever pursued who's not immediately tried to sleep with me, despite my best efforts.

"Yeah, her brother. Remember... The hot one." Maisie grins.

Oh, I remember, I think but don't say.

"I know who her brother is. I thought she was taking a bus," I say instead.

"She was going to, but I guess River said he wanted to pick her up."

"I see." I swallow, the action more difficult than it should be given the giant lump that's planted itself firmly in my throat. "Is he picking her up here?" I ask, almost hopeful.

“I’m not actually sure. I would assume so since most of her things are here.”

“I should go.” The dark-skinned man turns, and for the first time since River’s name was mentioned, I remember that Maisie and I are not alone. “You’ll call me later?” He pulls her close and kisses the side of her head.

“If you’re lucky.” She grins, giving him a soft shove toward the door.

It isn’t until he steps past me that I finally remember where I’ve seen him. He’s a football player. Tuck. Tucker. Something like that. Pretty sure I had a class with him last semester.

I wait until the door closes behind him before turning back to Maisie.

“How long are you gonna keep this up?” I ask her bluntly.

“Keep what up?” She pushes her long, dark hair over her shoulder, acting like she has no clue what I’m talking about.

Maisie is the definition of beauty. Slender, toned frame.

Flawless skin, a shade of brown so soft it merely kisses her skin, like a deep tan only richer.

Long, dark hair with big, beautiful curls—when she doesn’t straighten them out like today.

But it’s her eyes that are the most striking, a bright blue that seems to glow against her light brown skin.

It’s no wonder she has so many male friends .

Anyone who has eyeballs wants their shot with Maisie Rose.

“Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing. First Adam. Then Ryan. Now him.” I gesture to the door behind me. “Seems like someone is making a habit of hooking up with football players, I don’t know, in hopes that it might make it back to a certain someone you’re hoping to make jealous?”

Maisie may or may not have hooked up with one Macallan Stewart—a sophomore, soon-to-be junior—on the football team a few months ago.

She’d never admit it, but I think she really liked him.

I still don’t know exactly what went down as she’s never given us full details, but it’s clear whatever it was, it was bad.

Bad enough that I’m pretty sure she’d run him over with a car if given the chance.

I guess hooking up with all his teammates is the next best thing.

“This has nothing to do with Mac.” She hisses, clearly offended by my insinuation, her pretty face turning sour. “Maybe you should worry about your own love life and stop meddling in mine. Or is Conner still not texting you back?”

I open my mouth, ready to correct her, only to snap it closed. It doesn’t matter how badly I want to tell her the truth. I know I can’t. At least not yet.

Lyric, nor Maisie, has any idea that River and I have been talking—mainly texting—since his visit during family weekend last fall.

Personally, I wanted to tell them right away, but River was adamant that he didn’t want his sister to know.

Not that there's really all that much to know.

Talking is all we've ever done. Hell, I have only ever even been in the same room as the man once and that was the same weekend I met him.

I've never been the kind of woman who pines after someone, but with River, try as I may, I just can't shake him.

And to make matters worse, I don't even know if he feels the same way I feel about him, though I can't say I fully understand my feelings for him given our current situation.

How do you know if your feelings are true when you've never been given a real opportunity to explore them?

All I know is that night, at the glow party, the night that Lyric left early with Maisie, well, it was one of the best nights of my life.

The way River looked at me as we danced.

The way his fingers bit into my hips. The gentle graze of his hand at the small of my back.

The way his breath tickled my ear as he told me how beautiful I was.

It was the most innocent thing in the world, and yet, it wound me so tightly that I was sure if he leaned in and kissed me, I would have shattered into a million pieces all over the ground.

He didn't, in case you were wondering. But I went home that night feeling like there wasn't an inch of my body he hadn't touched.

I didn't expect him to text me the next day, especially when he declined my obvious advances, making me feel a bit off-kilter as that had never happened to me before.

I certainly didn't expect for him to keep texting me.

But the more he did, the more invested I became, to the point it was impossible to hide it from my friends any longer.

So I lied. Told them some bs story about how I was talking to Claire's older brother, Conner.

She lives across the hall, and well, no one likes her, and since I had also met her brother at the glow party, I thought it was a safe tale to spin because not a chance either Maisie or Lyric was gonna go across the hall and ask her.

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I regretted it the moment I said it and have had to spend the last five or so months living in that lie.

Though it did give me a cover for being on my phone all the time.

Now, when they see me smiling at the damn thing, I don't have to answer twenty questions.

Though those days have become fewer and far between as of late.

I know River is distancing himself from me. I just don't yet understand why. Is it because he's tired of talking to me and doesn't want to pursue anything? Or is it because he does want to pursue something with me but is worried about what other people might think?

It's something he's said before, that he's unsure about the age difference between us. I turned nineteen a few months ago. He just turned twenty-four. And while five years feels like nothing to me, given that I'm the same age as his baby sister, I can kinda see his hiccup.

Then again, it's not like I'm asking the man to marry me. I just want him to fuck me. And then maybe repeat it a few times until he's out of my system so I can finally move on and get back to being me .

"I wasn't trying to offend you," I finally say, softening my approach. "It's just... You can do so much better than him." Again I point toward the door. "And I know you know that."

“Tucker is... nice.” She forces a smile, confirming I was right on the name.

“Tucker is not your type,” I state flatly.

“And? It’s not like we’re dating or anything. We’re just having fun. And just because you’ve become a nun these past few months doesn’t mean the rest of us have to. You want my opinion? I think you’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” I arch a brow at my very good friend, who I’m tempted to throw a shoe at.

“Your two closest friends have amazing sex lives, and here you are, clinging to a man who won’t so much as come see you in person.

No offense, Char, but you are in serious need of getting laid.

Abstinence has turned you into a completely different person.

Where is the girl from the beginning of the year?

The one who lived more freely than any person I had ever met before.

You were the life of the party. Now all you do is stare at your phone all night.

You barely go anywhere. You haven’t hooked up with a guy in months.

In case you forgot, you’re in college. This is the time to be living it up because in a few short years, you won’t be able to anymore. At least not like this.”

I want to argue. Tell her that she’s wrong. But I can’t find it in me to do so. Why? Because she isn’t wrong. I just refuse to acknowledge why that might be.

“Look.” She takes a step toward me, her expression softening. “I’m not trying to give you shit. I know you really like Conner. It’s just... How long are you going to let him string you along?”

“That’s not what he’s doing.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what he’s doing. And you know it too. If he wasn’t, he’d make an effort to see you, to spend time with you. Hell, to do anything at all with you. So why hasn’t he?”

I could give her a few reasons off the top of my head, but I don’t because doing so would give away the truth. A truth I haven’t admitted to anyone, not even my friends back home, who have no idea who River or Lyric are and wouldn’t say a word to anyone.

“I just don’t want to see you put all this effort into someone who isn’t willing to give it back.”

“I know.”

“Know what?” Both of our gazes swing to the door at the sound of Lyric’s voice.

“I was just telling Char that she needs to drop Conner and find herself a man who’s interested in actually seeing her,” Maisie tells Lyric, crossing the room to wrap her in a hug. “I was wondering when we’d finally get to see you.” She releases her after a brief moment.

“Sorry. This one didn’t want to let me out of bed.” She hitches her thumb behind her at the exact moment Kai appears in the doorway.

“She’s lucky she’s standing here at all.” He grins. “I was tempted to lock her away.”

“He acts like he’s not coming to see me in a couple of weeks.” She smiles, the action lighting up her whole face.

I’ve gotta give it to Lyric. As far as men go, she found herself quite possibly one of the hottest to ever grace the surface of this planet, and no, that isn’t an exaggeration.

When she and Kai first started hanging out, I was so sure he was gonna end up hurting her the way he had countless women before her.

I didn’t know a thing about him and yet, even I knew his reputation.

But somehow, against all odds, she caught him in her line, and he doesn’t appear to have any interest in trying to break free.

The most notorious womanizer on campus and little innocent Lyric was the one who ended up taming him. Not only that, but the man worships the ground she walks on.

“I’m glad you’re still here,” Lyric tells me, moving farther into the room to wrap me in a hug. I squeeze her right back, knowing I’m going to miss the hell out of her. “I was worried I would miss you.”

“But you weren’t worried you’d miss me?” Maisie pouts.

“Kai is taking you home,” she tells her flatly. “I knew you’d still be here.” She throws Maisie a smile over her shoulder before turning back to me. “What time are you leaving?”

“Soon. My dad is picking me up in a couple of hours. He wanted to pick me up this morning but...” I gesture to my bunk and all the things I have not yet packed.

“Procrastination seems to be going around today.” Her gaze drifts to Kai for the

briefest moment.

“When are you leaving?” I ask her.

“Now. River’s already here.”

“He is?” My chest tightens.

“He didn’t want to come up, so he’s waiting in the car.”

Rejection stings like a motherfucker.

Months we’ve been talking. Months. And he doesn’t even have the common courtesy to come up and say hello?

If I was looking for a sign that I’m fighting an unwinnable battle, I think I just got it. Feels like it just whopped me right in the face pretty freaking hard.

“Speaking of leaving,” Kai interjects, turning toward Maisie, which gives me the perfect view of the intricate tattoo art that climbs up the side of his neck. “You about ready?”

“Almost,” Maisie tells him, shoving the remainder of her things into an already overstuffed bag.

Kai helps Lyric grab the rest of her things, while I take my time, knowing I’ll be the last one to leave anyway.

It’s bittersweet, watching them all pack. On one hand, I’m so sad the year is over. On the other, I think some time away to clear my head is exactly what I need.

“Tell me you’ll both come to visit at least once,” Lyric says as she lingers in the room long after Kai has taken her bags down for her. “We can go to the beach. Go shopping. There’s so much stuff to do there in the summer.”

“Try and keep me away,” Maisie agrees.

“I would love that.” I force a smile.

“I’m gonna text you as soon as I get home and then we’re gonna get it planned. Even if you have to come separately, I want to see both of you at least once.”

“When did she become so bossy?” I ask Maisie with a laugh.

“Since Kai is starting to rub off on her,” she retorts, knocking her elbow against mine.

“Because I love you, I’m going to pretend like you didn’t just say that.” She crosses her arms in front of herself, the action causing her ponytail to swing, the silky brown strands brushing her back. “I’m really going to miss you girls.”

“Me too,” I admit, closing the distance between us at the same time Maisie does.

“Me three,” Maisie agrees, wrapping one arm around me and the other around Lyric, pulling us into a group hug. “We call or text weekly. I don’t want to go the whole summer barely talking.”

“Agreed,” Lyric and I say in unison.

We stand like that for a long moment, three friends hesitant to say goodbye, but eventually, all good things must come to an end, and this is no exception.

I stand in the hallway and watch Lyric and Maisie leave, not going back into the

room until they disappear around the corner. As desperately as I wanted to walk down with them, I didn't want to give River the satisfaction.

In fact, I'm done giving River anything at all.

He's made his stance pretty clear.

He doesn't want me. Message received loud and clear.

Him not even being willing to come upstairs and say hello in person is the eye-opener I've been waiting for.

I'm done lying to my friends.

I'm done pretending I stand a snail's chance in hell with the man.

I'm just done.

I'm going to go home, enjoy my summer break, and do everything in my power not to even think of the name River Parker for at least the next three months, though something tells me that's going to be a much harder feat than I realize.

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Charlotte

Lyric: What time are you getting here tomorrow?

I stare at the text message, my fingers hovering over the screen as I contemplate my response.

Me: Never.

I quickly delete the message and retype a new one.

Me: Actually, I can't make it.

Delete.

I want to back out so badly I can taste it, and yet I can't seem to bring myself to do it. In the two weeks since she asked me, it's all I've done—contemplated how to get out of it, and now it's here, and I know I can't.

It's not that I don't want to see Lyric.

Of course I do. And after five weeks back at home, I could use the escape.

If my mom makes me go to another spin class with her, I might run away and never come back.

Not that I'm against exercise, but riding on a stationary bike while a woman yells at

me to go faster is not really my cup of tea.

My reasons for not wanting to go should be pretty obvious.

Her brother.

You know the one... The one who stopped texting me entirely about three weeks ago and now is completely ghosting me. Yeah, that one.

Though the way it stands, a run-in with River is highly unlikely.

From what Lyric has told me, she hasn't seen much of him this summer.

Not that I asked. It just happened to come up in conversation.

I gently pushed, curiosity getting the better of me, and was relieved to learn that it was because he has a new job and not that he has a new woman in his life.

He had told me a while back that he had applied for a new job at some big firm but hadn't heard back yet.

The way Lyric talked, he'd been trying to get on at this place for a while, so I can only assume it's the same firm he told me about.

I just wish he had shared the good news with me himself instead of having to hear it from his sister.

He's the only person I've ever met who could make cybersecurity sound sexy.

I swear, I could listen to him talk about what he does for a living for hours and never tire of it.

Then again, I could listen to that man read the phone book and be thoroughly entertained, so I guess that's not saying an awful lot.

I digress...

He has a new job. He's not going to be there. I have no reason to be stressed.

But if that's true, then why do I feel like my stomach is about to fall out of my butt at the mere thought of being so close to where he is?

Rejection does not look good on me, I'll admit. It's making me petty.

I should call Lyric, explain that something came up last minute. But that doesn't sound like me at all. I've never been this person. A person who hides from uncomfortable things. And definitely not a woman who allows a man to dictate what I do.

I glance up, catching sight of my reflection in my vanity mirror. Same pale skin. Same auburn hair. Same green eyes. I look the same. But as of late, I don't feel the same. And I think it's about time I changed that.

I'm going to North Carolina. And if River Parker does end up gracing us with his presence, and I sure hope he does, then I'll be there to show him exactly what he's missing out on.

Me: Noon.

I hit send, finally answering Lyric's earlier message.

Guess there's no backing out now...

“I can’t believe I’ve been here for two days and I haven’t seen that man of yours.

I thought you two were attached at the hip.

” I let my head lull toward Lyric, who’s stretched out on the chair next to me in a two-piece bathing suit I couldn’t have paid her to wear at the start of last year.

I think it’s safe to say a lot has changed since then.

“He only comes down like every other weekend.”

“How’s that been?”

“Considering we spent nearly every waking moment together for the last few months... Lonely.” She pouts out her lower lip.

“Sounds like I’m not the only one ready to get back to campus.” I turn my face back up toward the sky, breathing in the salty sea air.

“I know why I want to go back. I’m a little surprised that you do, though. You hate school.” She snorts out a laugh.

“I don’t hate school. I actually love school. Just not the classroom part of it.” A smirk tugs at my mouth.

“Still haven’t heard from Conner?” She guesses. And by Conner, she unknowingly means River, which makes me feel like a dick bag of a friend.

I mean, technically, I didn’t do anything wrong. River and I were never a thing. We just talked... a lot.

“It’s for the best, I think.” I try to make myself believe the lie. “We’re just in very different places in our lives. He’s already done all this.” I gesture around at nothing in particular. “He’s an adult, living an adult life, and I... Well, I’m not.”

“You’re nineteen.” Lyric points out my flawed logic. “Technically, you’re both adults. A handful of years in age doesn’t change that if the connection is there. Look at me and Kai. We’re four years apart and we’re making it work.”

“Yeah, but Kai is still in school. Albeit graduate school, but still school. He’s still working toward what he wants to be. Conner’s already there.” I blow out a breath. “Honestly, I’m kind of relieved,” I softly admit.

“What do you mean?” Lyric rolls to her side to face me, propping her arm under her head.

“With Conner, I didn’t know who I was. Like, he made me question everything about myself. I was constantly trying to prove that I was good enough.”

“You?” She slides her sunglasses down on the bridge of her nose to really look at me. “You should never have to prove you’re worthy of any man. You’re Charlotte freaking O’Malley. Any guy would be beyond lucky to be with you.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my friend.”

“No, I’m saying it because it’s true. You are the most fearless, fun, beautiful person I have ever met. And you forget I’ve seen guys quite literally line up to talk to you at parties. And they should because you’re incredible. Don’t ever let anyone make you feel anything less than that.”

I stare at my friend for a long moment, the truth so close to the tip of my tongue that it almost slips past my lips... Almost.

I don't deserve a friend like Lyric. She's loyal, supportive, the easiest person to talk to, the friend I seek out above any other when I need to vent. She never judges. She just listens and somehow understands, and even if she doesn't understand, she tries to.

When she walked into our dorm on move-in day wearing a very modest sundress and those freaking Converse of hers, I thought, oh great, I've been roomed with a Goodie Two-shoes who's going to make this year so dull and will probably nark on me every chance she gets.

And while she very much is a good girl, even if Kai has brought her out of her shell a bit, she's not at all who I expected her to be.

I thought she would be a nuisance. Instead, she became my best friend.

And here I am, lying straight to her face over something that's not even that big of a deal.

Again, it's not like I slept with her brother and lied about it.

Nothing physical has ever happened. And truth be told, Lyric doesn't seem like the kind of person who would care.

So then why is it that I can't bring myself to just tell her the truth?

"I'm going to tell Maisie you said that I was the most beautiful," I say with a straight face, unable to hold it for more than a few seconds before I start laughing.

"Screw Conner." She grins, not taking the bait.

"Screw Conner," I agree.

“We should go out tonight.”

“We should.”

“There’s this amazing little place not far from here. They have the best crab cakes you’ll ever eat, and if we’re lucky, River’s friend Evan will be working, and he’ll slip a little rum into our virgin daiquiris.”

“Who are you and what have you done with sweet little Lyric?” I tease.

Ten months ago, we had to beg her to go out and even then, she rarely drank. Now here she is, suggesting not only that we drink, but that we do so illegally. Is it bad to say that I’m proud of how far she’s come?

“Ha. Ha.” She sticks her tongue out at me. “If I haven’t said it already, I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Yeah, me too.” Despite the hesitation I had in coming here, now that I’m here, I really am enjoying myself.

Granted, I just got here yesterday, but so far so good.

“What do you say we head back to the house and grab some food? I don’t know about you, but the sun makes me ravenous.”

“I could eat.”

“Money says my mom already has a five-course meal prepared for us.” She chuckles, pushing herself upright. “She never knows what to do with herself over summer break.”

“I kinda get why you want to be a teacher now. Getting every summer off is definitely a perk.”

“Not at all why I want to be a teacher, but yes, it certainly is an added bonus,” she agrees, grabbing her beach bag before proceeding to stuff her towel and sunscreen inside.

“It’ll come in handy when you and Kai start knocking out little runway models.”

“Oh Lord, way too early for that kind of talk.” She stands, reaching for my towel, which I quickly slip off my chair and hand to her before standing myself.

“You know it’s going to happen one day.”

“I hope so.” She smiles softly, more to herself than at me. “Just not for a very long time.”

“When you two finally decide to tie the knot, I call maid of honor. I don’t care if Maisie has known Kai her whole life. I call dibs.”

“I’ll let you two figure that one out when the time comes. Luckily, we’ve got a while.” She rolls her big, beautiful hazel eyes.

Lyric is one of those girls who’s so unaware of her own beauty that it only makes her even more beautiful.

She’s small and petite, with long brown hair and the cutest freaking freckles that pepper her nose.

The kind of cute you wish you could bottle up and sell.

And she's completely oblivious to the effect she has on other people.

She took the most notorious womanizer in school and made him a one-woman man.
That in itself should tell you everything you need to know.

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We make the mile walk back to her parents' house on foot.

Growing up, I would have given anything to live this close to the ocean.

My parents live on the western side of Virginia and the closest beach is over two hours away, so when I was a child, we only visited it a couple of times a year if we were lucky.

I can't imagine just walking out my front door and being able to smell the sea.

"There they are," Lyric's mom, Heather, greets us the instant we walk through the front door of their small, ranch-style home, a plate of sandwiches in her hand that she quickly sets on the breakfast bar that separates the living room from the kitchen. "I hope you're hungry."

"Told you," Lyric murmurs under her breath just loud enough that I can hear her. "Thanks, Mom. We're actually starving."

"I thought you would be. I know how being out in the sun makes you hungry." She smiles at the daughter who looks so much like her, it's uncanny. Though, after meeting her dad, Mike, I can see a little of him in her too.

I refuse to think about who else looks like Mike. A certain second-born son who I've tried really hard not to think about, which is damn near impossible when I'm surrounded by the people who made him, in the house where he was raised, with pictures of him as a kid everywhere I look.

Taking the seat at the bar next to Lyric, I grab a sandwich wedge and tear off a big bite, hungrier than I had realized while we were on the beach.

“Don’t eat too much, though. We’re having your brothers and the girls over for dinner tonight,” Heather says just as I start to swallow the bite, which ends up getting stuck halfway down, causing me to break out into a fit of coughing.

“Are you okay?” Lyric smacks my back gently, like that’s going to help the food go down.

“Yeah,” I croak, reaching for the bottle of water Heather extends to me. “Wrong hole.” I clear my throat and take a long pull of water. “Sorry, go on,” I say, completely aware that I’ve interrupted what she was saying.

“Oh, that was all.” She waves a hand through the air.

“Char and I were going to go to Ziggy’s tonight,” Lyric tells her mom with a pout.

“Well, too bad. You can go tomorrow. I haven’t had all my children in the same room since Christmas. You can give me one dinner. We have yet to celebrate River’s new job, so it’ll give us the opportunity to do that as well. Besides, it’ll give you a chance to introduce Charlotte to your brothers.”

“She’s already met River.” Lyric is quick to tell her. “At family weekend, remember?”

I certainly remember ...

“Oh, that’s right. Well, Dalton and the girls then.”

“Dalton who? The only people I care about are my nieces.” Lyric knocks her

shoulder against mine. “You’re going to love the girls. They are the absolute cutest, sweetest little things.”

“I’ve heard so much about them; I feel like I already know them.” I force a smile.

“Are you okay if we go to Ziggy’s tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I’m quick to agree, because really, what am I supposed to say, no?

“Then it’s settled.” Heather claps her hands together. “Dinner is at six. Don’t be late.”

“Where are you going?” Lyric asks her mom as she collects her purse, sliding the strap over her shoulder.

“To the store to buy what I need for dinner.”

“Can you pick me up some pineapple while you’re there?”

“Sure. Anything for you, Charlotte?” It takes me longer than it should to realize she’s talking to me, my brain still trying to digest the fact that in just five short hours, I will be sitting in the same room as River for the first time since the night we met.

So much for not seeing him while I was here, though I’d be lying if I said a part of me wasn’t excited.

He’s probably going to lose his shit when he walks in and sees me.

That I’m aware of, he has no idea I’m here.

Then again, he and Lyric are pretty close.

It's not out of the question that she would have mentioned it.

I'm not sure which I'd prefer—him knowing what he's walking into, or being completely caught off guard instead.

“Oh, no, I'm good. Thank you.” I take another bite of my sandwich, my mind already off to the races.

What do I wear?

What do I say?

Do I act like I don't know him at all?

Do I act like I do?

A million and one questions plague my brain over the course of the next few hours.

When it comes time to get ready, I take extra care in my appearance. If I'm going to be forced to endure the company of a man who's made it clear he wants nothing to do with me, the least I can do is make him regret that decision, even if just a little bit.

“Char!” Lyric gives me a catcall whistle as I exit the guest room Heather was nice enough to make up for me for the week.

It sits directly across from Lyric's room, so she has a perfect view of me from where she's sitting in front of her vanity.

“You look amazing,” she tells me as I step into her doorway, leaning my shoulder against the frame.

“Figured if I was going to meet your whole family, I should look semi-decent.” I look down at the black, pleated miniskirt that I paired with a fitted blue top with sleeves that come to my elbows.

It’s modest but sexy. Sleek but casual. And just the right type of outfit that will have River Parker unable to keep his eyes off me tonight. Or at least, that’s the plan.

I know what you’re thinking—I thought you were done with him—and maybe I am. Or maybe I’m just waiting for him to realize his mistake. Hopefully, this outfit will help me out a little in that department.

I tied my auburn hair up in a loose pony with tendrils falling down around my face and kept my makeup soft and natural, with the exception of my red-painted lips. If I’m going to put on my best metaphorical face, it doesn’t hurt if my actual face looks good too.

“Decent? You look incredible.” Lyric gives me a full once-over. “Not that that’s out of the norm for you. You always look good.”

“I wouldn’t say always,” I disagree. “And I’m not sure if you’ve actually looked in that mirror in front of you, but you don’t look so bad yourself.”

I gesture to the light pink sundress she’s wearing, her hair left down, falling in soft curls down her back.

“Kai’s coming,” she tells me, her feet bouncing up and down in excitement.

“He is?” I arch a brow, surprised that I’m just now hearing this.

“He called while you were in the shower. Apparently, my mom invited him and he said yes. I told him he didn’t need to drive almost three hours for dinner, but he said

it's the first time he's been formally invited by my parents and there's no way he's not coming. You don't mind, right?"

"Why would I mind?" I shake my head.

"I just don't want you to think I'm neglecting you for him. He's leaving in the morning."

"Is he staying here?"

"My mom lets him stay in Dalton's old room when he comes to visit."

"I thought this was Dalton's room." I hitch a thumb behind me toward the room I'm staying in.

She shakes her head. "That was River's room."

"Oh." I try to mask my reaction.

"Not that you could tell. He took everything with him when he moved out and then my parents repainted, so it doesn't look anything like it did when he lived here. My room is the only one that's still the same, though it won't be for long."

"What do you mean?"

"Kai has asked me to move in with him permanently. Like not just for the school year."

"Seriously? When?"

"Last week."

“And I’m just now hearing about it?” I gape at her.

“I hadn’t made up my mind yet. I mean, I love him, obviously. And I want to be with him all the time. But I’m also only nineteen and moving in with someone seems like a really big step.”

“Because it is a big step. But I hate to break it to you, Lyric; living with him during school is still living with him. The only difference is you won’t come home for the summer. At least, not the full summer.”

“I know. It’s just... a lot.”

“It is. And if you’re not ready to give him an answer, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“I told him yes an hour ago.” Her smile widens.

“And you’re sure about it? Because you didn’t sound sure just now.”

“I am. I’m just not sure how I’m going to break the news to my parents. I told Kai I wanted to wait until we’re back in school. Maybe tell them toward the end of next year. At least that way we’ll have been together for a while and they’ll hopefully have fewer objections about it.”

“But they know you’re living together in an off-campus apartment during the school year, right?”

“Yes, but if they ask, we’re sleeping in separate rooms.”

“Do you really expect them to believe that?”

“No, but it’s what I tell them to make them feel better, even if they know it isn’t

true.”

“Um. Okay.” I let out a soft laugh. “What time is he going to be here?”

She glances at the clock on her bedside table.

“Probably soon. He was only ninety minutes out last we spoke and that was over an hour ago.”

“Should we go down and see if your mom needs any help?”

“She’d probably appreciate that.” She slaps on a quick coat of lip gloss before standing. “I hope you’re ready for tonight. Things can get a bit interesting when all of us kids are together.”

“You forget I visited Maisie two weeks ago. You can’t get much crazier than her house. I swear every neighborhood kid takes up a second residence there.” I knock my hip into hers as she passes me in the doorway.

“That is very true. I guess in comparison, this will probably be a very boring evening.”

“I highly doubt that,” I murmur under my breath as she heads down the hall with me following a few feet behind.

I highly doubt that indeed...

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River

Pulling into the driveway of my parents' house, I bring my car to a stop directly behind Dalton's SUV.

Truth be told, I'm surprised he's here already.

He's pathologically late. Always has been.

When he married his wife, Avery, we thought maybe that would change, but unfortunately, she's just as bad as he is.

Once they started having kids, forget about it.

My mom began telling them the start time to any event was an hour earlier than it was just so they would arrive remotely on time, which could very well be what she did tonight.

Shifting into park, I kill the engine, grabbing my cell out of the center console before exiting the car.

This is the first time in two weeks I've been off work before six, and while I'm glad for it, I wish I could be going home instead of having to deal with my family for the next two or three hours.

It's not that I don't like my family. I do.

In fact, as far as families go, mine's a pretty good one to have.

I've just been so busy with this new job that I've barely had a few minutes of downtime, and it's starting to wear on me.

I've been assured that things will slow down, but right now we're dealing with a major security breach, and let's just say they wasted no time throwing me headfirst into the fire.

Not that I mind much. Work is about the only thing I have going for me right now.

Whose fault is that? My inner voice taunts me.

Shaking off the stress clawing at my spine like sharp nails ripping through skin, I climb the two steps onto the porch and then tug open the front door, a familiar smell enveloping me the second I step inside.

Mom made my favorite—stuffed bell peppers. I'd recognize the scent anywhere.

A smile touches my lips as I close the door and turn toward the kitchen, my steps abruptly coming to a stop at the sight of someone I was not expecting to see sitting next to my sister at the dining room table located just to the left of the kitchen.

Charlotte O'Malley.

Fuck me .

"River!" Lyric jumps up the instant she spots me, crossing the small space to throw her arms around my middle, and squeezes tightly.

I instantly feel guilty.

Summer break is already half over and in just over a month, she'll be heading back to Virginia, and I've barely spent any time with her while she's been home.

"Hey, sis." I squeeze her back, releasing her when I feel little arms close down around my leg.

"There's my girl." I lean down and swoop up my youngest niece, Lacy, who just recently turned two. Nuzzling my face into her neck, she squeals out in laughter.

"Wiver."

"Wacy," I say back in my best toddler impression, very aware of the bright green eyes burning holes into the side of my face.

I can't believe Lyric didn't mention that Charlotte was here. Then again, I haven't spoken to her in a few days, so I guess she really didn't have the chance. And why would she feel the need to reach out specifically when as far as she knows, I shouldn't care if she has a friend over.

Only in this case, I do care. I care very fucking much.

"'Bout time you showed up." Dalton is the next to greet me, his wife, Avery, at his side.

"Surprised you beat me." I bump his fist, giving Avery a nod of hello. "Let me guess, Mom told you five."

"One day you'll have children of your own and you'll find out how hard it is to get anywhere on time," Avery chimes in.

"He's been this way his entire life, Av, don't blame it on the kids," I tease, giving her

a wink as I lower Lacy back to the ground. She takes off running the instant her feet hit the hardwood. “I think her energy doubles every time I see her.” I smile, watching her little legs wobble beneath her.

“You have no idea.” Avery sighs as she watches her daughter adoringly.

Careful not to glance toward the dining room, I head into the kitchen to say hello to my mother, who’s currently got my four-year-old niece, Lyla, on the counter, acting as the taste tester. A job I used to do frequently when I was little.

“Hey, Mom.” I lean in, laying a quick kiss to the side of her head before stepping back so she can resume chopping vegetables for the salad. “Where’s Dad?” I ask, ruffling Lyla’s hair, which earns me a smack and the most dramatic groan I’ve ever heard come out of a four-year-old.

Point taken.

“In the garage, as per usual. He should be in shortly.” My mom hands Lyla a cucumber slice, which she immediately takes a bite of. “Go ahead and have a seat. The salad will be ready in just a minute.”

“Anything I can do?” I ask, hopeful that she’ll give me an excuse to delay sitting down next to a certain auburn bombshell who probably feels like I owe her an explanation. And she would be right. Not that I’m at all prepared to give her one.

I can’t lie. The night we met, I was definitely smitten.

She made me feel like a pubescent fourteen-year-old boy who could barely contain his urges .

Her age and closeness to my sister were the only things that kept me from stripping

her bare and fucking her into the next century. And man did I want to do just that.

I told myself that's all it was, a physical attraction that I'd forget the instant she was out of sight. Only that's not what happened at all.

Instead, we started texting. Then we started calling each other.

And before long, we became really good friends.

More than friends, though neither of us ever admitted as much.

The more I got to know her, the more I wanted to know, and honestly, it terrified me.

Pussy thing to say, I know, but true just the same.

It doesn't help matters that good friends have been in short supply for my sister, and the last thing I want to do is get in between her and someone she cares about and who clearly cares about her.

Not that Lyric would ever stop me from pursuing something with one of her friends, but deep down I know she wouldn't love it.

Even if she wouldn't admit to it, I know my sister.

It's why I never told her about me and Charlotte talking in the first place and why I asked Charlotte not to tell Lyric either.

Lying to her is even worse than that truth, I know. Which is another reason why I backed off. I couldn't tell her the truth without admitting I had been lying for months and that I had pulled one of her best friends into the lie. So I tried to make it right by cutting ties.

I've hated every second of it.

I hate it even more now.

"No, honey, I've got it covered." My mom interrupts my thoughts and it takes way longer than it should to realize she's answering the question I asked. "Go visit with your sister. Might be the only chance you get before Kai gets here."

"Kai's coming?" I'm a little surprised by this. Not because he doesn't come around—he's here most weekends—but because this is the first time he's been included in a family dinner.

I didn't much care for the guy at first, but even I have to admit, he's growing on me.

How could he not when he makes my sister so incredibly happy?

Because of him, we have Lyric back. Not the shell that her ex, Leo, left for us—the carcass he feasted on and then left to rot in the sun.

But the real Lyric, happier and healthier than ever.

Any man who can do that for my sister is all right in my book.

Even if I do think he's a little old for her.

Hypocritical, given the age difference between me and Charlotte is even bigger. Then again, I never did anything with Charlotte outside of talking. I mean, I definitely wanted to, but I didn't, and that's the real takeaway here.

"River, you remember Char?" Lyric asks as I take my normal seat at the far end of the table, directly across from my sister.

“Of course.” I tip my chin in way of hello, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “It’s good to see you again, Charlotte.”

“Yeah, you too.” She offers me a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. Doesn’t take away from how striking she is.

Every reason I had for backing away now seems trivial and immature at best, and while I was sure it was the right move, I can’t deny that I’m kicking myself in the ass a bit at the current moment.

“So, how’s the break so far? I feel like I haven’t talked to you in weeks.” I turn my attention back to my sister, forcing an ease I certainly don’t feel.

“Probably because you haven’t,” Lyric fires back, her tone light and teasing. “And it’s going well. Don’t tell Mom I said so, but I’m ready to go back to Virginia.” She lowers her voice.

“I wouldn’t know why.” I give her a pointed look because we both know it has nothing to do with her eagerness to return to the classroom. “Have you talked to the parentals about your living situation?”

“They know.”

“They know you plan to live with your boyfriend and they’re okay with it?” I arch a brow.

Lyric is the baby. In my parents’ eyes, she will always be the baby, and as such, they’re very reluctant to let her grow up.

“Not sure okay is the right word, but yeah. I mean, it’s not like they can stop me. I am an adult.”

“I suppose that’s true.” I turn back to Charlotte. “What about you? What are you going to do now that this one is moving in with Prince Charming?” I try to say and act the way I would if this were just a normal interaction with a friend of my sister’s that I don’t know well.

She can see through it, of course. But my sister seems none the wiser, and that’s the entire point.

“Maisie and I are rooming together.”

“Maisie is the one with the blue eyes,” I confirm, even though I know exactly who Maisie is. Charlotte talked about her often during our months of conversation.

“Blue eyes. Perfect skin. Legs that go on for days.” Lyric nods. “That’s the one.”

“Are you as excited for the start of sophomore year as my sister is?”

“Eh.” She lifts her shoulder in a half-shrug.

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“Not a fan of school?” Again, something I already know the answer to, just trying to save face and not tip my sister off.

It’s over. What purpose would it serve for Lyric to learn the truth now, other than to hurt her?

“She likes the extracurriculars more than the classroom.” It’s my sister who answers as she gently elbows her friend.

“Oh yeah?”

“And the extracurriculars like her.”

I bet they do ... I think but don’t say, fighting the irrational jealousy that bubbles inside my stomach like hot tar.

“When do you go back again?” I ask in general, not directly asking either of them specifically.

“Second week of August,” Charlotte answers as she stands. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to run to the restroom really quickly before dinner starts.”

I watch her until it’s no longer safe to do so. The sight of her lean, long legs in that skirt is enough to damn near do me in. I glance back at my sister to find her watching me.

“She’s gorgeous, isn’t she?” She reads me like a fucking large print book whose

letters you can see from a mile away.

“She’s attractive. Young. But attractive.”

“I feel so bad for her.”

“Why?” I lean back in my seat, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“She was talking to this guy last year, like most of the year, and he recently ghosted her. Like can you imagine? What kind of guy would ghost someone like Charlotte? I can’t wrap my head around it.”

My stomach feels heavy, like I just swallowed gallons of tiny rocks that keep sinking deeper into my gut.

“That’s shitty,” I force out, trying so fucking hard to seem uninterested that the effort is borderline painful.

“That’s one word for it. Anyway, I think being here has helped take her mind off it.

I feel a little guilty that Kai is coming tonight.

I mean, I’m ecstatic, but at the same time, I’m afraid Char will feel like a third wheel.

Do you think maybe you could hang out for a bit this evening?

Make it feel less couple-y and more of like a group. ”

“I don’t know, Ly. I have to be up early for work tomorrow.”

“Just hang out for a couple of hours after dinner. You don’t have to stay super late.

Please.” She pouts out her lower lip.

On one hand, the last thing I want to do is hang around longer than I have to.

I’ve tempted fate enough where Charlotte O’Malley is concerned.

But at the same time, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious how much further I can test it before the very precarious tight rope we’ve been walking for months snaps and we both go plummeting to the rocky path below.

“Two hours. That’s the best I can do.”

“Thank you!” She claps her hands together, a wide smile tugging at her mouth when the doorbell rings.

“I wonder who that could be,” I deadpan.

“Hush,” she scolds, quickly jumping up from her seat. “I got it,” she announces, though Dalton is already heading in that direction.

I wait for a few beats, trying to talk myself out of what I’m about to do, but like I have no self-control at all, I stand, quickly crossing the room before slipping down the hallway in search of Charlotte.

It might be the only chance I have to speak to her privately, so it’s best I take the opportunity now while my sister is distracted.

I reach the bathroom just as the door swings open and Charlotte steps out, damn near running right into me. Taking her by the shoulders, I gently guide her back into the bathroom before kicking the door closed behind me.

“What are you doing?” She hisses, a light blush kissing her cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were here, Red?” I ask, careful to keep my voice low.

“When would I have? You haven’t talked to me in weeks.”

“You still could have texted me. A little heads-up would have been nice.” I’m being an asshole, I know. It’s the only way I know to keep her at arm’s length when all I want to do is pull her closer.

“I didn’t realize I could text you. Given that you haven’t answered any of the texts I’ve sent you, I assumed you had blocked me or something.”

“Blocked you? What am I, fifteen?”

“You tell me.” She crosses her arms in front of her chest defensively. “Your behavior would argue that you’re younger than you are.” She moves to step past me, but I cut off her only path of escape.

“I’ve been childish.” I can admit that much.

“If you didn’t want to be my friend anymore, all you had to do was say so.”

“I don’t want to be your friend.” I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “I want to be a fuck lot more than just your friend. That’s the problem.”

Her lips part, but no words immediately come out.

“Why is that a problem?” she finally asks.

“You know why.”

“Do I?”

“You’re too young for me. And you’re my sister’s best friend.”

“One, you’re only twenty-four. Don’t blame my age when we both know five years is nothing. Two, it’s not like I asked for your hand in marriage. And three, me being your sister’s best friend didn’t stop you from texting me for months . I don’t understand why all of a sudden it’s an issue.”

“If you don’t understand, then you haven’t been paying attention,” I bite.

She smells like she did that night—lavender and vanilla—and I find myself taking a deep inhale, letting her scent overtake my senses.

Fuck, how often have I closed my eyes and thought about that smell.

Our bodies pressed together. The heavy beat of the music vibrating the floor beneath our feet.

Her hips grinding into mine in a way that nearly had me coming the fuck undone right there in a room full of people.

Dropping her off at her dorm room without so much as kissing her was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.

But now that I’ve spent months getting to know her, I don’t know if I have the strength to resist her a second time.

If she touches me, if she comes any closer, I can’t be held responsible for what I do next.

“Do you want me?” she asks unapologetically, and fuck me, so damn beautiful.

I bark out a laugh like it’s the most ridiculous question I’ve ever been asked, even if the answer is a resounding yes.

“You do. That’s why you flaked?” It’s a question, though it shouldn’t be given that the answer is staring right back at me in those bright green eyes of hers.

“You think a few months texting each other makes you some expert on my life? Besides, the why is irrelevant and doesn’t change the fact that this wouldn’t work.

You’re in school in Virginia. My life is here in North Carolina.

Your only concerns are passing classes and finding the perfect outfit for the next party.

Meanwhile, I’m out here living in the real world.

We aren’t in the same place, no matter how much I wish we were. ”

“You think a few months texting each other makes you some expert on my life?” She throws my words back at me. “Classes and outfits, really? You make me out to be some ditzy co-ed who only cares about getting drunk and hooking up with frat guys.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” Her green eyes narrow.

“I just...” I try and fail to give her some kind of explanation that makes even a lick of sense.

“Why are you even in here? Why not just continue ignoring me? You’ve gotten really good at it.” She tries to step past me. I cut off her path.

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, at least you’re sorry.” Disdain drips from her voice.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing. You’ve made your position on the matter very clear.”

“Lyric can’t know.”

“If I haven’t told her yet, I think it’s a pretty safe bet that I’m not going to. Don’t worry. Your image of the perfect brother will remain intact.”

“That’s not what I care about.”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t that exactly why you’re standing here?”

” She steps closer, getting right in my face.

“I won’t do this with you. Either you’re in or you’re out.

Either we’re friends or we’re not. And before you spew some bullshit about why this would never work, consider for a moment what I actually want from you.

I don’t want to marry you. Hell, I don’t even want to date you.

” She shakes her head softly. “All I want, all I’ve ever wanted, is to fuck you.”

I don't know what happens. One second, we're standing toe-to-toe, the next, I have her completely spun around and pinned to the bathroom door, my mouth closing down on hers.

She opens for me instantly and I groan into the kiss, sliding my tongue across hers. I'm rock-hard in an instant, every pore in my body begging me to strip her bare and fuck her right here and now, the way I've thought about doing more times than would ever be considered healthy.

I'm a man obsessed.

I've been obsessed since the first moment I saw her.

Every minute since then has been a struggle.

Every second, a battle.

My head and my body at war with one another.

I should stop kissing her, but I can't. She tastes too good. Feels too perfect against me. And when she lets out a little whimper into my mouth, I unravel.

Grabbing her leg, I hitch it up over my hip, pressing my arousal against her.

Her hands find the back of my hair and she pulls hard, riding my swollen cock through my jeans in a way that has me damn near emptying my load into my boxers.

I reach between us, stroking her center through the thin material of her panties. She groans again, this time the sound vibrating through her into me.

Sliding the material to the side, I trace my finger down her seam, salivating over how

soft and bare she is. Greedily, I slip a finger inside, swallowing the gurgle of pleasure that spills past her lips.

I'm ready to fuck her right now, to give her exactly what she wants, the feel of her warm and wet around my finger my breaking point.

"Wait. Wait." Charlotte breaks the kiss, grabbing my wrist to still my hand. "Not here." She lowers her leg, forcing my fingers to retreat.

I drop my forehead against hers. My breath comes in short spurts like I've just finished an intense run.

"I'm sorry." I start to pull away, but she's quick to stop me, tangling her arms around my neck.

"I'm not. I want this. Just not here, in your parents' bathroom, with your whole family just down the hall."

"You're right. Fuck." I manage to break free from her grip, needing to put as much space between us as possible so that I can form a coherent thought. "You go out first. Make it look like I was just waiting for you to finish."

"Okay." She nods. Without another word, she turns and quickly slips into the hallway. I wait until the door closes behind her before locking myself inside.

I move toward the sink, catching sight of my flushed skin and sweat-lined forehead in the mirror.

"What the fuck, River?" I whisper-hiss at my reflection.

What the fuck indeed.

I want to regret what just happened.

I don't.

If anything, I'm counting down the seconds until I can feel her against me again. Only this time, I won't be stopping until I'm buried so far inside of her that she doesn't know where she ends and I begin.

I've known for months that Charlotte O'Malley has the ability to bring me to my knees.

It's one of the reasons I tried putting distance between us.

Because I knew that if I didn't, I was going to be in big fucking trouble.

And right here, despite everything I've done to try to stop it, she proved just how much power she actually holds over me.

I don't stand a chance.

I don't think I ever did.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

River: I can't stop thinking about that kiss, Red.

Red... It's something he started calling me the night we met, and even though I pretend to hate it, secretly, I love it. I think more than anything, I just love that he thought enough of me to give me a nickname at all.

I glance up to find him watching me from across the room where he's lounging casually on the couch, his legs stretched out in front of him.

I fight against the smile that tugs at my lips, my gaze darting to Lyric, who is so entranced by Kai that I could probably start singing at the top of my lungs and she wouldn't notice.

Maisie, on the other hand, who surprised us by coming with Kai, is not so easily distracted.

Imagine my shock when I finally emerged from the bathroom to find her standing in the living room.

Me: Me neither.

I quickly press send, watching him glance down at his phone.

"Who are you talking to?" Maisie is quick to ask. As I said, not so easily distracted. And given that she's sitting right next to me, there's little I can hide from her.

“No one.” I’m careful to keep my voice low.

I don’t know what happened tonight.

It was like one second River was acting like we were complete strangers, and the next, he was pinning me to the bathroom door and kissing me like I was the very air his lungs needed in order to stay alive.

I can still feel the effects of his touch on my body.

Of his lips on mine. Of his finger pressing inside of me.

The way he curled the tip... I nearly came apart.

It was everything I had spent the last few months dreaming about and yet not nearly enough.

I wanted so much more. I just didn’t want it with his entire family down the hall.

“Given the smile you’re fighting, I would venture to say it’s not no one.” Maisie snorts, glancing at my phone when it vibrates in my lap. “I thought you weren’t talking to Conner anymore?” She hitches a perfectly shaped brow at me.

I, of course, have River’s name as Conner in my contacts because if one of the girls happened to see a message come in on my phone, it was the only way I knew to fully sell the lie.

“It’s complicated,” I say in a hushed voice, reading the message.

River: We should talk about it.

“Complicated how? He strung you along for months and the last I heard, had ghosted you completely. Don’t tell me he texted you some half-assed apology and now everything is forgiven.”

“Wait, what’s happening?” Maisie’s inability to keep her voice down cues Lyric in on our conversation. Guess she wasn’t that distracted after all.

“She’s talking to Conner again,” Maisie tells Lyric like it’s some ground-breaking news.

“Since when?” Lyric sits up a little straighter.

“He texted me a little bit ago.” I try to keep my expression neutral, which is hard to do when I feel River’s eyes on me.

“He better have given you one hell of an apology if you’re talking to him again.” Lyric words it almost like a question.

“Not exactly,” I say, looking over at River, who’s watching the entire situation unfold with a...

Wait, is he smiling ?

“Char.” Lyric lets out a hard puff of air.

“It’s fine,” I reassure her.

“Is it? Dude strings you along for months and then completely ghosts you and you’re all it’s fine .”

I try not to be offended by Maisie’s poor impersonation of me.

“You don’t fully understand the situation,” I calmly try to explain.

“Clearly not, because I cannot wrap my head around why you would be talking to him after the way he did you.”

I know Maisie means well, but sometimes her delivery is a little lacking.

“Maybe he had his reasons.” River offers, and I swear I feel every ounce of color drain from my face in an instant. “I don’t know about you, Kai, but I’ve ghosted a few women in my time, none of whom deserved it.” His face tilts to the man next to his sister.

“I’ve made some mistakes I’m not proud of,” Kai agrees.

“Not you?” Maisie laughs with a dramatic eye roll at the man who’s like a second brother to her.

Given that they basically grew up together, I’m sure Maisie knows some serious dirt on Kai. Not that she’d ever out him for it. The two are practically family.

“I’m not taking this dude’s side,” River continues. “I’m just saying, maybe there’s a reason for his behavior.”

“Not an acceptable one,” Maisie fires back.

“Can we not sit here and debate my life like I’m not right here?” I offer.

“Just saying, if I were you—”

“There are plenty of things you’ve done that I would never do, and I don’t judge you for it.” I’m quick to stop her from saying whatever it is she was going to say next.

“Sounds like maybe you are,” Maisie clips.

“Are they always like this?” River asks Lyric, amusement in his voice.

“Always.” She chuckles, offering us an apologetic smile. “They’re like siblings. They bicker relentlessly, but they also love the hell out of each other.”

“I guess I love you.” Maisie softens, nudging me with her elbow.

“I guess I love you back,” I murmur with a grin.

“I just worry about you, is all.”

“I know.” I blow out a soft breath.

“So, Kai, Lyric tells me you’re studying to be a civil engineer. What does that entail, exactly?” River asks, and I’m so grateful for the conversation switch; I could kiss him right here and now, audience and all.

I wait until everyone seems to have moved on from my love life, if that’s even what you want to call it, the conversation turning from course of study to best college parties, before I type out another message.

Me: If this is the part where you tell me it was a mistake, don’t.

His response is faster than I expected.

River: Wasn’t it?

Me: I don’t regret it.

River: Neither do I.

I bite down on my bottom lip as I meet his gaze, the deep green of his eyes visible even from here. It's like looking into the most lush, beautiful forest you can possibly imagine, and I'm instantly lost in the thick foliage.

He looks back down at his phone seconds before another text comes through.

River: Doesn't change the fact that this isn't a good idea.

Me: Stop telling me what is or isn't a good idea and tell me what you want.

Several seconds stretch between us, to the point that I almost think he isn't going to respond.

River: You.

My breath hitches as I look up, our eyes locking in place.

I hold his stare for a moment, my heart beating new pathways inside my chest.

I don't respond to that. Honestly, I'm not sure how to. Add on the fact that Maisie is watching me again and I decide maybe this is a conversation best had when we don't have an audience.

I tuck my phone away, refocusing on the conversation, even if it's impossible to keep my mind from drifting back to River's last text message.

You . Such a simple word and yet it holds more possibility than my mind will let my body entertain at the current moment, the vision of us tangled in the sheets, River deep inside of me, too beautiful of an image to fully ignore.

River is the first to leave, with the exception of Dalton and the girls.

Well, technically, he's the only other one to leave, given that the rest of us are staying here, but that's not really the point.

And no, I'm not at all upset by the fact that all I get is a simple head nod in way of a goodbye because, honestly, I got way more out of tonight than I could have hoped.

Lyric and Kai call it a night shortly after. Maisie and I stay in the living room until they go into their separate bedrooms, not wanting to intrude on their good night kiss, which from the sound of it, gets pretty heated.

Once we're sure the coast is clear, we head into River's old bedroom. Since Maisie was an unexpected guest and Lyric only has a twin in her bedroom, her only options were to room with me or sleep on the couch. I think it's clear what she chose.

"So is it just me or did Lyric's brother get even hotter?"

"Maisie asks as she flops down on the large bed that takes up most of the small room.

Propping up on her elbows, I feel her gaze on my back as I strip off my top, then reach into my bag to retrieve my nightshirt.

"I wouldn't mind taking him for a ride, if you know what I mean." She snorts out a laugh.

"Not sure his sister would appreciate that." I'm careful to keep my voice as neutral as possible.

"Not sure his sister would appreciate the two of you talking behind her back, but that

hasn't stopped you."

I momentarily forget how to breathe as my brain struggles to process her words.

"What are you on about?" I wrinkle my nose in confusion as I turn back to her.

Her blue eyes crinkle at the edges like she's trying to piece together an overly complicated puzzle with too many pieces for no reason.

"Are you going to stand there and tell me it wasn't River you were texting tonight?"

"What?" I choke on a laugh that gets stuck in my throat.

"Seriously?" She pushes herself upright, pretzeling her legs close to her body.

"Seriously what?" Nerves make my insides ache.

"Char." She gives me a pointed look. "I watched you two all evening. You would get a text and look up and he'd be watching you.

He'd smile. You'd smile. Then you'd text back.

Rinse and repeat. Did you honestly think I wouldn't notice?

You two were giving some serious vibes, and if Kai hadn't been there, I have no doubt that Lyric would have noticed too. "

"Maisie, I—"

"Please do not insult me by lying."

I think over my options.

Lie and make the situation worse.

Or tell the truth and pray I can keep her quiet at least for the time being.

“You can’t tell Lyric,” I finally concede, blowing out a hard breath.

“You had him in your phone as Conner.”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean...” I can literally see the pieces fall into place. “You were never talking to Conner. It’s been River this whole time.”

“Yes.” I have trouble holding her gaze.

“You’ve been lying to us for months.” The accusation in her tone makes me cringe.

“Yes.”

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“Stop giving me one-word answers and explain before I march across the hall and tell Lyric.” Her threat snaps the last thread of denial I was fighting so hard to keep in place.

“I can explain.”

“You better.” She crosses her arms in front of herself.

This is the last thing I want to do right now. But given the way Maisie is looking at me, I know the only way to get past this is by walking straight through.

“You remember the glow party?” I ask, taking a tentative seat at the edge of the bed, angling myself toward Maisie.

“Of course.”

“Kai took you and Lyric home, and I stayed back with River.”

“Please do not tell me you fucked him.”

“No.” I shake my head. “In fact, nothing happened. Not a single thing, no matter how much I wanted it to. But we did have a lot of fun together, and well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t insanely attracted to him.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Right, well, after that, I thought that’s all it would be. A night of fun. But then he

texted me the next day. I don't even remember giving him my number, but I must have at some point. I really had a lot to drink that night," I quickly explain.

"So you started talking." It's not a question so much as it is a statement.

"We did. But that's all it was. Just talking. Really just texting. I mean, we did talk on the phone some, but most of our conversations were had over text."

"So when did you start hanging out?"

"We didn't. We've never done anything but talk. Tonight was the first time I've seen him since the glow party last year."

"So you expect me to believe you have been talking for months and you've never met up?"

"It's the truth." I knot my hands in my lap. "He started distancing himself toward the end of the year and by a couple weeks into summer, he stopped texting me completely. Everything I told you was true with the exception of who I was actually talking to."

"So it's been River this whole time."

"Yes," I confirm a second time.

"And Lyric clearly has no idea."

"No. River asked me not to tell her. He didn't want to give her the wrong impression."

"And what impression would that be?"

“That there’s something going on between us.”

“But there is.” Her brow furrows in confusion.

“Not really. I mean, up until tonight, we were just friends.”

“But if you were just friends, there would be no reason to hide it.” She shakes her head. “Wait, what do you mean up until tonight?” She seems to just catch that little bit of information I didn’t actually mean to give. “What happened tonight?”

“He kissed me,” I quietly admit.

“When? Where?”

“In the bathroom. Around the same time you and Kai arrived.”

“But he had stopped talking to you?”

“Yeah.”

“But then he kissed you in the bathroom with his whole family a few feet away.”

“I know, right?” I let out a humorless laugh.

“So I’m confused. Are you two a thing or aren’t you?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know.” I toss my hands up, letting them fall back to my lap with an audible smack.

“I guess I can see why you let him string you along now. When I thought it was Conner, I didn’t see the allure. But River... I dare say I’d let that man do anything he

wanted to me, including string me along.” Maisie grins, the action loosening some of the tension in my chest.

“He’s not stringing me along. I don’t think anyway. I think he’s just hesitant.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. The things he would say to me made me feel like he liked me, and not just as a friend, but then he’d contradict himself by saying I’m a good friend or something stupid like that.

Mixed signals are an understatement of what he was giving me.

But then tonight, when I told him I didn’t want to date him, that I just wanted to fuck him, he kissed me. ..”

I blow out a breath, not realizing how badly I needed to talk this out with another person until now. I mean, I confided in Maisie and Lyric, but it never felt right because I was still lying, even if what I was saying was the truth.

“You should tell Lyric.”

“I can’t. Not without breaking River’s trust.”

“And what about Lyric’s trust?” she fires back.

“I know, okay? I know how horrible of a friend this makes me. But telling Lyric ensures this is over and, Mais, I’m not ready for this to be over.”

“So then what’s your plan?” Her expression softens.

“Truth? I don’t have one.”

“Well, if you’re hoping to keep your secret a secret for a little while longer, might I suggest you not spend any time in the same room while Lyric is present. You two are not very subtle.”

“Does that mean you aren’t going to tell her?” I ask, almost hopeful.

“I don’t like it, and I think you should tell her, but no, I won’t tell her. This is your burden to bear, not mine. If you need someone to talk to, I’ll be here for you, but understand that if she asks me outright, I will not lie to her.”

“That’s fair.” I take what I can get, and honestly, it’s more than I deserve.

“Now tell me, is he a good kisser? Oh God, I bet he’s an incredible kisser. You lucky bitch.” She smacks the bed dramatically.

“He’s pretty incredible,” I admit. “He did this thing with his tongue...” I groan. “No one has ever kissed me like that, Mais. Like I was the anchor tethering him to the ground.”

“If you’re trying to make me jealous...” She gives me a tight-lipped stare. “It’s working,” she finally says, her mouth splitting into a wide smile. “That man is F.I.N.E. fine, fine, fine.”

“On that, we can definitely agree.”

“Her older brother Dalton isn’t too bad either. Too bad he’s married.”

“Maisie.” I laugh.

“I’m just saying, I’m wondering what their parents put in the water because their children are freaking beautiful.”

“They really are,” I agree.

“And did you see Dalton’s girls? Looks like they took the pretty pills too.”

“One could say the same thing about your family,” I feel the need to point out. “Or are we just ignoring the fact that you look like a runway model and your brother looks like he stepped off the pages of GQ?”

“Please,” she sputters. “Have you looked at yourself in the mirror recently? No wonder River couldn’t keep his hands off you today.”

“If only,” I murmur, thinking back to our bathroom encounter.

I guess technically it was me who stopped it from going further. I wanted it to, of course. But it didn’t feel right. I mean, it felt right. So right I damn near forgot my own name. But the timing was... Well, not appropriate. Even still, I’m both impressed and surprised by my own willpower.

“I’m going to go brush my teeth before bed,” Maisie tells me, standing.

“Okay. I’ll wait until you’re done and then I’ll go.” I watch her walk to the door.

“Hey, Mais.” I wait until she looks over her shoulder at me before continuing.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Just do us both a favor and don’t lie to me again, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I nod, watching her exit the room seconds later.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

River: Can I see you before you leave?

“I wish you could stay longer.” I look up from my phone when Lyric enters the room.

“Me too.” I give her a smile, quickly tucking the device into my pocket.

Kai and Maisie stayed until Sunday morning, leaving me and Lyric with four additional days alone together. The week went way too fast, and while I’m ready to get back home, I’m going to miss spending all day lounging on the beach with my best friend.

I expected River to stop by. To randomly pop in because he just couldn’t stay away.

He didn’t. In fact, I haven’t heard from him since the night he kissed me.

That is, until this morning. I’m left to assume that Lyric told him I was leaving today, which would explain the text just minutes before I was preparing to leave.

“I can’t convince you to stay a few more days?” She pouts out her bottom lip.

“I would if I could.” I pick up my duffel off the floor, tossing it over my shoulder.
“But I’m pretty sure my mother would like her car back.”

It’s partially true. My mom probably would like her car back.

Then again, she's retired and rarely leaves the house, and if she needs to, she can always use my dad's car.

They didn't have me until they were in their early forties, so they're in the later stages of life than a lot of my friends' parents.

And because I'm their miracle baby—their words, not mine—there's very little I don't get away with.

So really, I could stay. And a part of me really wants to.

The other part of me, however, is tied in knots over River's text and feels like I can't get out the door fast enough.

"Okay. You'll call me as soon as you get home? Let me know you got there safely?"

"I will," I promise, accepting the hug she so freely gives.

"Love you." She squeezes me tightly.

"Love you, too." She releases me after a few seconds.

"Be careful." She tugs open the door for me.

"Always." I throw her one last wave before exiting the house.

Climbing into my mom's Ford Escape, I drop my bag into the passenger seat before firing the engine to life.

Connecting my phone to the charger, I no more than plug the thing in and another message pops up.

River: 4588 West Point Drive, Apartment 6A.

Wait... He wants me to come to his house?

When he said he wanted to see me, I was thinking meeting up for coffee or a quick bite to eat where he would proceed to rehash all the reasons why this is a bad idea, not going to his home , where we will no doubt be alone.

Excitement churns in my stomach.

Typing his address into my GPS, my temptation only grows when I see he lives just eight minutes away. Eight minutes and I could be standing inside the home of the man I've been obsessing over for months.

Isn't this exactly what I've been wanting? A chance to be alone with him. So why do I feel so nervous all of a sudden?

Me: On my way.

Without giving myself too much time to overthink it, I hit send and plug my phone into the car charging port before dropping the device into the console. Backing out of the driveway, I follow the directions now displayed on the screen in the center of the dashboard.

My clammy hands grip the steering wheel too tight. The closer I get, the worse my anxiety becomes. By the time I pull up outside of his apartment building in what feels like the blink of an eye, my insides are wound so tight that I'm sure at any moment I'm going to split apart from the tension.

Pulling down the visor, I check myself in the mirror. Having only applied a light layer of mascara and lip gloss before leaving Lyric's, I look better than I expected.

Though some of that might be the natural flush of my skin, my nerves manifesting on the outside as well.

Pulling down a few strands out of my messy bun, I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly, meeting my green eyes in the reflection of the small mirror.

You got this . I mentally try to hype myself up, but it does little to calm the nervous twitch of my hands.

Another breath in and out, and I close the visor, turning my attention to the eight-story building in front of me as I turn off the engine and force myself out of the car.

I can smell the sea in the air as I cross the parking lot that sits adjacent to the building. Considering I basically drove in a straight line from Lyric's, I can only assume the beach is nearby. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a view of it from the upper levels of the building.

I talk myself in and out of what I'm doing about twenty times before I reach the front door. And, of course, it's locked, requiring someone from inside of the building to buzz you in.

Swallowing down the thick knot that has settled at the base of my throat, I press the button to apartment 6A and hold my breath.

River's voice comes over the intercom within seconds.

“Bout time you showed up, Red.”

I glance up, realizing there's a camera pointed down directly at where I'm standing.

Freaking great.

He doesn't wait for a response before he hits the buzzer and the door in front of me unlocks.

Without a word, I tug it open and slip inside the cool building, which feels refreshing on my too-hot skin.

I head to the double set of elevators that sit straight across the lobby, cursing when the doors slide open the instant I hit the button.

So much for having a minute to collect myself.

The ride up to the sixth floor feels like an eternity and yet happens so fast I've barely processed the movement before the elevator stops and the doors slide open once more.

Confirming it's the correct floor, I step out into the hallway, taking in the dark-colored tile that perfectly complements the light-colored walls and greenery that decorates the space between apartments. The building is even nicer on the inside than it is on the outside.

Stepping to the right, I follow the hall to the very end where I find the door that has 6A attached to the exterior.

Lifting my hand to knock, I don't even touch the wood before it swings open, leaving me standing with my hand awkwardly in the air. I drop it the instant River's face comes into view.

I didn't think it was possible for River to get better looking, but as he stands in front of me in a plain white shirt and gray lounge pants, so casual and at ease I could die, I'm struck by how beautiful he is all over again.

“Hey.” He opens the door wider, stepping back enough to give me room to enter. “I wasn’t sure you would show,” he says as I step past him into the apartment.

“Neither was I,” I admit, looking around at the sparsely decorated, yet very tidy, space.

It’s an open floor plan, each room bleeding into the other, with very little in the way of separation. Gray wood floors. Cream-colored walls. A large wraparound couch in the center of the living room. A television mounted to the wall in front of it.

It may not have much in the way of decorations, but with windows lining the far wall, you don’t really need many.

As I suspected, you can see the water from up here and the view is spectacular, even from where I stand by the entrance.

We’re at least as far from the beach as Lyric’s parents’ house, but because there is very little around to obstruct the view, it feels much closer.

I take a moment to study it before finally turning toward River when I hear the obvious sound of the door closing behind me.

“Nice view.” I gesture to the windows, feeling a little embarrassed that that’s the best I could come up with.

“Yeah, it’s one of the reasons I picked this place.” He grins, seeming completely at ease, while I’m over here feeling like I might bounce out of my own skin. “You thirsty? Hungry? Anything I can get you?”

“I’m good.” I shake my head, slipping off my shoes by the door, a cardinal rule in my parents’ home. “Why aren’t you at work?” I ask, knowing he should be given that it’s

only three in the afternoon. “Isn’t there some emergency that has you working all day every day?”

“There was,” he confirms. “We have locked down the breach and assessed the damage, as well as put additional action into place to prevent it from happening again.” He tries to dumb it down in a way that I will understand, and I appreciate it because I know next to nothing about cybersecurity or what all it entails.

“Given the number of hours I’ve been working, they let me off early and gave me the entire weekend off. ”

“Lucky you.” I knot my hands in front of me.

“How was the rest of your visit with my sister?” he asks, heading into the kitchen.

“It was good.” I try so hard to keep my voice neutral that it ends up coming out strained. “We spent a lot of time on the beach.”

“Not surprising.” He grabs two bottles of water from the stainless steel fridge before heading back toward me. “My sister loves the beach.” He extends me a water even though I said I didn’t want anything.

“Thanks.” I unclasp my hands to accept the bottle.

After twisting off the cap, I take a long pull, for no other reason than to give myself something to do.

It’s so strange to be able to talk so openly with someone, to share some of your darkest fears and deepest desires over the phone, only to have no idea what to say to them when they’re standing right in front of you.

Imagine meeting someone online. Someone you immediately connect with.

Someone who just seems to get you. Imagine spending months getting to know that person.

Sharing almost everything with them. And then imagine standing in front of them for the first time.

Then you might be able to understand just a smidge of where I'm coming from.

And, while no, this isn't the first time we're meeting in person, it might as well be because it's the very first time we've ever been truly alone, and this knowledge terrifies me as much as it excites me.

"How many bedrooms do you have here?" I ask, again just trying to ease my own tension with easy conversation.

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“Two.” He sips his own water, his eyes locked on me as he does.

River is the definition of gorgeous. Forest green eyes.

Blond hair. A short, well-kept beard that’s easily three shades darker than the hair on his head, accenting a face that might as well have been etched from stone; he’s so perfect.

Far more perfect than any human has the right to be. It’s unfair really.

Add on the fact that he’s tall, standing at least five inches taller than my five-eight stature, with broad shoulders, thick muscles visible through the thin fabric of his T-shirt, and a smirk that can dismantle every single one of my defenses in an instant, and I think it’s safe to say he’s pretty irresistible.

“Why am I here, River?” I finally ask, unable to take the silence a second longer.

“I don’t know,” he admits, twisting the cap back onto his water bottle before lowering it onto the end stand that sits next to the couch.

“You don’t know?” I arch a brow, my breath catching in my throat when he steps closer, taking my water bottle and setting it next to his.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.” He steps closer.

“Was that before or after I told you all I wanted was to fuck you?” I try to fake a confidence that I don’t actually feel.

“Both.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.” I fight to keep my composure when he takes another step, our bodies now mere inches apart.

“I’ve been an asshole these past few weeks.”

“You think?” I square my shoulders.

“I just wanted to do right by you.”

“And you thought ghosting me after months was doing right by me?”

“No. That was a selfish dick move, and I’m sorry for it. But it was the only way I knew how to...”

“How to what?” I urge him to continue.

“How to get you out of my system.” He blows out a hard breath, the warmth of it sliding across my face.

I inhale the scent of him, all mint and musk.

God, he even smells like perfection. “I thought time and distance would dull the way I ache for you.” His fingers tangle around mine and he lifts my hand, flattening it against his chest.

I can feel the thrum of his heartbeat, nearly as fast and erratic as mine.

“And how did that work out for you?” I ask softly, trying to force breath in and out of my lungs in slow, steady pulls.

“How does it look like it worked?”

His fingers graze my other arm and I swear I feel that simple touch everywhere .

“What do you want from me, River?” I ask in exasperation, refusing to let him distract me. If he wants me, he’s going to have to say it.

“I already told you.”

“Tell me again.”

“You.”

I have no idea how my legs manage to keep my body upright because it feels like the ground sways under my feet, turning the world sideways.

He slides my hand from his chest seconds before his appears at the small of my back, pulling me flush against him. I damn near groan at the feel of his tense muscles pressed against me.

“I can’t make you any promises.”

“I’m not asking for any,” I reassure him.

He leans in, sliding his nose against mine.

“You better be sure, Red. I’ve spent months dreaming about this body.” His hand slides from my back to my hip, his other hand coming up to grip the other. “Once I start, I may never stop.”

“Good.” I barely get the words out before his lips crash to mine with so much force it

pushes me backward, his grip on me the only thing that keeps me in place.

I open for him immediately, moaning into his mouth when his tongue slides against mine in a way that feels like he's been kissing me his whole life.

"Keep making noises like that and this is going to be over way quicker than I want it to be." He husks against my mouth, tugging my bottom lip between his teeth before biting down gently.

I damn near come undone.

"Quick is good." I smile as he kisses the place his teeth just were. "Means we can do it again even sooner." I wrap my arms around his neck, laughter bubbling in my throat as he lifts me straight off the ground, my feet swaying in the air as he moves.

Moments later, I find myself pressed against the wall of windows.

My shirt comes off first, then my bra, the cool glass biting into my skin as he pushes me flush against it, his head dipping as his mouth closes around my nipple, nipping and sucking in a way that lights a fire straight through me.

He moves to the other side and repeats the process, dragging the nub between his teeth, causing my back to arch, unable to stifle the cry that breaks through the otherwise silent room.

I feel him smile against my skin seconds before he does it again.

When his mouth makes its way back up to mine, I'm breathing so hard I briefly wonder if I'm not about to hyperventilate.

I can't help it. The way he's looking at me, the way he's touching me, like he simply

can't get enough, it's overwhelming in the most incredible way.

No man has ever made me feel this way, like I'm turned inside out, and he's barely even touched me yet. My flesh prickles with anticipation when he pulls back, his heated gaze meeting mine.

"Last chance," he warns, popping the button of my jean shorts open.

"Shut up and kiss me," I say breathlessly, my heart doing a full flip in my chest at the sight of the smile that tips his lips seconds before he does exactly what I say, kissing me so completely that I feel consumed by it.

He unzips my shorts at a tortuously slow pace, pulling them down even slower, to the point that I'm tempted to move him aside and do it myself. Or at least that's what I think until he slowly lowers to his knees in front of me.

I watch in open fascination as he kisses my lower abdomen, licking and swirling his tongue against my skin as he moves lower, lower, so low that his lips are now on my bare public bone. I hiss when he dips lower, my head falling back on a deep groan when his lips press to my center.

"You smell even better than I imagined." He inhales me deeply, groaning, and I melt, my fingers going into his hair as I urge him further.

The first swipe of his tongue is like feeling the sun on your skin after spending months in the darkness. The second, a cool breeze against too-hot skin. By the third, I can't form a coherent thought.

All I know is want. Need. Desperation.

He takes his time, sucking and kissing, licking and biting, driving me to the point of

climax so quickly, I barely have time to brace for impact before it hits me with so much force, I feel disoriented.

My core sings. My head buzzes. My body..

. Well, that bitch has decided she no longer belongs to me at all but to the man currently lapping up my release like it's the sweetest thing he's ever tasted.

And then he's in front of me, kissing me long and deep, making sure I taste every bit of my pleasure on his tongue.

"Let me grab..."

"Don't." I hiss against his lips, closing my fingers around the impossibly hard erection that strains against his lounge pants. "You don't need it."

He pulls back, eyes dark.

"You're on birth control?"

"Something like that." I nip at his lips.

"Something like that?" He narrows his gaze, not willing to just take me at my word, which I guess I can understand.

"I can't have kids, okay?"

"Like at all?" His expression shifts, making me desperate to move on from this conversation.

"No. And no, I don't want to talk about it." Understanding passes over his features.

“You trust me to fuck you bare?” He practically moans the words.

“You forget I know you, River Jonathan Parker. Even when you’ve tried to shut me out, I know you.

And I’ve waited months to have you. I don’t want to feel you with a barrier.

I want to feel all of you.” I lean in, pressing my lips to his.

I kiss him slowly, thoroughly, letting my fingers trace the length of him over his pants before finally slipping inside.

He hisses against my mouth at the first touch. Running my fingertips from base to tip, I revel in how soft his skin is, in how hard and ridged he is for me. And when I trail my thumb over the tip, sliding through the dampness of his arousal, something in him unravels.

One minute my fingers are on him, the next my hands are above my head, one hand wrapped around both of my wrists, holding me in place.

I watch with bated breath as he frees himself from the confines of his pants, his heavy erection bobbing as he uses his free hand to part my legs far enough to allow him to settle between them.

I drop my head back on a whimper as he slides his length through my seam, my body so primed and ready for him he meets absolutely zero resistance.

Releasing my hands, he hoists one leg over his hip, then the other, leaving my bare ass pressed against the glass.

I open my mouth to object, but he quickly cuts me off, reading my thoughts perfectly.

“The glass is tinted. No one can see in.”

Without another word, he lines himself at my entrance and plunges into me in a swift motion, our bodies coming together in a clash. He fills me so deeply that I gasp, my body not accustomed to the width and length of him.

My fingers are in his hair. At the nape of his neck.

My nails scratch across his back as he moves at a relentless pace, fucking me so fast and hard that the pleasure borders on pain, and yet, it's not nearly enough.

I want all of it. All of him. I want him so deep that I don't know where he ends and I begin.

I want to draw him in and never let him leave. I want... everything .

With that fleeting thought, my body erupts around him, the very earth beneath us seeming to shake with the aftermath of the most intense orgasm I've ever experienced. But that isn't enough for River. He keeps going, driving me to climax again before I've even recovered from the first.

And then, with the sexiest grunt I've ever heard in my life, he spills his release inside of me. And as we come down, our limbs tangled together, our panted breaths intermingling, I have only one thought... I can't wait to do that again.

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River

“Everything okay?” Charlotte presses up onto her elbow when I reenter the room. I drink in the sight of her naked in my bed, red hair spilling across the most perfect ivory skin I’ve ever seen.

She’s breathtaking... Truly.

The knot of unease in my chest is only slightly outweighed by how desperately I want to sink back inside of her and never leave.

“Yeah, it was just work.” I drop my cell phone onto my dresser as I stalk toward her.

“Anything important?”

“No, just wanted to see if I could work tomorrow.” I crawl up the bed, pulling the covers back so that not a single inch of her is hidden from my view.

“I thought they gave you the weekend off?”

“They did.”

“So are you going to?” She drops her elbow, shifting so she’s flat on her back.

I smile. Always so willing and ready for me.

“And miss out on one more day of this?” I lean down, pressing my lips to her

stomach. “Not a chance. I told them I had a family obligation I couldn’t get out of.” I move up higher, kissing the soft skin at the underside of her breast.

“Is that your way of asking me to stay another night?” She giggles when I hit a ticklish spot.

I didn’t technically ask her to stay last night.

I just refused to let her leave my bed once she was in it.

One taste, and all I wanted was more. One touch and I was mesmerized.

But feeling her bare around me, there are no words to what that’s done to me, though addicted seems like the most fitting thing I can come up with.

I had never fucked a woman bare before..

. Never trusted someone enough to allow myself.

And maybe it was foolish of me to trust Charlotte enough, but I did.

I do. Having felt her warm and wet around me, flesh to flesh; there’s no going back now anyway.

Anything less than all of her simply won’t suffice.

“Do you want to stay another night?” I climb farther up her body and swirl my tongue around each nipple, puckered with arousal, before my lips reach hers. I kiss her slowly and deeply, already so hard for her it’s damn near painful.

I’ve been with enough women in my life to know that Charlotte O’Malley is a rare

breed. Wild and untamed. Willing to take everything I give her and still ask for more.

No matter how much I know we shouldn't be doing this, there isn't a fucking thing in this world that could get me to leave this bed right now.

"I could be persuaded." She grins against my mouth.

"Oh yeah?" I slide my tongue against hers. "What do you want?"

"You're off to a good start." She tangles her hands in my hair, kissing me back with just as much fever as I'm kissing her.

"What about this?" I slide my hand between us, smiling when I feel her so wet and ready for me she's practically pooling over my fingers. Dipping two fingers inside of her, I hook the tips, letting out a satisfied groan when her entire body jumps.

"Yeah," she rasps.

I press my thumb to her clit, moving it in soft circles against it as my fingers continue their assault.

"And now?" I hum against her neck.

"You're getting warmer." She pants, already out of breath.

I abruptly withdraw my hand, not giving her time to object, before I quickly replace it with the tip of my cock edging at her entrance.

"Is this what you want?" I press in an inch, damn near losing my ability to hold back at the feel of her.

“Mm-hmm.” She nods, pressing her lips together.

“This?” I press forward a couple more inches.

“Yes.” She groans, arching her back in an effort to force me deeper.

“So greedy.”

“Yes,” she unapologetically agrees.

Fuck if I don’t love her like this. Red hair splayed across the pillow. Perfect breasts on full display. Her arousal so clear in her expression that it nearly has me spilling my load before I’m even fully inside of her.

“More?”

She nods.

I oblige.

“More?” I ask again.

Her eyes open and meet mine.

“I want it all.”

My restraint snaps in an instant, and I plunge the rest of the way inside. The groan that works its way up my throat before spilling past my lips is one of pure animalistic need.

My mouth finds hers, kissing her so deeply that I’m able to swallow every moan and

whimper of her pleasure until I've taken everything her body can give me, and then I take a little bit more because I am a selfish fucking man who simply cannot get enough.

And when I empty my release inside her, the feel of her climax still spasming around me, I feel euphoric. Like a junkie that just injected liquid gold into my veins, my entire body feeling the effects.

What I said earlier feels even more prominent now.

Charlotte O'Malley is my new favorite addiction. And one, for the life of me, I don't know if I'll ever break free from.

"Tell me something I don't already know," Charlotte says sometime later as we lie in bed, naked limbs tangled together, skin still damp from another round.

"Something you don't already know..." I think about that for a long moment, having more trouble than I should coming up with something, which should tell you just how much I shared with her over our months of texts and calls.

"I think people who eat pineapple on pizza are wired wrong," I say the first thing that comes to mind.

"Seriously? That's the best you could come up with?" She lays a soft smack to my stomach.

"You already know so much about me," I admit.

"And yet, I feel like I don't know nearly enough." She glances up at me, eyes so bright that I'm convinced I could lose myself in them if I let myself.

“What do you want to know?” I twist a strand of soft, auburn hair around my finger.

“Everything.”

“Everything, huh?”

Her stomach growls so loudly that I could hear it even if I were standing across the room.

“Sorry.” She laughs, tucking her face into my chest. “You said pizza and I guess my body decided it was hungry.”

“What time is it?” I ask as I glance over at my bedside table. Nearly three in the afternoon. We’ve been in bed most of the day and I’ve been so wrapped up in her body, I didn’t even think to feed her. “Shit. It’s late. You’re probably starving.”

“Not until about thirty seconds ago.” She looks back up at me. “I had other things on my mind.” She fights the smile that plays on her lips.

“What are you in the mood for?” I sit up, taking her with me.

“Anything.”

“You don’t have a preference?”

“I mean, pizza sounds pretty good.” She smiles sheepishly.

Fuck, she really is so beautiful.

“What do you like on your pizza?” I throw my legs over the side of the bed before pushing to a stand. After slipping on my boxers, I cross the room and grab two clean

shirts out of the dresser before tossing one to her.

I know she has clothes of her own, but after seeing her walking around in nothing but my shirt yesterday, I'm eager to repeat the process.

"Pineapple." She snorts out a laugh when I turn wide eyes on her.

"You're fucking with me, right?"

"I would never fuck with you." She pushes up onto her knees, giving me the perfect shot of her exquisite body for a few short seconds before she slides my tee over her head. "Have you ever tried it?"

"No, and I never will." I curl my nose in disgust as I slide on my own shirt.

"How can you say you don't like it if you've never tried it?" She climbs out of bed and pads across the floor toward me.

"Some things I just know."

"Like how you knew we wouldn't work?" She arches a brow, trailing her hands up my chest. "Turns out we work really"—she presses up on her toes—"really"—she kisses the side of my mouth as she palms my dick, and I bite back a groan—"well." She finally finishes, smiling as she pulls away.

"I never doubted we'd be good in bed." I grab her hand, pulling her back to me, my fingers going into her hair as I angle her face up toward mine.

It's no secret that I'm at odds with this.

On one hand, she's basically all I've thought about for the last several months and

telling her that this is a one-time thing feels equivalent to stabbing myself straight through the ribs with a serrated blade and twisting—excruciating.

On the other, I can't shake the feeling that if I don't, I will regret it.

Maybe not today. Or a week from now. Or even a month from now.

But one day, when the reality of our situation comes crashing down and I'm forced to end whatever this is.

On that day, I will regret not letting her go when I was still able to.

But that day is not today .

I angle her head to give me better access, kissing her good and proper before releasing her, knowing if I don't, there's no chance we'll be leaving this room anytime soon and she needs to eat.

"You really want pizza?"

"I really want pizza."

"With pineapple?"

"With pineapple," she confirms. "I guess some of us are just wired wrong." She gives me a cheeky grin before she practically skips out of my bedroom.

This gorgeous woman is going to be the death of me.

Pineapple on pizza.

Fuck me.

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Charlotte

“I told you,” I tease, watching River go in for a second piece of pizza with pineapple .

“You don’t know unless you try.”

“It’s gross.” He shakes his head, causing blond strands to fall across his forehead in a way that is so sexy I have to resist the urge to groan at the sight of him.

“Then why are you eating it?” I arch a brow in question.

He’s sitting on the far end of the couch while I’m tucked into the bend, my legs stretched out in front of me, giving me the perfect view of his profile as he eats.

“Because I’m hungry.” He smiles around a mouthful of food, a twinkle of humor in his hunter-green eyes.

“Liar. You like it. If you didn’t, you’d be picking the pineapple off.” I point a finger at the slice he’s holding.

For someone who thought pineapple on pizza was just wrong, you’d think he would have ordered himself something else, but no.

He ordered what I wanted and tried it even though he didn’t want to.

And that right there is just one of the many reasons why I’m completely smitten with the man in front of me.

The last two days have been... Well, unbelievable really. Unbelievable and so incredible I still haven't been able to fully wrap my head around it. It feels like a dream. The best dream. A dream I want to hold on to for as long as I can. A dream I never want to wake up from.

"Then it would just be a cheese pizza that tastes like pineapple." He crinkles his nose. "At least this way the pineapple offers some texture."

"Keep making all the excuses you want. You don't have to admit you like it. I know how much men hate being wrong," I tease, poking my foot into his side.

"Wrong?" He drops what little remains of the slice back into the box before setting his sights on me. "I am a lot of things, Red, but wrong is never one of them."

I instantly squirm under his intense stare, trying and failing to contain my smile when he grabs my foot and pulls me flat onto the couch before stalking up my body like an animal who's just stumbled upon its next meal.

"Somehow, I doubt that." I squeal in laughter when his hand finds my side and squeezes.

"Guess I'll just have to prove it to you then." He trails his tongue across his bottom lip seconds before his face dips to the crook of my neck, his mouth pressing against my pulse, which jumps against the touch.

"And how do you plan to do that?" I ask, trying not to let him distract me, which he is very, very good at.

"By showing you all the ways I'm right ." His teeth sink gently into the side of my neck, biting just hard enough to leave imprints on my skin.

I arch into him, silently asking for more, the thread between pleasure and pain so thin that it's possible for it to be both things at once.

"How is this proving you're always right?" I manage to get the words out without groaning when he nips the flesh a little harder this time, his tongue darting out to lick the area.

"Because I knew you'd like this." He moves to the other side, repeating the process.

"And? It's no secret that pain and pleasure often go hand in hand."

"True." His lips are at my ear now, sucking the lobe into his mouth as he gently rolls it between his teeth. "But not everyone enjoys the pain. I knew you would." He kisses his way across my cheek.

"That hardly makes you always right." I start to argue, but he swallows my words, cutting off my ability to continue. Hell, making it hard to form a coherent thought at all.

"You were saying?" He smiles against my lips, deepening the kiss to the point that all I see is him. All I feel is him.

River Parker has a way of quieting all the noise that tends to bounce around in my head like an overplayed pinball machine. Everything falls silent. Everything but the sound of my own heart thudding around in my chest.

I forget what we're talking about. I forget everything but this.

The feel of his mouth on mine.

The warmth of his hand as it moves between us, parting my thighs just enough to

give him access to slip beneath my underwear and touch me.

“Yessss.” I hiss when he dips a finger inside, teasing me.

From the very first time I had sex to now, I’ve been searching for this.

The high that River gives me. The feeling of being bent completely to the will of another and wanting it.

He winds my body to the point of breaking and then pushes me further.

He doesn’t ask permission. He simply takes. But he gives even more.

He works me like a violin and he’s the most skilled player to ever walk the face of the earth. He’s perfection, playing the song of my body with such innate precision that within minutes, I’m grappling to hold on to even a semblance of control.

“River.” His name comes out as a plea as he presses his thumb to my clit and begins moving in time with the finger, now fingers, inside of me.

“Come for me,” he rasps, his breath hot against my face before he silences me with another mind-bending kiss.

I come apart in his hands, crying into his mouth as the ripples of pleasure work over me like a violent ocean wave. A wave I’ve yet to recover from when his hand is quickly replaced with the weight of his thick erection.

Shoving my underwear further to the side, he enters me in one fluid motion, filling me so completely full that there isn’t a pore in my body that doesn’t feel the effects of him.

Our bodies come together in a clash of hands and lips, neither able to get enough of the other as we scratch and bite, drawing every ounce of pleasure from each other until we're both spent.

River collapses on top of me, giving me the fullness of his weight, which I relish more than I could ever put into words.

He feels incredible on top of me. His heart ramrodding in his chest so violently that I can feel it against my own.

He buries his face into the side of my neck, his breathing labored.

"You are—" His words die on his lips when the front door buzzer breaks the otherwise silent room, startling us both. "Who the fuck could that be?" He wonders aloud, kissing the tip of my nose as he reluctantly withdraws from my body.

I watch in utter fascination as he tucks his thick length back into his lounge pants before fully standing and crosses toward the front door.

I sit up just enough that my eyes can continue to track his movement.

He presses the button on the speaker that sits on the wall directly next to his front door.

I quickly realize he has no access to the camera outside, which means when I arrived the other day, he assumed it was me, but he didn't know for sure.

"Yeah?" He's still mildly out of breath when he says it, bringing a satisfied smile to my lips.

"Yeah?" Lyric's familiar voice fills the room. "Is that any way to greet your sister?"

I stand so fast that I nearly topple over in my attempt to get off the couch.

River's eyes meet mine, a twinge of panic in his expression that he quickly masks.

"I didn't realize it was you. I can't see you, you know?"

"Are you going to buzz me up or make me stand out here having a conversation with a speaker?" She feigns annoyance.

"Come on up." He hits the button that unlocks the front door before fully turning toward me.

A brief moment of silence passes between us, like we're both trying to figure out what the fuck we should do.

"She can't know you're here," he finally says after a beat.

I nod once, trying not to be offended by his words.

As much as I want Lyric to know the truth, even I can agree that this is not the way she should find out.

I make a beeline for his bedroom, surprised when he quickly follows me inside.

"What are you—" I start to ask, falling silent when he steps into my space and kisses me.

"Stay here. Stay quiet. I'll get her out of here as soon as I can." He kisses me again before turning to pull a clean shirt out of the drawer.

It takes me longer than it should to realize that some of his release got on the bottom

of his shirt. Thank goodness he noticed because I sure as hell didn't. Which reminds me, I'm in desperate need of a bathroom so that I can get myself cleaned up.

"I need to clean up," I tell him, looking past his shoulder when I hear a knock at the door.

"You can use the bathroom. I'll turn the television on so she won't hear you." He quickly backs out of the room, apology lining every feature of his handsome face.

"What if she recognizes my mom's car outside?" A flash of panic slides through me.

"Is there anything on it that would give it away as yours?"

I think for a moment, not able to think of anything, so I shake my head.

"Then I don't think she'll think anything of it. It's not like it's a rare model or color, right?"

"Right." I nod.

"Stay here. Stay quiet." It's the last thing he says before he pulls the door closed.

I stare at the back of that door for a few long seconds, having to fight with the unsettling sensation of feeling like someone's dirty little secret.

Something that needs to be hidden away. And while I understand, and agree, that this is not the way for Lyric to find out, it doesn't mean that I enjoy feeling this way.

Not able to stop myself, I move closer to the door when I hear voices. Pressing my ear to the wood, I shamelessly try to hear what they're saying. Unfortunately, the noise of the TV doesn't just drown out me, it also drowns out both of them.

Blowing out a hard breath, I make my way into the en suite bathroom.

After making quick and quiet work of cleaning myself up, I crawl into River's bed, pulling the blankets up over my head to shield out the light pouring in through the window.

I don't know how long I lie there. Twenty minutes. Forty. An hour. Two hours. The minutes bleed together, my eyelids growing heavier the more time that passes.

I must doze off completely at some point because one second I'm fighting sleep, and the next I'm blinking into the darkness of the room, a heavy weight draped across my middle.

It takes me longer than it should to realize it's River, his deep breathing the only sound in the otherwise silent room. One of his legs is thrown over mine, his arm draped across my stomach. His face buried in the side of my neck, his breath warming my skin.

I take a brief moment to let myself soak in the incredible feel of him before my mind focuses on other matters.

How long was I asleep?

I crane my neck to be able to see the clock on the bedside table.

It's just after four. My head is so upside down right now, it takes a long moment for my sleep-riddled brain to decide whether it's four in the morning or in the afternoon, though the fact the only light in the room is the soft glow that spills in from the hallway, I figure it's morning, otherwise the sun would be spilling in through the window.

Resting my head back on the pillow, I stare up at the dark ceiling, my hand finding River's arm that's draped across my middle. I begin numbly tracing shapes with my fingertips as I listen to him breathe.

How long was Lyric here?

Why was she here?

Did she suspect anything?

These are the questions that plague my brain as I struggle to reclaim the sleep that my body so desperately needs. Even now, after sleeping for several hours, I can still feel the exhaustion of this weekend deep in my bones.

It's not lost on me that I'm supposed to leave today. The thought sends unease sliding through my chest.

I know that as soon as I walk out that door, everything will be different. It's easy here, inside our private bubble. As effortless as breathing. But out there, in the real world, the simplicity of our relationship, for lack of a better word, is gone.

For all I know, this will all be over the instant I'm gone.

River said he couldn't get me out of his system, which is code for let me fuck you out of my system instead.

And given the way we've been going at it like rabbits for two solid days, I imagine he's probably getting close to that point.

Then again, I felt the same way, and yet, I feel nowhere near getting him out of my system.

If anything, I only want him more. It's not hard to see why that's a very big problem.

If he ghosts me again, it won't just be a scrape, it will be a cut so deep that not even the best surgeon would be able to stop the bleeding.

Because even though my body is still learning his touch, my heart has been in this game a lot longer than the last two days, even if I've been reluctant to admit as much.

The thought should scare me, and I guess in a way it does, but it also strengthens my resolve.

I've never been someone who gives up without a fight and I'm sure as hell not about to start now.

It was different when we were just talking. But now things are different.

The days of playing fair are over. And I will utilize every weapon in my arsenal to get exactly what I want.

Him...

Charlotte

“What do you mean you’re just now heading home?” Maisie’s voice carries through the car speakers as I merge onto the freeway, having just left River’s apartment a few short minutes ago.

Only a few miles separate us, and yet, every pore in my body mourns the loss of his nearness. I want to turn around and go back so badly I can taste it.

Much to my delight, River seemed as reluctant to let me go as I was to leave, which explains why I ended up staying another night and didn’t leave until this morning when he had to head into the office.

“Lyric said you left Friday afternoon.” Her voice is still thick with sleep and given that it’s not even nine in the morning, I think it’s a safe bet that my phone call woke her up.

“I did. I just didn’t go home.” I smile to myself, remembering exactly where I spent the weekend—pinned beneath River, looking up into those hunter-green eyes as he drove into me over and over again, taking my body to places I never even dreamed it could go.

God, just the memory has my skin heating to an uncomfortable level.

“Char?” Her tone is riddled with a hundred questions that she efficiently asks with that one word.

“Yes?” My smile widens to the point of practically splitting my face in half.

“Where have you been all weekend?” she asks, though the way she asks tells me she already knows. Her next words solidify this fact. “You were with River, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I practically squeal.

“And given that Lyric hasn’t said a peep to me, I’m assuming she doesn’t know.”

“No.” I shake my head, even though she can’t see me. “But she did show up while I was there and I ended up hiding in River’s room.”

“Tell me you’re joking.”

“I wish I were.” I blow out a breath, her statement bringing me back down to reality quick, fast, and in a hurry.

I’ve been so overwhelmed by River, by everything that happened this weekend, that I’ve yet to let the guilt of my actions sink in. My best friend came over to visit her brother and I hid in his room, his cum still warm inside of me. The thought makes me feel nauseous.

“Charlotte.” Maisie sighs audibly. “I was fine keeping your secret when you two were just talking... But this.”

I can see her shaking her head in disapproval as if she were standing right in front of me.

“I know it makes me an awful friend, but, Mais, I can’t help it. I want him,” I admit.

“And I know I shouldn’t burden you with this, but I had to tell someone. If I didn’t, I

was going to explode.”

“And there wasn’t some friend at home you could tell? One who wouldn’t be betraying one of her best friends just by knowing this information?”

“They wouldn’t understand. Not like you do.”

“You are putting me in an impossible position. You know that, right?”

“I’m sorry... I—”

“So how was it?” she interrupts, a hint of resignation to her voice, like she knows now and there’s no changing it, so she might as well know the details too.

“Incredible!” I practically squeal with the excitement that bubbles out of me like lava erupting from a volcano that’s been dormant for decades. “He is... Oh my God, Mais, I don’t even think I can find the words.”

“That good, huh?”

“Even better than what you’re probably imagining.”

“Fuck me.” She groans. “If he fucks even half as good as he looks...” She trails off. “So, are you two like together now?”

“Not exactly. But he did say he would like to see me again.”

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“We didn’t really talk about it. We were, um, well, preoccupied.”

“But did he give you the impression he wants to be with you?”

“Yes. No. Hell, I don’t know. All I know is that he was reluctant to let me leave today and that has to count for something, right?”

“Maybe. Or maybe he just wanted to fuck you a few more times.”

“I don’t see the problem with that.”

“There isn’t one. Except it’s not just sex anymore, Char. Your heart’s involved.”

“No, it isn’t,” I’m quick to deny the truth even though I basically already admitted as much.

“I’m just saying, tread carefully. I don’t want to see you get hurt. Until he actually says he wants to be with you, and Lyric knows, you need to be prepared that this may not go the way you want it to.”

“I know.” My good mood sours slightly.

“Okay. As long as you know what’s at stake.”

“I do,” I assure her, because really, I do.

“Then I won’t say another word on the matter. As long as you promise me that when this inevitably goes sideways, you won’t take me down with you.”

“I would never...”

“So you’ve got what, at least a couple of hours until you’re home?” she chimes in when I don’t continue.

“Closer to three.”

“Perfect. So you have plenty of time to tell me everything. Start from the beginning. Leave nothing out.”

And so I do.

I rehash it all, only leaving out the explicit parts that feel too personal to divulge in any great detail. By the time I finish, I feel lighter, having had a chance to say it all out loud to another living person. If I had to hold it in for much longer, I was likely to split apart at the seams.

Maisie hangs on to every word, only stopping me here and there to ask questions or clarify something.

And as we hang up the phone nearly an hour later, I’m struck by just how lucky I am to have her in my life. She may not realize it but being able to talk to her about this has given me a great deal of comfort.

Our relationship has always been a little rough around the edges, and it’s no secret that I tend to lean more on Lyric than Maisie, especially when it comes to sharing things I’m not entirely comfortable with.

But in this situation, Maisie is the perfect person to confide in, and not because she’s not River’s sister, but because we’re a lot more similar in the way we are with men, and I just feel like she understands me better in that way.

Even still, it kills me not to call Lyric and share in my happiness the way I just did with Maisie.

I could call her, lie and say it was Conner, but that feels worse than just not telling her

at all.

It was one thing when we were just talking, but things have escalated way beyond talking now, and I'm not sure I could look her in the eye ever again if I continued the Conner lie.

I will let her believe that ship has sailed, and I think that's ultimately better than cooking up more half-truths.

Besides, I only lied about Conner so that she wouldn't constantly be asking me who I was talking to. Now that she's moving in with Kai, she won't be around to question me, so really, there's no need to create more lies between us than there already are.

One day, she'll learn the truth. I just hope like hell, when that day comes, she can find a way to forgive me.

"Are you excited to get back on campus?" River asks, the deep rasp of his voice making the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

It's been three weeks since the weekend we spent together, and any fear I had that he would ghost me a second time had evaporated less than an hour after I returned to my parents' house when he called me and talked to me for the entirety of his lunch break.

And then proceeded to call me every single evening that followed.

We've even had nights where we've stayed on the phone so late, neither of us wanting to hang up, that I've fallen asleep to the sound of him breathing and have woken up to find the call still connected several hours later.

He hasn't said anything, but I get the feeling he likes me a lot more than he's trying to lead on. Not that I have any problem with that.

“Not as excited as I am to see you,” I tell him, stuffing some of the clothes laid out on my bed into one of my duffels.

When he asked me to spend the weekend with him before returning to campus, there wasn't a chance in hell I was going to say no.

My plan is to take all my bags with me because I will be heading directly to campus from River's on Sunday afternoon.

I hate having to take so much luggage with me on the bus, but I don't really have any other options.

And I can't take my mom's car this time because, well, I'm not coming back home.

Plus, she wasn't all that thrilled with me that I kept her car three days longer than I said I would last time I borrowed it.

“Were your parents upset when they found out you weren't staying with them your last weekend before you return to campus?”

“No, I wouldn't say that. Maybe a little disappointed that I didn't want them to drive me, but nothing other than that.”

“Do they know where you're going to be this weekend?”

“As far as they know, I'll be at UVA. I told them I was officially allowed to move into my dorm tomorrow and that I'll be staying with Maisie and her family tonight and then heading to campus in the morning.”

In truth, move-in day isn't until Sunday, but I figured a little white lie wouldn't hurt anyone.

Seems to be a recurring theme of mine as of late.

Half-truths, omissions, and flat-out lies, no matter how small.

I used to pride myself on being someone who could be taken at her word, but now.

.. Guilt twists my stomach into a tight knot that I force myself to breathe through.

“What about your parents? Were they upset when Lyric left two weeks earlier than planned?” I quickly tack on, not giving him a chance to comment on me openly admitting that I lied. He probably thinks I’m a very untrustworthy person and that thought does not sit right with me.

I am trustworthy... At least, I used to be. Now I don’t know what I am.

“Not upset so much as afraid they’re gonna end up with another grandchild.” He chuckles, the sound deep and rich.

“I take it they’re not over the moon about her living with Kai?”

“That’s one way of putting it. Don’t get me wrong, they like the guy and all. It’s just...”

“Lyric is their baby,” I finish for him, already knowing exactly what he was going to say.

“Exactly.”

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“And how are you dealing with all this? I don’t have brothers, so I don’t know how this works, but aren’t you supposed to be super overprotective and hate any guy she’s with?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Lyric and I have always been close, and while yes, I will always look out for her, I’ve always trusted her enough to make her own decisions. She’s the one who has to live with the consequences if things don’t work out.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“She’s lucky to have you, too.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.” I blow out a heavy breath.

“We’re not doing anything wrong.” He’s quick to reassure me.

“If that were true, we wouldn’t be hiding it from her.”

“We’re not hiding... We’re just enjoying each other’s company without the complications of outside sources.”

“Not sure it matters what we’re doing, only that we aren’t truthful about it.”

“Are you having second thoughts about coming?”

“What? No, of course not.” I shake my head even though he can’t see me.

“Good. Because I’ve been dreaming about the feel of you tight and wet around me all fucking day.” He practically groans into the phone, his words sending my heart rate skyrocketing in an instant.

“Just all day?” I play coy.

“Okay, ever since you left my apartment the last time. Only now it’s more prominent because I know in just a few hours, I’m gonna have you pinned beneath me again, and, Red, I can’t fucking wait.”

“Me neither,” I admit softly, having to concentrate really hard to keep my voice from breaking around the edges.

The things this man says to me... I wish I could bottle them up so that one day, when this is all over, I can go back and revisit these moments. Moments that make me question everything I thought I wanted.

Not that it much matters what I want. I think he’s made his position pretty clear. We’re in different places in our lives. I’m too young for him. I’m his sister’s best friend. Blah. Blah. Blah.

Sex.

That’s what this is.

Quenching a thirst.

Satiating a hunger.

He’ll tire of me eventually.

Until then, though, I'm going to hang on for dear life.

If I had any self-respect at all, perhaps I would have told him to go fuck himself when he followed me into the bathroom at his parents' house.

But as I've proven time and time again over the last several months, my willpower is nonexistent when it comes to River.

And as it would seem, his is a little frayed when it comes to me, too.

If it weren't, things would have never escalated this far.

"What time does your bus leave?"

"Um." I glance at the clock. "I have to be there in two hours. Why?"

"Because I'll be there to pick you up in an hour."

"Wait, what?" I freeze midway through shoving some socks into my bag. "You're coming to get me?"

"Is that okay?"

"Yeah. More than okay. I'm just a little surprised, is all. I thought you had to work until five."

"I took the afternoon off. I was going to show up and surprise you but then decided it was probably better that I told you, just in case."

"And how is it that you know where I live?" I ask, humor lining my voice.

“I may have done some research.”

“What kind of research?”

“The kind where I go through my sister’s things. She keeps a paper planner and address book. She’s old-school like that.”

“I lived with her for an entire school year. I’m aware.” I let out a soft laugh, my mind drifting to Lyric for a brief moment. “I’m also aware of how weird she is about them. I drew a flower on a page of her planner one day and she nearly had a meltdown.”

“Sounds like my sister.” He snorts. “Well, lucky for me, she had your home address in one of those books.”

“You’re like a stalker,” I tease.

“Is that what constitutes as stalking these days?”

“At least on some level,” I confirm with a smile.

“Well, if it gets you in my bed, then I guess I’ll do whatever it takes, including stalk you.”

“Is it weird that I kind of like the idea of you stalking me?” I ask. “I mean, I could totally get on board with the idea of you standing outside my bedroom window watching me.”

“I think that goes beyond stalking into a peeping Tom.” He barks out a laugh.

“You can even bring binoculars if you like,” I keep going. “You know, so you can see better.”

“Don’t think I’m going to have any luck with that given that your dorm room is going to be on the third floor.” He points out, reminding me that we’ve already got our housing assignments for the school year.

“I don’t know. If it’s dark outside and light in the room, I dare say you could see a great many things through the window.” I smile darkly to myself.

“Are you trying to tempt me?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “Then again, you can see it all up close and personal anytime you like, so maybe don’t waste your time with the window and just come straight to the source.”

“Straight to the source is my preferred method of entry.” His voice is smooth as silk, his words holding more meaning than one.

“Mine too.” I purr, testing his restraint.

“Fuck. This is going to be the longest hour of my life,” he grumbles and I smile, the action so wide it feels like my face might split in half.

“Then you better hurry up and get here.”

“And what will you do with me once I do?” It’s his turn to tease.

“I guess you’ll just have to find out. See you soon.”

Without another word, I end the call, fighting the urge to squeal like a child as I clench the phone to my chest, bouncing on the balls of my feet in excitement.

I can’t help it.

This man... God, he just makes me so deliriously... happy.

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River

“What in the world am I going to do with you?” I prop my shoulder against the doorframe, letting my eyes travel the length of Charlotte’s body, naked and spread open on top of my bed, her upper body supported on her elbows, enhancing her perfect tits.

She was asleep when I left the bed. I assumed she’d still be asleep when I returned a few short minutes later. Happy to report, I was wrong.

“I can think of a few things.” She lifts a hand, shifting her weight to one arm as she hitches a finger at me.

My feet move before my brain even tells them to.

She’s been here for less than twenty-four hours, and already I’ve been buried inside of her more times than I can count. I can’t get enough of her. And given the way she’s looking at me, I’d say the feeling is mutual.

“You’re insatiable, Red,” I tell her, stalking up the bed until I’m positioned in my new favorite spot, directly between her thighs.

“And you’re wearing too many clothes,” she replies, grabbing my shirt and tugging upward. I dip, allowing her to pull the material over my head before I lift one arm and then the other, fully surrendering the article of clothing, which she quickly tosses to the floor.

Every reservation I had, every excuse I made to keep this woman at arm's length, went straight out the window the day I kissed her for the first time. Since that moment, I've been caught in a twister, unable to fight against the torrent of wind pushing me toward her.

Even though every fiber in my body is saying there's no way this ends well, there's nothing on this planet that could stop me from being exactly where I am at this current moment.

I press my lips to hers, groaning at the sweet taste of her lips.

Charlotte O'Malley is my kryptonite. She dismantles every one of my defenses with a single look. She commands my body with a single touch. She brings me to my knees with a single press of her lips to mine.

I don't stand a chance against her. I don't think I ever did.

"What classes are you most excited about this semester?" I ask just as Charlotte shoves a too-big bite of lo mein noodles into her mouth.

She gives me an annoyed look, like how dare I wait until she's got food in her mouth to ask her a question, which only further spreads the smile teasing at the corners of my mouth.

She was more than a little surprised when I told her to get dressed, that I was taking her out to dinner. I could see the question in her eyes without her ever having to ask. What if we're seen ...

I assured her it wouldn't be an issue. Lyric is in Virginia.

My parents are watching the girls tonight because Dalton and Avery went to the

symphony, of all places, and there isn't anyone else around that has a clue who she is.

Even if I see someone I know, they won't know her, and really, that's all that matters.

I have no idea how long we're going to keep this little charade up. It feels shady, sneaking around and lying to everyone. But at the same time, I can't deny that I like having her all to myself.

"Creative writing." She waits until she's swallowed her bite before answering.

"Creative writing?" I arch a brow, a little surprised by this. Charlotte does not seem like the kind of person who would enjoy a class like that.

"I loved my creative writing class in high school. Besides, I'm going to need the credit hours for my major."

"You declared a major?"

She nods slowly.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense here."

"English."

"English?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while now and I've decided I think I'd like to work in publishing."

"Are there a lot of publishing houses in Virginia?"

“Some. But I have no plans of staying in Virginia.”

“Ah, that’s right. The New York dream.” I tear off a bite of eggroll between my teeth.

During one of our many conversations we’ve had over the last few months, Charlotte confided in me that she has every intention of moving to New York after she graduates. She wanted to attend school there, but her parents refused to pay her tuition if she attended school out of state.

“That’s right.” She twists another bite of noodles onto her fork. “This place is incredible, by the way.” She gestures around the dimly lit restaurant.

“I told you it was good.”

“It’s not just good. This is like the best Chinese food I’ve ever eaten.”

“Perks of living in a touristy area. You get some of the best restaurants.”

“I bet it gets old, though, always having so many vacationers around.”

“I didn’t think so when I was younger.” A smile plays on my lips.

“Oh God, don’t tell me you’re one of those guys who hooks up with the girls here on vacation with their families.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“Oh no.” She sets her fork back onto her plate. “You are. You’re one of those local guys who prey on young women looking to make the most of their summer vacation.”

“To be fair, I never preyed on anyone. But yes, when I was younger, me and some of my buddies spent a lot of time at the beach, and as such, we met a lot of girls from out of town.”

“And you hooked up with them.” She crosses her arms in front of herself, leaning back in her chair slightly.

“Some of them, sure.” I shrug. “But that was a long time ago. I haven’t hooked up with an out-of-towner in years.”

“Untrue,” she tells me flatly.

It takes me a second to realize she’s referring to herself.

“I was here on a vacation of sorts, visiting my best friend... And well, you know what happened next.”

“Fair. But different.” I grab my water from the table, taking a quick drink. “What about you? Ever gone on vacation and hooked up with a local?”

“Besides you, you mean?” She tries to hide her smile as I nod. “Once.”

“Once?”

“When I was fifteen. I was on vacation with my parents, my aunt and uncle, and my cousins, one of which is only a couple years older than me. We went to the beach, just the two of us, met up with a group of local guys who invited us to a bonfire.”

“And what happened next?”

“One of them took a liking to me. He flirted with me all night. Said he’d never met

anyone like me before and he wanted to stay in touch after I left. I'll admit, I was a little smitten, so I gave him my number. And then later that night, I gave him my virginity in the bed of his pickup truck."

It takes a lot to ignore the twinge of jealousy that slides through my chest. It's no secret that she's slept with other men, just as I've slept with plenty of other women, but it doesn't mean I like hearing her talk about it.

"Let me guess. You never heard from him again."

"Ding. Ding." She flashes me her bright white teeth.

"Your adversity to my teenage exploits makes a hell of a lot more sense now."

"I cried for two weeks after we got home," she admits softly. "And then I swore I'd never let a guy hurt me like that again."

"And did you?"

"Nope." She pops her lips around the P. "I've hung out with plenty of guys since then, but with one very big difference. I don't give them any power. I take what I want and I move on."

"Just like that?"

"Hard for someone to hurt you when you don't give them the chance." She shrugs softly.

"It's lonely, though, right? Never letting anyone get too close." I should know. It's basically been my entire MO since college.

“I don’t think so. I have my friends. My family.”

“But it’s not the same.”

“No, it isn’t. But some things are worth protecting.”

“And what about me?” I ask, curious as to just how honest she’s willing to be with me.

“What about you?”

“You let me get close.”

“And then you ghosted me.” She gives me a pointed look.

“And yet you’re still here.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re friends and friends forgive each other when they mess up. So long as it doesn’t become a recurring theme.”

Friends...

I mean, I know that’s technically what we are, but it doesn’t make hearing her say it any less of a punch to the stomach.

Because deep down I don’t just want to be her friend. But for the life of me I can’t bridge the wide gap that exists between us.

It's easier this way.

Less complicated.

"Is that all I am to you?"

"No." She shakes her head, her eyes seeming to take on a mischievous twinkle.

"You're also really, really , good in bed."

"So what I'm hearing is, you're using me for sex." I chuckle low.

"Do you have a problem with that?" She drags her teeth across her bottom lip in a way that has me eager to call for the check.

"Not a single one." I clear my throat, shifting in my chair as my cock stirs to life.

I open my mouth to say something else, my words disappearing on my tongue when a familiar voice reaches my ears.

"River Parker. I thought that was you."

I glance up just as a slender brunette with big brown eyes stops next to our table. My chest tightens at the sight of her.

"Annie." I force an easy smile to my lips despite the fact that I feel like someone has just taken a dagger and ripped open an old scar that took way too long to heal. "It's been a long time."

"Five years." She rocks back on her heels, her hands knotted nervously in front of her. "How are you?"

“I’m well. And you?” I try desperately to seem unaffected by her sudden and unexpected appearance.

“I’m pretty good. I’m actually in town visiting Mom and Dad. They’re just over there if you’d like to say hello. Jared is with them. I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

The fucking nerve... Anger seeps through my posture, making my shoulders go rigid.

“Thanks, but I’m a little busy at the moment.” My eyes meet Charlotte’s.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Annie acknowledges Charlotte with a curt nod, her gaze narrowing in on the redheaded beauty sitting at the table with me. “Annie.” She holds out her hand.

Charlotte stares at it like it’s a snake that’s poised to strike.

Instead of taking the hand she offers, Char reaches across the table and takes my hand. I could fucking kiss her.

“Charlotte. River’s girlfriend .” She gives me a knowing look as if to say I’ve got you , seeming to read the situation perfectly.

Annie is an op. The enemy. The only girl I’ve ever loved, therefore, the only one who’s ever broken my heart. And fuck did she. More like she ripped it out of my chest and impaled it with the point of her high-heeled shoe.

I haven’t seen her in years , but the sight of her standing here still brings back so many memories, memories I’d soon rather forget.

Like walking into my friend’s house to find her bent over the back of his couch while he fucked her from behind, for starters.

I shake off the thought, turning my gaze back to Annie, who draws back slightly, her friendly facade slipping.

“Last I heard, River doesn’t do girlfriends.” She throws it like a dagger, but it just bounces off the target and flops to the ground.

“I wonder why that is,” I grind out, my smile anything but friendly.

I wish I could say the sting of her betrayal didn’t still hurt like a bitch, but fuck me, does it ever. The only reason I’m even still sitting here is because of Charlotte. If I were with anyone else, I would’ve exited the building as soon as I saw her face.

“Well, things change. As you can see. Thanks for giving him up. I won’t be as foolish. Especially with what he can do with his tongue.” Charlotte looks straight at Annie and slides her own tongue dramatically across her lower lip and then winks.

She fucking winks. And it’s all I can do to contain the laughter that bubbles up in my chest.

This woman...

Annie balks, her mouth falling open in surprise.

“Real winner you got here, Riv,” she snips at me.

“Don’t I know it.” I look right at Charlotte as I say it because even though her words were meant as a dig, she’s not wrong. Red is a winner, and if she keeps this shit up, I might be tempted to keep her.

“You can go now,” Charlotte tells Annie, her voice sickly sweet.

“Sorry I came over,” she says directly to me.

“So are we.” It’s Char who answers and again, I have to bite back a laugh.

Annie searches my face, hoping to find pity there, but she finds nothing but hard, cold resentment. Not that she should expect anything less.

Two years we spent together. Two years that I worshipped the fucking ground she walked on. Two years wasted that I’ll never get back. And that’s not counting the months of torture I endured having to watch her and my ex-friend traipse across town, rubbing their relationship in my face.

The day she moved was one of the best days of my life. This is the first time I’ve seen her since.

“Bye, bye now.” Charlotte wiggles her fingers in a patronizing wave, shoos Annie along.

She looks back at me like I’m going to step in, stomping away seconds later when I don’t.

“You beautiful creature. I could fucking kiss you right now,” I tell her as soon as Annie is out of earshot.

“I’ll allow it.” She returns my smile. “But maybe wait until we’re back at your place so you can kiss me good and proper.”

“In that case.” I hold up my hand, signaling the waiter. “Check, please.”

Charlotte drops her head back on a laugh and I take a moment to revel in the sound.

This woman has me hook, line, and sinker, and she doesn't even fucking know it yet.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

“Shit,” River grumbles as we exit the restaurant to find it pouring down rain. “Should have checked the forecast before we walked here.” He holds his hand out from under the awning, the rain spattering against his open palm.

“What’s a little rain?” I smile, stepping out onto the sidewalk with my arms outstretched.

The downpour is torrential, the water soaking through the material of my thin top in seconds, clinging to my body like a second skin.

“A little rain?” He snorts out a laugh at the sight of me drenched to the bone.

Spinning, I turn my face up to the sky and open my mouth, allowing the sky to wet my tongue and throat with droplets of rain.

When I turn back to River, I find him watching me, a smirk tugging up the side of his mouth. God, I love that look on him.

Holding my hand out to him, I’m marginally surprised when he takes it, stepping out into the storm with me.

“See, not too bad.” I smile up at him, squinting to keep water out of my eyes.

“I think someone needs to adjust your perception of what’s not too bad.” He chuckles.

“Come here.” I press up on my toes, wrapping my arms around the back of his neck before I start to sway.

“What on earth are you doing?” He laughs, mouth open, eyes lit with humor.

“Dancing in the rain, of course.” I give him a cheeky grin.

“I wouldn’t exactly call this dancing.”

“Well, hot stuff. Then show me how you dance.”

Taking my hand in his, he squares his shoulder, his opposite hand falling to my hip.

“Like this,” he says, stepping back.

I move the opposite foot forward, matching his movements. Sidestep, backward, sidestep, forward. We waltz through the rain like a regal couple from times past.

Tipping my head back, I smile as the rain pelts my face.

“You’re beautiful,” River says, his gaze locked on me when I look back to him.

“So are you.” I smile, licking the water from my lips.

“No, I mean it, Red. You’re stunning. Even drowned like a rat...” His hand comes up to cup the side of my face as our movements slow.

“Careful, I might start to think you’re falling for me,” I tease, my stomach hollowing at the look he gives me.

“I think it’s a little late for that.” I swear is what he says, but his voice is so low and

the rain is so loud that I can't be sure.

Movement to my right catches my attention and I turn, realizing Annie is standing on the sidewalk, presumably waiting for her ride to pick her up on the curb, if the way she keeps looking down the street is any indication.

Lucky timing.

Turning back to River, I reach up and take his face in both of my hands and I kiss him like my whole world depends on it. I pour everything into the kiss, my fingers tangling in the wet strands of his hair as I hold on to the rush of emotions that pours over me.

I may have started the kiss as a fuck you to the woman stupid enough to let this man go, but it quickly morphs into something all of its own.

When River breaks the kiss, panting as he rests his forehead against mine, Annie is all but forgotten, and my singular focus is on the man in front of me.

"Keep it up and I'm liable to fuck you right here in the middle of the sidewalk," he grumbles.

"And that's a problem?" I pull back just enough that he can see the wicked arch of my brow.

He tips my chin with the back of his hand, his eyes searching mine like he's looking for something he's not sure he wants to find.

My heart stutters in my chest.

"Come on, Red. Let's get you home and out of these wet clothes." He grins.

“Say less.” I drag my teeth across my bottom lip before clamping down on it.

He uses his thumb to free my lip before capturing it with his own, dragging his tongue along the indentations my teeth left behind.

If I didn’t know it already, I certainly know it now...

I’m in some serious trouble.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, my fingers moving in soft strokes through River’s silky hair.

It’s dark. So dark I can’t tell if he’s sleeping or awake, though given the even nature of his breathing, I think he might be the former. His head is lying on my chest, arm wrapped around my middle, leg thrown across mine.

We’ve been lying this way for a long time.

Since we got home from the restaurant.

Well, technically, it was a little bit after that, given that I barely stepped into the apartment and he had me stripped bare, ass on the kitchen counter as he drove into me.

After that, he carried me into his bedroom, curled up against me, and hasn’t spoken a word since.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out Annie was an unexpected and unwanted visitor. I could feel the tension radiating off him the second she approached the table.

Based on what was said, I know enough to know that she was his girlfriend once

upon a time. And that she hurt him. That much was painfully obvious.

Which is precisely why I did what I did. Because if she hurt him, then I wanted to hurt her, and it was the only thing I could think of. And it worked. I knew the instant I looked up at her that I had most definitely struck a nerve. So I dug in, hoping to strike a few more.

“No.” It takes him so long to answer, I wasn’t sure he was going to. “It’s in the past.”

“You loved her.” It’s not a question. That much was pretty clear.

Another thing that’s also pretty clear is that I hate it. Though I refuse to give it any more thought beyond that.

“I did.”

“Do you still love her?”

“No.”

“What did she do?”

“Why can’t you have kids?” He abruptly changes the subject, catching me somewhat off guard. He hasn’t brought it up even once since I told him. Guess that shows how much he doesn’t want to talk about Annie.

“Promise you won’t say anything to anyone?”

“Who am I going to tell?”

Fair...

“I have a prolactinoma.”

“A what?” I feel him furrow in confusion.

“It’s a brain tumor.”

“You have a...” He starts to move, but I hold him in place with the arm that’s draped around him. Though, if he really wanted to get up, he could.

“Really, it’s a pituitary tumor but since the pituitary gland is located at the base of the skull, a lot of people call it a brain tumor.

It’s easier to explain that way. But don’t worry, it’s benign.

And as of my latest scan, isn’t growing.

But it does wreak havoc on my hormones, making it where I rarely have a period and I have to take synthetic thyroid medication to make my thyroid function properly, as well as birth control to help regulate my estrogen levels. ”

“But what is that exactly? A pituitary.”

“Basically, it’s a little gland that is responsible for producing hormones in your body. Since mine does not function properly it renders me infertile and even if I were to get pregnant, my body would not produce the appropriate hormones to sustain the pregnancy.”

“But there’s a chance?”

“I’m also on birth control, if you’re worried,” I reiterate.

“No, it’s not that. I just... Was curious if maybe one day you could. Like, can you have the tumor removed?”

“I already have. When I was seventeen. It grew back within a year. So no, it’s very unlikely because of the scar tissue from the original tumor and the fact that another one is growing in its place, flooding my body with the prolactin hormone.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Honestly, I don’t even think about it most days. It’s become such a regular part of my life, and it doesn’t really affect how I feel from day to day, as long as I take my meds, of course.”

“But you don’t tell people? Like, my sister doesn’t know.”

“No. It’s not something I like people knowing. Even though it’s not that big of a deal, I feel like people always treat me differently. Like I’m somehow more fragile because of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve accepted it. Besides, could you imagine it? Me, a mom .” I shiver at the idea. “Now stop trying to change the subject and tell me what Annie did to you.”

“I think you’d make a great mom someday.”

“Well, you’d be the only one. Now stop stalling and tell me what she did.”

“Cheated on me with one of my best friends.”

I feel him tense slightly beneath me, so I resume playing with his hair in hopes of

keeping him relaxed and talking.

“How long were you together?”

“Almost two years. We started dating the summer between junior and senior year. After graduation, I stayed local for school. I lived on campus, but I was still around all the time.”

“How did you find out?”

“Walked in on them.” He blows out a breath. “Though I think Jared set me up to catch them.”

“How do you mean?”

“He texted me, asked me if I wanted to hang out. Told me to just come on over, so I did. Walked into his place and he had her draped over the back of the couch, fucking her from behind, in perfect view of the front door.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Simple. Because he wanted her and she was hesitant to break things off with me, so he took matters into his own hands.”

“And they’re still together?” I caught that much too.

“Apparently so. Good for them. They deserve each other.”

He falls silent for a long moment.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I finally say, my voice barely breaking the surface.

“I’m sorry about the dick who broke your heart.” He turns his head upward, burying his face into the side of my neck.

“He didn’t break my heart. He opened my eyes. I’m not sorry about it and you shouldn’t be either. But what she did.” I can’t even bring myself to say the bitch’s name. What I’d like to do is go back in time and claw her fucking eyeballs out. “It’s inexcusable. And I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

“She did me a favor, honestly. I always knew something was off with us, but I was in so deep that I ignored all the red flags and warning signs. Better that it happened when it did rather than after we married or, worse, had kids.”

“Did you want those things with her?” I ask, almost afraid to hear his answer.

“Once upon a time, I thought I did.”

“You loved her so much you wanted to marry her?” I almost choke on the words.

“I did.”

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“I’ve never loved anyone enough to even date them, let alone marry them.”

“Give it time. You’re still very young.”

The way he says it makes my chest constrict in the most uncomfortable way.

“So are you,” I needlessly point out. “And you were younger than I am right now when you were ready to marry someone.”

“I didn’t say I was ready to marry her. I said I wanted to... someday.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever love someone that much,” I murmur, more to myself than anything.

“You will.” He yawns, clearly fighting sleep.

“Maybe.” I resume playing with his hair.

Maybe one day I could love you , I think but don’t say.

And it’s true.

I can feel it, the undeniable pull, like gravity pushing me in the direction it knows I need to go.

I’ve known for a very long time that I could fall in love with this beautiful man in my arms. The difference is, I won’t let myself.

I know how this ends.

And it isn't happily ever after.

But that doesn't mean I am anywhere even close to being ready for this to be over. I'm not. So I'm going to enjoy the ride for as long as it lasts, and when it comes to a stop, and eventually it will, I'll walk away.

I snuggle deeper into his embrace, letting my eyes flutter closed.

But not a moment before then.

"Is it just me, or does it feel weird as hell being back here already?" Maisie asks as she unpacks her last bag, throwing the contents out onto her bed in the most disorganized way possible.

"Very weird," I agree, looking around the room, which looks very similar to our room last year with one clear difference. There are only two beds. "And it's even more weird that Lyric isn't here."

"Agreed." Maisie turns toward me as if the mention of Lyric reminds her of something. "How was your weekend, by the way?"

"It was... good." I try and fail to keep my smile at bay.

It's been less than six hours since River dropped me off and already I miss him so much it's borderline painful, though I refuse to entertain why that might be.

"So you're still fucking her brother behind her back." There's not an ounce of judgment in her voice, just stating a fact.

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“I know, but when you say it like that, it makes me feel...”

“Guilty?” she guesses.

“Among other things, yes.”

“Then maybe you should tell her the truth. You realize she’s not going to give a shit, right?”

“Tell that to her brother. If it were up to me, she would have known from the very first text message he sent me.”

“It’s weird, though, right? That he didn’t even want his sister to know that you two were just talking. Like what’s the big deal?”

“I think it has more to do with Leo and Summer than anything. She lost most of her friends when all that went down, and then she found us, and he said he didn’t want to get in the way of that.

I don’t know.” I blow out a hard breath.

“It all seems kind of trivial now, given how happy she is. I understood in the beginning. Now...” I shrug.

“So give him an ultimatum. Tell him he either tells Lyric or you’re done sucking his...”

I snort out a laugh at the way she rolls her tongue against her cheek and pumps her fist to symbolize... well, you get the idea.

“Maisie!”

“What? I bet he’d agree to tell his sister so you can stop sneaking around.”

“I don’t think so. I think he has other reasons for not wanting her to know.”

“Which are?”

“It’s a way for him to keep me from getting too close.”

“And here I thought that was your MO,” she fires back.

I consider her words.

Maybe it is.

Maybe that’s exactly why I’ve been so willing to go along with this. Because deep down I know that if I let myself, I could fall for River, and fall hard. But as long as there’s this barrier between us, this thread of lies, it prevents us from fully giving ourselves to the other person.

If I’m being honest, it’s not like I’ve pushed the matter of telling Lyric, either. I just never considered why that might be.

“Or maybe it still is.” Maisie looks at me for a long moment, my thoughts clearly displayed on my face, unintentionally, of course. “Is that why you haven’t told her?”

“No, of course not.” I shake my head. “At least, I don’t think so.” I groan, dropping

my face into my hands before scrubbing the palms against my eyes. “Can we please talk about something else?” I lift my head. “This is giving me a headache.”

“Well, too bad. Because until you come clean and tell our best friend this thing you’ve been keeping from her for months , I’m going to continue to talk about it.”

“You’re a real pain in my ass, you know that.” I snort out a laugh.

“Back at ya, babe.” She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Now hurry the hell up.” She gestures to my still unpacked bags. “We have a party to go to tonight and I will not be hearing any excuses about you not being able to go because you still need to unpack.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I’m quick to argue. “I’m not Lyric. When have I ever made an excuse not to go to a party?” She gives me a knowing look. “Okay, so I skipped a couple toward the end of the year.”

“A couple? You hardly went to a single one last semester. You were too busy talking to Conner .” She uses her fingers to put air quotes around the name as she says it. “To come out with your friends.”

“Or maybe I just got sick of being the third wheel with Lyric and Kai every time you ditched me.”

“If I remember right, you used to be the one who always ditched us. Back when you were fun.”

“I’m still fun!” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“Oh yeah?” Her hands go to her hips and she gives me a doubtful look. “Prove it.”

“Oh, you’re on.” I uncross my arms, wagging a finger in her direction. “Challenge accepted.”

“This is going to be fun.” She smiles wide.

Yes , I think but don’t say.

Yes, it is.

We spend the rest of the afternoon unpacking and getting our room in order.

It’s just after six when Lyric shows up with Kai in tow— no surprise .

By which time I have done my hair, opting to style the thick auburn strands into soft curls, leaving them to hang freely down my back.

Finished my makeup, which I kept light with the exception of the smoky eye look that makes my green eyes stand out in a way that no other eye makeup seems to.

And managed to slide my way into the tiniest freaking dress known to man, the strapless material held up by the sheer tightness of the dress that hits me mid-thigh.

I may or may not have also sent a picture of myself to River that I took in the bathroom after I was finished getting ready.

I thought he’d appreciate the sight of me in something so scandalous, though I second-guessed myself almost immediately after and have continued to do so the longer his response takes to come through.

I keep telling myself it’s because he hasn’t seen it, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit worried that maybe the picture wasn’t the best idea.

Though I refuse to let myself dwell on it for too long because I promised myself that tonight I was going to have fun, and obsessing over what River does or does not think of said picture is not my idea of fun.

“Char!” Lyric’s eyes widen when she catches sight of me, her gaze tracking me from the top of my head to the heels on my feet before making their way back to my face. “You look... amazing .”

“Thank you.” I smile, gesturing to her outfit, a deep blue dress that flares at her hips, hitting right at her knees. “You look pretty damn good yourself,” I tell her, shaking my head when I see the white, high-top Converse on her feet. “Well, most of you does,” I tease.

Honestly, if I saw Lyric wear anything other than her Converse, which I’m pretty sure she has a couple dozen pairs of, I would think something was wrong. Doesn’t stop me from commenting on it every single time, though.

“You love them.” She crinkles her nose at me, her attention swiveling to Maisie as she pushes her way through the door, her shower bag hanging over her forearm.

“Jesus, Mais.” Kai groans, slapping a hand over his face. “What are you wearing? A napkin?”

It isn’t until she steps farther into the room that I understand his reaction.

A napkin might have been generous given how small the scrap of material is that she’s wearing.

The dress is candy apple red, barely long enough to cover the bottom of her ass, and dips so low in the back, you can quite literally almost see the top of her butt crack.

The rest isn't much better—the fabric cut to cover only the front half of her body, leaving her sides and back completely exposed.

She has her dark hair tied up in a slick pony that moves from side to side as she walks.

If sex itself took on a human form, Maisie is what it would look like.

And here I thought my dress was a bit risqué, but Maisie makes me look like I'm wearing an ankle-length nightgown. Never mind that it makes Lyric's dress look equivalent to a nun's habit.

"If you don't want to see, don't look." She throws Kai a glare over her shoulder as she carefully leans down and retrieves her heels, a matching candy red, from the floor next to her bunk.

"I work my ass off in the gym and on the field. I have every right to show it off." She slips on one heel and then the other, the damn things so high she nearly reaches my height, which is at least a good three inches taller than her with no shoes. And I'm also wearing heels.

"Hard to do when you're wearing the smallest scrap of a dress known to man. Your brother would shit himself if he saw you in that."

"Well, good thing he's not here then."

"Seriously. Don't you have a jacket or something you can put over that?" He's looking at the ceiling when he asks.

"A jacket?" She snorts out a laugh.

“Leave her alone.” Lyric gently elbows his side. “She looks incredible.”

“She looks like she’s trying to draw attention that could get her into some serious trouble.” He grits his teeth, his back molars grinding so hard I swear I can hear it.

“That’s where you come in.” Maisie gives him a cheeky grin.

“I have no desire to be a bodyguard. I’m only going because Lyric is and for no other reason.”

Even as he says it, I know without question that if someone were to mess with any of us, most especially a girl who’s practically his sister, he wouldn’t just stand idly by and watch it happen.

“Well, lucky for me, I can take care of myself.” She all but flips him off with her expression before her head whips toward me.

“What do you say, Char?” She extends me her arm, which I’m quick to slip mine through.

“Ready to go turn some heads?” She smiles wide, showing off nearly every single one of her stark white teeth.

“Always.” I smile back at her, faking an ease that I certainly do not feel. Mainly because I’m still painfully aware that my phone still has no new messages on it.

Maisie tugs me toward the door, not turning back until we’ve stepped into the hall.

“Are you two coming or what?” she calls after Lyric and Kai.

“We’re coming.” Lyric shakes her head, grinning up at Kai as they join us in the hall.

We exit the building together, following the sidewalk to the parking lot where Kai's car is located.

He quickly slides into the driver's seat while Lyric moves to the passenger side, joining him in the front of the car.

Maisie and I climb into the back, both careful to keep our dresses in place so as not to unintentionally flash anyone.

Maisie's dress may be way more revealing than mine, but that doesn't change the fact that one tug in the wrong direction and one or both of my girls will most certainly make an appearance.

The drive over is relatively quick, the party just on the other side of the campus. We've been to several parties at this particular fraternity already, but it doesn't lessen the tension in my shoulders as we pull up outside.

Kai lets the three of us out on the sidewalk before driving away to find a spot to park. There's a ton of people here already, several spilling out onto the front lawn. The first party of the year is always one of the biggest, and this one is no exception.

It feels like yesterday that I came here for the first time, a resistant Lyric in tow. She was so timid back then. And while I think a part of her will always be a little timid—it's just who she is—Kai has definitely brought her out of her shell.

"Wasn't it this party last year..." Maisie starts.

"That I met Kai." Lyric nods, a smile touching her pretty face.

"A lot has changed since then." It's my turn to speak.

“That it has.” Lyric is quick to agree.

“Okay, enough reminiscing,” Maisie speaks after several long beats of silence stretch between us, each seemingly lost in our own thoughts. “I’m ready to get drunk and dance my ass off. Who’s with me?” She throws me a look, a question lifting her perfectly manicured eyebrows.

“Lead the way,” I say, more determined than ever to prove to her that I can have just as good of a time now as I did this time last year, before things got... well, complicated.

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Charlotte

Sweat clings to my skin, droplets forming every few minutes to roll down my back before being absorbed into the thin material of my dress.

I don't know how long we've been here.

An hour or five. The seconds bleed together, the buzz in my veins and the pulse of music in my ears my only real point of focus.

I catch sight of Maisie out of the corner of my eye, a smile on her face as she grinds her ass into the guy behind her, a blond with thick eyebrows and the slightest gap between his teeth, which I see when he smiles, saying something into Maisie's ear.

Thank goodness Kai and Lyric left already because had they not, Kai would probably be wiping the floor with the very handsy fellow.

Not that he can really talk, given that he couldn't keep his hands off Lyric all night.

I think it's safe to say we all know why they left early, and it wasn't because they weren't enjoying themselves.

It's because they were. Maybe a little too much, given the way they left in such a hurry.

Speaking of handy fellows, if Dean moves his hand any farther down my back, he'll be palming my ass, and while a few months ago I would have welcomed the action,

now the only thing keeping me from kneeing him the groin is the particular part I'm trying to play.

The one that says no man has the power to change me.

If only that were true.

Still, I cling to the lie. Let the warmth of the tequila I've been drinking all night dull my thoughts, my feelings, until I'm nothing more than flesh and blood. Unseeing. Unfeeling. Simply existing in this space between reality and delusion.

"You're so hot." Dean's voice is too loud in my ear, his breath too warm, and I briefly wonder what I saw in him last year that spurred me to hook up with him not once, but on two different occasions.

"Glad to see your eyesight is on point," I retort, my arms going around his neck as I continue to move my hips in time with the heavy beat of the song currently blaring from the speakers set up in the corner of the room.

"Why don't we get out of here?" He husks, his hand sliding from my lower back to my hip. "Go somewhere more private." His fingers bite into the skin as he squeezes.

"I think I'll pass." I press my hands to his chest in an effort to create space between us, but his hand on my hip holds strong.

"Really?" I can hear the smile on his lips seconds before his tongue darts out, licking the lobe of my ear. "You've never told me no before."

"Guess there's a first for everything." I push harder against his chest, able to break free of his hold after some considerable effort.

He reaches for me again, but I'm already several steps back, retreating into the thick crowd of people that are packed into the room like sardines.

I take my first real breath in what feels like ages when I finally reach the front porch, the warm night air considerably cooler than the heat that blanketed the inside of the house.

I close my eyes and take another long pull in through my nose, trying to find my composure through the veil of Jose Cuervo.

Only instead, the entire world around me seems to tip and I end up having to grab the edge of the porch rail to steady myself.

Shit.

How much did I drink?

I try to count the shots Maisie kept handing me in my head, but I lose track pretty quickly. Either way, it's apparent to me that I overdid it.

Making my way to the porch swing that sits unoccupied despite the various groups and couples crowded on the porch, looking for fresh air, no doubt, I plop down, the wood creaking beneath my weight.

Pulling my phone out of the front of my dress where it's been tucked all night, I blow out a hard breath when I swipe my finger across the screen to see that River still hasn't texted me back.

I'm seconds away from calling him when someone plops down next to me on the swing.

“I’m drunk,” Maisie announces, stretching her feet out in front of her.

“Me too.” I smile, though it feels disingenuous.

“I saw you dancing with Dean.” She gives me a toothy grin.

“We were just dancing. Speaking of which, why are you out here? You seemed to be quite enjoying yourself in there.”

“Meh.” She lifts a shoulder and drops it. “Is it weird that I’m kinda ready to go home?”

“No. I am too,” I admit.

“Too bad our ride left.”

“Yep.” I nod slowly. “We walking, or you want me to get an Uber?”

“Fuck it.” She pushes to her feet abruptly, causing the swing to sway back and forth.

“Let’s walk.”

“You sure? It’s like a twenty-minute walk and we aren’t exactly wearing the right attire.” I glance down at her very high, very narrow heels.

“Who cares.” She lifts a foot, removing one shoe before balancing on the opposite foot to remove the other.

“You’re going to walk all the way back to our dorm barefoot?”

“Better than walking in these. I swear, they had to have gotten the design of these shoes from a torture dungeon because they have been murdering my feet all night.”

“You’re the one who wore them,” I needlessly point out.

“Beauty is pain,” she tells me. “Besides, you’re one to talk.” She looks down at my heels, which aren’t nearly as tall as hers but are definitely not the most comfortable things in the world.

“Fair.” I nod, slipping off my heels before leaning over to pick the shoes up off the porch. “Solidarity,” I tell Maisie as I stand.

She slips her arm through mine and together we make our way down the porch and through the front lawn before finally veering left when we reach the sidewalk. We only get about a hundred yards or so when a car slows next to us, the driver’s side window coming down.

“Are you fucking walking home?” A familiar voice fills my ears and for a brief moment, I think I’m hallucinating.

Only when I turn toward the car, my feet stumbling to a stop, it’s River freaking Parker staring back at me. And he looks pissed .

“What... What the hell are you doing here?” I stumble over my words, alcohol and shock colliding together like two battering rams striking with the same intensity.

“I’d say that’s irrelevant at the moment.” His gaze flashes to Maisie, registering her reaction to seeing him. He doesn’t know she knows. Or at least, he didn’t. Though given the smile she’s wearing as she looks between the two of us, I’d say he’s piecing it together pretty quickly.

“Uh-oh,” Maisie whispers so loudly she may as well have just spoken at normal volume. “I think we’re in trouble.”

“Get in the car.” He gives me a look that leaves no room for argument. “Both of you.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Parker, sir.” Maisie giggles, tripping over her own two feet in her attempt to reach the vehicle.

River shakes his head, a small smile tipping the side of his mouth so briefly I start to wonder if I didn’t imagine it.

Maisie climbs into the back seat. I move to follow, but River stops me.

“You. In the front with me.”

“You didn’t tell me he was so bossy.” Maisie hiccups, covering her mouth with her hand, which only slightly muffles her laughter.

Well, if he wasn’t sure she knew yet, he sure as shit knows now.

“Thanks, Mais,” I mutter loudly before shutting the back door.

I stomp around the front of the car like a pouty child who’s been caught doing something they shouldn’t before tearing open the passenger door and climbing inside.

The familiar scent fills my senses as soon as the door closes, sealing me inside. I close my eyes for a brief moment and breathe in deeply.

The car smells like River’s cologne, the kind of smell that you want to snuggle into, the kind you can’t get enough of.

It isn’t until the car begins to move down the road that I chance a look at River, his profile only visible from the soft lights coming off the dashboard in front of him.

He's so handsome my chest literally cracks open at the sight of him.

His hair messy like he's run his hands through it a hundred times over.

His lips pursed in irritation. His eyes focused on the road, crinkling at the sides like he has to squint to see.

"Why are you here, River?" I finally ask to break the thick tension in the car. Tension so thick not even Maisie, as drunk as she is, dares to speak.

"Why? Let's see. Maybe because I no more than pulled into my apartment complex and I got a picture of you, dressed in that." He throws me a sideways glance, his heated gaze tracing the length of my dress before his eyes find the road once more.

"So? It was just a picture. It doesn't explain why you drove nearly three hours when you were already home."

"Doesn't it?"

"I thought you'd like it," I admit, my voice low.

"I did." His nostrils flare, but he doesn't look my way again. "Maybe that's the problem."

I open my mouth to speak about a hundred different times, only to end up snapping it closed, unsure of what to say.

It isn't until we pull up outside of our dorm that River's voice fills the car once more.

"Maisie, are you good to find your way to your room?" he asks, his eyes finding hers in the rearview mirror.

“Yep.” She nods, glancing my way as she pushes the door open. “Good luck,” she mouths before slipping out of the car and closing the door.

We both watch her cross the parking lot in silence, neither of us saying a single word until she disappears inside the building.

“You told her about us?” His voice is eerily hard.

“She put it together.”

“And you didn’t think that was information I should be made aware of?”

“It never came up.” It’s a lousy excuse, but it’s the best I have at the moment. “She won’t say anything,” I try to reassure him.

“Until she does,” he grumbles. “She knows everything?” He confirms.

“She does.”

He blows out a hard breath.

“Why are you really here, River, and don’t give me some bullshit excu—” My words die on my lips when River’s fingers close around the back of my neck and he pulls me to him, his mouth swallowing my gasp of surprise.

He kisses me frantically, deeply, thoroughly, until I swear the whole world has tipped sideways, casting me off balance.

When he finally pulls away, I’m breathless, my cheeks flushed, my lips swollen, my entire body aching in the best possible way.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he murmurs against my mouth, pressing his lips to mine again, a soft peck that I swear I feel all the way down to my toes.

“I’m yours.” My fingers find his hair, tangling in the soft strands.

I pull back abruptly when something I hadn’t considered before hits me like a slap across the face.

“Is that why you’re here? You saw that picture and thought what? That I was going to hook up with another guy?”

His gaze doesn’t meet mine, confirming my suspicion.

“Look at me,” I demand, not continuing until the dark green of his eyes comes into view.

“Do you really think so little of me? That I would no more than leave your bed and crawl into someone else’s?”

” I ask, a little less offended than maybe I normally would be, thanks in large part to Jose, whose buzz is still swimming heavily in my veins.

“We never talked about...” He shakes his head. “We aren’t exclusive. You have every right to sleep with another man if you so choose.”

“And would you be upset if I did?”

“Would you be upset if I did?” He turns the question on me.

I consider it for a moment, how I would feel if he slept with someone else, and I can come up with only one word that would describe even a fraction of how that would

make me feel.

“I would be devastated,” I admit, my words barely audible.

“Well, to answer your question, I wouldn’t exactly be happy about it either.”

“You just drove three hours worried that I was going to hook up with someone else. I think you’d be more than just unhappy about it,” I call him out, silently begging for a truth he’s been so hesitant to give.

“You’re right. I’d probably kill the motherfucker.” Anger flashes through his dark green eyes, but that isn’t all I see.

I smile, my hand sliding to the side of his face.

“I’m not going to sleep with anyone else. Not as long as we’re doing whatever it is we’re doing here. So long as you agree to the same.”

“Done,” he says without hesitation, widening my smile.

“Then it’s settled. So the next time I send you a picture of me in a dress like this.” I gesture down at myself. “Know that I’ll be taking it off later, alone, wishing it were you stripping me bare.”

“I shouldn’t have come all this way. I just... Fuck, I don’t know what came over me.” He shakes his head, causing his hair to fall across his forehead.

I reach up, pushing it back away from his face.

“Well, since you’re already here.” I trail my hand down his cheek, across his neck to his chest and then lower, not stopping until my fingers are playing at the buckle of his

jeans. “No sense in wasting the trip.” I smile, popping open the button.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Charlotte O’Malley.” He hisses through his front teeth.

“And what a sweet death it will be.” I lean forward, pressing my lips to his once more.

River

“How did you get talked into babysitting?” My sister snorts into the phone, not bothering to mask her laughter.

“Mom and Dad have dinner plans with Deb and Ryan. And Dalton and Avery have to go to some student-teacher thing at Lyla’s preschool, and they didn’t want to have to take the girls.”

“And you were the best they could come up with to watch them?”

“Why do you say it like that? Like I’m incapable of occupying a two-year-old and four-year-old for a couple of hours.”

“Um, because, have you met you?”

“The girls love me.”

“They do. I’m not disputing that. But let’s face it, Riv, you’re the fun uncle, not the responsible one.”

“I’m their only uncle,” I needlessly remind her. Given that they’re Dalton’s kids, we have no other brothers, and Avery is an only child, I’m the only uncle they’ll ever have, by blood, anyway. “And for the record, I am plenty responsible.”

“But these are human children...”

“Well aware,” I grumble, pulling into my parents’ driveway.

The memories of the last time I was here with Charlotte come flooding in. Her pressed against the bathroom door. My mouth on hers. The way she whimpered against my lips. Fuck... If it weren’t for the fact that I’m on the phone with my sister, the thought would probably make me hard as a rock.

“I may not have been comfortable watching them when they were really little, but I feel like they’re old enough now that I can handle them.”

“You say that until Lacy has an accident and you have to clean poop off her, or Lyla throws one of her epic temper tantrums.”

“Let’s hope neither of those things happens.” I throw my car into park, killing the engine. “But if they do, you’re only a phone call away.”

“Not that I’ll be much help over the phone, but feel free to call me. I’ll have a good laugh at your expense.”

“I think Kai is rubbing off on you and I’m not sure I like it,” I tell her, laughter vibrating through my words.

“Well, given that he’s the love of my life, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t one.”

“Says you.” I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I’ll remember this conversation before I answer your phone call next time,” I playfully warn.

“Yeah, right. You love me too much to ignore my calls.” If she were standing in front of me, she’d probably have stuck her tongue out at me following that sentence.

“I love you a little less after this phone call,” I grumble, clearly joking.

“I’m gonna pretend like you didn’t just say that.” She chuckles softly. “Now, for the reason I actually called... Are you coming down for family weekend again?”

“Why? Aren’t Mom and Dad coming this time?”

“Yes, but I want you to come, too. I barely got to see you all summer. Besides, we had so much fun last year.”

Last year...

Red hair. Paint splatters taking the place of freckles. Bright green eyes.

I can see Charlotte so clearly—that night burned into my memory so vividly I’m certain that I’ll still remember it in perfect detail fifty years from now.

Lyric isn’t the first person to ask me about family weekend.

Char brought it up a couple of days ago, wondering if I was coming.

I told her Lyric hadn’t asked and I didn’t think it was a good idea regardless.

It was one thing pretending like we didn’t know each other when she was here over the summer.

But things have progressed a lot since then and I have a feeling that even if I tried, I couldn’t mask the effect that woman has on me.

Not from anyone, but most certainly not from my sister.

Which then begs the question, why haven't I told her yet?

I wish I had an answer to that question. Truly, I do. But for the life of me, I can't bring myself to admit that I've been lying to her for months and that I may or may not be falling for one of her best friends and that the thought terrifies the shit out of me.

But for as scared as I am of my quickly forming feelings for one Charlotte O'Malley, not a single ounce of me wants this to end. In fact, the thought of that happening is the very reason why I'm scared. It's been a long time since someone has made me feel even a fraction of what she does.

I think, in the end, that's why I don't want Lyric to know. Because as soon as I admit it out loud, it becomes real. And right now, I just want to hide in this little private bubble we've created for a little bit longer. There's less pressure there. Fewer ways for us to disappoint each other.

"When is it again?" I ask, climbing from my car, my focus hooking on something in the back seat.

Switching my phone to the other ear, I open the back door to investigate, a wicked smile touching my lips when I realize what I'm looking at.

.. A pair of white, lace panties. Panties that I peeled down Charlotte's legs seconds before she straddled my lap in the back seat and rode me like I was a wild horse she was trying not to get bucked off of.

It was messy and awkward, trying to fuck in the small back seat of the car, and yet, it was also so fucking hot.

Seems she left me a little token to remember her by.

Balling up the material, I have to resist the urge to bring them to my nose before stuffing them into my pocket.

I can't believe they've been there for nearly two weeks and I've just now noticed.

"Did you hear me?" My sister's voice brings my frazzled brain back into focus.

"Sorry, what?"

"Family weekend. It's in two weeks."

"I'll see what I can do," I promise, knowing full well that if I go, it will be for a hell of a lot more than spending time with my little sister.

"Well, I hope you can come. Maisie's brother, Jackson, is coming this year, and we're all planning on going out after the parentals have retired to their hotels. He's your age, so between him and Kai, it should be a little less awkward for you than it was last year."

I have a lot of words I could use to describe what last year was like, but awkward is not one of them.

"I will let you know for sure in the next few days. A lot of it will depend on work."

That's only partially true. Things have slowed down significantly at work, and I haven't worked a weekend in three weeks, not that I've told her as much.

My true hesitation is Charlotte. It's one thing to spend time with her alone.

It's quite another to spend time with her under the watchful eyes of my sister.

And then there's Maisie to consider. I'm still not comfortable with the fact that she knows what's going on.

Not that I did myself any favors when I showed up pissed off and demanded that they get in the car.

If she didn't know before that, she would have then.

What's to say she won't get drunk and slip up if I'm sitting right in front of her?

It's risky.

Then again, this whole thing is a fucking risk, and yet, I keep jumping off the same cliff over and over again. So far, I've only hit water below. But how many more times can I jump before it's no longer water I land in but hard, unrelenting earth.

"Well, I really hope you can make it."

"I should go. Mom and Dad need to leave by four and Mom still has to run down her list of instructions for the girls."

"The girls are already there?"

"Mom picked them up on her way home from work so they'd already be here when I got here. I guess they trust me to watch them but not enough to pick them up from preschool."

"Who can blame them. Have you been in a car with you?"

“I am a perfectly fine driver.” I huff.

“You drive like the road is your racetrack and you’re speeding toward the finish line.”

“You are really on my ass today, you know. First I’m not responsible enough to babysit, now I drive like a maniac. Anything else you want to insult me on before I hang up?”

“Hmm...” I can see her tapping her chin in thought as if she were standing right in front of me. “Nothing I can think of at the moment.”

“In that case, I’m hanging up before you do think of something.”

“I only give you crap because I love you.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Love you too,” I mutter, ending the call as I head up the steps that lead to the front door of my parents’ house. “Mom. Dad,” I holler as I push my way inside without knocking.

“Wiver!” Lacy comes barreling toward me and I lean down, swooping her into my arms.

“Wacy!” I nuzzle her little neck the way I always do, tickling her with my facial hair. “Where’s Memaw and Papa?” I ask, giving her a little bounce.

Before she can answer, my mom comes out of the living room, running her hands down the front of her cream-colored blouse. Her face lights up at the sight of me.

“Hi, sweetie.”

“Hey, Mom.” I tip my chin. “Where’s the other rug rat?”

“She’s coloring with your father.” She gestures behind herself and I nod, stepping past her into the living room. My father is sitting on the floor, Lyla next to him.

“Hey, Pop.” I set Lacy on the couch with a dramatic plop, smiling when she squeals in laughter.

“Your turn.” My father climbs to his feet, handing me the crayon he was coloring with just moments ago.

“What are we coloring?” I ask, lowering myself down onto the spot he just occupied moments ago.

“Butterflies,” Lyla informs me, the word duh so clearly displayed in how she says it. Dalton and Avery are gonna have their hands full when this one becomes a teenager.

“Butterflies. Oh yes, I see.” I reach for Lacy, tugging her down onto my lap before handing her a crayon as well.

“She can’t color,” Lyla says.

“Oh, I’m sure she can color just fine, can’t ya, baby girl?” I ask, watching Lacy press the crayon to the paper, tracing long lines of thick crayon marks through the center of the page.

“Told you.” Lyla huffs, so full of attitude I have to resist the urge to laugh.

“I think she’s doing beautifully,” I disagree.

“She won’t stay within the lines.”

“That’s okay.” I shrug, turning my attention to my mom as she reenters the room, sliding her purse onto her shoulder.

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“The girls’ cups are in the fridge. No drinks without lids.

They’ve already had a snack, but if they get hungry before Avery and Dalton get here, there is a package of goldfish crackers in the pantry they can have.

If Lacy has an accident, there is a change of clothes in the diaper bag on the kitchen table.

Make sure you put her on the potty every thirty minutes, otherwise she will have an accident. ”

“Every thirty minutes, got it.”

“And, River, under no circumstances are you to give them candy.”

“No candy, understood. Anything else?”

“Call me if you have any questions about anything at all.”

“I’ve got this. You can go.”

I’m starting to think they find me as incapable at this job as Lyric does.

“Okay.” My mom moves farther into the room and drops kisses to the top of both girls’ heads. “Memaw will see you babies later. Love you.”

“Love you.”

“Wove woo.”

“Say bye, Memaw.” I take Lacy’s hand, waving it for her.

“Bye. Bye.” Lacy bounces in my lap.

My dad appears moments later, following my mom out the front door with nothing more than a backward wave. A man of many words, that one.

“Finally,” I murmur under my breath.

“Finally,” Lyla mirrors my word, giving me a toothy grin.

“What do you girls want to do this afternoon?”

“Trampoline!” Lyla stands abruptly, forgetting all about her coloring page as she bounds toward the back door.

“Well, Wacy. What do you say? You wanna go jump on the trampoline?”

She nods enthusiastically, climbing out of my lap to chase after her sister.

I’ve just stood to follow them when my phone rings.

“Seriously, you just left,” I grumble, expecting it to be my mom, only when I look at the screen, I see that I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Charlotte O’Malley,” I answer, grinning when her face appears on the screen.

It’s only recently that we started to FaceTime, and I have to say, I rather like being able to hear her and see her. Certainly gives a whole new meaning to phone sex.

Makes me wonder why we waited so long to do it.

“River Parker.” She graces me with that beautiful smile of hers. “What are you doing?”

“At the moment, I’m getting ready to take the girls outside to jump on the trampoline.”

“You’re at your parents’?”

“Don’t worry, no one is here.”

“Wait. You’re babysitting?” She crinkles her nose, accentuating the freckles that pepper her perfect ivory skin.

“Why is everyone so surprised by this? I am capable of taking care of my nieces.”

“I have no doubt. Just surprised you didn’t mention it.”

“It was a last-minute thing. Avery and Dalton decided they didn’t want to have to take the girls to Lyla’s parent-teacher conference, but my parents already had dinner plans.”

“I see. So is Uncle Wiver going to jump on the trampoline with them?”

I laugh at her pronunciation of my name.

“I would, but I’d probably bounce them right out of the damn thing if I did. You want to say hi?” I ask, following after the girls, who are not so patiently waiting at the back door. “Girls, do you want to say hi to Charlotte?” I flip the phone around so they can see her.

“Hi,” they say in unison before Lyla takes over.

“We’re going to jump on the trampoline.”

“So I heard.” Charlotte’s voice is sweet as silk. “Do you like jumping on the trampoline?”

Lyla nods enthusiastically.

“What about you, Lacy?”

“Yep.” She pops the P, rocking back on her heels.

“Can we go now?” Lyla whines.

“Say bye to Charlotte.”

“Bye.” Both girls wave into the phone and when I flip it back around, I find Charlotte smiling widely.

“They are too cute.”

“I know, right. Too cute for their own good.”

“Come on, Uncle Wiver.” Lacy tugs at my shirt. My parents have taught them they don’t step foot outside without an adult, so neither tries to open the door, but they definitely aren’t happy that I’m making them wait.

“Okay. Okay.” I chuckle, opening the back door before ushering them both out. After helping Lacy onto the trampoline with her sister, I zip them inside and then move toward the back porch to sit on the bottom step where I have the perfect view of

them.

“Sorry about that.” I turn my attention back to Char.

“No worries. How has your day been?”

“Stressful but good.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really. I’d rather you tell me about your day.”

“Not much to tell. I had class all morning and then I met Lyric for coffee earlier. She mentioned something about family weekend.”

“Yeah, she called me earlier.” I nod.

“Are you going to come?”

“Not sure it’s the best idea,” I admit. “I think I’d much rather skip it and spend the weekend just you and me.”

“I wish. Unfortunately, that’s not really possible given that my parents will be in town.”

“They’re coming?”

“Yeah. They did last year too. They usually just come up for a day. Because they live relatively close, they opted not to stay in a hotel, so they’ll only be here for a few hours.” She pauses for a brief moment. “Aren’t your parents coming this year?”

“They are.”

“See, even more reason for you to come.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s more reason.” I chuckle. “I see my parents all the time.”

“I guess that’s true. I forget that you live so close to them.”

“Lyla, get off your sister.” I shake my head, returning my attention to Charlotte.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you think I should come?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“You don’t think it’s risky?”

“No more risky than what we’re already doing. At least this way, it’ll give me a chance to see you.”

“See me but not touch me.”

“Says who?” Her smile turns sheepish. “If you get a hotel room...”

“Are you saying you’ll spend the weekend with me?”

“Like you even have to ask.” She rolls her pretty green eyes with a smile.

“Okay, I’ll come.”

“You will?”

“Took a lot to convince me, didn’t it?” I snort out a laugh. “Seems I have trouble telling you no, Miss O’Malley.”

“Some would argue it’s the other way around, Mr. Parker.” She draws her bottom lip between her teeth in a way that makes me desperate to do the same.

Crying tugs my attention back to the girls and I see Lacy lying in a heap, holding her head as she wails.

“Shit. I gotta go. Niece down.”

“She okay?” Worry laces her voice.

“She will be. As soon as her sister stops using her as a body slam bag.” I stand, quickly closing the distance between me and the girls.

“Call me later once you’re home.”

“I will.”

“Talk soon.” With that, she disconnects the call.

An hour later, Avery and Dalton arrive. I’m happy to report that other than Lyla trying to smash her sister’s head in on the trampoline, there were no other incidents to speak of. It did, however, reinforce my indecision over having children one day.

Don’t get me wrong, I love my nieces dearly. But spending less than two hours as their sole caretaker and I am more than happy to pass them back off to their parents.

“Did you have fun with your uncle?” Avery asks as she swoops Lacy up, kissing all over her face.

“Yes!” My youngest niece is quick to answer.

“What did you girls do?” Dalton asks, taking the seat next to his oldest daughter, who has resumed coloring her butterflies.

“We colored. Jumped on the trampoline. Talked to Uncle River’s girlfriend. And then watched some cartoons.”

My stomach tightens at something she glazed over so casually. Something my brother and his wife certainly did not miss.

“Girlfriend?” Dalton’s gaze finds mine, a thick brow arching in question.

“She’s just a friend.”

“And what is her name? This friend of yours?” Avery asks with a smile on her face.

“Charlotte,” Lyla answers before I can, never looking up from the picture she’s coloring. “She was here with Auntie Lyric before. She has red hair and pretty freckles and she and Uncle River are going to spend the weekend in a hotel.” She glances over at her dad. “What’s a hotel?”

I gape at my oldest niece, way more perceptive than I gave her credit for.

“It’s a place where people stay when they’re on vacation, remember? We stayed there when we went to meet the princesses at Disney.”

“Oh yeah.” She smiles, resuming coloring.

“Can I, uh, talk to you outside?” Dalton’s eyes narrow in on me.

“I’ll get the girls ready,” Avery tells him. I feel her eyes on my back as I follow her husband out onto the front porch.

“Charlotte?” Dalton turns on me the second the door closes between us and the girls.

“She’s just a friend.” The lie comes out too quickly.

“Just a friend...” He lets out a disbelieving snort. “I saw you, you know. The night we were all here for family dinner. The night Charlotte was here visiting our sister.” He gives me a pointed look.

“Saw me do what?” My chest restricts, limiting the amount of air I can pull into my lungs.

“She came out from down the hallway all flushed and distracted. I thought little of it until less than a minute later, you appeared from the same area, also looking flustered and dazed.”

“You never said anything.” I work my jaw in irritation at my carelessness.

“Because I wasn’t sure.” He shakes his head slowly. “River, tell me you aren’t sleeping with one of our little sister’s best friends.”

“I’m not.”

“You’ve always been a shit liar.” He runs his hand through his hair, exhaling a deep breath.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Does Lyric know?” He cuts me off before I can complete the lie.

I deflate, realizing I’ve been caught and no matter how much I lie, Dalton is going to see right through it. He’s always been good at snuffing out my bullshit.

“No,” I finally admit.

“But you are sleeping with her?”

“Yes.” It’s my turn to blow out a hard breath.

“And you think that’s not going to blow up in your face at some point?”

“It’s just sex. We’re two consenting adults who happen to be attracted to one another. It’s nothing serious.”

“Nothing serious.” He grimaces like the words taste bitter on his tongue. “You let the girls talk to her, Riv. That doesn’t sound like just sex to me.”

“Because you can’t talk on the phone with a person you’re having casual sex with?”

“Because if it were just sex, you wouldn’t care enough to.”

He has a point, not that I would ever admit that to him.

“You can’t tell Lyric.”

“Do I have idiot written on my forehead?” He gestures to his face. “I’m not telling her shit. You are.”

“Dalton...”

“I’m serious, River. After everything that girl has been through. After all the lies and deception she endured last year, you’d think you’d understand more than most how hurt she’ll be by yet another person she loves lying to her.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Come clean. Tell her the truth. And then grovel like hell and hope she can forgive her own brother for lying to her.”

“You say that like it’s so simple.”

“It is.” He clasps me on the shoulder. “It really is.” He turns to go back inside. “And, Riv... Do us both a favor and do it sooner rather than later. You know firsthand the longer the lie, the more deeply the deception cuts.”

He doesn’t have to say he’s talking about Annie. I already know he is. And fuck him for even bringing that shit up.

“I will tell her,” I say to his back. “When the time is right.”

“There won’t be a right time, Riv. You and I both know that. Tell her, and tell her soon, before it ruins your relationship with her entirely.” With that, he disappears inside.

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Charlotte

“I’ve missed this,” Lyric announces, fluffing the pillow under her head, the three of us sprawled out on a pile of blankets with Maisie’s laptop on a chair at our feet playing a movie I’ve never seen before— *Something Borrowed* .

Basically, it’s about a girl who’s in love with her best friend’s fiancé and then the two start sleeping together behind her back. The entire concept of the movie makes me kinda nauseous, if I’m being honest. I hate cheaters.

Even still, there’s a hint of familiarity in the story.

A woman lying to her best friend, hiding a relationship she knows will hurt her. It’s not the same, of course, as me and River. He’s not her fiancé but her brother, but the lying part, yeah, that I can relate to more than I like.

“Me too,” Maisie agrees, popping a few pieces of popcorn into her mouth.

“We should make this a weekly tradition. We get together and just hang out like this. In our jammies. Totally low-key.”

“I’m game.” I smile when Lyric’s head lulls in my direction.

“Me too,” Maisie says again, this time around a mouthful of popcorn.

We fall silent again, spending the next thirty minutes watching the end of the movie. While I still hate the premise, I feel a little more satisfied with the overall movie

when everyone involved gets a happily ever after. Well, everyone except the friendship that ends up shattered to pieces.

“Is it just me or was that ending sad?” Lyric huffs, sitting up to shut the movie off.

“At least the right girl ended up with the guy,” Maisie says.

“Yeah, but the whole best friend aspect. Her sleeping with the other girl’s fiancé.” Lyric shakes her head. “And then for their lifelong friendship to just end over some guy.”

“But he wasn’t just some guy,” Maisie argues. “He was the love of Rachel’s life and Darcy was a twat who was cheating on him anyway.”

“I just don’t get how friends can do that to one another.”

It takes me way longer than it should to realize that Lyric has been through something very similar, having caught her best friend in bed with her boyfriend of four years.

Weirdly, River also caught his girlfriend having sex with one of his friends. Not sure what they’re putting in the water down there in North Carolina, but I want no part of it.

“You’re thinking about Leo and Summer.” It’s Maisie who finally broaches the subject, a tenderness in her voice that she reserves for very delicate situations.

Lyric nods softly.

“I mean, I’m over it, of course. I’m so in love with Kai I could burst at the seams. In that way, I’m even grateful.

Because if they hadn't done what they did, I never would have ended up here.

I never would have met Kai... Or either of you.

" Her gaze bounces between the two of us.

"But when I think back to what happened... I just wish Summer had told me she was in love with Leo. Maybe it wouldn't have been easy to accept, but at least then we could have tried to salvage our friendship.

But instead, she lied and betrayed me in a way that was utterly unforgivable.

I think more than anything, that's what makes me the most sad, that I can't forgive her.

That years of friendship are just... gone. "

"Sometimes it's for the best," Maisie reassures her. "Anyone who would do that to you wasn't a true friend to begin with." When Maisie's eyes dart to me, the nauseous pit in my stomach opens even further, the pizza and popcorn I ate earlier stirring uncomfortably.

There's nothing accusatory in her gaze, but it's unsettling just the same.

"I think everything happens for a reason," I chime in.

And I really do. Because if Summer and Leo hadn't chased Lyric out of North Carolina, not only would I have never met her, I also would have never met her brother.

"Me too," Lyric agrees. "Like fate knows exactly what it's doing.

Even when it feels like your life is crumbling down around you, there's always a purpose.

Something greater you're being called toward.

Like Mac." She turns to Maisie for a brief moment before her gaze slips to mine.

"Or Conner. Even though it sucks that neither of them realized what incredible women you are and how insanely stupid they are for letting you slip through their fingers, at the end of the day, it's because something better awaits you both. I truly believe that."

My stomach twists again, this time so violently I have to grit my teeth closed and take a few deep breaths through my nose to keep myself from actually puking.

I told Lyric that Conner and I decided we were better off friends and left it at that.

I didn't want to lie to her any more than I already was and keeping up the Conner charade just felt.

.. wrong. The only reason I even told her that in the first place was because we lived together and it was better than refusing to tell them who I was spending every night on the phone texting with.

That only made them want to know more. Once I said it was Conner, they both stopped asking.

So in a way, it did exactly what I needed it to.

Now that she's living with Kai, I don't need a cover.

Especially given that Maisie already knows the truth.

“You’re both going to find someone who makes you feel the way Kai makes me feel.

Like I can’t breathe in his presence. Like when he walks into a room, the whole world stops.

He touches me and I’m lost to the sea. He is the moon, the stars, the sun—my entire universe.

And I love him so deeply that sometimes it scares me.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you.” Maisie snorts out a laugh.

“I’m not...”

“Relax, Lyric. I’m kidding.” Maisie jabs an elbow gently into Lyric’s side. “We are both insanely happy for you. Aren’t we, Char?”

“Insanely.” I nod in agreement.

“It’s so crazy to me that it’s only been a year since I walked into that party with Char and saw Kai sitting on that couch.

I can still see him in perfect detail, long legs stretched out in front of him, a look of indifference on his face.

The way his eyes flared just slightly when they met mine the first time.

It feels like a lifetime ago. So much has happened since then.”

“I know what you mean.” Maisie rolls to her side to face Lyric, who’s sitting up against the wall in between the two of us. “I mean, not about Kai but about last year feeling an eternity away. This time last year I had a slight obsession with Macallan.”

“Slight?” I bark out a laugh, earning me a narrowed glare from Mais.

“Fine. I was borderline insane over him. Now I daydream about running him over with a car. Or pushing him headfirst down a flight of stairs. Or—”

“We get the idea.” Lyric giggles. “Things change so quickly that sometimes it’s hard to comprehend.”

“That they do,” I find myself saying without really meaning to.

But they do. In the last couple of months, River and I have gone from texting each other to not speaking at all, to screwing each other’s brains out every chance we get. Honestly, the whole thing has kind of given me whiplash, though I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world.

“Promise me something.” Lyric’s gaze bounces back and forth between the two of us.

“Promise me that we won’t ever let anything come between us.

That no matter how many things change, or how much time passes, we will still be this close years from now.

That we will always be truthful with one another and will never let someone or something come between us. ”

“I promise.” Maisie is the first to speak.

My heart thunders in my chest because what she's asking me not to do, I've already done. I've already broken the trust between us. She just doesn't know it yet, and the thought makes me physically ill.

"Yeah, me too." I swallow back the bile that leaches to the inside of my throat like thick tar threatening to suffocate me.

The truth... It's there on the tip of my tongue, begging to be set free, only when I open my mouth, it's not words that come out.

"Shit." I throw myself upright, managing to snag the plastic trash can next to my desk before the contents of my stomach start spewing out.

"What the..." Maisie jumps up like she's afraid I might get vomit on her.

"Char, are you okay?" Lyric touches my back, but another round of retching makes it impossible to answer her. "Has she been sick?"

I can only assume she's asking Maisie.

"Not that I'm aware of." Her answer comes seconds later.

I continue to throw up until my stomach is empty and my head is pounding from the strain. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and straighten, looking at Lyric, who's still next to me, then at Mais, who's standing above me, a bottle of water extended in my direction.

"Are you okay?" Lyric asks again.

"I... I think so." My throat feels like I've swallowed battery acid. I take the bottle of water from Maisie. As desperate as I feel for a drink, I'm too afraid to put anything

else in my stomach until I'm certain it's not going to come back up.

"Have you been feeling sick at all before just now?" I realize Lyric's hand is still on my back, rubbing gently.

"I've felt a little sick to my stomach since the pizza," I admit, though something deep down tells me it's not the pizza that made me sick, but my guilt.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"No." I push the trash can away before slowly rising to my feet. "I just..." My stomach rolls again. "I'm gonna go rinse this out and brush my teeth," I tell them, snagging the trashcan off the floor before making a beeline for the hallway where the bathroom sits.

It takes me a few minutes, but eventually, I feel well enough to head back into the bedroom. When I reenter, Maisie and Lyric are cleaning up, both turning toward me as I enter.

"Any better?" It's Lyric who asks.

"Much." I let out a slow breath. "Guess the pizza didn't sit right for whatever reason."

"That happened to me one time when I ate sushi," Maisie interjects. "Haven't been able to eat it since. Every time I even think about it, I feel like I'm going to hurl."

"Well, I hope that's not the case here because I love pizza." I pout. "Sorry to put a damper on the evening."

"You didn't." Lyric crosses the small space, coming to a stop directly in front of me.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I mean, really sure?” The way she looks at me instantly puts me on edge.

“Yeah. Why?” I try to keep the defensiveness from my voice, but a small sliver slips through anyway. What is she asking me... Really? Does she suspect I’ve been hiding something? Fear snakes up my back, coiling tightly around my spine.

“You just... You seem a little... Not yourself. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I am.” I manage a softer tone this time around.

“Okay, well, if you ever need anything, like to talk or whatever, you know you can call me, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“I know I’m preoccupied with Kai, but that doesn’t mean I’m not here if you need me.”

I realize this is more about her guilt than my own. She’s afraid she’s being a bad friend. She has no idea what a bad friend is. It’s something I’m becoming well versed in, as ashamed as I am for it.

“Lyric. I know,” I reassure her more forcefully. “And I promise, I’m fine. I mean, other than I just threw up all my insides and am already somehow failing Calculus, which is kinda stressing me out.”

“You’re failing Calc?” Maisie injects from the other side of the room. “Why didn’t you say anything? You know I’m incredible with math. I could have helped you.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You’re so busy with soccer, and you have your own

classes to worry about.”

Maisie is the busiest person I know. She’s on an athletic scholarship, so she has to maintain good grades on top of practice, which she has nearly every day, and when she’s not practicing, she usually has games. And somehow, she still never misses a social engagement. She’s like a freaking machine.

Meanwhile, I have no job. No sport. No extracurricular activity to speak of.

And yet I’m still over here failing math simply because I can’t stop daydreaming about a certain pair of hunter-green eyes and the man they belong to long enough to focus on anything.

The only reason I’m not failing all my other classes is because they’re easy enough to skirt by.

Math, on the other hand, has never been my strong suit.

“You could never bother me. If you need help, say so, and I’ll help.”

“I’m not the best with math, but I’m sure Kai would be able to help if Maisie can’t. I’m not exaggerating when I say that man is a freaking genius. At this point, I’m purposely trying to find a single thing he doesn’t excel at.”

“Must be nice to be him,” I grumble, half laughter, half groan.

“Don’t fail because you’re too stubborn to ask for help.” Maisie gives me a pointed look.

“It’s fine. I’ll figure it out,” I promise. “And if I can’t, I promise to ask for help,” I add, mainly just to appease them. “Now if you two don’t mind, I think I’d like to lie

down. I don't actively feel like I'm going to puke at the moment, but I'm still not feeling great."

"Of course." Lyric drops into the chair next to me and slides on her shoes, a pair of baby blue Converse that matches her top perfectly. "Kai is expecting me home soon anyway."

"I have a ton of homework," Maisie adds, both trying to make me feel less guilty for cutting our evening short, no doubt.

"We can do dinner later this week if you're feeling better," Lyric tells me as she stands.

"I'd like that." I nod.

"At the risk that you actually have a stomach bug, I'm not going to hug you," she tells me with a smile. "But I love you and I'll see you later." She turns to Mais. "As for you, I'm going to be at your game on Saturday, and I expect to see at least one goal scored by my favorite player."

"I'll see what I can do." Maisie smiles.

"Love you, girls." Lyric moves toward the door.

"Love you too," I say, climbing up into my bed.

"Love you," Mais calls after her seconds before the door shuts.

"You all right up there, Char?" Maisie asks as I roll over, trying to get comfortable.

"I'll live."

It's the last thing I remember saying before I doze off a few short minutes later.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

“So, Charlotte. Lyric tells me you’ve declared English as your major.” Heather Parker, Lyric and River’s mom, stares at me from across the table, a soft smile on her lips, her resemblance to her daughter uncanny.

Since my parents only came for Friday’s festivities and left the same night, I somehow got pressured into joining Lyric’s family for lunch.

Not that I so much mind, given the pair of green eyes I can feel watching me from his place at the end of the table.

Even though we’ve barely spoken today, I still relish every second I get to spend in the same room with this man.

Family weekend started off with a bang. And by bang, I mean River had me up against a wall, screwing my brains out just twenty minutes before my parents arrived on campus.

I don’t think I’ve ever run so fast in my life as I did trying to get back across campus before my parents came looking for me in my room.

I beat them by mere minutes and was still trying to catch my breath when they knocked on my door.

“Yes, that’s right.” I reach for my glass of water; my throat suddenly so dry it feels like sandpaper.

“I minored in English,” she tells me proudly. “I’ve always loved reading and writing.”

“Me too,” I admit. “I want to work in publishing, preferably editing.”

“Well, if I ever sit down and write that novel I’ve been saying I’m going to write for the past twenty years, I’ll know who to go to.” She winks, turning her attention to her daughter at my side. “How are classes going so far?” she asks Lyric, thankfully freeing me of the spotlight.

Not that I’m a shy person who minds the attention. I don’t. But with a certain someone’s gaze burning holes in me, it feels damn near impossible to focus.

I glance his way, our gazes locking. My skin prickles, the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention the way they always do when River looks at me a certain way.

I know I said I didn’t mind being forced to join them today, but I think I’ve changed my mind because sitting here, with River just a few short feet away, and not being able to touch him or really even speak to him without raising a few eyebrows is tortuous.

The corner of his mouth quirks up like he can see into my mind and knows exactly what I’m thinking. The thought should be unsettling, but it isn’t.

“Isn’t that right, River?” At the mention of his name, he quickly looks away.

“What was that?” he asks, clearly not paying attention to the conversation, which makes two of us.

“I said that at NCU, they don’t have as many things planned for family weekends.” If

his mom noticed the stare-off we were having, she doesn't let on. "When you attended there, we only ever went to one."

"That's because he lived just a few minutes away and we saw him all the time," Lyric interjects.

"Well, that too," her mom agrees. "But also because it wasn't nearly as big of a deal there as it seems to be here. When we went to school there, there was no such thing as family weekend."

"Are you trying to remind everyone how old we are?" Her husband, Mike, nudges her with his shoulder.

Michael Parker is a man of few words. Something River did not inherit from him, but Lyric did. She has his softness. His humbleness. His kind eyes.

"No one forgot, Pop." River snorts out a laugh when his father shoots him a look.

"Laugh now, but one day, you'll be my age." His eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles.

I can't help the way my own mouth tips in amusement. I love my family, don't get me wrong, but they are not nearly as entertaining as this lot, especially when Dalton and the girls are around too. I envy what they all have.

I've always wanted a sibling. Someone I could share the kind of bond that Lyric has with her brothers.

Someone who would always have my back. That I could fight with, laugh with, grow up with.

But alas, my mother was not able to have any more kids after me.

Honestly, she's lucky she even had me. The doctors didn't think she would ever have children.

As such, she's always called me her miracle baby.

And while my parents love me fully and unconditionally, I've always felt like something was missing.

A loneliness I could never quite outrun.

Pushing my half-eaten plate of food to the side, I relax back into my seat with a glass of water pressed between my hands, fuller than I should be given the amount of food still on my plate. Then again, given the size of the sandwich they gave me, it's no wonder I couldn't finish it.

I turn my attention back to the conversation, stifling a laugh when Lyric kicks River under the table for bringing up her living arrangements, which neither of her parents is very happy about.

I'm honestly surprised Kai didn't join us for lunch, but I guess he chose to meet up with Jackson and Maisie instead, giving Lyric some time alone with her family.

Well, and me, as it were. Though none of them make me feel like an unwanted tagalong, which I appreciate, given that I feel bad enough for crashing as it is.

Not that Lyric gave me much of a choice.

"Jealousy does not look good on you, brother." Lyric gives him a look that says if you don't shut up right now, I'm going to kick you again, and this time, it's really

gonna hurt.

“Yes, I’m so jealous. Didn’t you know I wanted Kai for myself?” He presses a hand dramatically to his chest.

“Ha. Ha,” she deadpans. “You know what I meant. Ever since Annie—”

In an instant, it’s like all the air is sucked from the room, the tension so thick, it’d take a chainsaw to cut through it.

“Don’t,” River cuts her off with a quick shake of his head, the two exchanging a look.

“I’m just saying, not every woman in the world is a lying cheater.”

“Did you ever think that maybe I’m single because I like it that way?” He’s careful not to look at me and I’m glad he doesn’t because I have no idea what he’d see on my face if he did.

“I don’t think you like being single. I think you’re afraid...”

Afraid of what? I want to ask when she trails off.

“Afraid?” He barks out a humorless laugh. “I’ve dated plenty of women since Annie.”

“And you always break things off every time things get too real for you.”

“Or maybe I break things off because I realize they aren’t right for me.”

“Perhaps this isn’t the best time and place for this conversation,” Heather cuts in, looking between her two children.

“Or maybe that’s just what you tell yourself to keep anyone from getting too close,” Lyric continues like her mother hasn’t even spoken.

“Because you’re my sister, and I love you, I’m going to ask you nicely to let this go.”

The two stare at each other for a long moment. In the year I’ve known Lyric, I’ve never seen her so much as get an attitude with her brother, let alone argue with him in front of other people. Not that they’re really arguing...

“I’m not saying this to make you mad.” Lyric blows out a puff of air. “I just... Is it so bad that I want you to be as happy as I am?”

“I love that you’re happy. But happiness doesn’t look the same for everyone.” River’s gaze darts to mine for the briefest of moments, so brief, in fact, that I wonder if I imagined it. “And if you must know, I’ve been seeing someone for a few weeks now.”

My stomach goes hollow.

“You have?” Lyric draws back, surprised by this information. “Why haven’t you said anything?”

“Because it’s new and we’re just keeping things casual. Enjoying each other’s company.”

“What’s her name?”

River shakes his head from side to side.

“Seriously.” Lyric huffs, looking at her mom. “Did you know about this?”

Heather shrugs. If she does know, she's damn good at hiding it. Though even if she does know, there's no way she knows it's me.

"I'll tell you when and if there's more to tell," he says simply. "But for now, it's between me and her." This time when his eyes find mine, they hold my gaze long enough for me to know that I'm not imagining things.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" I startle when the waitress speaks next to me, having not even realized she had approached.

"I think we'll just take the check," Mike tells her with a soft smile. "So, your mother tells me there's some sort of carnival today." He looks at Lyric, effectively ending a weird, and frankly uncomfortable conversation between the two siblings.

I look at River, giving him a what the fuck look.

Like honestly, why would he say that? Especially with me sitting here, right under his sister's nose.

And while the thought makes me half sick, I also can't deny the way my heart spiked at his words.

Or the way it still stirs restlessly in my chest beneath his gaze.

"What the hell was that?" I hiss to River a few minutes later as we leave the restaurant, the two of us lagging behind the others, who have already stepped outside.

"What was what?" He fights a smile, which makes me want to smack his smug ass across the chest.

"Don't play stupid. Why did you say that you were seeing someone?"

“Because I am,” he says, like it should be so obvious. “She’s currently standing in front of me, looking at me like I’ve grown another head.”

“Maybe because you have.” I huff, turning on my heel.

“Are you mad at me?” He chuckles, following me out of the restaurant.

“Of course not,” I say before quickly catching up to Lyric, who’s standing on the sidewalk with her parents, waiting for us.

“You good?” she asks, seeing something in my expression that gives her pause.

“Oh, yeah. Just tired. I slept so bad last night.” I blow it off like it’s nothing.

“Well, we’re going to head to the carnival here shortly. Kai and Maisie are meeting us there with Jackson and her parents. Are you coming?”

“I need to run back to the dorm beforehand, but I’ll meet you there?”

“Okay. Just text me if you can’t find us when you get there.”

“I will.” I give her a quick one-armed hug. “Thank you for lunch,” I tell Mike, turning my attention to Heather when she speaks.

“It was lovely seeing you again, dear.” She smiles at me affectionately.

“You too.” I grin, turning back to Lyric. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay.” She nods.

“Bye, River.” I spin on my heel, getting all of two steps away before he calls after

me.

“Actually, do you mind if I walk with you? The hotel is in the same direction and I’m going to need to change if we’re going to be outside all day.” He gestures to his jeans. “It’s way too warm for pants.”

“Um.” I glance back at Lyric and then at River. “I guess.” I shrug indifferently.

“I’ll catch up with you guys in a bit,” he tells his family before jogging up next to me.

“What the hell are you doing?” I wait until we’re out of earshot to ask.

“Walking you to your dorm.”

“You don’t think it’s a little suspicious?”

“No. Why would it be?”

I turn my face to look up at him.

“Seriously?” I can’t tell if he’s messing with me or not.

“It’s clear my sister is oblivious. Today proved that. Besides, I’m a nice guy and walking a pretty girl back to her dorm room when I’m headed in that direction anyway is what nice guys do.”

“Do nice guys also come inside pretty girls’ dorm rooms?” I fight the smile that twitches at the corner of my mouth.

“If said pretty girl invites him inside.” His eyes darken as he looks down at me.

“Something I’ll have to keep in mind.” My mouth widens into a full-blown smile.

“Be sure you do that, Red.” River smiles back, revealing a mouthful of perfect white teeth.

Gahhh. Why does he have to be so damn good-looking?

This would all be so much easier if he weren’t. Maybe then I could resist him. Maybe then I wouldn’t be lying to my best friend. Maybe then I wouldn’t wake up to a ten-ton boulder sitting on my chest every morning. Maybe then I could breathe ...

We make the rest of the ten-minute walk back to campus in silence. A billion things climb up my throat, but not a single word slips past my tongue. I’m honestly not sure what to say.

I want to ask him about what Lyric said, about him ending relationships before they get too real.

I want to know if there’s truth to that.

I want to know that if I get too close, if I’ll be one of them.

Then again, don’t I already know the answer to that?

Didn’t he already do that to me? Months of talking and then when things started to feel real, he ghosted me.

And then, only after I told him all I wanted from him was sex, did he let me back in.

An uneasy feeling knots its way into my chest, squeezing so hard I swear I see stars.

I was so sure that's all I wanted at the time. An itch I needed to scratch. A thirst I needed to quench. Only now, I'm not so sure that's still true. Hell, I'm not sure it was ever true to begin with. I think I just wanted him so badly, I didn't care.

I shake off the thought, refusing to entertain the idea.

It isn't until we reach my building that I finally speak, slowing to a stop as we approach the entryway.

"Well, this is me."

"It is." He rocks back on his heels, hands shoved into his pockets.

Do not invite him up.

Do not do it, Char.

Bad idea.

What if Maisie comes home...

Unfortunately, my mouth doesn't seem to agree with my brain. How could it with those damn hunter-green eyes boring into me like they want to devour me from the inside out.

"Do you want to come inside?"

Another flash of his pearly whites.

"What do you think?"

River

“We should probably think about getting dressed. Your sister is expecting us,” Char says, her fingers drawing slow circles across my bare chest as we lie tangled in her tiny twin-sized bunk.

“Five more minutes.” I groan, nuzzling my face into her sweet-smelling hair.

This is exactly what I told myself I wasn’t going to do this weekend. I had a plan. Visit my sister. Spend the weekend drinking in Charlotte’s beauty from a distance. Taking extra precautions not to draw attention to our current situation.

That shit went out the window the instant I saw her yesterday. The first chance I got, I had her pinned to the wall of my hotel room, fucking her good and proper so that when I saw her later with her parents, I could relish knowing that she was still feeling the aftermath of my presence inside her.

“If we both show up late, she’s going to notice,” she says, making no attempt to get up.

“Nah, she’ll be too preoccupied. Between my parents and lover boy, she probably wouldn’t notice if I skipped out altogether.”

“She’d notice.” Char is quick to disagree, her head coming up to look at me as she props her chin on my chest. “You know, we could just tell her.”

I suck in a deep breath, holding it so long that my lungs begin to burn before slowly

blowing it out.

I don't know why I'm so hell-bent on keeping this from my sister.

It's not like she's my parent and she's going to ground me when she finds out.

And sure, maybe she'd be a little upset that we kept it from her for so long, but if I know my sister, her anger would be short-lived.

So that brings me back to the question at hand.

Why does the thought of telling her make me feel like my insides are knotting in on themselves?

Is it because I'm truly worried what she'll think?

Or is it that I'm scared what this becomes once we're no longer hidden by half-truths and lies? And do I want to find out?

A part of me does. The other part of me is stuck where I was at the beginning of summer—on the fact that if we were to actually give this a real shot, it would fail epically.

“Or not.” Char grimaces like she's just tasted something sour. Something in my expression must give away the internal thoughts currently waging war in my brain.

It's not that I don't like Char... I do. Hell, I think I like her a little too much. And therein lies the real issue. Because as adamantly as I deny my sister's claims that I'm scared, I also can't deny that deep down, she might actually be right.

I'm torn between wanting to hold on to Char with all my strength and never let her go

and running in the opposite direction as fast and far as my feet will take me.

“It’s just...” I start to explain but can’t seem to find the right words.

Charlotte pushes herself upright, her auburn hair spilling over her shoulder in a way that has me desperate to reach up and run my fingers through it. I don’t.

“No, I get it.” She swings her long legs over the side of the bunk, jumping to the floor with ease. “I just thought... After what you were saying at lunch...” She trails off.

“Charlotte.” I sit up, watching her slip into her panties and bra with her back to me.

“What are we doing, River?” She spins around, her bright green eyes pinning me in place.

“I think it’s pretty obvious what we’re doing.” I smirk, trying to break through the sudden tension in the air.

“Don’t be a smug prick. I’m being serious.”

“We’re having fun,” I say, jumping down from the bed before dipping to slip on my boxers.

“Then why tell your sister you’re seeing someone?”

“Well, we’ve agreed to be exclusive for the time being. So technically, I am.”

“But we’re just having fun...”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive. We can both be seeing each other and having fun.”

“What if I want more?”

I can tell by the way she clamps her teeth that she regrets asking the question the second it leaves her lips.

“Do you?” I take a step closer, not able to stop myself.

She’s like a magnet, pulling me closer. No matter how hard I try to pull away, I can’t seem to break free of her gravitational force.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She blows out a frustrated breath, meeting my gaze.

“I thought this was just sex.” I cock my head to the side.

“It was... It is.”

“Well, which is it? Are we just having sex, or do you want it to be more?”

“What do you want?”

I shake my head. “If you want this to be more, you should say so.”

“Would it change anything if I did?” Her bright green eyes bore into mine.

Would it?

I wish I could honestly answer that question.

On one hand, the thought of ending this feels equivalent to walking on hot coals or peeling off my own skin—impossible. On the other, I’m not sure I’m ready to take this further. At least not yet.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“I’m sick of lying.”

“Me too.” It’s the truth. I’ve never been one to spin webs or deceive the people I love, and my body and brain revolt against me every time I do.

“Then why can’t we just tell her? Even if all this will only ever be physical, isn’t it better for it to be out in the open?”

“If she knows, it’ll only make things more complicated.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” She crosses her arms across her bare abdomen, like she’s hugging herself. “Are you ashamed of being with me?”

“God, no.” I close the distance between us, my hands going to either side of her face as I force her gaze to mine.

“You are funny and kind. An absolute spitfire that would give any man a run for his money. Not to mention, you’re incredibly beautiful.

” I brush my thumb across her lower lip, having to resist the urge to press my mouth there.

“I could never be ashamed of being with you. If anything, I feel honored.”

“Prove it.” She holds my gaze. “Tell your sister the truth.”

“And if I’m not ready?”

She pulls her hands away from her face and takes a full step back. It takes every

ounce of willpower I possess not to reach for her when she does.

“I’m not asking. Either you tell her, or I will.”

“Charlotte.” I shake my head, indecision tearing at my chest.

If I refuse, she’ll end things, and the thought of that makes me feel like I’m treading water, and at any second, the sea is going to pull me under the waves.

If I agree, she’ll take that as me agreeing to more, and I’m just not ready to do that yet.

“Do you want me?” she asks after a long moment.

“You know I do.”

“Then why are you so resistant to anyone finding out about us?”

“Because I can’t make any promises to you.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Maybe not today, but you will.”

“And that’s so appalling to you, is it?” She sneers, misunderstanding.

“That’s not what I—”

“Please don’t.”

“Where is all this coming from?” I ask instead.

“I don’t know.” She throws her hands up in defeat. “I guess hearing you tell Lyric that we were dating made me want it to be real.”

“It is real.”

“No, it’s not. We’re pretending. We’re hiding in this bubble, shutting out the rest of the world. What we have isn’t real. It’s a fantasy.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I tug on my pants before quickly slipping on my shirt.

“If you don’t know, then we’re further apart than I realized.”

“Just say what you want, Red.”

“You!” She erupts, emotion filling her eyes with unshed tears. “I want you.”

“You have me.” I step toward her, but she instantly steps back.

“No, I don’t. I have what small sliver you’re willing to give me. It’s not enough.”

“What are you saying?”

“If you feel even a fraction for me of what I feel for you, you’ll tell your sister about us.”

“And if I don’t?” I pick up my shoes off the floor, sensing the direction this is going.

“Then I’ll have my answer.” She crosses toward the door and tugs it open.

We both freeze at the sight of Lyric standing in the doorway, her hand raised like she was about to knock.

Her eyes widen in surprise, her gaze darting from Char, standing in her bra and underwear, to me, clenching my shoes to my chest.

“What the—”

“Lyric, I can explain,” I say, calmly stepping toward her.

“I had a feeling...” She shakes her head, turning her attention to Charlotte. “You two must think me really stupid.” Tears prick my sister’s eyes.

“No, Lyric...” Char starts, only to be cut off by Lyric.

“Please do not disrespect me by lying further. I knew something was going on. I could tell by how weird you two were acting. The way you kept looking at each other at lunch. But then I thought, no, it’s just my imagination.

But then you left with her.” She looks directly at me.

“I tried to convince myself that it was nothing, but the longer you were gone, the more I couldn’t deny the truth that’s been staring me in the face for some time now.

” She squares her shoulders. “So, which one of you wants to tell me what the hell is going on here and just how long you’ve actually been lying to me. ”

I open my mouth, fully prepared to say this was a one-time thing, but Charlotte beats me to the punch.

“We started talking after the glow party last year,” she admits, turning to grab her sundress off the back of her desk chair before pulling it over her head, allowing Lyric the space to step fully into the room. “But it didn’t become physical until the week I visited you over summer break.”

“Last year...” My sister thinks on this for a moment. “It wasn’t Conner.” Realization dawns on her face.

Charlotte shakes her head, unable to meet my sister’s eyes.

“You lied to me... For over a year.”

“I’m so sorry...” Charlotte’s chin quivers, her eyes brimming with tears. The sight makes me feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach, all the air leaving my lungs in an instant. “I wanted to tell you. So many times, I almost did.”

“Then why didn’t you? Did you really think I would care? That I would stop you?”

“It’s my fault.” I step forward. “I asked her not to tell you.”

“Why?” Her voice echoes off the walls around us.

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“Because it was just a few short months after Summer and Leo, and you were finally starting to find your footing again. I didn’t want to encroach on your friendship with Charlotte. I knew how badly you needed her.”

“What a load of horse shit,” she spits, surprising both me and Charlotte with her words. “Get out.” She turns toward Char, who rears back in confusion. “I need to speak to my brother... Alone.”

Understanding crosses Charlotte’s expression and she nods only once before slipping on her sandals and heading for the door, not once looking back at me as she does.

My sister waits until the door closes behind her before giving me her full attention.

“How could you?” She swipes angrily at the tear that sneaks past her lashes. “Charlotte?” She points toward the door she just exited through. “Of all the women in the world, it had to be her.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“Do you love her?”

“What? No.” I shake my head, but the word tastes bitter on my tongue, like my body knows it’s a lie even if my brain won’t accept it.

“So you’re just, what, using her for sex?”

“I’m not using her for anything. She’s the one who came onto me, not the other way

around.”

“Oh, poor you. A beautiful girl came onto you.” She rolls her eyes, her hands fisted at her sides. “You lied to me.” The words are so soft on her lips I almost don’t hear them.

“I know...”

“You, River... The person I trusted more than anyone. You lied to me. Why?”

“I told you—”

“Don’t you dare blame this on Summer and Leo. How could you possibly think you’d be protecting me by doing the same thing they did?”

“This is not the same.”

“A lie is a lie, no matter the circumstances.”

“What do you want me to say, Lyric? That I met Char and I was instantly attracted to her? I was. Do you want me to tell you that we spent months talking, getting to know each other, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to know? That I tried to end it when I started to feel something... That she’s made it impossible for me to walk away?

” I run a frustrated hand through my hair. “Would any of that make it better?”

“Did you think I would care? Did you truly think I would stand in your way, to the point that you not only lied to me, but you convinced my best friend to lie to me too?”

“I just... After Leo, you were so... broken. I didn’t want to do anything to set back all the progress you had made.”

“You’re still lying.”

“No, I’m not.”

“This has nothing to do with me. And you know that, even if you haven’t admitted it to yourself yet.

This has everything to do with keeping a barrier between you and Char.

You used me as an excuse to keep her from getting too close.

You knew as long as there were lies between you that you’d be able to keep her at arm’s length. ”

“That’s not—” I open my mouth to argue but quickly snap it shut.

“You haven’t just been lying to me. You’ve also been lying to yourself. And for what? Because you’re scared of getting hurt.”

“I’m not scared...”

“Bullshit.” Her nostrils flare. “I know you, River. I know what Annie’s betrayal did to you, and I get it.

I’ve lived through it myself. But you can’t keep doing this.

You can’t keep putting up walls between you and other people because if you do, one day, you’re going to find yourself barricaded behind them with no means of escape.

” She blows out a breath. “Charlotte deserves better. And frankly, so do you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say the one thing I should have said the moment she appeared in the doorway.

“I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m sorry I broke your trust. And I’m even more sorry that I pulled Char into the lie.

Please don’t be upset with her. You mean so much to her, and the thought that I may have caused a rift.

.. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. ”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you started fucking my best friend and lying to me about it.” She seethes. “Does anyone else know?”

“Know what?” I play dumb because I don’t want to answer the question. I don’t want to implicate anyone else because, at the end of the day, I’m the one to blame here, not anyone else.

“About you and Char.”

“Ly—”

“Who?” She reads me like an open book.

“Dalton... And Maisie.”

At the mention of Maisie, she draws back like I’ve physically slapped her across the face.

“Maisie knows?”

“She figured it out the night we were all at Mom and Dad’s for dinner, the week Char was visiting.”

She shakes her head, more tears filling her eyes as she realizes three of the people closest to her in her life have been lying to her. Guilt tears me open.

“I see.” She tries to hold on to a semblance of her composure.

“I’m so sorry, Lyric. Truly. I never meant for it to go this far.”

“Whether you meant for it to or not is irrelevant. You wanna know the sad thing? I would have supported this. I would have been happy for you. For Char.”

“I know.”

“Which is precisely why you didn’t tell me.” It’s not a question. “You’re going to break her heart. You know that, don’t you?”

“Charlotte is tougher than she looks.”

“She wants you to think that, but deep down, she’s just as fragile as the rest of us, maybe even more so.” She turns toward the door.

“What are you going to do?” I call to her back.

“Nothing. There’s nothing to be done.” She tugs open the door, turning to look at me over her shoulder. “Do not ever lie to me again.” It’s the last thing she says before she disappears into the hallway.

Charlotte

“Lyric...” I chase after my best friend as I watch her exit my building like that damn thing has been lit on fire. “Lyric, please wait.”

She stops so abruptly I damn near run straight into her.

“You lied to me.” She spins on me so quickly the action makes me feel slightly off balance. “You, Char, of all people.”

“I know.” I choke out a sob, feeling ready to burst open at the seams. “I wanted to tell you. I asked him to. Upstairs, before you showed up, I demanded it. I was prepared to end things if he didn’t come clean to you.”

“But that doesn’t answer the most important question, Char. Why didn’t you ? You had so many opportunities. Even if River asked you not to, you’re my best friend. I trusted you.” Her voice breaks, bringing fresh tears boiling to the surface.

“I know. And I’m so sorry, Ly. So fucking sorry. Just tell me what I can do. I’ll do anything.”

“There’s nothing you can do. You broke my trust. And the worst part is, I wouldn’t have cared about you and River. Hell, I would have been happy for you. But you didn’t give me the chance.”

“I didn’t know... I wanted to tell you. But.

.. I wanted him more,” I let myself admit, emotion clogging my throat, making it difficult to pull in a breath.

“The way he makes me feel, Lyric. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.

It’s exhilarating and breathtaking and terrifying all at the same time. ”

“You’re in love with him.”

I open my mouth to disagree, to tell her there’s no truth to her statement, but that would just be another lie, I quickly realize. Because no matter how hard I’ve fought against it, or how many times I’ve denied it, even when I’ve felt it deep in my bones, I can’t ignore the truth any longer.

“I am.” I swipe at the tear that streaks down my cheek.

“I’m in love with him.” Saying it out loud is like taking in a deep breath of air after being underwater for too long.

Like seeing the sun after weeks of being trapped in the dark.

Like feeling the grass under my feet after feeling nothing but harsh rock and stone.

I hear movement behind me, too late I realize, as I glance behind me to find a wide-eyed River, his mouth slightly agape, an unreadable expression on his handsome face.

“Seems I’m not the only one you’ve been lying to.” Lyric draws my attention back to her. “I’ll let you two talk.” Without giving me time to say anything more, she takes off across the lawn.

“Why did you say that to her?” River asks from behind me, and I feel his eyes staring

holes into my back.

Turning slowly, I force myself to meet his gaze.

“Because it’s the truth.” I lift my shoulder in a semblance of a shrug. “I’m in love with you.” My chin quivers as I say it, fear and relief swirling together in an unsettling combination, making me feel sick to my stomach.

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Would it have changed anything?” I ask.

The look he gives me says it all. No, it wouldn’t have. Defeat settles deep in my bones, making me feel heavy with exhaustion.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” I murmur under my breath loud enough that he can still hear me.

“I just...” He scrubs his hands down his face.

“It’s okay. I knew what this was. Hell, I asked for it. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Char...”

“Please don’t make this any worse than it already is. Maybe we should take this as a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“That our time together has run its course.”

“Is that what you want?” He stares at me intently, his hunter-green eyes so devastatingly beautiful I have to bite back that sob that threatens to peel itself free from my throat.

“Does it matter if it isn’t?” I fight the tears that linger against my lashes, begging for them not to fall.

“I don’t want this to be over.”

“Neither do I.” I bite down on my bottom lip to keep the damn thing from quivering.

“Then don’t do this.” He takes a step toward me. “Lyric knows now. You got your wish.”

“I didn’t want her to find out this way any more than you did.” I try to keep the anger his words incite inside of me at bay.

“I know that.” His expression softens. “I just mean... You got what you wanted.”

“Did I?” I hitch a brow at him.

“I don’t follow.” He shakes his head like he’s genuinely confused.

“I wanted you to tell her because if you did, it would mean that you at least felt something for me. It’s clear to me now that you don’t.”

“Don’t assume you know how I feel.”

I flinch at the harshness of his words.

“Then tell me... Tell me how you feel.”

When he doesn't say anything, a humorless smile tugs at the corner of my mouth.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." I shake my head, moving to step past him.

"Char." His hand closes around my forearm. I meet his gaze, waiting for him to say something... anything. Instead, he stares at me for a long, tense moment, and then his hold on me vanishes. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." I blink back tears. "Me too." With that, I take off back inside my building, able to hold off my sobs until I'm in my dorm room.

I close the door, lock it, and then proceed to collapse onto the floor, feeling like my chest is being cracked open as I burst into tears.

"Char?" I blink, once then twice, the action of opening my eyes painful as Maisie's face comes into view. "Are you okay?" Her expression is full of concern, and only then do I realize I'm still lying on the floor, curled into the ball I apparently cried myself to sleep in.

Fresh tears bubble to the surface as everything comes flooding back.

Lyric...

River...

The way he just let me walk away, not an ounce of fight in him.

Because he doesn't love you . My inner voice is a petty little bitch.

"Come here." Maisie lowers herself to the floor, pulling my head into her lap, her hand sliding through my hair.

“He just... let me walk away,” I choke out, my voice hoarse as it scratches past my too-dry throat.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“River...” I swipe away the tears that blur my vision. “Lyric, she...”

“I know,” she says soothingly.

“You do?” I roll onto my back so that I’m looking straight up at her.

“Lyric told me that she suspected something was going on and when you two were last to meet them, she came here and found River in your room and you half-naked.”

“Does she know that you knew?” I sniff.

Maisie nods.

“Oh, Mais... I’m so sorry.” This only makes me cry harder.

“It’s okay. You didn’t make me lie. I made that choice for myself.”

“Is she really mad?”

“I wouldn’t say mad. She’s more hurt than anything.”

“Do you think she’ll ever forgive me?”

“I do. You just need to give her some time. We both do.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this mess.”

“Stop worrying about me and tell me what happened with you and River. He never showed up at the festival and when Lyric called him, he said he was on his way home.”

“He left?” I croak, the realization further splitting me open. I curl into myself again, trying and failing to keep the pain from seeping in.

“He did,” she confirms softly.

“He overheard me telling Lyric I was in love with him,” I admit, sniffing loudly.

“I take it he didn’t handle it well?”

“He didn’t handle it at all,” I croak. “He just... looked at me like he didn’t know what to say.”

“Maybe you just surprised him.”

“I didn’t surprise him, Mais. I scared him. Apparently, enough for him to run away back to North Carolina.”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Maisie says unapologetically.

I look up at her once more.

“Mais...”

“I’m just saying... You are the most beautiful, fierce, witty, and overall entertaining person I’ve ever met. If he can’t see how incredibly lucky he is to be loved by someone like you, then he’s a damn fool.”

“If only that made it hurt a little less.”

“Unfortunately, nothing will. Except for time.”

“I don’t want to feel like this, Mais. Like I’m being torn open by invisible claws that won’t stop scratching and ripping at my skin. I hurt... everywhere.” I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing tears past my lashes.

“Which is precisely why I’ve decided to write off all relationships for... well, maybe ever.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Oh, but I do. And seeing you like this only reinforces this for me. No man is worth this, Charlotte. Not even River Parker, gorgeous as he may be.”

“I wish you could convince my heart of that fact,” I mutter bitterly.

“Come on. Let’s get you in bed. Maybe you’ll feel better after a long night of sleep.”

I hate to tell her, but not even sleep is going to ease this pain that seems to be eating me alive from the inside out. I’ve never felt my emotions manifest into physical pain before and the feeling is unbearable.

But I do what she says anyway, pushing up on wobbly legs before climbing into my bunk.

When my head hits the pillow, all I smell is River.

His cologne. The natural scent of his skin.

It envelopes me, holding me captive. Turning to face the wall, I bury my face in the pillowcase and then allow grief to swallow me whole once more.

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve never seen her like this before,” I hear Maisie say, her voice breaking through the fog of sleep.

I blink into the brightness of the room, tugging the blanket over my head to block out the light that stings my tear-swollen eyes.

It’s been six days since River left.

Six days since I’ve left this bed.

I haven’t showered.

Have thrown up any food I’ve attempted to eat.

And have only drunk what Maisie has forced down my throat from time to time, grumbling about not letting me die of dehydration.

I need to get up. I know I do.

And yet, I can’t seem to get my body on board with that plan.

“I’ll talk to her.”

My eyes open again at the sound of Lyric’s voice. I had assumed whomever Maisie was talking to was on the phone.

I tense as the ladder to my bed creaks, the mattress dipping moments later as Lyric takes a seat at the edge, her hand settling on my leg as she lets out a slow sigh.

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“I’ll give you two some privacy,” Maisie says seconds before I hear the door open and then close, silence filling the room.

“Do you hate me?” I ask after a few tense moments, pulling the covers away from my face.

“Of course I don’t.” Lyric squeezes my lower leg as if to reassure me of this fact, or maybe it’s because she feels sorry for me, given how bad I probably look, not that I care much.

“I’m hurt that you didn’t feel like you could tell me, but in a way, I kind of understand why you felt like you couldn’t. ”

“You do?” My throat is so dry it’s borderline painful to get the words out.

“Here.” Lyric extends an unopened bottle of water toward me like she can see I’m having trouble.

I nod in thanks, twisting off the cap before taking a long drink, the cold liquid stinging the roof of my mouth. Replacing the cap, I collapse my head back down onto the pillow, blowing out a long breath as I force my gaze to meet Lyric’s.

Her gaze is soft, not a trace of anger anywhere to be found, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me feel even worse about everything that’s happened. I deserve her wrath. In some weird way, I need it. Need her to be angry.

“When I first started falling for Kai, I was reluctant to talk about him, especially

because of his connection with Maisie. I feared what she'd think of me for loving a man who'd all but proven that loving him was the biggest mistake a person could make.

Only she didn't care. She worried about me, but she never tried to talk me out of it.

Never made me feel stupid for letting myself fall for him.

Never judged me." A sad smile touches her lips.

"I can't imagine how you must have felt, with him being my brother and all.

I hate that he put you in that position.

That he asked you not to tell me. He never should have done that. "

"I should have told you anyway." I fight the fresh onslaught of tears building behind my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I refuse to let them fall. I've cried more in the last two days than I think I've ever cried, and for the life of me, I don't know why.

I mean, I do know why. But at the same time, it all feels a bit much .

Though it's not like I really have a say in the matter.

I want to slap myself, scold myself, remind myself that no man is worth this kind of misery.

Only that's not true.

Because he is... He's everything . I just realized it all much too late.

“Yes, you should have,” she agrees. “And while knowing that you felt like you couldn’t hurt more than I can say, a part of me really does understand.”

“It was all for nothing anyway. Lying to you. Risking our friendship, which is the most precious thing to me, though I’ve been shit at showing it. I did it all because...”

“Because you love him.” She squeezes my leg a second time.

I nod, knowing if I open my mouth at this very moment, a sob will come out instead of words.

“River is... Well, he’s more complicated than he looks. Annie, his ex—”

“I met her,” I interrupt, not missing the surprise that lines her face.

“You met Annie?”

“I went to see River at the end of summer. He took me out to eat. She came up to our table. I had no idea who she was at the time...”

“But he told you about her?”

I nod, my ear shifting against the pillow.

“You seem surprised...” I point out.

“I am. River never talks about Annie to... Well, anyone. The fact that he opened up to you tells me he cares for you a lot more than he’s ready to admit. Maybe even to himself.”

“She really hurt him.” It’s not a question.

“Very much. Annie was his whole world. River was head over feet in love with her. Even though they were young, he told anyone who would listen that he was going to marry her one day. But then...”

“She blew up his life. Much like Leo did yours.”

“Talk about sibling bad luck.” She lets out a humorless laugh. “You would think this sort of thing was contagious the way it spread through our family. Only Dalton was left unscathed. Then again, there’s still time.”

“Don’t say that. He and Avery seem very happy together.”

“They are. And I don’t think she would ever.

.. Then again, you never really know what someone is capable of until they do it.

” She gives a weak shrug. “Anyway, Annie really did a number on him. He was never the same after that. He would meet a girl, get really excited about her, they’d date for a few weeks or months and then he’d end it abruptly with no real explanation outside of he didn’t think it was working out. ”

“You think he’s scared to get too close to someone?

” It’s something I’ve suspected for a while now, but hearing her say it gives me some comfort.

Knowing it’s not necessarily that he doesn’t want me, but that he’s scared to open up, afraid that history will repeat itself and he’ll get his heart broken all over again.

“Can’t get your heart broken if you never let anyone close enough to touch it.” Her words mirror my own thoughts. “For what it’s worth, I think he really cares for you.”

“His actions would suggest otherwise.” I let out a shaky breath, willing my voice to stay even.

“Give him time. He might come around.”

“I don’t think he will. And even if he does, who’s to say he won’t get freaked out and run again.” I shake my head. “My heart wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“I get that. But take it from someone with experience in this department. When it’s real, not even their fear can keep them away.

Take Kai for example. When I told him I loved him, he ran for the hills.

But it wasn’t long before he let himself admit why he ran.

Because he loved me too.” When she smiles this time, it reaches her eyes.

“I think Kai is the exception here. Besides, he never stood a chance against you.”

“Me?” She crinkles her small nose. “I think maybe you have you and me confused. If there’s a woman in this room that no man can refuse, it’s not me, it’s you.

Don’t let my brother’s fear make you think you’re less than you are.

You are Charlotte freaking O’Malley. The most fearless, incredible girl I know.

If River doesn’t realize what he stands to lose by letting you go, then he doesn’t deserve you.

And I’m his sister, so that’s really saying something. ”

“I was afraid you’d never talk to me again once you learned the truth.” I need to focus on her and me and not River. He made his choice, and it wasn’t me. The sooner I come to terms with this fact, the better. “I was so sick over it. It’s all I could think about most days.”

“I won’t deny that I was angry. Out of all the people I love, you were the last person I ever thought would keep something like this from me.

But after talking to Kai and Maisie, I realized that sometimes you just need to have something of your own.

River is my brother, not my boyfriend. I don’t own him or his actions, no more than I own you or yours.

You are both consenting adults, free to make your own choices.

Do I wish you had told me the truth? Obviously.

Does it hurt a little knowing you didn’t feel like you could?

It does. Is what you did unforgivable? Absolutely not.

I’m hurt by the lie but not by your actions.

You’re free to love whomever you want...

As long as it’s not Kai,” she quickly tacks on with a grin.

“Definitely not.” I chuckle, though the sound feels foreign spilling past my lips. “Have you spoken to him?” I ask, all traces of humor evaporating in an instant. “To River?”

“He’s not answering my calls.” She shakes her head. “But don’t worry, he will, when he’s ready.”

“I hate that I put a rift between you two.”

“You didn’t. River and I have been through worse. We’re siblings. This is far from the biggest fight we’ve ever had. We’ll get past it. But not before I have the chance to tell him what an absolute idiot he is for letting someone like you go.”

“Please don’t...” I suck in a sharp breath.

“You deserve better than what he’s shown you, Char.

You are clever. Not to mention drop-dead freaking gorgeous.

You deserve a man who puts you on a pedestal and isn’t afraid to let the whole world see him worship at your feet.

You are not the kind of girl who should be hidden away.

And shame on him for making you feel like you are. ”

“It wasn’t all his fault. Really, I pursued him.

He told me from the first time we kissed that he couldn’t give me more and yet, it didn’t stop me.

I was so desperate to be close to him that I was willing to take anything he would give me, and I convinced myself it was enough. For a while, I really thought it was.”

“For what it’s worth, I hope he gets his head out of his ass before it’s too late. I would

kill to have you become my sister.”

“I think that’s taking it a little far.” I snort.

She gives me a simple shrug and then hops off the bed.

“A girl can dream.” She grins up at me.

“So... Are we good?” I ask, propping up on an elbow as I force myself upright. The entire room spins for five solid seconds before the sensation passes.

“We’re good. Under one—no, two circumstances. One, you never lie to me again.”

“Done.”

“And two... You take a shower. You’re starting to smell. And you look like you’re building a bird’s nest in your hair.”

I reach up and touch the side of my head, feeling the deep knots that have formed from basically lying in the same position for days on end.

“Point taken.” I smile, though it feels anything but genuine.

“You might want to think about getting dressed too. Maisie and I are taking you to a party tonight.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“Nope, not listening. You cannot lie around and rot in this room. The only way to feel like yourself again is to start acting like yourself again. And what better way to do that than to go out and have some drinks with your best friends?”

“Drinks? You?”

“For you, I’m willing to suffer through a beer or two.” She grins, the action lighting up her whole face. “Kai is designated. I’ll be here to get you and Maisie at seven. You better be ready.”

I open my mouth to argue but quickly snap it closed, knowing full well it will do me no good. Besides, Lyric should be furious with me. The least I can do is try for her sake.

“Okay,” I finally agree. “And, Lyric...” I call after her just as she tugs open the door. “Thank you.”

She gives me a soft smile.

“I’ll see you at seven.”

“Seven,” I repeat.

She steps out into the hall, pulling the door closed behind her.

Letting my eyelids flutter closed, I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly, hunter-green eyes sliding across my vision, making my chest constrict.

I open my eyes, trying to shake off the thought of him. The smell of him. The feel of him. All the things that have haunted me for days, keeping me prisoner in my misery.

Lyric’s right... This isn’t me.

Summoning all the strength I have, I throw my legs over the side of the bed and quickly jump down.

Pretending I feel better than I actually do, I gather my shower stuff and head to the bathroom.

Maybe the hot water will wash away River's touch, which lingers on my skin like invisible tattoos I can't see but can most definitely feel.

Though I doubt it will be that easy to erase all traces of him, it sure as heck isn't going to stop me from trying.

Charlotte

“Chug. Chug. Chug,” Lyric and Maisie chant in unison as I tip the glass further, emptying the remaining contents in seconds. Slamming the cup down, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and then hold it out, smiling.

“Pay up,” I say to Maisie’s brother, Jackson, who foolishly bet he could drink a beer faster than me. Obviously, he had no idea who he was messing with.

“You guys set me up.” Jackson grins, pulling out his wallet before dropping a twenty-dollar bill into my outstretched hand.

“That’s on you, Brother.” Maisie snorts. “We did try to warn you.”

“Rematch.” His blue eyes flash toward me.

“How about no,” Kai interjects, narrowing his gaze on his drunk friend.

I snort out a laugh. Not that I’m one to judge—all my cares fucked right the fuck off about an hour ago after our third round of shots—but he is swaying slightly, whereas I’m still pretty steady on my feet, so I guess I’m technically in better shape, or I guess worse shape, depending on your point of view.

“Don’t be a buzzkill.” Jackson clasps Kai on the shoulder, giving him a cheeky grin.

“You forget you’re sleeping on my couch tonight, and I will not, under any circumstances, be cleaning up your vomit when you inevitably start puking.”

“And let’s not forget that the only reason you’re even here is to come to my game in the morning,” Maisie reminds him. “If you miss it because you’re too hungover, I will kick your ass.”

“Like to see you try, little sis.” His eyes flare in challenge.

“And for the record, I came tonight so I could have a good time. If I just wanted to see your game, I would have driven over in the morning,” he says matter-of-factly, like he’s just shown her.

“Again?” He tilts his head in my direction.

“I’m game. It’s your wallet that’s going to be empty,” I warn him.

“Double or nothing,” he slurs.

“Even better.” The smile that slides across my lips feels too easy, thanks in large part to the alcohol buzzing through my veins, but right now, I’ll take it. Anything to keep my mind off...

Nope.

I shake off the thought before his name even crosses my mind, focusing instead on the handsome blue-eyed man across from me.

Jackson is hot. There is no mistaking that. But since I’ve had enough of messing around with my friends’ brothers to last me a lifetime, I will not go there, no matter how easy it would be to do just that.

“Jackson,” Maisie scolds. “She handed you your ass already. Are you really so eager to lose all your money?”

“It was a fluke.” He cracks his neck by no more than twisting his head from side to side. “And I’m gonna prove it.” His gaze comes back to me.

“It’s your money.” I shrug, handing my cup back to Lyric, who happily fills it, then fills Jackson’s from the same keg.

“Ready?” He holds his cup up in front of his face.

“Ready.” I smile, victory already mine.

“Go.”

We both tip back our cups. Ever since I was little, I’ve had the unique ability where I can pretty much just pour liquid down my throat without barely swallowing a single drop.

Because of this, my cup is empty in a matter of a few seconds, whereas Jackson still has at least a third of his cup left when I finish.

“You are insane!” Maisie squeals, holding up my hand to declare me the winner.

Jackson throws his cup down as soon as it’s empty, scowling at me like the sore loser he is.

“I believe you said double or nothing.” I reach out my hand as soon as Maisie releases it, wiggling my fingers at him.

“Fucking sorcery is what that is,” he grumbles, pulling out his wallet to hand me two more twenties.

“Thank you very much.” I giggle, tucking them into the back pocket of my jeans with

the other twenty. “Easiest money I’ve ever made.” I burp... loudly. “Excuse me.” I grin.

“I’d say so.” Kai chuckles, shaking his head at me.

“I wanna dance,” I announce abruptly.

“Yes, please!” Maisie wiggles her hips next to me, nearly as intoxicated as I am.

Meanwhile, Lyric is leaning into Kai’s side like he’s the only thing keeping her standing upright. Lightweight . The thought makes me laugh to myself.

“Lyric?” I arch a brow at her.

“Hmm...” She taps her chin. “Only if you’ll come with me.” She looks up at Kai, batting her thick lashes at him.

He grins, trapping her chin between his finger and thumb before pressing his mouth to hers.

The sight feels like a hefty punch to the stomach, and it takes everything I have not to bend against the impact. Jealousy slides through my chest, spreading like a lethal poison, reaching every single one of my extremities in seconds.

I close my eyes, remembering the feel of River’s kiss. The way he would always scratch his teeth gently against my lower lip. The sounds he would make when he was close to falling apart...

My eyes dart open and I suck in a ragged breath.

How could I not see how hard I had fallen for him until he was letting me walk away?

How could I not appreciate what I had and do everything to hold on to it? How could I just let him go so easily?

The thought that I might never feel his touch again. Might never hear his laugh or the deep gruff of his voice when he first wakes up. Feel his smile against my skin as he nuzzles his face into my neck. Hear him say my name... Red .

I have to fight the urge to fold in on myself.

“You good?” Maisie slides up next to me, slipping an arm over my shoulder.

“I will be.” I force a smile, allowing her to guide me from the room.

The rest of the night goes by in a blur. One minute, I’m dancing in a crowded room being handed shots from what feels like every direction. The next, I’m outside, Lyric’s arm tucked into my right, Maisie’s into my left, as the three of us follow Kai and Jackson to his car.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Lyric asks, nudging my hip with hers, nearly knocking herself over in the process.

“I did.” I try to force my words to come out even, but there’s an undeniable slur to them just the same. “But I think I might be a little drunk.”

“You think?” Maisie snorts out a laugh.

“Are you drunk?” I ask no one in particular.

“Wasted.” Lyric grins, the action splitting her face in two.

“Very,” Maisie agrees.

“I need you girls to promise me something...” Lyric licks her lips like they’re too dry to continue until she does so. “Promise me that we won’t ever let anything come between us.” When she says this, her eyes come to me.

“Promise.” Maisie hiccups.

“I promise,” I say, all traces of humor leaving my body in an instant. “I’m sorry about River.” Emotion tickles the back of my throat.

“We aren’t doing that.” She shakes her head, matter-of-fact. “I know why you lied. And I also know it wasn’t to hurt me.”

“I never want to hurt you.”

“I know.” She gives me a soft smile.

“I love him,” I blurt abruptly.

“I know,” she repeats a second time.

“But the real question is...” Maisie interrupts. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do about it?”

“You can tell him point blank how you feel.” She suggests. “Lay it all on the line. If he rejects you, then you’ll know for certain. But if he doesn’t...” She raises her eyebrows suggestively.

“He already knows how I feel.”

“Does he?” Lyric’s forehead crinkles in question. “I mean, he overheard you tell me

that you were in love with him, but that doesn't mean he fully grasps the enormity of your feelings for him."

"He knows," I state flatly. "And as you can all see, he's done nothing about it."

"Give him time." Lyric pats my arm sympathetically. "If I know my brother, he'll realize his mistake eventually. Might take him a while... Men, " she grumbles, earning herself a scowl from Jackson before a knowing smirk slides across his lips.

"In the meantime"—Jackson turns, walking backward, his eyes fixed on me—"if you need a rebound or someone to make him jealous, I'm happy to volunteer." He holds his arms out at his sides as if to say I'm all yours .

"Um, no," Maisie cuts in. "Turn back around." She does a swirling motion with her finger.

"You're such a buzzkill," Jackson tells her, humor lighting up his handsome features.

In another life, and by other life, I mean a year ago, Jackson is totally someone I would've hooked up with.

He's tall. Handsome. Funny. And those eyes.

.. That was before, though. Before River.

.. Before I went and fell in love with a man who doesn't love me back.

Suddenly, the urge to hook up with random men is gone, replaced by an achingly painful longing for only one man.

"And you're a whore." She sticks her tongue out at him.

“The mouth on my baby sister.” He nudges Kai as he spins back around. “When did she get so vulgar?”

“Pretty sure she’s always been that way, brother.” Kai laughs, the sound deep and rich. “You just refused to see it.”

“We should call him.” Maisie drags my attention back to her.

“Who?”

“River.”

“Yesssss!” Lyric agrees much too excitedly.

“Why would we do that?” I look between the two of them.

“Tell him how you feel. Put the ball in his court. You’re Charlotte O’-fucking-Malley,” Maisie says like that actually means something.

“I’m not calling him.” I shake my head, way too drunk to even consider what she’s suggesting.

“Yes, you can.” Lyric stumbles as she fights to retrieve her phone out of her back pocket. “If you don’t, I will.” She waves the phone in front of my face.

“I would expect you, of all people, to be against this horrible idea,” I tell her flatly.

“Well, too bad, I’m drunk and my brother is stupid, so we’re doing it.”

Before I can stop her, she presses a button on her phone and then holds the device to her ear.

“Lyric.” I move to take her phone, but she releases my arm, stumbling out of my grasp.

“Come here.” Kai turns, and without warning, plops her over his shoulder so that she’s hanging down his back.

“I can walk.” She giggles.

“Not very well.” He huffs.

It takes me longer than it should to realize her phone is still pressed to her ear.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

“River, this is your sister,” she slurs. “Charlotte is the most incredible, funny, smart, beautiful person on this planet, and if you let her go, you’re a fucking idiot.”

My eyes widen at her language. Lyric rarely ever cusses, so when she does, you take notice.

“Ly...” I hiss under my breath.

“Now call me back or I’m going to drive all the way to North Carolina and whoop your ass.

Or better yet, call Char. If you don’t, someone else is going to swoop in and steal her away and I don’t feel like dealing with you being a whiney, moepy baby when that happens.

So man the freak up. That is all.” With a smile that says she’s extremely pleased with herself, she ends the call.

And then, without warning, pukes, narrowly missing Kai as the liquid hits the ground behind him.

“Um...” Jackson steps away.

“Whoops.” Lyric buckles in laughter.

Maisie and I step around the vomit, sharing a brief look of amusement.

“And this is why she doesn’t drink,” Maisie tells me.

“Converse, if you puke in my car,” Kai warns, lowering her to her feet with so much care it causes the ache in my chest to expand.

“I won’t.” She gives him a toothy smile before all but falling into the back seat when Kai opens the door.

“Too early.” Maisie groans, throwing an arm over her face when I flip on the small lamp that sits on my desk.

“Sorry,” I offer, slipping on one shoe and then the other before standing.

“Where are you going?” Maisie props up on her elbows, her brown curls wild around her face as she stares down at me.

“I’m going to get some coffee,” I say, shoving my cell into my pocket.

“Wait, why aren’t you sleeping?” She sits up further. “It’s like seven in the morning.” She glances at the clock on the wall.

“I’m not tired. Besides, don’t you have a game to get to?”

“Not this early.” She flops back down.

“Could you two be any louder?” Jackson grumbles from the floor, flopping onto his back as he stares up at me with bright blue eyes.

“You could have stayed with Kai and Lyric like you were supposed to,” Maisie reminds him.

“And listen to those two fuck all night... Pass. Honestly, I don’t think they ever sleep.”

“Must be nice.” I hear the smile in Maisie’s voice.

“I know you did not just say that in front of your big brother.”

“Don’t be such a prude.” She laughs.

“I need to use the facilities,” Jackson announces, abruptly shoving to his feet, swaying slightly the instant he’s upright. He’s shirtless, his well-defined chest and abs on full display. And while normally I might be tempted to look for a bit longer, I quickly glance away.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out,” I tell him before speaking to Maisie. “I’ll be back in a little bit. Want me to bring you anything from Greenberry’s?”

“Yes, please! Double shot of espresso over ice with vanilla sweet cream, just like I like it.”

“You got it.” I move toward the door, Jackson quick on my heels. “Can I get anything for you?” I ask, tugging open the door.

“You offering?” His voice is way too close, and I glance over my shoulder to see his face so close to mine I can smell the alcohol that lingers on his breath.

“You wish.” I grin, stepping out into the hallway.

“You’re right. I do.”

“Well, isn’t this cozy.” My head spins toward the familiar voice, every ounce of color

draining from my face when I see River sitting in the hallway across from my door.

“River...” I say his name on a breathy exhale.

“Would appear that you move on quicker than I accounted for.” He pushes to a stand, dark circles under his eyes like he’s been sitting here for hours and hasn’t slept.

My forehead wrinkles in confusion, but then I remember the half-naked man standing behind me and I quickly realize what this must look like.

“No, it’s not—”

“Please don’t insult me by lying.” His face is masked in a blank expression, making it impossible to read his emotions.

Does he seriously believe that I would hook up with someone after a few short days?

Not that I didn’t consider it, wondering if maybe it would make me feel better. But even the thought made me want to vomit.

“Coffee. Black. Thanks, Char,” Jackson says just a few inches from my ear before backing into the bathroom, clearly sensing this is not a conversation he wants to be a part of.

“I knew you liked to get around... But this...” He gestures to the door Jackson just stepped through. “Seems you’re making your rounds with your friends’ brothers.”

I draw back like he’s just slapped me straight across the face, tears stinging the backs of my eyes from the impact.

“Go fuck yourself.” I shove past him, taking off down the hall before ducking into the

stairwell. I take the stairs two at a time, damn near falling toward the bottom but somehow managing to catch myself on the railing before I go down.

River catches up to me once I'm outside.

"Red."

"Don't!" I spin on him so fast I nearly fall for the second time in less than a minute. "How dare you!" My voice carries across the open space. "How dare you leave the way you did and then show up unannounced and insult me?"

"Forgive me." He sneers. "What do you expect after that bullshit I just saw? Maisie's brother, Charlotte, really?"

"I didn't sleep with Jackson!" I growl in frustration. "And if you care to verify that claim, perhaps you should go back upstairs and speak to his sister, who is inside the room."

"He was coming out behind you with no shirt on."

"Yeah, because he's here for Maisie's game and didn't want to stay with Lyric and Kai, so he crashed on our floor. Not that I owe you an explanation. You've made it perfectly clear that we aren't together. That you don't care about me..."

Some of the anger leaves his face, but he's still fisting his hands at his sides.

"I'm standing here, aren't I?"

"After a week! You don't text. You don't call. You just leave and then nothing."

"I needed time to think."

“Well, good for you. I hope you enjoyed it.” I move to turn, but he catches me by my forearm, holding me in place. “Let go of me.” Unshed tears cloud my vision.

“I’m sorry...” He blows out a slow breath, releasing me as he takes a full step back.

I take my first real look at him, drinking in the sight of him after far too many days thinking I’d never see him again. Other than the dark circles under his eyes and his messy hair, which appears to have been pulled and pushed in every direction, he looks just as handsome as ever.

The sight of him further intensifies the crack splitting my chest open.

“I’m sorry for what I said upstairs. And for not calling or texting.”

I soften slightly at his words.

“Why are you here, River?”

“For you. I’m here for you.”

I open my mouth to say something, but my vision blurs, and suddenly, it feels like the world is tipping sideways.

“Char...” River’s panicked voice is the last thing I hear before everything goes black.

River

“Where is she?” My sister appears in the doorway of the waiting room, her eyes wide and hair tangled like she just rolled out of bed and didn’t have time to brush it. Kai enters behind her, a hand resting on her back.

“She’s with the doctor,” I tell her, running a hand through my hair.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. We were outside talking and then she just went down.”

“Went down?”

“Passed out.”

“Is she hurt?”

“I caught her before she hit the ground, so no, physically, she’s not injured. But she is a bit shaken up.”

My mind replays the moment so vividly it’s as if it were happening all over again. Her bright green eyes shuttering, her ivory skin going ghostly pale, and then she just... dropped. When she finally came to, she stared up at me like it was the first time she had ever seen me.

“She’s awake?”

“She woke up a couple of minutes after she passed out. I brought her straight here.”

Because of her tumor, this seemed like the best move. Though I still don’t know if that’s why she passed out.

“How was she when she came to?”

“Confused. Disoriented. A little shaken up.”

“But she’s okay?”

“We don’t know why she passed out yet. They’re running some tests, but yes, she’s okay.”

“Asshole.” She rears back and slaps my arm the second she reaches me.

“Damn, Ly. What was that for?”

“Do not ever text me and tell me that my best friend is in the hospital and give me no details. The whole way here I was imagining worst-case scenarios.”

“I’m sorry. You’re lucky I texted you at all. I was trying to make sure she was okay.”

“Wait. Why are you here anyway?”

“Pretty sure you left me a voicemail last night threatening to whoop my ass.” My lips tip in a semblance of a smile.

“You drove overnight?” She guesses.

“I did.”

“Please tell me you came here to make things right with Charlotte. That girl has been a mess without you.”

“No more than I’ve been without her,” I admit, not missing the smile that briefly graces my sister’s face.

“I knew you’d come to your senses.” She takes the seat to my left, Kai lowering himself into the one next to her, his hand never leaving her. “Did you call her parents?”

“She asked me not to.” I shake my head. “You were the only person she wanted.”

“Charlotte O’Malley.” A doctor appears in the doorway and we all three stand.

“How is she?”

“Are any of you immediate family?” he asks, looking between the three of us.

“I’m her sister,” Lyric speaks up, not batting an eye at the lie that slips past her lips as she steps forward.

“Can I speak to you in the hallway?”

“Of course.” She nods, following the doctor out.

I drop down into the chair behind me, scrubbing my hands over my face. I’m so physically exhausted I think I could sleep right here, but mentally, I’ve never been more awake.

One minute passes. Two. I glance at my watch.

“I’m sure it’s fine.” Kai’s gaze is locked on me. “Though I can imagine how I’d feel if it were Lyric lying in a hospital bed.” He shakes his head like he can’t even stomach the thought.

“You really love her.” It’s not a question. Anyone with eyes can see that he’s crazy for my sister.

“More than anything.” He tips his chin in a nod.

“She’s lucky to have you.” I lean back, resting my head on the wall behind me.

“You’re wrong there, brother . I’m the lucky one.” A half-smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Though it seems like maybe I’m not the only one who’s garnered the love of a woman he doesn’t feel like he deserves.”

“Fuck.” I blow out a breath. “I don’t even know how it happened. I just...”

“Woke up one day and realized you couldn’t live without her?” He guesses.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Been there.” He chuckles.

This is the first time I’ve ever spoken to Kai so casually, and I have to admit, it’s not nearly as awkward as I thought it would be.

Our gazes both flash back to the door as Lyric steps through, her expression soft, hesitant, like there’s something she has to say and she really doesn’t want to say it. I know my sister well enough to be able to read that much from her demeanor.

“Well?” I sit up straighter, my heart suddenly beating against my ribs like it’s been

injected with a high dose of adrenaline.

“She collapsed because her blood sugar was low and she was also a little dehydrated. And it appears as though she’s experiencing a miscarriage, which could have also played a factor.”

“Wait, what?” My jaw goes slack, sure that I’ve heard her wrong.

“They have her on IV fluids and want her to stay for a couple more hours for observation, just to make sure there are no further complications.”

“Did you say...”

“Miscarriage,” she confirms.

I stare at my sister for a long moment, sure that she’s said something else, but the ringing in my ears is suddenly so loud I can’t make out what or why, all of a sudden, both she and Kai are looking at me with the strangest expressions. Like they’ve pieced together what I have yet to.

Miscarriage?

As in, Charlotte was pregnant?

With my child?

Suddenly, the realization slaps me in the face, and I glance down to find my hands trembling where they’re fisted in my lap.

And now she’s not pregnant?

My thoughts scramble together, confusion and unease settling into my gut.

I don't know whether to be relieved or devastated.

Honestly, I feel a little bit of both.

"Are you okay?" I think my sister says and someone touches my arm.

I try to pull in a breath, but it feels like my throat is suddenly closed and I can't reach the air my lungs so desperately need. Pretty sure I'm on the verge of having a panic attack.

"River." Lyric's voice cuts through the fog and my gaze snaps to hers, understanding staring back at me.

"Did he say it's because of her tumor? Is that why this happened?"

"You know about that?" She seems surprised, and maybe a little hurt. "The doctor just told me. I had no idea."

"She doesn't want people to know," I force the words out past the sudden dryness of my mouth. "Can I see her?" I ask, pushing to a stand. I ignore the way my legs scream beneath my weight, my knees wobbling slightly.

"You can. But just one at a time for now. She's understandably upset, and we don't want to overwhelm her any more than she already is. Maybe I should go first," she offers.

"It should be me." I step past her. "What room is she in?" I ask once I reach the door, my back to the room.

“Just down the hall. Room 102B.”

I nod curtly, stepping out of the room without another word. I feel my sister's gaze follow me long after I leave the waiting room and head down the hallway.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

I swipe at a tear that trickles its way down my cheek, my gaze focused out the window, to the parking lot beyond, to all the people coming and going with no clue of the pain that's currently ripping me open from the inside out.

Miscarriage.

The word bounces around in my head.

How did I get pregnant with no period, while on birth control?

It doesn't make any sense. Then again, if I'm honest with myself, I'm not always the best about taking my pills.

Not that I don't take them, but I do miss a day here and there.

Even still, I thought I couldn't get pregnant.

Turns out, I can. I just can't support a pregnancy, which I already knew.

Although knowing it to be true and actually experiencing it as a reality are two very different things.

And honestly, I just wasn't ready to feel this.

.. sad. Hidden underneath my grief is also relief.

I'm only nineteen and in no way ready to have a child, but that emotion is hard to grasp through the stark reminder that it won't matter if I'm ready or not—my body will never allow it.

“Red.” I startle, my gaze crossing the room to find a disheveled River standing in the doorway, his shoulder propped against the doorframe, watching me with dark eyes.

“Hey.” I squirm under his intense gaze, guilt filling me so full it's a wonder I don't burst open at the seams.

“How are you feeling?” He pushes away from the door, moving farther into the room.

“Okay, I guess.” Emotion clogs my throat. “Do you know?” My chin quivers as I speak.

He nods slowly and that's all it takes for the floodgates to open up. I drop my face into my hands seconds before sobs begin to rack my body. I try to muffle the sound, try to hold on to a semblance of control, but it does me no good.

I can't face him.

Hell, I can't face myself.

The bed dips beside me seconds before his arms close around me, the warmth of his embrace a stark contrast to the cold seeping from my pores, making me tremble harder.

“It's okay,” he speaks into my hair, his hold on me tightening. “It's okay,” he reiterates, rocking softly in a gesture that feels so soothing it only makes me cry harder.

He falls silent next to me, continuing the rocking motion as he gives me the time I need to cry myself dry and then somehow manage to cry a little more.

When I finally lift my head several minutes later, it hurts to open my eyes that feel painfully swollen.

Even still, I manage to find his gaze and hold it, reading all the things he hasn't spoken but reflect so clearly in his expression.

He's upset. Of course he is. He has every right to be.

How could I have been so irresponsible? Missing my pills. Going out drinking with no idea that I was carrying his child in my womb. A womb that rejected it before it ever had time to really make a home there.

"I'm so sorry." I force myself not to look away as I speak.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." He shifts, taking my face in his hands. I have to resist the urge to pull away, sure that I look like death warmed over.

"I have everything to be sorry for," I disagree.

"These things happen. Accidents happen. You got pregnant. That's as much my fault as it is yours." I open my mouth to disagree, but he's quick to continue. "The miscarriage... Also not your fault."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you saw how much alcohol I was pouring down my throat last night," I say gruffly.

"You and I both know that had nothing to do with it. People drink before they know they're pregnant all the time. This isn't your fault. This is a medical condition that

you have and you bear no fault in this.”

“But you must be relieved.” I have trouble meeting his eyes, but his hold on my face remains, shifting so that I have no choice but to look at him.

“I won’t lie and say that a part of me isn’t relieved. I am. I’m not ready to be a father any more than you’re ready to be a mother. But I’m also sad. For you. For me. For the child we lost.”

Fresh tears streak past my lashes and fall down my cheeks, joining the many others that have fallen before them.

“You should hate me. You have every right to,” I manage to say.

“I could never hate you, Charlotte.” His eyes rake over my face, hovering over my lips for a brief moment before meeting my gaze once more. “Not when I’m so fucking in love with you it hurts.”

My mouth parts at his admission. My heart beats a new hole in my chest as it pounds erratically.

“You love me?” The words are nothing more than a whisper on my lips.

“More than I ever thought possible...”

“But you left.” I blink.

“I left because I was scared and confused, and I needed time to figure out how I truly felt. But I’m here now, and if you’ll have me, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You want...”

“I want us to be together. For real. Out in the open for all to see. I want to scream my feelings for you from the rooftops. I want to parade you in front of crowds of people, letting everyone see that the most incredible woman in the world is mine . That’s what I came here to tell you.

That’s what I should have told you the second you opened your door this morning. ”

“But what about... What about all the things you said a few months ago? About how this would never work.”

“Fuck what I said. I only said those things because I was trying to keep you at a distance. I knew I was in love with you even then. And I was terrified. Because I knew, deep down, what I know sitting here today—that you have the power to destroy me if you choose to do so.”

“I would never... I love you,” I choke out the words.

“Be with me. Tell me you’ll be mine.”

“I’m already yours. I’ve been yours since the moment we met. You just didn’t know it yet.”

He cuts off anything else I might have said by pressing his mouth to mine.

He kisses me like I’m the sun warming his skin on a summer day.

Like I’m the axis his world revolves around.

Like I am the moon and the stars and the whole universe wrapped up into one.

Like I am everything .

And I kiss him back just the same.

Because he is all those things to me and more.

He is my whole world.

And I will hold on to him with all that I have until my dying breath, and maybe even after...

“Get a room.” We break apart at the sound of Lyric’s voice, my eyes finding hers the instant she steps inside. “Glad to see you two made up.” She smiles, looking between the two of us. “Mind if I have a second alone with my best friend?” she asks, her focus now solely on River.

He nods, releasing his hold on me like it’s the last thing he wants to do. Standing, he leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead.

“I’ll be right outside.”

“Okay.” I smile up at him.

“I love you.” He touches the side of my face and I swear I melt into a liquid puddle.

“I love you.” I rest my hand on his before watching him reluctantly pull away. Turning, he exits the room seconds later.

“Hey.” Lyric moves farther into the space taking the seat next to me that River just occupied. Reaching for my hand, she takes it, closing her fingers around mine.

“Hey.” I blow out a slow breath.

“How are you?”

“Better now,” I admit. The pain isn’t gone, not by a long shot, but instead of feeling like I’m drowning, I’m now floating on top of the water, letting the tide slowly pull me to the shore.

“So that”—she gestures behind her to where River just exited the room—“looks like you two are figuring things out.”

“We are.” I smile, and despite everything, it’s genuine. “He wants to be together. Like together, together.”

“Of course he does.” She sighs, like that much has been obvious all along. “I knew that from the moment I saw his face when he heard you tell me you were in love with him. And I also knew he’d come around... eventually.”

“And you’re okay with this... I mean, me and River?”

“Are you kidding? I love it. So long as you two don’t break up and make things extremely awkward for me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“How are you feeling?” She reminds me why I’m sitting in a hospital bed, and I grimace, the reality of what’s happened today returning with a vengeance.

“I’m okay,” I lie. I’m not even a little okay, but I know I will be. Eventually.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your tumor?”

“It’s not something I like to make public knowledge. It’s really not that big of a deal,

but I feel like people always treat me differently once they know.”

“I would never treat you differently.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I’m sorry about a lot of things.”

“Don’t do that. You’ve had a hell of a day. Don’t drag yourself further through the mud on my account. I love you and I don’t care if there are certain aspects of your life that you chose not to share with me, as long as you know that you can.”

“I do.”

“Now, is there anything I can do for you? Anything that you need?”

“No. I just want to get out of here.”

“The doctor said a couple of hours.”

I give her a questioning look.

“I told him I was your sister.” She grins.

“You are my sister,” I tell her, squeezing the hand she’s holding.

“And you are mine.” She pulls me into a hug. “Just promise me you won’t lie to me again. I can’t be there for you in the way I should be if I don’t know what’s going on.”

“No more lies,” I promise as she releases me.

“What the fuck!” We both startle as Maisie enters the room, still in her soccer

uniform, strands of hair falling out of her messy ponytail.

She lets out a visible sigh of relief when she sees me sitting up in bed.

“You bitch!” She points a finger at me, stomping toward me and Lyric.

“Do not ever do that to me again.” She throws her arms around my neck with so much force I tip backward before being able to right myself again.

“I was so worried about you.” She squeezes so hard I struggle to breathe.

“What are you doing here?” I ask once her hold on me slackens.

“Lyric told me. I came as soon as I saw her text. I thought you went for a walk or something when you never came back to the room. I had no idea...” She releases me, straightening to her full height. “So you’re okay then?” She gives me a long once-over.

“I’m okay.”

“What happened? Why are you here?”

“Um, you might want to sit down,” Lyric tells her.

Maisie crosses to the other side of the small bed, squeezing in next to me on the opposite side as Lyric, who angles her body so we’re all sitting in a semi-circle on the bed.

“Okay, now spill.”

I spend the next several minutes explaining everything to Maisie. The tumor. Me

fainting. The baby. By the time I'm done, she looks a bit shell-shocked but also a little sad.

"Is there anything I can do?" It's the first question that leaves her mouth.

"Yeah. You can not treat me differently. I'm not made of glass. And while, yes, I'm a bit of an emotional wreck at the moment, I will get through it. But only if you two don't tiptoe around me and make me feel like I'm damaged somehow."

"I can do that." Maisie nods. "And River?" She tilts her head toward the hall.

"He knows." I nod. "And he knows the baby was his."

"So are you two..."

"Officially together," Lyric announces with glee.

"Oh, thank fuck." Maisie lets out a long exhale. "I wasn't sure I could take much more of your ass moping around the room like a lost little puppy."

"I did nothing of the sort," I argue, even though I know that's exactly what I've been doing.

At least she's doing as I ask and not treating me with kid gloves.

"Bullshit." She snorts out a laugh. "How is he handling all this?" All traces of humor are gone in an instant.

"Better than I expected," I admit. "I think he feels kind of like I do. Sad but also a little relieved."

“I can imagine.”

“Maybe one day...” Lyric adds softly.

“Unlikely, given everything. But hey, there’s always adoption.”

“There you go. Or there’s always surrogacy,” Maisie adds on. “I would totally be pregnant for you.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” I bark out a laugh, the feeling foreign against my throat.

“I totally would.” She seems mildly offended.

“How about we cross that bridge when we get there.” Lyric offers with a smile.

“Knock. Knock.” We all three look to see River once again standing in the doorway, his muscular frame damn near filling the entire entryway. “Mind if I have a few minutes alone with my girl?”

My girl... I bite down on my tongue to keep the squeal I feel coming up my throat from spilling out of my mouth.

How can I feel so sad and yet so insanely happy in the same breath?

“By all means.” Maisie is the first to stand, leaning down to kiss the side of my head.

“Love you, girl.”

“I love you,” I tell her, turning my attention to Lyric. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“I’ll be in the waiting room until they release you,” she reassures me, squeezing my hand one last time as she stands.

I watch my two best friends exit the room, Lyric stopping for a brief moment to squeeze River's arm before disappearing into the hallway behind Maisie.

"You look a little better." He smiles softly.

"I feel a little better," I admit.

"When they release you, I want you to come stay at the hotel with me."

"You got a hotel?"

He nods slowly.

"I just booked it. Not a chance in hell I'm going back to North Carolina right now, and no offense, but I have no desire to sleep in that tiny bed of yours. I got us a king bed. We can lie in bed and watch movies. Soak in the bath. Order room service."

"That all sounds incredible." I reach for him and he's quick to close the distance between us.

"We'll get through this. One day at a time," he reassures me.

"One day at a time," I agree, losing my breath when he lowers his mouth to mine.

"I hope you're ready for this, Red. Because there's not a chance in hell you're getting rid of me now."

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and deepen the kiss.

I guess it's a good thing I don't want to , I think but don't say...

Charlotte

“How do you feel?” River runs his hands down my bare arms, suds collecting along my skin as the water from the shower beats down on us from above.

“A little better,” I admit, though that’s not saying a whole lot.

The last couple of days have been a lot... To say the least.

First River showing up. Then, me passing out. The hospital. The miscarriage.

I knew something was off about my period.

It’s sporadic and hard to predict, but when it does come, it’s usually always the same.

But this... The cramping. The amount of blood flow.

I should’ve suspected something was off, but then again, why would I?

I had no reason to believe I could even get pregnant, birth control or not.

A miscarriage was the furthest thing from my mind.

And while I had no time to even process the fact that for a short time, I was actually pregnant, I still feel really sad.

I guess that’s to be expected. Even if I’m nowhere near ready to have children,

knowing that there was a human life growing inside of me, no matter how brief, and now there isn't, feels a lot like losing a small piece of myself.

"Is there anything you need?" River's lips find my shoulder and he presses a kiss to my wet skin.

"Just this." I settle deeper into him, his chest firm against my back, keeping me upright.

His arms come around me, hugging around my chest.

"We can talk about it... If you want," he offers.

"What's there to say that we haven't already said? I'm just sorry."

"We've been over this. You have no reason to be sorry. People get pregnant all the time, despite taking precautions. Besides, I'm pretty sure you didn't conceive a baby all by yourself."

Baby... Just the thought has tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

As much as I'm not ready to be a mom, a part of me is still mourning what I lost and what I know I will likely never have.

"Are you sure you want this?" I ask, emotion thick in my voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Me?" I glance up at him over my shoulder.

"Is that even a question?" He takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger,

holding my head in place. “Do you really believe I would be here if I didn’t want to be?”

“I just don’t want you to feel obligated...”

“Charlotte.” He shakes his head at me. “I love you. I’m here because I want to be and for no other reason.”

“Say it again.” A soft smile touches my lips.

Despite everything that’s happened, one thing has not changed—this man’s ability to make me feel happier than I ever dreamed possible, even in one of the lowest moments of my life.

“I love you, Charlotte O’Malley.”

I turn in his embrace, my hands going to his waist. I flex my fingers into the firm ripple of his muscle, not missing the pink hue that now tints the water at our feet.

I’m bleeding heavier today than yesterday.

I cringe slightly at the sight. It’s the very reason I told him not to get in the shower with me to begin with, but he was hearing nothing of it.

He climbed in behind me without a second thought.

“So you think this can actually work?” I ask, looking up to find him watching me intently.

“I do.” He takes the wet strand of hair sticking to the side of my neck and moves it away with a gentle brush of his fingers.

“Why now?”

“Because now I know I can’t live without you. Nothing else matters. We can figure it out as we go.”

“So we’re doing this? Like really doing it. You and me?” After everything, I feel like I just need to hear him say it.

“You and me.” He nods, dark green eyes locked on mine.

“And what about the fact that you live in an entirely different state?”

“Hasn’t stopped us to this point.” He leans in closer so that our noses almost touch.

“Fair point.” I reach up, cupping his neck with both of my hands.

“I know we have a lot to figure out, but right now, all you need to know is that I love you and that I’m here, and that I’m not going anywhere. I spent the last few days hating every second without you. It was enough for me to realize that I don’t ever want to do it again.”

“You were so convinced that I was too young for you. That our lives were too far apart... What changed your mind?”

“You did.”

“How?”

“For so long, anytime anyone got too close, all I felt was panic. But with you, while I won’t deny that I was scared, that I still am scared, the thought of living without you terrifies me more.

Over this last year, you have become my best friend.

Anytime something happens, you're the first person I want to tell.

When I wake up, you're the first thing I think about and the last thing on my mind as I drift to sleep each night.

Without even realizing you'd done it, you replaced the axis my world spins on.

You are now that axis. The very thing that tethers me to the universe. There is no longer me without you."

I don't even realize I've begun to cry until River reaches up, swiping away the tears that now stain my cheeks.

"Well, when you put it like that," I choke out, something between a sob and a laugh scraping its way up my throat. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For taking such good care of me. For being so amazing through all of this. I'm not sure I deserve your kindness, but it means more to me than you will ever know."

"You deserve a lot more than just my kindness. You deserve my love. My respect. My devotion. And I plan to give you all of that and so much more. I'm going to love you so completely that you'll never again doubt whether or not you deserve it.

Because you do. And I will spend every single day reminding you of this fact. "

"Is that all?" I release my hold on him, letting my hands slide down his chest before resting my forehead there, against his wet skin.

“You want more?” Humor laces his words.

“No.” I shake my head, lifting my face to meet his. “I just want you.”

“I’m yours.” He takes my face in his hands, leaning in to lay a soft kiss to my mouth.

I melt into his touch.

It’s not sexual.

There’s no expectation or goal.

He kisses me just to kiss me.

And I love every single second of it.

“I love you,” I murmur against his lips, my arms closing around his neck.

God, how freeing it is to finally just say it out loud. To not have to hold in how I’m feeling. To just admit the truth without restraint or apology.

I love him... It really is that simple. And yet, my feelings for him are anything but simple. They are complex, sometimes confusing, and often overwhelming, but that makes it all the more exciting.

He snakes an arm around my waist, pulling me flush against him.

“I... Um...” I immediately try to pull away, self-conscious about the fact that I’m bleeding.

“Don’t.” He reads my thoughts perfectly, tightening his grip on me to prevent me

from slipping away.

“I don’t mind and neither should you. I love every part of you, Charlotte.

Every freckle.” He kisses my nose. “Every pore.” His lips brush my cheek.

“Every hair. Every drop of blood. From the top of your head to the tips of your toes, there isn’t a single thing about you that isn’t utter perfection. ”

I relax against him, his words like a soothing balm to my fractured soul.

“Careful, Mr. Parker. I might start thinking you actually mean what you’re saying.”

“Good. Because I mean every word.” He captures my face in his hands a second time, forcing me to meet his gaze. “I need to know that you’re hearing me.”

“I hear you.”

“And that you believe me.”

“I believe you.”

“Good.” He kisses me. “Now, what do you say we put on those ridiculous robes”—he gestures to the fluffy bathrobes hanging on the back of the closet door—“order pizza, and not leave the bed for the remainder of the day? And maybe tomorrow too.”

“Under one condition.” I pull back with a smile.

“Name it, Red.”

“You make sure to remember the pineapple on the pizza.”

“Fucking pineapple,” he murmurs, tugging my mouth back to his.

“You love it, and you know it.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He laughs, the sound full and rich. “But I’ll tell you what I do love... You.”

“Enough to eat pineapple on your pizza for the foreseeable future?” I cock a brow.

“Enough to eat pineapple on my pizza for the rest of my life.”

My heart does a full somersault in my chest.

There are not enough words in the English language to describe the intensity of my feelings for this man.

It happened slowly and yet kind of all at once.

He became a quest, a challenge, a thirst I simply had to quench.

But once I had him, I knew I had severely underestimated who actually held the power here. It was never me. I think, in a way, I’ve always known that.

He wasn’t a quest or a challenge. Those are just the things I told myself to make me feel like I still possessed even a semblance of control where River Parker was concerned.

Newsflash, I don’t. I never did.

He had me from the first time he smiled at me.

And what's worse, I think he knew it too.

"I knew from the first moment I laid eyes on you that you were something special," he says as if his thoughts mirror my own. "I'm happy to report just how right I was."

"Now is not the time to gloat." I smile, feeling much lighter than I have all day. "It's time to order pizza." I kiss the corner of his mouth before stepping out from under the water.

His eyes trace the movement, watching me as I exit the shower.

"Well, are you coming?" I ask, glancing at him over my shoulder as I slip into my robe.

"What do you think?" He grins, following me out of the bathroom moments later.

"Char." My eyes flutter open and instantly meet River's, his face so close to mine I can feel his warm breath on my face. "It's time to wake up." His hand touches my hair, fingers slipping through the tangled strands that I didn't even bother to brush after getting out of the shower.

Pulling the blanket up to my face, I cover my mouth as I speak, having not yet brushed my teeth.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

“What time is it?” The words drag up my throat painfully, like I gargled glass before falling asleep.

“Almost noon.”

“Noon.” I shoot up too quickly and the room spins for a brief moment. “How did I sleep so late?”

“I’m sure your body needed the extra rest.” He shifts in bed seconds before his lips touch the back of my shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a truck,” I admit, the events of yesterday slamming into me.

As if my body suddenly remembers what my brain is just now revisiting, a horrible cramp twists my stomach, causing me to double over.

“Are you okay?” The worry in River’s voice is so clear he might as well have it tattooed on his forehead.

“Yeah. I just need... I need to use the restroom.” I throw the covers back, not the least bit concerned that I’m naked outside of my panties, which I kept on for obvious reasons.

Shifting, I can feel the overfull pad press against me, and I inwardly cringe.

Without another word, I stand and step softly across the small room before disappearing inside the bathroom. As I expected, the pad is saturated in dark blood,

and I remove it as soon as I'm sitting on the toilet.

My stomach twists again, this time the pain more emotional than physical as I lean over, hugging my knees to my chest.

I don't know why I feel so sad . I mean, I know why , and I know everything I'm feeling is probably completely normal, but I certainly wasn't prepared to feel it.

I didn't want a baby.

I wasn't trying for a baby.

So why do I feel like my whole world just got ripped out from under my feet?

The pain... It's excruciating. And for the first time since I found out that I miscarried, I actually allow myself to feel it. Let it slide through me, coating my insides. Let it overtake every emotion I have until I'm hunched over on the toilet, silent sobs wrecking my body.

I cry and cry with no end in sight, and then I cry some more.

I let it all out.

The pain of losing River's child.

The reminder that I'll never be able to bear one of my own. That I'll never feel the little kicks in my belly or experience holding my baby for the first time.

The guilt of knowing that I wasn't ready for this and that despite my grief, there's also relief. Because no matter how much I want this one day, today is not that day.

And while this thought should be calming, it's the opposite. It makes me feel that much worse.

"Char," River calls through the door, followed by the gentle rap of his knuckles against the wood. "Are you okay in there?"

"Yeah, I just need... a minute." I try to hide the emotion in my voice, to no avail.

"Is there anything I can do?" The defeat in his tone sends a fresh batch of tears flowing past my lashes.

"No, I'm gonna take a quick shower." I stand from the toilet and flip on the water before he has a chance to reply.

Stepping under the too-warm water moments later, I wash away the remnants of yesterday. I let the grief pour out of me and then watch it swirl down the drain like water. I scrub my body over and over until my skin is red and raw from the friction. And then I do it all over again.

When I finally exit the shower several minutes later, I feel marginally better. Not back to my normal self but as close as I think I'm going to get for the time being.

Determined not to let River see me like this, I take a few more minutes of solitude, allowing my eyes to dry and some of the puffiness to subside before I finally exit the bathroom.

I find River at the far side of the room. He's sitting on the windowsill, looking out over the ground below. He turns as soon as he hears me enter, forcing a smile to his lips, though it does nothing to hide the worry in his eyes.

"You okay?" He watches me move farther into the room wearing the T-shirt he had

on yesterday.

Considering I didn't exactly have the chance to pack a bag, the only clothes I have are the ones I came here in.

Luckily, the hospital sent me home with a little care package filled with pads, cleaning wipes, and a disposable toothbrush, which I specifically asked for, and thank goodness I did because brushing my teeth damn near brought me back to life.

"I don't have any clothes." I tug at the bottom of his shirt.

"Lyric and Maisie stopped by this morning and brought you a bag." He gestures toward the small foyer area where I see a small gray duffel bag that I recognize as one of Maisie's. "They wanted to see you, but I refused to wake you up because I knew how badly you needed to rest."

"What time were they here?"

"A couple of hours ago." He shifts so that he's able to get a better look at me but otherwise remains seated.

"What time are you heading back to North Carolina?" I ask, grabbing the duffel bag from the floor before setting it on top of the bed.

Unzipping it, I pull out a clean pair of underwear, a pair of my favorite lounge pants, and an oversized T-shirt that I oftentimes sleep in. It's like Maisie knew exactly what to pack that would make me comfortable. God, I love her.

"Not until you're feeling better." He watches me pull his shirt over my head before quickly replacing it with the one Maisie packed for me.

“I am... feeling better, I mean.”

“Is that why your eyes are swollen from crying?” He doesn’t miss a thing.

“Sometimes you just need to let it out.” I shrug, avoiding his gaze as I collect my underwear and pants before dipping back inside the bathroom to change. Given that I also have to put a new pad in my clean underwear and dispose of the other, it’s not exactly something I want an audience for.

I return less than a minute later, dressed, and running a brush through the wet tangles of hair hanging down my back.

“Charlotte.”

I glance up to find River slowly crossing the room toward me.

“River,” I say back, not sure what else to say.

“You know it’s okay to not be okay.” He stops about a foot from where I stand.

“I know.” I reach into my bag and pull out a stick of deodorant before tucking it under my shirt and applying it to each of my underarms. “But I also know you have a life you need to get back to and you can’t just stay here and babysit me.”

“I’m not babysitting you. I’m here because I want to be. This isn’t just happening to you,” he needlessly reminds me, though I doubt he feels on the verge of being swallowed by a black hole of grief like I do.

“I know that.” I huff out a breath.

“So if you need to talk, talk to me. If you need to cry, I’ll hold you while you do it.

Don't hide from me."

"I'm not hiding. But there are some things not even you can fix."

"I'm not trying to. I just want to be here... with you. Is that really so wrong?"

"Of course it isn't."

"Then don't push me away."

"I'm not... I wouldn't..." I can't finish the sentence because since the moment I opened my eyes to find him watching me, isn't that exactly what I've been doing?

"It's okay if you need time alone. So long as you know that you're not alone." He reaches for my hand and I allow him to take it, settling into his arms moments later when he pulls me into his embrace.

"I know." I bury my face in his chest, breathing in the scent of him. "I just don't want you putting your whole life on hold for me."

"You are part of that life now, Red." He pulls back, brushing wet strands of hair over my shoulder before cupping my face. "And we're in this together."

"You never wanted any of this... You tried to let me down easy and I wouldn't take no for an answer. No one would blame you if you decided this was too much."

"I always wanted this. That's why I tried to avoid it. Because you, Charlotte O'Malley, scare the ever-loving shit out of me. Something tells me that won't ever change."

"I scare you?" I furrow my brow.

“The way I feel about you scares me.”

“The way I feel about you scares me,” I repeat back to him.

“Then I guess we’ll just be scared together.” A hint of a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth.

“Now tell me how you’re feeling... Really.”

“Sad. Guilty. Relieved,” I say the last word apologetically. “You?”

“All of the above.”

“What do you have to feel guilty for?”

“Seriously?” His eyes sweep over my face. “How about the fact that I disappeared on you for days, no doubt putting unnecessary stress on you. What if that’s what...” He looks away, like he can’t bear to look in my eyes as he says it. “What if it’s my fault?”

“Don’t do that.” I take his face in my hands, pulling him closer. “Don’t take responsibility for something you had no control over. This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I went out drinking the night before.”

“You heard the doctor. Drinking didn’t cause this.” He’s quick to disagree.

“And neither did the stress or grief I felt over your absence. My body can’t sustain a pregnancy,” I say as if to remind myself that this is no one’s fault. Not really. “I won’t let you blame yourself for this.”

“And I won’t let you blame yourself, either.”

“It just happened.” I give him a sad smile, accepting that placing blame is a moot point. “It would have happened even if you hadn’t left and even if I hadn’t been drinking.”

“It just happened.” He nods softly.

“I need to know you’re not here because you feel guilty.”

“Of course not.” He pulls me closer, dropping his forehead against mine. “I’m here because I’m so madly in love with you the thought of being anywhere else would be a torture worse than death.”

A light laugh escapes my lips and he pulls back enough to study the reaction.

“I doubt anything is worse than death,” I point out.

“That’s because you don’t know what it’s like to live without you.”

“I could say the same about you.” I curl my fingers into his hair.

“Then let’s make a promise to each other right here and now that we won’t put the other through that ever again.”

“You know we can’t promise that. You don’t know what the future will hold.”

“Maybe not. But I know that I don’t want to live without you.”

“And I don’t want to live without you.”

“So then, let’s not live without each other.”

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s that simple.” He smiles down at me and for the first time since I woke up, the crushing weight on my chest feels a little less heavy.

“Okay then,” I agree.

“Okay then.” He takes my face in his hands, his mouth finding mine in an instant.

He kisses me slowly, tentatively, like he’s afraid I might shatter.

“I’m not made of glass,” I murmur against his lips. “Now kiss me.”

He smiles against my mouth and then does just that, kisses me until there is nothing left but him and me and the promise of our future together.

River

Three Months Later

“Red, if you don’t hurry up, we’re going to be late.” I rap my knuckles on the bathroom door, not sure what’s taking her so long.

“I’m almost done,” she calls back, followed by a loud crash and a slew of curses.

“You okay in there?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I come in?”

“Since when do you ask?” I hear the smile in her voice seconds before I push my way inside the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” I chuckle, finding her on her knees in the bathroom.

“I knocked over my makeup bag.” She gestures to the contents spread across the floor. “Don’t just stand there watching. Help.”

“But watching is so enjoyable.” I grin, crouching down to assist her in cleaning up her items. “Are you okay?” I ask again, for an entirely different reason than I asked moments ago.

She seems flustered. Off. Very un-Charlotte-like.

“Yeah, I just...” She rises to stand when I pick up the last item, dropping it into her cosmetics bag, giving me my first full view of her.

I have to bite down the groan of appreciation that works its way into my throat at the sight of her.

She’s dressed in a pair of tight, black pants with an oversized deep blue sweater that damn near hangs to her knees.

While I will take her in one of those little tight numbers she likes to wear any day, she is equally as beautiful when she’s fully covered, especially when I know how much I’m going to enjoy stripping her out of this outfit later this evening.

She has her red waves tied up in a loose pony that hangs softly down her back, little tendrils left down to fall around her face. She’s kept her makeup light and natural, showing off her freckles. She is absolutely stunning, as per usual.

“Is it weird that I’m nervous?” she finally asks.

“Nervous?” My forehead furrows in confusion. “We’re meeting Lyric and Kai for dinner. What could you possibly be nervous about?”

Char has spent the last half of winter break with me in North Carolina, and since Lyric is here visiting our parents, I thought it would be the perfect chance for all of us to get together, which is something our schedules have not allowed up to this point.

Between me and Char alternating weekends that we visit each other, and Lyric busy with Kai and school, we’re rarely all in the same place at the same time and even when we are, someone is usually busy with one thing or another.

“I don’t know. This is the first time we’ve all been out together.” She shrugs, unable to meet my gaze.

“Hey.” I close the space between us in one step, using my hand to tip her chin up, forcing her eyes to mine. “You survived dinner with my parents,” I remind her, sliding my hand across the side of her face. “Lyric and Kai should be a walk in the park.”

My mom insisted on having us over the day Charlotte arrived, and while I tried to get out of it, wanting her all to myself, Char thought it would be a good idea for her to get to know my parents a little better.

Not that I had any objection to that. I just don’t have a fondness for sharing her with other people.

Even if those people are the ones who brought me into this world.

“I know it should be, but what if it’s... I don’t know... Weird.”

“Why would it be weird?”

It’s only now dawning on me that she is actually worried about this.

“Because Lyric is your sister and my best friend, and this is the first time we’re going out with her as an official couple.”

“We’ve been around my sister since we’ve been dating.”

“Yeah, but mainly just in passing or with other people around. This is different. A more intimate setting.”

“You have nothing to worry about. My sister knows how crazy I am about you. She’s not going to make it weird.”

“Maybe not. But what if I do?”

“How could you possibly do that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been known to be a bit handsy. What if I touch you in a way that freaks her out or makes her uncomfortable? I mean, I don’t have any siblings, but if I had a brother and he was dating one of my friends, I can’t say I would enjoy seeing them grope each other.”

“So then we only grope where she can’t see,” I offer with a smirk, cupping her other cheek so I’m holding her face in my hands.

“You’re not helping.” She groans, a semblance of a smile playing on her lips.

“No? Kinda seems like I am.” I chuckle, dropping my mouth to hers.

She melts into the kiss, opening for me when my tongue drags across the seam of her lips.

I dip my tongue into her mouth, groaning when she matches my eagerness.

Letting my hands fall from her face, I slip one around to the back of her neck, the other falling to the small of her back as I pull her flush against me.

Breaking the kiss, I trail my lips down the side of her neck, licking and sucking along the soft skin.

“We’re going to be late,” she tells me, her fingers tangling in the back of my hair as

she urges my face back to hers.

I kiss her again, slow and deep, the hand at her back slipping to her ass as I palm her cheek through the thin material of her leggings.

“Is that your way of telling me to stop?” I suck her lower lip into my mouth, my teeth gently scraping across it as I release it.

“No.” She captures my mouth again. “It’s my way of telling you to hurry up.”

I smile against her lips.

“Oh yeah?” I slip my hand into the band of her pants, pushing the material of her panties aside before dragging a finger along her seam. She’s so wet for me already I can’t help but groan my approval. “Is this what you want?” I ask, dipping a finger inside of her.

“Yes.” She hisses when I slip in a second finger, stretching her.

“Tell me what you want, Red?” I husk against her lips.

“You.” She lets out a little whimper of pleasure when I press the pad of my thumb against her clit and start moving it in slow circles in rhythm with my fingers inside of her.

She drops her head back, shamelessly riding my hand.

“You already have me,” I remind her, kissing the base of the throat. “Tell me what you want.” I bite gently.

“I want you... Inside of me. Right now.”

“Right now?” I smile against her skin.

“Right now.”

“Who am I to deny my girl of everything she wants.” I grin, pulling my hand away.

She starts to protest, but the words die on her lips when I tug down her pants, spin her around, and press her into the vanity so that her ass is up in the air. Freeing myself from my own pants, I step up behind her, line myself at her entrance, and enter her in one swift thrust.

Char cries out, gripping the sides of the counter like she’s holding on for dear life.

Normally, I would take my time, savoring every second of being inside her, but tonight we have somewhere to be. I’ll have to make up for it later when we’re back home and aren’t on a time constraint.

For now, I fuck her hard and fast, the sound of skin slapping skin and Charlotte’s soft groans of pleasure the only sound in the otherwise silent room.

I’m hanging on by a thread less than a minute in, but I keep up the relentless pace until she cries out her release, her body spasming around me, coaxing my own orgasm to the surface.

I let out a hard grunt as I spill myself inside of her, not slowing until I’m sure I’ve milked every ounce of pleasure from her.

Reluctantly pulling out of her, I pull her upright and spin her toward me, smiling at the flush of her cheeks and the sated look in her eyes.

“Better?” I ask, kissing the tip of her nose.

“It’ll suffice... For now.” She leans in, dragging her tongue along mine in a slow, lazy kiss that has me rethinking going out at all. Before I can suggest it, she pulls back with a knowing smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For always knowing exactly what I need.”

“It’s pretty easy to know what you need when it always seems to line up with what I need.” I reach around her for a towel, proceeding to clean myself off before tucking myself back into my pants. “We really should get going, though.”

“I need a minute to clean up.” She shoos me back toward the door. “Two minutes.”

“Two minutes. I’m holding you to that.”

“If you were so worried about being late, maybe you should have kept your hands to yourself,” she calls to my back as I exit the room.

I pause just inside the doorway, looking at her over my shoulder.

“Oh, but, Red, where is the fun in that?” I give her a playful wink and then exit the room.

“Rumor has it, you had dinner with Mom and Dad the other night.” Lyric looks between me and Char as she takes a bite of her salad. “How was that?”

“Oh, you know Mom.” I sit back in my chair, more relaxed than I have felt in a long time, and I don’t have to guess why. I know with complete certainty that it has everything to do with the redheaded beauty next to me.

“That I do.” Lyric chuckles. “Let me guess, she drilled you about your relationship, trying to gauge how serious it is.”

“Pretty much,” Charlotte answers before I can.

“And?”

“And what?” I look at my sister like she’s grown a second head. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing. I told her I was madly in love with Charlotte but that we were taking it slow and letting things progress naturally.”

“Boring.”

Kai snorts out a laugh but encourages Lyric to keep going.

“I’m just saying it’s clear you two are crazy about each other. Why waste time figuring things out when things will ultimately figure themselves out regardless?”

“What would you have me do, move to Virginia?” I avoid looking at Char, who clears her throat like she just swallowed something down the wrong hole.

“If that’s what you want.”

“And you’d be okay with that?” I cock a brow.

What my sister doesn’t know—what none of them know, including Charlotte—is that I’ve already talked to my boss about moving into a remote position and I have an appointment next week to look at apartments in Virginia.

Nothing is set in stone, of course, but I'm sick of only getting to see her on the weekends.

I want her all day, every day, not just some days.

“Are you kidding? Nothing would make me happier.”

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“Good to know. So if I ever decide to move to Virginia, at least I know I have your blessing.”

“You’re a brat. Here I thought you were about to tell me you were actually moving there.”

“We’ve only been dating for three months.” Char points out, and for a moment, I second-guess my secret plans.

I had never once considered she wouldn’t want me there.

“Try over a year,” Lyric disagrees. “Whether it was official or not, you two were a thing long before either of you was willing to acknowledge it.”

“Not everyone falls in love and then moves in with the person a week later.” I look directly at Kai, who only smirks, stretching his arm to drop it around Lyric’s shoulder.

“It was months later, not a week.” My sister rolls her eyes.

“I beg to differ.” Charlotte snorts out a laugh. “You may not have officially moved in with him until this past fall, but you were living with him long before that. Maisie and I would go days without seeing your face.”

“Some of us just know when we’ve gotten it right,” Kai speaks up, smiling at my sister in a way that makes it pretty fucking clear how he feels about her.

I know I've got it bad for Char, but if I had to wager a guess, I'd say Kai is in the same boat where Lyric is concerned. No, I don't have to guess. I know. Though I'd rather not think too much about that, given that she's my sister.

"I love you." Lyric leans into him.

"Not as much as I love you," he whispers into her ear just for her, but I still catch his words.

Tightening my hand around Charlotte's, I look to find her eyes on me.

"You okay?" I mouth.

She nods with a soft smile, squeezing my hand right back.

"Speaking of Maisie"—Lyric refocuses—"are you coming to her birthday party the weekend after next?"

"Like this one would let me miss it." I nudge Char.

"He promised to help set up the day of." She sticks her tongue out at me and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to lean forward and suck the damn thing into my mouth.

"Good. We can use all the help we can get. Kai's friend has already agreed to DJ for us, and Jackson is taking care of the food."

"We're on decorating duty." Char gestures between herself and Lyric.

"I think you mean we're on decorating duty." I gesture between the four of us.

“Fair.” Lyric laughs.

“I just hope someone doesn’t ruin the surprise.” Charlotte lifts her glass to her lips, taking a small drink.

“I don’t think they will. Most people don’t even know it’s for Maisie’s birthday. Only the handful of us involved in putting it together know what it’s for. No one else will find out until they arrive.”

“Not a bad plan,” I admit.

“Thanks. It was Kai’s idea.”

“Just seemed like the most practical move.” He shrugs.

“It’s gonna be so much fun.” Lyric claps her hands together. “And just wait until you see Char’s dress. You’re going to die.”

“Can’t be any better than seeing her naked.” The words slip out before I even think to stop them.

I’m not sure how I expect my sister to respond to that, given that I’ve never spoken so candidly in front of her, but her tipping her head back and belting out a laugh was the furthest thing from what I thought she would do.

“Anyway...” Char clears her throat, trying to mask her own laughter as she stares at Lyric.

“It’s true,” I say directly to the woman at my side, keeping my voice low so that only she can hear me.

She swats at my arm and throws me a warning glare that says we are not talking about this in front of your sister.

Most of the evening goes on the same way, and by the end of dinner I've laughed so much my fucking stomach hurts.

I can't remember a time in my life when I've ever felt so damned happy.

Like for the first time in a very long time, everything is just falling into place, and I know with complete certainty that it's thanks to the beauty who climbs into the passenger seat of my car and hits me with a smile that lights up her entire face.

"Told you it wouldn't be weird," I tell Char, waving at my sister as she and Kai pull away.

"I don't know. You made it a little weird." She gives me a knowing look.

"Did I?" I cock my head to the side, amusement dancing across my expression.

"Pretty sure you talked about me naked not once but three times."

"I can't help it."

"You could have helped it." She gives me a pointed look.

"Not when all I could think about was getting you back into my bed so I could ravish your naked body."

"Well, when you put it like that." She leans toward me, her hand coming to rest on my thigh.

“Careful, Red. I said in my bed, but if you start touching me, I’ll have you bare before we ever leave this parking lot.”

“Is that a promise?” She practically purrs.

“Why don’t you come here and find out?”

As if to call my bluff, she moves closer.

Or maybe she moves closer because she wants me to do exactly what I just warned I would. Without waiting to find out either way, I snake my hand around the back of her neck and tug her closer.

“Last chance to back out,” I warn.

“Now where’s the fun in that.” She bats her long lashes at me.

“Car it is.” I pull her mouth down to mine. “And then bed.”

“Promises. Promises.” She tsks against my lips.

“I’m going to show you promises.”

“Less talking, more kissing.”

She doesn’t have to tell me again.

I don’t say another word.

Not as I strip her bare.

Not as I take her hard and fast in the back seat.

I don't utter a fucking word until I spill my release inside of her for a second time today, reveling in the feeling of her tight and wet around me, coaxing me empty. Even then, I only say one word.

“Charlotte.”

It's not lost on me how dull my life was before this spitfire woman came charging into it, refusing to take no for an answer.

She's wild and free in a way I've only ever wished to be, and so damn beautiful it fucking hurts to look at her.

She's everything I'm not, and yet, in some weird way, we fit perfectly. Like the last piece of a puzzle, she completes the picture, and fuck me if it isn't a masterpiece.

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Charlotte

“Char!” I turn at the sound of my name, smiling when I see Lyric jogging toward me.

“Hey.” I stop, waiting for her to reach me. “I thought you had class until two today,” I say, giving her a second to catch her breath.

“I skipped math. I was actually just heading over to the dorm to see if you or Maisie wanted to have lunch.”

“Maisie has practice, but I’m free.”

“Yeah?” Her entire face lights up.

“Beats sitting in my dorm staring at my computer screen, trying to figure out what the hell to write for this English assignment.”

“What’s the assignment?”

“A five-thousand-word essay on how my life has changed since starting college.”

“Well, that should be easy enough, right?”

“You would think so, but everything I write seems so juvenile. And I really need this professor to like my work if I want any hope of getting into her writing seminar this summer.”

“You’re taking a writing seminar?”

“I’m hoping to take a writing seminar. But there are only twenty spots and unless I can really impress her with this essay, there’s not a chance in hell I’m going to get in.”

“Please. You’re an incredible writer. You’ll figure it out. Of that, I’m sure.”

“I wish I shared your optimism.” I chuckle. “So, where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere is fine with me.”

“I’m kinda craving Mexican.”

“I could be down for some chips and salsa.” She rubs her stomach. “I haven’t eaten today and I’m starving.”

“Why haven’t you eaten today? It’s noon.”

“Well, I overslept this morning and then I got... Distracted.” She gives me a sly smile.

“By the time I got undistracted, I had like five minutes to get dressed and get my butt out the door. As much as I love living with Kai, it’s days like today that I wish I still lived on campus. Everything is so much closer.”

“Well, you could always move back in with us next year,” I suggest, hopeful but not delusional.

“As much as I miss living with you girls...”

“You like living with Kai a whole hell of a lot better.” I grin. “Don’t worry, I get it. I

would rather live with River than Maisie, but don't tell her that."

"How are things with my brother, anyway?" she asks as we turn, heading toward the only Mexican restaurant within walking distance, a little hole-in-the-wall place just off campus.

"Really good." I try to contain the smile that spreads across my face, but it does me no good.

"So the long-distance thing..."

"Is challenging, but we're making it work. Maisie has been kind enough to make herself discreet on the weekends that he comes up. He's been staying with us instead of a hotel because..."

"Staying in a hotel nearly every weekend gets expensive." She finishes my thought.

"Exactly." I nod.

"But it's been okay?"

"Better than okay. I know it's weird because he's your brother and all, but... God, Lyric, he really just makes me so happy. Like I never in a million years thought I would ever be this girl."

"And what kind of girl is that?"

"The kind that is obsessed with a singular man who consumes nearly every waking thought I have."

"It's scary loving someone that much."

“It is.” I realize that if anyone understands how overwhelming it can be, it’s Lyric.

“But you’re happy?”

“Very.”

“And how are you feeling... physically, I mean.”

My insides coil at the thought of what she’s asking me. While I’ve made peace with losing the baby, it still hurts when I allow myself to think about it for too long.

“I’m getting by.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to bring it up. I just... Want to make sure you’re okay, is all.”

“I am. I have good days and bad days, but for the most part, I’m feeling better about everything. It’s not like I can change it, so what’s the point in dwelling on it?”

“I guess that’s true.” She thinks over my words for a long moment.

“I have something to tell you, but I’m worried about what you’re going to think.” Something about the way she looks at me has me feeling pretty sure I know exactly where this is going.

“You’re pregnant,” I blurt.

“What? No.” She shakes her head with a laugh.

“Then what?”

“Promise you won’t say anything until I’m ready to tell everyone.”

“Of course.” I stop walking, feeling like I need to be standing still for this.

“Kai proposed.”

“What?” I squeal so loud my voice carries across the open space.

“Last night.” She nods, failing to fight the smile threatening to split her face in half.

“And... What did you say?”

“Yes. Duh.” She laughs.

“Did he give you a ring?” I search her left hand for one, but there’s nothing.

“He did. It’s stunning.”

“Then why aren’t you wearing it?”

“Because I feel like I need to tell my parents before it becomes public knowledge.”

“I get that.” I smile, taking her hand and squeezing it tightly. “How do you feel?”

“So happy that I’m afraid I might explode.” Her eyes glass over with unshed tears, tears of happiness if I had to wager a guess.

“I’m so happy for you, Ly. Truly. There isn’t a person on this planet who deserves to be happier than you do.”

“Well, I don’t know about that...” She shakes her head. “I just... I never pictured this

as the turn my life would take. That night, when I sat down on that couch and met Kai's stare, it changed everything, and even now, I simply can't wrap my head around it."

"Life is funny like that. One minute, you think you know what to expect, and then bam, you hit a roadblock you couldn't see until you were smashing face first into it."

"River?" She guesses.

"I never saw myself settling down. Commitment was the furthest thing from my mind. All I wanted was to live the full college experience. Hook up with random guys, drink too much, make all sorts of mistakes. Instead, look at me." I hold my arms out.

"A one-man woman. Who would have thought it?" I snort out a laugh.

"Monogamy looks good on you," she tells me with a grin.

"And engagement looks damn good on you," I say back. "Lyric Elliot. It has a certain ring to it."

"It does, doesn't it." She loops her arm through mine as we resume walking.

"I need you to do me a favor and tell River before anyone else because if I have to keep this to myself for very long, I might be the one exploding."

"I'm going to tell him this weekend when he comes to see you."

"He's not coming this weekend," I correct her. "Something about work and he couldn't get the weekend off."

“Oh.” She seems surprised by this. “Okay, well, a phone call would suffice, I guess.”

“And Maisie?”

“I was planning to tell her at her birthday party next weekend, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to wait that long.”

“She’s going to freaking lose her shit.”

“In a good way, I hope.” Lyric grimaces.

“Are you kidding? She’s going to be so happy. Kai is like a brother to her,” I say, briefly wondering how she would feel if River asked me to marry him.

It’s absurd to even think that this early on, but I won’t deny that if he did, I’d say yes in a heartbeat.

“Your brother, on the other hand...”

“You think he’ll be upset?”

“No, I think it’ll be bittersweet for him. He only wants your happiness. But you’re also his baby sister.”

“I’m glad he has you.” She squeezes my arm. “And I’m glad you have him. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for him. To find someone who makes him even a fraction as happy as you make him.”

“Well, to be fair, he makes me equally happy.” I can’t help the smile that seems permanently attached to my lips anytime I talk about River.

“Who knows, maybe one day we’ll be sisters for real.” She gives me a cheeky grin.

“Let’s not get too ahead of ourselves. Besides, only one engagement at a time. And right now, it’s your turn.”

“Mrs. Kai Elliot.” She sighs contently, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“How does it feel knowing you landed the most sought-after, unavailable man on campus?”

“Pretty damn good.” She chuckles. “But then again, I could ask you the same question. It’s not like my brother was exactly standing there with his arms open just waiting for someone to fall into them.

If anything, some might argue that he was more unattainable than Kai, and yet, look at him now.

You should see him when he talks about you, the way his entire face lights up.

Very similar to how you react whenever we talk about River. ” She throws me a knowing look.

“Don’t act like you aren’t exactly the same with Kai.” I nudge her with my hip.

“Fair. I guess it’s safe to say we’re both pretty smitten.”

“You just agreed to marry the man. I think smitten is underplaying it.”

“Perhaps. Though I get the feeling I’m not the only one whose life is going to change.”

Something about the way she says it gives me pause.

“Do you know something?” I can’t help but ask, getting the distinct feeling she’s not telling me something.

“No. Just call it a feeling.” She shrugs. “Do you ever worry it will all go away?” The playfulness of our conversation dies in an instant, replaced by something more serious... fear.

“Every single day,” I admit.

“Me too. I just look at Kai and can’t help but be terrified that one day I might lose him.”

“That man is head over ass. Trust me when I say, he’s not going anywhere.” I blow out a breath. “But I do know what you mean. I think it’s normal to be scared when things are seemingly too good.”

“I guess.” She blows out a breath.

“If he was planning on going anywhere, he wouldn’t have asked you to be his wife.”

“Yeah.” Her smile returns as she contemplates my words. “I guess you have a point there.” She looks up as we near the restaurant. “Finally. I’m so hungry I think my stomach is eating my intestines.”

“Don’t think that’s possible, but okay.” I bark out a laugh, tugging the door open when we reach it before gesturing for her to go in first.

It’s just after four o’clock when I get back to the dorm. After eating my weight in nachos and fajitas, I feel overly full and honestly, kind of ready for a nap.

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Pulling my phone from my bag, I frown when I see I don't have any calls or texts from River. Usually he calls me every day on his lunch break, so I thought maybe I had just missed it, but alas, nothing.

Dropping the device back into my bag, I push through the stairwell door before turning up the hallway, heading in the direction of my dorm room, which sits at the far end of the hallway.

It takes me longer than it should to realize there's someone sitting outside my door, and even longer to realize who it is until I get close enough to see messy blond hair and then hunter-green eyes that find mine even in the distance.

"What the..." I pick up the pace, surprise and excitement making my feet move faster than normal in my attempt to get to him. "What are you doing here?" I throw my arms around River's neck the instant I reach him, burying my face in his neck as I breathe in his incredible scent.

"Thought I'd surprise you," his deep voice rumbles in my ear. "Are you surprised?" He pulls back to look at me.

"Very." I take his face in my hands, pressing up on my toes to kiss him. "Why didn't you tell me you were here? How long have you been waiting?" I let my hands fall away as I take a small step back.

"Not long. My sister intercepted you so that I could get here before you got home."

"Lyric knew you were coming?"

He nods.

“That little liar.” I huff out a laugh.

“Don’t be angry with her. I wanted to surprise you by being here when you got home.”

“I’m not angry.” I shake my head. “But I thought you had to work.”

“I did. Just not at my job.”

“Huh?” My forehead crinkles in confusion.

“Don’t worry. It’ll all make sense shortly.”

“You’re being awfully cryptic,” I needlessly point out.

“I know.” He smiles, rocking back on his heels.

“Do you want to drop off your bag before we go?”

“We’re going somewhere?” I don’t try to hide my confusion.

“We are.”

“Um, yeah, okay.”

He steps out of the way to allow me space to unlock my door. I drop my bag just inside and then pull it closed, locking it back.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be, I guess.” I study his face, trying to figure out what he’s up to, but he gives nothing away.

Ten minutes after he ushers me into his car, we pull up outside a large apartment complex just a short drive from campus. Pulling into an open spot, he kills the engine, unlatching his seat belt as he looks over at me.

“Ready?” He practically bounces with excitement, which only serves to confuse me further.

“For what? Do you know someone who lives here or something?” I hitch a brow.

“You could say that.” He pushes open the driver’s door. “Come.”

I blow out a slow breath before unlatching my own seat belt and exiting the car, meeting him on the sidewalk moments later.

Taking in the large, three-story brick building in front of us, I allow River to lead me to the front door, where he inputs a code into the keypad that unlocks it before steering me inside.

“Okay, so clearly you know someone ,” I grumble, following him down a long hallway before stopping at a set of elevators. “Why are we here, River?” I ask as we wait for the doors to slide open, which they do almost instantly.

“You’ll see.” He takes my hand, pulling me into the elevator with him.

We ride the car up to the third floor before stepping out into a hallway that looks nearly identical to the one we came in on. Shiny, white tile floors. Light gray walls. Dark wood accents. It’s a really nice building, whoever lives here.

“Here we are.” He stops at a door about halfway down the hall, this time using a key to gain entry.

I give him a look that I’m sure looks a lot like what the fuck is this before his hand finds the small of my back and he ushers me inside.

I blink once, twice, allowing my eyes to adjust to the bright room that has so much natural light pouring inside, it almost feels like you’re outside, standing beneath the sun.

“What is this place?” I ask, looking around the empty apartment. There’s nothing here. No furniture. No decorations. Not even a single curtain or blind.

The walls are a soft gray, similar to the ones in the hallway. The floors are hardwood, dark and shiny. It’s an open concept; the living room, kitchen, and dining room all basically one large room, with nothing more than a breakfast bar for separation.

I step farther into the room, not missing the wall of windows along the back wall that looks eerily similar to River’s apartment in North Carolina, minus the incredible view.

“This is my new home,” he says from behind me, and I turn to look at him, sure I’ve heard him wrong.

“What?”

“I’m moving to Virginia,” he says, taking a step closer to where I’m currently standing in the middle of the room. “I signed the lease to this place this morning.”

“You’re... You’re moving here?” I stare at him like I can’t decide if I want to scream at him for not discussing this with me first or jump into his arms and kiss him until

my lips are painfully swollen and begging for reprieve.

He nods slowly, taking another step toward me.

“This is your new apartment.”

“Our new apartment,” he corrects. “That is if you want to live here.”

“Wait...” I hold my arm out to steady myself, feeling suddenly off balance. “You want me to move in with you?”

“I do. But it’s okay if you don’t want to. There’s no pressure here. I just... I couldn’t take being so far away from you any longer.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“A couple of months.”

“A couple of months...” I gape at him. “But your job... The remote position.” I answer my own question, knowing he’s been transitioning into a work-from-home position for a couple of weeks now.

He nods again, letting me piece it together on my own.

“So you requested a remote position so that you could stay with the company, but you wouldn’t have to stay in North Carolina.”

“Exactly.” He smiles.

“Because you want us to live together?”

“Yes.”

“Here?” I gesture around the space, trying to get my brain to catch up, but it seems sluggish and a little reluctant to do so.

“Here,” he confirms.

“You and me?” I probably sound like an idiot, but I’m fairly certain I’m in shock.

“You and me.” His smile widens.

“I...” I do a full three-sixty spin, taking in the relatively large space. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You can start by telling me how you feel.”

“About you moving here?” I force myself to meet his gaze, having not expected to find doubt swimming behind those incredible green eyes of his. “I’m...” I close the space between us in an instant. “I can’t believe you did this for me.”

“For us.” He tips my chin, tilting my face up to his. “Unless it’s too much. If it’s too much, I can—”

“It’s not too much,” I cut him off. “It’s... perfect.” I throw my arms around his neck, my feet leaving the floor seconds later as River lifts me off the ground, his arms wrapped around my back so tightly it’s almost hard to breathe, not that I mind.

Burying his face into my hair, he takes an audible breath.

“Is that a yes?” he asks after a long moment, lowering me to my feet.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes,” I repeat, sliding my cheek against his before my lips find their mark at the corner of his mouth. “Yes. Yes. Yes,” I repeat, moving to cover his mouth fully with mine.

He deepens the kiss, his fingers splaying across my spine as he holds me firmly in place.

“Wait.” I pull back abruptly. “Lyric knew about this?” I don’t know why, but the realization takes much longer than it should to dawn on me.

“She did.” He sweeps his thumb over my bottom lip. “Who do you think helped me?”

“That brat.” I pout. “I can’t believe she didn’t say anything.”

“To be fair, I made her swear on her life not to tell you.”

“I can’t believe you did this.”

“But you’re happy I did?”

“Are you kidding me?” I stare up at him. “This is... Everything. When do you move in?”

“I signed the lease already, so technically, I can move in now if I want. Though, I do have some things to settle in North Carolina beforehand, so I’m thinking next week at the earliest. Though you’re welcome to move in today if you want.”

“Maisie’s going to kill me,” I say as I realize it. “First Lyric, now me. We’re abandoning her one after the other.”

“I think Maisie will enjoy a single room more than she’ll let on.”

I think on that for a moment, realizing he's probably right, given the lack of privacy having a roommate gives you. Especially when said roommate basically locks you out every weekend when her out-of-town boyfriend comes to visit. Sorry, not sorry. I smile to myself.

"I think I'll wait until you move in before I do. I don't want to stay here by myself."

"Okay. But will you at least stay here with me tonight?" His grip on me tightens. "We could order food. Set up a picnic on the floor. Spend the night christening every imaginable surface." His lips brush against mine.

"I think I like the way you think, Mr. Parker." I smile against his mouth.

"Is that a yes?"

"A thousand times, yes. To all of it." My fingers once again find his hair, diving into the thick strands as anticipation lights up my body like a freaking Christmas tree.

"Fuck, I love you, Red," he grumbles against my lips, deepening the kiss.

"I love you more." I slide my tongue against his, desire pooling low in my belly.

"Not possible."

"Very possible," I disagree.

"Perhaps I should show you just how wrong you are." River hoists me up and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me toward the wall of windows. "I think we'll start here."

I jump slightly when my back hits the window, the cold glass biting through the

fabric of my sweater, cooling my too-warm skin.

It's not lost on me that the first time we ever had sex, it was against the wall of windows in his apartment. Seems fitting that this is where we will kick off the next chapter of our lives together.

A life where we're no longer separated by lies or secrets. Not by distance or time. A life where we can give ourselves fully to the other person with no barrier between us. And damn if it doesn't feel right.

"What if someone sees?" I wonder aloud, not sure if these windows are tinted like the others were.

"Let them watch. At least then they'll know."

"Know what?" I gasp when he grinds into me, every nerve ending in my body firing on all cylinders.

"That I'm the luckiest fucking man on the planet." His face dips, his lips finding the crook of my neck as he kisses and licks the sensitive skin just below my ear. I tilt my head back to give him better access.

"Is that so?" I smile, cupping the back of his hand as his lips continue to assault my skin in the best way possible.

"You. Are. Mine. Red." He emphasizes each word. "About time the whole world knows it." He draws back to look at me, dark green eyes hooded with desire.

"I. Am. Yours," I confirm, taking his face in my hands. "For as long as you want me."

“I’ll never not want you.”

“Then I’ll be yours forever.”

“Now that I can live with.” The smile that takes over his face steals the breath straight from my lungs.

“Me too,” I admit, pulling his lips back to mine. “Me too,” I repeat, having never meant anything more in my entire life.

I can’t predict the future. I’m not naïve enough to believe that forever is a promise he can keep. But I will hold on to him with everything I have, for as long as I have. And for now, that will be enough.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:00 am

Charlotte

“Please tell me why we’re going all the way to the other side of town for dinner when there are plenty of places we could simply walk to.” Maisie groans next to me.

“Because it’s your birthday and the usual places won’t do,” I say from beside her, squeezed between her and River in the back seat of Kai’s car.

Between classes and moving, this week has been stressful, to say the least, and while River and I still have a million things to do to get our apartment in order, I’m grateful to have a reason to stop and celebrate this time with my friends.

Maisie’s birthday.

Kai and Lyric’s engagement.

Me and River moving in together.

We have many things to celebrate as of late.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” I nudge her with my elbow.

“Buried somewhere under my lack of sleep,” she grumbles.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to wake right up when you see where we’re taking you,” I reassure her.

Kai, Lyric, River, and I, along with a handful of Maisie's other close friends, spent the entire afternoon decorating and getting everything set up for tonight. I don't have to wonder if she'll be surprised. I know she will be.

It's going to put last year's party to shame.

Though party might be a bit of a stretch.

We really just went to dinner and then went back to our dorm and got drunk on alcohol Kai bought for us.

It was low-key but fun. This year, however, Lyric and I wanted to do something more for her.

Part of it is because we both feel guilty for being so MIA this year.

The other is because we love Maisie and want to show her how much.

It can't be easy for her, watching her two best friends so happy in their love lives while she's still living in denial over the fact that Macallan Stewart thwarted her last year and she's spent every day since trying to exact her revenge, to no avail.

Not that any of us are going to point this out to her. I've tried, and it did nothing but piss her off, so I've opted to bite my tongue and let her do whatever it is she feels like she needs to.

Besides, I'm not really one to judge. I've done worse in the name of getting the last word in.

"Are we almost there, at least?" she asks the group.

"Two minutes," Kai says from the driver's seat.

“And Jackson is meeting us there?” she confirms.

“Yep. He’s already there,” Lyric answers this time. “Someone made us late.” Lyric turns her head to look at me, giving me a pointed stare.

“Don’t glare at me. Talk to your brother.” I hitch a thumb at the man next to me, who looks so handsome in his dark jeans and blue button-down that I can barely keep my eyes off him... Or my hands, for that matter. Hence why we’re late...

“I offer no apologies.” He drops an arm over my shoulder, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Worth every second,” he murmurs so only I can hear.

“I’m going to pretend like you were busy unpacking and not”—she gestures between the two of us—“doing whatever it is you were probably doing.” She makes a face like she’s just bit into something bitter.

“Like you two don’t fuck like rabbits,” Maisie fires to Lyric with a knowing smirk.

“Um, brother in the car.” River shifts uncomfortably.

“Like you have room to talk.” She turns her attention to us. “You two are worse than they are.” She points at Kai and Lyric. “And that’s saying something.”

“I offer no apologies,” River repeats a second time, his smirk morphing into a full-blown smile.

“I’ve been abandoned for dick.” She huffs, but it doesn’t hide the glint of humor in her expression.

“There are worse things to be abandoned for,” I offer.

“Spoken like someone who’s not on the receiving end of her two best friends leaving

her high and dry.”

“Mais...” Lyric starts.

“I told you I’d stay with you for the rest of the semester,” I remind her.

“And have to deal with you two...” She gestures between me and River. “I’d rather live alone.”

“At least this way, you get the room all to yourself...” I nudge her again with a lift of my eyebrows. “You know, to do... whatever.”

“I could do that even when you lived there.” She nudges me back.

“Yeah, but now you can do it without causing my eyeballs to bleed,” I tease.

“We’re here,” Kai announces before Maisie can say anything back, pulling the car into a vacant spot across from the restaurant.

“What is this place?” Maisie looks up at the awning, where the name is so faded it’s illegible.

For someone who grew up not far from here, we had to find a place she wasn’t familiar with so that she wouldn’t piece together what we were up to.

This was Kai’s suggestion. When you walk in, it’s just like any other run-of-the-mill bar and grill.

But the cool thing about this place is they have a back room that’s cut off from the rest of the restaurant, with its own private bar and stage, which is what we rented out for the night.

Not that any of us girls are legally old enough to drink, but that's where dating older men comes in handy.

"Claire's," Lyric answers. "And don't judge it just yet. I know it doesn't look like much from the outside, but trust me, the food is amazing."

Kai kills the engine and we all climb out of the car.

The second my feet hit the ground, River tucks me into his side like he can't stand it when there's any sort of distance between us.

Not that you will ever hear me complain about this.

I love it. Every graze of his fingers. Every brush of his hand.

Every touch, no matter how small, lights my insides on fire.

"Come on, birthday girl." I extend my free arm to Maisie, who slides hers through mine, joining me on the opposite side of where River is.

Kai leads the way, Lyric's hand tucked in his, the other three of us fast on their heels. River keeps his hold on me until we reach the door, and then he's forced to let me go so that Maisie and I can step inside.

Lyric approaches the hostess, speaking low enough that Maisie can't hear. With a nod, the young girl turns and leads us toward the back of the restaurant. It's not until we stop in front of another door that Maisie seems to take notice something is up.

She looks at me, but before she can ask the question on her lips, Kai opens the door and I all but shove her inside the dark room.

The lights click on seconds later and an uproar of "Surprise!" fills the space as

everyone in attendance jumps to their feet, some setting off poppers, little shards of colorful paper flying through the air.

“What the fuck!” Maisie steps back, a wide smile on her pretty face as she takes in the scene unfolding before her.

She looks at Lyric and then at me.

“You didn’t.”

“Happy Birthday!” we say in unison, wrapping our arms around her from opposite sides, enclosing her in a hug.

“I can’t believe you bitches.” She shakes her head as she pulls back, looking out over the dozens of people in attendance.

“Yo. Yo. Yo. Yo,” the DJ, Kai’s friend, speaks into the microphone set up on stage with his turn tables. “Now that the guest of honor has arrived, I think it’s time we get this party started!” He presses a few buttons and music fills the room seconds later.

Jackson appears through the crowd, pulling his sister into a hug before dragging her farther into the room.

“Well, our work here is done.” Lyric extends her fist and I bump it.

“I say it’s time to enjoy the fruits of our labor,” I tell her with a smile.

“I would agree.”

I turn to River, batting my eyelashes dramatically.

“Froufrou or hardcore?” he asks.

I tap my chin like I'm really considering it.

"Hardcore," I finally answer.

"Froufrou," Lyric says at the exact same time.

We look at each other and burst into laughter.

"Women." Kai grins at Lyric before looking at her brother. "Bar?"

"Bar," River agrees, kissing the side of my head before disappearing through the crowd.

"Well, soon-to-be Mrs. Elliot, may I have this dance?" I bow dramatically in front of Lyric, my eyes falling to the gorgeous engagement ring now sitting on her finger.

She tips her head back with a laugh before taking my outstretched hand, and together we make our way to the dance floor, which already has a few people on it, swaying to the music.

Minutes bleed into hours, the night going by in a blur.

There are shots.

Music and dancing.

More shots.

A couple of frat guys giving Maisie a lap dance, which is only made funnier by the fact that her brother Jackson is in attendance.

Pretty sure Kai had to restrain him. Otherwise, he would have knocked the two guys'

skulls together for violating his little sister, though she didn't seem to mind one bit.

All in all, it's been a pretty incredible night.

One of the best.

Something I'll remember for a long time to come.

And it's only made that much more special by the people surrounding me.

Lyric, with her kind nature and soft heart.

Kai, the man responsible for my best friend's immeasurable happiness. Even with all his brooding, I'm happy to call him a friend.

Maisie, fearless and unapologetic, the life of any party. My spirit sister.

And then there's River.

The kind of man romance novels are written about.

He's perfection in every way.

There isn't a day that will pass that I won't feel like the luckiest girl on the planet to have him at my side.

This feeling is only reiterated when he pulls me close, nuzzling his face into my hair in that sexy way he does.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go home and finish what we started earlier," he murmurs into my ear, sucking the soft lobe in between his teeth.

My body sings to life in an instant, every other thought outside of being naked beneath him lost to the hum his touch evokes beneath my skin.

“I think I could be on board with that,” I admit, my arms going around him.

“Think anyone would miss us?”

“Do you really care?” I pull back to meet his gaze.

“Nope,” he says matter-of-factly, pulling a smile to my lips.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I arch a brow in challenge.

Without warning, he swoops down and picks me up. The next thing I know, I’m over his shoulder, my face at his back.

“River!” I squeal in laughter, the alcohol burning away any embarrassment I might feel under normal circumstances.

“I guess I’m leaving,” I call to Lyric, who gets one look at me draped over her brother’s shoulder and starts laughing.

“Don’t you need a ride?” she calls after us, but River doesn’t slow.

Guess that’s a no.

“Tell Maisie bye for me.” I have no idea if she hears me as we disappear into the crowd, and frankly, I don’t care.

Right now, the only thing I care about is going home and letting River have his way with me.

Naked beneath him is my favorite place to be, and I don't see that letting up anytime soon.

Guess happy endings really do exist.

Though we're nowhere near the end...

We're only getting started.