



Veiled

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Waylon

I'm a music manager. I've taken the smallest artists and made them soar into superstardom. I'm good at what I do, and I never fail.

Except with him. I let him down, and that doesn't sit right with me.

No. I'll track Justin St. James down and find a way to make him happy and settled.

No matter what it takes.

Justin

I'm so tired of being Justin St. James. Of people invading my space and acting like they own me. Like I owe them for my fame.

It's all about the music for me. I love it. But the fame . . . I could do without.

So I see my chance, and I take it. Only maybe I didn't realize just how much Waylon, my manager, did for me. How inexperienced and naive I am.

He thinks I can have it all—that he can find a way for me to be happy. But I'm not so certain that can happen.

I want the music, but I still crave that beautiful veil of privacy.

Is it even possible to have it all?

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PROLOGUE

Waylon

“Where have you been?”

Justin doesn't look all that surprised to see me in his apartment when he walks in. A trick I've learned from my good friend Jenny. Though I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been dodging me for months now.

I'm his goddamn manager. It's my job to manage him, but I can't do that if he won't talk to me. I don't get it. He was riding a damn high. Immoral—his rock band—has been back on tour all summer. He should be happy, but now he doesn't want to be bothered?

It makes no damn sense.

Grady Bell, the lead singer for Immoral, was happy as hell to be back with the band over summer break. But now he's back at home with his kids and husband who came on the tour with him.

Maybe that's why Justin is mad. Because the tour ended. I mean, it was only supposed to be three months. He knew when he signed up what it would be, but I don't think that's it.

He tosses his keys on the table by the door with a heavy sigh and closes the door behind him. Stalking into the living room where I'm currently camped out on the

couch. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I shrug. “I have a key.”

“For emergencies,” he deadpans and walks over to the bar tucked into the corner in his apartment.

“Yes well, I haven’t talked to you for months. It damn well could have been an emergency. I had to check to make sure you didn’t slip and fall getting out of the shower or something.”

He rolls his eyes at me, pushing his dark hair back with his fingers, his sharp green eyes hitting me from across the room as he grabs a bottle of scotch and pours some into two glasses. He screws the lid on the bottle and walks over to me, holding out one of the glasses.

“It wasn’t months.”

I take the glass as I respond, “Seven weeks. Almost two months since the tour. I’ve texted back and forth with you maybe twice since then. And you gave one-word answers every time.”

I hate that my voice sounds hurt. But I’ve been his manager for a decade. Off and on, yes, because Immoral has taken some hiatuses, but still. I was there when he needed me, but now he’s shutting me out.

I’m not sure why it hurts so badly. But it does.

He sits down in an armchair near the couch, his long legs spread as he leans back with the drink in his hand.

My eyes trail over him slowly. He looks ready for a concert—complete with ripped black jeans, a plain white t-shirt, and a black leather jacket. It's the look he's known for. His dark hair and bright green eyes make the fans squeal in delight.

Doesn't hurt that his face is so pretty, it could make you weep, and his hair is thick and full, always looking like it's been swept with his hand and blown by the wind. He's mastered the I don't give a fuck look.

"I'm fine. The tour is over. What do you want from me?"

"What do you want from me ? I'm your manager. I work for you. But I'm the one who's been chasing you down to see what you want the next step to be."

He laughs bitterly, taking a long sip of his drink and swallowing it down, keeping his eyes on me as he lowers the glass from his full red lips. "Next step? What next step? I'm one step up from a former boy-band member."

"Hey. Don't knock boy bands. Their fan bases are unmatched."

He rolls his eyes, and I can't help but smirk, knowing boy bands drive him crazy. "I don't want anything, Waylon. I want to drift off into nonexistence."

"What the hell does that mean?" I place my glass on the side table and lean forward a little, hoping to keep his attention.

"Don't worry about it." He downs the rest of his scotch and stands up, going to the kitchen and placing the glass in the sink. But I'm right behind him.

"Don't worry about it? Are you kidding me?" I ask angrily when he turns around. "You can't say something like that and then just walk off. What do you mean?"

“I mean I don’t want to be famous anymore. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of being told what I can wear. Where I can go. What I can do. Someone runs my social media.” He’s standing close to me now, and I resist breathing in his clean scent.

“You hate social media. You wouldn’t even have it if someone didn’t run it,” I point out.

“That’s not the point,” he says, moving even closer to me. So close, I close my eyes and remind myself that Justin is a client. He’s untouchable.

I’ve known, or at least suspected, he’s interested in men for a long time—even though he’s never said it out loud. He’s had girlfriends—high profile ones—and I don’t think it was for show, but I’ve seen him glancing longingly at men too. A curiosity or a wanting—I’m not totally sure. But I see it. I’ve seen it.

I’ve never asked him to talk about it because he has to know if he wants me to know, he can tell me. I’m openly gay and have been my whole damn life. Grady Bell, his own damn band member, is married to a man.

I open my eyes now, standing a foot away. And I could be wrong. But the way he’s looking at me right now makes me think I’m right—how his eyes are homed in on my lips, his breaths coming faster and faster as he crowds against me, and his nostrils flaring. “What is the point?”

“The point is, I don’t want to be Justin St. James anymore. I don’t want to be that guy from Immoral anymore.”

I poke his chest with my finger, and let me tell you, that’s a mistake because his chest is solid. “You are Justin St. James.”

His eyes flare with anger, but then they’re right back on my mouth. I know—I can

feel it—that if I leaned into him right now, I’d be met with the kiss of my life, and I absolutely cannot do that.

I won’t.

I’ve worked too hard and too long to get to where I am to throw it all away on someone who doesn’t seem to know who he is or what he wants. He’s lost. That’s for damn sure.

“I don’t want to be.” His voice sounds so damn tortured, the sound strained as it falls from his lips. And goddammit, I lean in. I shouldn’t. It’s so damn stupid, but I do it anyway.

I tell myself it’s just to comfort him. That maybe when I reach my hand around the back of his neck and wrap my fingers around it, it’s to give him a sort of hug. But it’s all a damn lie.

I use that hand to pull his mouth forward, and when his lips meet mine, the spark that ignites into a full-blown inferno is my own damn fault. I know that, but I can’t seem to stop it as he grunts against my lips as we connect.

We kiss hard, both pushing against the other one for dominance. Years of pent-up frustration, back and forth, of having to fight him to get him to do every fucking thing, comes to the surface. And when my tongue moves over the seam of his full lips, he opens for me, letting it sweep inside and take the taste of him I’ve been dying to for years now.

We’re around the same age. I’m two years older, but I’ve been babysitting his ass for years, and he’s been pissing me off since day one. So when I thread my fingers through his perfect hair, I grip it maybe a little too hard, making him grunt again, but he doesn’t push me away.

No. He leans into me, his hard cock pressing against my erection through our pants, making us both pant and moan. I should stop this, but I can't.

I'm tugging at his jacket before I can stop myself, and it falls to the floor. His shirt follows before he starts working on the tie around my neck. "I hate this fucking thing."

"No, you don't," I breathe against his lips, my fingers still in his hair, holding on tight as I kiss him hard again, commanding him with my mouth. He removes the tie and then starts to work the buttons on my shirt.

I pull my suit jacket off and let it fall to the floor—a crime against designer fabric, but I'm not really working with my brain at the moment. He removes my shirt as we work to get each other's pants off.

Before I can take my time and take in the sight of his nearly nude body before me, his hand wraps around my aching dick, and his mouth is on mine again. I grip his hard shaft at the same time as we kiss and rut together.

It's rushed and frantic, like we couldn't slow down for even a second, like we're afraid it's a dream, and if we blink, the other one will be gone.

His mouth slides down my jaw to my neck, his teeth leaving little bites as he goes. It only intensifies with each moment. My head falls back as his big hand drags over my dick, twisting when he reaches the engorged head, then using the pre-cum to slide back down. I pull his lips back to mine and kiss him hard, my fingers in his hair.

He cries out just as I feel his hot cum dribbling down my hand and landing on my hip. It sets off my own orgasm, and I nip and kiss his lips in a hard punishing kiss as my cum shoots from my dick and gets all over him.

We both stroke each other until we're too sensitive to the touch, and he rests his forehead against mine, still breathing heavy.

"You need to go."

I almost don't hear him, too lost in the ecstasy of an intense orgasm, my knees wanting to give out and my body wanting to succumb to the tired, satisfied feeling.

"What?" I pull back to look into his eyes which are intensely watching me.

"You heard me." He steps back, and I watch as he tucks his wet dick in his pants and fastens them. He grabs my shirt and tosses it to me. I catch it, but I don't move or speak. I just watch him.

He grabs his shirt and jacket from the floor but doesn't put them on.

"Go."

I slowly pull my pants up and grimace at the mess, tucking myself away. "So that's it? You aren't even going to talk to me?"

"I'm tired, Waylon." Somehow I know it's not the kind of tired that's fixed by sleep that he's talking about. His shoulders are hanging heavy, and his eyes are wary as he watches me.

I pull on my shirt and button it slowly, trying to process what the hell just happened. I did not just jerk off a client. No way I just did that.

Except I know I did.

And not only that, I came my brains out when he did the same thing to me. His

guttural cry when he came is now burned into my memory.

I pull on my suit jacket and find my tie, sticking it in my pocket. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say to him, not sure what else to say.

“Yeah,” he says absently, and there are so many things I want to say. So many things I want to ask him, but I don’t. I just walk to the door, pull it open, and walk out.

I have no idea what he needs from me or anyone else.

That thought terrifies me to my core.

Because for the first time since I met him, I feel like I can’t help him.

And that’s just unacceptable to me.

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Chapter One

WAYLON

“O kay, so apparently you aren’t going to answer your phone,” I say, sipping my wine as I sit out on the deck of Grady and Ryan’s massive home on Christmas night. It’s snowing, and I’m freezing but bundled up. “You could though, you know, give me a call. Let me know you’re alive.” My tone is dry, and to most I’d probably sound bored.

Really though, I’m just worried. Really, really worried. I’ve managed Justin for a long time—well before he decided he was done with Immoral. Done with the band. Done with traveling. Done with everything and just took off. The day after our little hookup—or the Incident, as I refer to it in my mind—he was just gone. I went to his place, and everything was packed up.

The place was empty except for the furniture that came with the place, and that was it. I knew it was a bad idea to hook up with a client, but I didn’t think he wouldn’t ever talk to me again.

He just disappeared without a damn word. It’s been months and nothing at all.

“Okay, well...” I swirl the red wine around in the glass as I stare out at the snow—thankful the deck is covered and snow isn’t currently pummeling me. I need to move the hell out of Kansas City, I swear, but most of my clients decided to live here. “I guess that’s all I can say. Merry Christmas. I hope you’re alive.”

I hang up the phone and just stare at the dark sky as the snow falls and watch my breath as it puffs out of my mouth into the cold night. There was more I wanted to say. So much more, but it's pretty damn clear I didn't mean much to him. I try not to let the bitterness take over.

I'm fine. I'm a strong successful gay man in my prime, and he's not my problem anymore. Good riddance to the over-hyped brat.

I wince at my own thought because that's what the world thought of Justin St. James—but I know him better than that. I know how passionate he is. How much he actually loves the music and can't stand the over-the-top grand performance of it all. I know he was struggling, and instead of forcing him to talk to me...

Well... the Incident . The stupid fucking mistake. I crossed a line with my client. I know that, and I regret it. I want him to answer his damn phone so I can tell him how sorry I am, but he won't fucking answer.

"There you are. You cannot leave me alone with the chaos. You know this. It's in our friend contract." I chuckle as Jenny shuffles outside through the sliding glass door. She's of course dressed spectacularly in a stunning black shimmery dress and to-die-for heels. I mean, she could literally die wearing those things out in this weather, but the woman fears nothing.

"Where is your coat?" I ask her.

"I'm hoping I won't be out here long. Are you fucking crazy? It's like zero degrees."

"Hence the coat," I say as I motion to my warm attire and shake my head as I take in her bare arms and legs. It's fine inside in the heat, but the woman is nuts, coming out here after me. "I'm fine."

“You’re not,” she says so matter-of-factly. I hate how well she knows me. We met when her client Ryan rekindled his friendship with my client Grady and then fell in love—or they were already in love and finally pulled their heads out of their asses and decided to be together. But out of that marriage, I gained my best friend in the form of the ball-busting badass standing before me now, who’s currently freezing her ass off.

“I’m fine.” I stand up and start toward the door to make her go inside, but she stops me. Her bony little hand pushes on my chest and forces me to stop and look at her.

“What’s going on?” I sigh, knowing she won’t let me by.

“Just checking on Justin,” I answer her honestly because there’s really no point in not answering her. She already knew what I was doing out here.

With a heavy sigh, she confirms that she did in fact know. “You sweet, sweet moron.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say but can’t help the smirk. I’m being an idiot. I’m a manager for musicians. They are finicky fuckers. They come and go. I know this, and I don’t know why I’m so damn hurt by Justin ghosting me. Hell, he ghosted the rest of the world too. They’re fine, with the exception of some very dramatic preteens and diehard fans.

Of course, they probably don’t know exactly what he sounds like when he comes and probably haven’t kissed his sweet lips, but still. I’m not special. I know this.

I’ve had so many hookups over the years, I don’t even remember all their names. But this is the one that’s getting to me?

Why the hell my brain is choosing now to be all needy and clingy is beyond me. It

makes no sense.

But I cared about Justin before the Incident , and damn it, I still care now. I need him to be okay. That haunted, lost look the night I left his place can't be the last time I see him.

I, however, can't stop worrying about the man.

“He's gone. But he won't be gone forever. You know he'll be back. Probably when he can't figure out how to use the Uber Eats app and is starving to death. Or when he has to fill up his own car with gas.”

I laugh, but he's not helpless, and he can do all those things with no problem. He's not a child. He's nearly thirty. Still, she does have a point. He was a member of Immoral—a wildly popular band. He's had the privilege of money for well over a decade and hasn't had to do much on his own for a long time. “He's been gone for months. Surely he's figured it out.”

“Hey.” Her voice softens and so does her attitude, which is pretty weird for Jenny. “He's fine. He's doing some damn diva bullshit—probably off on a wild vacation, partying and being a dumbass—but he's totally fine. He'll come back.”

“Why wouldn't he tell me he was going to do that?” You know, other than me being a total dumbass and putting my hands and lips on him, even though I know I shouldn't have.

“That I have no answer for, other than he's a thoughtless shithead.” I wince at that because she doesn't know what happened between us. Why? I'm not totally sure. We've always shared our disastrous hookup stories before. And our triumphant ones. But for some reason, I just couldn't tell her what happened with Justin.

The sliding glass door slides open, and there's Grady wearing a Santa hat on his head and a jovial smile. "Jen-Nay! Where did you go?"

"I will smother you," she says with a dead-eyed stare I know isn't full of hatred the way she wants it to look. She's grown awfully fond of Grady over the years. Don't tell her I told you that though.

I smile to myself as Grady stumbles out and wraps his arm around her small shoulders. "You're freezing."

"You're drunk," Jenny says, and again, she doesn't sound nearly as annoyed as I'm sure she wanted to.

"Nah." He waves her off easily. "Just festively tipsy."

That actually gains a smile from Jenny as she shoves him off her. "What do you want?"

"We're going to play charades. You're on my team."

"Goddammit. Why do I always draw the short straw when it comes to you?" she asks with a smile she lets slip, and I can't help but laugh.

"You're on our team too, Waylon, my boy," Grady says happily, and I can't help feeling some of that festive joy he's spreading. The kids went to bed shortly after the dinner Ryan and Grady had catered, but some of the adult guests are still lingering.

"Sounds good. Who else do we have?"

"Okay, if we're going to discuss teams, I'm going inside. I'm freezing my tits off," Jenny interrupts and pushes past Grady, walking into the warmth of the house.

Grady and I follow as I tuck my phone into my pants pocket and remove my coat and gloves. Grady answers my question while pulling the door shut. “We also have Sebastian, Dawson, and Royal.”

I look around the fancy living room—that still seems really homey, despite the price tag of it all. “So that leaves, Axel, Maverick, Ryan, Cooper, and Soren on the other team?”

Grady grins. “Yup. And if we lose, Ry will never shut up about it. So we have to win.”

I shake my head at him. Ryan is a nice guy, but the dude played professional baseball for years and is competitive as fuck. And most of the other guys here are professional racers—somehow even more arrogant and competitive than any other sport I’ve seen.

So who wins is anyone’s guess.

“I need more wine,” I say, walking over to the bar in the living room.

“Me too,” Soren says, sauntering over, and I wrap my arm around his shoulder.

“Good to see you, by the way,” I say happily as I give my cousin a squeeze. I was thrilled when he fell for the Hotshot, I gotta say. Having my cousin at every social event I attend has been really damn nice.

“Good to see you too. You look a little tired though.”

“Gee thanks.” I grin and pour more wine into his waiting glass as he just stands there, eyeing me with those investigative reporter eyes and his brows raised.

“What’s wrong?”

Did I say it was nice, him being here? Maybe I'm nuts.

I sigh and pour some more wine for myself and take a sip. "Nothing."

"Waylon . . ." He's still eyeing me.

"Justin is still not returning my calls."

He frowns and then brings his glass to his lips, taking a drink. "I'll do some digging after the holidays."

I start to tell him not to bother—that I'm moving on—but I don't get the words out. I'm too curious. I need to make sure he's okay. I want to know what the hell he's doing. Why he left. And Soren is a damn good reporter.

I just give him a nod before Grady hollers at us. We join everyone on the large sofa and start the game that most don't take seriously but is really fun all the same. Because with this group—everything is fun.

Eventually.

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Chapter Two

WAYLON

“Soren, what are you doing here?” I’m surprised to see my cousin show up at my office in Kansas City. The guy travels a lot between investigating stories and accompanying his boyfriend on the road. But that doesn’t mean it’s not good to see him.

“What? You didn’t miss me?” He feigns disappointment before he saunters into my office, and I close the door, turning to see he’s made himself at home in one of the comfortable chairs across from my desk. I make my way over to my chair, unbuttoning one button on my suit jacket before sitting down.

“Of course I did. But I didn’t expect you.”

He’s grinning wide, and I’m a little nervous about what he’s doing here even before he opens his mouth to tell me. “I found him.”

I sit there, stunned because there’s no way he’s talking about Justin. It’s been months since Christmas. It’s April. Not one word. Not one lead. Not one fan sighting. And I’d given up hassling poor Soren about it.

I thought he’d forgotten too.

“I did,” he says when I don’t say anything. “You know I’m good at what I do, and although it was tough, I did it.”

“Where is he?” I’m still in total disbelief.

“Tennessee.”

“What?” My brows shoot up to my hairline. He did not just say Tennessee.

Soren smirks. “Yup. Out in the middle of nowhere. I may have had someone track his spending.”

“Allegedly,” I add for him because that has to be illegal, but Soren has made quite a few friends in his line of work. Investigative journalists will stop at nothing to get the story.

“Right.” He smiles at me, but he doesn’t look worried in the slightest that I’ll call him out for his less than ethical practices. “Anyway, he must have had lots of cash on him or something because there was no use on any of his cards. But then he rented a cabin.”

“A cabin?” I stare at Soren in disbelief. “A goddamn cabin in the middle of nowhere Tennessee? That’s where Justin St. James has been?”

He shrugs. “I don’t really know where he’s been, but that’s where he is now.” He stands up from his seat. “I’ll text you the details.”

“Thank you,” I say numbly.

He gets up and walks to the door but then stops and turns to look at me. “Are you okay? I’ve never seen you act this way about a client before.”

I swallow hard, my stomach in knots because I know it’s strange. I know I should just let it go, but I can’t seem to do it. “I’m okay.” He nods and turns back toward the

door. “Tennessee? Really?”

He chuckles, and I see him shake his head. “Yup.”

After he leaves, I sit at my desk for what feels like forever before a series of texts come through with all the details of the town and place Justin appears to be living now.

I book a flight without giving it too much thought and then text Jenny.

Me: I’m going out of town for a bit. You think you can watch my dog for me?

Damn Cooper—I swear the guy has talked every single one of us, except Jenny, into adopting pets from the animal shelter where he volunteers. She’s the only holdout, but she has a soft spot for the guy. And now that he’s dating her client Maverick, she’ll be around him even more. I predict she’ll have a new best friend in no time.

I watch the dots appear after she sees my message. She types and then stops a couple of times before sending a message through.

Jenny: Fuck no. Have that adorable little cutie pie who talked you into adopting him watch him.

I grin at that.

Me: He’s out of town with Maverick. As his agent, you should know that.

I get a middle finger emoji for that one and crack a pleased smile.

Jenny: Ah, fuck a duck. Fine. I’ll watch your yippy-ass dog.

Jenny: Where the hell are you going?

Yeah, this is the part she's really not going to like. But might as well get it over with.

Me: Tennessee

And the white dots appear again. And then disappear. Then appear and disappear again.

Jenny: Why?

I take a deep breath and type the reply as I climb up from my desk and head out of the office.

Me: Soren tracked Justin down. He's there, so I'm going.

Please don't call me an idiot. I fucking know.

Jenny: You idiot.

Damn it.

Me: I know.

Jenny: Drop the dog off at my place. I have a meeting tonight, but I shouldn't be out too late.

I smile. She may not agree with me, but Jenny is loyal. She'll support me as she calls me an idiot, and I couldn't ask for a better friend.

Me: Thank you.

Jenny: Be safe.

I text her a thumbs-up emoji I know will piss her off and will likely result in another middle finger waiting for me when I get home. Then I drive straight to my house.

My dog—who I lovingly nicknamed Cujo because the tiny little basset hound with the sweetest face in the world turns into a holy terror who tears up all my shit and will bite you if you get near his food—runs up to greet me happily.

I smile as I scratch his ears. “Hey there, Cujo. You’re going to stay with Auntie Jenny for a bit.”

I laugh when I see the middle finger emoji waiting for me on my phone from Jenny, like I knew I would, and put my phone back in my pocket. Cujo follows me happily up the stairs and into my bedroom as I find my suitcase in the closet to start packing for my flight. Trying not to think too much about what the hell he could be doing in Tennessee.

He’s not from there. He was born in Texas. As far as I know, he doesn’t have any family there.

Cujo jumps up on the bed and tries to pack himself, but I carefully remove him from lying on my clean clothes and point at him. “And do not eat Auntie Jenny’s shoes, or I swear she’ll take you to the pound. And we can’t have that.”

He cocks his head to the side, listening to me, and I can’t help sitting next to him and petting him while he climbs onto my lap.

“She won’t. But knowing her petty ass, she will order a bigass steak and eat it right in front of you out of spite. So be good.”

He just pants happily as I pet him, and then I finish packing before dropping my dog off at Jenny's house. Saying a silent prayer that he doesn't tear up her house and I won't owe Jenny too many damn shoes when this whole thing is over.

I shouldn't be flying to Tennessee tonight.

I shouldn't be chasing a guy who doesn't want to be chased.

But I can't just leave it alone.

He's not okay. I can feel it deep in my bones.

And for whatever damn reason, if Justin isn't okay, I'm not okay.

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Chapter Three

WAYLON

This cannot be the right address.

I thought maybe it would be a bigger town, like Memphis or Nashville. At least civilization.

But this town?

This place where I think I blinked and missed the actual town because I didn't see one coffee shop. Not one store. Nothing in the city limits except a bar and a post office building smaller than my bedroom.

This can't be right.

I drive down the old, paved road in the rental Jeep I picked up at the airport and hope Soren got the address wrong. I flew into Nashville, but I've been driving for two damn hours now, and the navigation tells me I'm two minutes from my destination.

This can't be right.

It just can't.

I have to admit the scenery is gorgeous. I'm surrounded by trees as the Jeep climbs up a hill, and when the navigation says to turn off the road, I do it, pulling up to a row

of five cabins on the top of the hill.

I check the address again as I park in front of one of them.

I don't see a soul in sight. There aren't even any cars parked outside of the cabins, and I don't see garages.

This is it. This is how I die.

The city boy comes out to the hills, deep in Tennessee country, and dies. Wild animal? Maybe. Falls off a cliff? Possibly. Crazy hillbilly with a gun? Could be.

Goodbye, cruel world.

I climb out of the Jeep and shut the door, just as a truck that looks brand-new but is covered in dirt pulls up. My heart is racing in my chest as I await my fate when the door to the truck swings open and Justin climbs out, his eyes hard and angry.

He slams the door and stalks up to me, looking pretty much the same as last time I saw him. No leather jacket though. Despite the sun starting to set, it's still pretty sweltering out here, with humidity that nearly steals your breath away.

He's wearing worn-looking jeans and black boots with a black t-shirt that clings to every ridge of chiseled muscle. His hair is a little bit longer, the black strands hanging over his eyes.

"Why?"

"Good to see you too. I'm totally fine, by the way. Thanks for asking," I deadpan, crossing my arms and feeling completely out of place with my expensive dress shoes and suit. But this is what I wear.

I wouldn't be caught out and about in anything else, not even in the hills of Tennessee. His eyes drift over me, and I hate that my entire body heats and not from the summer weather. "Go home."

"You can't be seriously living here," I say, looking around the deserted area. There's nothing out here. I've known Justin for a long time. He likes the finer things in life. He likes his food delivered and doesn't know how to cook. He likes his assistants to pick up his dry cleaning and groceries.

I cannot believe he can survive out here.

"I'm doing just fine. Go home. You don't work for me anymore."

"This is how you tell me I'm fired?" I ask him, moving a little closer, now that I know it was Justin in the truck and not some Deliverance type of shit. I didn't make it through that movie, but I saw enough to be scared as fuck out here.

"I told you I was done being Justin St. James from Immoral. And then I left. What else do you need?"

He steps into me, and I try like hell not to breathe him in. He smells the same, but there's a hint of outdoors there too. Maybe some sweat. He smells too damn good. "I need you to come back home and stop this shit."

"Why? You aren't hurting for 10 percent of my earnings, Waylon. You'll be just fine without me."

Except I won't be.

I can't say that though. I square my shoulders instead and look him dead in the eyes. "It's not about a goddamn paycheck. It's about the fact that we hooked up, and then

you moved out into the middle of nowhere. In Tennessee.”

He scoffs at me, all broody and angry. I remember a time when he enjoyed the fame. The music. The crowds. When he was truly happy. But I barely recognize this man before me. The man he’s become slowly over the past few years as he grew tired of it all.

And I ignored it.

Because I didn’t want to believe he was miserable.

“You really think I left because you jerked me off?” He moves into me, and for a brief moment, I lean into him, my eyes closing as I remember the way his strong body felt against mine. He’s added muscle since then. I wonder just how damn solid they’d feel under my hands, but I quickly remember myself and step back.

“Why did you leave then?” I ask seriously because I’m at a loss. I know he was getting tired of it, but I didn’t expect him to just pick up and leave. “And why Tennessee?”

“It’s none of your business, Waylon. You’re fired. Go home. Go back to the city. It’s getting dark.”

I look around, seeing the sun setting behind the trees and try not to show my nerves. “I’m not leaving until you talk to me. If this is about us, you need to tell me. I know I messed up.”

He laughs again, but there’s no humor there. “It’s not about you and me. My bags were already packed. You were just too busy to notice.”

I study him carefully, my eyes narrowed in his direction. “Why did you leave? You

can be Not Justin St. James in Kansas City.”

“No. That’s not true, and you know it.”

“Fine an hour outside of Kansas City, like Mav.” The man likes his privacy too and hasn’t had any trouble finding secluded areas.

“Go home,” he says as he locks his truck and starts toward one of the cabins.

“I’m not leaving. You know me pretty well,” I say as he stops to look at me. “You know I’m not giving up this easily. Talk to me.”

“No,” is all he says before unlocking the cabin and going inside, slamming the door behind him. I don’t miss the click of the lock when he gets inside either.

Well fuck.

What the hell am I going to do now? I look at my phone and see absolutely no bars on it. No service out here.

This is just fucking great. This really is how I’m going to die.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I decide to get back in the Jeep and make my way back to the nothing little town I drove through, finding the bar I drove past and parking outside. I see lights on, and a couple of cars are parked outside, so I assume they’re open.

I lock the Jeep and head inside. The five people inside stop what they’re doing to stare right at me, their eyebrows raised.

Great. I'm back in high school all over again. Yes, I know I stick out here. Thanks for staring, townsfolk.

I make my way to the back of the bar, where an older woman wearing a black t-shirt studies me carefully but greets me with a smile. "What can I do for you, sweetie?"

Well at least she seems fairly friendly, even though I still feel eyes on me from where a jukebox is playing country music that makes my ears bleed, and the whole place smells like smoke and some sort of meat. I think.

"Do you know if there's a hotel around where I could stay?"

Her eyebrows lift in amusement, and yeah, that's what I was afraid of. "Well, I think Sam Kershaw was renting out a couple of his places. I don't know if he'll do that for a night or two though. Usually rents on a monthly basis."

I nod my head at that and pull out my phone. Still no bars. "And how would I get hold of him?"

She eyes me cautiously, and I just hold my damn breath, sure she's about to have one of these country-boy behemoths escort my ass out of here any moment. She looks past me, and time moves slowly because yep, I'm getting tossed out of here.

"Sam?"

"Yeah, Rose?" An older man walks over from where he was standing with another man by the pool table.

Rose—the nice woman behind the bar smiles and then nods in my direction. "This young man is looking for a place to stay. Didn't you say you were renting out your cabins?"

The man looks me up and down, sizing me up as I shift uncomfortably while he takes in my suit. His eyes land on my shoes for an awfully long time before they travel back up to my face. “That’s two city boys in one week.”

My jaw nearly drops at that moment because he has to be talking about Justin. “Guess we’re drawn in by the scenery out here. Pretty peaceful.”

He studies me carefully. I’m not liking the stare-down, but then he nods. “Okay, I’ll need to run a credit check and get some paperwork. How long are you looking to stay?”

Somehow, I don’t think I should say “no longer than I have to,” so I settle on, “I can pay you for a month to start.”

He nods at that.

“I’ll need a deposit. If you pass the credit check.”

I nod, not at all worried when I’m sure I could pay him in cash for a year’s rent tomorrow—you know, if I could find a damn bank. “Not a problem.”

Goddammit, please don’t let me be stuck here the entire month for Justin to pull his head out of his ass and come home.

I’m not sure I can even take a full week.

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Chapter Four

JUSTIN

I get back from a long walk and am surprised when I see Sam's truck parked outside. I instantly wonder if something is wrong. He's usually not here this time of night. He comes by in the morning to check up on his cabins and the property surrounding it about twice a week.

But the sun is almost completely set now, and it's pretty damn late in the day for him to be here.

And then I spot the other vehicle parked next to his.

No.

The same damn rental Jeep that Waylon was in earlier today.

I walk outside of my cabin, my hands shaking, I'm so pissed off, but I try to keep my composure. "Sam," I say as I reach him.

The kind older man looks at me with a smile. "Hey, city boy."

I can't stop the grin on my face at his nickname. Not a fan of city folk, but he said since I passed the credit check and could pay for a year in advance, he'd make an exception.

The credit check is how I'm assuming Waylon finally caught up with me, and I knew it would be a risk when I did it. But after months of bouncing from place to place, only using cash, I wanted to settle down for a bit.

And it looks like it bit me in the ass.

"Has he already signed a lease?"

Sam looks taken back a little by my question but gives me a quick nod. "He did. Only for three months. Passed the credit check and paid awfully fast."

Goddammit. How the hell did Waylon make that happen?

"You okay there, city boy? You're looking a little pale."

I grit my teeth and force a smile. "I'm fine. Just wanted to make sure you're okay. Not used to you being out here so late."

He chuckles. "Yeah, the wife won't be too happy with me, but maybe I'll buy her something pretty with all this city money coming in."

I smile genuinely at that. The man's wife has him wrapped around his little finger, and no doubt he'll buy her flowers this week just because. Not to get him out of any trouble.

"Well, keep an eye on him, will ya?" Sam asks with a smile, but I think he's serious. "Not sure about this one. Wears a suit and has some goop in his hair."

I barely manage to stifle a laugh, and if I wasn't so pissed off that Waylon is here, I probably wouldn't have been able to hold it back. Him and his fucking suits. Always on. Always perfectly poised.

Ready for his part.

Sam hops in his truck and leaves, his truck winding down the road and disappearing behind the trees as I stand there and go through some breathing exercises before heading to Waylon's cabin.

I bang on the door. Clearly the breathing didn't help at all, but I don't care. I bang again just before the door casually opens, and Waylon stands there, looking totally unbothered, like he was waiting for me. "Justin."

"Why are you here? What the hell are you doing?"

He just smirks at me, utterly calm and confident. "I'm not leaving. I'm your manager, and clearly,"—he looks me up and down, his eyes landing on my own—"you need to be managed."

"I told you, you're fired. I don't need or want anything from you. And three fucking months? You paid for three months? Are you completely insane?"

"Well..." His casual tone makes me nearly feral. "Three months to start. If I don't tear shit up, and what else did he say..." He pretends to think. "Oh yeah, if I keep it down, I can extend the lease."

I shake my head, my teeth clenching so damn hard I'm worried they'll crack. "How the hell did you find cash out here?"

He waves that off. "Oh, I paid with PayPal. Pretty damn handy, if you ask me. Of course, I had to pay the fees, but that wasn't so bad."

I might actually kill him. My fists clench at my sides as I try like hell to stay calm. He's playing me. I know that. He's handling me, like he's always done. It's what he's

good at.

And I hate it.

“Sam takes PayPal?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Yup. Shocking, I know. But turns out, he’s pretty good with all the modern technology shit.”

I growl. I don’t mean to, but I do. I can’t believe he found a way to do this to me. “I don’t care. Leave. You need to get the hell out of here.”

“Can’t.”

He starts to close the door, but I put my shoe there to stop him. “You can. And you will. I don’t want you here, Waylon.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m here.”

We just stare at each other, my rage ticking up, but he doesn’t seem bothered.

“Goddammit. I did what you asked of me for years. I played the part. I was the quintessential rockstar. And yet, I still behaved. I did what you wanted. Why the hell can’t you do what I’m asking now?”

“Leave you alone out here in the middle of nowhere? Leaving all your friends behind?”

“I don’t have friends,” I say coldly. “I had bandmates, and they’re fine. You are not my friend either, Waylon. You never were.”

I know it's not the nicest thing to say, but I can't be bothered with that right now. He's stone-faced, and I can't tell what he's thinking. I never really could. That's the thing about Waylon—he's smart. Very smart. So damn smart, he knows how to separate emotions from business.

And that's what this is. Business.

“You're fired.”

He swallows hard, and I try not to watch his throat bob with the motion and think back to our one and only hookup. That was exceptionally stupid. Beyond stupid. I knew better. But after years of lusting after the gorgeous man who wouldn't stop bossing me around, I was struck stupid and couldn't resist the chance to be with him.

I told myself it was goodbye.

Only he won't let it be. He had to come after me.

“Well...” he starts, his voice cold and his eyes giving nothing away. “Then I guess I'm just your friendly neighbor.”

My jaw ticks with anger because I know he won't back down. He's not leaving. Still, I have to make one last plea. “I like it here. I was finally settled. Don't do this to me.”

And for one brief second, I swear I see a sliver of guilt. Maybe even a moment of retreat. But then his eyes shutter, and he stands a little taller. “You mind letting me close my door, neighbor? Don't want any bugs to invade my adorable little cabin.”

My heart drops, and rage flows through my body, but I remove my foot and allow him to close the door in my face.

I'm not leaving here. I like it here.

So I'm just going to have to find a way to make him leave.

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Chapter Five

WAYLON

I 'm not his friend. That's just fan-fucking-tastic.

That's totally fine though. Maybe we weren't friends, but I thought we had a mutual respect. I thought he maybe gave a damn about me. I know I care about him.

I groan when I sit down on the old lumpy couch in the living room/dining room/kitchen of the world's smallest cabin. How the hell am I going to make this work?

I don't know.

And we aren't friends.

I hate how much his words stung. It shouldn't have bothered me. I'm very good at keeping things professional, but for some reason, that cut me deep. Though I'm pretty sure I did a great job of masking it.

I learned a long time ago that people believe what they want to see. When I was the lonely kid on the playground and teachers would come to check on me, I was great at laughing it off and making it seem like I was just fine.

When my parents tried to "get me right with the Lord," when I came out to them at sixteen, my aunt—who was the only one in my family I ever liked—tried to get me to

move in with her. Tried to make sure I was okay. I played that off too. Like I was totally fine with my parents telling me I'd go to hell if I didn't—well I'm not sure what they thought I could do to “fix” myself. Pretend not to be gay, I guess.

That was never going to happen.

My aunt died a year later, and then I went off to college. Never looked back.

So in the end, I was just totally fine.

I know I need to pack my shit and cut my losses, but I can't seem to do it. Maybe it's my stubborn streak, but maybe it's his that's keeping me here. Because no matter how much he says he's fine and he wants me to leave, I know he needs help. I know he's all alone out here with no one to look out for him, and that's dangerous.

My phone rings, and I pull it from my pocket, glancing at the screen to see I barely have any service inside.

That's just fucking great.

I hit answer, hoping it won't drop the call. “Jenny?”

“Hey. Did you make it?” Her voice sounds crackly on the line, cutting in and out, like it's the first goddamn phone to ever exist and not brand-new. I have to talk to Sam about getting Wi-Fi out here.

When I asked him about it, his eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. He let me know there's no internet in the cabins, but a café in town has that—and I quote—“fancy shit.”

This is going to be a long damn three months.

“Yes. I’m here. The service is shit.”

“What?” she asks loudly, just to prove my point.

I scream into the phone. “The. Service. Is. Shit.” And I have no idea why I’m screaming. That’s not going to make it any better.

Her voice cuts out, and then a moment later, the signal is lost. Well, that’s just fantastic. I gotta tell you, I don’t know how the hell places like this even exist anymore. This is goddamn ridiculous.

I type out a quick text to let her know I made it and the service is, in fact, shitty. That I’ll call her tomorrow if I can find a spot in town that has a signal.

I raise the phone up in the air—why I think that will help, I don’t know—and thankfully, it sends before I place my phone down on the couch next to me.

How the hell is this my life now?

I need to find a way to get Justin to talk to me, figure out how to help him, and then get the hell out of here.

I wake up in the world’s most uncomfortable bed. I mean it’s somehow both hard and soft at the same time, with a spring poking into my side for most of the damn night. First thing today, I’m ordering a decent mattress. I don’t care how much I have to pay to get it shipped out here.

I cannot take another night like last night.

My body aches as I climb off the mattress from hell and make my way into the bathroom—which consists of a toilet, a shower I’m not sure I’ll even fit in, and a sink

with a rusty old mirror above it. I take a piss and wash my hands before I move into the kitchen.

There's an old coffee maker, but as I search through the cabinets, I'm horrified to find absolutely no coffee.

This. Cannot. Be. Happening.

There's no way in hell Door Dash or Grubhub will deliver out here, and there's also no way I'm going to start my day without coffee.

Nope. No. Way.

So, I do the only thing I can. I stumble out of the cabin in my skimpy black briefs and make my way over to my neighbor's front door. And he is not pleased.

But I don't miss the way his eyes slide over my body, slowly with absolutely no subtlety, checking out every inch of my bare skin. I wish I could say it had no effect on me, but of course it does.

His perusal lights a fire in my blood, but then his face goes back to angry. "What the hell are you doing? You trying to get arrested?"

I smirk at that. "There are cops around here to arrest me?"

He rolls his eyes at me—sadly, he's already fully dressed in ripped jeans and a white t-shirt. "Why are you here?"

"I was wondering if you could loan me some coffee until I can get back into town."

He studies me carefully, his brow furrowing and his pretty full lips pursed in

annoyance. Damn, he's cute when he's annoyed. "No."

It's my turn to roll my eyes at him. "Justin, are you really going to deny me coffee? You know how I get without caffeine."

He stares at me, unmoving and cold, but then he huffs loudly and flails his arm behind him, turning his body. "Fine. Just come in. I'll get you a cup."

I grin wide, unbothered by his little outburst. This turned out better than I could have planned.

I move past him, walking into his cabin and barely manage not to jump when the door slams behind me. He could for sure murder me out here, and they'd never find my body. But it is what it is, and damn it, I need coffee.

He walks into the kitchen and grabs me a mug from the cabinet, filling it with coffee and then walks over to hand it to me. "Here. Now go."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll stay here and drink it," I say, taking a seat on his couch—one he must have bought himself because it's brand-new and so comfortable I have to catch a groan from falling from my lips as I settle into the plush fabric.

I take a drink of the coffee and close my eyes, savoring the wonderful life nectar.

I feel him sit down next to me on the couch, but I'm still enjoying my coffee with my eyes closed before he speaks. "Why are you doing this to me?"

I open my eyes and look right into his. "What exactly am I doing to you? Maybe I needed some peace and quiet."

He glares at me angrily. "You're drowning here already. There's no way in hell any

of this is relaxing for you.”

I smirk at that. He’s not wrong, but I’m very good at putting on an act when I need to. “I’ll admit the bed is lumpy, and I’m going to have to get some coffee, but I love it. The trees. The quiet. It’s lovely.”

His eyes narrow. “What do I have to do to get you to leave?”

I take another drink of my coffee and lift my shoulder. “Tell me why you left. Tell me what your plan is.” My eyes meet his. “Tell me you don’t need me.”

I swear that one knocks him off kilter for a brief moment, but unfortunately, he recovers way too fast. “That one is easy. I. Don’t. Need. You.”

I try not to rear back like he slapped me, but I’m not sure I manage. It hurts. It really fucking hurts, and it takes me a moment to catch my breath.

I try to cover it by taking a large sip of coffee to regain my composure.

Don’t let him see the hurt, Waylon. You’re better than this.

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Chapter Six

JUSTIN

O kay, I'm an asshole. That was cruel. There was a time when I needed him for what seemed like everything. My parents were barely around, once I started making money with Immoral and they got their cut of what they liked to call "management fees."

But then, Waylon stepped in. And he was a real manager. He managed the band, but he managed us all individually too. He's only a little bit older than me, but he's always seemed so much more mature.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly, but Waylon is already going to extraordinary lengths to hide the hurt I saw in his eyes. He brings the cup down from his lips, and his eyes narrow at me.

"Fine. You don't need me. But the other questions. Do you even have a plan?"

"Do I even need a plan?" I bite out because I feel like my entire life has been structured up until now. Always on a schedule. On a tour. Recording on time. Nothing was ever done on a whim.

"Yes. You need a plan. Are you really just going to live in a cabin, out in the middle of nowhere with no Wi-Fi, for the rest of your life?"

I hate that when he takes another sip of coffee, my eyes dart to the way his bicep flexes, pulling it tight and the veins pop just slightly. Waylon isn't jacked, but the guy

works out. That's for damn sure. He's on the leaner side, but he's toned to perfection. "Why do you care what I do?"

I watch him swallow a sip of coffee, completely unbothered by his near nudity. But I have to shift slightly in my spot on the couch—because obviously, my body is for sure bothered by his nudity. Far too damn hot and bothered.

I can't believe I gave into the stupid ass crush I've had on him since we first met. I kept the boundary up because we worked together—I didn't want things to get messy. But then, I told myself I wasn't going to see him again. So it was fine. I indulged.

Now I'm sitting here with him almost completely naked, and I can't stop thinking about the way his mouth tastes. About his lithe body against mine. The way he sounds when he comes.

I need to shake this off. I try my best to focus. "I don't want to tour anymore."

"Okay," he says calmly, finishing his coffee. "So what are you going to do for a living?"

I hate how calm he sounds. "I have plenty of money, Waylon." My tone is dead, and I just want this conversation over. But Waylon, being Waylon, doesn't drop it.

"Yeah well, living is about more than money."

"You're really going to lecture me about there being more to life than things?" The man loves the finer things in life. Not that there's anything wrong with that, honestly, but I don't need his hypocrisy right now.

He grins at me, his eyes lighting up with mirth. "You'll be bored. You need to keep busy. I know you do."

I look out the main window of the cabin and out into the great nothingness of the woods surrounding it. “There’s plenty to do here.”

He studies me carefully and then stands up, his crotch in my face, and it takes all my strength to look away from the bulge there in his tight briefs. He walks toward the kitchen, and I can’t stop myself from watching the firm globes of his ass move while he walks. He puts the mug in the sink and then comes back into the room, his arms folded—but not trying to cover himself.

“I’m staying until I feel like you’re settled. So if you want me to leave, that’s up to you.”

“You hate it here,” I say, standing up to look him in the eyes. “Just leave. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Oh, how I wish that were true,” he says, not missing a beat, and I realize there is no making him leave. He’s beyond stubborn.

“I just want to write songs, okay?” There’s a hard edge to my tone, but he doesn’t flinch. “I want to write songs that mean something. I don’t want to write the next “Shake it Off.”

“Hey, don’t throw shade at Taylor. There’s nothing wrong with making the world shake their ass and have fun.”

I frown at that but have to stop myself from smiling. “Sorry I insulted your queen.”

He gives me a half-smile. “You should be. Besides she writes her own songs and has a lot more than shaking to her lyrics.”

“Maybe that was a bad example,” I say, trying not to get lost in the conversation. I

need to focus. I need to figure out how to make him leave. “I just want to write my own songs. I want soul in them. I want them to mean something.”

I expect him to mock me, but surprisingly, he doesn’t. “Okay. And you’re going to do that here.” It’s not said like a question, but I hear it anyway.

I nod in answer. “Yes. I want to.”

“And what about performing these songs?”

I watch his body as he stands there, just questioning me, getting lost in the sleek lines of all that tanned skin. I can’t think straight. “Look, can we talk about this later? When you have some damn clothes on?”

His cocky grin grows on that handsome face of his. He knows the effect he has on me. The son of a bitch. I kept it hidden for so long, but now that he knows how my body responds to his, there’s no going back.

He walks over to me, stopping only a foot away, letting his finger drag down my chest over the cotton of my shirt. “I thought you hated my suits.”

“I do,” I say instantly because I hate seeing him so buttoned up all the time. Waylon may think he’s in control, but the truth is, he’s just as shackled to the fame and life of celebrities as I was. That suit doesn’t scream freedom to me—it’s a tell of how damn restrained he is. “But this is not working for me.”

My eyes drag over his bare skin, and he grins at me, dropping his hand from my chest and shrugging. “Fine. I’ll go shower and put on a suit. But we are going to discuss this.”

“Good luck with that water pressure. It’s nothing like what you’re used to, I

guarantee it.”

He curses and grumbles all the way to the door before he yanks it open and leaves my cabin.

Yeah, no way he won’t crack soon. Waylon won’t last long here, and then I can get back to getting some damn peace in my life.

Chapter Seven

WAYLON

He wasn't lying about the water pressure. Holy shitballs, I've never had a worse shower in my life. I'd be better off letting the kitchen faucet run over my head than the little dribble from the shower.

This is torture. But when I've shaved and dressed in one of my suits, I feel a little better. Not to mention finally having coffee flowing through my veins.

And Justin is willing to talk. That's a step. A small one, but it'll have to do for now because after that shower and terrible sleep, I need a win. So when I'm fully dressed, I make my way back over to his cabin, only to find him sitting on the porch, waiting for me.

The porch of his cabin has two—what look like handmade—rocking chairs, and he's sitting in one, so I take the other. "Ready to talk?" I ask him.

"Ready to listen?" he shoots back, and I can't help the smile that crosses my face because damn it, I do love this feisty side of him.

"I am. Tell me what you want."

His eyes meet mine for a moment, and in that very brief time, I swear I see hunger there. Desire. Want. But then he quickly shuts it and takes a deep breath, looking out at the view. A view I can't deny is supremely beautiful.

“I told you. I don’t want to be famous anymore. I want to be a songwriter.”

“And you want to perform,” I point out because I know him. As much as he may not have reveled in the fame part, he’s a performer by nature. He loves to listen to the crowd responding to him. And if he’s going to be going solo and writing his own songs, I imagine that will only be amplified.

“I do,” he confirms. “I have a gig tomorrow actually.”

“A gig?” I ask curiously. “Where?”

“It’s a tiny little dive bar about twenty minutes from here. It’s perfect. I booked it myself.”

“Do they know who you are?”

He shakes his head. “No. I told them I was a new songwriter and wanted to test out my songs on a live audience at no charge.”

I take in the information, hating how I can hear the excitement in his voice, even though he’s trying to hide it, and really hating that I need to squash it. “Justin,” I start before huffing out a deep breath. “You like this place, right?”

He rolls his eyes at me, already irritated, but at least he answers, “I do. I paid for a year in advance.”

“So you,”—I point at him just to add emphasis to my point—“Justin St. James, are going to show up at a bar and play for only twenty minutes from the place you want to be for the next year?”

I can see when the realization hits him, and he does exactly what I expect him to. He

gets defensive. “They won’t recognize me. It’s a small bar out in the middle of nowhere. It’ll probably be an audience of twenty people at the most, and that includes the owners and the waitstaff. No one will even be paying attention. Don’t try to ruin this for me.”

“I’m not trying to ruin this.” I remain calm. “I’m trying to help you out because whether you like it or not, you are Justin St. James.” His jaw clenches tight, but he doesn’t say anything. “Someone will recognize you.”

“No, they won’t,” he says stubbornly, but I can see the uncertainty there.

“You gonna wear a wig, sunglasses... maybe a little hat?” Okay, now I’m being a dick, but I swear I’m trying to help.

He glares at me, and I can’t help grinning like a fool. “No, asshole. But no one around here even knows who Immoral is.”

I can see why he thinks that, but it’s not a totally safe bet. “And if someone does? A new waitress or anyone with internet—which, okay, around here might not be many— but someone might. And if they do, it’s only a matter of time before people are swarming your new place and you’ll be forced to leave.”

“It won’t happen,” he says stubbornly.

“It could, and then you’ll have to leave or have absolutely no privacy whatsoever. Which I’m guessing is why you’re here.”

I can’t help looking around at the desolate place. “I am,” he says so quietly, I almost don’t hear him and turn my head to look at him just in time to see he’s also looking out at the land around us. “I wanted this goddamn veil of privacy so bad, I could taste it. I used to dream about it. After shows.” I watch as he swallows hard, and then his

eyes meet mine. “A place just like this, out in the middle of nowhere. No one breaking into my apartment. No one following me everywhere I go. A place where I could go to the store or for a walk without a camera in my face.”

I nod slowly because I know. I’ve worked with a lot of celebrities over the years, and they all seem to have a varying need for that veil of privacy Justin is talking about. Some don’t seem to need it at all and thrive on the attention. Some don’t mind smiling for the camera sometimes, but Justin was always different. He loved being on that stage, but after he was done playing, he wanted out of the spotlight.

“Then you can’t play at that bar.” I’m really not trying to be an asshole this time, but his jaw clenches hard all the same.

“It’s fine. I know it’s fine. You’re just here to mess with my head.”

“You know deep down that’s not true.”

He stands up, moving to the edge of the porch. “I need this,” he says so desperately, I have to give in. But in my own way...

“So let me set up some gigs. Small, but far enough away from here.”

“Why?” He turns to face me, his arms crossed over his lower stomach.

I try to hide the hurt I feel, just from that simple question, but I doubt I’m successful.

“Because you need this, and I’m a damn good manager.”

“Ten percent of zero is still zero. Not a great business move.”

I shrug and stand up, but don’t move toward him. “It’s not about business, and you know it.”

His eyes lock on mine, nearly making me stutter and fall as I start toward the porch railing. I catch myself quickly and make it to the edge, letting my hands rest on the railing as I look out. “Is this because...?”

I don’t bother turning to look at him, but I shake my head. When he stops talking, I know he must have been watching me. “No. That was a mistake.”

I feel him tense next to me and know it wasn’t a nice way of putting it, but there’s just no other way to describe it. I shouldn’t have done it. I knew it then. Although... I don’t regret it.

Even though I should.

But it can’t happen again.

I need to help him get settled in whatever it is that will finally make him happy. And then I need to get the hell out of here and back to my life.

“Then why not just let me fuck up so you can say I told you so ?” he asks bluntly, and I can’t help smiling at the fact that he didn’t shrink back in the slightest, despite my words being sort of shitty.

“Because you may not believe this.” I turn to face him. “But I want you to be happy. I need to know you’re doing what you love and you’re safe.” His eyes are intense as they remain on mine, sending an unwanted shiver through my entire damn body that I force myself to ignore.

It can’t happen again.

Which also brings me to the next thing on my agenda. “Did you come here so you could...” He’s waiting for me to be as blunt as I usually am, and for some reason, I

can't seem to get the words out. My fingers grip the railing, and I look away from him.

"I could what?" he asks carefully. I can feel his eyes boring into the side of my head, but I refuse to look at him.

"You weren't exactly out then . . ."

He lets out a harsh laugh, understanding what I'm asking. "You think I came to the hills of Tennessee to live my best gay life?"

I roll my eyes at him, but my fingers only grip the railing tighter, thinking about him doing just that. I mean, he should. He absolutely should if that's who he is and what he wants. I want that for him.

I do.

Sort of.

Damn it.

"Or bisexual life," is the only response I can come back with.

"I am bisexual," he confirms, and I nod, even though his identity doesn't make a difference to me, one way or another. Just as long as he's able to be as open and loud about it as he wants to be.

"I understand this may not be the best place to hook up, but if you're wanting this veil of privacy you're talking about, maybe that's because you want more freedom to do that."

He shakes his head, sighing deeply and looking out at the horizon. “It’s about the music for me. That’s why I’m here. Not the fame and not hookups. I want to be free. Can’t you get that?”

I can.

I don’t say it though. I don’t say anything for a while as I look out at the trees and absolutely no traffic, cars, or people of any kind. “I’ll help you. And then I’ll leave.”

He doesn’t say anything at all, but I see the subtle nod he gives me.

That’s good enough for me.

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Chapter Eight

JUSTIN

This is all you could find?" I grump as we climb out of Waylon's rental car, and I look at the tiny bar in front of us. The parking lot is gravel, and the bar is on the outskirts of the last town we drove through about five minutes ago.

Off an old dirt road, and you wouldn't even know this place was here if the one neon sign outside wasn't flashing blue and red. There are several cars parked here though.

A hell of a lot more than I'd have thought.

"It's perfect." Waylon isn't at all bothered by my attitude as he closes the Jeep's door and straightens his tie, looking at the old bar with worn wood siding that looks like it could fall apart at any moment. "It's four hours from your precious little cabin. They were happy to have a live musician and probably have no clue who you are." For four long hours in the car with Waylon and his delicious-smelling cologne, I sat there, giving him the silent treatment for not just leaving me the hell alone.

But I knew when he mentioned the glaring flaw in my plan—that twenty minutes from the cabin wasn't nearly enough to keep up the anonymity I'd been enjoying and maybe I did need to accept his help.

I look at the bar, my heart hammering in my chest at the thought of walking in there with my guitar and playing the songs I wrote.

“And if anyone recognizes me?”

I hate the fear that sweeps through me, just thinking about it. I want to perform live more than almost anything—that one thing I want more than privacy and to live my life in peace. “Then we’ll be headed back to the cabins four hours away from here anyway. It won’t matter.”

I nod my head slowly, hating that he really is good at the business side. I’m not really looking forward to the four hours in the car on the way back, but that doesn’t lessen the adrenaline I’m feeling about performing live again in the slightest.

This is what it’s all about for me.

This is why I agreed to letting my parents shove me into everything they could to get me in front of the camera from the time I could walk. For this chance to perform in front of a crowd.

For that high.

It’s hard to explain because I didn’t like anything else that came with that high. I didn’t like the groupies—although yeah, of course when I was old enough to want sex, I was thrilled to be offered sex all the damn time—but I didn’t like the attention offstage. I knew they were with me solely because I was Justin St. James.

I didn’t like the cameras in my face when I got offstage. Or the interviews I had to do. Talking about playing music isn’t what I want.

I want to play music.

That’s it.

And Waylon is giving me that opportunity. I study him carefully, hating that after four hours in the car, he seems just as put-together as he always does. Not one hair out of place.

But I still can't trust it. He has to be getting something from this. Maybe he's trying to lull me into a false sense of security so he can get me to go back on tour. Or maybe he has some big interview set up. I don't know.

But I know he has to want something. No one does anything for free.

And he says it has nothing to do with our hookup—our mistake, as he so kindly called it.

I curse myself for the pang of pain I feel, just thinking about him describing it that way. It's stupid. It was a hookup, and it was a damn mistake. A stupid, beautiful fucking epic mistake, but a mistake, nonetheless.

Why can't I stop thinking about it?

I curse myself again and try to force all thoughts of Waylon and stupid fucking hookups out of my brain to just think about the music. I take a deep breath and grab my guitar from the back seat. "Let's do this then."

Waylon leads the way inside the smoky old bar, no one even turning to look at us as we make our way toward the back. There's an older man standing behind the actual bar, his eyes on us, sizing us up.

"Mr. Callahan?" Waylon says, stretching his hand out for the older man's.

The man stands there, doesn't move for the longest time, just staring at us both like outsiders. Dread forms in my belly, thinking about him turning us away. I'm sure

Waylon called to set this up, but what if they hadn't actually agreed, or what if he's changed his mind?

The man looks at the guitar case in my hand, and then his eyes slide up to my face. Waylon drops his hand when it's clear the man isn't going to shake it, and we both just wait.

He nods his head toward the corner of the room, where a single microphone and a chair are sitting. "Not going to do some fancy introduction or anything, but the room is yours. If they start throwing beer bottles at you, I'd get out of here if you don't want to get hit. Not my job to break up a rowdy crowd either."

The guy is obviously thrilled I'm here.

Waylon looks amused though, and I just give a quick thanks and a nod before walking over to the chair to setup. Waylon hangs back, giving me space I'm grateful for. I don't need him to hold my hand through this, damn it.

I grab my guitar and set up, sitting down on the chair and placing the beautiful cherry red acoustic guitar on my thighs as I adjust the microphone. No one is paying any attention. The bar is pretty damn full. There are a couple of people playing pool. Some playing darts. Everyone has a beer in hand and is seemingly in a good mood.

And from the first strum of my guitar, it all fades away. None of it matters. I barely even notice when people start to listen. I just lean into the microphone and let my fingers slide over the strings of my guitar, singing the words I wrote, and playing the notes I constructed to go along with them.

And for the first time in a long damn time, I feel free.

Chapter Nine

WAYLON

Watching him play is electric. Like it always has been. There's something beautiful that happens to Justin when he's on stage. I watch his long, nimble fingers slowly strum the guitar that looks like a part of his body.

He's lost in the words as his beautiful voice fills the bar. Everyone has stopped what they're doing. All eyes are on Justin, and even in a place like this, I'm not surprised in the slightest.

I'm also not at all surprised by the woman who has her phone out, recording this with a gleeful expression on her face by his second song. She knows who he is. I can see it on her face.

Which means it's only a matter of time.

But I let him have these precious moments where he doesn't have to be Justin St. James. Where he's just J. Just a guy playing his guitar and singing his heart out. With no fame to worry about and the mob that's coming.

By his fourth song, the bar has filled up even more. And by the fifth, I'm giving him the signal that we need to go. On the last line of his song, he's jumping up and packing up his guitar while I shake the bar owner's hand and we head out, trying like hell to ignore the flashes from the camera phones.

We make it out to the Jeep and hop in as I peel off down the road, a high like none other coming over me. I don't want him to have to deal with anyone following us. No doubt the news is already breaking as we speak.

There are no doubt bloggers and journalists on their way to this tiny town. Hopping on flights right now, but they'll be too late. And it's four hours away from where he's set up his sanctuary.

We've only been driving for twenty minutes when Justin grabs my wrist that's on the steering wheel—not hard but enough to get my attention. “Can you turn off on that next side road?”

I'm worried for a moment that he's panicking, but one glance at him shows how happy he appears to be. I nod, my eyes going back to the road and my heart racing in anticipation. He's happy. I could see that from the smile on his beautiful face.

But maybe the adrenaline is wearing off. Maybe he's on his way to a panic attack and he knows it. I'm not sure, and the worry consumes me as I turn off the main road and go down a curvy gravel road. It's dark and hard to see, but I turn off the gravel road to an even more deserted spot and put it in park.

Justin immediately jumps out, and I give him a minute before I climb out too, leaving the Jeep on as I walk around to the side of the car he exited. I approach him cautiously, just waiting for the drop, but I barely get my mouth open to ask him if he's okay when his hand goes around the back of my neck, and his lips crash against mine.

I grunt in surprise, but I don't miss a beat, thrusting my body against his and kissing him hard. I should stop it. I wish I could say I resisted for even a second, but there was no resistance whatsoever.

His hands move down to my ass as we kiss. Mine move to his hair, sliding through his soft locks, and I relish the feel of his tongue in my mouth. His strong hands grip my ass through my suit pants as he pulls me into him, our hard dicks grinding against each other.

We're both panting, desperate for relief, and I don't even think about it before I'm asking against his lips, "Do you have a condom and lube?" He nods, his nose dragging over mine, while he reaches into his back pocket.

We can barely keep our mouths off each other as I work his pants open and push them down, freeing his gorgeous cock that bounces free and slaps his abs. I want more time to explore him. I want to fall to my knees and feast on his cock, uncaring about the dirt and gravel at our feet, but there's no time.

It's frantic as he quickly sheathes his cock with the condom and then opens the lube, I hastily undo my pants and turn away from him, pushing them down as I listen to the squelching sound of him applying lube to his covered dick. I moan hungrily when his lubed finger slides down my crease to my eager hole.

He quickly preps me with one finger and then two as I reach up and grip the top of the Jeep, ready for the pounding I know he's about to give me.

I feel his fingers slowly slide out of me, leaving lube behind and making me feel wanting and empty. I thrust my ass back toward him, but to no avail. I whimper needily and don't even care. I feel his body against mine, his dick at my entrance but not sliding inside me the way I want him to. His warm breath fans over my ear. "You ready for another mistake?" his deep voice whispers harshly in my ear.

All I can do is nod and reach behind him, grabbing onto his hip and urging him forward.

“Say. It.”

“I want this. I want you...”—I finally regain my wits just enough to add—“to fuck me.” I lean my forehead against the cool metal of the Jeep, my body having nowhere to go, deliciously trapped between the vehicle and Justin’s warm, hard body.

He presses forward, and that first initial burn I love hits me just as he breaks through that first ring of muscle, his cockhead slipping inside. We both groan loudly, and then he pulls back, pushing more of himself inside me.

“Yes. Harder.” I arch my back and push my ass against his cock, taking more. “Harder.”

He thrusts forward more, stretching me, making me his as he slides home, finally bottoming out, but he doesn’t take his time after that. He pulls almost all the way out of me and then slams into me again, making me grunt and groan, electricity firing up my spine as his balls slap against my body.

He wraps a hand around my throat, not causing any pain, but getting a better hold on me as I hold onto the Jeep and move my hips with his, answering each of his powerful thrusts.

His other hand slides down my body to my cock. He wastes no time stroking me fast and hard as he moves in and out of me, shifting in just the absolutely perfect way and nailing my prostate, making me cry out for him over and over.

Pleading with him to let me come. I feel his whole body thrumming with need, just like my own. His teeth graze my neck, and I feel him leaving hard kisses there, sucking hard and leaving his mark.

It’s all too damn much. My body is pulled taut with need. My balls draw up tight as

he pegs my prostate and strokes me with purpose. I cry out as my entire body warms and tenses, euphoria taking over as I come. My release sprays the side of the Jeep and slides over his hand as he pushes into me hard, his grip tight, digging in and leaving marks, I'm sure of it.

Marks I couldn't care less about.

That's not true. Marks I desperately want on my flesh. I feel him thicken inside me and a rush of heat as he fills the condom inside my ass. His body blankets mine, and I hear his harsh pants in my ear as we both try to catch our breath.

"Fuck," I breathe, and I swear I hear him chuckle before he pulls out of me. I tug my pants up and fasten them slowly. Not wanting to face what we just did.

I don't regret it.

It was stupid, and it was a mistake, but I can't find it in me to actually feel bad about doing it. It felt too good. Too damn right.

One look at him over my shoulder as he pushes a hand through his hair, his pants now pulled up but looking gloriously debauched, shows me he doesn't regret it either. He's giving me a devilish grin, which I return before making my way back to the driver's seat, wincing slightly at the sting in my ass.

Yeah. No regrets.

At least not yet.

Chapter Ten

JUSTIN

I am a total fucking idiot. I blame the high of performing again. I always loved doing a performance. Being on stage. People swaying to the music I created, but I hated the afterward.

I hated when we were swarmed by fans. When I had to be polite and talk to the news crews. I didn't want to. I didn't want to be Justin St. James at that time. Only on stage. But last night, playing at that tiny little dive bar. Fuck, it was nice. So damn nice.

I couldn't help myself. I wanted to celebrate. So like a total dumbass, I chose to do that by sinking inside Waylon's tight as hell body. And holy shit, it felt good. Way too damn good.

"I can hear you thinking from here."

Damn him. I grumble and turn my head to look at him. He's lying in the other bed in this dank hotel we picked last night. It's two hours away from the place I played, and I'm hoping that will be far enough.

I don't want to have to deal with anyone today. Except for my annoying-ass ex-manager, I suppose. We didn't talk after our hookup last night. We just climbed back into the car and drove until we spotted a small town off the interstate.

He grabbed us a room, and we passed the hell out.

But he's wide-awake now. And he looks as irritated as I feel. "I wasn't thinking. I just woke up," I grumble, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and sitting upright.

"Right." He glares at me from his side of the room, not sitting up. In fact, he seems to bury himself further into the bed, yanking the covers over his head.

"I can't believe you can lie under that comforter, man. God knows what's on it."

He makes a strangled noise and tosses the entire comforter off him, glaring daggers at me. "That's disgusting."

I laugh. I don't even mean to, but it's funny. He looks really pissed off, his hair a mess, his eyes tired from sleep, just glaring away at me like an angry little bird. He's also only wearing those ridiculously tiny briefs he apparently loves to wear. I try like hell not to stare at his body.

I've seen it. I've been inside it. I do not need to stare.

"That's what I was saying. Fucking gross."

He grimaces and stands up, not making it easy not to stare at his tight little ass as he walks over to the dresser that appears to have a coffee maker on it with a few packages of coffee and sugar. "If this doesn't work, I may murder you. I can't be held responsible."

"Noted," I say rolling my eyes. The guy is really addicted to caffeine. "Do you think they know where we are?" I have to ask, my heart sinking with the vulnerability of it all. I don't want to be followed back to the cabin.

It's my own little oasis, and I want it to remain that way. No reporters. No bloggers. No screaming fans. Waylon starts the coffee maker and snorts as he turns to face me. "You sound like you're on the run."

I kind of am, but I don't say that out loud. I feel like a goddamn fugitive who never did anything wrong. "Ha," I deadpan.

He sighs, still not bothering to hide his near nudity. At least I had the decency to put on a pair of sweats I packed before falling asleep. Not Waylon. No. He might as well just sleep naked. "I haven't had a chance to look yet, but I think it'll be fine." He walks over to the bed he was sleeping on and grabs his phone. I try not to watch his abs that are flexed tight and his arm muscles doing the same thing as he scrolls through his phone. His face gives nothing away as he meets my gaze. "They're obsessed. But I don't think anyone followed us. There's no mention of where you went after the show."

I let out a relieved breath. "Thank. Fuck."

He cocks his head to the side, studying me carefully and making me squirm before he finally speaks. "You really do hate it, don't you?" He sounds like he's having some sort of epiphany, and I want to scream.

All these years I put on a good front—I know I did. I was really good at the act, but I still... shit. I was hoping the people close to me would pick up on it. It's not fair, but it is what it is. When it was announced that, because our lead singer was going to take some time off, we all were too, I was relieved.

I wanted that time so damn badly. The other guys wanted to quickly find another band to join or maybe go solo, but I just wanted out. "I don't hate singing. I don't hate being on a stage with my guitar." I fucking love that actually.

“But you hate the crowds. The fans.”

I cringe. Our fans make us. I know that. I owe them so much. But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I don’t want to owe them for making me. I want to just exist. “I don’t hate the fans. I hate when they break into my place. I hate not ever having any privacy. I hate not being able to have a bad day.”

He frowns deeply, and I wonder what the hell he’s thinking. Usually, Waylon just says it. I’ve never seen him think so damn long about something, I swear. I start to squirm. “I didn’t see it.”

I cock my head to the side, studying him. “What? Didn’t see what?”

“The hatred you had for it. I knew you were...” His eyes meet mine, like he’s trying to be careful, which, if I’m honest, I hate. I don’t want him to be careful with me like I’m a fragile being or something. “Reserved.”

I laugh at that and shake my head. “I just wanted privacy. I wanted to be able to be me without some goddamn article about me spiraling. Or using or depressed or whatever the fuck they wanted to spin because I didn’t have a smile on my face. And everyone acted like it was the price of fame.”

“It is,” he answers quickly, and of course, that’s his answer. He’s the PR side of fame. It’s their goddamn go-to. You owe the fans. “But you also don’t owe anyone your soul. You need to do what makes you happy.”

I look at him in shock and don’t really know what to say. I didn’t really see that coming, to be honest. It’s not like Waylon ever came out and said I owed my fans or anything, but I never really pushed back. When we had to do a fan event, we did it. When we had to do interviews, we did them. And I usually forced a smile on my face for all of it.

I'd been just going along for so damn long, I finally couldn't take it anymore.

"You really believe that?" I ask, and his coffee finishes brewing so he starts to doctor it up with a shit-ton of sugar and creamer.

"Of course I do." He looks almost hurt as he turns to look at me, his coffee sitting on the dingy dresser. "I wanted to be the best, Justin. I wanted to..." He seems to bite his tongue, and I'm desperate to hear the rest of the sentence. I don't know why, but before I can ask him to go on, he seems to straighten up, schooling his features and grabbing his coffee. "Next gig, I'm setting up an escape hotel. Not this side-of-the-road-motel shit." He starts toward the bathroom. "I swear if this shower is a trickle, I'm going to lose my shit."

I guess the conversation is over. I try not to let it annoy me too much when the door shuts and I hear the shower turn on.

He curses, so I'm guessing the pressure isn't great.

I grin. Kind of serves him right for not finishing this conversation.

Although, I'm not really sure why I care so much.

Chapter Eleven

WAYLON

This shower is pathetic. Goddamn, I miss my shower back home, but I can't leave Justin. I know it's pathetic. I know this is so damn stupid, but I didn't know. I truly didn't fucking know he was so miserable.

And for some reason, I just can't let that go. So I'm going to book him more gigs in small little dive bars across the country. I'm going to help him produce an album, if that's what he wants, because the songs he wrote—they're fucking beautiful. They need to be out in the world.

The world needs Justin St. James, even if they can only have a small part of him. I'm determined to make sure he's happy. Again, I don't know why it matters so damn much to me, but it does.

It bothers me that he was clearly so unhappy for so long, and I missed it. I want my clients happy. Happy clients equal a happy manager, as far as I'm concerned, and I feel like I failed him.

I don't like to fail. It's unacceptable to me.

I finish washing in the stupid drip of water this shower has to offer and down my coffee, staring into the mirror in the motel bathroom. I'm definitely planning ahead better next time. I cannot take much more of roughing it .

I look at my reflection in the mirror, my eyes catching on a faint bruise on my hip, likely from Justin's fingers digging in as he fucked me. My body heats from the memory, my skin prickling and tingling all over.

No. No more of that.

I look into my own eyes through the mirror. "We will not be fucking," I say into the mirror, scolding myself. This is business.

Last night was a weak moment and maybe a moment of celebration. That's fine, but we won't be doing that again.

I nod my head at my own reflection, as if that's that, and wrap a towel around my waist, grabbing my coffee and walking out into the main part of the motel room. Justin is lying on the bed, still only in sweats, perusing the channels on the crappy television.

I try like hell not to let my eyes roam over all that tanned, tattooed skin wrapping his tight muscles.

Nope. No.

And then he notices I'm in the room, his eyes sliding all over my nearly nude body, and goddammit. My cock twitches under the towel, wanting to jump him right there on the bed. I want to lick all that smooth skin. Trace the veins that pop in his sinewy muscles.

"You can have the shower now," I say, trying to look him in the eyes and not any lower. Lower is dangerous, but honestly, so are his eyes. I see that intensity in them. Intensity that makes me want him even more. I want to find out what's behind those eyes. Behind the forced smile.

I want to know why he didn't tell me a long time ago that he hates the fame part of his celebrity. That he was tortured by all the goddamn interviews and autographs. I want him to talk to me, but I also think talking is dangerous.

He climbs off the bed and tosses down the remote, his body stalking toward me, making my breath hitch and my cock harden fully. Shit, this towel hides nothing. But I refuse to acknowledge it.

I try not to breathe him in like some creeper as he walks past me and heads into the bathroom. I quickly get dressed and go straight to my phone, now that I've had my caffeine fix. I of course have messages from Jenny about the performance last night and a picture of torn-up shoes, with the comment, "Fido is going to the pound."

Shit. I'm going to owe her so many shoes by the end of this. It's fine. I text her back quickly, telling her more shoes are on the way before I go on social media to assess the damage.

People are going wild for Justin's performance. Everyone's freaking out that he showed up for only one night in a tiny little town. They're reasonably upset that they had no warning and therefore couldn't go, all speculating if it was a one-off or if he'll be back. All hoping it means he's coming back.

They're going to be a little disappointed that no big concerts are coming up, but they'll live. Immoral was huge as a whole, but Justin has quite a few fans on his own too.

He comes out of the bathroom, still wet with a tiny scrap of towel around him. I will not ogle him. Nope. I just look down at my phone, ignoring the gorgeous naked man as he gets dressed a few feet away from me. Mostly. I manage to mostly ignore him. I'm only human, damn it.

He sits down on the edge of his bed, looking at me expectantly. “You know you can go home.” It isn’t a demand this time. He doesn’t tell me that I’m fired and I need to leave him alone.

It’s progress.

My eyes lift and meet his slowly, thankful and kind of sad at the same time that he’s now fully clothed. “Look, I want to help you. I want to help you do this thing...” I wave my hand, trying to find the right thing to say. “I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t know what?” he asks, but his voice isn’t nearly as prickly as it’s been since I found him in his little cabin.

“I didn’t know you were so damn miserable,” I say honestly because at this point what the hell else do I have to lose? “I feel like I failed you, and I hate to fail.” I keep my head held high and my shoulders straight as I say it. I don’t want him to see my shame.

He studies me carefully, his pink tongue darting out to lick his lips, and I hate that my eyes track the movement. “Okay.” My eyes widen when he agrees, shocked to the core. “But don’t you have other clients who need you?”

I grin at that and then shrug. “Of course, but I’ve been training this young reporter wannabe, Dalton, for a while now. I think he’d make a fantastic manager instead of a reporter, and he’s finally starting to see things my way.”

He scoffs, but he’s grinning. “Is that so?”

“It is.” I nod. “He’s ready, so I’ll have a discussion with him later. Jenny likes him too, so I think she’ll be happy to take him under her wing. She’ll help.”

“Why?” He shakes his head slightly. “Why do you care so much about letting me down or whatever.”

I did let him down, but I can tell he’s uncomfortable with the idea of ever needing me. “Because I don’t fail,” I answer him, my chin lifted. “Ever.”

He huffs, but I don’t think he’s nearly as annoyed as he’d like to be. “So it’s about your ego.”

“Of course,” I say easily and wink. He just rolls his eyes at me. “But I think you deserve to have your true passion. If touring dive bars in tiny little towns is what you want, we’ll do it. And we’ll keep your whereabouts secret while you perfect your songs and get them how you want...” I peer over at him carefully. “I’m assuming you want to record them eventually.” I make sure to keep it a secret.

He gives a clipped nod. “I want the songs out there, but I don’t want to do a tour to sing them live. I want to live on my own schedule.”

I nod. It’s not the normal way of doing things, but it works. He really does have enough money to live very comfortably the rest of his life, and this way, he still gets to make music.

But it’ll only be about the music.

“Works for me,” I say easily as I stand up and start packing all my things into my bag. “Let’s go back to the cabin, and I’ll get the next gig lined up with a better plan for a place to stay after.” I look around the motel room and shudder.

He laughs, shaking his head at me as he grabs his bag too. “And they call me a diva.”

I snort. “Wanting some damn sort of comfort in a room I’m staying in isn’t being a

diva.” I totally am though.

“You can’t work for free,” he says, trying to be firm, and it’s kind of cute, but I wave him off easily.

“Unless you start charging...” I look pointedly at him, and he glares at me. “It looks like I am.”

“Waylon...” he starts, but I wave him off again.

“I know. I’m fired and all that.”

“No,” he says quietly, sighing. “Thank you. I guess you’re rehired. At least for a few months, while I perfect the songs and maybe even enjoy performing a bit.”

I give him a nod, seeing on his face that he’s hoping I won’t argue or call him out. That I won’t gloat. But I don’t need to do any of that. “Okay then.” I hold out my hand to him, and he takes it. I shake his hand firmly. “Good to be working with you again.”

He grins and shakes my hand back before letting it drop. He looks serious again though, like he wants to discuss something. And by the slight blush of his cheeks, I can pretty much guess what it is.

“Right,” I say, standing up tall and swinging my bag over my shoulder. “We have a professional relationship again, which means last night doesn’t happen again.”

I can’t tell if he’s relieved or disappointed as he lifts his chin and then nods. “Right. Professional.”

I smile and pat him on the shoulder. “We can do that. Now let’s get on the road

because that coffee was godawful, and I have to have another cup or I'll die."

He rolls his eyes excessively and huffs as he grabs his bag and heads toward the door.
"So fucking dramatic."

I shrug it off, following him. "I make no apologies."

I can't tell from the back of his head, but I'm pretty sure he's smiling as he leaves the motel and heads to my car.

This will be fine. I am nothing if not professional.

Chapter Twelve

JUSTIN

“ O kay, so I talked to Dalton, and he’s more than eager to take on new responsibilities. Apparently, he’s been working with Jenny too, but the kid will be good in music and sports. So I’m not worried.” Waylon seems to be full of energy this morning as he makes himself at home on the porch of my cabin.

He brought breakfast from the local café, so I didn’t kick his ass out. Not that I would. Professional relationship.

He’s my manager again. And working for free.

I don’t know if this is a good idea or not, but so far, it seems to be working out, I guess. We made it back to the cabin last night, and he already has another gig lined up for next week.

It’s five hours away in the opposite direction of the first one. And he has a place picked out with a few nice hotels in the area where we can escape afterward. It all seems ridiculous, I know, but it’s still a damn relief to think that this place is my secret, and I don’t have to worry about anyone showing up here.

“Are you sure?” I ask him, taking a drink from the coffee he brought.

“Positive. And I do have service on my phone sometimes, so it’s not like I can’t work at all for my other clients. This will be just fine.” I think he’s trying to convince

himself, but I don't call him on it.

The truth is, I am grateful he found me, not that I'll ever admit it. Thinking about the first gig I got for myself—it would have been a disaster. I would have been on the run again in no time. I don't want that.

I just want a little peace.

“Okay,” I say. “Thank you.”

He gets that weird look on his face every time I say it. It's not like I've been totally ungrateful this entire time. I don't think. But I do owe him thanks. I want to record the album and get it out there, but I won't do that before working out the kinks first. It's important to get it just right, and for me, that means performing.

A lot.

“So what are you going to do in the meantime?” I have to ask. He's going to go out of his damn mind here. I know him. He can't stay busy in a little town like this.

He shrugs. “Meditate, I guess.”

I snort. “You don't meditate.”

“Guess I'm going to have to learn.” He looks around at the trees and the sky, which is a bright blue and very clear this morning. “What the hell have you been doing here this whole time?”

“Writing songs. You gonna start doing that too while you meditate?” I tease, the tightness in my chest lifting slowly.

“I’ll leave that to you,” he says with a slow grin, sipping his coffee. I try really damn hard not to stare at those full lips and think about what kissing him was like. I also have to force myself not to suggest we could get naked to pass the time.

It’s a terrible idea.

I know he’s right about keeping it professional. But I can’t seem to really, totally convince myself of that. I’m working on it. It’ll be fine.

“You know you could fly back to Kansas City.” His right eyebrow lifts, and I think it’s in annoyance. He’s ready to argue with me when I add, “We have a week until we need to leave for the gig. You could go back and forth. At least then you won’t be bored.”

Part of me—a part that I’m trying really hard to ignore—wants him to stay. And I don’t know why the hell that is. It was only days ago that I wanted him the hell out of here. Now’s my chance, and I’m silently pleading with him not to go.

Yeah, this is probably really not good.

“No. It sounds like a damn hassle, going back and forth. I’ll just stay. I’ll be fine.”

My lips twitch with a smile, and I hate it, but I’m relieved he’s going to stay here and not leave in between gigs.

I should be worried, but I tell myself it’ll be just fine.

Oh, the lies we tell ourselves.

Well, I managed not to jump him after the gig tonight, but I’m still on a total damn high from performing at the little bar outside of a charming town with a population of

eight hundred people.

I kept my set short, at only an hour, and then we fled into the night. And I have to say I'm really damn proud of myself for not jumping Waylon because holy shit, he looks good tonight. Even in his damn suit.

The suit fits him perfectly, tailored to his tight, lithe body. His hair is done perfectly. He's gorgeous. There's no denying it, and there's no denying my attraction to him either. But I kept my hands to myself the entire two-and-a-half-hour drive to the nearest hotel.

He gets us a room, and we get settled inside. This place is definitely a step up from the first place we stayed. But it's not so grand and expensive that anyone would think to look for us here.

And yeah, the more I have thoughts like that, the more I feel like I'm on the run.

Waylon removes his suit jacket and places it on the back of the office chair by the desk in the room. I watch as he unbuttons the cuffs and rolls up his sleeves, showing off sinewy forearms I can't look away from.

Fuck, he's hot. This is not good.

His face says he can read my thoughts, but for whatever reason, he doesn't call me on it. He also doesn't indulge me either. "I'm going to go pick up some food. You stay here, maybe wash the bar off you."

I grin. "I can go too."

"You could, if you want to risk being seen," he says simply because he knows I'm not going to argue with him. I nod in agreement, and he leaves with a smile on his

face.

This last week, I was certain he'd leave. Go back to Kansas City and tell me he just couldn't do it, but he stayed. And he actually seemed to be enjoying his time there. Mostly he just read, sitting out on his porch in a swing he had delivered from the same furniture store he ordered a new mattress and couch from. He seems to be making himself right at home.

That should not be a relief to me, but I think it is.

I go into the bathroom and flip on the light, seeing it's a major improvement from the last place we stayed too. I undress and turn on the water. Tonight felt good. Really damn good.

I hop into the shower and use the hotel shampoo in my hair, thinking about the small poorly lit bar and the smell of smoke and stale beer. It would have been wretched to anyone else, but I loved every second of it.

Just me and my acoustic guitar at the back of the bar. With Waylon's eyes on me.

Shit. That should not make my dick so damn hard, but it does. I'm rock-hard and aching, just from thinking about those eyes watching me. Like he really heard everything I was trying to say through the songs.

Analyzing and knowing. Before I know it, my hand is wrapped around my stiff cock and I'm stroking it until I'm crying out, my cum hitting the shower wall. Well, damn. I guess I needed that.

I try to calm my body, my dick still semi-hard even after coming. It has nothing to do with Waylon and everything to do with the high of the performance. That's all.

I rinse off, making sure to clean my cum off the shower wall, and then climb out, drying off, and wrapping the towel around my waist before walking out into the room. Waylon is just getting back, walking through the door with takeout bags in his hands, his eyes locking with mine and then dropping.

He silently peruses my wet and willing body, his eyes hungry, but then he clears his throat loudly and looks only at my face. “I got some burgers. Nothing but grease and carbs. Thought you’d need it after that.”

My face heats for a moment, my stupid brain thinking he meant jerking off in the shower at first but then quickly realizing he meant the performance. Jesus Christ, I’m losing my mind.

“You okay?” he asks, placing the food on the desk. He’s watching me with concern now.

“I’m fine. Just tired,” I lie. I’m not tired at all. I’m wired and really fucking horny. This is really not good.

Thankfully, Waylon lets it slide and heads toward the bathroom, waving me off. “Okay then, eat. I’m going to go shower the stank off me, but you don’t need to wait.”

He leaves, disappearing behind the bathroom door, and I can’t help but wonder if maybe he’ll do the same thing I did in that shower.

Fuck, my dick hardens all the way now, and I seriously contemplate jerking off again for the second time in ten minutes before I finally decide to get dressed and eat something.

Maybe that’ll get my mind off my dick for a bit. But just as I’m about to bite into the

greasy hamburger, Waylon walks out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel, and my eyes greedily eat him up.

Shit. This is going to be much harder than I thought.

Chapter Thirteen

WAYLON

Being professional is bullshit. I just want to go on record saying that. Watching Justin perform on his small stages all over the country for the past two weeks has been torture. Because the man is gorgeous on his very worst day doing absolutely nothing, but when he's performing on stage—with his guitar and the microphone as his only props and dressed in tight jeans and a t-shirt—he's the hottest man on the planet.

This is the fourth show I've booked for him, and let me tell you, it's getting harder and harder to book places that don't suspect it's actually Justin St. James who'll be coming to their bar.

I'm always very careful. I make sure to feel them out, but I know it's just a matter of time before the bubble bursts. He's more famous than he realizes. So much more famous. And the chatter online is just gagging for this guy.

They're desperate to find out where he'll be next. I think he needs to slow down. Maybe wait a month in between gigs, but I can feel how antsy he gets.

He loves this part.

I watch him in awe as his long fingers stroke the strings of the guitar and listen carefully to every single note he sings. It's hauntingly beautiful. His new songs—the ones he wrote by himself out in the cabin—they're deep. They're real. And they hit

you right in the chest.

He's talented—there's no denying it. And everyone in the bar is transfixed on him. Phones in hand of course. Most of them recording him. They know they're part of history right now.

The few who get to see him in person.

I notice more people crowding into the bar, and that's my signal that we need to get the hell out of here before he's mobbed. I catch his eyes and motion with my chin toward the door. He knows.

He finishes his song and quickly puts his guitar away, thanking the crowd and heading toward the exit. People are reaching out for him, trying to get him to stay. Some even holding on.

"Don't touch," I say with a deadly fierce tone. I may not be a huge guy, but I still give off a don't fuck with me attitude when I need to. The girl who was clinging to Justin's arm pouts but lets him go.

Maybe we need to hire a bodyguard. This could be potentially dangerous. I make a note to address it with Justin later as he loads up his guitar and we hop into the car. I drive out of there, watching carefully for anyone following us.

I don't see any headlights, and it's dark as fuck, so when I get on the interstate, I'm reasonably certain no one is behind us. "Fuck, that was close." Justin sounds tense.

I sigh, relieved that we made it out of there without anything major happening. "I think you need a month off. They're getting wise."

"Why does it have to be like this? Why can't they just relax, and if I show up in their

town, be happy.”

I snort at that. “Because you’re Justin St. James, and you’ve been MIA for a while. They all want to win the internet and get you on camera. You know this.”

“I hate it,” he grumbles, and I sigh again. I let him down for so long. How the hell did I not see this? He’s miserable. Not his usual high after these shows because he had to deal with people groping him on his way out.

“I’m sorry,” I say honestly. I don’t like it when he’s sad. It makes me sad too, as odd and kind of pathetic as that is.

He’s quiet on the three-hour drive to a town away from the bar he performed at tonight. I think we’re in Oklahoma. Yeah, it’s Oklahoma tonight. I go through a drive-thru on the way to the hotel, Justin having put a hat on and lowering the brim as he curls up in his seat.

No one notices. Thank fuck.

We get to the hotel, but he’s busy sulking instead of eating, and I don’t really feel like eating either.

“Tonight was still good, Justin. You still got to perform, and no one followed us.”

He just kicks his shoes off and scoots up the bed, leaning against the numerous pillows against the headboard.

I get it. I really do. But he’s also being a bit of a brat. I move to the bed, kicking off my shoes, pulling off my socks, removing my suit jacket, and then sitting down next to him. He shocks the hell out of me by laying his head on my shoulder, but I don’t say anything.

I just stroke through his hair with my fingers and try to offer him some comfort. “I know you hate when people paw at you.”

“I just want simple, you know? The bar had three times as many people in it tonight by the time I was through with my first song.”

It’s true. The speed of the internet is getting faster and faster, and anyone who was in the area was right in that bar as quickly as they could get there. “Maybe I chose too populated of an area,” I admit.

He sighs softly. “I know I’m being ridiculous. Soon, there won’t be anywhere to hide, and it makes me slightly sick.”

“You could do shows live on the internet or something. Stream from your cabin.” I stroke his hair softly.

He grumbles, and I fight the urge to laugh at his grumpy tone. “It’s not the same. I just want a small, simple atmosphere, you know? I just want it to be about the music and not the fame.”

He’s so damn different from all my other clients. There’s no denying it. My job with all of them is to keep them famous. Not keep the fame at bay. “It’s still about the music, Justin,” I assure him. “You were a sight up there tonight. Beautiful.”

He looks at me, his eyes a little glassy and tired, his tongue darting out and licking his parched lips. I try not to. I really fucking do. I know this is a terrible idea, but I can’t resist. I lean into him, capturing his lips with my own.

He doesn’t shove me away like he should. No. He kisses me back hard, his lips fierce and his tongue searching. “This is a bad idea.” I have to at least say it out loud once.

“Totally,” he says, sitting back just enough to strip his shirt off and toss it before his lips meet mine again with a hungry passion.

His fingers start on the buttons of my shirt as I kiss him, my fingers going through his hair. I can’t get enough. I know this is a horrible idea, but I just can’t stop myself. He was beautiful on that stage. His words are beautiful. The music he creates. It’s all too damn much, and I’m only human, damn it.

He gets all the buttons undone and pushes my shirt off my shoulders, his mouth going to my bare chest, leaving soft kisses. “I can’t resist you. Why the hell can’t I?” he asks almost in wonder.

He pushes me back, and I comply, falling onto the bed as he kisses down my stomach and reaches the top of my pants. He slowly undoes my belt and then my pants, prying them open but then going back to the bare skin of my abdomen. “Justin,” I plead, my aching dick still confined and needing release.

I can feel the asshole smiling against my skin, but he just uses his tongue to slide around my belly button and drag over my ribs, driving me insane. My hands are in his hair, but I don’t guide him to where I want him. He knows exactly where I want him.

He slowly works his way down, pushing my pants down but leaving my tight briefs on. I kick away the pants and moan ridiculously loud when he mouths my hard dick and balls through the briefs, the fabric soaking wet from my pre-cum and his saliva.

“Justin,” I try again, my voice hoarse.

“You smell so damn good. You smell...” He sounds wrecked already, and he’s still wearing his jeans. “You smell like home.”

“Fuck,” I say, my hands dragging through his hair. “Please. I’m dying here. Suck

me.”

His long, graceful fingers move to the hem of my briefs, and finally, he pulls them down. My hard cock slaps against my lower stomach, and my balls scream in relief. He shimmies them down my thighs, and I kick them off before he moves back up. I part my legs, hoping he'll give me some relief, but the bastard kisses and sucks on the inside of my thighs.

Everything before this has been hurried. Rushed. It seems he's going to take his time with me this time, and I don't know if that's better or worse. I want it. There's no denying that, but the longer he kisses my thighs, the more time he takes, fixated on my body, the more I become addicted to the feeling.

When he finally drags his parted lips along the length of my shaft, I nearly come instantly. My thighs shake with the effort to hold off. My body is screaming, and I'm a writhing, aching mess by the time his warm, wet mouth closes around my cockhead, sucking hard and dragging his tongue through my slit. “Yes,” I pant, my fingers sliding through his sweaty hair.

I'm panting, with my head tipped back as I reach for him and try not to thrust further into his mouth. I let him tease me and control every second until he finally, finally, takes me into the back of his throat, swallowing around me and making me moan.

“Yes. That. Please.” I'm a babbling mess, leaning back on my elbows so I can watch him as he sucks me off like a pro. I feel his fingers stroking over my heavy balls, teasing me and driving my body crazy. He pops off my cock long enough to make me groan in frustration and suck two fingers into his mouth. “Oh, fuck yes,” I say as I watch him, and he gives me a wicked grin before taking my cock back into his mouth.

His fingers find their way to my hole, circling and getting it wet before he slides one

inside and then two. When he brushes over my prostate the second time, I can't take it anymore. My back bows, and I unleash, coming deep into his throat. He moans and swallows around me like he was starving for it.

Holy shit, that's hot.

I come until I almost lose my mind, my cock jerking and releasing in his mouth as he milks my prostate and sucks me dry. When I can't take anymore, he removes his fingers, and I pull him up to me, attacking his mouth hungrily and flipping us so I'm on top of his strong body.

I can feel his cock poking against me through the denim on his jeans, and I can't believe he didn't seek his own release. "You must be aching right now," I say against his pretty, full lips.

He only grins against my lips. "You have no idea. I want you so badly."

"My mouth or my ass?" I ask devilishly, and he groans, his lips pressing hard against mine as he thrusts up, his cock dragging against me.

"Both. Anything. Everything. I just want to come. I'm dying here," he gasps, and I smile.

"You poor thing," I say with a wicked grin and kiss my way down his body. "I'd love to give you my ass, but I'm just not sure I can give up the chance to taste you." I make my way down his hard chest, kissing over his tattoos and licking his muscles.

I reach the top of his jeans and unbutton them, pushing them and his boxer briefs down, not bothering with teasing him as much as he did me. His big cock jumps out, slapping against his stomach obscenely as I shimmy his jeans and underwear down and off, my eyes back on his dick.

It's flushed red at the tip, leaking profusely, and I lick my lips. "Holy fuck, you have a beautiful dick."

"Waylon," he whines. "Please," he gasps, and I smile at him, trying to decide whether I should tease him. "Waylon," he says, clearly not amused, his voice a higher pitch than normal.

"Fine." I lower my mouth to his cock like it's a hardship, but I moan when I take him into my mouth, living for this moment when a burst of pre-cum hits my tastebuds. I moan again and take him to the back of my throat, thanking the stars that I don't have a gag reflex.

I tease him for a while, but he's keyed-up and desperate for it. I pull off his cock, and he whimpers, fucking whimpers for it. "Don't worry," I say, winking at him. I maneuver my body so I'm flat on my back and leaning my head over the edge before I lift it and look at him expectantly. "Just thought you might want to fuck my mouth."

I watch gleefully as his cock jerks hard, and he scrambles off the bed to do just that. "You sure?"

I nod, lying my head back, the blood rush making the room swim a little, but it's worth it to see how excited he looks—like he's desperate for it. "I'm sure. I trust you."

"Oh fuck," he gasps quietly as he guides his cock to my mouth.

"You won't hurt me."

He starts slow, fucking into my mouth before he realizes I can take it and starts to thrust into the back of my throat. I open wide and take it. My cock is back to hard as I start to stroke myself in time with his thrusts.

Every time the head of his cock hits the back of my throat, he makes a strangled noise, and my stiff cock jerks in my hand, wanting more, getting off on his pleasure. It's not long before his hot cum is spurting into the back of my mouth, and he pulls out enough to let me swallow, while I continue to stroke my own dick until he's wrung out, his softening cock leaving my mouth, and my cum sprays from my dick.

I stroke myself through my orgasm before I climb further onto the bed and settle on my side, not worried about the mess. Justin mimics my position, lying on his side, totally naked and facing me.

“That was . . .” He sounds breathless.

I smile, knowing it was a mistake and that's likely what he wanted to say, but it was too damn good for either of us to actually say it.

“We shouldn't do that again.” He must land on that, and I chuckle, too fucked-out to care or be upset by it.

We shouldn't, but I'm pretty sure we will.

Chapter Fourteen

JUSTIN

“ We shouldn’t have fucked again,” I try, but it’s weak at best. It felt so fucking good, grinding my cock against him until we were both shouting into each other’s mouths. There’s cum and sweat everywhere.

We haven’t climbed out of this bed all night, but I don’t care. I can’t seem to bring myself to care. I know the lines could easily get blurred. I know I need to be strong and resist this, but it feels good.

It feels performing-on-a-stage good. And I can’t seem to deny myself this after the shitshow that was tonight.

And yeah, I know I’m being a brat about the show. It wasn’t that big of a deal that people showed up, except I can feel the scrap of freedom—the veil of privacy—slipping away slowly.

I know soon I’ll show up to a crowded bar with cameras flashing in my face. I know I’m an asshole. I know people strive to have that level of fame, and I should be grateful, but goddamn it, I’m sick of it.

Really and truly.

I just want peace and the music. It’s not too much to ask, but it seems like maybe it is. Like I’ll never have it.

“Probably not. But we did,” he says matter-of-factly, and it actually brings a smile to my face instead of annoyance.

“I know I’m an asshole,” I say grimly. I realize he doesn’t have to be here. He doesn’t have to put up with my shitty attitude. But he did seek me out. I still wonder why. The unanswered question always hangs there.

“You don’t love the fame. I thought you did, but it’s clear now,”—he chuckles—“very clear that you hated it. You’re not an asshole. You just aren’t typical.”

“And that’s what makes me an asshole,” I say, rolling to my side. “It’s not just wanting to be different though. I just am.”

He rolls to his side, still blissfully naked and tucking his hands under the side of his head. “I know. And yeah, you’re going to have people calling you a spoiled brat and speculating that you just want attention or to be different. But I know.” His eyes bore into mine so hard I swear he’s looking right into me.

“The money is nice. I’m not . . .” I huff. “I’m not ungrateful, but . . .”

“It came at too high of a price,” he finishes for me, and I flush but then nod. “No matter what, there will be some people who think you owe them. You don’t.”

I want to believe him. But I think I might always feel that guilt gnawing away at me because I’ll never have to worry about money again. Even if I never sell another album or tickets to a show.

I’ll be fine financially.

“And what about this?” I ask, motioning between our bodies.

He grins at me, his hair adorably rumpled. “Well, this was weeks of stress and not getting laid.” I smile, not disagreeing. “And relieving some tension. A lot of pent-up tension, actually.”

I nod, not unhappy that he didn’t call it a mistake. Not unhappy at all. “And next time we get...”—I grin wryly—“tense...” I leave the question there for him to answer.

My heart is thumping hard in my chest, though, with anticipation because I want him to say this is okay. I want him to want to continue this. Even if it’s wrong. Even if it’s unprofessional as hell.

I just want this.

“Well, I suppose it would be okay.” He looks curiously at me, watching my reaction. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with two consenting adults getting off together when needed.”

“Sexy,” I say dryly, and he laughs at that, pushing his hand against my bare chest and shoving me.

“Well, what do you think?”

I lick my dry lips, trying to think about the question and not about how the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen is lying next to me, naked, and his lips aren’t on mine. How badly I want to remedy that.

“I think we’re adults, and we know what this is,” I say trying to sound convincing. “I say it’s super professional, if you ask me.”

He cackles at that, tossing his head back and exposing his elegant throat to me, looking so damn gorgeous that way. His eyes meet mine, full of mirth. “And how is

that? I have to know.”

I shrug, blushing slightly. “Well, it helps us work. Clears our minds. Keeps us from wanting to kill each other. I think that’s very professional.”

He grins and then wraps his arms around my neck, pulling me into him as he kisses my lips. “I don’t even care that it’s total bullshit. I’m gonna go with it anyway.”

I grin and kiss him hard. “Good.”

“Please tell me you’ve lined up a gig,” I say, kneeling at Waylon’s feet in the tiny-as-fuck shower in my cabin. The sex is good, but the space is not. I nuzzle his hard cock as his fingers slide through my wet hair.

“That’s what you want to talk about now?” he asks breathlessly, gazing down at me.

I lick and tease his hard shaft, stroking it with my hand at the same time. “I’m going crazy.”

“Jeez, way to make a guy feel special,” he deadpans, but it’s said jokingly. It’s been surprisingly easy and simple these past two weeks. We hook up, we hang out, then we go back to our separate cabins.

But I’m still losing my mind. “Don’t be like that.” I lick the head of his cock and stroke it in my hand, my other hand holding myself up by grasping his hip hard. It’s too small of a space, and I’m starting to cramp up, but still, no regrets. “You know, I can’t seem to get enough of this cock.” I lick the tip again for emphasis and then suck the head into my mouth, making him groan.

“Come here.” I do what he says because yeah, it’s cramped. When I stand up, we barely fit, but I don’t mind being this close to him, chest to chest. Cock against cock.

“Hi,” I say as he wraps his arms around my neck and pulls me into a kiss.

He reaches between us, grasping both of our dicks together and stroking, moving his hips in perfect rhythm. “Hi.” He kisses me softly, panting lightly against my lips as he brings us both intense pleasure. “It’s only been two weeks.”

“I need a gig,” I say desperately. I do. I wrote a new song, but it’s not quite right. I need to play it in front of a live audience. Test it out.

“I know.” The silky flesh of his cock slides against mine, and it feels so damn good, I tilt my head back, breathing heavily. He licks my throat and makes me groan. “I’ll book one for next week. We just need to be careful.”

I nod my head, happy he’s on board but protecting me. I’ve always felt safe with Waylon. Truth be told, leaving him behind was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But I thought—I wanted to believe—I could do it on my own. That I didn’t need him or anyone.

Clearly, I was wrong. And there’s a part of me that really does like being taken care of. I come on a gasp, my cum making a mess between us. He uses it to slick up his own cock, stroking until his orgasm hits him, and then he presses his lips against mine.

I kiss him through it as he strokes and milks every bit of pleasure from us both. We dry off and then get dressed before going into the living room, sitting on the comfy couch. Waylon grabs his phone. I can only assume he’s working because Waylon always works.

Despite putting Dalton in charge of a lot of his clients, he checks in and makes sure everything is running well. He can’t help it. I get it. His job truly defines him, and he’s damn good at it.

“Everything okay?” I ask when he sighs deeply and then clasps the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger.

“Yeah, musicians are just idiots,” he says with a wink my way.

I roll my eyes, but I can’t disagree. “Who did what this time?”

He snorts, sends a message quickly on his phone, and tosses it next to him on the couch. “A rockstar spouting off political views that are abysmal.”

I cringe. “Yikes.”

“Yeah, fun times. Poor Dalton, but it’s sink or swim time. My bet is on the kid.”

I smile at that, liking that Waylon seems to be letting go of some of the control lately. “Who is better to work for? Rockstars or athletes?” I ask, waggling my eyebrows at him, and he laughs.

“Thank God, I was never interested in sports. Jenny has her goddamn hands full every day.”

I laugh. “Not shocked.”

He puts his bare feet in my lap, and I absently massage them with my hands. “Were you a jock?” he asks, and I laugh.

“Hell no. Scrawny as fuck and loved music class and art.”

He grins. “I can see that.” His eyes roam hungrily over my body. “Except the scrawny part.”

“Yeah, I hit my growth spurt later. What was high school like for you?” I ask carefully, realizing I don’t know much about him, despite knowing him for so damn long.

“Oh God, I also loved music but wasn’t very artistic. I was shy and awkward. Couldn’t wait to get the hell out of there.”

“I can’t picture you shy.” He owns every single room he walks into with a quiet, understated authority, but still, he’s not shy.

“Oh, it was painful. I was so damn shy.”

“So what made you become a manager?” I should have asked him this years ago, I realize. But it seemed like every time we were around each other, it wasn’t like this. Not ever. Everyone was always busy. It was always chaotic shuffling.

He thinks on it for a while as I rub his feet that are still resting in my lap. “When I left home, I promised I’d prove everyone wrong. That I’d be successful. Powerful. That they were wrong about me.”

I stop rubbing his feet and gaze at him. “Fuck ’em.”

He laughs. “Yeah, it’s funny. Everything I did for the first few years after leaving, I realized I did to prove them all wrong. But that’s not what I wanted anymore. Finally, I realized I was still living for them, and I didn’t want to do that anymore. But I was already an intern at a management firm and went with it. Started to really love my job.”

“You’re good at it,” I say honestly.

He preens. “Thanks. But I suppose for that to be really true, I should get back to

work.”

I chuckle at that as he withdraws his feet from my lap and grabs his phone. Researching places for my next gig because he truly is the best manager anyone could ask for.

I was stubborn and kind of an idiot to try to leave him behind.

Good thing he doesn't give up easily.

Chapter Fifteen

WAYLON

“The parking lot looks pretty full,” Justin says, neither of us getting out of the car.

“It’s a Friday night in a small town. I don’t think there’s much else to do,” I reason, but it does look pretty full. I was careful when I set this up, but there’s been a lot of talk about where Justin will show up next. And it’s only been three weeks since his last performance.

People are still on high alert.

But I could feel how eager he was to perform again, and damn it, I want this for him. I really do. I want him to be able to play a small venue and not have to worry about it becoming a huge deal.

But I think we both know it won’t last too long.

“What do you want to do?” I ask because it’s up to him. He says play, he’ll play. He says leave, we’ll leave.

He takes a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

I nod and follow him out of the car. He grabs his guitar, and we walk inside. It’s packed, but no one looks our way when we walk through the door except for a nice woman behind the bar.

She greets us, and I introduce myself and Justin before she guides us to the spot for him to set up. It's all extremely low-key and simple, and I settle in at the bar while Justin sets up.

I feel relieved when I hear the first strum of his guitar, his honey-soaked voice singing out into the crowd. Some are fascinated by him—it's honestly impossible not to be—but a lot are just going on about their time.

I keep my eyes on everyone and my phone as I catch up with Jenny and Dalton, while listening to Justin's sweet music in the background.

My phone rings, and I answer it when I see Jenny's name pop up. "Hey, sweetie."

"Hey, I see your boy is playing again."

I look around and see a couple of cellphones out. "They have the location already?"

"Yup," she says knowingly, but since I haven't seen anyone come through the doors, I give Justin some time up there.

"It's getting harder and harder to find a good place to go."

"You know soon it's not going to matter where you choose, right?" She doesn't say it condescendingly, but I know she wants to say more. "Come home," she settles on, and I grin.

"Aw, do you miss me?"

"Nope," she says lightly, and I can hear her smiling. "Just want you to come get your little demon furball."

I laugh. “Be nice. I’ll be home soon.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Are you sure about that? I get that you have some unfinished business with Justin, but you have nothing to prove. This whole hiding from fame thing really isn’t your problem.”

I glance at Justin, watching the serene look of peace on his face. “Yeah. It kind of is. I need to see this through.”

“He’s never going to be happy, Waylon. You don’t get to pick and choose with fame. We don’t get to make that happen. It just happens.”

She’s not telling me anything I don’t already know, but it irks me all the same. “I have to try, Jenny. He deserves to share his music without being mobbed by fans.”

“You’re getting soft on me,” she says, and I can hear the fond smile over her words.

“Maybe,” I admit. I don’t know if I’d let any other clients get away with this. Okay, I know I wouldn’t, but Justin has always been different.

“Call me soon,” she says before hanging up. I watch Justin a little longer before I signal it’s time to go. He swiftly follows me out of the bar, putting his guitar in the back before I take off. There are lots of cars coming in as we’re going out.

“You don’t miss the big crowds at all?” I ask him carefully.

He looks absently out the window. “Sometimes. But I don’t miss the after part. I don’t know.”

He sounds lost, and I hate it. Maybe I shouldn’t have gotten so soft with him. I drive for a few hours, silence taking over the car. I start toward the hotel I’d planned to go

to, the town is fairly small, but the hotel looked nice.

It's late. After midnight. And when I see a ball field, lit up only by the night sky and the moon, I detour and park near the dugout.

Justin looks over at me, and I can feel the question before we even get out. "What are we doing here?"

"Grab your guitar," I say, not answering and climbing out of the car. He follows me, although cautiously looking around.

No one is here. It's completely serene and beautifully empty. I can hear crickets, but that's the only sound. It's a warm night, and I head right through the gate, toward the green of the ball field.

"What are we doing?" he asks, following me. I sit down on the grass and pat the spot next to me.

"Whatever we want," I finally answer him, and he sits down, placing his guitar case next to him protectively. "Get your guitar out."

His eyes sweep around again, and he looks at me in question but finally does what I ask, placing it on his lap, cradling it to his chest.

"Play," I say simply, looking around. "No one is here. No one can see us. You're just playing for me."

He still looks uncertain. "You sure we aren't going to get arrested?"

I laugh at that and shake my head. "You need to let go more, Justin. You want to be free? Here's your chance. The town is asleep, and we're on the outskirts. No one is

here, and no one is coming.”

I watch as he nervously licks his lips, but then his fingers start to slowly strum away, playing one of his newer songs I recognize instantly. It’s about love. But it’s also about life in general. About going after what you want.

It’s beautiful. He sings softly as he plays the haunting notes. I can’t stop watching him, and when his eyes close, his fingers still stroking over the guitar strings, his voice floating out of him, that’s when I see it.

The serenity of it all. Of him finally getting lost in the music he loves so damn much.

I lean into him, my lips pressing softly against his neck, and he never falters. Never misses a note. “You can go here anytime. When it becomes too much, no one can take this away. It’s about the music for you.”

He keeps playing, but he stops singing, his eyes opening and meeting mine. “It is.”

“I know,” I say with certainty because some of my artists, they love the music, but it’s a means to an end. A way to fame. It’s not that way for Justin. His musical gift sometimes feels like a curse to him.

“I think you need to find a way to perform for large crowds again.”

“That’s not what I want,” he says stubbornly.

“You sure about that?” I challenge and continue, “Because this isn’t sustainable, and we both know it.”

“You’re being a dick,” he says annoyed, and I hate it, but he needs to hear this.

“I’m not. Listen to me,” I say softly against his lips, kneeling in front of him now. “I’ve seen you play for thousands, and I’ve seen you play for hundreds. For tens. And just for me.”

“So?” he bites out.

“So every time, it’s the same. There’s a moment where you let go, and it’s just you and your guitar. You want these songs out there for the world, and they should be. You want to write what you want, and you should. But you love this part too. The live playing.”

“So I can do it at bars.”

“You really think it’s enough?” I have to ask because I know deep inside, he’s meant for this. And the going from small town to small town, the hiding, it’s going to whittle him down to nothing. To being bitter and angry again.

“What do you want from me?” he asks quietly.

“I want what you want. I want you to write what you want, and I want you to perform, but this is...”

“What?” he asks, putting his guitar to the side, and I move into him.

“It won’t last, and you know it. You’ll go back to being bitter.”

He looks pained by that, his hands going to my sides and holding me there, not that I was going to go anywhere. “I know.”

I’m surprised he didn’t argue, but I just kiss him instead of saying anything else. I don’t think we need to talk more about it. We both know he can’t just put being Justin

St. James back into the bottle. It doesn't work like that.

We kiss, and I press him back so he's lying flat on the grass, my hands on his chest. I undo his jeans and my pants quickly, freeing our dicks as we rut against each other on the baseball field.

Never thought this was a fantasy of mine, but here we are. It's hot as hell as we grind and kiss, his hands gripping my ass as I wrap a hand around our shafts, and we fuck into it. My cock slides against his until I come, and he follows me over. We lie like that for a long time, just kissing, not worrying about the mess we made until I go to the car to grab some wet wipes.

We clean up, then kiss some more before he grabs his guitar and plays me more songs. Beautiful songs that go straight to the heart.

Yeah, the world needs these songs, and they need Justin to sing them.

Chapter Sixteen

JUSTIN

Y eah, I don't know what the hell is going on. When I left Kansas City, I thought I had it all figured out. I thought I knew what I was doing. That I didn't want to be Justin St. James, the rockstar, anymore. I wanted nothing to do with Immoral.

I was going to play in small bars and maybe quietly record some songs and release them, but goddamn Waylon had to come along and show me the flaws in all my plans. He reminded me of how much I love performing.

It doesn't really matter where. But I do love the sound of the crowd. I love the idea of reaching millions of people on that kind of level that only music can reach. He showed me just how much I love the music and the fans.

This isn't good.

I thought I had it all figured out, but I didn't know anything. I'm lost and aimless. But when he kisses me, like he's doing now, everything makes more sense and less, all at the same time.

"What are we doing?" I say breathlessly against his firm lips.

"Kissing," Waylon says easily, lifting my shirt up and off. "Maybe more."

"You know what I mean." I say, letting my shirt fall and unbuttoning his. "Is it still

just sex?" I have to ask because it doesn't feel like it. Something has shifted. I can get lost in him just like I can get lost in music, and that's new for me.

I'm addicted.

I find myself reaching for Waylon even more than I reach for my guitar, and that's saying a lot. He kisses my lips, his hand going through my hair at the back of my head. "I don't know. I'm your manager."

"I can fire you again," I say with a small smile.

He bites my bottom lip. "I'm a very busy man."

I frown, thinking back over the years and his lack of dating. I assumed he was hooking up, but since I've known him, he's never had a relationship. "You don't want a relationship?"

He steps back but only to undo his pants and push them and his tiny orange briefs down and off. He's totally naked, and he should know I can't really think when he's naked. But he talks anyway as he works on the button of my jeans with nimble fingers. "This is just supposed to be releasing tension while we figure out your career."

"It was," I say because yeah, of course it was, but it's not how it ended up, and I think we both know that. It's only been a little over a month of fooling around, and I can't get enough.

It's not even just the sex either.

I like laying my head on his chest after sex and listening to his breathing and heartbeat. I like how comfortable I feel with him. How right it all feels.

“We shouldn’t complicate it, Justin. Eventually, I’m going back to Kansas City. My career...” He pushes my jeans and boxer briefs down, and I kick them away before our eyes lock. “It’s important to me.”

“So I’ll go back to Kansas City.” It’s not like I bought this cabin, although I do love it here. I can’t deny it. But I can love it back in KC. It’s not like it’s all that different. I can build a cabin there.

He stares at me contemplatively. “You left.”

“You followed.”

A small grin spreads over his face at that, and he nods. “I did.”

“Why?” I ask him the question I’ve wanted answered for a while. “Ego? Because I was the one who left?”

He’s not angry at my question, but he does wave it off. “Lots of people leave. It’s normal. I’ve been fired plenty of times.”

“Then why me?” I ask, my eyes closing as his hands brush over my lower stomach, and I feel his plump lips at my throat.

“You were different.” He kisses and sucks over my Adam’s apple and then over my collarbones, the left and then the right. “You were always different. I couldn’t let you go.”

“But now you could? Eventually, you’re going back to your career. You’re really going to leave me behind?” I hate how hoarse my voice sounds, but it hurts. Now I know how he felt.

“We aren’t there yet. We have to get you into a studio. Maybe book some small concert venues, if you’re up for it.” His hands slide down my sides, sending shivers throughout my entire body. “We still have time.”

I keep my eyes closed, and his lips meet mine, brushing over them. His hands slide down my arms now, making me tremble and want.

“We don’t have to rush this.”

“Feelings?” I ask incredulously.

He sighs softly. “I do have feelings for you, Justin.” He says it firmly but keeps his voice quiet. “You know I do.”

I know he has a fondness for me, but that’s not what I want to hear. Somehow, I’ve turned into this desperate, needy creature over the past month or two. I crave him. I want to kiss him and be inside him, but I also just want him.

And I can’t have him.

That’s what he’s telling me right now. Although nicely. He’s telling me this isn’t going to last, no matter how we feel.

“Do you ever um...” My voice cracks, and I open my eyes to look deep into his. He looks at me curiously, and I flush a little. “Do you ever top?”

He grins knowingly at me. “Why?” He leans in and licks over my bottom lip and then kisses over my jaw and down my neck. “Do you want to be filled? Stuffed full until you can barely breathe? You want to be owned, Justin?” I’m a panting, wanton mess as I finally make myself nod in acknowledgment.

“Yes. So badly.”

“Get on the bed.” I like his bossy tone more than I want to admit, and I get to the bed more quickly than I’m proud of, but I really don’t care. I want this so damn badly.

I climb onto the bed on all fours, waiting for him. The anticipation buzzes through my body as I listen to him. A bottle of lube and a condom land next to me on the bed, and I breathe out slowly as I feel Waylon’s strong hands run over my back, his fingers dancing along my spine.

“Look at you. So beautiful.”

“Please.” I’m desperate for it.

“Have you ever been fucked before?” he asks, his hands going over my ass and slowly pulling my cheeks apart. My face flames at the intimate action, but my cock is hard and leaking.

“No. You. I want it to be you,” I say, just babbling away. A total mess already.

He hesitates for a moment, just staying there, before I hear his shaky breath. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I say instantly, despite knowing I quite possibly have some pretty strong feelings for him—and my heart could get crushed—but I want this. I know that much. I want him in every way I can have him until it ends.

I grunt, and it turns into a long, deep moan as I feel his wet tongue swipe over my hole. I didn’t see it coming, but I’m desperate for it to not stop. He pries my ass cheeks apart and goes to town. Eating me out until I’m a sloppy, wet mess, begging for it. “Please. Fuck me. Please.”

I reach back, my hands in his hair as I push him into me, going against what I just begged for. But my God, his tongue feels so damn good as he circles my rim, stiffening his tongue and sticking it inside me. Licking inside. Driving me insane as I hump against the bed.

“Please.”

I swear I can feel him smiling against my rim, but I don't care. I'll be embarrassed later. He adds a finger and then another, softening my hole. “Just relax,” he says, commanding my body to do just that, and it works.

I let him inside me. Soon he's adding lube to his fingers and scissoring them until I'm panting and sweating and dying for him to be inside me. But I don't ask again.

I don't plead.

I realize this is Waylon. And I just let him take care of me.

He rolls the condom on, and then he's slowly pressing inside me, kissing along my spine as he enters me in the most perfect way. I brace my weight on my arms and take each stroke he makes into me. I let him own me, pressing against my prostate with expert precision, and I don't even have to touch my cock to come.

It seems to come out of nowhere. My orgasm hits me so damn hard, I nearly black out as he pushes against my prostate, his cock filling my hole, and I float into a beautiful ecstasy.

I hear him moan, feel his cock jerk inside me, releasing into the condom, and then his body collapses on mine, pushing me into the wet spot, and I can't even be bothered to care.

I've never felt so beautifully out of control in my life.

"Let's record an album," I say, turning my head to the side and resting my face against the cool sheets.

"Okay," he says, not climbing off me, both of us just feeling.

Feeling things we won't say .

Chapter Seventeen

WAYLON

“Goddamn, Waylon.” Chance looks at me excitedly, shaking my hand. “You got him here. You got Justin St. James back in the recording studio. That is fucking fantastic.”

I grit my teeth, trying to smile, but it doesn’t work. I know I kind of pressured Justin into this, but I’m hoping this is the right move. His songs are perfect, and this studio is one of the biggest ones in Nashville. Chance may be a sleazeball, but he knows what he’s doing.

It’s the fastest way to get this done. And we go way back. “You think he’s ready?”

I look at Justin, already in the booth, his guitar in hand. “I do. These songs, they’re different from what everyone is used to from him.”

He nods at that, but then he shrugs. “But it’s Justin St. James. It’ll sell. And it’s not like we can’t fix it up.”

“No,” I say firmly, my eyes meeting his, which are full of surprise.

“What do you mean no?”

“I mean he has the creative control. You don’t touch his songs. That’s the deal.” I promised him, and I’ll make damn sure I keep my word on that part.

“You know we know what we’re doing.” He motions toward the records all over the walls, showing off the studios achievements.

“I do.” I look over at Justin again and offer him a reassuring smile. “But so does he. He’s back, but under his conditions.”

“Well, let’s just listen to them first before we get all worked up,” he says I think more to his assistant than to me, but it doesn’t matter. I won’t back down on this. He doesn’t need the money. Or the fame.

If this studio won’t produce the record, there’ll be someone else who will.

Justin begins to play, and I watch Chance as he listens. Not seeing a hint of him liking what he hears, but not seeing that he doesn’t either. He’s playing this one close to the vest, and that’s fine.

Justin sings three songs before Chance motions for him to come out of the booth, his face grim as he faces us both. “They’re good.” But he doesn’t sound happy. His eyes meet mine. “But they aren’t marketable.”

“You said yourself, they’ll sell.”

He huffs and looks over at Justin. “You need to let us play around with the music a little. We can make these work. They’re catchy, but some of it is a little dreary. That second song... I’m not sure that’s what your fans want from you.”

I watch Justin’s firm jaw set. “It’s what I want. If they’re true fans, they’ll love it because it’s me.”

“Just let us add in some, I don’t know, happy.”

I roll my eyes and huff, sick of this. I knew it was probably a bad idea to come to him. “We’ll walk. He doesn’t need the studio, but you being the one to put out his first, and maybe only, solo album, that’s a big deal.”

Chance looks around the room at all the records and then at me, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t think it’s going to work out.”

Justin tries to hide his shock, but I see it before he schools his handsome features. “Okay then,” I say, shaking Chance’s hand and steering Justin out of there. He looks bewildered as we get into the car.

“He passed.”

“It’s fine. You can self-produce, if you want, or we’ll find someone else to do it, if you want this. If not, well... I’ll book a damn bar.”

He looks over at me and shakes his head. “Am I being an idiot? Are the songs bad?”

I instantly answer him with a quick shake of my head. “They aren’t. They’re different. And to some fans, that’s going to be hard. But it doesn’t matter, Justin. They’re beautiful songs, and they should be out in the world.”

He swallows hard, his eyes troubled before he looks out the window, and I start the drive back to the cabin.

I hate this. I know I let him down, and that’s just unacceptable to me. How the hell do I keep letting this man down over and over?

“I’m a goddamn mess, huh?” he asks with a slight laugh.

“No.” I grin and turn onto the dirt road that leads up to the cabins. “Well, no more

than any other artist.”

He laughs. “Maybe I should let them have all the control.”

“Nope.” I park the Jeep. “We aren’t doing that. This is how you wrote them, and you’re keeping them that way. It’s scary, but you can do this.” I decide tough love is the way to go.

He looks out over the Tennessee hills and nods, determined. “Okay. So what now?”

I smile, so damn happy we aren’t going to wallow. “Now, I’m going to work my magic.”

I wink at him and hop out of the Jeep, my phone already out, ready to make this happen for him.

A week later, we’re in another Nashville studio, but I have a much better feeling about this. Daisy’s studio is smaller, much smaller, but I like the vibe, and she’s thrilled when she hears the songs.

She’s ready to sign him already.

I look to Justin to see if this is what he really wants, and he seems pretty damn content. “And you won’t change them at all?”

“That’s not what we do here,” Daisy says with a kind smile. “I take on artists who write their own songs for a reason. You want your story told. I’m here to help you tell it. Not tell you how to. Your songs are beautiful.”

She’s not just saying that to seal the deal. Daisy is the real thing, and I’m grateful.

“Okay. And do I have to agree to concerts and stuff?” Justin looks nervous now, his hand going to the back of his neck in a nervous habit. “I mean, I probably can. I just...”

Daisy places her hand over his that’s on the table, and I didn’t miss the slight shake. I doubt Daisy did either. “All we do is produce the album. Yeah, we’ll promote it, but we let you decide how you want to promote it on your end. Wherever you decide to do it. We don’t want to own you,” she says kindly, and I swear I see the relief on his face instantly.

“I was owned for a really long time,” he says honestly, his eyes glassy.

She frowns at that but nods her head knowingly. “I know. My grandpa was an artist.” She looks over at the wall lovingly toward a picture I recognize—the dude is super damn famous. Especially in Nashville. My eyes meet hers as she smiles sweetly. I had no idea that was her grandfather when I set up this meeting. “And he hated studios. He just wanted to sing what he wanted to sing. It’s why he started this studio back in the day before he passed.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say earnestly.

“Thank you.” She sighs softly and looks at Justin. “I want to keep his legacy going. I want you to sing what you want. When you want. And I couldn’t have been more thrilled when I got the call from Waylon. You’re perfect for this. Those concerts in the bars? They’re inspirational.”

Again, she’s not saying it for false flattery. “Really?” he asks.

She nods. “I think it’s great. Getting back to basics.”

Justin looks a little sheepish. “I never really got to do that. They recruited me for

Immoral, and we were touring huge stadiums from the start.”

She smiles. “So you needed that even more then, huh?”

He nods. “I think so.”

“Is that what you still want to do?” Daisy asks but doesn’t seem to be wanting one answer more than another.

“I’m not sure. I want this record out there, but I don’t want to go on huge tours again. I don’t want my life to not be my own.”

She nods her head knowingly. “Okay. Sounds good. Let’s get this recorded then. And out there.”

We sign the papers then and there, which is pretty much unheard of, but Daisy, I quickly realized, is a rare light in this world. And this is where Justin wants to be. We set up a recording schedule and head back to the cabin where we strip down and celebrate, with his cock being buried deep inside me until we’re both so sated we can’t and don’t want to move.

He lays his head on my chest, and I hold him to me. “You made it happen.”

“It’s not done yet.” I have to say it because I’m not ready to let him go, and the thought was strangling me.

“No,” he says, nuzzling even closer into me and breathing me in. “It’s not.”

I need to be strong. Justin is an amazing man, but I don’t do relationships. I don’t have time for them. I like the quick, easy hookups because they’re convenient for my schedule.

It does have to end. We both know this. We're both adults, and despite being fond of him, it won't end well when it does inevitably end.

It doesn't have to get messy.

We can do this.

I can set him up and make sure he's happy, just like I set out to do.

I can and will let him go.

Chapter Eighteen

WAYLON

“ I f you don’t get your ass back here, I’m going to send this doggie to you. I’m sure FedEx will do it for me,” Jenny says, and I laugh.

“No, they won’t. And just admit you love him already.”

“No,” she says stubbornly. “Are you coming home?”

“Justin starts recording tomorrow. We need to figure out promo and maybe a couple of low-key appearances. Then I’ll come home.”

“You’re fucking him, aren’t you?” She says it less like a question, even though she tries to phrase it that way.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Jesus Christ, Waylon. We don’t fuck the clients. Mostly because they’re exhausting and like literal children. But you know professional code and all that.”

“It’s not like that, and he’s not a child.”

She huffs, annoyed. “Yes. He is. He didn’t like his comfy little fame, and he ran away from home. Throwing a tantrum.”

“Watch it,” I snap before I can stop myself.

She’s quiet for way too long, and I start to squirm a little. “Oh no.” She’s quiet again, and I cringe. “You fell for him.”

“No,” I argue weakly, but just then, I hear and see Justin coming through the cabin door—his cabin, since I haven’t been in mine in weeks—with food from the café and a curious smile on his way too pretty face when he sees I’m on the phone.

My heart kicks up a little faster when I see him smile. That grin does stupid things to my heart.

Uh-oh.

“I should go,” I say into the phone. “Justin is back with the food.”

“You should leave. Feelings are dangerous, Waylon.” I know. We both feel that way. Choosing to put our careers above everything. It’s something we have in common. Something I’ve always prided myself on.

“I’ll call soon.”

“You idiot,” she says softly and pretty damn lovingly for Jenny.

We hang up, and Justin puts the food down on the coffee table before brushing his lips over mine sweetly. My heart kicks again. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I say softly, my voice not wanting to work. This is so not like me. I’m never out of things to say. “Thank you for getting lunch.”

“No problem. You catch up on work?”

I snort at that thought. “No. Not even close. But it’s fine. They’ll all live.”

He frowns now, sitting back against the couch. “They probably aren’t too happy with you being MIA for so long.”

“Dalton is handling it just fine,” I say, and I think he really is. Not that I haven’t been checking in.

“You sure?” he asks like he doesn’t want me to answer, and I get it. Damn, this is really bad.

“Yeah. I am. I was thinking about your next gig...”

“Yeah?” He’s intrigued now, and I notice he doesn’t seem as tense as he was even a couple of weeks ago about the next performance.

He trusts me, I realize.

Hell, that’s heady.

“How about a little bit bigger bar in downtown Nashville? We tell them who you are, and we hire extra security.”

I can feel his curious eyes on me, feel the worry there, but he doesn’t immediately argue.

“It’s not touring all over the world. It’s not a huge obligation, but it will be a decent-sized crowd where you can play what you want to,” I continue to try to sell it a little. If I didn’t think he was ready for it, I wouldn’t have, but I can see the excitement on his face now.

“Let’s do this,” he says, and I’m beaming brightly now. Proud of myself because I made him smile.

Lord, I have it bad.

It’ll pass though.

I’m going to get him set up, and then I’m going to leave this behind. I’m an adult with a lot of responsibilities. I need to remember that. Keep it on repeat in my head.

The crowd is insane. The bar is well-known, and even though they only had a week to prepare for Justin’s concert, it’s packed. But the security is good, and people aren’t getting in without a ticket.

Tickets that were priced low because Justin insisted, and he’s donating the profits to charity. Kind of cool. So cool, I donated my 10 percent cut too. But they sold out within minutes, and I don’t think one of those tickets went unused.

There are people gathered outside the bar too, but there’s a car waiting to take Justin out of here, as well as security guards waiting to escort us out.

He doesn’t look nervous in the slightest. Not hesitant at all. He was born for this. He starts playing, and the entire bar goes quiet. Listening intently to his brand-new songs. Songs he wrote himself.

Songs Daisy was happy to produce. The album isn’t live yet. They’re hearing these songs for the first time right now.

And they are captivated.

We all are.

My heart pangs with a sudden sharp pain because I know that it's really not necessary for me to drive him back to the cabins. Not really. He doesn't need me any more than my other clients now.

We could meet up for contracts and planning, but I don't need to stay.

He sings into the microphone and plays his guitar, singing his heart out, but I can feel his eyes on me.

No. I can't stay. I really, really shouldn't.

I'm smarter than this, damn it.

Chapter Nineteen

JUSTIN

H oly shit, that was fun.

I didn't know it could be so fun. It was even better than the tiny bars I'd been playing and better than the world tours. It was downright electric. I could feel the excitement. It was somehow just... perfect. It was exactly what I wanted. Not small, but not overwhelmingly huge.

They were there for me, and they were there for the songs I wrote.

I can barely wait for Waylon to unlock the hotel room door, sliding his keycard in just as my lips meet his. I don't care if anyone sees. I don't care if anyone knows I'm with him that way.

I mean, I guess I'm not, but it feels like I am. He's on my mind all the damn time. I was thinking about him on stage and how he made all this happen. How he didn't just write me off and call me an idiot when I left.

He fought for me.

That's a big deal. That matters. And I have him.

I kiss him hard, hating to pull away, even if it's just to remove our clothing. Wanting every part of me touching every single part of him. He made this happen for me. Do I

think it's going to be totally simple from here on out? Of course not. But Daisy really seems to get it.

To get me. And Waylon found her for me.

When we're finally naked and on the bed, suddenly I'm not in such a rush anymore. I don't want this to end. I was a grumpy asshole, hoping like hell I could hide from the world—or so I thought—but really maybe in the back of my mind, I knew he'd come for me.

He seemed to figure it out and fix it. Making me feel safe in ways no one has ever done for me. I kiss his neck and move down over his chest, giving attention to each nipple. My tongue lashes over each one before sucking the hard nub and then lowering my mouth further.

His hands go to my hair, tugging a little extra hard—just the way I like. It makes me feel wanted and secure, but he doesn't direct my movements. He just lets me know he's there. Like he always is.

My ever-steady rock.

When I swallow his dick and hear that sexy shout of surprise, I can't help smiling around his engorged cock. It jerks when it hits the fleshy back of my throat, and I fight my gag reflex but refuse to pull off him. I want to devour him.

I want to kiss him and suck his dick, and fuck him and have him fuck me, all at once. I want to live right fucking here. Never come up for air. I'm not sure what the hell is happening, but I don't want to fight it. It just feels right.

His hand tugs on my hair, and he's breathless when he says my name. "Justin... so close. I want you inside me. Please."

I'm not going to deny him. There's no way. I lick my way up his shaft slowly, taking my time before I release him. Grabbing a condom and lube, I quickly cover my cock and use two fingers to prep him.

He doesn't want a lot. I know he doesn't from the way he's squirming impatiently. I use the excess lube to slick my cock and press the head to his hole, looking into his intense eyes before sliding into him.

It's almost too much, being inside him. My chest feels like it might crack open from the sheer pleasure I see in his eyes. And there's something else there. Something under the surface he isn't saying.

And I'm pretty sure I'm feeling it too.

He rears up at the same time I lean down, and our lips crash together as I thrust into him over and over, both of us chasing our pleasure and taking it through desperate, hungry kisses.

My hand wraps around his cock as I push inside him, trying to fucking live inside him as his hands grip my ass and push me deeper, like he has the same goal. Soon, I feel that familiar tingle, trying to keep it at bay as I slide my lubed hand up and down his hard shaft. When he comes with a sharp cry, I let go, my release hitting me so damn hard, I almost collapse on top of him but manage not to crush him.

I kiss him softly as we both recover, and then I pull out, quickly get rid of the condom, and fall next to him on the bed, lying on my stomach and panting like I ran a marathon.

"That's one way to celebrate one hell of a show," Waylon says, and I can hear the grin he's no doubt wearing.

I finally catch my breath and roll to my side, facing him while he's still lying on his back. I watch his chest rise and fall with each rapid breath. "Thank you."

His head swivels in my direction, and his eyes lock on mine. "You did that, Justin. That was all you."

A slow grin takes over my face. "Bullshit."

He actually looks a little shy. A slight blush emerges on his pale cheeks. "You could have done it. You would have."

"I'm not so sure about that," I say honestly. "I'm glad you found me." I feel vulnerable and raw, but I owe him that truth.

I watch his elegant throat flex as he looks up at the ceiling again and away from me. "I am too. You're settled now." He looks over at me again, and for some reason, I can't seem to breathe. Panic starts to claw at my insides because there's something in his gaze I instantly don't like. "You're happy."

Not so damn happy now. There's something permanent in his tone. "What aren't you saying?" I ask carefully.

"I need to get back to my other clients, Justin. I did what I came to do."

I lean up on my elbow, looking directly at him. "Get back? You're leaving?"

He sits up slowly, his hand pushing through his hair, and he won't look at me. "I have to."

"But Dalton is handling everything." Panic surges through me as I sit up too, trying to will him to look at me. But he won't do it.

“He can’t take on my clients forever, Justin. We found what you were looking for.” His eyes meet mine, and I see the sadness in them, nearly crushing me in an instant. He’s serious. “I’ve never seen you look so damn settled than when you were on that stage tonight. I’ll help you book more venues, just like that, and you have Daisy here too. She knows what she’s doing. She’s fantastic.”

But I want you.

I don’t say it out loud, my self-preservation too damn strong because I can see his resolve. He’s leaving. “So this was just a goodbye fuck?” I ask coldly, motioning to the rumpled bed.

He stands up from the bed, still gloriously naked, but I can’t even take the time to admire his body because I feel like I might vomit. “Of course it’s not goodbye. If you still want me as your manager, I’ll happily accept that position.”

But nothing else.

He’s leaving.

“And what? You’ll still throw me a fuck every once in a while, when we meet up to talk business?” I sound bitter. Really fucking bitter. But I can’t seem to cut it out.

He winces, and I almost feel bad, but I keep my chin held up. “We knew what this was. It was releasing tension. Professional, remember?” His eyes meet mine sternly. How the hell can he be so cold? Professional? That’s what this was. Shit. How the hell did I lose control?

He grabs his clothes and starts dressing, and I want to rip every single piece of clothing out of his hands and make him stay. Make him look me in the eyes and tell me this is only business. That it’s nothing more. That I don’t mean anything more to

him than a client.

“Right,” I say, finding my boxers and jeans, tugging them on but not bothering to zip my jeans up. “So when do you leave?”

I watch him button his shirt, his eyes finally on me, but they look different. Shuttered. Like he’s protecting himself. As if he’s the one who needs protecting right now. Clearly, this was nothing to him. I wonder how many clients he’s done this with. The thought makes me cold. “My flight leaves in an hour.”

If he’d have punched me right in the heart, it would hurt less. “Wow.”

He walks closer to me but doesn’t touch me, though for a brief moment, it felt like he wanted to. “This is a good thing. You’re on the right path. This is what I came to do. I’m sorry I can’t stay.”

“You should go,” I say, trying my best to keep all emotion out of my voice.

“Justin...” he starts, but I school my features into an ugly scowl.

“Go. I don’t want you to miss your flight. You’re right. I’ll be just fine.”

He studies me carefully for what feels like an eternity, but then gives a reserved, clipped nod. “Okay, you have my number. Call me with any questions, and I’ll get more gigs just like tonight scheduled.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t seem to. I’m afraid I might throw up if I open my mouth. I can’t believe I let this happen.

I thought I was smarter than this.

Clearly, I'm not because watching him leave feels like he's taking a piece of me with him.

Chapter Twenty

WAYLON

“O h, you look like shit.” I resist the urge to flip her off when Jenny answers the door because I know she’s not wrong. I just got back to Kansas City from Nashville, and I feel as bad as I look.

I didn’t want to leave.

I didn’t ever want to leave him, and that’s when I knew I needed to leave. It wouldn’t have worked out anyway. He’s my client for one, which was stupid enough, hooking up with him, but catching feels for a client is unacceptable.

It never works out.

“Where’s my dog?” is all I can manage as my dog takes that moment to run right to me, yipping away excitedly. I scoop him up into my arms, cuddling into his soft fur.

“Nope. You aren’t hiding behind Cujo.” Her fingers wrap around my wrist, and she pulls me further into her house. “Get in here.”

I follow her, still carrying my dog before I sit down on her familiar sofa and don’t let him go, cuddling him to my chest. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I hear her heavy sigh, and I’m sure she’s judging me. I’m judging me too. It was stupid. Really fucking stupid. “Are you still his manager?”

I nod numbly. “I think so. He didn’t officially fire me.”

There’s silence for a long time before she sits next to me on the couch and pulls me into her, letting me lay my head on her small shoulder. “I’m sorry, Waylon.”

I sniffle a little, and I can’t look her in the eyes. “It was for the best. You were right. It never ends well.”

I can feel her wanting to say more, but blessedly, she doesn’t. She’s quiet as she hugs me to her, which means I must be even more pathetic than I feel right now. I’m smarter than this.

I know better. I did fall for him. I know I did. It was real. But I only would have hurt him, or he would have hurt me, or we would have just epically destroyed one another. My life is here. I love the life I’ve built. I’m so damn proud of it.

I can’t give that up.

And he’s finally happy. In his little cabin in Tennessee, touring only to large bar gigs that he approves of. He’s calling the shots now. I went there for one reason and one reason only, to make sure he was settled and okay.

And he is.

I think he’s more than settled now. I watched him on that stage, and I saw the peace on his face. And I knew it was time to leave.

“We need wine,” Jenny declares and jumps up from the couch, my dog climbing off my lap to follow after her. I don’t argue. A good glass or two of wine will fix me right up.

Maybe.

Probably.

I always bounce back. It's kind of my thing. I'll be fine, and Justin will be great.

I'm not fine. Not at all. I feel numb and aching in ways I never knew was possible. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me. Normally, I love going over to Ryan and Grady's house, but tonight, it took everything inside me not to send a text telling them I couldn't make it.

But I couldn't do it. They're my best friends in the world besides Jenny, and I haven't seen them for far too long. It's only been a week since I left Nashville, and most things have gone back to fairly normal.

I've caught up with most of my clients in person. I've set up gigs for Justin, to which he replied with a thumbs-up emoji each time I sent him the information. But I know he'll go to them.

It's just a feeling I have, but I know he loved it.

I should have mentioned that I could go with him to each one, but I felt too raw to do it. Never has that happened to me, where I didn't offer my services to a damn client, but it's too soon. I need a break.

I need to give my brain a chance to get with the damn program.

I'll get back to it. I will.

I ring the doorbell, holding onto the expensive bottle of wine I brought as a gift like a security blanket, pressing it against my chest and clinging to it. Ryan answers the

door, his eyes glistening with delight. “Finally.”

“Hey, sorry. I know I’m late.”

He just waves it off and pulls me in for a hug. “It’s very unlike you.”

It’s true. I’m punctual to a fault. Always on time. Never ever late. Always professional. “Sorry,” I say, barely getting the word out.

“You okay?” He pulls out of the hug, studying me way too damn closely. He knows me too well, and I don’t like feeling on display.

Thankfully, one of his twins, Kiera, comes running up at that same time and leaps into my arms. “Hey, baby girl!”

“Uncle Waylon!” She’s four and so damn cute, I can barely stand it. With big blue eyes and blond pigtails. “Where have you been?”

Ryan laughs and takes the bottle of wine from me so I can hug her better. I carry her further inside and snuggle up to her. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I had some business to attend to.”

“Where?” she asks, scrunching up her cute little nose as I sit us both down on the couch in the living room. I don’t get a chance to answer her because her twin brother comes running into the living room with his racecar, zooming it all over the coffee table.

“Uncle Waylon! You’re back!” he says, before launching the racecar across the room and chasing after it.

“Yeah. I am. Did you miss me, Connor?” He just nods but then runs off, and I laugh,

addressing my little princess, “Nashville.”

“Where is that?” she asks, her attention fully on me with those wide eyes.

“Tennessee,” I say just as Grady walks into the living room, his eyes meeting mine in a warm greeting.

“Finally. Where have you been?”

“Nessee,” Kiera answers, and I smile at her attempt.

“What is that?” Their oldest daughter Kristy walks into the room, looking far too old for me. She’s eight now, but I think she grew a foot since I saw her last. Time, slow down.

“Tennessee. It’s where Uncle Waylon has been,” Grady says, kissing the top of her head. Goddamn, it’s still weird seeing him as a parent. He’s damn good at it, that’s for sure, but he’s the rockstar. The playboy. The fucking manwhore, honestly.

And now he’s married to his best friend with three beautiful kids. Happy as hell. How the hell does he do it?

“Oh,” Kristy says, shrugging and then sitting next to me on the couch. “Did you bring me anything?”

I laugh as Grady admonishes her, “Kristy.”

“What?” she asks with big bright eyes.

I only laugh. Holy shit, I missed them so damn much. My family. “I’m sorry. I was kind of busy, but I should have brought you something.”

Grady sighs, and Ryan laughs as he walks into the room. “You don’t have to bring them anything when you go away for business.”

There’s a loud crash followed by a loud, “Dad! Daddy!” from Connor, and Ryan is on it.

“No bones better be broken!” he hollers as he walks down the hall toward Connor’s room. Grady shakes his head, smiling as Kristy and Kiera shuffle off to assess the damage.

“If bones were broken, he’d be screaming bloody murder,” Grady says, settling into the couch across from where I’m sitting. “It’s good to see you.”

I still wait for more cries, but when it’s quiet, I let out a relieved sigh and address my old friend. “It’s good to see you too.”

“You missed the twins’ birthday, you know.”

“Fuck,” I curse, “I’m so damn sorry. Fuck. How did I miss that?” I’m appalled. I’ve been there for every birthday.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Grady looks a little worried. “I was just giving you shit. Don’t get upset about it.”

“You know how much these kids mean to me,” I say earnestly, looking over at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to miss it.”

“They’re okay. You’re here now.” He’s watching me closely. “Are you okay?”

No. I’m so far from okay. “I’m fine.”

He doesn't believe me. That's very clear by the way he cocks his head to the side. "No, you aren't," he says, and it pisses me off instantly. And then he says something else, something that makes my blood run cold, and all the sadness comes rearing back. "Justin looked really happy at that bar."

Justin.

Just his goddamn name kills me. This is not good. "Mm-hmm," I say noncommittally.

Please talk about anything else.

Grady just leans forward a little, his eyes on me, and then he sighs deeply and shakes his head like he's disappointed. "When Jenny told us you went to Tennessee to find Justin, I thought you'd finally done it."

"Done what?" I can't help but ask.

"Went after something you wanted. For you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask, shifting uncomfortably on the couch.

"You know what I'm talking about." His eyes narrow. "Justin. You went after Justin. Finally."

I blink and then blink again, trying to focus. "Of course I did. He's a client who needed help." I try to hold my chin up high. "I went and helped him. I'd do the same for you."

His expression is angry. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. Stop playing stupid little games, Waylon. I know you too well for that shit."

“Look, I’m sorry I missed the twins’ birthday. I feel awful about that.” I stand up, wanting to leave. “I’ll make it up to them.”

“It isn’t about the twins,” he says, standing up too. “And you know it. They’re fine. They missed you, of course, we all did. But still, I was hoping you were finally going after happiness.”

I glare at him. “I am happy.”

“Bullshit,” he says calmly, his gaze serious but also a little sad. Shit, I think that’s pity. I don’t want to see pity. “You could be though. Why did you leave him?”

My chest aches at the question. So badly, I absently rub over the spot with my hand. “He was happy. I got him settled. Which is what I went there to do. I did my job,” I say firmly with way more conviction than I actually feel.

“Bullshit,” he says again, more easily this time. “Why can’t you admit it?”

“Admit what? You’re really pissing me off, Grady,” I say with as much venom as I can muster. He really is my family. His family is my only family besides Jenny. I don’t want to hurt him or really push him away, but I don’t want to talk about this.

“That you’re in love with him.”

I rear back as if he slapped me right across the face. “What? I am not in love with him,” I sputter.

“You’ve been in love with him for a long damn time, Waylon.” Grady says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, and I feel like I can’t catch my breath.

“No. I haven’t. He’s a client.”

He just shakes his head. “No. He’s not. He never was.”

I just stare at Grady. My friend. My family. “Of course he was. You think I took advantage of him? That I had other motives for becoming his agent?”

“Of course not,” he says softly. “You’re the best manager anyone could ask for. You were fantastic for Immoral, but there was something different between you and Justin. There always was. And it wasn’t one-sided.”

I shake my head like a lunatic. “That’s not true. It was a professional relationship, and when he got sick of being famous, he ran off. I needed to check on him. That’s all. I would do it for you in a heartbeat.”

Grady places a hand on my shoulder, trying to calm me. “I know you would. All I’m saying is you two have been in love for a long time. And because you’re a professional, I know nothing happened. You wouldn’t let it. You guarded yourself from those feelings, but when he left...”—he squeezes my shoulder gently—“I thought maybe you two were going to go for it. That you’d follow him and confess your love.”

“You’ve been watching too many movies,” I say, but I still feel like I can’t breathe.

“You’re being an idiot,” he says quietly. Not angry. Sad.

“I don’t love him. I crossed a line with him I shouldn’t have, and I’m making up for it, but it isn’t love. I don’t have time for love,” I say, my deepest truth coming out. I told myself a long time ago I was going to be successful and would do anything I needed to, including putting my love life on the back burner.

I didn’t need it. Love isn’t a permanent thing. My parents had conditions for their love. My. Parents. The people who should have loved me most just... didn’t.

He's looking at me with so much pity now, it feels like it's crushing me. "Make the time. Life is too short, Waylon. You deserve to be happy."

"I am," I say it but don't feel it, and it's not convincing. "I'm fine," I try again.

"Please don't do this to yourself," he says, and I swear I see his eyes glistening a little bit. "You're one of my best friends in the world. I want to see you happy."

"Not everyone needs love to be happy," I say because I believe that. Some people are perfectly happy never being in a relationship. It doesn't make them any less fulfilled, damn it.

"That's true," he agrees, and I feel slightly triumphant, but then he opens his mouth again. "But you do. I've seen the way you look at him. I see the love there. Don't be stupid."

"Drop it," I say bitingly because I can't have this conversation anymore. I'm trying to move on and heal.

I need to move on.

Thankfully, he just purses his lips and gives me a pinched, pained look before calling for the kids to help him set the table. They run into the dining room excitedly, and he walks out of the room.

Ryan comes in after them, but stops at me, his eyes on my face. "You okay?"

I shake my head, too tired to lie. "No."

He hugs me like he was expecting that, and then we head into the dining room to join the family. I'm grateful he doesn't push it and that Grady doesn't bring it up again

even as we're saying goodbye.

I go back to my home with my dog, and I try like hell not to think about how quiet it is. How empty.

This is not like me. I love my home. I love the quiet.

I don't need to complicate my life. I'm not Ryan and Grady.

Damn them.

Chapter Twenty-One

JUSTIN

I can feel his eyes on me. I don't know how because the place is packed, but I know he's here. He didn't tell me he'd be showing up to my gig tonight. He hasn't shown up for the last three since he left Nashville over a month ago. But he's here tonight.

I do my best to get through my set without looking for him in the crowded bar in LA. Despite him leaving and making me feel like an idiot, I've been doing pretty damn well.

Daisy and Waylon have kept me busy. My album dropped and is doing really damn well on the charts.

So why he felt he needed to be at this show tonight is beyond me. But it doesn't matter. Not at all. I'm perfectly fine without him. I don't need him.

I strum my guitar and own the crowd as I sing into the microphone. My songs. My way. In a place where you can feel the electricity coming off the audience, but it isn't stifling.

There's plenty of security, and I have a car waiting for me just outside. Just like the last few shows I've done. It's flawless, and it feels really damn good. Like what I've always craved.

I should be thankful to Waylon for making that happen, but I'm still too damn mad at

him, so I just do my job and then escape into the car after the show ends. Not having to stick around for interviews or autographs.

I climb into the backseat and close the door. The car takes off just as I notice I'm not alone. My manager is here. Dressed impeccably in a stupid black, perfectly tailored suit. His hair is styled beautifully, as always, and his expression is professionally staunch.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him, trying to sound bored.

"I wanted to check in," he says easily, pulling off the nonchalant act far better than I did. Probably because it's not an act for him.

"I'm fine. You didn't need to take my car. You could see how well I'm doing during my show."

"You are doing well," he says, his lips quivering like maybe he's fighting a smile, but I don't care. I don't care if he smiles or not. I look straight ahead, pulling my gaze from him.

"I am. So why the hell are you here? I'm sure you have a trainwreck client or two to deal with."

"Justin," he sighs exasperatedly like I'm acting like a child. And maybe I am. He hurt me. There. I said it. He hurt me badly, just leaving me like I was nothing to him. No—worse—like I was merely a client.

"You should go back to Kansas City," I say, just as my car pulls up to the hotel I'm staying in. There's security here too, expecting me as I rush inside, but I can feel Waylon on my heels.

I ignore him and go straight for the elevator. Either security sucks or they know Waylon because he joins me inside the elevator, along with two security guards. They walk us to my room, and I slide the keycard in, opening the door and turning to the guards. I thank them, and they leave before I turn to Waylon. “You can go too.”

“Just talk to me,” he says, looking and sounding exhausted.

I relent because I’m a fucking idiot. I push the door open further, and we both walk inside, the door closing with a click. “What do you want?” I ask him, trying not to look at his face and into those eyes.

I don’t want to be weak.

“I’m sorry I left you like that. It was sudden, and I know I didn’t do it the correct way.”

I laugh bitterly as I grab a bottle of water from the fridge in the suite. Opening the lid, I chug half of it before looking over at Waylon, who’s still standing uncomfortably by the door. “But you still wanted to leave.”

“I have a job.” He says it, but it’s almost in a defeated sort of tone.

“Then go do it,” I say, anger bleeding through my words.

“Justin,” he says again, and it sounds like he’s almost pleading with me. Goddamn him. I was doing just fine.

But I can’t take it. I toss the water bottle on the bed and march over to him on a mission. I grasp the back of his neck, my fingers digging into his flesh, just as I pull him to me and slam my mouth against his.

He grunts, but he doesn't push me away. His hands go to my hips, his fingers digging in and pulling me into him as he kisses me back, not missing a damn beat. It feels so damn good and so bad at the same time. Like my heart is being ripped out because I know he'll leave again.

He isn't mine.

But he feels like mine right now. I kiss him hard and strip his jacket from his shoulders, pushing it off him, and it falls to the floor. I work on his buttons as he pulls my t-shirt off, both of us falling into a flawless rhythm. I'm so damn mad at him, but I can't keep my lips off him.

I kiss him hard, bruising his lips as I press against him, removing his stupid dress shirt and tossing it before working his belt and pants open. "You're an asshole," I say, biting on his bottom lip.

"I know," he says, pushing my jeans and briefs down. I kick them both away and grab his hair, holding him there as I kiss his mouth.

He kisses me back, neither of us making any other move. Just a punishing kiss before I release him, and he kicks off his shoes before pushing his pants and underwear off. He moves to the bed, and I grab a condom and lube, watching as he climbs onto the bed, putting his ass on display for me.

I hate him.

I want to fucking hate him.

I want to punish him for leaving me. I put the condom on, lubing it up first and then moving a finger to his hole. I want to just shove into him, but I can't cause him pain. I prepare him quickly but efficiently before I wipe my hand on the bedding, and then I

move into position behind him.

“Fuck me,” he grunts, pushing back.

My fingers thread through his hair, and I grab on roughly. He doesn't complain, just tries again to thrust back against me, but I don't let him have the control. I wait until he's whimpering, and then I slide into him in one smooth quick motion that makes us both gasp.

I don't stop though. I fuck into him over and over, my hold on his hair tight, but he's not in pain. He's moaning and thrusting back onto my cock, fucking himself on it as I push into him over and over, my orgasm already threatening me.

It's coming too fast. Too soon, but when his ass clenches around me and he cries out, I know it's over. He's come untouched, and I can't even take the moment to be in awe over that fact. I can't relish in it because I come so damn hard, it nearly hurts, and then my heart just takes over.

It's like it's cracked in half because I know I made a mistake. That I shouldn't have taken him again. I shouldn't have kissed him again. All the pain from the night he left creeps back up and chokes me.

I pull out of him and stumble away from the bed in a daze. “You need to go,” I barely manage. “Now.”

Waylon slowly climbs off the bed, and I watch numbly as he dresses. He doesn't look at me, and I'm glad. When he's fully dressed, he leaves with the cold loud click of the hotel room door.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and try like hell not to let the emptiness creep in.

But it does.

I'm so very empty.

Chapter Twenty-Two

WAYLON

“So let me get this straight...” I want to stop her, but Jenny just keeps going, undeterred. “Fucking him, without talking at all, and then not saying anything afterward until he kicks you out isn’t a good plan?”

“Fuck off,” I say with no venom, laying my head down on her marble countertop I’m currently leaning on and try to resist bashing my head into it.

“What were you thinking?”

I lift my head, and I don’t actually see any judgment there or amusement. She’s looking at me like I’m a kicked puppy, which is kind of how I feel after getting back to Kansas City this morning. After catching a flight out of LA.

“I wanted to see him.”

“Right,” she says, leaning against the counter on the other side, facing me. “But don’t you think you should have tried words instead of moaning and grunting your hello?”

I don’t tell her to fuck off again—at least not with words—but I’m pretty sure my face says it. She just grins at me, and I roll my eyes with a heavy, deep sigh. “I was going to talk to him, but he kissed me.”

“Made you stupid, huh? I’ve heard about kisses like that.” She stands up and walks

over to the fridge, looking at it before huffing and closing the door. “So what are you going to do?”

“Nothing,” I say absently, climbing onto the bar stool at the counter. “He hates me. He wanted me to go. So I left.”

“You’re being an idiot,” she says, walking back over to stand in front of me, crossing her arms.

“Drop it,” I try, but it’s Jenny, and she doesn’t.

“No,” she says effortlessly. “You love him.”

“We don’t have time for love,” I throw back at her because if anyone understands, it’s her. “I thought you wanted me to end this anyway. Shouldn’t you be happy?”

She frowns deeply at that, a slight wrinkle between her brows. “That was before I saw you. You have it bad, my friend.” She drops her folded arms. “I didn’t know it until I saw you, but you’re really in love with him. Like actual love.”

She says it like she’s almost shocked. “You said I fell for him.”

“And you denied it,” she shoots back.

I did. I wanted it to not be true. “It doesn’t matter. I’m a professional.”

“Cool. So don’t fuck your other clients,” she says and waves me off. “But you’re in love with this one, so don’t be an idiot.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” I ask angrily, not even sure who I’m mad at. I don’t think it’s her.

She leans down on her elbows on the marble counter and looks directly at me. “We can have both, if that’s what we want. You don’t have to choose. You can love him and have him, and you can love your career and have it too. Don’t let them win.”

I sit up straight, knowing she’s talking about my parents. People I very rarely talk about. “I’m not. I don’t do this for them.” Not anymore.

“I know you don’t. I know you love your career.” She stands up straight, but she’s still looking right at me. “But I also know that you think love will make you weak. I used to think that too.”

I try like hell to swallow the lump in my throat away, but it won’t budge. “It does make you weak. I’m a fucking mess.”

She smiles at that in a way that can only be described as sweet, but that’s not right. Jenny isn’t sweet. “Fix it, sweetie.” She rounds the corner and pulls me into a hug. “You love him, and it’s okay.”

I wrap my arms around her reluctantly, not wanting to feel this. “I messed it all up.”

“As men tend to do,” she says with what I know is a smile on her face, even though I can’t see her. My face is buried in her neck.

“What if he won’t let me fix it?”

“He will,” she says with so much certainty. “I know he loves you too. Who wouldn’t?” she asks teasingly, and it does what she intended.

I let out a little laugh, even as tears start to fall from my eyes, ruining her expensive shirt. But she doesn’t push me away.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Love really sucks,” I say, sniffing, and she laughs, hugging me tighter.

“Yeah, it doesn’t look fun.” I sniff again and pull back enough to see her face.

“When are you going to go through this? I want to return the favor.”

She tosses her head back and laughs. “Never. Ever.” She winks at me and brushes a tear away from my cheek. “But if I do, I know you’ll be there to laugh at my dumb ass.”

That makes me laugh again, but it’s short, and I barely feel it. Because I don’t know if I can fix this.

And I’m really not used to this feeling.

Chapter Twenty-Three

JUSTIN

“That was really good,” Daisy says sweetly as I come out of the recording booth, having recorded my newest single. I feel pretty good about it and lean my guitar against the sofa before sitting down.

She joins me, looking like she’s really excited about the new song. She didn’t ask to make any changes either. Stuck to her word, and I’m grateful. “Thanks.”

“Well, I’ll handle everything else, but I think this is going to be a hit.” She grins at me, and I look at her smiling face and bright eyes. I try to imagine a world where she and I could be a couple.

I’m not stupid. I’ve seen the interest in her eyes since we met four months ago but never pursued it. She hasn’t either, thankfully. I don’t think I could take having to turn her down.

And not just because we work together. Clearly, I don’t have a problem crossing professional lines.

Nope. It’s because of him. I should be into Daisy. She’s gorgeous, but not only that, she’s kind. And she really cares. She won’t just dump me when she’s had enough and leave me feeling cold and empty.

“Can I ask you a question?” Well, damn. Maybe I wasn’t saved from having to reject

her after all. Her lips are in a slight pout as she watches me carefully.

“Relax. I’m not going to jump you,” she teases, and I cringe.

“Sorry. I know. I just, umm . . .”

“Well, that answers that,” she says, relaxing back into the sofa.

“Answers what?” I ask cautiously, not really wanting an answer. Afraid of the answer.

“If you and Waylon were a couple.”

That makes me laugh, but it comes out bitter and angry. Something I really don’t like at all. “We aren’t a couple.”

She tilts her head to the side, her eyes appraising. “You sure seemed to be. What happened?”

“We were never a couple.” I sigh, the pain too deep. “He just left.”

“But he’s still your manager.” It’s not really a question, but I nod anyway.

“Yeah, he’s fine with having a professional relationship with me.” And apparently, fucking me until he got bored, but I don’t say that part to her. “But he doesn’t want anything else.”

“Are you sure about that?” Her eyes aren’t on me, but she’s looking behind me pointedly, compelling me to turn around.

When I see Waylon standing there in the doorway, I immediately glare at Daisy,

ignoring him. “Did you know he was there?”

She shakes her head emphatically. “No. He wasn’t until just now, and I had no idea he was coming today.” She looks hurt, and I cringe for being such an asshole to her. She doesn’t deserve that at all.

“I’m sorry. Of course you didn’t.”

She offers me a sweet smile and pats my knee with her hand before standing up. “You two should talk. I’m going home. Lock up when you leave, please.”

She doesn’t wait for me to answer, passing Waylon with a sad smile on her way out. I sit on the sofa, my arms crossed and my body tense. I hear his footsteps, my heart starting to race, but I don’t lift my eyes to look at him. I’m afraid to look at him. Apparently, looking at Waylon makes me stupid.

“You two looked awfully comfy.”

My eyes snap up to his now, rage soaring through me and keeping any lust at bay. “Are you fucking kidding me? What is that? Jealousy?”

He looks worn and broken, defeated in a way I’ve never seen Waylon before. “Yes,” he answer simply, his voice quiet.

“You don’t have the right to be jealous.” I try to stay firm. “We’re just client and manager, remember?”

His face is stoic, he doesn’t move. Doesn’t allow his expression to do anything, and it’s infuriating.

“You should go. I don’t need your assistance right now. I’m sure another client needs

you though.”

“They do.”

“Then go.” My eyes hold his, mine cold and unfeeling—I hope, at least. I don’t feel anything for this man. I don’t.

“I can’t,” he says, his voice cracking on can’t .

“What do you mean?” I hate sitting while he’s standing, but I don’t move as I hold his gaze.

“I mean I’m not here on business. I’m here to see you.”

I try like hell to calm my rapidly beating heart. “Why? You said this is just professional. And I don’t need your help as my manager right now. You have gigs booked. You have my recording sessions booked. I don’t need you.” I hope that sounded convincing, and I think it might have because he looks almost ill. His arms wrap around his stomach, like he’s in pain.

I wish I could say I don’t care. But I do. Worry shoots through me. He’s not actually in pain, is he?

“I’ve been told I’m being an idiot.”

My brow furrows. “By who?”

“Jenny.” He still hasn’t unwrapped his arms from around his middle, looking shaky and tired. Sick almost.

My brow furrows more, and I cock my head to the side. “Doesn’t she call everyone

an idiot? I'm pretty sure those were her first words when she met me."

A flicker of a smile forms on his face, but it disappears so fast, I'm not sure if that's what I saw. "She's right this time. I am being an idiot. And apparently, Grady thinks so too."

"Grady?" I ask, even more confused now. "Why does he think you're being an idiot?"

He drops his arms from around his stomach and kneels, bracing his weight on my knees as he looks directly into my eyes. "Because I'm in love with you. Because I left, knowing I was in love with you. Because I didn't think I deserved love. I didn't think I had time for love and that eventually, it would fade. I don't understand love without conditions."

I swallow hard, looking into his eyes. Those are the words I wanted to hear. I mean the in love with me part. The rest just absolutely breaks my heart for him. I want to be strong, but I touch him. I brush my hand over his cheek, and he leans into it. "Love should never have conditions."

His watery eyes meet mine. "I'm not an easy man. I'm stubborn, and I'm a little bit of a workaholic."

I snort. "A little?" He smiles slightly, and I stroke my thumb over his lips absently. "So am I. I love my job, especially now that you found the perfect balance for me. You're brilliant with those sorts of things, Waylon. You really think you can't make time for love?"

"I want to. I've never wanted to before. I was busy and happy to be busy..." He leans further into my touch. "But I want to with you."

I'm trying like hell to control my breathing, but it kicks up in excitement I can't deny at his words. "My love for you has no conditions, Waylon. I love you so fucking deeply that nothing will change it. Not even you leaving me behind."

"I didn't want to leave you," he says, the pain in his eyes a crippling weight.

"Why did you?" I have to ask the question, even if I'm starting to understand what the answer is.

"I was scared." Yeah, that's what I just realized. "My parents... I play it down. I always have. Said I didn't need them. That they didn't matter, but I really thought hard about maybe just trying to be what they wanted, so they would love me." My heart aches for him so deeply, I can barely stand it. I pull him to me, onto my lap so he's straddling my thighs. I grip his face with both my hands, needing more contact as he goes down. "I couldn't do it. I left and told myself I didn't need their love. That I didn't need them. That I could have my career and I'd be happy."

"You were happy. And you built one hell of a career," I say honestly. Waylon is in the top tier of music managers. Everyone wants him. It's what young musicians dream of, having Waylon as their manager someday.

"It's not enough anymore," he says, his eyes honest and true as he looks directly at me. "Not even close to enough. I love you. I'm sorry I left. I shouldn't have."

A smile takes over my lips, and my eyes are glistening with unshed tears now. "How the hell did we get here?"

He lets out a small watery laugh. "I don't know. Apparently, Grady thinks we've been in love for a really long time. I didn't see it though."

I smile at that, thinking back to all our years together. Over him taking care of

everyone around me but making sure I was taken care of too. Of bickering and arguing with him but still knowing he had my best interest in mind. Of looking up to him and admiring him, even though we were only a few years apart in age. Of being scared shitless to make my own decisions but him giving me the strength to do just that. He never told me what to do.

He was my guide.

“I didn’t either, but I think maybe he was right,” I say, leaning forward and brushing my lips over his. I can feel him trembling. “I’m in love with you.”

He smiles sweetly. “We can make this work. If you can forgive me for leaving, I’ll do everything I can to make it work.”

I kiss his lips softly and a tear finally falls from my eye and trickles down my cheek. “We’ll make it work.”

How I started the day so damn angry and now feeling so damn happy I could burst from it is beyond me.

But he loves me. He’s here.

And I’m so goddamn in love with him, I’m not going to argue.

Chapter Twenty-Four

WAYLON

“ Y es. Fuck. Yes. There. Right there.” I’m a babbling, sweaty mess as Justin thrusts into my body, nailing my prostate over and over, but I can’t help it. I’ve missed the hell out of him. And not just the sex.

I’ve missed kissing him, arguing with him, and laughing with him. I’ve missed every single part of him, and now he’s mine. How we’re going to make it work, I’m still not sure. We just came back to his small cabin after leaving the studio, and our clothes were gone in an instant.

No time to really talk about things. We just needed each other. I’m surprised we made it the whole drive without having to pull over and tear into each other like this, but somehow, we made it.

When his cock leaves my hole, though, I whimper embarrassingly loud. I’m about to beg him to get back inside me when he flips my body over, so I’m on my back and he’s between my thighs, staring down at me with so much intensity, I can’t seem to form words. “I needed to see you.”

I nod dumbly and stare at his cock, covered in a condom and lube. I want the stupid condom gone. So damn badly. I just want to feel him and only him inside me. As if he can read my mind, he looks at me thoughtfully, running his hand down over my chest and then my abs. “I got tested a couple of weeks ago. I haven’t been with anyone else in a really long time.”

“Same,” I say. Words still aren’t my friends. I can’t think.

“Do we need the condom?”

I shake my head furiously, wanting that fucker gone. “I trust you. I only want you.”

He smiles so sweetly, it nearly cracks my damn heart, and then he quickly gets rid of the condom and slicks up his bare cock before slamming back into me and stealing my breath in the best possible way. “Yes. Holy shit, yes. So much better,” I babble until he leans forward and crushes his mouth to mine.

He finds the slow, steady punishing pace that drives me fucking wild until I come so damn hard I nearly black out. And when he comes, I can feel the warm, sticky cum deep inside me, making me feel full. Complete in a way I never knew I needed.

He collapses on top of me, and I wrap my arms around him, keeping him there. Never wanting to let him go. “I love you,” he says and kisses me softly.

“I love you too.” I can’t believe I almost let him get away. That I thought I could ever be happy without him, after knowing how much I loved him.

“How are we going to make this work?” he asks, and I can hear the tremble in his voice.

“I’m going to move here. We’re going to build a house, hopefully a little bigger than this, with decent water pressure and a nice coffee maker.”

He lifts up, bracing his weight on his arms as he looks down at me. “How about a house in Kansas City with all the same things?”

My heart kicks up in speed because I know that’s what I really want, but I need him

to be happy. I can make it work from here. “We don’t have to.”

He smiles and leans down, his lips brushing over mine. “Your work is important to me too. You don’t have to give up anything for me to love you. I love you because of who you are, and being a manager is a big part of who you are.”

Fuck. I’m tearing up again. I haven’t cried this damn much in a long time. “Are you sure? It’s beautiful here.”

He smiles and then nods. “It is. Maybe someday, we can move here or build a house here for when we need to get away, but you need Jenny and Ryan and Grady. The kids. They’re your family.”

“So are you,” I say truthfully, still holding onto him.

He grins. “I’ll always be your family, and they’ll be mine too. We’re a package deal now.”

“What about touring?” He kisses me again and then pulls out slowly, making me wince slightly and desperately want him back inside me. But I try to ignore that urge as he rolls off me and lies on his back too, taking my hand in his and locking our fingers together.

“We’ll figure it out. I want to keep it simple and small. I can do that from there and travel when we need to.”

“We’re really doing this?” I say happily, looking at our fingers locked together.

“We are,” he says firmly, and my heart kicks happily in my chest.

“Well, we don’t have to leave today,” I say, letting go of his hand but urging his body

back on top of mine. I pull him down to kiss me hard, my dick already back in the game and ready for more.

When I feel his cock hardening too, I smile against his mouth.

“Now that I have you, I’m never letting you go.”

“I’m more than okay with that,” he says as we kiss and grind together, getting lost in each other, and holding on tight.

Never letting go.

Chapter Twenty-Five

WAYLON

“Y ou did a damn good job taking care of things while I was away, Dalton,” I say, smiling at my friend across from the table of one of my favorite restaurants in Kansas City. We just got back into town last night and are staying at my house.

I smile, thinking about leaving a very sleepy Justin in my bed to go meet Dalton for lunch. I asked him if he wanted to come along, but he just brushed me off. Needing his sleep, I suppose.

We stayed in that cabin together for almost a week, making love and talking about all our future hopes and dreams. All aligning because we want each other so damn badly, so not much else really matters.

Still, we’re both going to have our careers. It’s important to both of us that the other does, and I think that’s important. He cares about my career as much as I care about his. It’s the perfect balance, and I can’t believe I almost messed it all up.

“Thank you,” he says, blushing slightly, and I fight the urge to tease him. He’s a little on the shy side, but his instincts are good. He’ll make a great music manager, if that’s what he really wants to do.

“So do you think you’re ready to take on more responsibilities? I might need to hire someone full-time to help me out soon. I’m not quitting, but I think delegating responsibilities isn’t a bad idea.” Even though it’s hard to let go.

“Um...” He looks nervous as hell now, and I’m curious.

“What is it?”

He clears his throat and takes a sip of water. “Well, I loved helping you out while you were gone, but I’ve also been shadowing Jenny for a bit too...”

I grin, fighting the urge to laugh. “Sports? You’re going the sports route instead, aren’t you?” I can see it on his face, he’s hooked.

He looks a little sheepish, though, shrugging his shoulders. But then an indignant little wave crosses over his face as he lifts his chin. “What? I can’t like sports?”

I laugh now and shake my head. “Calm down. If you like sports, you like sports. I think you’ll be great.” I smile gently at that because I do think he’ll be amazing at whatever he does. He’s a go-getter, this one.

He seems to visibly relax now. “Thank you. Sorry. I just... sometimes I’m that insecure, totally gay kid in school with a crush on the jocks.”

“You and me both,” I say truthfully. “But you can do whatever the hell you want, stereotypes be damned, and the sports world is lucky to have you.”

“Thank you, Waylon. I can definitely help you out still too. I love music too, but there was just something about being on the track...” Oh yeah, he’s smitten. “I can’t explain it.”

“You’ve found your passion, I see.” I’m beaming now, happy as hell for him.

He nods shyly. “I think I have.”

“Good. Go with it,” I tell him, and then we switch to other topics, munching on our lunch before I make it back to my house, finding it pretty damn full.

Way fuller than I expected. When I walk inside, the sound of laughter carries from the kitchen. I recognize Jenny’s and Grady’s voices.

When I round the corner, I see my kitchen and dining room are in fact full of friends. I instantly zero in on Justin, who’s standing by Jenny, preparing some sort of cheese and meat plate.

“Uncle Waylon!” I barely turn in time for Kiera to leap into my arms, and I catch her. “You’re home!” She’s way too damn cute and very excited.

“I am,” I say, hugging her to me. I see Soren and Royal are here, along with some other racers. Ryan is here too. “What is everyone doing here?” Not that I care. I’m happy to see every single one of them.

“It’s your welcome home party!” Kiera says, stretching her arms out wide as I hold onto her while she acts like she’s flying.

“Is that so?” I ask her, hugging her little body to me.

“Yup. Welcome home.” Jenny walks over to me, handing me a glass of champagne. “Where is Dalton? He’s supposed to be here.”

“He’s...” I look behind me and see him lingering back a little. “Right there.”

Jenny grins over at him. “Get in here.”

Dalton obeys, walking further into the kitchen. I look around as someone turns on music, and my house buzzes with excitement and chatter. Kids running around. Kiera

runs off to join her brother and sister. Justin walks to my side, kissing my cheek before I wrap an arm around him and just look around at my—our—family.

“Is this your doing?”

He shakes his head. “You think I’m capable of planning a party?” I chuckle in response. “It was Jenny. They’re all so damn happy you’re home.”

“We’re home,” I correct quickly, and he just grins with a quick nod. He looks more at peace than I’ve ever seen him.

I was wrong when I thought all he needed was the perfect venue to play in. He needed this too.

And so did I.

We made it work. This is what love feels like when there aren’t any conditions. And we still managed to keep that veil of privacy for him. We bent our perfect ideals of love and life until we made it into this perfect thing.

And it’s goddamn beautiful.

Justin

Two years later . . .

I finish my set, my heart still having that familiar adrenaline rush I've always had after a show, but I don't leave the stage just yet. We're in Kansas City, in the Power and Light District.

Kansas City is our home. We built our own house together. We still have Waylon's dog, but when Cooper heard we were getting a bigger house, he talked us into adopting two cats—a brother and sister—the last of the litter. We couldn't say no.

Our house is a happy place. Full and loud at times, like when Ryan and Grady bring the kids over. Or when Jenny comes by with Dalton and his boyfriend.

It's wild that I thought I wanted away from this place. That I was so unsettled in my life only a few years ago. But now, I wouldn't trade what I have for the world.

And there's only one more thing that could make it even more perfect.

“You all know I'm madly in love with my manager, Waylon, right?” I ask into the microphone, and the cheers I get back are almost deafening. Waylon, who's standing in his usual spot on the side of the stage looks curious, his arms folded and his eyes on me. “Well, I want you all to welcome him on stage for me because I have a question to ask him.”

The hoots and hollers are deafening this time. I can barely hear myself think, and I'm

grinning like a fool and shaking like a fucking leaf as Waylon walks onto the stage in his impeccable suit with a suspicious, yet hopeful look on his face.

“I write words for songs, but I’m still not that great at this stuff,” I say, reaching into my pocket for the custom ring I had made months ago, just waiting for the right time. I lift it in the air, and Waylon stops walking only a couple of feet away, his mouth agape.

The crowd is silent now.

“I love you. More than anything.” I look out at the crowd and then back at Waylon. “Maybe even more than music.” Waylon laughs, his eyes tearing up, and mine do the same. “Marry me, Waylon. Be my husband and my manager forever.”

I swear I can hear the crowd gasp and then just hold their breath. Waylon walks closer to me, and for a moment, nerves hit me so hard, my knees nearly buckle. But then his arms wrap around my neck, and his lips press hard against mine before he says, “Of course I will.”

Relief washes over me, and I pull his mouth back to mine, kissing him hard as he accepts my proposal.

Funny how life always has other plans for you. I thought I knew what I wanted. I thought I didn’t need him or anyone else to survive, and maybe that was true, but I don’t want to just survive.

I want to be happy.

I want to thrive.

And with Waylon, I will.