

FOREVER MORE



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. BROMBERG

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Contents

1. [Annie](#)

2. [Lyric](#)

3. [Annie](#)

4. [Lyric](#)

[Also by K. Bromberg](#)

[About the Author](#)

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ONE

Annie

THE MUSIC IS PIPED in softly overhead to the nearly empty bar. There are a few stragglers sitting here and there, grabbing a last drink before heading home for the holiday. It's probably their last reprieve before they are forced to endure their great grandma's burnt turkey or spending time with their sibling they can't stand.

I smile bittersweetly into my drink because it would be such a nice problem to have. Family to annoy you and drive you crazy. A place to go to where you belong regardless.

The barstool squeaks beside me as someone sits down, but I don't look their way. Rather, I wait with bated anticipation that builds with each passing second before I hear a velvety smooth voice ask, "Whiskey on the rocks, huh?"

"It's been that kind of week," I say after a sip, my smile automatic despite the response. Nerves dance with that anticipation. Both hum through my veins even though we've been here, done this many times before.

"Let me guess," he says as he points to my drink to order the same when the bartender looks our way. "Holiday blues got you down. Your roommates, your friends, *everyone* is leaving to go home for the holiday except for you?"

“I think you messed up.” I look at the man beside me for the first time. I’m met with narrowed gray eyes and a smile that just won’t quit. His dimples are subtle but there, and everything in his expression makes my insides sag just a little.

Lyric Evermore.

Yes, *that* Lyric Evermore. Lead singer of Evermore. Notorious ladies’ man. And a guy currently with a furrow to his brow as he stares at me while running a hand through his hair so that the silver rings on his fingers glint against the dim light.

“I didn’t mess up. I know my lines.”

“Yes, you did.” I shrug and fight my full-on grin. “Face it. The always-perfect Lyric Evermore messed up.” His smile is dazzling. So are his dark gray eyes that take me in and dance with amusement. “You may be a rock star now who has women falling at his feet every second of every day, but you can still flub a line.”

“At least it’s a line with you instead of screwing up a lyric onstage,” he murmurs before giving a shake of his head and simply staring at me. For the briefest of moments, I wonder if he feels the same way I do about being here. About doing this for a fourth year in a row.

About me like I do him.

But then he emits a bark of a laugh before pulling me into one of his big bearhugs, and I know I’m just hoping for things that aren’t there. That I’m still holding on to hope that he might see me as anything more than a little sister.

This is Lyric after all, and why would he choose me when he can have anyone he wants?

Besides, if he was interested in me, wouldn't he have already made a move?

I shove the thought away and the resolve I had to finally tell him how I feel fades as he pulls me against him and squeezes tight. He smells of sunshine and ocean, and I'm taken back to that first night we met.

4 years ago

“Whiskey on the rocks, huh?”

I jolt at the sound of the voice. There's no use trying to hide my half full glass or the bottle of whiskey partially hidden by the leg of the table where I sit on the front porch outside my pretty crappy apartment.

And frankly, it's been a rather shitty week so the last thing I want to do is talk to someone I don't know. My misery is no one else's business but my own.

“It's been that kind of week.” It's all I say as I take another sip and close my eyes as it burns its way down my throat. I fight back the urge to cough at its god-awful taste and make a fool of myself. But the whiskey was all my roommates had left behind before they left home for the holiday, and I'm too damn broke to buy something I actually like.

“Let me guess,” he murmurs while I try to place his familiar voice. And of course, he sits down in the chair beside me without an invitation to.

Can't a girl just be left alone?

“Let's not guess,” I mutter.

“Holiday blues got you down? Everyone left town to head home for Thanksgiving and you’ve got no one to go home to?”

His words make my throat burn more than the alcohol did. Tears threaten but I sniff them away.

I finally put two and two together. He’s the guy who lives across the way in Apartment 34C. The one who plays music all hours of the night and who sings loud enough for all to hear.

“Go away 34C,” I mutter.

“No.”

“No?” I cough out the word and then it falters when I turn to look at him for the first time. *Holy shit*. 34C is hotter than hell. I’m met with storm cloud gray eyes that are framed by thick lashes. One of his eyebrows is quirked up as he stares at me while his lips are curved at the corners. His shoulders are broad, and his dark brown hair is a little long where it curls at the base of his neck and over his ears. Tattoos mark his biceps but are hidden by the cuffs of his old school Nirvana T-shirt with a hole near the collar.

I’ve seen 34C from afar, heard his voice way more than I’ve actually laid eyes on him, and boy is that a travesty. Staring at him might have just made living in this shitty apartment tolerable.

“No,” he reiterates, that smile of his widening with the acknowledgment that I was checking him out. “You look sad and lonely. Left behind, actually. And—”

“You don’t know shit about me,” I argue, embarrassed to be caught feeling sorry for myself.

“You’re right. I don’t.” He shrugs. “But I know it’s Thanksgiving tomorrow, and everyone I know has left to go

home, hang out with family, watch football games, and do who the fuck knows. They're all going to be there while I'm stuck here feeling sorry for myself that I don't have any family to go home to."

"Oh." I stutter, surprised by his candidness and selfishly feeling happy that I'm not the only one left alone. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be. You're in the same boat, right? Stuck here alone?"

"Um. Yeah. I guess."

"You either are or you aren't and by the way you're sipping that drink and looking miserable out here, I'm thinking you are."

My sigh fills the space between us as I pick up the bottle by the leg of the table—the one I put there so I didn't look like a drunk stealing sips during the afternoon—and pass it over to him. "Do you want to share in my misery?"

The smile he flashes is so bright it's blinding. "Lyric Evermore," he says and holds his hand out to shake my free one.

I stare at it for a beat, almost as if I'm confused over how this man is suddenly in my space, and I'm perfectly okay with it. And then I burst out laughing.

"That can't really be your name, can it? I mean, it's a stage name, right?"

"What's wrong with my name?" he asks, brows furrowed like a little boy, and I suddenly feel like an ass.

"Nothing is wrong with it. In fact, it's pretty damn cool for a musician to have that name—"

“Ah, so you listen to me rehearsing then? You know I’m a musician.” His cocky smile does things to my insides I don’t want to admit to. “*And you like it.*”

I stare at him and give a little shake of my head. “You have a good voice. I’ll give you that.”

“Why so stingy with the compliments?” I just stare at him with a blank face, caught off guard by his comment before he barks out a laugh and says, “I’ll take good voice. It’s better than some of the rejections I’ve gotten. But let’s get back to the matter at hand—why are you making fun of my name?”

“I’m not. It’s just—” My cheeks flush. “How does a singer end up with a name like Lyric when no one could know he was going to have a voice good enough to sing to begin with?”

He purses his lips and nods, his eyes never leaving mine. “You have a point there, one I may have pondered before myself, but I assure you, it’s my real name. Ironically. Supposedly my parents were really into music. And drugs.” His expression falters for a beat before the smile returns full force to cover up the sudden slip of emotion. “But that’s a story for another day. So ...” He sticks his hand out to me again. “Lyric Evermore. Hopeful rock star with a fitting name. Singer who you’re stuck listening to rehearse. Guy who’s stuck here this weekend without anywhere to go.”

I laugh, my cheeks hurting from smiling so hard, as I take his hand. “Annie McIntyre. College student who’s broke as hell. Girl who has nowhere to be this holiday.”

“So, see? It’s official,” he says and cringes when he takes a sip straight from the bottle.

“What’s official?”

“This. *Us.*”

“Excuse me?” I choke over my own sip and his laughter floats through the empty complex.

“Yeah. Our own Evermore-McIntyre-Thanksgiving.” He takes another sip and uses the bottle to motion to the space around us. “We’ll drink some, laugh some, order takeout from that taco shop right down the street that has a sale running.”

“One should never eat from a place running a sale on their food.”

“Let’s be daring Annie McIntyre. I mean, it’s better than being alone.”

I stare at him and shake my head. “Who said I wanted to spend Thanksgiving with you?”

“Women don’t say no to me. It’s easier to just realize that now and save us the time.”

“Save us what time?” The man may be gorgeous but he talks like I already know what he is talking about.

That and he’s arrogant. A usual turn off for me, but there is something about him—a playfulness mixed with that boyish grin—that has my complete attention.

“The time it’ll take for you to argue with me, pretend you’re not interested, and then grovel as a means of making up when you realize you really are.”

“You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Always.” Another blistering grin that has me smiling in response. “So what do you say we make our own tradition? Whiskey and rolled tacos from the taco shop down the street and no mention of how somewhere along the way we lost our family in some way or another.” He taps the neck of the

whiskey bottle against the edge of my glass. “Sound like a plan?”

I smile as I hold on to Lyric a little longer and think about that first Thanksgiving four years ago. How I told him about how I was fumbling blindly through my first year of law school and how he talked about his plight as a struggling artist, bumming the couch of a friend to sleep on, while he tried to get his demo tapes listened to. We talked about our nonexistent families, our likes, our dislikes, and when the weekend was over and our friends returned, how we made a promise to one another to meet again next year regardless of where life had taken us by then.

TWO

Lyric

GOD, she smells good.

I hold onto Annie a little bit longer and just breathe her in. A small piece of normal in my crazy, chaotic world of touring and groupies and everything in between. A world I fucking love but that I need a break from every now and again.

And she is the perfect kind of break.

Someone who has no problem putting me in my place, who doesn't lap up my every word because of who I am, and who knew the poor, pitiful Lyric Evermore before the world did.

"You look good. Great." *Beautiful.* With her dark hair, the flash of freckles across her cheeks (I know she hates them), and her light eyes, Annie McIntyre is anything but ordinary as she so often claims.

"So do you," she says and pulls up one of the cuffs on my black t-shirt to look at my biceps. "New ink, huh?" There's disapproval in her tone and I love that it's there. She wouldn't be Annie without it.

"Yep. I got it when the guys and I were in Tokyo." I shrug at the Japanese letters and think of that night. Way too much

saki, a little homesickness, and an odd urge to call her when typically, we don't talk for weeks at a time.

“Let me guess ... you had too much to drink? Does that imply you don't remember what it means?”

I give her half grin. “Something like that.”

But I know exactly what they mean and who I was thinking about as I had the word *love* tattooed on my arm. It was generic enough that the internet sleuths could decipher it and not think anything of it, while deep down I could keep its meaning to myself.

My own whiskey is slid across the bar top toward me. I let the burn of the first sip hit me before I speak again. “So tell me what's new? Any intriguing cases you're working on? Any guilty clients who are actually innocent? Is the legal world still thrilling you? Fill me in.”

3 Years ago

“Cheers to our second annual Annie-Lyric-Thanksgiving taco fest.” I hold my whiskey up and tap it against hers. “This time without the discounted tacos that made us get a little bit sick.”

“Cheers,” she says through a laugh. Her smile is shy, but her eyes are warm as she meets mine again. “I wasn't sure if you were going to show.”

“What do you mean you weren't sure if I was going to show? Of course, I'd be here. Isn't that the promise we'd made each other?”

“Yeah, but that doesn't mean ...”

Annie averts those gorgeous eyes of hers down to her glass and hides them behind her thick lashes. Why the sudden shyness?

“It’s only been two months since I moved away. Are you going to tell me you thought I’d forgotten about this tradition? About you?”

“It’s technically not a tradition until it’s been done a few times so ...”

“You and your technicalities, Annie.” I scoot my chair next to hers, grab her into a bear hug, and press a kiss to the top of her head. “Of course, I’d be here. This is our thing. This. Us. Remember?”

When she looks up at me, I swear there are tears welling in her eyes and as much as I hate the sight of them—the understanding that she thought I’d flake on her—I also love seeing them there too.

That means I matter. That *this* matters.

“Ok. Yes. This is our thing.” A ghost of a smile graces her lips followed by a resolute nod of her head. “I’m glad you’re here.” Her smile widens a little bit more.

“Me too.” I clink my glass against hers again. “Now I’ve got something I’ve been waiting to tell you in person.”

“What?” Her head startles, eyes growing big.

I fight the grin on my face but it’s useless. “I did it, Annie.”

“No way.” She squeals and claps her hands together and wiggles in her seat before jumping up and throwing her arms around me. “You’re serious?” She pushes against my chest and looks up at me. I love that she knows what I’m talking about

without me having to say another word. “You are serious. Oh my god. It’s really happening, isn’t it?” Tears fill her eyes this time but out of pure happiness.

“It is.” My own eyes burn with tears I push away. “I signed a recording contract last week. It’s with a smaller company but they have a great vision and plan for me and Evermore and—”

“Don’t you dare make any kind of excuses, Lyric.” She presses a kiss to my cheek. “You did it. You really fucking did it, and I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

When she meets my eyes again, it’s hard to swallow over the emotion lodged in my throat. I didn’t realize until just now how I wanted her to be the first person to know my good news. Hell, I didn’t even realize how much I looked forward to this—her, tacos, a tradition—until I walked in here tonight and saw her sitting by herself.

Now she knows.

And oddly, now I feel like I can breathe for the first time all week.

“Lyric.” She says as if she just heard my name. Shock and excitement etch the lines of her face. “We need to celebrate. Tacos and tequila and everything in between.”

So we celebrate. With food that’s beyond our budgets and with margaritas that are stronger than hell. We get tipsy. More than tipsy. We make up pipe dreams about how I’ll perform in Madison Square Garden one day, and how she’ll be on the side of the stage rocking out with me. We laugh till our sides hurt and talk like we only have tonight.

And later, when the drinks are had and the mood has chilled and we’re dancing around her vacant (and still

crummy) apartment laughing like loons, I lean forward and press my lips to hers.

There are a few moments of freefall.

The kind where we stutter for a second at the shock of what I did, and then where we fall into the kiss. Where my only thought is the next taste on her tongue, the next feel of her lips, the next sparks that will fly from our connection.

The kiss is fast and furious and fueled with alcohol.

And just as quickly as it happens—my hands cradling her face, my lips branding hers—it ends when I break to draw in a ragged breath.

Realization hits.

Oh. Shit.

I'm kissing Annie.

I kissed Annie.

The girl who's become my closest friend. The one I depend on to pick up the phone when I'm having a rough day. The one who's not one of my throwaways who's hoping to get into my pants on the off chance I become a superstar.

“Oh my god.” They're the first words that pass over my lips. Did I just fuck this up? She knows I'm a player, does she think I just played her? Did— “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—I—it's the alcohol.”

Annie stares at me with eyes and mouth shocked open wide and I hate that I can't read her expression. “It's—it's okay. It's—”

But she kissed me back.

Didn't she?

Or am I too drunk to know the difference?

Motherfucker.

Think Lyric.

Think.

Fix this.

“You’re my best friend.” Her face falls and the sight of it guts me. I feel like a floundering teenager here. “I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t want to ruin this. Us. Who we are.” I fall face down onto the couch, my last sentence muffled.

But I hear her chuckle as I opt to stay where I am—face planted in the cushion—now that the room is spinning.

It’s not till later when I wake up staring at the cracked ceiling, listening to her soft snores from her open bedroom door, that I realize the entire night was about me. That Annie let me have a moment to shine and live in it. I’ve never had that before, and of course, I went and ruined it by kissing her.

By taking the one thing I’ve wanted from her for over a year, when she’s showed no outward interest at all in me.

Leave it to me to fuck things up.

The memory hits me hard and fast as I stare at her from across the table. I’ve relived that kiss more times than I care to count over the years. Hell, I may have even tried to find one to rival it in the many women I’ve kissed since then ... but nothing has touched it.

Maybe it was the moment and the celebration that made it so special.

Then again, maybe it was her.

“So tell me, does your partner have you working on any exciting cases or are you still just doing the day-to-day stuff?” I ask, wanting to know what I’ve missed out on.

“Just the day-to-day. But Justin said—”

“Justin?” I ask, more than aware that it was Mr. Jenson last time I spoke to her and now it’s Justin.

“Yes.” She gives me an odd look. “The other associate lawyer I’ve told you about. Justin.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I was thinking of Mr. Jensen. My bad.”

And so Annie McIntyre fills me on the details of her life. The details I want to hear despite knowing if that were my life, I’d slit my wrists from the boredom. But this is Annie. Steady-eddy, Annie, who loves routine and discipline, and everything in between.

My polar opposite.

And I wouldn’t want her any other way.

“Should we head over to the restaurant? I made reservations so we’d have a table.”

“Of course, you did.” I smile and just stare at her, lost in whatever this pressure in my chest is.

“C’mon. Let’s go. I made sure we’re in the back room so that no one bugs us for autographs or pictures from the rock star.”

“Rock star sex god. Get it straight,” I joke.

“Oh please.” She rolls her eyes. “Good to see your ego is still small and humble.”

“Never.” I laugh. “And that’s just how you like me.”

I throw some cash on the bar, wrap my arm around her shoulders, and head toward the chilly world beyond this cozy hole in the wall bar.

THREE

Annie

THERE IS a slow hum to the restaurant. We're seated in the back room, empty except for us. The light is dim, the atmosphere low key, and the food is killer.

Lyric caught the eye of a few people while walking our way over here. No doubt, that means that there will be paparazzi sitting outside waiting to take a picture of rock's newest 'it' boy when we leave.

Good for him. He deserves everything great that is happening to him.

But there's a weird tension between us that I can't pinpoint. An awkwardness that has never been between us before. Maybe it's the curious way he keeps looking at me while we talk about every non-important thing under the sun that has my overthinking going into overdrive. The new single of Evermore's that has gone platinum. A weird co-worker of mine and his odd quirks. His upcoming tour that he is headlining for the first time. My new place down the street that I've promised to show him.

Little snippets of our very different lives.

But something is different about Lyric tonight.

Something ... I don't know, but I can't quite put my finger on it. He's quiet when he's normally loud. He's a bit distant instead of being in my face. On top of that, I keep catching him staring at me in a way that says he wants to say something but doesn't know how to say it.

This is the last time we'll be able to do this, Annie. I'm too busy. The rumors in the press about Cassandra Miller and me are true.

Those are the words I've made up in my own head. Words I've stewed over and a relationship I've basically conjured up after seeing an US Weekly article about him and the model. One that I've been too afraid to ask about yet.

Two Years Ago

The bar is loud and the whiskey I sip has a deep, rich flavor. It's something I've learned to appreciate over the last few years. More like, it's something that Lyric and I have promised ourselves we'd learn to appreciate.

I'm still not sure if I one hundred percent like this shit, but Lyric is coming soon, and I have to at least pretend to like it.

The funny thing? He knows that too. He knows that I hate the taste—especially after how drunk we got on it that first Friendsgiving, but that I drink it as a nod to that first time. And he's taken up the hobby of sending me mini-bottles of it from his travels all over the world as a way to poke fun at me.

My phone buzzes, and my heart sinks when I see Lyric's name on the screen. I know he's not coming before I ever answer the call.

“Hey.” *Where are you?*

My ear is blasted with a cacophony of sound, and I recoil at its harshness through my cell. “Annie? You there?”

Tears already burn in the back of my throat as I wait for him to say it. As I wait for him to confirm my hunch.

“Annie? C’mon. I know you’re there.”

“Lyric.” I clear my throat. “Where are you?”

“Not there.” He gives a half-hearted laugh, trying to pull a joke off but it falls on my deaf ears. Especially when there is a feminine laugh in the background and then a shushing sound. “Look. Rehearsals are running late. Way late. We had issues with sound and then Trixie was struggling with her guitar and ...”

“And it’s a shit show.” I swallow over the excuse that’s lodged like a lump of disappointment in my throat.

“Basically.” There is a sudden shutting of a door and the background noise is now muffled as if he stepped into a different room. “I’m so sorry, Annes.” He uses the nickname he has for me when he knows I’m upset. “We were supposed to be done three hours ago. Just enough time for me to catch the train to meet up with you. I lost track of time and didn’t realize how late ... I don’t think we’ll be done until who the fuck knows when.”

“Okay.” My voice wavers, and I hate that it does.

“Can I make it up to you? Can we meet up tomorrow night? Celebrate Thanksgiving then?”

The first tear slips down my cheek, and I shove it away with the back of my hand, angry that it’s there. “I can’t. I have to fly out to Chicago for that deposition,” I lie.

“On Thanksgiving weekend?” he asks. “That’s a little harsh, isn’t it?”

Probably as harsh as I’m being right now. But I knew this was coming. I knew Lyric was going to move into his new life of stardom and that Little Annie with the crummy apartment was going to be a thing of the past.

I knew it was coming, but it doesn’t hurt any less.

“Yes. I volunteered to be the one to go so that everyone else could spend time with their families.”

Better to put space between us on my own terms. At least now I can feel like I have some control of the situation.

“But I’m your family.” His words hang on the line between us as my chest aches.

I think I’ve always been in love with Lyric Evermore. It sounds stupid, but it’s true. Maybe even since that first night he sat in the chair beside from me at the apartment complex and walked his way into my life. With his soft smile, cool arrogance, and gorgeous face.

And maybe after that kiss last year, I’d been holding out hope that he’d feel the same way about me someday. That he’d walk into the bar this year and realize that with his crazy lifestyle, I was the one who grounded him.

That I was the one he wanted.

Silly pipe dreams for a girl like me to think a guy like him would want me any time other than when he’d been drinking.

“Annes. Don’t be mad. I promise I’ll make it up to you. You know I’m good for it.”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate. You’re leaving for Europe at the end of the week, and I’m in Chicago. We’ll just have to do a rain check.” I try to sell the lie that I’m not hurt.

I don’t think I do.

“I’m sorry, Annie. You know I don’t say those words unless I mean them.”

My smile is forced, and I hope it reflects in my voice. “I know. Apology accepted.”

“So you’ll come visit me on tour in Europe then, right?”

“You’re distracted,” Lyric says and squeezes my hand, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Just thinking about that time I visited you on tour in Europe.”

His smile is half-cocked as he remembers too. The constant travel. The constant partying. The women who would beg, borrow, or steal to get a few minutes alone with him.

“We had fun, didn’t we?”

And we did. We stayed up talking long after the show was over. We explored ancient cities and ate food we couldn’t pronounce.

We grew closer in those five days. Closer and yet we never crossed the line past friendship.

I yearned for it. I willed it to happen. And then I walked away from him in the airport in Rome, with the heat of his

gaze on my back, and mourned and grieved for what I knew would never be.

I was his little sister in a sense. And he was the big brother who was looking out for me.

At least I've tried to sell myself that lie for the past three years. The problem is every time he calls or I see him, I still get that flutter in my belly. I still close my eyes when we hang up or part ways and sigh. *I still kind of love him.*

"We did have fun." I give a slight smile as I take a sip of my margarita, my thoughts from earlier returning. "And what about you and Cassandra? I'm seeing reports—"

"Nothing there. Just friends. We went for drinks so I could introduce her to Kieran. That's it." He shoves my shoulder playfully. "Is that what this is about?"

"Is that what, what's about?"

"You're being weird tonight." He chuckles and dips a chip into the salsa. "I assure you, if there was someone in my life, you'd be the first to know."

And I'm not sure if I'm relieved by that statement or upset.

Maybe a bit of both.

Then again, maybe if I have a few more drinks, I'll build up the courage to let Lyric know how I feel about him.

Maybe.

FOUR

Lyric

"IT HAS A LITTLE BALCONY TOO?" I glance over my shoulder to where Annie stands inside her apartment and raise my eyebrows. The pride reflected in her expression is everything. "I'm impressed and a bit jealous."

"Oh, come on." She blushes. "Your house in Los Angeles is probably twenty times bigger than this with a view of the ocean."

She has a point, but big means nothing. It just means there are more rooms to be empty. More space to make you realize how alone you feel.

I shrug in response as I lean against the railing, my back to the San Francisco skyline, and everything I want to admire standing in front of me. "I'm proud of you. I truly am. I mean, this place is amazing."

"Thanks. That means a lot." She snuffles and then turns to make her hands busy as Annie typically does when she's made to feel on the spot or vulnerable.

"Who would have thought, huh? Two young, crazy kids trying to find our way would make it to where we are right now. Successful. Living our dreams. Making a name for ourselves."

“Who would’ve thought.” She fidgets some more. Straightens a few pictures on her bookshelf. Moves a pillow on her couch. She’s nervous about something more than me being proud of her.

Oh, fuck.

My gaze goes immediately to her hands. To her fingers. To one finger, searching to make sure there is no shiny damn diamond on it.

My heart stops in my chest until I get a clear view and see that there isn’t one there. That she hasn’t met the love of her life and not told me. That she isn’t lost to me.

“Do you want a glass of wine?” she asks, her eyes narrowed as she stares at me. Probably because I have a pained and relieved look on my own face.

“Sure. Yes. Please.”

Last year

I sneak through the back door of the bar. It’s one we frequent often when we’re in town so the manager knows me well enough to give me some privacy.

That and the hundred dollar bill I slip him when I do, doesn’t hurt either.

But after missing last year’s Evermore-McIntyre-Thanksgiving, there’s no way in hell I’m missing this year’s.

Besides, it’s been way too long since I’ve seen her. And even longer since I’ve been able to sit with someone who knows the old me. Someone who will judge me and harass me and treat me like I’m fucking normal.

But confusion is the name of the game when I turn the corner to find Annie sitting there, a glass of whiskey in her hands, and a smile on her face as she laughs with the man next to her.

Come again?

“Annes?” I say, trying to hide the surprised confusion in my voice.

“Lyric.” She’s on her feet in a second and in my arms the next. “It’s so good to see you. It feels like it’s been forever.”

“Since Rome,” I murmur, holding onto her a little tighter as I worry about what her next words are going to be.

“You look good.” She eyes me up and down, her eyes going to my tattoos to see if there are any new ones. I almost wish I’d inked some more on there so she would find them. So she would notice me. “Lyric, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Richard.”

And there are the words I was dreading hearing.

Richard.

Hmpf.

Maybe we should just cut to the chase and call him Dick.

The smile is forced on my lips as I reach my hand out to the guy in the crisp white dress shirt and the stick up his ass. “Dick? Nice to meet you.”

“No. It’s Richard,” Annie warns as she puts her hand on my forearm and squeezes. “I thought it was time that the two most important guys in my life finally met.”

I feel like I’m swallowing glass as I pick up Annie’s whiskey off the table and help myself to a long sip of it.

“Good. Great.” I nod as he shakes my hand. Can’t he get a better grip? “Shall we order more drinks?”

And as we wait for drinks to come, I watch Annie smile at Dick and grit my teeth every time she does.

Happy looks good on her.

So does love.

Then why am I hating this so much? Is it the invasion on our tradition? Is it that she never even mentioned Dick to me the times we’ve talked? Is it ...

Oh shit.

I’m in love with her.

I love Annie McIntyre.

That’s what this is, isn’t it?

Jealousy and confusion own the polite nods of my head and the forced smiles ... but the dread in my gut is heavy. The fear that maybe the one thing I never realized I wanted has been under my nose all this time.

Serves you right, asshole. You’re not good enough for her anyway. Annie is everything good that you aren’t. She’s the sunshine while you’re the pitch black night.

She notices my sigh and gives me a look that asks if I’m okay. I smile in response.

I’m fine.

I always have been, right?

Besides, I can get any woman I want.

But she just won’t be the one I’m pretty sure I’m in love with.

“Wine for you, fine sir.”

“Thank you, milady.”

We stand a foot apart, our smiles as soft as the light all around us, and the silence between us finally comfortable like old times.

But hell are my nerves running rampant.

Especially after I remember how seeing her made me feel last year. After realizing that no amount of touring or other women or losing myself in songwriting can take away the pull this woman has on me.

I tried to forget my revelation from that night. I attempted to bury it in my work and in my play.

But right now, I know it to be truer than ever.

I’m in love with Annie McIntyre.

“Why the sudden serious face?” she asks as a smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

I offer a chuckle as I take her wine glass from her and set both of them down on the table beside us. Her gaze narrows as she tries to figure out what I’m doing.

“Lyric?”

Somehow her hands are in mine. I’m so nervous, I don’t remember grabbing them but they’re there, and her fingers link with mine without me ever asking her to.

“I think it’s time we finish something we started years ago. Something I was too scared to follow through with. Something I was too chickenshit to tell you last year. I love you, Annie.

I'm in love with you." She opens her mouth and then closes it as the shock of my words hit her. And then I panic. Then I know I need to explain and make my case. "And this—seeing you—is the one thing I look forward to every year, but it's not enough for me anymore. I want more. And I want more with you. I know my life is chaotic when you prefer calm. I know my life is unpredictable when you prefer structure. I know that you like discipline and I fly by the seat of my pants. I know —"

"Stop!" she says with a laugh that is deep and rich and puts color in her cheeks. "Just shut up and kiss me already."

"What?"

She steps forward and presses her lips to mine. They're even softer than I remember. And the kiss even better.

She tastes like home.

She is home.

Annie rests her forehead against mine as my head swims with a dizziness I've never felt before.

"I've been in love with you since that first night Lyric." The heat of her breath feathers over my lips. "I've told myself I was crazy. That we'd never work. But you're who I want to pick up the phone and call when things go bad or are good. You're the bright spot in my life. So see? It's official."

I chuckle. I may not have remembered all the lines from that first night we met, but I remember this one. "What's official?" I play along.

"This. *Us*," she murmurs against my lips.

"Thank God, because there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Forever more," she whispers.

“Forever more.”

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About the Author

New York Times Bestselling author K. Bromberg writes contemporary romance novels that contain a mixture of sweet, emotional, a whole lot of sexy, and a little bit of real. She likes to write strong heroines and damaged heroes, who we love to hate but can't help to love.

A mom of three, she plots her novels in between school runs, sports practices, and figuring out how to navigate parenting teenagers (send more wine!). More often than not, she does all of this with her laptop in tow, and her mind daydreaming of the current hero she is writing.

Since publishing her first book on a whim in 2013, Kristy has sold over two million copies of her books across twenty different countries and has landed on the *New York Times*, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestsellers lists over thirty times. Her Driven trilogy (Driven, Fueled, and Crashed) has been adapted for film and is available on the streaming platform Passionflix, Amazon, and other streaming platforms.

You can find out more about Kristy, her books, or just chat with her on any of her social media accounts. The easiest way to stay up to date on new releases and upcoming novels is to sign up for her [newsletter](#) or follow her on [Bookbub](#).

