Let’s Pretend

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Summary

Sequel to Burn It Down [https://archiveofourown.org/works/17410292].

It’s been a long time since the reader last saw any of the MC so, when she receives a call from Jax Teller asking for a place to lay low, it knocks her for six. Reunited with her best friend, old feelings and tensions rise to the surface, but will Jax put her before the club and find a place in the new life she’s built for herself, or will he break her heart and return to lead the Sons out of the mess that he helped create?

Notes

The saga continues… It’s been seven years since our reader left Charming and a lot has changed in that time. As with The Other Guy and Burn It Down, this doesn’t follow canon, but bits and pieces that have gone on in between times will be filled in as we go along. Thank you for sticking with this story and I really do hope you enjoy. Let’s get started…
The click of your heels against the pavement followed you as you crossed the parking lot, hitching your handbag further up on your shoulder. The documents inside weighed heavy on your arm but it was nothing you weren’t used to. It was your own fault anyway. It wasn’t required for you to take your work home with you, and yet you always did. The evenings seemed shorter when you had something to focus your mind on, so you’d sit over dinner, fixing typos and analysing figures, getting ahead for the following day.

Turning on to the main street that ran through the centre of town, you caught sight of your reflection in a shop window and paused for a moment to run a critical eye over yourself. Your skirt had twisted around your knees on the ride over and you straightened it now, ensuring that the seam at the back sat just right. Your shirt was neatly ironed, buttoned respectably almost to your throat, and your cardigan was a neutral shade. Nothing fancy. Nothing unique. You were all about blending into the crowd these days. You’d taken to straightening your hair each morning, ensuring it was sleek and shiny before pulling it back out of your face, and your make-up was practised and tidy. You smiled. The new you still ticked every box that you’d set for yourself.

You were greeted by the smell of cheap coffee as you pushed through the front doors of the small office building where you worked. A reception desk faced you and Melanie raised a hand in greeting as you approached.

‘Well, don’t you look… tired,’ you observed tactfully, at the sight of the dark circles under her eyes.

‘Please, God, tell me you have an aspirin,’ she groaned, leaning her head heavily in one hand as she winced. ‘I am never drinking again.’

You swung your bag down to rest on the counter, rifling through until you found the small box at the bottom and dropping it in front of her. ‘Here. And that’s bullshit.’ At her baleful glance, you scoffed. ‘Don’t look at me like that. How many times a week do we have this conversation? Not usually on a Monday though. Who the hell hits it that hard on a Sunday night?’

‘It was Saturday night,’ she responded sheepishly. ‘This is the hangover from the hangover. Yesterday, I was catatonic.’

You laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls, and her grimace intensified. ‘Have a good one, Mel. Catch you at lunch.’

‘Yes, please, yes. I need grease and a whole lot of it.’

‘We’ll go to Raymond’s. My treat.’

You climbed the stairs quickly, eager to get to your desk so you could finally rid yourself of the weight you carried and, when you walked in, your boss was setting a steaming mug down beside your computer. He glanced up with a smile as you stopped to shrug off your jacket, hanging it on the coat rack before continuing towards him.

‘Thought I heard you downstairs. You making sure Mel’s still awake for me?’

‘I left her with aspirin and the promise of an artery-clogging lunch at the diner. Should keep her going for a couple of hours at least.’

‘That girl needs to realise she’s 27, not 18,’ he grumbled, but you knew there was no malice to his
moaning. You’d struck lucky landing a job at the small foundation where you spent your days. The pay was enough to get by and the people had become good friends. ‘How was your weekend, Y/N? I assume you weren’t out partying ’til all hours?’

‘Just a quiet one for me, Charlie.’

‘And that’s why you’re my favourite,’ he told you with a grin as he slipped back into his office. ‘But don’t tell anyone I said that!’

‘So, then Alice said that it had been, like, weeks since she last got laid, and it’s girl code that I can’t let her go without, right? So, we ended up at The Glade and they had a special deal on shots, so we figured that was the sensible thing to do. I mean, we’ve both got rent to pay. And I was taking it slow, Y/N, but then these, like, crazy, biker guys showed up, all in leather and stuff, and they were buying all the girls drinks and-

You’d zoned out a little as Mel rambled, picking at your fries, but the mention of bikers had your attention and you cut her off with a cough. ‘Wait, did you say bikers?’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’

‘How many of them? Did you see their patches? What did their rockers say?’

She frowned at your sudden intensity, shaking her head at your interrogation. ‘Erm, I don’t know, Y/N. I wasn’t really paying that much attention-’

‘Well, were there pictures on their kuttes?’ At her look of confusion, you simplified the question for her. ‘On their backs, Mel. Did they have pictures on the backs of their vests?’

‘Yeah… Erm, eagles or something, I think. Maybe vultures? I told you, Y/N, I don’t know. It was some kinda bird.’

Your heart rate evened out as you let that information sink in and you nodded slowly. Of course, it wouldn’t be them. You’d left the M.C. behind nearly seven years ago, and you’d heard nothing from them in that time. It had suited you. Walking away from them had cut you up inside and there wasn’t a day that went by that you didn’t miss the family that had taken you in, but you’d needed the clean break. Losing Opie, the man you’d loved, at the hands of your brother’s organisation had damn near broken you, and it was for your sanity and your safety that you’d decided to make a fresh start.

Mel was staring at you like you’d lost your mind and you shot her an apologetic smile, taking a large bite from your burger before you could open your mouth and freak her out again. ‘Y/N, can I ask you something? When was the last time you got laid? ’Cause I think you need to, like, badly.’

The road out of town was gridlocked and you drummed your fingers against the steering wheel, impatient to get going as your turnoff came into view. A country song drifted from the radio, the
sound tinny and crackling with static. It was probably long past time to replace it, if not the whole vehicle, but you couldn’t find it in your heart to change a thing. Opie’s truck was the one thing from your former life that you held onto. It was a catalyst for happy memories and heart-wrenching grief alike, and it barely suited your new worker-bee lifestyle, but, when the air was still and your mind was quiet, you almost believed you could still catch his scent in the worn leather of the driver’s seat. It smelt like home.

Finally reaching the junction that would lead you off into the residential streets, you took a left, picking up speed as the traffic cleared and the road opened up before you. It was such a familiar journey that you didn’t need to think, taking each turn instinctively, your homing beacon guiding you, and, when the song changed, you began to sing along. Reaching one hand up, you pulled from the clip from your hair, letting it fall into its natural place, and, when you stopped at a red light, you flipped down the sun visor, running your thumb over your lips to rub away your lipstick, checking in the mirror that you’d removed every last trace. The closer you got to your apartment, the more you felt you could relax, and your appearance reflected that, the tension leaving your shoulders as you began to breathe more freely.

Pulling the truck into the space allocated to you, you cut the engine, sighing deeply as you grabbed your things and prepared yourself to climb the stairs to the third floor. You slipped your heels off before you began the ascent, padding up the staircase barefoot, the metal cool against the aching balls of your feet. Your door was solid wood, the number picked out in the centre in two shining gold metal plates, and your key slid easily into the lock as you let yourself in.

It had been a matter of pride when you’d found yourself able to afford your own place. For so long you’d been forced to rent rooms in shared houses, and, of course, you’d shared a dorm room at college, but having your own space was a luxury that you’d craved. Now, you dropped your shoes in the corridor, setting your bag down beside them. Off of the corridor were several doors - the bathroom on your left, and the main bedroom and spare room on the right - and at the far end, the space opened out into a large living room and adjoining kitchen. You’d filled your home with thrift store bargains, not particularly bothered whether it matched, so long as it was comfortable and didn’t smell funky, and now you drew comfort from the clash of your furniture and quirky decor. It wasn’t like you ever invited anybody back here anyway. It was your space and you protected it fiercely.

You moved around the kitchen on autopilot, preparing dinner, your mind drifting back to the conversation you’d had with Mel at lunch. She’d become a friend in the past year that you’d been at the foundation, and perhaps knew you better than anyone else did these days, but you knew she found your lack of interest in any sort of social life confounding. You were young after all, not unattractive, and since you’d moved to town, she hadn’t seen you so much as cast a sideways glance at a single guy.

It wasn’t like you’d been a saint since you’d left Charming. You’d had a couple of meaningless hook-ups when you’d been doing your degree, and even a boyfriend that had had the potential to become semi-serious. But you’d shut it down before it could reach that point. You didn’t mean to cut yourself off from love, or the possibility of it - not that anybody could blame you for being distrustful of men, given your history - but not one of the men that showed an interest in you measured up. They didn’t have Opie’s kind eyes and ability to make you feel completely safe and secure. They didn’t have Tig’s experience and understanding of exactly what was going on inside your head. And they didn’t have Jax’s heart-stopping smile and natural confidence, and his willingness to break down your walls.

Jax. You paused with a forkful of pasta halfway to your mouth, struggling to swallow around the lump in your throat as the face of the club’s Vice-President flashed across your vision. Leaving him had been perhaps the hardest part of moving away. It was Jax that had come to your rescue when
you’d fled your brother’s vindictive clutches the first time. Aaron had seen you as nothing but a commodity, auctioning you off to the highest bidder to be used at their will, and you’d run as soon as the opportunity arose. But Jax had taken you in without question, allowing you a place in his life, in his club, and accepting you as one of his family.

Things had become complicated when his marriage began to fall apart, and he’d transferred his affections to you, needing you to lean on, the lines between friendship and something more blurring as he struggled to keep it together. It had put a strain on you and Ope that you hadn’t had a chance to fix before things had come to a head with The Collective, the organisation that your brother had headed up, and the two men you loved the most had ended up in jail for Aaron’s murder. Opie had been killed in an act of bloody revenge and just like that your life had fallen apart. It had been messy and heartbreaking, and you didn’t think you’d ever fully recover from the emotional trauma of it all.

Pulling yourself together, you forced yourself to take another bite, chewing on autopilot. Your anger back then had nearly killed you, drawing you down a dark path of self-destruction. Tig had remained by your side through it all, and you’d reached out to him, at a loss for what else to do, letting him coax you into feeling again, tearing down the armour that you’d thrown up around your body, mind and heart. It was Tig that had given you the strength to break away and follow your own path, and you’d be forever thankful to him for that.

Unable to stomach any more, you set your plate to the side, reaching for the glass of whiskey that you’d poured to drink with your meal and taking a generous sip. It wasn’t often that you let yourself think of the club in this level of detail. It stirred up a longing deep in your gut for the feeling of belonging that you’d only ever experienced at Teller-Morrow: for the scent of Gemma’s musky perfume, and Chibs’ arm heavy round your shoulders as you drifted off to sleep curled against him on the couch, and long evenings spent on the clubhouse roof, chain-smoking with Jax, putting the world to rights. But tonight, for some inexplicable reason, those memories wouldn’t leave you alone.

For the next couple of hours you sat, your eyes blurring as they raked over the papers that you’d brought home from the office, while the TV chattered away in the background. The whiskey bottle steadily emptied, and, when your head began to spin, you stumbled into the bathroom to brush your teeth, stripped off your clothes and crawled into bed, letting sleep provide a sweet escape.

The buzz of your cell on the nightstand woke you, and you blinked blearily at the time, rubbing your hand over your eyes to clear your vision. Four A.M. Your mind felt thick with sleep and, when you squinted at the screen of your phone, you didn’t recognise the number.

‘Hello?’

There was a beat of silence. You considered hanging up, your thumb hovering over the little symbol that would end the call, but then a husky voice came down the line, and you forgot how to breathe.

‘Y/N? It’s me.’

‘Jax?’

‘It’s good to hear your voice, darlin’.’

‘I-I don’t.’
‘I know. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be calling you. I just didn’t know who else I could ask.’

‘Ask what?’

‘I need a favour.’ He paused as though expecting you to shut him down, but you were struggling to hold it together, unable to do anything but wait for him to go on. ‘I’m getting out - early release, good behaviour. But I can’t… I can’t go back to Charming, Y/N, not yet. I need somewhere to lay low for a little while.’

‘Y-you want to come here?’

‘I don’t want to mess up your life,’ he assured you. ‘If this is… If you can’t, I understand. I just… You’re still my best friend.’

‘Okay.’

‘What?’

‘Okay. You can come.’
Chapter 2

Jax.

Jax was coming.

Here.

It was more than your mind could handle and you’d lain awake for the rest of the night, and the several that had followed, tossing and turning as your stomach churned with anxiety.

You’d known that he’d gone back inside, of course. It hadn’t been big news as far away from Charming as you’d ended up, but it had still been worth writing about, and you’d seen the headline halfway down the page of a newspaper being read by one of your classmates, the familiar face scowling out at you in black and white. But, though your fingers had itched to reach out and read more, you’d fought the urge, telling yourself that to do so would only mean getting sucked back in to the life you’d walked away from, and so the details were sketchy in your head. You supposed that you’d hear the full story soon enough now, and that anxiety formed into a knot that refused to shift no matter how many deep breaths you forced yourself to take.

At work, your brave face was displayed in force, and if any of your co-workers had noticed your reaction to this unsettling new development, you’d be surprised. You crunched numbers, churned out reports and fed back to your superiors as efficiently and with the same cool professionalism as always, making time for a couple of lunch breaks spent shooting the breeze with Mel, and laughing at tales of Charlie’s grandchildren who’d happened to be visiting for the week. It was at home, alone, with the endless hours of evening stretching out ahead of you, that it hit you just what you’d agreed to, and you found that the whiskey bottle in the kitchen was emptying far quicker than it usually did as you counted down the days.

What had even made you say yes to him? You weren’t sure. Seven years. It had been seven years since you’d seen or spoken to anyone from the MC and now he was coming to you for help? You would have been well within your rights to tell him no, that you had no clue how he’d even managed to get hold of your number, and yet… It was Jax. Jackson Teller. Your savior, once or twice, and the best friend you’d ever had. The sound of his voice over the crackly phone line had brought wave after wave of intoxicating nostalgia crashing down over you, and the pang of longing that often haunted you had reared its head and taken control, leaving you reeling when you processed the conversation that had just taken place. It had lasted for just seconds, and yet it had turned your world upside down. Again.

The day of his intended arrival, you crawled out of bed at dawn. You hadn’t slept. You’d found yourself lost in memories of life with the club, of love and loss and friendship, and they’d carried you through until the sun glimmered faintly through the curtains, alerting you to the morning. Standing in the doorway of the spare room, you wondered why it hadn’t occurred to you until now to prepare it for your guest. In truth, you knew that you were trying to delay the inevitable, pretend that maybe, just maybe, you’d imagined the whole thing. You’d had no word from Jax since that call, and, for all you knew, his release could have been postponed or scrapped altogether. It wouldn’t have taken much, just getting caught up in some dumb fight with another inmate, and he’d have been expected
to serve out the rest of his sentence. And yet, you knew somehow that wasn’t the case. You could feel the air humming with his proximity as he drew closer, like it was readying itself, though you knew you would never be truly ready.

Sighing heavily, you ran a hand through your hair before going to war with the rickety futon that you’d found at the back of a garage sale not long after moving in. It had once been your bed, so you knew just how uncomfortable the damn thing was, but it was all you had, so, after its hinges creaked in protest at being manhandled into a sleeping position, you set about stuffing a duvet into a clean cover and fluffing up a couple of old pillows, making it up until it could almost pass for a welcoming place for Jax to rest his head. Had to be better than a prison bunk at any rate, you figured, moving some of your old clothes out of the top drawer of the dresser to make space for his things, and, giving the room one last glance over, you shrugged and turned your back on it, letting the door close behind you.

By lunchtime, you were a nervous wreck. You cursed yourself. For the days previously, you’d fought so hard to keep your composure, refusing to allow your old life to encroach on the new, your mask perfectly in place as you went about your daily tasks. But today was different. So far, you’d spilled your coffee twice, both times only narrowly avoiding important paperwork that was spread over your desk, and it had taken you far too long to put a call through to Charlie as your brain went into freefall, jabbing ineffectually at the wrong buttons on the phone until you’d finally managed the right combination to move the caller on. You knew your presence was doing more harm than good, and when you approached the door to your boss’ office just after two o’clock, knocking lightly, the look on his face as you cautiously asked about taking off early was almost relieved. He gestured for you to take a seat, which you did, perching on the edge of the chair, wringing your hands and waiting for him to speak.

‘Y/N, is everything okay?’

‘It’s fine,’ you lied, shooting him a tight smile that you knew didn’t reach your eyes. ‘I just- I have a doctor’s appointment that I totally forgot about until like… now, really. So, I thought I’d ask if I could knock off a little early. I don’t want to miss it or anything, but if it’s a problem-’

‘No, no problem,’ he reassured you, his own smile kind, though his brow was creased with concern. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, you haven’t seemed yourself all week. I mean, your work hasn’t suffered, of course, but I’m worried about you, personally. You know you can talk to me if you need-’

‘I don’t.’ His frown deepened as you cut him off and you fidgeted uncomfortably. ‘Sorry, Charlie, I didn’t mean to… I just haven’t been sleeping well, that’s all. And I’ve been drinking too much coffee to compensate. I mean, look at me!’ You held out your hand so he could see the tremor of your fingers - nothing to do with caffeine, you knew, but it helped to make your point. ‘I just need the weekend to get myself together and I’ll be good, I promise.’

‘Well, alright then.’ He nodded slowly, still slightly disbelieving. You couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t your best performance, but all you could focus on was the clock ticking steadily onwards. You weren’t sure exactly when Jax would arrive, but, by your calculations, you figured it would be around five, and the closer the time came, the more you found yourself succumbing to the tension in your joints, holding yourself rigid, as if you could freeze time through sheer power of will. It hadn’t worked yet. ‘You make sure you get some rest then, okay? No taking work home with you tonight.
And if you need anything, you know who to call.’

‘I will. Thank you.’

You climbed to your feet, not looking back as you hurried to your desk and gathered your things. Coat, bag, keys, phone… You patted down your pockets to check your cell was where it should be before slipping out into the corridor and making for the stairs.

‘What time do you call this?’ Mel teased with a raised eyebrow as you attempted to sneak past her, hanging up her call at just the wrong moment. ‘Charlie closing the office early? Because I didn’t get that memo!’

‘No.’ You crossed to the reception desk, knowing that you’d never hear the end of it if you continued with your hasty exit. ‘I’ve got an appointment, that’s all.’

‘What sort of appointment?’

‘Doctor,’ you told her, sticking to your lie. ‘Nothing serious, but I don’t wanna miss it.’

‘Okay.’ She flicked her hair over her shoulder, ignoring the reception line when it rang again. ‘Well, we’re heading out later on tonight if you wanna join us. Could be fun. You remember fun, right?’

‘You remember fun, don’t you, Jax? Letting loose? Remember how you used to do that? Remember how you pushed me into Opie’s arms when you were trying to use me to get at your wife, huh? You remember that? And remember how Opie died? Yeah, he died! That’s right! To protect me! And now I’m alone and nothing’s the same and I hate everything!’

The words you’d screamed in your best friend’s face one of the last times you’d spoken echoed in your ears, and you swallowed hard, shaking your head in an attempt to rid yourself of the memory. Mel took that as a swift decline of her invitation and rolled her eyes.

‘Suit yourself. You’re gonna die old and alone, you know?’

‘I know.’ You didn’t take her words to heart. You knew she worried. ‘Have a good one, Mel. I’ll catch up with you on Monday.’

‘Yeah, whatever.’

Your intention had been to get home, shower, change, and mentally prepare yourself for Jax’s arrival, but instead you found yourself pacing the floor of your living room, jumping at the roar of every engine that rumbled past and working yourself up into a tangled bundle of nerves. Your nails, usually filed and neatly painted, were bitten down to the quicks, and you drew blood as you continued to gnaw at your thumb. A bowl of pasta sauce was defrosting on the counter, and you busied yourself for a moment, carrying it to the fridge and sliding it inside, but that was over far too quickly, and then you were back to pacing again. The click of your heels was muffled by the carpet, growing quieter still when you crossed the thick rug in the centre of the room, and you became oblivious to the pinching sensation in your toes as you moved, growing numb with the repetitive motion.
And then a knock came at the door.

You froze. You knew that if you didn’t answer he would just knock again, but you couldn’t bring your feet to move anymore, as though your pacing had exhausted your limbs, turning them into lead, so that you were stuck in the spot where you stood, staring out into the corridor. Your eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. Ten minutes to four. He was early. Ordinarily, you wouldn’t even be home from work right now, and yet here you were. Like it was meant to be. Like you were still so in tune with him that you’d known that you’d need to be here waiting.

Slowly, you dragged yourself towards the front door, pausing with your fingers on the handle, taking a deep breath, though your lungs still burned as though it wasn’t enough. You could practically feel him, standing there, just a couple of feet away. Jax. You pressed down, tugging the door open, your eyes locking on a pair so intensely blue and filled with pain that the familiarity made your heart shatter instantly.

For a moment, neither one of you moved. The past hung in the air between you, thick with unspoken accusation and broken promises, and his fingers tightened around the bag he clutched, knuckles going white as he waited for you to speak. And then the bulk he carried dropped to the floor and he closed the space between you, gathering you up in his arms as you wrapped your own around his neck and clung to him.

‘Y/N.’ He didn’t say anything else. Just your name. But just his voice brought tears to your eyes, and, when he dropped his grasp on your waist lower, you let him haul you up his body, wrapping your legs around him so he could stoop to retrieve his things and step inside, the door closing quietly behind him. ‘It’s good to see you, darlin’.’

‘God, Jax,’ you spoke at last, though your voice was muffled as you buried your face in the crook of his neck. ‘I can’t believe you’re here. I just… I can’t believe you’re really here.’

He held you for a long while, listening as you sniffled against him, reluctant to relinquish your hold even as he let you slide back to the floor. The scent of him took you back - leather and cigarettes and engine oil - and you inhaled deeply before finally stepping away to look at him, wiping your fingers under your eyes to wipe away any stray tears. He was just as you remembered. Older, obviously, the lines on his forehead a little deeper, his hair a little shorter than the last time you’d seen him. You’d forgotten how tall he was and how small he made you feel, and that train of thought immediately led on to Opie, leaving you fighting for self control all over again.

As you were studying him, you found that he was studying you in just as much detail, his brow furrowing as he took in this version of you that he didn’t recognise. Your hair was still scraped back into a neat bun, your make-up neutral, your suit trousers and shirt fitted and professional. You weren’t the same girl that had driven away from T.M. in your late lover’s pick-up truck, and you could see him struggling with that reality, even as you reached up to pull your hair free of its tie.

‘You must’ve made good time. You’re earlier than I expected.’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve been on the road since they let me out,’ he admitted. ‘Didn’t seem much point in paying for a motel when I figured I wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway.’

‘Makes sense.’ You didn’t pry in to why he wouldn’t be sleeping. It wasn’t your business anymore, and you weren’t sure you wanted to know just yet. Instead, you stepped to one side, motioning for him to grab his bag and leading him back down the corridor. ‘So, this is the guest room. Or your room now, I guess. It’s pretty uncomfortable, I’m sorry. I don’t get a lot of visitors.’

‘It’s better than what I’m used to.’ He slung his bag down on the bed, running his eyes around the
room, the towel you’d laid out for him to use, the mirror that was gathering dust on top of the dresser.
‘It’s great, thank you. I know… You’re doing me a favour just by taking me in, Y/N. You have no idea.’

You returned his smile, still wary, still unsure, awkward after your emotional reunion, before turning your back on him and gesturing at the doorway across the hall. ‘That’s the bathroom. Living room’s through here…’ You led the way, painfully aware of him following you, the size of him even more imposing when you kicked off your heels beside the couch, slowly making yourself comfortable, morphing back in to the girl he knew. ‘So, just make yourself at home, I guess. You want a drink or something?’

‘Yeah, thanks.’

‘Beer?’

He nodded and you grabbed one from the fridge, taking the top off with practised ease and passing it to him as he settled himself on the couch. ‘You not having one?’

‘Actually…’ You hesitated, wondering if it would be rude to disappear for a little while, but deciding that, ultimately, you needed to if you were gonna make it through the night. The dizzying rollercoaster of emotions of just the past ten minutes had drained you, and you felt uncomfortable now in your work clothes. ‘I might go jump in the shower, if that’s okay. Sorry, I just… I need-’

‘It’s okay. I get it.’

‘Alright then.’

You spun on your heel and left, wondering what in the hell you’d been thinking by allowing Jackson Teller back into your life.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Wow, so this chapter ended up being waaaay longer than I intended. I thought about cutting it in half but, honestly, I couldn’t really find a good place to split it, and this whole scene is like, super-important, so I figured best just to leave it as it is. Consequently, next week’s update is likely to be a little shorter, but variety is the spice of life! Thanks for reading!

Jax was slumped against the arm of the couch when you stepped back into the living room, his beer bottle balanced on his knee as he ran one finger around the rim, seemingly deep in thought. You’d taken your time showering, needing the solitude to get your head straight after the cascade of emotion that his arrival had unleashed upon you, but now, back in your baggy tracksuit bottoms and tank top, your hair hanging in damp rats’ tails around your face, you felt more comfortable, ready to face him and start rebuilding a friendship that had been lost somewhere in the process of moving on from the devastation you’d left in Charming. Looking at him now, with his attention elsewhere, you found yourself noticing little details that you’d missed before - the dark circles beneath his eyes, the pallid cast to his skin, the tightness in his jaw that meant he was gritting his teeth. He looked stressed to hell, and you longed to reach out to him, to stroke away the telltale signs painted over his face, but instead you crept further into the room, taking a seat at his side. He finally registered your presence as you tucked your feet beneath you, shooting him a shy smile. His gaze raked over you, taking in your changed appearance, the tension in his shoulders visibly ebbing away when he found that he was finally facing the girl he recognised.

‘Better?’

You nodded. ‘Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to- I just needed-’

‘It’s okay. I get it. This is weird for both of us, darlin’.’ A crooked smile quirked his lips and he shook his head, a deep laugh rumbling from his chest. ‘Y’know, I was gonna tell you how much you’ve changed. When you opened that door, I thought I had the wrong place at first. But now… You’re still the same old Y/N I remember.’

‘Guess I am.’ You returned his grin, running a hand through your hair and sinking deeper into the couch cushions, remembering for the first time how easy it was to be in his company. ‘Can’t run from who you really are. I figured that out pretty quick.’

‘That right?’

‘Yeah. Trouble seems to find me wherever I go. I’m like a magnet for it.’

He raised an eyebrow at you, hovering somewhere between curiosity and concern, though his worry won out in the end. ‘You got trouble here?’

‘No,’ you reassured him, quickly. ‘I, er… I’m a little more choosy about the company I keep these days.’ That damn eyebrow rose even higher as he nodded slowly, and you cursed yourself, backtracking when you realised how that sounded. ‘I mean, not that I- I know nothing that happened back there was your fault, any of the club really… I just… Honestly, I spend most of my
Understanding flashed across Jax’s face, and his thumbnail began to worry at the label of his beer, his gaze focused on the condensation that trailed down the side of the bottle. ‘Nobody to lose, right?’

‘Right.’ You swallowed hard, determined not to let your mind drift back to who you’d lost before, though you found his memory lingered more powerfully with Jax’s presence in your home. Clearing your throat, you changed the subject, trying to steer the conversation in a direction that might give you some of the answers you felt you needed now that he was going to be camping out in your spare room. ‘Speaking of, how’re Tara and the boys? Must’ve been tough for them with you inside for so long.’

A humourless chuckle escaped him, and he pushed himself to his feet, pulling a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his shirt. ‘Tara was gone long before I got myself locked up. Took the boys and moved to Oregon.’

‘Oh, God, Jax, I’m sorry. I didn’t—’

‘It’s for the best. I can see that now.’ He pulled a smoke from the pack, offering you one, though you shook your head to decline. ‘Back then it felt like everything was falling apart but… things got messy back in Charming. Bloody. People were dying. It was better that she got them away from that. They deserve better.’

‘You didn’t follow them up there?’

He lit up without asking whether you’d mind, the bitter tang of smoke hanging heavy in the air as he inhaled deeply, the end of the cigarette glowing orange for a second before he let his hand fall to his side. ‘Thought about it. But…’ Another toke, his face creasing with a frown. ‘I couldn’t leave the club. And me and Tara had been over for a long time. You know that, probably better than anybody. I intended to go up and see Abel and Thomas, but… Well, it didn’t happen before…’

He tailed off, turning his back on you and wandering across the room to the balcony doors that looked out over the parking lot. The tension that had left him at the sudden familiarity of you without your suit and heels returned tenfold, his spine stiffening as he lost himself in his thoughts.

You’d thought he might offer his story without prompting, hoped you might get away without prying for information, but when he remained silent for several long moments, you found that you couldn’t take it anymore.

‘What the hell happened, Jax? Why were you in jail? Why have you run to me now? Why can’t you go home?’ He cast you a pointed look over his shoulder as you sighed heavily, the weight of your questions hanging in the air between you. You weren’t sure you had the right to ask him about any of it, not after you’d run right when he’d likely needed you most - after all, he’d been grieving for Ope just as much as you had - and yet, surely, his presence in your home, in your life, after all these years gave you some sort of claim on the truth. ‘I’m sorry, I know it’s none of my business, but… I just… I’m worried. You look… Tired. Honestly, you look kinda broken.’

‘Y/N, you don’t wanna know, trust me.’

‘Teller, c’mon, this is me.’ You eased yourself up from your seat, following his path across the room and resting a tentative hand on his shoulder, pulling him gently round to face you. ‘You told me I’m still your best friend. So, talk to me. Please.’

‘Y/N—’ He was still trying to fight it, the desire to break down and let it all come flooding out. You
could still read him like you had done all those years ago, and you knew it was that same pull, that same trust, that he was warring with now.

‘Jax. You called me up after 7 years asking me to let you back in. And I said yes. Without thinking. Without any hesitation. But I need to know why.’

He sucked in another hit of nicotine, turning his focus to the floor as you continued to stare up at him beseechingly, and you could spot the exact moment that his resolve crumbled, the quirky furnishings your apartment disappearing as he was transported back to the clubhouse with you, like it used to be, up on the roof sharing secrets, away from his brothers downstairs.

Still, his voice was strained when he began to speak. ‘What you did, you and Tig, burning down the Collective’s HQ. It started a war.’

The words hit you like a bullet to the gut and you wrapped an arm around yourself instinctively, as though you could protect yourself from the impact of that single statement. ‘What? No. How?’

He tilted his head to one side as if searching for a way to soften the blow, but there wasn’t one. How could there be? What you’d done had blown back on all of the people you loved and there was no way to make that okay. ‘For a long time they tried to put it on us. It made sense after Ope, but they could never get it to stick. So, in the end, they started looking elsewhere, for other people to pin the blame on. They decided, for some reason, that it must’ve been the Chinese. Lin was looking to move South, start running arms and drugs in Collective territory.’

‘So, they went after Lin? Then what happened?’

‘They still didn’t have the evidence they needed to move on it in any real way. The guys high up in the organisation, they’re not stupid. They weren’t gonna risk moving on Lin until they had proof. So, we tried to give it to them.’

‘You set him up?’ The lump in your throat was making it hard to speak, and your voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper as you fought to process the fallout that Jax had had to deal with.

‘Tried. He found out what we were doing and he came after us in a big way. This conflict… It’s touched every group in Northern Cali.’ Your horrified gasp caused him to hesitate, but he continued as you collapsed back onto the couch, shaking your head in disbelief. ‘The club, the blacks, the wetbacks… We’ve all lost people. And the Collective were just sitting up there on their pedestals watching as the streets tore themselves apart.’

‘Jax-’

‘They don’t like to get their hands dirty if they can avoid it, and the explosion… It made the news, drew attention to their operation. So, they found a new outlet to come at us through. Damon Pope.’

‘Pope?’ For a beautiful second of relief, your confusion outweighed your guilt, as you tried to place the name in your memory, finally pinning it to a black gangster that pretty much controlled the streets in Oakland. ‘But… he’s… I mean, he’s pretty powerful in his own right, right? He let the Collective use him as their little bitch boy?’

Jax smirked at your choice of phrase, though the truth was far from amusing. ‘For every person Pope had in his pocket, the Collective had someone higher up the ladder. Their boss, their boss’ boss. He needed their cooperation to keep his business going.’

‘That’s a lot of past tense, Teller,’ you couldn’t help but point out, and he settled himself back down beside you, dropping the butt of his spent smoke into the empty bottle that he’d set on the floor.
‘Pope’s dead.’

‘Oh. You-’ The accusation hovered on your lips, but he confirmed your suspicions before you could voice it.

‘I did it. Pinned it on Clay, but the police moved too soon and I went down as an accessory.’

‘Clay?’ Your brain was struggling to keep up now and you shook your head to clear it. ‘But- Why? Why would you do that?’

‘It’s a long story. He… He had a lot to answer for. He was working against the club, trying to line his own pockets before he stepped down. He got people killed. Trust me, it was for the best.’

‘Shit.’ You couldn’t even imagine everything that Jax had been up against, and you’d left him to struggle alone. For the first time, you found yourself questioning whether you’d done the right thing in leaving, and yet you were sure now that, if you hadn’t, you may well have ended up dead.

Jax continued, seemingly needing to get the whole story off of his chest now that he’d opened up.

‘Now Pope’s second’s stepped up. A man named August Marks. Up till now he’s been making the right noises, playing his cards close to his chest, avoiding making any alliances until he knows what his next move is. He’s a smart man. He’s doing just enough to keep everyone happy, make them think he’s on their side, but it’s only a matter of time before the walls start closing in, and, when they do, he ain’t gonna be looking to do the club any favours.’

‘That’s why you ran?’ Everything was starting to fall into place. Jax had some of the most dangerous people in California watching his every move, just waiting for him to slip up. No wonder he looked so wrung out.

‘Marks knows it was me that took down Pope. Now I’m out, I’m pretty sure he’s gonna have his guys pushing for revenge. Behind bars I had protection, but out here… The last thing I wanna do is bring any more drama down on the club. They’ve suffered enough.’

Silence fell as he came to the end of his explanation, and you replayed it in your head, combing over the details, unable to believe that a decision you’d made when you’d been torn up inside by anger and grief could have caused so much damage. One particular fact was sticking in your mind though, refusing to shift, and your voice shook as you forced yourself to ask the hardest question. ‘Y-you’ve lost people? Others?’

He didn’t want to tell you. You could feel it, see it in the way his jaw dropped just a little, his eyes flicking between yours as though searching for a way out. But you had to know. ‘Bobby. Piney. Few prospects and transfers, guys you wouldn’t know. Clay went down in Stockton. Feds tried to get Juice to rat. He’s fallen off the map right now. We reached out to our own contacts when we got wind of how bad things might get, got on board with the Galindo cartel, but that’s proved to be more trouble than it’s worth. And the Irish…’ A growl of frustration caught in his throat at the thought of the IRA and the extra violence you could imagine they’d added to the mix. ‘I tried to move the club out of guns, figured keeping our noses clean while shit hit the fan would be the best move, but they’re breathing down our necks. Like I said, everything’s falling apart.’

Bobby, the man who’d baked you muffins when you’d first arrived and steered you away from some of the less savoury associates that frequented the clubhouse; Piney, the old boy who’d treated you like his own, watching out for you with his usual silent stoicism; Juice, the guy who’d tried to help you, despite the awkward position that it had put him in. A sob fought to escape you, but you choked it down. You couldn’t let yourself fall apart, like the rest of Jax’s world. It was your fault. It was all your fault. ‘I-I don’t know what to say. I… God, I’m sorry.’
‘Please, don’t.’ He leant towards you, reaching out to rest a large hand on your knee, though you shivered at his touch. ‘This isn’t your fault. I didn’t wanna bring this to you, but I didn’t know where else to go. Now, being here, I can see that you’ve built a life for yourself, a real life. The last thing I want to do is drag you down with me.’

‘You’re not,’ you insisted. After all, you knew now that offering him a haven away from the chaos was the least you could do. ‘You won’t. Besides, what’s the point of any of this if I can’t help out a friend, right? I’ve never forgotten that you saved my life, Jax. You and Opie… I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the two of you.’

‘That what the new ink’s about?’

Out of your work clothes, the ink that adorned your skin could be seen more easily, and the new addition had unsurprisingly caught his eye. A simple tattoo, just one word, marked across the soft skin of your forearm, just beneath the crook of your elbow. hOpe. A tribute to the man you’d loved and what he’d given you.

‘Yeah.’ You traced a fingertip over the italic lettering, the capital O standing tall amidst the rest. Nobody in your world but you knew the significance, but that didn’t seem to matter when you intentionally chose outfits that would hide the signs of your past. ‘I struggled when I first left. Bounced from town to town, job to job. Couldn’t decide what I was doing or where I wanted to go. I was just… lost. It’s not easy being alone. Getting this… It reminded me that he’s always with me. I mean, I’m not religious, you know that. Don’t really believe in… anything. But he sacrificed himself for me and that’s gotta mean something, right? So, when I look at this, it gives me the drive to keep going. It’s what he would’ve wanted.’

‘I think he would’ve been proud of you.’ Jax was on his feet again, drifting around the room, inspecting the few framed photographs that stood on your shelves. ‘You got your degree?’

‘Yep.’ You moved to his side, grinning at the sight of yourself in your gown with your classmates. ‘Worked my ass off for it, but I did it. Don’t think I slept for years trying to juggle studying with staying afloat.’

‘And what do you do now?’

‘I’m with a small foundation in the centre of town.’ Now that you’d grown more comfortable in Jax’s presence, you found that you were embarrassed by your behaviour in the office earlier that day. It was out of character, and the last thing you wanted to do was let your carefully put together mask slip, even an inch. You’d have to work extra hard to make up for it next week. ‘We do a lot of work with homeless kids, young people who’ve gotten caught up in drugs or violence. I’m not on the front lines. We have welfare staff for that - they go out doing outreach, that kinda thing. I mostly try and forge links with local businesses, food banks, hostels… Anyone that might be able to help us help them, y’know?’

Jax’s smile was laced with approval. ‘Sounds like good work.’

‘It is. I love it. It’s… It’s kinda all I have here.’

‘But you got your own place?’ He gestured round the apartment, your home, your hideaway. ‘I mean, that’s… It’s good.’

‘It is. It’s my haven,’ you agreed. ‘But all I do is go to work then come home and… work some more. Some nights, I sit here and I think, I could just climb in my truck and go.’ It seemed important, somehow now, that he knew that your life wasn’t perfect. Even though you’d made your
clean break and built yourself up from the ground, you still struggled, almost every day.

‘Go where?’

‘Home. Back to Charming.’ You shrugged. ‘It’s the only place I ever really felt like I belonged, and I miss you guys. You and Chibs and Tig. I just… I miss having family around.’

He fixed you with a pointed look. ‘We’re still your family. Doesn’t matter how far away you are.’

‘But it’s not the same if I can’t… If I can’t reach out and…’ Unable to help yourself with him standing so close, you raised your hand to cup his cheek, stroking over the coarse stubble, your eyes locking with his. The intensity behind the piercing blue took your breath away, yet you found yourself frozen there, in the moment. Once again, you felt that you’d been transported backwards, that you were standing on top of a hill overlooking the town, with Jax’s arms around you and his mouth hovering over yours. But that time it had ended in pain and betrayal, and that thought brought you crashing back down to earth. You pulled away. ‘I-I should get dinner. You hungry?’

‘Yeah.’ He followed you as you turned away and headed into the adjoining kitchen, busying yourself fetching a pan from the cupboard and filling it with water. ‘So, the truck I saw out front. That’s yours?’

‘Yeah, it is.’ You set the pan on the stove and turned on the burner. ‘Recognise it?’

‘Course I do. Can’t believe the old thing’s still running.’

‘Yeah, well, I can’t stand the idea of trading it in. It’s the last piece of Ope I have.’

You heard Jax sigh, felt his breath ghost over your bare shoulder as you passed him to reach the fridge, though you forced yourself to keep moving. You couldn’t let yourself be close to him when the conversation was focused on Opie. ‘I miss him too.’

‘I know.’

‘I feel like he was always my pull back to true north,’ he went on. ‘Like, he helped me see the right thing to do. Since he’s been gone, every decision I make seems to be the wrong one.’

You knew what he meant, had felt that way yourself several times, although it sounded like he’d been caught between a rock and a hard place since you’d left town. ‘It doesn’t sound like there were many right ones to be made.’

‘Maybe not. But when you have people’s blood on your hands, it makes you question everything.’ You could feel the burden of his guilt. It emanated from him, filling the room, and you wished you could take it away, but your own was too intense in that moment for you to even attempt it.

‘I can see that. I kinda feel that now too.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What Tig and I did… It was dumb. I knew that. But I never imagined…’ The water on the stovetop was beginning to bubble, and you hastily tipped in some pasta, replacing the lid to let it simmer, grateful to have a task as you faced up to your demons.

‘It’s not on you. You were grieving. I’d considered doing the same thing.’

‘But you weren’t stupid enough to do it.’
‘Honestly, if you’d come to me instead of Tig, it would’ve been hard to say no.’ Jax ran two hands through his hair, slicking it back, his lips drawn into a thin line.

‘So, you haven’t busted his balls about it?’

‘Of course I have. But he’s still in. Things were tense enough before. It was always gonna kick off at some point.’

You supposed that was one way to look at it - the club was always caught up in some kind of conflict, it seemed - but you still felt like you needed to justify your actions. ‘Y’know, when Ope died, Tig was the only one that I felt really treated me the same as he always did. That’s why I went to him. I felt like everyone else was expecting me to break down at any moment. I didn’t mean to shut you out.’

‘It’s okay. I was keeping my distance anyway, as much as I could bear it. Gemma was on my back. Soon as she got wind that Tara was thinking about taking off, she was pushing me to go back to playing happy families. Anything to keep those boys in Charming. Plus, I know what I did to you and Ope. I was stupid and selfish, and I didn’t know how to begin to make that up to you.’

You’d pretty much suspected that to be the case, but it still stung to hear Jax admit that Gemma had pushed you aside so casually. It hadn’t been long before that she’d been trying to coax you into hooking up with her son and tempting him to kick Tara to the kerb. ‘It wasn’t your fault, not really. I mean, yeah, you were a jackass but I kept running to you every time you called. Ope had every right to be mad. I just…’ You shook your head, pouring the sauce into another pan and setting it on the heat. ‘You saved my life, Jax, picking me up off the side of the road, taking me in. I felt like I owed you so much, and yeah, there was a time back there when I wished more than anything that you’d realise you wanted me instead of Tara. My loyalties were so divided even I didn’t know what I wanted, until I lost it. I loved him. I really did. I told him but… I just hope he believed it.’

Jax’s expression was kind when you finally found yourself with nothing left to do but wait, turning to face him with the ghost of past hurt swimming in your eyes. ‘Well, he loved you. He gave up everything for you. That’s gotta mean something, darlin’.’

‘I guess.’

‘It did. When they offered him that deal, Y/N, he didn’t hesitate. He took it without even considering what that might mean for him, for the club, for his family. I’m not so sure I could’ve done that, but Ope… He’d have done anything for you.’

‘I know.’ And you did, truthfully. It was why you had his name inked on your skin, why you still drove that stupid truck, and why you forced yourself to get up on the mornings when you wanted nothing more than to hide beneath the covers and let the world go on without you. ‘I just wish we’d had more time.’

You ate in front of the TV, both drained by the revelations of the conversation you’d shared and the emotions that had been stirred up in such a short space of time. It had been easy to fall into a companionable silence, and, before you knew it, it had gotten late and the day that you’d been anticipating for so long was coming to an end. The decision to call it a night had been mutual, and you tidied up as Jax excused himself to use the bathroom, readying himself for his first night on that
damn uncomfortable futon. The idea had hovered in your mind that perhaps you could just offer him a place in your bed - it was big enough, after all - but you knew now that you needed a little space to process what you’d learnt about the past seven years. Despite your exhaustion, somehow you knew you wouldn’t be sleeping.

It was only as you were saying goodnight and readying yourself to close your bedroom door and let the onslaught hit, that another thought occurred to you.

‘Jax, can I ask you something?’

‘Sure, darlin’.’ He was ready for bed now, clad only in a loose pair of cotton pyjama bottoms that hung low on his hips. In less distressing circumstances the sight might have stirred something within you, but your head was far from that place right now.

‘If you’re out early, you’re on parole, right? Don’t you have to sign something to say that you’re not gonna leave the state, check in with a parole officer, not carry a weapon… that kinda thing?’

‘Yeah,’ he admitted. ‘Yeah, that was one of the conditions of getting out.’

‘So, you really shouldn’t be here?’

‘There are only three people who know where I am. And none of them are gonna rat.’

‘But they could lock you up again, Jax!’

The murmur that reached your ears just before his door clicked closed sent a spike of pain through your heart. ‘Honestly, I can’t help but think that might be for the best.’
Chapter 4

It was almost noon by the time Jax stumbled from your guest room the following day, blonde hair sticking up at all angles. The sight was so heart-wrenchingly familiar that you had to stop yourself from moving forward to wrap your arms around his waist, head seeking out the dip of his collarbone where it used to fit so comfortably. Instead, you nodded towards the bathroom, arching an eyebrow as he grinned at you sheepishly. ‘Go. Shower. I’ll make coffee.’

You’d already worked your way through three mugs of steaming caffeine since you’d risen at sunrise. After the revelations of the previous evening, sleep had been almost impossible, and you’d tossed and turned through the night, trying to silence your conscience as it preyed on your fears. So many dead, so much blood spilt, lives turned upside down, and it was all because of you. It had been seven long years since you’d had to deal with that sort of chaos, since you’d allowed yourself to pay it any mind at all, and you weren’t quite sure what to do with the knowledge. It sat in your gut, the sickening truth turning your stomach, and when you’d finally crawled from beneath the covers, your limbs had felt heavy with it, as if you dragged clunking iron shackles with you when you tried to move. It had felt so good at the time, watching the Collective’s Headquarters go up in flames, deafening explosions splitting the air as the sky burned orange, but now you wondered if the small amount of closure it had given you had really been worth it. Of course, it hadn’t. Not by any small amount.

With another mug cradled in your hands, and one left cooling on the counter for Jax when he was ready, you wandered over to the balcony doors and stared out into the noon sunshine. Down below you could see Opie’s truck, parked where you’d left it, the constant reminder that, at one time in your life, you’d had something good. Beside it now was a shiny black motorcycle, and you felt a small tug of recognition despite the fact that it was unlikely to be the same bike you’d ridden on all those years ago. Jax had a taste for Harleys - most of the MC did - but, honestly, as long as you could feel the thrum of the engine vibrating through you and the rush of air as you flew along the country roads, you didn’t pay much attention to make and model.

‘She’s a beauty, huh?’

You’d barely heard Jax approach until he spoke, and you glanced over your shoulder to see him padding across the room towards you, his feet bare, though he’d thrown on a pair of jeans and a too-big t-shirt. Behind him on the couch you could see a plaid shirt waiting to be slipped over the top, but for now he sipped on his drink, coming to stand at your side.

‘She sure is. New?’

‘Old. That’s the bike I was riding back when we first met. Guys tuned her up for me when I was inside.’

‘Wow. That’s…’

‘Yeah, I know you don’t care. Whaddya ya say we take her out for a spin later on though, huh? Must’ve been a while since you climbed on the back of one of those.’

‘Too long,’ you admitted, and he smiled, wrapping an arm around your shoulders and pulling you into a hug. The soapy-clean scent of him mixed with the rich aroma of coffee, and you inhaled deeply, letting yourself relax. There was nothing you could do about the war that you’d started, about the people that you’d both lost. It was out of your hands and had been for a long time. But you could enjoy this moment right now, with your best friend at your side and the freedom of the
open road calling to you. ‘Let’s do it.’

You thought you remembered the rush of being on the back of a bike. You thought you could still feel the thrill of the ride, the solidity of the warm body that you clung to, and the adrenaline that coursed through your veins as you sped along, weaving through traffic and leaving it behind, obscured in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes. But the reality was so much better than the memories that crept into your dreams. You could smell the leather of Jax’s kutte, feel the soft cotton of his shirt and the burn of the wind against your bare arms, and you couldn’t keep the smile from your face as the tyres ate up the miles, doing a circuit around town before turning off onto a narrow lane that snaked through the forest. There were no other cars to slow you down, nobody around to hear the whoop of excitement that escaped you as you tipped your head back, lost in the epic sense of freedom that you didn’t even realise that you’d missed. Just you, Jax and the open road, and it was incredible.

When he finally rolled the bike to a halt outside a rundown little bar propped at the top of the bank next to the river, he was laughing. ‘God, I missed that.’

‘When you were inside?’

He shook his head. ‘Even before. Riding for fun, I mean. Not having to watch my back, look over my shoulder the whole time.’

You nodded in understanding. When you’d first left Charming, you’d found yourself doing the same thing, constantly checking that you weren’t being followed, waiting for the Collective to track you down once again. ‘Well, now you’ve got nothing but time, right?’

He led the way into the building, his hand coming to rest on the small of your back when you reached the bar. It was quiet for a weekend afternoon, you thought, but then it was off the beaten track, and probably a little squalid for the taste of most of the locals.

‘Two beers.’ The bartender fetched Jax’s order with the unhurried lethargy of somebody who wasn’t getting paid nearly enough, but the bottles were icy cold when you reached for them and, when you made your way out through a side door onto a small terrace that looked out over the water, the seating was warm from the sun.

You settled yourself down with a sigh of contentment, kicking your feet up onto the table and tilting your face up to the sky. You heard a hum of contentment from your side, and you glanced over at Jax, who had mirrored your movements, to see him grinning at you. ‘What?’

‘You know, we could be sitting outside the clubhouse right now. I swear, it’s like being in a time warp, being here with you.’

‘Ha!’ You shook your head, taking another sip from your drink. ‘Yeah, well, speak for yourself, Teller. I feel a hell of a lot older than I did back then.’

‘You look good though,’ he shot back. ‘Like this at least. Didn’t think much of the whole buttoned-up, secretary look you were rocking when I got here last night.’

‘It’s professional.’
‘So, what? You can’t send emails and stick numbers into spreadsheets with your hair down?’

‘I can. I choose not to.’

‘Why?’ He was teasing you, you knew, enjoying the challenging edge to your voice. It reminded the both of you of the easy friendship that you used to have, and you were happy to play along. It was certainly better than the tension and truths of last night.

‘Because I’m a different person than I used to be. This is the new me, okay? I work hard, and I look the part. You don’t like it, I can point you to the nearest motel in town.’ You arched an eyebrow at him, prompting a burst of laughter. ‘This is the real world, Jax. I have to live in it. I don’t have the club watching out for me anymore. I’ve got bills to pay and a reputation to maintain.’

‘And your ink’s gonna get in the way of that?’

‘Maybe.’ You shrugged. ‘It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.’

‘I get it,’ he admitted, the playful tone gone from his voice now as his eyes roamed over you, taking in your ripped jeans and tank top, and the hair that you brushed back from your face. ‘I meant what I said last night, Y/N. I’m proud of you. Ope would be too. But personally, I prefer this you. The real you.’

You swallowed hard at the sincerity in his tone, before altering the direction of the conversation, shifting the focus back to him before things could get too intense. Jax had an ability to zero in on your insecurities unlike anybody else, and it made you feel weak and a little unstable. Better not to give him the chance. ‘What about you? I mean, you’re not going back to Charming, but is that a forever thing or are you just… taking a break?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know.’ He sighed, swinging his legs off the table so he could lean forward and rest his elbows on his knees, taking a long pull of his beer. ‘I haven’t really got that far. I just needed somewhere to lay low while I figured it out.’

‘And how long do you think that will take?’

‘You trying to get rid of me?’ His lips were quirked lazily, but you could sense the uncertainty behind the question, and you hurried to shut it down.

‘No, of course not. I-I… Having you here is…’ You couldn’t find the words. ‘It’s knocked me for six, if I’m honest, and I kinda feel like I’m stuck in a tailspin right now, but… I did miss you, Jax, and you know you can stay as long as you want.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I just wanted to know what your plans are, that’s all. I mean, are you looking for work? Are the MC still waiting on you? What about the boys?’

‘Those are a lot of big questions.’

‘Just something to think on, I guess.’

‘Y/N… I don’t know how to exist without the club. That’s the truth. I mean, I’m a sloppy mechanic. I have a problem with authority figures. I keep crazy hours. I’m not sure I can hack the nine to five, you know? It’s something I need to figure out.’

‘You’re selling yourself short.’
'Maybe. Either way, Tig and Chibs know where I am. They know I need some time. They’re holding things together while I figure out my next move. And the boys...’ Visible pain flashed across his face at the thought of his sons, and you reached out a hand to rest on his arm, squeezing gently, seeking to reassure him that you were there. ‘They’re better off without me. I don’t want this life for them.’

‘Jax-’

‘No. Tara was right. That’s the one thing I’m sure about right now.’ His eyes met yours when he turned in your direction, his own hand covering yours as his face expression softened. ‘Well, that... And you.’

Two weeks later, you arrived home to find Jax pacing the living room with his cellphone pressed to his ear, a deep frown furrowing his brow. He mouth was drawn in a thin line, and you could see the telltale tick in his jaw that indicated his frustration. Whoever was on the other end of the line was telling him things he didn’t want to hear, you’d recognise that look anywhere, and you backtracked to the bedroom to give him his privacy.

Tossing your bag on the bed and stripping out of your work clothes, you tugged on your pyjama bottoms, collapsing onto the mattress with a tired sigh. You’d fallen into a comfortable routine with Jax almost immediately, and you really did enjoy his company, his presence in your home making it feel more welcoming that it ever had before. However, you had a tendency to stay up late into the night, talking and indulging in far too much whiskey, and it was taking its toll on your work. You were arriving each morning feeling drained and exhausted, and leaving in the evening feeling even worse, though you raced home more eagerly than you’d care to admit. It didn’t help that your sleep was plagued by nightmares, of the Collective, of those you loved in the club being gunned down by faceless attackers, and of Opie, his eyes locked on yours as they dimmed, his life slipping away. You didn’t mention them to Jax. You knew he carried a burden of guilt for the people the MC had lost, and you didn’t want to add to it. You’d asked for the truth and he’d given it. It was up to you to deal with the fall out. You just needed to keep your life in tact while you did that.

When you finally emerged, shuffling out into the corridor and heading for the kitchen, Jax was perched on couch with his head in his hands. Immediately, you went to his side, the barriers between you having long since collapsed as you learnt how to be friends again. ‘Hey, what is it?’

‘The club.’

‘More trouble?’

‘The Irish. Chibs is doing the best he can, but they’re insisting they talk with me. Won’t deal with anybody else.’

‘But Galen hates you,’ you remembered, and Jax let out a humourless laugh.

‘Yeah, well, with Clay gone, he’s had to learn to set his personal feelings aside.’

You rolled your eyes at that. You’d never met the Irishman, but you’d heard enough about him to shudder at the mere mention of him. You knew that dealing with him was a necessary evil for the MC, but you hated how he chose to assert his authority over SAMCRO. ‘So, what are you gonna do?’
’No clue. I can’t go back, Y/N. Not yet. There’s an unspoken peace in place right now, but if I show up and Marks gets wind of it…’

’But if you don’t…’

’Exactly. Look, I hope you don’t mind, but I need to speak to them in person.’

’Jax-‘

’It’s just Chibs and Tig, okay?’

’They’re coming here?’

’Yeah. They’ll be here in a couple of days.’

Nothing had really changed. The club still had the uncanny ability to invade your life and suck you back in. There was no point in pretending otherwise.
'There she is, the little runaway!' Chibs’ booming voice seemed to fill the apartment as soon as he stepped in the door, and the ground beneath your feet disappeared as you were swept up in his arms, the bristle of his scruff scratching against your face as he pressed a sloppy kiss to your cheek. You thought your ribs might crack if he held you any tighter, but you didn’t protest, wrapping your own arms around his neck and pulling him close. As soon as you’d seen his smile, deepening the scars that slanted upwards across his cheeks, the anxiety that had plagued you since the news of their impending arrival had disappeared, and now all you felt was ecstasy at the reunion. ‘Christ, it’s good to see you, love. S’been too long.’

‘It has,’ you agreed, cupping his face in your hands as he released you, narrowing your eyes as you checked for new scars, creases. ‘It’s good to see you, Chibby.’

Seconds later, he’d stepped past you, making room for your other guest to step inside, and your heart gave a small leap of delight as Tig pulled you against his chest. ‘Hey, baby.’

‘Tiggy.’ You nestled against him, smiling when you felt him bury his face in your hair, a sigh of contentment escaping him as he breathed you in. Chapped lips brushed against your forehead, the bridge of your nose, the very tip, before travelling downwards to meet yours in an unexpected and hasty kiss that somehow said everything you couldn’t find the words for. ‘I’ve missed you.’

‘I’ve missed you too, sweetheart. Every day.’

Along the corridor, you could hear Chibs and Jax greeting each other, and you knew it wouldn’t be long before club business took over. It was why they were here after all. Still, it felt good to be back amongst your boys, you couldn’t deny it. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m good, baby, I’m good. How are you? You look good.’

‘I am.’ You stepped back and his eyes roamed over you, starting at your bare feet and climbing up your ripped jeans, your faded, old tank top, to finally meet yours.

‘That’s good to hear.’

‘I owe it to you.’

‘The Irish are pissed, Jackie.’ Chibs was running his fingers through his greying locks, glaring at the President as he paced back and forth. ‘They’re not gonna make it easy for us to get out of guns, you knew that. And they’re refusin’ to deal with anybody but you. We kept it going while you were inside. We had to. It was the only safe income we had. But the deal expired as soon as you became a free man. You’re the only one that can take this forward.’

‘And if I come back, then what?’ Jax bit back. ‘Marks’ men start baying for my blood, calling for revenge, and we end up right back where we started, with our people, our allies, dying bloody.’

‘And if you don’t come back, we end up in the same mess,’ Tig pointed out. ‘Cept it’ll be the Irish cutting us down, instead of black.’

‘Look, I get what you’re saying, I do. But it’s better for everyone if-’
‘No, it’s not,’ Chibs snapped. ‘The streets are quiet for now, but that doesn’t mean it’s over. Only reason the killing’s stopped is that nobody knows who they’re going after for revenge anymore. Nobody trusts anybody, and nobody can afford to lose any more bodies. They’re just taking their time to get themselves whole, figure out who exactly they’re targetting, before it all kicks off again. It’s inevitable, Jackie.’

‘But you, boss, you could use this to your advantage. Talk to them, mend a few fences. Use this time to start bringing them back together.’ Tig was calmer than Chibs, his tone even and considered, and Jax’s wild-eyed stare was flicking between them as he processed their words.

‘Why me? Why does it have to be me?’

‘Because you’re the Pres, man. Charming’s your town and everybody knows that. And that reaches out into Oakland and Stockton. You got history with the Niners, and you were damn close to having Alvarez on side before shit went south. If they’re gonna listen to anybody, it’s gonna be you.’

‘It’s not that easy.’

‘Of course it’s not fucking easy!’ Chibs exploded. ‘If it was easy, we wouldn’t be here right now trying to drag your sorry ass back to Charming! It’s all falling apart, Jackie, can’t you see that? We need our leader!’

‘And you’ll have me. I just need a little time to figure out my next move.’

‘Boss—’

‘If Marks comes after us, and he will come after us, I need a plan, okay? He’s bigger and more powerful than us, the Mayans, the Niners, the Bastards and the Chinese combined! It’s not enough to unite the streets, if that’s even possible! I need to give him something he wants, and, right now, the only thing he wants is me dead! Me coming back is only going to make things worse!’

‘Well, then let’s start planning, Pres.’ Tig faced down Jax’s outburst, unflinching, though his exasperation was painted over his features. ‘Because we gotta do something soon. Galen’s not messing around.’

‘Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I think I’m ready to call it a night.’ You stifled a yawn as you leant forward to place your empty bottle on the coffee table, before climbing slowly to your feet. When their discussions about the Irish had gone nowhere, you’d intervened, bringing out dinner and beers, and encouraging the conversation onto easier grounds. The tension had eased, and a pleasant few hours had passed, shooting the breeze, the buzz of alcohol relaxing you as you revelled in the memories that the guys laughed over, so many good times before… Before. ‘I guess we should sort out sleeping arrangements.’

‘What’s on offer, love?’ Chibs had also risen from his seat, collecting the empty bottles and glasses and carrying them through to the kitchen, always the gentleman, not willing to let you take care of the mess.

‘Guestroom with a futon that’ll sleep two, and a double airbed. Or there’s the couch, but it’s kinda short for you giants.’
‘No offence, but I ain’t sharing a bed with either of you,’ Jax drawled lazily.

‘One of you can always crash with me,’ you offered, not wanting to think of any of them having to rough it on the floor, though you knew they’d all had worse. ‘You guys sort it. I’m gonna go brush my teeth.’

You emerged from the bathroom, to see Chibs preparing the airbed, the wheeze of the foot pump drowning out the quiet conversation that he and Tig were having as you lounged against the doorframe. ‘You guys all good?’

‘Aye, love. Jackie’s gonna bunk in with you, if that’s alright?’

‘Course.’ In all honesty, you’d hoped that it would be Chibs or Tig that took up the spare space in your bed. It felt more appropriate somehow, easier, even though Tig had gotten far closer to you than Jax ever had. ‘Well, sleep tight, guys. I’ll see you in the morning.’

Chibs abandoned his task to wrap you up in his arms, squeezing you tightly, pressing a kiss to your forehead when he finally let you go. ‘Sweet dreams, Y/N.’

Jax had changed into a pair of sweats when you entered your bedroom, his shirt stripped off and discarded on the floor. Your mouth went dry as you took in the firm muscles of his stomach, the smooth planes of his chest, and you had to force your eyes up to his as he dropped onto bed. If anything, he’d only grown more attractive with age, and it stirred up feelings that you’d tried to convince yourself were long dead. ‘You sure you’re okay with this?’

‘Yep.’ Your voice was short, clipped, and you swallowed hard as you fought to maintain your expression of nonchalance. ‘Makes no sense for one of you to sleep on the floor when I’ve got a double bed in here.’

‘Okay then.’ He waited for you to crawl in beside him, before reaching down to tug the duvet up and over the both of you. ‘Thank you for this, Y/N. Letting us stay here, putting up with all the crap. I owe you.’

‘That’s what friends are for, right?’

‘Right.’ Something in his face faltered, just for a second, but then he was rolling over as you flicked off your lamp, his back to you as you shuffled down the bed, clinging to the edge of the mattress to maintain the space between you. ‘Well, goodnight.

‘Goodnight, Jax.’

A couple of hours later, you were still awake, tossing and turning as you tried not to touch the body sprawled out beside you. Jax, despite the stress that had shown on his face as he’d slipped into bed, had crashed out pretty much straight away, snoring softly, and the heat that radiated from him was almost magnetic. It wasn’t the first time you’d shared a bed with him. Back at the clubhouse, it had been a regular thing. You’d hole up in one or other of your rooms and watch movies until the early hours, when you’d drop off one at a time, waking in the morning to eat cold pizza for breakfast and indulge in childish cartoons. It had seemed so easy then, so simple, even with the feelings for him that stirred in your stomach whenever he smiled. But now, his closeness was a reminder of just what it had felt like to want him that way, to wish he was yours, and it unsettled you, as that familiar
warmth pooled deep inside of you.

Eventually, deciding that sleep was an impossibility, at least in that bed, you rolled out of it, pulling your hair up into a messy ponytail as you crept out of the door.

Padding out into the living room, you were surprised to see that the couch was already occupied, and Tig shot you a crooked smile as you moved to sit beside him.

‘Can’t sleep, baby?’

‘Apparently not.’ You fidgeted to get comfortable, drawing your legs up so that they were tucked against your chest, but, when Tig patted his lap with large hands, you twisted in your seat and stretched out, the worn denim of his jeans soft against your calves. ‘Not really used to sharing a bed these days.’

He arched a brow at you, eyes locking on yours as he scoffed in disbelief. ‘You’re kidding?’

‘What?’

‘Wow. I guess I just figured you’d have it all by now. Husband, kids, all the domestic trappings a girl could ask for.’

It was your turn to smirk. ‘I’m not really the domestic type, Tiggy.’

‘Could’a fooled me.’ He raised a hand from where it had been resting on your knee and gestured around at your living room, cosy and quirky. ‘I mean, look at this place. Looks like you’re doing well for yourself.’

‘Yeah,’ you admitted, ‘I am. And this place, it’s home. But… It’s just me here. Always just me.’

‘You like it that way?’

‘Sometimes.’ You sighed. ‘To start with, I enjoyed the solitude. I mean, I went from the clubhouse to a room in a sharehouse because it’s all I could afford, and then I had a roommate at college. So, I thought the quiet was just… It made me feel like I could breathe, y’know? But after a while… I guess I started to miss people. You know what it’s like at T.M. There’s always someone around to talk to, or have a laugh with, or… I don’t know. The walls start closing in some nights.’

He was nodding as though he knew exactly what you meant, and you supposed he may well do. Tig had always been the one who understood you, who could read you like a book, and you’d never fully appreciated that until he’d brought you back from the brink of self-destruction nearly seven years ago. ‘That why you said yes to Jax?’

He fixed you with that piercing blue gaze and you felt your cheeks grow warm as he studied your reaction to the question. ‘Honestly, it never occurred to me to say no, not at the time.’

‘And how’s that working out for you?’

‘Well, I ran away from all the drama and the death, and now it’s found its way back to my door.’ You shrugged. ‘It kinda feels inevitable.’

Tig nodded, but you could feel his stare burning into you still, as you scratched at a small stain on the couch cushion. ‘That’s not what I meant, sweetheart.’

‘I know.’ You huffed in resignation, before lifting your head to look at him, meeting his gaze and
holding it as you considered your answer. ‘It... It feels complicated, I guess. I’ve never… I’ve never just liked Jax, you know that. I was completely in love with him before I even really knew him, and then, when everything happened with Ope, I hated him. For a long time, I hated him. And now, he’s here, and I’m trying to figure out what it means to just be his friend, to just be here for him like he needs, but it’s hard. It’s... it’s draining.’

‘So, that’s why you’re sitting out here with me.’ He let out a deep chuckle, his head falling back against the couch for a moment before he reached out an arm to you. You didn’t hesitate before swinging your legs off of his lap so you could crawl into it, resting against his chest as he stroked his fingers down your spine. It was reassuring and familiar, and it felt like coming home. If Opie had been your sense of security, and Jax was your nostalgia, then Tig was surely your comfort. ‘Oh, baby, I’m sorry this has happened. You made a clean break and here we all are, dragging you back in again, messing with your head. It’s not fair.’

‘Nothing’s fair.’ The scent of whiskey and leather intoxicated your senses, and you inhaled deeply. Sitting there, with Tig’s arms around you and the silence of the night blanketing the apartment, you almost felt like you’d travelled back in time. Jax had said that to you several times over the past few weeks, that being with you was like being in a time warp, but you hadn’t quite got there yourself. You’d felt too on edge, too aware of what you were doing and saying, and who you were talking to. It had never been like that before, but you were so conscious of not overstepping any of the invisible boundaries that had been built up between you after all of the hurt you’d caused. But now, you finally understood. If you closed your eyes, you would almost have been able to believe you were sitting on the clubhouse couch in the early hours of the morning, long after the partygoers had called it a night and headed out into the darkness, letting the soft thrum of Tig’s heartbeat lull you to sleep. If only that were true. You’d give anything to be back there, all those years go, to have the benefit of hindsight guiding your decisions. There was so much you would have done differently. ‘I’m so sorry, Tig. For what we did. For what I asked you to do.’

‘Hey, no. Don’t do that. Don’t you do that.’ He’d tensed beneath you, though his fingers had drifted up to brush through your hair, teasing out the knots with a gentleness that not many people would have imagined him capable of. ‘A lot of shit went down after you left, but none of it was your fault, sweetheart.’

‘Of course it was. Jax said-‘

‘Jax has a hell of a lot to answer for,’ he growled. ‘Don’t get me wrong, alright? He’s my Pres and I’ll follow him to the ends of the earth, but his decisions have gotten a lot of people killed.’

‘Decisions he wouldn’t have had to make if I- if we...’ You tailed off, blinking to clear the tears from your eyes. You’d struggled to make your peace with it since the night that Jax had filled you in, knowing that it was too late to do anything to change it, but now, opening up to Tig, you felt vulnerable, raw, and your guilt had returned in force. ‘We started it, Tiggy.’

‘The Collective started it when they started selling girls like cattle, when they came after you and killed Ope.’

‘But the club getting involved, the war... That’s-’

‘That’s been a long time coming, baby, trust me. The streets had been tense for a while. The blacks and the wetbacks, they were just looking for some excuse to start killing each other, and, once that shit went down, we’d have been dragged into it, you can count on that. If it hadn’t been the Collective looking for revenge, it would’ve been something else. C’mom, tell me Jax told you this.’

‘He did, but-‘
‘But you’re still sitting here beating yourself up over it?’ When you pulled back to see Tig’s face, he cupped your cheek, rubbing away your tears with his thumb, his touch rough with callouses. ‘Baby, nobody blames you, okay? Nobody. You were grieving and you were broken, and yeah, you got fucking mad about it. We’ve all been there. You gotta let this go.’

You nodded slowly, leaning forward to rest your forehead against his, and when you sighed quietly, Tig tilted your chin up so he could brush his lips over yours. It was the second time he’d kissed you like that, brief, and chaste, yet somehow still strangely intimate, but, though you made no move to deepen the kiss, you also couldn’t bring yourself to pull away. He didn’t mean anything by it, you were sure, had seen him kiss Gemma in just the same way. And it felt nice to be close with someone, for the first time in too long.

‘Now, c’mon,’ he broke the moment with a lightened tone, a wide grin splitting his face as he nudged you, encouraging you to allow the change of subject. ‘You gotta have some friends in this town, right? You got a job, a whole life here. I wanna hear about all of it.’

‘Really?’ It would all sound so dull in comparison to life in Charming, you knew, but maybe that’s what he needed to hear, that you’d found the normal, boring life that you’d needed so badly when you’d driven away.

‘Really. Fill me in. We’ve got all night.’
You jolted awake, heart pounding as you tried to get your bearings. Your head was cushioned on warm denim, and a large hand rested on your waist. Sunlight poured in through the balcony doors across the room from where you lay stretched across the couch, and you blinked dazedly as you pushed yourself upright. The loud clattering from the kitchen that had woken you with such a start continued as you twisted to take in Tig’s still sleeping figure, slouched in his seat, and you climbed to your feet, shuffling towards the source of the noise. Jax was making coffee, slamming the mugs down onto the surface of the worktop as though they’d wronged him, and his expression was cold when he noticed your presence.

‘Dude, loud,’ you groaned, returning his glare, but crossing to the fridge to pull out a half-full bottle of milk, figuring you may as well take advantage of the boiled kettle now that you were up. ‘You wake up on the wrong side of the bed?’

‘Better than waking up on the couch,’ he growled. ‘What happened to you? I woke up and you were gone.’

‘Couldn’t sleep,’ you explained with a shrug. ‘Found Tiggy watching TV, got talking. Guess I must’ve crashed out.’

‘Yeah, guess you must’ve.’ The harshness of his tone took you aback, and you frowned as you placed a hand on his arm, trying not to notice how he flinched when he pulled away.

‘Hey, don’t be like that. We had a lot of catching up to do, okay?’

‘Yeah, right. I’ll bet.’

‘Jax-‘

You were cut off by the soft pad of footsteps approaching, and Chibs appeared, looking just as exhausted as you felt. ‘Jesus, Jackie boy, didn’t nobody ever teach ya how to make coffee without waking the dead?’ The Scot wrapped an arm around you, pulling you into his side so he could press a sloppy kiss to your forehead. ‘Morning, love.’

‘Morning, Chibby.’ You shot him a bemused look as the President chucked a used teaspoon into the sink, the resounding clang of metal on metal finally rousing Tig, who surfaced with a groan.

‘What the hell, man?’ He craned his neck on the couch to take in the chaotic coffee-making, running his hand through his unruly curls. ‘There better be bacon if you’re making that much noise.’

‘I can do bacon,’ you reassured him, fetching another mug from the cupboard and nudging Jax out of the way with your hip. ‘Move it, Teller. Why don’t you go grab a shower before you break my kitchen, and I’ll get breakfast going, huh?’

He hesitated for a moment, drink halfway to his lips, gaze flicking from you to Chibs and Tig who’d now joined you in the kitchen, stretching his stiff joints until they popped. His expression was tense, reluctant almost, but you felt the atmosphere shift when he finally nodded. ‘Yeah, alright.’

The three of you that remained exchanged wary looks as Jax shoved his way out of the room.

‘What crawled up his ass?’ Tig asked, but all you could do was shrug.
‘Not a clue. Woke up mad for some reason. Maybe it’s everything with the Irish. I mean, he’s gotta know you guys are gonna start in on him again today, right?’

‘We’re not starting in on him, love,’ Chibs chided you gently. ‘We’re just asking him to do his damn job, that’s all.’

‘I know that,’ you sighed. ‘It just doesn’t seem fair. For as long as I’ve known Jax, he’s been working his ass off for the club, you know? It doesn’t seem right that he can’t catch a break every once in a while. He’s been through a lot.’

‘We all have, baby,’ Tig reminded you.

‘I know.’ You turned your back on them, moving to the fridge once again and pulling out a couple of packs of bacon. ‘I’m sorry. I’m staying out of it.’

‘It’s club business,’ Chibs explained, apologetically. ‘It’s not like we’re trying to shut you out, love, or to take Jackie away from you. I know you’ve just got him back. But we need somebody to get a hold of the shit that’s going down in Charming or there won’t be a club left for him to come back to.’

‘I get it. I just… I worry, that’s all. About all of you.’

When Jax returned, freshly showered and dressed, his mood seemed to have improved, if only marginally. The tower of crispy bacon that you’d fried up helped further, sandwiched between fluffy slices of white bread and slathered in sauce. The men ate hungrily, and, for a moment, you found yourself just watching them, chewing eagerly, chatting with their mouths full, at home even so far away from their own place in the world. Anywhere with their bikes and their brothers was home to them, and you envied them that. Your apartment felt more like yours than it ever had with them filling the space, the scent of leather hanging in the air, and you knew it would feel hollow and lonely when they inevitably left.

‘Hey, you okay, darlin’?’ Jax reached over to rest a hand on your knee as the others set about clearing the plates, and you nodded, shooting him a tight smile.

‘I’m fine.’

‘You sure? You were miles away for a second there.’

‘I just…’ You covered his hand with yours, lacing your fingers together as you sought the right words to explain. ‘I just realised how much I missed this, I guess. You, all of you; having family around. It’s really gonna suck when you go.’

His eyes darkened, and he sat back in his chair with a soft huff, scrubbing a hand over his beard. ‘Well, I’m not going anywhere, not yet.’

Chibs had returned to the table just in time to hear his declaration and he cleared his throat, drawing the President’s attention. ‘We need to talk about that, Jackie. We got nowhere last night, but we can’t leave without…’

‘Without what?’
‘Without you. We need you to come back with us, Pres. Galen, he isn’t gonna wait forever.’

‘If he wants to deal with me, he’s gonna have to wait a little bit longer. I’m not ready yet.’

‘But Jackie, he wants—’

‘I don’t give a fuck what he wants!’ Jax exploded from his chair, hands resting on the table as his face reddened, the fragile peace shattering around you. ‘Since when is my club playing the little bitch boy to a bunch of Irish assholes? Since when do we let Galen O’Shay make decisions for our table?’

‘Since a whole lot more of us are gonna end up dead if we don’t!’

‘Oh, and let me guess! That’ll be my fault, too? Just like Bobbey, just like… You think I don’t know what you’re all saying behind my back? That I got them killed! You think I want to come back to that?’

‘Jackie—’

‘No! I’m not doing this. I’ve given you my answer. It’s time for you to go.’

He didn’t wait for a response before he turned his back, storming out into the hallway, the jingle of his keys the only indication of his intention to leave before the front door slammed shut behind him.

‘You should go after him.’ Your voice sounded weirdly quiet after the shouting of just moments before, and Chibs gave a single tight nod before reaching for this jacket, hung over the back of one of the chairs, and shrugging into it as he followed Jax out into the morning.

You slumped back into your chair, feeling drained by the fight that you’d had no part in, and you jumped when Tig reappeared from where he’d been skulking in the kitchen, having almost forgotten that he was still there.

‘Well, that didn’t sound good.’

‘You didn’t want to weigh in?’

‘Not my place,’ he admitted, dropping down into the seat beside you. ‘I mean, I can tell him what I think, sure, but I’m not his VP. I’m not even his Sergeant. Better to let Chibby deal with it. He’s got more of a chance of talking him round.’

‘You think he will?’

‘Honestly, right now? No. I think the kid’s too damn stubborn to listen to reason, and I think you’ve made it a little too comfortable for him here. He doesn’t wanna leave you, baby, and I get that.’

You took a moment to process that and the masked suggestion behind his words. ‘I don’t… Are you saying I should talk to him?’

Tig shrugged. ‘Couldn’t hurt.’

‘But I…’ You tailed off, unwilling to complete the sentence, though you knew Tig would hear you anyway, his half-smile only confirming your suspicion. I don’t want him to go.

‘Last night, you said you’d never just been friends with Jax.’ His tone was even, measured, and you knew you weren’t going to like the next question.
'That’s right.’

‘But you never said exactly how you feel about him now. I mean, you don’t love him, you don’t hate him… So, where does that leave you?’

‘I…’ You swallowed hard, recalling the wave of emotion that had crashed over you when you’d opened your door to find him standing there, the feeling of being wrapped up in his arms, like finding your way back to where you truly belonged, and the warmth of him in your bed, chasing away any hope of sleep. ‘I don’t know. I-I mean, I thought I was over it, over him. It’s been so long, and after everything with Ope… But the longer he’s here, the more I find myself… I mean, it’s Jax, Tiggy. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to look at him as just a friend.’

If you thought you saw a little of the light go out of the outlaw’s eyes, you were sure it was just your imagination, the shifting of the sun that continued to spill in through the large windows, and his laugh only reinforced that belief, warm and understanding. ‘Oh, baby, you got it bad, don’tcha?’

‘I think I do.’ The words stuck in your throat, bringing tears to your eyes, and you were spared having to explain as Tig pushed his chair back so he could drop into a low crouch and stare up at you with an open, honest gaze.

‘You’re not betraying him, you know? By liking Jax. Ope… He wouldn’t judge you for it.’

‘How can you know that?’

‘Because I knew him. It’s been years, Y/N, like you said. He’d just want you to be happy, sweetheart.’ When all you could do was nod dumbly, wishing that you could find it in your heart to believe that what Tig said was true, he changed the subject, slapping his hands against your legs to draw you out of your own head. ‘C’mon, get dressed. It’s a beautiful day. What d’ya say we head out for a ride?’
‘Ah, man, this is exactly what I needed.’ Tig’s groan of satisfaction as he took another bite of his greasy cheeseburger brought a smile to your lips, and you picked up a stray fry from your plate and dipped it into your sauce. Raymond’s was quiet this early in the afternoon, and you were glad that you’d chosen to bring him here for lunch when the ride had made your stomachs growl, your old life colliding with the new in a far less traumatic way than you might’ve imagined. ‘So, this is, like, your local?’

‘Yep.’ You nodded. ‘Usually come in a couple of times a week with a friend from work. Those,’ you gestured towards his burger, ‘are a great hangover cure.’

‘And there was me thinking you’d gone all domestic. You still party, huh?’

‘Not me. Mel. She… She likes to hit it kinda hard.’

‘Sounds like my kinda girl.’ He winked at you and you rolled your eyes, tucking in to your own meal as your hunger got the better of you.

‘What about you?’ you prompted, reaching for your soda. ‘Clubhouse still rocking every Friday night, or are you guys getting too old for that now?’

‘Old?’ His brow creased in mock-offence as he ran a teasing hand over his chest with a flourish. ‘I’ll have you know I’m in my prime, baby. I could still drink you under the table any night of the week.’

‘Oh, I don’t doubt that.’

‘We should test the theory while I’m here.’

‘Sounds fun.’

It really did. Though you lived a quieter lifestyle now than you had before, it wasn’t because you hadn’t enjoyed walking on the wilder side. After everything that had happened, you tended to feel on edge, slightly reckless, now when you drank, and it worried you that you wouldn’t have anybody there to catch you if you fell. With Tig at your side, and Chibs and Jax, you knew you could let your hair down and be safe, and that made it a whole lot more appealing.

Your meal was interrupted by a shout of your name across the diner, and you squeezed your eyes shut in a moment of denial as you heard the clatter of heels crossing the tiled floor towards you.

‘Y/N? I thought it was you! Out socialising on a weekend? I didn’t know you had it in you!’

You glanced up as Mel came to a halt beside your table, dark glasses covering her eyes. ‘Hey, how’s it going?’

‘I’m exhausted.’ Without waiting for an invitation, she nudged you with her hip, motioning for you to slide along so she could join you on the bench seat. ‘We went to the opening of this new place a couple of towns over last night. Total dive! Didn’t help that it was full of kids barely old enough to drink. Honestly, it was tragic.’

She laughed and you laughed with her, fully aware of Tig’s questioning gaze. ‘Didn’t stop you having a good time though, evidently.’
‘Well, there’s not a lot that can’t be improved by tequila, right?’

‘I vaguely remember that.’

‘Hence, I need a little Raymond’s treatment to rid me of this hellish hangover. I’m actually dying.’

‘Here.’ You pushed your plate towards her, and she snagged a handful of fries, munching on them half-heartedly with one elbow planted on the table to support her head.

Across from you, Tig cleared his throat, and you knew he was waiting to be introduced, but the sound caught Mel’s attention, almost as if she’d been semi-oblivious to his presence before.

‘And who is this?’ She slipped her shades down her nose to cast an appraising eye over the outlaw’s wild curls and tanned skin, before her lips curved upwards in a flirtatious grin. ‘Y/N, you been holding out on me?’

‘This is Tig,’ you told her now. ‘Alex Trager. He’s an old friend, just passing through.’ Turning to Tig, whose piercing blue eyes had crinkled at the edges as he took in the dishevelled state of your coworker, you went on. ‘Tiggy, this is Mel. We work together at the foundation. She’s the one that’s usually in need of the hangover cure.’

‘I can see that,’ he observed with an enthusiastic nod. ‘Nice to meet you, sweetheart.’

‘And you.’ Mel reached out to grab some more of your food, nibbling on a chip as her gaze drifted south to the patches stitched onto the front of Tig’s leather. ‘Biker, huh? You used to run with these guys, Y/N?’

‘A long time ago,’ you admitted.

‘Not something you thought might be worth mentioning? I mean, damn… If this one’s anything to go by, it might just be worth swinging by your old stomping ground and seeing what else is on offer.’

You swallowed hard, but nodded anyway, taking a sip of your drink to cover your discomfort. ‘Yeah, well… Looks aren’t everything.’

‘Ouch,’ Tig held a hand to his heart, eyes narrowing. ‘Why’d you have to hurt me like that, baby?’

‘Shut up.’ You kicked out at him under the table, smirking when he grimaced. ‘Anyway, I think we’re pretty much done here. You wanna grab the bill?’

‘Sure. I’ll go settle up.’ Sensing your need to extract yourself, hating yourself for hating the way Mel’s hungry stare devoured your friend, Tig pulled his wallet from the pocket of his jeans as he slid from the booth, making for the counter and leaving the two of you alone.

‘Seriously, Y/N? A biker gang?’ Mel was looking at you incredulously. ‘It’s like you have this whole secret life I don’t know about.’

‘Not so much.’ You pulled your jacket tighter around you, suddenly very aware of the ink it hid from her sight. ‘It’s just… history, y’know?’

‘With that guy?’

‘No.’ You considered that for a moment, then shrugged. ‘Well, yeah, kinda. But not just him. There’s… It was all a really long time ago, okay?’
‘And you gave up all that to move up here and turn into little miss office clerk? All buttoned-up blouses and business meetings?’ She shook her head. ‘Shit, girl, I swear, you’re a mystery to me.’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘One you’re ever going to share?’

‘Probably not.’ A sigh escaped your lips, sending the loose strands of hair that fell about your face fluttering. ‘It’s not who I am anymore, Mel. I… I worked really hard to put that life behind me and that’s where I want it to stay.’

‘So, what’s he doing here?’ She tilted her head towards Tig who was tucking his wallet away, grinning at the waitress as he turned to make his way back to you.

‘Like I said, just passing through.’ Inching your way across the seat, you persisted until she climbed to her feet and let you leave, though the slight purse of her lips let you know that the conversation was far from over. ‘I’ll see you Monday, okay?’

‘You can bet your ass you will.’ She sat back down again with a scoff. ‘We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.’

‘So, she seemed nice.’ You arched an eyebrow at Tig as you toed off your boots, kicking them to one side as you shrugged out of your jacket. ‘You’d left the diner in silence, and you were sure he’d felt your tension on the ride home. It had felt weird enough to come home to Jax every night whilst maintaining the character you’d created for yourself at work each day. Now that Mel had seen who you really were, who your family was, it would be even harder to keep up that front, and you were genuinely worried by what she might have to say about it when Monday rolled around.

‘Yeah, she’s great.’ Realising how cold you sounded, you sighed heavily, dropping down onto one end of the couch and running your fingers through your hair. ‘I mean, she really is. She’s probably the best friend I’ve got around here and I’d probably go crazy without her...’

‘But?’ Tig perched on the coffee table opposite you, eyes searching your face.

‘But she’s kind of a gossip. You can bet it’ll be all round the office first thing Monday morning that sweet, little Y/N was having lunch with a crazy outlaw biker guy.’

‘And what’s so bad about that?’ He brow was creased with confusion, and you hated to offend him and the life that he’d chosen, but it just wasn’t yours anymore.

‘That’s not who I am around here, Tiggy. I’ve spent so much time trying to distance myself from the MC, from everything it stands for, and it’s been working. The people I work with, they don’t see the girl whose brother sold her as a sex slave, whose boyfriend got his skull bashed in trying to protect her, y’know? They just see Y/N - college degree, smart suits, nine-to-five. Plain. Boring. Normal.’

‘Baby, you’re far from boring.’ His expression had softened just a little, but you could see that he was still put out by your confession. ‘Listen to me. How long do you think you can go on acting like you’re this little plain Jane office girl, huh? You really think that was gonna last forever?’

‘It could. It was.’
‘Nah.’ He shook his head. ‘That’s not who you are, sweetheart. Those things you’re running away from, those things you don’t want anybody to know… They don’t define you - sure, great, don’t let them - but they made you who you are. They made you strong and determined and fierce. Don’t ever pretend to be anything else, you hear me?’

Your cheeks flushed with heat as you processed his words, but you couldn’t recognise any of those traits in yourself, not anymore. ‘I don’t feel very fierce these days.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ He climbed to his feet, sinking down next to you so he could pull you into his side and press a soft kiss to the top of your head. ‘You’re a badass, baby. I know it. I’ve seen it. You just gotta embrace the burn.’

You were still sitting like that, Tig’s arm wrapped around your shoulders, your face buried in the crook of his neck, when the apartment door banged open, and you heard Jax’s voice drifting along the hall, mixing with Chibs’ lilting Scottish tones. The President’s eyes fell on you as he sauntered into the living room, darkening ever so slightly, and you pushed yourself away from the outlaw that held you, as the air thickened with tension.

‘Everything okay?’

‘Fine.’ Jax muttered, stalking towards the balcony doors and pulling one open so he could smoke.

‘We’ve reached an agreement,’ Chibs elaborated, perching on the arm of the couch and reaching out to ruffle your hair. ‘Jackie’s spoken to Galen, bought us a little more time. It’s not enough, but it’ll do for now.’

‘So, you’re staying?’ Your voice was laced with hope as you focused your gaze on your best friend, watching as he inhaled a deep lungful of smoke, before releasing it again in a wispy cloud.

‘Looks like.’

‘What about us, boss?’ Tig looked between the officers, poised and awaiting his next order, though his shoulders seemed to slump when Chibs spoke again.

‘We’re heading back, Tiggy. Ain’t no use hanging around now. Got work to do.’

‘When?’

‘Now. We’ll pack up our shit and go, ride ’til we lose the light, find a motel to hole up in for the night. If we make good time we should be home before dark tomorrow.’

Two hours later, the apartment was silent. Chibs and Tig had made short work of readying themselves to leave, though they’d each taken the time to say a proper goodbye, wrapping you up in their arms and kissing away the tears that you hadn’t been able to control. You knew that this was what you wanted - distance from the MC and the person you became when they were around - but it
still stung to watch them go.

‘You look after yourself, alright love?’ Chibs had rasped in your ear. ‘And our boy there. He’s a real mess right now. Needs you more than ever.’

‘I know.’

‘Remember what I said,’ was all Tig had to offer, and you’d nodded, forcing a smile.

‘I will.’

‘You’re a badass, baby. That’s why I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

And now they were gone, but the tension still remained, Jax’s face like thunder as he stared into the gathering darkness outside the window.

‘You hungry?’ You set down the book you’d been reading, preparing to push yourself upright and prepare dinner, but Jax only shrugged. He was sitting at the other end of the couch, just inches away from you, and yet he felt far more distant. ‘Hey, are you okay?’

‘I told you, I’m fine.’

‘You’re not. You look…’ You tailed off, unable to find the right words to describe the hostility still emanating from him. ‘Would you just talk to me, please?’

For a moment, you thought that he was going to ignore your plea, continue to sulk like the petulant teenager you imagined he’d once been, but then he leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he fixed you with a pointed glare. ‘What’s going on with you and Tig?’

‘What?’ You frowned, shaking your head as you tried to follow his train of thought. You’d been expecting an outburst about the club or the Irish, about something Chibs had said to him throughout the course of the day that had put his back up. Not this. ‘I- I don’t… What do you mean?’

‘C’mon, Y/N. I saw the two of you. Soon as he walked in the door you were all over each other. What the hell was that?’

‘He’s my friend. I’ve missed him.’

‘Yeah, like I’m your friend?’

‘No. No, it’s different.’ Your mind was reeling.

‘Why?’

‘Because…’ You couldn’t do it. You couldn’t tell him that those old feelings you’d once harboured for him had come right back as soon as he’d stepped back into your life. You couldn’t put that on him at a time when he was already in so much turmoil, when he could turn right around and walk back out the door at any moment. ‘It just is, okay?’

‘You left me in your bed to spend the night with him,’ Jax bit out, and it was that - the venom in his tone, the bewilderment in his eyes - that made you realise exactly what this was.

‘You’re- You’re jealous?’
‘No, I just… He’s not good for you, Y/N.’

‘And you would’ve been?’ you scoffed. ‘Back when it was my relationship with Ope you had an issue with?’

‘No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know! That’s not what this is about.’

‘It’s not?’

‘No!’

‘So, what is it about then, Jax?’ Your temper was fraying as his voice grew louder, and you were fighting to hold it in. ‘I mean, I let you into my home, into my life, after everything we’ve been through, and you think you can start telling me how to live it?’

‘Y/N-’

‘No,’ you cut him off. ‘Look, even if I did spend the night with Tig, and I mean actually spend the night… Even if I left you to sleep alone and spent all night wrapped around him, that is none of your business, Jax! You’re not my president! You’re not my boyfriend! You don’t get to throw a temper tantrum every time I do something you don’t like!’

You’d thrown yourself across the room as you snapped, pacing back and forth. The rage within you felt foreign and familiar all at once, and you hated the sensation. It was something you associated with the club, with loss and grief and blame, and it made your skin itch.

‘Y/N… Y/N, stop.’ You ignored him, continuing to cross back and forth, hands balled into fists at your side. ‘I said stop!’

And then he was there in front of you, chest heaving as he too fought to stay in control. His hands were on your shoulders, holding you in place, and you could feel the heat coming off of him as he sucked in a deep breath. His eyes were locked on yours, intense and intoxicating, and when you felt his fingers tangle in your hair, all you could do was stand, frozen in place, and wait for it to happen.

His lips crashed down on yours with bruising force, and you whimpered at the pressure, though you made no move to pull back, letting him work out his frustrations through the kiss, the smokey scent of him overwhelming your senses so that the rest of the world melted away. It had been so long since you’d been kissed like that, like you were the oxygen he needed to survive and he couldn’t get enough, constantly needing more, wanting more, and you found that you were clinging to him, lost in the feelings of desire, of being desired. By Jax. Your Jax. God, it was such a mess.

When he finally broke away, he left you breathless, hands trembling as you forced your weakened limbs to take a shaky step back, needing to put a little distance between you to clear your head. He looked just as shocked as you were sure you must, and the silence between you was deafening. Ghosts roamed the room around you, judgemental glares and harsh whispers stopping the moment from becoming quite what it could have been, and then he was shaking his head, running his hands through his hair, his expression desolate. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ you reassured him, your own voice a rough husk that you almost didn’t recognise. ‘It’s okay. It’s fine.’

But, of course, it wasn’t.
Chapter 8

‘Beer?’

You offered a grateful smile as Jax dropped down beside you on the couch, careful not to touch you as you took the bottle from his hand. It was cool, condensation trickling over the glass, and you took a sip, turning your attention back to the television.

Most evenings were spent this way now, comfortable but near silent, only the chatter of the people on the screen stopping things from getting awkward. You hadn’t spoken about the kiss, about Jax’s venomous reaction to your close relationship with Tig, about any of it, and now it hung in the air between you. Often you’d glance at him to see him deep in thought, though you didn’t know whether he was replaying the moment your lips met as you’d done, over and over, or whether he was lost in his concerns for the club, the pressure that the Irish continued to increase day after day, and the whispered calls that he stepped out onto the balcony to take, pacing back and forth and running his fingers through his hair. When he came back inside, it would be sticking up at all angles, and you longed to stroke it back into place, smooth it back from his face and relieve some of his stress, but you didn’t dare. It felt like you were both walking a fine line now, and you were determined not to tumble over the edge.

In truth, you were conflicted by the old feelings that had raised their head the second that Jax had wrapped you up in his arms, growing by the day. Not only because it felt like a betrayal to Ope, to everything you’d had and everything he’d done for you, but because his presence in your life was so tenuous. He could decide to leave at any moment, to head home and take up his place at the head of the table, and where would that leave you? Heartbroken and desperately trying to pick up the pieces. No matter what he said, you knew that Charming’s pull was magnetic. He wouldn’t be able to resist it forever.

You weren’t even aware that a heavy sigh had escaped you until Jax nudged you with his elbow, startling you from your reverie. ‘Something on your mind, darlin’?’

‘No,’ you lied, drawing your knees up to your chest as you picked at the label of your drink. ‘Just tired, that’s all.’

‘Yeah?’ At your nod, his lips quirked up in a sympathetic smile. ‘Not sleeping well, huh? I kinda noticed.’

‘Yeah?’ At your nod, his lips quirked up in a sympathetic smile. ‘Not sleeping well, huh? I kinda noticed.’

‘Sorry.’ Your cheeks flushed with heat, and you fidgeted again. Despite the tension that had become a part of your daily lives, Jax had never returned to the guest room. It wasn’t something that you’d discussed. He’d just slipped into bed beside you on the first night after Chibs and Tig had left, rolled onto his side, turned out the light, and that was that. You wondered now how often you’d kept him awake with your restlessness and why he didn’t return to the lumpy sofabed in the room next door, but that was a question you didn’t dare ask.

‘It’s alright. I don’t sleep much these days either.’

‘How come?’

‘Just a lot going on.’

‘Right.’ There was something weirdly intimate about the thought of the both of you lying side by side, wide awake and yet pretending for the benefit of the other not to be. ‘You spoken to Chibby
today?’

‘Nah.’ He took a swig of his beer, before pushing himself to his feet and pulling his cigarettes from his pocket, making for the open balcony door. ‘He was due to have a call with Galen this afternoon. Reckon I’ll get caught up on it tomorrow.’

‘Bet you can’t wait,’ you teased, but all that earned you was an eyeroll.

‘There’s no such thing as time out from the club. It’s taken a while but I’m realising that.’

‘You had years off when you were inside, surely?’

‘Not really.’ He lit up a smoke and inhaled deeply, blowing pale grey wisps out into the night. ‘Always something needs sorting. Calls to make, people to reach out to on the inside. Now I know what it was like for Otto, y’know? We kept asking him for favours, and he kept on giving. Cost him everything. I’m starting to think that’s all the club is. It just takes and takes until you’ve got nothing left.’

Your discomfort forgotten, you edged forward in your seat to study Jax’s face, noticing how deep his frown lines had gotten in just a few short weeks, and a new pit of worry for him formed in your stomach. It had been long time since you’d had a conversation even this long, and you realised now that that meant Jax had been carrying his burden alone. You kicked yourself. It didn’t matter how you felt, what you’d done, the intensity of the moment you’d shared… Some things were more important and you couldn’t help but feel that you’d let him down. You weren’t sure you’d ever heard him speak about the MC so negatively before and it hurt your heart. ‘C’mon, Teller, you don’t mean that.’

‘Don’t I?’ He scoffed. ‘It took my wife. It took my sons. It took… my best friend.’ He hesitated as a look of pain flashed across your face, but you quickly pulled it together.

‘Jax-’

‘I lost you for… years.’ He turned his back to you, staring out over the parking lot, one hand shoved deep in his pocket. ‘You had the right idea. You lost Ope and you got out before it could take anything else. Maybe Tara was right. I should’ve left with her and the boys right after Thomas was born. Then we wouldn’t be in this mess.’

Forgetting all of the reasons why you shouldn’t, you eased yourself to your feet, padding across the room until you could wrap your arms around Jax’s waist, resting your head against his back and breathing him in. Warm fingers covered yours, calloused thumb rubbing over your knuckles, and you felt him relax into you. ‘It is what it is, Jax. I’m sorry that you’re hurting, I am, but this is the life you chose. You’ve always done what you’ve thought was right. And even if you had got out, who’s to say that you wouldn’t have gotten sucked right back in again?’

He pulled away from you then, turning to quirk an eyebrow at you as he processed your last comment. ‘Yeah, I guess you have some experience of that.’

‘Just a little.’ You shrugged. ‘We’re family, Jax. That’s what the club is. Yeah, okay, so it brings a lot of drama with it. But if I’d picked up the phone at any point over the past seven years and called any one of you guys for help, for anything, you’d have been here at my side in hours. I know that. That’s why the MC is a good thing.’

‘It’s getting harder to see that.’

‘But you will.’
That night when Jax crawled into bed beside you, you didn’t grab onto the edge of the mattress, trying to maintain the standard foot of space between you. Instead, he held out an arm, and you curled yourself against him, your head on his chest, his fingers stroking over the curve of your waist. It meant nothing, and it meant everything, and it didn’t help, wouldn’t help when morning came. But you knew he needed it, and you were determined that you wouldn’t let him down. Not again.

‘Y/N, you got a minute?’

Your fingers continued to type as you glanced up at Charlie, giving a sharp nod as he hovered over you. ‘Sure. Just let me finish up this report.’

You’d slept better the previous night, your body pressed flush with Jax’s as he held you, and you’d arrived at work in a better headspace than you had for far too long. You knew that you’d fallen behind, your efficiency tailing off as your head filled with other things, and it was with leaden limbs that you dragged yourself into the seat opposite Charlie’s a few moments later, a forced smile on your face.

He steepled his fingers as he turned to you, and you could see the tension in his jaw that meant this meeting wasn’t going to go well. ‘Y/N, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but is everything okay with you?’

‘Yeah,’ you lied, before sucking in a breath and deciding to be honest. ‘I mean, actually, there’s been kind of a lot going on. I know my work’s slipped, Charlie, and I’m sorry, I really am. I’ll get back into the swing of things, I promise. I’ve already worked through my backlog of emails and-’

‘We lost the Clear Mind partnership.’ His words cut you off and your jaw dropped as you shook your head in disbelief.

‘What? No, that was… I mean, that was all tied down.’ Clear Mind was a professional counselling organisation that charged through the roof for anyone looking to access their expertise. They ran group sessions in major cities across America, and you’d worked long and hard to put in place a deal whereby any empty spaces could be filled by those the foundation referred for free. It was sure to be invaluable to the more difficult cases that were beyond the capability of your welfare team, and you’d been maybe a signature away from locking it down nationally.

‘It was, until you ignored their calls for two weeks and failed to return a contract by the stated deadline. It’s shoddy work, Y/N. Honestly, I expect more from you.’ You cursed. ‘God, Charlie, I’m sorry. I’ve- I’ve been all over the place, but I didn’t… I didn’t even realise they were waiting on me. I- I don’t know what to say.’

‘Pull it together, kid,’ he scolded you gruffly. ‘This is the kinda thing people get fired for. The only reason I’m not turving you out on your ass right now is ’cause up ’til now you’ve been the hardest worker in this office. But you’re on thin ice, Y/N. People at head office are gonna find out about this and that’s not the sort of rep you want preceding you, you hear me?’ You nodded dumbly. ‘Alright, get out of here. And don’t let something like this happen again.’
‘He seriously said that?’ Mel’s eyes were shining as she sat across from you in the diner. You’d dragged her out to lunch for the first time in weeks, and she’d been hungry for gossip, though you wished she was taking a little pleasure from your fuck-up. ‘Damn, I thought Charlie was a pushover.’

‘He is,’ you admitted. ‘I mean, God, I wouldn’t have blamed him if he’d told me to pack my things and get the hell out. Clear Mind, Mel! I mean, that could’ve really made a difference for us!’

‘I didn’t realise things had gotten so bad with you.’ Her expression softened at the emotion in your voice and she reached across the table for your hand, giving it a tight squeeze. ‘I mean, I know you’ve been a million miles away since… Well, since I caught you on a date with that sexy outlaw biker guy, but I just figured you were finally getting some.’

That brought a smile to your face, though it was short-lived. ‘Definitely not that. And it wasn’t a date. I told you, he’s just a friend.’

‘Whatever you say.’

‘Look, there’s… There’s a lot of history raising it’s head right now, and it’s kinda messed me up. I mean, I don’t even know what I’m doing half the time, y’know? I’m not sleeping. I’m just…’ You sighed, aware how melodramatic you must sound. ‘God, I fucked up, Mel. I really fucked up.’

Mel’s hand was still clutching yours, glittery varnish sparkling in the light above your booth. ‘You know, if you ever wanna talk about it, Y/N-’

‘No.’ You shut her down immediately. ‘I can’t. I’m sorry. It’s… It’s complicated.’

‘I’m sure I can keep up.’

‘I know you could, I just… It’s not really something I wanna share. I’m sorry.’

She huffed indignantly, her touch falling away as she picked up her coffee. ‘Okay, I’m gonna level with you here, Y/N, and I need you to hear me, because I think it needs to be said.’ She waited for your small nod of acceptance before she went on. ‘You’ve been here a long time now, and you’re my friend. You’re Charlie’s favourite, or you were, and people like you, Y/N, they do. But… It’s like you’re a ghost or something.’

‘Like… What?’ You frowned at her, confused, but her sharp look silenced you.

‘You just… pass through. You don’t let anybody in. You don’t put yourself out there. Sure, you’re happy to go out for lunch and listen to me ramble on about my life, but you never tell me a single thing about yours. And when five o’clock rolls around, you log off and that’s it. You fall off the face of the earth until it’s time to go back to work. You don’t affect anything. You don’t get involved. You’re just… You’re just here. But I’m not sure you really wanna be.’

You were gawping at her, reeling from her observations. You thought you’d been doing such a good job at playing the part, fixing your mask in place every day, and she’d seen straight through it. You hadn’t given her enough credit, you realised now. She was smarter than she’d ever admit. ‘Mel, I didn’t… I don’t mean to shut you out.’

‘But you do. And hey, I don’t take it personally. You wanna play at being friends, I’m happy to go along with it. It stops things in the office from getting boring. But, Y/N, when things get bad and you need somebody and you still won’t let me in… That kinda sucks.’ You were still trying to find
the right words to convince her that you did care about her friendship, that she was the only person you really had in this new life you’d built for yourself, but she was checking her phone and finishing her coffee in one long gulp. ‘I gotta head back. I’ll catch you later, okay?’

The rest of the day had passed in a blur, the sick feeling in your stomach a distraction that you didn’t want or need. You’d thought that, so long as you kept Jax and the club separate from your work, you’d be able to carry on as normal, to pretend that he hadn’t turned your life upside down by barrelling back into it, but it seemed that your facade had already been cracking. As soon as the clock on your computer clicked over to 17:00, you switched it off, heading out into the street with your head down and your fists bunched at your sides.

The slam of your apartment door behind you shook the walls as you thrust your bag to the floor and kicked off your shoes, storming into the kitchen without bothering to say hello. Jax had been on the phone when you entered, but he hung up now, casting you a wary glance as you reached for a beer, decided it wasn’t strong enough and retrieved a half-full whiskey bottle from the cupboard instead.

‘Bad day?’ he asked, drawing closer and lounging against the doorframe, brow furrowing in concern as you unscrewed the lid and took a healthy glug straight from the bottle.

‘You could say that.’

‘Yeah, same here.’ You moved past him, heading for the couch, and he slipped the whiskey from your fingers, taking a swig himself before sinking down at your side. ‘Wanna talk about it?’

‘No.’ You huffed quietly, taking back the bottle when he offered it and hugging it to your chest. ‘I don’t know. I messed up, Jax, I really messed up. And now the kids that we work with, they might not get the help they need and it’s all my fault.’

‘Y/N, I’m sure that’s not-’

‘It is. It is true. I… I’ve been distracted. I’ve been so caught up in having you back, and Chibs and Tig being here, and what happened with us, and I haven’t been sleeping, and little things started slipping through the cracks, and now… I could’ve lost my job today.’

He didn’t say anything, stretching his arm along the back of the couch so he could toy with the ends of your ponytail.

‘I thought I’d built something here, Jax. I thought it was a fresh start - new friends, new home, new career. And now it all seems to be crumbling and I can’t even blame you for that, because apparently it was all just fake to begin with. My friend, my only real friend outside of the club, says she’s doesn’t know me. She says I’m keeping things from her and she’s right, of course she is. But how the hell am I supposed to tell her about my past? How am I supposed to explain to her what my brother was, what I went through, about Ope…?’ You sucked in a breath as tears welled in your eyes, blurring your vision. ‘The only way I can deal with it is to not talk about it. I have to pretend that it didn’t happen, that none of it happened, or… Or I feel like I can’t breathe.’

The arm resting against your back slipped to your waist, tightening, tugging, and then you were in Jax’s lap so that he could cradle you to his chest as you cried. ‘I’m so sorry, darlin’.’

‘It’s not your fault. None of it is. It’s me. I’m just tired of feeling so broken.’
'You’re not broken.’

His tone was soothing, the familiar feeling of being held by him fighting off the worst of your sobs as you fought to regain control. It felt good to cry, to let it out, but it also made you feel weak, as though you were letting your demons win. His hand was rubbing gentle circles over your spine, the other stroking lightly over the curve of your waist, and you relaxed into him, scrubbing the tears from your eyes so you could look up from where your face had been buried in his neck and fix him with a watery stare. ‘What about you? Your day sucked too?’

‘Stuff with the Irish,’ he told you with a shrug. ‘Nothing you need to worry about.’

You scoffed quietly, twirling the whiskey bottle in your fingers. ‘God, how did we get here, Teller? Are we bad people?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then why can’t things just be simple?’

It was a loaded question, especially with his fingers still smoothing over the wrinkled fabric of your blouse and his blue eyes locked on yours, intense and searching. The muscles in his stomach tightened beneath you as he inched you impossibly closer, and the atmosphere shifted almost imperceptibly when you nuzzled against him. ‘You said you’d been distracted by what happened with us. Guess we never really talked about that, did we?’

You sighed. ‘It was just a kiss.’

‘It wasn’t. It was more than that. I crossed a line and I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t… Please, don’t be sorry. It wasn’t…’ You tailed off, unable to find the right words. ‘It’s not like I didn’t want it. It’s just… complicated.’

‘I know.’ He caught his bottom lip between his teeth, and you wondered if he was remembering the taste of you. You pushed yourself up straighter in his lap, slipping a hand to the back of his neck so you could lean in and rest your forehead against his. ‘What are you doing, sweetheart?’

‘I’m…’ Again you tailed off, unsure. What were you doing? This wasn’t what you’d planned, what you’d wanted when you’d stormed into the apartment, but suddenly it was all you could think about. Anger churned in your stomach, at yourself, at Mel, at the club, at your brother, and it was thick and toxic. You needed to let it out, a release that would allow you to vent all of that frustration, and suddenly Jax’s hold on you seemed more than inviting. It was intoxicating and your head was starting to swim. ‘I need this. Please, Jax.’

‘What happened to complicated?’

‘It doesn’t need to be,’ you insisted. ‘We can keep it casual. No ties. No feelings. Just you and me.’

‘You think we can do that?’

‘We’re friends, right?’

He hesitated for a beat longer, and you shifted in his lap, teasing him just enough that he gave in with a low growl, fingers lacing in to your hair so that he could hold you in place as his mouth found yours. It was only the fourth time you’d ever kissed him, and yet it felt like coming home as he sank into you hungrily, the sweet-scratchy sensation of his scruff against your skin drawing desperate
whimpers from your lips as his hands travelled over your body. It was so easy to lose yourself in
him, to forget about the troubles of the day, the worries that plagued your mind and the million
reasons why this was a bad idea, and, when he twisted you round so you could straddle him, your
chest flush with his as you broke away, breathless, you knew your eyes were pleading with him for
more.

‘You sure about this?’

You nodded, unable to speak, to think, to do anything but cling to him and steal another greedy kiss.
And then he was easing himself to his feet, strong arms holding you up as you locked your legs
around his waist, and carrying you to the bedroom with long, hurried strides, blindly finding his way
as his lips attacked your throat.

And finally it was happening. You collapsed onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, and for one
peculiar moment a surge of reality awakened your lust-dozed brain and it seemed completely surreal
that it was Jax’s fingers propelling you towards the edge, his mouth drawing desperate moans from
your lips as he sought to drive your bad day far from your mind, but then the world around you
splintered, shattering into a million beautiful pieces, and you lost the thought somewhere in the haze.
It was dark beneath the covers, the air thick with the musky scent of Jax, his warmth reeling you in as you lay on your side, trailing your fingers over his chest. The sun had come up hours ago, but you’d been unwilling to move, your limbs deliciously heavy, so you’d burrowed your way down the bed, hitching the blanket up to block out the light and pretend you still had several long hours of the night left. When your bodies had been sated, you’d slept in the outlaw’s arms, and he’d woken you later with heady, languorous kisses that had raw want thrumming through your veins in seconds. It felt like a dream, one that you never wanted to end, and you shifted closer now as his fingers brushed over your shoulder, his lips pressing against your forehead, every sensation heightened by the blackness that blinded you.

‘Y’know, I have this memory from when I was a kid.’ His voice was a gravelly whisper, thick with tiredness and the intimacy that came from spending so much time wrapped around each other that it was almost as if you’d become one sometime throughout. ‘I’m riding my bike down the street, peddling as hard as I can, and Ope’s right there beside me. Piney had just swung by to meet JT and they’d gone speeding off on their motorcycles, and we just wanted to be like them, y’know? When you’re a kid, you can imagine it: that you’re not frantically pumping your legs trying to keep up because there’s an engine rumbling away beneath you, and you feel like you’re flying.’

‘I bet you guys were cute kids.’

‘Hellraisers, more like. Always gettin’ into mischief. But I kinda feel like that’s when it all started, y’know? This mission to sit at the head of the table. That was all we’d talk about. We were legacies and we were so sure it’s what we wanted our lives to be. Even when JT died… It didn’t stop us. If anything, it just made me more determined, to follow in his footsteps, to become the man that he was.’

‘Jax-’

‘No, I’m not… I’m not trying to say it was a mistake. Without the club I wouldn’t be so close to my mom, I probably wouldn’t have Abel, and I definitely wouldn’t have met you. But I have to remind myself that at one point in time I wanted this, more than anything. It’s just crazy, isn’t it? How you can look back and pinpoint a single moment when your entire life’s course was set? That moment, with Ope, that’s what it was for me.’

‘I know what you mean.’

‘You do?’

You nodded. ‘I felt like I had all of my choices taken away when my folks died, like I was completely out of control. I was dependent on Aaron for everything, and that meant I had to do what he said, because if he walked away from me, I had nothing. And then… then he did what he did and I wasn’t my own person anymore. They dressed me up, made me up like some kinda Barbie doll, and auctioned me off, and then that person owned me. I was just… a body, y’know? Theirs to do whatever they wanted with. Until I hit rock bottom and that was my moment, that’s when I had to make a choice. And in that moment, I decided that I would rather die than let what was about to happen happen. He’d starved me, chained me up, beaten me bloody, but I wasn’t going to let him violate me like that. That moment changed everything.’

‘It brought you to me.’
‘It did. I hit the jackpot when you found me. You changed my life forever. You gave me a family, a home. You gave me Ope. You’ve been the best friend I’ve ever had. Even when I left, I knew that I had you and Chibs and Tiggy, that Opie had died to give me a better life, and there was a time when I couldn’t have even imagined having anybody care about me that much. I carry it with me, all of you, every day. It keeps me going. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to thank you enough for that.’

‘That why you let me back in? Why you let me come here?’

‘I don’t know,’ you admitted. ‘I think I just can’t say no to you. That’s kinda always been our problem.’

Your breath caught in your throat as he crooked his neck, leant his forehead against yours, and you felt his lips quirk in a smile when you tipped your face up to kiss him. Whispered secrets through the dark felt safer somehow, like you could speak the words without being judged, like the rest of the world had fallen away until there was just you two, though when he rolled on top of you, any thought of divulging more unspoken truths flew from your mind.

The weight of him pinned you to the mattress, and his breath ghosted over your face, and then he was kissing you again, devouring you with so much hunger that it was almost as if he’d gone weeks or months without touching you, instead of a couple of hours. He lost himself in the rhythm of it, the sensations, and you were left to hang on tight and let him take control, driving you to the edge time and time again. It was urgent and needy, and yet at the same time, the way he cupped your face in his hands, the way he pressed kisses along the column of your throat even as he drove into you with jarring force, made it seem intimate and as if he was glad it was you, only you.

His name fell from your lips and he swallowed it greedily, drinking you in, hips stuttering, and then you were falling, tumbling down and down and down, and you held your breath, waiting to hit the ground and shatter into a million tiny pieces, but Jax’s arms were around you, holding you close, keeping you safe, and you clung to him as the waves of pleasure ebbed away.

‘That just keeps getting better.’ Large hands were pushing your hair back from your face, his touch searing hot, and you could only nod dumbly, still dazed. ‘I’m never gonna get enough of you.’

It wasn’t casual. It didn’t sound casual. It could have taken the pretence that you were trying so hard to keep up for the sake of your heart and stamped all over it, but the covers protected you, your little haven, a bubble where nothing could hurt you. When you emerged blinking into the afternoon sunlight, it would be different. You’d have to steel yourself, harden yourself so that you could separate your emotions from pure physical sensation, but right there you could revel in his affection, let it carry you away, and you did. Your heart sang.

And so it went on. During the day, when the sun streamed in through the windows, and your work and the MC’s demands dominated your attention, you were friends. You’d talk, laugh, eat and ride, and you realised just how much you’d been missing over the past seven years, holding people at arm’s length, not allowing anyone to get close. Having a best friend was something you’d taken for granted when T.M. had been your home, but, having him back, you knew you would never do that again. Although you avoided any subjects that might bring either of you pain - the war you’d started, decisions made, the lives lost - it was nice to have somebody to talk over the small everyday things with, and you felt lighter because of it.
But at night… As soon as the sun set something shifted, the atmosphere would become thick with tension, and Jax would inch closer to you on the couch, snaking an arm around you so you could curl against his side. He’d always initiate that first kiss, though you never pushed him away, because by that point your blood would feel syrupy in your veins, pumping slowly round your body, everything poised in anticipation. It was the beginning of the period of time when it was okay for him to touch you, for you to tangle your limbs with his and cling to him, for whimpers and moans and husked breaths, and you couldn’t believe that you finally had Jax in your bed, in your arms, deep inside, after so long wanting him, needing him, loving him. It was an act, you knew, you’d made that clear the first time you’d let him carry you to your room, but it was one you’d come to depend on, to need as badly as you needed the oxygen that filled your lungs, and you pushed your fears about what that dependency might mean aside. You couldn’t let it tarnish this, not yet.

‘I’ve filed that report, Charlie.’ You stuck your head around your boss’ office door at half past four on Monday afternoon, giving him a wary smile. ‘And I’ve put a call in to Clear Minds, see if I can get an appointment to see their Business Development guy, maybe patch things up. I’ve also got a meeting with a food bank that’s expanding a couple of towns over, see if we can set up a referral system, and I had a call back from that new clinic that just opened - they’re gonna start signposting to us if they have anyone they think we can help.’

You’d worked your ass off that day to try to pick up the pieces of your period of distraction, determined to prove yourself once again and redeem yourself in Charlie’s eyes. He was nodding, returning your smile, a look of relief spreading over his face.

‘That’s good, thanks Y/N.’

‘Of course. Is there anything else you need me to do?’

‘Nope.’ He was drumming his fingers against the desk, and you could see his laptop poking out of the bag that hung on the back of his chair, a sure sign he’d be heading out soon. ‘It’s good to have you back on form.’

‘Thank you.’

The big push to catch up, to get a couple of wins under your belt had taken it out of you, and you had to admit that you felt drained and exhausted as you sank back down into your chair, the words on your computer screen blurring when you clicked onto a new email in your inbox. Several of your colleagues had already left for the day, and you determined that you’d work for another twenty minutes, then start thinking about heading home too. Before, you were always glued to your desk until five at the earliest, preferring the electrical hum of the office to the silence of your apartment, but everything was different now. Now, you had someone to go home to, and you would never get enough of the smile that would grace Jax’s features when you let yourself in every evening. Like he’d missed you. Like he couldn’t wait for the darkness to creep in…

The trill of your phone interrupted your reverie, and you reached for it in a daze, recognising Mel’s extension on the display.

‘Hey, what’s up?’

‘Y/N, you’ve got a visitor.’
'Yeah?'

'Uh huh. A little more history, I’m guessing.'

Your heart gave a little leap, and you took a moment to gather yourself, before clearing your throat and trying to keep the excitement from your voice. ‘Okay, erm, I’ll be right down.’

You gathered your things as quickly as possible, shutting down your computer and shouldering your bag. Your heels clattered against the stairs as you hurried down them and you swung right into the reception area, unable to keep the grin from your face when you caught sight of Jax’s kutte.

‘There she is!’ Mel announced, her voice dripping with curiosity, and Jax turned towards you, opening his arms to welcome you with a tight hug.

‘What are you doing here?’ you murmured as you returned the embrace, and you felt a deep chuckle rumble through him.

‘Thought it was about time I saw where you worked.’ He pulled back to meet your eyes. ‘Not ashamed of me, are you?’

‘No,’ you insisted, and the arm around your waist tugged you closer, drawing a surprised squeak from your lips.

‘You sure?’ His voice was husky and seductive, his eyes darkening, and, though a part of you wondered exactly what this was, you couldn’t fight it if you tried. ‘Wanna prove that, darlin’?’

His mouth was hovering over yours, teasing, tempting, and it was the most natural thing in the world to slip your hand around the back of his neck and tug him down to close the distance between you so you could kiss him, thoroughly, honestly, forgetting where you were and that you shouldn’t be doing this, not at work, not in the daylight. It wasn’t the way it worked.

You knew Mel would have questions, could see her watching you wide-eyed from the corner of your eye as you pulled back, breathless, your cheeks flushed with heat. But you didn’t want to deal with them today. Instead, you laced your fingers through Jax’s and made for the door. ‘Let’s get out of here. I’ll see you tomorrow, Mel!’

‘Uh huh.’

‘You gonna tell me what that was?’ you asked Jax as you wandered hand in hand back towards the parking lot where he’d left his bike, trying to ignore the butterflies that were fluttering in your stomach. ‘I mean, public displays of affection aren’t really what we do, right?’

‘I know.’ Jax shrugged. ‘Guess I got carried away. Maybe the whole buttoned-up secretary look is starting to do it for me?’

‘Not quite as buttoned up as usual,’ you pointed out. Your late nights with the biker in your bed were eating into your sleep, so that you’d started sleeping in later each morning, not bothering to straighten and style your hair or do your make-up. Your natural waves framed your face, your lips kiss-bruised and your eyes sparkling with happiness, and for the first time you felt like you’d found a compromise between who you were and who you used to be.

‘Yeah, I noticed.’ He shot you a crooked smile and stopped so he could pull you into him once more and tuck a stray lock behind your ear. ‘Reckon that friend of yours is gonna have some questions for you tomorrow. What are you gonna tell her?’
‘I don’t know,’ you admitted. ‘I’m still kinda figuring this out myself.’

‘It’s good though.’

‘It is.’ You moved around him, eager to get home so you could let him know exactly how good it was. ‘Whatever it is, it’s really good.’
Chapter 10

‘Wake up, baby. I’m here.’

Your eyes flickered open and you started at the dark figure looming over you, disorientated. Panic clutched at your chest, restricting your lungs, and you sucked in a breath, slowly becoming aware of the ends of his hair tickling your face and the sweet whiskey scent of him. And then a smile quirked your lips.

Opie.

You reached out to tug on his shirt, pulling him down beside you so you could curl yourself against him, humming contentedly when strong arms wrapped around you, holding you close. ‘I missed you.’

‘I hate it when you cry.’ His admission made no sense until you swiped your fingers under your eyes and realised that your cheeks were wet, hot, salty tears still falling, though you had no idea why.

‘I didn’t know I was.’

‘You haven’t stopped. I can hear it, all the time. I hated not being able to come to you.’

‘But why would I be crying? I mean, I’m happy,’ you protested. ‘I am.’

‘With Jax?’ There was a tense edge to his voice and a shudder ran through you, even as you ran your fingertips along the curve of his collarbone.

‘No. I’m yours. I’m always yours.’

‘But Jax is in your heart.’

‘H-he…’ You tailed off. Was it true? Somewhere in the back of your mind was a fuzzy image of your best friend as he slept, lips parted as he snored quietly. His chest and throat were littered with deep red marks and you wondered idly how they got there, trying to ignore the taste of him on your tongue. ‘He’s my friend. We’re casual friends. We… I don’t know what we are.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are you in love with him?’

‘I… Ope-’

‘Did you love me?’

‘You know I did.’ You were pleading now, unsure what was happening, your voice desperate. You couldn’t explain it, but you were blinking rapidly as you tried to focus on his face. It was blurring before your eyes, almost like he was fading away, and you fistedit his shirt in your hands, trying to keep him there, to keep him with you. ‘I loved you more than I’ve ever loved another person. I know I realised that too late, and I never told you, not properly. But I loved you. I still do.’

‘You shouldn’t. You shouldn’t let anybody in. People leave you and you break so easily.’
‘I don’t. I’m strong. Tig said—’

‘Tig left you. I left you. Jax will too. It’s inevitable. You have to get out, away from the club. This isn’t what I wanted for you.’

‘But… No, Ope, I need them. I need you. Where—What are you doing?’ He’d crawled from the bed as you spoke, and was now standing unnaturally straight, his spine rigid, his gaze fixed on the opposite wall.

‘You have to see. All the club does is kill.’

‘No. Opie, please!’

His features were still fading, faster now, so that you couldn’t quite make out his mouth or his nose or the dark eyes that had held you enraptured so many times. He flickered once, twice, and then his head shot forward with a loud crack, blood spattering over the walls as though his skull had been struck, caved in by something hard, and you screamed as he crumpled to the ground.

‘Y/N! Y/N, wake up. It’s okay. It’s alright, I’ve got you.’

You were being held, strong arms locked around you, but the voice you could hear wasn’t Opie’s. You fought against the embrace for a moment, desperate to scramble from the bed so you could go to his side where he’d sunk out of sight onto the carpet, but then Jax’s words broke through and the breath left your body in a single sagging sigh.

‘Shit.’

‘It was a nightmare. You’re okay, I promise. Nothing can hurt you.’

Except it could. Opie’s words were still ringing in your mind and you flopped back against the pillows with your hands over your face.

‘Shit,’ you said again. ‘God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.’

‘It’s okay.’ Jax settled beside you, head propped up on one elbow as he watched you with concern. ‘What happened? What were you dreaming about?’

‘I—I don’t know,’ you lied. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘You called out for Opie.’

‘Did I?’ You shrugged, schooling your face into an expression of nonchalance. You couldn’t talk about it. You didn’t want to think about it, but the image wouldn’t leave you. Opie. Seeing him again, even if only in your imagination, had been like a shot through the heart and it ached now with every feeble beat. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘C’mere.’ He pulled you closer, tucking you against his body, and you didn’t bother to fight, though for the first time all you wanted was to sleep alone, to have some space to deal with the fresh wave of grief that threatened to drag you under. ‘Go back to sleep, okay? I got you. You’re okay.’

The nightmare stayed with you. You hadn’t managed to get back to sleep and you knew that Jax
had stayed awake too, watching over you, though he hadn’t spoken again. His embrace had once felt like a cocoon, keeping you warm, keeping you safe, away from anything that might hurt you, but it had felt suffocating as you’d heard Opie’s warning over and over. It hadn’t really been him, you knew that. You weren’t stupid. But that didn’t mean his words weren’t true, and the fact that they’d come from somewhere deep within you meant that you already believed it, somewhere, buried away. You believed that Jax would leave you.

It didn’t matter, or it shouldn’t. You were friends after all, and the door that you’d chosen to slam shut when you left Charming was now well and truly open. Even if he left, you’d stay in touch, with him and Tig and Chibby. You couldn’t let them go again. And you weren’t anything serious, you’d insisted on that. It was just a casual fling, a bit of fun to carry you through a rough patch and satisfy a need that you’d carried with you through the years. Except your heart, traitorous organ that it was, was having a hard time remembering that. Each time he smiled you got butterflies, every touch set it racing, and you were falling harder each and every day. Opie, the one in your dream, conjured up by your subconscious, was right and you knew there was no way you were getting out of this with your heart in tact.

You lost yourself in your work, letting it dominate thoughts and distract you from the harsh reality you’d been forced to face. The lunch hour came and went and, despite Mel’s pleas for you to join her for a session of gossip and grease at the diner, you kept your head down and tunnelled through it. Charlie made vague contented noises when he placed a coffee on your desk mid-afternoon, pleased that his best worker was back on her A-game, but you barely looked up. There was safety in spreadsheets and diarising business meetings, generating reports and running Google searches. You let them soothe you, take you away, and, before you knew it, it had grown dark outside and the office was empty.

There had been several years when you’d been afraid to venture outside alone in the dark, fearing that The Collective would be lurking around the next corner. But, as the time ticked by and they didn’t show, you’d pushed your fears aside, and now you barely gave it a thought as you locked up and headed for your truck. Your phone trilled as you slid behind the wheel and you sighed when you saw Jax’s name on the screen, answering with reluctance.

‘Hey.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m just leaving work. Something wrong?’

He let out a quiet huff of relief. ‘You didn’t say you were staying late. I was worried.’

‘Sorry.’

Silence. A loaded silence that stretched on so long that you thought he might have hung up before he spoke again.

‘Are we okay?’

‘Of course we are.’

‘Cause you’ve been acting weird since you woke up, and you were calling for Ope, and I’m-’

You cut him off, hating the pain and confusion in his voice. ‘I’m sorry, Jax. We’re okay, I promise. It’s just shaken me up a little.’

‘What happened?’
'I don’t wanna talk about it.’

’Y/N…’

You knew you weren’t being fair. ‘When I get home, alright? I won’t be long.’

‘Alright. Be safe.’

The apartment was quiet when you got back. Only a single light glowed in the living room and, when you’d set down your bag and kicked off your shoes, you shuffled in that direction, gaze immediately falling on the shadowy figure of Jax where he leant against the balcony railings, a single curl of smoke rising from the cigarette clasped between his lips. For a moment, the sight took your breath away.

Sometimes familiarity dulled the impact of Jax’s beauty - there’d been a few seconds the first time that he’d carried you to your bed when you’d found yourself wonderstruck by the firm ridges of his stomach and the taut muscles that shifted beneath your hands as you clutched at his arms, but after that he’d gone back to just being Jax: the man who’d saved you, so many times; the man who managed to break down every damn barrier you put up against him. But, with his outline illuminated by the streetlights down below and the light that spilled out of the balcony doors, he seemed to glow. Next to Opie, he’d always seemed small, but he wasn’t at all. He was tall and broad, strong shoulders tapering down to slim hips, long fingers flexing as he toyed with his rings. And, when he noticed you standing there, watching him, the half smile that played across his lips had heat pooling in your stomach. But it wasn’t time for that yet, and Opie’s words echoed through your head.

People leave you… Jax will too…

‘Hey.’ Jax had stubbed out his smoke, stepping back inside but keeping his distance. You knew it was for your benefit. He could sense your hesitance and it was setting him on edge. ‘You okay?’

You nodded, slipping around the couch so you could take a seat, wringing your hands as you waited for him to settle himself down beside you.

‘You wanna talk about it now?’

You didn’t. You desperately didn’t, but somehow you felt like bottling this up would bring everything to an end too soon, sooner than you could bear. You had to give him something, you owed him that, so you cleared your throat and nodded again. ‘Okay.’

‘What happened in the dream, darlin’?’

‘It was…’ You sucked in a breath, searching for the right words. ‘It was Opie, like we were before. He was… He was right next to me and I could reach out and- and touch him and… It felt so real.’

It must hurt him, you thought, to hear you admit to dreaming about the man you’d loved when he was laying right next to you, his marks painting your skin. Still, he reached out a hand to take yours, squeezing gently.

‘He was talking to me. He… He was worried about me, and I was crying, and- And then he wasn’t next to me anymore. He was standing by the bed, and he was still talking, and then he wasn’t, and
then… Then there was just blood, everywhere, and he collapsed, and I didn’t know what to do, Jax! I didn’t know what to do, and I was going to go to him, to see if he was okay, but then I woke up and- and- and…’ You couldn’t speak anymore as heaving sobs racked your body, and Jax was wrapping you up in his arms so he could hold you as you cried.

‘I’m so sorry, babe. I’m so sorry.’

‘I feel so guilty, Jax. I feel like I’m letting him down just by having you here, and I know that’s stupid, I do, but… I can’t help how I feel.’

‘You know we don’t have to do this. We can stop.’

‘No, we can’t.’ Your words were choked and you buried your face in the crook of his neck, breathing in deep lungfuls of his scent to calm you. That in itself was a sign of just how far gone you were, you realised, as you pulled back and met his eyes. ‘I know we said this was going to be casual, Jax, but that’s just… It’s not really working is it?’

You felt his shoulders slump as he continued to watch you, gaze burning in to you as you fidgeted uncomfortably, wishing he would say something, anything. Finally, he spoke. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, this just doesn’t feel very casual to me. I just… I wanna be with you all the time, I wanna be touching you all the time. I guess I’ve just never had that before with something that’s supposed to just be…’

‘Casual?’

‘Yeah. Maybe it’s just me. I don’t know.’

‘It’s not just you.’ His confession made your heart skip a beat, despite the intense feeling of discomfort that your dream had left you with. ‘What do you wanna do? I mean, I know you said we can’t stop, but we can, if you want to. It’s up to you, Y/N.’

‘No, God, no.’ The words fell from your lips before you’d even had time to think about the ramifications. ‘I’m not looking for a solution here. I’m just putting it out there, that’s all. Seeing Ope, the things he was saying… The last thing we did was fight about you and me, Jax. It’s bad enough to feel like I’m betraying him, but to do it just for fun, just because… That makes it worse somehow. I love you. You’re my best friend, but I am falling for you. Hard. And it’s scary as hell.’

‘I love you too.’ He didn’t clarify just what sort of love that might be, but you didn’t need him to, not really.

‘Just don’t break my heart, okay?’

‘I wouldn’t.’

‘Oh, I’m pretty sure you will.’ Because, at the end of the day, Opie was right. Jax would leave. It was inevitable. But you couldn’t let it break you. You wouldn’t.

As if he could read your thoughts, Jax bent his head to press a soft kiss to your lips, lingering there for a beat too long before pulling away. ‘Look, we’re together right now, okay? And this is good. You told me this is good.’

‘It is.’
‘So, let’s just enjoy the time we’ve got, alright? You and me, this little bubble. Let’s make the most of it. It’s been a long time since I’ve had something this good.’

‘Me too.’
Chapter 11

‘So, I didn’t think there was much I didn’t know about you, Teller,’ you drawled as you lounged against the kitchen counter, a bottle of beer dangling from your fingertips. ‘But I sure as hell didn’t know you could cook.’

‘Yeah, well, you haven’t tried it yet.’ Jax arched an eyebrow at you before turning back to the griddle pan sizzling on the hob, flipping one of the steaks with a pair of kitchen tongs. The heat in the kitchen had caused a thin sheen of sweat over his forehead, and his t-shirt clung to his chest, accentuating the muscles as he turned the other hunk of meat, a half-smile quirking his lips. ‘Go sit down. I’ll bring it through.’

You lingered just long enough to kiss him, but did as instructed, drifting through into the living room and taking a seat at the table. The balcony doors were open and a gentle breeze drifted in, cresting the couch and cooling your bare arms. You’d returned home from work to find Jax rifling through a carrier bag from the local supermarket and pulling out all kinds of things that made your tummy rumble. He’d proudly announced that he was making dinner, turning down any offer of help, and you’d decided to just go with the flow and let him get on with it.

You’d been doing that a lot over the past couple of weeks. Ever since you’d opened up to Jax about your feelings for him and your guilt about Ope, you’d been doing as he suggested: living in the moment, enjoying the time you had. It should’ve been more difficult with your impending heartbreak hanging over your head but it had proved surprisingly easy. Jax had a way of taking you away from your worries. When he pressed his forehead to yours, his eyes warm and hypnotic, he made you feel as if you were the only two people in the entire world, and you went with it, embracing the bubble that formed when it was just the two of you alone in your apartment, and counting down the hours until you could get back to him, wrap yourself around him, lose yourself in him again. Of course, you could still feel Opie’s memory in your mind, sense him in your dreams, but talking about it had silenced him for now, and instead you focused on what Tig had said when he’d realised the battle that was going on inside of you: He’d just want you to be happy, sweetheart. And you were. For the first time in a really long time. So, you were going to hold onto that.

When Jax appeared with two steaming plates of food, placing one in front of you with a flourish, you tucked in.

‘Y’know, this is pretty good.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, I mean, if you’re looking for a career change, I reckon this could be an option.’

‘Shut up.’

‘I’m serious.’

He shook his head, chewing thoughtfully for a moment. ‘You think that’s what I should do? Leave the club, try something new?’

You shrugged. ‘I think that’s a choice only you can make.’

‘But it’s what you would do.’

‘It’s what I did.’
He nodded. ‘Guess I hadn’t thought about it like that.’

‘The thing is, Jax, I knew it was time to leave. I just felt it. So, I think, when you’re ready to walk away, you’ll feel it too.’ You reached for your beer and took a sip. ‘So, I guess, how do you feel?’

‘I feel like I wanna be here. Like I wanna be with you.’

‘Even if it means stepping down, never going back?’ He fell silent, downing his cutlery and you swallowed hard. ‘Well, there’s your answer. You’re not ready yet. And that’s okay.’

You shot him a smile, and he returned it, pushing his chair away from the table. ‘I’m gonna grab another drink. You good?’

‘Still going on this one.’

‘Alright.’

The subject shifted onto easier ground when he returned: work and Mel’s latest exploits, what was on TV that night and whether it would be nice enough to go for a ride at the weekend. Normal conversation like a normal couple. That was what you lived for. Of course you were there to help Jax through this crisis with the club, but you believed what you’d said: you couldn’t try and alter his decision either way, no matter how much you might want him to stay. It had to be his choice and his alone, just like your decision to leave had been yours.

Afterwards, he dragged the cushions from the couch out onto the balcony, and you sat side-by-side, his arm looped around your shoulders as the stars began to blink into existence high up above you.

‘Thank you for dinner.’ You shifted closer, leaning into him, letting your eyes flutter closed as his lips brushed over the top of your head. ‘It really was great, Jax.’

‘Least I could do. You’ve done a lot for me.’

‘I’d do anything for you.’ He hummed in contentment, shifting so that he was laying down, sprawled over the cushions, pulling you down after him and tucking you against his side. ‘Does this remind you a little of being on the clubhouse roof?’

‘Kinda does,’ he agreed, before a lascivious grin flashed across his face. ‘Except back then I couldn’t do this.’

When he kissed you, the night sky faded away and the only stars you could see were on the backs of your eyelids. His lips were velvety soft, and he tasted like salty meat and cool beer. You sighed into his mouth, and he sank into you, shifting so that you were beneath him as warm hands found bare skin.

‘I’ll never get tired of this.’

You opened your mouth to agree, but all you can manage was a small whimper as he eased himself upright and pulled off his shirt. The muscles in his arms tensed as he lowered himself over you once more, and you smoothed your hands over them, eyes locking on his.

‘Wanna take this inside?’
‘No.’ You shook your head. The moment was perfect, the breeze dancing over your skin and the way he seemed to glow in the lamplight that filtered out from the living room. ‘No, don’t move, please. Here. I need you here.’

‘God, I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

The words hung in the air between you, and then he was kissing you again with a new ferocity, drawing out your soul until you were so completely under his spell that he could have cut your heart out right there and you would have let him.

The next few weeks passed in a blur of heated nights and easy evenings, weekend days spent on the back of Jax’s bike as it ate up the miles or drinking in the sunshine. It was almost like a honeymoon, you thought, just the two of you, revelling in each others’ company. You kept waiting to tire of him, or to argue, but each day was even better than the last. Things were good, so good, and your worries melted away into oblivion.

Of course, the phone calls from the MC continued, and you should have known that the stormclouds lingering on the horizon would soon close in. The rain started on a Thursday nearly a month after Jax had cooked you dinner. You arrived home to find him with a face like thunder, stuffing shirts into a holdall.

‘What’s going on?’ He was leaving, you knew it. Going back to Charming, taking up his place with the club again, and you wrapped your arms around yourself, afraid that you might fall apart.

‘I gotta go.’

‘Jax-’

‘Things with the Irish have gone South again. Somebody’s gotta go to Belfast and speak to the guys at the top.’

‘Wait, what?’

‘Yeah.’ He sank down onto the bed with a sigh, shoulders slumped. ‘Trust me, I don’t want to.’

‘It has to be you?’

‘At this point, yeah.’

‘But…’ You paused. ‘You’re still on probation, Jax. You shouldn’t even be here! You can’t leave the country!’

‘I’m hitching a ride on a cargo flight courtesy of a friend,’ he told you with a smirk. ‘The risk’s minimal, I promise.’

‘How long will you be gone?’

‘I don’t know.’ Finally, he seemed to register your distress, how you were still trying to hold yourself together, and he climbed to his feet again, moving towards you so he could rub his hands
over your arms. ‘I’m coming back, Y/N, I promise. I’m coming back to you.’
Chapter 12

The apartment felt empty. Where before it had been your haven, now you hated being there alone, your bed cold, a dinner for one something you could barely face. Jax had been gone a little over a week, which meant, with the long ride over to the airfield, that he’d probably only been in Belfast for two or three days, and you had no clue how long it’d be before he returned. Or if he even would.

Because you weren’t stupid, you really weren’t. You knew what he’d promised you, and you knew that he loved you… It had gotten to the point where you could see it in his eyes, feel it in the way he held you close, the thud of his racing heart when you were wrapped around him. But meeting with the Irish was a big step towards taking up his position with the club again, and you couldn’t convince yourself that it wouldn’t be the pull he’d needed to head back home. The others were waiting on him, and the trouble he feared wouldn’t go away the longer he hid. If anything, it would be intensifying as frustrations grew and tempers frayed, and it’d be all out war before anyone would know what had hit them. The news of those that had already been lost had broken your heart and you couldn’t stand the thought of any more death, but you still weren’t ready to let Jax go quite yet.

After a Sunday night spent huddled on the couch, with a thick quilt draped over you, because you couldn’t face the hours in the darkness of your room without him, you were relieved to have a reason to leave the house as another week rolled around. You headed out early on Monday morning, cranking up the radio in the truck to break the monotonous silence, and hurried to the office just so you would have something to do, a purpose, a team to be a part of. You had no clue how you’d lived alone for so long, cutting yourself off from the world. After being dragged back in so abruptly, you couldn’t stand the isolation this time around.

But, when you reached the glass-fronted reception, the building was still in darkness, though you could see movement in the shadows inside. Your stomach knotted as you hesitated for a moment. Your instincts were telling you to run, your mind flashing back to the life you used to lead, warning you that maybe, just maybe, there was danger here. You remembered this life, knew the sort of people that were after Jax… It wasn’t out of the question that they’d managed to track him down, leading him to you, and you’d be one hell of a bargaining chip if they had you under their control. You were frozen in place, one part of you telling your legs to move, your feet to run, while another told you that it couldn’t be happening, not in your town, not in this new existence that you’d worked so hard to create.

You were still hovering, poised on the balls of your feet, debating what to do next when the door in front of you was wrenched open and Mel was standing there with a gleeful look on her face.

‘Hey, wow, you’re here early.’ She tilted her head back towards the reception space behind her as you nodded dumbly. ‘Waste of time though, I’m afraid. Power’s out. Spoke to Charlie and he said people should just work from home for today. I was just heading out.’

‘Oh.’ Your mind was still reeling, the panic that had been creeping in slowly receding until you could force a smile and coax your body to relax. ‘Right, okay. Well, I guess I’ll just-’

You were turning to go, but Mel cut you off, wrapping an arm around your shoulders as she stepped out onto the street. ‘Stop, don’t do that. It’s a snow day, Y/N! Sort of, anyway. Charlie won’t have a damn clue what we’re doing, so why don’t we go grab some breakfast? I’m in need of something greasy and covered in ketchup.’

You really did smile then, though you were already turning her down. ‘Mel, you’re terrible! And I have a tonne of stuff to get on with, so-’
‘But we haven’t talked properly in ages! And you keep shooting me down whenever I ask any questions about that hot blonde biker dude that picked you up the other week! C’mon, we need a catch-up! Please!’

You didn’t have time to respond. She was already leading you away, heels clicking along the sidewalk, and you couldn’t do anything but let her propel you along.

Half an hour later, you were both ensconced in a booth of a small coffee place on the other side of town, far enough from the office to still have electricity and therefore be able to serve up the sort of breakfast that Mel was craving. You’d been reluctant at first but, actually, as you cupped your mug in your hands and took your first sip of steaming caffeine, you were glad that she’d dragged you along. For one thing, it was far better than going back to your silent, empty home, and for another, maybe it would be good to talk, even if you just skimmed over the details. She was a girl, she’d had relationships, good and bad. Maybe she’d be able to help you out, or smack you round the head and tell you to pull yourself together. At this point you’d take either.

‘So, that guy,’ Mel began once your food orders had been taken and the waitress had scurried away. ‘What’s the deal? And don’t tell me it’s just Jax like you have done every time I’ve tried to bring it up, like it was just Tig a couple of months ago. I need more, Y/N! You’re like the queen of the sexy biker guys!’

An image of Gemma flashed into your mind and you couldn’t help but grin. If she’d heard Mel’s statement, her eyes were be darkening at the thought that you might be out to steal her title. Queen of the bikers was definitely way more her thing than yours, but of course, Mel wasn’t to know that the position wasn’t open for you to take. ‘You have no idea,’ you muttered, taking another sip of your drink. ‘But I’m not sure what you want to know. I mean, he is just Jax. He’s a friend from the past, just like Tig. And, yeah, we’ve been hooking up or whatever, but it won’t last, so…’

You’d tailed off and were staring morosely at the scratched wooden surface of the table when Mel took your hand, squeezing it gently. ‘Oh man, you really like him, don’t you?’ When your eyes flicked up to meet hers, she shot you a kind smile. ‘It’s written all over your face, Y/N. And I’ve seen how you’ve been the last few weeks. You’re like a completely new person, laidback and happy. I’m guessing that’s down to him.’

You nodded.

‘So… Tell me.’

And you did. Not about the drama, and Aaron and Opie, and all of the violence and the death. But about how Jax had become your best friend when you’d first moved to Charming, and how’d you’d fallen for him hard almost straight away but that the timing had never been right. And you told her about moving away and losing touch with him and the rest of the club, and how it had turned your whole life upside down when they’d sought you out and pushed their way back in. You told her how you’d tried to keep it casual with Jax, how you’d tried to protect your heart, but he’d somehow found a way in, with his crooked smile and the way he looked at you as if he’d discovered his reason for living, and how he wrapped you up in his arms so that nothing in the world could hurt you ever again.

‘Except that it will be him that hurts me in the end, I know it. But I can’t do anything about that now because… Because I love him, but I just can’t see a happy ending for us.’

She’d remained silent as your truth had come spilling out, but now she shook her head, taking a bite of her bacon sandwich and wiping the grease from her chin. ‘Dammit, girl, you’ve got it bad.’
You sighed. ‘Yep.’

‘But I don’t understand. Why are you so sure it isn’t gonna work out?’

‘It’s complicated.’ That was an understatement. ‘He’s the President of the MC, y’know, the motorcycle club? And people are looking to him to be a leader and make the big decisions, and he can’t do that from here. Someday, he’s gonna have to go back, to go home, and… I’ll just be here. I don’t really know where that leaves me.’

‘So, why can’t you go with him?’ It was an innocent question, asked with the best of intentions, but it had your pulse pounding in your ears at just the thought of going back to Charming, sitting in the clubhouse, driving the roads that you’d travelled with Ope at your side.

‘I-I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

You swallowed hard, picking at the fries on your plate, though at this point they all tasted like cardboard. ‘There are just… a lot of memories back there that I can’t… I can’t go back there, Mel. I-I lost someone.’

‘Oh.’ To give Mel her due, she didn’t push for more information. She just sucked in a breath and reached for your hand once again, holding it tightly until the waitress returned with your bill. ‘Hey, I’m glad you told me. You know I’m always here for you if you wanna talk.’

‘I know. It feels kinda good to get it all off my chest.’

And it did. You went home feeling lighter and the day passed quickly when you got down to work.

You could do this. You were strong. Yeah, you loved Jax, but the club needed him and, if he had to leave, you’d be okay, you told yourself. You had Mel and your work, and maybe you could even branch out, meet new people, make more friends. You didn’t want to shut yourself away anymore. Your conversation with Mel had proven that you could talk about your past, tell your story. She didn’t need to know every part, every painful detail. Just enough to give you a history, prove that you were a real person and not just a hollow shell that had sprung up from nowhere with a suit jacket and a neat bun. For the first time in a long time, you felt hopeful for your future, whatever it might hold.

You were in the middle of cooking dinner when the phone rang. For the past week you’d been living on sandwiches and takeaways, unable to muster up the energy to cook just for you, but tonight you had a pot of pasta boiling and a tomato sauce simmering on the stove.

You reached for your cell where it lay on the counter, flicking it open when you didn’t recognise the number. ‘Hello?’

‘Hey, love, how’s it going?’

Chibs. You grinned. It had been a while. ‘Hey Chibby. Things are good. How’re you?’
‘Aye, gettin’ by.’ There was something in his tone, a tension that set you on edge and had the smile falling from your face as quickly as it had sprung up.

‘What is it? Is something wrong? Is it Jax?’ He cleared his throat and the noise of the bar that you’d been able to hear in the background faded. You pictured him pushing his way outside, hopping up onto one of the picnic benches and settling himself on the table, running a hand through his greying hair. You imagined yourself sliding up next to him and leaning against his shoulder, the comforting feel of his arm wrapping around you, his scruff catching in your hair as he stooped to press a kiss to the top of your head. You’d sat like that so many times. And still, he was quiet. ‘Chibby, please. Did something happen?’

‘Nah, not yet.’ Another pause, and the clink of glass as he sipped from his beer. ‘Things are gettin’ bad round here again, lass. People are dyin’. None of ours yet but it’s just a matter of time.’

‘Is-Is it Marks?’

‘Aye. He’s done playing the slow game, I reckon. He’s got people on his back, out for blood, and he’s gotta make a move. He’s putting pressure on the other groups on the street, tryin’ to force them to talk. Jax has got their loyalty still for the moment, but the longer he stays away, the more of their people get killed… It won’t be long ‘fore someone gives Marks the proof he needs that it was us that took out Pope, or that it was us that went after The Collective. And then we’re done for.’

‘Chibby-’

‘S’all falling apart here, love.’

‘Jax, he went to talk to the Irish. I-I thought that would help things settle down.’

‘Too little, too late.’ You heard him sigh heavily, and you felt his anguish right down to your bones. He was worried for the club, for the lives of the men currently under his command. It was a position you didn’t envy.

‘So, what do we do?’

‘I hate to do this to you, Y/N, I do. But we need Jackie to come home. It’s the only way we’ve got a hope in hell of getting out of this without the whole club getting decimated. I need you to talk to him.’

‘But, even if he does,’ you questioned, ‘what can he actually do at this point? I mean, if he shows his face, surely Marks will… Marks will kill him, won’t he?’

‘I don’t want that, love.’

‘No, but-’

‘Look, I don’t have all the answers. I don’t have a fucking clue how we’re gonna get ourselves out of this mess. All I know is that I can’t do it alone. When Jax gets back, I need you to tell him to come home, okay? We need our President back. Otherwise… Shit, I don’t even wanna think about what’ll happen. This is his club. It’s time for him to step up.’
You were half asleep when you heard your front door creak open. It had been four days since your phonecall with Chibs and each night since you’d lain awake, tossing and turning, until exhaustion finally pulled you under just before the dawn. You’d heard the desperation in the Scotsman’s voice, frustration at the situation, anger at Jax, and it brought home exactly how bad things were getting again back in Charming. But how could you ask the club’s President to leave when his absence was something you dreaded? How could you push him away when you were so in love with him, especially when taking up his mantle again may lead to his demise? The questions had plagued you and you’d fought to bury them, biding your time until Jax returned from Ireland and hopefully brought with him a little clarity.

You blinked dazedly as he slipped into the room, toeing off his sneakers and pulling his t-shirt over his head. Even in the dim light filtering in through your blind you could see the bruising over his ribs and you stretched out a hand towards him as he lowered himself onto the bed.

‘Shit, Jax, what happened?’

‘Galen happened,’ he muttered with a grimace, settling himself back against the pillows and reaching for you, dragging you closer so he could bury his face in your hair. ‘Asshole’s a pitbull in an expensive suit.’

‘Are you okay? How was it over there?’

‘Nothing you need to worry about.’ He usual drawl was thicker than usual and you wondered when he’d last slept. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, a cut across one cheek and a graze on his chin, and you pushed yourself up on your elbow so you could brush your lips over the most obvious of his injuries. ‘I missed you, darlin’.’

‘I missed you too,’ you admitted, tucking yourself into his side. ‘I wasn’t sure… I mean, I was worried that… Chibs called and-’

‘He shouldn’t have done that.’

‘I’m scared, Jax. For the club and for you. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here.’

‘You’re doing it,’ he reassured you, rolling towards you and wrapping his arms around your waist. ‘Knowing I had you to come home to, it kept me strong over there, let me do what I needed to.’

You didn’t let yourself think about what exactly that might be. You knew Jax was no angel and you were sure that no matter how beaten up he seemed to be, there was an IRA member who looked ten times worse. ‘I’m glad you’re back. I hated it here without you.’

‘I know.’ He was whispering now as sleep stole over him, and you smiled as his eyes drifted shut, long lashes fluttering against his cheeks. ‘I’m sorry, Y/N. I’m really sorry.’

When you woke later that morning, the space beside you was empty. You strained your ears, listening for any hint of where Jax might be, maybe the shower running or the low buzz of the
television through the wall, but all was quiet. Swinging your legs out of bed, you padded out of the bedroom and down the hall, stretching as you went, but you found the kitchen and living room empty. You frowned, tiredness and your own anxiety leading you to wonder whether you were losing it completely, whether you’d just imagined Jax’s return in the early hours, but then a piece of paper on the coffee table caught your eye and you snatched it up, immediately recognising his distinctive scrawl.

_Gone for a ride._

That was it. No further explanation, no where he was headed or when he’d left or how long he might be. Not an I love you. Not even a damn kiss. Something about the note felt strangely cold, and you balled it up in your fist and tossed it into the trash, telling yourself that you were being stupid. He’d obviously woken before you and been in a rush to head out. There was no point in overthinking it. Who knew what he’d been through over in Belfast, and after so long away from the game… Of course, it was gonna screw with him a little. He’d be okay. Things would be back to normal in no time. But even you felt that was a lie and you were right.

Where Jax’s return had initially brought with it a sense of relief, that gradually faded as his behaviour continued to confuse you. At night, he’d wrap himself around you, time and again, devouring you, losing himself in you, and afterwards, when he was finally sated, he’d hold you so tightly that you thought you might break. But during the light of day, he was like another person, someone that you didn’t recognise. He barely spoke to you, spending far too many hours pacing back and forth across the balcony with his cellphone to his ear, face set in a grim frown. When he wasn’t talking to the club he was mostly silent, disconnected, staring off into the distance and pulling away whenever you went to touch him.

Each flinch, each time you asked him a question that he ignored, each meal he left untouched, made your stomach churn until you’d become a tangled knot of anxiety. After talking with Mel, you’d come to the realisation that if or when Jax left, you’d find a way to keep going, to pull yourself together and get back to the life you’d built, but you’d expected him to leave on good terms. This, the way he was treating you now, was breaking your heart, making you feel weak and helpless, and it had gotten to the point where you hated coming home to the tension, the unbearable silence, and the uncertainty of just what was going through his head. You needed answers but had no clue how to get them from him anymore. He just didn’t seem to care.

‘Are you leaving me?’ you asked eventually one evening as he slumped on the couch, staring at the blank screen of the TV, a beer swinging from his fingers. ‘I’d rather you just told me, Jax. This, the silent treatment, it’s driving me crazy. So, if you’re getting ready to go back, please, just say something.’

There was a beat where he didn’t acknowledge the fact that you’d spoken at all, and you thought he might ignore you, as he had so many times before, but then he leaned forward, setting his beer down on the coffee table and twisting round to face you as you took a seat at his side. ‘Honestly, Y/N, I’m not sure what I’m doing.’

‘Chibs said the club needed you back. He said people were going to die.’

‘Yeah, and he’s right. But if I go back, it’s my blood they’re gonna be after, and can you tell me that none of my guys are gonna get caught in that crossfire?’ He sighed as you lowered your gaze to your hands, finding yourself tugging at your fingers as you contemplated his dilemma. ‘I have a VP, and I have a sergeant, and their loyalty is to me, always. So, if someone’s aiming a gun at my head, it’s gonna be second nature to them to throw themselves in the path of that bullet.’

‘Jax—’
‘I would’ve done it for Clay, once upon a time. Not towards the end maybe, but before that. So would Tig.’

‘So, what? You’re staying away to make them hate you? Pushing their loyalty to breaking point?’

His eyes flashed. ‘No, that’s not what I’m… No. I’m staying away because I can’t see a way to get my club out of this without losing more of them. I thought that with a little time I’d be able to figure it out, but this shit’s just getting worse and I’ve still got no answers. Going over to Belfast just proved to me that I’m in way over my head. The Irish, they’re pissed and they’re powerful, and they’re tired of playing games. They don’t want to deal with me, but their egos dictate that they’ll only talk to the President. Honestly, I think their plan was to take me out and make everybody’s lives easier.’

‘Don’t say that!’

‘Why not? It’s true.’ He flopped back in his seat, running a hand through his hair, looking more defeated than you’d ever seen him. ‘God, Tara and the boys are better off without me. Who’s to say the club wouldn’t be too?’

You reached for his hand, lacing your fingers through his, relieved when for once he didn’t pull away. ‘They love you, Jax, the club and your boys. It doesn’t matter what mistakes you’ve made. You’re their brother, their father. They need you.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘Fine, then I need you.’

He scoffed at that, though his hold on your hand tightened. ‘You were better off before I forced my way back into your life.’

‘That’s not true,’ you argued, and you meant it. ‘Things might have been easier, sure, but I wasn’t happy, not really. Not like I have been since you got here. We started this thing because we were sad and it felt right to turn to each other, because you’re my best friend and I trust you, but it felt so right, Jax, and I fell in love with you so easily. And, when I’m with you, none of our history seems to matter, nothing we went through to get to this place, and I need that. I need you in my life. So, if you can’t go back to Charming, don’t. People will understand. But, please, Jax, you’ve got to stop shutting me out because it’s killing me. Just tell me that you’re going back and let me deal, or that you’re not going back and that you’re going to stay here with me, forever, because that’s what I want. That’s all that I want. I just… I need to know what’s going on.’

‘It’s not that simple, Y/N. I wish it was. You know I love you.’

‘So, why? Why can’t it be that simple? If people are going to die whether you go back or not, why can’t you just walk away and let it go?’ You hated the sound of your voice, like you didn’t care, like nothing mattered but the two of you. You hated that those people you were talking about like their deaths meant nothing were people that you loved. But in that moment you were desperate, needy, wanting nothing more but for him to put you before the club and swear that he’d stay.

Jax’s face had darkened even further, though you could see your own desperation mirrored back at you in his eyes. ‘Because it won’t matter to someone like Marks whether I’m in or out,’ he explained. ‘The second he gets wind that I’ve stepped down, he’ll have his people on to me, tracking me down. He’ll come after me anyway, because he wants my blood for Pope’s and for the people above him, for The Collective, and if I stay here… I’m gonna lead them straight to you.’
In some weird way, during your years away from Charming, you’d forgotten how it all worked. You’d forgotten that a grudge held on the streets was never forgotten, that betrayal was a price always paid in blood, and that the more you could make your enemy suffer, the bigger the win and the ego boost on top. If Marks came after Jax and found him with you, the life you had together, you knew with a horrifying certainty now that he wouldn’t just take Jax out and be done with it. No, he’d make him suffer and he’d use you to do it. The thought sent chills of fear down your spine, and your skin went cold as you considered that new reality, that maybe The Collective would be your downfall after all, when you’d honestly thought that you’d escaped. And, worst of all, it would mean that Opie’s sacrifice, what he’d done to buy you your freedom, would mean nothing.

‘Jax…’

‘I know.’ Sensing your distress, he dropped your hand and tugged you into his lap, stroking your hair back from your face as tears welled in your eyes. ‘I know. I’m sorry, Y/N. But this is why I can’t make this decision, do you get it now? This is why I’m stuck. Whatever I do next, somebody dies. People I love…’

‘I’d never thought about it like that. I… I don’t know what to do now. I’m scared, Jax.’

‘Don’t be.’ His lips were ghosting over yours, kissing away the tears from your cheeks, scruff scratching against your damp skin. ‘You don’t have to be, I promise. I will always put you first, okay? I swear to you. I won’t let anything happen to you, Y/N. I will always keep you safe.’

But his words felt hollow somehow, meaningless, because what good was he, one man, against an army? And that night, when he slipped into bed beside you, reaching for you, moving over you, you clung to him just as tightly as he clung to you, knowing that every time now would feel like the last. The clock was counting down.
Chapter 14

Jax was still sleeping. Somehow you’d fallen into a mismatched sleep pattern where you would drift off easily, finding peace in his arms, and wake far too early, watching the world lighten outside your window, and he would lay awake half the night, before crashing out when the exhaustion became too much, and sleep until late morning, finally surfacing feeling groggy and no better for the hours of rest. You didn’t mind. It was at times like this, when he was still, his chest rising and falling steadily, that you could drink him in, taking in the minute details of his face so you could commit them to memory: the faint scar above his eye, a souvenir from a scrap with one of Lin’s guys behind bars; the faint creases in his forehead from too much time spent frowning, the furrows wrinkling his skin until his concern had just become a part of him; the reddening of his bottom lip, a result of long hours spent gnawing on it as he paced back and forth on the phone. Jax’s life story was painted over his face and you wished you could change it - a little less grief, a little less pressure, a lot less pain - softening it for him until the only lines that aged him were laughter lines, crinkling around his eyes.

You shifted closer to him, nuzzling against the dip of his collarbone and letting your fingers ghost over his chest, tracing the lettering of his son’s name. Your touch sent a shiver through him and he rolled towards you, wrapping you up in his embrace. Though he held you just a little too tight, clinging to you as an anchor as his dreams tortured him, you didn’t pull away. It was warm there, safe, and you could smell the traces of his cologne from the day before and the musk of leather that seemed to have seeped into his skin over the years. Hitching the covers up a little higher, you formed a cocoon for the two of you, a hiding place where the world couldn’t touch you, and settled in. You knew you’d have hours yet before Jax woke, but you had no intention of leaving the bed without him. It was the weekend, and the feeling that you were on borrowed time hadn’t lessened since he’d been brutally honest with you about the choice he was facing. Every second was precious, every moment like this one to treasure, and you weren’t going to waste a heartbeat.

When Jax’s cell began to buzz on the bedstand a little while later, you hoped he’d sleep through it. You didn’t bother to lift your head to see who was calling, wishing for just a little bit longer in your haven, but it was persistent and eventually the outlaw stirred, groping blindly for the source of the noise before he’d managed to crack open an eye. Flipping the phone open, he squeezed you tighter as he grunted out a greeting to the caller. You nestled against him, trying not to listen, to recapture the moment that had been interrupted, but then his body tightened, tension flooding through him, and you knew it was a lost cause.

‘He what? When?’ A beat of silence. ‘Shit. Where is he now?… Is somebody with him?… Alright, alright, just let me think.’ He pulled away from you, twisting to sit upright, feet firmly planted on the floor as he reached for his pants. ‘You’re sure it was them?… Was anybody with him?… Goddamn it!’

You watched as he climbed to his feet, dressing awkwardly with just one hand, before slipping out of the room and leaving you alone, the door clicking shut behind him. You slumped back against the pillows, a lump forming in your throat as you wondered what news had stirred him up. You weren’t stupid, you knew that somebody had been hurt, but you tried to ignore the feelings of guilt that bubbled up inside of you. Had they been hurt because Jax was here with you? Were they a victim of your happiness, just as Opie had been in his own way? How many more people would get hurt because of the club’s ties to you? After all, this all still stemmed from the organisation your brother had fronted, didn’t it? If the club hadn’t taken you in, if you hadn’t led Aaron right to their door, if Opie hadn’t killed him, if you hadn’t burned down The Collective’s Western base… None of this would be happening to the people you loved. Jax wouldn’t be facing these decisions. People wouldn’t be dying.
When Jax reappeared, all of the colour had drained from his face, and his eyes were dark pits of despair. You knew what was coming before he even opened his mouth.

'I’ve gotta go back. To Charming. I can’t put it off anymore.'

Jax was packing when you finally pulled yourself together enough to form words. He’d disappeared for a while, gathering his things from the rest of the apartment, and now he moved robotically, on autopilot, collecting his clothes from around your room and cramming them into a bag, though you knew it wouldn’t all fit if he didn’t fold them properly. A vague notion to tell him that flitted through your brain, but it got stuck somewhere between the thought and giving voice to it, replaced by a more urgent concern.

'What happened? Who got hurt?’

'Chibs.’ He didn’t pause to answer you. 'He was riding alone, got jumped. They reckon they were Mayans.’

'But…’ You hesitated, letting that information sink in. 'I thought you guys were tight with the Mayans now. I thought you were allies.’

'We were,’ he bit out. 'But there’s only so much wetback blood can be spilt before that loyalty snaps. Marks is going after anyone that can give him the proof that it was me that killed Pope, that it was my club that tried to take The Collective down. He’s smart. He’s targeting my friends, people he might be able to get to talk, hurting them so they’ll put that blame on me. Looks like Alvarez finally hit his limit.’

'What about Chibby? Is he gonna be okay?’ Panic coiled in your stomach. Another enemy was the last thing the MC needed and now their VP was out for the count. They were vulnerable and you understood then why Jax had to go back.

'He’s critical. Broken ribs, punctured lung, head injury. They’re keeping him under observation for now but we won’t know more until he wakes up.’

'Oh God.’ You let your head fall forward, burying your face in your hands as hot tears spilled over your cheeks. The thought of the Scotsman, usually so vibrant, so full of life, lying in a hospital bed, bloodied and broken, brought home all that Jax had been afraid of and it forced the air from your lungs, tightening around your chest until it was almost impossible to breathe. 'Jax, I-’

'I know.’ His clothes were overflowing from the bag, crumpled fabric getting the way of the zipper so that there was no way that he could possibly close it. Instead, he let out a frustrated growl, wrenching a handful of shirts free and tossing them to the floor. 'Fuck it, they can stay.’

'Jax!” He was still moving, avoiding your gaze, steadily removing himself from your life piece by piece, and your fear and frustration had reached boiling point. Your cry was laced with misery and grief, and finally he looked at you, taking in your trembling form, huddled beneath the covers.

He sank down beside you, his purpose and determination faltering as he tugged you closer. 'I’m sorry, Y/N.’

'Don’t. Don’t be sorry. I-I just… I need to know. What happens now? You’re going back, but w-
what does that mean? For us, for you, for the club? Is this it? Are you stepping back up or- Are you ever coming back?'

His eyes glazed over and you knew that he too was fighting to keep it together. He didn’t have any answers for you. All he could do was hold you tighter as he shrugged, uselessly. 'I’ve gotta be there for Chibs. That’s all I know right now.’

'Then I’ll come with you.’

'You can’t. Do you understand what just happened? It’s too dangerous.’

'But-’

'You have to stay, darlin’.’ He brushed the hair back from your face, eyes locking on yours, thumb wiping the cooling moisture from your cheeks. And you knew he was right. 'You have to stay so I can picture you here, going about your life, doing little things like eating dinner and watching TV. That’s what’ll keep me going, Y/N. Can you do that for me?’

You nodded, though it seemed like an impossible task to carry on as normal in his absence. 'Okay. I’ll stay.’

'Thank you.’ He ducked his head, mouth seeking yours, and when he kissed you, it was as if he was trying to reach the depths of your soul, stealing a part of you away to carry with him, a part you gave willingly. It seemed to last for hours and seconds at the same time and, when he broke away, it was far too soon. 'I’ve gotta hit the road.’

'Already? You don’t want breakfast or-’

'This isn’t gonna be any easier if we string it out,’ he pointed out. ‘I love you. I’ve never loved anybody like I love you, not Tara, not anyone. Tell me you know that.’

'I know that.’

'Tell me you love me.’

'Of course, I love you. You know I love you, Jax.’

'Then stay safe for me, okay? And keep fighting. You’ve got a sweet life here, Y/N, and it’ll be easier to get on with it once I’m out of the way. So, keep living it, alright? For me and for Ope.’

You swallowed hard. 'Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?’

'Because I don’t wanna leave you without one.’

One more kiss, bittersweet and tinged with the salty taste of tears, and then he was swinging his bag up onto his shoulder and heading for the door. You could’ve thrown yourself from the bed, run to the balcony, watched as he rode away. But your limbs were leaden. Instead, you lay in your empty bed and listened to the sound of his engine fade into the distance, only a pile of wrinkled shirts on the floor beside you to prove that he’d ever been there in the first place.

The days began to blur. You were running on autopilot, your survival skills kicking in to keep you
going, dealing with the basic needs while your heart solidified into stone: you needed money for rent so you went to work; you needed to eat so you choked down a slice of toast before bed each night; you needed to sleep so you curled yourself up beneath the covers and went through the motions of trying to rest until the sun crept into the sky again the next day. Your existence felt empty, meaningless, now that you were on your own again, and the lack of any sort of contact from Jax only worsened your feeling of abandonment.

You tried to call. Of course, you did, probably more than you should, but you needed to hear his voice. More than that, you needed to know that Chibs was okay, that he was okay, that things were coming back together and not crumbling to the ground. You left messages, countless messages that covered the full range of human emotions, as you told him about your days, trying to inject some enthusiasm as you chatted about your colourless life, crying as you choked out how much you missed him, how afraid you were, and then lost your temper as it hit home that you were spilling your heart out to a machine. And then, after a couple of weeks, the monotone voice on the other end of the line informed you that the mailbox was full, and that was that.

In frustration, you tried Chibs and Tig, but it seemed as if the entire MC had vanished off the face of the earth or else was doing its level best to avoid you, and it turned the blood in your veins to ice. How bad had things gotten if they wouldn’t even speak to you? What the hell was happening in Charming that meant not a single one of them could pick up their phones? You dreaded to think and, in that moment, you made yourself a promise. If you didn’t hear anything by the end of next week, if another seven days passed with no news, then you’d go and find out for yourself. If Jax didn’t call, you’d follow him to Charming, no matter what the risk might be.
Your bag was bulging at the seams. The zipper was straining, the fabric within threatening to burst out and undo all of your hard work, and the worst part was, you thought, that you didn’t even have a clue what was inside. You’d begun packing after dinner. Another week had passed with no word from Jax or the club, and you’d decided it was time to make good on your promise to yourself, to head to Charming to see exactly what the hell was going on, ignoring the warning signs flashing in your head that you wouldn’t like whatever you found there. Something bad must be going down, something horrible, for Jax to have gone radio silent on you, but you couldn’t let yourself think about that, couldn’t handle your own fear at the very thought of being back with the club, so instead, you focused on your plan.

Hence, packing. You’d moved around your room in a daze, grabbing whatever clothing came to hand and shoving it haphazardly into an empty holdall, until there was no room for anything else, and then you sank down onto the bed with a sigh. It was all becoming so real now, that you were heading back, stepping foot once again in the town that had given you everything and then snatched it all away. Panic rose up in your chest and you pushed it down, kneading at your skin as if you could physically restrain the anxiety as you went over the schedule you’d set out for yourself.

You would set your alarm for first light, grab your things and go. You’d even considered sleeping in your clothes so you’d have one less thing to think about when morning came, but decided against it, knowing you’d wake and want to change anyway. You’d hit the road as soon as possible, beat the traffic out of town, hopefully make good time as you tore up the miles between here and there. If you managed to avoid stopping you might even make it by sundown and, when you did, you’d head straight to T.M. Somebody would be there, no matter what was going down, and they’d have to let you stay. And then you’d see Jax and everything would be okay. It would all be okay.

The buzz of your cellphone on the nightstand dragged you back to consciousness just as sleep had darkened the edges of your vision, and you groped blindly in the black, answering without bothering to look at the display.

‘Jax?’ It was a guess, a wish, but this moment felt so like the one that had brought him crashing back into your life again that it seemed impossible for it to be anyone else.

His voice was gravelly with exhaustion, and you pictured him, sitting on the roof of the clubhouse, a cigarette clutched between his fingers as he let out a heavy sigh. ‘Hey. Sorry to call so late.’

‘No, it’s- it’s okay. God, I’m so happy to hear your voice. I’ve been so worried.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… to cut you out like that, I swear. Things here have been…’

You waited for him to go on, a lump forming in your throat when he didn’t, and you pushed for answers though you weren’t sure you’d like them. ‘Well, what’s going on? Are you okay? How’s Chibs?’
‘He’s good, doing better. They discharged him a few days ago and he’s got Gemma looking in on him. He’ll be alright.’

‘Good, that’s good.’ But still not enough. ‘And you? What about you?’

‘Oh, darlin’, that’s a complicated question.’

Your heart sank. ‘Jax—’

‘I’m alright,’ he cut you off, before you could plead with him for honesty. ‘I’m kinda relieved actually. It was the right thing, coming back here.’

‘So, you’re figuring things out?’

‘Yeah, yeah, I am. I know what I need to do now. It feels good, having a direction.’

‘Well, that’s good. I’m glad things are working out.’

A beat of silence followed, and then, ‘How’ve you been?’

‘Honestly?’ You eased yourself up the bed, reaching over to turn on the lamp at your side and squinting at the sudden brightness. ‘I’ve been losing my mind. I’ve got my bags packed, Jax. I was gonna leave at first light to come and find you.’

‘Why would you do that?’

‘Why? Because I love you and I was worried sick when I couldn’t get hold of you or Tig or Chibs…’ You swallowed hard, fighting back the tears that welled in your eyes at the thought of the frustration and fear that had plagued you since he’d left. ‘I thought… I thought maybe… I don’t know what I thought.’

‘You thought Marks had got a hold of me, finished me off for good.’ There was a hint of amusement in his words, and you knew he was smirking, but to you it wasn’t remotely funny.

‘No. Maybe. Yeah, kinda. I was scared, Jax.’

‘I know.’ He sucked in a breath and you heard a small groan fall from his lips as he stood, the soft thud of his footsteps as he walked. ‘You don’t need to worry, okay? If I go out, when I go out, it’ll be on my terms. No one else’s.’

You frowned at the implication. ‘I’m not sure I like the sound of that.’

‘Look, I promise you, I’m sorting things with Marks and The Collective. There’s gonna be peace on the streets. My club will be safe. It’s all gonna work out.’

There was an air of finality to his declarations that was unsettling you, and you leant forward, drawing your knees up to your chest, as if by wrapping your arms around them you could hold yourself together as your anxiety sought to tear you apart. ‘Are you sure you’re okay, Jax?’

‘I’m good,’ he lied again, and then, ‘I miss you.’

‘I miss you too. It… It doesn’t sound like you’re planning on coming back anytime soon.’

‘I would if I could, darlin’. You have no idea what I would give to be able to hold you right now.’

Your gaze wandered the room, seeking a distraction from the weight of the conversation, finally
falling on your bag, waiting, ready by the door. ‘I could still come, y’know? To Charming. I mean, I’m already packed.’

‘No, don’t do that. Things are better but they’re not settled yet. It’s not safe for you here.’

‘When will it be?’

‘Soon.’

‘Jax—’ Your exasperation was growing, eclipsing your fear as you realised that he was telling you everything and nothing all at once.

‘Hey,’ he cut you off again. ‘You know I love you, don’t you?’

‘I know.’

‘And I’m proud of you, the life you’ve built for yourself there. It’s a good thing, Y/N. It’s normal. Normal’s underrated.’

‘It kinda sucks without you,’ you admitted.

‘Nah. You’ll get used to it. You’re strong, stronger than anybody realises. And you know the club’s gonna be there for you if you ever get any trouble.’

‘The club?’ Again, you found yourself frowning, unsure, on edge. ‘What about you?’

‘I just mean that you’re never alone. That’s important.’

‘I haven’t felt alone since you picked me up on the side of the road all those years ago, Jax. My life changed because of you. And then you came back into it and changed it again.’ And then you left, you wanted to say, you left and now I am alone, but you kept your mouth shut, not wanting to push him away when you needed him to stay and talk a while longer.

‘I’m sorry that I dragged you back into all of this.’

‘I’m not. It’s all been worth it.’

‘Even if I can’t ever come back?’

The tears that you’d been holding back renewed their efforts, breaking free to trickle over your cheeks as the question took root deep in your heart. ‘Jax—’

‘I’m sorry. Look, Y/N, I gotta go.’

‘No, you can’t just say that and—’

‘I’m sorry, okay? I probably shouldn’t have called. I just needed to hear your voice.’

‘You’re scaring me,’ you whimpered, and you wished he wouldn’t go, not with this weird tension between you that you couldn’t even begin to understand. Nothing that he was saying was making any sense, but every question you asked seemed to drive him to be more and more cryptic.

‘I’m not trying to, darlin’.’ There was genuine remorse in his voice, you could tell even over the miles, and it only made you cry harder. ‘I just wanted to let you know that I’m okay. And to check that you’re doing alright without me.’
‘I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are,’ he insisted, and you knew that he needed to hear it, so you nodded, unable to force a reassurance past your lips. ‘Now, go back to sleep.’

‘Okay,’ you murmured. He was going. There was no point fighting it any longer. ‘Is it okay if I call you later?’

‘You can call whenever you want. I’m always listening.’

‘Goodnight, Jax. I love you.’

‘I love you, so much.’ You’d already pulled the phone away from your ear, expecting him to hang up and bring the conversation to an end, so you barely heard the pain in his voice as he told you, ‘Goodbye.’

Another day gone. Another day alone. You’d tried to contact Jax several times to ease the knot in your stomach that had formed after his call to you in the early hours but, despite what he’d said, he didn’t answer. So, you’d tried to keep busy, cleaning the apartment until the scent of bleach burnt your throat and your fingers were raw, and attempting to do some research for a new project that Charlie had asked you to take the lead on at work. At least, you thought, you knew now. You knew he was alive and that he was thinking about you, and that would just have to do, to keep you going, until he was free to talk again. It wasn’t much, but it was something, and it got you through the day until the evening rolled around again.

Now, you sat slumped on the couch, staring unseeing at the television as tiny figures acted out their melodramatic lives, and wished that you could turn the clock back a month and have Jax back at your side. What if what he said was true? What if he could never come back? Could you go to him, back to Charming, once it was safe? Or would the memories that had driven you away overwhelm you as soon as you set foot in the T.M. lot and make heartbreak inevitable for both of you?

You were pondering the question when your cell sprang to life, buzzing insistently in your pocket, and again you pulled it out and held it to your ear without taking a brief second to see who was calling. Jax. It had to be. Done with his day, he was checking in again, letting you know he was okay, ready to listen, just like he’d promised.

‘Hello?’

‘Hey love, it’s me.’

‘Chibby?’ The Scottish lilt wasn’t what you’d been expecting to hear, but it brought its own sense of relief, and a small smile quirked your lips as you sat up straighter, turning down the volume on the TV. ‘Hey, how’s it going? You doing okay?’

‘Aye, yeah, I’m good. Doc’s fixed me right up.’

‘Good, that’s so good to hear. I was worried about you.’

There was a pause, and for a horrifying moment, you thought maybe he wasn’t as well as both he
and Jax had claimed, but then he spoke again, and you forgot how to breathe. ‘Listen, love, there’s
something I gotta tell ya. It’s Jackie.’

You waited for him to go on, pushing yourself to your feet so you could pace the living room,
barking questions at him when he hesitated a second too long. ‘What? What is it? Did something
happen?’

‘He had an accident.’ The words hit you like a punch to the gut. ‘We’re… We’re not sure what
happened exactly. He was out riding and he… Something musta gone wrong with his bike.’

‘Chibs.’ There was something in his tone - desolation, despair - but you couldn’t let yourself
acknowledge it, not yet.

‘He went under the wheels of a semi, Y/N. There was nothing anybody could do. They told us it- it
woulda been quick.’

‘Quick?’ You dropped to your knees with a gasp, all strength leaving you as the reality sunk in.
This couldn’t be happening, not again. You’d done this once. It couldn’t be happening. ‘Y-you
mean- No, no, that can’t… No. No, that’s not right. Not Jax. He-he’s not… He can’t be…’

‘He’s gone, love,’ Chibs’ words crackled from the phone and you tore it from your ear, staring at it
in disbelief, though you could still hear the thickness of tears in his voice as it broke. ‘I’m sorry.’

He continued then, filling you in on details, funeral plans, asking you about travel arrangements, but
you couldn’t take it in. It was too much, it was all too much, and your heart was breaking and that
old familiar grief that had become such a big part of your life was growing and contorting and
winding itself around you until all you could see was the inky black of its binding tentacles as it
dragged you under. You’d done this once. You’d lost the man you loved. How could it be that
you’d lost another? How was it fair? How could the world have taken somebody else from you,
somebody so important, so vital to your existence?

You weren’t sure how long you sat there, knees pulled to your chest, tears dripping from your chin
and saturating the fabric of your shirt as you clutched at your phone like an anchor. And then, in one
sharp move, you tossed it away, the screen shattering as it hit the table and bounced off. You didn’t
move to retrieve it. You couldn’t. You couldn’t do anything except focus on remembering how to
pull air into your lungs and expel it again. In and out. Just get through this second, and the next.
And the one after that. It was all you could do.

Some hours later, a numbing sensation settled over you, driving away the pain so that there was just
nothing, and that nothing was a relief that you welcomed. It allowed you to clamber unsteadily to
your feet and stagger out onto the balcony, your joints aching as you unfurled your broken body. On
the horizon, the first faint rays of sunlight were just appearing through the gaps in the buildings, and
you realised that you’d spent the entire night lost in the fog, breathing slowly, one in, one out, and
now another day had started, and it was a day without Jax. There had been so many days without
him now that it shouldn’t be a challenge, but it was. A day, a life, without the possibility of him,
seemed unbearable and you reached out a hand to the railing to steady yourself as your grief pushed
against the numbness, trying to break through. You didn’t let it. There would be time for that.

Instead you focused on the hint of warmth in the air that promised that it might just be a beautiful
day, and the birds calling to each other in the trees that dotted the neighbourhood, welcoming the
dawn, oblivious to the highs and lows of human life as it went on around them. Somewhere in the
distance you could hear the steady hum of traffic, people already up and on their way to work,
always in a rush, always hurrying, striving, and what for? It all seemed so pointless now. The
wooden boards beneath your feet were ridged and they dug into your soles, but you didn’t move,
afraid that if you left the moment, you’d have to think about something else, something real, and so you stayed, watching the town you called home slowly wake.

The sun was fully visible when you heard it, the familiar throaty caw of a crow, and you leant forward, the balcony railing digging into your ribs as you searched for the source, finally locating the lone bird perched on the roof of your truck, black feathers shining in the sunlight. As you watched, it stretched its wings, then took flight, circling the lot a couple of times before moving higher, coming to land on the same railing you leaned against, just a foot or two away. Close up, you could see the glint in its eye as it surveyed you warily, the deep almost-blue tinge to its tail, as it stood, allowing you to take it in in all its majesty. You were captivated, holding your breath, the one you’d had to concentrate so hard on taking just seconds before, unwilling to scare it away, though it didn’t seem afraid. It held itself upright, strong and proud, midnight gaze still fixed on you, and for a split second it almost seemed as if it was waiting on you to do the same.

Down on the street below a car door slammed and an engine roared to life, and you cursed quietly as the spell was broken and the crow took off once again, soaring into the sky and away from you. And, from the trees, rose more, so many more, an entire murder of crows silhouetted against the sun, and the sight warmed you to your bones as you watched them leave you, following the first into the distance and away.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry. I wasn’t ready for this one to end and, man, it hurt! Our reader is a mess and who can blame her?! First Opie, now Jax… Will she be able to pull herself together this time around?

Let’s find out!

Coming Sunday 2nd June: Break Free, the sequel to Let’s Pretend and grand finale of The Other Guy.

'The reader has shut herself off from the world, consumed by her grief for Jax Teller. Alarm bells ring for Tig when she doesn’t appear in Charming for the funeral, and he makes the long ride up to see her, hoping he’ll be able to help her recover again.'

This is it, guys! This will be the last mini-series in The Other Guy saga! It will run for either 3 or 5 chapters, depending on how it feels right to split it when I start writing, and then it will all be over… But will the reader finally get her happy ending?

Thank you again for reading and for sticking with this story, and I’ll see you back here in a couple of weeks!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!