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THE PRICE OF DREAMS

Everhide Rockstar Romance Series - Prequel

TANIA JOYCE

ROCKED – The Price of Dreams
Everhide Rockstar Romance Series
THE PREQUEL

by

Tania Joyce

OceanofPDF.com

ROCKED – The Price of Dreams by Tania Joyce

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ROCKED – The Price of Dreams

Everhide Rockstar Romance – The Prequel

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Chapter 1

August 2006

I refused to let the first day of my freshman year at high school play out like it would in a typical teenage movie—everything moving in slow motion, me, the loner girl walking along the school corridor with books in hand while other teenagers jostled each other, laughing, cheering, and catching up with their friends after summer break. Nope . . . that wasn't going to happen. Not to me.

I'd been tossed from one elementary school to the next around Montgomery, New Jersey, over the years, thanks to my dad's work as a mechanic near New Brunswick—before he took off when I was twelve—and my mom changing tavern jobs every few years. This wasn't my first new school experience. I'd know kids here. Whether I wanted to associate with them was another thing. I wasn't sporty, nor academic, nor popular, nor a techie geek. I was a musician and not the classical kind. I loved rock. All I wanted to do was learn music. Perfect the guitar. Master the piano. Once I graduated, I wanted to join a band and get the fuck out of this town. Forever. If I kept to myself and focused on music, freshman year at Montgomery High would be a breeze.

As I headed along the hallway lined with lockers, looking for my allocated number, girls giggled and hugged their friends. Guys rammed their books and bags into their lockers. Metal doors clanged and rattled as they were slammed

shut. Noise and mayhem reverberated off every surface. The place stank of too much perfume and deodorant and reeked of too much testosterone—especially the rank quantity radiating off the jocks blocking the corridor, eyeing the girls and teasing them as they walked past. *Dickheads.*

As I passed one group of them, their lips curled and twitched with a *who-the-fuck-are-you* sneer. I didn't care. I was a pint-sized *stay-out-of-my-way* kinda girl. I had friends; I just preferred my own company rather than that of others. But I wasn't one to be shoved around.

I clung onto the strap of my backpack and cruised along, avoiding any eye contact. But my skin prickled under the weight of all the stares. Was it my clothes? My Converse shoes were ratty and worn beyond their used by date. My short denim skirt had frayed at the hemline, but it was my favorite. My tattered Bruce Springsteen T-shirt was full of holes, but I'd never throw it out.

Like at most schools, there were the rich kids, the average kids, and the poor kids. I was the latter. I was here because I had to be, and it was my ticket out of town. I'd use every resource this school had available to master music. I'd attend classes. Play and perform at every opportunity. Stay under the radar and out of trouble.

Rounding a corner, I scanned the locker numbers.

Thwack!

The slamming thud of someone being shoved against the wall of metal made me turn. Asshole Jock Number One pinned some poor lanky guy with shaggy dirty blond hair against the doors. Jock Number Two held a weedy, skinny guy

with a helmet-shaped mass of big wavy brown curls in a headlock. Jock Number Three laughed and jeered, encouraging his buddies. They all looked to be about the same age as me but were twice my size.

“Give it up, Kyle. You dweeb,” Asshole Number One hissed at the guy held against the lockers. “You’re still the same douchebag as you were in elementary school. Always will be.”

Jock Number Three yanked Kyle’s backpack off his arm and rummaged through it.

“Matias. Don’t.” Fear and defeat hooded Kyle’s eyes.

Matias pulled out Kyle’s lunch bag and held it in the air. “Woohoo! Got it.” He peered inside the bag. “Mmm. Sandwiches and home-baked treats. We love your mom’s cooking. Sweet.”

This had happened before? What the fuck?

Jock Number One slammed Kyle against the locker again. “Don’t hold out on me again, weasel.”

“Where’s yours, Hunter?” Jock Number Two shook and ruffled Hunter’s hair.

“Hank. Stop.” Hunter winced and grimaced. “Ow!”

Matias grabbed Hunter’s backpack and retrieved his lunch. He held up the bag. “Well. Look what we have here, Hank and Trevor. More goodies for lunch.”

Fire quaked my pulse. I hated people who bullied others or thought they were better than anyone else. Kyle and Hunter in their ripped jeans and plain T-shirts didn’t look like

they could afford the cheap cafeteria food, whereas the jocks in their brand-new Nikes, designer jeans, and football jerseys no doubt could afford to dine in five-star restaurants.

I quickly scanned the hallway. No one seemed to care what was going on. That fueled my flames even more. I wouldn't let these jocks get away with this. Furling my hands into fists, I dug my nails into my palms. My heart jumped like a mosh pit crowd at a heavy metal concert. I wasn't a violent person, but I knew self-defense. And these hopeless guys needed help. *I can do this.*

Walking past, I rammed my shoulder into the dickhead, Hank, pushing him off-balance. As the jock spun to face me, I kned him in the crotch.

He keeled forward. Collapsing onto the floor, he clutched his balls. "Ow! Fuck. You bitch."

Asshole Number One, Trevor, was next. As I jabbed him in the kidneys, I kicked the back of his knee to break his stance. He turned his head. Shock flared in his eyes.

Yeah. I'm taking you on, asshole.

Before he could utter a word, I placed my palm onto the base of his nose, crushed it inward and shoved it upwards.

Trevor screamed. "Argh. What the fuck?"

He let go of Kyle and stumbled backward. I tripped his ankle and he hit the hard ground with a thud.

"Bitch!" His pained scream resonated down the hall.

Everyone turned. *Oh, now they notice!*

Matias threw me an evil glare. His lip curled with a twitch. “What’s your problem, midget?”

“Dickheads like you.” I held out my hand for the backpacks. “Hand them over now or you’ll be next on the ground. Pick on someone your own fucking size. Seriously? What are you? Ten? Stealing lunches? You losers. Get the fuck out of here.”

Matias stood his ground. But the moment I stepped toward him, he flinched backward. I swiped the bags and lunches from his hands and turned to Kyle and Hunter.

“Here.” I handed Kyle his belongings. “Are you okay?”

But as he took them, prickles darted across my skin. Something unnerving rippled through the air, struck my chest and spun my head. *What the hell?* Had the adrenaline from taking on three big bullies finally hit me? *Yep. That must be it.*

Kyle sucked in a deep breath. His intense espresso eyes flickered with gratitude and a fuckload of confusion. Did he feel that weirdness too? Surely not. He was just dumbstruck that I’d saved his ass. “Um. Yeah. Thanks.”

Turning to Hunter, I handed him his lunch.

“You were awesome.” Awe and respect shimmered in his stunning azure eyes. “Thanks.”

Trevor scrambled to his feet, clutching his precious little nose. He glared at me, then glanced in one direction, then the other at the growing crowd. His face burned redder than a ripe tomato; clearly angry and embarrassed at being taken down by someone half his size . . . and a girl.

“You broke my fucking nose,” he hissed.

He stepped forward to push me on the shoulder, but I blocked his hand before it connected. “Seriously? You wanna take me on?”

I hadn’t broken his nose. There was no blood. No crooked bend in his bridge. *Shame.*

“Who the fuck are you, bitch?”

“No one you need to be concerned about unless I see you doing shit like that again.” My voice came out cool and calm, strong and stoic, but inside, I was shitting bricks. If these guys wanted to hurt me, I stood no chance. Three against one weren’t good odds. But I kept my game face on. “Grow the fuck up.”

Gasps and chuckles hovered through the groups of guys and girls watching.

Hank staggered to his feet, rubbing his nuts.

Were they tears in his eyes? *Cool.*

“Trev, let’s just go. I need an icepack for my balls.”

Trevor straightened the collar on his jersey. Smoke steamed from his ears. He stabbed a finger toward my face. “Look out, bitch. We own this school.”

I smirked. “Actually, the government does. Dipshit.”

Matias got up in my face. “You think you’re tough? Better watch your back.”

My knees knocked together. I didn’t want trouble. But I wasn’t going to back down. I lifted my chin and folded my arms. “Why? Do you want to see what I can do to you if you

grab me from behind? It will involve breaking your wrist, your nose, and maybe a rib or two. How's that gonna work for you and football season?"

Matias sneered at me. "Stay out of my sight."

I had no time for dickheads like this. "Stop being a bully and I will."

He hissed, grabbed his bag, and took off down the hall with his friends.

Everyone cheered and clapped. I just snarled and gave them the bird.

So much for avoiding trouble. So much for staying under the radar.

"You kicked their asses." Kyle grinned as he rubbed the back of his neck.

His golden-brown skin showed off a fresh summer tan, but the bruises on his arm didn't go unnoticed. My heart cinched. Did those assholes do that to him? *Fuck*. They looked nasty. I hoped I'd helped him, not made things worse. Would they hurt him again?

"You were amazing." Hunter gave me a big goofy smile, revealing a crooked eye tooth. He'd almost be handsome if it wasn't for his crazy hair and ultra-skinny physique. "Where did you learn to do that?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "My old school had free jujitsu lessons for girls." It had helped me on more than one occasion to keep a couple of my mom's sleazy boyfriends or assholes like those jocks off me. I'd learned how to defend myself. I prayed I'd never have to do it again.

“You’re dynamite.” Hunter opened his locker and shoved his lunch and backpack inside.

“Think nothing of it. Catch ya.” I waved farewell and the corridor of chaos resumed with students slamming lockers, talking, and making their way to first class.

“Hey?” Kyle called out. “What’s your name?”

Not wanting any more attention, I ignored him. Heading along the hallway, looking for my locker, I managed to take all of five steps before I found it. I glanced over my shoulder. Kyle and Hunter watched my every move. Throwing them a thin smile, I opened my locker then shoved my bag onto the shelf and grabbed my books for my first class. I closed the door. The guys still stared at me, but not in a creepy way. Their gazes swarmed with gratitude and . . . intrigue.

I’d never had anyone look at me like that before.

I guessed I had to be nice to some people in the school. I waved at them. “I’m Gemma. Gemma Lonsdale. Guess I’ll see you round.”

Chapter 2

A week later, during lunch, I sat in front of the piano in the school's music room. Fellow students' muffled laughs and chatter drifted through the closed door as they headed to the cafeteria or outside to eat, gossip, or play sport. Me? I hit replay on the YouTube video. Watching tutorials online was the only way I could learn the music I wanted to play. I couldn't afford private lessons and the school's music program rarely covered the genres or artists I liked.

The sharp snappy beat reverberated through the tiny tinny speakers.

Mastering Justin Timberlake's new song, "SexyBack," was no easy task. But I would nail this song if it was the last thing I ever did. But the more I played, the more frustration furred through my fingers. I couldn't play it fast enough or get the beat quite right. Clenching my teeth, I jabbed at the old ivory piano.

The door burst open, hitting the concrete wall.

Thwack!

I jumped. My heart hit my skull. *What the fuck?*

The two gangling guys I'd met on the first day, Kyle and Hunter, rushed inside, then slammed the door shut. They locked it and ducked below the glass windowpane.

The jocks who had bullied them stopped at the window. Hate flared in Trevor's eyes when he saw me across the room. He rattled the locked door handle and sneered. I gave him the finger. He cursed, thumped the door, then took off.

My heart slowly returned to my chest; I'd been scared out of my wits. But concern for the two guys cowering on the floor lingered. I hit pause on my video. "You guys need my help again?"

They shot upright, spun around, and slammed their backs against the wall.

"Oh. Hey, Gemma." Kyle breathed a sigh of relief, but his brows pinched together as he glanced around the room. "What . . . what are you doing in here?"

"Mr. Benson gave me permission." Under duress.

"He did?" Hunter gaped like he didn't believe me. "How did you manage that?"

"He must like me." Oh, no he didn't. But he was terrified of what I might say or do. I'd seen him naked, and he'd banged my mom. Just before summer break, for whatever reason, he'd gotten mega drunk at the local tavern and fallen victim to my mother's advances. I'd walked in on them at home going at it in her bedroom. Seeing his red, hairy ass in the air had not been pleasant. But it hadn't been the first time I'd witnessed Mom cheating. My heart had grown a hardened wall when it came to my mother, but it ached for my naïve stepdad, Derek. *So much for marriage.* Deep down, I felt bad for Mr. Benson too. He seemed nice. A dude who loved eighties and nighties rock . . . just like me. He'd regretted what

had happened and was petrified I'd tell his wife—the school librarian. I'd never have the guts to do so, but Mr. Benson didn't know that.

“Lucky you. He has a reputation for being mean.” Hunter peered out of the window, checking to see if the bullies had gone. “He hates anyone who's not in the marching band. That's his thing.”

I grimaced. While I held respect for most musicians and performers, all those drums, brass, and wind instruments weren't for me.

Kyle and Hunter still cowered by the door. I'd had my fair share of encounters with bullies over the years thanks to Mom's reputation, me being short, and my obsession with music. I understood how hard some days could be. Resuming playing the piano, I jutted my chin toward them. “Why don't you report Trev and his buddies?”

“Wish we could.” Hunter sighed, shuffled toward me, and took a seat on a nearby desk. “They were like that at elementary school, too. Reporting them will get us nowhere. Trev's dad is the vice principal.”

“Roger Sanderson?” Oh . . . this school just got better and better. *Not!* Trevor would hate me too once he learned who I was. He probably already did.

“Yeah. You know him?” Kyle crossed the room. After tossing his lunch bag on the desk, he ripped it open and grabbed a sandwich out.

“Not really. My mom and Roger had an affair about twelve months ago.” No point in lying; they'd find out about

Mom's reputation soon enough. "His wife found out and divorced him." Another broken family thanks to Mom.

"Oh . . . do you have a dad?" Kyle unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite.

I tinkered at the keys. "I have a stepdad, Derek. He's okay but not around much. He travels a lot for work. My real dad took off a couple years back. I haven't heard from or seen him since." I prayed and prayed every day he'd call or come home to take me away from this place. Every day I questioned why he hadn't taken me with him. He'd known what Mom was like. That was what crushed my insides. He'd left me with *her*.

"Sorry about your dad." Kyle lowered his chin. "Did my dad run him out of town by any chance? He's the local head cop, the captain. He and his cronies think they own the place."

Different theory, but no. Dad left because my mom was a whore. But the undercurrent of spite in Kyle's tone hurt my chest. Didn't he get along with his father? But then, what kid got along with their parents? I didn't know of any.

With a strained smile, Kyle held out half his sandwich. "Want some peanut butter?"

My mouth watered. There'd been no snacks at home for me to bring for lunch. I avoided the greasy cesspool of food offered in the school cafeteria as often as I could. I'd grabbed an apple today—that was it. "Um . . . sure. Thanks."

I took the sandwich and had a nibble. Peanut butter had never tasted so good.

“What are you playing?” Hunter waved his finger at the piano keys.

“I’m learning. I’m not very good.”

“What kinda music? Classical? Jazz? Band?”

“Fuck no.” I grimaced. “Rock. Pop rock. Classic rock. The charts. The all-time favorites.”

Hunter’s eyes lit up. So did Kyle’s. Their electric vibe rippled and tingled my skin. *Totally weird.*

“Wanna show us?” Excitement jumped in Kyle’s voice as he pulled up a chair beside me.

My pulse quickened. I’d never played for anyone before. “Why would I do that?”

Hunter laughed and jumped off the desk. Grabbing a chair, he swung it around backward, and took a seat beside Kyle. “Music is our jam. Kyle here plays every instrument under the sun and can hold a wicked tune. Me . . . I’m a performer. I sing and play the guitar and the piano.”

Fire blazed in their eyes as they talked about music. I guessed we all had secrets and hidden talents.

“How long have you been learning the piano?” Kyle asked.

“Um . . . only about two years.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “I’m self-taught. I’m much better on the acoustic guitar. My dad taught me before he took off. But I love the piano. The sound. The tone. The magic it can create.”

Understanding gleamed in Kyle’s eyes. He slapped his hand on the side of the piano. “Show us what you got?”

“No . . .” I fidgeted with my fingers in my lap. “I’m not that good.”

“We won’t laugh.” Kyle’s tone softened. “Promise.”

Something in his smooth, reassuring voice made me believe they wouldn’t make fun of my poor skills. “Fine.”

I reset the YouTube video and hit play. I hovered my hands over the piano then struck the keys, hitting every one with clumsy gusto.

Kyle stood, moved behind me, and I could feel him watching my hands. Hunter took to the floor beside the piano and danced, shuffling, sliding, and spinning just like JT. No . . . better. For someone so lanky, *damn*, he could move. And then . . . he sang. *Wow*. What a voice. Shivers charged up my spine and down my arms and through every vein in my body.

Kyle placed his hands on my shoulders and pulled them back. “Sit straighter.”

I refocused on playing but the warmth simmering across my skin beneath his touch distracted me. I missed a note. *Shit!*

“And relax your hands more,” Kyle added. “Your fingers are too tense. Hold your hands higher. Soft curled fingers, not rigid sticks.”

I spun to face him. “How do you know all this shit?”

He shrugged. “My mom’s a music teacher.”

“She is?” *Holy. Freaking. Awesomeness*. “I’d kill to have lessons.”

“So why don’t you?”

My heart cinched and shriveled as I twisted back around to face the piano. I slumped and stared at the keys.

“Um . . . I can’t afford them.”

Hunter glided toward us, still doing his sexy hip sway.

“Where the fuck did you learn to do that?” I asked.

“I’ve been taking singing, dancing and music lessons since I was six. I want to be a star. A rock star or a Broadway star or a dancer. I don’t care. I just love performing.”

“Dude . . . with that voice? Sing,” I said. His voice still hummed in my head. “You are amazing.”

“Nah . . . I’m just goofing around.” He leaned against the piano; a cocky smile curled across his lips as he flicked a wayward curl off his forehead.

Hmm. Clearly there was nothing wrong with his ego regarding his talent. But if that was him just goofing around, what would he be like performing when serious?

“Gem, if you wanna hear amazing, you should hear this one sing.” Hunter slapped Kyle on the back.

I gaped at Kyle. “You’ve had singing lessons too?”

“Yeah.” He scratched the side of his cheek. “My mom’s also a vocal coach.”

“Holy fuck.” My head spun with dizziness. Who needed The Juilliard School when you had your own professional teacher at home? *Lucky him.* “Well then? Let me hear you. Sing something.”

“Only if you join in.” Kyle dared me.

“I can’t sing.” Not that I’d really tried. I always sang at home when playing, but I didn’t like the sound of my own voice.

“Come on.” He nudged my arm. “Let’s play something easy. Do you know ‘More Than Words’ by Extreme?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” I rolled my eyes. Typing on my laptop, I found the lyrics online. “But I only know how to play it on guitar.”

“Cool.” Kyle rushed over to the wall and grabbed two acoustics off the rack. He handed one to Hunter and one to me. “You two play, I’ll do piano. Let’s give this a whirl.”

“I’m not singing.” I stood, then took to one of the chairs.

Kyle slid onto the piano stool. “Humor me. Please?”

Hunter sat beside me and propped the guitar over his lap. “I’ll lead. You join in.”

“Okay.” I strummed the guitar. It didn’t have the depth of my acoustic at home, but it’d do. I practiced the tune, recalling the notes and chords. It had been a while since I’d played the song, but it quickly came back to me.

“Ready? One. Two. Three. Go.” Kyle’s hands floated over the ebony and ivory like liquid silk. The tune tumbled from beneath his fingertips. He didn’t even look at the piano.

Total envy burned in every cell in my body. I wanted to play like that.

Hunter and I joined in, strumming in time with Kyle’s tempo. These guys were good. Way better than me. But I kept

up.

Then Hunter sang. *Holy. Shit.* His voice was sultry, seductive magic.

But then Kyle joined in.

A hot rush charged through my veins. My heartbeat quickened. The air around me warped. *Holy. Fucking. Crap.* While Hunter's voice was deep and a touch raspy, Kyle's was lighter, softer, more alto, but totally mesmerizing. Pitch perfect. Goose bumps darted over every inch of my skin.

What would these guys sound like when their voices broke? Just . . . wow!

Licking my lips, I swallowed the lump of awe lodged in my throat. I buried my nerves into the base of my belly. Taking a deep breath, I joined in the chorus.

I sang, mild and quiet. Hunter nodded, encouraging me to ramp up my volume.

My voice was nowhere near as strong as theirs, but I upped my effort. My fingers struck the chords in sync with Hunter. With my gaze glued to Kyle's hands on the piano, the lyrics fell from my lips. I didn't need the laptop after all. As we hit the last chorus, it hit me. We were singing in perfect harmony. Our voices melded beautifully and we were in tune. My heart thudded to a new rhythm, one that made the hairs on my arms stand on end. Electricity sparked in the air, sending my soul soaring around the room.

Magic.

That was why I loved music.

At the end of the song, Kyle spun around. Golden shards flickered in the depths of his dark eyes. The buzz jumping off him caught me off-guard. “Gemma, your voice is incredible. Have you never had lessons?”

“Nope. Never.”

“Your pitch is perfect.”

“Really?” I wrinkled my nose. “Thanks.”

His leg jiggled. “With a little training, you’d be exceptional.”

“Yeah . . . well.” I plucked at the strings, unable to meet his gaze. My gut hit the floor. There was no way Mom would ever pay for me to have lessons and I couldn’t bring myself to ask Derek. He struggled month to month in his commission-based insurance salesman job and never seemed to have any spare cash after contributing to bills. Now I was old enough, once I found a job maybe I could take some lessons. But until then, nope. “Like I said, I can’t afford it.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. Nervousness jumped in his voice. “What . . . what if I taught you?”

“What?” Had I heard him correctly?

“Do you love music?” Hunter lazed back in his chair, plucking softly on the guitar’s strings. “Do you want it to be your life?”

That was a no-brainer. “More than anything.”

“Then let’s make a deal.” Kyle leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. “You help keep Trev and his

dickhead buddies away from us, and I'll . . . or we'll . . . teach you how to play and sing.”

My mouth hit the floor. I glanced from Kyle to Hunter and back again, struggling to form words. “Are . . . are you serious?”

“Yes.” A beaming grin inched across his lips. “We never joke about music.”

But doubt pummeled my head and heart. “Do you think I’m that good?”

“Not yet.” Kyle shrugged. “But you will be. I promise.”

There was nothing else in the world I wanted to do more than play music. Since I had no money, no prospects, I had to take whatever opportunity or help that came my way. My gut cartwheeled and my heart beat to an overzealous allegro tempo. I’d never believed in fate until now. I was meant to meet these guys.

“Deal. I’ll see you here tomorrow.”

Chapter 3

The guys stuck to me like glue. Every time we walked the corridors or had a class together, they were always by my side. The bullies flung typical, gross, derogatory comments our way. “Fucktards,” “losers,” “muso geeks,” and “oh look, it’s the bitch and her ball-less babies” were the most common remarks, but at least the jocks weren’t physical. Maybe they were afraid I’d embarrass them again. Taking them on had been foolish. I was lucky my David and Goliath tactics had worked. I was a five-foot-four, petite fourteen-year-old going against brute, muscle-bound athletes. I wouldn’t stand a chance if they ganged up on me. But the few defensive techniques I’d unleashed on them had seemed to be enough to keep them at bay.

Respect . . . peeps.

After a month of me catching up with Kyle and Hunter in the music room during lunch break, we’d found our groove—thirty minutes on piano, then the remaining time on guitar and singing. We were so consumed when playing, we often missed the bell and got into trouble for being late to class. It was worth it. I was a sponge and wanted to learn and absorb everything they knew.

Kyle always watched me. Not in an I’m-into-her way, but more like he was intent on identifying my flaws or mistakes to refine my skills. He was more patient than I ever could be.

And Hunter? He goofed around, dancing and singing half the time. He was incredible on the keys, but he came alive with a mic in hand. So not the wallflower he'd been outside in the hallways. Same with Kyle.

After churning out "Don't Speak" by No Doubt on guitar, Kyle turned toward me. "Have you ever played electric?"

"Me?" I jerked my chin back. "No. Where would I get my hands on one of them?"

"Um . . ." His leg jiggled. He lowered his chin, unable to meet my gaze. "What would you say to coming over to my place? . . . With Hunter . . . so we could practice. I could teach you the electric or bass or drums or anything."

My pulse strummed a tempo faster. To get my hands on an electric? *Wicked*. I rested my arm on top of the guitar. "How many instruments can you play?"

"Um . . . fifteen, I think." He flicked his shaggy hair off his brow. Counting on his fingers, he rolled off the list. "Drums, violin, mandolin, cello, piano, guitar—electric and acoustic—trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, French horn, flute, bongos, tambourine . . . but my jam is the bass."

Holy crap! Was he a music protégé? "Out of all those instruments, why the bass?"

He plucked the strings of the acoustic in his hands. "I love the feel of the thick strings, the way it resonates through the amp and the thrum I get through my whole body when I play."

"Really?" I wrinkled my nose.

“Yeah.” Seriousness darkened his eyes. “When you find the instrument you love, it claims you.”

“I’ve only ever played acoustic and piano. They both kick ass.”

Hunter plonked down on the chair beside Kyle. “Give me an electric guitar or a grand piano any day. I have to go to Kyle’s to play them. I can’t afford my own. But the moment I’ve saved enough pocket money or get a job, it’s the first thing I’m gonna buy.”

“So, what do you say?” Hope filled Kyle’s eyes. “My place? After school? We can practice every Monday and Thursday when Mom is out giving private lessons, and any day on the weekend that Dad is at work. We’ll be able to make as much noise as we like.”

“Um . . . I don’t know.” I rubbed my hand on my thigh. God, I wanted to play more and more. But did they really want to keep doing this? “You wanna keep playing with me, even though I’m a girl?”

“Hell, yeah.” Hunter play punched me in the arm. “You’ve got talent. We make a great team.”

This was totally surreal, but my love of music overruled any other logic. “I’d love too.”

“Awesome. You can meet my sister, Emily.” The excitement in Kyle’s voice drained away. He sucked in a deep breath, struggling with an anguish I’d never seen before. “She’s um . . . sick. But she’d love you.”

My heart cinched. It didn’t sound like Emily had a cold. “Oh.” I softened my tone. “If you don’t mind me asking,

what's wrong with her?"

He stared at the whiteboard and dark clouds swallowed his eyes. "She has terminal leukemia."

Oh crap.

"She was diagnosed when she was eight. Dad used to yell at her all the time to stop complaining about not feeling well—'take an Advil and you'll be fine,' he'd say. Then one day she came home from school with a raging fever and swollen glands. Mom rushed her to the hospital. After running tests, that's what they found." Kyle's shoulders sank as if his heart had collapsed. An undercurrent of pain meandered through his soft voice. "There's no cure. Treatments don't work. Nothing helps."

I pulled my chair over beside Kyle and hooked my arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry. That must be hard." Nausea pooled in my gut. How horrid, knowing his sister wouldn't survive. I'd never known anyone who'd died before. Kinda freaked me out. "How . . . how long does she have?"

"Um . . ." Kyle sniffled and straightened. "They originally gave her two years. It's now been three. She's not well, getting worse every day."

Shit.

"She's an angel. So tough." Hunter's eyes misted. "Music always puts a smile on her face. She'd love having us play."

Kyle's eyes glinted as he jerked his chin at Hunter. "Hunt's got a crush on Em, but won't admit it."

“I do not.” Hunter’s cheeks broke out in red blotches. Oh, he so had a thing for Emily. “She’s like my sister. I’ve known her forever.”

A low chuckle rumbled in Kyle’s throat. He was tougher than I’d imagined. He turned to me. His eyes pleaded with me, like he needed this as much as I did. Maybe more so if it helped him deal with Emily’s illness. “What do you say, Gem? We’ll have more time. We can jam and learn new songs.”

Warmth stirred in the depths of my belly. It radiated into my chest and flooded my heart. “I’d love to. Let’s do this.”

“Do you wanna come over this afternoon?”

It was Thursday. Mom worked late. Derek didn’t get home till six. “Sure.”

That afternoon after school, I rode my bicycle with the guys to Kyle’s house. Hunter pointed out he lived a couple of houses down from Kyle’s place on the opposite side of the tree-lined road. I couldn’t believe they lived two streets away from mine.

Kyle’s old two-story house with its beige shiplap and small windows was neat and tidy. Sitting in the center of a large open yard, it was much newer and more modern than the crappy cottage I lived in.

We dropped our bicycles by the front door and Kyle led us inside. The smell of cigarettes, musty carpet, and cheap air-freshener hit me.

“Em?” Kyle hollered. “You downstairs?”

“Yeah.” A soft, tired voice drifted along the hallway.
“In the living room.”

Kyle led Hunter and me toward the open-plan kitchen and living room. Dark brown cupboards and a high counter split the area in two.

Emily lay stretched out on the old brown sofa by the recliner. She was covered in a fluffy quilt, and her little gray face lit up at the sight of Kyle.

“Hey Em.” He dumped his schoolbag on a dining table chair, rushed over, and kissed Emily’s tiny bald head. Her cheeks were sunken, dark circles surrounded her eyes, and her hands and arms were as thin as twigs. But she had the most beautiful smile. Kyle waved me forward. “I’d like you to meet Gemma.”

“Hi Emily.” I took a tentative step toward her. “Nice to meet you.”

“Finally.” Emily reached for my hand. Her touch was cold, weak, and fragile. “Kyle hasn’t stopped raving about you since the start of school.”

“I have not.” He chuckled.

“Have so.” A cheeky grin quivered Emily’s pale thin lips.

I giggled, loving that she bantered with her brother.
“He’s been very nice, teaching me to play better.”

Emily’s energy levels plummeted. “He’s an awesome teacher.”

“You wanna come downstairs and watch?” He squeezed her hand. “I could carry you.”

“Not today.” Her eyes fluttered closed. “I’m too tired.”

“I’m gonna make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for everyone.” Hunter headed toward the kitchen, looking for food. “Want me to get you anything, Em?”

“No thanks.” Her voice softened and drifted. “I’ll just rest.”

Kyle kissed Emily on the forehead and drew her blankets higher. “Okay. I’ll make dinner after we play. Your favorite, right? Chicken pasta.”

But Emily had already drifted off to sleep.

Tears stung the back of my eyes. “She’s so sweet.”

“Yeah. Every day with her is a blessing.” He smiled, but it didn’t touch his eyes. “Before she wakes demanding food, let’s grab a snack and play. But first, I wanna show you something.”

I followed Kyle back down the hall. He slid open the double doors on the left.

I must have died and gone to heaven.

I gaped as I floated into the music room. Guitars of all kinds lined the rack on the side wall. Brass and wind instruments filled the shelves beneath them. A baby grand piano occupied the far corner. Tall bookcases loaded with records, CDs, and music books towered near the entrance. Several microphones, and vinyl chairs stood next to a desk

covered in paperwork and a computer. A comfy green sofa filled the space beneath the window.

“It’s awesome, isn’t it?” Kyle nudged my arm. “This is mom’s office. My drums and guitars are in the basement.”

My mouth moved, but I struggled to find words. “Wow.” I stepped over to glance at the framed photos on the wall—a young lady singing on a stage in a musical, the same woman in an opera, and another image of her playing piano in an orchestra. I pointed to them. “Is that your mom?”

“Yeah.” Sadness loomed in the depths of his eyes. “She only performed for a year after she graduated.”

“Why doesn’t she still do shows?”

He stared at the photo of her playing piano. “Dad didn’t want her to. After I was born and he finished training, they wanted to leave Seattle and live on the East Coast. He got stationed here and insisted she stayed at home with me and Em.”

My chest ached. I couldn’t imagine giving up music to raise a family. Teaching wasn’t the same as performing. Not that I had any experience yet. “Will she go back to it?”

“I wish.” Kyle grunted. “Dad won’t let her. Not with Em being sick.”

I grimaced. “Won’t let her?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “He barely tolerates Mom teaching. He hates music. That’s why we can only play when he’s not around. Other than that, he’s a great dad.”

Didn't sound like it. But I didn't know him. "Are you sure it's okay we're here?"

"Absolutely." Kyle thumbed toward the doorway. "Come on. Let's eat, then we'll play."

"Lead the way."

As we entered the kitchen, the color drained from Kyle's face. He rushed to the sink and swiped up the half dozen empty beer bottles. "Shit, sorry. I'll put them in the trash."

"Don't worry about it, bud." Hunter bit into his sandwich.

"No. It's not okay." Kyle charged out the back door. The smashing of glass in the garbage can clattered through the air. So did Kyle's cursing. "Son of a bitch."

Concern darkened Hunter's eyes. The heaviness in the air pressed against my chest. My mom always came home from work smelling like beer and cigarettes. There were always wine glasses left on the counter and an open bottle or two of wine in the fridge. Derek enjoyed the occasional drink after work. But I'd learned over the past few weeks that Kyle's dad drank, sometimes too much.

When he came back inside, his gorgeous smile had returned. My stomach twisted and sank. He didn't need to hide the truth or pretend around me. I understood shitty parents. *Family?* Who fucking needed them?

He grabbed a sandwich from Hunter's stack on the counter and handed it to me. "Here. Eat. Then, we'll head down to the basement."

After demolishing the sandwiches, I followed the guys downstairs. The stench of cigarettes and beer wasn't as bad down here as it had been in the living room. A black sofa and a huge rear-projection TV stood at the far end of the mustard-carpeted room. My pulse quickened at the sight of the huge drum kit, the rack of four guitars, and the mics to my left. Yes . . . I'd entered the man cave.

"This room is incredible." I headed to the guitars and slid my fingers over the frets on a red Fender. "You have your own space to play."

"Yep. It's cool." Kyle dashed over and snapped up three more beer bottles off the lamp table and bar, then tossed them into an empty beer box, tucking it out of sight behind the counter.

"You don't have to do that." Concern softened my tone as I stepped toward him. "It's okay."

He lowered his chin. "It's not. I'm sorry."

"You don't ever have to be sorry around me." I eased over to him and gave him a big hug. *Shit . . .* Where had this come from? I'd never been a hugger. I'd never really embraced anyone to comfort them before. In fact, *I'd* rarely been hugged. I couldn't recall one time when Mom had given me a cuddle. Not once. Not ever. Inhaling the scent of his laundered T-shirt, I rested my cheek against his chest. His quick heartbeat pounded in my ear. As I squeezed him tight, his warmth enveloped me and sank into my bones. He just stood there with his hands by his sides, like he didn't know what to do. I smiled, half sad, half amused. I hated that he was embarrassed by his dad, but he probably hadn't been hugged

by many girls either. I got that. But this, hugging my friend, was nice. “No one is perfect. But you’re the best. Always remember that.”

“Um . . . thanks.” He eased out of our embrace. Redness darkened his cheeks.

“Are you two getting fresh on me?” Hunter grabbed a guitar off the wall.

“No,” I snapped. I wasn’t into Kyle. Or Hunter. They were . . . just my buddies. “That’s what friends do. Hug.” I held my arms wide. “Are you feeling left out? Would you like one too?”

“Nope. I’m good.” He shoved the Fender into my hands. “Right now, I wanna play.”

Kyle nudged his elbow against my arm. “You ready to learn that thing?”

I ran my hand up the neck, the steel strings cool beneath my fingertips. Excitement hummed through my veins. “You think I can?”

“Fuck yeah.” He walked over to the wall, grabbed another guitar, and plugged it in.

Hunter swiped the Gibson off the rack and hooked the strap over his shoulders. “Lesson one, here we come.”

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, the guys ran through the basic chords and scales with me. The moment I struck the strings, and the sound reverberated through the amp, fire ignited in my soul. Warmth wrapped around me, settling in my chest. Tingles shivered each hair on my skin. My heart had never beaten so hard. *Oh wow.*

After two hours of practice, we strummed out the chords to “My Best Friend’s Girl” by The Cars, and “Wild Thing” by The Troggs.

“You’re a natural.” Kyle’s eyes glinted as he watched my fingers glide over the strings.

“I think I found my baby.” I cuddled the guitar against my chest. “I’m in love with the electric.”

“You rock on the acoustic.” Hunter slayed out a riff. “But you come alive on that thing.”

“Thanks.” I tinkered on the strings. *Yeah. I had.*

Kyle glanced at his watch. “Shit, guys. You gotta go. I have to cook dinner and you don’t wanna be here when Dad gets home.”

“Shit, no.” Hunter jumped to his feet, unplugged his guitar, and put it on the rack.

I stood and did the same. “Kyle, you cook, too?”

“Yeah.” Kyle placed his guitar away and wound up the cables, stashing them neatly behind the drum kit. “Mom taught me so I wouldn’t starve.”

“He makes a wicked Thai curry.” Hunter led the way up the stairs. “Better than my mom’s, and she’s a great cook.”

“Kyle, is there anything you can’t do?” I asked as he shut the basement door behind me. Emily was still sound asleep on the sofa.

“Not sure.” Kyle grinned and play punched me in the arm. “I’ll let you know if I come across something.”

Giggling, I shoved him on the shoulder. “Smartass.”

As we headed to the front door, a car pulled in beside the house.

“Shit.” Kyle rushed forward, grabbed my bag off the floor, and shoved it at me. “Go. Both of you. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I hooked my bag over my shoulder. “Um. Thanks for today. It was—”

“Yep. Awesome,” Kyle cut me off, shoving us out the door. “We’ll talk tomorrow. Please. Just go.”

Hunter caught my hand. He tugged me across the porch, down the stairs, and over to our bicycles. “Quick, Gem. We gotta hurry.”

“Why? What’s the rush?” I picked up my mountain bike and pushed it toward the road.

Hunter had already jumped on his ride and was pedaling toward his house.

“KYLE?” A rough, booming voice roared behind me. My breath shuddered through my lungs. *Kyle’s dad*. “You worthless heap of shit. Where are you?”

I glanced over my shoulder. Mr. McIntyre staggered and stumbled up the steps toward the front door.

My mouth ran dry. I’d wanted to meet Kyle’s dad. *Guess today wasn’t a good day.*

“I’m here.” I could just hear Kyle’s shaky voice from where I stood at the front of the yard. He rushed forward and caught his father by the arm and helped him into the house. “Come on. I got you.”

“Get your puny hands off me, boy.” His father yanked free of Kyle’s grasp. But Kyle grabbed hold of his dad before he crashed into the hallway.

My heart bled as Kyle closed the door.

I wanted to rush to Kyle’s side, help him, but fear had frozen my feet to the ground.

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Chapter 4

“Gemma?” Hunter whisper-yelled as he pedaled back toward me at pace. He skidded to a halt. “What’s wrong? You have to move.”

“Um . . . Kyle?” My gaze remained glued to the front door. “Will he be okay? Should we help him?”

“That will only make it worse. Trust me.” He flicked his head toward his house. “Please, come.” Urgency shook his voice. “If Mr. McIntyre sees us out here, we’ll get into trouble. He won’t let us play anymore.”

Shit! I didn’t want that to happen. Digging deep, I found the strength to draw myself away from Kyle’s place. I didn’t want to cause him more grief.

Side by side, Hunter and I walked our bicycles toward Hunter’s house. The loose stones crunched beneath the tires. My mind still rattled at the fear I’d heard in Kyle’s tone. “So, Hunt? Is Kyle’s dad an alcoholic?”

Hunter stared down the road, then scuffed his Converse against the road. “Does Mr. McIntyre come home like that every day? No. But when he binges—usually at the end of a long roster—he’s always like that. It started when Emily got sick. He’s got a wicked temper, so it’s best to stay away. Kyle crashes at my place when he gets bad.”

“Does . . . does he hurt Kyle?” Bile bubbled at the back of my throat at the very thought.

“As in, hit him?” Hunter swallowed hard. “God, I hope not. Kyle’s certainly gotten the odd bump and bruise from carrying his drunken dad into the house or to bed. But he’s never said anything else to raise alarm. I hate there is nothing I can do to help other than offer him my floor when he wants to escape for the night.”

“How long have you known each other?”

“Since the first day of elementary school. He used to live the other side of town before his parents bought this house and moved in a few days before school started.”

“That’s so cool. I wish I had a lifelong friend like that.” I had a couple of girlfriends, but even they annoyed me. They were into makeup and shopping and cheer squad and boys. None of that interested me.

“You do now.” He threw me a goofy grin. “You have Kyle and me.”

Yeah. That was awesome.

Hunter unlocked the pedestrian gate at his house, and we wheeled our bicycles up to the front door of the low-set ranch-style home. We dropped them and my backpack by the potted plants.

“Jenny?” a lady’s terse voice called out from somewhere inside the house. “Come here. It’s bath time.”

“No.” A young girl shrieked.

Hunter winced. “Um . . . do you want to come inside? Meet my mom, dad . . . and my sister, Jenny?”

“Sure.” I stepped toward the bright red front door, but he didn’t move.

He caught my arm. Worry glazed his eyes. “Before we go in . . . you should know . . . Jen’s autistic.”

I shook my head. “Yeah. So?”

“Oh.” His brows shot skyward. “It’s just that some people get awkward around her. She can be full on.”

More full on than what I’d just witnessed at Kyle’s place? I doubted it. Hunter had nothing to worry about. “It’s cool. My neighbor’s granddaughter is autistic. I got this.”

He narrowed his eyes that shimmered extra blue in the soft porch light. “I should never doubt you, should I?”

“Nope.”

He flicked his curls off his forehead and grinned his goofiest grin. “Jenny’s only eight, but she’s twice the size of you and will probably try to smother you. Ready?” He unlocked and opened the door. “Welcome to Chateau de Collins.”

Delicious smells of Italian food filled the air as we stepped inside the entrance. Rutgers football paraphernalia—flags, footballs and framed jerseys, cushions, throws and coasters—dominated the living room to the right. A game blared on the trendy new flatscreen TV. In the kitchen in the far corner, saucepans boiled on the stovetop. I inhaled the delicious smells as homely warmth surrounded me.

As Hunter dumped his backpack by the console table, a loud shriek split my ears.

“Hunter.”

A naked girl charged down the hallway toward him. She flung her arms around his waist. Her short wavy brown hair curtained her eyes.

“Jenny Bear.” He kissed the top of her head. “How are you?”

“You’re home. I missed you today.”

“I missed you, too.” He rubbed her arms. “I’d like you to meet someone.” He stepped back. “Jenny? This is my friend Gemma from school.”

Jenny lifted her head and her azure eyes widened. A mischievous smile curled across her lips. “Oh. Are you Hunter’s girlfriend? He’s never had a girlfriend.”

“Hi Jenny.” I waved. “No, I’m not his girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

“I like you. You’re pretty. Can I give you a hug?” She stepped forward, arms open wide. All her cute little rolls of chubbiness and curves swayed toward me.

“Ah, Jen?” Hunter caught her around the shoulders and turned her to face the hallway. “How about we get you bathed and dressed first, then you can give Gemma a hug.”

Hunter’s mom rushed out of the hall, holding a towel against her chest. “I’m so sorry. Jenny took off while I was fetching her pajamas.”

Jenny giggled as her mom wrapped the towel around her. The moment Jenny was covered, she rushed over to me and hugged me tight.

Too tight.

I couldn't breathe.

Geez! She was strong.

"Mommy?" Jenny released me from her clutches.
"This is Hunter's girlfriend."

Flicking her fluster aside, Mrs. Collins wiped her hands on her apron, then shook my hand, firm and strong.
"Nice to meet you. I'm Lillian."

"Gemma. Not Hunter's girlfriend."

"You're the musician, right? Hunter has mentioned you play at school."

"Yeah. And he's teaching me to sing. He's got a great voice."

"That may be so." She half smiled at him. "But as long as all this music nonsense stays a hobby and doesn't turn into some foolish dream, we're happy for him to keep doing it."

Hunter shrank two inches, but I straightened. Our dreams weren't foolish. Music was all that mattered.

Mrs. Collins hugged Jenny and turned her toward the hall. Looking back at me over her shoulder, her voice turned all warm and buttery. "Would you like to stay for dinner, Gemma? I've made gnocchi. We'd love you to join us."

"I've never had it before. But that would be nice, thank you. Beats going home and eating alone." Anything sounded better than another microwave meal. And if whatever was cooking tasted half as good as it smelled, I couldn't say no. My mouth was already salivating.

“Fabulous.” Mrs. Collins nodded. “Let me bath Jenny, then we’ll eat.”

“I can bath her, Mom?” Hunter stepped forward.

But Lillian shooed him off. “I’ve got it. You look after your friend.”

As Mrs. Collins steered Jenny toward the bathroom, Mr. Collins came in from the garage, carrying a six-pack of beer. Dressed in tradesman workpants, steel-capped boots, and a Rutgers jersey, he was big and as wide as a bear.

“Dad?” Hunter led me over to the kitchen. “This is my friend, Gemma. From school. Gem, my dad, Art.”

“You’re the music girl, right?” He pulled a beer out of the pack and put the others in the fridge.

“Um . . . yeah.”

“Nice to meet you.” He cracked open the top of the beer can and took a swig. “You like football?”

“Not really.”

“I heard Lillian ask you to join us for dinner.” He flicked his finger toward the TV. “You wanna watch the game until then?”

“No, we’re fine.” Hunter thumbed toward the hall. “I’m gonna give Gemma some of my music books in my room.”

“Fine.” Mr. Collins eyes narrowed. “But keep the door open.”

Why? Oh . . . did he think Hunter and I were together? I pursed my lips, trying not to laugh. Hunter and me? Not ever

going to happen. I was convinced I'd missed being dealt teenage hormones. So far . . . anyway.

I followed Hunter down the hall, past the bathroom where Jenny was screaming and splashing.

“Argh. Argh. No,” she wailed. “I don't want to wash my hair . . . There's soap in my eyes. Mommy, it's stinging.”

“Jenny, just stop.” Lillian's voice was firm, yet calm. “I haven't even put shampoo on your head. It can't possibly be stinging. Now sit still.”

Hunter dragged me into his room and shut the door. “Just another great evening in the Collins' house.”

“Still beats mine.” I stuffed my hands into the rear pockets of my shorts. “I'd be home alone.”

He slumped against the door and threw me a tired smile. “If you can put up with noise and chaos, you're welcome here any time.”

“Thanks. I'd like that, but I don't mind being by myself. I'm used to it.” I scanned his room. It was tiny. Just enough room for a twin bed, single closet, and a narrow bookshelf that almost reached the ceiling. I ventured over to the shelves covered in CDs and music books. But the one at eye level stole my breath. It was covered in awards and medals, certificates and trophies. I read some of the plaques. *Best Male Vocals—Age 7–8, Best Male Performer—Age 12, Best Talent—New Jersey Regionals—Age 10.*

“Holy shit.” I spun around. “You won all these.”

“Yeah.” He flopped on his bed, adjusting the pillow behind him against the headrest.

“That is incredible.”

He picked at a rip in his jeans. “You’re the third person to think that.”

“I’m sure more people than your parents think you’re talented.”

“I didn’t include them in the count.” He stared out the window. Sadness flooded his eyes. “Kyle, Mrs. McIntyre, and now you are the only ones who think I’m good.”

“What?” I sank onto the end of the bed. “How can your parents not be proud of you? You’ve won all those awards.”

“They’ve never seen me perform . . . No, wait. That’s a lie. Mom came to my first talent show when I was six just before she had Jenny. Then she tried to come to a couple of shows when I was about ten, but she had to leave before I even sang because Jenny hated the noise. She hasn’t bothered since.”

“What about your dad?”

He puffed air through his nose. “No chance. All Dad cares about is football—going to Rutgers games with his construction buddies or watching it on TV. He hates me because I don’t want to play ball.”

“Shit.” I rubbed his ankle. “I’m sorry.”

He lowered his chin. “They don’t see how much I love music or how good I am. They let me take lessons and play to keep me out of the way, but they think it’s a waste of time. They don’t believe I can make a career out of performing. Kyle’s mom has always taken me to contests. She’s more of a mom to me than my real one.”

“You’re lucky—you have two moms. Mine literally hates me. She tells me that to my face.”

Hunter’s eyes hooded. “You don’t get along with her, do you?”

“No. I try, but it’s pointless. She only cares about herself and doesn’t care who she hurts or destroys in the process. For as long as I can remember, she’s cheated and lied. I’ve always had to fend for myself, even when Dad was around. I’m amazed my parents stayed together for as long as they did. They were never happy. Mom fucked around at every opportunity. Dad worked long hours to avoid being home. When they were together, they always fought over me and money.” Distant memories drifted through my mind. “The only time I remember being happy was when Dad took me on a week’s vacation every summer to a lake cabin near Clinton. We’d swim and play guitar and eat s’mores. I’d thought he loved me. But when he left, I questioned everything.”

“I feel you.” Hunter rested his head against the wall. “I may as well be on my own. The majority of the time, I don’t exist. Mom is devoted to working at the special school, running the after-school program and looking after Jenny twenty-four-seven. I love my sister and love spending time with her. She’s so sweet and funny. She loves watching The Wiggles DVDs, singing and dancing, and is a Wikipedia of facts and figures. I love taking care of her. Even on the difficult days, when she’s tired, or stubborn, or has gotten super-sensitive to noise or overwhelmed from being around too many people, I want to be there to calm her, stop her from hurting herself or others or breaking everything within reach. But Mom takes over and pushes me aside. I’m in the way or

I'm invisible. No one can look after Jenny like she can. Dad rarely offers any assistance."

"That must be hard. You seem so good with Jenny."

"Yeah, I am." Hunter leaned his head back against the wall. "But Mom doesn't see that. She makes me feel useless and only uses me as a desperate last resort. It sucks. Jenny is her life. Mom never takes a break. She has this huge heart but most days, I don't feel I'm part of it. I keep telling myself it's because I can look after my own needs and Jenny can't. But sometimes I just wish she'd take an interest in me, in what I'm doing. Is that wrong?"

"No." Hunter clearly loved his mom and craved for some of her attention. Not getting any affection was like walking on stage with no audience present or being shooed off the platform before singing. He just wanted to be seen, appreciated, and adored. Like most of us. "But your mom's incredible, right?"

"Yeah. She is." He smiled but no glint shimmered in his eyes. "But the worst thing is, despite Mom never wants my help, when I'm not here, I feel guilty for having a life and loving music."

"Hunt, you shouldn't. Maybe she's giving you the freedom to do those things. You're so talented. Don't let anyone or anything stop you from following your dreams." What would make him feel better about himself, his music, and supporting his mom and Jenny? *Oh! I got it.* I sat two inches taller. "If you can't help here at home, why don't you do something where your mom can see how good you are with Jenny? She runs the after-school program at the special school,

right? Why don't you volunteer there once a month or so? Help out that way. I'll come with you. I'm sure Kyle will too. We can play music, do singalongs, and entertain the kids. You'd have a very captive audience who'd adore you."

"Volunteer?" Furrowing his brow, he rubbed and stretched the back of his neck. His eyes clouded over, like he was lost in thought. Then he nodded. "I like that idea, but I can't ask you to join me."

"You're not. I'm offering." I leaned sideways, resting my hand on the mattress. "It'd give me something worthwhile to do."

"You'd do that? For me?" Disbelief rocked his tone.

I slapped and rubbed his socked foot. "It'd be for you and the kids. It'd be fun. We'd be helping and doing what we loved." It wasn't just for his benefit; I needed to do something that didn't make me feel like a waste of air, a mistake, or useless. The more I got to know Hunter, the more I discovered we had a lot in common.

"Too fucking right." The spark reignited in his eyes. "I'd do anything to help Jenny and play music. I love my sister and want her to have the best care, but fuck, I can't wait to get out of this shitty town. I'm gonna live life to the fullest, be a star, play music every day. Too hell with what my parents say."

"Same."

"You're pretty awesome, Gem."

"Thanks. You are too."

As we stared at each other, my heart didn't race or beat quicker, but it melded with his. We understood each other. Respected each other. Craved the same things. We shared the same dreams and passion for music.

I held my arms wide. "You want that hug now?"

"Yeah . . . that would be nice."

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Chapter 5

The three of us had become inseparable, in and out of school. By Thanksgiving, I'd learned several cover songs on the electric guitar. My piano skills had improved. I was singing more. I still wasn't confident with my voice but was getting better. I couldn't get enough of music. I wanted to spend every second of the day learning and playing.

One Thursday afternoon after school, we sat on the floor in Kyle's basement. I was on my acoustic guitar, Kyle was on his bass, and Hunter fooled around on the electric rhythm.

We weren't singing anything; we were just playing whatever came into our heads. Plucking strings. Stumming chords. Nailing notes. The electric vibe in the air hummed through my veins and drummed deep inside my chest. It was new. Different. Exciting. Then . . . our melodies mixed and morphed together.

Holy shit! My heart thudded against my ribs as I kept in time with the guys. I glanced at Kyle. My skin tingled from my head down to my toes. He caught his bottom lip between his teeth as if he were trying to contain his smile. His bassline hit the center of my sternum. I turned to Hunter. He bobbed his head. An oh-fuck-yeah grin curled across his mouth.

Did they feel that charge in the air? That . . . *magic?*

Hunter ripped out an incredible spine-tingling riff, raw and racy. The amp vibrated and jumped.

The breath shot from my lungs. “Wait? What the fuck was that?”

Hunter shrugged. “I don’t know. It just came to me.”

“Play it again. Don’t stop.”

My gaze homed in on Hunter’s fingers as he repeated the progression. Within seconds, Kyle changed his strums to align with Hunter’s tune.

“Holy crap.” My mind spun with dizziness. I closed my eyes. I could see the music. Feel the rhythm. Visualize the notes. “Again. This time, slower.”

My pulse throbbed with each beat. Sucking in a deep breath, I let the music take over. Move me. Claim me. Own me. *Oh, wow!* Words formed, fluttering into my mind. Furrowing my brow, I mumbled and whispered the lyrics. They became crystal clear and tumbled from my lips:

*Saw you standing in the hall one day,
You stole my breath, didn't know what to say.
I felt the air draw us closer,
Being near you makes my heart beat faster.
Was finding you meant to be?
Would you like to take a chance on me?
Wanna see what we can be?
Wanna see . . . wanna see . . . what we can be?*

Because . . .

You've got me all wound up.

Can't think clearly when you're standing near me.

You've got me all wound up.

Can't see anything but you before me.

Kyle stilled his strings and gaped. The fire in his eyes burned warm and deep.

I lowered my chin and blushed. "What?"

Hunter play-punched me in the arm. "What the fuck? You can write lyrics?"

I flinched sideways. "I . . . I don't know . . . They just came to me."

Kyle splayed his hands and praised the heavens. "That was insane and totally freaking awesome. We could write our own songs."

I cuddled my guitar against my chest, humbled by their praise and somewhat embarrassed. "It was one verse and a clumsy chorus. Don't get excited."

"Do you think you could create more?" Hunter's eyes widened.

"Maybe . . . I've never tried." *Shit. Pressure.*

"Give it a go. Hold on a sec." Kyle dashed upstairs and returned seconds later with a notebook and pen, and a mini tape recorder. "Here. Write down whatever comes into your head. Let's do this."

“Okay.” Butterflies jittered in my belly as I wiped my clammy palms on my shorts. “Don’t laugh.”

“Promise,” Hunter said.

But laugh we did. As we played, and came up with words and rhymes, we rolled around on the floor. Tears watered our eyes and my stomach ached. I don’t remember a time when I’d laughed so much. The lines and lyrics I jotted down were bad. Really bad. Corny and crazy.

But we kept at it.

New words. New lines. New tunes.

As the verses and choruses took form, Kyle scribbled notes and chords above each line of the lyrics. Hunter recorded our vocal takes on tape.

By the end of the following week, I typed on my laptop, deciphering the crossed-out lines, scribble, and scrawl from the notebook. The song was titled “All Wound Up.” We’d composed the music, compiled the lyrics, and mastered playing the song.

We’d done it.

As I grabbed the final printouts from the printer in Kyle’s mom’s music room, my hands shook. I handed the guys a copy each and sank onto the sofa between them.

We stared at the sheets of paper.

My stomach flipped and fluttered.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

We’d just penned our first song.

But the best thing was . . . there were more brewing
inside my head.

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Chapter 6

A few days later, we stood in a circle in the depths of Kyle's basement, practicing covers. We were churning out "Bent" by Matchbox Twenty. Hunter and I were slaying the electric guitars—I was still nowhere near as good as he was, but I would be—while Kyle hammered out the hit on the drums. Facing each other, we took to the mics and smashed out the vocals.

Hunter owned the floor, dancing and playing up to the mic like he had an audience of thousands. Kyle and I just shook our heads and laughed.

But with every strum, a storm of savviness swelled inside me, spurring me on to challenge Hunter's moves. I wanted to out-sing him. Taking a deep breath, I turned up the volume on my voice. I hollered out the lyrics. I stood my ground, swaying my hips, and seduced the mic as much as Hunter.

His eyes widened. But then he grinned and nodded, encouraging me to keep going. He, of course, refused to be outdone. He upped his moves and his singing.

So did Kyle. From behind the drums, his intense gaze fed my confidence. The loud, vibrant noise reverberating off the walls intoxicated me. The heightened energy in our performance sent shivers up my spine and pummeled my chest. *This . . .* was living.

With my heart pounding, sweat trickling down my face, and hair clinging to my neck, we rounded out the song. With one last bold strike on the strings, the twang hummed through the amp. Panting, I smiled at the guys. “That fucking rocked.”

A crazed, oh-my-goodness applause erupted behind me.

Slapping my hand over the strings to kill the lingering sound, I spun around. Mrs. McIntyre stood at the bottom of the steps.

“I’m sorry.” My pulse still pounded in my head. “Were we too loud?”

“No. Not at all.” She fidgeted with the scarf around her neck, then splayed her hands across her chest. “When did you three get so good?”

“We’ve always been good.” Hunter zipped his fingers over the frets and strummed the body’s strings hard.

“So true.” She gave him the most heartfelt, warming smile I’d ever seen. “And Kyle, you were brilliant on the drums. Perfect timing.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He spun a drumstick in the air, then caught it.

“Gemma?” She took a step toward me. “You have an incredible voice, but you need training. You’re too much in your head, not in your chest. You’re not engaging your diaphragm enough.”

Hunter had given me some pointers on singing, but I hadn’t perfected controlling my breath. I was gasping for air

after one song. “Um . . . thanks, Mrs. McIntyre. But . . . I can’t afford lessons.”

“I know.” She rubbed my arm. “But it is very rare I see such raw talent. I would be honored if you’d let me teach you. For free. As Kyle’s friend.”

My heart swelled. I didn’t deserve such kindness. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“No need. I want to help you. Your voice, if trained, could be on par with, if not better than, Kyle’s and Hunter’s.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Hold on there, Mrs. Mac.” Hunter held out his hand, but the biggest grin curled across his lips. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“Hunter.” She dipped her chin and gave him a be-serious smile. “You can hear it in her voice, can’t you? You, of all people, with your ear, can’t deny it.”

He leaned against his mic. “That’s why we’ve been teaching her.”

Excitement jumped in Mrs. McIntyre’s eyes. “The three of you together are charismatic. Your energy and vibe are electric. With a few tweaks and training, you guys could enter some contests.”

“We’re not that good. Are we, Mrs. McIntyre?” The more I played, the more I knew this was what I wanted to do. Music was the only thing that made me feel alive. Happy. Content. But were we anything special?

“Please, call me Claire.” She fanned her hand over her heart. “And yes, you’re that good. You harmonize perfectly. We’ll have to work on that as the guys’ voices deepen. But

you . . . you have a gift I haven't seen in a long time. Please, let me teach you?"

Wow! To have professional lessons? From a trained vocalist? I'd be crazy not to jump at the chance. But I didn't want to take advantage of Kyle's mom. "Mrs. McIntyre, that's very kind of you, but I couldn't. Not for free."

"It's Claire." She folded her arms and arched one slender eyebrow. "How about a deal then? If you bring me a batch of those brownies you made the boys the other day, I'll take that as payment each week."

"Really? Some brownies?" Tears welled in my eyes.

"Yes. Or cake, or muffins. I have a sweet tooth. So do the boys."

I swung my guitar around behind me and threw my arms around her shoulders. "You're the best. Thank you. I'd love some lessons."

She wrapped her arms around me and stroked and smoothed the back of my hair. As I inhaled the scent of her honey perfume, a rush of warmth flooded over me. With my cheek resting against her shoulder, I sobbed. I'd never been hugged by my mom. I'd never been cared for like this. Kyle's mom was the most remarkable woman I'd ever met.

"Now." She kissed my head then stepped back, rubbing my arms. "There is something else I want to show you. Come."

The three of us followed Claire upstairs and out into the double garage that was used for storage, not cars. The cruiser and van were left outside underneath a carport.

As we stepped into the space, I wrinkled my nose at the smell of dank dust, oil, and gas. The concrete floor was scattered with old boxes, a broken washing machine, and a cracked TV. In one car bay stood Kyle's dad's workout bench and boxing bag. Old car tires were piled in the corner by the busted roller door. The shelves that ran the length of the far wall were lined with cans of oil, lawn mower gas, and tins of paint, along with crates overflowing with power tools and cables.

Claire fidgeted with the fringe on her scarf. "I managed to talk William into letting you have this space. He hates you in the basement. If you clean this up, move his exercise equipment downstairs, throw out the old broken appliances and soundproof the walls . . . it's yours for band rehearsal."

"Band?" I pinched my brows together.

"Yes." Carol drew her shoulders back. "That's what you are, aren't you?"

"Are we?" Excitement flickered in Kyle's eyes as he glanced at me, then at Hunter, then back again.

As I stuffed my hands into the back pockets of my jeans, my heart raced. Was that what we were? *A band?* Had we moved past just learning and fooling around to become something of unity? But doubt swirled through my head.

"Doesn't a band need a drummer?"

"What about me?" Kyle slapped his hand across his chest. Hurt welled in his eyes.

Hunter grabbed Kyle's shoulder and gave him a nudge. "Dude, you love the bass more than the drums. You're much

better on the strings.”

“True.” Kyle shrugged, then a huge grin spread across his lips. “Bass kicks ass.”

Claire giggled, shaking her head. “I’ve taught every drummer in this district. No one comes close to being as talented as the three of you. You can advertise for someone if you wish and see who comes forward. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open. But for now, you don’t need one. You are so on-point using the loop machine.”

“She has a point.” Rocking on my heels, I gnawed on my lower lip, suddenly timid. “I kinda just like it being us for now.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Hunter smirked. “I don’t need some other shmuck thinking they’re better than me and controlling how we jam. Fuck that.”

“I agree. It’d take someone phenomenal to join us.” Kyle stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. “If we find someone, great. If not, so be it.”

I let out a relieved breath. The three of us were so in tune sometimes it was scary.

Claire grabbed my hand, drawing me into a circle with Kyle and Hunter. “You have something unique. It’s magic. It needs work and development and love and passion. You all have the dream to pursue music. Why not do it together? Make that your dream. Don’t let anyone stand in your way. I love you and will do all I can to help you on that path. Regardless of what you decide, this space is yours.” She squeezed our hands, then kissed Kyle on the cheek and headed for the

entrance. She stopped in the doorway and turned to look at us. Love and warning loomed in her eyes. “William will be home in an hour. Kyle, please make sure your friends are gone before then. You know the drill.”

Crap! Was Kyle’s dad drinking again? He seemed to do it more often than not. One day he was awesome and funny, the next . . . a write-off.

We nodded, and Claire left.

In the middle of the dusty garage, I clutched the guys’ hands. A fire blazed in their eyes, just like the one in my heart. “So, are we doing this? Officially gonna become a band?”

“I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else.” Hunter bumped his hip against my side, then plastered on a cocky grin. “Unless some record label offers me a solo deal and then I’m the fuck out of here.”

I giggled. He was such a goofball.

“Nope. Not even then.” Kyle entwined his fingers with mine. His low voice wrapped around my soul. “I want this. But only with you two. As a band. Forever.”

Yeah . . . I liked Kyle’s way of thinking. “The three of us. Forever. Let’s make it happen.”

“Fine.” Hunter rolled his eyes and sighed. “You’re right. It would be lonely at the top without you. Together forever.” His energy soared as he drew us into a hug. “We’re gonna be rock stars.”

“Argh!” we hollered, jumping up and down.

“Well then?” Kyle broke our embrace and clapped his hands together. “Let’s clean up this place.” He took two steps toward the massive mess and stopped. His shoulders slumped as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Fuck. There is so much shit in here. Where do we start?”

Yep, the task ahead was daunting. But it would be worth it.

He opened the lids of the first storage box and lifted out an old, deflated basketball. “We need to find out what is in each of these. Sort out what we can sell or throw out.” He jutted his chin toward the washing machine. “Those old appliances, I’ll put on Craigslist for free. Someone might want them for parts.”

“All right.” I stepped forward with a spring in my step. “Let’s get to work.”

As we shuffled through the boxes and made piles of sellable items versus trash, the electric vibe between us buzzed through the air. I cherished every smile, every laugh, every joke. I’d found two of the most incredible friends in the universe. We were three like souls with one dream.

I dug into a box of old gym gear. Shorts, shirts, and towels covered the equipment underneath. *Ew!* I hoped the clothing and towels were somewhat clean. As I tossed a shirt onto the trash pile, I turned to the guys. “If we’re gonna be a band, what are we gonna call ourselves? We need a cool name. Something that’s catchy and easy to remember.”

“The Three Losers.” Hunter smirked, sorting through a cardboard box of knotted Christmas lights.

“The Ashtrays?” Kyle held up a clear glass one out of another box.

“Guys? Be serious.” I tossed a pair of Kyle’s dad’s boxing gloves into a crate to take down to the basement. “We need something kickass. Something that says *don’t fuck with us*, like Trio of Fighters, or Triple Trouble, or The Three Kickers.”

Hunter grimaced and shook his wavy curls. “No. Those names suck.”

For the next half hour, we tossed around ideas, but nothing gelled. We had plenty of time to come up with a name. It was nice to get the cogs turning.

We were close to finishing for the evening when I opened another huge cardboard box. It was full of more of Kyle’s dad’s boxing gear. I pulled out an oval leather ball and held it up to show Kyle. “What’s this?”

He dusted off his hands and wiped them on his jeans. “It’s an Everhide. A boxing speed bag.”

I turned it this way and that. “It looks like it’s never been used.”

“Yeah.” He jabbed his hands onto his hips. “Because you have to be superfast, coordinated, always in rhythm, unrelenting and quick. That’s not my dad.”

Warmth stirred in my belly. “As in . . . if you don’t watch out, it will hit you in the face? As in . . . be on-speed, strong, resilient? Keep your eye on the ball? Focused?”

“Yeah . . . why?” Kyle straightened.

I eyed the ball, admiring the smooth leather and fine stitching. “Like something your dad has never touched. Like you’d pummel the crap out of anyone who stood in your way? . . . Like us?”

“Oh, yeah.” Hunter grinned, his azure eyes glinting in the bright fluorescent light. “That sounds like us.”

“Yeah.” The breath rushed from Kyle’s lungs. “Like us.”

“So . . .” My heart barreled up to the top of my ribcage. “We’re an Everhide?”

“Everhide.” Kyle nodded.

“Holy shit.” Hunter’s eyes widened. “I fucking love it. Every time we kick a goal, nail a song, play hard and fast, we’re Everhide. No one will keep up with us. It’s fucking awesome.”

Kyle’s lips twisted into a wicked grin. “We’re gonna kick ass. Everyone is gonna know our name and our music one day. Gem . . . you’re a genius . . . I love it.”

We rushed to the center of the garage and hugged.

Fire swirled deep in my belly. This was the start of something amazing. I was determined to make it happen.

The only question was how?

How did less-than-poor losers from the back streets of Montgomery crawl out from the gutter and become stars?

I had to find a way. But for now . . . we’d officially become a band. *Freaking. A-ma-zing!*

My friendship with these guys couldn't be reckoned with. I held them tighter. Breathed them in. Locked them into my soul. "From this day forward . . . we are Everhide. We're gonna take on the fucking world."

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Chapter 7

JUNE 2007

During the summer, after the guys had been on family vacation for a month—Kyle had visited his cousin Kade in Seattle; Hunter, his relatives upstate—we'd landed part-time jobs. Hunter worked two days a week at Rosa's burger joint. I had a shift or two per week at the local grocery store, and Kyle tutored music with his mom. Our goal was to save up for new equipment—better mics, bigger amps, and a bad-ass mixer. If we weren't working or practicing or learning everything we could about songwriting and producing songs, we spent the hot days down at the creek with friends, swimming, playing volleyball, and listening to music. I even spent time with my girlfriends, mainly Laura and Vicki, going to the movies and shopping.

But that summer wasn't all good times. Kyle's sister had taken a turn for the worse. Weak and feverish, she'd been admitted into the hospital in mid-July and wasn't able to come home. It was horrific to think she'd never do so again. We visited her as often as we could. We sang to her, read her stories, and watched her sleep. Each day, she grew frailer and weaker. It broke my heart every time we left her hospital bed.

Music kept our spirits strong.

By the time we hit sophomore year, we were jamming, rocking, and pumping out new tracks.

Thanks to Claire, we scored our first gig in mid-October at the local community fair.

As I paced the grass behind the stage, my palms grew sweaty. We were about to perform after the tiny tots had finished their ballet performance.

Covering popular chart-topping hits and classic rock songs, we'd blow the crowd away. The noise alone would shatter the parklands near the Princeton airport in two.

Dressed in black jeans we'd bought at the local thrift store, and T-shirts screen-printed with our Everhide logo across the front—Hunter's mom had Jenny's class make them for us—we screamed *teenage rockstars*.

The biggest change over the past few months had been the guys' voices and their insane growth spurts. They both stood a few inches taller than they had before. Their arms had toned from playing, although muscle build still evaded them. But their voices? *Wow!* Hunter's had deepened with a gravelly rasp that stirred my belly when he sang slow songs. Kyle's perfect alto tone gave me shivers down my spine on a constant basis. But they didn't affect me in *that* way. I'd never crushed on them. Hanging around them had made me immune to their developing good looks, but I never failed to be mesmerized and in awe of their raw talent. Our singing had gone to a whole new level. And today, we would put that on display.

I just needed to find my A-game.

"I'm gonna be sick." I clutched onto the railing by the stage stairs and leaned forward. My stomach gurgled and grumbled. Sweat broke out on my brow.

“Nah, Gem.” Hunter bounced around like a boxer about to take to the ring. “We’ve spent months rehearsing for this moment.”

I wished I possessed his confidence. We’d performed at a few talent contests, but the crowds had never been this big. While there were probably a couple of thousand people here at the fair, wondering around the market stalls and rides, there was only about one hundred people sitting in front of the stage, eating food and watching the entertainment. Their eyes would be on us.

“Will throwing up make you feel better?” Kyle rubbed my back and drew my hair into a ponytail, keeping it off my face. “You want me to take you to the restrooms?”

“Water. I need water.” I flattened my hand across my tummy to ease the nerves.

Rushing forward, past my mom and Derek, Claire held out a water bottle. “Gemma, you’ve got this.”

As she crouched in front of me, her neck scarf fell loose. Red marks, nasty scratches, and black bruises covered her throat and chest. My breath hitched. The nausea in my belly bubbled toward my throat. Kyle’s dad’s drinking had worsened over the last six months. Kyle’s bruises appeared more frequently. His ribs were often sore. The marks on Claire’s neck weren’t the result of everyday careless bumps.

I wasn’t stupid.

“Mrs. McIntyre?” Concern lilted in my quiet tone. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course, dear.” Claire quickly retied her scarf and smiled as if nothing was wrong. Like always, she denied anything had happened and covered up, and made excuses for William’s behavior. “Don’t worry about me. You need to focus on the show. There is no need to be nervous. Remember, breathe. Look out over the crowd. Smile and please enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you.” I placed my hand on her shoulder. “But is there anything I can do?”

“Gemma. Everything is fine. I promise.” A subtle tremor quaked in her voice as she squeezed my hand.

But she couldn’t lie to me. I knew things at home weren’t good.

“Come on, Gem.” Kyle caught my arm. “We need to get ready. It’s okay.”

As I straightened, a deep groove formed between his brows. I hated that there was nothing I could do to help him or his mom. The only thing that eased our worries was music.

He play-punched me in the arm. “Can we just rock that stage and blow the crowd’s mind? Let’s play so loud Emily hears us in the hospital.”

I took a sip of water and savored the cool liquid. With Emily’s health deteriorating and Claire’s marks making my heart hurt, my pre-performance jitters were insignificant. I pressed the water bottle against my cheek and closed my eyes. *Breathe. Look out. Smile. Have fun.* We’d do this for Emily. We’d do this for Claire. She was the only one who believed in us. “Okay. We can do that.”

“Gemma?” my mother, Janine, scoffed. Overdressed in high heels, too much makeup, and a gawdy sequined jumpsuit that screamed of the seventies disco era, she pointed one long pink talon at my face. “You get on that stage. I didn’t come all this way for nothing.”

Yeah, thanks, Mom. Real encouraging. Not.

Derek stepped forward, drawing Janine aside. “Gemma? You look amazing. Go break a leg.”

“Thanks. Will do.” I wiped my lips on the back of my hand.

“*Ergh!* This is ridiculous.” Janine rolled her eyes. “I’ve waited long enough. I’m going to find the bar.”

“Knock ’em dead, kiddo.” Derek gave me a hug and led Mom off into the crowd, not even toward the front of the stage to watch. My stomach sank for all of two seconds. The moment Mom was out of sight, my nausea subsided. *Go figure.*

“Is your family coming, Hunter?” Doubt loomed in Claire’s tone.

“Nope.” He pursed his lips and shook his head. “Dad’s working overtime on some new housing project. Mom’s at home with Jenny.”

She smiled a sad smile. “Maybe next time.”

We knew the idea of them seeing us perform wasn’t likely to come to fruition. They hadn’t been to our end-of-year school musical production or our contests. Nor had my mom, but that was no surprise. Hunter had dismissed it like it didn’t bother him, but it did. Covering his disappointment, he flashed

us his brilliant smile, spun in a circle, then slapped one hand onto my shoulder, and his other one onto Kyle's. He gave us a little shake. "We have each other. That's all that matters. Let's rock the shit out of this place."

"Fuck yeah," Kyle and I hollered in unison.

We took to the stage just after six-thirty. With Hunter on keys, Kyle on bass, and me on lead electric, we opened our thirty-minute set with Avril Lavigne's, "Complicated." Singing the hit in perfect harmony turned heads in the crowd and even stopped some people walking by. Halfway through the song, my nerves evaporated. The music had taken over me, mind, body, and soul.

As the stage lights flashed around us, we churned out Rob Thomas, Maroon 5 and P!NK, pumping effervescent energy into each note. We'd made the right choice in keeping to the hits. We scored cheers, claps, and whistles at the end of every song. Each one struck my chest. *This is freaking amazing.* The toddlers, dancing and spinning around in front of the stage with glow sticks around their necks, and the few teenage girls huddled together off to one side, singing and clapping along to our songs, were the biggest thrill. They loved our show.

After ending our performance with a cover of "Crazy in Love" by Beyonce, we rushed from the stage, leaving the clapping onlookers behind. The adrenaline coursed through my veins so fast my head spun. My heart hammered so hard I thought it might burst from my chest. Sweat soaked our shirts, our hair, our skin. What a rush. What a high. Panting to catch

my breath, I hugged the guys, and we jumped around in a circle. “We did it.”

“Can we do this every day for the rest of our lives?” hollered Hunter. “Please?”

“That was freaking insane.” Kyle leaned back, laughing. “Totally awesome.”

Mrs. McIntyre came over and joined our embrace. “Oh, I’m so proud of you. You were incredible. Well done.”

“Thank you.” I rested my head against her shoulder. “We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Her lessons each week had improved my singing technique. Her teaching contacts had scored us the gig. Now we needed more shows, more events, more performances. I needed that hit of adrenaline again and again.

“Oh, I think you would’ve made it without me.” Claire’s sweet smile filled my chest with warmth. “You have the drive and the ambition. Talent and motivation. That’s the key.” She tilted her head toward the stage. “Come on. We’d better bump out your gear to make way for the next act.”

After we loaded our equipment into Mrs. McIntyre’s van, we headed home to Kyle’s place. The electric charge from performing still hovered between me and the guys. Kyle’s dad was at the hospital with Emily. He wouldn’t be home for another couple of hours, giving us time to ride our high for a while longer.

As we sat around the dining table, reliving every second of our show, Claire placed huge bowls of chocolate ice cream in front of us. “To celebrate.”

I dug into my treat. Every time I closed my eyes, images flickered behind my eyelids—the stage lights flashing, the kids dancing, the parents sitting on picnic blankets or gathered in front of the food trucks, turning to watch us. The reverberations from the speakers and amps when we played that had rattled the stage still coursed through my legs. My fingertips still tingled from strumming my strings. I was an addict after one live show.

“We nailed today.” I licked off the chocolate on the back of my spoon. “Now we need to go next level. On top of finding more gigs, what do you guys think about submitting demos to some labels? We could mail them CDs, play at some open-mic nights, and post videos to YouTube. We gotta get our music out there.”

“Oh my God, yes!” Kyle slurped on a mouthful of ice cream. “Mom’s new laptop has a CD burner in it.”

“Yes, you’re more than welcome to use it.” Claire came over and stood behind me, placing her hands on my shoulders. “As long as you pay for the CDs and postage.”

“Hell yeah.” Kyle slapped his free palm against the table. “We can do that.”

“How can we get to open-mic nights?” Hunter shoveled ice cream into his mouth. “Most of them are held in bars and clubs closer to or in New York—not down here. And one huge hurdle . . . we’re underage.”

Yeah . . . that was an issue. But I wouldn’t let that stand in our way. “We’ll find venues that are open to all ages. Derek has offered to take us to gigs. We’re not gonna get anywhere playing in the garage. We need to find a booking agent. A

manager. That buzz tonight we got on stage? I want that every night.”

“Whoa now. Slow down.” Claire combed her fingers through my ratty hair. I really needed a shower. “Don’t rush ahead of yourself. School is still a priority. I’m all for you sending off demos. But you need more practice playing live. For now, find out what local community events are coming up and make a list of the family-friendly venues around the region that will let you play. Book some gigs. But . . .” She held up a finger. “The latter, is only during vacation. You need more experience before you consider sourcing a professional manager or booking agent.”

My shoulders slumped. The guys deflated, sinking two inches in their chairs. *Wisdom sucked.* But Claire was right. We weren’t going to become stars after playing at one small town fair. *Damn it.*

“Fine.” Kyle flicked his long bangs off his brow. “Our next purchase is a handy-cam to record videos for posting online and a stack of CDs so we can send off demos.”

“After my guitar.” Hunter grabbed the tub of ice cream from the kitchen counter and refilled his bowl. “I gotta get this Fender Stratocaster I’ve been eyeing at the pawn shop next to Jenny’s doctor in New Brunswick. It has my name on it. I’ll be able to afford it after this month’s pay.”

I giggled at the fire flickering in Hunter’s eyes. He always wanted new gear. It would be a lifetime before I could afford another guitar. I had my acoustic and used one of Kyle’s electric most of the time. When we became stars, Fender would be begging us to use their guitars. Or Gibson. Or

Yamaha. I wouldn't care which company. But Hunter had earned his reward. He religiously saved every penny outside our pooled band money. Once every two weeks, he headed into New Brunswick with his mom to help take Jenny to her doctor. He always came home with bold ideas for new equipment we should purchase. He wanted everything—guitars, in-ear monitors, and digital keyboards. But at present, we could afford a big fat zilch.

I didn't want to wait another month to start our videos and demos. "We can borrow Derek's handy-cam for now. CDs don't cost that much. This week, we can decide on the tracks we want to record and compile a list of the companies we want to submit to."

"I'm in." The broad smile that lit Kyle's face was as catchy as a Christmas carol.

More dreams and hopes filled my head.

But there was one big problem with hopes and dreams that I'd encountered time and time again over the years.

They didn't always go to plan.

Sometimes they were shattered.

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Chapter 8

On a Saturday, two weeks later, I was walking out the door to go to my afternoon shift at the grocery store when my cell phone rang. I dug my Nokia out of my purse and glanced at the screen. *Kyle*.

I pressed answer and put it to my ear. “Hey? What’s up?”

“Gem?” he sniffled, then sobbed.

“Um . . . Em . . . Emily died this morning.”

“Oh, shit.” Tears sprang from my eyes, and I sank onto the top porch step. I’d only been to visit her two days ago, and she’d seemed a little better. *Fuck*. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

“Where are you?”

“At home. Mom and Dad don’t want me at the hospital while they sort shit out.”

“Stay there. I’m coming over.”

I rang work. Called in sick. Then I jumped on my bicycle and rushed around to Kyle’s house. Hunter arrived shortly after his morning shift at Rosa’s, loaded with burgers and sodas. For hours, we just sat with Kyle, being there for him. Crying. Hugging. Comforting him. I hadn’t known Emily for long. Despite knowing she was ill, her final passing still hurt like hell.

A week later, she was buried in the local cemetery. I never wanted to experience anyone dying again. I couldn't stop crying, holding onto Kyle, Claire, and Hunter, hoping the pain in my chest would subside. It wouldn't. It didn't. Not until Kyle called Hunter and me over after school a couple of days later to jam. With tears streaming down his face, Kyle hammered and pummeled at his drumkit. Hunter and I matched his raw, angry, heart-wrenching beat on our guitars. We slammed and slashed every note, spilling our grief, our pain, and our loss through music. Only then could we breathe again. Music helped us move on.

Playing and writing songs gave Kyle something other than his sister to focus on. It took weeks for his smile to return to his face and for light to return to his soul. Claire drowned herself in more work, taking on extra private students to avoid being at home. William hit the bottle harder and harder. The guys and I spent more time at my place since Mom and Derek were hardly there.

We were determined to find a label.

Every month, we mailed demo after demo to record companies. We'd started with organizations in the New York area. Our first rejection letter had stung, but by the tenth, I was in tears. Why didn't anyone like our songs? We were good. Why wouldn't anyone take a chance on us?

Month after month, envelopes were returned. Many weren't even opened. After we'd sent samples of our songs to every company in New York, we broadened our submissions to include Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago. We even sent a few demos to Nashville.

But nothing.

There was no interest at all.

By the time we commenced junior high in August 2008, hundreds of rejection letters filled our email inbox and the folders in Kyle's garage. Each knockback we'd received hardened our resolve and fueled our determination to succeed.

Nothing killed our love of music. In fact, it grew every day.

Music had become our life.

On top of music at school, we'd play as often as we could at local fairs and contests, and we had secured a monthly gig at a tavern in Milltown. We'd even played at a rich teenage kid's party in Princeton and a wedding in Somerville. But both had been epic disasters. Hunter's mic had failed at the party, and at the wedding, I'd hit Kyle in the chin with my guitar, cutting him. There'd been a lot of blood, the bride's mother had fainted, and Kyle had ended up with four stitches. But it didn't deter us. We jumped at every chance to perform.

Our break would come. I knew it.

But when?

One thing had gained traction. Our social media. We had more than five thousand followers on YouTube and a couple of hundred likes on Facebook. People we didn't know were watching our videos. Liking us. Listening to our music. Each week, the number grew.

That spurred us on.

In January 2009, our hopes soared. Thanks to a last-minute cancelation, we'd been chosen to play at the new Seaside Music Festival at Jersey Shore in May. It was no Coachella. It wasn't even on the popular indie-band festival circuit, but it would be our biggest gig to date. We'd be the youngest participants and there'd be thousands of people in attendance. It was a chance to get in front of industry professionals. In our ninety-minute Sunday afternoon timeslot, we had the chance to play a mix of our original work and covers. To say we were excited was an understatement.

A month out from the event, we were jamming in the garage, rocking out "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" by Queen when prickles ripped across my skin. Something wasn't right.

Hunter slammed his hands down on the keys. "You know what? Fuck this. You and Kyle get to dance around the stage and play up to the crowd while I'm stuck behind this thing." He slapped his hand on top of the keyboard. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"What?" I stilled my strings and clutched at the pain spearing my ribs. I struggled to form words. Hunter loved music as much as Kyle and I did. Where had this come from? "You . . . you want to quit?" *No!*

"No." Frustration etched his brow. "God no. I mean . . . I don't want to play keys anymore. I just want to sing or . . . or . . . play rhythm. I'm a performer. I want to entertain the crowd. We're about to play our biggest gig soon, and I need to be part of the action."

“Geez, Hunt.” Kyle let out a long breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “That changes everything.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Hunter jerked his chin back. “We can do it. The three of us can sing side by side. As equals. I don’t want to be stuck on the edge of the stage doing nothing.”

The spike in my pulse slowly returned to normal. Hunter thrived on showing off. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to be closer to the audience. It was electrifying. He was like a wild panther that shouldn’t be contained. He needed to pounce and prance around. “You on rhythm would work. In fact, it will give us an edgier sound. Something different from any other band out there.”

“You’re right.” Intrigue lurked in Kyle’s eyes. He loved trying new things, pushing our music in new directions. “Do you think you can learn all the songs? Is four weeks enough time?”

“Pfft.” Hunter grinned, resting his hand on the keyboard. “Easy. I know half of them already.”

“Well then?” Kyle hooked off his bass and placed it on the stand. “Let’s get that keyboard out of the way and get you set up. Rhythm it is.”

“This is going to be awesome.” I clapped, then took off my guitar and helped the guys rearrange the space—keyboard moved to the back by the drums, stools stowed, cables re-laid.

Within minutes, we’d patched in Hunter’s guitar and set up a new mic, and were ready to play.

Each song we rehearsed rocked. Having Hunter beside us upped our dynamic. The three of us fed off each other,

trying to outperform, out-sing, and show off as much as possible. It boosted our level of fun into the stratosphere.

By the end of the week, we were running through our set list. Hunter was adamant about coordinating some of our moves. We had to look professional, right? The occasional choreographed steps, sway of our hips, or swipe of our arms *should* look cool. It was hard to tell with only a broken garage door as our audience. In fits of laughter, Hunter tried to teach Kyle and me how to dance. We were as uncoordinated as one-legged pigeons with no wings. We swore never to go full-on dance like the Backstreet Boys or NSYNC, but I'd kill to look and move like the girls in The Pussycat Dolls. They were fucking hot.

Two days out from the event, we ran through our final rehearsal in Kyle's garage. The three of us were pumped and more hyper than kids on candy.

I set the camcorder on the tripod in the corner. "Let's record our new song. I want to post it to YouTube and Facebook and let everyone know we'll be at the festival. We had over three hundred views on our last video."

"Three hundred?" Kyle's eyes widened. "That's insane."

"Wicked, right?" Hunter strummed his guitar.

"Ready? One. Two. Three. Go." I hit record and jumped into position in front of my mic.

Halfway through the chorus, Kyle messed up the notes. He burst out laughing. "Shit. Sorry."

“It’s okay.” I dashed over to the camera, stopped it, and reset the recorder. “From the top. Go.”

But in the second verse, Hunter sang the wrong words.

“What the . . .?” He chuckled, zipping his fingers over the frets. The goofiest smile slid across his lips. “I don’t mess up.”

The nerves and excitement had gotten to us.

“Sorry to break it to you, babe, but you’re not perfect.” I giggled, starting the camera again. These two guys were pretty damn close to it, though.

“Yes, I am.” He jabbed at the chords. “Always.”

Laughing, we reshot the video.

We nailed it that time.

We did one more take. And then . . . like always . . . the music took over. We played and played. The vibrations hummed through my fingertips and up through my arms, and settled in my chest. We fed off each other’s energy. We jammed and ripped out the tunes, lost in the magic of music.

Then . . . *bang!*

The front door crashed open.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT GODDAMN RACKET?”

Oh . . . shit!

The blood drained from my face. A chill shot down my spine. The guys froze.

Kyle’s dad was home.

And he was fucking wasted.

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Chapter 9

“WHAT THE FUCK IS ALL THIS CRAP IN THE HALLWAY?” William’s voice boomed through the closed door that led into the house. The cardboard box of our burned CDs we’d left by Claire’s office was kicked and thudded against the wall. The contents spilled across the floor and plastic shattered under the stomp of a boot.

Unable to breathe, I cringed. *Oh no . . .* All the discs we’d made to sell at the festival would be ruined.

Pure fear flashed in the guys’ eyes. I’d never seen them this petrified. We had to get out of there. But we were trapped. The main garage door was broken and lined with our equipment trunks. The only exit was through the house.

Since Emily had died, Kyle’s dad drank more frequently. There were days when he was fine, but when he got smashed, the monster within came out. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde had nothing on Mr. McIntyre.

Ice prickled my skin. “Shit. He’s home early.”

“You need to get out of here,” Kyle whispered. Tears welled in his eyes.

Hunter’s jaw tensed as he shook his head. “No. Not without you.”

“Don’t be a fool.” Kyle’s hand trembled as he placed his bass on the stand. “He’ll hurt you.”

“We’re not leaving you here to deal with him on your own.” Hunter stashed his guitar on the stand beside the keyboard. “We’re not little kids anymore.”

“Yeah, but we’re not trained cops either.” In a flurry, Kyle grabbed my electric guitar out of my hands and secured it in its case. He then shoved it under the desk. “You need to go. Now.”

He caught my hand and pulled me toward the door, but William’s roar halted us halfway across the garage.

“More music bullshit. Get this fucking crap out of my sight.” William stomped, cracking and smashing more of our CDs on the floorboards.

My heart splintered from the loss, but it trembled with fear. William wasn’t some high school teenage bully; he was a grown man on a drunken rampage. I clutched Kyle’s sweaty hand. “I’m scared.”

“Gem, I will never let him lay a finger on you. You hear me?” Kyle drew me against his chest and stroked my hair. I quaked in his arms. Inhaling his spicy scent, I tried to find some calm. But I failed. He was my best friend. I didn’t want to see him hurt again.

Hunter rushed over to join us. But as he crossed the carpet, he tripped on a cable and knocked the drumkit. One of the cymbals clattered and crashed to the floor.

“Oh, fuck!” Hunter cursed under his breath.

“Is that you useless kids?” William’s voice rattled the closed door. “I’ve had enough of this fucking music crap.”

My breath shuddered in my chest. Nausea pooled in my stomach. I swore my peanut butter sandwich was going to come back.

Heavy footsteps thudded down the hall, growing louder and louder.

“Claire?” William hollered. “I need another beer.”

But Claire wasn’t home. She was in Princeton, tutoring.

“CLAIRE?” William shouted so loud the door rattled.

Clutching onto one another, we stood as still as poles and held our breath. Listening.

There was no wind. No hum in the amps. Just William’s hissing and the creaking floorboards.

Kyle whispered, “Once he gets to the kitchen, we run. Out the front door. Okay?”

Hunter and I nodded.

Footsteps clomped closer. With my gaze set on the crack underneath the door, I dared not to blink, waiting for William’s shadow to pass.

“Ready?” Kyle’s voice was barely audible. We broke apart, preparing ourselves to run. Kyle’s gaze burned into the door as he mouthed, “*One. Two. Three. Go.*”

We rushed forward but before Kyle grabbed the handle, the door flew open.

William’s burly Bruce Willis-like frame filled the doorway. He swayed and staggered on his feet. His eyes blazed demonic red, and he stank like a beer brewery.

I jumped in front of the guys, hoping the sight of my tiny girly frame would stop William and bring him to his senses. But being female hadn't helped Claire when he'd hurt her. I trembled from my head down to my toes. My heart slammed against my ribs. But if I could take one blow for Kyle, one hit that wouldn't hurt him, one strike he didn't have to bear, I would.

Lifting my chin, I sucked in a deep breath and met the lifeless gaze in William's bloodshot eyes. I forced myself to smile and summoned a sweet voice. "Hi, Mr. McIntyre. How was work today?"

Steam fumed out of his ears and nose. Spittle drooled from his mouth. He didn't even glance in my direction. His gaze bored into Kyle.

William stumbled down the step, raised his hands, and charged toward his son. "You on that stupid guitar again, boy?" He back-handed Kyle across the cheek, then punched him in the jaw.

Kyle stumbled sideways. Blood spurted from his mouth. "Ow. Fuck!"

"Mr. McIntyre. No!" I screamed and pushed Kyle's dad with all my might. But the brute didn't move an inch. The few defensive moves I'd learned were useless against such a strong man.

"You pathetic girl. Get out of my way." He shoved me on the shoulder, sending me flying.

I slammed against the shelves, hitting my head. *Ow!* Crumbling to the concrete, I jarred my wrist and grazed my

hands and knees. *Shit!* With shaky fingers, I touched the bump on my head. Blood covered my fingertips. *Oh, crap!*

William lunged for Kyle, but Kyle blocked the blow. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

Kyle rushed toward me, but William grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and pinned him against the keyboard.

Hunter ran to my side and helped me to sit upright. “Gem. Oh fuck.” He swiped my hair off my brow. He shook all over. Tears brimmed in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Pain stabbed my head as I staggered to my feet. “But what are you doing? Don’t worry about me. Help Kyle.” He was my main concern. We had to get out of there.

William slurred in Kyle’s face. “You useless piece of shit. Is that what you’ve been playing?” He pointed at Kyle’s bass. He shoved Kyle backward, sending him and the keyboard tumbling to the ground. *Crash.*

William scooped up the bass, raised it above his head, and smashed it against the floor again and again. The neck cracked and splintered. The body shattered and split. Strings twanged and twisted. “Stop. Playing. This. Shit.”

“NO!” Kyle cried, scrambling to his feet. More blood and cuts covered his cheek. “You fucking asshole.”

As I clutched my clenched hands against my chest, my heart broke. Tears streamed down my cheeks. *Not his bass! That’s cruel. Beyond cruel.*

William’s breath heaved as he dropped the remains of the bass onto the floor. All Kyle’s hard work, the money he’d saved, gone. Destroyed. Rage flared in William’s eyes like he

was a bull about to charge. He hissed, “What did you call me?”

Crushed, with tears dampening his cheeks, Kyle cried, “You. Asshole.”

“Arrrrgh!” William roared and charged at Kyle. His fist cut through the air like a knife and struck Kyle’s chin.

Kyle’s head lurched backward. He stumbled a few steps but regained his balance.

“Kyle?” Hunter screamed, rushing forward. “Stop. Please. Let’s get out of here.”

But Kyle held out his hand for Hunter to halt. He straightened and glared at his father. Pure hate burned in his eyes. “Feel better, *Dad?*”

“Don’t talk back to me, boy,” William seethed.

“What are you going to do about it if I do?” Kyle sneered, wiping blood from the corner of his lips with his fingertips.

My head spun from my blow. I had to help Kyle.

“Argh!” William’s scream reverberated throughout the garage. He lunged at Kyle, clamping his hands around Kyle’s neck and crushing his thumbs into Kyle’s throat.

Kyle grabbed his dad’s hand and yanked it down to free his windpipe. Swinging his opposite arm up and over in front of him, he broke William’s hold. Then, with all his might, he rammed his elbow into William’s face. *Yes!* The basic self-defense techniques I’d shown him years ago had kicked in. Shoving his father in the chest, he sent William

staggering backward into the tripod. Our camcorder shattered on the ground.

I didn't have time to blink before William shot forward. He pummeled Kyle with punches and blows. Into Kyle's face. His ribs. His stomach. William was too strong. Kyle's eyes widened. He gasped for air. Keeling over, he fell to the floor. As Kyle cradled his head, his father rained blow after blow into his son's crumpled body.

Hunter and I bolted forward, grabbed William's shirt, and hauled him backward.

"Stop!" I cried. "You're hurting him. Please stop."

"Get out of my way."

William's backhand struck me across the face, hard. Lights flashed before my eyes. *Fuck!* That stung. But I wasn't going to let him lay another hand on Kyle.

Neither was Hunter.

Just as William raised his fist to smash Kyle's head, Hunter charged forward. "NOOOO!" He rammed his shoulder into William, driving him onto the floor. One of Hunter's swift punches connected with William's nose. The next slammed into the man's nuts.

William screamed and curled into a fetal ball. "You fucker. You absolute little fucker."

Hunter and I scrambled over to Kyle and hauled him to his feet. Bruises and blood covered his hands and face. Hooking our arms around him, we rushed out the door. I locked it and jammed the handle with a chair. William wasn't getting out of there anytime soon.

“Kyle, are you okay?” Hunter spluttered over his tears as we staggered into the hallway.

“No,” he sniffled. “But get me out of here. Just get me the fuck out of here.”

William bashed and rattled the garage door. “You little shits. Let me out. Now.”

We stumbled out of the house and ran. Ran as fast as our battered bodies could. We passed Hunter’s house. Art was at the football. Lillian was minding two of Jenny’s friends for the weekend, and we didn’t want to frighten them. At speed, we fled down the dark, treelined street and around the corner, and sprinted the short distance to my place. With Derek away for work, I didn’t expect my mom home tonight. We crashed through the front door. Kyle stumbled into the bathroom and threw up. He sank to his knees and cried.

Adrenaline and shock tumbled through me, numbing the pain from my own injuries. I rushed to his side and hugged him. I didn’t want him to be hurt anymore.

This ended tonight.

Hunter ran to my fridge and grabbed the icepack. I grabbed a face towel and wet it. As Kyle sat on the bathroom counter, I wiped the dried blood from his lip and nose, and a cut on his cheek. “You gotta get out of there. Your dad’s getting worse.”

He closed his eyes and nodded. Then they widened. The white around his irises blazed bright. “Shit. Mom.”

“I’ll call her.” Hunter pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed Claire. But she didn’t answer. She must

have been teaching. He left a message and sent her a text. We prayed she'd get them before arriving home.

Kyle caught my hand, drew it away from his face, and brushed his thumb down my cheek. "He hit you. I'm so sorry."

"I'm okay." A tear meandered along the edge of my nose. "I hate that I couldn't stop him."

He drew me into a hug and cried against my shoulder. I just held him, wishing I could take away his pain. Make everything better. Stop the hurt.

Hunter joined us. We shuffled into my bedroom and the three of us sank onto the floor underneath the window. Hidden behind the bed, we leaned against the wall. It was the only place that felt safe. Dark. Quiet. Away from our parents, our school, our daily shit. Away from the nightmare we'd just endured.

As I pressed the icepack over Kyle's cut fingers, he trembled and winced. More tears filled his eyes.

Hunter, sitting on the other side of Kyle, hooked his arm around Kyle's shoulders. "We need to get out of this fucked up town." Desperation dripped from Hunter's tone. "I hate it. The people. This life. We deserve more than this."

"I'm so sorry, guys." Kyle sobbed. "I never wanted you to see him like that or get hurt."

Hunter puffed air through his nose. "You're worrying about us when your face is all fucked up?"

"Is it bad?" Wriggling a tooth, he winced. "Fuck, this one's loose."

“Are you sure you don’t want us to take you to the hospital?” I swiped Kyle’s hair off his brow. “Your eye is black and bruised. The cut on your cheek isn’t bad, but the swelling is getting worse. You copped a fair hit to your nose, but it doesn’t look broken. What about your ribs and stomach? Are they okay?” My gut lurched as I relived each one of William’s pummeling blows.

“I don’t think anything is broken. Just stay with me.” He curled into my side and rested his head against my shoulder. His tears soaked through my T-shirt onto my skin.

Hunter leaned in and hugged him too. “I can’t believe you stood up to him. I was terrified but so proud of you.”

“Asshole got me though.” Kyle sniffled as he wriggled and rubbed his jaw. “But thank you for kicking his ass and hammering his balls. I hope he can never piss again.”

“I don’t think I hit him that hard.” Disappointment hovered in Hunter’s tone. “But my fucking hand hurts. I busted a few fingers.” He held out his shaky hand. His knuckles were bruised and cut, but nowhere near as bad as Kyle’s.

I rested my cheek against Kyle’s head. “You can’t go back there.”

“I have to.” Distance hovered in his voice. “I can’t leave Mom alone with him. I can’t report him. His work buddies will cover his ass. I’m afraid if I say something, I’ll be taken away by child services. I can’t risk that. I can’t lose you two.”

“You won’t. Not ever.” I clutched his hand. “But it’s too dangerous.”

“Every day, I’m terrified the fucker will kill me . . . and Mom. But she won’t leave him.” He straightened. Leaning his head against the wall, he pressed the icepack against his eye. “Like always, she’ll defend him. Say it was my fault. She’s so fucking terrified of what he’ll do to her. But maybe this time, when she sees this”—he pointed to his battered face—“she’ll have the guts . . . no, he’ll have the guts . . . to admit he has a fucking problem and get some help. Go to rehab or something.”

Nausea bubbled in my belly. What if William didn’t? Would this just go on and on and get worse until he killed one of them? Hurt them beyond repair?

I never wanted Kyle to have to go back home. “I don’t want you to go through this ever again. Whenever *you* need to, you can stay here with me.” I curled against his side. “My mom and Derek are hardly ever here. If they were, they wouldn’t care.” My mother would be ecstatic, thinking Kyle was my boyfriend and I had some interest other than music. *No chance of that happening.*

“Thanks. I might take you up on that.” He wiped the dampness from his cheeks with his palm. “I just want Dad to stop.”

I cuddled him harder. My heart cried. Kyle had stayed less at Hunter’s house these days. Mr. and Mrs. Collins had enough challenges with Jenny—Kyle didn’t want to burden them with his problems. Not that crashing on Hunter’s

bedroom floor was an issue. He just never wanted to raise alarm and draw attention to his horrid homelife.

But Hunter and I had known the truth. Six months ago, when Kyle had turned up to school with fresh bruises and bad scratches on his arm, he'd finally admitted that his dad had a temper when he was drunk, and it often involved Kyle being hit. It broke my heart that there was nothing we could do. The neighbors and the local community loved William. Claire was scared out of her wits and blinded by love. Kyle loved his mom, us, and music too much to say anything.

How fucked up was love?

“We have just over a year of school left, then we're out of here.” I rubbed Kyle's arm and glanced at Hunter. “You guys cool with that?”

“Fuck yeah.” Hunter ruffled his fingers through his hair. “I'd leave tomorrow. No question.”

“Is it that bad, Hunt?” I asked.

“Dad doesn't talk to me anymore. If he does, he just yells about my crap grades and to stop wasting my time with music. Mom is slightly better, but she still devotes every hour of her day to school and Jenny. They don't give a shit about me. I can't wait to get out of there.”

Since we started volunteering at the after-hours care program at Jenny's school last year, Lillian had been more open to Hunter . . . no, us . . . helping with Jenny. Once a week, the three of us looked after her at home, while Lillian ran errands. But Kyle and I never had to do much. Hunter was amazing with his sister. He always played Jenny's favorite

songs on their upright piano, danced around with her and read her stories. But the minute Lillian came home, she shooed him away and took control. Her overprotective nature and big heart almost never filtered through to acknowledging Hunter's help or showing her appreciation for him. Lillian was a beautiful person, an incredible cook, and I got on super well with her, but she put everyone else first before Hunter.

I felt for him. I knew what being deprived of parental love was like. I understood how empty and unworthy and pained it made you feel on the inside. I had no doubt Lillian was grateful and loved Hunter—she just hardly showed it. All he wanted was some love and recognition, but he never got any.

“We will get out of here.” I placed my hand on Hunter's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “We will. I swear.”

“How?” Kyle shuddered as he held up his bloody, bruised knuckles. His fingers shook as he twisted his wrist this way and that. Grabbing my hand, he brushed his fingertips over the cuts and grazes on my knuckles and clutched it to his chest. Then he clasped onto Hunter's battered hand that was resting on his thigh. “We can't play at the festival like this,” he sobbed. “Dad's fucked our chance to be seen.”

My heart shattered across the floor. Kyle was right. We couldn't play. Our injuries were too severe. Tears trickled down my cheeks, but nothing would dent my resolve or my determination to follow my dream. “Maybe this time. But never again. We will never give up on music or each other. You guys are my everything.”

Hunter nodded. Reaching across Kyle, he clutched my knee. “Gem, we would’ve never formed a band if it wasn’t for you. You’ve made us. You’re our life. We owe you so much.”

“Same goes.” I blinked, my lashes wet with too many tears. “You’ve taught me so much. I can never thank you enough. Music is who I am.” I swiveled to face the guys. Kyle’s head rested against the wall, but his gaze connected with my soul. I would give my life for him. And Hunter. Tonight had proven that. I caught their hands in mine. “I don’t know what this connection between us is, but it’s magic. It’s like I can’t breathe without the two of you in the room. I come alive when we play.”

Our bond was uncanny and powerful. It could never be broken.

“I feel that way too,” Kyle whispered.

“Yeah . . . we were meant to find each other.” Hunter’s eyes glistened in the soft light.

Squeezing their hands, I sucked in a deep breath. These two guys had become my family. We were stronger than blood. “Then let’s make a pact. The three of us will be best of friends for life. Music will be our lives. We will love and support each other through everything. And nothing . . . I mean nothing . . . will ever tear us apart.”

“Together. Forever.” Kyle nodded.

“And always,” Hunter added.

We fell into a hug, wrapping and entwining our arms around each other. Closing my eyes, I inhaled the mixed scents of the guys’ deodorants and our sweat from running and

playing. It encircled me like a warm safety blanket. These two guys were all I'd ever need.

With my cheek resting against Kyle's shoulder, I mumbled, "We will get out of Montgomery. I promise. I'll make it happen."

I'd sell my soul if I had to. I'd get us out of this hellhole and find a better life.

Our music would be the key.

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Chapter 10

I woke the following morning to Kyle's phone vibrating on my nightstand. Squashed between him and Hunter on my queen-sized bed, I wriggled and sat upright. After talking into the wee hours of the morning, we must've drifted off somewhere around two a.m.

I rubbed the tiredness from my eyes, then the side of my head. It still ached from where I'd hit it. As I traced my fingers over the rough, dried blood, the horror of last night flashed behind my eyelids. Kyle's dad on a rampage was something I never wanted to see again.

Kyle lay curled toward me. With his tousled hair fanned against the pillow and deep breathing, he looked at peace. But the skin around his eyes was black as tar. Purple bruises dotted his cheeks. The cut on his lip looked like a failed piercing attempt . . . no, it looked like he'd ripped a piercing out, and his hands were mauled like he'd been in a street fight. Take away all the marks and he was still handsome though.

I slapped him on the thigh. "Mom' lit the screen on his cell phone. "Kyle? It's your mom."

He groaned, rolled over, and reached for his cell, then hit the answer button. "Hey. Everything okay?" he said, tired and groggy. "What?" He shot upright, wide awake. The blood

drained from his face. Panic set into his voice. “Didn’t you get our messages? . . . Where? . . . What did he do?” His eyelids scrunched closed. His chin trembled. “Fuck. I’m so sorry. I mean it, Mom. I’ll fucking kill him. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He hung up and swung his legs off the bed.

“What’s happened?” I caught his arm. New fear resided in the depths of his eyes.

“Mom’s in hospital. Two broken ribs. Broken nose. Cuts and bruises.” He clenched his jaw and his fists. “She said she fell down the stairs. But she’s fucking lying. Just like always.”

“Holy shit.” Hunter lurched from the bed, raking his fingers through his hair. “He hurt her that bad?”

“Yep.” Fresh tears welled in Kyle’s eyes. “Asshole.”

I scrambled off the mattress and grabbed a fresh T-shirt to change into. “Which hospital? Let’s go see her. I’ll call a taxi.”

“I should’ve stayed at home.” He sat frozen on the bed, staring at the floor. “I should’ve been there to protect her. Fuck. This is my fault.”

“No, it’s not.” Hunter rushed to his side. “Don’t ever think that. But right now, we need to go see your mom.”

While we waited for the taxi, we devoured a packet of Pop-Tarts and a carton of orange juice. Every movement of my hands hurt, my knuckles sore and stiff. If I ached this much, what was Kyle going through? He clutched at his ribs every time he walked, each step slower than normal.

“Do you want some Advil?” I pointed to the packet we’d left on the counter last night.

“No. I’ll be okay.” He kissed the top of my head.
“Thanks for taking care of me.”

“Any time.” I grabbed my keys and cell phone, and we headed out the door.

I’d thought Kyle had been badly beaten, but nothing could have prepared me for Claire. She was lying in the hospital bed, and her arm was set in a cast. Her black eye had swollen to the size of a tennis ball. Her purple cheeks hid every inch of her olive complexion. The sparkle in her eyes had gone out. Hunter and I huddled at the end of the bed while Kyle sat beside his mom. He didn’t want us to leave the room.

After many tears, Kyle failed to convince his mom to change her I-fell-down-the-stairs story and report William. Wiping his hands down his face, with his shoulders slouched, he was sapped of energy. “I’m not gonna let him get away with this, Mom. I can’t. Not this time. If you won’t help me, Hunt and Gem will. I won’t spend another night in that house without him paying for what he’s done.”

“Kyle.” Claire clutched his hand. “No. Your father is a good man.”

“He used to be.” Kyle’s brow furrowed as he sniffled. “I want my dad back. I want summer vacations together and movie nights and laughs over dinner. But it hasn’t been like that for months—years in fact. I won’t let him hurt us again.”

“What are you going to do?” Claire’s chin trembled.
“Don’t do anything silly.”

“I won’t, Mom. I’ll think of something.” He stood and kissed Claire on the forehead. His eyes had clouded over like his brain was working overtime to come up with a plan. “You get some rest. I’ll come see you later this afternoon.”

I stepped forward and kissed Claire on the hair. “Love you, too. See you soon.”

Hunter repeated the gesture. “Mrs. Mac, I hate that you’re hurt, but you’re still the hottest chick in this place. Love you.”

Claire half smiled, shooing him away.

With our arms hooked around each other’s shoulders or waists, we headed out of the hospital.

My heart shuddered. I couldn’t understand why Claire wanted to protect William. If that was love and marriage, I never wanted to go down that path.

As we walked toward the taxi bay, a shiver shot up my spine, freezing the breath in my lungs. Kyle’s dad limped toward us across the parking lot. With a baseball cap pulled low over his brow—no doubt to hide his bruises—he kept his head down.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Kyle hissed, then stormed toward him.

Did Kyle have a death wish? Willing to take on his dad again?

Hunter and I rushed after him. *Yep*. We had one too. We’d take on William any day to keep Kyle safe.

Kyle shoved his father on the shoulder. “You put her in hospital, asshole. What the fuck?”

But William just took the shove and glared at Kyle with regret, anger, and sorrow consuming his eyes.

“I . . . I didn’t mean to.” William’s voice wobbled as he held his hand toward Kyle’s face and raised a shaky finger. “Did . . . did I do that?”

“You know perfectly well you did.” Kyle’s voice sliced through his clenched teeth. The muscles in his jaw tensed. “You hurt me and my friends.”

William fell back a step. His gaze jumped from Hunter, then to me. “What? Oh my God.” Tears welled on the rims of his red eyes. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt anyone.”

My head throbbed. I couldn’t get the replay of what happened last night out of my mind, but the mortification on William’s face made me falter. Did I feel sorry for him?

Wait . . . no. This was what addicts did. This was what Kyle put up with all the time—the manipulation, the guilt trip, the apologies that led to hope that it would get better. I wouldn’t fall for William’s please-forgive-me bullshit.

Neither would Kyle.

“But you did.” With tears pooling in his eyes, Kyle quaked. “You’re always sorry. You always say it’s not going to happen again. But it does. And each time it gets worse. Your apologies mean nothing anymore.”

William lowered his chin and shook his head. “I . . . I don’t remember last night. I woke up on the floor. You and your mom were gone.”

“Doesn’t that freak you the fuck out?” Kyle’s shoulders slouched. “You scared the living shit out of me and my friends. You could’ve fucking killed us.”

The blood drained from William’s face. The reality too real. Too close.

Hunter took a tiny step forward. “Mr. Mac, do you remember smashing Kyle’s guitar? Shoving him into the keyboard? Breaking our stuff?”

William swayed on his feet as he wiped his hand across his chin. “I’m sorry. I’ll replace everything, I promise.”

Trembling in my sneakers, I clutched onto Kyle’s arm for support. I didn’t want to upset William and have him lash out at us again. He’d never done so when sober, but after last night, I was afraid that the slightest thing could set him off. “You beat us up so bad, Mr. Mac, we can’t play at the festival this weekend. Our hands are messed up. We’re unable to perform in front of music reps.” *Shit*. We still had to call the event managers and cancel. My lungs ached, drawing in air. I hated that we’d lost our biggest opportunity to play. We’d never be asked back.

While that sucked, I was more concerned for Kyle and his mom. I tightened my grip on his arm. “But we had to help Kyle. We thought you were going to kill him. We tried to warn Claire, but you hurt her too. This can’t keep happening, Mr. Mac.”

“Gemma.” With hooded eyes, William shook his head. “I never meant to hurt you.”

I wished I could believe him. But I couldn’t.

“But you fucking did.” Kyle clenched his hands. Every ounce of his anger and hurt slammed into my chest. His voice shuddered. “It wasn’t just me and Mom this time, Dad. You’re out of control.”

William stiffened and sucked in a deep breath. “I said I was sorry. Isn’t that enough?” He went to push past Kyle, but Kyle grabbed his arm.

“No. Not this time.” Kyle spun his dad to face him. He threw William a chilling glare. Refusing to back down, Kyle raised his voice and stabbed his finger toward the steps. “You put Mom in fucking hospital. You’ve gone too far.”

My knees shook. Were more punches about to fly? Straightening, I flexed my sore hands, ready to defend Kyle. Hunter threw me a quick glance and nodded. Yep, we were on the same wavelength.

But the air around us warped with a heaviness that pressed down on my shoulders. William slumped and thumped his fist against his chest. “Don’t you think that breaks my heart? Seeing you and your friends injured makes me sick to the stomach.” He clutched onto the center of his polo shirt and yanked it. “I hate myself for doing this.”

“Good,” Kyle snapped. “Then do something about it. Right now. If you have any remorse and regret, admit you have a fucking problem. Go get help. Today. Or Mom and I don’t come home.”

Wait. What? Was that Kyle’s plan? My head rattled. Where would he go? I hated the thought of him leaving, but I could understand him wanting out. He’d found the strength to

take a stand. For that, I was proud of him. If he left, maybe I could go with him. My mom would be happy to be rid of me.

“Don’t be stupid.” Irritation shot through William’s voice. “Of course you will.”

“That’s not a threat.” Grit set in Kyle’s icy tone. “It’s a promise. You leave here now. Go home, pack a bag, and check into rehab.”

“I don’t need help.” William closed his eyes. Deep grooves etched his forehead. “I’ll stop. I promise.”

“Bullshit. Look at us, Dad.” Kyle yelled. With a tear trickling down his cheek, he pointed to me. “You hit Gem so hard she slammed into the shelf and cut her head.” He clutched Hunter’s arm and raised his wrist, showing William Hunter’s cut knuckles. “Hunt did this trying to get you off me.” Then Kyle took off his cap and swept his bangs aside, revealing his shiny black eyes and cheeks. “You fucking did this to me.”

My heart cinched. I hated seeing Kyle at his wit’s end. I wrapped my arm around his waist and hugged him, resting my head against his shoulder. I would never let him fall. No matter how broken he was, I’d always be there for him. No matter what.

“Kyle. Please?” his father pleaded. “You have to understand—”

“You weren’t the only fucking one who lost Emily.” Anguish ripped through Kyle’s voice. “You started drinking when she got sick, but it’s gotten out of control. Mom and I can’t do this anymore. If you don’t get help now, and I mean

right now, I will bypass your buddies at the station and go to the cops here in Princeton. I will report you. I will press charges. I won't stop until you are locked away behind bars. Do you understand?"

"Kyle?" William held up his palm, but Kyle ignored it.

"Do. You. Fucking. Understand?" Kyle yelled. "This is over. You have two choices. Rehab or prison."

My ears rang as an ambulance raced along the street and pulled up outside the emergency department. A flock of pigeons took to the air as the paramedics rushed to the back of the vehicle. The entrance doors flung open, and two nurses rushed out to aid them. That could have been Claire. Or us. What if next time, we didn't escape? I didn't want to go there.

"Mr. Mac?" Hunter's husky voice came out as timid as a lamb as he rubbed his chest. "I've known you for a long time. You're getting worse. This can't go on."

"We were so scared." My heart thudded so loud in my chest I was sure the guys could hear it. "Please get help."

William's eyes clouded over as he stared past Kyle toward the hospital entrance. As he took a deep breath, tears welled in his bloodshot eyes. "I always tell myself just one drink or two, but then I can't stop. I don't have an off switch. Beer used to be enough, until it wasn't. So I'd have a couple of whiskeys, then a couple more. Then a couple more."

"I know," Kyle hissed. "I've lived with this shit for years. But I can't anymore. This is the final call. Get help or Mom and I are gone."

My heart broke. I didn't want Kyle to leave. But we'd find our way back to each other. The three of us would never be apart for long.

William bowed his head, nodded and sniffled. "You're right. Last night was my rock bottom. I'm there. I love you. It may not seem like it, but I promise, from the bottom of my heart, I do. I don't want to be like this. I want to get better. So, I'll go. I'll call Marsha at work. She'll help me make some calls and find out which center can take me. I'll see Claire first, then go."

"No." Kyle blocked his path. "She'll talk you out of it and say everything is fine. Like always."

"Not this time." William shook his head. "If she's hurt like you, nothing will stop me from going."

For the first time, I believed William would follow through on his words.

Kyle hesitated, then nodded. "Fine. Five minutes." Kyle held up his hand. "But I'll come with you because I'm going to make fucking sure you are in rehab by tonight or I'll put you into one of these hospital beds myself. Got it?"

William dipped his head. "Got it."

Kyle hooked his arms around Hunter and me, then juttled his chin at his father. "And whether you like it or not, Hunt and Gem are coming come with us. I need them for support. They're all I've got." He threw us quick glances.

The I-need-you-more-than-life-to-get-through-this plea swirling in his dark eyes made my anxiety about the idea of

taking a grown man to rehab insignificant. If Kyle needed me, I'd be there. No questions asked.

“You have good friends. I admire that.” William smiled, but it didn't touch his eyes. Deep down, he must have regretted hurting us.

“Let's go.” Kyle jerked his head toward the entrance. “Time's ticking.”

Arm in arm, we followed William into the hospital. As he visited Claire, we made our heartbreaking call to the festival. They weren't happy but were empathetic when we told them we'd been in an accident. With our biggest chance for our music to be seen destroyed, how long would it take for a new opportunity to arise? Every avenue seemed to lead to a dead end. I wouldn't give up. I couldn't.

I prayed William would go to rehab without any more incidents.

What was the likelihood of that?

Chapter 11

After checking in and two days of medical and physiological assessment, William was advised to spend five months in rehab. He'd cursed at the length of time, but alcohol wasn't his only problem. He had to get sober, and deal with his mental health and anger-management issues. His work colleague, Marsha, had helped find a facility, lodged his leave with the force, and had driven us and William to the center in New Brunswick. She'd never questioned why or asked what had happened to Kyle, even though he looked like he'd been used as a punching bag, but concern had hovered in her eyes. I had a hunch she knew what had gone down and was only too willing to help.

Relief from the ordeal didn't set in until she dropped us off at Kyle's place after William's final admission examinations. I sank onto the sofa beside Kyle, exhaustion seeping into my bones. I prayed we never had to go through anything like that again.

Hunter grabbed sodas out of the fridge and handed them to us. Cracking the top open on his, he sat on the adjacent seat to me. He held up his can. "Here's to your dad getting better, bud."

"Thanks, dude." Kyle chinked his drink against Hunter's, then mine. "This rehab shit better work or Gem, I'll be moving in with you."

“Fine by me.” I patted his knee and took a sip of my cola. It really would be nice to have someone to talk to other than my bedroom walls. “I’d like the company.”

He held out his bruised hand. “I hate that we missed playing at the festival. But now, I just want to get better so I can jam with you guys again.”

“Hell yeah. Me too.” Hunter downed his drink, then grinned. “All fucking summer long and beyond.”

With only three weeks of the school year left, I counted down the days until summer vacation. I wanted the horrors behind us. The best thing about William being in rehab was that it gave Claire and Kyle a reprieve from living in fear every day. For five months anyway.

Two days later, Claire came home from hospital, a shell of her former self. She flinched at every loud noise, jumped out of her skin if we accidentally dropped something on the floor, and constantly looked toward the front door with anxiety flickering in her eyes.

I hated seeing her like that.

We all needed a vacation.

After my seventeenth birthday, and struggling through our end-of-year exams, we finally got a well-deserved break.

At the start of summer, Claire took the three of us to her family’s beach house at Amagansett on the outreaches of Long Island. The old, shingled home had been in Claire’s family for generations. It had been her great-grandad’s dying wish to never sell the property. To date, no one had broken that promise. Kyle had spent many vacations or quick getaways

out here, but this was the first time he'd invited Hunter and me. Nestled between multimillion-dollar mansions, the little rundown three-bedroom shack was a private sanctuary, tucked away on two acres behind rolling sand dunes and an endless stretch of beach.

Out here, past the Hamptons, was a world beyond my wildest dreams. Seeing how the elite lived made me hungrier than a kindle-fed fire to succeed.

On the back deck, the guys and I sat cross-legged on big comfy cushions. We strummed our guitars, playing around with a new song. The sun warmed my skin, the rays twinkled off the ocean on the other side of the dunes, and the gentle breeze teased my long hair. Fresh ocean air filled my lungs. We'd been working on a new tune for more than an hour, unable to nail the melody. Partly because my mind kept wandering—to my future, to the life filled with music that I craved, playing alongside these guys.

I zigzagged my gaze over Kyle, from his legs to his shirtless, toned stomach, to his broad chest and ripped arms. Every inch of his bronzed skin glistened in the sunshine. *Damn!* He'd grown and filled out over the past year.

Me? I hadn't changed a bit.

"Gem? Focus." A smile curled at the corner of his lips. "On the song."

"I was." *Not.*

Playing around with the progression of chords, we tinkered with the bridge. But within minutes, Hunter stole my attention. Now six-foot-two, he stood a head taller than me.

Every muscle on his body was taut and trim. He'd started shaving and his azure eyes had grown more stunning and electric.

"Whatcha doing, Gem?" He raised a questioning eyebrow. "You checking me out?"

I scrunched my nose and shook my head. "Ew! No." *God no . . . but kinda.* But not in an I-want-you way. I could appreciate his handsome looks . . . and Kyle's. But even with my lack of worldly fashion sense, I did know one thing. I'd been meaning to mention this to Hunter for a while. "I think it's time you did something with your hair. You need to kill the goofy curls. What do you think about cutting it shorter or growing it out? Long would be cool. Like a real rock star."

He jerked his chin back. "You don't like my hair?"

"I do . . . but nope." I pursed my lips to contain my smile as I plucked some notes.

"Well, shit." He raked his fingers through the mass of curls. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I just did." I shrugged. "You guys are good-looking. Own that."

"My parents would hate long hair." A wicked glint flickered in his eyes. "So . . . long it is."

"What about me?" Kyle ran his fingers over the frets as he struck the strings. "What should I do with mine?"

"Nothing." My tone remained flat, neutral. "It's perfect." I loved his new hard line and floppy blond bangs. The combination suited his jawline, and highlighted his beautiful brown eyes and gorgeous smile.

Kyle play-punched Hunter in the arm. “Ha! Suck it. I’m perfect.”

I shook my head and giggled. No matter how much the guys had grown and had morphed into good-looking men, they were still my best friends. But now . . . they were my *hot* best friends. The chords in my heart twanged. I wasn’t sexually attracted to them. Not in any way. Or any of the other guys at school. I didn’t like girls either. Was there something wrong with me? *But wait!* I didn’t want to be distracted by boys. They’d only get in the way of music. It was a good thing I lacked raging hormones. It allowed me to stay focused on our career.

“What about me? Should I change my hair? Wear more makeup?” Would those things help our image?

“Nope.” Kyle shook his head and smiled. “Your hair is gorgeous long, and you wear just the right amount of makeup when you put it on.”

“Total rock star, Gem.” Hunter nodded, then raised a saucy eyebrow. “But you could wear shorter skirts. You’ve got great legs. Show them off.”

I gave him a weird look like he was crazy. “I already wear miniskirts and shorts.”

“I know.” He grinned. “But they could be shorter.”

“Ew! Perv.” I flicked my guitar pick at him, hitting him in the forehead.

Kyle chuckled. “If we’re gonna be rock stars, maybe we do need to amp up our look. Dress the part.”

“Now I’m down for that.” Hunter’s eyes lit up. He loved his fashion and found the best bargains. “Let’s head to the thrift store when we get home and see what we can find. We need to rock on and off stage. Dress in leather and loud pants and ripped jeans. Gem, you’d look hot in little tanks and bra-top things. We need something trendier than just our screen-printed T-shirts.”

I retied my hair into a ponytail. We weren’t teenyboppers anymore, so hotting up our image wouldn’t hurt. “Sounds awesome. But I don’t want to wear black all the time. I like color and bling.”

I loved sequins and sparkles and rhinestones, and every color under the sun except pink. It was too girly, and it was all my mother ever wore. So no to anything in that shade.

“I’ll make sure you look hot, Gem.” Hunter winked and threw me a mischievous grin. “I promise. I can’t wait for the day when designers are begging us to wear their clothes, and we have fancy suits for award shows and a gazillion outfits for tour.”

“Oh, that would be super cool.” My chest filled with hope, my head flooded with more dreams. “One day. It’ll happen.”

“Let’s just stick with thrift stores for now.” Kyle chuckled. “We can barely afford that.”

That was Kyle. Always keeping Hunter and I grounded. We were the perfect team.

We spent four weeks swimming, writing new songs and spending time with Kade, Kyle’s cousin who’d joined us

for a few days. Kyle took us to all his favorite places around Amagansett and East Hampton to eat ice cream, have the best fish and chips, and the most amazing burgers, but eventually we had to head home. For the remainder of our vacation, we worked at our part-time jobs, hung out with friends down at the creek, performed at our regular family tavern gig, and lined up more events to play at. In mid-August, two weeks before the start of school, we trekked all the way to New York to audition for *America's Got Talent*. After hanging around all day and playing in front of the producers, we didn't even make the first cut. Screw 'em. They didn't know what they were missing out on.

By the end of summer, we had twenty thousand followers on YouTube thanks to one of our songs taking off. Our number of likes and views grew every day and so did our excitement. We had one year of school left. We'd had no interest from the record labels we'd sent demos to, so the three of us made a new plan—save as much money as we could from our jobs and our gigs, finish senior year, then move to New York. We'd be able to play at bigger venues and bars, get to more open-mic nights, go indie and record our own album.

But at the start of senior year, everything changed.

Again.

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Chapter 12

September 2009

Two weeks into the first term of senior year, I walked into my house at seven p.m. I'd just done a long, boring shift at the grocery store, and I was hungry and had homework to do. But moans and groans drifted from my mom's bedroom, across the small living room and into the kitchen. *Ergh!* She was at it again. But it couldn't have been with Derek. He was in Pittsburgh.

My chest ached. Even though Derek wasn't around much, I liked him. He was a good stepdad who deserved better than my mom.

I stuffed my earbuds into my ears and turned up the music on my iPod Touch that the guys had given to me for my birthday in May. After dumping my bag on the dining table, I ventured over to the kitchen to find something to eat. I opened the cupboards and my stomach grumbled in anticipation. But there was barely anything on the shelves—dry pasta, Cheerios, canned tomatoes, rice. I opened the freezer—no microwave meals. Fridge—nothing fresh. Mom had forgotten to do the grocery shopping again. She often ate at the tavern and left me to fend for myself.

I grabbed the cereal out of the pantry and the milk from the fridge. After filling a bowl, I plonked down at the table and ripped out my homework. *Science*. When in my life would I

ever need this crap? Kyle should be here to help. He was the smart one. Well . . . he was above average in every subject except math. Hunter and I struggled for every grade. We just aimed to pass.

I opened my school diary to see what work I had to do when the stars I'd drawn around next month's event caught my eye. Butterflies skipped through my stomach. After countless emails, phone calls, and what may have been deemed by some as harassment of event planners, we'd been booked to play at the Princeton Tigers ice hockey season opening celebrations. It was no huge football shindig, but this would be our biggest performance to date, playing in front of more than one thousand people. Who needed chemistry when the guys and I had a string of gigs booked over the next couple of months?

But if I wanted to get out of this town at the end of senior year . . . I had to pass every subject. I needed to graduate.

As I sat at the table working through the formulas, the door to my mom's room swung open. Mom, with her silky fuchsia kimono draping off one shoulder and her tousled peroxide blonde hair falling around her neck, leaned against the doorjamb and laughed.

"Oh, Nolan. You're so funny." She tilted her head to the side, allowing the balding man to nuzzle her neck. "We need to do this more often. When can I see you again?"

At least Nolan had clothes on . . . somewhat. His button-down business shirt hung open. His undone tie dangled around his neck. With an I've-just-been-fucked grin curling his lips, he zipped up his suit pants.

Erg! Where had my mother found this guy?

He was nothing like the men she usually brought home. With a huge gold TAG Heuer watch on his wrist and expensive suit, he reeked of money. He was not the low-to-average working-class loser or vulnerable shmuck she often had in her bed.

“Come away with me this weekend?” Nolan buttoned his shirt as he stared into her eyes. “Let’s go to my house in the mountains. Just you. And me. The birds and the bees.”

Oh. My. God. Vomit bubbled up my throat. I swallowed the foul taste in my mouth. “Hello. Company present.”

“Argh!” My mother shrieked and jumped. Placing her hand on her heart, she threw me a strained smile. “Gemma? Sweetheart. What are you doing here?”

Sweetheart? What the fuck? She never called me that. “Um . . . I live here.”

“Why aren’t you with your friends?” Hate flared in the whites of her eyes as she twirled and tugged on her dangling earring. “Playing music.”

“I had to work. It’s late and I have homework to do.”

“Oh . . . right.” Mortification grayed her face. “Nolan, this is um . . . my daughter.”

Nolan jerked his chin back. “Oh. I didn’t know you had a daughter?”

Mom threw her head back and laughed, fake and full of shit, like the rest of her. “She does her own thing so often, it’s

like I don't. She's a senior. She'll be gone at the end of the school year."

Feeling the love, Mom. *Not. Never.* But that wasn't unusual.

Nolan eyed me up and down like I was a waste of space . . . Exactly how my mother looked at me. "She's no trouble, is she?"

"No . . . never." Mom patted Nolan's chest. "She's more of a roommate than a daughter. I've raised her to be a strong, independent young woman."

What the hell? Was my mother drunk? *Raise me?* Me, my dad, Derek, and the lady next door had done that. Not her.

"Hmm. That's what I love about you." He snaked his hands around Mom's waist and kissed her. "You're strong. Sexy. Sassy."

Oh yeah . . . Now I was definitely going to throw up.

"I'll pick you up at four on Friday." He nibbled on her ear. "Okay, sugarplum?"

She giggled and blushed like a schoolgirl. "I look forward to it. I'll see you then."

Taking his hand, Mom showed Nolan out the door. The second the door clicked shut, she turned and stormed toward me. "How dare you interrupt me and make me look like a fool in front of Nolan?"

"Um . . . I didn't know you had someone here. You should be at work."

“I’m on a dinner break. I have to go back in ten minutes.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, you should. Nolan and I have been seeing each other for a while. It’s serious. He’s a property developer from Philadelphia and comes up every two weeks to check on his multimillion-dollar housing project . . . and to see me.” A greedy glint shimmered in her beady green eyes. “I’m certain he’s going to ask me to marry him soon. I’ll make sure of it.”

What? I pinched my brows together. “But you’re already married. To Derek.”

She fluttered her eyelashes and shimmied her shoulders. “Not if Nolan asks me.”

“You’re gonna leave Derek?” I gripped onto my pen tighter, so tight it should’ve snapped. “Why? He’s a good guy.”

“Oh, please.” She swatted the air with her talons. “He’s a small-time insurance salesman with no ambition and will never make millions. I deserve better.”

So did he. But for some strange reason, he liked Mom. And he loved his job. “If money is all you’re after, *you* could get a better job.”

“Me?” She splayed her hand across her chest. “Why would I do that? I won’t need to work if I marry Nolan. He’ll take care of me. Give me a better life. Treat me like royalty.”

What lies had she spun Nolan? The poor man didn’t know what he was in for. “Do you love him?” I was sure my mother wasn’t capable of that sentiment.

“Hah! Hahaha-ha-ha.” Pure shallowness rocked through her chilling laugh. “I like him. That’s good enough.”

“You’re pathetic.” I was right.

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m your mother. Show some respect.”

“Then earn it.” Acid dripped in my tone.

“You’re so ungrateful.” She stabbed her finger at me. “You better sort out your life. You won’t be coming with me if I marry Nolan. I’m not having you cramp my new lifestyle.”

Tears burned in the back of my eyes, but I sucked in a deep breath to keep them at bay. I refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing my crushed heart. “Don’t stress. I’m outta here the moment I graduate.”

She straightened, flicking her hair back over her shoulders. “It can’t come soon enough.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” I sneered, but my stomach sank to the floor. I’d tried to get along with Mom. I’d asked her to every show. I wanted her to be happy and supportive of my music, but she never cared. I shoveled the last mouthful of cereal into my mouth and pushed the empty bowl aside. “By the way, there’s no food in the house. Can I have a few bucks to buy some groceries tomorrow, please?”

“You earn your own money from your little job and your gigs; you should be paying me rent, contributing some cash toward the utilities, and buying your own food.”

“But I’m in school.” And I often purchased groceries—otherwise I’d starve.

Mom lifted her chin. “All you do is play with those boys. I should be compensated with a band management fee for driving you around and taking you to shows.”

“Are you delusional?” I grimaced, unable to fathom my mother’s crap. “I ride my bicycle everywhere. Claire and Derek drive us to our gigs. You’ve been to one show in the past year—the Easter fair in the park. You drove me there so you could go to the bar and pick up men.” She hadn’t even watched us perform.

“Oh . . . yeah.” She curled her hair around her finger. “That was a good night. But I promoted you at every opportunity. That’s worth some kind of payment.”

I clamped my teeth together. Fire coiled through my veins. “Entering a wet T-shirt contest in our white branded tank top doesn’t count as promotion.”

“Fine.” Pompousness shot through her tone. “Then you don’t get any of my hard-earned cash either. You can buy your own food from now on. And leave twenty bucks on the counter to help pay the electricity bill.”

“If it gets you off my case . . . gladly.” Acid turned in my gut. I didn’t earn that much money, but I’d survive. “What are you going to tell Derek about this weekend?”

“That I’m going away on a girls’ weekend. Like I always do. It won’t be an issue.”

My voice sliced through my teeth. “You need to tell him about Nolan.”

“Stay out of it,” she snapped. “This is none of your business.”

It was. He was my stepdad. I didn't want to see him hurt. Tears prickled my eyes again. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"Why?" She rested her hands against the chair, digging her nails into the vinyl. Her eyes narrowed into severe slits. "Because you screwed up my life. You were an accident. Your father tried to do the right thing and married me. But that left me stuck in this horrid town with a useless husband. Henry filled my head with promises that never happened. He was pathetic. You're just like him. Derek has proved to be no better. Y'all have done nothing but hold me back." She shook her head. "But not anymore. I'm gonna get out of here, and one day, you'll pay for ruining my life."

"I have paid." My heart constricted into a pin-sized ball. "Every day with your cold-heartedness. Do you honestly not care about love and family or me?"

Ice set in her gaze. "I've put food in your mouth and a roof over your head for long enough. You can look after yourself. It's time for me to look after me."

She'd done that since I was born. I'd taken care of myself since I was six. So be it. "You do that, Mom. I hope you get what you want."

"Oh. I will. Just wait and see." She winked, then returned to her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

A tear finally escaped and slid down my cheek. I quickly brushed it off with my palm as I stared at my schoolbooks. Mom had never lied about me being an accident and not wanting me. That was nothing new. I guessed I was the one who'd been delusional, hoping that one day she'd be

civil toward me. Love me. But her lust for money had grown to a crazed level of insanity. She watched too many reality TV shows like *The Real Housewives of New York* and had become obsessed with a rich lifestyle. Rather than work hard and earn it, she wanted to lie and manipulate some man in order to achieve it. That was a new low even for my mom.

We all wanted out of this town, but there was a right way to go about it.

Music would be my ticket to leave. I didn't care about making millions. I just wanted to do what I loved and earn enough money to be able to afford food and pay rent.

Maybe Mom hated that I was focused on my dreams and slowly making them happen. Maybe she was jealous.

I laughed.

Wouldn't that be fucking funny?

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Chapter 13

Two days later, I sat on a bench in the school's courtyard between Kyle and Hunter, jabbering away. We were finalizing our set list for our gig at the tavern that weekend. I made a shopping list—we'd need to buy more duct tape for securing cables and cords on the ground, and markers for labeling boxes. Some weeks, every cent we earned went on replacing and renewing equipment. Would we ever save enough to get ahead?

But Kyle, who usually planned everything, had been super quiet. I followed his gaze. A bunch of cheerleaders laughed and giggled at one of the nearby tables. The girls, like most of the other students in this school, left us alone. Most kids here had seen us play at events around the district and liked our shows. Everyone let us do our thing without any hassle. Even the bullies had backed off. That was cool.

But this was new.

Since we'd started senior, girls now noticed the guys. Kyle and Hunter had grown taller, filled out, dressed better. Heads often turned in their direction when we walked along the corridors between classes or hung out by our lockers. I had to admit, their asses looked hot in jeans.

Funny thing was, they didn't know how to handle the attention. They'd get super awkward and shy if a girl said hello to them.

Kyle had never shown interest in girls . . . until now.

Intrigue zipped through my veins. I elbowed him in the arm. “Who are you checking out?”

“No one.” He lowered his chin, clearly attempting to hide his flushed cheeks.

“You’re such a bad liar.” I giggled. “Who?”

“Um . . . shit.” Kyle winced. “I guess . . . Laura.”

“Oooo,” I teased. “You gotta a cruuuush. On a girrrrl.”

“Really? Laura?” Hunter wrinkled his nose as he spoke with a mouthful of sandwich. “You can have her. Now Trina is a different story.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, Hunt, you’ve got no chance. She’s into girls.”

“Damn.” His shoulders slumped. “She’s the only hot chick at this school. But it doesn’t matter. Once we graduate and move to the city, babes will be falling at our feet.”

“And guys.” No one at this school appealed to me. They were all dickheads. Everyone assumed that I was in a relationship with Hunter or Kyle or both. That didn’t bother me, but it would be nice to catch the eye of the occasional guy. Some flirty attention and a little ego boosting wouldn’t hurt. *Oh*. Maybe my hormones had kicked in. *Finally!* I wanted guys to notice me. *Sweet*.

Laura glanced in our direction and waved.

Kyle threw her a sheepish smile.

A weird quiver rippled through my stomach and tugged at the back of my belly button. Hold on one sweet

minute. I swiveled toward Kyle. “Oh. My. God. Something happened, didn’t it?”

His cheeks turned a darker shade of red. “Gem, can we change the subject? Are you happy with the set list for Saturday? Wanna change anything?”

My mouth fell open. Oh, he was out of it. We’d already gone through the changes. Twice.

I slapped his thigh. “Kyle McIntyre? Did something happen yesterday? At math tutoring?” He’d barely passed math last year. His mom had convinced him to get some help for senior year. “Did you get to first base?”

His leg jiggled and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Geez. Are you intuitive or something?”

“Yep.” *Crazily so.* “What happened?”

The cutest wrinkles formed on the bridge of his nose. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.” Hunter leaped from the seat beside me and sat on the ground in front of us. “Every detail.”

The three of us were still virgins. Any interest or encounter with the opposite sex piqued our curiosity. None of us had gone beyond kissing someone during vacation or when hanging out with friends of friends down by the creek or at the occasional party.

“Okay.” Kyle finished his mouthful of apple and scrunched up his lunch bag. “It’s pretty embarrassing. We were working through some calculations at the dining table when she um . . . slipped down onto the floor. I thought she’d dropped her pen. But the next thing I know, she’s sliding her

hands up my legs and unzipped my jeans. I totally freaked out. But she said she wanted to . . . you know . . . go down there. I nearly came in my pants. Anyway, I let her . . . um . . . blow me.”

“Holy fuck!” Hunter’s mouth hit the ground. “How was it? God, I can’t wait to get laid or have some chick suck my dick.”

Okay . . . I was convinced my hormones had finally switched on because I wanted to get laid too. I wanted to be kissed and touched and felt up and experience everything. Just no one here at school interested me.

“It was freaking hot.” A sly smile inched across Kyle’s lips, then he chuckled. “But I blew my load really quickly. Not sure if she’ll ever talk to me again. Still . . . it was epic.”

“All right.” Hunter high-fived him.

I hooked my arm around Kyle’s back and hugged him. “That’s so awesome. One of us finally got some action. But . . . I didn’t think you liked her.”

“She’s . . . okay, I guess. She’s the first girl that’s shown any interest in me.”

“Are you going to see her again?” Hunter asked. “Go all the way?”

“Shit.” Stress snagged his voice as he scratched his brow. “Maybe.”

I didn’t know why he was worried. “I can’t wait to do it.” I sighed. “I just want to get it over and done with, so I know what all the fuss is about.”

“Me too.” Hunter kicked my ankle. “When we’re famous, we’ll be fighting them off us.”

“I look forward to that day.” It would be nice to have so many fans we’d never have to worry about being choosy.

Kyle clutched my knee. “Gem, someday, someone who loves you just as much as Hunt and I do will fall for you and rock your socks off. I guarantee it.”

I jerked my chin back. “I don’t want anyone to fall for me. A boyfriend would get in the way of music. I just want to have sex. For fun.” *Shit*. Did I sound like my mother?

No. Not ever. I had no issue with single people hooking up but cheating on your husband or boyfriend was unacceptable. Destroying marriages and relationships was fucked up. . . So was marrying a man for his money. I’d never be like that. I never wanted to fall in love or get married. Love blinded you. Marriage was a trap, leading to heartache, hurt, or unhappiness. I’d witnessed enough of those to last me a lifetime. “For everything else in my life, I have you guys.”

“Forever.” Kyle scooped my hair over my shoulder and rubbed the base of my neck. Little tingles shot down my spine. I loved how these guys had my back.

Laura skipped over to us. Her short green cheerleading skirt flapped in the breeze, as did her long blonde ponytail. “Hi guys. How’s it going?”

“Good.” Hunter glanced up at her. “I think I need tutoring too. Maybe in oral history?”

She shoved him in the head. “You’re so gross.” But then, she turned and fluttered her eyelashes at Kyle. “So . . .

can we work on some more math this afternoon? At my place? After school?”

Kyle glanced at me, then at Hunter. He fidgeted and fumbled with the neckline of his T-shirt. The nervous heat radiating off him rippled through the air. “Um . . . sure. I have rehearsal until five. Can I come over after that?”

Hunter and I threw each other quizzical looks. We didn’t have practice today. Hunter had to work. But we didn’t say anything.

“Cool.” Laura swayed her hips, flicking her skirt side to side. “But I’m not sure you need to bring any math books, though. Get my drift?” Laura arched one slender eyebrow and wiped the corner of her mouth with her long fingernails.

“Oh . . .” Kyle turned bright red. “Okay.”

Laura dashed forward, kissed his cheek, then spun on her heels and returned to her friends.

Hunter and I nudged, tickled, and poked Kyle.

“You’re gonna get laid this afternoon,” I teased.

The color drained from his face. “I don’t know about that . . . but fuck . . . I don’t know what to do. I need to buy condoms, right? I’ve never done *it* before. She has.”

My friends Laura and Vicki, and several other senior girls, had been screwing most of the jocks since junior year. Now Laura had moved on and her sights were set on Kyle. I prayed she didn’t hurt him.

A devilish glint gleamed in Hunter’s eyes. “Do you wanna watch some porn after school to get some tips?”

“No.” Kyle fidgeted with a rip in his jeans. “I’m worried about performance issues. What if I’m too nervous?”

“Kyle?” I hooked my arm around his shoulders. “Do you wanna sleep with her? If not, you don’t have to.”

“Oh yeah.” He nodded. “I do. For sure.”

“We could go home via the tavern and talk to Mom? She’s an expert in the fucking department.” Snideness spiked my tone. As if we’d ask her for help with anything . . . ever.

“God no.” Kyle scratched the tip of his chin. “I’ll take my chances and wing it.”

“Good option.” I nudged my leg against his. “You’ll be fine. Just have fun.”

That night, at nine p.m. as I sat on my bed studying English, Kyle called me.

“Oh my God, Gem.” His voice hollered through my cell phone. “It was amazing. But fucking terrible at the same time. I had no idea what to do or when. But that didn’t matter. Laura just jumped on my dick and fucked me. It was insane. I don’t think she orgasmed. I’ll work on that. But fuck, Gem . . . I think I’m in love.”

My heart swelled, then sank. He wasn’t in love. He was just on a high. Laura had never hit his radar until she’d gone down on him. But after everything he’d been through, he deserved some happiness. So why did the niggle deep inside my chest twang? I couldn’t wait to find someone who gave me a rush, that high, that flutter in my stomach. Oh . . . those tingles across my skin. But who’d put up with my music? I never wanted to fall head over heels in love or risk being hurt,

so long-term relationships were out. But something short-term and temporary would be fun. “Is she your girlfriend now?”

“Yeah.” Excitement floated in his airy voice. “I can’t believe it. Me? I have a girlfriend. I’m dating a freaking cheerleader.”

“That’s awesome.” I wasn’t sure he’d get much math tutoring done. In fact, I questioned whether Laura was actually any good at math. I’d never heard her make claims about her grades. One of the jocks at school had raved about her teaching methods. Now I knew exactly what he’d meant. I wanted Kyle to be happy but careful. He didn’t need any more heartache. “Have you told Hunter?”

“Sure have. I just got off the phone to him. He’s so jealous I got laid before him.”

“I bet. But I’m stoked for you.”

“Um . . .”

A strange silence passed between us. That had never happened before. What was with that? Then my gut cinched. The strangest thought slammed into my head. Did he want to say he wished it had been with me?

Where the fuck had that come from? No Never. *Don’t go there. Don’t be stupid.* Hunter and Kyle meant too much to me. I would never allow myself to think of the guys in any way other than as friends. I wouldn’t risk losing them or our music, or causing a rift. Such ludicrous thoughts had to be killed.

He dialed down his tone. “You’ll find someone, Gem.”

“I’m not worried.” Maybe a little bit about my sanity. What would it take for guys to notice me? I plucked at a loose thread on my quilt. “But enough about sex and Laura. Let’s talk about the gig this weekend and Princeton next month.”

We spoke for more than an hour about gigs and other songs we wanted to learn to play and lyrics we’d worked on. We rattled on for ages about the new in-ear monitors we wanted to get custom-made. Time disappeared.

After we ended the call, I curled into bed and tugged the pillow beneath my head.

The riff I’d been working on filled my mind and thundered in my heart. Yeah . . . I was good. My silly thoughts of Kyle were just that. *Silly*. But to ensure they never happened again, I knew exactly what I had to do.

I needed to get laid.

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Chapter 14

October 2009

The night before the Princeton Tigers ice hockey opening season celebrations, I'd hardly slept a wink. Excitement swirled through my stomach as Derek drove Hunter and me to the Hobey Baker Rink at the university. Claire and Kyle followed in the van loaded with our gear. But concern for Hunter lodged in my chest. He'd been unusually quiet for the entire short trip. Yet again, his parents couldn't come to our show. Art, who was the biggest Rutgers fan, had opted to attend a football game rather than coming to see us perform. Lillian was at home with Jenny.

But Hunter's contagious energy returned when we pulled into the parking lot beside the arena. With the rink undergoing last-minute renovations and preparations for the commencement of the season next week, the celebrations would be held outside in the lot. People dressed in the white, orange, and black Tigers colors rushed between delivery vans and catering trucks which were preparing for tonight's event. Staging crew dashed around making final adjustments to equipment and place row after row of seating in front of the platform. A Tigers merchandise stall took prime position at the entrance to the area. All this spectacle was for the guys and girls to be presented with their team jerseys, followed by a party. With more than one thousand people attending this

shindig—Princeton sports executives, the players’ families, friends and fans—we’d give them a show to remember.

We checked in at security and drove up to the massive temporary stage.

“This place is awesome.” Hunter’s eyes lit up as he hopped out of Derek’s car and stared at the gorgeous old stone building. “Our first arena performance.”

Joining him at the front of the station wagon, I pinched my brows together and gave him a sideways glance. “But we’re playing outside.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He rubbed his hands together. “It’s a crowd. At an arena.”

“You’re such a goofball.” I giggled. Hooking my arm around his waist, I rested my head against his shoulder. *But, oh yeah! We were total rockstars.*

My heart strummed to a quicker beat as I scanned the lot. “Wait until we have fans paying to see us *in* arenas. No, at stadiums. That’ll be awesome.”

“I like the way you think, Gem.” Hunter squeezed me tight and rubbed my arm.

I looked forward to the day when we didn’t have to play at family bistros, local parties, or fairs. Online, our fanbase grew every day. At a recent night we’d played at our family-friendly tavern in Milltown, the manager had even had to turn away guests at the door. We’d attracted too many people who wanted to see us play. *That* had been wicked and somewhat surreal.

Kyle and Claire pulled up beside us. Time to setup. With Claire and Derek acting as our road crew, we lugged and assembled our gear onto the temporary stage. Claire and Kyle worked with the Princeton event team to connect our sound and lighting into their system. Derek helped Hunter and me patch in our guitars, amps, and mics. If we were going to perform at more gigs of this size, we'd have to hire people to help.

The buzz jumping between us hit the stratosphere as we ran through sound check. Tonight would be another first for us. It was a bold move, a risky one, but it was the first show where the majority of our set list would consist of original songs. We'd perform our hits that had the most likes online and the ones that got the crowd dancing at shows. It blew my mind, but we now had fifty thousand followers on YouTube.

At the side of the stage, in the small event tent that had been provided as our makeshift dressing room, I changed into my new black leather pants that I'd bought at a thrift store for twenty dollars and a sparkly T-shirt. The guys changed into black jeans and button-downs.

"I'm starving." Kyle buckled his belt. "Hunt, let's go grab some food. Gem, you want anything?"

I stepped out from behind the modesty board, smoothing my hands over my legs. I loved the soft leather against my skin—kinda made me feel sexy. "Sure. Grab me a burger, please." I needed carbs to burn.

"Will do." But Kyle's mouth fell open and his eyes fell to my pants. "Wow. You look hot in those pants."

“Thank you.” Warmth touched my cheeks. I liked that my pants had drawn eyes, even if they were only Kyle’s. I giggled and pointed toward the door. “Now get out of here. Go get food. I need to finish getting ready.”

As I brushed my hair in front of the mirror, Claire walked into the tent carrying a shopping bag.

“Hey, Gemma. How are you doing?”

I spun on my stool to face her. “I’m okay. Nervous, but good.”

“You’ll nail it. The set list is fabulous. The three of you are amazing. Don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise.” She raised the bag. “I bought you a present.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Sorry I didn’t have time to wrap it.” She handed me the goods.

I peered inside the bag. My breath hitched. *Oh, wow.* A flat iron and a few makeup items filled the bag. “What’s this for?”

“You’re a beautiful young lady.” She smoothed her hand over my hair, then juttled her chin toward the entrance. “But out there, you’re a rock star. I know you don’t wear a lot of makeup, but underneath those big stage lights, your stunning features can disappear. So . . . only if you want to . . . some proper foundation, eyeliner and eye shadow will help you glow for all the right reasons during your performance.”

“Thank you.” Tears prickled my eyes. I rarely got presents so I treasured every one. “But . . . but makeup just

sweats off and runs everywhere.” I didn’t want to seem ungrateful, but I’d learned about makeup the hard way playing at the Milltown tavern. After having eyeshadow and mascara streak my cheeks from perspiring and turning me into Alice Cooper’s love child, and lipstick wearing off in seconds, I’d given up putting any on.

“This won’t.” She shook her head. “This is professional stage makeup. It’s all waterproof. I’ve included the special makeup remover to take it off after the show.”

I pursed my lips and clutched the bag against my chest. Claire was an angel sent from heaven. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” She smiled and rubbed my arm.

Deep down, Claire missed performing. I hated that William wouldn’t let her return to what she loved. But if she could get some small sense of satisfaction from living vicariously through us, I was down with that.

“Would you like some help putting it on and doing your hair?”

I stood and snaked my arms around her waist, giving her a big hug. “Yeah. That would be awesome.” I squeezed her tight. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Let’s get you ready.”

Claire straightened my hair and showed me how to apply the thick creamy foundation and blend it into my neck. My hand shook so much, it took me three attempts to line my eyes with the liquid pen. But I loved brushing the silky glittery gold eyeshadow onto my eyelids and painting bright red

lipstick across my lips. As I pressed my lips together and stared in the mirror, I turned my head this way and that. *Holy shit!* I hardly recognized myself.

The guys walked into the tent with takeaway containers of food.

They stopped a few feet inside the doorway and gaped.

“Holy crap! Gem?” Kyle’s gaze raked over me. My pulse jumped and every hair on my body stood on end. “You look fucking amazing.”

“Damn, girl.” Hunter nodded as a wicked smile played across his lips. “The guys are gonna love you. Even I’ve got a boner.”

“Ew! I did not need to know that.” I glanced at my reflection once more. In my leather pants, black sequined vest, and glamorous makeup, I looked good. I felt good. I couldn’t wait to hit the stage. I turned back to the guys. “This is all thanks to Claire.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Kyle dumped the food on the table, kissed Claire on the cheek, then rushed over to me. He flung his arms around me, picked me up, and twirled me ’round. “Oh my God, Gem. This is so you. You’re so beautiful.”

I giggled as he placed me back on my feet.

The praise from my best friends and my transformation for the stage had ignited a new confidence inside me. I’d always been petite and average in looks, and had always fought to tame my crazy wavy hair. But I’d finally found my look. My identity. I was born to be a rock star.

We took to the stage with our guitars and blew the Tigers crowd away. But as I sang our song “Bonfire,” our ode to Claire, the song etched itself deeper into my heart. I hadn’t thought that was possible. She was the best and only mom I’d ever had.

*I always knew something burned inside of me,
A flame that no one understood or could ever see.
But you were the only one who always believed,
You spurred me on, always to succeed.
You brought out the best in me.*

*So I could touch the stars,
Set the night on fire.
Climb any mountain,
Do anything I desire.
Your love had a power,
You’re the one I admire.
You made me dream.
Yeah, I’m never gonna look back.*

*’Cause I’m a live wire,
Gunfire,
A blazing bonfire.
Yeah . . . I know who I am,
Thanks to you.
Thanks to your love,
Nothing’s gonna stop me now.*

Nothing's gonna hold me down.

Thanks to you.

After playing for ninety minutes, I ran off stage with the guys. At the bottom of the steps, dripping in sweat and panting to catch our breaths, we fell into a hug. The adrenaline from performing spiked my veins and spun my head. *Best. Feeling. Ever.*

But new screams and cheers caught our attention.

Four police guarded the little table we'd set up outside our dressing room tent for Claire and Derek to sell our T-shirts and CDs from. Behind them, a small crowd of about thirty college-aged guys and girls waved event flyers in the air as well as some of our merchandise.

Holy shit!

My heart leaped into my throat. Those people were here for us! They wanted us to sign stuff!

"Fuck yeah." Hunter rushed over to the fans. Cameras flashed. People cheered.

Not wanting to miss out, Kyle and I ran to join him.

As the fans jostled to greet us—in a somewhat controlled manner—a girl with tousled auburn hair grabbed my arm. "Oh my God. You're incredible. I love your voice. I'm such a fan."

I couldn't wipe the smile off my face even if I tried. "Thank you." I signed her T-shirt with a Sharpie we'd used to mark our boxes of gear. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show."

Another girl in a Tigers cheerleading outfit grabbed Hunter by the shirt and kissed him.

Whoa! Go Hunt. That was the hottest kiss I'd seen him have. Ever. *Woohoo!*

"Hi." She cupped his cheek. "I'm Gwendolyn. You're so fucking hot."

"I know." A cocky grin curled across his lips. "You aren't so bad yourself."

Then, he kissed her back. For all of five seconds before the girl behind pulled her out of the way. "Let the guy breathe, Gwen. Other people are waiting."

"Sorry." Biting her lip, she smiled and held up her CD for him to sign.

Once the girls left, I high-fived him. "All right, babe. Score."

He grinned from ear to ear. "This may be the best night of my life."

Then a guy in a Tigers jersey rocked up to me and handed over a flyer and pen. "Hi. I'm Ewan."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Gemma." As I met his brown-eyed gaze, my breath hitched. My skin tingled. The place between my legs clenched. *Holy angels.* That hadn't happened before. Not ever. But this dude was hot. Zac Efron hot.

"You totally rocked tonight." His voice was quiet, but it rippled with starstruck excitement. *Over me?* So cool! "I loved your music. All the team did."

“Thanks.” Blushing, I dragged my gaze away and signed the flyer. “So, you’re on the team? What position do you play?” I had no clue about ice hockey, but I could make conversation.

“Um . . . forward, left wing . . . and I’m the captain.” A shy smile quivered across his mouth as he rubbed his chest.

I arched an eyebrow, waiting for an onslaught of cocky arrogance, but it never came. This was the first sports person I’d met who hadn’t come across as full of himself.

“Congratulations. Good luck with the season.”

“Thanks.” He took the flyer from me but hesitated in drawing it away. “Um . . . any chance of getting your number?”

A hot rush swept over me from my head down to my toes. *I just got asked out? Yay!* I wanted to jump up and down and scream . . . but I didn’t. Digging my fingernails into my palms to distract myself, I kept my cool . . . and sensibility. I wasn’t stupid. There was no way I’d give this guy my number. “Um . . . no. But thanks.”

Kyle must have overheard as he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Do it.”

“No.” I shook my head and pasted on my sweetest smile. I wasn’t going to give my number to some random fan. No matter how hot he was. What if he was a psycho? Stalker? Creep?

“It was worth a shot.” Disappointment flickered in Ewan’s eyes, then he tilted his head in Kyle’s direction. “Are

you dating this guy? Or him?" He glanced at Hunter who was signing some girl's chest.

"No. These guys are my best friends. Always have been. Always will be."

"That's so cool." He stuffed his flyer and hands into the back pocket of his jeans. "Hey?" Nerves jumped in his voice. "If you guys aren't doing anything after this, we're having a party back at my place. You three should come. Here, I'll give you my address and number." He grabbed a spare flyer off the table, wrote on it, and handed it to me. "It's gonna be huge. I'd love to see you there."

"We'll see." Heat blazed in my cheeks. I folded and stuffed the piece of paper into my back pocket.

He gave me the cutest smile. "Now you have my details, you can call me or stop by anytime."

"Maybe I will." Butterflies fluttered and swooped through my stomach. I so wanted to call him. "But no promises."

After we'd greeted all the fans, the high from meeting them and the hype from the show still spiraled through my system at lightning speed. There was no way I was coming down off this cloud in a hurry. I'd been asked out. The crowd had rocked. Hunter and Kyle'd had girls ogle them. They'd both reveled in the attention. So had I.

As we loaded our amps into the van, a goofy grin still beamed across Hunter's face.

I nudged his arm. "I told you girls would dig the long hair. They'll notice that, then your eyes, then the rest of you."

His wavy strands almost reached his collar. Super sexy.

He leaned against the van. “If I’d known that, I would’ve grown it out years ago.”

“I know what you mean. I would’ve bought a flat iron sooner.”

“Yeah.” He tugged on a strand of my hair. “It’s really sexy straightened.”

“Thanks.” I play-punched his arm.

He ruffled the top of my head. “That hockey dude with the messy brown hair was into you.”

Smiling, I lowered my chin and tucked my hair behind my ear. I still couldn’t believe that had happened. “Yeah, he was.” Heading back to the stage to grab our guitars, I stuffed my hands into my pockets. The piece of paper brushed against my fingertips. “Um . . . his name was Ewan. He’s the captain, and he invited us to his party tonight.”

“Holy shit.” Hunter skipped up the steps. His energy could have hit the lights rigged above the stage. “We have to go. There’ll be college girls. And guys. We could have a few beers. It would be so wicked.”

“Go where?” Kyle clipped his bass into its case.

“We’ve been invited to a college party.” Hunter collapsed the mic stands and packed them into their equipment case. “We have to go. We may never get the chance to go to another one. We’re not even applying to go to school after we graduate.” He turned to Claire who was helping us bump out. “Can we? For a few hours? Please?”

She stopped rolling up a power cord, glanced at Derek, then looked back at Kyle. Her gaze softened as she smiled.

“I’m okay with it. How’s home by two?”

“Easy.” Kyle nodded.

“Alright, then. Go. Have some fun.” She held up a finger in warning. “You’re underage, so be careful. Look after each other.”

She was so super cool.

“Always. Love you.” Kyle hugged his mom.

“Do you need some money for the taxi home?” she asked.

“No.” Kyle chuckled. “We just earned a few grand. We can afford anything.”

She laughed and touched his cheek. “God, I love you.”

After I packed away my guitar and placed it at the top of the steps to take to the van, Derek drew me aside. “Are you sure you want to go to that party? Or would you like to come home with me?”

“Um. No.” I wiped my hands on my pants. “I want to go. I can take care of myself, and these guys will look after me.”

“Yes, but I know what college guys are like.” Concern lilted his tone. “You’re not on the pill, are you? Do you have condoms? Do you need me to get you some?”

“What?” *Oh, shit!* The blood drained from my face. It was *that* talk. “No. I’m good. I’ve got that covered.” *Shit!* I’d have to ask Kyle for one. *Just in case.*

“There’s one more thing.” He lowered his chin. “I know it’s not the right time to bring this up. I was going to tell you once we got home but if you stay out with the guys, I need to tell you now.” Sadness hooded his eyes. “I’m moving out, Gem. Tomorrow. Your mother slapped me with divorce papers yesterday. Says she’s met someone new.”

Nolan must have finally proposed.

My stomach hit the ground. I hated seeing him hurting. “You know that’s where she is, right? Away with *him* again.”

Derek nodded slowly. “Yes. She certainly isn’t on another girls’ weekend. I ran into one of her friends this morning at the store. I can’t blame Janine. I travel too much and spend too much time away.”

I picked up a cord and rolled it up. “It wouldn’t matter if you were here. She’d still fuck around.”

Staring at the floor, he winced.

Crap. I didn’t mean to upset him. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He grabbed the cords box from the back of the stage and placed it at my feet. “She wasn’t the woman I thought I married.”

I tossed my cord on top of the others. “I’m not sure she’s even human.”

He laughed at that. “I’ve already packed and want to leave early. So I better say goodbye now in case you crash at the party or stay at one of the guys’ places.”

Tears loomed in my eyes. Derek was the coolest stepdad. He’d been like a father to me. But yeah, he hadn’t

been around much. A new emptiness and loneliness hollowed my chest. “Where are you going? Can I come stay with you? I hate living with Mom. So fucking much.”

“I know. But hang in there. You only have a few months until you graduate. Then you want to move to New York with the guys and follow your dreams.” He cupped the back of my head. “Don’t let Janine or anyone else stand in your way. But if your plans ever change or it all turns to shit, I’d love to have you. I’m moving in with my brother in Tennessee. I’ll always be your backup plan. Okay?”

He drew me into a hug.

“Okay.” I sniffled against his shirt. “I’ll always have VIP backstage passes for you to come see our shows when we make it big.”

“Deal.” He chuckled and held me tight. He kissed me on the temple. “You’ve been the best stepdaughter a man could ever ask for. Love you, kiddo. I’ll be your biggest fan. Next to Claire.”

With tears and hugs all around, each one of us said goodbye to Derek. My heart hadn’t ached like this since my real dad left years ago. I’d miss Derek. Always.

After Derek and Claire drove off, we caught a taxi to Ewan’s place. As we drove along the palatial tree-lined streets, my solemn mood transformed to awe as I gawked at the huge extravagant houses, each one bigger or more opulent than the next. Although it was only several miles from home, Princeton was a completely different world compared to the back streets of Montgomery. I was out of my league amongst all this grace

and grandeur. But if I wanted to be famous, I'd better get used to it.

Oh yeah. It was time to party.

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Chapter 15

As I stepped out of the taxi in front of Ewan's house, blaring music hit my ears. Groups of college students laughed and veered toward the huge stone mansion highlighted by white picture-frame windows. My stomach flipped and fluttered. My first college party. *So cool.* And I'd get to see Ewan again.

I linked arms with Kyle and Hunter, and we headed inside. Two things struck me like lightning as I walked through the massive front door. The stench of beer and the mass of people. There had to be more than two hundred people here. Guys knocked back red solo cups of beer at the keg in the kitchen. Girls danced, holding drinks, in the living room. Other partygoers hollered and shuffled through the hallways and spilled out into the pool area. This outdid any high school party I'd ever been too. *Oh yeah.* This rocked.

We tossed our coats onto the pile in the front office and headed into the throng of people.

"Don't let go of me." I clutched onto Kyle's arm tighter. I was sure to lose Hunter in this place, but Kyle was still dating Laura. I'd stick with him.

"I got you." He squeezed my hand. "Always."

"Ahhhh." Some girl shrieked as we passed the living room. "It's Hunter. From Everhide." She rushed over and kissed him like there was no tomorrow. Other girls ran over and crowded around him.

Hunter pulled back from the kiss. The biggest shit-eating grin lit his face. “Hi.”

“Hi. I’m Petra. Come dance with me.” Before he could argue, she grabbed his hand and hauled him toward the makeshift dancefloor.

“He’s so gonna get laid tonight.” Kyle chuckled.

Lucky him.

After we greeted some of the partygoers, Kyle nudged my arm. “Wanna drink?”

“Sure.” I scanned the crowd but there was no sign of Ewan.

After grabbing cups of beer from the kitchen, we headed outside. We sat at one of the poolside tables by ourselves. While I took in our surrounds, stunned by the outrageous party, Kyle’s gaze stayed glued on me.

I took a sip of beer, then spoke over the rim of my cup. “Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something wrong with my face? Has my makeup run everywhere?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m just still reeling after our show. I loved playing beside you tonight.”

“Same.” I bit the edge of my cup. That weird ripple of warm air I felt whenever he got sentimental wrapped around me. I never truly understood it or comprehended it, but I loved it. His friendship, love, and support meant the world to me.

“We nailed it. Hunt rocked upfront, too.”

“We blew everybody’s socks off.”

“We certainly did.”

“Gemma?” Ewan rushed out of the house and headed over to me. “You came?”

The meter on my heartbeat quickened. “Here in the flesh.”

“What are you two sitting over here for?” He held out his hand. “Come meet my friends. We’ve never met real rock stars before.”

“Well, now you have.” I slid my hand into his. Tingles shot up my arm and pooled at the base of my neck. I’d never been affected by a guy like this before. The shivers I got from Kyle occasionally, didn’t count, right? He was just my friend. *This* was different.

Sucking in a deep breath, I shoved the spiraling, I’ve-got-no-idea-what-I’m-doing fluster into the pit of my stomach and pasted on a superstar smile. “Let’s go.”

Ewan led us over to a group of guys and girls drinking beer by the end of the pool. “Guys, this is Kyle and Gemma. From Everhide. They’re the band that played tonight.”

“Hi. I’m Nora.” Awe twinkled in the eyes of a girl with shiny brown short hair. “You were ah-mah-zing. I haven’t screamed and danced at a concert like that in ages. The entire show was incredible.”

I stood two inches taller. My chest swelled. This was so fucking cool. I guessed I’d have to get used to praise and compliments as our popularity grew. But ultimately, if we could touch someone with our music, give them a great show and a night of entertainment to remember, playing was worth it. “Thank you. I’m glad you had a great time.”

She looked around the crowd. “Where’s the other guy?”

“Hunter?” Ewan waved his beer toward the house. “Serena’s dancing with him now.”

“Oh, that bitch.” Nora slammed her empty cup down on the high table. “I better go see if he needs a new dance partner.” She winked, then dashed inside.

I pursed my lips to stop laughing. I turned and whispered to Kyle, “Should we warn him?”

“Oh no.” Kyle’s eyes glinted as he shook his head. “Hunt will love the attention.”

“So true.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Mayer.” One of Ewan’s friends with curly black hair raised his cup at Kyle. “Have you guys got an album out?”

“No. Not yet.” Kyle sipped his beer. “We post all our songs on YouTube and Facebook. You can follow us there.”

“Fuck yeah.” He pulled out his cell phone, searched the sites, and followed us. “Can we get a photo? I’ll post on my feed and get everyone to follow you.”

“Absolutely.” That was a no-brainer. I jumped at any chance to attract fans to our music.

As we huddled in a group for Mayer to take a few pictures, Ewan hooked his arm around my waist. He leaned in and smelled my hair. “You smell nice. Like roses”—then he wrinkled his nose—“and sweaty locker room.”

“Sorry.” I grimaced. “I didn’t have time to wash my hair after the show.” I’d just showered and changed. Thank goodness we’d been able to use the arena’s facilities—the coaches’ room—for that. But it was mid-October. It was too cold at night to walk around with wet hair, and I hadn’t planned on coming out to a party.

“No. It’s good.” He glided his hand up and down my side. My skin tingled beneath his touch. “I like it.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Kyle glanced at Ewan’s hand on my waist and then at Ewan’s face. He bent down and spoke low into my ear so only I could hear. “He wants you.”

Warmth touched my cheeks. “Yeah. Maybe.” Ewan was the first guy who had shown interest in me, and who I’d liked in return. He’d sparked something inside of me. I wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass me by.

“You wanna come dance?” Ewan tilted his head toward the living room.

Fear and excitement charged through my veins. Just looking at Ewan heated my blood. I turned to Kyle. “Are you gonna be okay for a while?”

“Yeah. Have fun.” I didn’t miss the sly, sexy innuendo in his voice but loved the warm go-girl smile that curled across his lips. He raised his empty cup. “I’ll have another drink and keep an eye on you.”

“Thanks.” He was the best, always looking out for me.

Ewan entwined his fingers with mine and led me inside. We jostled through the crowd of guys and girls dancing

and made our way into the center of the living room. Hunter was surrounded by girls. I knew he could dance, but *damn*. With his chest flush against Nora's back, his hands on her hips, and his lips nuzzling against her neck, he gyrated to the music. Nora's hand gripped his thigh. Her eyes were closed as if she were in a pure state of bliss.

Go Hunt!

I play-punched him in the arm. Coming up for air, he winked at me. I gave him the thumbs up.

Ewan snaked his hands around my waist then rested them on my hips. Swaying in time to the thudding music, we stepped from side to side. As we found our groove, he twirled me around. Every time I caught his gaze, my pulse quickened. Closing the gap between us, I put my hands on his chest and slid my fingertips over his silky hockey jersey. His pecs were as hard as rocks. His arms, toned and tight. He smelled expensive, if there was such a thing. All woody. Earthy. Manly. When I linked my hands behind his neck, his smoldering eyes darkened. *Oh yeah*.

As the next song boomed through the sound system, his hands roamed up my arms, across my back, and down onto my ass. My skin blazed beneath his touch. Our thighs and groins and chests brushed together. The heat between our bodies skyrocketed with each graze. I thread my fingers into his soft hair. My heart pounded faster and faster.

I wanted to kiss him. *So freaking bad*.

Ewan leaned forward an inch. His breath teased my face.

Oh yes. Fire coiled through my veins and pooled in my belly.

As he closed his eyes, he lowered his lips on to mine. Soft. Warm. Tender.

Oh yes. So good. Holding my breath, I trembled all over.

Smiling against my lips, he deepened our kiss. He sucked my top lip, my bottom lip, teased my mouth with his tongue. The air shot from my lungs and my knees weakened. Clutching onto his hair, I kissed him back.

The cutest grin slid across his lips. “You are so sexy. And gorgeous. Hmm . . . I think I could kiss you all night.”

I was down with that. “Okay.” I drew his mouth to mine. Parting my lips, I flicked my tongue against his. I hadn’t had a lot of experience kissing, but with Ewan it felt right. We found the perfect pace, licking and sucking and tasting each other. The air around us sizzled. Every hair on my body shivered. But oh, my . . . the ache burning between my legs was so much more overpowering.

He buried his fingers into my hair and groaned against my mouth.

Electricity zapped through me, straight to my core.

Oh . . . I like that.

I was getting the hang of this kissing thing.

Sliding my hands down his back, I clutched his ass. I drew his body flush against mine. His erection jabbed into my abdomen. I’d turned a guy on. *So freaking cool.* Nerves

fluttered in my belly, but I wanted more. More kisses. More heat. More flesh.

I slipped my fingers underneath his jersey and dug them into his sides. “Hmm. Nice.”

He pressed his forehead against mine and we swayed to the music. My heart had never pounded so fast. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Hunter following Nora upstairs. I giggled to myself. *Yay, Hunt.*

Ewan swept my long hair back over my shoulder, then dipped his head to nuzzle and kiss the side of neck. Goose bumps shivered across my skin from the base of my throat all the way down to my toes.

He nibbled on my earlobe. “You wanna go somewhere more private? Maybe upstairs?”

My eyes widened. My heart thundered against my ribs. I’d never been past first base. Never fooled around. But I wanted to.

I could do this. Make out. In private. “Okay.”

Taking my hand, Ewan led me through the crowd. As I passed Kyle talking to a group of guys at the bottom of the stairs, I tapped him on the arm. I twinkled my fingers at him. Concern flashed in his eyes, but I smiled to reassure him I was okay.

He chuckled and mouthed, “*Have fun.*”

Ewan led me upstairs into his room. It smelled of sweaty socks and expensive cologne. The walls were covered in ice hockey banners and posters of chicks in skimpy bikinis.

I didn't care. My two best friends were guys. I had to put up with their pictures all the time.

I took a few deep breaths and scanned Ewan's queen-sized bed covered in a black and orange tartan quilt. *Hmph. A true Tigers fan.* Wiping my clammy palms on my stomach, I prayed for the cocktail of nerves and excitement to ease.

Ewan locked the door. *Click.*

Oh, boy.

He stepped in front of me. A new hunger burned in his dark eyes. I'd never had a guy look at me like that before. I'd never felt so *sexy*.

He slid his hands onto my hips. "I've never been with a rock star before."

"Neither have I." I giggled, placing my hand on his chest. His heart raced beneath my touch. Was he as anxious as I was? "We're just gonna make out, right?"

"I'll go at your pace. That okay?"

"Yeah."

We shuffled onto his bed. Lying side by side, we resumed kissing. Each brush of his lips against mine was sweet and soft and sensual at first, but quickly grew hot, heavy, and hungry. With his body flush against mine and our hands wandering, the heat between us rose to dangerous levels.

A fire blazed inside me, but I didn't want to put it out. I slipped my hand underneath the back of his jersey. My palm sizzled as I pressed it against his scorching flesh. Venturing

downward, I clutched his ass through his jeans and gave it a squeeze. *So firm. So tight.*

“Hmm.” A deep groan rumbled in his throat. His hand ran down my arm, onto my hip, then he fumbled with the bottom of my shirt. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah.” I nipped at the side of his neck and knotted my fingers into his hair.

His soft fingertips glided toward my breast. My nipples ached and strained against my bra even before he touched them. His heated breath wisped against my face as he cupped my boob and teased his thumb across my hardened bud.

“Oh, wow.” I arched against his touch. *Damn.* “I like that.”

Smiling, he pressed his lips to mine. Our tongues entwined. But every cell in my body craved more skin. I tugged on his jersey. “Can I take this off?”

“Only if you do the same.”

“Okay.”

Our shirts hit the floor.

Holy wow. Ewan’s body was taut and toned as a tiger’s. I licked my lips, wanting to taste his skin, kiss his ripped abs, touch every muscle.

Caressing my head, he kissed me again. He was way more controlled than I was. I’d heard awful stories about guys just having their way with girls, fucking them and not taking their time, but Ewan was going nice and steady. He’d shattered

every asshole, cocky, dickhead stereotype I'd had about sports jocks. So far . . . anyway.

With gentle nips and kisses, he meandered down my neck, my chest, and kissed across the top of my breast. My eyes fluttered shut. Adrenaline spiked through my blood at every new sensation, every new touch, and every new tingle. My mind spun and my body hummed from total information overload.

But then, he tugged the cup of my bra aside and flicked his tongue over my nipple. After drawing my hardened bud into his mouth, he sucked and licked it.

My eyes widened. My breath hitched. *Holy. Fuck.* So wet and warm. Between my legs clenched. This was insane . . . but it wasn't enough.

He eased the cup covering my other breast aside. But before he repeated what he'd just done, I pulled on his hair. "Just take it off." We'd made out this much, I was happy to lose my bra. I wanted the whole damn experience.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

As I rolled toward him, he fumbled with the clip. As he was unable to undo it, I reached behind my back, released the hooks, and tossed my bra onto the floor.

His gaze raked over my bare chest. "Gemma, you're so beautiful."

Lowering his head, he licked and sucked my nipples. His hands roamed over my skin. With a mind of its own, my chest arched toward his mouth. Each flick of his tongue sent

goose bumps skipping across and tingling my flesh. My core clenched tighter and tighter. Arousal dampened my panties. Clutching his hair, I drew his lips back to mine. I had to kiss him. Crushing my tender nipples against this bare chest sent a whole new wave of heat through my veins.

Panting against his lips, I whispered, “Can I touch you?”

I’d rarely seen a real cock let alone touched one. Accidentally walking in on Derek in the bathroom didn’t count, right? Nor did walking in on Kyle and Hunter changing.

He swallowed. His Adam’s apple lurched. But then he nodded.

I pursed my lip to contain my smile. Ewan seemed more jittery than I was. Was he intimidated by me? A high school rock star? That thought was laughable. Ludicrous. But I’d run with it.

I ran my hand down his side, across his groin, then palmed his crotch. His erection bulged in his jeans. Ignoring the shake in my fingers, I popped open the top button and lowered the zipper. As I ran my hand over his boxer briefs, I cupped his rock-hard shaft. *So weird*. But my heart rate wouldn’t slow down.

He buried his hands into my hair. Moaning against my lips, he deepened the thrusts of his tongue into my mouth. The affect I had on him was intoxicating, empowering, addictive.

I tickled my fingers up and down his fine happy trail. His stomach flinched and flexed beneath my touch. Taking a deep breath, I dipped my hand beneath the top band of his

boxer briefs. I cupped his cock. Hot, velvety hardness filled my palm. *Fuck. Now what?* I'd seen a ton of movies and talked about sex with Hunter and Kyle enough to know a bit about hand jobs. But that was all I had to work with. I enclosed my fingers around Ewan. Stroking up and down, I pumped him gently and circled my thumb around the head. The sticky goo weirded me out at first and his smooth skin slipping over steel felt strange. But the blissed-out look on Ewan's face made it worthwhile. *This* was fun.

His eyes fluttered closed, and he lost focus on our kisses. His chiseled jaw tensed. And *damn . . .* the little moans rumbling in his throat turned me on even more.

He murmured against my ear, "Can I touch you?"

Oh. Hell. YES! "Yeah."

My belly somersaulted as he popped open my jeans and unzipped them. His fingers quaked as he dipped them inside my panties and slid a finger between my folds.

I stilled, holding my breath. I was so wet. Did he like that?

But when he rubbed me up and down, I no longer cared. What he was doing felt so freaking good. I hooked my leg over his and rocked my hips into his touch. He circled, prodded, and probed. But he wasn't hitting the right spot. I wriggled my hips. My body screamed at me. My insides clenched. "Higher," I whispered over our kisses.

"Oh . . . okay."

"Yeah . . . there." *Oh yeah. Now we're talking.*

I pumped his cock harder. Him touching me drove me crazy. But when he dipped his finger inside me, my heart leaped off the bed. My head collapsed deeper into the pillow. *Oh, wow.*

“You’re so wet.” He trailed a line of kisses up my throat. “And feel so good.”

“Thanks.” *Fuck.* What did you say to a guy feeling you up? But I liked the pace. I liked him going steady. I hated that my jeans were restrictive. Was I ready to go next level? *Yeah.* “Um . . . do you want to get naked? Get under the covers?”

He swallowed hard, then nodded. A sexy, wicked grin slid across his lips. “You wanna?”

“Yep.”

Our jeans joined our shirts on the floor.

Ewan ripped the quilt back, revealing glossy black sheets. We shuffled back onto the bed.

He pressed soft, searing kisses across my belly, over my breasts and up my neck. *Heaven.* I couldn’t believe it had taken me so long to do this. But yeah, I’d never found the right guy.

His lips met mine, and we returned to touching and stroking each other. The temperature in the room had risen by one hundred degrees. His fingers pulsing in and out of me made my toes curl. Tilting my hips toward him, I wriggled to find the right friction. The tension inside me was coiling hotter and tighter, but I couldn’t find release.

Fuck! This was ridiculous. I’d come this far.

Just do it.

I'm ready.

“Ewan . . .? Do you wanna . . . you know . . .?” Did he know what I meant?

As he hovered over me, his gaze locked onto mine. Want, desire, and sheer terror simmered in the depths of his eyes. *My god.* This guy was a college jock. He would have slept with hundreds of girls.

“You sure? Only if you’re sure,” he said.

What if the chance didn’t come my way again for months? Even years? This guy was fucking hot. I wasn’t after love or a boyfriend. I just wanted to lose my virginity to find out what all the fuss was about. To get it over and done with. I didn’t give a shit and held no sentimental value to the occasion. “Yeah. I am.”

Oh, wait. I was a virgin. *Fuck.* What if I bled? I winced. I’d hate to ruin his fancy quilt cover.

“Hey?” Concern lilted his voice. “We don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.”

What kind of guy got naked and made out with a girl and was then happy to stop? I’d found a fucking freak. Thank goodness. There were good guys out there. Just like Kyle and Hunter.

“It’s not that.” *Shit. Shit. Shit.* “I’ve just . . . never done it before.”

“Wait. What?” He jerked his chin back.

I slumped, sinking ten inches into the depths of the pillow. I wanted the mattress to swallow me whole. “Do I have to say it again?”

“No . . . It’s just that . . . neither have I.”

I laughed. Obviously too loudly because he drew back farther and pinched his brows together. No humor touched his eyes. “Why is that funny?”

I zipped my lips. “But . . . but . . . you’re in college? A star hockey player?”

He ran his hands over my boobs, teasing and tweaking my nipples. Each one made the hot pulses between my legs quicken.

“I swear on my trust fund, I’ve never done it.” He dipped his head and circled his tongue around my bud. “I’ve made out with a few chicks, but I’ve never had sex.”

I combed my fingers through his hair. “And you want to do it with me?”

His smoldering gaze raked over my chest and back up again. “Yeah. You’re fucking hot. A rock star. You’re every guys’ fantasy. Well . . . mine, anyway.”

I doubted that. But . . . owning it. “How do you get to college and still be a virgin?”

He kissed up the side of my neck. “My parents, until this year, kept me on a tight leash. I had to get into law school or the ice hockey team before I was allowed to go out. I nailed both.”

“So?” I ran my foot up and down the back of his leg. The tiny hairs tickled my toes. “Are you sure you want to sleep with me?”

He tucked my hair behind my ear, then kissed me. “Absolutely.”

“Well then.” I circled my hands around his broad shoulders. “We’re on the same page. But . . .” I cringed. “There might be blood.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “I have three older sisters. None of that shit bothers me. My sheets are black. I can just wash them after, or would you be comfortable with a towel?”

Seriously? What planet had this guy come from? The majority of the guys at my school were dicks about sex. The girls talking about their first times had never included any good experiences. Mine was fucking awesome so far, I hoped it didn’t change when I actually did the deed. But I didn’t want a furry towel under my ass. “I’m good.” Butterflies dipped and dived in my tummy. “So do you have a condom?”

I couldn’t believe those words had slipped past my lips. Was this actually gonna happen?

“Yeah. I do.” He rolled sideways and dug into his nightstand and retrieved a foil packet. He waved it at me. “You can still change your mind.”

I shot forward and kissed him, hard and deep. “No chance.” Too much fire coiled through me. It had to be put out.

“Okay.” He dragged his lips away from mine. “I’m not gonna last much longer if you kiss me like that. Let me get this

damn thing on.”

He fumbled with the packet, tearing it open. I’d never seen someone’s hands tremble so much. He held the condom, turning it this way and that. His nerves somehow smothered mine.

I placed my hand on his arm. “Pointy bit up.”

My mother had grilled me on how to have safe sex. When I’d started hanging out with Kyle and Hunter, she’d showed me how to put a condom on using a carrot. It was the only thing she’d ever taught me.

“Yep. Got it.” He fumbled again, fidgeted, and rolled it on.

My eyebrow arched. All this talk hadn’t hindered his erection. *My god!* He was big. How was that thing going to fit inside me?

Only one way to find out.

Drawing him over me, I hooked my leg over his butt. His hardness pressed against my crotch. Slicing my fingers into his hair, I kissed him. Our tongues sizzled together.

With a jerk, my hips tilted toward him of their own accord. I needed him. Wanted him. *Now.*

“Gemma?” The urgency in his voice matched the throb between my legs. “Can I?”

“Yeah. Just steady.” *Shit.* Here goes nothing.

He grabbed hold of his cock and edged toward my opening. As he nudged and wriggled into position, I closed my eyes. With a gentle drive, he entered me. Just an inch.

Shivers ran up my spine. My heart thundered against my ribs. *Okay. That was okay.*

He pulled back a touch, then drove in a bit farther. Holding my breath, I winced. *Yep . . . I'm okay.*

“Gemma?” Propped on his elbows, he kissed my lips. His hot breath brushed across my face. *Tease.* “This okay?”

His voice strained as if it took every ounce of his strength to stay in control. I liked that.

“I’m good.” I ran my hands over his arms, squeezing his tight biceps. *So sexy.*

He did it again, pulling out, then thrusting in a fraction deeper.

Okay. Ow! That fucking hurts. Squeezing my eyes shut, I dug my nails into his back.

“You wanna stop?”

“Nope.”

He rocked his hips gently. Slowly. Sensually. Each drive burned my insides, but it was exactly what my body craved. I took a deep breath and wriggled my toes to relax.

“Oh fuck.” His voice turned raspy and hoarse. “You feel so incredible.”

As he drove into me, he kissed me and swirled his hands over every inch of my fiery flesh—over my arms, down my sides, along my thighs. But the knot of want coiling inside me needed to be fed.

I whispered against his lips, “Okay . . . that’s good.” *Real good.* It stung, but it wasn’t unbearable. Pulsing my hips,

I meet his thrusts and moved in time with his deep drives. In fact, I wanted more. I'd adjusted to his size; now I wanted to be fucked. "Maybe a bit faster."

"Mmm," he groaned. His breath hissed as he quickened his pace. Digging deeper. Harder. Faster.

I circled my fingers around his shoulders and kissed beneath his ear. My eyes fluttered shut. Him, inside me, filling me, heated my core. I hurt, but it felt so fucking good. I rubbed against him, trying to find the friction I needed, but then his panting quickened.

He thrust into me harder and faster. His muscles tensed as his voice took on a possessed tone. "OhGod-ohGod-ohGod-ohhhhh-God."

His body jerked above me. He shuddered and shook. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "Oh. Fuck. Yeah." Then he winced. "Shit. I'm sorry. I couldn't hold on."

What the . . .? Was that it?

No. I wanted more. My body was wound tighter than a corkscrew. My clit throbbed and ached for more action. I wriggled my hips against him to find my release. He was about to move when I caught his hips. "Don't move. I wanna come."

As I pinned his hips against mine, I rubbed and pulsed my pussy against his body. *There. Oh yeah. There.* My heart pounded. My thighs and insides coiled tighter and tighter.

Ewan jerked. "Shit. I'm still orgasming."

"I'm gonna . . . wait . . ." With his cock buried inside me, I thrust and rocked against him. With a hot rush, my

release came. Jolts of electricity shot through me, quivering every nerve ending. Shivers raced up my spine and tingled the top of my scalp. Panting to catch my breath, I collapsed laughing against the pillow. “Oh fuck. That’s freaking insane.”

His eyes glinted and smoldered as he wriggled his hips against my pelvis. Every time he moved, I shuddered and convulsed. He planted soft kisses against my face, then my lips. “You like that?”

“Oh yeah.” My chest heaved. My heart thundered against my ribs.

He withdrew and collapsed beside me, drawing the sheet over our naked bodies. Panting, he stared at the ceiling. A gorgeous smile lit his face. “So that’s sex, huh?”

“Yeah.” I rested my head against his shoulder. “For our first time, that was fucking incredible.” No horror stories for me.

“Yeah. It was, wasn’t it?” He chuckled and kissed my forehead.

I curled toward him. But between my legs hurt like a bitch. “Have you got some tissues or a cloth? I’d like to clean up.”

“Oh, shit. Sorry. Yeah, I do.” He lurched off the bed. “I gotta get rid of this condom, too. Hold on. Let me grab something from the bathroom.”

I rolled onto my side, taking in every inch of his sexy naked ass as he ambled into the en suite. I squeezed my thighs

together. Fuck, I hurt. But nothing could stop me from floating among the stars.

He returned with a warm, wet cloth. After wiping myself clean, I glanced at the washer. There was some blood, but not too much. *Thank fuck.* I shuffled sideways on the sheets. Mortification crawled across my skin. I scrambled to wipe the damp spots off the bedding.

Ewan caught my hand and sat beside me. “Gem? Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just let me finish up.” I grabbed my clothes and dashed to the bathroom to change. When I came out a few minutes later, Ewan had redressed and sat on the end of the bed. His hot gaze still made me tingle.

He held out his hand. Sliding into his arms, I edged between his spread knees.

He looked up at me. “I hope I was okay.”

“I’ve got nothing to compare you to.”

He grinned. “Me either. But that certainly hasn’t scared me off from wanting to do that again.”

“No. Definitely not.”

“So . . . can I see you again?” He ran his hands up and down my legs. “Maybe have another go at what we just did?”

I combed my fingers through his soft hair. “I still can’t believe you were a virgin.”

“All my friends think I lost it back in high school. I had a serious girlfriend in my senior year, but we never did it. Her family was quite religious. I just wanted to get it over and

done with. He kissed my belly. I thought you, being a rock star, would've been with a ton of guys."

"Nope. I'm a music geek." But I could relate to wanting to get it over with. Now I knew what all the fuss was about it, I couldn't wait to do it again. It would only get better with practice, right?

Ewan glanced up at me with an awkward wince and smile. "Could we, um . . . keep this between us . . . like forever? That I lost my virginity to you?"

Oh, reputation was key, right? "What if I become famous?"

"Oh." A bright smile lit his face. "Then I'm gonna fucking brag to everyone."

I linked my hands behind his neck. "I look forward to the day. But you have my word. Until then, I won't tell anyone except for Kyle and Hunter. We share everything. No secrets."

"You trust them that much?"

"With my life."

"That's so cool."

"Gem?" There was a knock on the door. *Kyle* "You in there? We gotta go."

"Okay. Coming." *Shit.* "Sorry I can't stay." I wrinkled my nose. "We have to get home."

"That sucks. I'd love to hang out." He rose to his feet and cupped my face. "You're awesome."

"You too." I slipped my hands around his waist. "Thanks for being cool. It made it kinda special."

He pressed his forehead against mine. “Now can I get your number? I’d really like to see you again.”

“I have yours.” It was on the flyer in my jacket downstairs. “I’ll call you. Promise.”

“You better.” He kissed me, then thumbed over his shoulder toward his bed. “Um . . . I better just change my sheets. You okay to see yourself out?”

“Yeah. See ya.”

I kissed his hot lips one last time, then dashed out of the room. Kyle stood at the top of the stairs, leaning against the railing with his arms folded.

I pulled the door closed behind me. The expression on Kyle’s face morphed from please-tell-me-you’re-okay into a beaming smile “Holy shit. You did it?”

I squealed and rushed over to him. I flung my arms around his neck and gave him a huge hug.

He picked me up and spun me round. “How was it? Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I found my feet, my knees a touch wobbly after what had just happened. “It was good. Better than I’d thought. He was really cool.”

“Awesome.” He ruffled my hair, then jerked his chin toward the bedroom behind him. “Hunter’s coming. You both have to tell me everything.”

“As always.” No secrets. No lies. Never.

Hunter walked out of the room, still pulling on his long-sleeved T-shirt. A smile as wide as the Atlantic lit his

face. He rushed toward us, group hugged us, and hollered, “I fucking love college parties. And the girls? Mmm, they smell so damn good. And oh, Lord! I fucked what’s-her-name twice. My cock is still hard.”

“Her name was Nora.” I laughed and shook my head.

“Oh. Was that it? Cool.”

Kyle clutched Hunter’s shoulder and shoved him toward the huge staircase. “Come on, lover boy. Let’s get home.”

“Spoilsport.” Hunter laughed, then tilted his head toward me. “What’s with you? Why are you all hot and bothered?”

“I did it too. With Ewan.”

“Argh!” Hunter screamed and hugged me tight.

“Remind me, why do I have a girlfriend again?” Kyle quizzed us.

“Because you’re a fool, buddy.” Hunter clopped down the stairs. Kyle and I followed. “You’re a fucking fool. Who’d want a girlfriend when there are a gazillion college girls to sleep with?”

We grabbed our jackets out of the office and headed outside to wait for the taxi Kyle had called.

I buttoned up my coat. “I’m with you, Hunt. No to relationships. Music comes first. But that doesn’t mean I won’t sleep with Ewan again for fun.”

“Go Gem.” Kyle hugged me and kissed my head. “The sex goddess has been unleashed.”

“Maybe.” My cheeks still blazed from being with Ewan. Between my legs ached. I stuffed my hands into my pockets. My fingers touched the flyer Ewan had written his details on. *Yeah*. I’d call him in a couple of days. I definitely wanted another romp between the sheets.

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Chapter 16

It was nearly two a.m. when the taxi dropped us off back at my place. We were still wired and buzzed from the huge night. No one wanted to go to bed. During the ride home we raved on about the show, saving the taxi driver's ears from hearing about our party escapades. We were itching to share stories, so I invited the guys around to the back of my house to the small pergola and switched on the gas heater.

“Do you guys want a hot chocolate or food or something?” I unlocked the back door. “I'm starving. I'm gonna toast a couple Pop-Tarts. You want some?”

“Yes, please.” Hunter rubbed his hands together.

I led the guys inside. After we toasted the whole box of berry Pop-Tarts we returned to the pergola and took seats at the plastic table outside my bedroom window, miles away from Derek's room on the other side of the house. It would be nice being here to say goodbye to him in the morning. As we tucked into the hot treats, the warmth radiating from the outdoor heater kept the nighttime chill at bay.

“So, Hunt? Spill the beans.” I licked berry-flavored jelly from my fingertips. “How was *it*?”

“Fucking amazing.” He ripped a Pop-Tart in two. Steam rose into the air. “She had no idea I was a virgin. But that didn't matter. This mad intuition came over me. It's like I

was born to fuck. I got her off. I buried my cock inside her. I came like a champion. I loved every second of it.”

“So you finally popped your cherry.” Kyle chuckled. “About time.”

“And you too, Gem.” Hunter bit into the Pop-Tart and chewed his mouthful. “Was it okay?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “He was a virgin too.”

“Yeah, right.” Hunter puffed air through his nose.

I shrugged one shoulder. “I didn’t care if he was or wasn’t. We fumbled our way through it. It hurt like hell. But it was also really good. We both came. That’s a bonus when losing your virginity, right?”

“I orgasmed twice.” Hunter licked crumbs from his fingertips. “But I’m a legend.”

“You’ve had sex once.” Kyle grabbed his second Pop-Tart off the plate in the center of the table. “Don’t get full of yourself.”

“Like you’re an expert.” Hunter threw a crust at Kyle. “You’ve only been with Laura for a month.”

“She’s nice. But we have absolutely nothing in common.”

Grimacing, Hunter jerked his chin back. “So why are you still with her?”

Kyle shrugged. “Sex.”

“Dude.” Hunter ruffled his fingers through his wavy hair. “After tonight, can’t you see we don’t need to be tied down? College girls are way hotter and easier.”

“I gathered that.” Kylie grinned, leaning back in his chair. “I had to fight them off while you guys banged upstairs.” But then he lowered his chin and stared at his Pop-Tart. His voice softened with an underlying current of heartache. “But I like having a girlfriend.”

I placed my hand on Kyle’s knee and gave it rub. Deep down, Kyle longed for love and happiness and a family without the abuse he’d endured. He believed in happily ever afters.

I didn’t.

Kyle glanced at Hunter. Concern loomed in his eyes. “Don’t you want a girlfriend? One day?”

“Nope.” Hunter’s high nosedived, plummeting to the ground. He sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. The truth he hid from everyone except Kyle and me wrapped around my bones. “That could lead to love. And rejection. And heartache. And God forbid, she might want a family one day. You know I can’t ever have that.”

My heart sank into my stomach. He loved his sister, thought the world of her, but he was terrified he might have a child with autism too. I understood his concerns and fears. But he had a heart of gold and so much love to give, he’d make a great dad someday. I clutched his hand across the table. “You can if you want. One day.”

He squeezed my fingers, then tugged his hand free. “No. The risk is too high. I don’t want kids anyway. Not ever.” His rare frown morphed into a gorgeous smile. He straightened and pointed at us. “We’re gonna be fucking stars. We’ll be playing and traveling and touring. I don’t ever want

to be tied down. There are too many girls out there to have fun with.”

“I’m with you.” I high-fived Hunter.

Kyle chuckled and shook his head. “Gem, don’t you want to see Ewan again?”

“Maybe. But I don’t want it to get serious.”

“What if he’s the one?” he challenged.

I lowered my chin. My heart lurched and ached. “I don’t believe love like that exists.” *God, I wish it did.* “Look at our fucked-up families. Your mom shouldn’t be with your dad; she lives in fear every day. Hunter’s parents barely acknowledge his existence and live totally separate lives. My mom doesn’t respect the institution of marriage at all, cheating and screwing around and hurting the people around her. Why, based on our experiences, would I ever want a relationship?”

He leaned forward. His gaze locked onto mine, stealing my breath. My pulse strummed too fast. Had the beer I drank hours ago suddenly hit me? Was the high from being laid still coursing through my body? Somedays, our profound friendship blew my mind. It was hard to comprehend how much we cared about each other.

Kyle lowered and softened his voice. “I think there is someone out there for everyone. One day, you’ll find a guy who makes you feel like magic, like you can’t bear to breathe without him, and your lives will be better together rather than apart. He will fill your heart with passion and love you unconditionally, and the sex will blow your mind. That’s the love I want. I want to find my true soul mate.”

Shivers spiraled across my skin. I loved his intensity, his outlook on life, his hopes and dreams. I just didn't believe love like that existed. But I'd found the closest thing to soul mates in these two guys. The sex part I could get elsewhere.

Hunter burst out laughing. "That's way too fucking deep for this hour of the morning. We have music and each other. We don't need anything else."

"I'm with you." I dragged my gaze away from Kyle, breaking our crazy connection. We did share magic—just not the kind he craved.

That kind of love wasn't on my playlist.

"Yeah. Me too." Kyle picked crumbs off his plate with his fingertips. "Just like keeping it real and you guys grounded."

I play-punched his arm. "We need to channel more of that emotional crap into our songs. Girls will eat that shit up."

He raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"I know so." Hell, my guarded heart had warped with his words. Thank God, I wasn't a fool who'd fall for that nonsense. "Love—wanting it, finding it, feeling it and losing it—is the central theme to most songs. I've never been *in* love, don't ever want to be, but I love you guys, so we can just draw on that and write more kickass music."

"Oh yeah. Let's do that." Hunter chewed and swallowed the last mouthful of his Pop-Tart. "It might help me get laid more often."

I half grinned. "Hunt, I don't think you're gonna have a problem with that."

“You guys are crazy.” Kyle’s eyes glinted as he rested his elbows on the table.

“For music and girls? Yep.” Hunter pushed his empty plate aside. “Kyle, come on, dude. You missed out tonight. If Laura doesn’t do it for you, get fucking rid of her. I’ll contact what’s-her-name and we’ll go to the next party down at Princeton.”

My laugh rumbled in my chest. “Hunt, her name was Nora. Maybe you should stick to one-night stands if you can’t remember names.”

“Fine by me.” A mischievous smile curled across his lips. But then he drew in a deep breath, pinched his brows together, and looked at Kyle. He splayed his hand across his chest. “Bud, it’s honorable that you’re faithful, but seriously, if you aren’t head over heels in love with Laura, dump her. There are too many chicks out there waiting for good-looking guys like us to show them a good time.”

“Maybe.” Kyle’s leg jiggled beside mine. Envy flared in his dark eyes. “There were a lot of hot girls there tonight.”

“And we can take advantage of that.” Hunter shot forward and jabbed his finger against the table. “We’re rock stars. We’re gonna play more gigs. We’re gonna move to the city. Do you seriously want to be in a relationship? No. Fuck that shit. We may never make it to the big time, but we’re gonna have fun trying.”

“Not just fun. An insane amount of fun.” I nudged Kyle’s arm. “We’re too young to settle down. We need to live it up.”

The energy in the air was charged with sparks. Kyle sucked in a deep breath and nodded. A big grin lit his face. “You’re right. We should. I’m in.”

Oh yeah. Laura was gone.

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Chapter 17

Three days later, Kyle's dad came home. His five months in rehab had passed too quickly. Thin ice had been re-laid in Kyle's house. Every time I set foot through the front door, a chill ran down my spine. My ears were always on alert, listening for his cruiser pulling into the driveway. Mr. McIntyre assured us he was better. He'd lost weight. His skin held a healthy glow. But something in the depths of his eyes unnerved me and kept me on edge. It took less than two weeks for my intuition to be proven right.

I was waiting at the end of the street for Kyle and Hunter to ride to school. They were ten minutes late. Kyle was never late; Hunter always was. I was about to grab my cell phone and call one of them when Kyle sped down the road on his mountain bike like a maniac. Nausea flooded my stomach. When he reached me, he jumped off his bicycle and slammed it onto the ground. "The fucker."

"What? What's happened?" My heart pounded against my ribs.

He turned his head to the side and pointed to his face. The red mark across his cheek blazed bright.

My breath snagged in my lungs. *Oh shit*. I couldn't breathe. "He hit you?"

"Fuck, Gem." He paced; tears welled in his eyes. "He wasn't even drinking." He pointed to his cheek again. "This

happened yesterday afternoon. I was with Laura, actually trying to do math, working up the guts to break up with her. Then she started feeling me up, so I thought, what the hell, one last time won't hurt. I'll end things in another day or two. But Dad came home early. He walked in on us going at it. He lost his shit, called me a dirty little fuck and backhanded me. Laura freaked the fuck out and drove off."

I caught his hand and drew him to a halt. "Are you okay? Is she?" I remembered what it was like witnessing Kyle being hit. I still had nightmares about that night.

"Me? No." He shook his head. The rims of his eyes reddened. "I meant to call you, but I had to make sure Laura was all right first. I went to her house to talk. She was scared shitless, terrified of Dad. I can't fucking blame her. We broke up, surprise, surprise. I'm not upset about that. But when I got home, Mom and Dad were all apologetic, and he was full of his bullshit promises again. That pissed me off."

"Oh, no." I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him close, resting my cheek against his collarbone. I wish I could stop his pain. As I rubbed and circled my hands over his back, he slowly calmed down. "So, what happened this morning?"

He sniffled. "Just arguing. I told him to leave. Go back to rehab. Get the fuck out of our lives. That didn't go down well."

"I bet it didn't." I pulled out of his embrace but held onto his hand. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He tugged free of my hold and rubbed his brow. "On one hand, I want to give him a chance to prove

that he's changed, that yesterday was a one-off incident. I miss my dad. But on the other hand, if he touches me again, I'm fucking out of there. I'll come stay with you."

Kyle always held onto hope. He believed there was good in everyone, even his dad. That scared me. "I just don't want you or Claire to get hurt again."

"Me either." He smirked and shot out a breath. "You and Hunt were right about love and relationships and marriage. It's all bullshit. Staying single is the only way not to get blindsided."

"See?" I tickled him in the ribs. He flinched and jumped back. "I knew you'd come 'round."

"About time, hey?" He held up his finger and tried not to smile. "And don't do that. You know I'm ticklish as fuck."

"That's what makes it so much fun." And it put a smile back on his face.

"You're lucky we're friends. You're the only one who gets away with it."

"Aren't I special?"

"That you are."

As he hooked his arm around my shoulders and gave me a hug, Hunter pedaled down the road. *Finally.*

Time for school.

Over the next month, I saw Ewan a total of six times. After our initial night of fiery fun, we fumbled through a few more steamy encounters, but the flames fizzled out. His life revolved around study and ice hockey. Mine . . . music. We parted ways just before Thanksgiving.

After our gig for the Tigers, we secured a regular gig at a local bar in Princeton. There was nothing Ivy League about it. It was a true local hangout. But it opened the door to more college parties. With the three of us single, we were living the dream—playing, partying, and hooking up—and we hadn't even finished school. Kyle fell in and out of love every few weeks while Hunter and I enjoyed our newfound hunger for sex. But his tally of encounters quickly outgrew mine.

Over the Christmas break, we spent more money on new equipment, computer software, and mics to improve the professional sound in our recordings. We even uploaded a dozen of our songs onto Spotify. We had no idea if paid streaming would take off, but we hoped to make a few dollars if anyone ever listened to our tracks.

As the new year took hold, I struggled to find balance. With five months until we graduated, music consumed my every waking moment in and out of school. But frustration and disappointment played with my doubts. Rejections flooded our inbox from record labels, booking agents, and managers, and they threatened to tamper with my dreams. Why couldn't we get a break?

Sitting on the floor in my living room with the guys, I stared at my laptop. I scrolled the Internet, looking for new competitions, festivals, and venues to play at, as well as fresh

open-mic night listings. I even searched for different companies to send demos to. They were hard to come by. We'd sent our new songs to many of the ones we'd first submitted to only to be rejected again. I stabbed at the touchpad. "We've been doing this for years. Why won't anyone see we're talented? Why won't anyone take a chance and sign us?"

"I fucking don't know." Hunter stopped strumming his guitar. We were supposed to be working on new lyrics this afternoon, but we'd come home to a pile of returned envelopes on my doorstep. Kinda killed our vibe. He wiped his hand down his face. "Are we delusional? Do we think we're better than we actually are?"

Probably. But that wouldn't stop us from playing.

Kyle tossed his notebook aside on the sofa. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Tiredness loomed in his eyes. "It's useless. Maybe we should just stop. Quit. Take a break for a while."

My heart crashed onto the floor. Had I heard him correctly?

I sucked in a deep breath as I glanced from him to Hunter, then back again. The moment our gazes locked, unrelenting fire, steely passion, and sizzling energy rippled between us. Life without music wasn't worth living. Quitting wasn't an option.

"No. Never." Grit set in my tone. "I don't care if every label on this planet rejects us and we have to busk in Times Square for the rest of our lives, I'm not giving up."

“Me either.” Hunter slid his fingers down the neck of his guitar. “I can’t. Music and performing are in my blood. I can’t survive without them.”

“Thank fuck.” A sly smile slid across Kyle’s lips; his eyes twinkled. “I was testing you. To see if you still felt the same way I did.”

I slapped him on the thigh. “Don’t scare us like that. That’s just cruel.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Chuckling, Kyle hooked his hand around my head, drew me closer, and kissed the top of my hair. “But it was worth it to see you freak out. But I assure you, Gem. You’re stuck with us for life.”

I thumped his arm. “Good. We made a pact. You better not break it. Not ever.”

Chapter 18

February 2010

I hated Valentine's Day. It was cold, snowing, and overcast, and we were stuck indoors. Technically, the day to celebrate love was two days away on Sunday—but that didn't stop everyone at school today from smooching in the hallways and exchanging gifts. If they all knew that those fleeting moments of happiness would end in heartache they might not have been so smitten. I grabbed lunch at the school cafeteria and took a seat next to Hunter at one of the indoor tables. He'd cheer me up.

“I see you're inundated with endless Valentine treats, like me.” He waved at the bare table beside his tray. Not a card or flower, chocolate or soft toy graced the space. *Thank goodness.*

“Oh, I have been.” *Not.* I loosened my scarf and placed it on my lap. “I just told the delivery guy to take the dozens and dozens of roses I've received to my place. I can't carry them home on my bicycle.”

Grinning, he wrapped his arm around my neck and kissed the side of my head. “Please kick me in the balls if I ever fall for this bullshit.”

“Nah. You won't. We're too smart.”

But when he straightened, the deep red scratches slashing his cheek caught my eye. I hadn't seen him this

morning as he'd had a dentist appointment before school. "Shit." I caught his chin and turned his head to the side. "What happened to you? Wild sex romp with someone?"

"I wish." He grabbed his fork and dug into his pasta. "It's nothing. Jenny had a meltdown in the storm last night. She doesn't like thunder and lightning, nor the wind."

"Are you okay? Is she?"

"Yeah." His shoulders slumped. Tiredness drummed low in his voice. "After much singing and reading, we got her to calm down and take some medicine to help her sleep."

Most of the time Jenny was amazing, full of laughs and hugs and cuddles, but when she wasn't, she could be more catastrophic than a tornado. Worst thing was, now she was entering her teenage years, her episodes had become more frequent and harder to control. "She seems to be getting worse."

"And stronger." Lowering his chin, he rubbed the mark on his cheek. "She needs better care, schooling, and medicine, but my parents can't afford it. So we just have to manage."

I placed my hand on his thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes." A mischievous smile curled across his lips and his vibrant energy returned. That often meant trouble . . . and that he wanted to forget about home. He shoveled a fork full of carbonara into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed it down. "We play tonight and Sunday night, so between our gigs, we need to do something anti-Valentine. Something that is fun, crazy, and not romantic in any way."

“I like your line of thinking.” Hunter was great at finding new ways to make the three of us laugh and get outdoors, especially during the summer. From ziplining to skiing, swimming to canoeing, any time we weren’t playing music he was hellbent on action and adventure. He brought out our competitive natures. We thrived on outdoing each other. Always trying to go harder. Faster. Longer. Hunter was the high. Kyle, the calm. They were my yin and yang. I peeled the lid off my pasta dish. Steam curled into the air. “What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s go to the movies, eat pizza, go ice-skating and bowling.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Hmm . . . sounds too much like a date.” Or just like any other day hanging out with him and Kyle.

“What about axe-throwing, or a historical walk around Princeton, or cleaning the grease-traps at Rosa’s?”

Definitely *not* romantic. “Ew! You said something fun. Not gross or boring.” I’d done enough history at school to last me a lifetime. Cleaning grease traps may have made me vomit. And axe-throwing? I’d never gotten into the local zany sport, but I’d be willing to give it another shot.

“We have to do something.” He stabbed his fork into his pasta. “Dad’s football buddies are coming over on Saturday to watch endless hours of football and Mom is having a Valentine’s Day tea party on Sunday for Jenny and her friends. I don’t want to be home for either.”

“Hell no.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “Okay. Here’s a plan. Tomorrow afternoon let’s go ice-skating so I can

beat you in races again and axe-throwing for some bad-assed fun. Afterwards, we can watch violent movies all night at my place. We'll sleep in until noon on Sunday then go to our gig. It'll be great."

My mother remained intolerable, waiting for her divorce to finalize from Derek so she could marry Nolan. She rarely came home, spending most of her time with Nolan in Philadelphia. It suited me perfectly. Under sufferance, she'd agreed not to sell the house until I graduated. When I left, I couldn't give a fuck what she did with our shit box place. She could burn it for all I cared.

"Awesome." Hunter shoved pasta into his mouth. I didn't know where he put all that food. He was so tall and skinny, ate like an animal, and never put on weight. "That sounds perfect. I'll bring the DVDs and book the skating and axe throwing. You shout the pizzas. It's an anti-Valentine anti-date. You're the best."

"I know." I nudged my elbow against his arm. "Don't you forget it." *Oh!* Was some of Hunter's cocky attitude rubbing off on me? I liked that.

Kyle rocked up with two cards and a rose in hand.

"Ooooh. Who's got some valentines?" I teased, stealing the red card with a teddy bear on the front. I read inside:

Be my Valentine again. Love Laura

What the . . . ?

His cheeks blazed red as he flopped down onto the chair opposite us. "Um . . . that one is from Laura and the

other stuff is from . . . Vicki.”

“Vicki?” I drew my shoulders back. “As in, my friend, Vicki? As in, Laura’s best friend?”

“Yeah. That one.” Grinning, he rubbed the tip of his chin.

“How did that go down?” I asked. “Does Laura know?” Laura still pined after Kyle. But she was delusional if she thought they’d get back together. Kyle had moved on. A few college girls had helped with that.

“Yeah.” Kyle frowned. “She wasn’t happy.”

“What’s the deal with Vicki?” Worry rippled through Hunter’s voice. “Did she ask you out? You’re aware of her reputation, right?”

“Of course I am,” Kyle groaned. “I’m not stupid.”

“No, babe. You’re a stud.” I handed back his card. “You have two girls fighting over you.” But concern flickered in my chest. Vicki and Laura were cool. They weren’t stuck-up snobs like most of the cheerleaders at this school. They liked our music. But Vicki? Her interest in him had alarms going off in my head before a relationship even began. She liked the jocks, and they liked her. They got some action with no strings attached. I didn’t want Kyle to get hurt.

“It’s crazy, right?” Kyle’s eyes glinted. His cheeks reddened. “Two girls want me. Two! A year ago, no one even looked in my direction.”

“Yeah. You’re a real catch.” Sarcasm sliced through Hunter’s tone. But then he winced. “But Vicki? Do you just

want to fuck her to see if she's any good? If that's all, fine. You know she'll lose interest within a couple weeks."

A smug smile curled across Kyle's lips. "Maybe she's just been waiting for the right guy."

"Who wants to be the right guy?" Hunter shook his head. "We finish school in three and a half months. Think of all the fun we're gonna have in the city. You don't want a girlfriend. Trust me."

I'd never seen Hunter so worried about Kyle dating before. Maybe he just knew what Vicki was like and wanted to protect Kyle from any fallout. I loved that about him. Underneath that ego, he cared about us with all his heart.

Kyle shrugged. "But I like her. Tomorrow, we're going out to lunch and the movies . . . then back to her place. Her parents are out of town."

"It's your death wish." I opened my juice and took a sip. "You'll miss out on our anti-Valentine date."

"Your what?" He scrunched his nose.

"Hunt and I plan to outrace each other ice-skating, go axe-throwing, and watch violent movies. Everything will be unromantic but loads of fun."

"Wait?" Kyle straightened. "You're doing all those things without me?"

"Yep. Sorry, bud." Hunter shrugged. "You can't have everything. Gem and I will be living it up while you schmooze and snuggle your new girlfriend. Best thing is, we'll still probably get laid tonight and on Sunday after our gig without all the bullshit Valentine's crap. We win hands down."

Yep. Total win. But our anti-Valentine's fun wouldn't be the same without Kyle. When the three of us weren't together, my heart twanged. Why? And why did worry loom inside me every time Kyle or Hunter hook up with someone? I wasn't jealous. *Hell no.* I'd had my own fair share of hook-ups. But deep down, I was afraid. Afraid that one day, they'd meet and fall for someone. That one day, their love for some girl would overrule their love of music.

My stomach cinched and knotted. Losing one or both of them would be like losing a limb. I wouldn't be able to operate. I was so hungry for our career; I was sure I wouldn't survive if we didn't pursue music. I had no backup plan. I wasn't applying to any colleges. My future was built around those guys. Was that stupid? *No.* I believed we had something special. One day, the world would know it.

I had to find a way to make it happen.

I had to.

A week later . . . I did.

Before heading to Kyle's place for our bar gig in Princeton, I was killing time in my bedroom, browsing the Internet for more music events and competitions when something caught my eye. I read every detail on the website, three times. With each condition we met, my heart rate jumped. I hit print, grabbed the piece of paper off my desk printer, then rode to Kyle's place as fast as I could. I was earlier than he'd expected for our gig tonight, but this couldn't wait. No surprise, Hunter was already there.

With Kyle's parents at work, I charged into the kitchen and plonked down on a chair. Excitement skipped through my veins.

“What's got your panties all hot and bothered?” Hunter grinned over his cup of hot chocolate.

I grabbed the printout from my bag and slapped it on the table. “I found something. There's this music competition being run by SureHaven Records. It's called ‘Discovered-On-YouTube.’ If we're one of the twelve bands selected, we have to progress through six rounds. Every two weeks, we have to submit one original and one cover song. Online viewers vote. Only the top artists make it through to the next submission.” My heart beat so fast, I struggled to breathe and talk. “If we make it to the top three, the final is filmed and streamed from SureHaven's studios in New York. If we win”—I spun the sheet of paper toward them and jabbed my finger against the bottom line—“it's a record deal, a trip to LA, and prize money of one hundred thousand dollars. We have to enter.”

“One hundred grand?” Hunter's eyes lit up. “Think of what we could do with that kind of money. And a record deal?”

“Yep.”

We'd had no luck finding a manager. No booking agent would take us on because we were still in school. So we'd become our own little business operatives. I'd taken on the task of finding and scheduling our gigs. Kyle had focused on cutting and producing our tracks and videos for online. Hunter was our social media guru, posting endless photos and videos of us and our music. We made a great team.

Kyle pinched his brows together. “But aren’t SureHaven renowned for churning out manufactured artists? Factory-formulated hits?”

“They are.” I rested my elbows on the table. “But for a record deal and the chance to win some cash, I’d sign tomorrow.”

“And lose creative control of our music?” Kyle grimaced. “You want someone to tell us what we can and cannot sing?”

It would kill me giving up creative control if we won. I loved writing and playing our own music. We were good at it. But if we won, it’d open a world of opportunity for us. “It wouldn’t be forever. It’s only for one album—maybe two if they like us.”

“That’s not so bad.” Hunter shrugged. “I’d do it if it meant we got a deal and could perform.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kyle slumped in his chair. “We’ve got no chance of winning.”

“We won’t know if we don’t try.” I stole Kyle’s hot chocolate and took a sip. He didn’t stop me. He just grinned and let me have it. I needed something to settle the butterflies soaring in my tummy. We could do this.

He flicked his hair off his forehead, revealing deep furrows in his brow. “We submitted to SureHaven last year. They sent us a rejection email.” Kyle didn’t need to remind me. “What makes you think we’ll stand out in a YouTube contest?”

“Because we’re better now. We have a great following. The viewers vote, not the execs.” My confidence never faltered. Failure wasn’t an option. If we didn’t win this contest, we’d enter the next one that opened. I’d never give up. I didn’t care if I had to work part-time in a grocery store and busk on street corners for the rest of my days to help pay the rent. As long as I played music, nothing else mattered. I clutched his hand across the table. “We can do this. We qualify to enter. We have the required followers and experience.”

Kyle leaned forward and covered my hand with his other palm. The warmth of his touch fueled the fire rippling underneath my skin. I wanted to enter this competition. The doubt on his face morphed into a subtle smile. Golden sparks flared in his eyes. “If it gets us out of here, I’m in.”

“When does it open?” Hunter grabbed and perused the page.

“In a few weeks.” I sat back. “At the beginning of April. Finalists are announced just before we graduate.”

“Wouldn’t that be insane?” Hunter sucked in a deep breath, filling the air with his electric energy. “Finish school and land a record deal.”

Yes. It would. Dreams filled my head and heart. “Whether we win or not, we’re still moving to New York.” My unrelenting hunger to succeed swirled in my belly. The three of us wanted the same thing. I pointed to the page. “Let’s enter. Let’s work out what songs we want to cover and submit. We’ll never know our luck unless we try.”

“Okay.” Kyle nodded. His smile was as stunning as a starlit night. “I’m in.”

“Yay!” I squealed. Clapping onto both guys’ hands, I squeezed tight. “No one wants this more than we do. We’re gonna make our dreams come true. Deal?”

“Abso-freaking-lutely.” Hunter high-fived us with his free hand.

“Yep. It’s ride or die.” Kyle swiped the cup of hot chocolate off the table and drank the last mouthful. He winked at me. “Forever.”

“Hell yeah.” I flattened my hand over my tummy to stop the jitters. There was something about this contest that seemed right.

I didn’t want to get my hopes up. After a gazillion rejections, I was prepared for failure and elimination. But we’d work our asses off. With Hunter’s flare, Kyle’s talent, and my ambition, nothing would stop us. SureHaven had to notice us.

They had to.

I had a good feeling about this.

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Chapter 19

Prom. Prom. Prom. From the first day back after spring break, every conversation I overheard consisted of girls talking about dresses, shoes, and hairdos. The guys joked about asking girls to the dance, then gloated about a yes or shuffled along the hallways and hid if rejected. Thankfully—and to my relief—no one dared to ask me. The evil glares I gave most of the guys kept them at a distance.

One afternoon, I leaned against the wall outside the school's main entrance. I shot Kyle a text:

HURRY UP! WE'VE GOT TUNES TO PLAY.

Students rushed toward cars and buses, and hollered their daily goodbyes to friends—but Matias, the bully who'd made Kyle's and Hunter's lives hell during our freshman year, lingered by the front door. I froze. He glanced my way, then turned away, then came another few steps closer, raking his fingers through his buzz cut.

The blood drained from my face. *Fuck.* I'd seen that nervous look on guys' faces over the past week—the reddened cheeks, the fidgety hands, the sweaty brows. *Shit.* Was he going to ask me to prom?

Please don't. Please don't. Please don't.

He'd been tolerable and apologetic after we'd played at the community fair. He'd even said he liked our music. But I

didn't like him. Not the slightest. Muscle-bound, brutish footballers didn't do it for me. I still hadn't forgotten that he and his buddies had picked on Kyle and Hunter.

My heart pounded. Tightening the hold on my backpack, my palms turned clammy. I straightened. My heels connected with the brick building behind me. This wasn't going to happen. When Matias stopped six feet away, I clenched my teeth so hard, the muscles in my jaw ached. I cut him a scathing glare and shook my head.

His mouth fell open as if he wanted to say something, but no words came. Fear flashed in his eyes. Time stood still as his eyes locked onto mine. Nausea flooded my stomach. I saved him the trouble.

"No," I said. "Not gonna happen."

"Oh. Um. Okay." With a nod, he turned and sped across the parking lot toward his truck.

Thank fuck. I let out the breath I'd been holding and collapsed against the wall.

Kinda cool I'd scared him off.

Besides, I already had a date to prom. Since Kyle had hooked up with Vicki before spring break and had asked her to the dance, Hunter and I would go together . . . as friends.

With four weeks till the dance and eight weeks until we graduated, my focus should've been on finals, but it wasn't. Every day I checked my cell phone at least twenty times to see if our submission for the SureHaven contest had been successful. The contestants would be announced this Friday, but I'd hoped we'd hear something before they posted the

details on social media. No such luck. Maybe we hadn't been chosen.

Fuck.

Ten minutes after the bell had sounded, Kyle and Hunter ambled out of the building.

“What took you so long?” Leaning against the wall, I folded my arms. “I’ve been waiting forever.”

“Sorry.” Hunter ruffled his long hair with his fingers. “Mrs. Kent wanted to see us after class about our English assessment. She gave us some pointers and wants us to rework our drafts.”

“Damn.” If their drafts were bad, mine would be horrid. We’d spent hours on them last week. *Shit.* I needed a pass to graduate. “I thought your outlines were good.”

“So did we,” Kyle mumbled. “We can write lyrics and music, that’s all that matters. When we’re famous, we’ll have a publicist who can handle our stuff, right?”

“I like the sound of that.” I slapped him on the back. Every day, our excitement about finishing school grew. We’d started looking for apartments in the city. We’d made a budget. We had two bars ready to schedule us in to play. Totally wicked. “Come on. Let’s go home. I need a good jam session.”

But as we headed toward our bicycles, Vicki ran up to Kyle.

“Hi, babe.” She kissed his lips. “Are you coming over this afternoon?”

He slipped his hands around her waist and pressed his forehead against hers. “Not today. I have practice.”

Too sweet. Pouting, I threw Vicki an I’m-sorry smile, but secretly, my heart happy danced. *Music won!*

Kyle was different with Vicki. He adored her, but nothing beat music. *Thankfully.* Luckily, Kyle had Hunter and me to keep his head out of Cupid’s ass.

She tugged on the bottom of his shirt, stepped in close, and crushed her chest against his torso. “So when will I get to . . . you know . . . see you?”

He brushed his fingertip down her cheek. “Tomorrow at school. Lunchtime. I promise.”

I cleared my throat, interrupting their little smooch. “No can do. We’ve booked the music room for vocal practice.” We did that once a week. The acoustics were so much better in school compared to Kyle’s garage or my living room.

Vicki’s shoulders slumped and she dropped her head back. “Ergh! Your music takes up so much time.”

“So does your cheer.” Hunter leaned one hand against the wall, but his eyes ogled the long legs of Isabella, the cheer captain, walking past in her short skirt. He grinned and nodded in approval. “If I was desperate, I’d bang her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Good thing you’re not.” Isabella was the queen bee of the school. Tall. Beautiful. Rich. Popular. A downright bitch to anyone who wasn’t in her cliquy crowd. So Hunter had no chance. But he liked girls with long legs and big boobs. I’d learned that since our first night at Princeton

and from the countless hookups he'd had since. Good thing I'd always be safe from his roaming eyes and hands.

“Oh, Kyle.” Vicki ignored me and snaked her hands around his neck, linking her fingers at his nape. “I miss you, baby. Come over this afternoon. So we can . . . you know . . . study.”

Kyle closed his eyes. He smiled, but his jaw tensed as he sucked in a deep breath. I pursed my lips to smother my laugh. Not even sex would lure him away from music. Vicki had no hope.

“Not today.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “But you could come over tomorrow afternoon for a quickie before Hunt finishes work and we have final practice for our gig this weekend.”

“I don't want to wait that long.” She zigzagged her finger down his chest, then tugged on the center of his T-shirt. “Please?”

“Vicki, I can't.” Kyle caught her hands and lowered them to her sides. “We can hang out on Sunday afternoon. But until then, I've got too much to do.”

This was taking way too long. I jutted my chin toward Vicki. “You only want to bang him, right?” This was why I avoided relationships. All this clingy shit made me want to vomit. Hooking up with random college guys after our gigs was so much easier. No hassle. No emotional bullshit. And a helluva lot of fun. “Why not just go to the media room, the sports shed, or the art room like everyone else?”

“Oh yeah. We can do that.” She fluttered her eyelashes as she rubbed his tummy. “How about tomorrow? In the art room? Before school?”

“Sure thing. Sounds perfect.” He gave her a kiss, all sweet-like with just a bit of tongue. “Meet you here at eight?”

Hmmm. What did his kisses taste like? Probably peanut butter. *But ergh!* Don’t go there. Not ever. *Stupid.*

“I’ll be here at seven-forty-five. Don’t be late.” She patted his ass, turned on her heels, then skipped toward the parking lot.

“She’s a piece of work,” Hunter groaned, pushing off the wall. “Girlfriends take too much time and effort.”

“Nah. She’s awesome.” Kyle’s gaze lingered after her as she joined her giggling girlfriends by her car. “I’m totally in love with her.”

In love with her?

My heart did a strange stumble in my chest. That was why he’d been acting weird. *He loves her.* This wasn’t just an I’m-getting-some-action fling like he’d had with Laura or the quick flings he’d had with a few girls he’d picked up after our gigs. He’d fallen for Vicki.

I placed my hand on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’m happy for you.” I really was. I’d never been in love, so I didn’t understand the allure. Never wanted to. But Kyle was ecstatic. Seeing him smile filled my heart. I wanted nothing but the best for him.

I turned and walked backward in the direction of our bicycles. “So let’s take all this lovey-dovey shit and go write a

song. Hurry up.”

“Nope. No love songs today.” Following me, an adamant sternness shot through Hunter’s tone. “I haven’t had sex in over a week. My balls are aching. I need a total distraction. I wanna rock. Jam hard. Play party tunes and get excited about our gig this weekend.”

Oh yeah. “That sounds like a much better idea.”

“Majority wins.” Kyle laughed, scurrying after us. “Let’s jam.”

On Friday after the school bell rang, Hunter and I waited by our lockers for Kyle so we could head home together. We wanted to run through our new set list a couple more times before we played tomorrow night. Just when I was about to send out a search party, Kyle sprinted down the hallway.

Hunter held his hands arms out wide. “Where the fuck were you?”

Kyle skidded to a halt in front of us. “Sorry. I was in the library waiting for the printer but gave up when I saw this.” He panted, swiped his cell phone on, and turned the screen toward us.

“What is it?” I skimmed the email, but Kyle’s hand trembled so much I couldn’t read a word.

“We made it into the SureHaven contest.” Kyle’s voice pitched so loud, the roof lifted. “Our submission was selected. We’re in the first round of voting.”

“Argh! I screamed, jumping up and down. “Holy shit! Holy shit! Holy shit! That’s incredible.” My mind spun. We’d made it into the contest. To be selected was a huge achievement. Thousands if not millions of people would hear our music.

“I honestly didn’t think we’d make it that far.”
Bewilderment blazed in his eyes.

“I did because we’re fucking awesome.” Hunter hooked his arm around my neck and tussled my hair before he grabbed Kyle to join our hug. “We’re in. So many people are going to know our name by the end of the contest. This is freaking wicked.”

Butterflies swooped and swirled in my stomach. I hoped the flutters were a good vibe and not a bad omen. *No*. My intuition had never let me down. I had a good feeling about this. But I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. We had a long way to go.

“I’m so freaking stoked.” Kyle stuffed his cell phone into the back pocket of his jeans. “This is the first company to show interest in us.”

The notion of qualifying slowly sank in. We’d captured the attention of a huge record label. Now all we had to do was make our music stand out from every other competitor. How the hell would we do that?

Ideas bombarded my head as I swiped my backpack off the ground and slipped my arms through the straps. “Let’s run a few merchandise giveaways to encourage people to share our videos. Like us. Follow us. Tweet us. Oh. My. God . . . this is insane.”

“I’ll help.” Kyle fetched his bag from his locker. “I’ll also make a new graphic for displaying on the screens at the gig tomorrow night. This is so sick.”

My heart wouldn’t stop pounding against my ribs. Would our hard work pay off? Were we any better than the other entrants? I’d have to research them once the list of artists was published.

Hunter tied his hair into a ponytail. “I’ll ramp up our social posts to spread the word for our followers to vote.”

Oh yeah. He never missed an opportunity to post on social media.

Kyle wrapped his arms around me again and rocked me from side to side. “You’re the best. Thanks for finding the contest and entering us.”

“Thank me when we win.” I twisted out of his hold. Too much excitement zipped through my veins to be contained. “But for now, we have to rehearse. No rest for the wicked.”

The air hummed like an amp. We were on an adrenaline-fueled high as I hooked my arms around the guys’ backs. With our strides in perfect sync, we headed along the corridor. But as we hit the intersecting hallway that led to the tennis courts and Cougars Stadium, down the far end of the passageway, Vicki dashed past at lightning speed and disappeared toward the sports locker rooms.

Drawing to a halt, Kyle called out, “Vicki?”

But she mustn’t have seen us . . . or heard Kyle.

Kyle grinned. “Give me a minute . . . or five.” Changing route, he walked backward in Vicki’s direction. “I’ll just say goodbye to her quickly, then I’m all yours.”

“You have it bad for this girl.” Hunter shook his head.

Kyle held his hands wide. “Hook, line, and sinker. I’m not afraid to admit it.” With a fancy spin, he turned and took off down the hall at a sprint.

Hunter and I dropped our bags and slumped against the lockers.

“I love seeing him happy.” I smiled. He deserved it after the hell he’d been through.

“Yeah.” Hunter glanced down the hallway. “For some strange reason, she does it for him. I never thought I’d see the day where he’d get laid, let alone bang a cheerleader. Hell, I never thought I’d see any of us do that.”

I play-punched him in the arm. “We’ll be fighting them off in the city.”

“Oh yeah.” His eyes glinted. “We already do. And we haven’t even left New Jersey. Wait until we have Columbia, NYU, and other college students coming to our shows and fighting to be with us. We’ll have so many fans, Kanye will be jealous.”

Some days it was still hard to comprehend we had fans. Not many, but every one counted. They came to our gigs and waited to see us after our shows. They wanted photos and autographs and vied for moments of our time. We lapped it up. We craved more and more. And given our tumultuous home lives, the attention had become as addictive as amphetamines.

A door down the end of the corridor slammed against the wall, shattering the air. *Thunk*. Our heads turned in the direction Kyle had run.

“You fucking bitch.” Kyle stormed . . . no, sprinted . . . toward us. The tears welling in his eyes looked like they burned like acid.

Vicki dashed after him, pulling her T-shirt on, threading her arms through the sleeves. “Kyle, wait. It’s not what you think.”

He stopped in his tracks a few yards from us and spun to face her. “His dick was inside you. What is there not to think?”

“Oh, shit.” I rushed to Kyle’s side. Hunter followed.

Vicki reached for Kyle’s hand and clutched it against her chest. “Quill and I were just fooling around. It’s not serious.”

“Are you listening to yourself?” He yanked his hand free. “Were we not serious?”

“Yes. We are,” Vicki cried. “You’re my everything.”

“What?” Quill rounded the corner, tucking his shirt back into his jeans. “Then what are we? We were just hammering one out in the guys’ locker room.”

“Quill?” Vicki snapped. “Stay out of it.”

“Are you still seeing this music freak?” Quill snarled, waving his hand at Kyle. “You said it was over.”

“Are you fucking with me?” Kyle’s voice jumped two octaves.

“Kyle?” Vicki pleaded. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake.”

Falling back a few feet, Kyle shook his head. “Fuck you, Vicki.”

My heart bled for Kyle. This was why I never wanted to fall for anyone. It always ended in heartbreak. The pain contorting Kyle’s face and ripping through the air splintered my heart. So much for being happy. I jabbed my finger at Vicki. “Stay. The fuck. Away.”

“Get out of my face, Gemma,” Vicki snarled, slapping my hand aside.

She juttred out her arm to push past me. I blocked her move. With all my strength, I shoved her on the shoulder. She wasn’t going anywhere. “No.”

Hunter stood in the center of the corridor, guarding Kyle who paced the width of the hall. Hunter threw a noxious snarl at Vicki. “You fucked Quill Bancroft? You’ve moved onto the lacrosse team? Really?”

“Hey?” Quill hollered in defense, but everyone ignored him.

“Move, Gemma.” Hate flared in Vicki’s eyes. “You don’t own Kyle.”

“No, I don’t.” Steel set in my tone. “But he’s my best friend. You cheated on him.”

“I didn’t.” She shook her head.

“What do you call Quill’s dick thrusting in and out of you?” Kyle flicked his hand at her. “That was no cheerleading move, that’s for sure.”

“Come on, Vicki.” Quill ambled toward her. He took her hand in one of his and adjusted his crotch with the other. “It’s over with Kyle. So can we please go and finish what we started? My balls are hurting.”

I gaped. The guy had no shame. Unbelievable.

“No.” She yanked her hand free then stepped toward Kyle, but I held up my hand in warning. I’d take her down if I had to, friend or not.

A tear fell onto Vicki’s cheek. “Kyle? I’m sorry. I love you.”

“No. You don’t.” Poison dripped in his tone. “If you did, you wouldn’t have fucked Quill. So, screw you. I’m out of here.”

As Kyle stormed down the hall, I shook my head at Vicki. “How could you hurt him? Please, stay away.” I turned on my heels and with Hunter by my side, I rushed down the hall to follow Kyle.

Vicki cried, staggering after us. “Kyle. Wait.”

But it was too late. We were gone.

As I charged out of the big glass doors into the fresh air, my heart broke for Kyle. The three of us grabbed our mountain bikes and rode home as fast as we could. Kyle yelled and cursed the whole way. Every agonizing holler hurt my chest. He didn’t deserve his. No one did. *Lying, cheating, bitch Vicki.* No one did this to Kyle.

We skidded to a halt outside his home.

“Stay here.” He dropped his bicycle on the grass, then rushed inside the house. A minute later, he returned with a bottle of Jack Daniels in hand. He stuffed it in his backpack and mounted his bicycle. “Let’s head to the creek.”

Oh yeah. This would be interesting.

Bring it.

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Chapter 20

We zoomed down the road on our bicycles, then followed the dirt track that led through the parklands. We dumped our mountain bikes underneath a tree and strode to the edge of the creek. Kyle needed us. If he wanted to get wasted, cry, bitch, and scream at the world, Hunter and I would be by his side for every second.

Kyle sank onto the grass, cracked open the JD, and took a swig. He grimaced and winced as he swallowed . . . then he screamed. “Arrrrgh! That fucking bitch.”

I sat beside him, our knees touching. Vicki was my friend, but Kyle meant the world to me. I hated seeing him like this. We’d warned him about her reputation before he’d asked her out. But he’d fallen for her. I hated seeing him heartbroken and hurt. It hit me right in the chest. In some strange way, I experienced what he was going through. Maybe it was because we’d grown so close over the years. I’d do anything to make him feel better. Getting shitfaced together was at the top of the list.

“I’ll never forgive her for this. You deserve so much better.” Had Vicki honestly thought she’d get away with banging somebody else behind Kyle’s back? No one hurt my guys. I grabbed the bottle and took a swig.

Whoa!

My eyes widened. My throat burned. My chest ignited.
I coughed and struggled to draw breath.

Damn! Whiskey was the shit! I loved it.

Hunter sat in front of us and stretched out his long legs. He snatched the bottle from me and downed a mouthful. Staring at the JD, he moaned and licked his lips. “Wow! Why have we never drunk this before? It’s fucking awesome.”

Kyle stole the bottle back and drank another shot. “We don’t leave until it’s all gone.”

I placed my hand on his knee and gave it a rub. “If you insist.” Kyle passed me the whiskey and I raised it toward my lips. “To drowning your sorrows. Together.” I knocked back some more JD. It slid down my throat easily and warmed me from the inside out.

By the time the sun had set, we’d made it through a third of the bottle and were full of giggles and spinning shit.

Chuckling, Kyle shook his head. “It was too good to be true, wasn’t it?”

I draped my arm around his back. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I hoped she’d changed. You two were good together.”

“Thanks.” He tossed a stone into the rocky creek. Water splashed then the small rock was smothered by the gentle rapids. “I should’ve known better than to think some girl would love me. They all know about my dad and never come over to my place in case he’s there. They can’t stand how much time I spend on music. They always question my friendship with you guys.”

“Fuck ’em.” Hunter’s tone hovered low. “I’m over the bullshit of school. Let them think what they want. They’re not friends if they can’t accept us for who we are.”

“Hunt’s right.” I rested my head against Kyle’s shoulder. “But I’m sure one day, you’ll find someone who will love you. But she’ll have to be pretty damn special because you’re the best, and you don’t deserve anything less than phenomenal.”

He rested his head against mine and rubbed my arm. “Thank you. She’ll have to be fucking incredible to come anywhere close to you.”

He’d really drunk too much. I giggled, nudging his side. “Awwww . . . that’s so sweet.”

“Look on the bright side, bud.” Hunter took a swig of JD and grinned. “You’re single again. It’s time to stop this girlfriend nonsense. We finish school soon. You don’t want to be tied down in a relationship. We’re gonna go to more college parties. Play bigger gigs. We’ll have groupies and fans. We’re about to enter the best time of our life. So let’s go crazy, have a truckload of fun, fuck a ton of girls, and play music. We don’t need anything else.”

Staring at the trickling creek, Kyle’s brow furrowed. He sucked in a deep breath then slouched. “But I loved her.”

“We know. I’m sorry.” Hunter’s shoulders slumped as he handed Kyle the bottle. “But there are plenty more fish in the sea.”

Kyle took another swig, then shuddered. “Ergh!” He pressed his fingertips against his eyes. “I can’t get the image

out of my head. Quill's dick was in her . . . pounding her against the lockers."

"Hmm." Hunter leaned back on his hands, crossed his ankles, and grinned. "I'll have to try that position next time I fuck someone. Sounds kinda hot."

"That's what you get out of this?" Kyle grimaced, puffing air through his nose. "A new sex position?"

"Yeah. Absolutely." Jerking his chin back, Hunter's eyes shimmered in the evening light. "Something positive has to come out of this mess."

I raised an eyebrow. Hunter had a knack for changing the subject when he didn't want to talk about the topic at hand. Broken hearts and break ups weren't his favorite items for discussion; sex and music were. He could take any comment or conversation and turn it dirty. The guy truly had talent.

A smile curled the corner of Kyle's mouth. "You're crazy."

"Yep." Hunter splayed his hand over his chest. "That's why you love me."

"That I do." Kyle downed another mouthful of whiskey, then handed me the bottle. "And you too, Gem." Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he let out a deep breath. "You two keep me sane. Can you please stop me from ever getting involved with a girl again?"

"We'll do our best." I doubted we'd keep him from falling in love. He loved being in love. But one day, he'd make some girl very happy. He'd be devoted and true, loyal and faithful. Whoever claimed his heart had better love him as

much as he'd love her. His love would own her soul forever. Just like our uncanny friendship, it would never be severed.

Whoa! My head spun. Too many crazy thoughts. Too much whiskey.

It was way past dark by the time we'd polished off three-quarters of the bottle. My skin tingled. My words slurred. I swayed from side to side. *Yep . . .* I was drunk. So were the guys. We'd laughed about school and our gigs, and tightened up our plans to move to New York.

Around nine o'clock, Kyle turned quiet. He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"Hey?" I swiped his hair back off his face. "You okay? Or just drunk?"

He shook his head and sniffled. "This sucks. There's this ache inside my chest. I fucking hate Vicki. I hope she rots in hell. Drinking was supposed to make me feel better, not worse."

"Well, fuck." Hunter let out a low belch. "Did we get wasted for nothing?"

"Nah, this has been awesome." I held up the bottle of JD and waved it at them. My vision blurred as I tried to focus on the label. *Epic fail.* "I found something I like to drink. JD has my name written on it." Beer, wine and flavored vodka drinks hadn't done it for me.

"Okay." Hunter's laugh rumbled low in his throat. "You got me. Totally worth it. JD rocks."

But Kyle didn't say anything. He swayed from side to side.

Or *shit* . . . was that me?

“Hey?” I slapped his leg. “You gonna pass out on us?”

“No.” He half grinned. “Maybe.”

“You can’t do that.” I staggered and stumbled to my feet, then held out my hand to help Kyle stand. “Come on. I have another cure for heartache. Let’s go.”

He stared up at me like I was an idiot. “What cure? We gonna kill the bitch?”

“No.” I had something way better . . . well . . . at least we wouldn’t end up in jail. Fire blazed through the whiskey burning in my belly. “We’re gonna play music. Write lyrics. Jam until the sun comes up.”

Want for his guitar and painful reality swirled in his eyes as he took my hand. “But we can’t go to my place.”

I hauled him to his feet. We overshot our balance and toppled sideways a few steps. Catching each other around the waist, we laughed and found our feet.

“Not yours. Mine.” I clutched onto his arms to keep myself upright. The world spun at a million miles an hour. But it stopped when I focused on Kyle. Instant calm washed over me. Everything was right when I was with him . . . and Hunter. “Mom won’t be there. You can use my guitars and keyboard. My neighbor is half-deaf. It’ll be fine.”

“Gem. It’s late. We have a gig tomorrow night.” Kyle’s voice may have been serious, but his eyes betrayed him. This was exactly what he wanted to do.

Hunter lurched to his feet and straightened. He staggered on the spot to stay upright. “It’s perfect. We’re drunk. You’re messed up. We need fucking music. I’m in.”

After wobbling and weaving our way home on our bicycles, disturbing the neighborhood with our we’re-so-wasted laughs, we made it to my place. While I threw a pizza into the oven, the boys texted their parents to let them know where they’d crash tonight . . . and to hide the fact we were totally smashed. Our music was the best cover for everything.

As we devoured pepperoni pizza on my bed, the guys played the guitars and I scribbled down lyrics. At every opportunity, I pried Kyle to describe what his heartache felt like. He played slow, heavy riffs and chords. Hunter matched his strums. As words formed in my mind, my heart shuddered and ached. I felt Kyle’s pain. I could hear it in his notes. I sensed Hunter’s understanding and empathy. Music made us raw emotionally. True vulnerability took trust. We had that.

My hand skimmed across the page, jotting down lyrics. Softly, I sang.

*Walking through the park at night,
Looking at the stars so bright.
Wondering where you are,
Are you loving someone new or not?
We had it good, where did we go wrong?
I’ve been loving you for oh so long.
Now I’m wishing we could make it right,
Start over and love you with all my might.*

*Maybe I was just a fool for you.
Loving you was so easy to do.
I never saw the troubled signs.
You leavin' me has left me so blind.*

*How do you heal a broken heart?
How do you find strength for a new start?
How can I face the moon and the sun,
When I thought you were the only one?*

Playing, laughing, and making music, we finished off the JD and stayed up until one a.m. We passed out, sprawled across my bed at weird angles, too tired and drunk to move elsewhere.

We woke the next morning around eleven a.m., nursing sore heads and hangovers from hell. *Shit*. We had to shake this off and get ready for our gig.

Dragging myself out of my room, I headed to the kitchen and put on toast. Kyle grabbed the Advil and water. Hunter just cradled his head at the table.

“Remind me never to drink the night before a show.” Hunter rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “I want to vomit.”

“See, Kyle?” I grabbed the Advil off the counter and popped out two tablets. “We’re suffering with you. That’s true love. True friendship. Don’t ever forget it.”

“Never. But a hangover is better than feeling like crap over Vicki. So I’d say the night was a success.”

“And we wrote a kickass song.” Taking a seat at the table, I bit into a slice of toast, hoping the dry bread would absorb the alcohol in my system. It was going to be a long day. Even longer night. I picked up my notebook off the chair beside me and re-read the lyrics I’d scribbled. With a gentle push, I slid the book across the table’s surface to Kyle. “That”—I pointed at the page—“is the best fucking song we’ve ever written.”

“What? No, it’s not,” he scoffed, buttering his toast.

“Yes, it is,” I said. “Because it’s fucking emotional. From the heart. It’s deep and full of pain.”

He puffed air through his nose. “Thanks. I don’t need the reminder.”

“I’m the most unemotional person on the planet.” Hunter spoke with his mouth half full. “But even I’ll admit it’s awesome. Girls will love that shit, thinking a guy is so broken-hearted over lost love.” He waved toward the lyrics. “That song is panty-dropping stuff.”

Skidding the notepad back toward me, Kyle furrowed his brow. “So you wanna write more songs about me being cheated on?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Just true feelings. Deep emotions. The good, the bad, or whatever it is that has fucked us up.”

“A lot has fucked us up.” Kyle huffed as he tore his slice of toast in two and popped one piece into his mouth.

“No shit.” I stabbed my finger against the notepad. Excitement rippled through my voice. “That’s why our songs

are epic. That's why we're gonna win that contest. Everyone else just writes party songs and dance tracks. We go next level. We affect people. Our music gets into your heart. That's what makes us unique."

Intrigue and fear clouded his eyes. "You're onto something, Gem. I just don't want to be the center of all our songs."

"You won't be." Well . . . that wasn't entirely true. Just about every song I wrote was about him and Hunter. "Trust me."

"I do. With my life. But after yesterday . . . and Vicki . . . I never want to set foot back in this town once we leave."

Me either.

We just needed to graduate.

Seven weeks and counting.

Chapter 21

On April third, we uploaded our first videos and tracks to the Discovered-on-YouTube contest. I held my breath, hit submit, and said a silent prayer. *Please let us make it through to the next round.*

Each week of the contest, we'd be set a theme. The first one was "love." We sent our original along with a cover of "Don't Want To Miss A Thing" by Aerosmith.

Like on most reality shows, the entrant with the lowest number of votes at the end of the tally period would be eliminated. Hunter set out on a mission to have everyone at school vote for us. He pinned notices on boards, handed out flyers, and posted on social media several times a day.

Two weeks later, we got the email from SureHaven.

Jumping to our feet, we shattered the cafeteria with our shrieks, hugs and hollers. "We made it through." I cried. "We're in the next round." My heart had never raced so fast.

"Woohoo!" Hunter shouted.

"Fuck yeah!" Kyle roared.

The next theme was "dance." We sent off our recordings of "Don't Stop the Music" by Rihanna and the song we'd written after our first college party in Princeton.

Fourteen days later, in the middle of math, we received notification that we'd made it into the third round.

“Argh, we did it.” I leaped from my chair and jumped up and down in the center of the room with the guys, disrupting the entire class. We didn’t care. Fuck math. We scored a few claps and some praise from our classmates. Even Mrs. Fiat congratulated us but was quick to tell us to take our seats.

Nothing could contain my excitement. Every time I read the SureHaven emails and reviewed the scores online, my heart hit the stratosphere. Unless we lost, I wasn’t sure it would ever come back down.

The third submission was “rock.” We nailed P!NK’s “So What.” And our original song got the most votes that week.

We were successful again. Totally insane.

But . . . we were fifth in the overall tally. Only the top three made it to the finale. With three submissions left, our numbers spurred us on. We were gaining more followers in a tough competition. The all-girl band from Miami had incredible harmony. The Rackers, four guys from Wisconsin, had the perfect pitch for rock. Wyatt from Denver had a sweet boy-like tone. The chick from San Diego could win on looks alone. She’d sell records whether she could sing or not. But damn, she was talented too. Then there was us.

Our fourth submission theme was “heartache.” This one made me nervous. I hoped we put enough emotion into our singing. We poured our hearts into “Apologize” by Timbaland featuring OneRepublic and had written a fresh track about how we’d feel if we ever lost our friendship. Kyle didn’t want to polish off the song we’d penned about Vicki

cheating. He didn't want to give Vicki the satisfaction of having a song written about her. If we won, we might have to sing it over and over again, forever, and he didn't want that.

On the night before prom, we hit submit. We wouldn't know if we'd made it into the next round for another two weeks.

To keep my mind off the competition, I focused on the dance. It was time to frock up.

On Saturday night, I slipped into my long emerald satin dress with rhinestone-crusted straps. I put on my makeup, adding extra dark shadow for a smoky-eye effect, and deep red lipstick to my lips. I loved the total rock star vibe I'd created. Strappy silver stilettos completed my outfit and added four inches to my height.

Just after six o'clock, the guys knocked on my door to take me to the dance. When I opened the door, my heart skipped two beats. *Wow!* Hot didn't do them justice. I'd never seen them dressed in suits before. Hunter rocked a black and silver brocade number while Kyle, in a traditional black tuxedo, shirt and tie, looked like a runway model. I took a deep breath, and warmth flooded my chest. They smelled so good, all citrusy and spicy.

"Damn." I waved them inside. "You guys scrub up nicely."

"Speak for yourself." Hunter's gaze raked over my dress. "That is fucking gorgeous."

"But you're beautiful no matter what you wear, Gem." Kyle's eyes glinted as he stepped forward and handed me a

box. “Here. I got this for you.”

I opened the box to reveal a stunning cream corsage. “Oh. You didn’t have to. But thanks. That’s really cool.” It amazed me that Kyle always did those little extra things without thinking. He truly was special.

Claire, our designated chauffeur, came in with her camera and took several photos of us, some serious, some candid, and some of us goofing around before she drove us to the dance.

Linking arms, we strode into the ballroom at the Hyatt Regency in Princeton. I nudged Hunter in the hip, then Kyle. “Every girl is gonna be jealous of me. You guys are fucking hot.”

“We know.” Hunter grinned as he wriggled and straightened his tie. “But you can admire my awesomeness while we dance.”

“I am immune to your charm, Mr. Collins.”

But I did check out his ass as he led me and Kyle through the crowd. A girl could look, right?

Jostling past the students lining up for photographs, we made our way to the dance floor. In the middle of the bobbing and jumping mass of bodies, we danced with our school friends. Even Vicki.

Unfortunately, Kyle hadn’t been able to avoid her, even though he’d tried. Within a week of their breakup, the drama had died. Now, several weeks on, they were talking again . . . well . . . being civil to each other.

I'd never forgive Vicki for hurting Kyle. But she was one of my only girlfriends. I was sure we'd catch up at some party in the future, have a few drinks, and be friends again. Maybe . . . one day. But today was not that day. Until then, she could stay away from Kyle.

As I twirled and danced around with the guys, the band churned out chart-topping hits. Kyle and I winced when the lead singer missed hitting the high notes. Hunter cringed when the keyboard player failed to keep up with the beat. Worst thing was the band weren't crowd entertainers. They didn't look much older than us, but they just stood on stage and sang. That was why the guys and I would make it in the music industry. We knew how to put on a show, play to the audience, and fire everyone up.

But this wasn't our gig. Tonight was about having fun and enjoying our final school dance.

Underneath the balloons and streamers, we worked up a sweat. We were jiving and singing along to "Hotel California" by The Eagles at the top of our lungs when an ear-piercing shriek from the mic sliced through the air. Everybody's hands shot up to cover their ears. They stopped dancing and turned to the stage.

Some jock had charged on stage and stolen the mic.

Oh . . . it was Matias Protopski.

Matias held out his arm, keeping the lead singer at bay, and hollered into the mic, "Evening. Montgomery High."

On the side of the stage, Principal Gallagher and Mr. Benson charged up the stairs toward him.

But Matias spun toward them and held up his finger. “Hold up there, Principal G.” The principal halted in her tracks. Matias had become the school’s star football player. Every teacher treated him like a golden child. Even the principal made exceptions for Matias. Just like she was doing now.

Matias mouthed *thank you*, then turned to the sea of students and thumbed toward the band. “These guys are good, but why the fuck don’t we have our very own rock stars play tonight?”

My pulse jumped. I gaped, clutching onto Kyle and Hunter’s arms. Had I heard Matias correctly? The guys’ mouths had fallen open as much as mine.

Matias stabbed his finger at the crowd. “Everyone here loves their music, right? If you don’t, I’ll track you down and beat the shit out of you. You need to do yourself a favor and watch these guys on YouTube. They’re in this contest, ‘Discovered-on-YouTube.’ You need to watch it, follow them, and vote for these fuckers. Seriously? Who here doesn’t love Kyle, Gemma, and Hunter? Who wants to hear Everhide sing?”

The whole room erupted in claps and whistles and cheers.

My knees buckled. Tears prickled my eyes. I spun around in a circle like I was in a dream. *Was I dreaming?*

“You three.” Matias pointed at us. “Get your asses up here now.”

“Holy shit.” Stunned, Kyle murmured, “This is insane.”

“Fuck yeah.” Hunter, who never missed a chance to be on show, grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the steps. “Come on.”

“No. Wait.” I pulled back, drawing to a halt. “We don’t have our gear.”

“We’ll borrow the band’s stuff.” Hunter flicked his chin toward the stage. “It’ll be fine. We can do this.”

“But . . .” I glanced around.

Every set of eyes was upon us, clapping and chanting for us to sing. “Everhide. Everhide. Everhide.”

My heart thundered like a boom box. This was crazy. No one at school ever gave two hoots about us. Now this? Overwhelmed, I couldn’t take another step.

Kyle grabbed my shoulders and stared into my eyes. A strange calmness washed over me. He was like my Valium, always calming my mind. But I couldn’t have missed the fire in his eyes even if I’d tried. “Gem? Think of the contest. Every crowd is an opportunity to gain more followers, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So let’s get these guys on board.”

“Come on, Gem.” Hunter winked. “This will be fun.”

Hunter dashed up the steps and was halfway across the stage before Kyle managed to drag me forward.

Mortification had drained the color from the lead singer’s face. “What the fuck?”

Matias grabbed him on the shoulder. “Whatever the school paid you to be here, I will triple it. But these guys play now. Okay? So don’t fuck with me. Now . . . hand over the guitar and no one gets hurt.”

“Fuck off, dickhead.” The singer swatted Matias’s hand aside.

In the crowd, twenty footballers stepped toward the stage.

The drummer stowed his sticks and shot to his feet. The bassist handed Kyle his guitar. Hunter took to the keyboard. I held out my hand for the lead singer to give me his Gibson. *Awesome taste.*

He gnashed his teeth. “You fuck my guitar, you pay.” He hooked the strap over his head and handed it over.

“As if I’d ruin a guitar.” I grabbed the neck. “Are you mad? It’s like your baby, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then I promise I’ll look after it,” I said with a wicked grin and kicked off my high heels. We were gonna rock the shit out of this place.

The hired band mumbled and cursed under their breaths as they left the stage.

I slid the guitar strap over my head and wriggled it into position. In my bare feet and long dress, I giggled. This wasn’t my normal stage attire. Hunter and Kyle had ripped off their jackets and ties and popped open a few top buttons. We were ready to play.

Matias adjusted the mic for me.

I dipped my chin. “Thank you.” Some things never ceased to amaze me. Matias becoming one of our biggest supporters was one of them.

“I owe you guys a lot.” Matias placed his hand over his heart. “Your music saved me on more than one occasion. It got me through some rough, dark times.”

Well . . . holy shit! What did I say to that? We had touched people’s lives. That was one of the reasons we loved performing so much. Everyone was dealing with shit on a daily basis. We were lucky to be able to express ourselves through our songs. People obviously connected with them. “That’s . . . cool.”

“I’m still gutted you wouldn’t come to prom with me. It was a stupid notion to think you’d detach yourself from Kyle and Hunter for a night. I just want you to know I think you’re awesome, Gemma.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He may have redeemed himself a fraction by getting us to play, but not totally. He was still a bully to others and thought he was a football god. But were we any different about our music, thinking we were great? Probably not. At least we didn’t pick on people.

His heartfelt warm smile morphed into a mischievous one. “Now . . . are you gonna rock the fuck out of this joint?”

“That . . . we can do.” I struck the strings and retuned the flat B. *Much better.*

I turned to our captive audience. I sucked in a deep breath and transformed into performance mode. Flicking my

hair over my shoulder, I stepped up to the mic. “Good evening, Montgomery High.”

“Woohoo!” They cheered and clapped.

This was beyond surreal. Most of the people in this room had ignored us, bullied us, or had not given us the time of day during the past four years. But now, here they were. Cheering us on. *Go figure.*

“So now you’ve had a warmup.” I hovered closer to the mic, then turned up the volume in my voice. “Who’s ready to fucking party?”

Mr. Benson scowled at me from the side of the stage then broke into a beaming grin. As we struck the opening chords of “Teenage Dirtbag” by Wheatus, he grabbed Principal G. by the hand and dragged her onto the dance floor along with a bunch of other teachers.

After our first song, we churned out Jason Derulo’s “In My Head” followed by the tracks we’d submitted to the YouTube contest, then we transitioned seamlessly into a song we wrote last summer, one of my favorite slow tracks. We’d joked that it was about the high of discovering sex and Kyle falling in love. But in my heart, the lyrics reflected how I felt about Kyle and Hunter. They were my world. My life. My reason for living. We were on this path together. I hoped it never ended or led us in different directions.

We dialed down the tempo. Softened our voices. I took the first verse.

I found a love,

*That fate must have written in the stars.
Because you,
Make my heart race oh so fast.
Like a blinding light,
All I see is you.
Like the rising sun,
I burn for you.*

Hunter and Kyle joined in. We sang in perfect harmony.

*You set my soul on fire,
Fill me with desire.
Your kisses send me higher,
My heart feels lighter,
When I'm with you.
There's nothing else I wanna do,
Than be with you,
Every day.
For the rest of my life.
For the rest of my life.*

At the end of our slow song, we picked up the pace. We churned out another hit to get the crowd dancing before ending our impromptu set with our most popular track from the YouTube contest called “Rock All Night.”

I ripped out an incredible riff, then slammed my hand over the strings to kill the reverberations. Panting, I thrust my

hand into the air and hollered, “All right, Montgomery High. Rock on and good night.”

The whole room erupted and cheered.

The high coursed through my veins as Kyle and I placed the guitars on their stands and rushed to join Hunter in the middle of the stage. After we bowed, we hugged each other so tight. This . . . right here . . . with these guys . . . was my magic. My forever.

At the end of the night, we helped the band pack their gear into their van.

“You guys are really good.” Paul, the lead singer, offered us three joints. “You nailed it. Enjoy these on us.”

Hunter grabbed them and tucked them into his jacket pocket. “Thanks for being cool about us taking over.”

Carl, their bassist, chuckled and slapped Kyle on the shoulder. “When we make it big, you can be our support band any day.”

“I think it will be the other way around.” I handed the Gibson packed in its case to Lenny, the drummer, to load into the van.

“We’ll see.” Mal, their keyboard player winked. “Good luck with the contest. See you around.”

As the band drove away and the students headed off in cars and limos to after-parties, Hunter, Kyle and I made our way across the road to the park and took a seat on a bench. After the crazy night, we needed a moment to savor the high before hitting a party . . . and we had drugs.

“I’ve never had marijuana before.” Excitement skipped in my tone as I rubbed my arms in the cool evening air. Kyle quickly pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. I slipped my arms into the sleeves. It was warm and smelled of him—a touch spicy and always manly. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed the side of my head and shuffled in closer, keeping me warm.

Hunter, sitting on the grass in front of us, eyed one of the joints. “I’ve never tried it either. But . . . every new experience that is not sexual . . . has to be with you two.”

“Here’s to that,” I said.

He lit the weed, took a drag, then coughed and stuck his tongue out. “*Erg*h. It tastes like shit. This better not fuck with my voice.”

“One joint won’t kill you.” Kyle chuckled as he took the toke. He put the smoke to his lips, inhaled deeply, then blew out slowly. “Fuck . . . that shit is good.”

Kyle handed me the joint. Holding it lightly between my fingertips, I placed it between my lips and dragged in a breath of the drug. The end of the paper sizzled red. Sweet smoke filled my lungs. As I held my breath, my head spun. I swayed. Then exhaled . . . and coughed. “Not bad.”

Hunter took another hit and glanced out over the rose garden. “God, I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Me either.” Kyle waved his hand at Hunter for another turn at the cigarette. He sucked on the weed, then blew the smoke up into the air. “I’ve been seriously looking at

apartments. We can't afford much more than a two-bedroom hovel."

"Where will we store our equipment?" Hunter pinched his brows together.

Crap. We had a heap of gear now—lights, amps, speakers, mixing boards, and our guitars.

"I don't know." Kyle shrugged "In the van? In our living room? Until we can afford something bigger and better, we're gonna have to compromise."

"That's okay. We'll make it work," I said, taking the joint from Kyle and having another drag. This one hit me harder. My skin tingled. My brain turned fuzzy, and a wave of seriousness washed over me. "As for sleeping arrangements, we'll buy a sofa bed and rotate bedrooms once a month so we have equal turns at some privacy. Unless you guys want to share a room?"

They shook their heads.

I handed the marijuana to Hunter. "So if you hook up with someone, you'll just have to fuck them wherever your turn to sleep is."

Hunter raised an eyebrow at me. "You down with that?"

I smirked. "I've had to put up with you banging girls already. What's the difference if it's in my own living room?"

Kyle wrapped his arms around me and kissed the side of my head. "You are truly one of a kind, Gemma Lonsdale."

“And don’t you forget it.” I nudged his thigh. “We’re doing this. You guys are my world. We’re equal. We’ll never do anything without the other two agreeing or being involved. No one will ever earn more money than the others. Like now, everything we earn is split in equal thirds. We’ll never do solo gigs or interviews or even shit without each other’s approval.”

“Absolutely.” Kyle nodded. “We’re a team. Always.”

“To living the dream.” Hunter took another puff. “Oh . . . shit. We should get tattoos. Our initials or something. United in ink forever.”

“Yes!” My voice pitched high. “I love it.”

“That’d be cool.” Kyle nodded. “Let’s get them the day we graduate. The day we get the fuck out of here.”

“Yeah.” As I rested my head against Kyle’s shoulder, the breeze picked up. The hum of cars driving down the road a few hundred yards away sounded amplified in my ears. Every inch of my skin tingled, and a hazy calm swam through my head. I closed my eyes. Lyrics and music filled my mind.

Damn . . . we needed to smoke pot when we wrote music.

I straightened and took a deep breath. Hunter’s azure eyes shimmered in the dim light as he looked at me. I stole a glance at Kyle. His gaze was locked onto mine. Warmth meandered through my veins in slow coiling waves. I didn’t know if it was the pot or coming down from the high after performing or just our deepening friendship, but all felt right in the world. How did I get so lucky to find such incredible guys?

But they were being much too serious for my liking.

I burst out giggling. They joined in.

“Fuck.” Hunter grinned and hollered into the night.
“Look out, New York. We’re coming.”

Four weeks to go.

Unable to contain my smile, I drew Kyle’s coat tighter around me. “What would you guys do if we won the SureHaven contest?”

Kyle leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He turned his head toward me. “I’d love you forever.”

A new fire burned in his eyes, one that did strange things to my heartbeat. One that caused a tug to pull deep inside my heart. Maybe Kyle’s outlook and hope to find love one day had worn off on me. Maybe one day, love would be nice. But the inevitable failure of relationships and being fucked up by them killed my fleeting thoughts. *Yep. I am stoned.*

I slapped his arm. “You’ll do that anyway. That’s a given. But I mean . . . if we made it big . . . what would you do?”

“Me?” Hunter leaned back on the grass and stared at the stars. “I wanna tour. I wanna perform in front of thousands, in arenas and stadiums across the globe. When we have money rolling in, I want to ensure Jenny gets the right schooling, treatment, and help she needs. I wanna give Mom the break she deserves. Then, I’ll buy a fucking penthouse, fuck girls and live life to the fullest for the rest of my days.”

Hunter may have been cocky and arrogant on the outside, but inside, his heart was golden. He always looked out for his family. I loved that about him.

These guys were the closest thing I'd ever had to a family.

Our connection was thicker than blood.

"Me?" Kyle rubbed his hands up and down his thighs. "I wanna write songs. Compose them. Produce them. Record and release albums. I wanna see our fucking name lit up on billboards in Times Square."

Yeah. That would be wicked.

I glanced across the park, softly illuminated by pathway lamps. "If we made it big, I'd just be happy singing our songs, playing beside you two for the rest of my life."

"Yeah." Kyle nodded. "Nothing else matters as long as we always do that."

Marijuana fuzzed my brain. "We'll stay the bestest of friends, forever. Nothing more. Nothing less. No fucking up what we have. Okay?"

Hunter chuckled as he narrowed his hooded eyes. "You're really stoned, aren't you, Gem?"

I giggled, staring at the tiny joint in his fingertips. "Definitely feeling good."

"Me too." Kyle swiveled toward me and lowered his voice. "The problem is Gem . . . I already love you. In some unexplainable, cosmic universe, profound way . . . I love you."

My throat ran dry. My head spun. I swallowed hard. Then I burst out laughing. “Maybe you shouldn’t smoke pot. You’re intense enough without being stoned.”

Nodding, he stared off into the distance. “Yeah. That’s it.”

“Problem is, Gem?” Hunter blew smoke into the air. “I love you, too. Always will.”

“And I love both of you. As friends. With all my heart. There is no room for anyone else.” I clutched their hands. “We are fucking Everhide, and nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, will ever break us apart.”

One week before graduation, we clocked over five million followers on YouTube. Our Facebook page had more than one million likes. Twitter was insane. Every day we hit social media to encourage as many people as possible to vote for us in the SureHaven contest.

We were last in the poll. Without more votes, we wouldn’t make it to the sixth and final round.

Damn it.

With only four days left for voting, I slumped in the chair in Kyle’s mom’s office. “We tried, guys. We did good but weren’t good enough.”

“It’s okay.” Kyle stood behind me and combed his fingers through my hair, then rubbed the knots in the base of my neck. “There’ll be other competitions. We can try for *American’s Got Talent* again.”

Waiting all day in long queues only to be cut in the first round of auditions hadn't been fun. "I don't think reality TV is for us."

"Nah. We'll make it on our own." Hunter stood in front of the desk, juggling pieces of scrunched paper. He never sat still. "We move in a week. Life is about to change. We'll be fine on our own."

My cell phone pinged. No message showed up on the screen, so I swiped it open to read. The notification counter on my YouTube icon showed "10k+".

My heart stilled. "What the fuck?"

I clicked YouTube open. The top notification on our contest video read:

River Baxter liked your video.

My hand shot over my mouth then fell to my chest. The phone shook in my hand.

River Baxter, one of America's top selling rock artists, liked our video.

"Gem? What is it?" Kyle leaned closer. I showed him the screen. "Holy shit. No way."

River had not only liked our video, he'd shared it *and* voted for us. *Holy. Freaking crap!* For our fifth submission's theme of "sexy," we'd covered "SexyBack" by Justin Timberlake—the song that had brought Hunter and Kyle into my life. Hunter's moves, Kyle's hypnotic voice, and our wickedly seductive performance had changed the game. But it

wasn't only that song River had liked, but also our original, "Touch."

"Hunt? River Baxter liked us." My hand trembled as I handed him my cell phone.

"Oh. My. God. Look at our numbers. Our votes. Our followers." The blood drained from his face, but the hugest grin slid across his mouth. "This . . . this . . . this means . . ."

Yep.

Two days before graduation, we made it into the sixth and final round.

Two days after finishing school, we moved to New York.

Two weeks later, I got a phone call that changed our fucking lives.

We won!

We. Fucking. Won!

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Epilogue – The Next Six Years

We. Fucking. Won!

When SureHaven Records announced us as the winners, my heart exploded. Other than the night we'd gotten hurt by Kyle's dad, I'd never seen Hunter cry. But he did this time, and they were tears of happiness, not agony. As we jumped around, danced and screamed in the middle of our tiny West Village apartment, the tears cascaded down his face as much as they did on mine and Kyle's. We'd done it. We'd fucking won.

Within twenty-four hours, we were thrown into a recording studio to lay down the tracks we'd sung during the contest and propelled into a world of publicity. For three weeks, we sang the hits we'd performed online at shopping malls, on TV shows, and in clubs across New Jersey and New York, and as far north as Massachusetts.

It was insane.

By the time we got back to New York, we were exhausted. It had taken us four years of singing our hearts out and not giving up on our dreams to become an overnight success. Well . . . not yet.

Far from it.

We kept each other grounded by writing lyrics and playing our music at home when we got the chance. We met Lexi, the coolest, quirkiest girl I'd ever known at the café

across from our apartment, and her awesome drummer roommate, Hayden. They lived in our building on the same level as us. We became instant friends.

But there was no time to rest. By the end of July, SureHaven Records had us on a plane bound for Los Angeles to record our first album, written largely by the SureHaven team.

I'd never been on a plane before. Tears prickled my eyes as we soared above the clouds. I'd never forget the moment we thundered down the runway, that feeling of lifting off the ground, that sensation of flying through the air. Our lives had changed forever. With Kyle by my side, we penned "Horizon." The lyrics hit me right in the heart and were ones I'd always cherish.

*Don't care if we fly,
Don't care if we run,
Don't care how we're gonna get there,
Just gonna follow the sun.*

*So, take my hand,
We'll soar above the clouds,
Follow our dreams,
Never gonna touch the ground.*

Yee-yeah-ya. Yee-yeah-ya, Yee-yeah, yeah.

We'll aim for the horizon,

*Don't know when we'll be home again,
So baby, come on, come with me,
Don't know where this road will end.*

*Let's aim for the horizon,
Let's touch the stars,
Sail across the oceans,
Follow our beating hearts.*

*With you by my side,
We're gonna touch the sky,
Gonna love you forever,
'Til the day I die.
'Til the day I die.*

The manic excitement and euphoric energy that consumed us when we hit the studio made my head spin. But every time I entered the recording booth, the niggle in the pit of my gut twisted tighter. It irked me, not singing our own songs. But for our first release, it was the price we were prepared to pay. We'd negotiated three original tracks onto the album; I had to be happy with that. Especially when SureHaven loved "Horizon" and agreed to release it as our second single.

We were assigned a manager, Amie, and a publicist, Kate. We hired a personal assistant, Bec. Life had become surreal. But no matter how crazy things got, at the end of each day, I sat in our hotel room or in our apartment or wherever

our new crazy life had taken us, with Hunter and Kyle, and counted my blessings.

And we played *our* music.

We were living *our* dream.

“Heartbeat,” our debut song, hit the airwaves in September. I don’t think anyone, not even SureHaven, was prepared for the phenomena we’d created. Our single went straight to number one.

I had to keep pinching myself to make sure I was awake.

For our first album, we took to the road for a mini tour across the US. We walked red carpets and attended awards shows and played in front of huge crowds. After every performance came the wicked parties. A lifestyle beyond my wildest imagination was thrust in our faces—money, designer clothes, fancy hotels, exclusive invitations. The three of us were swept up in and seduced by the craze. The hype. The adoration. How could we not? We wanted to savor and experience everything on offer.

The highs kept on coming.

We won a Grammy.

Fuck yeah! A fucking Grammy!

After the success of the first album, SureHaven wanted to sign us for four more albums. *Four!* They wanted us to tour the globe, go next level. It was too good to be true. We’d never achieve such success this quickly on our own. We were dazzled by everything they offered. But even with Richard,

our lawyer, digging at every angle, we couldn't get more than three of our original songs on each album.

It sucked. But we couldn't refuse the deal.

We signed on the dotted line.

Four albums. Six years. That time would fly. We could do it.

SureHaven spared no expense, propelling us into glamorous makeovers, media training, designer gear, photoshoots, and public appearances. They threw every resource at us to perfect our singing and performance skills.

We thrived on it.

With our second album cut, singles released, and promo done, we hit rehearsals for our first world tour. During fittings for outfits at every high-end designer boutique across New York, we met Kara at Conrad's Fashion House. I'd found a true kindred spirit. Another incredible friend. We connected over our love of fashion and ambition, and our quick-witted banter with the guys. But boy, she didn't like Hunter. I loved that she never fell for his good looks and charm. She was clearly smitten with her boyfriend, Conrad.

We hit our first world tour early in the new year. But as fatigue took its toll, we fell into a haze of sex, drugs, and alcohol. SureHaven fed our addiction, giving us whatever we wanted as long as we performed each night and kept making them millions.

In this new world, the three of us had grown closer, stronger, more reliant on each other than ever before. We were afraid the bubble would burst, and we'd end up back in

Montgomery. We treasured every moment and never took anything for granted.

But not all went well.

On the last night of tour in London, tragedy struck. We were high on cocaine, dancing around with groupies and fans at our hotel, when Hunter tripped, fell backward, and crashed through a glass window onto the balcony.

I'd never seen so much blood in my life. His arm took the brunt of the fall. The glass sliced his flesh into strips that dangled loose between his wrist and elbow. It was totally gross and horrific. Instantly sober, the three of us swore never to touch drugs again.

We never did.

It took three months for Hunter's arm to heal and six months of physical therapy, but that didn't stop SureHaven pushing us forward.

Our third album was released seven months after we finished tour. Then something stupid happened.

Something unexpected.

I succumbed to love.

During our second world tour, Ben Newman, the drummer in our backup band, stole my heart. I tried to resist, but I was smitten from the moment he walked into the audition. People outside the music industry never understood the demands and devotion it required to play, practice, and perfect our craft. But Ben did. He was part of it. He fit into our world, my world, perfectly. He got along well with the guys

even after Kyle's initial cock-blocking in the name of concern. Win-win for everyone.

But Ben loved the limelight, sometimes too much, which pissed off Hunter. Ben interrupted interviews on the red carpet, craved the attention of the cameras, and tried to steal our thunder. Every time I told him to chill, he ignored me. But when SureHaven gave him a grilling—“*Gemma's the star, not you. Smile, nod, and keep your mouth shut,*”—he pulled into line.

He was lucky they didn't sack him.

But I should've known better than to fall in love.

At the end of tour, Ben and I took a quick getaway to a private resort. After a trying year, I needed to relax and recuperate. But my world shattered. Photos of me naked, fucking Ben in our private villa pool, went viral on the Internet. There was only one person outside the guys and our trusted PA, Bec, who knew where we were . . . Ben. After I broke down in tears, he admitted he'd tipped off the paparazzi. I'd never been so hurt, humiliated, and betrayed in my life. I'd never forgive him. My personal life was private. No one should have broken my trust or my heart. And he'd done both. I kicked him out of the resort's villa right then and there.

I now knew how Kyle had felt when he'd broken up with girlfriends in the past. Heartbreak sucked. I hated love with a new passion. In a mess, I called the guys. I didn't want them to, but they insisted on cutting their vacations short and met me at home. We drank. I cried. I held onto them like I never wanted to let them go. *Fuck!* Why couldn't all men be as awesome as those two guys?

I'd never fall for someone ever again. *Fuck love.*

That summer after tour, we found balance. We hung out with our friends, went to events, and prepared for our next album. We'd adjusted to our new lifestyle and fame.

While I loved living with the guys, I missed my own space. After growing up basically on my own, I needed somewhere to call home—and it was time to buy our own condos. I couldn't believe I had earned enough money to afford a place in Manhattan. In fact, I'd earned more money than I'd ever know what to do with.

After real estate agents showed me condo after condo, I found the perfect one in Tribeca. A brand-new, three-bedroom, two-story apartment overlooking Tribeca Park. It was home from the moment I walked in the front door. And if the universe didn't conspire enough to bring Hunter and Kyle into my life all those years ago, it truly played another hand when the guys found a fabulous five-bedroom penthouse to buy together in the building down the laneway, five hundred yards from my place. We were meant to be together forever. No question about it.

Christmas time was chaos. We had a ton of events to attend and perform at. We were about to go on stage for a charity concert at Madison Square Garden when Bec walked into the dressing room with a police officer. My heart stilled at the sight of her teary eyes and trembling chin. But the blow the officer delivered was one I'd never forget. Kyle's parents had been killed in a car accident. They had been on their way to see our show.

Kyle buckled, fell to the ground, and sobbed. Hunter and I collapsed beside him.

No. No. No. Not Claire. Why? She was an angel. My heart had never hurt so much.

Claire had been a mom to all of us. After we'd finished school, Claire and William had moved to the beach house at Amagansett. Leaving the stressful police force behind, William had worked for a home security company, monitoring rich Hamptons homes, and Claire had found a love of painting and sang twice a week at the Amagansett Tavern. William had remained sober since rehab and had never raised a hand to Kyle or his mom again after that afternoon with Laura. They'd finally seemed to be over their past nightmares only to have their lives stolen away.

Was being in the music business a curse? We'd been through drugs, injuries, scandals . . . and now death. How many more blows could we take?

Too devastated to perform and unable to comprehend our loss, we canceled a month of events and shows. Losing his folks hit Kyle hard. He spiraled downwards, drinking and partying hard, and slipping into awful bouts of depression. Some days he couldn't get out of bed. It took weeks for Hunter and me to help him find the strength to move on. But after four weeks off, SureHaven pushed us back on stage, out to attend events and into the studio to record another album.

Each time we recorded, the three of us grew more agitated and annoyed at not having more of our own music on the album, but then again, we never took our situation for granted. We were extremely lucky to be in this position. Who

knew that three hopeless kids from Montgomery could have reached such great heights? SureHaven had made us stars, but we hated not showing off our own songwriting talent. We never stopped writing lyrics. We never stopped composing music. It was who we were.

Two more albums, then things would change.

We'd have control.

In February, we hit the studio at full throttle to finalize our fourth album. We'd had more control in selecting the songs for this release—they just weren't our own. During award season we won a ton more accolades. New Grammys, AMAs, BRITs, and other mind-blowing statues lined our shelves. We were now one of the top-selling rock bands on the planet.

But it was far from all roses. The more popular we grew, the less privacy we had. We could rarely leave our homes without security. Sam, Mick, and Chester, our security guards, became our shadows. The paparazzi tracked our every move. The gossip bordered on ludicrous. I'd grown paranoid after "*the Ben*" incident. I didn't hook up with anyone for months after he betrayed me. Then, when I did, I enforced a strict no-phone rule, no-dating rule, and no-more-than-one-night rule. *God*. I'd turned into Hunter. It wasn't just that I never wanted my heart broken again; I didn't trust anyone. My circle of friends grew smaller and smaller.

People inundated us at every opportunity, asking us to endorse products, appear at events, support politicians, and state our views on current trending topics.

We ignored the majority of the requests.

We chose who we'd work with and when. We loved our sponsors—Fender, Pearl, Marshall, and designers like Conrad's Fashion House, and Dolce and Gabbana. But away from the public eye, we devoted our time and care to supporting The McIntyre Leukemia Foundation that Kyle had set up in honor of his sister, and the Collins Foundation, Hunter's group housing project and support network for young adults with autism and their families. They were the causes closest to our hearts.

With our fourth album cut and singles released, we hit promo, traveling to several countries across the globe and announcing our third world tour that would start in the fall.

The three of us were in a good place. We were happy. Content. We loved playing, meeting fans, and touring. We treasured everything we'd achieved. We protected and cherished the friendships we'd developed with Lexi, Hayden, Kara, and Conrad.

But we never forgot our roots. We were still just kids from Montgomery.

The hype around our third tour broke records around the world. It was the fastest series of concerts to sell out in seconds.

Walking onto the massive stage setup in our rehearsal space in an airplane hangar in Newark made my heart soar. Spinning around and picturing what we were about to do brought tears to my eyes. The LED projection screens were huge. Our choreography was phenomenal. The lighting and sound would be spectacular.

“You ready to do it all again?” Hunter’s eyes lit with awe as he scanned the stage.

“Absolutely.” Kyle hooked his arm around my shoulders. “There is nothing else I’d rather be doing.”

“Got that right.” I cuddled into Kyle’s side. “This tour is going to kick ass.”

Kyle, Hunter, and I had become true performers and crowd entertainers. We only played our instruments for a few songs during our shows; the rest of the time we sang, strutting around the stage and runways, loving every second of interaction with the audience.

Long days at rehearsals morphed into kicking off the tour in Australia.

Over the next nine months we’d visit twenty-four countries, fifty-three cities, and perform eighty-seven shows.

On the road, every day was set on repeat. There was a mix of interviews, meeting and greeting the fans, soundchecks, performances, travel, and hanging out for a couple of hours after our shows backstage or at hotel bars. Sex was on tap. We ate like kings and rarely drank alcohol on tour to protect our voices. Navigating the crowds waiting outside our hotels and finding ways to get in and out of places unnoticed had become a skill we’d now refined.

But nothing filled my heart as much as music. Every show, I was on fire. The moment I came off stage, I couldn’t wait to get back out there. As we traveled from country to country, mile after mile, once the crowds left and the after-parties died, the guys and I sat up till all hours of the morning

in our hotel rooms, writing music, laughing, and just living in our own little bubble.

On rare days off in our hectic schedule, we had crazy fun. We went skiing, hung out at the beach, and went sightseeing. We loved any adrenaline-fueled activity like ziplining and jet skiing; they gave us a rush. SureHaven freaked when they found out. Something about insurance if we got injured. But we ignored them.

We needed our hit of fun.

We were living the best life . . . until . . . something changed.

In Paris, I couldn't sleep. I was restless. Lyrics spiraled through my head, but . . . there was something else. Some new ache had grown in my chest. In the hotel's penthouse suite that I shared with the guys, I snuck out of my bedroom. I grabbed my guitar and headed onto the balcony that had a gorgeous view of the Eiffel Tower.

I sat on one of the padded bench seats and played softly. As I stared at the gorgeous city full of lights, my heart shuddered. It hit me. I had the most incredible life. Not many people ever achieved their dreams, but I managed to live mine every day. I had two incredible guys by my side who had been on this journey with me. I had an awesome team. I was surrounded by people and fans who adored me . . . but I was lonely.

I was tired of meaningless hookups. Tired of not having someone to hold at night. I missed how content I'd been with Ben. *Shit!* Did I want a boyfriend? Who the fuck

would put up with this life? Who'd put up with me? Who would fit into my world that I could trust?

Tears prickled my eyes. One escaped, sliding down my cheek.

No one. That was the fucking problem. *No one.*

“Hey!”

I jumped at Kyle's voice. I quickly dried my cheek on the sleeve of my T-shirt.

“Shit, babe. What's wrong?” He rushed to my side and drew me into a hug.

I closed my eyes, refusing to let more tears fall. But the salty droplets pushed at the back of my eyelids, wanting to escape. I sucked in a deep breath, refusing to give in.

I sniffled but spoke with a calm, nothing-is-wrong voice. “I'm fine. Just couldn't sleep.”

“But you're crying.”

“No. I'm not.”

“Gem, don't lie.” He smoothed his hand over my hair and kissed the top of my head. “I know you. What's going on?”

His warmth enveloped me as I cuddled into his chest, breathing in the scent of his freshly laundered pajama T-shirt. “Do you ever have that feeling that even though you have so much to be grateful for, you have so many good and wonderful things in your life, and every day you count your lucky stars, but you're still missing something? Do you feel guilty or ashamed for wanting something more?”

His heart thudded and raced beneath my ear. He inhaled deeply, held his breath, then let it out slowly. His arms tightened around me. This was what I missed . . . being held close and loved by someone.

But I wanted a lover, not just a friend.

Shit. Fuck. Shit. I did not need this bullshit in my life. We were only halfway through tour. I had to get my head back in the game.

“Gem, I have everything I want. Right here. With you.” He hooked his fingertip underneath my chin and raised it up. His gaze locked onto mine. “Like you, I always want more. Would love more. But I’m afraid to ruin what we have. I don’t want to fuck up our lives.”

“Me either.” I drew my brows together. *Wait.* I wasn’t sure we were on the same page. “Are you talking about music?”

“Um . . .” He smiled but it didn’t touch his eyes. “Like you, I can’t wait until we record all our own music. I love SureHaven’s songs and touring, but I want it to be the songs we write. Let our tracks rule the airwaves, not theirs.”

“Yeah. Two years we’ll be able to do that.”

I rested my head against his shoulder and curled my arms around his elbow. We sat in perfect silence, savoring the quiet and calm. But the ache in my chest flared. “Kyle? Do you get tired of endless casual sex?” *No.* That hadn’t come out right. “I mean, do you ever get lonely? Do you miss having a girlfriend?”

He rubbed and stroked my arm, gentle and soothing. “Yeah. It’s been messing with my head for a while. Our crazy life keeps getting in the way. But . . . but what if it didn’t have to?”

“It always will, won’t it?” I sighed. “I think I’m just tired. We haven’t had a break for weeks. I’m looking forward to a few days off after Tokyo.”

“Yeah. We’ll go snowboarding. Go out dancing. Eat endless bowls of ramen.”

“I can’t wait.”

“You know what you need?” He sat upright, turned toward me and cradled the side of my neck.

“What’s that?” I curled my hand around his forearm.

His gaze never left mine. The loneliness in the depths of his gorgeous dark eyes seemed to reflect my own. We understood each other. We always had. For three slow steady breaths we just sat there, absorbing the peace, the quiet, the gentle breeze. Then a small smile inched across his lips. “We need music. Let me grab my guitar and we’ll play until the sun comes up. It’s only an hour off rising.”

I sniffled and nodded as I tucked a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. I stuffed the ache in my heart away.

“Yeah.” I’d like that.”

And we did. We sat on the bench, strumming in sync until the rays appeared over the horizon. It was perfect. Beautiful. Calming. It cleared my head of any crazy nonsense.

I had everything I needed.

After our shows in Tokyo, the three of us headed to Furano to ski, rest, and recuperate. But my competitive streak with Hunter came out on the slopes. Every downhill run was a race. Every rush to the chairlift was a push-and-shove contest. Every jump and trick on our boards, we had to outdo each other.

“You don’t give up, do you?” He panted as we collapsed in the snow at the bottom of the hill, waiting for Kyle to catch up.

“Nope. Never will.” I clipped off my board and tossed it beside me.

“You cheated coming down through the forest. You cut out onto the track.”

“I did not.” Okay. Maybe I did. I didn’t want to hit a fucking tree.

“Unfair.” He took off his board and dropped it on the snow.

“You’re just too slow.”

“No, I’m not.”

Splat. He’d shoved a handful of snow into my face.

“Argh. That’s freezing.” I hadn’t seen that coming.
“Why you . . .”

I flicked snow at him, but he caught my hands, pushed me back, and pinned me against the ground.

Laughing, I wriggled and twisted, unable to break my hold. *Damn.* He was strong.

“Gem? Stop.”

“No.”

“Gem?” He tightened his grip on my hand.

“What?” I stilled.

Oh, shit.

My breath faltered. His azure eyes that were usually full of mischief and fun smoldered with a fire I’d never seen before. My mouth ran dry. He’d never looked at me like that before. My heart did a strange flip. I didn’t like it. Not one little bit. Fear seized my lungs.

“Gem?” He softened his voice. “You’re the most amazing girl on the face of the planet. You know that?”

“Hell yeah,” I joked. “Don’t fucking forget it.” Tugging my hands, I tried to break free, but I couldn’t. Not without kneeling him in the balls or hurting him.

“But there’s one thing we’ve never done, and I was wondering if you’d be open to the idea of . . . “

Thwack!

A huge snowball hit our heads.

“Hunt. Get off Gem.” Kyle boarded up to us and fell onto his knees. “Don’t rough her up just because she beat you down the slope. I saw. Live with it, dude. She’s the champ.”

“Fuck you.” Hunter rolled off me, but I didn’t miss the disgruntled edge to his tone.

Giggling, I sat up, shook the snow from my hair, and wiped my face. “Kyle’s right. Let’s do one more run before we stop for the day. Just so I can prove to you I’m the best.”

But that night, I woke in a cold sweat.

My heart raced. My body was on fire. Between my legs throbbed.

Clenching my thighs together, I burst out laughing.

Hunter had entered my dream.

My sexy, hot, mind-blowing dream.

Stupid dream.

But then, the dreams didn't stop.

Every night, they grew hotter. Steamier.

Shit!

That was when everything changed.

That was when everything we'd worked so hard for began to rip apart . . .

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ABOUT TANIA JOYCE

Tania Joyce is an author of contemporary and new adult romance novels. Her stories thread romance, drama and passion into beautiful locations ranging from the dazzling lights and glitter of New York, to the rural countryside of the Hunter Valley.

She's widely traveled, has a diverse background in the corporate world and has a love for sparkles, shoes and shiraz.

Tania draws on her real-life experiences and combines them with her very vivid imagination to form the foundation of her novels. She likes to write about strong-minded, career-oriented heroes and heroines that go through drama-filled hell, have steamy encounters and risk everything as they endeavor to find their happy-ever-after.

Tania shuffles the hours in her day between part-time work, family life and writing. One day she hopes to find balance!

She loves to hear from her readers.

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