



Blurred  
LINES

VICTORIA ELLIS

# BLURRED LINES

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*Blurred Lines*

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First Edition

*For my sweet girl, Nora Jade*

A-SIDE



TRACK ONE: YOU GOT LUCKY

## AVA

HE SHAKES HIS HAIR OUT OF HIS EYES AND FLIPS THROUGH albums at The Vinyl Kitty—my favorite record shop in all of Chicago. I don't want to be standing here, gawking, but my eyes are drawn to him.

He's tall, so fucking tall, easily six-foot-four or five. He clearly works out; the size of his biceps screams that he lifts heavy, yet he doesn't look like a typical gym dude. My eyes trail from his arms to the front of his shirt—a Bob Seger concert tee. *Intriguing*. I wonder if he's more of a *We've Got Tonight* or *Old Time Rock N' Roll* kind of guy.

His hair is dark, almost dark enough to match mine. I like the way he's left just a little bit of scruff on his face. His Converse look like they're falling apart, like he's traveled many places in them.

He stands dead center in the rock section, one row away from me. I've never been the type of girl to walk up and introduce myself to a guy, but he makes me want to. It isn't love at first sight—I don't believe in that garbage—but it might be infatuation at first sight. I feel a slight pull toward him. Like the universe has conspired to put me directly in his path.

He turns in my direction, and I snap my head down to the albums so hard I think I've given myself whiplash. I start thumbing through them like I've been doing this the entire time, as opposed to checking him out.

“Hey,” he says, and when I don’t answer, because I’m blissfully unaware that he’s speaking to me, he says it again.

I look up and around, trying not to seem too obvious. When we finally make eye contact, I see his are a beautiful emerald green—the kind you can get lost in, make bad decisions because of, and swoon over.

“Come here often?” he asks.

*Did he really just use that line?* My face must display my thoughts, because he immediately starts in again, smiling. *My God, his smile.*

“Yeah, that was stupid. My bad.” He laughs, walking my way, where he extends his hand over the albums that separate us. “I’m River.”

I take his hand in mine and he’s fire to my ice.

“You’re freezing,” he observes. “What’s your name?”

*I forgot to tell him my name. Jesus Christ, this is going really well.* “Ava Keyes.”

“Well, Ava Keyes,” he starts, smiling at me again—and his teeth are damn near perfect, blindingly white, “The Doors or Black Sabbath?”

I smile nervously. “That’s kind of like asking me to compare apples to oranges.” I stare at him as he holds both albums up on either side of him. “The Doors would get my vote every time, though. Jim Morrison is one of the greats—a lyrical genius.”

He nods, cocking his head to the side and pursing his lips a little. “Hmm.” He studies me, looking me up and down, and I’m fully aware that he’s taking me in. “Thank you, Ava Keyes. It was very nice to meet you.” With that, he flashes another toothy smile, putting the Black Sabbath album back in its place before walking over to the cash register with the Doors album in hand. He glances back at me once before focusing his attention on the transaction.

I stand and stare at the space he’s left me in—wondering what the fuck that was all about—until I hear the bells chime,

signaling his departure.

After walking around to the spot he'd stood in while browsing, I'm happy to see two more of the same record. My fingers make their way to the specific Doors album and I trace the lines of Jim's face, admiring him, then I turn to head to the checkout.

Right before I leave, Frankie, the owner of the shop—and one badass seventy-year-old tattooed and pierced grandma—calls out to me.

“Ava!” She rushes around the counter toward me, her bright pink mohawk staying in perfect Aquanet place. “I almost forgot to give you this. That guy who just took off, he left this for you.”

She hands me a small folded piece of paper—with a phone number—that reads:

*There are things known, and things unknown, and in between are the doors.*

*Call me, Ava Keyes.*

# TRACK TWO: WE ARE FAMILY

BY SISTER SLEDGE

## AVA

EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED ABOUT LIFE, LOVE, AND BEING A decent human has come from my father. He's my number one go-to, the coolest dad to ever exist, and he likes to remind me of it often.

My family is comparable to the annoyingly perfect sitcom kind. My mom and dad were high school sweethearts who married at nineteen, had me at twenty-one, and my brother Dillon at twenty-four. The only time I can even remember things being *almost* rocky is when we were waiting to receive an answer on my brother's autism diagnosis. But even if—or when—they were struggling, they seldom let it show.

I want a love like my parents have, the kind that sweeps you off your feet. I want a family like mine, even if we are annoyingly perfect.

My mother glances over at my father. "Honey, can you please get a haircut? It isn't the seventies anymore. I love you, but you're starting to make the neighbors think we just smoke doobies and listen to old-school rock music all day."

My dad turns to look at her, obviously perplexed. He arches just one brow and brings his hand to his chin, rubbing at his blond scruff. "Honey," he playfully mocks her, "isn't that exactly what we do?"

"Hey!" Dillon yells out. "Drugs are bad. It isn't something to joke about."

“Dill, there’s nothing wrong with taking a load off.” My father flashes a grin, puffing at an imaginary joint, and my mom swats him on the arm.

“No, you’re right, babe. Your father just thinks he’s hilarious,” she says, patting Dillon on the shoulder before she returns to washing dishes.

But I know that wasn’t *all* joke. I found a joint in his nightstand when I was looking for money for takeout when they went to see The Eagles last summer. I know all about their little recreational activities. My mom would never admit that, though. At least not to us. While the two of them are pretty open with us, that’s a line she won’t cross.

“Dad, what’s this one?” Dillon asks. *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* blares on the stereo. He’s been trying to learn the names to our parents’ favorite songs.

While our father explains the origin of the ballad, I remember being a few years younger and asking him these same questions. Now, at seventeen, I can name them all easily.

I look down at the table, admiring the doodle my dad is concentrating on. He always has a sketchbook with him, insisting that inspiration can strike at any time.

He’s a freelance graphic designer and one of the most talented artists I’ve ever known. My mom, on the other hand, works solely with the left side of her brain. She’s an executive at a record label here in the city. She’s less artistic and more conservative all around. They balance each other out.

I love both my parents equally—most of the time—but I have a connection to my dad that runs deep. It’s almost as if we’re the same person, just in different bodies.

When I was younger, he’d always tell me, “*Kid, there are going to be good days and bad days. You’ll have them both. It’s inevitable. But as long as you’ve had more good days than bad, you know you’re doing all right.*”

When I was sad after our dog died, or because a friend moved away, he gave me the same quick pep talk. He always helped me put things in perspective and realize I wouldn’t be

sad forever. That these were just small blips on my radar. Soon I'd have another dog I'd grow to love, or another friend to hang out with. There would always be more good days than bad.

Dillon starts galloping around the kitchen, breaking me from my thoughts. "Lookin' for a soul to steal!" he half-sings, half-shouts.

I look over to my parents, who are now sipping from their matching coffee mugs and having a silent conversation with their eyes.

Yeah, we're *that* family. The one that loves hard as hell and is probably about to get a noise complaint from the neighbor for the third time this week.

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I SIT CROSS-LEGGED on my bed and look around my room. These walls have changed so many times over the years. From lime green, to hot pink, and even black. Now, they're white—fresh and clean—and home to old-school rock posters and shadow boxes with ticket stubs.

My bedroom is a sanctuary. It's where I go to recharge. My books, the plants on my dresser, even the fresh lilac candle that's burning. It all adds to my comfort and gives me a peace I can only find in here. My mom says I should practice yoga whenever I feel stressed, but I feel like that's some woo-woo hippie shit I don't need. Junior year has been stressful, though. The ACT is coming up, but I have zero motivation to study. I know exactly what I want to do when I grow up, although I already feel like an adult.

I want to be a writer. I want to make people feel something. To take them out of their world and into a different one. Right now, my writing consists of poetry and short stories, but one day, I'll be a *real* writer. I'll write *real* novels, and my words will be out in the world for everyone to read.

I pick up the note River left for me at the record shop, running my fingertips over the words *he* wrote two days ago.



I'm nervous to call him. At this point, he probably thinks I'm not going to, but I'm just trying to muster up the courage to actually do it. I've never had a guy do something like this for me. Sure, I've dated, but his note was swoon worthy. Mysterious.

My dad swings open my bedroom door and I smile at him. If my brother or mom were to come in without knocking, I'd be fuming. But my dad, he gets free rein. It's an unspoken rule between us.

He has a soda in his hand as he smiles back, extending the blue can toward me. I take it, gratefully.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, old man?" I ask, popping the top on the can before taking a quick swig.

"Ah, just needed to escape the chaos for a bit. I'm feeling a bit off today, kid. Figured you'd be listening to some good jams. What do you have there?" he asks, nodding to the paper in my hands.

I immediately fold it and tuck it underneath the pillow resting behind my back. "Oh, nothing, Dad. Just..." All words leave my brain. "Nothing." My voice shakes when I say it, and he gives me a suspicious stare.

He walks over to my bookshelf, quickly turning around and swiping the note from its safe spot. Or, what I thought was a safe spot.

"Hey!" I shout, annoyed, but somehow still laughing because that's what he does to me.

"*Ooh la la*," he says, in a high-pitched voice that makes me want to die inside. "Who is this River dude? He likes my buddy Jim, I see." My dad recognizes the Jim Morrison quote and his eyes grow wide, a goofy smile spreading across his face while he waits for my answer.

Weighing the pros and cons of telling him, I decide it's better to just spill it than continue to deal with his badgering. "He's just a random guy I met at The Vinyl Kitty."

"A *random* guy? Random guys don't typically write you love notes, kid."

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Dad, a *love note*—really?”

“I’ll be right back, Aves,” he says, turning on his heels and hurrying out of my room. I ponder for a minute while I wait.

*What’s he doing? Is he going to get Mom so they can both try to get it out of me?*

I decide to go after him, walking down the long hallway to where I hear him rummaging through what sounds like papers.

“Dad, what on earth?” I round the corner to my parents’ room and see him digging through a clear plastic bin.

“Ah-ha!” he declares, clenching a paper in his fist and holding it above his head like he’s just won an award. “I knew I’d find it.” He flashes another one of his silly smiles.

“You’ve officially lost me.”

“Let me recite this beaut’,” he says.

*My God. The Jim Morrison thing really has him going.*

He clears his throat. “Sweetheart, just a quick note to tell you I love you. And remember, like Jim says, ‘*It’s like gambling somehow. You go out for a night of drinking and you don’t know where you’re going to end up the next day. It could work out good or it could be disastrous. It’s like the throw of the dice.*’ Last night was great. Winking face—”

“Dad, what the hell! Too far! I don’t care how your night went. Gross.” I feel the contents of my stomach threaten to come back up.

“Oh, kid, it’s just sex. Relax. Your mother and I made you and your brother. You know that, right?” He laughs. “My point is, this River kid is a guy after my own heart. This is a note I wrote to your mother after we...*you know*...for the first time. A Jim Morrison quote, Aves! I feel like this might be meant to be. Who is River, and have you utilized that phone number he left you?”

He seems excited—*too excited*. He’s normally over-the-top critical if I even have *remote* interest in a guy.

“So,” I start, “let me get this straight.” I look my father dead in his aqua blues. “You’re telling me, to call a random guy I met in a record shop. You are *condoning* this. You do realize he could be a psychopath, right?”

“Kid, anyone who writes Jim Morrison quotes on notebook paper *and* goes to The Vinyl Kitty is our type of guy. I’ll get you some pepper spray, just in case. But call the dude. This is going to be good.”

TRACK THREE: THIS IS THE  
ONE

BY THE STONE ROSES

## RIVER

“HI, IS THIS RIVER?”

The gentle voice flows through my cell speaker, and I instantly know it’s her. I don’t randomly give my number to every good-looking girl I see. Plus, I’d know her voice anywhere. Soft and smoky.

“Hi...Ava?” I ask.

“How’d you know?” she teases, and I swear I hear a small giggle. It’s the cutest shit I’ve ever heard in my life.

“Well, I only gave my number out to a handful of women in record shops last week. So I figured I had pretty good odds in my guess.” I laugh, but she doesn’t return my humor. “Kidding, Ava. I’m kidding.” It’s hard to get a feel for someone’s reaction over the phone. I listen as she breathes out a long breath.

“Okay.” There’s an uncertainty in her tone, like she’s nervous. “Hi, River.”

“Hi, Ava,” I say for the second time in thirty seconds. “Did you like the note?”

When she says yes, my heart skips a little. I was hoping she would. It felt like a move straight out of *Ten Things I Hate About You*. “Do you want to hang out sometime?” It’s a lame follow-up to my overly romantic gesture, but I’m awkward because I don’t know what else to say right now. For some reason, this girl intimidates the hell out of me.

“Sure. What do you have in mind?”

*Well, fuck.* I hadn't thought that far yet. Thinking fast, I tell her, “I know a place. I'll text you the address. Is this your cell phone?”

She says it is, and then we end the awkward conversation between us. *I hope I didn't fuck that up too badly.* I curse myself for being such a dork.

---

THE CITY AIR bites at my skin while I wait for her. I come up to the rooftop often, since my parents pay extra to have access to this part of the building. It's not like they use it, with both of them trying their best to be gone all the time, not wanting to be around each other. So, I might as well get our money's worth.

I use it as a refuge when I need it. A spot to go when I need to be free of my parents' incessant arguing. I can play uninterrupted up here—just me, my guitar, and this breeze—with the humming of traffic below.

**Ava:** I'm here. Do I just come up?

My stomach knots up and I realize now just how nervous I really am. I'm not exactly sure why this feeling has crept up so suddenly. All I know is this girl intrigues the hell out of me.

**Me:** Yeah. Charles is the doorman. He should be standing down there. He'll point you to the stairs to the rooftop.

*Why the hell didn't I just meet her down there?* I'm making this more complicated than it needs to be. I should work on not being so weird next time.

After a few minutes, she walks through the door, and Jesus Christ, she's beautiful. Upon seeing her again, a smile stretches across my face. Her long dark hair is wavy tonight, different from the straight strands the first time I saw her. The Chicago sunset glows and reflects in her dark eyes, casting honey-colored hues into them.

She's wearing black leggings and an oversized sweater. It's simple, yet she looks breathtakingly beautiful. She has natural beauty, played up with just a little hint of makeup. It's so different from other girls my age, who go overkill on transforming their face into being fucking unrecognizable.

"Hey, Ava Keyes," I say, still smiling.

"Hi, River." Her cheeks redden just a little. "Nice to see you again."

Soon, we ease into ourselves and conversation with each other, in a nice cozy spot. Right on a bench on the rooftop—the perfect spot to watch the sun set completely. We talk about our favorite things as the sun disappears into nothingness, leaving us sitting in the dark on top of the city.

"What's your favorite thing to do? How do you like your coffee? What's the first thing you noticed about me?" she asks.

*Holy rapid fire.* I laugh and say, "First answer is easy, my favorite thing to do is play music with my band, Blue Label. I'm the guitarist. I was the last member in the band to turn eighteen. Just last month, actually. I've always loved to play, so that's my forever plan. My parents don't agree—at all—but I can't imagine doing anything else. Now that I'm eighteen, I'm going to start calling the shots in my own life." I let out a sharp breath, surprised I'm even considering bringing up my parents right now. "I like my coffee loaded up with sugar. And I noticed your smile first."

She smiles when I say it and it's contagious, lifting the corners of my mouth up as well. "Your turn," I tell her.

"Hmm," she thinks out loud. "I think spending time with my family is probably one of my favorite things to do. I like to write and draw. I take my coffee black with just a hint of sugar. I don't like sweet things."

She stops, so I remind her with, "And what did you notice about me?"

"Everything, really. The way your smile was a bit uneven, perfectly so. Your hair and how you had to shake it out of your eyes. How you knew I was nervous and flustered but you

didn't skip a beat. How you didn't make me feel silly for feeling the way I felt."

Shadows dance across her face, the light and dark meeting and intertwining, and she looks effortless and cool. I want to kiss her. But I don't.

She tells me about her favorite artists, everyone from Iggy Pop to Diana Ross to Leonard Cohen. She tells me her dad is a huge influence in her life, especially when it comes to her taste in music. *I wish my dad influenced anything good in my life.*

I use the time that she talks to soak up every ounce of her. The way she smiles. Her hair, and the way she tossed it up into a ponytail not long after she got here. There are tiny wisps framing her face, refusing to stay tamed. I wonder if that's any indication of her soul—of who she is. I feel like it could be. I keep accidentally catching my eyes wandering to her heart-shaped mouth, wanting to know what her lips feel like against mine.

"Are you happy or sad?" she asks, and I'm taken aback just a little.

"What do you mean? Happy or sad about what?"

She brings her hand up to the side of her neck, gently rubbing it and leaning into her palm. "I feel silly now that I asked, but I'm a writer. I like emotions. You should probably know that about me. In the record shop you seemed happy, but rushed, like you didn't have a lot of time. Tonight you seem... gentle, relaxed. You seem happy, but sad. There's something in your eyes, like you're holding back." She finishes, and my jaw drops in response. "Or am I way off?" There's that giggle again.

"No, you're not," I tell her. "I'm pretty much equal parts happy and sad all the time, I think."

When she asks me why, I don't really know the answer.

"I'm happy because I'm finally getting out of this city soon," I say, and her eyes fall to the ground. "I'm sad because I'm getting out of this city soon. You see what I mean? I guess



I'm conflicted about a lot of things—most things, actually. I want certain things for myself that I'm not sure I deserve.”

She digs further and I want to stop talking about it but for some reason, I don't. Maybe it's because, even though we've only been talking up here on this roof for a couple of hours, this is more than I've talked to anyone in a while.

“Because I should stay here,” I continue. “I should take over my father's business and I should do what's expected of me. I shouldn't be chasing some dream in California that has a slim chance of working out.” My dad's words swarm around in the forefront of my mind, haunting me.

She's shaking her head, and the only thing now illuminating her is the string of lights hanging along the edge of the rooftop's walls. “Well, that's dumb.” Her forwardness continues to surprise me. “You'll never make it if you don't think you will. If you think from the beginning it has a slim chance of working out, then how can it? I have an idea.” She crinkles her nose—something I've already learned she does when she's up to something—and smiles. “Play me a song.”

I refuse one, two, three times. Four times. I refuse enough times that I could have already played her three of my songs. The honey hues have long gone from her eyes and what stare back at me are earthly, yet heavenly. They're eyes I could get very, very used to.

“Listen. You play me a song, and I'll do anything you want in return,” she says, striking me a deal I can't refuse. There's something devious in her cool tone, and I like this side of her. She looks up at me from beneath long black lashes, with those big doe eyes, and I can't resist her.

I quickly go inside to grab my guitar, ignoring Ruby—my sister—who knows I'm up here with a girl. She's here hanging out after having dinner with my parents and her fiancé, teasing me as I run back out the door.

Ruby and I have never been super close, our six-year age gap being the main reason, but we've always been the type of brother and sister who banter back and forth and have fun while doing so. She's the golden child, following in my

mother's footsteps, poised to be the next committee head of multiple Chicago organizations. I'm the black sheep of the family. I don't fit in with them, but I don't think I want to either.

I get back up to the rooftop and smile at Ava, who waits for me patiently, the warm glow of the string lights accentuating her own smile.

I already know what I'll have Ava do in return for this. And I can't wait.

## TRACK FOUR: KISS ME

## AVA

THE WAY HE MAKES LOVE TO THE STRINGS OF HIS GUITAR, using only his fingers, is the hottest thing I've ever seen in my entire life. I watch as he strums them, his fingers dancing to a memorized tune. It's mellow and warm and one of the most beautiful sounds I've ever heard.

He doesn't look at me while he plays and he doesn't sing either. Instead, he hums. I can't help but get lost in it, swaying back and forth. I want to get up and dance, but I don't. It might be too much. I resort to closing my eyes, allowing his music to transform me in every good possible way. I allow myself to be swept up this moment, in his passion that mixes with the tired city noise around us.

I don't know how much time passes—maybe three minutes, maybe twenty—but if there is one thing I know, it's that I could listen to his sound forever.

The moment he puts down the guitar, a mischievous yet shy smile spreads across his face. I can barely see him now, with the sun completely gone and only buildings taller than this one helping to light us up. I start to tell him how much I loved his performance, how beautiful it was, but he's quick to change the subject.

“My turn, Ava.”

“Oh, God,” I say. “This already sounds like trouble.”

“Kiss me,” he says. His infectious smile grows even wider, stretching across his face.

I notice a tiny chip in one of his teeth. *So, he isn't perfect.* But the slight imperfection adds character to his beautiful smile. One tiny, simple flaw.

“Kiss me,” he repeats, pulling me from my thoughts.

And that's exactly what I do. Right there, on a wooden bench on the top of Chicago, sitting on a plaid blanket he must have brought up here before I arrived. I inch toward him, cup his face in my hands, and meet his lips with my own. He's warm and soft, and tastes like vanilla chapstick. I pull back a tiny bit and he hungrily leans forward, wanting more. He bites my bottom lip softly, just enough to let me know he's in charge, and I grow warm with want.

We stay like that for longer than I'll likely remember. Just the two of us, the rooftop, and the stars shimmering above us, intertwined in each other.

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MY MOM and dad singing *My Sharona* downstairs in the kitchen wakes me up at the beautiful hour of seven AM, and I want to die.

But then, allowing my eyes to flutter open as my mind loses the sleepy glaze, I remember River. I remember the rooftop and that bench and talking with him for hours, and kissing him for just as long. Suddenly, *My Sharona* doesn't sound so terrible. It sounds kind of...well, it still sounds terrible, but thoughts of last night help move me along anyway.

I make it downstairs, the smell of bacon grease wafting in the air, and my parents are onto the next old song. My mom's wearing a cream-colored apron that reads, “*This is Actually Takeout*” while my dad has on a black raggedy one that says, “*I Can't Cook for Shit*”—how fitting.

I watch them for a few minutes before I inch closer. I carefully stay out of their line of sight, not wanting them to know I'm here. I enjoy seeing my parents like this. It feels vulnerable, but in a good way. My dad lightly taps on the

bottom of a pot as my mom sways her hips to the sounds of an Eric Clapton song reverberating through the record player's speakers. My mother's dark hair is a wild mess on top of her head, and she's stuck a crochet hook in it to hold it in place. My dad has his black robe on under his apron, and his high tops on his feet. They're both messy and weird and perfect.

*Wonderful Tonight*—a song I've come to know as my parents' first dance song at their wedding—starts quietly rumbling through the speaker, and my dad drops his cooking utensils and grabs ahold of my mom by the hips.

I hang back, watching them sway in time to the music, wondering how they've managed to find this kind of love. When the song is over and the two have broken apart, my dad starts flipping the crisp pancakes off the griddle.

"Hey, guys," I say, finally announcing my presence as I walk in—disrupting their morning date, no doubt. I grab a banana and peel back a couple of layers to munch on it.

"*Ooh la la*, how was your date, kid?" my dad asks, scraping a burnt piece of batter from the griddle.

*This dude is too much.* "Dad, number one, can you stop with the '*ooh la la*' thing?" Most teenagers wouldn't spill about their date to their parents. Hell, I know my best friend Hailee wouldn't. It just feels natural to me though. "Two..." I smile.

"Oh, honey! It went well!?! Tell me all about Randy," my mom says. She's grinning excitedly but doesn't really know anything about it like dad does. She just overheard us talking about it on my way out last night.

"It's River, Mom," I correct her, rolling my eyes but not taking offense. "It went well. Dad basically pushed me into calling him, all because he knew a quote from his friend Jim."

"Jim who?" She looks confused, and my dad and I both laugh; him because he thinks everything is funny, and me because I'm delirious from the lack of sleep.

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A WEEK LATER, I'm standing in Iconic—the music venue and bar below The Vinyl Kitty. It's alive with the sounds of Blue Label, River's band. On Wednesday nights, Iconic is an all-ages bar of sorts, serving mocktails and hosting live music for the younger crowd of the Chi-town area.

River seemed nervous when he invited me, shyly asking if I had plans on Wednesday night. It was cute, a change in pace from his confident but quirky demeanor. His nerves then are lost on me now though, because I've never seen him more in his element than he is tonight.

My eyes stay laser focused on him. He's on the left of the stage, next to the band's blond frontman. The other guys are all my type as well, but none of them matter in comparison. They don't hold a candle to River. His sun-kissed arms curve and flex, expertly holding his shiny black electric guitar as he strums to an original beat. Tiny circular beads of sweat roll down his temple to his perfect jawline before finally dropping to the stage while he works his guitar—gazing down at it like it's the only thing that matters. He shakes wild strands of hair from his face as the stage lights hit him, light rays bouncing off his body.

*The way her hips sway, magic flowing through her veins, and I like it. I'm falling hard, one, two, three, she's got me love drunk, easy to see she should be my girl. Yeah, she's gonna be my girl.*

I know River helps the lead singer, Jesse, write the lyrics and I can't help but wonder if I could possibly be his muse. *Is this song about me?*

The crowd is relentless, cheering with fists in the air as the guys lead into the chorus again. I take a sip from my cherry-red mocktail, which is essentially fruit punch in a glass, and keep my eyes trained on River. Watching him do the thing he loves most is quickly becoming something I love to do.

The venue smells of sweat, onion rings, and patchouli—a weird combination—and I don't even care. This is perfect.

When their set is done, River jumps off the stage and comes to find me. "So, what did you think?" he asks.

"I think you're amazing, Riv," I tell him, and he pulls me to his chest, his body warm against mine. "You were totally in your element up there."

He looks down at me, smiling. "Was it worth missing out on studying for? I feel bad you skipped your study session with Hailee." He pulls back from me but grasps my hand and leads me to a table in the corner. "By the way, when am I going to meet this best friend of yours?"

A warm feeling grows inside of me. I love that he wants to meet the people who mean the most to me. "Don't feel bad. It was beyond worth it."

He kisses my lips and I feel him smile against my mouth. "I think I really like you, Ava Keyes."

I melt.



TRACK FIVE: WALKING IN  
MEMPHIS

BY MARC COHN

## RIVER

“ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO HANG OUT WITH MY PARENTS tonight?” We’ve been seeing each other for four weeks and we’re already going to do this. We must be out of our goddamn minds.

“Yes. I really want to meet this dad of yours that you talk about so much. He’s gotta be a pretty cool guy,” I tell her, laughing as her cheeks redden. I grab ahold of her hand and place her palm in mine.

“Do I really talk about my dad *that* much? Shit. I’m lame.” Ava shakes her head back and forth.

She leads me into her house, a small Tudor-style place nestled in Beverly, a neighborhood known for its bomb Irish pubs. My family never comes here, but I’ve been to this town multiple times with friends after shows. We never get carded, and the beer is cheap.

A boy pops out from behind the front door as we make our way in and I jump back, though I kind of love this kid already. “Hey, I’m Dillon. I have autism. Let’s get that out of the way right now. And, I could still kick your ass if you piss my sister off.”

“I believe you, Dillon. It’s really nice to meet you. I’m River.” Ava’s told me about her brother and how close they are. I feel like I already know him. “I don’t intend to piss your sister off, so I think we’ll be okay.” I glance at Ava as she playfully nudges her brother.

I researched a little about autism after Ava told me about her brother. I knew what it was, obviously, but I had no idea just how differently it can appear from person to person. I know so much more now, after falling down an educational website rabbit hole.

A tall, broad man rounds the corner into the entryway and I can only assume it's Ava's dad. "Hey, River. I'm Jeff. I don't have autism, but I'll have to side with Dillon if you piss my girl off." He extends his hand to me and laughs, getting a kick out of himself. He's exactly how I pictured him. He's got an old ripped up band tee on and worn blue Levi's. "Kidding." He shrugs. "I've heard lots of great things about you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, sir. I kinda sorta think your daughter is pretty cool." *Fuck. What? I think she's pretty cool?* "I mean...I've really enjoyed getting to know her." I stumble over my words and hate myself for it.

"You think my daughter is kinda, *sorta* cool?" Jeff pats me on the back as we make our way into the kitchen. "I think she's kinda sorta okay, too. I plan on keeping her, I guess. For now, anyway."

He gives me a smirk and we sit down around the long, wooden kitchen table. Meatloaf is the centerpiece and I am practically salivating, it smells so good.

My palms are sweaty when Ava reaches under the table to take my hand in hers and squeezes. I'm slightly embarrassed at how nervous I am. She doesn't seem to notice, but if she does, she doesn't let on.

Mr. and Mrs. Keyes are playfully bickering about who sang *Respect* better, Otis or Aretha. This is a debate I can get behind. *I wish my parents would argue about music instead of finances or who's a better parent.*

"So, River! My guy," Jeff says, grinning. "Tell me all about your life." He cuts into the meatloaf. "Aves says you're leaving for California in August?"

I hate thinking about this. I love thinking about this, because I love my music and my band and I can't wait to

really hone my craft. But, leaving Ava after we're just getting to know each other...*that*, I hate.

"Yes, Mr. Keyes. I'm going out there to study music after graduation. I'd really like to try to make it into a career. I know it's kind of a lofty goal but, I really want it," I tell him, hoping he isn't silently judging me. I get enough criticism from my parents.

"That's awesome. I'm not sure if you know this but we raised Ava on all the good shit. We're a big music family here. What do your parents think about all of it? Are they sad to see you go?" He's genuinely asking me this, and I want to laugh in his face but I can't be rude. He doesn't know any better.

"Well." I shift nervously in my chair. "They don't really get it. It's not what they want, you know? They want me here, working for my dad's business."

We get a little deeper into my dad's firm and why sometimes parents want their kids to live out their own dreams. It makes sense coming from Jeff, and I can at least understand why my parents are so hell-bent on me staying here.

"I'm going to tell you something, Riv," he says, and I normally hate when anyone I don't know well calls me that, but with Mr. Keyes, I don't seem to mind. It's like he sees me and likes me, and that's a feeling I can get used to. "You aren't always going to make the decisions your parents want you to, but it's your life. You've only got one, and you have to do what makes *you* happy."

I watch as his eyes trail to his wife. She glances up from taking a bite of her potatoes, and I see a look transfer between them that I don't understand the meaning behind.

But he's right. I only have one life. I can't constantly worry about what everyone else wants. I just wish things were different. I wish Ava was graduating this year, too. I would whisk her away and we'd have the time of our lives together in the Golden State.

If only it were that easy.

## TRACK SIX: WHAT IT'S LIKE

BY EVERLAST

## AVA

ONE WEEK LATER, I'M SITTING IN RIVER'S ROOM. HIS PARENTS are out for the night, attending some charity gala, and we have the place to ourselves. His space is exactly how I pictured it. Three guitars resting on wooden stands, gray walls, and black sheets. His vinyl records are in an awesome clear display case hanging from the wall, showcasing the beautiful artwork.

“Ava, your dad is probably one of the coolest old guys I've ever met,” he says. “Not old, you know. But, older than us.” The corners of his lips turn upward. *My God, I love his smile.*

After he met my parents, I informed him that—for once—my parents didn't totally embarrass the shit out of me in front of someone. Normally, my dad goes way over the top with the whole “*I'll be waiting on the porch with a shotgun*” bit. But, he didn't give River a hard time at all. I think he may have seen a bit of himself in River.

“I'd really rather you not meet my family,” he says. I don't think he means for the words to come out so harsh, but they sting. “Shit. It isn't that I don't want you to meet them. It's more like...I don't want to subject you to the mess my family can be at times.” He sighs. “All the time, actually.”

I understand what he's saying, but I still want to meet the people responsible for making the guy I'm really starting to care for.

“My parents hate each other. They aren't anything like yours, Ava. My sister moved out almost five years ago. It's

just me most of the time here. My parents are so sick of keeping up appearances when they're out in public together that by the time they get home, it's one argument after another. And I'm always caught in the crossfire of their bullshit."

As if on cue, a door slams, and River sits straight up in his bed that we've been lying on. We aren't doing anything wrong, just lying here and talking—fully clothed, on top of the blankets.

"Are you okay? Should I go? Will you get in trouble?" I ask him, his reaction having me flustered. Before he can answer, a screaming match ensues.

"Fuck you, Robert. You have no idea what a piece of shit you are, do you? You really are a fucking narcissistic asshole!" a woman yells, her high-pitched voice ringing out through the condo.

The rummaging and slamming of cabinets and doors follow. "Don't be such a damn buzzkill. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have a damn pot to piss in, Karen. You know it, and it eats away at you. Keep putting together your lame-as-fuck fundraisers." This voice is deeper; it's a loaded trigger, guttural and caustic.

River takes me by the hand and tells me to grab my purse. "We're leaving. I don't want you here for this."

When we leave his room, his mom—or who I assume is his mother—is standing down the hallway from us, in front of the front door. "River! Honey. Who is this?" She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her mascara. "Your father is a drunk asshole again. Who would have thought? Didn't even make it halfway through dinner before he started shit with his partner." She's beautiful—tall and curvy—and her brown curls bounce as she waves her arms in the air expressively.

River keeps walking and she moves out of the way. He says, "It's Ava. And we're leaving." He pulls me and I trail along behind him.

We make it down to the lobby before he says another word, but he's shaking, and his face has gone from its usual ivory tone to an angry bright red. "I'm so sorry, Ava. This is *exactly* what I wanted to avoid. A perfect example of my family. I'm sorry you had to see it." He falls back against the exposed brick.

"Why are you apologizing to me? Your parents were fighting, Riv. It's fine. I just wish I had met them under better circumstances," I tell him, hoping the words are comforting enough to pull him out of this new mood. I've never seen him so shaken up.

"You don't get it. These *are* the circumstances, Ava. This is our life. My family. This isn't a one-off type of night. This is a daily occurrence in the Jacobs household. It's been this way my entire eighteen years and I don't think it'll change anytime soon." There's embarrassment on his face, and he wears it like it's a plague.

I don't know how to help in this moment because our families are clearly so vastly different, so I pull him in and hug him. Up until now, things have been kind of surface level. This is a side to River that I didn't know existed. He's normally cool, calm, and collected. But tonight, he's vulnerable and... just really fucking sad.

"I'm sorry," is all I can manage.



TRACK SEVEN: WHERE IS MY  
MIND

BY PIXIES

## RIVER

EVERYTHING WOULD BE PERFECT IF I WEREN'T SO SELFISH.

But I am.

It's been over a month since Ava and I first hung out on the rooftop, and I'm falling in love with her. Four weeks in, and I already love her. *Who the hell am I?* Certainly not the same River I was before I met her. It isn't that I mistreated women before, I just never really cared enough about anyone to stay for long. But leaving for California isn't optional; I have to go. Which means I shouldn't have ever started things with her, but now that I have, I can't stop. And I don't want to.

I'm stuck between enjoying the present and counting down each day until I leave—because there *will* be an ending to us. And it will come before we even have a chance at a real shot together.

“My sister's basically a clone of my parents. She's into high-society bullshit and fancy dinner parties. She's marrying a lawyer. She's following in my mother's footsteps and I'm the black sheep, hanging out on rooftops with girls and hightailing it to California to try to make it big.”

She smiles. “It's your life, Riv. You're never going to please *everyone*.”

I wish she weren't so damn understanding. She's too pure for this world, and I know it. She's too pure for me, but here we are. I love her for it.

We're lying on the plaid blanket I got three Christmases ago. It's worn, but it's my favorite. Ava props herself up on her arm, and I don't speak. Our eyes meet, and I realize that she's given me in just four weeks what no one else has given me in a lifetime—the ability to just *be*. I'm comfortable with her. My body relaxes the moment I see her. I don't have to try to be the cool guy, the River that stands on a stage and puts on a show.

With her, I just am. And it's my favorite way to be.

"You're beautiful, Ava Keyes." I don't think before I say it, it just pours out.

She scrunches up her nose and smiles her cute little smile before looking down at the blanket, fingering the hem that's lined with fraying fabric.

I can tell she has something on her mind. "What's wrong?"

She stares at me, doing that thing where she squints her eyes really subtly, and I know she's trying to decide if she should say it or not.

"River." Her voice is low, but not sad. It's filled with something; I can't place it. "I want you to make love to me tonight." She sighs. "And before you tell me that you can't, that you're leaving..."

Her voice trails off, probably because I've told her this before, that we can't. That we'd get too emotionally attached before I leave. It wouldn't be good for either of us.

"I want you, River Jacobs. And I don't care if I never get over you. I want you tonight. Especially if in a few months you'll be gone. We don't have time to keep wasting."

She's forward and it's attractive as hell. I want to give her all of me. I want everything with this girl. When I met her, there was just something about her that sucked me in and kept me wanting more.

"I want you too. I need you to know something," I tell her, bracing myself for what I'm about to say. I didn't expect to do this tonight, but I can't keep it in anymore. I don't want to keep anything from her. "It's been four weeks since we were here the first time." I motion to the rooftop. "I don't think

there's been one day we haven't seen each other and honestly, I'm surprised you haven't gotten sick of me yet—”

“I could never get sick of you, Riv. I like everything about you,” she interrupts, in true Ava fashion.

“And I, you. I thought when I left you that note in the record shop that we'd have a couple of cool dates if I was lucky enough for you to call me, but I never in my wildest dreams thought we'd be here, on this rooftop, still hanging out four weeks later.”

“Four weeks isn't really that long,” she notes, smirking at me.

“I know, I know. But for me it is. And anyway...” I pause to shake my head at her, “I love you, Ava.” With that, I stop, assessing her as her eyes grow wide. “And before you get all freaked out, I've never said that to anyone besides my family before. I didn't expect this to happen, but it did. And I'm terrified because I'm leaving and I love you, but I don't know when I'll see you after I move. I hate that I'm being so selfish.” I feel overly emotional, but I try my best to contain it.

Ava scoots closer to me, reaching her hand up to stroke my cheek. *She's perfect.* “I love you too, Riv. I mean that. But going after a dream you've had for years isn't selfish. I want you to know that, and I want you to believe that.” She pulls me closer to her. “But you're right. You will leave faster than our feelings will fade and that's going to be terrible. But right now, you're here and I'm here. So can we just be *here*? In this moment only? Please?”

I don't answer her, but I press my lips to hers, hoping that's enough.

# TRACK EIGHT: YOUTH

BY DAUGHTER

## AVA

RIVER STRAYS FROM MY MOUTH, RUNNING HIS TONGUE ALONG my jawline and up to my ear. He sucks on my earlobe as he undoes my blouse with one hand. He has no idea this is my first time, but he will soon enough.

River claims every inch of my skin, making his way down my body and planting small kisses along the way. When he gets to the top of my jeans, he stops and looks up at me from behind his long eyelashes. “Can I?” he asks, his voice a whisper.

We’re taking our chances out here on this roof, hoping no one comes up, but in my mind, it’s almost hotter that it’s a possibility. I’m nervous, feeling the warmth in my skin despite the biting early spring air.

I nod and suck in a sharp breath as he unbuttons my jeans and slides them down my legs, tugging them from my ankles. I’m wearing black panties; they aren’t anything special, but at least they don’t have flowers on them or something.

He pauses, taking me in and staring down at the black cotton—the only thing separating us. He hooks them with one finger and looks up to me, his eyes not leaving mine as he pulls them down. I arch my hips toward him, telling him with only my body how badly I want him.

“Ava, are you sure?” he asks, his face inches from my center.

I'm naked and vulnerable but with him, I feel safe. "Yes. Please." I've never been so sure of something.

At the sound of my voice, he buries his head into me, licking and sucking and paying attention to every single part of me. He focuses his tongue on my clit and then runs it down my length, up and down, up and down. Until finally, one flick of his tongue at my opening and I can't hold in my moans any longer.

I moan his name into the city night, and he knows I'm ready for more.

He inserts one finger, my opening tight around him. I feel his eyes trail up my body, to my own, and I look up at him. There isn't even one ounce of hesitation in his eyes in this moment, and I'm grateful for it. *Take my body, River. Take it and let it numb your pain.*

After working me with both his tongue and his fingers, he eases himself onto his knees. I look at him with sheer need as he pulls himself out of his pants, and I see just how ready he is. This may be temporary, but in this moment, I wholly understand it's what I want.

"Are you ready?" he asks, running his palm up and down himself.

"Yes. I want you to know I'm a virgin. But River, yes. I'm ready. I want this." I don't want this news to make him refuse, but not telling him wouldn't be right.

He asks me again if I'm ready, and again, I reassure him. I watch as he slides a condom on, not bothering to ask me about birth control because he's handling it himself.

"Tell me how you feel," he says. "The entire time. If it doesn't feel good, Ava. If it hurts. Tell me."

I promise him I will, and my promise turns into complete pleasure as River enters me, slowly, for the first time. I know he doesn't make it all the way in, but I am satisfied with this. He continues—slowly—in and out, taking his time. He stops every so often, mid-moan, waiting a few seconds before

resuming. He asks me, more than I'd like, if I'm okay. I reply, each time breathlessly, that *yes*, I am much more than okay.

He focuses completely on me, cupping my breasts in his hands and gently pumping in and out of me. He takes my hand and brings it to my clit, showing me exactly how to rub to make everything that much more heightened, intensifying every single feeling running throughout my body. When I release, or at least what I think is a release, it feels like nothing else in the world matters. A high of adrenaline and natural ecstasy lingers as he finishes and allows himself to rest on me.

While there are no fireworks in the sky, I feel a million tiny embers exploding inside of me. *I'm in love with River Jacobs.*

"I don't want to leave you," he says, lips pressed to my chest.

I know what he means, but I can't think about that right now. "This moment only. Please, Riv."

He nods. "This moment only."



# TRACK NINE: BLUE JEANS

BY LANA DEL REY

## RIVER

“DILLON EDWARD KEYES!” AVA YELLS AT HER BROTHER. “Knock that shit off or I’m selling you on eBay!” She slaps at his hand, in a playful manner.

“You can’t sell me. Mom has to sell me because you don’t own me!” Dillon retorts.

I reach across the table and give him a fist bump. “You tell her, Dill.” The two of us laugh, a sense of camaraderie filling the diner.

Ava smiles. “You two are something else, truly.”

Dillon has only known me for two weeks, but we feel like long-lost best friends. He taps his fingers on the table wildly—a nervous tic. He can’t decide on what to order, stuck between waffles or biscuits and gravy, and I don’t blame him. Those are two of my favorites, too. He argues with himself for a good fifteen minutes, and the waitress has to come back three times to see if he knows what he wants yet, but Ava and I don’t mind the wait.

I squeeze Ava’s knee under the table and she looks at me with appreciation. We haven’t talked a ton about what happened at my house—with my parents—but the way that Ava just accepted it and allowed me to be upset, spoke volumes to me. As crappy as it was at the time, it almost feels like it brought that much more understanding and respect to our relationship.

When Dillon excuses himself to go to the bathroom, I say, “He really is a spitfire, that kid. I never know what I’m going to get with him. But it’s cool, learning more about him. He’s teaching me so much, without even trying to.”

She asks what I mean and I hesitantly tell her about how little I knew about autism before meeting him.

“People misconstrue autism all the time. It’s something I’ve had to get used to. On paper, yes, he’s autistic. But doctors call it *high functioning*.” She uses air quotes when she says it. “It’s annoying. I mean, what does high functioning even mean? He’s just Dillon to me. He has autism, so what? Movies and books...they don’t always portray autism how it really is. You’ll see all of the bad and none of the good. Because there are so many ways it can affect a person, and for Dillon, he’s mainly affected when it comes to decision-making. But you can’t tell simply by looking at him. So many people think that it’s something you can see with your eyes, but that isn’t always the case.”

I can tell how passionate she is about the subject, her eyes wild and glistening when she adds, “I just want you to know how much it means to me that you’ve taken the time to get to know him.”

Dillon slides back into the booth and Ava asks him if he washed his hands.

“Yes, *Mom*, I washed my flippin’ hands. Now, let’s get back to business.” He smiles big. “River, why do you have to leave? Maybe you could just have a band here? There are schools in the area. I looked them up online last night on Mom’s laptop.”

I look at Ava before answering and she’s smiling softly, a sadness lingering just behind her eyes.

Then I turn to her brother. “I really appreciate that, Dill. I’ve just always had the dream of going to California and seeing what’s out there. It almost feels like it doesn’t exist, you know? Like California is some dreamland. I want to be able to see it and touch it. Be in the middle of it and know that it’s real. The school is just a bonus for me,” I tell him.

Dillon doesn't like the answer, but he accepts it. "So, what will happen with you and my sister?"

# TRACK TEN: MAPS

## AVA

HE'S WEARING HIS LEATHER JACKET. A STAPLE, EVEN IN THE summer months, despite Chicago heating up over a hundred degrees, the windy air hot and sticky. River and I have been dating for five short months. Within these five months, it feels as if we've lived a hundred lifetimes together. He's played me old-school Green Day on his acoustic guitar and written songs for me that he sings while we sip spiked lemonade from our mason jars. He says his parents will have no idea, but the good girl in me still gets a little nervous.

When we sit down, the first thing River does is turn to me, pulling me in with force. No kissing me. No running his fingers through my wild, raven hair that he loves. He just holds me tight, keeping me close. I can feel his heartbeat against the side of my neck.

"I'm leaving early, Ave." His words suck the breath out of me.

He doesn't meet my eyes, and I'm glad for it, because I can't look at him right now. I knew he was leaving, but it wasn't supposed to be for another three weeks. We were supposed to go to the beach to build sandcastles and swim in the water until we had matching sunburns. We were going to scour the record store for hidden gems before other people could grab them. And we were going to spend a day trying all the different donut shops in Chicago, deciding which one was our favorite.

“Why?” It’s all I can get out. I’m afraid my voice will turn into a shaky mess and he’ll hear my disappointment.

“We got the lease for my apartment there to begin a bit early, so I can try to get settled in and acclimated before having to find my way around when classes start.” I think I can hear a slight shakiness in his voice, too.

River decided long ago to attend Wentworth, a prestigious school of the arts, across the country. I would have supported this—I *do* support this—but I would have even more so had it not been all the way out in California.

“Well, I mean...” I desperately search my mind for the right thing to say. I want to be the cool girlfriend, the one who’s understanding and not overly emotional, but I still have a whole year left of high school. That feels like forever right now, in this moment. “That’s great!” I say, trying to evoke happiness in my tone.

He looks at me now, squinting his eyes. “Is it?”

The two of us have been inseparable from the moment we decided to exclusively be together. Our pull toward each other is undeniable. Magnetic. Adapting to being without each other is going to be a challenge—probably for both of us.

“You’re starting a new life, and one day, you’re going to be famous. You and those strings, and those fucking mesmerizing eyes of yours.” I smile, feeling my eyes grow glossy, my cheeks burning just under the surface. I loop his arm over my shoulders and melt into him.

“We can’t stay together—we’ve talked about that already—but it kills me, Ava,” he says, and it’s true.

We talked about this when we first started dating. That at the end of the summer, we were to go our separate ways and understand that we had fun, but the timing wasn’t right.

He has to go live his life, and I have to finish high school and move on with mine.

But, neither of us knew how quickly our feelings would develop into so much more than physical attraction. Neither of us knew we’d be confessing our love for each other one month

into our relationship. The stakes were high and fast and incredibly out of nowhere.

“I know.” And I did. I knew this was going to happen. I just didn’t think it would be this fast.

And now, for the first time, I admit to myself that *maybe*, I thought he might change his mind. That he would ask me to wait for him or tell me that he’d wait for me. It stings now, all of it. My temples throb and all at once I just want to get out of here and out of this situation.

I push the feeling down and smile at him as my heart breaks. “I hope one day I’m standing in a crowd, catching one of your guitar picks, River Jacobs,” I tell him. “And I will miss you every single day until then.”



TRACK ELEVEN: KEEP  
BREATHING

BY INGRID MICHAELSON

## AVA

SOMEONE COMES INTO MY ROOM AND AT FIRST, I THINK IT'S Dillon. I grab a pillow, ready to throw it at him so he gets lost. I love him, but he isn't allowed to just walk into my room. When I see it's my dad, a smile forms. I'm trying not to think about River and the fact that he's leaving, but it's damn near impossible.

“Ah! This is one of my favorites.” He moves his head in time to the beat of an old Nirvana song, making his way over to where I sit on my window seat. He's wearing his favorite ripped jeans and black-and-white Converse high-tops. “Care if I take a seat, Aves?”

“Anytime, Daddy-O,” I say, patting the cushioned window seat. “What's up?”

My dad and I are friends first, father and daughter second. At least that's how I've always looked at it. My mom has always done the disciplining. My dad, on the other hand, would sneak me bowls of ice cream whenever she banished me to my room, and he always took me to McDonald's on Sunday mornings for a breakfast sandwich when she was too busy with Dillon to notice I needed attention, too.

“Your mother and I were going to do this together...” his voice trails off and my stomach spins. *What could they need to do together?* “But I told her I wanted to talk to you on my own. I kinda want this to be like one of our normal weekend chats, you know?”

I interrupt him with, “Dad, you’re kind of scaring me, so if you could just jump to the point here...”

He smiles his signature *‘everything is fine’* smile. “I’ve been feeling kind of off for a while. I can’t really describe it, but I just haven’t felt like myself.” He pauses and scratches at his chin, rubbing the tiny hairs that have sprouted since the last time he shaved. “I went to the doc, which was so lame—you know I never go to the doctor.”

And he really doesn’t go to the doctor, unless he’s so sick he can hardly move.

“Well, she ran some tests and it turns out I’ve got a little issue.” I can tell he’s stalling, not wanting to hit me with whatever news he has. I watch as his body tenses, as the small veins in his neck bulge, and he sucks in a deep breath. “The doctor thinks I have cancer, kid.” He smiles again and I’m... *why is he smiling?*

“Look, it’s no big thing,” he says. “It’s prostate cancer and the survival rate is in my favor. It’s something we’re going to nip in the bud and then get back to life as we know it, as soon as we can.” He’s trying to make me feel better, but hearing the words *‘survival rate’* feels like a punch to the gut.

It’s as if the entire room shifts onto its side. I hear his voice but it’s a distant echo, far away but still surrounding me. For a moment, I think I might pass out, but when he reaches out and touches my knee, I snap back. “Dad. I can’t. I don’t—”

“Aves, you don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know. I don’t want this to be some big secret I keep from you or Dillon. Your mom and I decided we wanted you two to know about everything, so every step of this journey, you’ll be walking it with me.”

One, single, solitary tear rolls down his flushed cheeks and he quickly bats it away. “Shit, kid. I don’t know why I’m getting all emotional.”

He sniffs, and I pull him toward me and bear hug him as tight as I can, like he might disappear at any second. His frame is much larger than mine, his arms pure muscle, stomach flat

and hard. I breathe him in, his cologne the same as when I was a child.

He always smells like winter, even in the dead of summer. Firewood and cedar and evergreen. A mixture I've always loved.

All at once, I lose it. "I don't want you to die, Dad," I sob against him as my world spins out of control. All I can see are caskets and funeral flowers and tears.

*How is my dad sick?* I barely remember him ever even having a cold or at least, letting it affect him. *He's healthy. He isn't sick.*

He pulls back from me, grasping me softly by the shoulders and shaking me just a little. "Hey." His face is hopeful and lighter than when I pulled him in for the hug. "No one is dying. I'm right here, Aves. We've got too many concerts to go to. Too many songs to be heard. An aisle to walk down. You know, all the good stuff."

"Dad!" I groan, chuckling but not understanding how a laugh could even escape my lips when my father's just told me he has cancer. But this is what his specialty is—making people feel happy, even in the worst of times.

I know if I ever lose him, I'll never be the same. So, I refuse to think it's even a possibility. Because I can't lose both River *and* my dad. I know I'd never come back from it.

TRACK TWELVE: SLOW  
DANCING IN A BURNING ROOM

BY JOHN MAYER

## AVA

RIVER HAS ONE ARM DRAPED OVER THE STEERING WHEEL OF his Mustang, the other on my thigh, caressing me with his thumb, back and forth, back and forth, to the beat of *Blitzkrieg Bop*.

He finds it easier not to talk about the fact that he's leaving tomorrow, but I can't stop thinking about it, and it's ruining our last hours—our last moments—together.

"You'll be okay, Aves." He glances at me and winks. Normally my nickname is reserved for my dad, but I like the sound of it from his lips.

"Yeah," I respond, not looking at him, because I know if I look into his eyes, I will fucking lose it. I feel him slipping away while he's still sitting next to me.

I don't tell him about my dad. I don't even want to say it out loud, to make it real. I've somehow gone from having two incredible men in my life—consistently—to possibly losing both of them.

He just nods, eyes forward, refusing to look at me. Then, all of a sudden, River makes a U-turn and starts driving in the direction we just came from. He's speeding fast, and I ask him what the hell he's doing.

"I'm taking you home. This is fucking stupid and I'm fucking stupid. I should have never started this with you." His words hit me like a freight train, and I turn from him to the window and stare out, willing myself not to cry.

We drive the miles back to my house and he parks. I immediately grab the handle and yank on it, but he pulls me in toward him. His face is red and blotchy, like he's been crying, silently.

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Ava. I didn’t mean it how it sounded, I’m just upset. I don’t regret that we’ve spent our time together this summer. I regret that I’m hurting you right now and being a selfish prick.” His jaw tightens as he looks quickly to me, and then away again.

I instantly feel bad, although I’ve thought it too. For weeks I’ve been internally struggling with him leaving. The pain of finally finding someone who gets me, and having him ripped away for the sake of his dreams, really hits me now. My chest is heavy, and I suddenly realize that heartbreak is real. It’s an actual thing, and I’m feeling it. My lungs feel like they’re about to explode with the weight of everything I’m saying and everything I’m holding back. “How are you a selfish prick?” I choke out.

“I could stay here. Wait for you, be with you. But I’m not. It crossed my mind to—”

“River, absolutely fucking not. I wouldn’t let you even if you tried. You’re going to California, and you’re going to do some really amazing things while you’re there. Doing something for yourself isn’t selfish.” My lips say the words, but they aren’t the ones I want to say. I want to say that I wish he *would* stay. I can’t tell him that, though, because then I’d be the selfish one.

He sinks in his seat and puts his head in his hands. “You and I have something pretty amazing right here. I’m leaving that for what? To make it as a big fucking musician? That won’t happen and we both know it. Really, what are the chances?”

I take his head in my hands and look him in the eyes, wondering if this is the last time I’ll have the privilege of doing so. “The chances are zero percent if you stay here and wait around for me. You’re going to California, River Jacobs.

And one day, I'll tell anyone who'll listen that I knew *the* River Jacobs before he made it big."

We don't go wherever he was planning on taking me. Instead, we climb in the backseat as rain starts to fall from the sky. My head's on his shoulder and his arms are encasing me as a Springsteen song softly plays from the speakers. We don't speak, because words can't fix this, can't make it better. Sometimes words only complicate things or make them worse. Sometimes, a tender touch is the only thing that helps.

When I get out of River's car, it's raining enough that my tears and the raindrops collide, enabling me to better hide my misery from him. Cars whoosh past us, kicking up water from the quickly forming puddles. Dark rain clouds loom over us and it's the perfect goddamn setting for this shitty situation.

"I don't want to say goodbye to you, Ava. I'm ready to say goodbye to this city, I'm ready to see what California has for me, but I'm not ready for you to not be a constant in my life. We just didn't have enough time." His emerald eyes are dark. The light that I love is dim and sadness pours out, spilling onto his cheeks.

"My dad always tells me something when I'm having a shitty day. That there's going to be good days and bad days. You'll have them both." I smile at the memory, and then I almost start bawling. Because my dad is sick and River doesn't know and I'm terrified. "He says good days and bad days...they're both inevitable. But as long as you've had more good days than bad, you know you're doing all right."

River steps out of the car—the old Mustang that I'll miss—and walks around the front of it, reaching for me and wrapping me in his arms as the rain falls harder, drenching us.

"Today is just one bad day, Riv. We've had way more good ones. We're both doing all right," I say, though neither of us feel all right.

I breathe him in, just in case this is the last time I have the chance to. He smells like the woods, spices, and home. I clutch the fabric of his hoodie, willing him to stay, while knowing he can't.



We stand pressed tightly together as the rain and our tears  
roll down our cheeks in unison.

# TRACK THIRTEEN: RUNAWAYS

AVA

I CAVE.

The next morning, I'm drained from sobbing into my pillow for hours on end and not sleeping. So, instead of heading to school, I decide to go to River's. I glance in the mirror and see a puffy face with bloodshot eyes gloomily staring back at me.

Now, I'm waiting outside his parents' condo because I know he'll be leaving at any moment and I need to tell him how I feel.

River walks coolly out the double doors and I jump out of my car like a mad woman.

"Riv!" I flail my arms, running toward him. "Wait!"

He turns toward me, whipping his head around at the sound of my voice calling his name. When realization hits, his eyes grow wide, like he didn't expect to ever see me again. *Same, River. Same.*

"I don't want you to go." The words are as sharp as the breath I've been holding in. I'm out of breath, out of time, and the look on his face is telling me everything I don't want to hear. "Please, don't go. I can't imagine my life without you. I don't want to. I know that's shitty of me to say, especially now. But I had to. I had to at least try."

"Ava," he says, his voice sad and deflated.

I silently plead with him to look me in the eyes, but he won't meet my gaze. Instead, he stands only a couple of feet away, staring at the ground. It feels like he's already gone, and I feel like I'm going to fall apart right here. "I can't stay here. I'm sorry, I—"

"Riv!" I beg, because it seems as if I've exhausted all other options. "Please! Didn't you hear what I said?"

His eyes find mine now, but the River I love isn't in there. These eyes are cold.

"You're trying to get me to stay by *guilting* me? Ava, come on. Why are you doing this right now? We've talked about this. You know I'm leaving and you show up here like some crazy person trying to get me to throw away my dreams for you? A girl I've known for half a year?"

My body goes numb and the familiar sting comes, of tears threatening to escape my eyes.

"I'm sorry." He digs his hands into his pockets. "That came out wrong, but Ava, I cannot—"

I interrupt him again because my sadness has quickly been replaced by hurt. And when I hurt, all I want to do is hurt back. "Save it, Riv. I get it." I turn to start walking away from him.

"Ava! Fuck. Please, just hang on a second. This is a huge surprise," he calls after me. "Yesterday you were fine with this."

I stop when I get one hand around my car door handle. Turning to him, with eyes that now match his own cold, dark stare, I say, "I wish I never met you, River Jacobs."

Then, I quickly get into my car and speed away. I don't look back at him, forcing myself to think of anything but the memories of him and his scent and his emerald eyes.

TRACK FOURTEEN: IT MUST  
HAVE BEEN LOVE

BY ROXETTE

**AVA**

***DAY ONE WITHOUT RIVER***

*I GUESS I'm the type of girl who writes in a journal now.*

*I'm upset. I'm sad. I'm frustrated. I'm annoyed. I'm mad.*

*My emotions are mixed up and tangled.*

*So, I guess I'll start from the beginning.*

*River Jacobs. Even writing his damn name is hard, the pain is still so fresh. He left for California less than twelve hours ago. Left for California, and left me here, in Chicago.*

*It wasn't supposed to end the way it did. I don't know why I showed up at his parents' to confess how desperately I wanted him to stay. Maybe because I've spent seventeen years looking for what River has given me in six months? I don't know. I shouldn't have told him I wished I'd never met him. It was dramatic and childish. It just came out before I could even think better of it. I don't wish we had never met. I wish I could take it all back.*

*I'm writing down his words so I remember them...*

*"You're trying to get me to stay by guilting me? Ava, come on. Why are you doing this right now? We've talked about this. You know I'm leaving and you show up here like some crazy person trying to get me to throw away my dreams for you? A girl I've known for half a year?"*

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## **Day Five**

*RIVER CALLED TODAY. He called and I answered and his voice made my entire body ache for his touch. I couldn't talk to him. I tried, but I miss him too much. I miss the way he said my name. I miss his smile and his scent. I miss the way he held me.*

*He apologized for his words. The words written right up there ^ that I think will haunt me forever. The worst part of everything is that while it hurts, I just cannot be mad at him about it. I wish I could.*

---

## **Day Fourteen**

*IT'S BEEN two weeks since River first called and I've decided I'm not going to reply to his texts anymore. I've dodged his calls because hearing his voice on the line, like he's so close when he's really so far away, just makes things worse.*

*But now, I don't think I can text him either. I don't want to hear about how wonderful things are going for him. I know that might be selfish, but since no one will ever read this, it really doesn't matter. I just can't hear about all the things that are going so great for him while I'm stuck here, without him and with my dad sick.*

*I never told River about my father's cancer. If I said it out loud, I'd be forced to believe that it's real.*

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## Day Twenty-One

*I GOT a long text from River and I want to write it down. I know eventually I'll delete it, and I don't want to forget his words. So, I'll keep them here. In my journal, where they're safe.*

*“AVA,*

*I miss you. I wish things had worked out differently for us, but they didn't and I hate it. You aren't taking my calls anymore and you haven't replied to my last few texts. So I'm guessing that means you're done talking to me. I don't blame you.*

*I know we said we couldn't be together with me moving out here, but some part of me never allowed myself to fully comprehend that. I think I just kept pushing it out of my mind, that way I wouldn't have to face the reality.*

*I've had a dream to play music for as long as I can remember. I've also dreamed of getting away from my parents for as long as I can remember. California was going to make those dreams come true. But then you happened, Ava Keyes. You came along and you changed me.*

*You taught me that not all families are dysfunctional.*

*You taught me to live in the moment.*

*You taught me that there are more good days than bad.*

*And you taught me that taking a chance can be worth it.*

*Because you took a chance on me. You called me when I left you my number and I will always be grateful that you took that chance on a random eighteen-year-old in a record shop.*

*I'm taking a chance now, Ave. I need to see where my music takes me, and I know that's separating us and I'm sorry.*



*I refuse to believe that this is a forever goodbye. One day, our paths will cross again, and I will make up for all the lost time. I'm sure of it.*

*I LOVE YOU, Ava.*

*Goodbye for now."*

---

## **Day Twenty-Eight**

*HE HASN'T SENT any more texts and he hasn't tried to call. I guess this is what I wanted when I stopped replying.*

*But if this is what I wanted, why does it hurt so badly?*

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## **DAY FORTY-TWO**

*I'VE DECIDED to turn my pain into art. It was my dad's idea, really. If I want to write novels eventually, why not start here, with these pages? River will be my muse and I will write one screwed up love story. I'm calling it *Blurred Lines*. Because all of this has shown me that, when you realize you love someone you can't have, it makes you do messy things. Things you regret because the lines are so blurred. The title might change, but for now, that's it. It feels right, even if nothing else does.*

*I'll write about how we met. How his eyes will haunt me for the rest of my life; how beautiful and captivating they are. I'll write about the way they shine and glisten. How they hold pain he doesn't talk about. I'll write about how he made me feel for the past few months. The way his arms snaked around my back, resting against me, holding me and clinging to me like I'd slip away.*

*I'll write about the way he said my name and the places we went. I'll write about the rooftop and our first kiss. The first time he made love to me underneath the stars. How the lights of the city rolled over his skin as he arched his back and moaned my name.*

*I'll write about the way he left.*

*I'll write about how I broke as I drove away from him.*

*I'll write about how I stayed that way for a very, very long time.*

B-SIDE

TRACK FIFTEEN: DON'T YOU  
WANT ME

BY THE HUMAN LEAGUE

## AVA

*Five years later...*

THE PHOTO OF THE PENIS POPS UP ON MY SCREEN AND I grimace. Is this guy fucking serious? Who the fuck ever wants to receive an unsolicited dick pic?

Never have I ever received a picture of a boner and been impressed. I wonder if that means I'm a lesbian.

I was almost there. *Almost*. Our conversation was hot. He was undressing me with his words, and they were borderline fucking poetic at this stage in my life. I close my eyes, trying to get back there mentally by remembering his earlier words—before the picture came through and ruined it all.

*I'd do anything I could to make you feel good. I'd position you so you're straddling my face and I'd use my tongue to...*

Nope. It's useless now; he ruined it. I'm dry as a goddamn desert and completely over this shit. Each time I try to go back to re-read the earlier messages, the picture of his dick pops back up, front and center. Does my phone have a virus now?

This is what I get for trying my hand at online dating—men who hide behind their phone screens, assaulting unsuspecting women's eyes with their genitals.

Now I feel obligated to...finish him, even though I don't want to.

Why do they call it finishing, anyway? Hell, I'm fucking finished! Can I just type that in reply to his unsolicited dick in his hand, with his dog staring up at him in awe in the background? *Learn how to crop a picture, for Christ's sake.*

It's amazing how fast a good thing can turn south, slap you in the face, and make you wish you never swiped right to begin with.

*I guess this is online dating.*

I let forty-five minutes pass before I text him back.

**Me:** Omg. Sorry. I'm the worst. My phone died. I thought it had enough battery. I hope you finished...

**Me:** And that you thought about me. ;)

I add the last part in, trying to let him down easy and not be too rude.

**Connor:** It's okay, baby. I didn't finish, though. I wanted to wait for you. I figured something must have happened. Did you like the photo I sent you?

*Good Lord, are men really this moronic?* No one wants to see your genitals. No one. Well, maybe someone. But not me.

I can't keep this up. I hit the settings icon on the dating app and tap the red letters that read **BLOCK**. *Sorry, Connor. It was fun while you were pretending not to be a typical man-pig. You had to go and ruin it with your dick pic and nineties bed sheets.* The only good thing about that picture was the dog, and I feel bad he or she even had to witness it being taken.

I toss my phone next to me on the couch and it bounces on the cushion then falls to the floor. Not caring enough to pick it up, I grab the bottle of wine I opened earlier—when I needed a little liquid courage—and pour more into my glass.

I don't know how I got to this point. I tuck my legs under me on the couch and take a sip, trying to rack my brain for a logical reason as to why my life has gone so astray that I'm sitting alone on a Friday night, scrolling through a dating app.

After my breakup with River, I used my pain as motivation to launch my writing career. I can still remember the feeling

that soared through my entire body when I landed a literary agent. If I allow myself to think about it enough, even now, my heart picks up pace in my chest. It's like I'm taken right back to when I received the acceptance email for *Blurred Lines*, the title of the manuscript that changed my entire life.

It paid for my dad's treatment, despite my parents having enough money. I just wanted them to save theirs in case things got really tight. After my book shot straight to the top of every major bestselling chart, everything changed for me. If River and I couldn't be together in real life, at least we could end up together in my fictional pages.

It's hard to believe I've published three novels. It's even weirder to me when I tell people I'm working on my fourth and that I've been able to make a full-time career out of being a writer. I really did it. It's one of my favorite accomplishments to date, just a smidge under being an ambassador for The Leading Way of Chicago—an organization that Dillon belongs to downtown.

The director had asked me to be an ambassador for their program, to go out into our community and help educate families of children with autism, and also their teachers and peers. At first, I felt extremely underqualified. After all, I hadn't gone to school for anything of the sort. But the director said there was no one better to educate than those who live it. So, Dillon and I both have given various talks on living with autism and what that means not only for him, but for our family and his future, as well.

Writing, though—even still—makes me think of River. I wrote daily after he left. Every single feeling I didn't want to feel was written down in my journal, tucked neatly away in my nightstand, out of my mind and into a leather-bound book. I wrote them and tried to put them out of my memory. My heart physically ached until the harshness of his hurtful words had dissipated.

*“You show up here like some crazy person trying to get me to throw away my dreams for you? A girl I've known for half a year?”*

I might never forget the words. They still tug on my heartstrings a little, but the five years separating me from that memory has helped with the healing of him calling me *crazy*.

Writing *about* him was easier than talking *to* him, at that point. I didn't want to hear about his new incredible life without me. Maybe that was selfish of me, but I think I've grown at least some since then.

I pull myself from my thoughts and pick my phone up from the floor. I don't have enough wine in my modest apartment in Chicago to keep reminiscing on my youth.

If someone had asked me if I ever thought I'd be here, I'd tell them no fucking way in hell. I wouldn't be on a dating app, because I wouldn't be single.

Less than a month ago, I was engaged to Brady Turner—the sexy-as-hell CEO of a startup turned multimillion-dollar business that had been featured in *Forbes Magazine*. Turns out, Brady Turner was also a lying, cheating son of a bitch.

And before that, there was only River Jacobs.



TRACK SIXTEEN: I HEARD IT  
THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

BY MARVIN GAYE

## AVA

AFTER BEING INTRODUCED BY FRIENDS, BRADY AND I JUST clicked. He was easy to get along with, easy on the eyes, and easy to love. I had a feeling when he flew us out to California for our anniversary that he might propose, and I was right.

I sit on the couch and close my eyes, remembering the pivotal moment like it was yesterday.

*Brady gets down on one knee inside the beautiful Napa winery and says the words I've been waiting to hear since I fell in love with him—back when I was living in my tiny apartment, still ruminating over my past.*

*He looks up at me with his beautiful, perfect smile, his dark brown eyes meeting mine. "I'm in love with you, Ava. You've given me the best three years of my life and now, I can't picture spending it with anyone else. You're beautiful, patient, and kind. You're the most loving and selfless woman I've ever known. For all these reasons, plus a million more, I'd like nothing more than to spend forever with you. Will you marry me, Ava?"*

*I pull him up to me and press my wine-stained lips to his. When we finally break apart, he slips a gorgeous princess-cut diamond ring onto my finger and I gasp at the sight of it.*

*With absolute certainty I say, "Yes!"*

*His arms wrap around me and he pulls me tightly to his chest as thunder rolls outside the winery. Raindrops fall hard against the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the*

*vineyards. Our servers pull out their phones and start snapping pictures of us. The smell of red wine and oak fills the air as Brady tangles his fingers in my hair, pulling me in for another kiss.*

*I am drunk on the most expensive Cabernet in California, and it pairs perfectly with his love. For the first time in a long time, everything feels right.*

I shake my head at what *should* be a fond memory, but not long after our Napa trip, I was drinking the same Cabernet when I found out he'd been fucking another woman behind my back.

Finding out about Brady's infidelity was shocking, to say the least. And so, at only twenty-two years old, I was sent spinning into an early quarter-life crisis.

After River, I wasn't sure I'd ever fall in love again, let alone get engaged or married. For the better part of an entire year, I longed for him. Hell, I ached for him, for his touch, for his late-night talks. River nearly killed any hope I ever had in men, the letdown so substantial it eliminated my desire for any sort of happy ending—with anyone.

But Brady changed all of that. At least for a little while.

After our newfound engagement, my stomach was in knots as I drove to my parents' house the next morning. Brady and I touched back down at home in Chicago after our trip, going our separate ways when work called, as it often did.

I still remember walking into my family's home, with a huge smile on my face. I still remember how I *felt*, before my elation was destroyed by a blindsiding affair.

*I glance down at my new, shiny diamond ring. It feels like it weighs a hundred pounds on my finger—in a good way, a way I can get used to. I see my brother first, his tall and lanky figure, with a Chicago Cubs shirt on that's too big for him paired with basketball shorts. His blond hair, a stark contrast from my own, glistens in the sun rays peeking through the window. The house smells like acrylic paint, mixed with the*

*scent of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies floating through the air.*

*Once my parents and Dillon are sitting in front of me at the kitchen island, I fling my arm out from behind my back and shove my hand in their faces, squealing with excitement. "I'm going to be Mrs. Ava Turner!" I shout, jumping up and down.*

*My mom flashes a smile and stands, walking around the island and pulling me into a hug, her signature perfume lingering on her clothes.*

*Dillon, on the other hand, looks at me with one eyebrow raised. He takes a sip from his soda can and clears his throat.*

*I let go of my mom and turn my full attention to Dillon, my sweet brother, whose support has never wavered.*

*"Dill, why are you looking at me like the world's coming to an end?" I ask.*

*"I don't think you should marry him." The words fall from his lips and I recoil back into myself. Dillon blurts things out without fully thinking about the consequences sometimes, so the rational part of my brain tells me to cool it, to hold off on being pissed at him.*

*But those seven words strung together, take up such a small amount of space in the world, yet hold this gigantic meaning that settles in the very depths of my stomach. A bout of severe nausea washes over me, making me weak in the knees.*

*It's not the response I'd expected, so I don't know what the hell to make of it or how to combat the growing feeling twisting at my insides.*

*"Sorry, sis. He just rubs me the wrong way." He picks at the skin at his nails, refusing to make eye contact with me.*

*"Dillon Edward Keyes!" our mother scolds. Her hand finds mine on the island before she intertwines our fingers. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I have no idea why your brother has decided to be an asshole about this." She snaps her attention to him, shooting him a look that means he's in for a bunch of shit the moment I leave the house.*

*I feel a small burst of pride despite my hurt, that my mother has no qualms about calling Dillon an asshole when he's being one. And he is being one right now, borderline ruining my moment.*

*"You know," my dad chimes in, clearing his throat, "Brady seems like a nice guy, but I bet he doesn't quote Jim Morrison like my buddy River did." He tries to laugh but it starts a coughing fit, so my mom offers to take him to rest. Before she rolls him out of the kitchen he adds, "More good days than bad, kid."*

Thinking about it now, I swear to God, I almost break all over again.

I left after that, kissing my mom on the cheek before hurrying out the door. I needed time to process what Dillon said to me before having a conversation with him and possibly saying things I didn't mean.

While I knew deep down that Dillon thought Brady left a bit to be desired, I never imagined him saying I shouldn't marry him. It hurt me more than I'd like to admit, even now.

But he was clearly right. I shake my head at the memory and take one last sip from my wine before grabbing a water bottle. I don't need a hangover tomorrow when I work on editing the second draft of my latest novel.

I'm not sure why I'm writing a main character who's being cheated on. It only brings back painful memories of my own life and my short-lived engagement to Brady "*The Cheating Bastard*" Turner.

Maybe I write about heartbreak so well because I've been torn in two—more than once.

I'll never forget the phone call from Hailee that changed my life, when she told me Brady had cheated on me with someone at his office. That he'd confessed this to her boyfriend—Brady's best friend.

I found out on a Thursday night while watching the Bachelorette.

By Friday, I'd kicked him out—not only of our apartment, but my life.

TRACK SEVENTEEN:  
SOMEBODY THAT I USED TO  
KNOW

BY GOTYE

## AVA

IT'S BEEN SIX WEEKS SINCE I FOUND OUT ABOUT BRADY, AND while six weeks hasn't cured everything, it sure as hell has been enough time for my sadness to morph into a lesson: *Don't waste time on men who don't deserve you.*

I just wish I had seen it before I wasted three years on Brady, but alas. At least it'll make for a damn good book one day.

Hailee, tired of my moping, finally convinces me to go out. We're both already a bit buzzed from our pre-game at the apartment. I figure I can reward myself for my long, hard day of work. Editing makes my brain hurt and I could use some best friend time.

Chicago nightlife is always a good time. Each little neighborhood has something different to offer. We decide on a fun little hole-in-the-wall dive bar in Logan Square, known for its cheap beer and diverse crowd. The bar smells of sweat and whiskey, and the eighties jams are so loud the music is shaking my drink on the table.

"How about that one?" Hailee winks at me before nodding to a man with a clean-shaven face and a blue button-down with vertical stripes. She's dead set on finding me a rebound.

"He looks like he just walked out of Yale and went shopping with his daddy's credit card. Next." I laugh, the alcohol flowing inside of me and tainting my sense of humor a bit.



The men in the bar significantly outweigh the women, which is favorable for me, I guess. But I still don't think I'll wind up going home with anyone. Maybe we'll just find some hot guys to have fun with here and then Hailee and I can go home and pass out.

Hailee points out a burly man with a beard down to his chest, an older gentleman in a sweater vest (I hope she's kidding about that one), and finally, a man sitting with two others by the bar's entrance. He's handsome. His eyes look dark in the dim light of the bar. His smile is nice—contagious almost. He throws his head back and sips on his Corona.

“All right, let's go,” I tell her. The guys in the group are easy enough on the eyes, and it might be better than the two of us sitting alone and being approached by randoms all night.

Hailee trails behind me and just as we get to the door, needing to pass it to get to the guy's table, he walks in.

I stop so suddenly that Hailee runs into the back of me and pushes me straight into his chest. I breathe him in before quickly stumbling my drunk ass backward. He smells like he always has—woody, spicy, *home*. I am devastated and elated all at once.

Every single ounce of air inside my lungs suddenly evaporates and I'm left breathless, like I've seen a ghost. *How is he here?* River Jacobs. My first love. My first heartbreak. My first everything.

“Ava.” His voice is low and husky—the same as I remember.

The way he says my name brings every single emotion I've ever felt for him surging back, making me lightheaded.

I allow my eyes to pan up to his, a green emerald forest I have no problem getting lost in. “River.” His name tastes good on my tongue, sweet and sultry. I gulp it down. “How are you here?” I'm not subtle, and I suppose I have the wine and two vodka shots to thank for that. I hope I don't look as messy on the outside as I feel on the inside.

When he smiles his crooked, perfect smile, I melt into myself. I know that smile so well and God, I've missed it. I've tried to convince myself I don't but, the truth is, I've never been able to get him out of my head. He's always been there, far, but his lasting impact remained relentless.

"Don't look so surprised, Ave." He chuckles. It's a deep, throaty laugh and I'm reminded of yet another thing I've missed infinitely. "I'm back visiting my sister, trying to sort things out. Long story." He runs his fingers through his hair and sighs.

Hailee sits down at the table with the three men, and I signal to River that we should go outside. It's loud as hell in this place. I don't want to have an awkward *I haven't seen you in five years* conversation over Bon Jovi's screeching. So, when he nods, I reach for his hand and lead him out of the bar. The alcohol swimming inside me gives me the confidence to take the lead, even after all this time.

I glance back at Hailee, giving her a look so she knows I'll be close by if she needs me, and she grins back at me.

Once we're outside, River says, "I've missed you, Ava." The gaze he's holding and the honesty in his voice, mixes with my buzz, making everything in this moment blur together.

I look at him, really look at him, for the first time in over five years. His emerald eyes glisten in the dark as headlights roll over his face, cars whooshing past us.

I want to tell him I've missed him, but something stops me. My pride? My new jaded self? "I'm so surprised to see you." I glance away from his face because it's too perfect, even after all this time, and I'm suddenly shy in his presence. So much has changed. There's been so much time and distance and hurt packed into these years, but now he's too close to me and all I can think about is getting my hands on him and letting them speak the words that I can't right now. "But you did tell me you'd find me again someday," I say, remembering it as I smile up at him.

"Yeah, and you stopped taking my calls. That hurt." He looks away from me for a moment and then turns back toward

me. “I mean, I understand why. I really do. It was hard, though. I get that it was my choice to leave but that didn’t mean I wanted to lose you. I just—”

“Let me make it up to you tonight,” I interrupt him. With us, it was never *just* about the sex, but it had been a beautiful bonus. I’d be lying to myself if I said I hadn’t thought about it multiple times over the years. Seeing him now makes me feel like I’m seventeen again, and the rush is more intoxicating than alcohol could ever be.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asks, as we stand on the sidewalk outside the bar. My eyes widen at his question and he quickly says, “That wasn’t supposed to sound like a lame attempt to take you home with me.” An uncomfortable laugh escapes his lips.

I boldly reach out to cup his face in my hands, bringing my mouth to his to allow my actions to do what words can’t, losing myself in the moment as I taste the nostalgia on his lips.

Tonight, I don’t care about consequences. I don’t think about the mess this might make for us in the morning.

Tonight, I want him in his entirety.

“Who says I want you to take me home, River Jacobs?”

TRACK EIGHTEEN: LADY  
MARMALADE

BY LABELLE

## AVA

MY SKIN IS HOT BENEATH RIVER'S HANDS. SUDDENLY, TIME melts away and it feels like we've always been this way. However, he's all grown up now and gotten even better at seducing the hell out of me. He reaches up and lets my hair down, allowing his hands to get lost in it as it falls onto my shoulders.

A whispered moan escapes my lips as he trails his hands down my thighs. He's teasing me, remembering every spot I loved to be touched, his breath hot on my skin.

As he moves a stray strand of hair out of my face, the dim light casts a shadow over the tenderness in his eyes, and I smile. His gentle touch reminds me of when he loved me, and part of me wonders if deep down inside, he still does.

I grab him then, pulling him toward me to kiss him. Too much time has passed since our lips last touched, in a way we could take our time with.

Straddling him, I slip my shirt over my head, then unzip his pants with one hand, the other still on his face, feeling his scruff. His tongue intertwines with mine and his breath is hot and minty, and I can taste the liquor he must have downed earlier in the night. I allow myself to let go just a little, to succumb to the feelings I never thought I'd have again.

My drunkenness had faded into a buzz when my eyes fell on him as he walked into the dingy dive bar. And now, with

him here in my bed, knowing what we're about to do, I feel surprisingly sober.

I'm pulled quickly back into the moment when he whispers into my ear, "Can I fuck you?" He sticks one finger inside me, then pulls it out slowly and puts it into his mouth. I watch his lips quiver as he savors it with a groan. "You're so fucking wet," he says, finishing the sentence with a heated kiss.

I can taste myself on him, and it only heightens my arousal more. I feel him, hard against my thigh, the throbbing of his cock sending a surge of heat throughout my entire body.

I want to savor every second of this, slow time down and devour every moment, feel every single inch of his skin against mine. I crave him with everything inside of me.

I press one hand against his chest to settle him back down on my bed. With the other hand, I start working his cock. I watch as his face radiates ecstasy, and I'm pleased to see he wants this just as badly as I do. He's moaning softly, quiet and low, and playing with my tits, caressing them and using his thumb and index finger to gently squeeze my nipples. I pull one hand away and bring it down to my pussy, guiding his fingers back inside me. I want to show him how wet he makes me. I want him to *feel* me.

Once he does, a loud moan escapes his lips. His eyes roll back, his mouth falling open, and I know he can't take much more. I sit back, moving my hips in a circular motion as he fingers me. I've gone so long without his touch, I'm ready to feel all of him, every single inch, inside of me.

I lower my face down to his and bite down gently on his ear. "Please, fuck me," I whisper to him as I guide him inside me, finally allowing myself to relinquish every ounce of control I have left.

TRACK NINETEEN: WILL YOU  
STILL LOVE ME TOMORROW

BY THE SHIRELLES

## AVA

MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN, THE SUN RAYS SPILLING IN FROM MY still-open blinds. His arm is warm and tightly wrapped around my naked body.

“Hi.” My voice is raspy and I can’t see straight—a mix of the early morning light and the late-night endeavors. I tug at the blanket that he’s stolen from me at some point in the night. The force jolts him awake, and he looks lost for a moment.

When he realizes where he is, and that he’s with me, he calms, and a toothy grin spreads across his face. “You know I always was a blanket stealer.” He’s right. A tiny detail I forgot until now.

We lie there together, not touching any longer, both on our backs staring at the white popcorn ceiling. The sex was mind-blowing. The feelings that rushed through my body the moment I saw him standing in that bar was incomparable to anything I’d ever experienced. It felt different—*he* felt different—than all those years ago. Then again, we were teenagers back then. We didn’t know half of what we know now.

“How have you been?” He rolls toward me. “And don’t give me any of that surface-level shit, Ava Keyes. What’s been happening these last five years?”

It’s true that the moment I saw River last night, I wanted to tell him everything, only it’d been with my body as opposed to



my words. I didn't want to talk last night, not after I'd been drinking, not after seeing him after all this time.

Last night, the only comfort I wanted was his hands on my body. Now, I don't even know where to start. *I drowned my sorrow in a journal, then turned it into a passion project. Wrote a book about you. My dad was diagnosed with cancer and beat it, but it just won't leave him alone and keeps coming back.* I choose not to say all of that.

Instead, I say, "Oh, you know, just typical young-adult things. Got my heart broken, my dad got cancer, I got engaged." I look at him, waiting for his response.

River sits up on one arm and rests his head in his hand. "Your dad has cancer?" The color drains slightly from his face. "I want to hear about all of it, Ave." His eyes lighten as the morning sun casts a beautiful glowing hue upon his face.

"You really want to hear about it? Even the engagement? I'm surprised." When he doesn't say anything, I tell him everything. From my dad being diagnosed with cancer, to the engagement, even the moment I found out of the betrayal.

"You've always had a thing against blonds." He tries to make light of the situation, and I throw a pillow at him.

"Not true!" I exclaim. Although, it is very much true.

"Yes, it is, but it's okay." He reaches for me underneath the covers and takes my hand in his. His expression is no longer playful, a frown taking over. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. That guy didn't deserve you. I mean, in all honesty, no one deserves you." His words make my heart skip a beat. "I'm even more sorry to hear about your dad. Is he okay now? Is the cancer back? How's your mom doing? And Dill?" he asks, rapid firing the questions at me.

It's strange how you can be separated from someone for so long but the moment you're in their presence again, everything falls right back into place. It's like no time has passed between us. We just...were and are and always will be.

I'd love to get lost in this moment, to allow myself to fall head over heels for River Jacobs again, but I cannot allow

myself to go through this again. Not with him. It didn't work before, and I can't set myself up for failure now.

"Where did you go, beautiful?" His husky voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I laugh with uncertainty.

"Sorry, just thinking," I tell him.

He fingers his hair and doesn't make eye contact with me, but I stare at his bare chest poking out from beneath my white sheets. "I didn't expect to run into you. This city is big. What are the chances, you know?"

"Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to see you back in Chicago. I assumed you'd stay out in California forever." I clear my throat to answer his question about my father—and to change the subject. "My dad's cancer comes and goes. It shows up in different spots. He likes to say that the cancer just can't get enough of him." I find a small laugh deep inside of me and let it out.

River doesn't pressure me to answer all his questions. Instead, he holds me in his arms, giving me time.

Plus, it's my turn to ask him questions. I know we need to talk about the way we left things, that we can't just carry on like it didn't happen. Right now, though, I'd rather not. My hungover haze starts to lift and I stand, quickly wrapping the bed sheet around me. Turning to River, I catch him staring and smile. "Nothing to see here," I say.

"Everything to see. You've always been beautiful, Ava, but somehow, you've gotten strikingly more so. The years between then and now have been absurdly good to you."

I ignore his compliment because I can't hear that right now. I can't allow the lines to become blurred. Not in reality, outside of fiction. Not after what we just did underneath these sheets. Not after what was meant to be my *forever* had just recently failed. The timing...the timing wasn't right for us before, and it isn't now. *Again*.

"So," I say, changing the subject. *Again*. "What about you, still dating that blonde?"

He bursts into uncontrollable laughter, covering his mouth with one hand, and I know I messed up. *Shit.*

“Been checking up on me, huh?” He smirks, biting down on his bottom lip, and I want to jump on top of him and kiss his beautiful mouth. Of course I’ve seen his social media over the years. *We aren’t living in the Stone Age.* “Nope, not dating any blondes. Not dating anyone, actually. You know I wouldn’t have come home with you last night if I was.”

“You could have just gotten lost in the moment.” I wink and step into the master bathroom of my apartment and start brushing my teeth.

It isn’t long before I feel him behind me, slipping the sheet onto the floor and locking his hands around my waist. I drop my toothbrush and turn around to face him, and he’s naked, too. I feel him as he grows hard, his eyes not leaving my own.

“I want you again, Ava.” His voice is so low, so gravelly, *so fucking sexy.* “Round two?”

# TRACK TWENTY: SKINNY LOVE

BY BON IVER

## RIVER

I LEFT AVA'S APARTMENT AFTER OUR SECOND SEXY GO-around. Now, I walk down the city street after parking almost three blocks away from the treatment center, thanks to Chicago's shitty parking. During my stroll, I think about the feeling of Ava's skin on mine—a fucking perfect taste of heaven I can't get out of my mind.

I can't seem to get over the years that have passed between us and how they've done little to change my feelings for her. Sure, there's been other women, but I've never forgotten Ava. Ava and her sweet soul and giggle and understanding nature. Finding a woman who even came close to Ava, who could hold a candle to what I've always thought—and known—that she and I shared, had been virtually impossible.

I check my watch; I still have plenty of time to spend with my sister—Ruby—before I have to head to the studio to record. This'll be my first time seeing her since I've come back, and the center has allowed her a pass to go out for breakfast with me this morning.

And *yup*, the band is still together. The four of us moving out to California brought us even closer than we were as seniors in high school. We've practically made band history, going five years without breaking up or swapping out members. We never made it big, but we have been able to make a great side hustle out of it, and the passion keeps us going.

I pull out my phone to text Ava, having traded numbers with her before I left, but decide I should wait a bit. Seeing her again makes me think of a million questions I want to ask her. There are so many things we didn't get to talk about since I had to leave earlier than I wanted to.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Hoping it's Ava, I yank it out and check. It's a text, from Jackie.

**Jackie:** Hey. I was just thinking about you and wanted to know if we could hang out.

I don't reply. I can't think about Jackie right now, not after last night. Not after reconnecting with Ava.

My guitar is on my back and I'm walking into Ruby's room at the treatment center for the first time. My palms sweat, tiny beads forming in the center that I wipe away just as she comes into view.

She's sickly looking, so different from the sister I remember. It's only been a few years, but she looks decades older.

I try my best not to look too shocked, but I have a feeling it's written all over my face. "Rubes."

She smiles, and I can tell it's forced. The corners don't turn upward, not even a little. "Hey, little brother, long time no see. Ready for a little breakfast date with your dear old sister?"

She and I have talked on the phone a few times since I received the call about her overdose, but seeing her in person is a stark difference. It's easier to disguise a voice than a face, and the lines on hers are deep, her skin blotchy. She's always been thin, but now her clothes hang off her body, her bones peeking out in sharp lines and harsh angles.

She stands, rising from her bed, and I wrap my arms around her to pull her in for a hug. It feels like if I hold her too tightly, she might break. A painful realization.

She sits back down on the bed and I claim the chair next to her.

“I’m here now. Tell me everything,” I say. I know she’d rather just get out of here and eat some delicious food down at our favorite diner, but I don’t want to play the *everything is perfect* game. My conscience burns a hole into my soul, and I realize now, after seeing her, that I have an extreme amount of guilt for not being a better brother to her.

Ruby and I were never the closest of siblings, but when our parents fought, we were all the other had. We talk now about her drug habit, the pressure she feels to be perfect, her husband and how similar he is to our father. We make a pact that we’re going to do better as siblings, to form an actual relationship.

She asks me about my life, trying to covertly take the attention off her, and I tell her I saw Ava last night. I don’t mention the details of the night we shared, for obvious reasons. “You probably don’t remember her, but I dated her for a few months before moving to California,” I remind her.

A soft smile spreads across Ruby’s face. “Give me a little more credit than that. We may not have been close, but I remember you two running around just before you left for California. Every time I’d go home to visit, Mom would tell me you were out with Ava. How did seeing her again go?”

I was a mess back then. I hated how Ava and I had left things, I hated myself for accusing her of being crazy, and I hated letting her walk away even more.

“It was incredible,” I say, hoping Ava feels the same. “I’ve missed her more than I allowed myself to feel,” I add quietly, being honest with my sister.

Ruby lowers her head to her hand, resting her elbow on her bed and then folding up into herself. “Well, if I learned anything being with that prick of a man, it’s that life is short and love is fleeting.” She straightens back up, her eyes having just the tiniest gleam in them. “You never know, if it was there once with you two, it could be there again.”

“This visit is supposed to be about *you*, Rubes. I want to hear about how *you’re* doing. So, how about that breakfast?” I smile at her and her face lights up.

TRACK TWENTY-ONE:  
COMMUNICATION  
BREAKDOWN



BY LED ZEPPELIN

## AVA

“NO FUCKING WAY IN HELL. NOT A CHANCE. I SIMPLY JUST cannot,” I tell Hailee when she questions me about River. Last night was incredible; this morning was even better, somehow. But now that I’m sobered up and have had time to think, there is *no way* I’m ready to just jump back into River’s arms. It’s too soon. I want to, but it’s too soon.

“You’re clearly still in love with him,” she says, a small smile spreading across her face.

“Are you kidding me? I’m definitely not. River and I have been over for years. We were kids. It was silly.” I don’t even believe my own words. *Pathetic, Ava. Who are you trying to convince?*

“I’ve been your best friend for like, ever,” she says, tossing her long wavy locks over her shoulder while giving me her infamous *I can detect your bullshit* look. “I get the whole not wanting to jump into a relationship right after Brady just broke your heart into a million—”

“He did not break *shit*, Hailee. I’m fine.” My words are shaky and I’m quickly irritated with myself. I feel vulnerable, and it isn’t something I enjoy. I don’t know if it’s from thinking about Brady, the disappointment, or River. Because it all sucks. Every last bit of it.

“I’m just saying, don’t push River away because you’re sad. You’re really good at that, you know. I’ve watched you do it over the years, more times than you’d probably care for me

to count.” After that falls from her lips, my heart pangs just a little.

As if River’s ears are ringing, a message from him pops up on my cell phone. Hailee looks down at the same time I do.

**River:** I can’t stop thinking about you, Ava Keyes.

She squeals. “He’s still in love with you, too! Oh God, my best friend will be married soon after all!”

“Too fucking soon, Hailee.” I roll my eyes and playfully nudge her.

Who would have known just eight tiny words could make me swoon inside? I feel my skin flush, a warmth bubbling just under its surface. Despite being a writer for a living, I suddenly lose every word in my brain. They all just fly out my ears and evaporate into thin air.

“Text him back! Text him back!” she cheers, hands clasped together, looking at me like I’d make the biggest mistake of my life if I leave him on read. “What are you going to say?”

“I think you’re more excited about River and I reconnecting than I am,” I say with a smirk, intentionally dodging her question.

I don’t know *what* to say to him. I don’t want to lead him on. Also though, I don’t want to lead myself on. I’ve thought about what would happen if our paths ever crossed again. But now that they have, I feel so conflicted. I don’t think I can allow old feelings to resurface and creep back in.

Even when I dated other men—hell, even when I was engaged to someone else—thoughts of River came and went every so often. Thoughts of how my life would be if things had turned out differently.

I could text him back several things, all of which are dancing around in my mind. I could tell him I can’t stop thinking about him either; that would be true. I could also tell him how much fun last night was and that we should have round three. Or, I could tell him what I should say, even though I don’t want to.

I just can't allow myself to dive back in. Not after Brady. Not after everything. My mind spins. *What if he wants a relationship?* There's no way. Not now. Not yet. I feel like I'm getting ahead of myself but I send a text back, telling him we need to talk.

"What the hell was that?" Hailee asks, looking disappointed. "No one wants to get the *we need to talk* text. Are you out of your mind?" She cocks her head to the side and heaves out a short sigh. "Ava, Ava, Ava."

Maybe it was a little dramatic, but *still*. "Look, River and I were perfect—at seventeen and eighteen. But the timing isn't right—again. It wasn't right in high school, and it isn't right all these years later." I take a long sip of my coffee, trying to gather my thoughts. "I just got out of an engagement. An *engagement*, Hailee! It's been *six weeks!* It wasn't just some silly, meaningless relationship. I was about to marry Brady. I just can't move on right now. It wouldn't be fair to River—to anyone—and I'm going to tell him that tonight."

I regret everything immediately. I already want to take the text back, but I can't. This is how things have to be. *I cannot allow myself to get wrapped up in River again.*

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LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I meet up with River to talk about last night, this morning, and how fast things have escalated. River tells me he wants me, and I feel more alive than I have in years. But at the same time, I know we have to pump the brakes.

"What? Do you think it's just by chance that we ran into each other last night, Ave?"

There's a sadness in his green eyes that I placed there. It makes me feel like the biggest asshole in the entire world. I'm trying to avoid either of us being hurt, but just five minutes after sitting down at the coffee shop I frequent, I see I've already sabotaged that idea.

“I think it’s crazy that in this big city, with a million dingy dive bars, we walked into the same one, yes. I don’t think I believe there’s some divine reasoning behind it, though,” I say.

My head used to fit perfectly into the crook of his arm, and I always loved being there. I want to be there now, instead of sitting across the table from him, hurting him. I can’t look into his eyes for long because when I do, I give in. I always have.

Last night brought it all back. The love, the tears, the heartbreak, the dreams we shared together.

“It just isn’t the right time. I’ve been through so much in the last few weeks.”

River refuses to look at me. Instead, he runs his hands up and down the scruff on his face and sighs as he sits quietly, gathering his thoughts before speaking again. “I get it. We’ve been out of each other’s lives for a long time. We had a really good night together, and it’s too soon for anything else. I can respect that.” He takes a breath and says, “Was the sex at least as mind-blowing as you remember?”

We both laugh then, and I ease back into myself. This is the River that I loved, the relationship and dynamic and playful banter I always felt I couldn’t live without. But I have. And I am.

“Sure was. I see you’ve been practicing your skills.” A small knife twists in my chest at the thought, but I remind myself I’ve done my share of fucking other people as well. We’re grown adults, and that’s part of it.

“I liked it too, Ave. I know you’re scared, but look, we’re both here now. Why can’t we just see where this goes?” He runs his fingers through his hair again, a habit that I love.

“I don’t think I can continue getting over Brady and clear my head while seeing you. It isn’t that easy. You’re just...” I sigh, deeply, sadly. “You’re not someone I can just see and not want to be all over. You know?”

He reaches his hands out toward me, over the table, and I grasp them. “I get it. I do. But I want you to think about it. Because I’m here and I’m telling you I want this. I won’t ever

stop thinking about last night. The way we fit together so fucking perfectly, Ava. You can't deny that." He lets go of my hands, stands up, and gives me one last look before he turns to walk away—his eyes, his soul, his love, all pleading with me to change my mind. "I'll be here when you're ready. I hope you'll call."

And with that, River walks away from me again, this time leaving the decision of our fate in my hands. The impact of that knowledge burns a hole right through me that I know will be hard to get rid of.

TRACK TWENTY-TWO:  
HOLDING HER AND LOVING  
YOU

BY EARL THOMAS CONLEY

## RIVER

“WAIT...SO LIKE, YOU JUST LET HER GO? ARE YOU A FUCKING moron?” Jesse says, our lovely lead singer apparently making sure I *know* I probably just lost Ava again.

“What should I have done? Brought her to my place and locked her in a closet?” I’m kidding, but Jesse raises his eyebrows.

We’re at sound check for one of our first sets back in our city. Secretly, I’m hoping I can convince the guys to move back home. Maybe they’ll appease me if I coax them with beer and a sob story about needing to be here for my family—despite hardly communicating with them throughout my years in California.

In truth, we have nothing tying us to the West Coast. We can play our music anywhere. After seeing Ruby, I know I want to be there for her more. That means being *here*, in Chicago.

I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t think Ava might have a little something to do with it, too.

Unable to help myself, I send a text to her. I know I shouldn’t, but I’m just a man—with too much access to his phone—asking a woman to please give this another shot. I know it’s too soon for her, but is it too soon to simply be in each other’s presence?

**Me:** Hey, Aves. Got a show tonight in the West Loop. You and Hailee could come out. As friends only. I’m not trying to

rush you.

“You’re texting Ava, aren’t you?” Jesse laughs at me and my lack of impulse control. “I’m pretty sure you’ve talked about her more the past few years than any of the girls you were seeing—or screwing, or whatever it was.” He’s not wrong. “I think, by the way you talk about her, she’s probably better than *you-know-who*. The one that’s tagged along on our little trip here. When is she going back to California, anyway?” He winks at me and Charlie throws in his two cents.

“She Who Must Not Be Named!” my bandmates shout in unison.

*A fucking Harry Potter reference?* “Guys. Sore subject, all right? I’ll have you know it wasn’t my idea for her to come back here. She’s from Chicago, too, remember?” I’m not in the mood to talk about her.

We gear up then to start sound check. This gig is last minute, something Jesse lined up with a music venue owner he connected with through social media. I sling my guitar over my shoulder and run my hand up and down the strings, feeling the cool metal glide beneath my fingertips.

*This is home.* My city. My guitar. The band. I fall in love with playing even more every single time we have a show. If my parents did one thing right for me and Ruby, it was setting up our trust funds. I feel like a bad human sometimes, not needing to make an income, but most of the time I just feel abundantly lucky and grateful. I get to play music and try to make a career out of it while still being able to pay my bills.

An hour later, the crowd shuffles in, some heading to the bar to order drinks, others making their way to the stage to get a good spot on the floor. When the lights explode to life, a burst of energy flows through my body and I’m ready to put on a show. Just as my fingers strum the first chord, I scan the crowd for one particular face.

I try as hard as I can to lose myself in the music, to regain my composure doing what I love the most, but I feel like I fail miserably. I spend the entire set glancing up, gazing out at the sea of people, hoping she’ll show.



But she doesn't.

In fact, she ignores the text I sent. And the one I send after that. This feeling is familiar. I felt it when I first left for California, when she declined my calls and stopped responding to all my texts.

I ask her how she's doing. I even ask how the breakup shit is going, but nothing. All I get is radio silence.

Maybe she'd have had more words for me if I stayed gone.

TRACK TWENTY-THREE:  
BUTTERFLY KISSES

BY BOB CARLISLE

## AVA

“IT FELT LIKE TIME STOOD STILL. LIKE MY BONES WERE desperate to move, begging me to run after him. But all I could do was sit and stare at the space he left. All I could do was fixate obsessively on the ache he left inside of my chest.” I take a sip of water and glance up at the crowd of readers listening to my words.

The silence is somehow screaming as I unearth my past to the strangers before me. “I argued with myself, telling my brain to give it up, to give *him* up. We only dated a few months. He was never meant to be my forever. *Right?* I didn’t know then and I guess I still don’t know now. Ryland Johnson was my version of perfect. Everything he did, from the way he said my name to the feeling of my hand in his, made me feel a way I hadn’t even known existed up until I met him in that tiny record shop. But when he left, the feelings stayed. I couldn’t shake Ryland from my thoughts. So, I decided it was better to push him out. To act like he never existed in the first place. And that was my first mistake.”

I close my bestselling novel to date, and the bookstore patrons clap. I smile, pulling the book to my heart. “Thank you so much. Please feel free to stick around if you’d like to say hi or get your copy signed,” I say.

I had a book tour after this novel first came out and now, every so often a bookstore in the city asks me to come out for a signing, to which I always oblige. I love this part of my job.

Almost an hour into signing books for fans and new readers alike, an incredibly excited teenage girl comes up to me with her copy of *Blurred Lines*.

She gives me a warm smile, reaching her hand out to shake mine. "I'm Lydia. I loved your book; it reminded me of me and my boyfriend. I want to be an author someday, too." She giggles, her cheeks reddening. "I'm sorry, I just really look up to you so much."

"No, don't be at all! That means so much to me," I tell her, taking the book and signing it for her.

"My boyfriend is going away to school, to Connecticut, but we're going to try and make things work. We've already promised to call each other every day and visit as much as we can," she says.

A woman I assume to be the girl's mother waits patiently behind her, smiling at me when I notice her.

"Thank you so much for writing this book," the girl says. "Can I...can I ask you a question?"

I nod, offering, "Of course! What's up?"

"Is Ryland based on someone in your actual life? Did you ever have any experiences like the ones in your book?"

I've answered this question many times before. Typically, I try to give a little information without totally throwing my personal life out there, but something about this young woman makes me want to tell her more. "Ryland is based on someone I once knew. And we actually did reconnect. The timing of it wasn't exactly ideal, so, we went our separate ways again. I still think about him often, though," I confess. "If you take anything away from today, please let it be that you can make your relationship work. You can. You just both have to put in the effort." I smile at her, a regret forming behind it that I hope she can't see. "And I hope you'll send me a copy of your first bestseller someday."

She nods and smiles back at me before thanking me for signing her book. She turns to leave but stops and focuses her attention on me once more. "If you love him even half as

much as Allie loves Ryland in your book, I really hope the two of you cross paths again. Maybe the timing will be better next time.”

Her words force River back into the forefront of my mind again. Though this time I’m not sure what washes over me more, the regret, or this youthful hope.

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I GLANCE around my apartment one final time just as a knock sounds on my door.

My family has never been the kind to nitpick about the cleanliness of my space, but I always like it to look as perfect as it can for them. My decorative pillows are laid out on my couch with purpose, my house plants are freshly watered, and I’ve had pot roast simmering in my crock pot, filling my apartment with its savory scent.

“Hey, guys!” I say, opening the door and motioning them through.

My dad wheels through first, always in his trusty wheelchair on treatment days because of the toll it takes on his strength. Dillon bounces in after him and I can’t help but wish I had even half of his energy.

“Hey, kid!” my dad says. “It smells like heaven in here. Sorry we couldn’t come to your signing earlier. These damn treatments get in the way of everything.”

“Number one, don’t apologize for going to treatment. Number two, my mom’s recipe was easy to follow, thank the Lord, because we all know I don’t know my way around a kitchen to save my life.” I laugh as my mother pulls me in for a hug.

“You even have one of my favorites on the record player. Now this is a jam if I ever knew one,” he notes, as the sound of *Unchained Melody* drifts through the speakers.

We sit around my small kitchen table, bumping elbows as we eat. The slow-cooked meat is tender and juicy, to my

surprise, not burnt like my usual homemade meal attempts.

“Dillon has some pretty cool news to share, don’t you, Dill?” our dad says when our chatter dies down a bit, glancing over toward my brother.

A smile spreads across Dillon’s face as he takes a bite of his food and shyly keeps his eyes trained on his plate. “Dad!” he groans out. “Stop making it a big deal.”

“It is a big deal, honey,” my mom says, adding her opinion while eyeing my brother and then me. I notice for the first time how tired she looks. Like maybe everything my dad is going through is weighing heavily on her. Even more than usual. “Tell your sister before I do,” she says, grinning from ear to ear.

“Okay, what the heck is going on?” I inquire.

“I have a girlfriend,” Dillon finally says

My jaw drops in response. “What! Why didn’t any of you tell me before now? Who is it? Is she nice? What’s her name?” I’m a mess of questions, elated for my little brother. *His first girlfriend.*

“Calm down, lady,” Dillon jokes. “It’s pretty new. I met her at my program. We were put into a group together to learn about taxes and mortgages.” He’s talking about The Leading Way, the organization he belongs to.

“Her name is Sabine, and she’s a very nice girl,” my dad says, to which my mom agrees by nodding her head. “We’ve only met her twice, so we haven’t been holding out on you or anything. We just thought Dillon should tell you in person. Plus, we may have wanted to see your reaction.” He smiles, and Dillon playfully jabs his elbow at him.

“Dillon, that’s awesome. I’m really excited for you. I can’t wait to meet her. Soon, okay?” I say, reaching to squeeze his shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah.” He smirks. “Let’s talk about something else.”

I've never known my sweet brother to be shy. This girl must really be something.

# TRACK TWENTY-FOUR: CHANGES



BY DAVID BOWIE

## RIVER

ONE MONTH...THREE MONTHS...FIVE MONTHS GO BY AND I'VE done little more than two things: given up all hope of any sort of second chance with Ava and permanently moved back to the city.

Almost everything is the same—aside from having more communication with my parents—who are still somehow together and still somehow convincing themselves their marriage will work out. I've been to their house twice for dinner in the past five months, which is a step up for us. Both times I was at their condo, they stormed off from the dining room after getting into an argument.

Exactly like old times, parallel to my entire childhood.

Ruby and I have a good pattern going on where we see each other at least once a week. I'm so fucking proud of her for each huge stride she takes.

I fall back into the previous lifestyle I had out in California, getting back into my routine of eat, sleep, work, Jackie—a girl I've been talking to on and off who happened to move back to the city when I did. The guys like to joke that she came back here for me, but I really hope that isn't the case. Jackie insists she'd been thinking about moving home to Chicago for a while and I want to believe her.

She's safe for me. Because I know I'll never fall in love with her. We've had the same conversation many times over. She knows I don't see a future with her. I've told her a million

ways, trying to be as gentle as possible. I like her as a friend, as a hookup buddy, which is exactly how we started out. I just don't see a future with Jackie. She isn't Ava and she never will be.

I'm not just using her; we're using each other. It's a mutual agreement, to say the least.

Until, that is, she tells me she's catching feelings for me again and I have to cut it off.

We're sitting at the bar after one of my shows when she tells me she wants to be with me. I look at her, trying—yet again—to imagine us making sense together, but I can't. It's just not there. And I refuse to lead her on.

She stares at me, waiting for my answer, tilting her head to the side and running her long red fingernails through her platinum blonde hair. She's a natural brunette, but there isn't much natural about her anymore. That's what California does to people. I didn't know Jackie when she lived here in the city, but I've seen her awkward high school pictures. Her hair, her boobs, her lips, her nose, it's all been surgically changed. Honestly, I thought she was prettier in the pictures.

“Look, Jackie. We had agreed this was strictly a friends-with-benefits type of deal. I don't want to hurt you because I care about you, but you know we just don't work.” I choose my words carefully, but they come out harsher than I had anticipated.

“I know what we said. I'm just asking if we can try, that's all. I just want us to try.”

I look at her, and she stares back at me with her sad eyes and *fuck*, I can't hurt her. I don't have a mean bone in my body and sometimes, it's a fucking curse.

TRACK TWENTY-FIVE: SIMPLE  
TWIST OF FATE

BY BOB DYLAN

### AVA

JUST OVER A YEAR AFTER RIVER AND I BUMPED INTO EACH other in the bar, I'm consoling my best friend who just had *her* world turned upside down. I glance down, checking my cell phone for the time. I was supposed to be at my parents' house twenty minutes ago for dinner.

"Hails, can you give me a second so I can call my dad?" I ask her, to which of course she responds yes—through sobs.

As if he hears me telepathically, his name pops up on my screen as my ringer goes off.

"Dad!" I answer, walking into my bedroom so he doesn't hear Hailee's wails. "I'm so sorry I'm not there. I was on my way out the door when Hailee found out Ryan was ending things."

His voice immediately calms me down, his smooth tone flowing over the phone line, assuring me he isn't upset with me for missing our planned dinner. "Oh, shit. Is she okay? I'm sure she isn't. I was only calling because I was worried. You're always on time and your mom had me convinced something crazy happened," he says with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry to make you worry. Raincheck?" I ask.

"Of course, kid. You can come see your old dad anytime."

I like when he jokes because it means he's feeling good. We exchange *I love yous* and hang up, agreeing to make plans later.

Hailee's freckled face is soaked with tears, but she looks beautiful even when she's a crying, blubbery mess with mascara running down her cheeks. I pull her in close, understanding all too well that words don't really help in times like these. Comfort, safety, love, that's all I can give her right now.

Ryan, her longtime boyfriend, broke things off with her earlier this evening. Mere hours ago, the two of us were dancing around in our underwear—feeling thirteen all over again—to old N'Sync, Britney Spears, and Spice Girls songs. We had painted our toenails pink and took turns singing the lead in *Baby One More Time*.

Tonight was supposed to be *the* night—the night Ryan finally proposed to Hailee after four years of dating. I had never been in the presence of a cuter, more complementary couple. Hailee made up for the things Ryan lacked, and vice versa. Hailee loved to cook; Ryan didn't mind the dishes. They both wanted four children. They loved the city but agreed on raising their children in the suburbs. Ryan's hair was dirty blond and perfectly suited Hailee's strawberry blonde strands.

The most important thing, though? Their love was more than surface-level. Something that can be hard to find in this city filled with dating app hookups and catfishers prowling on the unsuspecting.

Ryan had been dropping what we thought were engagement hints for weeks. He even asked me for Hailee's favorite ring cut, for fuck's sake.

But despite it all, instead of getting down on one knee in Neeba's (one of the most expensive spots in the city), Ryan turned the tables completely, breaking it off with her over filet mignon and—you guessed it—Caber-fucking-net.

*How fucking ironic.*

"I don't know how I'm so fucking stupid. How did I not see this coming?" Hailee half-sobs, half-screams. It physically hurts me that she's blaming herself for this.

It's hard to find the right words and I'm so worried I'll say something insensitive, so I'm quiet for a moment, just allowing her to feel. I know all too well what pushing feelings down and refusing to own them can do.

"Nothing I'm about to say will help, and I know that, but I want you to know that I love you and that we can get you through this. I know your heart is breaking and I'm sorry. Right now, it's impossible to see anything beyond this moment, but it will happen. I know from experience. I want to be here for you the same way you've always been here for me."

She looks up at me, her. Her eyes are sad and glassy, but Hailee is strong and beautiful and I know we'll come out the other side better for all of this.

"I know the best cure for all of this shit." I take her hand and squeeze. "The Bachelor!"

Hailee throws her head back, groaning. "How many times do I have to tell you that shit is scripted?" She snorts out a laugh and flips the television to my favorite guilty pleasure that coincidentally just started ten minutes ago.

I shake my head at her and go to grab us a third glass of the champagne we had originally purchased when we thought she'd be an engaged woman tonight. We're both tipsy, teetering on the edge of drunkenness, but what the hell. Neither of us are driving tonight and we both have feelings to push away.

When I return with our poison, Hailee is thumbing through my phone and staring intently at the screen.

"What are you doing, weirdo?" I ask her. I don't care if Hailee goes through my phone; I have no secrets from her. But she never does, so it's out of character, even though she's my best friend.

"You just got a connection request from some kinda-cute guy in Wicker Park." I take note of the way her face scrunches when she says *kinda* cute.

This stupid dating app again. I seldom even go on it, and whenever I get a notification that a guy wants to send me a message, I typically clear it and never think about it again. The last time I was actively scrolling the virtual male classifieds, an unsolicited dick picture was burned into my mind. That seems like a lifetime ago now. Most of the time, I forget I even have the app on my phone

I steal the phone from her hands and look at the smiling face staring back at me. She's right. He isn't terribly unfortunate looking or anything, but there is something about him that screams *momma's boy*. And not in a *oh, he's so cute, he brought flowers to his mom* kind of way. But more of a Bates Motel kind of way.

"No, thanks," I scoff with a huff, handing over her glass.

"Fine, whatever. But this is fun!" She persistently swipes through various men, eyes wide and looking the happiest I've seen since she fell apart in my arms earlier. "Look at this one." She scoots closer toward me so I can see the candidate. "He's twenty-nine, owns a frozen yogurt shop, and has a golden retriever!" She swoons. "And look, even better news! He specifically says he has no kids!" We burst out in laughter.

"Here, take your cell and find a hottie we can double date with. I'll download this app right now. Ryan who?" She hands my phone back and runs a hand through her hair, then messily sips from her glass. She pretends to forget all about Ryan, but I'm well aware she's just hurting right now. She's getting tipsy; her typical indication coming next, "Ugh. I'm so horny I could die."

Hailee loves talking about sex when she's drinking. It's just a strange trigger for her, I guess.

She successfully installs the app and goes to town, smiling down at her phone like a deranged sex addict looking for her next victim. We all deal with our pain in different ways, I suppose.

"Look at this dude." She laughs. "His bio says, *I suck at real life relationships so fuck it, let's try this shit.*' At least he's honest." She shrugs. "Woah. This guy." She reads his bio out

loud to me. “*Male. Thirty-five. I already have a wife. I want a girlfriend. Serious inquiries only.*’ Jesus Christ on a cross.” She immediately swipes left.

I absentmindedly swipe through a sea of men’s smiling faces to appease tipsy Hailee. Washboard abs and selfies with puppies fill my phone screen. I’m more interested in The Bachelor episode we were supposed to be watching; it’s definitely second best to The Bachelorette, but I’ll take it. I’m so tuned in to the show that I don’t notice my phone fall out of my hand. In a daze, I reach for it on the floor and when I turn it over in my palm, pressing home, I gasp and it falls back to the floor.

Hailee jumps. “Shit! You scared the hell out of me!”

She must have been daydreaming a little too hard about things I don’t want to know about.

“What are you on about, anyway? I was just typing a message to a drop dead gorgeous Australian transplant. You know how much I love accents!” She giggles.

I pick my phone up off the ground for a second time, stunned. My body is warm, and I wonder if I’m seeing things correctly or if this wine is laced with a hallucinogen.

Hailee yanks my phone from my hand and peers down at it. “You. Have. Got. To. Be. Fucking. Kidding. Me.” She pauses between each word to add emphasis on the fact that she’s losing her mind in the same way I am.

We both sit in silence, staring at my screen, as River’s scruffy sexy face stares back at us, green emerald eyes and a chiseled jaw. Something about the way he’s gazing deep into the camera makes me feel some kind of way. Indescribable. Those damn eyes.

Hailee is the first to speak. “You have to swipe right. Let’s message him.” She looks at me, waiting for an answer.

“Fuck, no! No, no, no. That is a terrible idea.” I shake my head and try to pull my phone from her, both of us clutching it, white-knuckled as if we’ve seen a ghost.



“Terrible idea? If I remember correctly, you loved that man. And you had another chance with him and you didn’t call him back. Even after what you described to me as *mind-blowing sex*. I can’t—”

I interrupt her with, “Of course you remember the sex, you perv,” then I laugh and relax momentarily. “I never called River, I know. I wasn’t ready for anything then.” I don’t dare rip my eyes from the screen. I miss him.

“Okay, but you are now! What are you waiting for?” she squeals.

“I probably broke his heart or pissed him off. Or hell, maybe both.” My heart aches in my chest. I had done my best to push thoughts of River away, to convince myself I needed to move on from the men—*the ghosts*—of my past. I chose to walk away from River, from Brady, from anyone I cared about that had hurt me.

Hailee’s eyes shift from excited to empathetic in seconds. “You won’t know if you don’t try.”

Just as I’m about to tell her that tonight is about *her*, and that we can find her a dude to relieve her womanly issues, she swipes one single finger to the right on my screen, sealing my fate and in turn making the wine I just downed threaten to come back up.

“Hailee fucking Henley!” I half-scream, half-cry the plea. “What did you just do?” I grab at my phone, securing it and bringing it to my chest. “*No!* You didn’t. Doesn’t that mean it notifies him? Fuck! Hailee!” My cry turns to anger because I do not want to send myself spiraling back down the black hole that is River. I don’t want to get hurt. I love him too damn much. *Loved. I loved him way too damn much. Past tense.*

She smiles innocently—a smile that has gotten her out of numerous traffic tickets, late assignments in school, and being grounded by her father.

“That shit doesn’t work with me, Hailee. Take it back right now. Get back to that picture and swipe to the left, or whatever. Do what you need to do so River doesn’t see me on

there.” I think about how embarrassing it is that I’m on this shitty dating app to begin with, and now, he’s going to know. I don’t want anything serious. I have too much going on with my next book release. The deadlines are killing me. I can’t afford to get distracted by River. And with me and River, it’s usually either all in or nothing at all. It’s just easier for my sanity to have the latter, to have no part of him.

She reaches over to me and pulls me in, squeezing me tight. “This is exactly what I need.” She sits back, looking at me with her icy blues. “My best friend, champagne, and an activity to take my mind off the joke that my life has become.” She smiles softly, and this time, I return it.

“You’re the worst.” I joke. “I love you.”

“It’s fate, you know,” Hailee whispers, resting her head in her hands, looking at me like she just planted a seed for love to blossom.

I roll my eyes so hard my brain hurts. “You call it fate. I call it bad timing.”

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HAILEE ENDS up spending the night. She lies next to me, snoring—one of my best friend’s only downfalls. I can’t sleep, thoughts of River drifting around in my head.

It’s been three hours since Hailee swiped right on his face. I’m not sure if I’m sad or relieved that I haven’t received a notification from him.

I think back to our last moments together after he’d graduated high school, leaving me a lonely upperclassman crying into my pillow, young love at its finest.

I can still see him as we sat on top of his parents’ rooftop. It was a beautiful place. His family had the kind of money that mine worked tirelessly for. The rooftop was a beautifully designed hangout spot for tenants and guests only. Green ivy danced up and down the brick building, tall green hedges

framing the roof's edge, leaving only one solitary spot with a bench to overlook the city.

That was our spot. Where he first told me he loved me. Where we sat and talked for hours, uninterrupted. That Chicago rooftop. The place we called home. The place where we mended each other's broken parts.

TRACK TWENTY-SIX:  
REUNITED

BY PEACHES AND HERB

## AVA

I TRIED TO FORGET THAT HAILEE, IN HER DRUNKEN STUPOR, swiped right on River. The first couple of weeks, I sulked. I yelled at her more times than I care to admit. I checked my phone incessantly and she sent me at least two texts a day asking if he'd messaged me yet, to which my reply was always a pissed off emoji. I reminisced on River and my fleeting high school relationship, and the even more fleeting one-night sexual encounter that had left me reeling.

I battled with my mind. I tried to drown River out, to push him down, back, anywhere but in the forefront of my thoughts. At first, nothing helped. But over the weeks, an unfair anger grew in the space that sadness once lingered, and I slowly started to not give a shit.

*How could River not even message back?* Even if he wasn't interested, he could have at least asked how I was doing. Maybe our high school relationship and hot-as-hell one-night stand didn't make as lasting of an impact on him as it did on me.

Or perhaps even worse...he was just pissed at me for never calling *him* back. I couldn't think about River being mad at me. That hurt more than him not reaching back out.

I never stopped thinking about him. Not after he'd left me to start his new life in California, not when I dated handfuls of men, and certainly not when I was buried deep in the novel-writing trenches. *Writing about him.*

I hadn't even been able to completely push thoughts of River out when I was engaged to Brady. The guilt and shame of thinking about another man while engaged had filled the spot that River used to inhabit inside my chest. I didn't reach out to River while I was with Brady, but there were times that Brady would say something, do something, and I would think about how differently River would have reacted.

But now, six months after Hailee swiped on his gorgeous face—and, ironically enough, when I've just *barely* stopped allowing him to invade my thoughts and muddle my clarity—his name flashes on my phone screen. The dating app alerts me that I have a new message from River, his profile picture minimized next to the text.

**River:** Ava.

I scrunch my face when I read his one-word message. *Yeah, Riv. That's still my name.*

**Me:** Hey stranger.

My attempt at playing it cool, calm, and collected. Like I hadn't just been obsessing over the fact that he was ignoring me.

**River:** Sorry about that. I deleted the app from my phone but I guess my account still remained active. I just re-downloaded it. Surprised to see you when you popped up.

A few moments pass with me stuck in slow motion.

**River:** How are you?

I'm finding it hard to wrap my mind around the fact that he and I have resorted to talking over a dating app messenger. *This is how it's going to be? Strangled generalized conversation?*

**Me:** I'm good. I thought I saw a ghost when you came across my feed. I just figured you were ignoring me. Ha.

I add the *ha* in, trying to seem less paranoid, but I'm sure he sees right through my awkward words. River could always see through me.

So, I message him again.

**Me:** Not that I could blame you. I was the one who didn't reach back out to you, I'm fully aware. I deserved to be ignored, really.

**River:** Well, if it makes you feel better, I wasn't ignoring you on purpose.

I don't have anything to say that won't make it sound like I'm a true Debbie Desperado, so I close the app and set my phone on my desk. A high-pitched ding sounds moments later and I try not to look, but my curiosity gets the better of me.

**River:** Can I see you?

*Fuck.*

**River:** Are you still in the same brownstone? Thirty-Fourth?

*Double Fuck.*

**River:** Say the word and I'll come over in a few hours.

I wait. I could make up an excuse; it'd be simple. I've never lied to River before but lying now, through a text, might be easy enough.

Part of me wants to see him, hug him, breathe in his scent. The more sensible part of me reminds me not to go down this road. I left my past in the past and my tattered common sense tells me to leave it there. I know better than to drive down that road again.

However, knowing better doesn't always stop me from the same cycle of bad decisions.

**Me:** Yep. Same place. I'll see you soon.

---

I'M RACING around my apartment like a mad woman trying to find any stray plastic cups, empty wine glasses, or random dirty old bras. I'm typically a fairly clean person but work and deadlines and life have gotten in the way more than I'd like to admit lately. Just one more reason I shouldn't be seeing my ex-

boyfriend tonight. My editor is going to be texting, calling, and emailing me tomorrow to remind me that my extension is almost up.

I'm not even close to being finished with my second draft. So there's that.

At this point, I shaved my legs, cut my kneecaps twice, doused myself with too much Light Blue perfume, had to re-shower because I smelled like I had bathed in cherry blossoms, and successfully burnt a lasagna I was going to surprise him with.

*Things are going great over here.*

I'm just about to send a mayday text to Hailee to ask her if she'll grab takeout on her way to the apartment, since she's been staying with me ever since her breakup with Ryan. I could disguise the takeout well enough to be homemade, but just as I pull my phone out of my pocket, my buzzer rings out through the apartment and I jump a mile like I'm not expecting a fucking visitor.

He had messaged me saying he'd be at my place around eight that night, but it's only a quarter after seven and he's already here. River always did love keeping me on my toes. He's probably hoping to catch me scrambling around my apartment. I slick my long hair down, trying to tame any baby flyaways, and re-cuff the bottom of my distressed black skinny jeans. When I glance at myself in my full-length mirror, I realize that in all my efforts to find stray bras, I forgot to put one on after my shower.

River, now knocking impatiently on my door, is making a hell of a lot of noise in the hallway. It sounds like he's crinkling up paper bags.

I yank the door open, breathless from my overzealous activities, and see River balancing two large and overflowing brown paper bags in his arms. I rush to take one from him but he pushes in past me and finds the kitchen island, thrusting them onto the marble countertop.



“That was really close.” His catchy smile spreads across his face.

How is it possible that he looks even better than all those years ago? Even better than our night we shared last year? He gets better with age, like fine wine and whiskey.

River just looks at me, and I, back at him. I can tell he’s taking me in, and I can only hope his thoughts are similar to my own.

“It’s really nice to see you. I’m glad you finally decided to message me,” I joke, nudging at him, and he sweeps me up into his arms, holding me tightly for a moment before letting me go. I start to ease into him just as he pulls away from me.

“I told you,” he starts, pulling containers out of the bags, “I didn’t have it on my phone for a while.” He brought Chinese food. The aroma, the sight of the orange chicken...it brings back memories of being seventeen again and eating this very thing on his parents’ rooftop as the sun went down, our favorite records playing in the background.

I wish I weren’t so damn curious but I can’t help but ask, “Why?” Seems weird to download it, delete it, and re-download it. *Unless...*

“My girlfriend wasn’t really a fan of me having a dating app on my phone.” He laughs nervously, and I meet his eyes with my own, brushing my hair from my face.

“Yikes. Yeah,” I say, feeling like a freight train has just crashed into me. “I feel that.” I grab plates from the cabinet—trying my best not to show how much his words affected me—and hand one to River. He lets me make my plate before adding any food to his own.

“So, obviously, if you couldn’t guess, we broke up.” He follows me to the couch and we sit on the black leather, inches apart. “Wasn’t meant to be.” He sips from the drink I poured for him.

“I’m sorry.” I’m not sorry. Not really, anyway. “Are you doing okay?” I really don’t want to hear anything about the

women he dates, women that aren't me. But I feel like I have to ask.

Swallowing a bite of rice, he says, "Oh, yeah, for sure. I liked her, but really, only as a friend. She wanted to try to be more, so I tried. It just didn't work. I think I was too consumed with you, to be honest. You know, holding out hope." He keeps his head lowered toward his food but glances up at me.

I shrink back into myself. I knew this would come up, but I still wasn't ready to deal with the emotions behind it. I can't hide from the fact that I hurt him, though. "I'm sorry I never called you. It wasn't that I didn't want to, or didn't want *you*, I just..." my voice trails off as I search for the right words to explain my thought process. "I had just gotten out of an engagement six weeks before we saw each other. It wasn't the right time, Riv." I hope my words suffice, but the pain in his eyes tells me I hurt him worse than I'd previously thought.

"Is it the right timing now?" he asks, in perfect River fashion, jumping right to the point, no filter.

I catch myself blushing, and immediately look down into my wine glass, swirling it and stalling.

He reaches over and runs his hand up my leg, resting it on my knee and poking one finger between the ripped fabric, stroking my skin. I know how I *want* to answer this question, and I know how I *should* answer this question, but the answers don't match up.

He inches closer to me, closing the gap that separates us on my couch. Our ability to pick right back up where we left off isn't lost on me. I can't deny the sparks—never-ending, undying—that fly between us, unraveling me at my core. How is it possible? How does this make sense? After all this time, River still makes me melt into a thousand pieces.

River looks at me with his green eyes and I can't help but focus on his full lips and the tiny constellation of freckles that clusters along his strong jawline.

When I don't answer, he takes the opportunity to reach up and cradle my face in his hands, turning me toward him and

pulling me in to meet him halfway. Our lips are inches apart and he's breathing against my skin, eyes now focused on my mouth. I'm intoxicated without even having a taste of him. I feel myself slipping, giving away to the moment, to the past, to all the things I had given up years ago. The things I had convinced myself were no good for me.

I give in to my desire and pull him hard to me by the middle of his shirt, meeting his lips with my own and intertwining my tongue with his. He's warm, soft, home. I'm launched right back into being seventeen again, soaking in every ounce of him, knowing it will all be over again soon.

But I want this, even if it isn't forever. Hell, even if it's only one night again.

One thing is certain: River Jacobs is the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. I'm addicted to him, to his love, and to his taste.

Let the pain of my past swallow me whole.

---

FOUR HOURS LATER, River is walking out my door. We'd spent our entire time together in the same spot on the couch, talking, kissing, laughing, and passing the time intertwined as if nothing had changed since we were together last.

As soon as the door closes, River and I having mutually decided that he wouldn't stay the night, Hailee pops out of the spare bedroom with a toothy grin on her face.

"I thought you'd be sleeping by now." I return her smile, sleepy-eyed and buzzing—maybe from the alcohol, maybe from River.

"I couldn't sleep, silly! I was dying to get a recap. My ear against the door only provided so much." She laughs. "Kidding." She grabs my hand, practically bouncing with excitement, and leads me to the couch that River and I sat on just moments ago.

I huff, sitting down, feeling tired and ready for bed, but still on a high. "He's perfect." I concede to my internal fight.

“I wish he wasn’t, Hails.” I shrug. “He’s the same River I remember, but somehow so different. He’s there, but he’s smarter, wiser, more mature.”

She looks amused. “Well, duh. That’s normally what happens when time passes.” We both laugh, but I still can’t seem to get my feelings out in any way that makes sense. “Is he still playing? Doing the band thing?”

“Yep.” She asks me what else we talked about, and I tell her, “Everything,” before I go into the details. “It was a lot of catching up, you know? It’s been a long time.” My phone buzzes against the wooden coffee table, and River’s name brightens up the dark room.

“Fucking Christ! He’s already fallen back in love with you.” She eyes the phone like it’s a block of gold, waiting for me to read the text.

**River:** Ava, will you go on a date with me?

My heart twirls in my chest. I was hoping he enjoyed his time with me as much as I enjoyed mine with him. With a smile, I read it out loud to Hailee.

“O-M-G.” Her enthusiasm is overwhelming. “Well, of course, you’re saying yes.” I’m sure glad she always knows what I’m going to do and what I should do.

And my first reaction is yes, of course. *Why wouldn’t I?* Life is giving us a second chance, kind of a third chance even, throwing the two of us together again. By way of a dating app, of all things. Of course I will see where this goes. *Because it’s River.*

But then the left side of my brain takes over, planting tiny seeds of doubt. If it’s never been the right timing before, how could it be now?

*Because it’s fucking River,* the right side of my brain argues. And he’s sexy, he’s smart, he’s...the only man to have a permanent spot in the back of my mind. That has to count for something. *Stop trying to sabotage a good thing.*

Hailee waves her hand in front of my face. “Earth to Ava! Hellooo?”

“I don’t know, actually,” I confess, leaving his message on read and setting my phone back on the table.

She looks annoyed with me and says, “Look. I have a great idea.” This will be good. “Do you remember the sexy Australian from the dating app? We matched, so I messaged him! His name is Oliver and we’re going on a date tomorrow night, and you and River are going to accompany us. That’ll keep you from worrying about me possibly getting raped or murdered, because I know you’d be concerned the entire time.” She cocks her head to the side. “You’ve really got to stop with all those crazy true crime shows.” She’s trying to reverse psychology me into doing this, and it’s working.

“Are you really ready to go out on a date?” I ask. “After everything with Ryan?”

“I’m just having fun, Aves.”

“I guess there’s no harm in going on a date.” But deep down, I know there is. River is addicting. It took me years to try to get over him and I’m not sure I ever fully did. *What if it happens again?*

Despite my fear, I agree, partially to appease Hailee and partially because I can’t deny that there must be a reason the universe keeps catapulting River and I back into each other’s arms.

We agree to text Oliver and River in the morning, and head to our separate rooms for the night.

I pull back the sheets and shimmy out of my jeans and V-neck, then slide into my bed. The sheets feel cool and smooth against my skin and I’m finally able to relax, taking in everything that happened tonight.

River and I didn’t have sex. We would have, probably, but I couldn’t with Hailee here; it didn’t feel right. I also wanted to see if River was really only here because he thought I would gladly spread my legs and take all of him in, or if he was satisfied just being with me.

He certainly didn’t seem to mind.

Thinking now, about River, I feel the urge to touch myself. It's strong and I don't want to fight it. Sliding down my black lace panties, that were chosen on the off chance that we did take it further, I start to gently rub myself, focusing on my clit with one hand and my nipples with the other. I think solely of River, his strong arms and scruffy face. He was so close to me in the moments before I took control and placed my mouth on his.

If we would have taken it there tonight, I would have let him take me. I would have succumbed to everything he is, his wants, his desires. I want to be the one to make him feel good again. The one he *wants*.

I can almost feel him inside of me as I slide my fingers down my slit and into my opening, wetness coating my fingers. I moan, loudly at first, catching myself and holding back as much as I can.

I imagine my two fingers are his hard cock. The length of his erection fills me up, sliding in and out of me, pumping his hard thickness slowly at first but increasingly harder the longer we go. I close my eyes tight and think of his face above mine. River buries his head in my chest, licking and sucking, twirling his tongue around my hard nipples, teasing me exactly how I like it.

He leans back and grabs ahold of my thighs, steadying himself so he can give his cock to me fast and hard. The sound he makes smacking against me turns me on, makes my blood boil beneath my skin and I'm trying my hardest not to come, wanting to wait for him.

I rub my clit harder, faster, wanting River to actually be here in bed with me. I imagine him pulling out of me, wanting to last as long as he can. He licks my slit up and down, concentrating at first on my clit and then moving down to my opening and tongue-fucking me to oblivion. I'm grabbing his head and holding it down into me, trying to get his tongue as far as it can go inside of me.

"*Fuck,*" I groan. I need him here. I'm hooking my fingers inside of me, fucking myself fast, in and out, my sex slick with

desire as I dig my head deeper into the pillow, angling it back in pleasure. He feels so good, so right. I finger fuck myself until I can't take it anymore. Bucking my hips, I focus entirely on my clit until I'm coming, drowning in thoughts of River's hands all over me.

I fall asleep almost immediately after, my mind exhausted and finally giving in to the night.

TRACK TWENTY-SEVEN:  
POETIC JUSTICE



BY KENDRICK LAMAR

## AVA

BY THE TIME I'M DONE WORKING FOR THE DAY, HAILEE'S throwing us a freak-out party.

I open the door and step out of my home office where I see her in full panic mode. "You do realize I was trying to write a book and you were running around screaming about not being able to find matching panties, right?" I tease. I've learned how to tune Hailee's loud demeanor out when I've needed to over the years.

"Sorry, but I think having coordinating lingerie is pretty important," she teases back with a shrug. "Honestly, I don't even know how to date anymore. Whose idea was this?" She shoots me a glaring look and I throw my hands up, not willing to take the blame for this one.

"Yours," I say, rolling my eyes. "We could cancel. No one's holding a gun to our heads." I'm only half-joking, but she immediately shoots the idea down.

"I haven't had sex with anyone other than Ryan—and my hand—for years. We're going on this date and I'm getting laid by a sexy Australian man, do you hear me?" She huffs lightly. "I don't care how much I bitch and complain, we're doing it."

I laugh and tell her that River wants to pick me up, then ask if she wants to ride with us or Uber. She weighs the pros and cons and ultimately decides to Uber, making a joke that River and I might want to have sexy time before dinner. She's a psychopath, but I love her.

When River texts me to say he's outside, I find it strange that he doesn't want to come up and get me, but I try not to read too far into it. With one last spritz of my perfume, I tell Hailee I'll meet her there soon, then I'm out the door and onto the sidewalk in front of the building, searching for River in the sea of vehicles parked on the side of the street.

There's no way he still has that old Mustang, so I don't even bother trying to look for it. I turn my head when I hear a wolf whistle, and it's River, taking a bronze-colored helmet off his head, perched on top of a gorgeous, sexy looking motorcycle. The bronze of his helmet matches the bronze on the frame of his bike. *Holy shit.* River on a motorcycle. I didn't think this man could get any sexier, but when I see him here, straddling the large bike with tiny beads of sweat trickling down his forehead, I'm taken aback.

I saunter up to him, smiling. "Well, well, Mr. Jacobs, looks like you got yourself a shiny new toy while we weren't talking."

He laughs, deep and from the belly, tossing his head back then meeting my eyes. "I had to do something destructive besides writing a million songs about you and playing them on repeat." He hands me his helmet and I step back.

"Oh, no. You only have one helmet? We'll call an Uber," I say, hesitantly.

He shakes his head. "Just get on the bike. Besides, I never needed two helmets..." his voice trails off, not breaking my gaze, "until now."

A horn blares and I take the helmet from him even though I definitely don't approve of him not wearing one.

"Relax," he says. "I'll be careful. And who knows, if you stick around, maybe I'll buy a second one." He winks at me.

In response, I scoff and rest one hand on his shoulder, then I lift my leg up and over the bike and sit behind him. An awkward air washes over me, and it's an odd feeling to have with him. I've never ridden a motorcycle before. I don't even know where to place my hands.

He glances at me in the small rearview mirror and then turns, looking over his shoulder. “You can touch me, you know.” His words are playful, his eyes burning a hole into me. “You didn’t have a problem touching me last night, if I remember correctly.” He adds, “Oh, hey! I noticed you decided to put a bra on today, is that because we’re going out in public or did you just not want me staring at your tits during dinner?”

I nudge him softly and we both laugh, but then I tell him, seriously, “Only because we’re going out in public. I figured I’d save the rest for later.”

And with that, he revs the engine, palming the handles and kicking up his feet. I can’t help but feel tiny butterflies swarming in my stomach, thinking that tonight could be the start of something really fucking good.

---

I’M two cocktails in and Hailee is ahead of me, finishing her third. I remind her with a tiny kick under the table—gently, of course—that she doesn’t want to get sloppy.

She rolls her eyes at me. “Isn’t he hot? Thank Jesus for dating apps!” She’s excited, rightfully so; the two of them have totally been hitting it off.

Oliver smirks and snakes his arm around her in the booth as she sinks into him. “So,” he says, “how long have the two of you known each other?” He looks from me to River and we turn to each other, grinning, but it’s River who answers him.

“Forever, basically,” he says. “Since Ava was seventeen and I was eighteen.” He looks perplexed now. “Good God, we’re old.”

“Hey! Speak for yourself!” I say playfully, taking a sip of my vodka cranberry.

River slides his hand over and onto my knee, alternating between squeezing and caressing it as I bite into my burger, stopping briefly when I feel his skin on mine. His touch has

always done this to me. It sort of, makes my mind go foggy, like I'm in a daze.

I smile at Hailee, who isn't touching most of her food. It's a nervous habit of hers. When she notices me staring, she quickly takes a bite of her chicken sandwich. It's as if we can read each other's minds.

It isn't long before I want to be alone with River. I ask Hailee to come to the bathroom with me, so I can check on her before he and I excuse ourselves.

Once we're in the confines of the two-stall hideaway, I ask her, "Will you be okay if we leave? How are you feeling about Oliver? It seems like you two have *a lot* of chemistry."

She's fixing her mauve lipstick that perfectly complements her sun-kissed skin. "Oh, honey, I've been waiting for you two to leave all night," she jokes. "But in all seriousness, yes, you two go. I'll be fine. I don't get murderous, stalkery vibes from this dude. I get *I'm going to fuck your brains out* vibes from him."

I roll my eyes as she does a series of pelvic thrusts, her flowy dress swaying. *This girl. I swear.* I laugh, making her promise she'll call and check in. Then I usher her tipsy ass back to the table where I grab River by the arm to pull him toward the door, wanting him to myself.

He quickly tosses two twenties on the table and trails behind me. "That was one hell of a way to make an exit," he comments once we get outside. "How did the girly bathroom conversation go?" He raises one eyebrow and pulls me to him. "I'm no dummy. Were you talking about how awesome I am?"

I snort, quickly covering my reddening face, forgetting that River knows all about this quirk of mine.

He moves my hands from my face and kisses the tip of my nose. "I sure missed that."

We get on his bike and River drives off, chasing the Chicago sunset. The notorious city wind catches the hair peeking out beneath my helmet. I feel free, alive, and more myself than I have in a very long time.

When he finally pulls over, it's in front of a large apartment complex with more windows than I have ever seen. The entire thing is basically glass, with tiny slivers of siding mixed in.

Hopping off his bike, I shake my helmet hair out and run my fingers through the tangled long strands. "Where are we?"

It's beautiful here. If it weren't for the impeccable architecture signaling money signs, one could easily tell just by how the passersby walking down the sidewalk were dressed. Red-soled shoes, for instance, along with expensive designer bags to match even *more* expensive designer formal wear. The city is bustling with the privileged.

"My place," he says. "I figured, you entertained me last night so tonight, it's my turn."

We walk into his building, and I should have known he'd live somewhere like this. His mother and father had been putting copious amounts of money away for him and his sister since they were infants. So much so, that they could live off the funds forever and never need jobs, if they didn't want them. I secretly think they were subconsciously trying to make up for being less than ideal parents.

By the time we're shut inside of River's large apartment, I'm dizzy from the alcohol. I don't normally get buzzed off two cocktails, but I was so nervous earlier that I didn't eat much at all today.

River hands me a water from the fridge. "Drink up, you need to hydrate. Are you still hungry? You didn't finish your food because you were in such a hurry to get my pants off." He cracks himself up as I roll my eyes, nodding my head yes, that I'm still hungry.

"I think you've gotten a little more full of yourself over the years, River Jacobs," I say, although he isn't wrong. He smirks as he turns away and starts making me a sandwich. I stand nearby, taking in the beautiful apartment around us.

The floors are light gray laminate, and the walls, a blinding white. The place could definitely use a woman's touch, but he

does have some style. Green leafy plants decorate the corner of his living room, that offshoots from the large open kitchen. His guitar rests against a tall white-brick fireplace. She's beautiful; pear-shaped, wooden, six smooth strings. If I had to guess, I'd say he still makes love to her daily.

When he's finished with my sandwich, he guides me to his sectional and we sit in unison, his face twisting from playful to serious in seconds. "Can we talk about something kinda, sorta serious in nature?"

I scrunch my nose. "I suppose that depends on what the topic is."

"Well," River starts in, "you and me, obviously." He leans back, resting one hand on his stomach and the other behind his head. "Let's talk about us."

I run my hand over the hem of my shorts, fingering the fraying strands as I avoid the elephant in the room. I watch in awe as his shirt drifts above his pants, exposing his skin.

"When we were together at the end of my senior year and into the summer, it was one of the best times of my life. There was always something about you, and I still feel it there, that just allowed me to be unapologetically me. No hiding, no pretenses." He smooths his hands over his hair, and I feel him look away.

I take this chance to glance up at him. His eyes are glassy, like he's traveled off somewhere behind them. "I knew the moment I saw you in that record shop that I wanted to explore you more. Completely."

"And then?" I ask.

"And then, I left. I can't be sorry about that because it was great for my craft. If I wouldn't have taken those classes and met the people that I had out in California, then I wouldn't know the people in the industry that I know today."

This is the first time he's really spoken about his music since we started talking again. The conversation last night was fluffy, light, and more about the things we missed about each other—and sexual innuendos.

“I thought about you all the time,” he continues. “And when I ran into you in that shitty hole-in-the-wall bar years later, I thought, wow, this is really life giving us another chance. I could hardly believe it was even happening. But then, you never called. You never reached back out after you said you needed time. And believe me, I understand needing time. I just—”

His eyes meet mine now, and a sadness takes over the beautiful green they once were. Watching them transform like that, physically hurts me inside.

“Why didn’t you ever call?” he asks.

I take his hand and squeeze, begging with my touch for him to forgive me, because words won’t do my reasoning any justice. With him, the only way I know how to be is honest.

“I didn’t want to go backwards.” I trail my eyes away, not wanting to see his reaction. “Brady hurt me. He really fucking hurt me, and I’m ashamed to say it, but he broke me. I felt like I needed to look ahead, move forward. I thought that by trying to bring you back into my life, I was just living in the past.”

I sigh. “And that’s the best excuse I have. Don’t think that I didn’t think about you often, because I did. Hell, there were times I thought about you when I was engaged to someone else, River. That speaks volumes.”

After a long pause, I add, “A lifetime had passed since you and I were together. Or at least it felt that way. I thought about you, yes, but I never thought we would be in the same place at the same time again, let alone run into each other. I assumed you had made California your new home and that was how it would stay.”

He just nods, understanding now. At least, I hope.

“Why did you come back, Riv?” This is another topic we didn’t even broach last night. I knew his return home wasn’t for *me*, but I somehow hoped that maybe, even in the back of his mind, I was a small part of it.

“Family drama.” His tone changes, dropping even deeper. “When I saw you at the bar that night, I had just gotten back

into town. Ruby overdosed and was in a rehab facility. She almost died and it made me realize how disconnected I had become from the city—and my family.”

He wipes at his face and I pull him to me, allowing him to fall against my chest, wanting to be supportive.

Ruby. River’s sister. While River was trying to build a career with his band, she was attending charity events in the city and wearing pencil skirts to committee meetings. I know she married a lawyer after her father’s heart.

Ruby and River weren’t ever incredibly close, from what I remember, but he’s always loved her.

“It all became too much for her. She felt this immense, heavy-weighted pressure to be perfect all the time. To look perfect, and act perfect, and have a perfect life. So she started doing heroin. Women were trying it behind the scenes after some fucking high-society dinner parties. One of the women was fucking an eighteen-year-old and he got it for her and they all started doing it as a party favor. But that shit’s addictive, you know?”

And I did know. I had lost a really good friend to it when I was a freshman in high school, and River knew that. So it was a mutual understanding between us that any further explanation wasn’t needed.

“How’s she doing now?” I ask him, and the genuine concern in his eyes lifts slightly.

“Ruby’s on a really good track. She’s clean. She attends weekly meetings to help her stay strong. I never really thought the two of us would be close, but as terrible as everything was—what went down, the overdose, the addiction—at least I’m getting to know my sister.”

I nod and he pulls back from me, looking me in the eyes, his emerald forest meeting my golden specks. “I never fully stopped thinking about you either, you know. You were always there, in the back of my mind. I dated a lot of women, but only one kind of stuck around a bit. She’s the one I deleted the



dating app for, but honestly, it was just infatuation and lust. I knew it would never work.”

His confession hits me in the gut, though I have no reason to feel any type of way about it. I think I’d almost rather him be in love with her mind than her body. I immediately start wondering what she looks like, comparing myself to the image of her I’ve created in my mind.

“And it didn’t work out, obviously,” he adds quickly.

We talk about her for a little while longer, and I ask him why it didn’t work. I can tell he holds back, trying not to give me a lot of information, but he explains that they didn’t have a connection beyond a physical attraction. At least on his end.

He’s very handsy, touching me, sitting close, stroking my hair and my cheek and my thighs as we talk about everything and nothing and a hell of a lot in between. He asks me about Dillon and how he and my mom are doing, how my dad is, even though we talked a little about them last night.

I really wish I had better news to report about my dad. I try to go to my parents’ house a couple times a week for dinner, but it can be hard with work deadlines.

I try to stifle a yawn, but I’m unsuccessful. I stretch tall above my head and glance at the clock that flashes one ten AM. I’m reminded of my looming deadline.

“You’re sleepy,” River says, rubbing at the nape of my neck. “Let’s go to bed.”

I hesitate because I feel gross. It’s been hours since I showered, and I’d rather not leave that kind of impression. I think about how to say this to him, but they look on my face must be telling enough.

“I’ll cuddle you, but no sex. But let the record show that I see in your eyes how badly you want to undress me.” He laughs. “Besides, don’t you have to be up early for some kind of deadline or something? You mentioned it last night. Is deadline even the right word? Your writing stuff is way over my head.”

“Says the most creative man I’ve ever met.” I smile.

He escorts me into his dark bedroom, handing me a shirt that I slip on and over my body. I'm swimming in it, since his muscular frame is so much larger than mine. I let my pants fall and climb into bed with River. I fall asleep nuzzling against his chest, breathing him in and allowing my heart to beat to the same rhythm as his.

TRACK TWENTY-EIGHT: I  
REMEMBER YOU

BY SKID ROW

## AVA

RIVER JACOBS IS NEXT FUCKING LEVEL.

I wake up a mere five hours later and there's a note resting delicately next to me on the pillow. He's also left a white mug of coffee on the bedside table that's still steaming. The smell is divine, heavenly even, after my lack of sleep. I take a sip before reading the note. *River and his notes*. After all this time, he's back to writing me.

The coffee is black, with the slightest hint of sugar. He remembers exactly the way I take my coffee. I pull my legs up and smile before reading the note.

*Ava, I wanted to be here when you woke up, but you looked so peaceful sleeping—with your mouth open and drool running down the side of your face—so I let you sleep. I'm recording with Blue Label for the majority of the day today. We want to get a new EP out to start sending to Chicago reps. I'd love to see you tonight, but it might be late and I don't want to be your booty call. \*wink\**

*I'll text you soon. I have something special planned for us. Lock up when you leave.*

*xo River*

I'm absolutely mortified. *Drooling? Was he joking?* I search for evidence on the pillowcase but find nothing. *What an ass.*

---

I SPEND the rest of the day in a blissful state, on a high that only River can bring me.

He even rubs off on my work, becoming my muse for the day. Which can't be half-bad considering he inspired my first bestseller. I think he may be my good luck charm. I smile to myself, wondering if he read my book, but knowing I'll never be the one to bring it up. Then, I write a record seven thousand words in nine hours. That's more than I've written at one time in months.

After I finish working for the day, I head out into the city, walking around in what feels like a too-good-to-be-true daydream. My conscience tries to pull me from it multiple times, telling me to be cautious, that I don't want to end up with my heart broken by River again, but I'm already in too deep to turn back.

River was right. We have been given another chance—really, a third. If my heart gets broken in the end, will it be worth it to spend time with him again?

I smile. I think so.

A call from my publicist interrupts my thoughts.

“Hey, Ava,” Helen greets me in her smooth tone.

“Hi there. Before you even ask, I had a great writing day and we're getting close,” I tell her happily.

Before hanging up, she tells me she got a call from a local bookstore who wants to host an intimate event and showcase my first book, so we're going to be setting up another signing. Excitement runs through me. I don't think I'll ever get tired of meeting the readers who find so much joy in the words I write. This *has* to be the best job in the entire world.

It's amazing how life can turn around suddenly, without even realizing it. It seems to me that River tends to do this to me. *More good days than bad*. My dad's words ring in my ears.

---

WHEN I WALK into my apartment after being out for some fresh air, I find Hailee and Oliver canoodling on the couch. They look at each other when they notice me, and something in Hailee's eyes tells me she's been up to something mischievous.

"You two didn't bang on my couch, did you?" I playfully jab.

"Damn!" Hailee exclaims. "I knew there was one spot we hadn't fucked on yet."

I roll my eyes at her as she gets up off the couch—wearing only pink boy shorts and an oversized T-shirt—and rushes over to meet me in the doorway.

"Tell me everything. My God, you were literally dying to get out of there last night." I set my keys down on the table and hang my purse up next to it.

"I was, actually. We had a lot to catch up on, River and I." Leaving the two of them to finish their date in peace, I retreat to my bedroom. When I walk past Hailee's makeshift room, I can't help but wonder how many times the two of them got it on last night.

I check my phone, pleasantly surprised to see River has sent me a text.

**River:** Okay, so. I'm picking you up at six PM sharp tomorrow night. I probably won't have a ton of time to talk today but know I'm thinking about you more than I should be.

I blush.

**Me:** Okay. Thank you for the lovely note. I'm going to just assume that I was not drooling and that you were joking. We're going to go with that, okay? I had a really good time last night, Riv. Have a good day and I'll see you tomorrow.

I just want to text him all day, talk to him, carry on our conversations from last night and this morning. I don't want to

appear too needy straight out of the gate though, so I vow to only text if he texts me first.

I mute my brain, determined to float in this ecstasy for a little while longer. This dream-like headspace where neither River nor I need to get our hearts broken this time.

*Does it have to be a dream?*

TRACK TWENTY-NINE: GET RID  
OF THAT GIRL



BY THE DONNAS

## AVA

WHEN RIV PICKS ME UP THE NEXT NIGHT, I'M ABSOLUTELY floored. He's in front of my apartment building, only this time, instead of his motorcycle, he's sitting in a black sixty-seven Mustang convertible with its top down.

"River! How the hell did you get your hands on one of these?" I ask, running my hands along the side of the car, my smile taking up my entire face.

He lights up when he sees me like this. "I rented it from a friend. He's an avid collector of classic cars."

This car is identical to his old one that he wrecked out in California, something I learned the night he took me to his apartment after dinner with Hailee and Oliver. "This had to be pretty damn expensive," I comment.

"Well, with a trust fund from parents who feel bad about the way they raised their kid, it wasn't too pricey." He laughs.

He opens the door and I slide into the car, smelling the old leather of the seats. River gets back in and places one hand on the steering wheel and the other on my leg.

"So, what's the deal for the night? Where are we going?" I ask him.

It's his turn to give me a wideset grin. "We're going to get a little nostalgic, Ava." He glides smoothly onto the busy Chicago street and I let my hair down and out of the bun it was pinned back into. It falls loosely around my shoulders, my

dark locks soaking in the perfect sunlight that's warming me up from the outside in.

No more than fifteen minutes later and after some traffic delays, we're climbing the stairs to the rooftop that we first fell in love on. My heart is doing nervous somersaults in my chest and I feel sweaty as he grips my hand in his.

He flings the door to the roof open and I look to the right immediately. It's still there, after all this time. The rest of the roof has had a makeover, but the bench—our bench—is still here.

“Well, if you needed any other signs that we're meant to be, that might be it.” River looks at the old bench pointedly, raising an eyebrow and ushering me over to it.

As we sit down, my heart rate starts to slow naturally, finding comfort in his presence and in this place that we're in. “You're some kind of wonderful.” I lean toward him, giving him a quick kiss on the mouth.

“Whew. You taste good,” he says, kissing me again before pulling away and licking his lips. “Is that brown sugar?”

“I may have made cookies before I left,” I hint.

“If you made chocolate chip cookies and didn't bring me any, we may have to just go our separate ways.” Those are his favorites, I remember.

“Of course, they're intended to be for you, but there is such a thing as a cooling period, you know,” I counter.

He smiles and we turn our attention out onto the city. On the sun setting slowly, melting away into the sky. A mixture of reds, blues, and oranges, all turning and twisting into each other. A masterpiece.

I look to River, another masterpiece.

Just as I'm about to ask about his family, the rooftop door opens with a loud screech and two men dressed in suits carry large trays to a table.

“Thanks, guys!” River stands up, shaking each of their hands. “Really appreciate you doing this for us.” When they

retreat back inside, River makes a show of revealing what's under the silver cloche, lifting it up dramatically, and taking a bow.

I look at him in disbelief. Grilled cheese sandwiches. I run over to peel the bread back on mine, and spy bacon and ketchup on the inside. A wave of nostalgia hits me as I remember the night, so many years ago, when I had burnt the spaghetti and he had to come through with the save. At the time, I felt so stupid and silly, until he revealed that the only thing he knew how to make was grilled cheese sandwiches.

River sits down and I bend down, kissing him once before sitting across from him. His grilled cheese is plain, like a psychopath, but I still love him despite it.

My mind takes pause. *I still love him? Thank Jesus Christ that was an internal thought. Why the hell did I just think that? No. Nope. Stop it.*

“You okay?” he asks, reading me like only he can.

I shake it off, doing what I do best and pushing the thought away. “Of course. Riv, this is perfect, and you are wonderful. I forgot how great you were, honestly.” I smile softly. “If I hadn't forgotten, the years would have passed much slower, I'm sure.”

I find my eyes wandering to his mouth often, thinking about how much I want to be on top of him, kissing him, and intertwined with him once again. I have to almost force myself to stop thinking like this; I don't want to start drooling.

By the time the sun is fully down and stars are visible in the night sky, we're lying on the exact same plaid blanket we used to lie on.

“You've kept it this entire time? Like at your parents' place?” I ask him, truly wondering.

“No, it came with me. I've always had it. This thing is special to me.” I know exactly what he means, but he continues anyway. “Do you remember that we were wrapped in this blanket the first time we were intimate? Or how we cuddled in this while we sat up on that bench,” he points, “and

you told me you wanted to be a writer? That you wanted to help people escape from their worlds and into better ones.”

“Yes,” I whisper to him. All the feelings I’ve been containing are threatening to spill over now, too much pressure bubbling beneath my surface to hold them in. Tears, really big tears, spill down my cheeks, and I struggle against a whimper that’s begging for release.

“Oh, no. Did I upset you?” River sits up on one arm, resting his weight on his elbow, visibly upset himself.

“No.” I shake my head through the tears, trying to find the right words to explain my overflow of emotions in this moment. “I’m happy.” I smile at him, so he knows that I’m being honest. “I’m happy, but I’m scared too, if I’m being honest with you.”

He asks, “Why scared?”

“Because I’m having this internal struggle of how this can work when it didn’t before.” He looks let down. “I want this to work,” I tell him quickly. “I just worry. It makes me nervous.”

“I understand the hesitation, but we won’t know if we don’t try. We were in high school, Ave. That was a lifetime ago. I’d like to think things are different now. Aren’t they?” He sighs, taking both of my hands in his, underneath the stars, on the same rooftop we were on so many years ago. “Promise me one thing,” he says. “Just don’t run. We can figure everything out. Just don’t run from this again; don’t run from *me* again.”

I nod my reply and we make love on the rooftop. It’s better than I ever could have imagined, connecting to River’s mind and his body. To feel his skin on mine so intimately.

I’m hooked on River. In the best possible way.

TRACK THIRTY: I KNOW  
YOU'RE FUCKING SOMEONE  
ELSE

BY TYPE O NEGATIVE

## AVA

RIVER AND I FALL INTO A RHYTHM WITH EASE OVER THE NEXT few months. To make up for all our time apart, we keep busy, spending nearly every moment together. Dinners at my place, long nights at his. My parents invite us over for dinner and my dad looks really good. There's color in his cheeks, which is always a welcome surprise.

We visit some of our old favorite spots; among them, the record store we went to weekly when we were in high school. When we go, without fail, we pick out one new record each. The Vinyl Kitty was, and still is, one of my favorite places in the world. Back then, River and I were super cool, and records weren't popular. CDs were the big thing, but hip kids with Converse and black leather jackets always congregated in record stores.

That was us.

Well, for the most part. I traded in my Converse for black combat boots and often paired them with floral dresses and my same leather jacket, just to be a rebel. River still wears Converse occasionally, but he has a new leather jacket.

This morning, we wake up in his bed after a fun night out and shower together—something that's become one of my favorite ways to start the day. He always lets me stand under the waterhead first. We'd get done much sooner if it weren't for all the caressing, kissing, and touching.

River's hands on my skin ignites a spark inside of me that I can't deny, that I don't want to deny. He runs both hands along my arms as the water flows down our naked bodies, and my eyes are drawn to his perfect mouth. His lips slightly part and I flick my eyes up to his, knowing he's caught me.

"You're so beautiful," he says, his eyes wildly looking me up and down. "How'd I get so lucky?"

I grin at him, loving the way the warm water mixed with his body pressed against mine feels. Instead of answering him, I reach up and cup his face, and pulling it toward mine. I press my lips to his, gently.

I feel him grow hard against my thigh and a passion takes over that I can't control. I wrap my arms up and around his neck and pull him flush against me, my body aching for him as it often does.

"Mmmm, Ava. You have no idea what you do to me, do you?" he asks. I know exactly what I do to him.

I buck my hips up as he runs just one single anxious finger down my slit. I let out a small moan as he slips it inside of me, working me slow and steady. The way River makes me feel is almost euphoric, my body on fire, burning with desire for him.

His lips make their way away from mine after one last bite of my bottom lip. Moving down my neck, he finds my nipples and goes back and forth between the two, giving them an equal amount of attention as he rolls his tongue over my right nipple, thumbing my left with his free hand. Everything about River is sexy, always has been. I remember the way he paid attention to every small detail the first time we made love. He's the same type of lover now, taking his time with me.

My desire takes hold again and I grab the hand he's fingering me with and force two more fingers in. He likes this, I know by his smile I feel spread across his face that's resting on my tits. He lets out a loud groan, his pleasure meeting my own. He's no longer slow, methodical. Instead he moves his fingers in and out of my wet slit faster and faster.

I resist the urge to finish. I want to wait for him, to come with him. I pull his face up to mine and cradle his head in my hands. Fixating my eyes on his, “Take me,” is all I have to say, and he’s more than ready. All it takes is a breathy moan of my name from his lips to damn near send me over the edge.

He’s throbbing, rock hard, refusing to allow his gaze to stray from my eyes as I bite at my bottom lip. I try to steady my breathing but it’s no use. All I can think about is that first, hard pump into me.

When I can’t take it any longer, I turn from him and bend slightly at the waist, beckoning him to come inside. He does, and I scream his name as he enters me, with one hard thrust.

His moans echo off the shower walls as he fills me with every satisfying inch of him. I feel him pulsating inside me, and it takes everything in me not to fall apart with release immediately.

I love that he knows what he’s doing, that he wants to please me as much as I want to please him. He pulls out of me and I wonder what the hell he’s thinking, but I feel his lips on my pussy seconds later, licking me, his tongue going in and out of me and then up to my clit in a rhythm that is pure fucking magic.

When he enters me again, it’s like the first time—hard, fast. He’s fucking *ravaging* me and I wouldn’t want it any other way in this moment. I throw my head back, the warm shower water rolling down my face as I try to keep myself from coming undone.

“I’m going to come,” he says, pumping in and out even harder than before.

“Please,” is all I can manage, knowing I’m right there on the cusp with him.

He moans, and it’s deep, husky, guttural. I tighten myself around him and he groans with pleasure loudly, releasing inside me.

I turn back around to face him, breathless. “You’re incredible. And yes, I know exactly what I do to you.”



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WHEN I STEP into his room, his cell phone is lit up on the nightstand. I'm not the type of woman to go through someone's phone, but I can't help but look. After all I've been through, I convince myself that I can at least sneak a quick peek. I *need* to sneak a peek.

But the moment I see the name, I wish I hadn't. *Jackie Marshall. Fuck. Jackie Marshall? Why is she texting him this early?* And there were two missed phone calls while we were in the shower. *Who the hell is Jackie Marshall?* The name doesn't ring a bell. He's only talked about one woman from his past. *Could it be her?* I fucking hope not. I hear him turn the water off and I haphazardly yank my clothes on.

I'm all but totally dressed when he walks into the bedroom, coming to an abrupt stop at the sight of me. "Woah! Where are you going? I thought maybe we could snuggle a bit and then I could make you some breakfast," he says.

I don't meet his eyes. I'm not sure if I'm overreacting. It isn't like I just saw him making out with a girl in front of me; it's just a random girl's name on his phone screen. *We aren't even exclusively dating, right?* I mean, we never talked about it. Besides, the name could have belonged to anyone—an agent for his band even. Who knows?

Still, I feel the need to leave. "Oh, I'm sorry," I say as I finish gathering my things. "I really have to work a bit today. My publisher is getting pissed at my lack of progress lately." I give him a weak smile and hope he doesn't notice.

He walks me out and kisses me with lips that are the same as earlier, but feel different on mine.

---

"DON'T WORRY, YOUNG GRASSHOPPER," Hailee says to me. "I know exactly what we'll do." Pursing her lips, she shifts her

gaze to her phone and picks it up. “We’re going to Facebook stalk the bitch!”

“Oh, good *Lord*, Hailee, what?” I’m genuinely nervous. Hailee can be savage when it comes to things like this. She once cyberstalked a guy so hard she ended up finding out what the dog of his great aunt’s husband (twice removed) ate. Now *that’s* dedication.

Narrowing her eyes and furiously tapping at her screen, she asks, “Jackie Marshall, right?”

I nod my head, regretting even telling her about what happened—which is probably nothing.

But then she slowly looks up from her phone screen to me and says, “Fuck.”

“What?” I ask her, as she scowls down at her cell. “Hailee, what? You can’t just say *fuck* and look at me like that and not say anything else!” My heart drops right into my butt.

“I’m friends with her.” She hesitates before thumbing her phone again, then looks up at me for a moment. “I mean, I have a shit ton of friends on here, so I don’t exactly *know* everyone, but I can’t believe I don’t remember this girl.” She pauses for a beat. “This *woman*.” She accentuates the word and I want to vomit.

I sit down next to Hailee and examine her screen with intent. *Woman* is right. This woman is easily in her late thirties and has long platinum blonde hair that looks disgustingly expensive to maintain. She’s wearing a business pantsuit that hugs her in all the right places and is holding an award in her hands with a wide smile plastered to her face like she just won the fucking Nobel Peace Prize. *Shit*.

Upon further examination, we find that she’s a very well-off realtor. She lives in the Gold Coast, has a tiny white Maltese puppy named Dottie the Diva (*barf*), and enjoys happy hour at overpriced spots—every single day of the week. The last status she posted though (a check-in at some socialite place), was months ago. It seems like she’s been on a Facebook break. *Maybe?*

*How the hell could River be in contact with this bimbo Barbie? Or rather, why the hell?* “Okay, wait.” I have a thought. “How do we know this is the right Jackie Marshall? I feel like both names are fairly common, no?” I say, knowing there could be tons of Jackie Marshalls in the world—just not necessarily in Chicago.

Hailee doesn’t look hopeful but she digs anyway. “So,” she says, her eyes not leaving the screen, “we can look at her mutual friends if she has them public, and we can check her tagged photos. Let’s see.”

It doesn’t take much sleuthing to find out that River is friends with her and they both checked into an upscale martini bar that plays live music right around the same time she stopped posting. The date suggests it was right before he messaged me on the app.

“Well, that’s annoying,” Hailee says. *Understatement of the damn year.*

Why do I care that River was hanging out with her before we started talking again? Well, maybe because she was calling him at seven AM this morning. Maybe that’s why. I struggle back and forth in my mind and Hailee asks me what I’m thinking.

“Why do I care?” I shake my head. “Tell me why I care that he was hanging out with her before we reconnected.”

She locks her phone and it goes black. “I don’t think it’s so much that he was hanging out with someone before you met up with him again. I think it’s that you were hesitant to start things back up, and then you did, and right after you started getting in your feelings, you saw her name pop up on his phone,” she says. “Sound about right?”

I nod. “Yeah, I guess so.” My phone vibrates in my pocket and I know it’s River. He’s already sent two texts I haven’t opened yet.

Here’s the thing. I could just ignore him and shut this shit down right here and now. I could never—*ever*—call him back, just like I hadn’t a year ago. Or, I could be an adult and just

ask him about this, or *them*, which seems like the most logical thing to do.

But I can't fucking tell him that I ran out of his apartment because a woman's name appeared on his phone screen. *How childish.*

After debating with Hailee, I decide to just ignore it for now. I can move forward and guard my heart. If I see her name on his phone again, or anything else weird, I'll just bring it up.

I had told River last night that I would cook him dinner tonight, and I won't go back on that. I don't want to mess this up this time. I don't want to block myself from being happy. Last night, on the rooftop with River, was perfect. I felt everything I thought I'd never feel again. I don't want to stop myself from finding my happiness with him.

But I also don't want to put myself right in the path of a fucking tornado either.

---

SEVEN HOURS and one migraine later, he kisses me on the forehead and pulls me to his chest.

"You smell like an old bookstore," I tell him, looking up at his face. *His beautiful face. My God.*

"I fell asleep reading a book and it was on my chest." He laughs. "You have a hound dog nose, babe. Can't sneak anything past you."

*If only you knew.*

"Sooo," he says, drawing out the word and tapping his fingers together, "what are you making me for this wonderful, delicious dinner of yours?"

I roll my eyes. "I've gotten better over the years, I'll have you know."

He squints his eyes and a look of disbelief flashes across his face.

“It’s a surprise, okay?” I grin and bring a hand up to the side of his face, rubbing his scruff.

This time does go better. A lot better. I’ve learned how to use an oven timer, and it works tremendously in my favor. But unfortunately, our conversation is a bit off. For the first time since River and I reconnected, we’re awkward—and I know it’s entirely my fault.

I can’t stop my brain from spinning. I can’t quiet Jackie’s name from screaming in the back of my mind. I laugh nervously when his phone dings, signaling a text. *Is it her? Is this going to be a repeat of what transpired with Brady?*

After a mostly silent dinner, River washes the dishes while I dry them. He passes me the last plate, along with a questioning glance.

When I put it away, he turns to me. “Okay, not to be a downer, but what’s wrong with you?” I go to speak, but he adds, “And don’t tell me *nothing*, Ava Keyes. I know you, and that would be a bold-faced lie.”

*Jesus Christ, of course.* Why was I given a face that shows every ounce of emotion on it?

“I felt like things went really well last night.” He hooks a finger in my belt loop and gently tugs me closer to him. “I felt like we sort of just fell right back into where we used to be. I can talk to you for hours, Ave. I never get tired of you.”

His voice and his words and the way he strings them together make me weak in the knees. *Why does he have to be so charming?*

I don’t want to seem like I’m overreacting, so I nonchalantly say, “Nothing. Really. I’ve just had a lot on my mind.” I know it sounds stupid the moment it falls from my lying lips.

He gives me an *I call bullshit* look and I back away from him.

“Fine.” I run both hands through my hair and lock my fingers behind my head, looking at the floor. “Who exactly is

Jackie Marshall to you? And I don't mean in the past, I mean now." *There. Fucking there.*

He narrows his eyes slightly, and then his face softens. I feel like he doesn't want to tell me who she is. Something about the way he looks at me, like I'm the ugly pound puppy and she's the pretty purebred. *Is that dumb? That's dumb, right? Lord.*

"She's the woman I dated, the one I told you about. She helped me find an apartment to lease in Sacramento shortly before I came back home. A buddy of mine out there had recommended her to me. She was the top-selling real estate agent in the entire city. That's how we met."

I twist my face, trying not to roll my eyes.

"We sort of hit it off, in certain ways. Not in the ones that count, though. We're over and done with, like I said," he says.

"Why was she calling you so early this morning then?" I just get straight to the point. There's no use in darting around it anymore now that it's out in the open.

"I have no idea. She sent me a few texts and called a few times throughout the day. Left a couple of very discreet voicemails. I haven't returned any of her attempts to reach out because I don't feel like there's a reason to." Surprisingly, I believe him. He has no real reason to lie to me. "Seriously, I wouldn't have started things up with you if there was anything left there with her. Ava, look at me, please."

I look up at him, hesitantly.

"I want you. I meant every single word I said last night, and I hope you meant the things you said to me, too." He looks hopeful, staring deep into my eyes.

*He has no reason to lie.* I keep telling myself this. *No reason.*

*So why do I feel so off about it?*

"What can I do to help us get past this? I can block her number. I can delete her on social media. You can talk to her —"

“River, no.” *It’s fine*, I tell myself. He wouldn’t suggest I talk to her if he had something to hide. “I believe you.” And I do, to an extent.

He smiles, but not as bright as yesterday. “I wouldn’t do anything to mess this up with you. You need to know that. Not this time and not ever again. I promise you that.”

TRACK THIRTY-ONE: SHE'S  
GOT ISSUES



BY OFFSPRING

## RIVER

“WHAT ARE YOU CALLING AND TEXTING ME FOR, JACKIE? WE agreed months ago to let this thing die. I’m seeing someone.” She’s called nonstop all day and I’ve tried my best to ignore it but she just... *Won’t. Stop.*

“Sorry to interrupt your newest fling, River,” she starts, but I’m not about to argue with her.

“Ava isn’t a fling,” I say, calmly. “Why have you been calling me?” The last time I spoke to Jackie, she told me I was a piece of shit for choosing to hang out with my sister rather than sit in her apartment with her.

I tried, I really did. And the problem wasn’t really *her*; it was who she wasn’t. We had the physical connection, but I couldn’t move past that to an emotional connection no matter how hard I tried.

“This is important. Why can’t you ever answer your phone? I’ve been calling you all day. What if I was fucking dying, River? Would you even give a shit?” The tone she has pisses me off.

Of course I care about her. For some reason, I still care about her. But strictly as a friend. She doesn’t want to hear that, though, so I keep it to myself. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on, Jackie?”

“Can we meet up? This can’t really wait and I don’t want to tell you this over the phone.”

I suddenly feel sick, wondering what she could possibly need to talk to me about. My mind drifts to Ava, that she'd probably be annoyed with me for meeting up with Jackie, but I also know she trusts me. So I tell Jackie, "I'll be over in an hour."

TRACK THIRTY-TWO: F\*\*K ME  
PUMPS

BY AMY WINEHOUSE

## AVA

“THIS PLACE MAKES ME THINK OF DILLON,” RIVER SAYS AS WE stand in the middle of The Vinyl Kitty. “Remember the time he came with us and wanted the Handsome Beasts album with that nun on it?”

We both laugh and I nudge him playfully. “I forgot about that!” Smiling at him, I add, “I’ve been planning an autism awareness benefit in his honor, actually.”

“Really? Tell me about it.” River says, his eyes shining with genuine interest.

“I’m super excited about it. All the proceeds are going to the organization Dillon has been part of for years now. They help people on the spectrum by teaching them life skills, like managing finances, building resumes, communication skills, and stronger relationships, stuff like that. They’ve been great for Dill.” River takes my hand in his. “You can be my date, if you’d like.”

He squeezes my hand, holding my gaze. “I’d love to.”

We stand together in the middle aisle of the overpacked store. It’s probably no more than six hundred square feet, lined floor to ceiling with records and old band memorabilia. The walls have signed artist pictures and concert tickets, set lists, and guitar picks in frames.

Frankie, the owner, saunters over to say hello—pink mohawk and all. Some things never change.

The Vinyl Kitty sits above Iconic, the rock n' roll bar that Frankie also owns. I remember getting a fake ID when River and I went to watch one of our favorite bands play. They have an all-ages night, but on the night this particular band was playing, you had to be twenty-one and older to get in. They weren't a well-known band, but we loved them. The Jack and Dianes were a punk rock, angsty, mess of a band. I still remember the way River pumped his fist to the beat, the wild look in his eyes as he stared at the stage.

Tonight is *his* chance. Blue Label is playing there, at Iconic. The big show. Three agents will be in the crowd and the band's hoping one will see something in them and pick them up.

We pick up a handful of records at The Vinyl Kitty. The cashier is a young girl with a white pixie cut who's making out with her boyfriend that probably isn't supposed to be behind the counter, but the girl probably knows Frankie is too cool to reprimand her.

Frankie gives River the key to let us into the building early to set up. Walking in, I feel a sentimental wave roll over me.

The dark red walls are lined with black trim, and vinyl records make up the entire floor, resting perfectly under glass. Coolest. Fucking. Spot. Ever.

The entire bar has a sequin top with glass over it. It's blinding, but beautiful. I'm checking out the records under the floor surface, seeing if I remember any of them, when River grabs me by the waist.

"Remember the last time we were here?" he whispers into my ear, dropping his guitar case and biting down gently on my ear lobe.

Boy, do I. We had sex in the bathroom. We were overcome with teenage emotions and hormones and the music and the atmosphere.

"Mmm hmm." I nod my head, nuzzling his face as he buries it into my neck. He trails his lips up to my mouth, and I feel him smile against my lips as he kisses me.

His phone buzzes beneath the fabric of his jeans, where it rests in his pocket. He stops and slides his phone out to check it. “Probably one of the guys calling to be let in. Fucking terrible timing.” He smirks up at me. When he looks back down at his phone, his lips spread into a thin line and I practically hear him take a nervous gulp.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“N-no, it’s nothing,” he stammers, locking his phone and shoving it back into his jeans. “We should probably get set up. Wanna help me unload my stuff or do you want a drink?” He tries to play it off, giving me his wickedly attractive grin, but I see right through it.

“Are you sure nothing is wrong? Your entire demeanor just changed when your phone went off.” I don’t want to push too hard because tonight is big for him. *But was it her?*

“I’m just nervous about tonight.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “But there’s something I need to tell—”

A banging on the door ensues, pulling us from our conversation.

“It must be the guys,” he says, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. “We’ll talk after the show, okay?”

With that, he runs off, leaving a dangling question mark in his absence.

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“RUBY!” I shout over the loud flowing music in Iconic. “Ruby! Over here!” Our eyes lock before she hurries over to me. She looks really good. She’s been sober for a while now, after a brief relapse.

“Hi, Ava!” Ruby’s face lights up when she makes it to where I stand with Hailee and Oliver. “I can’t believe my little brother is about to play a show for some of the most important people in the industry.” She swats at her long bangs, shifting them.

“I’m so glad you could be here. You look amazing,” I tell her, and her already rosy cheeks redden even more. Just as we ease into conversation, the lights dim and the band takes their respective places on the stage. “Here we go!” I turn to her and then Hailee, squealing in excitement for River.

Three songs in and he looks hotter than ever with his guitar strapped around his body, tight black Offspring shirt, black jeans, and black and white Converse. He runs his hand through his hair before settling them on his electric guitar. The stage lights bounce off his body, creating colorful diamond shapes that emphasize the curves of his biceps as they strain while he strums.

He closes his eyes and I watch him lose himself in the rhythm. Something I’ve seen before, too many times to count. I find him attractive doing just about anything, but I always feel a rush of warmth running deep in my veins at seeing him in his element like this. Just like that, I forget the weirdness from earlier. Any questions disappear, replaced with sheer desire.

Iconic isn’t much bigger than The Vinyl Kitty, so we’re all packed into the place, the crowd close together and jamming along to the sounds of Blue Label.

Hailee, Oliver, and I stand by the stage and sip our drinks. We made a pact to pace ourselves more than we did the last time we were all together. But three songs in and Hailee has already broken our rules, bringing us a shot at the end of each song.

“Wooo!” she screams when the crowd finishes clapping, and the guys start in on the next song.

I’m slightly embarrassed. but I think the majority of the crowd is tipsy enough to not judge us.

River’s eyes meet with mine when he looks up, and his face softens. The way his fingers dance along the guitar strings, like music and me are the only things that matter in this moment, makes me swoon. I’m on a high, intoxicated from the mix of alcohol and him, when Hailee nudges me so hard I spill my drink down the front of me, my ice-cold

Corona seeping down my tits and onto my stomach, sending a ripple of goosebumps to life on my skin.

“Dude, what the fuck! Are you *that* drunk already?” I ask Hailee, feeling *that* drunk myself.

Her eyes are glued to something behind me, I turn to look and she quickly pulls my arm so I’m facing her again. “I don’t think you wanna do that,” she slurs, her eyes wide.

“You’re acting like a weirdo,” I tell her, turning and following her gaze to a gorgeous blonde. I look closer. She’s wearing a loose, flowy dress that shows an exorbitant amount of cleavage, but does next to nothing to show off any kind of figure. She’s wearing cherry-red lipstick and a bomb ass smokey eye. She looks familiar but I don’t quite—

Hailee’s face is next to mine as she peers over my shoulder. “Let’s kick her ass.”

And suddenly, I know. *Jackie fucking Marshall.*

---

I’M STABBING my ice with my stirrer, which means I’ve switched to a cocktail, which means this night probably won’t end well for multiple reasons.

I cannot believe Jackie *fucking* Marshall is bouncing around in here with her big fake boobs and bright red lips. The minute I realized it was her, I wanted to throw up. *Why would she be here?* Clearly, they still communicate, otherwise what kind of crazy stalker would just randomly drop by at their ex-boyfriend’s show?

I’m pissed, but I don’t know who to be mad at. River? Jackie? Myself for letting him back in only to hurt me?

My brain spins a million miles an hour and I catch River’s eyes again, only this time, my panties don’t get wet. My eyes dart to his and I give him a glare, hoping he understands it means he’s royally fucked this up.



Confusion spreads across his face, so I decide to make it abundantly clear, looking from Jackie and back to him. His eyes trail from me to Jackie, and back to me, widening. He tilts his head back, and I can feel his frustration from here.

I have one moment of hazy clarity when Oliver takes my drink from me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” I look at him and he raises one eyebrow. I nod my head, trying to convince myself.

Hailee chimes in with, “I can kick her ass if you want me to.” She says it a little too loudly, swaying. She’s *probably* joking, but the people around us won’t know that.

Oliver looks down at her. “I feel like we shouldn’t be kicking any asses tonight, love.”

An unfamiliar voice interrupts our conversation. “What’s the problem, babe?” Jackie’s voice is high-pitched, like she’s trying really hard to be what she thinks is feminine.

I shift my eyes to her, to Jackie fucking Marshall and her pretty pursed lips. Hailee immediately slams back the rest of her drink, then tosses it behind her like it’s made of plastic and won’t shatter when it hits the floor. Luckily, Oliver catches it, avoiding a near disaster as she starts heading in Jackie’s direction. *Fuck.*

I trail behind Hailee like an obedient puppy, with Oliver on my heels.

“First things first, Jackie.” Hailee puts both hands on her hips, standing almost nose to nose with her. “You don’t get to call me *babe*. My name is Hailee, and you’ll call me that or nothing at all.”

My heart picks up pace and I’m fucking dying inside. My knees weaken with every second ticking by. River’s band plays in the background and I feel his eyes burning a hole right through me.

“Second,” Hailee says, throwing both arms in the air, “why the fuck are you here? Still living in the past?” She waits for Jackie’s answer and I don’t move from my spot directly behind her, ready to grab Hailee if she starts swinging. We

don't need any assault charges. Hailee is feisty on a normal day, let alone when alcohol starts flowing.

Jackie's face slowly twists into a smile. "I'm not sure who you are," she says in her condescending tone, "but you need to learn how to handle your liquor a little better I think, sweetie."

Oh, no she did *not*. I step in front of Hailee and tell her I got this. "Jackie, right?" I ask, not waiting for her confirmation. "Listen, I don't know why you decided to stumble in here tonight but you should probably leave. Are you here for River? Because if so, he and I are together. Give it up."

I'm not usually a confrontational person, but the liquor has given me a strange confidence that feels weird coming from my lips. "You can go now." I turn toward Hailee, who's smiling a gigantic drunk smile at me, probably ready to give me a high-five, but I get a tap on my shoulder.

"Ava, right?"

I turn, looking surprised.

"Yeah, I know about you, too, sweetie. He's told me all about you. He likes you, wants to spend time with you, sees a future with you. Blah, blah, blah."

She's clearly jealous, and I'm done dealing with her. I turn again, this time grabbing Hailee by the arm. The two of us and Oliver head back to our spot at the bar, the music drowning out anything else Jackie says.

Once we're there, I resume drinking before stealing a glance at River. His eyes are still on me when Jackie saunters over to me, her red lips pressed to a can of Pepsi.

When she speaks, she does so with conviction, confidence radiating from her makeup-filled pores. "River's great and all, a real gem of a guy," she says, pausing to flip her hair and look me up and down, "but did he tell you I'm pregnant with his baby?"

My stomach churns and I lose it right then and there, vomiting a mess of food and liquor and what's left of my heart onto the record-filled floor of Iconic.

TRACK THIRTY-THREE: IT'S  
NOT RIGHT BUT IT'S OKAY

BY WHITNEY HOUSTON

## AVA

I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, MY HEAD FEELING FUZZY, AN awful emptiness in my stomach and an ache in my chest. I sit up, immediately bringing my hands to my throbbing temples. Long white drapes let in a fair amount of morning sun and suddenly, I realize I'm not in my apartment. It takes a second to figure out where I am, what day it is, and who the hell I even am.

*Oliver's apartment. Sunday morning. Ava Keyes.*

I lie back down and roll over on my side and Hailee's big blue eyes are staring straight at me. "Jesus Christ, Hailee! You weirdo!"

She squints, and a look of pain crosses her face. "Woah, no need to yell. My head hurts just as bad as yours probably does."

We both turn to the sound of feet shuffling toward us as Oliver rounds the corner into the room with a hand over his eyes. "Everyone decent?" We say yes in unison and he removes his hand, giving us both a look of disapproval. "You two ladies are quite the handful."

Hailee motions for him to sit down on the bed and he does so, saying, "Last night was truly Iconic. Not in a good way, either."

The moment he mentions Iconic, everything rushes back to me and I feel sick again. "I'm sorry, Oliver, sorry you had to babysit two drunk girls last night. That isn't a good look for

us.” *Fucking Jackie. Fucking River. Fucking BABY?! A goddamn baby.* My, how this changes things.

“Don’t apologize.” He cocks his head to the side. “How are you two doing?”

Hailee flings the blanket over her head and I sigh.

“Figured as much,” he says, leaving us to sulk together in her bed.

Hailee looks at me after Oliver shuts the door. “How are you actually doing? Have you even had time to process anything yet? I remember bits and pieces and the things I’m remembering are not pleasant.”

“Ask me in an hour, Hails,” I tell her, needing time to try to replay the pieces of last night. “Do you know what happened after I threw up?” Embarrassment washes over me and I feel my skin grow warm.

“Oliver got us out of there,” she says. “I can’t tell you how we got home, though.”

“At least Oliver’s a decent man,” I mumble.

---

I CANNOT COMPREHEND what happened last night. Things finally seemed to be going in my favor and now this? He didn’t even respect me enough to tell me he was having a baby with another woman. It’s painfully obvious they weren’t—or aren’t—over.

A text comes in. I consider not looking at my phone because I have a nagging feeling it’s River. My curiosity gets the best of me as I unlock my phone.

**River:** I’ve called you nonstop all night. Haven’t even slept, Ava. Talk to me.

He hasn’t slept all night? Poor baby. He won’t be sleeping ever again once Jackie pops his kid out.

I don’t reply but he doesn’t take the hint.

**River:** I wanted to tell you last night but then the guys got there and everything started happening so fast.

*I don't care, River. Leave me alone.*

**River:** Ava, please fucking talk to me. I'll go crazy if I lose you again. You don't understand how much I love you. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. Please.

*He loves me? Real cute. He loves me. Fuck him.*

I decide to call my dad. His voice always calms me down.

Two rings in and he answers. "Hey, kid. I was just thinking about you. Your mom and I were playing an old Tina Turner album. Remember when you were just a little girl and you'd run around the living room dancing and singing her cover of *Proud Mary* into a hairbrush?" He laughs, a deep throaty belly laugh—one of my favorite sounds in the world.

I smile despite the sadness. "Yeah, Dad, I remember. I could use a moment like that right about now. No cares in the world."

"Do you wanna talk about it?" he asks, concern growing in his voice.

"Not really. I just wanted to hear your voice, that's all. It always helps." And it does. Just hearing the comforting voice of my father helps mask the pain I'm currently avoiding.

"More good days than bad, kid," he reminds me, and I clench my eyes shut tightly, refusing to allow the tears to fall this morning. "More good days than bad."

I ask about his treatments and how he's feeling, as I always do. His answers are the same most of the time. *Good, good, good.*

Once we hang up, I undress and step into the shower, hoping it'll help soothe me. My anxiety is on another level, my mind racing.

I hear my phone ding another three times before it falls silent and I lather, running the sponge over my body as I watch the soapy water circle the drain. That's when I realize the weight of it all. The weight of River Jacobs. No amount of

water will ever rinse him from my skin. He's left his mark, a permanent one, an invisible imprint penetrating deep down into my soul.

That's when I finally let the tears fall. A mix of water and tears and heartbreak and a permanent loss that I will never heal from.

TRACK THIRTY-FOUR: GOOD  
THINGS



BY THE MENZINGERS

## AVA

THIS MANUSCRIPT I'M WORKING ON IS SLOWLY KILLING MY creativity. Unless my personal life is to blame.

I thought, after *Blurred Lines*, that I'd have more creative control over my writing. I'd heard horror stories about agents and publishing companies dictating the shit out of an author's work, but I thought maybe things would be different for me. Especially considering my first book sold so many copies.

I was wrong. Now, I'm working on a book that feels like it's only half-mine, just to appease the mainstream.

I close my laptop for the night, not wanting to see the manuscript anymore. I'm close to finishing but I honestly have no idea what comes next. After this book, I'm determined to call the shots. Even if that means a new agent and a new publisher—or none at all.

Scouring my bookshelf, I pull out the old journal I wrote *Blurred Lines* in. I start flipping through the pages of heartbreak and loss, laughing at some of the dramatic theatrics I wrote.

I pull out my favorite pen, positioning my hand on the page.

*I haven't written in this journal in a long, long time. I've all but forgotten how to write anything other than what my agent or publisher wants, and that's kind of sad now that I think about it.*

*It's not that I don't enjoy writing. I do. But I miss writing about things that are real. The sounds and the feelings, the places I go when I hurt. I miss putting my pen to paper instead of my fingers to keys.*

*The last time I wrote in a journal, I was seventeen and reeling from heartbreak. I suppose things aren't all that different now.*

*I'm in love with River Jacobs. Again.*

*I thought he was in love with me too, but he decided to go and get someone pregnant. And not tell me about it. Did he cheat on me? I have no idea. I guess it depends on how far along Jackie is. But honestly, I don't want to know. I just...I don't.*

*River leaving for California was a pain that had been indescribable at the time. It was undoubtedly the hardest time of my life, considering we received the news of my dad's health at the same time. The combination was unlike any heartache I'd ever felt up to that point.*

*I'm different now. I'm older and I have to be at least a little bit wiser. I'm stronger because I know what I deserve.*

*River and Brady are on the same playing field now, neither of them able to be content or happy with what they have.*

*I gave my all to Brady and I gave my all to River, and it wasn't enough.*

*Time to move on.*

TRACK THIRTY-FIVE: TORN

BY NATALIE IMBRUGLIA

## AVA

*Six weeks later...*

“GET YOUR ASS OUT OF BED! YOU HAVE A SEXY HUNK OF Australian man meat to see!” Hailee hits me over the head with a pillow and I reach for the closest thing to throw at her—a book.

“Shit!” she says, ducking out of the way and turning back once she’s in the clear to give me a dirty look.

“Oops.” I say, smirking at her. “I can’t be held responsible for what I do when I’m awoken from my beauty sleep.”

“Girl,” Hailee rolls her eyes, “the last thing your ass needs is beauty sleep. You are one hot tamale.” She whistles. “That heartbreak regimen of yours is fucking fire.”

Her eyes meet mine and I can tell she’s testing the waters. “Relax, Hails. I’m fine. It’s fine. We’re all fine. I’m okay.”

She narrows her eyes at me, but lets it go. “Good, then get your ass moving. We have a cocktail date to get to!” She walks out the door and pops her head back in, adding, “And let’s try to be on time for the boys, please?”

I sit up in bed and stare at my black TV screen, running through all the thoughts in my mind. I really am doing fine, good even. It’s been six weeks, and I’ll admit the first three or four were hell. I think I showered twice, survived on a coffee-

only diet, and didn't leave my apartment. But I finished the next round of edits for my novel and sent it off. I also managed not to give in whenever River reached out to me, which was plenty. Not once did I buckle.

I've been working out in the apartment gym twice a day for the past two weeks, primarily focusing on my glutes and my endurance. Watching fitness influencers on YouTube has become a hobby of mine, something to distract me from my life.

Without fail, River showed up once a week—every Sunday—to bring me a bagel from the bakery we used to go to together. I always got the bacon chive with plain cream cheese, and he's brought me one every Sunday up until this past one, always leaving it right outside my apartment door. And I always threw it straight into the trash, aside from the one that Hailee managed to sneak away and eat. She had no qualms about eating *a perfectly good bagel*.

He stopped bringing them, though. I guess he's finally getting the hint, and maybe getting over me too. *Good*.

Something inside me clicked around week four. Maybe it was seeing Hailee with Oliver and how close they'd grown in their short time of knowing each other. How he looked at her when I third-wheeled, like she was the only woman in the room. I realized I wanted that. I thought River was that person for me, but he proved me wrong.

Once I noticed that sitting around did nothing for my personal life, I decided I was done moping. I got back on the dating app because hell, I needed a good laugh. And a good laugh I got. Plenty, in fact.

I met an iron worker with a choking fetish, a man whose kink was wearing diapers and being a full-grown man-baby, and a seventy-year-old who wanted to pay my rent in exchange for sending him feet pictures. It was going well.

That's when Hailee and Oliver decided to take it into their own hands and set me up with a friend of Oliver's. The guy's a transplant Australian like Oliver, supposedly single with no baggage—*HAH, I'll believe it when I see it*—and hot as fuck.

I'm not a fan of blind dates but honestly, what do I have to lose?

Sadly, not much.

“Ava!” Hailee singsong screams at me in my own apartment. “Get your ass moving!”

This is unusual for us. I'm typically the one hurrying her along. So, I throw back my covers, determined to have a good attitude about the Aussie dude, and do as Hailee says. I get my ass moving.

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TIGHT BLACK DRESS, dark red lipstick with a gloss on top, black strappy heels, hair long and flowing—check, check, check, check. I feel hot, and ready for whatever tonight might bring.

When Hailee and I walk into the dueling piano bar, we turn heads. She's gorgeous, I'm dressed to the fucking *tens*, and we're on a mission to meet our men.

Hailee spots Oliver before I do. The bar is dark, with only the piano stage lit up. The two beautiful baby grand pianos—one pearl white, the other black—sit facing each other, waiting for the competition to start. The crowd sits in a dark and hushed silence, waiting patiently for the show to begin. As we get closer to the table, I can see past Oliver to my date, and Hailee was not lying. The man is gorgeous.

My eyes are immediately drawn to his dirty blond hair. I've always been drawn to dark hair, so this would be a first for me, but there's something about having your heart broken by your ideal man that leads you to question what you've always wanted before.

His eyes are dark, at least in this lighting. The dim, seductive lighting casts mysterious shadows over his face. He smiles in the dark and it's infectious. I'm taken aback, hit by the blinding whiteness that radiates from his mouth. *Is he a*

*fucking Australian male model?* I'm immediately self-conscious. I know I look good, but do I look *that* good?

"I'm Christopher. Chris for short. Oliver's friend from back home." He pauses. "It's great to meet you, Ava."

He extends his hand and I take it. When he helps me into my seat, I feel giddy. "It's nice to meet you, too," I say.

Hailee and Oliver exchange a playful look and smile, watching the two of us like proud parents of an arranged marriage. "Told you she was hot!" Hailee says.

I roll my eyes at her, feeling my face warm.

"You were right, Hailee," Chris says to her, not taking his eyes off me.

I play with my necklace nervously, and the piano players start in to the tune of *A Whole New World*—*how fitting*.

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TWO HOURS LATER, we've moved from the upscale piano bar to a club and I'm rubbing my ass against Chris's dick on the dancefloor, four Tito and lemonades deep, sandwiched between him and Hailee, with Oliver behind her. I glance to my left and think I see River. I shake my head and he's gone. My eyes must be playing tricks on me, seeing the ghost of fuckups past.

I turn around to face Chris—determined to push the image of River out of my mind—before taking his face in my hands and aggressively kissing him. He kisses me back with full force, tangling his fingers through my hair and pushing his tongue past my lips and into my mouth.

"I gotta pee!" Hailee yells over the music and drags me with her as the guys retreat back to the table.

I gaze into the mirror, eyes blurry, and fix my hair. "Will you please do something about my lipstick?" I ask Hailee as she comes out of her stall.

She washes her hands and when she's done, she says, "Yeah, take this," then hands me a tissue. "Wipe it all off and we'll start over." She's in the stall, and I'm wiping the color from my lips as she says, "So is he hot enough to give it up or what? He's so nice!"

"Hailee!" I say. "It isn't always just about sex, you know." I roll my eyes at her. "But you're right. The Australian can get it." Laughing, I open the door. My laugh catches in my throat when I *actually* see River, arms folded over his chest, standing right in front of me.

"What the hell, Ava?" he asks, his eyes dark and narrowed.

Hailee peeks around me, making an audible gasp. "River. Hi."

With his eyes trained on me, he says a curt hello to her and she scurries back to the table. "We need to talk," he says to me.

"What are you doing here, River? Are you following me or something? Jesus Christ," I scoff, running my fingers down the center of my hair and closing my eyes for a moment.

"I saw on Facebook that you were here, so I decided to come find you. You've been dodging my calls for weeks." He's yelling, not at me but to me, over the music. He gently grabs ahold of my arm, saying, "Come with me," and I follow.

Once we're out on the street, my dress sticks to me almost immediately thanks to the hot summer air.

River gives me a look up and down. "You're trying to impress that guy in there, clearly." *Clearly*. "Nice little show of you, tongue-fucking that dude."

"How long have you been watching me?" I ask, not wanting to know the answer, but needing to.

"I've watched long enough to see his dick protruding through his pants and rubbing against your ass. So, that was fun." He's looking at me like I'm doing something wrong and it pisses me off.



“What’s your problem, River? Seriously. I’m on a date with a nice guy—who didn’t impregnate someone and not tell me about it.” I feel the sting of my words before they’ve even left my lips.

River frowns, his lips drawn into a thin line on his face. “Real nice, Ava.” Sighing, he says, “I just want to talk to you. I’ve been trying to, fucking relentlessly, for weeks. You won’t give me the time of day. And I get you’re upset, I really do. And I don’t blame you at all, but I meant it when I said I wanted to give the two of us a real fucking shot. But you just gave up.” He crosses his arms again, leaning back onto the brick wall. “You just gave the fuck up on us.”

I’m buzzing, closer to drunk than not, and I don’t want to deal with this. I’m so sick of men hurting me and thinking they somehow have a right to do so, and I should just forgive them and make amends. I loved River. I loved him and he hurt me again and I haven’t held out this long just to fall back into his trap.

“River.” He’s looking out onto the street and I move in front of his path to lock eyes with him. I want to say a million things but I don’t, because I’m not doing this. “*You* fucked up.”

“I know I fucked up!” He launches himself off the wall and his face is so close to mine I can feel his breath—hot and sad, with tequila still dancing on his tongue. “But how can I make anything better if you’re just going to ignore me. Because now you’re fucking up too! I love you and you’re going to lose that. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Jackie’s pregnancy, but it isn’t like I fucked her while I was with you. I told you that I was with her, that it didn’t work out, and that’s the fucking truth. I didn’t find out about the pregnancy until the day after you confronted me about her calling my phone in the morning. Bet you can guess why she kept calling, now, huh?”

He brings both hands to his head and hunches over, heaving. “I tried to tell you the night of my show. I couldn’t help that Jackie came and bombarded you before I had the chance to tell you myself. And I’m so sorry for that, but I can’t

change it. I've tried calling and texting you for weeks and you never once replied. You wouldn't even hear me out. So why the hell am I the one standing here, begging you to talk to me *again*? He starts to walk away from me.

"River!" I call out, not wanting him to leave like this, my throat swelling, pain pricking at my chest with every breath. He keeps walking, but once he's a good distance away and I'm just about to burst into tears, he turns around.

"Remember that I was the one who loved you, Ava. Always. It was always me." He turns at that, and then walks out into the night.

In this moment, mascara running down my sweaty face, I realize he isn't entirely wrong. He left me the first time, but he'd made attempts to reach out. He was following a dream and I was upset at him for it, in a way. When he came back into my life by chance at the bar, he wanted to pursue things and I never called him. And even now, despite everything, he's been calling and texting and bringing me fucking bagels and I won't even give him the time of day.

I never realized anything was bothering River. He never seemed off to me. And I guess that says more about me than it does him. I come to the gut-wrenching realization that I may have been standing in my own way this entire time, pushing him away because I was afraid of getting hurt.

And now look at me—a goddamn sobbing mess on a busy Chicago street, alone.

In my heart I know...I just lost River Jacobs for good.

TRACK THIRTY-SIX: I MISS YOU

BY INCUBUS

## AVA

THREE WEEKS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE NIGHT RIVER AND I SAW each other. Three weeks. That's twenty-one days, five-hundred and four hours, thirty thousand, two-hundred and forty minutes, and way too many seconds, and I have felt every single one of them tick by like a slow-motion car wreck I can't escape.

When River and I went without talking before, it was purely out of my anger, my stubbornness. I still had glimpses of him, when he'd drop bagels off and I'd open the door to smell his lingering cologne. Or when he'd send me a text or leave me a voicemail. Now there's nothing. No texts, no calls, no bagels. No River. It's like he never existed in my life at all and just as quick as he showed up, he's gone again.

Hailee's been worrying about me. She and Oliver come over often to check in, asking me to hang out or go to dinner with them, but I always politely decline. The only good thing that has—once again—come out of this, has been my writing. I've written the entire first draft of another book. I finally got the bit of free rein that I've been begging for. It's amazing what happens when your creativity is allowed to flow. Hooray for silver linings.

But the most pathetic part?

I made a fake Instagram account and followed him so I could still see what he was up to. If I can't have him in my

life, I can at least keep an eye on him and make sure he's doing okay.

And doing okay is exactly how he's been doing. He posts frequent updates about the baby. Jackie is looking increasingly pregnant, and also annoyingly beautiful. I don't know if the two of them are together. If they are, her Facebook doesn't list it, because believe me, I've stalked the shit out of that daily, too.

I check my phone for the first time all day, determined not to go on social media for at least a little bit. I need to stop obsessing over River and his life. A text from Chris is waiting for me, along with a text from an unknown number. No other notifications at all.

**Chris:** Hey, I was just wondering if you maybe wanted to get dinner tonight. We could go out or stay in, doesn't matter. Just hoping to see you again. Maybe a do-over date?

He's reached out to me a few times, even with the inside knowledge that I needed some space after what went down in front of Iconic that night. I know I'm not ready for a relationship of any kind but he was nice, and Oliver is great, so I know any friend of his would be a great friend to me as well.

**Me:** Want to come over? I can send you my address. I just want to be upfront that this would be more of a friend date right now, if that's okay. I understand if you don't want to, but I'd love to have company if you do.

**Chris:** Totally understand. I'd love to.

And with that, I send off my address and decide I should probably clean up my apartment a bit. I'm normally the clean type, but depression can suck the life right out of you and leave you not giving a shit about things you normally care about, so here we are.

I remember there's another text message waiting for me and check it.

**Unknown:** Hi, is this Ava?

**Me:** Hi, yes. I don't have you saved in my phone. Who is this?

It takes almost twenty minutes for a response, time I use to tidy up and put myself together just a little, at the very least. When the next text comes through, I'm wishing I hadn't said yes to a friend date with Chris. I just don't feel up to seeing people.

**Unknown:** Yeah, you definitely wouldn't. lol This is Jackie Marshall. Please don't disregard this message, I really need to speak with you.

Of course. Jackie fucking Marshall is coming back into my life to kick me while I'm down.

**Me:** What about?

**Jackie:** Can we meet up? It won't take long and I'm near your place. I know you have deadlines and things for your books.

So, River is still talking to Jackie about me and my books and even where I live? I don't get it. I don't want to talk to Jackie. I'm not sure why she can't just say her piece via text, but I'm not in the business of pissing off pregnant women. Plus, I don't have anything going on in my life anyway so why the hell not?

I text Hailee to tell her I'm meeting with Jackie and she asks if I want back up. I tell her no, that I'm not going to throw down with a pregnant woman, and that I'll tell her all about it when I get back. If anything, this might be good content for my next book. After shooting a quick text to Chris and asking him to come a little later, I'm on my way to meet my ex-boyfriend's baby momma.

She's already sitting down on a bench when I see her, so I don't get a good view of her baby bump, but from social media alone, I know it's there.

Her face is puffy, and dark circles pigment the skin under her eyes. "Ava." She smiles. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me."

“It was no problem, really. What’s going on?” I’d like to just get straight to the point and not act like two friends meeting for coffee to shoot the shit and gossip about our lives.

“I know I’m not your favorite person and sitting here with me is probably on the bottom of the list of things you’d like to be doing, but...it’s about River,” she says. “First things first, I need to apologize to you for the way I came at you at Iconic. I shouldn’t have been the one to tell you, and I definitely shouldn’t have done it in the way that I did. I was being immature, and it was gross. I’m sorry about that. That isn’t who I am.”

My ears perk up at the sound of River’s name. I obviously knew this had something to do with him, since she and I are only connected through him, but I’m interested to know what it is.

“Now, about River. He’s miserable, absolutely miserable, and he has been ever since the night you and I first met. I’m sorry about that, by the way. I was pissed off at him for not wanting to be with me, for choosing you and expecting me to be fine with it. And I know now that he didn’t do anything wrong. I was the only one at fault. I’m about to be some little boy’s mother, you know? I need to start owning up to my own shit and start taking responsibility for my actions. And regardless of how he and I are, I want him to be happy, and he was *really* fucking happy when he was with you,” she finishes, out of breath, one hand on her belly.

She offers me a smile that I accept, even though everything she’s said somehow makes me even more confused than I was before. “If he’s so miserable, why isn’t he reaching out to me?”

“He wants you to be happy. He said you deserve to be happy and that he can’t ever give that to you. He basically told me he loves you so much that your happiness means more than his. But honestly, Ava, between me and you, River is being such a whiny pessimistic asshole that I don’t want to bring a child into the world with him so fucked up. And I think you’re the only one who can un-fuck him up.”

“That man has it bad for you.” She’s crying now, a quick turn. “Hormones. Just hormones, that’s all.” She fans her face with her hand. “I promise you. Hormones and the fact that I obviously care about him, too. I want him to be happy as much as he wants you to be happy.”



TRACK THIRTY-SEVEN:  
BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT

## AVA

I'M PLEASANTLY SURPRISED BY MY CONVERSATION WITH Chris. He's a breath of fresh air. The conversation is light and we share a playful banter that comes naturally.

"Okay, so. Next question..." his voice trails off as he thinks. "How old were you when you had your first kiss?" He looks intrigued.

I squint, trying to remember my actual age. "I think I was thirteen, maybe fourteen. Tommy Lohman. In his backyard, on my neck."

He almost spits his wine out of his mouth. "On the neck? You went straight from no kissing to neck kissing? Dang, girl." His astonishment turns into laughter.

He's one of the best looking men I have ever seen and if I weren't so fucked up from River, I'd be all over taking a chance with him.

He rubs at his light blondish-brown scruff and I admire how symmetrical his face is. "Your turn."

"Hmm," I think aloud. "How about..." I huff. "Have you ever been in love?" I think we're on round ten of our questions, and I'm starting to run out of interesting ones.

He knows the answer to this quickly and gives me a resounding yes. "I was in so deep." His accent is strong with this statement and I see pain behind his eyes. "It's been a long time, but yeah. I had a great girl. Her name was Jessica. We

don't speak anymore but she was my best friend for a long time."

I don't want to push the subject, and when he asks me the same question, I balk.

"What do you mean you can't answer?" he says. "That's not part of the game and you know it."

I roll my eyes at him to make a point. "Okay, okay. Lord." I glare at him. "Yeah, for sure I was. I probably still am. It's annoying and I'm sick of it and it just lingers."

Chris doesn't look sad or upset when I say it, probably because he already knows. "Why do you think it lingers, as you say?"

It takes me by surprise that he presses further. Up until now, we simply asked, answered, and kept it moving. "I don't know, Chris. I really don't. Probably because when he and I are good, we are so fucking good it's insane, but every single time we reach a good stride, something comes along and screws it all up. You know," I break for dramatic effect, "like a pregnant ex-girlfriend."

I look down into my lap, trying to figure it out myself. "I feel like we have so much more to do together, yet it never works out. But still, for some reason, I can't ever fully let River go. No matter how hard I try to forget about him, he's always there." This is the first time I'm really trying to self-diagnose my addiction to River Jacobs and I'm pretty sure I hit the nail on the damn head.

"Well, hot damn, I think you've solved all your issues." He laughs. "But in all seriousness, this River guy sounds like he's really left his mark on you." When I don't respond, he adds, "In a good way, Ava. A good way, if you two can figure this shit out, get out of your own way, and stop letting other people get in it."

*This man is giving me advice about another man?* This doesn't happen often, from what I've seen anyway. I decide to take advantage of the situation and pick his head a little.

“Why didn’t he tell me he got another woman pregnant? Why did he let me find out from the pregnant woman herself instead of being man enough to say it to my face?” I realize now that that’s the worst part of it all. It isn’t even that I feel like he was kind of lying to me by omitting a very important detail; it was that Jackie told me, not River.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Chris asks. “He didn’t want to lose you. Only, in turn, by being so cautious as to *not* lose you, he in fact, lost you.”

*Makes sense, really.* “Okay, but then why get mad at me when I got mad about it? If he knew he was being slick, why not just apologize and try to move forward?”

Chris looks confused, like that’s all the time we have today and he’ll send me a bill later. “Sometimes, when someone knows they’re wrong, defensiveness is an easy out. But are you sure he didn’t try at all? No apologizing? Nothing? Just jumped straight into anger?”

I think back to the night, the sweat and the people around us, the liquor and the love. The hurt. Chris is right. River did try to apologize.

“If you love him,” Chris says, looking me in the eyes so deeply I feel like he can see my soul, “you should tell him. Because if there’s one thing I learned from my love—Jessica—it’s that time is never on our side.”

Sadness looms over him and I pull him in for a hug, I tell him I’m sorry through my tears, and I feel his own on my shoulder.

“It’s never on our side,” he repeats. “So, go after him, Ava.”

TRACK THIRTY-EIGHT:  
SOMETHING

BY THE BEATLES

## AVA

IF MY LIFE WERE A ROM-COM, I WOULD HAVE LOOKED AT Chris and without a single word, fled my apartment and ran down Michigan Avenue in the pouring rain straight into River's arms. He would have randomly been standing there, in the middle of the busy sidewalk, just waiting for me. We would have made out passionately, everyone around us clapping, and then the credits would start to roll.

But this is not a rom-com and I am one stubborn bitch. But I'm also a *realistic* stubborn bitch, and I need time to process everything that both Jackie and Chris said to me the other night.

"Okay," Hailee says as she fills a balloon up with helium, "but you *are* going to call him, right?"

I ignore her, trying to make sure the crew is hanging the *Autism Awareness Benefit* sign as straight as possible. It's ginormous and the perfect shade of blue.

"Sorry, Hails." I take a deep breath. "I think I will, one way or another. I need to talk to him, regardless of what could happen. Whether we end up together, who knows, but I don't think I could ever be in a healthy relationship if I don't get closure."

"Why the hell do you need closure? River is your person. Why are you overcomplicating this?" she asks me.

I'm tired of talking about it—it hurts—and I want tonight to be a good night. I want all the attention on Dillon and the

organization that has helped so many people in this city.

“Look, I just want you to be happy, that’s all,” Hailee says. “If it’s by yourself, or with River, or with some random homeless dude, I don’t give a shit. I just want you to be happy.”

I take both of her hands and shake them while saying, “Everything will be okay. What’s meant to be will find its way to me and I am content in not yet knowing what that is.”

She looks at me with an odd expression on her face. “Did you get that from a self-help guided meditation book?”

We laugh and then get back to work on setting up for the benefit.

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YOU’RE PROBABLY the best big sister anyone could ever ask for,” Dillon says, his smile infectious.

He turns away for a moment to greet one of his friends and I take the time to take him in. He’s got my height beat by a good few inches, but I’ll always be his big sister. I wait as he talks to his friend before turning back to me, his smile still as wide as ever.

“Have I ever told you how proud I am to have that title? To be your big sister?” I ask him.

He squints his eyes and I can almost see him raking his thoughts for an old conversation between the two of us. Finally, Dillon shakes his head and laughs. “Who knows, sis. Doesn’t matter, though. Your words, and all the work you’ve put into this event, mean a lot.”

He’s grown up so much over the last few years. From being completely dependent on our mom and dad, to working hard and striving for his independence, he’s turned into an adult right before my eyes. Sabine runs up behind him and places her palms over his eyes. She giggles and he turns to her, pulling her in for a hug.

The microphone screeches to life with an ear-piercing shrill.

“Good evening, everyone! On behalf of The Leading Way, I would love to invite our event organizer, Ava Keyes, up here to say a few words.” The tall, dark-skinned woman smiles warmly in my direction and I head up to the stage to take my place.

Suddenly, my nerves are on fire beneath my skin. Electric waves of anxiety pulse inside my chest and I suddenly realize that this is the largest crowd I’ve ever spoken in front of. Even talking to aspiring young writers, in crowds of two or three hundred, doesn’t beat this.

Stepping onto the stage, I adjust the microphone and scan my eyes over the massive crowd that fills the large room.

“Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for attending the benefit this evening. We’re so incredibly appreciative for your support. All donations from tickets as well as raffle baskets are going directly to The Leading Way of Chicago.” Taking a quick breath, I glance down before starting in about Dillon and the experience my family has had.

“As some of you may know, my brother, Dillon Keyes, was diagnosed with autism at a young age. Growing up, I watched my parents struggle to gain access to resources that would help Dillon and our family. But it’s vital, as most of you are aware, that children receive early intervention. And because we were told that Dillon was high functioning, it was difficult for our family to get the benefits he deserved.”

I purposely shy away from looking at my family, knowing how emotional they’ll be. I don’t want to make a mess of this by breaking down in the middle of it. “All we kept hearing was how *normal* Dillon seemed. As Dillon and I grew up, our parents did a wonderful job at educating us of the misconceptions of autism. After we were old enough to fully comprehend the struggle ourselves, our parents told us how Dillon’s teachers would call parent-teacher conferences, frustrated about Dillon acting out in class. They didn’t believe my parents about the diagnosis. There was even a parent in



one of my mother's mom groups that commented on how normal Dillon looked, as if his disability couldn't possibly be real if she couldn't see it."

I throw my hands up and shrug. "Misconceptions. That's what a lot of this boils down to. My parents battled against many forces but finally got Dillon enrolled in ABA therapy, and our world changed for the better. Let's fast-forward to enrolling in The Leading Way. Once Dill was able to start taking classes with them, his confidence started to skyrocket. He began to believe in himself and all that he could accomplish. He met other young adults that were going through similar things and he found a sense of community within the very walls of this organization."

I finally give in and allow my eyes to pan over to my beautiful, perfect family. My dad sits in his wheelchair, which has become quite the staple over the last couple of years, and my mom is holding his hand in hers. Dillon smiles up at me with tears in his eyes.

Just as I'm about to complete my speech, I glance over to the left of Dillon, to the man standing next to him. Their shoulders are touching, the closeness between the two one of comfortable ease.

When I look into his eyes, every single ounce of love I have in my body bubbles inside of me. My heart leaps into my throat, my legs aching to jump off this stage and run into his arms.

*River came. He's here.*

I realize that I'm staring in a wide-eyed gaze at the man I love, so I force myself to rip my concentration from him and turn it back to the rest of the crowd.

Clearing my throat, I continue. "My parents were worried that Dillon wouldn't have the same chance to succeed as other people, due to his autism diagnosis. They found themselves terrified that job applications would be tossed into a shredder before a chance was even given, that Dillon would be a statistic rather than a success. But The Leading Way totally erased those fears. So, thank you for supporting this

organization. We're just one of the many, many families touched by this incredibly giving program. Not only are they Chicago's most comprehensive pathway program, but they've completely changed our lives, and we are indebted to them forever."

The words are hard for me to get out as my emotions get the best of me. But I do my best to wrap it up. "So, thank you. Thank you for being here. Please know that your money is being donated to a life-changing, miracle of an organization. Have a wonderful time tonight!"

Clapping fills the air and the woman who introduced me walks back onto the stage, announcing that the raffle basket bidding will start shortly.

As I make my way toward my family, and toward River, my nerves swarm for a different reason. *He's here. Now what?*

Hailee jumps in front of me, wide-eyed and smiling. "Did you see that River's here?"

I nod and before I know it, she's slapping me on the butt and saying, "Go get 'em tiger!" a little too loudly for my liking.

When I approach my family, my mom beams at me. "Honey! What a beautiful sentiment." She pulls me in for a hug, and her warmth mixed with the lilac scent on her skin comforts me almost immediately.

After we finally break our embrace, I bend down to hug my dad. "Hey, Daddy-O." He's strong today, I can feel it in his grip. For that, I'm thankful.

"Nice speech, kid." He grins. "Made me get all emotional and stuff." The lines get deeper in his face by the day. "Are you almost done with that next bestseller of yours?"

"I promise it's getting closer." He's proud of my writing career, and it makes me feel on top of the world to know so. While his grip is strong, the lines mixed with the discoloration under his eyes worry me. I don't want to put a sour tone on tonight, so I try to shake it away.

Feeling River's eyes on me, I turn to him and give him a soft smile, but Dillon wraps his arms around me, stealing my attention.

"You didn't tell me River was coming!" he says. "Were you trying to surprise me?"

I pull back from Dillon and nod. "Yeah, Dill. Something like that."

My mom tugs at Dillon's sleeve and tells him they have some mingling to do, and the three of them head off, leaving me alone with River.

Once I allow my eyes to meet his, I turn back toward him and the silence that lingers in the air is a bit awkward, neither of us knowing where to begin. We both start to talk, and then stop simultaneously and laugh, breaking through the weird barrier. Almost.

"You first," I say, not knowing where to begin.

River's typical confident appearance fades as he looks away from me, his eyes darting from the floor to the people surrounding us before finally settling on me. "I wanted to tell you, Ava. I don't want you to think I was seeing Jackie behind your back, or that I was going to try and keep her pregnancy a secret from you." He lets out a big breath and motions to a cocktail table.

I nod, and we walk over to sit.

He takes both of my hands in his across the small table. "I never wanted this to happen. I was being careless. I knew you needed time to sort things out after your engagement, and Jackie was comfortable for me. She wanted more, I didn't. I told you that, and it's the truth. I tried, honestly. I tried to feel something more for her, but I just couldn't. Not with you dancing around in the back of my mind." He squeezes my hands in his, and it hurts hearing about any kind of relationship with Jackie, but I know I have no right to hurt.

When he doesn't continue, I start in, wanting to fully acknowledge everything he's saying. "I was quick to judge you that night at Iconic, when Jackie came in. I'm fully aware

that I didn't even give you a chance to explain, I just totally fell apart and pushed you away, and that wasn't right of me. I'm sorry for that, Riv. I really am. But, faced with the possibility of you cheating, after what happened with Brady, it killed me."

"I would never do that to you. I get how it looked, and I know it was sprung on you in the wrong setting by the wrong person. You should have heard it from me. I should have *made* time to tell you. I'm sorry. I wish I could go back and do it differently, but I can't. I'd give anything to erase the hurt you felt that night, but life doesn't work like that. I can only try to make up for it now." He smiles, but it's fleeting. "I'm so fucking sorry I hurt you like that." He sits a bit straighter and pulls away from me, adjusting his tie.

It's the first time I've really taken in his attire. A full-on black suit, white dress shirt, and black tie. He looks stunning, like a goddamn star.

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ears and smooth my pleated skirt. "I forgive you." It's maybe the first time I've ever said those words—to anyone. Sure, I've made up with people, but have I ever uttered the words of forgiveness? I'm not sure. But in this moment, with River, I know I want to. And I know I want them to be true.

"This thing we have going on, Riv," I motion between the two of us, "I think it's too good to just let slip away again. Everything that's led us to this very moment..." I suck in a sharp breath. "It's been a bit of a mess," I finally say, laughing. "It's been a mess but it's *our* mess. It's a mess of you and a mess of me mixed with the people who got involved in our mess." I don't even know if my words are making sense, but I don't care.

He gets up and walks around the table where he stands in front of me, his dress shoes and my heels touching at the toes. He bends his head down to mine, his breath hot against my skin as he whispers, "Maybe we should clean the slate and start a new mess?"

Taking his head in my hands, I bring his lips down to mine. After our kiss, I say, “So, The Doors or Black Sabbath?”

TRACK THIRTY-NINE: WE'VE  
GOT TONIGHT

BY BOB SEGER

## AVA

TWO DAYS AFTER THE BENEFIT, I KEEP GOOD ON MY PROMISE to my dad and hit the send button on the email to my editor. My next book is out of my hands and I feel confident about it. I didn't know how it would end before. But after my conversation with River the other night, it came to me. The perfect ending.

I smile as my cell phone vibrates against my desk, seeing River's name light up my screen before I answer, "Hey, Riv."

"Hey, I'm almost to your place. Tacos or pizza?"

I practically salivate at his words. I don't even remember eating today and it's almost five o'clock. When I get into the zone, all rational thought—like eating a meal—flies out the window. "Surprise me."

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"IF YOU DON'T CUT that out, we won't have any pepperonis for the pizza!" I playfully jab at River as he pops yet another pepperoni into his mouth, smirking at me.

"Fine by me, we can just add extra cheese." He smirks.

I look from the bag of shredded cheese to him and cock my head to the side. "Don't think I haven't noticed you sneaking cheese by the handfuls." I pull him toward me, reveling in his touch. I have missed this man more than my

words will ever fully explain, in fiction or otherwise. “I’m so glad you’re here,” I say against his shirt.

After we slide the pizza in the oven, River pours wine for us and we move from the kitchen to the living room.

Once we’re settled on the couch, River looks at me and says softly, “It took awhile, but here we are. There’s no one else I’d rather steal pepperonis and cheese from on a weeknight.”

“What about a weekend?” I tease, swatting at him.

The sound of his cell phone rattling against the table pulls us from our banter. I watch lustfully as he moves and bends a little to pick it up.

“Hey,” he says when he answers the call, looking directly at me. He all but drops the phone the moment the loud, intense screeching blares through the speaker.

“I’m having the baby!” It’s Jackie’s voice that’s wailing, permeating through the phone with such force that River has to rub at his ear.

I immediately set my wine glass down and go into *oh shit* mode. “Okay, what does she need us to do? Does she need anything from her house? Do we need to just get right to the hospital?” More wailing ensues and I start to think that getting to the hospital would be the best thing for all parties involved here.

River asks Jackie if her mom is with her. Another shrill scream followed by a long yes.

“Okay, can you put her on for me?” River asks, and Jackie’s mom takes over the conversation. He puts her on speakerphone as I grab my purse and his keys before turning the oven off.

I usher him out the door. “Let’s go!” I mouth to him, while Jackie’s mom gives him instructions on how to get into the labor and delivery section of the hospital.



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ONCE WE'RE in the comfort of River's new SUV, he reaches over and palms my knee. I can feel how clammy his hand is.

He traded in his motorcycle in preparation for the baby. I look across the new vehicle at River and he must feel my eyes on his, because he glances at me quickly before turning his eyes back to the busy road in front of us. The color has drained from his face and I take his hand in mine.

"Hey. It's going to be okay, Riv. What's going on in your head?" I ask.

He lets out a long, drawn out breath before saying, "I think the fact that I'm about to become a father is finally hitting me."

*What if he doesn't want me there for it?* I didn't even ask if he wanted me to come.

"You're going to be an amazing dad," I tell him. It's easy to say because it's the truth. There's no doubt in my mind that River is going to be a great father. He's selfless and kind, giving and loving.

He keeps his eyes trained on the road. "What if I'm not?" he asks, and his tone is full of a fear I've never known. His normal, quirky, easygoing sense of humor gives way to worry and doubt. "What if I'm like my father?" he asks, even quieter. His knee is shaking vigorously, his fingers tapping against the wheel. I wish I could take away some of his anxiousness and take on that burden for him, but I can't.

I'm not sure why the thought hadn't crossed my mind until now, until he's voiced it. Of course he would worry about this. "Your dad showed you exactly how you want to avoid being, Riv. You know as well as I do that you won't make those same mistakes." I try to reassure him and hope he's capable of hearing my words. I know he has a million thoughts running rampant through his mind right now, and that's just one of them.

After we pull into the hospital and park, a clerk directs us to the birthing suites and we speed walk in the direction he points us in. I stop, mid-stride, suddenly feeling the overwhelming urge to make sure this is okay with him. I don't want to be another worry on his radar.

“Should I be here?” I ask. “I mean, do you want me here? I won't be offended if you say no. I want to be here for you, but I just don't know if it's okay. Is it?” I'm speaking in circles.

River grabs my hand and pulls me toward him. “Of course I want you here. I *need* you here. You're my person. I'm about to have another person, a little one, and I want the woman I love here with me.”

I smile at him, and we pick up the pace again. Once we make it to the waiting area, River walks up to the receptionist and I hang back by an open couch. It doesn't take him long and before I know it, he's back over to me and wrapping his arms around me.

“I'm going to go back into Jackie's room. They allow two support people in so I'll be in there with her and her mom. Are you okay out here? Can I get you anything before I head in? Is your phone charged?” He pats his pockets. “Shit! Is *my* phone charged?” His face sinks when he sees his battery in the red.

I pull out my long charger wire from my purse and hand it to him. “Get in there, Riv. You're going to become a dad today. It's freaking wild, isn't it? My phone is fine. Text me updates when you can, okay?” I stand up on my toes, bringing my mouth to his, locking us together for a brief moment.

“I love you,” he whispers, his forehead resting against mine. “Thank you.”

I know he's not just talking about the charger. I breathe him in, his spicy scent filling my nostrils, his words giving me the sense of security I've been longing for. “I love you, Riv.”

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THE NEXT SIX hours give me time to reflect on everything that's happened; how life unfolds so strangely, but perfectly at the same time.

After everything that happened at River's show, I never expected to be here, waiting for his baby to be born, yet here I am. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

The hum of the automatic doors is natural now, so when River walks through, I don't notice until he's standing in front of me. My eyes pan up to his, which are glassy and puffy, like he's been crying. And I know.

"I'm officially a dad to a little boy." He lets out a small cry when he says it and I melt inside. "Lennox Marshall Jacobs was born almost an hour ago. They've been cleaning him up and helping Jackie get comfortable. I came out as soon as I could."

I've seen River look happy more times than I can count, but I think this is an entirely new level of happiness, his smile stretching proudly across his face.

"I'm so happy for you. How is he? How's Jackie? Is she doing okay?" I ask.

"Come back and see for yourself," he says, and I immediately grow anxious.

"Are you sure? Do you think it's okay with her?" I instantly feel bad. From what both she and River have told me, she really cared about him and really wanted it to work. I don't know that I should parade in right after she had a baby. I'm probably not her favorite person in the world.

"Yes, Ave." He motions for my hand and I place mine in his. "We've already talked about it. She wants you to meet Lennox, too."

After he leads me through the doors and back to Jackie's room, I gasp the moment I see her cradling their tiny baby in her arms. He's wrapped from his neck down to his toes in a white cotton blanket, a pastel blue hat on his tiny head.

"Hi, Jackie," I call out to her as we step over the threshold. Once we're closer, I can see that Lennox is a spitting image of

River, down to his perfect button nose. I hope he gets his beautiful emerald eyes one day. “He’s absolutely perfect.” I feel so overcome with emotion seeing this beautiful baby that River contributed to making.

Jackie hands Lennox to River, and the two of us sit on a window seat.

River gently sways Lennox back and forth in his arms. “I just can’t believe he’s here. I feel like a hundred lifetimes have passed since you told me, Jacks.” The way he nicknames her hits me hard in the gut, but I swallow it down.

“Don’t tell me how long it was for *you*, buddy.” She laughs then winces, grabbing hard onto the bedrail.

I don’t stay long before excusing myself, congratulating Jackie and commenting on how gorgeous Lennox is on my way out. I ask River to update me later tonight on how both Jackie and Lennox are doing. It’s important to me to do the right thing, to give the three of them time together as a family. Because, that’s what they are—a family.

It’s both a painful and beautiful realization.

# TRACK FORTY: WILD HORSES

BY THE ROLLING STONES

## RIVER

BEING A FATHER IS DIFFERENT THAN I EXPECTED.

Sure, I knew it would mean long nights and a new lifestyle, but I don't think I ever understood the amount of love that could come from such a tiny little human.

Love is strange.

I love my parents, even though it's been an uphill climb. I love Ruby, how healthy she's gotten and the relationship we've grown. I love the relationship she'll be able to have with my son. I love Ava, more than almost anything.

Loving Lennox, though, is incomparable to any love I've ever known. You can't measure a love for a child. Nothing comes close because it's such a different feeling.

The moment I first laid my eyes upon him, I knew I was going to change for the better. And it's all thanks to this little man that's basically a miniature version of me.

Ava and I have both started slowly transitioning into parenthood—me as a father, her as my partner in crime. We're doing exponentially well for having no fucking clue what we're doing. But does anyone?

Ava holds Lennox's legs while I wipe him so he doesn't get poop all over the both of us. I wash bottles, she sanitizes pacifiers. We're a team, the best kind of team I could ever ask for.

Seeing Ava basically be a stepmother to Lennox has solidified what I've known for quite some time now. Something I've known since I first saw her, when she was browsing records and beckoning me to her with no effort.

Lennox is five days old now. Jackie agreed to let Ava and I keep him overnight at my place. Co-parenting isn't as tough as I thought it would be. Even though really, Jackie and I both don't ever want to be without our son.

"He's crying." Ava's voice is muffled, her lips pressing into her pillow. "River!"

"I hear him, Ave. I'm exhausted. Can you take my turn and I'll get the next? I can't even see straight." I sit up and rub at my temples. The hallway light peeks in from underneath the door and I can barely see Lennox fussing in his crib, but boy do I hear him. "Ava?"

She replies with a snore.

---

THREE HOURS LATER, the only thing keeping me sane is the gentle hum of the coffee maker as it brews my saving grace. Ava walks into the kitchen, smiling and holding Lennox close to her chest.

"Good morning, Daddy!" she says, looking down at Lennox and then back to me. When she senses that I'm not really in the mood to speak yet, she asks what's wrong.

*What's wrong? What's...wrong?* Ava and I have been doing so well and I don't want to start a petty argument because I'm tired, but she has to know what's wrong. "I'm tired, Ave. I was the only one who got up with the baby last night. Three times."

"I'm sorry, Riv. I didn't realize," she says, her face twisting into a frown.

Ava's a pretty solid sleeper and it's hard as hell to wake her, so I know she wasn't purposely avoiding taking care of the baby. I'm just so damn tired I can't see straight.

I flick the coffee maker's switch to off and grab my mug from under the spicket, blowing on the top to cool it down. "I just could have used some help. I really wanted to be able to play with him today and now I feel like a damn zombie," I say, mouth still hovering above my coffee. I watch as my breath swirls the dark liquid.

"You could have woken me up," she says defensively, swaying with a fussy Lennox. It's time for another four-ounce bottle and he's getting crabby.

"I guess I just thought you'd take some initiative, that's all," I say, setting down my coffee after taking a swig. "I'll make him a bottle. He's getting hungry."

"No," Ava says, reaching for a clean bottle. "I'll do it. Why don't you go rest a bit and when you get up, we'll have some family time?"

Her kindness makes me wish I hadn't said anything but I feel myself growing grumpier by the minute, so I kiss them both on the forehead and head back to the bedroom.



TRACK FORTY-ONE: HOLDING  
ON

BY SAM RUSSO

## AVA

“HEY, DAD.” I TAKE THE SPOT NEXT TO HIM ON THE COUCH. Mom and Dillon are out grocery shopping and I just really need to talk to my dad.

Jackie picked Lennox up an hour ago and River has things to do with the band, so I figured it was perfect timing to come see my dad. Plus, I need some much-needed advice. From the one person I’ve always been able to count on.

“Hey, kid. How ya doin’? How was your first night with a baby?” he asks, smiling.

I cock my head to the side and blink slowly, wide-eyed.

“That good, huh?” He laughs. “Parenting is a wild ride, honey. A fun, challenging, wild as hell ride.” He coughs and quickly takes a drink of water. “How’d River do last night?”

I hate to put the weight of my thoughts on my sick father, but he’s the person I always go to. I’m not sure if I should tell him about the small incident in the kitchen this morning or not.

“You aren’t telling me something, and you know that never goes over well,” he says, butting into my thoughts.

Groaning, I say, “Dad, I don’t want to bother you with this,” even though part of me is glad he’s forcing it out of me. I’d be trying to fool myself if I were to even pretend that I don’t need to hear his wisdom.

He gives me a look, furrowing his brow and crossing his arms over his chest.

“River got a bit short with me this morning because I didn’t help with the baby last night,” I admit.

“You didn’t help with Lennox?”

“It isn’t that I didn’t want to!” I rush out. “I was sleeping. I guess he tried to wake me and I just didn’t get up and help. I don’t even remember it. I think I remember hearing the baby cry once, maybe twice, but I fell right back asleep...”

A wide smile spreads across my dad’s face.

“What?” I ask.

“You and Riv are going to have a lottttt of arguments over sleep, let me just tell you that right now. Sleep will soon be a luxury. Having a pint-sized human kinda consumes your nights, unfortunately.” He gazes off for a minute, and I assume he’s thinking about when Dillon and I were babies. “I remember when your mom and I got into an argument because she accused me of sleeping more than her and I thought she slept more. We both ended up falling asleep during the argument because we were so tired. Best sleep we had in weeks.” He chuckles.

“It’s hard, Dad. And that was only our first night with him. River is drained and I just feel bad for being useless.” I sigh. “After River went back to sleep, I sat looking at Lennox as he slept. I know he isn’t my biological child, but I already love him like he is. It’s still hard, though—knowing River and Jackie are his parents. I’m not. I’m disposable. You know? What if River and I don’t work out and I lose River *and* Lennox? It’s like everything is magnified now.” I start spilling the words that have been circulating all day in my head, knowing my dad would never judge me for my feelings.

“You know my favorite thing about you, kid?” my dad says, and it catches me off guard because I’ve just emptied the contents of my heart to him and he’s changing the subject.

“What?” I ask.

“Your ability to overthink just about everything.” He pulls me to his side and hooks his arm around me. “I love that you can see things from every side. You’re logical. That means, you have less of a chance of getting yourself into sticky situations because you’re a smart thinker.” He squeezes my arm a bit and rests his head against mine. “But you can’t overthink parenting and you certainly can’t overthink the future. We’re living in the here and now. Do you remember that quote? The one River first left for you in the record shop? That quote about things being known and unknown and in between there are the doors? That’s life, kid.”

I pull back from him, confused. “Dad, you’ve lost me.”

“Ava. You cannot fixate on the unknown. You have to just be content with what you do know, and I’m pretty certain you know you love River and want to be with him, right?”

“Of course.”

“The things in between are the doors. That’s where you’re going to have to allow your mind to relinquish control a bit and lead with your heart. You just have to remember that and know things will work out how they’re meant to.” He smiles. “Always.”

TRACK FORTY-TWO: HEY  
JEALOUSY

BY GIN BLOSSOMS

## RIVER

AVA WALKS IN THE DOOR TO MY PLACE AND I LIGHT UP. I BEAT her home by ten minutes and I'm glad I did, so I can try to make up for this morning.

She spots the vase of flowers and smiles softly. "For me?" she asks.

"Who else?" I grin. "I'm sorry," I say, reaching out for her and pulling her in once she takes my hands. "I was a tired jerk this morning. Being a dad is the best thing in the entire world but it kinda makes me a grump."

Ava laughs, tossing her head back. Then, while still pressed into me, she looks up and into my eyes. "I love you, River."

"I love you, too. How's the fam?"

"I spent most of my time with my dad. Have I ever mentioned how awesome he is?" She gently pushes away from me and heads to the fridge. After opening it and grabbing a bottle of water, she says, "I'm scared," then turns back around to face me.

"Scared of what?" I ask, though I think I know the answer.

"Scared of a life without him. You know as well as I do that he's looking worse and worse all the time. He goes for his checkup soon, and I don't want to hear any bad news. He talked me down from a ledge earlier." She sighs. "And by the way, you weren't a jerk. I was a jerk. I'm sorry I didn't help

you. If we had split waking up in the middle of the night, we would have had more time together today.”

“Nah,” I tell her. “We would have both just been zombies and Lennox would be ruling the household,” I joke. “We’ll get the hang of this thing, Ave. And about your dad...”

I trail off, knowing words won’t make this better, but knowing I want to try anyway. “Your dad is incredible. He and your mom have raised two awesome kids into full-blown adults. I envy what a great father he is. If and when we get any news that’s less than ideal, we’ll figure it out. Together.”

She makes her way back to me and squeezes me tightly, a tear escaping her eye. “It’s a good thing you’ve met Jeff Keyes,” she says softly. “I think he’s rubbing off on you. You’re already a pretty damn good father, too. And you’re a wonderful partner, Riv. Thank you.”

---

WE FORGOT to send the diaper bag back this afternoon, so Ava and I stop by Jackie’s to drop it off.

Jackie’s long blonde hair is a wild mess on top of her head. “Remind me to never do this again,” she huffs, bending down awkwardly to pick a feminine product off the floor that her dog just ran out with from the bathroom. “Having a baby fucking hurts.” She clenches her lower abdomen and scolds the dog for digging in the trash again. “You’re one disgusting mutt.”

“Is there anything I can help with?” Ava asks her sincerely. She sits next to me on Jackie’s couch where I’m holding the baby.

Jackie smiles at her, and it makes me so unbelievably proud of how much the three of us have grown. Having a baby does that to you. Lennox is a little miracle worker.

“Actually, I have a doctor’s appointment on Thursday and it’s supposed to be really bad out. Lots of storms. Would you guys want to take him for the day?” Jackie asks. “We should

probably get a schedule set up, so we aren't always guessing. I think it's important that Lennox spends time with you two, just as much as it is with me. He needs all of us."

Having Jackie acknowledge this makes me feel on top of the world. I wasn't really sure if she'd ever try to keep him from me in any way, but the thought had been festering in the back of my mind. That maybe, I wouldn't get to see him as much as I'd like.

"That's a great idea," I tell her.

"Just let us know. I can always take him if you have a rough night. I can work around my schedule anytime," Ava says, and she and Jackie start talking about how important sleep is as I stare down at my baby boy.

"I am so in love with you, little man," I whisper to him, rocking him to sleep until he shuts his eyes. I watch as he falls asleep, humming him a lullaby as the ladies chit-chat.

I never expected him, never saw him coming before Jackie hit me with the news. But I feel like the luckiest guy in the entire world with him in my arms.



TRACK FORTY-THREE: THERE  
IS A LIGHT THAT NEVER GOES  
OUT

BY THE SMITHS

## AVA

*Six months later...*

I THINK I'LL ALWAYS FEEL MOST MYSELF IN MY CHILDHOOD home, here with my family. Today, my mom has chocolate chip cookies baking and Dillon and his girlfriend are hanging out in the den watching some thriller movie. The sound of her squealing followed by his laughter is heartwarming. I love seeing him so happy.

Despite the warmth of these walls and the love that lives between them, today isn't sunshine and rainbows.

Today, our worlds are forever changing. They haven't told Dillon yet, but my dad has just told me he's made the incredibly tough decision to stop all his treatments.

I try to tune out the screaming and laughter and focus solely on my dad. "Isn't that kind of like giving up?" Tears well in my eyes, threatening to spill out. I try holding them back but it's pointless.

"How is that giving up, kid?" The way he smiles at me, like we're talking about something trivial and not his life, really hurts.

"You've fought for so long, Dad. I don't get it. Why fight at all if this is the end result? I need you here. Mom and Dillon need you." I sob against him as we sit on the worn leather couch. We've spent so much time talking on this couch,

staying up late, eating too much ice cream, and listening to records together.

My dad is stronger than me, even in this moment, when he's at his weakest. He holds me tight, stroking my hair and telling me everything will be okay. But it won't be.

"Dad!" I raise my voice, just a little, and I'm not proud of it, but I can't get him to understand. I need him to keep going, to keep fighting this. "You can't give up. You just can't." I collapse again because nothing I'm saying is enough, and I know it.

He pulls back from me, hands on my shoulders. His grip is barely there. I could shrug him off easily if I wanted to, but I don't. I want to feel him here—*trying*.

"Kid, don't you remember what I used to tell you all the time? When you were sad about things or mad about something?" He clears his throat, and I can almost hear the cancer bubbling in his chest.

It breaks my heart into ten million pieces and I realize I'm being selfish. I don't want him to try to live if living means pain for him. I would rather take on the pain of him being gone.

"More good days than bad." He pauses to sip his water. "Do you know how many good days I've had?"

I shake my head, but I know where he's headed.

"I've had so many good days. So, so many. Couldn't count them if I tried. The bad days...those are the ones I could count. The difference is incredible," he says.

I nod at him, wiping away tears from my cheeks.

"I know you're sad right now," he says. "And you have every right to be. I can't sugarcoat this. You know I wouldn't even if I could. You and I have always been honest with each other. This is going to really suck. I don't want to leave you guys. I hate knowing how much of your life I'm going to miss. But most of all, more than anything, I'm so happy. I'm so complete. I'm so proud."

My dad has told me thousands of times how proud he is of me but it feels different today.

“My life with you and your mom and brother has been the most fulfilling life I could ever ask for. You three have made me the happiest man in the world. And I’ll be forever grateful that I was the lucky man who got to be *your father*.”

I can’t control the tears. Soon, he becomes blurry and out of focus, the rushing tears breaking through, spilling down my cheeks.

“I got to meet my step-grandbaby. That was a miracle. Lennox is a beautiful little boy and I got to experience being a grandfather. I know you and River are in it for the long haul, and you two will raise that little boy up on the best rock n’ roll and love that no amount of money could buy.” He snuffles himself, and then smiles.

“Now, we’ve had this talk and we won’t be having it again, okay? I’m here now and I want to act like I’m alive, not like I’m dying. So, go put on one of our favorite records and let’s get lost for a while.” He smiles, wiping my tears away with his fingers.

I do as he says, because I don’t know how many more times we’ll be able to get lost together, listening to our favorite records. I don’t know if we’ll get to do this five more times or three...or never again.

TRACK FORTY-FOUR: DON'T  
KNOW WHY

BY NORAH JONES

## RIVER

I SHIFT MY CAR INTO PARK IN FRONT OF AVA'S PARENTS' home. When Ava's dad decided to stop his treatment for cancer, I knew I needed to do this before he got even sicker.

Ava's mom meets my knock on the front door and leads me into the living room, where her husband is sitting in his wheelchair.

"Hey, Mr. Keyes!" I greet him.

"Hey, Riv. Can't you call me Jeff by now? Mr. Keyes makes me feel so damn old." He goes to stand, but I motion him back down and bend to hug him.

He can only stand anymore to pivot back and forth from the toilet or bed. His strength is gone, but his wild spirit is as vibrant as ever. He tells me to call him Jeff just about every single time I see him, but I never want to be disrespectful.

Today, I relent. "Okay, Jeff."

He smiles—a near spitting image of the love of my life's smile—and asks, "To what do I owe the pleasure?" He has a bit of a coughing fit, but quickly regains his dignity and waits for my answer.

"Well, I came to ask you a pretty important question," I say, offering a smile of my own.

The knowing look in his eye, the chuckle that escapes him, tells me he saw this coming.

“But first, I want to do something,” I say, setting my phone on the tripod I brought along and hitting record.

---

A FEW HOURS after seeing Ava’s parents, I quietly sneak into the bookstore as Ava reads a passage from her upcoming release. It took longer than anticipated to get Lennox down for his nap, and he was *not* about to let me leave him while he was still awake. He’s grown so attached to me, and even though I love it, it makes it difficult sometimes to part—for both of us.

Ava’s sweet voice flows with an emotion that isn’t forced as she stands in front of the large crowd, congregated here solely for her. She looks so confident up there, so smart, her eyes dancing from the page to her attentive fans.

I smile as I watch her, thinking about her first novel. It may be an oldie for her at this point in her career, but *Blurred Lines* is still my favorite. The most beautiful, heartbreaking, perfect book I’ve ever read. She doesn’t know I’ve read it, or that my copy is so well-loved there’s more pages dog-eared than not.

I knew, when I read it the first time, and when I re-read it again just before Lennox was born, that I could never be without Ava again. The words in there told me more than she ever did about her true feelings toward us. Each time I’d read it, I could physically feel her heartache spring off the pages. She wrote it right after our split, when I left for California. The hurt she felt—that matched my own—still twists inside of me. I’ve taken a silent vow to myself to make sure I never cause her pain like that again, even if it was unintentional, and years ago. But it doesn’t matter when it was, because whenever I read her words—and I read them often—it feels like I’m eighteen all over again. I never bring it up, the sore subject, the elephant in the room that tore us apart. The heartbreak that inspired some of our best work, individually, while apart.

“The words fall from my cherry-stained lips, and as I realize their magnitude, the weight of everything I’m saying,

he pulls me into his arms and plants a series of tiny, perfect kisses against my skin,” Ava reads aloud.

I watch her, so impressed by her, and I realize just how *in love* with this woman I am. I’ve known this for years, but when I really stop and think about the love beating inside of my chest for Ava Keyes, it still takes me aback.

*She’s everything.*

“I guess what I’m saying is, I hope you’ll stay,” she finishes, closing the book then looking up at the crowd and smiling her beautiful smile. Her eyes immediately find mine, and I wink at her, knowing full well that I plan on staying forever.

Once the signing portion is over, Ava comes to me, and I congratulate her for yet another successful event.

“How did I get so lucky?” I ask her.

She giggles, and it brings me back to the very first time I heard that giggle of hers, up on the rooftop, overlooking the entire city of Chicago. She smirks and bats away my compliment. “Come on. I’m tired. Let’s go pick up Lennox. I miss him.”

I nod, then grab her hand and lead us toward the exit, knowing it’s time to get this out of the way, once and for all. “I have a confession to make,” I tell her, as we walk out of the bookstore.



TRACK FORTY-FIVE: LEAN ON  
ME

BY BILL WITHERS

## AVA

A FEW WEEKS AFTER MY DAD STOPS HIS TREATMENT, I GET THE call I've been dreading for years.

“Honey, I think it's time,” my mom says. “You should come over this morning, okay?” Her voice shakes through the phone line, and her pain isn't lost on me.

She doesn't have to elaborate. I know what she means. I've been going over there more often the past few weeks, knowing time was no longer working in our favor. I could no longer pretend certain things didn't exist by simply ignoring them. River played a role in that realization, that epiphany of sorts. In more ways than one. When he told me he read *Blurred Lines*, he unknowingly forced me to acknowledge certain things I'd been keeping at bay, hoping they'd just go away. This, with my dad, being one of them.

Now, River and I are racing to my parents' house, going well over the speed limit. I don't even care, I just need to be there for my father. Once we dart into the house and my mom says he's still hanging on, I sigh a breath of relief.

I all but run to his room, shaky and out of breath when I get there. “Dad.” I lie down next to him on the warm bed and take his hand in mine. My mom told me he's been like this for the last few days. His body is too weak to get up, just tired. “I love you so much. I love you.” I wrap my arms around him and repeat the words. I could tell him I love him a hundred, hell, a thousand times, and it still wouldn't be enough.

“Hey, kid,” he murmurs faintly as he attempts to hug me back. “I love you. So much.” He opens his beautiful blue eyes for a mere second before clenching them shut again. His lips are dry and chapped and I don’t want to remember him this way.

I want to remember him slow dancing with my mother in the kitchen.

I want to remember him popping into my bedroom with a can of soda and a record.

I want to remember his strength and his warmth. I don’t want his life to end this way, with so much left to say and so many more stories to share. So many more albums to listen to.

He grunts, wincing in pain from an unknown source. I look at my mom to ask if he’s okay, but I see that she’s silently crying, her shoulders shaking up and down. She has one hand over her mouth and one clutching Dillon’s arm. River’s standing beside her, a silent support system in case she needs it. He gives me a small, encouraging nod.

I feel myself break inside. This is really it and I’m not ready. I choke down a sob, still gripping his hand.

My dad struggles to open his eyes, if only a little, and gives my palm a barely-there squeeze. “Remember,” he whispers, “always more good days than bad.”

I force a smile, nodding at him. “I’ll remember. I promise, I’ll always remember.” I lurch forward to hug him. I try to weep quietly against his shaking shoulders.

Eventually, they stop moving.

I stay like that a while, still holding onto him.

Until I feel River’s arms around me, his soothing voice in my ear, saying, “Come on, Aves.”

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IT’S DIFFICULT, but after the coroner comes and legalities are discussed, my mom, Dillon, River, and I sit in the living room

—without my dad—and do exactly what he'd want us to do: remember him happy, laughing, and full of life.

“Okay.” I smile widely, with tears in my eyes. “This one takes the cake!” I pass the photo to my mom, and she and Dillon look on at my dad in his old “*I Can't Cook for Shit*” apron with Dillon in one arm, a spatula in the other, and baby spit up running down his cheek.

“That's me and Dad?” Dill asks to no one in particular, smiling down at the old photograph.

“Sure is, honey.” My mom looks at the picture, tears threatening to spill over again, though I'm not sure how because it seems to me that we're all cried out.

River squeezes my hand and I nestle into the crook of his arm. “More good days than bad, Mom,” I whisper.

She nods. “More good days than bad.”

TRACK FORTY-SIX:  
WONDERFUL TONIGHT

BY ERIC CLAPTON

## AVA

*DEDICATED TO THE STRONGEST, SMARTEST, FUNNIEST, AND coolest dad I know.*

I flip open the proof copy of my newest release and read the dedication, knowing how proud my dad would be of my latest work. While it's sad he can't be here to read it, I know that if he could, he'd love it.

"Hey, you." River slinks up behind me and wraps his arms around me. I'm well aware that if it weren't for him, I would have broken into a million pieces when my dad died.

I turn away from the kitchen counter to face him, closing my book. "Hey, yourself. Is Lennox sleeping?"

River settles his palms on either side of my hips and lets out a long sigh. "Yes, finally." He laughs. "That boy hates bedtime. He's one stubborn little man. Is that the final copy?" He eyes the book I just set down.

"Yeah. It looks great, doesn't it?"

River's eyes trail down to the cover and back to me. "It's perfect, Aves. Another bestseller, no doubt."

He allows his hands to fall back to his sides and turns from me, walking over to our record player—an old one of his. He used to keep it in his room, but I brought it out into the kitchen where it'd get more use.

He thumbs through the records sitting next to the old player and then slides his choice out of its sleeve and gets it

rolling.

The record player hums to life, and the sweet sound of *Wonderful Tonight* by Eric Clapton fills my ears. My parents' song. Now, our song.

"May I have this late-night kitchen dance, Ava Keyes?" River asks, extending his hand toward me.

I smile at him, placing my hand in his, and we dance.

# EPILOGUE: TOUCH ME



## TOUCH ME

### AVA

*One year later...*

LENNOX SHOUTS, “MOMO!” BETWEEN BITES OF HIS breakfast, flinging food everywhere. I double over, bending at the waist and exploding into a mess of laughter and mashed carrot particles. I hide my face, trying to shield him from seeing that I find this amusing.

I’ve quickly discovered that toddlers latch onto *anything* that makes someone laugh, and I do not need an even bigger mess to clean up.

“Momo, for the love of all things holy, would you just come here so this boy can see you?” I yell to our dog, so he can get his ass over here and appease Lennox.

River walks around the corner, with Momo trailing at his heels. I swear that dog worships the ground River walks on.

“You’re doing a great job, Avie,” River tells me, smirking as he spots the mess of scrambled eggs all over the kitchen.

*Avie* is what Lennox calls me. He can only say five words right now: Mama, Dada, Momo, Avie, and duck. I bet you can guess what was on all our minds the first time he said that last one.

River and I purchased this house when Lennox was only four months old, knowing we wanted a big home with a large

enough yard for him to play safely in. We've already hosted our fair share of barbecues with both his family and mine.

River's parents finally divorced, and it seems that's all it took to make them not be so miserable. His mom and dad get along great now—surprisingly—and visit our home often. River's trying to rebuild relationships with both of them. When they come around, it makes me miss my dad terribly, but luckily, I still have my mom and Dillon, who've both accepted Lennox as their own.

Lennox has three sides to his family, and they all spoil the ever-loving crap out of him. I wouldn't have it any other way.

River's been acting mildly strange this morning. He's been running around like a mad man and being very short-tempered, which is different for him. Maybe it's stress. Blue Label was recently signed to a major record label here in the city, and while it's a huge opportunity for the band, it's stressful more than anything.

River runs out to grab more formula because we're running low, and I'm surprised to see Jackie pull up into the driveway just a few moments later.

I hear her tapping lightly on the door, so I quickly get up, lifting Lennox with me. When I swing open the door, I tell him, "Look, Lennie, Mama's here!" Then I shift my focus to Jackie. "Hey! You know you don't have to knock, silly. Just come in."

"I know, I know," she retorts. "I just feel weird!" She smiles and scoops Lennox up into her arms. "Hey, baby!"

After a few moments with him, she turns her attention back on me. "*Well*," she says, drawing out the word as she looks around the house. "You're probably wondering why I'm here." She pauses, for what I assume is dramatic effect, and smiles mischievously. "River has a surprise for you. I think you'll like this one. He's been working pretty hard on it."

I bite back a grin, wondering what he has in store for me.

"So, listen," she says, bouncing Lennox on her hip. "He wants you to meet him in your spot in an hour. Oh, and he said

to dress up.”

---

THE ROOFTOP IS DECORATED with a never-ending sea of beautiful flowers, including all my favorites—lilacs, hydrangeas, and sunflowers, as far as the eye can see. There are tables with white tablecloths and red ribbons. River is standing at our bench, and I call out to him as I walk.

“River! What the hell is going on here? You’re crazy!” I beam at him. “You and your surprises.”

When I get to him, he’s shaking, and my laughter quickly turns to worry. “River, what’s wrong? What’s going on?”

He looks amazing, wearing black pants without holes—non-distressed, it’s a miracle. A gray button-down with the sleeves pushed up completes this new fancy side of the man I love.

He reaches his hands out to take mine, pulling me close to him as he takes a deep breath. “Ava Keyes.”

*Holy fuck.*

“I am so goddamn in love with you, Ava,” River says, smiling and taking my hands in his. “When I first saw you in that little record shop, I knew you were special. And look at us now, so many years later. Our love is one messy, strangely thrown together soundtrack, isn’t it?” He pauses. “But it’s perfect because it’s ours. We made it.”

Slow tears begin to roll down my cheeks as every ounce of love I have inside of me for this man ignites.

“We made it,” he repeats, breaking away from me to get down on one knee in front of our bench, the old plaid blanket draped across it. He reaches around to his back pocket and pulls out a velvet burgundy box, then opens it. “Ava Keyes, will you marry me?”

Before I even have a chance to look at the ring nestled inside, I explode into a sobbing mess of happiness, pulling

River up and into my arms. “Yes, River. Yes. A million times over, yes.”

We intertwine as River’s lips meet mine, and I realize I’ve never felt more complete in all my life. In his arms, on this rooftop, where everything began.

Suddenly, I notice we aren’t alone on the roof, as a mass of clapping and cheering ensues. River spins me and I look over his shoulder, seeing everyone we love. Hailee, Oliver, my mom, Dillon, Sabine, Jackie, Lennox, Chris, Ruby, River’s parents, along with our mutual friends, are all standing with us on the rooftop—glasses of champagne in hand, raising them and cheering at us.

The tears flow even faster now as I smile at my mom and brother, who are both crying as well, but quickly, a wave of grief rolls over me; a tightening in my stomach at the realization that my dad isn’t here, that he *can’t* be here. I try to push it away, push it down, but no...*no*, I decide. I won’t diminish the feeling of sadness, because it’s valid—my dad not being here.

“One more thing, though.” River pulls me from my thoughts, pointing to a large projector and screen hanging down along one of the brick walls of the roof. “There’s someone who couldn’t be here today that really wanted to be. He’s got something to say.”

River hits play and I see him. My dad, sitting in the living room in front of the fireplace with River. He looks so good. Not pre-cancer or anything, he just looks like *my dad* and I’m so grateful for it. I bring both of my hands to my face, letting the tears flow freely because of course River thought about this. Of course my dad thought about this.

“Kid! I just wanted to tell you that this fine young man has asked me to allow him to marry you.”

I watch as my dad, in his black concert tee and baseball cap, pats River on the back. “I told you before you even called him that this was going to be a good thing, and now look at the two of you.” He laughs. “If you’re seeing this, it means I can’t be there, and I’m torn up just thinking about that. But I want

you to know how much I love you.” He turns to River. “And I love you too, kid. Take good care of my girl, okay? She’s all yours now.”

The recording ends and River pulls me to his chest as I cry from happiness and sadness and everything in between. I miss my dad so much. I miss his laugh and his smile, but most of all, his love. I feel him here now, though. I know he’s here.

And finally, it dawns on me, even though it may not be conventional, or the way we once pictured it, River and I *have* made it. Together, finally. Exactly how it’s meant to be.

River—still holding the ring box—takes the gorgeous princess-cut diamond out and slips it onto my finger. Light bounces off the crystal, shimmering against the midday sun. It’s stunning.

River’s emerald eyes glisten at me, a soft smile spreading across his beautiful face. He lifts the cushion from the tiny jewelry box and pulls out a small slip of paper that was nestled neatly inside. Then, he hands me the folded piece of paper. “Your dad asked me to give this to you today. He said I needed to be sure to remind you.”

I open the paper, tears still coating my eyes as I look down at my father’s handwriting.

*“There are things known, and things unknown. And in between are the doors. I love you, kid.”*

**The End**

□ Listen to the Blurred Lines Spotify Playlist [here](#) □

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: TURN THE BEAT AROUND

BY GLORIA ESTEFAN

Thank you first and foremost to my editor, the blurred to my motherfucking lines, Christina Hart. WE DID IT. I'm not sure how, but I won't question it. THANK YOU.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Ellis, the founder of Cruel Ink Publishing, LLC, is a multi-genre author that publishes psychological thrillers, suspense, and romance novels. She is also the author of two poetry collections. She resides near Chicago, Illinois with her husband, newborn daughter, and an abundance of animals.

Email: [victoriaellisauthor@gmail.com](mailto:victoriaellisauthor@gmail.com)

Facebook Reader Group: <https://bit.ly/fbreadergroup>

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