



PIPER LAWSON

RIVALS

HE WAS THE BOY IN THE POOL HOUSE.
I WAS THE GIRL WHO DREAMED HE WAS A PRINCE.

Copyright 2023 by Piper Lawson Books

Content editing by Becca Hensley Mysoor

Line editing by Cassie Robertson

Cover by Books and Moods

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locations are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.

CONTENTS

VIP signup

RIVALS

DEDICATION

A Love Song for Liars

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

A Love Song for Rebels

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

A Love Song for Dreamers

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Wicked Holiday Surprise](#)

1. [Annie](#)
2. [Tyler](#)
3. [Annie](#)
4. [Haley](#)
5. [Tyler](#)
6. [Annie](#)

[Afterword](#)

[More New Adult Romances by Piper Lawson](#)

[About the Author](#)

RIVALS

PIPER LAWSON

Are you a VIP?

If you'd like to stay in touch, join my (Piper's) VIP newsletter! I'll reach out a couple of times a month with book news, exclusive reads, and limited deals.

Join by clicking the link below:

[BECOME A VIP!](#)

RIVALS

When the biggest rockstar in the world invited me into his home, there was one rule:

Don't touch his daughter.

For a kid from the wrong side of the tracks with no future, the offer should have been a dream come true.

Classy new digs.

A fancy prep school.

Someone who cares what happens to me.

Except for that rule.

The rich pricks at my new school worship me. I couldn't care less.

She's the one person who makes me feel worthwhile.

I want to save her from the turmoil eating up her picture-perfect world.

But she thinks I'm her rival: for her friends, her future, her father's love.

I should keep my distance.

Avoid rescuing her from the assholes at school.

Definitely pretend I can't see in her bedroom window from the pool house.

There are only two obsessions my life—music...and *her*.

All I have is my talent to set me free.

But my future will burn if I can't stay away.

**FOR EVERY GIRL
WITH A BIG DREAM
AND A RECKLESS HEART**



A LOVE SONG FOR LIARS

PART I

Annie

I HATE TYLER ADAMS. Hating him would be my religion if music wasn't.

But he's here, facing me, his hair falling across the pillow in a dark cascade. His eyelashes are thick and so long it's unfair. His mouth is parted in sleep, the top bow firm and the bottom lush.

I'm freaking out, my heart racing a mile a minute.

He's warm. His heat emanates from his body, inviting me closer.

I hate how much I want to.

I want. I want. I want.

My thighs press together because if there's a response to that realization that doesn't involve a rush of heat flowing south, I don't know what it is.

Of course I'd never let him know that when he's awake, but he's not.

Thank God he's not.

I shift in bed, wincing as my muscles ache.

Perfect.

There's a reason I've never had sex, and if I were going to, he's the last guy I'd sleep with.

He could have so much more than this stupid place, this stupid school... Instead he sold me out for a bunch of dumb, rich assholes.

Tyler groans, and my heart leaps.

When he shifts, rolling onto his back and exposing even more beautifully carved torso, the covers ride low on his hips.

Not quite low enough to see if he's wearing anything. I swallow.

I could look.

Don't fucking look.

I press my hands to my eyes as if it'll erase the image of the beautiful guy next to me.

Two days ago, all I cared about was being on stage, impressing my rock-star father, and not falling for Oakwood Prep's rebel prince, Tyler Adams.

But when his eyes start to open...

I know I'm well and truly screwed.



Two days earlier

“ARE you going to fuck it or just fantasize about it all day?”

The syrupy sweet voice makes me cut off my chorus halfway through a line.

“Your spoon.” The platinum blonde in the front row crosses one tan leg over the other, making her plaid skirt ride

up. “You’re staring at it like you want to—“

“She’s a mermaid, Carly. She wants to be human. It’s an emotional moment.” My hand tightens on the flatware from the school dining hall.

“Whatever, Little Virgin Annie. And you?” Carly turns to the corner of the stage, where Jenna’s reading her lines behind a curtain of straight, dark hair. “You’re wearing a garbage bag for a tail. You look homeless.”

“Annie made it,” Jenna blurts, turning pale under her freckles. “I was afraid I’d trip when we got our costumes, so I wanted to practice first.”

I step between them. “First off, Jenna? Daniel Craig slept on park benches and J. Lo couch surfed at our age, so that’s a compliment.” She finds a nervous smile before I turn back to Carly. “Second, Jenna has conditional acceptance to Stanford, and your fast track is to *Real Housewives*, but that’s no reason to be jealous.”

Our school’s queen bee edges forward in her seat. “I don’t know why you’re even rehearsing, Annie. Being a dumb teenager who’ll never be what her daddy wants must be super relatable. I bet every night the great Jax Jamieson wishes he hadn’t fucked that groupie and ended up with you.”

I could beat Carly over the head with this spoon. Not hard enough to do permanent damage—assuming there are cells inside to damage—but hard enough to mess up her perfect waves. Maybe hard enough the made-up minions on either side of her would lift their overtweezed brows in surprise.

But I won’t let her see her words get under my skin.

“Girls, I hope you’ve been practicing while I’ve been gone.” Miss Norelli strides through the auditorium doors,

returning from checking on a burnt-out stage light.

Our drama director shuffles up the aisle, her black sheath dress hugging her full figure, and takes a seat a few rows behind Carly and the others.

She pushes her purple glasses up her nose expectantly, eyes narrowed on the stage.

When the music starts again, I will myself to focus on my performance. To be a mermaid far away from the catty comments of bitchy schoolgirls who wouldn't have the first idea what to do with themselves if they ran out of people to torture.

But when I see Carly unscrew the top of my water and tip a tiny brown bottle to pour something inside, my voice wavers.

“Stop! Annie, I thought we had this section,” Miss Norelli calls from her seat a few rows back.

Frustration flows through me. “We do. We did.”

“Why don't we try it with the understudy?” Carly smiles as if the idea just popped into her head.

“Good idea.” Norelli folds her arms, and I swallow the anger as I trade places with Carly, who holds out her hand expectantly.

I shove the spoon into her hand before flipping her off. “Wash it when you're done.”

I step out of my garbage bag and retrieve my water bottle, sniffing it before shoving the thing back in my bag.

“That part never should've been yours,” Lana, one of Carly's minions, whispers. “The only reason Norelli picked

you is because your dad's a rock star. There's no way you got his talent."

"Carly's still the understudy," Tara, the other minion, points out. "A lot can happen in five weeks."

"Shut it, Flotsam and Jetsam." They should've been Ursula's eels, not Ariel's sisters.

Watching Carly perform, I wish she sucked, but she's actually good.

"That's enough rehearsal today," Miss Norelli says when Carly finishes. "Annie, a moment."

I get up and cross to her seat.

"Where's the girl from auditions? The fearless one, the focused one."

I shake my head. "She's here. I swear."

She sighs. "We're running out of time."

It was my decision to audition for the lead in the school musical and cross our school's reigning queen, but what even Carly doesn't know—what she can't know—is how much I need this role.

This year, everything is going to change for me. I feel it the way you feel spring in the air before anything blooms.

I cling to that conviction as I head to the front of the auditorium to pack up my things.

"Hey, princess."

I glance up to see Kellan Albright, a senior, standing over me. With his perfect dirty-blond hair and bright-white smile, he's athletic and has a decent voice. It's a curse for the rest of

us because he landed the male lead and begged out of almost half of rehearsals for sports.

Of course, if any of the girls missed that many rehearsals, we'd get cut. But it's hard to find guys who're both willing and capable of doing the part.

"Look forward to seeing you at the party this weekend."

"The mid-production cast party? Canceled," Jenna offers with a look toward Carly and her minions. "Carly's solarium is getting renovated, and her parents won't have people over until it's finished."

"What about your place?" Kellan's blue eyes dance.

If looks could melt skin, mine would be peeling off from the evil stares of Carly and her minions, and I swallow an incredulous laugh. "As much as we're all BFFs, that's as appealing as waxing my eyebrows off."

He laughs as I head for the doors, falling into step next to me.

"I know I've been busy with practice, but we should rehearse together. Maybe at the party." He squeezes my arm before holding the door for me.

"Maybe."

I pass him and head to my locker to grab my books and sunglasses, the feel of his touch lingering on my bare skin.

Kellan's attractive, and a lot of girls would love his attention, but he's not my type. He's sports and parties and being seen. But right now, I'll take my allies where I can get them.

I pull out a pen and lift the front hem of my skirt to write a single word on my thigh in blue ink, then I shut my locker and

head for the main doors.

If I'd thought Oakwood Prep would be simpler than the public school I attended most of my childhood, I was wrong. It's full of people with too much money and too many expectations and too many liposuction.

If I could go back to public school, go back to being normal... I'd take it in a hot second.

Because the difference between them and me is I grew up with less than nothing until I was plucked from that existence and told I was meant for another one.

Outside, I slide my sunglasses on as I head for the parking lot.

The campus is sprawling and beautiful. I soak in the spring day, the expanse of green grass, the mature trees. It's hot for Dallas, and all I want is to get home and jump in the pool.

I reach the modern steel fountain that marks the middle of the quad, the halfway point between the school and the parking lot, when a familiar form blocks my way.

I swear I've hit my daily quota of assholes.

"There are consequences for taking things that don't belong to you."

Carly stands between me and the parking lot, flanked by minions.

"Roles don't belong to people."

"I was talking about Kellan," she retorts.

"People definitely don't belong to people."

My focus falls to Lana's dirty manicure, the black smudges up her arm that weren't there during rehearsal.

Oakwood Prep is like society—the rules supposedly apply equally to everyone. They don't. Not even close.

Even amongst the rich, there are circles of power, of influence.

Carly's dad is the head of the school's board, which means she can do what she wants. To whomever she wants.

“If Kellan's your pathetic attempt not to die a virgin, good luck with that,” she goes on, leaning in as she senses the kill. “No guy at Oakwood will touch you.”

I close the distance between us and meet her predatory gaze head-on. “Promise I can get that in writing?”

“Carly.”

A low, smooth voice at my back has the baby hairs on my neck lifting. The minions' attention snaps to behind me.

Uniforms are an attempt to make everyone look the same. In this case, they come up short. All three guys coming down the stairs toward us are good looking, but one stands out. You'd feel this guy's magnetism in a blackout.

He's tall, with roped arms his navy jacket can't hide, and broad enough he could carry the entire school's baggage without breaking a sweat. He has an angled jaw and cheekbones, brown eyes a little too serious to be kind, and dark, wild hair.

If Kellan is this school's preppy king, Tyler Adams is its rebel prince. He has the easy grace earned by being a senior, gorgeous, and a musician.

When he speaks, everyone listens.

When he plays the guitar, everyone worships.

“Tyler,” Carly breathes. “Wanna give me a ride home?”

I don’t wait around for the answer but use the distraction to dodge all of them and head to my car.

I want to get the hell out of this toxic place before I burn it down.

I shift into my silver Audi, turning the key in the ignition.

It doesn’t start.

My forehead falls to the steering wheel as I remember the minions’ black-streaked arms. They probably rummaged under the hood for the shiniest parts to stab at with their manicure sets.

“*The Little Mermaid*. A girl who has everything but it’s still not enough.”

My attention snaps toward the guy leaning in the passenger window, and I immediately regret leaving it down.

If Tyler Adams and my co-star Kellan share top billing on the “senior boys every junior girl would give their BMW to bang” list, it’s for different reasons.

Kellan’s full of charm, the golden boy who comes from money and radiates ease and promises of good times.

Tyler’s gorgeous. Talented. Mysterious. He comes from nothing and doesn’t blink before taking everything.

But no matter how fascinating he is, it’s a lie.

“Being the daughter of a king doesn’t mean her life is perfect,” I answer at last. “If you think so, you’re dumber than you look.”

He rubs a hand through his dark hair, the chunk of blue at the front that sets him apart. “But you told me I had a great

future. You put on a scarf and held my hand and ogled my fate line.”

“It was a charity carnival. I was fourteen.”

“I paid five bucks for that spiritual advice. Don’t tell me I wasted it.”

I hit the start button once more. It makes a grinding noise until I slap a hand against the dash.

Please, don’t let me be stranded at school.

When I blink my eyes open, Tyler’s nodding through the windshield, rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt, the jacket already gone.

I don’t want Tyler Adams under my hood. But if I have to call my dad, it’ll invite questions as to why my almost-new car won’t start.

So, I pop the hood before rounding to the trunk for my toolkit, dropping it at his feet after I find it. Tyler yanks off his loosened tie and holds it out.

I take the tie from him, draping it around my neck for safekeeping.

I don’t notice his height, his hard body, the careless way he rubs a hand over his neck as he surveys what’s under my hood with a relentless intensity.

“You know why Carly fucks with you.”

I shift against the front fender, twisting one end of his tie around my fingers as I watch. “She’s jealous of my fashion sense.”

He spares me an incredulous look. “You bait her. You walk around this place with your heart on your sleeve, begging to

bleed. It's impossible for her to resist.”

You could teach an AP course on making me bleed.

I knot the bottom of my shirt up around my navel to get relief from the heat. “She can’t handle anyone having anything that could be hers—including the stage.”

“The spotlight’s not all its cracked up to be. Fans don’t want you, they want what they think you possess. And the more you possess, the more people feel entitled to take.”

The edge in his words catches me off guard.

I work a coiled elastic off my wrist, twisting my long hair up in a messy knot and fanning my sweat-damp neck. “Careful, Tyler. Someone might think being Prince of Oakwood is getting old.”

Tyler shifts to stand in front of me in a heartbeat.

He’s in my space, tall and built and intent, the weight of his attention moving from the car to me. The crisp white shirt, rolled at the sleeves, makes him look gorgeous and a little reckless, like some pirate on a mission to charm and destroy.

But it’s the expression on his face, that knowing smirk, that pins me in place. It’s as if he just caught me doing something filthy.

“Careful, Annie. Someone might think you give a shit.”

Once, I held his hand and told his fortune.

Never again.

He betrayed me. Hurt me more than Carly’s teasing and pranks ever could.

I want him to back the fuck up, but I can’t speak. Right now, all I can do is take in Tyler’s light cedar scent, his half-

lowered lashes, his voice a soft murmur on my skin.

I clear my throat, arch a brow. “Do you need something?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Finally, he moves.

Down my body.

My breath hitches as his face is level with my chest, my waist.

I press my thighs together when his face passes my bare legs.

The heart is supposed to propel blood to your vital organs.

Mine’s a traitor. It doesn’t give a fuck if I live or die.

When he’s this close, it beats for him.

He drops his wrench in the toolkit at my feet, and I shut my eyes in humiliated relief.

Get a grip.

If he ever finds out how I feel, the last of my pride and self-respect will go up in flames.

“What’s this? Don’t tell me you cheated on our English test.” Tyler lifts the edge of my skirt, and I smack his hand away.

“What’s under my skirt is none of your business.”

He huffs out a breath as he straightens and returns to work.

“There it is,” he murmurs moments later under the hood. “They yanked the coupling for your... never mind,” he says at my blank expression. “Carly’s better at politics than cars.”

He lowers the hood, wiping the rolled-up arm of his dress shirt on his forehead. “You should be fine. If it gives you any

grief, let me know.”

“Thanks.” The word sticks in my throat, and he holds my gaze for a beat, two.

I hurry to slide in through the driver’s door. When I hit the start button, the engine roars to life.

Relief washes over me as I stuff my blazer in the back seat and unbutton my shirt another button while the A/C kicks in. Sweat beads on my chest, and I’m fastening my seatbelt when Tyler leans his muscled forearms on the driver’s door.

“You get slapped with community service?” He nods toward the black garbage bag on top of my books.

I shift my sunglasses up on my head. “Oh, I led the litter pickup for Young Environmentalists at the park last week, but no, that’s my practice costume for the musical. It has a hole in the bottom so I can walk.”

“I see. You’ll have trouble evading horny sailors.”

“Yeah, well, Hans Christian Anderson was pre-MeToo.”

This time, Tyler’s smile is genuine. I can tell because it lands in the center of my chest like a blow.

I wish I could lick my suddenly dry lips without him taking credit for it.

He reaches into the car, and my breath hitches as he lifts his tie from around my neck, drawing it out in a long ribbon.

The silk strokes my neck for what feels like minutes, and I force my gaze away when he finally pockets the tie.

My attention lands on the lone motorcycle across the parking lot. “Next time Carly gets creative with my car, I’m borrowing your ride.”

“No, you’re not.” He straightens, shoving a hand through his messy-is-sexy hair. “Jax Jamieson would destroy me for letting his baby girl near it.”

There it is. The reason I can’t avoid Tyler completely, even I want nothing more than to cut him out of my life.

Oakwood’s rebel prince doesn’t live in a brick mansion with a closet full of V-necks and two Ivy-League-educated parents.

He lives in our pool house, thirty feet from my bedroom.

Annie

“SORRY I’M LATE. CAR TROUBLE.” I trip into the café, and Pen looks up from her table. “I did bring you presents, though. Check your e-reader.”

My friend grabs her tablet from her bag. “Ooh! How many books did you get me?”

“Ten? Twelve?” I laugh. “You’re going away. You’ll need some new material.”

“You’re the best,” she informs me when I finish telling her about the mix of fiction and nonfiction I picked out.

We go to the counter, and I order a peppermint tea.

“How was rehearsal?” Pen asks while we wait.

I fill my friend in on what happened with Carly, and her eyes widen.

“The bitches tried to stop me driving away from the crime scene,” I finish.

“Sabotaging your ride is a new low. She’s escalating.”

I roll my eyes. “Carly can’t stand people taking things she wants.”

“It’s more than that. You’re a traitor to an income bracket,” Pen says, mock chastising. “Writing essays about how her dad and a bunch of others’ are destroying the middle class through their greedy empires and campaigning with the administration to spend our community involvement hours with actual disadvantaged people instead of working with fancy ad agencies on shiny posters for environmental groups.”

Her smile fades. “For real, though. Why is this *High School Musical* fantasy so important to you? In a year, we’ll both be at Columbia, and this will all be behind us.”

My tea is set in front of me, and I reach for it. “She doesn’t get to decide who has a voice, on stage or anywhere else.”

Pen follows me back to our table. “So, how’d you get here if they fucked up your ride?”

“Tyler fixed it.” I glance at her empty mug. “Do you want another Americano to get through calc?”

Hands grip my arms, and in a second, I’m looking straight into my friend’s dark, dancing eyes. “No, I do not want another Americano. I want to know in what world Tyler Adams was elbow deep in your business.”

Penelope’s smart. Like, next level. She’s the head of debate team and the newspaper, she’s taking all AP courses, and she doesn’t miss a beat.

Her dad moved here from Shanghai and met her mom at UCLA before they came to Texas. Mr. Wang knows my stepmom because Haley’s in software too.

“When was the last time you and Mr. Pool House talked about something other than who ate the last Cheerios?” she presses.

“Four months.”

“Which is weird given you’ve been living together for the better part of a semester and you were friends before that.”

Yes, we were friends. Or whatever you call it when you hang with someone incessantly, argue over bands until three in the morning, and take over diner booths across an entire city on an epic quest to find the best cheese fries.

When I met Tyler, he was part of a community outreach program at my dad’s label in Philly for kids from troubled backgrounds.

He was talented and gorgeous, but none of that was what attracted me to him.

There was a deeper pull.

I knew Tyler had seen some shit the way you can tell when another person’s been through it. Still, anytime I asked about his family, he shut me down.

When my dad finished the album, we moved back to Dallas, but Tyler and I stayed friends.

“Remember when he moved here from Philly to work with your dad and everyone at school lost their designer *shit* over him?” Pen muses. “Oakwood should’ve eaten him alive, but they didn’t.”

And that’s what I hate the most. The boy I trusted, my partner in crime during one of the most tumultuous periods of my life, traded my friendship for theirs.

“The whole thing was messed up from the start,” I admit. “Tyler showed up at our house. My dad said they’d be working together on music with Tyler living in our pool house and finishing senior year at Oakwood. Zero additional explanation.”

I go on at her raised brows. “I was so thrilled he was here that I let the weirdness slide. That was my first mistake. Do not, I repeat, do *not* let the weirdness slide.”

I take a sip of my tea, and Pen scrunches up her face. “But he’s not an asshole to you like the others are. So, why did you stop talking to him?” Her dark brows pull together.

The night at Carly’s birthday party comes back to me in a rush.

I remember the way he’d looked at me when we were alone, as if I was the only person who mattered—right before he humiliated me.

“She’s nothing. Nobody.”

“It doesn’t matter, Pen. I’m over it.” I reach into my black leather bag for my schoolbooks. We have a history test Friday, calculus is a never-ending nightmare, and there’s a poetry assignment breathing down my neck. I love writing but wish I didn’t have to do all the other crap too.

“But you liked him before he was cool,” she insists. “He looks like Adam Levine fucked Paul Rudd and, through some miracle of modern science, they reproduced.”

I shift in my seat. “Accurate.”

My friend grins. “You should write him a limerick.”

“There once was a prince of a clique. His guitar was pretty slick...”

“If this ends with a punchline about his dick, I’m going to die.”

I pick up my tea, eyeing her over the rim. “I’ve never seen his dick, but I’ll call it ‘Ode to Pretty Assholes.’”

This time neither of us can stop the laughter.

“You need to get laid,” she says once we’re both breathing again. “If only so Carly stops calling you that stupid nickname. There are a lot of guys who’d love to help you out.”

“I’m not having sex to spite her.” I narrow my gaze. “Besides, you don’t give a shit about my sex life. You’re going to Italy for a week.”

Her smile melts away, and I cock my head.

“Wait, why do you look as if that Americano is your last meal?”

“It’s the last third of the semester. Exams are coming up. Debate team needs to be prepping for state. I need to hand in this essay, and—”

“And you’re going to be in Tuscany, drinking Chianti and flipping us off while your dad works.”

Pen sighs. “Promise you’ll keep me up to date. The most exciting things always happen when I’m gone.”



“THIS IS FUCKING IMPOSSIBLE,” a low voice grumbles as I make my way through the back hallway of our house after parking in the six-car garage.

The sight greeting me in the cavernous kitchen is the biggest rock star in the last two generations bent over a high chair, feeding my almost-seven-month-old half sister. Judging from the amount of baby food on the tray and Sophie’s face, my dad’s losing.

“Shouldn’t she be sleeping by now?” I drop my bag on the island big enough to host a dinner party.

“If I could’ve gotten some damned food into the kid, she would be.”

Jax Jamieson can rock stadiums, produce multi-platinum albums, charm new stagehands, and cut down aggressive reporters with a stare.

Apparently, he’s met his match in Sophie. With her chocolate eyes and full head of dark hair, she can barely sit up but is capable of yanking Dad around as if he’s dangling on a cord like one of her zoo-animal-shaped soothers.

“Think I was this tough to feed as a baby?” I come up next to the high chair, folding my arms.

My dad pinches my side. “Seems like you ate enough.”

“Oh my God! You can’t say that to teenage girls. Every pamphlet says so.”

“I gave those to the band to read.”

We joke about it, but the truth is he wasn’t there when I was a baby. He didn’t even know I existed when I was Sophie’s age.

My birth mom was someone he met during his early days touring when he was swept up by the lifestyle. He was still a teenager. He says she wasn’t a hookup but refuses to talk about how it all went down.

Once he found out, he decided I should live with my aunt Grace and her husband until I was older. You might expect learning your insanely successful rock star uncle is actually your father would be a gift.

It wasn’t.

I'm beyond fortunate. I'm reminded every time I volunteer at one of the shelters in Dallas or pore over research for a civic policy paper.

Still, it can't erase the feeling I'm missing something inside.

A necessary component that's irreplaceable, that no amount of money can fix.

"Come on, little hellion," Dad murmurs. Sophie lets out a wail and slaps at his hand hard enough to send prunes flying onto his face.

"You look like a crime scene victim." I take the spoon from him and ply Sophie with little coos. The kid is cute when she's not wailing. "Dad, do you want to watch a movie tonight? You're way behind on your Marvel."

He grunts. "They make one every damned month. But tonight, I need to get a couple guitar tracks worked out for a project. You seen Tyler?"

Disappointment courses through me. "Not since school. I had rehearsal, then studied with Pen."

"Glad to hear it. The studying, not the rehearsal."

"Because in your world, the men play the guitar and women do the math," I deadpan.

"There is one world, and in it, my daughter is going to college."

When your dad happens to have been the biggest rock star on the planet before he semi-retired, things like graduations and diplomas and college admissions don't seem nearly as impressive as millions of album sales, screaming fans, and seven-figure endorsement deals.

I would give anything for his musicality, his confidence. The way he commands a room, the God-given spark that makes it so you can't look away.

Instead, I have his eyes and his flair for the dramatic.

Hardly a fair trade.

“Do me a favor and watch Sophie while I go down to the studio with Tyler,” my dad says on his way to the sink. “Haley’s at a meeting but should be back soon, and there’s lasagna on the stove.”

If only my dad would see me the way he sees Tyler. They spend hours together discussing guitar, sound, vocals. Working on new tracks for other artists and causes.

In less than a month, I’ll be the one on stage, and they won’t be able to ignore me.

Not Carly. Not Tyler. Not my dad.

Then he’ll see me like he sees Tyler.

Then I’ll matter like they do.

My phone vibrates, and I glance at it.

KELLAN: Think about my idea?

A TEMPORARY TRUCE with Carly and the others would mean I wouldn’t have to constantly worry about getting a knife between the shoulders between now and opening night.

“I want to have a few people over this weekend,” I decide.

Dad turns off the faucet, his shirt clean but soaking wet.
“Haley and Sophie and I are in LA.”

“Even better. You hate parties.”

“And teenagers at my house leave behind messes that will linger until I’m back.”

He frowns down at his shirt as if realizing teenagers aren’t the messiest part of this household.

I play my trump card—my dad’s longest friend and guitarist, better known to the world as Mace. “Not if Uncle Ryan’s supervising.”

Dad yanks the shirt over his head, apparently giving up on trying to get it clean, and heads for the hallway leading to the stairs. “If Mace is free, you can have friends over,” he calls over a shoulder. “But if they break anything, I’ll break you and them.”

Yes. It’s the closest thing to a resounding affirmative I could hope for.

I’ll host an epic cast party for the rich assholes, prove to Tyler Adams he’s wrong about me tempting Carly and her minions, and the entire musical standoff will be resolved by Monday.

Easy peasy.

Annie

“THIS IS SICK, ANNIE.” Jenna looks around the patio on Saturday night. “Don’t you think, Carly?”

Carly lifts a bare shoulder under her perfectly waved blond hair. “It’s better than nothing.”

“Better than nothing” is an expanse of natural rock with a waterfall wrapping around the end of a pool that takes me twenty strokes to span. The stone surrounding it stretches for ages, with enough space to host a hundred people standing.

This patio is my sanctuary. There’s no pressure here, no haters, no self-doubt.

Unless all of those things are lounging in chaises drinking vodka-laced punch.

“You should’ve invited your friend,” Kellan, whose low-slung black swim trunks show off an impressively sculpted torso, says to me. “Pamela?”

“Penelope. She left for Italy yesterday.”

He nods. “My uncle has a place in Florence.”

When you attend private school, stripping out of uniforms is an occasion we take seriously. The girls are wearing bikinis,

the guys in swim trunks hanging low on toned abs the dress shirts only hint at during the week.

I'm in a cherry-red one-piece bathing suit, and I pulled on jean shorts too. I could probably use the padding from a bikini top—I'm still hoping my boobs make a late surge senior year—but my goal for tonight isn't attracting attention. It's making peace.

"How's your car, Annie?" Carly asks sweetly. "I saw you still in the parking lot Thursday when I left."

"Good as new." I won't give her the satisfaction of getting to me, especially since I'm trying to smooth things over.

I glance around the patio. During the daytime, I love swimming laps in this pool. Now, the lights turn it electric blue. Sleek chaise loungers with side tables are arranged around the perimeter. A table with a bar and snacks sits discreetly off to one side. Built-in speakers at thirty different points in the patio—including some of the chairs, umbrellas, and the gardens—make it feel like the music's inside us.

My gaze lands on the house. Uncle Ryan's rules for tonight were no drinking and no coming inside—except for Miss Norelli, whom he greeted at the door. Now they're in the living room, staring at each other on the couch.

The form I spot through the sliding glass doors isn't Uncle Ryan.

I hold up my cup in a toast—the minions had the carafe spiked with Grey Goose before the caterer left—and Tyler shakes his head.

The slider opens, and Carly shrieks, "Tyler, let me get you a drink!"

She dashes to the bar and fills him a Solo cup, her curves bouncing under her tiny bathing suit.

“Come play ‘I’ve Never’ with us,” she insists as he crosses to where we’re standing along with Lana, Tara, and Jenna.

Of course Tyler’s jeans and T-shirt come off more compelling than the half-naked guys outside. I see him in school clothes as often as not, and I try not to stare at the way his black T-shirt hugs his chest and reveals strong arms, beautiful hands.

But when my gaze locks on his, something says he caught me looking.

Kellan starts the game, and I force my attention to him.

“I’ve never been fucked up the ass.”

Carly shoves Kellan but drinks. “Only me? Fine. I’ve never had a thousand people screaming my name.” She steps close enough to brush her boobs against Tyler’s arm as if she has fleas and he’s a scratching post. “That’s you, baby. That show you did in Miami last month.”

He cocks his head. When he speaks, his voice is amused, with an edge of something I can’t make out above the music. “I filled in as a favor to Jax when their guitarist had a car accident. The crowd didn’t know my name.”

“They were undressing you with their eyes. Same damn thing.”

Tyler looks as if he’s about to argue but takes a drink. “I’d rather be good than famous,” he says after, staring into his cup. “The best guitarists aren’t guys like Jax. They’re session musicians. They’ve played on every radio edit you’ve ever heard for the last seventy years, and you couldn’t name one of

them. Not everyone needs thousands of screaming fans to be worthwhile.”

“Spoken like someone who’s afraid.” I’m supposed to be making friends, but I can’t resist stating the obvious. Tyler looks up. “Fame is only as dangerous as the person who commands it. If you’re talented enough to get the world’s attention for more than a few minutes, you have a responsibility to use it. It’s not something you can toss aside.”

Tyler’s nostrils flare, a muscle in his jaw working.

I’ve hit a sore spot in this boy they love to worship.

“It’s your turn,” Carly reminds Tyler.

Kellan drapes an arm around my neck, and I’m surprised because I almost forgot he was here, but Tyler’s attention locks on the arm around my neck as if he wants to melt it away with sheer disdain.

“I’ve never worn a garbage bag as a fashion statement.”

The comment works under my skin like a dull blade even before Carly screeches with laughter. “Drink, Annie. A lot. Jenna? You too.”

“But damn, girl, you make it look good,” Kellan murmurs, running a finger absently along my collarbone. It tickles like an insect, and I want to brush it away, but my attention’s on Tyler.

He looks pissed, or his self-contained version of it. I’ve never seen him lose his temper. He’s easygoing except when he broods, when whatever’s below the surface is carefully leashed and dealt with deep down, where he’d never let me. Where he’d never let anyone at this party, I’m willing to guess.

I'm genuinely at a loss for why he's still standing here when he looks as though the last place he wants to be is poolside.

My throat is already burning, but I tip the cup back, swallowing gulp after gulp, and by the time I straighten, it's empty and all I can taste is cherries and vodka.

"Your turn," Kellan nudges.

I square my shoulders and deliver my challenge at the boy in front of me. "I've never lived in a pool house."

I regret the words before I finish them.

They're mean because they're insensitive but also because they're true.

Tyler reaches for his cup and lifts it in a silent, mocking toast. "You win."

He turns and starts back across the patio.

You win.

It sure doesn't feel like it.

I don't know why I said that except I felt cornered and attacked, but my chest tightens unbearably.

"What's his deal?" Kellan complains.

"What that boy has money can't buy," Carly purrs. "For every girl who'd give her allowance to lick your abs, there's another who'd blow her trust fund to suck his dick."

My entire body stiffens as she takes off across the patio toward the pool house. I can't hear what she says when she catches up to him because Kellan says, "Fuck him. You look like a real mermaid."

“Thanks,” I say, but my gaze lingers on Carly and Tyler talking at the door.

He’s going to reject her. Any minute.

I chew on my cheek.

Come on, Tyler. Shut the door.

Instead, he meets my gaze as if he can hear my words, holds it for a beat.

Then he lets her inside.

It shouldn’t hurt.

Still, after our talk the other day, I’d thought that maybe he was over being these peoples’ prince, that he saw through her bullshit.

I was wrong.

“Your house is amazing,” Kellan says when Jenna and the minions go to get more drinks. “I bet it’s even better inside.”

I flash him my biggest smile. “It is. You want to see?”

I pull Kellan through the side door of the house to avoid Uncle Ryan and Miss Norelli.

“This is the backstage tour,” I say under my breath.

We sneak past the living room, bending over at the waist to avoid being seen. My heart’s hammering in my ears by the time we get to the garage and I hit the lights.

“Whoa,” Kellan says.

My dad’s cars are here. There are also shelves of awards. “Take your pick. The Grammys live inside because my stepmom made him bring them in, but everything else is here.”

“Why does he keep them in the garage?”

“I don’t think he has a lot of respect for awards and formality. Your parents have this shit too.”

“Not like this.”

My head’s buzzing from the cup I drained outside, but it’s Kellan who looks drunk—on the surroundings. I know what that’s like. People get a hit of my dad, and they’re hooked. It’s why I don’t bring many friends here.

“So, we didn’t have a chance to rehearse.” Kellan shoots me a loaded smile. “You could show me your room.”

I’m not interested in taking Kellan there, even if he’s the only person in the musical who doesn’t have a raging hate-on for me. I’m not holding my breath for poetry and professed love, but I’m also not looking to punch my V-card with some lacrosse player who doesn’t even know my best friend’s name.

“I have a better idea.” I take his hand, and we trip toward the other side of the house and out into the gardens.

Torchlight bathes everything in a warm glow, but it’s blurring together. It’s a grid of flowers, waist-high but almost like a maze.

“That’s a shit-ton of roses.”

I can’t help smiling. “They came with the house, but my dad planted more. He likes building stuff, working with his hands.”

“I get that rich, I’m not touching anything.” He brushes a hand over a rose bush and snaps off one of the blooms. My heart kicks as he tosses it into the shrubs. “You into pain? Because if we fall into these, it’s gonna hurt.”

He snickers as he pulls me against him. I inhale, startled, and catch a hit of booze on his breath, his expensive cologne.

I push against his chest to get a few inches between us.
“Whoa. Slow down.”

“Come on. You’ve been flirting with me for weeks.”

“Not flirting.” Desperation edges into my tone, the need to explain and be understood. “I mean, you’re attractive. Obviously. But you’re the only person who doesn’t think Carly should’ve gotten my part.”

“Good deeds should be rewarded, and I can think of a few ways for you to use that pretty mouth.” Kellan’s gaze flicks deliberately down to his pants, then his hand slides down to grab my ass.

Alarm has my throat tightening, my body stiffening.
“Stop.”

He doesn’t. I duck under his arm but catch my toe on the rock edging the garden and trip.

I stick my hands out to brace my fall, wincing as I land in the rose bushes, their thorns scratching at my skin, but I push myself up and trip through the garden toward the patio.

“Annie, what the fuck?”

I glance back, but Kellan’s lurching toward me. A muttered curse says one of the rose bushes bit him, too.

I round the back of the house, the pool coming into view. Laughter floods my ears. Cans litter the patio. I watch in horror as someone empties a bottle of liquor into the pool.

These people aren’t my friends, and there’s nothing I can do to change that.

My stomach plummets, the ground tilting at a reckless angle beneath my feet.

I shove past bodies to the pool house and hit the code for the keypad. After two tries, the door opens, and I fall in.

The door closes behind me and a low, rough voice splits the darkness. “Party’s by the pool. Get out.”

I don’t move. The next second, I’m shoved up against the wall by something hard and warm.

Not something. *Someone.*

A hard chest crushes my breasts, and male hips dig into my stomach. I’m so thrown it takes me a moment to catch up.

But it’s his scent, cedar and sunshine, that keeps me from freaking out the way I did with Kellan.

“Annie?” Disbelief cracks the anger in his voice, his lips inches from mine in the dark.

“I know,” I whisper. “You didn’t recognize me without the garbage bag.”

Tyler steps back, and I sway.

He lunges for me, wrapping an arm around my waist.

Even though I want to shove him, I’d fall in a heap without his support. So, my fingers close over his hand, and as he helps me across the floor, I imagine away the heat of his body.

Six uncertain steps later, I’m deposited on something soft.

His bed.

The glow of light—the nightstand lamp switched on—has me wincing until my eyes adjust.

Tyler’s staring down at me, a shirtless, scowling god. His toned chest floods my field of vision.

I swallow. The buzz from the alcohol has my gaze sliding down the muscles of his stomach, lingering on the indentations left by the shadows, the faint trail of hair that disappears into the top of his unbuttoned jeans.

“What did you take?” His voice is commanding, forcing my eyes up to his.

“Nothing. I had one—two drinks?” Tyler lifts a dark brow under the thick fall of hair. “Two and three-quarters drinks,” I decide.

He doesn’t smell like cologne and liquor. Tyler smells clean and warm, like a forest.

“And you’re here because...”

I think I prefer my trees quiet.

I slide onto my side, closing my eyes and sinking into the relief the new position brings. “Kellan wanted to wrestle in the roses. I didn’t.”

A string of impressive curses drifts through my head, almost as if I’d uttered them, but the voice isn’t mine.

Then he’s gone. I feel him vanish from the side of the bed only to reappear a moment later.

“Did he hurt you?” Tyler’s voice is so low it’s barely audible.

I shake my head, and the room spins. I force my eyes open to see him braced over me, close enough his knees brush the bed, holding a glass.

“It’s water,” he says flatly. “You’re dehydrated.”

“You don’t have to sound like you care.”

The growl would have made me jump if I wasn't so buzzed.

I'm not trying to be a brat. He doesn't need to pretend when we're alone. It's not like with Dad and Haley, when civility is a must.

Okay, maybe I'm being a bit of a brat, but I'm protesting Kellan, the fuzziness in my head, my own stupidity in thinking I could win these people over...

Plus the shirtless Hottie McTraitor in my pool house.

The one who sinks onto the bed next to my head, making the mattress dip with his weight. My fingers brush his thigh.

"Annie. Drink the damn water." There's a note of worry in his impatience. "You can hate me again after."

I sit up and drink, studying him over the rim of the cup as he studies me.

We're closer than we've been in months, except for maybe the other day at my car when he moved down my body.

But now he's searching my face—not for emotions, but for marks, for trauma, for signs of something that shouldn't be there.

"You won't find anything," I murmur when I finish the water. His dark gaze comes back to mine. "Anything worth finding is underneath."

But he takes my chin gently in his hands, turning my head and brushing back my hair.

His fingers graze my cheek, and I flinch at the sting.

"He scratched you." Tyler utters the words as if they're vile, and I twist out of his grasp.

“I fell into a rose bush. It bit harder than Kellan.”

I reach past him to set the cup on the nightstand, but he takes it from me before I can.

“It doesn’t feel as good as I thought it would,” I inform him.

“What doesn’t?”

I drop back onto the bed, my eyes closing before I hit the duvet. “Hating you.”

Annie

WHEN I WAKE, my head's on a pillow, and it smells like home.

No. Home is a fabric softener brand. This pillow smells like sunshine and cedar.

Like him.

Blinking my eyes open reveals I'm in a strange bed.

And I'm not alone.

Tyler Adams is stretched out across the sheets as if he owns them. He's as beautiful asleep as he is awake. Maybe more so.

His firm mouth looks more forgiving with his lips parted in sleep. His eyelashes are black and so long I want to trace them with a finger. Thick, dark hair falls across his forehead, shielding him from the world.

I wonder what boys who have everything dream of.

The sheet is twisted around his legs, and his chest is bare. I drink in the cut lines of his body.

What the hell am I doing here? Did I crawl into bed with him? Did we...?

Please, God, tell me I didn't sleep with him.

Not that I haven't imagined having Tyler Adams pop my cherry—back before he revealed himself as an ass who cares more about popularity than me.

But, hello, that's why we have dreams and the privacy of our own heads—so we can fantasize about stupid shit we'd never admit to ourselves in the light of day.

He groans, stirring. When his lashes flutter, my heart leaps into my throat.

Shit, shit, shit.

He stills once more, and I exhale slowly.

Pulling back the edge of the blackout curtain reveals the soft colors of the early-morning sun peeking over the hills and trees along the horizon.

I make a lap of the room I haven't visited in months.

Tyler's schoolbooks and bag sit on the desk my dad and Haley got when he moved in. His guitar rests against the wall by the door. He got it secondhand from my dad's label, played it until his fingers bled.

A pile of street clothes is neatly folded on the dresser. Faded T-shirts, black and gray. A Henley. Two pair of jeans.

The same day my dad's agent sent him a car for his final album hitting platinum, I got Tyler a Ramones T-shirt for his birthday.

He wore that shirt until the hem frayed.

I miss those days. We didn't care about anything but having fun and being alive. Every second we spent together—messing around with music on my dad's tour-bus-turned-studio, or questing to find the best cheese fries in Philly, or

doing impressions behind the soundboard—felt like we were taking control of our lives. Making new memories.

Tyler didn't value our friendship. He traded it for popularity at Oakwood.

I'd figured the pain would fade over time, but seeing him every day—even for a moment in the hallways or before or after school—means the ache in my gut never quite goes away.

He saved your ass last night.

He saved my ass because if something had happened, my dad might've thought he was involved in the party and come down on him. It's the only explanation.

The boy I knew, the one I laughed with and dreamed about, is long gone.

I tug on the door of the pool house and step outside in my bare feet. The speakers have long since gone silent, and there's no breeze, but I can still smell him as if he's followed me.

I clean up the patio, collecting bottles and cans before putting the bags behind the pool house.

When the cleanup is done, I sneak upstairs to my room.

I don't bother hitting the lights. The ominous, lumpy shapes are my king-sized bed, my dresser and desk, and the comfy armchair by the window I use to read and do homework. The dark spots along the wall across from my bed are music boxes, lined up on the shelf like guardians.

On impulse, I stop by the last one and lift the top.

“It's a Small World” streams out until I shut the lid again.

It's the same song every time, the same arrangement, played by gears instead of humans. The little dancing dog in a

tutu has always been the best part.

I'll figure out how to keep my part in the musical and keep Carly and her damned minions at bay without Kellan's help. Without anyone's.

In my ensuite, I reach for a washcloth, but the reflection of the girl in the mirror makes me freeze.

Not because she's hungover or lonely.

Because she's wearing a frayed Ramones T-shirt.



SUNDAY MORNING, I shower off the booze and party, dress in jean shorts and a tank top, and fluff out my damp hair.

There's a text from Pen with a picture of the villa they've rented, asking how the party was.

I enter and delete a few texts, settling on: *No one died. I don't think Carly and I are destined to be best friends. Go drink more wine.*

Tyler's T-shirt sits on top of my laundry hamper. I toss the T-shirt and some other clothes into the laundry, then grab *The Great Gatsby* for English class and pad down the hall. The sound of a guitar pulls me toward the kitchen.

I pause to listen, my eyes closing as I lean a shoulder against the wall.

Thousands of years ago, human beings should have spent every ounce of their precious time finding food or shelter or safety. Having sex.

Not singing songs and creating instruments.

We did it anyway. Maybe we knew then what we seem to have forgotten since: life isn't about money or winning or even surviving. It's about finding meaning in the time we have.

When I peek around the corner, Uncle Ryan is laughing from a chair at the table and Tyler's playing on a stool at the island.

He's a magician. There's no other word for the way that instrument sings under his hands.

I don't believe in gods, but if they ever existed...

Their ashes stir each time that boy lifts a guitar.

I swallow my envy and enter the kitchen. "Morning."

"It's afternoon," Ryan points out.

"Like you and Dad ever got up before noon on tour." I head for the coffee maker without making eye contact and pick out a pod. Haley found this killer Columbian blend I could live on. "Dad call you this morning?"

"Not yet. But far as I know, everything went fine. Now is when you bribe me," he adds with a wink as I set my mug under the stainless nozzle and hit Start.

Uncle Ryan's attention shifts to Tyler. "You play like a prodigy, kid, but that guitar is a piece of shit. Get Jax to give you a new one."

Ryan's phone erupts into a rendition of my dad's band laughing their way through a cover of Johnny Cash, and I glance over my shoulder.

"Tell my dad no Jamieson belongings were harmed in the making of last night's gathering," I call as Ryan heads down the hallway to answer.

The coffee finishes brewing, and as I go to retrieve it, I sneak a look at Tyler.

His presence shouldn't suck the air out of the kitchen, but once Ryan's gone, all I see is the guy who lives in the pool house. Gray sweatpants cling to his hips, and the white T-shirt outlines every plane of his torso, leaving his arms deliciously bare.

I remember that chest bare last night, too close to ignore.

His body's beautiful, but it's the way he uses it that's impossible to forget. The control in everything he does.

Tyler uses that body like he's had it before, like it's his favorite suit of armor and they've been through countless battles together.

His hair isn't falling across his forehead like it was when I left his bed hours ago, but standing up as if he woke the moment I walked out the door and has been running his hands through it since.

Which is impossible.

I clear my throat. "Why did I wake up in bed with you?"

Tyler lifts his chin, assessing. "Why did I wake up in bed *without* you?"

The way he says it sends shivers up my spine.

"You passed out," he goes on, setting the guitar against the wall before rising and crossing to the counter next to me. "I didn't want you to wake up somewhere unfamiliar alone."

I shift a few inches, giving him access to the coffee maker and cupboard overhead. "I would've figured it out."

"But the seconds before that are the worst."

I take a sip of my coffee, burning my tongue. “What do you mean?”

He reaches over me for a mug and to change the coffee pod. I don’t think he’s going to answer, but finally, he does.

“My dad used to padlock the door if he was drunk or in a mood. Never knew until I got home from the label or school or hanging out if it was one of those nights. The worst part wasn’t finding a place to crash. It was waking up and not knowing where I was.” He grimaces. “Especially somewhere cold.”

I set my coffee on the counter, my stunned gaze never leaving his face as I think of the T-shirt he must’ve pulled over me after I passed out, the blankets tucked in around me. “Tyler —“

“Annie! Your dad wants to talk to you.” Ryan’s voice comes from down the hall.

“Be right there!” I shout back, then lower my voice. “I didn’t mean what I said about you living in the pool house. It was cruel and insensitive, and I’m sorry. You said that thing about my garbage bag, and I lashed out.”

The machine finishes brewing, and Tyler reaches past me to toss the pod. His shoulder brushes my breasts in a way that sends awareness flowing through me. I tuck my hair behind my ear, swallowing as I sneak a look up at him, but he’s oblivious, and before I can respond, he continues.

“We all do shit when we’re hurting. It’s a good reason to keep from getting hurt in the first place.”

I go to the giant fridge for cream, setting it in front of him. He stares at it as if he’s surprised I know how he takes his coffee.

I turn away, going to the cupboard for cereal. “I said I hate you. I don’t. I envy you. You take what you want, and you don’t feel bad about demolishing whatever’s in the way. Like friendships.”

“If we’re not friends, tell me how we’ve talked more this week than in the past four months.”

I freeze in the middle of the kitchen, watching him add cream to his coffee. “Because lately whenever I get into trouble, there you are.”

He puts the cream back in the fridge without so much as an indication he’s heard me. I shake my head to clear it as I set the cereal on the counter. “Listen—don’t tell my dad about Kellan.”

“Or what?”

His words have me stiffening.

If my dad finds out I can’t handle myself, it’s more evidence I’m not as capable as I should be, as capable as Tyler.

Tyler might be the Prince of Oakwood, but he’s in my castle now.

I close the distance between us, stopping when my bare purple-painted toenails graze Tyler’s socks. I tilt my head up to take in every line of his handsome face, his chocolate eyes bright with challenge.

“If you tell Dad about Kellan,” I murmur, “I’ll tell him I woke up in your bed.”

My dad is protective. The day he finds out I’m not innocent, heads will roll.

Tyler’s jaw tics because he knows that too. He reaches up to brush a thumb along my cheek, tracing beneath the pale red

scratch I saw in the mirror this morning.

“You’re not built for games,” he replies at last, his breath light on my face. “You’re too earnest.”

“You don’t know me anymore. You said it yourself. Dad would freak if you let me ride your bike. He’d lose his mind if he found out I was riding you.”

Tyler reaches for his coffee on the counter and takes a long sip while I wait impatiently.

“What?” I say sharply, and his mouth twitches.

“I think *you’d* lose your mind if you were riding me, too.”

His gaze traps mine, and heat floods my body, hardening my nipples, settling between my thighs.

My small victory gets smaller because I’m vibrating from his words.

Our friendship never came with barely veiled innuendos. No sexy, loaded provocation.

So, what the hell is this?

The rules of what’s between us are changing...

But I’m not the one who changed them.

“Annie!” Ryan hollers again.

I take a step back, still staring at Tyler. “Your T-shirt’s in the washing machine. I’ll leave it by the back door.”



ALL DAY MONDAY AT SCHOOL, people are talking behind my back. I’m dreading rehearsal that afternoon, but it’ll be a relief too, because I’ll find out what they’re saying.

Turns out I don't have to wait long.

Jenna leans over in calc, when the teacher steps out, to whisper, "Are you okay? There's a rumor going around that you begged Kellan to punch your V-card, he said no, then when he tried to leave, you crawled after him."

I cut a look at Carly across the room. "That's how it happened," I deadpan. "I planned the whole party so some jock would stick his dick in me."

Jenna goes back to her book. My gaze lands on Pen's empty seat. I really wish she were here.

By the time I make it through lunch, then fourth and fifth periods, Carly and her minions have been spreading gossip all day, but it's Kellan I'm dreading most.

I don't want to look him in the eye.

I don't want him to touch me.

Not because I'm afraid, but because he's a reminder of how stupid I was to think I could win these people over.

Miss Norelli calls us to attention. "Since Mr. Albright doesn't have lacrosse today, we can run the rowboat scene."

The one where they nearly kiss. *Perfect. I get to beg for Kellan's attention on stage, too.*

Miss Norelli looks around as I drop my bags on the corner of the stage. "Where is Kellan?"

There's no Kellan in sight.

She checks her watch. "He must be running late. Annie, a word."

I cross to her, and the rest of the crew goes about their preparations.

“It was kind of you to host the party this week, which makes it hard to say this.”

The hairs on my arms lift. “Say what?”

“I’ve been thinking long and hard, and I’m not ready to put you on stage in the leading role after your inconsistent performance this past week.”

Every muscle in me tightens at once in denial and panic.

No. Shit, no, she can’t take this away from me.

I want to say it’s hard to focus when someone’s threatening to poison you with your own water bottle or point out that Kellan misses more rehearsals than he makes.

But Kellan’s good when he’s here. I hate that it’s true.

“I know I haven’t been consistent recently,” I admit, “but I’ll fix this. I swear. Just give me two weeks.”

“We put a premium on words, but actions speak louder.” Norelli sighs, checking something on her phone. “I can give you ten days, but I’m making sure Carly is well-versed in the lead. If your consistency doesn’t improve, I’m making an executive decision and putting Carly in your place.”

I nod because I can’t find the words to speak.

Before I can, Kellan strides in the door. He makes his way up to the stage, and I drag my feet to meet my prince, who’s taking his sweet time shrugging out of his blazer. When he straightens, my gasp isn’t the only one in the room. His eye’s so swollen it’s almost shut, fresh and pink and angry.

“I trust you’ll be more careful leading up to opening night. We can’t have our prince looking like he was bludgeoned,” Norelli chides.

I swear this day can't get worse until Kellan's good eye narrows as he lowers his voice. "You can wave your ass in my face and then fuck someone else, but tell him he doesn't need to run interference. You're not worth it."

I shake my head to clear it. "What...? That's not from lacrosse," I realize. "Someone hit you."

Kellan grimaces. "Don't pretend you don't know."

We put a premium on words, but actions speak louder.

I told Tyler not to tell my dad about Kellan.

It never occurred to me he'd take matters into his own hands.

The boy I've never seen lose his temper finally lost it.

I should be sickened or angry, and part of me is.

But there's a surge of conviction underneath.

Kellan's expensive cologne makes my stomach turn, but I step closer. "I know what you think happened, but I'm going to do you a favor and tell you the truth.

"I didn't pick Tyler Adams over you."

Kellan opens his mouth to respond, and I cut him off.

"But I would."

A gasp comes from the wings. I don't look to see if it's Carly or Jenna or the minions.

"He's twice the man you are," I press, "because he doesn't let petty bullshit get in the way of what matters.

"Now, I know you're no prince, but for the next hour, do us both a favor and pretend."

Tyler

YOU EVER HAVE a dream that's so real you can't tell it apart from the truth?

That's the kind I've been having.

Dark, seductive shapes.

Whispered promises of things I told myself I never wanted.

I never used to dream, but lately I can't stop, and every time I dream it's the same.

Tonight in the headmaster's office after school is no dream. It's a nightmare.

"Mr. Jamieson, there's been an incident." The headmaster's imperious tone has an apologetic edge, like he'd rather be getting a colonoscopy than delivering the news.

Most people don't like pissing off Jax Jamieson. I get it.

"What kind of incident?" My mentor's voice is whisky on the rocks. The guy could chew you out without losing that smoky depth.

I wish I could shove out of this too-low leather chair and stalk the hell out of this "look how rich we are" office. Instead, I force my gaze to the blotter in on the headmaster's desk.

“Mr. Adams assaulted another member of the senior class. Mr. Albright is a member of the lacrosse team,” the headmaster drones as if that matters.

“What’d he do to you?” Jax demands.

I don’t answer, but my knuckles grip the arm of the chair.

Since moving to Dallas, I’ve gotten a read on everyone at school.

Kellan Albright? The blond douche talks a big game, and we moved in the same circles, went to the same parties the times I bothered to attend them, but he always seemed harmless.

Until this weekend.

“You tell him about Kellan, I’ll tell him I woke up in your bed.”

I rub my good hand over my jaw. They’re still waiting on an answer.

“Nothing.”

The headmaster sighs. “Mr. Jamieson, we accommodated your... charge for his final semester. It’s highly unorthodox to admit new students mid-year, particularly for seniors. We can’t let this kind of behavior slide. It’s for Mr. Adams’ benefit, but also for the other students and their parents.”

“Then suspend him if you need to.”

The headmaster’s brows rise. “Fine. Thursday’s a PA day, but you’re suspended from school for the rest of the week.”

That’s less than ideal. I’m not a stellar student, which means I’ll need some extra studying time so I don’t fall behind more than I have before exams.

I'm going to graduate high school if it kills me. Everyone else in my family did, and if they can, I sure as hell can.

The parking lot is almost empty at this hour, and Jax doesn't say a word until he's at his car and I'm at my bike.

"You're not here to fuck around. You're here to work."

I hate that he's the one to remind me. "I know."

Most musicians would kill for the chance to work with Jax Jamieson. Every time he picks up his guitar, or lays down a phrase, or picks up the headphones to listen with a critic's ear, I'm reminded.

Music's my path forward. It's how I'm gonna be independent, distance myself from my upbringing and my dad's reach.

After eighteen years of shitty luck, when I'd practically tossed in my chips and given up for good, life dealt me a straight flush: the biggest rock songwriter and performer of the last two decades not only invited me into his studio—he invited me into his home.

Jax is more than a boss or a mentor. He's the father I could've had.

Except I couldn't have. He made sure of that.

I shake off the dark thoughts and flex my hand.

His gaze narrows. "You're a musician. You know better than to fuck up your hands." Jax prods at my palm, and pain spikes up my arm. "Now you're home from school, and you can't even play. Was it worth it?"

I remember the look on Kellan's face when I slammed my knuckles into his entitled jaw.

“It was my best work all week.”

I shift over my bike and reach for my helmet, but Jax hasn't moved.

“Tyler, I care about your future, but I don't want this shit happening anywhere near my kid.” I could laugh at the irony. “If anything else happens under my roof, you're out. We clear?”

I nod.

The world isn't a just place. Some people, like Jax, try to make it fair. They're only soothing their guilty consciences.

What about the ones who want to make the world better?

They're deluded. Admirable, beautiful, and deluded.

I take the long way home so Jax's Bentley is parked when I pull into the garage and cut my engine.

I walk around the house and through the gardens.

Rose petals cover the ground in one spot, and I stop, thinking of what put them there Saturday night.

I pick up a rose that's broken off its bush and lying on the path. The petals are intact, the purple rich and royal and defiant in the twilight.

My hand squeezes into a fist, and I clench my jaw at the pain before setting the rose carefully on the flagstone wall bordering the garden and continuing on my way.

The hum from the pool drifts into my brain, and it takes me a second to notice the splashing as I emerge onto the open patio.

Through the pool's electric-blue water, her body is just visible. Her hair billows behind her like a cloud, her dark-blue

bathing suit has me remembering the red one that made her legs look miles long Saturday night.

I pull out my phone and type out a text to the soph I met at UT Dallas back in January.

TYLER: Come over tonight.

I MOVE through the pool house in the dark, dropping my phone on the bed. In the bathroom, I strip off my clothes and step into the shower. The spray washes away a day of frustration and anger.

Kellan's lucky. He might not think so icing his face tonight, but he has no idea what I'd have done if he'd hurt her.

When I moved to Dallas, I hadn't planned on being the rich kids' fascination, but it made everything easier—catching up in school, blending in.

It's easy to stay on top when people don't know what you care about.

When they know how to hurt you...

You're weak.

I can't afford weakness. Not when I'm so close to making something of myself.

I want to get through graduation and leverage my work with Jax into session gigs in LA, New York. I'll have enough to provide myself, enough to leave my shitty home life behind and be free.

"Spoken like someone who's afraid."

Annie's wrong. I'm not afraid of fame, but I'm not dumb enough to think it's for me. And even if it wants me... I don't want it.

So, why does it bother you so much?

Because I don't want to want it. I'm never going to make the same mistake my father did.

When people get a taste of that life, it fucks with their head, destroys them and everyone around them.

When the prospect of six figures turns to seven turns to eight... it stops being about the music and starts being about something ugly.

The spray goes cold, and I step out and towel off.

Despite my current surroundings, I don't accept kindness easily. A favor is a debt in disguise.

The favor Jax did me by bringing me here isn't a new debt.

It's a payment on an old one.

I'm drying my hair when I jerk open the bathroom door and step out.

The hall light's on. I realize it a second before the sharp intake of breath has me freezing.

Annie Jamieson's in the doorway, her eyes round with shock. The dark bathing suit is painted on her slow curves. Her wet hair is the color of melted toffee, and she's dripping on my floor. "Holy shit."

Her attention isn't on the puddle she's leaving beneath her. It's not even on my face.

It's squarely between my legs.

I wrap the towel around my hips, taking longer than I should. “Hi.”

“Hi.” But her gaze lingers below my waist. “I needed a towel. The cabana’s... big.”

“It’s big,” I echo.

“It’s out! It’s out of towels,” she practically shouts, reddening. I don’t bother to hide my amusement.

“Did you want this one?” The way she’s staring, I can’t resist asking. My hands hover on the knot.

“No!” Her gaze snaps to mine as I swallow my first laugh all day.

She goes to the linen closet while I dig out a pair of sweatpants from the dresser.

“The lights were out,” she blurts over her shoulder, the flush lingering on her face. “I didn’t think you’d be here, and I didn’t think you’d be naked.”

“Two-for-two.”

The first time I saw Annie Jamieson three years ago, she was listening to music on her headphones on a bench outside school in Philly. Her eyes were closed, lips curved as if she were on another plane. Lost in a dream.

I didn’t know her name, but I wanted to know what it was like where she was because nothing in my world felt like that.

Over the next few weeks, I learned she loved music and books, both popular and the ones you need CliffsNotes for. I learned she was compassionate, the kind of person whose heart aches for animals in shelter commercials and who always stops to talk and joke with people living on the street even if she’s in a rush.

I also learned she was Jax Jamieson's daughter.

To this day, it's the only thing about her I'd change if I could.

"I thought you'd be at Big Leap." Annie wraps a towel around her body, knots it at her chest.

I think of Jax's former tour bus, converted to a mobile studio, in the driveway. "I've been dismissed."

"Seriously? My dad thinks you walk on water."

My attention lingers on her legs a beat too long before I look away. I tug on the sweatpants, leaving them low on my hips.

"No one walks on water except Haley." Jax's wife could burn the house down, and he'd just take her face in his hands and ask her who'd pissed her off so he could bring them down. It would be ridiculous if she wasn't so completely deserving of it.

I turn to see Annie working on a knot in the hair that hangs in wet chunks over her shoulder, ending at her breasts. She lets out a little growl, and against my better judgment, I close the distance between us. "Stop. You're going to rip your hair."

Picking guitar? No problem. Girl hair? Not my zone of genius. But I'll try because my biggest pet peeves are celebrity couple names, people who can't park without taking up two spaces, and watching Annie Jamieson hurt herself.

I expect her to fight me, but she huffs out a breath and drops her hands.

She was always cute, even back when she was a naïve fourteen and I was a worldly sixteen.

That changed when I wasn't looking, because now she's just the awkward side of beautiful. Her amber eyes reveal every thought, her pink lips are full in every variation of smiling and frowning, and the slight shoulders that curve inward when she's lost in a book or listening to music on headphones make you want to hold her against your side.

Not that she'd stay there. The girl's a live wire.

"Did you start the poetry assignment?" Annie asks, dragging me back.

Her voice is lower than most of the girls' at school, with this little lift at the end that makes you do a second take. Like when a girl walks by in a long skirt and you don't notice the full-length slit up the side until she's passed you.

"My future is music, not essays. Suffering for your craft is legit, but I'm not gonna suffer for someone else's."

She turns that over. "I'm suffering but not getting anywhere. Norelli wants to give Carly the lead."

Annie's low admission surprises me.

"Why?"

"Carly gets in my head at rehearsal."

Annie turns toward me as much as she can given my hold on her. Her gaze lingers on my chest—because it's at eye level, not because she's thinking about me naked.

"You'd never be in this position," she goes on. "Not because Carly wouldn't sabotage you, but because you're too good to let it affect you."

Pleasure unfurls in my gut without permission. Most girls who see me play get dreamy-eyed, but it has nothing to do with my abilities.

At least not with a guitar.

I force myself to focus on my task and not her flushed face. “Why do you want it so badly?”

Shit, this is impossible. I’m like Sisyphus if his boulder were instead a thousand strands of glorious tangled silk.

“Because on that stage, you’re *everything*.” Her voice is full and wistful, lifting the hairs on my arms. “A magician. A therapist. An artist. You have the privilege of an audience’s attention. They trust you to make them feel, make them believe. Name one place other than the stage where you become a god by falling on your knees.”

The knot’s almost free, but my fingers stop moving.

This. This is why I shouldn’t be a breath away from Annie Jamieson. Because no one moves through the world like her. She’s not afraid of its beauty and its darkness. She sees more, *feels* more, than anyone I’ve ever met. Spending time with her makes me believe I’ve witnessed something precious.

Precious things are dangerous.

“But I can’t do that unless I can get over this bullshit with Carly.”

I finish untangling her hair and lay it across her shoulder, the ends brushing the top of her towel. “Then be so good they can’t look away.”

“Thanks for the advice... and the hairstyling.” Her chuckle has me drawing a rough breath before she pins me in place with those amber eyes, the softness of her lips. The scratch on her cheek is fading, and I want to trace it but rein in the impulse.

I turn away, crossing to the dresser for a T-shirt because I've just realized there are way too few clothed body parts in this room.

“Kellan’s face was turning the color of rotten bananas in rehearsal,” she says as I’m pulling the shirt over my head.

I freeze.

Shit.

“I don’t know—“

“You’re so busted.”

I tug the hem down as I turn back to her. “I’m suspended until the weekend. Sat through a mind-numbing lecture from headmaster.”

She folds her arms over her chest, which makes my gaze drop to the little indentation between her breasts too close to where the towel’s knotted. “But you didn’t tell my dad why.”

I shake my head.

Annie crosses to me with deliberate steps, and I’m too surprised to stop her before she reaches for my hand.

Unlike Jax, she doesn’t make it worse, just inspects the reddened knuckles before sighing. “So, when Kellan hurts me, it deserves punishment, but when you hurt me, it’s fine.”

Her words lift the hairs on my neck and our gazes lock. Adrenaline surges through me.

She wants to do this now.

Fucking good. I’ve been waiting for it for four months.

I step closer until her towel brushes my chest. “If this is about me not answering your messages after you moved to Dallas, I had a ton of shit going on.”

She lifts her chin, unwilling to be intimidated. “Is that when your dad started locking you out?”

Pain has my gut twisting. “Still don’t wanna talk about—“

“Fine.” Her eyes flash. “Then let’s talk about what happened when you came here and everyone at Oakwood fell in love with you.”

Everyone? I want to ask, but she’s already going on.

“I could handle the weird popularity thing. But at Carly’s party, the way we talked and laughed and...” She shakes her head, the expression on her face shifting from anger to longing in a way that has my abs tightening. “I started to think we could be us again, even if you had other friends. Even if we hadn’t talked in months.

“That’s why I made you Rice Krispies squares the next morning like we used to. I came here to talk, but you weren’t alone.”

My heart stops because I’m starting to see where this is going.

Annie goes on, though I wish she wouldn’t. “There was a UT lanyard on the hook by the door, a girl’s boots on the mat.”

“You were jealous?” My voice is hoarse with incredulity because of all the thoughts that’d occurred to me, that wasn’t one of them.

“No.” She shoves angrily at my chest, but I don’t budge. “But I overheard you tell her I was nothing. Nobody.”

Fuck.

“I’ve been called nobody before,” she goes on, her voice oddly hollow, “but I never expected it from you.”

That hollowness must be contagious because it takes up residence in my gut, spreading with every breath.

I knew something had upset her, but she blocked me the next day with her phone. The day after with her heart.

She'd decided our friendship was over, and I let her do it.

It was what I wanted, wasn't it?

The first thing Jax told me when he offered me this opportunity was to stay away from his daughter.

Now, I want to take it all back.

I want to tell her she's more *something* than every other Oakwood student.

I want to protect the heart she wears on her sleeve like a fashion accessory.

“What do you want from me?” There's desperation in my words. Anything she asks me for right now, I'll give to her.

Her next breath fills her lungs, my ears. “I want to forget you.”

Five words.

Each one tears a layer off my heart.

It's her pain, but somehow I'm the one feeling scraped and bloody.

My phone buzzes on the bed, and my stomach drops before I read the text.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I tug on my hair hard enough my scalp hurts. “You gotta go.”

“What?”

A knock comes at the door, and Annie opens it.

Trisha's surprised face appears, and every curse word I've heard and some I haven't stream through my head at once.

Annie's body stiffens, and I get why even before Trisha hangs her UT lanyard on the hook by the door.

But before I can speak, Annie's out the door and across the patio, the hair that was in my fingers moments ago clinging to her back in wet waves.

"What the...? Did you spring a leak?" Trisha frowns at the puddle of water on the floor.

It's going to be a fucked-up night.

I never used to dream, but since Annie Jamieson spent the night in my bed—since I tugged my favorite T-shirt over her red bathing suit and felt her curl into me as if I was the answer to her problems instead of the cause of them...

I can't stop dreaming of mermaids.

Annie

“YOU SEE the car out front last night?” I ask my dad over coffee Tuesday morning before school.

“Friend of Tyler’s.”

I cut him a look. “And you don’t mind?”

“I mind that he went and screwed his hand.”

Haley comes into the kitchen dressed in jeans, a tank top, and a tidy ponytail, Sophie on her hip.

I find a smile for my half sister until my dad asks, “You see much of Tyler lately?”

I swallow my coffee the wrong way.

It was easier to keep him at a distance before I learned Tyler hit Kellan. Before he untangled my hair as if it was his job.

Oh yeah, and before I walked in on him naked.

Tyler Adams is hot. The well-tailored prep school clothes don’t do him justice.

The boy I grew up with is a man, imposing and beautiful and dangerous. Anyone who’s ever made the mistake of

thinking Tyler Adams is all brooding prettiness with nothing to back it up needs to think again.

Would he even fit?

Some part of me is desperate to know the answer, but I'm sure as hell not about to ask him.

I'd gone to the pool house already upset about rehearsal and left even more confused.

It wasn't seeing all of him that threw me, it was the shock on his face when I told him what I'd heard back in January.

That single expression has me wondering if I'm missing something that would explain why Tyler's been so secretive all year.

I thought he might've been about to open up to me until that girl showed up and every spark of hope in my chest extinguished.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" my dad asks as I jump out of my chair.

"I was working on some things for rehearsal last night." I grab a piece of bread and drop it in the toaster. I check the clock and, on second thought, take the bread back out. "Uncle Ryan gave me some trade secrets, and I kind of missed doing my calculus homework."

Dad slings an elbow over the back of his chair. "Rehearsal doesn't take precedence over homework."

I pat my father on the cheek. "Tell it to your Grammys, Dad."

For good measure, I tap Sophie, now in her high chair, on the nose. "Can you say Grammys? Gram-mys." She gurgles and beams, which is the most positive response I've gotten

from the universe all week. “Make good choices,” I tell her before turning for the door.

Three hours later in second period, I’m cursing calculus, wishing for the life of me Pen was here.

Jenna leans over. “You stuck? I can help. No one should suffer proofs in silence.”

I glance up at the front of the class. The teacher’s gone for a few minutes.

Jenna shows me how to work through the proof, and I try to keep up.

“What do you even need this class for?” she asks.

“Pen and I are going to Columbia together. She wants to do journalism. I’m going to start in liberal arts and niche down later.” I want to do something that helps people, but I can’t decide if it’s through journalism or social science or even psychology.

“I’m going into engineering at Stanford. I need math. You don’t. Are you taking the musical for credit?”

I shake my head. “There’s an evaluation component if I want credit, and I didn’t think I’d have time.”

“If I had the lead in the musical and an extra course, I’d for sure drop calc and get the credit for drama instead.”

I’m still turning that over when the bell rings and she falls into step next to me on my way to my locker.

“I don’t mind suffering for my craft, but I’m not gonna lose sleep suffering for someone else’s.”

I’d never thought seriously about getting credit for the musical, but given that I’m at risk of losing the lead, it’s time

for desperate measures.

“I’m sorry about what happened with Kellan.” Jenna’s voice pulls me back. “I was with Carly, so I didn’t see what went down, but I can’t picture you hitting on him and him prying you off.”

“Thanks. Are you and Carly hanging out now?”

She shrugs. “We’re not best friends or anything, but she’s nicer to me than she has been. She’s pissed at you, though. More than usual. Tyler was crazy-fierce Saturday night when he kicked everyone out.”

I’d been so caught up in the fallout with Kellan I hadn’t thought about that.

I hug my books and glance down the row of lockers to see Tyler’s friends at their lockers without him because he’s at home, suspended.

It still means nothing.

But after school, I scan my first-period English notes and leave the copies on the doorstep of the pool house.



“GOT YOUR SPEECH?” Haley asks my dad in the back of the limo that night. “Tell me you’re not winging it.”

“I’ve played sold-out shows at Horseshoe. That’s a hundred and five thousand seats. I think I can manage a room full of rich donors.”

She stares him down until he pulls the marked-up sheet of paper from his pocket. “So, you had your agent spend half a

day writing that,” she says dryly, “and you won’t use a word. That’s borderline sadistic.”

My dad flashes her a grin. “Come on, Hales. I’m a songwriter. And it’s only sadistic if he’d be at the fundraiser tonight.”

I can’t help smiling.

I like my stepmom a lot. She’s smart and funny and bold. She runs her own software company with a guy in Philly who’s Tom Hiddleston hot and used to be her professor.

It *kills* my dad that she won’t leave Carter and go out on her own, which he insists is because Haley could do better solo, not because Carter’s younger than my dad with a panty-dropping smile.

Dad and Haley met back when he was still on tour and she was interning. However it happened, he looks at her like the sun rises and sets out of her ass.

It’s the real fucking deal.

“You look fantastic, Annie,” Haley comments.

“Thanks.”

“Jax?” Haley nudges my dad with her elbow.

He frowns. “It’s not a dress. It’s a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen.”

My jaw drops. “It is not!”

“Could we not afford more fabric?” he asks Haley, who narrows her gaze at him before turning to me.

“Ignore him.”

The black dress Pen and I picked out skims my body, has little spaghetti straps, and ends mid-thigh. It’s sophisticated

and fresh, especially with strappy sandals. I left my hair down, taming the waves that tickle the bare skin between my shoulders.

I feel older, grown-up. More confident.

I stare out the window and hum under my breath.

“Is that from the musical?” Haley asks me. “It’s sounding good.”

“Thanks.” I look at my dad, but he’s on his phone. “Don’t forget to line up security for the night of the show.”

Assuming I still have a role, I think, but I’m not about to say that.

He glances up, blinking. “Annie, it’s on the list.”

I shake my head.

When we pull up in front of the venue, my dad grunts, adjusting his tux. “It’s not too late to turn around,” he mutters. “We can grab the bourbon, head home, and fund this entire project ourselves.”

“That’s not the point. The point is to collaborate.” Haley pauses. “If you’ve never heard of it, a collaboration is where you compromise and work as a team—”

“Funny, Hales.”

The charity event is a fundraiser for music education at some gallery in Fort Worth with a bunch of people my dad knows. Sophie’s at home with Uncle Ryan playing babysitter, which I think he secretly loves.

The frustration I felt in the car ebbs as we make our way around the event. My dad glad-hands people. It’s not in his nature, but despite Haley’s joke, he’s come around to it.

Usually, he doesn't invite me to these things, but tonight, he introduces me around.

"This is my daughter, Annie. She's a junior at Oakwood," he tells one producer. "And taking two AP courses."

"One, actually," I say.

My dad frowns. "Since when?"

I shift, twirling the drink in my fingers. "Since I've decided to drop calculus."

"Excuse us." He stalks toward a spare room and yanks the door shut behind us. "You can't drop calculus."

"I can. I checked the school's drop policies, and even though it's late in the semester, they'll allow it. And I wouldn't be losing a credit. I can get one for the musical. I have to turn in an assignment, but basically, it's as good as done."

"You're not dropping calculus for a musical."

His commanding tone sets my teeth on edge.

"Calculus isn't a prerequisite for Columbia. Even if it was, I still have time to take it next year."

"You're in school to learn, not to mess around on stage." He spreads his hands. "You can do that anywhere. Anytime. The education you're getting right now is important."

I want to blurt that I can't think about proofs and second derivatives when I'm trying to hang onto the lead of the musical, but I know if I tell him, he'll just tell me it's better that way. Or look at me as if it's obvious that I could never command a stage like he could, like Tyler can.

"Do you even get the irony?" I ask. "You're telling your own child music isn't important at a music education

fundraiser you're keynoting."

"I didn't say it's not important," he retorts. "But music's not the world."

"It's *your* world, and you won't let me near it."

The words hang between us because that's the crux of all of this.

I'm the daughter he keeps at a distance, the one he shuts out from part of his life when he lets other people like Tyler into it.

"You don't get to decide this, Dad. I've already made my choice. If you won't give me permission, I'll stop showing up to calculus."

"Do that and you're grounded."

I scoff. "You don't know what that means."

"I'll figure it out. And so help me, you won't leave the house except to go to school for the rest of the semester."

I yank the door open and start into the hall.

"Where are you going?" Dad growls at my back.

"If I'm going to be grounded next week, I'll enjoy my freedom while I can."

Tyler

“CAN YOU BELIEVE THE CHICKS?” Brandon goads me. “It’s like a buffet.”

I tune my guitar on the little box stage and survey the living room of the frat house packed with bodies. “We’re here to play.”

“Yeah, we are.” The wicked inflection in his voice lets me know exactly what kind of playing he has in mind.

Brandon’s a good guy. Sure, he’s loaded and a little entitled, but he’s a straight shooter.

I don’t count on him to have my back, but then, I’ve learned that’s an unrealistic expectation to have of anyone.

Trisha comes up on stage. She shifts close enough I smell perfume and plants a flirty kiss that tastes like beer on me before I can dodge it. “Thank you for doing this.”

“Sure.” I don’t say she’s paying me, though it’s true.

She bounces away, and I turn to adjust my amp.

“So, that’s how you do it.” Brandon looks impressed. “You really don’t give a fuck.”

There’s a short list of things I care about, and girls aren’t on it. I would never disrespect them, and I would never

pretend to care when I don't, which is why I've been candid with Trisha about what we are.

She helps me out with what I need. It's a transaction.

A couple times, things went further when my head was messed up.

But that was a mistake, and I told her as much.

We're getting ready to start when my phone jumps in my pocket. Brandon sends me a WTF look, but I shake him off when I see the number.

I duck out into the hallway and hit Accept.

"My dad is an autocrat." Annie's incredulous voice has my brows lifting. "I did what you suggested, and he lost his shit."

Warning bells go off in my head. "What did I suggest?"

"To do whatever it takes to be good. I told him I'm dropping calculus to focus on the musical, and he freaked out."

I pick at the corner of the wallpaper in the hallway, the bruises on my knuckles fading. "So, lock yourself in your room and crank The Struts for twelve hours. Problem solved."

"I didn't call you because I wanted you to solve it. I called because I needed to tell someone, and I can't tell anyone else."

Most people can't understand the pressure that comes with this life, with her life.

There's so much to say to that, but what comes out is, "I thought you blocked my phone."

"I unblocked it."

"When?"

Annie doesn't answer, but I want to know whether it was before Monday night when she came by the pool house or after.

"What do you want?"

"I want to forget you."

But last night, I found the notes from the English class I'd missed on my doorstep.

No reasonable person would read so much into two sheets of paper, but it was almost as if she'd opened the door a crack and was waiting for one of us to step through.

"I'm playing a set," I hear myself say, "but I'll be back later if you want to talk."

Trisha's probably hoping I'll crash with her, but I can't stay here if I know Annie's spinning out across town.

"Forget it," she says.

I don't want to get sucked in. Annie's little rebellions are usually more like silent protests anyway.

But she has a car. Who knows where she'd go?

"Wait," I say before she can hang up. "I'm gonna give you an address. Don't get lost, and don't get into trouble."

Annie snorts. "I'm not coming to find you, and I never get into—"

I click off, exhaling hard as I text her the address.

The girl's walking trouble. Everywhere she goes, people watch her. Not because she's Jax Jamieson's kid, but because she has this energy you can't ignore.

As we play our first few songs, I notice the ache in my hand has subsided and I'm almost back to a hundred percent.

Not that anyone here's in a state to appreciate it. The crowd is plied with alcohol and noise. They want to drink and dance and—judging by the number of couples groping and grinding—to fuck.

My music's always been for me, first and foremost. As a kid, it was a way for me to escape my shitty life. I could shut myself in a room, a closet, a shed, and play.

I soaked up everything I could from the internet, music class at school, hundreds of albums I borrowed and stole. Later, I got a chance to play as part of a community outreach program with Wicked. Real instruments, real musicians, real *everything*.

That changed my life. I realized music could be not only my escape but my salvation, my future...

And the pieces started clicking into place.

It's why I'm so hellbent on being a session musician after graduation. I want security, reliability, to know that I never have to depend on another person who'll let me down.

Tonight, I've resigned myself to another hour of playing covers with Brandon's band for a numb crowd.

At least until a whisper drags down my spine and makes me look up, tossing my hair out of my face.

Annie Jamieson is hovering by the window.

In a room full of drunks, those clear amber eyes are a beacon, a reminder of everything beyond these four walls.

A group of girls standing in front of her moves, and I fucking *miss a chord*.

She's wearing a black dress that should be illegal, but it's not only the clothes, but the fire in her eyes, the straightness in

her spine, that makes her look like a college freshman, not a high school junior.

You came, I mouth, sure she won't be able to read my lips.

But she lifts a shoulder, her mouth curving. *Don't get too excited*, she mouths back.

Mistakes love company. They travel in packs, like the shallow girls that prowl the halls at Oakwood.

My first was inviting her here, so while I'm at it, I throw in a second for good measure.

I play for her, adding some extra flourishes, a solo that has Brandon's jaw on the floor.

"Name one other place you can become a god by falling on your knees."

I'm not a god but a demon, my hands flying over the strings as I finish, holding the last note for extra reverb, a little vintage flair that would've made Hendrix grin.

But when I look up, I have to search for her.

I finally spot her in the corner, talking to a built, clean-cut guy.

My good mood dies.

Fuck no. I didn't bring her here to get hit on by some keg-standing bro.

Half my mind's on them through the rest of our songs, and at the end of our set, I shove my guitar into its case.

Before I can push through the crowd, Trisha's at my arm. "Didn't realize you were babysitting tonight," she says, cutting a glance toward the corner.

“It’s not like that.” But I crane my neck, trying to keep my eyes on Annie.

Trisha slides a stack of bills into my pocket. “Maybe you should take some of that judgment you like to level at the world and turn it back on yourself.”

I brush past her to where Annie’s standing next to Frat Boy.

Sure enough, he’s grinning at her like she’s sex and chocolate all wrapped up in a single package.

Annie’s gaze lights on me, and her smile dims a few watts at whatever’s on my face. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I slide a hand around Annie’s waist, brushing her hip with my fingers as I bend toward her ear. “We’re going.”

Frat Boy’s face falls, and I memorize the moment he realizes she’s not his.

Still, the regret in Annie’s voice as she says goodbye annoys me all the way out the front door and down the steps.

“Why were you being a dick to that guy?” she demands once we’re on the sidewalk. Drunk people stumble past us, laughing and carefree.

“Because he was working to get in your pants.”

She cocks her head. “Then he didn’t need to work so hard. I’m wearing a skirt.”

I’m seconds from ripping into her with some uptight tirade about college guys only wanting one thing, but my phone rings before I can.

The number has me stopping in my tracks. I let it ring, and when the phone goes silent, the world suddenly feels too still.

“It’s your dad, isn’t it?” Her voice fills the night air around us.

I haven’t talked about it with anyone because if I don’t say it out loud, it doesn’t matter so much.

“No,” I hear myself say. “He was my father but not anymore.”

I rub a hand over my jaw, the stubble I didn’t have time to shave this morning. Whether it’s the surprise phone call or the way Annie’s looking at me, nonjudgmental and patient, I continue.

“The money I saved from working with Wicked in Philly was supposed to pay for college. I had two years’ worth. My dad thought I owed it to him.”

Her shiny lips curve, incredulous. “He locked you out. You owed him nothing.” Her voice is soothing, but under the surface, there’s an echo of anger.

“He has his reasons for thinking I did.” My chest contracts as the memories wash over me, things I’ve buried deep down where they belong. “I told him if I did that, we were even and he could never ask me for anything again. He promised.

“So, on my eighteenth birthday, we went to the bank and I signed over every penny. I haven’t talked to him since.”

My phone dings once more with a voicemail notification. I hit Delete and shove the phone in my pocket.

“Aren’t you going to listen to it?” she asks.

“No. Either he’s saying everything’s great now that I’m out from under his roof, or he’s blown through the money and wants more.”

I start walking again, my motions stilted, and she follows.

“I don’t blame him,” I say after half a block. “You get too dependent on people, they find a way to take from you. It’s human nature.”

“But relationships aren’t one-way. When you say no to someone because you’re afraid they’ll take from you, you’re also saying no to what they could give you.”

“Which is what?”

The little noise in her throat makes me look over, and I’m surprised to see her smiling. “You have to say yes to find out.”

I turn that over as we come to a little dive bar tucked into a strip mall at the corner.

She stares at it longingly. “My car’s right behind that building, but it seems like a waste to go home. I shaved my legs and everything.”

My attention drags down her body. Her strappy shoes with fuck-me heels. The black dress that hugs her curves. The hint of makeup lining her eyes, the gloss making her lips shine.

It’s a bad idea, but whether it’s the look on her face as if maybe she needs this or a feeling in me like maybe I do, I can’t say no.

“I missed out on dinner too,” I admit. “Maybe they’ve got cheese fries.”

Her face lights up like I just promised her the fucking sun.

Inside the dive restaurant are a dozen students and a few older people. There’s an arcade at one end with a billiard table.

Annie makes a beeline for the billiard table. “Oh yeah. This is it.” The desire in her voice has the hairs lifting on my neck even before her gaze finds mine. *Wanna play pool?*

Adrenaline hits me, a rush that's too intense given her innocent question.

Fucking yes, I want to play pool. After the call from my dad, I want it so badly I ache.

"We need stakes," she decides, glancing at the chalkboard menu over the bar. "Loser buys cheese fries."

"Not enough," I argue. "Whoever sinks a ball gets to ask a question."

We go to the bar to order sodas, then set our Cokes on the edge of the billiard table. I reach for the cues on the wall as she leans over the felt and racks up the balls. "Are you dating that girl who was at the pool house and the party?" she asks casually, "or is it only sex?"

The light hanging over the table casts her face half in shadows. That coupled with her low, confident voice, has me doing a double-take.

"My bad." Annie takes a cue from me and breaks, and one ball drops into the corner pocket. She smiles, slow and satisfied, before lifting her gaze to mine. "So, is it only sex?"

A voice deep down tells me I should lie, that it's better for all of us.

But she won and she asked, and I can't reward her with anything less than the truth.

"She's my tutor."

Annie's smile melts away as she straightens. "But I walked into the pool house that morning after Carly's party and she was there."

I take a drink of my soda, eye her over the cup. "I met her my first week here. Knew I'd need some help in chemistry and

physics, and she tutors both.”

“She came over at midnight?” Annie arches a dark brow, and I mimic her in response.

“I wanted someone to talk to without a stake in all this. It was a fucked-up week. She came, then she crashed.”

She stares at me a long moment, and I nod to the table, impatient. “It’s still your shot.”

Annie misses.

I circle the table before lining up my shot across from her.

I sink the five.

There are a million things I could ask her, but the one I’m most interested in is, “Tell me why you’re really pissed at your dad.”

She screws up her face. “Because he won’t let me anywhere near music.”

“You can’t blame him for that.”

“I don’t. I blame you.”

Surprise has me stiffening.

“You were better at everything, always, than I was,” she continues. “Since you moved here, all of his time that he’s not working, or with Sophie, or with Haley, he’s with you.”

It’s still my turn, but Annie circles the table, never lifting her attention from the possible shots, even when she has to step sideways to avoid me.

“But I realized something tonight,” she goes on. “It’s not your fault. He wouldn’t have let me in anyway.”

“I couldn’t come between you if I wanted to.” There’s a sense of urgency beneath my words.

She chalks up her cue, oblivious, and I step between her and the table.

I take the cue from her hands so she’s forced to meet my gaze. “You have to know that,” I press.

Her expression shifts from determined to resigned. “It’s not only about the music. At my dad and Haley’s wedding last summer, a woman approached me and said she was my biological mother.”

My stomach ices over. “What the fuck?”

“She handed me a letter that’s sat unopened in my drawer for a year. I haven’t told anyone except for you right now. Maybe it’s like the voicemails from your dad. I want to believe it says that she loves me, that she’s proud. That we should get brunch sometime in New York or wherever she lives.” She shrugs a shoulder, the simple movement conveying way more than apathy. “But what if it says something terrible? Some secret I can’t unknow?”

The confusion in her voice rips at me. I hate that she’s had this burden for a year, even if it’s partly my fault.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I murmur even though I think I know the answer.

She puts a hand on her hip, cocking her head. “You were busy being too cool for me.”

“Maybe I’m done being too cool for you.”

Annie sucks in a breath but recovers fast, angling her chin up. “Maybe I’m done caring.”

She starts to step away, but my fingers wrap around her upper arm, and her gaze flies to mine. She's close enough I could pull her into my arms, and against my better judgment, I want to.

"She can't say anything that changes who you are," I tell her. "Who your dad is."

I release her arm, brush a thumb over her cheek, and watch the conflicting emotions scroll across her face.

The scratch has healed, like my hand, but we can't go back to the way we were before.

There was always a connection between us, and I'm starting to see why.

We have the same pain even though we've never talked about it. Even though we deal with it differently.

I bury mine so deep it can't get surface, but hers...

She breathes it every day. Lives through it, makes the world more beautiful despite all of it.

Annie grabs her cue back from me but doesn't step away. "I don't want your pity, okay? I want to play pool. And laugh. And pretend I'm some college freshman out late on a school night and I shaved my legs for a good reason."

"Fine. Don't move." She wants to play grown-up, I can do that.

I turn back to the table, rounding the felt and making quick work of the two ball before returning to exactly my previous position, inches away from her. I can smell her shampoo or body wash, something simple and floral, and I want to drop my face to her neck so I can figure out which it is.

She lifts a brow in amusement, as if she notices how close I am, too.

“What happened with Kellan Saturday night?” I ask. “Until you stumbled into my pool house, you looked like you wanted his hands on you.”

She swallows, her full lips parting. The vulnerability on her face slices through me. “I was never into Kellan. I thought he saw me.”

Fuck.

No matter what I promised Jax, if I’d met her tonight, looking like this?

I’d lead her into one of these shadowy corners and show her I see her.

In the dark, I see this girl.

Laughter drags my attention toward a couple a few years older who’ve been flirting at the bar. They shift off the stools, him wrapping an arm around her as they make out on the way past us to the door.

By the time I turn back, Annie’s gone. Slipped past me to plan her next attack on the table.

We trade shots back and forth, careful not to tread on anything too personal, as if we both recognize we got too close.

Best new band you’ve found this year.

Most embarrassing moment at Oakwood.

Vacation you dream of taking after graduation.

Book you were forced to read for English class that you secretly love.

Even though we're steering clear of dangerous territory, we're getting to know each other again, and it feels good.

Finally, there's one shot left. The angle's terrible. There's almost no way to catch the three without sinking the eight.

"You got a plan for that?" I ask, coming up behind her.

"Working on it."

"I can already taste my cheese fries," I say solemnly.

She bends over the table, her dress inching up the backs of her thighs. "Better grab your wallet, then."

More than one interested pair of male eyes finds her, and my protectiveness kicks in.

"Let me help," I say, surprising both of us.

I swore I wouldn't let myself get caught up in her, but in this darkened dive bar where no one knows her or me, that decision feels a million miles away.

I shift closer, shielding Annie's body from the rest of the bar with mine. "Get your angle."

"Oh, I've got mine." Her voice is low and teasing. The flat of her back brushes my chest, her ass pressing lightly against my groin, and I have to bite my cheek to hold in the groan. "Do you?"

Who is this creature, and what has she done with the girl I used to be friends with?

The floral scent is definitely her hair.

I want to know how the rest of her smells.

"You think you know how to do everything," she murmurs, and her smug tone chafes my ego.

“I do know how to do everything.”

Annie turns her head, catches me staring. Her cheeks are flushed, lips parted, and she’s trying to figure out what I’m playing at.

That makes two of us.

My hands tighten on her as if now that I’ve felt her against me, I can’t stand the thought of her anywhere else.

I won’t kiss her. A thousand paths that lead to my destruction begin with kissing this girl.

But I want to.

I want more of her, closer. To spin her and lift her up on this pool table, to make her see how fucking awesome she is.

To have some of that awesomeness rub off on me.

“Tyler...” Annie turns back to the table, loosing the cue in a smooth, practiced motion that has my brows shooting up. The final two balls sink neatly into the pockets, eight last.

Admiration and pure fucking lust coil at the base of my spine.

I can handle both of those until she utters five words that crash like a battering ram against the wall around my heart.

“You owe me cheese fries.”

Annie

“BITCH, I missed the hell out of you.” Pen bounces at my front door Thursday right before noon, her lime-green Mini in the driveway. She holds out a gold rectangular box. “This is for your dad and stepmom from my parents. It’s some fancy booze.”

I take it from her and lead the way through the house. “Perfect. Dad, Haley, and Sophie are out, but I’ll put it with the fancy booze collection.”

I head for the wine storage room off the kitchen and drop off the box.

“One for them, one for us. I’m so ready for this PA day.”

I grab a bottle of champagne at random out of one of the coolers.

Surprise crosses Pen’s face. “I thought we were studying.”

“Later. I want to hear all about your trip.”

Soon, we’re in bathing suits by the pool, the sun baking us. She’s telling me about Tuscany, the house and rolling hills.

“And your book recs were on point,” she adds. “I made it through two rom-coms, plus the one about the refugee who

started a business in her new country and got all the local women involved. So good.”

“I’m glad. Any guys on this trip?” I prod.

“The winery next door had a son.”

She pulls out her phone and shows me pictures of a guy with dark eyes and curly hair.

“Pen. Did you...?”

“Second base. Which I think is only first base in Italian.” She sighs. “I forgot how much I love your pool.”

“You may be seeing more of it. I’m grounded.” I lift my glass in a toast.

“Wait, *what?*” Pen’s screech echoes off the house as she grabs my arm.

“I decided to drop AP calc. My dad was not a fan.”

“You can’t drop calc.”

I explain my reasoning, and she finally concedes. “So, is this grounding thing the reason you went out and bought that fuck-hot bikini? To give your dad a heart attack?”

I look down at my bathing suit. That’s not how I would’ve described it, but now that she says it, I can see where she’s coming from. It’s red and cut high on my legs, makes my ass look great, and the magic top pushes everything up enough that it looks as if I have real, live boobs. Cleavage and everything. “I just felt like it.”

“What about the pool party?”

The memory has me shivering despite the sunshine. “Kellan hit on me, but when I passed, he turned pissy fast.”

Her face turns thunderous. “I’m going to shove his balls down his throat.”

“Too late. He had a black eye the whole week.” I nod toward the pool house.

She picks up the bottle of wine and fills her glass halfway. “Tyler Adams hit him. I should go away more often.”

I nearly drop my glass as Tyler and Brandon come around the side of the house. My throat goes dry, and it’s not from the champagne.

They’re both wearing shorts and nothing else, but it’s Tyler’s body that has me sitting up straighter.

His shoulders are broad and deliciously rounded, his pecs defined. Suddenly, I’m remembering how he looked playing at that party. How he smelled. How he felt, that body pressed against mine.

I hate how girls trip over themselves for musicians as if the fact that a guy can play a chord progression magically predicts his ability to get you off.

But from the second I walked in the door of the fraternity house and saw Tyler on that stage, I was lost.

They didn’t deserve him, didn’t even appreciate what he was giving them.

I did.

Thank goodness for padding because it’s way too hot out for my nipples to be getting hard under this bathing suit.

“Tyler hit who over who?” Brandon asks.

“Kellan Albright.” Pen pulls her sunglasses down her nose, then reaches for the sunscreen.

“That’s how I heard it.” Brandon cocks his head at my friend. “Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of tanning?”

“If I was trying to tan, yes. If I’m studying, no.”

Brandon smirks. “Doesn’t look like studying.”

“Do you want me to prove the fundamental theorem of calculus on this patio with my lipstick? Because bitch, I’ll do it.” His jaw goes slack, and she turns her attention to Tyler. “You’ve been looking out for my girl.”

“Someone’s got to,” Tyler answers.

Pen smirks. “Gasp, Adams.”

“Your girl knows exactly what she’s doing,” Brandon weighs in. “Lil’ sis was a serious cockblock last night.”

He grins at Tyler, who’s shooting him a death glare, before returning to Pen.

“It’s obvious the whole ‘come play our party’ thing was Trish’s excuse to get our boy on campus for a little extra-credit homework. Then you show up”—he nods at me— “and Ty’s gone all night.”

I take a sip of my drink. “Sorry.”

“Like fuck you are,” Brandon cackles.

It’s true. Learning that girl is Tyler’s tutor made me feel like he didn’t bail on me for someone else—not in January, not even this week.

Has Tyler slept with anyone since he moved here?

Maybe that’s why he’s so broody and repressed. The guy needs to get laid.

“You girls going to use the pool or just gawk at it?” Brandon grabs Pen’s glass, drains it despite her squeak of

protest, then jumps—cup still in hand—into the pool.

I stare at Tyler over the rim of my glass, and his gaze warms on mine.

“Brandon’s right.” I rise, adjusting my swimsuit, then toss my hat on the patio and yank my hair up into a messy topknot. I brush past Tyler and cannonball into the water.

When I come up, I hear cheering from Brandon and squealing from Pen, who carefully steps over the edge into the shallow end.

Tyler’s the last one in, but I can’t take my eyes off him when he disappears below the surface or when he emerges once more, tossing his wet hair back with a grin that makes my stomach flip.

Last night with Tyler felt exhilarating.

We both have reasons to be weighed down, but hanging with him, like it was us against the world, was a rush I didn’t expect.

The news of his dad’s blackmail, or whatever you want to call it, made me angrier than anything I can remember.

My dad’s never made me feel like I owed him. Even the shock of my birth mom showing up, the secret I’ve been carrying around about the letter that lives in my desk upstairs, feels small and less dramatic by comparison.

I want to track Tyler’s dad down and chew him out. I want to tell him he doesn’t deserve to have a son who’s talented and capable, one who’s resourceful enough to fend for himself when his parents don’t.

I want...

God, I want so many things with Tyler.

I shouldn't, but I can't seem to stop.

We splash around for a while, trying to keep a volleyball in the air. Eventually I pause on the wall to catch my breath, watching Pen and Brandon fall into teasing conversation.

“Hey.” I gasp as I realize Tyler's sneaked up on me in the pool. My gaze pulls to his abs and the water that licks at his stomach a couple inches above the waistband of his shorts.

“What is that?” he asks.

I glance down at the ink sticking out the top of my bikini bottom and mentally curse that I forgot to scrub it off. “Just words. I write things I want to remember.”

“Like ‘buy milk’?”

I put my hands on my hips. “No. Like ‘be fearless’ or ‘open your heart.’”

“Can I see?”

I hoist myself half out of the pool on my elbows and try not to squirm as he tugs down the side of my bikini bottoms.

“Leave it all.”

I feel my body flush under his scrutiny.

Normally I write wherever I have space and my words won't be seen—my wrist, my thigh, my waist. Of course, this time it's on the front of my hip, below my hipbone. Dangerously low.

“It means don't hold back. Leave the fear, the doubt, the uncertainty, and give everything. Be everything. I've been telling myself that in rehearsal.”

I drop back into the water, and he shades his eyes with a hand. “You could get a tattoo. It'd last longer.”

I shake my head. “I couldn’t decide on one. I’d be covered everywhere. It’d make Dad’s sleeve look like one of those girly ankle tats.”

Tyler grins. When he motions me closer still with a crooked finger, I inch toward him, the water doing nothing to cool my heating blood.

Then before I can decide what his game is, he dunks me.



“I KEEP SEEING banners around for prom. That your doing?” Brandon asks Pen as we head inside after we finish swimming to find something to eat.

“I was on the junior prom committee, but one of the directors of senior prom came down with chicken pox.” Pen shrugs. “Anyway, A’s gonna be my backup.”

“We’ll see,” I say as we scrounge some sandwiches from cold cuts in the fridge and fresh ciabatta rolls on the counter. “I might still be grounded, and I draw the line at serving drinks to the minions while wearing a monkey suit. Are you guys going?”

“I’m still waiting for the right moment to ask Tyler,” Brandon drawls, and Tyler snorts.

“Bring me roses, B, or there’s no way I’m letting you blow me in the limo.”

I shake my head because, apparently, I’m not getting a real answer. “Carly’s been bragging about how Kellan asked her. If only that’d get her off my back.”

“Guess you missed your chance.” Brandon laughs at Tyler as we take our plates of food back out to sit on the patio.

I shiver at the thought of Tyler taking Carly. I picture him in a tux, soft lights and white smiles and flirting in corners.

“I wouldn’t touch her if my life depended on it.” Tyler shifts into the chair at the head of the table. Even out here, he naturally assumes the control position.

“What about at the pool party?” I ask.

“I let her use my bathroom, then kicked her out.”

“Why?” I can’t resist asking. “She’s a dick to us, but she’d probably wax your motorcycle with her tits if you asked her to.”

“Guess she’s not my type.” He reclines in his seat, pushing sunglasses up his nose. “I don’t want her tits anywhere near my shit.”

That pronouncement makes me irrationally happy.

My phone buzzes, and I glance at it. “Norelli just said the gym is free for rehearsal for anyone who can go! I need to be there.”

Tyler cocks his head. “You’re grounded. You’re not leaving.”

I wink at him. “Watch me.”

I’m grateful we ended up consuming less than half a glass each of champagne earlier as I say goodbye to Pen, then head to the garage and reach for my keys.

They’re not there.

I whirl and stalk back to the patio, where Tyler and Brandon are still sitting.

“Where are my keys?”

Tyler clasps his hands behind his head. “Beats me.”

I'm halfway down the driveway to catch the Uber I called when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Come back. Your dad'll be pissed if you leave on my watch." Tyler's voice at my back is one part amused, one part annoyed.

"I need to rehearse."

"You can rehearse in the house." He catches up and cuts me off.

"I'm going. You can't stop me."

"Wanna bet?"

He slings me over his shoulder before I can take another breath.

The ground is a few feet from my face, blood rushing to my head as I try to orient myself. "What the hell! This is medieval. No, these are like... press gang tactics. Put me down!"

"Once we get to the house."

I grind my teeth together as I bounce on his shoulder. "You're staring at my ass, aren't you?"

"As much as you're staring at mine."

The finger I'm tracing over the stitching on the back pocket of his jeans stills, and Tyler chuckles.

"I was hoping you'd have a comic strip on your thigh. This is a long driveway."

The only sounds for the next dozen steps are his steady breathing and my awkward huffs of breath.

When he finally sets me down, we're in the rose garden where I was with Kellan last weekend.

“I have to tell you something,” he says.

I blink, feeling the blood flow back down my body and out of my head. “Okay...”

Tyler bends to pick something off the flagstone, turning back to me. It’s a purple rose, its stem broken but its petals intact.

“I called you nothing that day because I figured if I said it enough, I’d start to believe it.”

My throat tightens. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Not great.” He rubs a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in a way that should be stupid but isn’t. “Before I came here, Jax told me to keep my distance.”

Unbelievable.

I open my mouth, but Tyler continues first.

“He was right, by the way.” He steps closer until I’m forced to lift my chin to hold his gaze. “I have no business inserting myself in your life.”

I fold my arms over my chest, taking in his contrite expression. “I will be the judge of who inserts themselves in my *anything*, thank you very much.”

His mouth twitches, and he holds up the rose.

A gift has to cost something. Not money but time, emotion.

The flower’s not a gift, but it feels like one.

I take the stem from his hand and turn it between my fingers. “When I lived with Aunt Grace, back before I learned Jax was my dad, we had roses in the house at least once a month. Usually red. Her husband bought them for her.” My

chest squeezes hard at the memory. “I always knew when they were coming because it was the day after they fought. She’d sleep in that morning, spend extra time putting on makeup when she got up.”

Tyler’s body stiffens as my words sink in. “Did he ever hurt you?”

His voice is so low I nearly miss it.

“He never touched me.”

“That’s not quite the same.”

My lips curve. “No, it’s not.”

I think of the backhanded comments he muttered when my aunt wasn’t in earshot. How I was useless, didn’t belong, didn’t deserve to live with them.

I know now the words were directed at my dad, not at me, but I found ways to cope. Writing words of encouragement on myself, things I could hold on to, was one of those ways.

Tyler looks past me, his jaw working. “Fuck, you must hate roses.”

He reaches for the flower, and I hold it away. “Not at all. They’re breathtaking and fragile and resilient. For everything in life that sucks, there’s something beautiful if you know where to look.”

The disbelief on his face has me smiling in earnest.

“Our lives are the stories we tell about them. The stories we *sing* about them,” I go on pointedly. “And our hearts don’t belong in cages. We’re meant to be fragile. We’re born to bleed.”

I squeeze his arm before turning to start back toward the driveway.

“Annie...” His voice is a warning.

I pull up, sighing. “I need this musical. You can let me go to rehearsal, or you can help me.”

He stares me down, emotions running together behind his dark eyes. Helping me would mean more than just going against my dad, and we both know it.

“That’s what I figured,” I say when he doesn’t respond.

When I get to my room, I set the rose on my nightstand and call to tell Norelli I can’t come to practice.

Through the window, I hear Tyler’s voice, Brandon chuckling on the patio.

I drop the phone on my bed and grab my music box off my shelf, the one that plays “It’s a Small World.”

I lift the window frame and chuck the music box into the bushes, where it lands on a garden light with a sickening crunch.

The laughter stops.

Tyler

“YOU GONNA TELL me where we’re going on a Friday?” I ask Jax, shielding my eyes against the morning sun.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “A meeting. Last day of your suspension, so we might as well get something accomplished.”

We turn off the main road and drive up to a gate. If there’s a house beyond, I can’t see it, just rolling pastures and white fence. Once the gate buzzes us in and we make our way up the driveway, a huge house reveals itself.

After we park, a butler shows us to a bright reading room surrounded by glass overlooking a stable in the backyard where horses play in green fields.

“Jax.” The man walking in looks at ease in jeans and a sport coat.

“Zeke.” Jax shakes his hand. “This is Tyler.”

I extend my hand, and he takes it.

Zeke gestures out the window. “These are champion racehorses. Retired now. Some take to it better than others. Some of them you’d swear are replaying the races behind those big eyes of theirs.”

“Zeke left Wicked a number of years back, but he helped with my first platinum album. He now has a number of interests in LA and New York.”

He smiles. “I’ve established more than two dozen major recording artists at three labels.”

My brows rise because that’s impressive.

“I’m going to be honest. Jax tells me you’re interested in a career in the industry. He’s sent me a few of your demos, but I prefer to see things firsthand.”

We follow him to another room, where he flicks the light switch to reveal instruments everywhere.

Zeke passes me a guitar. “Let’s hear it.”

Jax studies me. This is a test.

I can play anything for anyone, but I wasn’t expecting to do it today.

Still, it’s as natural to me as breathing.

The song starts out slow, picks up tempo without losing its mood. It’s thrumming and alive, crisp and precise one second and messy the next.

But all of it’s on purpose.

Everything is on purpose, or you lose more than a moment.

You lose yourself.

When I finish, Zeke’s face is unreadable, until he cuts a look at Jax. “Say it.”

“Told you.”

I pass the guitar back, feeling relief.

“I need someone who’s willing to work hard and who has the natural talent. That spark.” Zeke replaces the guitar before holding out a hand once more.

I go to shake it but stop when I see the business card in his fingers.

I look between him and Jax. “I have another six weeks of school. I’m a senior. I want to graduate.”

Everyone in my family managed it. I’m sure as hell going to.

Zeke smirks as if school is a trivial thing. Jax doesn’t react.

“You know what makes opportunities exciting? They don’t last. Don’t wait too long, kid.”

They make small talk for a few more minutes before we head back out to the car.

The property recedes into the distance as Jax’s Bentley cruises down the road.

“Today was about me,” I say after a few miles.

“I said I’d help you. This was the plan all along—polish your skills and get you out into the industry.”

“Why me?” I ask the question that’s been hanging over me for a year, the one I know the answer to but he won’t admit.

“You remind me of me. Music was more than my pressure release. It saved my life. It’ll save yours, too.”

My fists ball at my sides.

Did you expect him to just say it?

I could call him out right now.

Because he’s not only saving my life...

He destroyed it in the first place.

“What about Annie?” I hear myself ask instead. “She loves music too.”

He shoots me a surprised look. “I don’t want her anywhere near the music industry.”

“The longer you ground her, the more she’s going to dig in.”

“Says the kid who brought her home at two in the morning yesterday.”

My mouth snaps shut. How he knew about that I’m not sure. “She needed someone to talk to.”

Jax shoots me a look as we stop at a light.

There’s no reason for him and Annie to be anything but close. I’m starting to see what I couldn’t before—that the more she tries to let him in, the more he holds her away. She acts as if it’s fine, but it’s not. She’s hurting. I can feel it across the damned patio every night of the week.

“This life can build you up, but it can tear you down even faster,” he says at last. “She’s a good kid. I want her to have the things she wants.”

“You want her to have the things you want her to have,” I correct. “You can’t fill a prison with diamonds and expect her to forget the door’s still locked.”

I think about the letter she’s been sitting on, what she told me about her childhood.

Yeah, Jax asked me to keep an eye out for her, but that’s not why I hung out with her yesterday.

It’s not even why I kept her home.

Somewhere between literally carrying her ass up the driveway and watching her walk away from me, I started to think about how she puts herself out there. She invites the world to reject her, practically demands it, and when it does, she hurts.

But it never occurred to me she did it by choice, that she was aware of it.

Maybe there is something to putting your heart on the line.

We pull up to the gates at Jax's house, the familiar rows of trees, and the gates swing wide automatically at the sensor in his car. "You're here because you're capable," he says. "But more than that, you fit in. I knew it since the first time I saw you with your damned blue hair and your swagger sitting on my couch with my kid."

My chest aches. This place *is* starting to feel like home. More than Philly ever did.

I reach into my pocket, fingering the card in my jacket.

"Call Zeke," Jax intones, palming the steering wheel as we cruise up the long driveway, the gates closing silently once we're through. "Not after graduation. Now."



Annie

I'M CHANGING out of my uniform into a jean skirt and a tank top after school when there's a knock on my bedroom door.

Tyler's on the other side in jeans and a T-shirt that clings to his body. His hair's freshly dyed blue, probably something he did to kill time during his suspension, and his expression is determined.

"There weren't any notes for English today," I inform him, but he just holds out a music box.

"That broke," I say, frowning. "It hit a light in the garden and cracked. I heard it."

"And I fixed it."

I inspect the case, noticing tiny cracks where the wood split. I open the lid, and the ballerina dog inside starts to dance.

It's almost as good as new.

"Where's the music?" I ask.

He rubs a hand over his neck, the most fleeting and un-Tyler-like display of uncertainty I almost miss it. "I figured you'd rather make your own."

My chest expands so much I can't breathe, can't even speak.

Yes, I'd rather make my own. The fact that it even occurred to him has my heart thudding in my chest.

"If that's too cheesy," he goes on, "I can—"

"No. It's perfect."

"Fine. Let's go." It must be my imagination that has his voice sounding rougher than before as he jerks his chin down the hall. "You said you want to kill the musical. You said the

problem's Carly, but if you get more confident in your own craft, rehearsal will go smoother no matter what she does. You're getting better, but there're some things we can work on."

I trail him down the hall and out the side door of the house, stopping to grab flip-flops in the hall. "You've been listening."

"Can't help it when your window's open. Sometimes I see you too."

He turns back to look at me in the garage to see if I'm coming, but I'm frozen in the doorway.

"Come on, Annie. I won't tell Brandon you get off to him every night if that's what you're worried about."

Tyler cocks his head, grinning, and that spurs me into motion.

I chase after him, shove him with every inch of strength I possess. "You're full of shit."

His laughter should be annoying, but I love the sound of it as I follow him down to the renovated tour bus in the driveway.

Inside, a glass door separates the studio from the couches in the lounge area, and Tyler lifts the guitar over his head as he drops onto one of the couches.

"Ryan's right. You do need a new guitar." I drop onto the seat across from him, shifting forward to trace a finger across the body of his instrument. The wood is cheap to begin with, and it's banged up.

"Yeah, well, they don't exactly grow on trees."

I blink up at him. "They do. They're wood."

“Smart-ass.” The slow smile that stretches across his gorgeous face is one more reminder something has changed since yesterday when he turned me down.

He’s cautiously open. Carefully receptive.

“First guitar I ever played was my dad’s,” he goes on. “Did I tell you that?”

I shake my head, trying not to look as if I’m living for what he says next.

He starts to play, fingers moving over the strings like it’s a dance he’s done a thousand times. “He wanted to make a career of it. He had a band, used to play local gigs outside of work, odd jobs mostly. He had trouble holding one down, but he did land a gig cleaning at Wicked for a few months. Hell, he even met your dad once when I was too young to remember.”

I’m not listening to his playing anymore, I’m too focused on his words. “Wow. Does Dad remember him?”

His thoughtful expression turns flat. “I wouldn’t be here if he didn’t.”

I start to press, but Tyler stops playing, cutting off the sound before rapping his knuckles lightly on the body of his guitar.

“So, here’s the thing,” he begins. “If you’re gonna stand on that stage, you need to know you’re enough. Don’t worry about what you’re making them feel—think about what you’re creating. What happens after you make it is none of your business. What happens before that is your only job.

“You can hide nerves when you’re playing an instrument with your hands. When it’s your breath, that doesn’t work.” He runs a hand through his hair, making his biceps jump under the

T-shirt. “How much do you know about resonance? Reverb? Timbre?”

I shift forward to the edge of the seat, our knees nearly brushing. Frustration seeps into my voice. “Nothing you couldn’t learn on the internet. My dad won’t teach me.”

“I’ll teach you.”

Gratitude has my entire body tingling. I exhale heavily, realizing I haven’t really played with him, in front of him, in a couple years. We were kids then. Now, the stakes feel higher.

“Thank you. We could start with ‘Part of Your World’?”

He’s shaking his head before I finish. “Nothing from the musical. Something else.”

“Okay.” I mentally scroll through the possibilities. “Let’s do something in six-eight.”

“You have a time signature preference?” He grins, and my stomach flips.

“Yes. Six is perfect. It’s like... a Möbius strip. A twisted loop.” I connect my thumbs and pointer fingers, then twist one hand upside down so my thumbs touch my pointer fingers instead. “No end and no beginning but order and momentum. ‘Nothing Else Matters’ by Metallica. The Beatles’ ‘Oh! Darling’. Enough Queen tracks to fill an album.”

He shakes his head, and I think he’s about to make fun of me, but all he says is, “The lady wants six.”

Then he kicks off Queen’s “Somebody to Love,” and my heart lifts.

This is already more fun than rehearsal.

We practice until my throat's worn out. Tyler accompanies me on guitar, watching, giving notes.

I have so much to learn. This guy is not only the most talented person I've ever met—he's an encyclopedia. We've talked music before but not technique, strategy, physicality. My mind races trying to keep up with everything he tells me.

I haven't felt so alive in ages. Even the best rehearsal has never felt as good as this. Maybe because I have to deal with the glares and the snide comments and the sabotage.

Here, it's just people who love music. It's the biggest high there is. More than acing a test or winning an award.

"Better," he says when we wrap up. "Now you need to do that at rehearsal."

I look down at him from where I'm standing, leaning a hip against the wall of the bus. "Carly's going to be there fucking with my head. It's like something's crawling up my spine and I can't get away from it."

Tyler turns something over in his mind. "Sing it one more time."

I start, and he rises, moving to stand behind me.

Close behind me.

He touches the waistband of my jeans, and I jolt. His fingers brush the bare skin of my lower back, and I hiccup. "What are you doing?"

"Keep going."

The words come out rough as his finger traces a slow path up my spine.

I focus on my breath, my tone, the shape of the vowels and consonants in my head, my mouth, my throat.

I pour everything into keeping my voice level. When he reaches the back of my bra, he reverses directions, stroking back down.

Slower.

Harder.

My shoulders start to shake.

Tyler's touch searing my skin is nothing like Carly's sabotage. It's hard to keep going for an entirely different reason. Every phrase is harder to execute; every word is a struggle for my brain; each vowel sticks in my throat.

Finally, I finish, and his touch falls away.

He doesn't move. His breath skims my ear when he speaks. "There. That wasn't so terrible."

When I turn my head, all I see is his damned perfect mouth at eye level. A wave of longing washes over me. "No. It wasn't."

I wait for him to pull back or to crack a joke.

He doesn't.

His lashes lower, and holy hell, he's staring at my mouth too, as if it's all he wants.

Do it.

I want you to.

I swallow, leaning in a millimeter at a time.

His body is tight, controlled. I want to know what happens when he lets go.

“Tyler! You in there?”

My dad’s voice from the driveway outside has Tyler stepping back smoothly.

Like that, the moment’s gone. As if it never even happened.

He reaches for his guitar and jerks his head toward the door, expression unreadable. “I’ll catch you at dinner.”

I lick my lips, nodding. “Yeah.”

The touching wasn’t terrible.

The part where he leaves me wanting more and knowing I’m not going to get it...

That part sucks hard.

Tyler

MY WEEKEND DID NOT GO AS PLANNED.

I'd expected to hang with Brandon and the other guys from our band, fix a weird sound my bike's been making, and lay down some music with Jax.

I did those things, but they're not what I remember come Monday, especially when I catch sight of the girl with long, red hair heading determinedly for my locker at lunch.

"You need a new guitar," Annie states, leaning against the locker next to mine. The side of her forehead meets the metal as she cocks her head at me. "This shop is selling one that looked amazing, so I lined it up for you to try."

I shut the door. "Seriously?"

"And you have a free period. So, let's go," she insists, bobbing next to me down the hall.

Her slow smile has my abs tightening.

I sneak a look at her, the skirt that swings against her smooth thighs, her breasts outlined by the jacket, her silky hair waving over one shoulder.

I was getting used to seeing her in shorts, jeans, bathing suits, but she looks really fucking pretty in her school uniform.

Even if it has me thinking about what's underneath.

"You just want an excuse to hang out with me," I drawl as we fall into step together.

"This is a favor. I'm sick of you."

But we basically have been hanging out.

All weekend.

She needs help. I give it to her.

No, I don't advertise to Jax that we're spending time together. It's simpler that way.

But it's addictive the way she listens, how she tries.

When she sings, her voice is smooth and rough at once, velvet with a raw edge. Unpolished, but there's a realness you can't fake, an earnest emotion that grabs you by the base of your spine.

Girl's got a gift.

I've never gotten invested in anyone else's music before, but I want her to succeed, and I want to be there when she does. To see the lightbulb go off when she figures something out, when a piece clicks into place in that beautiful mind of hers.

We get to the all-purpose room and meet the guy with the guitar.

He introduces himself and gestures to the open case.

"Wow," he says to Annie when I start playing.

I tune out whatever he says next, needing to get a read on the sound, the feel, the weight of the instrument under my hands.

It's actually not bad. I've played some nice guitars of Jax's and the one at Zeke's the other day, but maybe I have been slumming it too much with the one I got before I knew I was gonna do this for a lifetime.

"How much?" I say when I set it down.

He shrugs. "How's two?"

"Two hundred?"

"Two thousand."

I'm about to say hell no when Annie grabs my arm. "Give us a second."

She pulls me out into the hall, half-empty since everyone's at lunch.

"Do you like it?"

My laugh is humorless. "Yeah, but two large is insane."

She reaches into her wallet and pulls out a thick stack of twenties, two fifties on top. "He'll negotiate."

My hand closes over hers, the warmth of her making me want to hold on. "I'm not negotiating, and I'm not taking your money. Don't you dare feel sorry for me."

"I feel sorry for the guitar."

Adrenaline pumps through my veins. "You think my hands are that good?"

She puts her wallet away and shoots me a slow smile. "I wouldn't know."

It's only teasing, but those words affect me. We're in a school hallway, but suddenly I picture dragging her into a stairwell and showing her just what my hands can do.

Because, suddenly, fixing her music box and playing while she sings don't feel like the best use of them.

I want to press my thumb into her mouth, to make her moan around it.

I want to drag up her skirt to find out what words she's hiding beneath.

I want to grab her ankles, wrap those endless legs around my hips tight enough I can grind into her.

Late last night, she texted to say my lights were on and asked if I wanted to practice in the pool house.

I shut that down even though I wanted to say yes.

If I was the talking type, I might ask her to be more considerate.

To stop teasing me with those long looks, the knowing smiles, the smart-ass comments.

But none of it makes a difference because Annie and I are still worlds apart in every way that matters.

We might share a smile in the hallway at school, but I have my friends and she has hers. She goes to rehearsal. I hang with the popular kids, feign ambivalence when Carly spews her bullshit when all I want to do is find Annie and get the hell out of this place.

It's necessary. The framework that keeps everything in place, that reminds me not to fall for Jax's daughter when he isn't there to remind me himself.

"What is this?" Annie bends to pick up something that's fallen on the floor.

I take it from her. "Nothing. Your dad's."

I've been staring at the business card all weekend, but I haven't made the call.

I shove the card in my jacket pocket and force my attention back to the task at hand. "If I'm going to start over, I'd rather go with mahogany. Something heavier weight with better sustain. Maybe a rosewood fret. V neck. I like how it fits in my hands."

"Three days ago you didn't want a new guitar. Now you're Clapton. Anything else?"

I reach for her blazer collar, straighten it with both hands for an excuse to touch her hair, to graze her neck with my thumbs. "Twenty-four fret."

"All right, big boy." She grins, and I swallow the laugh. "Stay here," she says before heading back to let the guy down easy.

I tune out the conversation, but my chest expands at the fact that she cared enough to set this up for me.

This girl makes me wonder what things are possible in this world.

My phone rings in my pocket, and like that, my good mood evaporates.

When the voicemail appears, my finger hovers over the delete button, but thinking of Annie's comment about how you have to open yourself up sometimes, I hold the phone to my ear instead.

My father's voice spills out, angry and pleading in turn.

You still owe me, Tyler.

I gave up everything for you, you ungrateful bastard.

You can't abandon your family.

A group of students approaches, laughing and oblivious, and I wait for them to pass before I duck into a recessed stairwell.

I lean my forehead against the cold painted brick, squeezing my eyes shut. If I'd thought maybe something had changed, like maybe he'd wake up and see what an asshole he's been his entire life...

I was wrong. It never changes.

"Okay, he was bummed but... Tyler?" Annie's footsteps draw closer until I feel her at my side. "What happened?"

I shake my head. "Same bullshit as always. For some reason, I still fucking care."

Annie ducks between my arms and takes my face in her hands. "Caring isn't a weakness. Even if the person you care about doesn't care back, that doesn't mean you should stop."

I heave out a breath, her cool hands grounding me. My hair's falling over my face and part of hers. I wish it could hide us from the world.

"You're good at caring about people," she goes on, her voice a murmur.

"Like who?"

"Like me."

I exhale heavily, my hands braced on the wall on either side of her head. "I told you I don't."

"But you've shown me you do."

I pull back enough to look into her eyes brimming with empathy I'd never ask for but need like my next breath.

There are moments you look back on, ones that feel small but change everything.

I should step back, reinforce the distance between us.

I don't.

Instead, I wrap both arms around her, pull her closer. My fingers imprint themselves on the fabric of her jacket, the soft strands of her hair.

When I tuck her head under my chin, her breath hitches. I take a long inhale, wishing her scent didn't calm me like it does. Even the layers of our uniforms can't hide the warm comfort of her body.

Her hands slide up my back until she's holding me as hard as I'm holding her.

I'm supposed to keep her out, but I don't know how.

Leaving this summer will hurt like hell.

And I'm terrified by how much I want to stay.

Annie

“WE’LL NEED A TWO-THOUSAND DEPOSIT. Cash or credit?”

I hold out a debit card. “How long will it take?”

“A month. That’s the fastest service for anything custom,” he goes on at my expression.

“Can you do a rush? It’s for a friend.” I debate, chewing my lip. “My dad is Jax Jamieson.”

His eyes widen, and he glances at the name on my card, then back up. “No shit. I’d know those eyes anywhere. I made guitars for his first tour.”

Discomfort works through me. “Do you keep in touch?”

“Some.”

Something tells me that even if my dad would be cool with giving Tyler a guitar, me buying him one wouldn’t go over great. “It’s a surprise.”

“For your daddy?” The manager’s brows rise as he looks at the order. “Seem to recall he prefers twenty-two—”

“How long?”

The manager frowns. “Four days.”

Apparently, there are perks to being Jax Jamieson’s kid.

I thank him and head out to my car.

The money for this purchase is coming from a statewide writing competition I won in the fall, plus the full-time hours I logged working as a summer student at the library last year.

I was saving it for college—even though my dad and Haley have said they’ll pay my tuition and expenses, I want to at least contribute—but something about this decision feels right.

Tyler doesn’t have that kind of cash, but he’s also proud. This is something he’d never ask for, something I want to do for him.

All week, he’s been helping me practice. In the mornings, after school, whenever we can sneak in a moment.

My performance in rehearsal is improving. I focus on my technique, on connecting to what I’m doing, and tune out the bullshit. I don’t make eye contact with Carly, and I keep my bag and water bottle at the corner of the stage where she can’t get to them. I have less than a week until when Norelli promised to render a verdict on keeping me in the lead, and I’m not going to waste it.

As I walk, my phone rings.

“Hey,” I answer, breathless. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Good things, I hope.” Tyler’s smooth voice comes down the line, sending tingles through my stomach.

Lately, his voice does that to me.

Not only his voice—his touch. Hell, even his presence in the same room. I can’t so much as brush up next to him making coffee in the morning without wishing Dad and Haley

would drop into some alternate dimension so I could stare at him longer, memorize the feel of his body when he reaches over me to grab something from the fridge.

But the part I can't forget when I'm lying awake at night is the way he let me hold him in the hallway at school on Monday. His body was filled with tension, but the tighter I wrapped my arms around him, the more those muscles gave, the more deeply he breathed.

"You hang up on me?" he asks.

"Sorry, I'm here."

His low chuckle has me flushing as I get into the car.

"What's up?"

"Your dad left a note inviting me for dinner."

"Haley's best friend, Serena, is in town. The whole family's going out to this steakhouse. Even Sophie." I start the car, and the purr of the engine is comforting.

"If this place is fancy, I'm screwed. My tux is at the dry cleaners."

"Like you care. You could walk into a restaurant in boxers and have the entire staff falling over each other."

"I'll have to try that." His voice lifts with humor, and my lips curve too. "Tell me what you're wearing."

I glance down at my clothes, which I changed into after school. "A dress. Black. Tight. It's kind of short."

"Not the one from the frat party. You looked way too grown-up."

Indignation sets in. "I am grown-up."

He mutters something inaudible before clearing his throat. “I should bring brass knuckles if I’m gonna need to deck the waiter for hitting on you.”

The protectiveness in his voice has the hairs lifting on my arms. “You know you can’t take down every guy who looks at me.”

“Why not?”

I trace a finger along the stitching on my leather steering wheel, my heart thudding dully in my chest. “Because sometimes I want to be looked at.”

For a moment, I think Tyler’s gone, but eventually, his hard exhale tells me he’s still on the line.

“See you at dinner, Six.”

He hangs up before I can respond, but the nickname leaves me biting my cheek.



SERENA MOANS. “This is delicious. You didn’t need to go to this trouble for me.”

“It’s no trouble,” Haley says over the table at the fancy restaurant where we have a private room. “Your visit’s a nice excuse to have everyone together.”

And we are together. My dad’s at the head of the table and wearing a nice dress shirt, Haley’s at the other end looking more relaxed than I’ve seen her since Sophie started teething, and Sophie’s tucked in next to her. Haley’s best friend, Serena, a sleek marketing executive from New York with a fabulous ponytail and a killer smile, sits next to Sophie, and Tyler’s across from me.

“Sophie’s going to be gorgeous like her parents,” Serena goes on.

I sip my soda. “She’s already got every guy in miles wrapped around her finger.”

Serena shoots me a teasing look. “Something you have in common, then.”

I glance at Tyler sitting across from me as I dig into my salad.

Since our call, he’s barely spoken to me. It’s as if he’s punishing me for the tension in our conversation.

But when I walked in the door, I swear his attention locked on my legs. Any time his gaze meets mine, it lingers for half a beat before sliding away.

“Can you pass the pepper?”

I look up to find Tyler’s attention on me. I reach for the grinder next to my plate and hold it out.

He takes it, and our fingers brush.

He holds on, and so do I, a beat too long before letting go.

I go back to my food, and the conversation turns to plans after school. I tell Serena about Columbia.

“What about you?” she prompts Tyler. “Graduation’s a month away.”

“I’m not going to college. I’m gonna finish with Jax, use that to get steady work as a session musician.”

“No, Tyler’s going all the way,” I interject. He lifts a brow, and I continue. “Platinum albums, stadium tours, girls who tattoo his face on their ass.”

Serena laughs, but Tyler's gaze intensifies on mine, and I keep going. "Imagine it. *Ty-ler. Ty-ler. Ty-ler.* They'll fall at your feet."

"I don't need them falling at my feet."

"That's why they'll do it."

My dad told me once that fame can smell desperation but it chases talent. The moment it senses you need it more than it needs you, it evaporates like morning mist.

Tyler doesn't care who looks at him. That's why it's impossible to look away.

"I can understand the desire to get working," Haley says, her voice bringing me back. "But if you ever wanted college, there are some fantastic performing arts schools. What's the one in New York, Serena? The one your brother was accepted to?"

"Vanier. I've never seen Beck as pumped as when he got the letter," she says, shaking her head with a smile.

Dad frowns at Tyler. "Have you called Zeke yet about his offer?"

My head snaps to him. "What offer?"

"A contact who can employ Tyler after graduation," Dad says. "Play his cards right, he'll have more than studio sessions."

But Tyler acts as if he hasn't even heard, moving food around his plate.

I'm stunned he hasn't mentioned this, which goes to show I've been wrong about how much closer we've gotten these last weeks.

Tyler's the only person who cares what I want, cares enough to help me get it.

And everything I want for myself I want for him a million times more.

I want to see him cast off the history with his father and realize he can make something incredible.

Tyler makes eye contact with my dad, ignoring me. "I'll call him. I haven't gotten around to it yet."

I kick him under the table. *Why haven't you called him?*

Leave it alone. He digs into his food.

Serena's brows lift, and she takes a drink before turning to me. "Haley told me you have the lead in the musical."

I fill her in on where we're at, but I'm still spinning from the revelation about Tyler's opportunity, still stinging from his dismissal.

"Any attractive costars?" she asks.

I take a sip of soda, my gaze drifting to the guy across from me—the one who's avoiding my gaze as though it's his mission in life. "Kellan plays varsity lacrosse."

A fork clatters against a plate across from me.

Serena leans in, eyes brightening with anticipation. "Who's Kellan?"

"He's my prince," I tell her, spearing a piece of salad.

A thud echoes under the table as if a knee connected with the wood.

"He's a prick," Tyler mutters.

Now I have his attention.

My eyes flash. *You wouldn't dare tell them.*

He holds my gaze. *Try me, Six.*

“Kellan,” Haley interjects. “Tyler, is that the guy you had a fight with at school?”

My dad’s head snaps toward me.

“If I wanted to date Kellan”—I interject around the bite of lettuce, hurrying to swallow, and Tyler’s gaze narrows—“that would be my business.”

Dad laughs humorlessly. “Nice try. Until you’re eighteen, I can control where you go and who you see.”

I drop my fork. “I’m already grounded. You can’t ground me twice.”

“Then no musical.”

Shock has my breath sticking in my chest.

Haley sighs. “Jax—”

“Sure. No problem. I’ll tell Miss Norelli I’m out of the musical—which I’m now getting credit for, by the way—because Jax Jamieson declared it,” I say sarcastically, shifting out of my chair and throwing my napkin down on my seat. “My report card’s coming soon. Since you’re more interested in my grades than my life, you can have the next family photos taken with that.”

I stalk out of the room, eyes burning. I nearly run into a startled server bearing a carafe of water and mumble an apology as I trip around tables toward the bathrooms.

I’m halfway down the hall when a low voice comes from behind me. “Annie. Stop.”

I whirl to face Tyler. The dim lights overhead cast his tense face in shadows as he closes the distance between us.

“What’s wrong with you?” His low voice has every muscle in my body tightening, and he comes to a stop a foot away.

I toss my hair over my bare shoulder. “Why do you care? You’ve been avoiding me all night. You should be halfway to New York by now.”

A woman walks down the hall toward the bathroom, attention flicking to us. I step to the side, and Tyler does the same.

Somehow, that brings us even closer.

“Are you mad I’m not on a plane to New York?” he murmurs when we’re alone again. “Or that I’m not paying enough attention to you? You can’t have it both ways.”

There’s a bite to his words, as if the stakes are way higher than our dinner conversation.

Maybe they are.

“I’m mad you didn’t tell me. I care about you, damn it!”

He leans in, a muscle in his jaw ticking in frustration. I breathe through my mouth, ignoring the scent of his shower, the way his dark button-down shirt clings to his muscles, the jeans that hug every inch of his hard legs. “Then pretend you don’t, like everyone else pretends.”

I step back on instinct, but there’s a coatrack behind my shoulders. I hit it, hard enough a few empty hangers fall to the ground.

I drop to the floor to retrieve them. Tyler’s next to me in a second.

“I never asked for you to care,” he mutters, kneeling at my side. “In fact, I’ve done everything I could to avoid this.”

We reach for the same coat hanger, neither of us letting go.

“Oh, really?” I retort. “You hang out with people you don’t like. The only time you show the world what you’re capable of is during gigs with Brandon at frat parties. Instead of putting yourself out there, you bury your talent and ambition and who you are because you’re afraid to take what you want. If that’s not a cry for help, I don’t know what is.”

I wrench the hanger from his grip and stand, replacing the hangers on the rack. My dress has ridden up embarrassingly high, and I work the hem back down my thighs as he stands, too.

“I don’t need the psychoanalysis, Six.” When I look up, his angry expression is inches away. “If you think I’m your boyfriend, you’ve made a big-ass mistake.”

“Clearly.” I brush my hands down my dress one last time emphatically. “I have all the responsibilities and none of the benefits.”

His eyes flash, and I know I’ve pushed him too far.

I’ve never seen Tyler out of control.

That changes tonight.

I know it as the words hang between us for a heartbeat. Two.

“That’s what you want? Benefits?” Tyler’s voice is a rasp.

His gaze lands on my mouth, and heat floods my body. He strokes a finger down my cheek gently. Then he rubs his thumb against my lower lip.

“You want me to kiss you until you can’t breathe.”

My mouth opens on instinct, my breath trembling out. I don’t know when I’ll need another because the way he’s looking at me, I might die right here. As if he knows what I’m thinking and likes it, his eyes darken more.

“Or run my hands up this dress the way I’ve been thinking about all night.”

He hitches a finger under the hem and traces a slow path upward.

Somehow, we’re still alone in this hallway, but we won’t be for long.

Anyone could walk in and see his hand up my skirt, inching to the apex of my thighs.

“If I go high enough”—his voice is drugging—“I’ll find all your secrets. Written and otherwise.”

I’m throbbing. Shock twines with desire in my gut.

I’m in a restaurant thirty feet from my family, and I’m soaked for him.

It’s messed up, but I want this, so fucking much.

More than that, knowing he’s here, a breath away, and that he wants it too...

It’s the biggest turn-on.

Trying to reconcile my former friend with the popular asshole I thought betrayed me with the one who’s in front of me is impossible.

I give up trying.

Tyler leans closer, his hair tickling my neck and his mouth a hot caress against the shell of my ear. “I could steal you out

of this restaurant. We could take my bike and run away. Leave your dad, the assholes, the expectations.”

I’m drowning. The wanting and craving and longing combine in a writhing mass of guilty need that expands to fill my entire being.

“But what happens then?” he murmurs. His touch falls away, and I nearly moan in protest.

I blink once, twice, before the soft sound of footsteps on carpet alerts me to the woman making her return journey from the bathroom, steadfastly avoiding eye contact.

“I hope you have a plan for then,” Tyler says once she’s past. “Because that’s where I get stuck.”

When I meet his gaze, I’m startled to see the fire behind his eyes is leashed once more.

The truth slams into me and leaves me aching.

He’s not asking for real—he’s proving a point.

That even if I want him and he wants me, we can’t be together.

In his world, we can’t.

I take a deep breath, willing my heart to stop racing as I tug on my hem with one hand, smooth my hair with the other.

“We’d figure it out together,” I say, and the words come out surprisingly level. “Except you don’t want to.”

I turn and head straight into one of the single-stall bathrooms, slamming the door hard enough the frame shakes.

Annie

SOME MOMENTS SEEM DESTINED to remain mysterious even if you stop, rewind, replay them from a million angles.

Until last night, my most recent was the moment the woman calling herself my mother approached me at Dad and Haley's wedding, pressed that envelope into my hand with pleading eyes, and added to the uncertainty I'd always had about my place in this family.

Now, it's the scene in the hallway with Tyler that haunts me when I drive home after dinner alone. I stare out the window at the lights of the pool house for a long time before yanking the curtains closed.

After I close my eyes, I'm transported back to that hallway, remembering his sensual words, his searing touch, the look of pure desire on his face.

Still, it's the mask of regret and frustration as we stepped apart that stays with me.

I know if we get caught, my dad will lose his shit, maybe even send Tyler away.

None of that explains why Tyler looked as if he'd betrayed himself by his words and actions.

Somehow, I fall asleep.

After grabbing a coffee in the thankfully quiet kitchen the next morning, I return to my room and shut the door.

In the top drawer of my desk, I find a familiar envelope. I run my fingers over the name on the front, the return address, as I have a hundred times.

I'm aching to open it. It's been sitting there for a year, untouched. Waiting for the right moment.

Which isn't when you're pissed at the world.

But I'm too worked up to deny myself.

Ripping at the seal makes me feel like I've crossed another point of no return, and my hands shake as I unfold the paper.

Dearest Annie,

Your father wants you to believe I didn't care about you. I did.

I told him immediately I was pregnant. It took me two months to get through his people and get to him.

He came to see me and told me he didn't care. He looked me in the eyes and said it wasn't his problem.

You weren't his problem.

Eighteen months after you were born, a lawyer showed up with adoption paperwork.

He promised if I didn't sign it, he'd get me fired from my job.

I hated it, but I signed it. I was afraid.

What I didn't fully understand was the NDA, which meant I couldn't talk about any of this or I'd be sued bankrupt.

If you want to reach out to me, I've included my email address and mailing address. It would mean the world to me to see you.

Love always,

Fiona

Your mother

IT'S NOT A LONG LETTER, but my breath hitches as I struggle to get through the entire thing.

I've always intuited on some level that I didn't fit in, that my dad didn't want me, but I told myself it was bullshit.

If this is true...

It's *evidence* he didn't want me.

I pace my room, up and down the line of music boxes on the wall.

It's me. There's something wrong about me, something that makes it impossible to love me.

Wow, that's heavy.

But I need to get these feelings out, replace them with something better.

If I can just get the right words, the right phrase, on my skin, it'll remind me I can handle this.

But the words don't come, and the emotions claw at me, scrambling to get out.

I take my notebook and a pen over to my bed, and I write.

I don't stop.

All of it pours out.

Every line on the page is like tugging at a thread inside me, unraveling one more ball of wants and needs and fears.

My phone buzzes, making me jump. Somehow, it's been nearly two hours.

Pen: We working on English after lunch? Jenna wants in.

I tuck the letter into the back of my notebook and set both on my desk before taking a shower, scorching away what's left of the feelings until I'm empty.

"Have you seen Tyler today?" Haley asks when I head downstairs for breakfast at noon. "He seemed upset last night, and his bike's gone."

"Nope."

I play with Sophie and study my dad as he fixes a coffee. He keeps secrets from the world, but now I wonder how much he keeps hidden from me too.

"I think you can be ungrounded," he decides under Haley's watchful gaze. "If you keep up your schoolwork."

The relief isn't as big as I'd expected, like a single brick sliding off my chest and leaving ninety-nine more.

"Freedom," I inform Sophie solemnly, clapping. "Freedom."

She moves her arms, trying to clap along, and laughs at our game.

What if for a year and a half—a year older than Sophie is now—my dad knew I existed and wished I didn't?

Before I can play that out, the doorbell rings. Pen and Jenna fall inside the moment I open it.

“So... homework and snacks?” My friend holds up a box of mini cupcakes.

Jenna wrinkles her nose. “Those will go straight to my ass.”

“Good. More for me.” Pen’s already regaling us with stories of debate team as we settle into my room.

“Ooh, what’s this?” Jenna asks, glancing at the notebook.

“Nothing.” I grab for my journal, but she’s too fast.

“Is that your poetry assignment for English?” Jenna asks as she thumbs through the pages.

The letter remains tucked in the back, but my breath is tight in my chest.

She flips through to the pages I was writing today, emptying my soul onto the page. “Whoa, these are intense.” Her gaze flicks to mine, filled with anticipation. “Tell me they’re not about Kellan.”

“No. Besides,” I go on, eager to change the subject, “isn’t he dating Carly?”

“Really?” Pen makes a face. “Scratch that. They’re perfect for each other.”

“I can’t see it lasting,” Jenna comments, surprising us. “Kellan’s obsessed with himself, and Carly has the attention span of a flea. Except when it comes to what she can’t have.”

“Well, she’s running out of time if she wants to try to steal lead in the musical.”

“You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.” Jenna shakes her head. “You’re getting really good in rehearsal. You have some secret sauce you want to share with the rest of us?”

Tyler.

“I have nothing to lose,” I say at last, and she frowns.

“We all have something to lose.”

I hold out a hand, and after a second, Jenna passes me the notebook. I tuck it into my desk drawer. “Let’s study in the dining room.”

Jenna shrugs as we collect our books. “Fine. Bathroom?”

I point her in the right direction. “Meet you there.”

Maybe she’s right and we do all have something to lose.

Because after last night, there won’t be more private rehearsals with Tyler.

There can’t be.

I wish it didn’t hurt so damned much.



“FIRST DAY OF FREEDOM. How do you feel?” Pen asks as we head to English on Monday.

“Like a new woman.”

As we filter into the classroom, my gaze lands on the boy in the second row. The messy hair, the broad shoulders under his jacket. When he turns to listen to something Brandon says, I soak in the strong lines of his profile.

Tyler and I haven’t spoken since I slammed the bathroom door in his face at the restaurant.

Last night after studying with Pen and Jenna, I practiced in my room, the window shut.

The text came through after dinner.

TYLER: We need to talk.

INSTEAD OF RESPONDING, I'd kept my curtains closed until I turned out my own lights.

There's no way to make this better because what I want is for him to take it back. Not what he said, but the resignation after.

Hell, I'd even take the irrational, angry Tyler over the coolly distant one.

Because that, at least, would be validation that he felt something. That he still feels it.

"Carly, are you passing notes?" I half hear the teacher's question, but Carly's response has me snapping to attention.

"Annie sent it to me."

The teacher intercepts the message. Denial slams into me as I recognize the paper from my notebook, the paper I'd written on yesterday morning.

That's impossible.

"Annie, why don't you come up and read this for the class."

My legs are blocks of ice as I shove myself out of my seat. I can't meet Pen's gaze or Carly's or anyone's on my way to

the front of the room.

I take the paper, unfold it, and draw a breath.

No one gets in deep

Except you

You take the shovel from my hands, scrape back the dirt

I watch you dig

Your hands, your arms, your heart

My soul splinters with every inch you gain

Until you're at the bottom

The words I wrote privately spill out, fill the silent room.

My tongue has swelled to twice its normal size as I sneak a look over the top of the page. Everyone's staring, but there's only one gaze that drags mine like a magnet.

Tyler's sitting back in his seat, his posture casual, but his face is anything but. A muscle tics in his jaw, those dark eyes sparking with emotion. He's still as a statue, but beneath the surface, he's roiling.

Still, you don't stop

You find the edges of my deep, the cracks

You peel it back, toss each piece over your shoulder

As if each one isn't a layer of my heart

Hold my breath while you look inside

Hold my breath while you meet my eyes

I might wear my heart on my sleeve, but this is something new.

Perfect transparency.

I'm stretched thin, a spider web ready to tear in the lightest breeze.

But it's not for Tyler—it's for me.

Each word is clearer, more deliberate than the one before.

Each emotion is more raw, but my hands have stopped shaking.

It's too much, too deep

I see that now

You rise and I take your place

*I throw the pieces back inside, make a new floor and keep
going*

Without looking up, I know you're gone

And I'm alone

Wondering if it was my fault to dig that deep

I'm throbbing when I finish.

Still, a part of me remains intact, as if I've peeled away the layers of my heart, leaving only the most vital parts, and seen for the first time the wonder it truly is.

I fold the piece of paper, the piece of my soul, and walk back to my seat.

For the rest of class, I ignore everything and stare straight ahead. I don't talk to anyone until Pen and I go off campus for lunch.

"Jenna stole your notebook," she says once we're sitting outside the café.

"No," I say firmly. "It was in my drawer this morning. I would've noticed it was missing. She ripped out the page."

“She wanted to humiliate you.” Her lips curve. “It didn’t work. You were great.”

“It wasn’t a performance, Pen. It was like putting my intestines on display for everyone I hate.”

“You wanted a stage, you got one.”

My phone buzzes with another text from Tyler, but I ignore it.

He won’t approach me at school. He’s their prince, and this is a reminder of the bullshit lines he sees between us. A way for him to stay removed, unemotional, in control.

I turn Pen’s words over through the rest of classes. *You wanted a stage, you got one.*

I always felt as if being on stage meant playing a role, but now I wonder for the first time if this is how my dad feels playing his own music, if it’s possible the crowd can make you as vulnerable as it makes you strong.

At the end of the day, I drop my books in my bag, grab my gear, and head to rehearsal.

“Annie,” Miss Norelli says when I’m barely in the door, “I want to run the dancing scene. Can you grab Kellan?”

I head up to the stage and drop my bag in the wings. After shrugging out of my jacket and rolling up my sleeves, I scan for him. My attention snags on two figures behind a curtain, bobbing heads mashing together.

“Can we break up this two-headed-dog thing?” I ask.

Kellan pries his face away from Carly, looking disinterestedly at me.

“Annie, I’m surprised you even showed. You seemed emotional in English today.” She smiles wickedly. “Your little poem had a very unrequited love vibe, don’t you think? Listen, I know you didn’t get asked to prom, but Kellan and I will tell you all about it.”

Kellan snorts at her meanness, and I turn my back.

At least she doesn’t know what happened between me and Tyler. Falling for the guy in my pool house, the one they all worship? I’d never live that down.

Kellan and I take the stage, and I force myself to step closer to him, wondering how Ariel ever loved this guy.

The choreography is simple, but Kellan trips as he sings the chorus, and I hold in a groan.

Miss Norelli calls, “Stop! Kellan, what’s going on?”

“Annie’s fucking it up.”

I barely hear Norelli chastise Kellan for his language because I’m looking past him to take in Carly’s mischievous expression. My hands ball into fists. “Maybe if you spent half as much time practicing your dance moves as your seduction moves, you’d have it down.”

“Again,” Norelli commands.

We do it again. And again, Kellan makes it look like my fault when we screw up.

Carly’s already up off the floor, heading for us.

Miss Norelli sighs. “Annie, I understand it’s challenging, but we can’t keep doing this. I’m going to have to—”

“It’s not challenging.” I glare at my costar.

“She’s right. It doesn’t look hard.”

Every heads whips toward the open auditorium doors.

There's a collective gasp followed by whispers as people realize the same thing.

Tyler Adams is in rehearsal, and he has a fucking opinion on it.

Kellan recovers first, barking out a laugh. "You can do better? Be my guest."

Even Norelli doesn't object as Tyler makes his way up the steps, sets his bag on the floor, his jacket over that. His tie is loose, and his shirt clings to the slopes and planes of his chest and shoulders. He rolls up the sleeves as he approaches.

My anger at Kellan fades. He's a pawn in this game of Carly's, nothing more. The frustration I feel with the boy in my pool house though...

Oh, that's a living, pulsing thing.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss as he approaches.

Tyler reaches up to flick the top button of his shirt open, then the second, his gaze never leaving mine. "You haven't answered my messages."

"A rational person would assume I didn't want to see them."

My attention drifts to the exposed skin at the top of his chest as he takes my hand, tugs me closer.

I'm too startled to resist when he fits my hips to his and murmurs his response next to my ear. "Thank fuck you don't speak rational."

Someone starts the music.

Tyler nudges me back, and he steps into the choreography Kellan screwed up.

I've died.

There's no way in my lifetime I expected to see Tyler Adams dance on stage at our school, not to mention with me.

But it's not a dream, it's a waltz, and his touch warms my waist through my shirt, his confident hands moving my body where he wants it.

When I lift my gaze to meet his, I'm taken from stunned to wrecked. The longing from the restaurant hallway is there, but there's also fierce determination, as if he knows this is a bad idea and he gives zero shits.

There's something beneath the fierceness. If we were alone, I'd pressure him to tell me, but I don't have to wait long for him to spill his secrets.

Eight bars in, the guy I can't stop thinking about sees my "what the hell" and raises me a "the fuck he is."

Because Tyler starts to sing.

His voice is smooth and full, wrapping around me as if we're the only two people here.

He's playing Kellan's part better than Kellan does.

I feel each word in my soul.

His gaze holds mine as he sweeps me across the floor. I dig my fingers into his shoulder through his shirt, living for the warmth of his palm against mine, the one I read at that carnival so long ago.

I knew something was going to change for me this year, I could feel it coming like a promise.

I'd thought it was landing the lead in the musical, but it's more than that.

It's Tyler.

I don't know if this is his way of showing me I can't avoid him or the world's most public peace offering, but no girl or fish could resist this prince. He's strong and sure. The cool edge that follows him around has melted, and the invitation beneath is impossible to reject.

It takes a moment for me to realize he's stopped, we've stopped, and the stage crew cuts the music.

"It's not her. It's you." His words are loud enough for the entire auditorium to hear.

Kellan's watching from the corner, stunned.

Tyler's touch leaves my skin tingling, my heart hammering as he steps away.

I'm missing his warmth, his talent, his strength, even before he picks up his bag and jacket and heads for the door.

I don't pretend I'm not watching him go, standing in the middle of the stage and waiting for my heart rate to return to normal.

Actions speak louder.

When Norelli calls us back to order, I catch sight of Carly's pale face, her slack mouth, and I understand what happened.

In this power struggle between me and the assholes, I forced Oakwood's prince to choose a side.

And he chose mine.

Annie

AFTER REHEARSAL, I make a stop on the way home.

Then I collect my prize from the trunk of my car and head around the house toward the patio.

I rest my package against the siding before knocking on the door of the pool house.

Tyler answers, deliciously disheveled. He looks as if he started changing but forgot, clad in faded jeans with his dress shirt half-unbuttoned. “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” I laugh. “You show up at rehearsal and go all Rodgers and Hammerstein, and you’re asking me what’s up?”

He pulls back the door, and I glance past him at the three guys in the main living area with their instruments, all staring at me.

“Give us a second,” he tells the guys.

“Right. We’ll just... water the plants.” Brandon offers a wink as he and the others trail past me.

Tyler crosses the room, the muscles of his back tugging at the dress shirt in a way that makes my throat dry as I follow him inside and shut the door.

He picks up a remote, and a speaker in the corner starts to croon something bluesy.

I set the guitar case on the bed. “This is for you. Because you believed in me enough to help me. And I believe in you.”

He opens the zipper with calm hands, pulling back the soft top to reveal the instrument inside.

His long exhale has the hair standing up on my neck. “Annie, I can’t accept it.” Tyler tries to shut the case, and I grab the top at the same time.

“You know,” I say, my voice rising, “most of the time, I let you be an idiot.”

His jaw tics, eyes flashing. “I’m an idiot?”

“Yes, because you won’t take the things you want. I had this guitar made for you because this way you can’t ignore it, can’t pretend it’s not yours.”

He doesn’t release my hand as I stare at him, my eyes burning as the weight of the last few days builds up on me.

“This guitar is made for a prince. Not a prince of assholes, but a prince who trusts himself enough to take what the world gives him and then some. You can break it or sell it or throw it in the pool, but if you’re going to throw it in the pool, at least wait until I’m gone.” My heart twists at that sickening thought. “It’s so beautiful—”

“You’re so beautiful,” he interrupts. “Do you know that? How fucking beautiful you are?”

His voice is raw silk.

My heart thuds as he steps closer, stops in front of me.

Tyler fills my vision, his sculpted chest and shoulders making me feel small but not weak.

“You’re worth a thousand of every person in that school,” he states. “When they’re assholes, you fight back. When you almost get assaulted at your own party, you turn it into an excuse to work harder. You survive everything that gets thrown your way.”

Tyler cups my face, that firm, perfect mouth descending toward my cheek. The first brush of his lips on my skin sends a jolt of awareness through me, electricity that has my lips buzzing and my breasts aching.

More.

I circle his wrists with my fingers to keep him from moving away.

He doesn’t. He moves to the other side of my face, and as his lips descend, I lift my face.

This time his lips brush the corner of mine, cling for a moment. It’s open-mouthed and deliciously sexy.

My fingers creep up his face, curl into his hair. I tug at the ends of the soft strands—not hard enough to bring his mouth to mine, but enough that when my tongue darts out to wet my suddenly dry lips, I taste him too.

I want him closer. Want more of him, all of him.

Holding back nearly breaks me, takes every ounce of control I have plus some borrowed from tomorrow, next week, next year. Tears sting the backs of my eyes from the effort until one spills over, tracing a bold path down my cheek.

Shit.

“You can’t kiss me right now,” I breathe. “I wanted our first kiss to be perfect.” I reach up to swipe at the tear, the evidence that this isn’t going how it’s supposed to, and he brushes my hand away.

He gazes down at me, his expression full of wanting and something more.

“Really.” His breath dances across my lips, and his warm palms cup my neck. “Because I just fucking want it.”

Before I can protest, Tyler Adams is kissing me.

His hand is in my hair, dragging my mouth to his.

Of the million thoughts I could have in this moment, the only one that cuts through fog is, *Fucking finally*.

He tastes like home and adventure, everywhere I’ve been and everywhere I want to go. It’s so new I’m fascinated and so familiar I ache.

The first brush of his tongue sets me on fire. Forget playing it cool. My arms lock around his neck and pull me up so I can press my body closer to his.

I want to feel him everywhere. From the way he kisses me back, I can tell he wants that too.

He backs me across the floor, swallowing my gasp when I hit the wall.

My hands slide up his firm chest, relishing the muscles that jump beneath my touch. I swear I feel every inch of him, and my leg hooks around his as if I can draw him into me from that motion alone.

Kissing Tyler is a storm I want to bottle, to study, to chase to the ends of the earth.

We're both storms, two opposing forces clashing, becoming one. It's hard and hot and bewildering.

My teeth sink into his lower lip, and he groans, tugging on my hair so I open for him.

He grabs my ass, grinding against me, and I rub my breasts against his chest through our clothes, needing some friction, any fucking friction.

His lips skim my damp cheek and down my neck. I angle my jaw up, needing him closer, and he devours me like a starving man.

I'm dying.

Turning to a liquid, to a gas, to plasma under his hands.

If this is what it feels like to be real with Tyler, I'm in. I want everything he is, and I want to be everything he's not.

I want to shut out the world and lose myself in him, to beg him to show me all he—

A knock at the door has Tyler tearing his mouth away. The anguished look on his face has my gut wrenching.

"It's Brandon," comes the voice through the door. "You ever gonna come out, or is this a sock-on-door kind of situation?"

Tyler shoves a hand through his hair. "One sec," he calls back, his gaze on me. I adjust my clothes, and he helps me off the wall.

I square my shoulders and lift my chin. "That was..."

"Fucking crazy." His heavy exhale makes me inordinately happy.

"Yeah. It was fucking crazy."

He steps close, leans his forehead against mine as if he can put off the inevitable, steal a few more seconds where it's just him and me.

That tiny gesture gives me more hope than anything he could say.

“Enjoy the guitar,” I toss when he steps back. “And I won't tell anyone crying turns you on. It's our little secret.”

He smirks at me, and my heart flips.

As I turn for the door, I decide the only thing better than Tyler smiling is Tyler smiling when his mouth is still swollen from mine.



Tyler

“YOUR LILIES NEED MULCH,” Brandon says when I close the door after him.

“Where'd the others go?”

“They took off. You were taking too long.” Brandon rubs a hand over his jaw. “Trisha called. She doesn't think she has more gigs for us. I'm guessing you guys haven't smoothed things over.”

“Nothing to smooth. We’re done.” I haven’t seen Trisha since the night of the party. “I coulda used the tutoring before exams, but it wasn’t worth the drama.”

I turn to see Brandon circling the bed.

“Damn, this is sweet.” His fingers slide over the strings and frets, admiring the wood, the full sound. “It’s yours?”

“Yeah.”

Brandon’s low whistle is admiring. “One of my brothers bought me a six-foot stuffed lizard for my sixteenth birthday party as a joke. This is way better. What’s the occasion?”

I take it from him, put it back in the case, and close it before following him to the couch and dropping onto the opposite end. “It’s my ‘I’m in over my head and it’s all my fucking fault’ party.”

He frowns. “That some Catholic thing?”

I shoot him a look. “Jax introduced me to a guy who can get me working in New York after graduation.”

“No shit. When are you going?”

My abs clench. “This summer, I guess.”

“You guess,” he echoes.

I rub a hand over my mouth. I swear I can still taste her. “When I came here, it was a short-term deal for my music. I wasn’t planning to make friends. No offense.”

“None taken.” He cocks his head. “I always figured part of why you ran with us was to keep Carly and others from fucking with your girl.”

I swivel on the couch to stare him down. “What are you talking about?”

He smirks. “It’s obvious. Not to all of them, but to me. Only reason Carly can’t see it is she doesn’t want to. She’s got what my dad would call a vested interest. Gotta say, I’m sorry I missed that stunt at rehearsal. Sounds like a bold move.”

I shove off the couch to pace the room, thinking of Kellan’s and Carly’s bewildered faces. “It’ll cost me.”

“No. It’ll cost *her*.”

I pull up sharply. That thought hadn’t occurred to me.

When Annie showed up at my door, half of me wanted to lock her out of my life and my heart.

The rest of me wanted to press her up against that same door and prove I’m worthy—of her trust, her hope, her damned guitar.

I’m supposed to be in charge, but tonight she turned the tables. She was holding court, and I was on my knees.

“I can’t,” I hear myself say.

“Can’t what?”

“Anything,” I grind out. “I can’t have her. I can’t ignore her. I can’t even look at her without wanting her.”

It’s a dangerous game. Not only because Jax would string me up, but because I’m supposed to be leaving and focusing on my future, scraping together the pieces of the hand I’ve been dealt to try to make a life for myself. Not lose my head by depending on a girl, letting her depend on me.

“Who says you’re supposed to?” Brandon shakes his head. “You want me to say Annie Jamieson doesn’t want something from you? You’re asking the wrong question. What you should be asking is, who’re the people in this world you wanna count on? Because none of us make it through alone.”

Annie

JENNA'S always early to English. This morning I am too, looking up from her seat, my arms folded.

"I know you took my poem."

She stops in front of me, avoiding my gaze. "I'm sorry, okay? I need to be on Carly's good side. I'm not like you. You don't need her. She knows it."

I shake my head, but I can't find it in myself to be angry about the poem because I know what it feels like to want approval. "Carly's going to turn on you again if you don't give her enough shit on people."

"I think I gave her enough," she says softly.

I move back to my seat, and the room fills.

Brandon strides in, but there's no sign of Tyler. *Where is he?*

"Ugh. I've been trying to finish the fourth book you sent me since the weekend," Pen says, dropping her things on her desk right before the bell. "It's just getting real, where she's blown off her entire family and set off with this guy around the world even though he's keeping secrets from her. But debate's brutal, and I was sequestered all night. And student council..."

Tyler walks in the door, and suddenly Pen's talking Greek because I don't get a word after my gaze locks on his tall frame, his messy hair, his cut jaw. The casual way he drops his books on the desk, then looks toward the back of the classroom.

My breath sticks in my throat when his attention lands on me and his eyes warm.

Morning, he mouths.

God, strike me down if that's not the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Hey, I mouth back.

The teacher starts, and as Tyler turns toward the front of the room, I face palm. *Hey?* That's the best I can do?

Wait. This is Tyler we're talking about. I don't need to try to impress him.

Except I want to. Fuck my stupid heart, but I want him to think I'm the coolest girl he's ever met.

He knows you're not cool. You walked into his pool house, yelled at him, started crying, and he still kissed you.

I bite my lip as I stare at the back of his head through the rest of class.

"You think *Gatsby* applies universally?" Pen gripes at the end.

"It's about the rise and fall of the American dream," I respond, distracted. "It's more relevant now than it was in Fitzgerald's time. Today, the super-rich are people like Gatsby, new money from tech and finance, but there's more inequality than ever."

“East or West, who the fuck cares? This place is full of eggheads.”

“Pen,” I say, unable to keep it in any longer, “Tyler kissed me last night.”

“And it was so good you didn’t call me immediately and instead lay in bed, staring out the window at the pool house, while you rubbed one out, like Gatsby looking at his damned green light?”

I cock my head at her as we head out of class. “Oddly poetic.”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” she says as we pull up next to our lockers.

I flick the lock and jerk the door open. “I didn’t stare out the window at the pool house while I got myself off, but I did leave the curtains open.”

Her laugh has me shaking my head.

After leaving Tyler with Brandon last night, I tried to rehearse, to do homework, to play with Sophie while Haley worked in the kitchen and my dad watched his favorite home reno show, but eventually I gave it up and dragged my ass upstairs.

And yes, I made myself come thinking of Tyler. It’s hard not to. The guy’s a walking orgasm.

It’s not even about sex, which a few weeks ago I couldn’t have cared less about but suddenly feels more important than final exams, world peace, and what’s for breakfast put together.

It’s the feeling that every second we’re in the same room and I can’t touch him, can’t feel the warmth of his body, can’t

smell his sunshine and cedar scent is a waste.

Being closer to Tyler isn't something I "want." Every part of my body insists that it's necessary if I'm going to keep breathing.

I know it's stupid and high school, but I can't let go of it.

But even if some part of him does want me, he's not impulsive like I am. He holds the world at a distance, and after learning how his dad treated him, I understand why he has trouble trusting.

And there's a more immediate problem. If my dad finds out, he'll lose his shit, but he won't take it out on me.

He'll take it out on Tyler.

Which means he can't find out.

"Well, if you want to know for sure what's in his head..." Pen points at a sign hanging in the hall.

I laugh. "Prom is a four-letter word, Pen, and it's this weekend, and we're juniors."

"Tyler's not. Get him to take you. Just the thing to take the edge off exams looming a few weeks away, where boyfriends and boy toys alike come to frolic under guise of darkness."

I turn to follow Pen's gaze and see a familiar outline at his locker with Brandon. Pen slams her locker and walks toward him. I trot after her, cursing.

"Hey, Tyler!" Pen calls.

He turns, his attention landing briefly on her before flicking to me. "Hey."

His gaze travels down my body and back up again, and I want to squeeze my thighs together. I soak in the sight of him,

his messy dark hair, the strong shoulders under his jacket, the loosened tie at his neck.

Playing it cool, take two.

Except I don't want to.

I want to tell him I shaved my legs last night.

I want to cup my hands around his ear and whisper the rumor I just heard about our history teacher, and I want to know if he'll laugh when I do.

I want to strip the jacket off him, to unbutton that shirt and

“So, I'm helping with tickets for prom,” Pen plows on. “How many can I put you down for? I have it on good authority you're an excellent dancer.” Her eyes turn wicked.

Brandon swallows a laugh. “You a good dancer, Pen?”

“I'm terrible,” she says proudly.

“I can make up for it. Go with me.”

My friend blinks, taken aback. “Um... are you serious?”

I bite my cheek.

“I thought I had a date, but Tyler refused to take me.”

Tyler flips off Brandon with a smirk.

“Okay. Sure, I'd love to.” Pen regains her composure, glancing toward Tyler and me. “See, children? It's not that hard.”

With a wink, she and Brandon set off down the hall. I'm flushed when I turn back to Tyler, tilting my chin up to meet his amused chocolate eyes.

“Wow. I'm not sure what happened,” I comment.

“Me either.”

He rummages in his locker for books. His *Gatsby* paperback falls out of the locker, and we both bend to grab it. My head hits his, and I groan, rubbing the spot as I straighten.

“You okay?” he asks. “Knowledge is dangerous.”

“Not the worst excuse to avoid studying but maybe not a doctrine to live your life by.”

Tyler grins as he brushes the hair back from my forehead, inspecting the spot where our heads clunked.

It stops hurting.

Suddenly I’m thinking about how we’re a foot apart and what he’d do if I stretched up onto my toes to kiss him right here. Whether he’d pull back with a warning look or exercise his right as prince of the entire damned place and press me into the lockers like he didn’t give a fuck who was watching.

“So, I know you said you don’t dance,” I say, “but you’ve already broken that rule—”

“I’m not asking you to prom, Six.”

Disappointment floods me. “This wasn’t a fishing expedition for a corsage. I just figured it could be fun to go as friends. Now that we’re friends again.”

Tyler turns away, shutting his locker with a click before rounding on me. “I don’t do dances.”

“Right.” I look past him. “Guess I’ll see you later.”

His mouth twitches. “Not so fast. Walk me to class.”

I shift my bag over my shoulder, and when I drop my hand, his fingers brush mine.

Every inch of me should not be tingling.

I match my steps to his, not wanting to miss that touch.

“So, I tried the guitar after you left,” Tyler comments.

I’m distracted when his thumb starts lightly stroking the back of my hand.

“The neck’s perfect,” he goes on. “Twenty-four frets. It’s a dream.”

“When can I see you play it? I mean, hear you play it?”

I expect him to say no, but he surprises me. “Tonight. After rehearsal.”

A shiver of anticipation buzzes through my body. “Deal.”

As we pull up near his class, I add, “You don’t think we’ll be interrupted by college girls?”

We’re not even dating, but the idea of him with anyone else has something white-hot streaking through me.

“Not my type.” Tyler turns to face me, and I miss his touch already.

It’s that sudden emptiness that has me asking, “I thought high school girls weren’t your type?” in a coy voice that isn’t mine.

Tyler glances down the hall. Before I can breathe, he drags me behind the open classroom door, his hand threading through my hair as his body pins me against a locker.

Oh.

My.

God.

Tyler.

His kiss is fire. Hard and sharp and branding.

His lips skim my jaw, making me tilt my head up to give him even more access. My mouth falls open in shock at the scrape of his teeth along my ear, my breath falling out in pants.

“You’re cute when you’re jealous,” he murmurs against my skin.

With a last hot look, he slips into class and leaves me thrilled and boneless against the lockers.



REHEARSAL IS FUCKING BRILLIANT. I’m hitting every song, the dialogue, the choreography.

I’m invincible.

“Excellent, Annie,” Miss Norelli says after we finish the hardest number and I grab my water at the corner of the stage. “Something’s really clicking with you. Your costume will be ready for a final fitting the start of next week.”

My chest expands. “I get to keep the role?”

“You get to keep the role. I know I said I wanted the girl who auditioned, but you’re not her. You’re better.”

Hell yes.

I want to scream it to the world. I nearly dash off a text for Tyler, but I decide to savor it for a few minutes myself.

I run to the bathroom using the few minutes before we start again.

When I emerge from the stall, someone’s waiting for me.

“I have something that belongs to you.” Carly leans against the vanity, arms folded.

“More poems that happened to find their way into your possession?” I don’t bother to sound kind as I wash my hands. “Forget it, Carly. It’s over. You lost.”

Her gaze narrows, cold and cruel. “You’re not interested in a letter from someone named Fiona? A woman who says she’s your mother?”

My hands are still under the tap, the hot water stinging my skin.

It’s not possible, but from her expression, I know it’s true. “How did you...?”

“Jenna knew the poem wouldn’t be enough to keep me happy for long. That letter though? She can sit at my table through the end of exams for that. Let me tell you, this is some juicy stuff. My dad has contacts in publishing who’d be very interested in the story.”

Sweat breaks out on my neck as I reach for a paper towel to dry my hands. “It’s not true.”

She shrugs. “I’m sure a bit of grunt work can uncover the truth. It’s amazing what a detective can do.”

Panic starts deep in my gut, but I swallow it down.

She smiles, and when she lowers her voice conspiratorially, I almost think it’s genuine. “We all call our parents names, give them hell for their choices. But at the end of the day, it’s our dirty laundry. And it’s one thing to argue at the dinner table but something else for the world to tear down your walls, rip away your privacy.”

Her words make me shiver, but I force myself to focus. “What do you want?”

Her eyes brighten as she moves closer. “I love when you’re not as stupid as you look. If you want your letter back, you’ll back out of the musical.”

“No way. Opening night’s in a week. If I back down, I’ll look like an asshole to the entire cast and crew. Norelli will never cast me in anything again.”

“Not my problem.”

My entire body tingles as if my brain’s stopped sending blood to my fingers, my toes. “You’re doing this for a role. You know how fucked up that is?”

She smiles. “You’re considering letting your entire family get ripped to shreds for a role. You know how fucked up that is? I warned you,” she goes on. “Don’t take things that don’t belong to you. The role, Kellan, Tyler.” Her eyes flash, and my nails dig into my palms until I swear they draw blood.

She brushes past me but stops at the door. “I’ll give you until this weekend to decide. I’ll have a lot of rehearsing to catch up on.”

Annie

WHEN I GET HOME from school, I run to my room and yank open the drawer, then flip open my notebook.

The letter's gone.

The numbness from earlier starts again, this time filling my chest, my arms, my legs.

I search the rest of the drawer, the one below that. The floor. My books, binders, pockets, even though I know it can't be in there.

When I go back through the kitchen, no one's there.

The patio's dark when I shift through the door, closing it after me. I cross to the edge of the pool, staring into the shimmering water. The low buzz of the filter fills my ears with white noise.

Jenna didn't just take my poem—she took my letter.

I tug off one sock, then the other.

She gave it to Carly.

I take the steps one at a time, the water lapping at my toes, then my calves. Then my thighs, soaking the edge of my plaid skirt.

If it gets out, it could ruin my family.

When the water's up to my waist, my Oxford shirt stained dark up to my breasts, I dive, squeezing my eyes shut and pulling myself through the water. When I make it to the deep end, I sit on the bottom.

The blackness and the silence surround me.

One bubble slips past my lips, then another.

My dad taught me how to swim, back before I knew he was my dad. He rented out an entire wave pool so it could be just the two of us so I wouldn't be embarrassed to be the only ten-year-old who needed water wings.

I haven't thought of that in years, but now—

Something grabs my arm.

My eyes fly open, and I gulp pool water, twisting in the unrelenting grip.

I'm trying to breathe and cough at once as I'm dragged upward. My chest burns, crying out.

We break the surface, and the grip drags me out of the pool and up onto the tile, where I lie facedown and contorted while I cough water.

"What the fuck?" Tyler's voice is a rasp in my ear as I melt into the tile.

"It's called swimming," I groan. "You should try it."

"Bullshit."

He crosses to the cabana, grabs two towels, and comes back.

I shift to sitting and take one from him, wrap it around my shoulders, and squeeze the water from my hair. "I opened the

letter from my mom. She said my dad knew about me for a year and a half before he came back. She said he didn't want me."

Tyler stiffens.

I wait for him to defend my dad... or to say it's all in my head.

He doesn't.

"If your dad didn't want you, he's an idiot."

My eyes are burning for the second time in two days. My tears mix with the salt water on my cheeks.

"Come on." His voice lowers, soothing. "Don't do that."

"Because of your fucked-up attraction to crying girls?"

"Exactly. If I grope you within view of the kitchen, it's gonna get bad."

I try to smile but suck at it. "Carly has the letter."

I explain how Jenna stole it, and every muscle in his body goes tight, his face pale in the lights from the patio.

A shiver grabs me, and Tyler wraps the second towel around my feet.

"She wants me to step down from the musical, which, apparently, I won." I lift my hands in the air. "Yay?"

"Congrats."

Misery lodges in my throat as I stare at his handsome face.

"You can't quit," he says. "You've earned it, and most importantly... no one rocks a garbage bag tail like you."

My lips curve, and I taste salty tears.

The sound of the sliding door from the house drags my attention away as Haley rushes out.

“I looked out the window and saw you dressed and soaked. Did you fall in the pool?”

My dad’s hot on her heels, Sophie in his arms.

I curse under my breath. “I’m fine. It was a joke.”

Haley doesn’t look comforted, and my father looks alarmed as he stares between me and Tyler. It’s too dark to read whether the shock is tinged with suspicion.

“Take a shower, then come in for dinner,” he says at last. “Both of you.”

Dad heads back into the house, Sophie in one arm and the other wrapped around Haley.

But I can’t worry about the way my dad is looking at me and Tyler. I’m thinking of the man who taught me to swim, what the letter Carly has would do to him.

“We’ll figure this out,” Tyler murmurs as if reading my mind.

He brushes a thumb over my cheek, and my heart presses against my ribs.

And that squeeze in my chest gives me hope that I’m not in this alone.



“I HAVE THE ANSWER,” I tell Tyler after English the next morning as we head down the hall to our lockers. “Purple satin.”

His gaze narrows. “I think we’re asking different questions.”

“Last night after dinner, I took Pen prom dress shopping. I didn’t want to kill her buzz with the Carly situation.”

“Did you try on any dresses?”

I hold out my phone, a picture Pen took. The dress is pale purple, my favorite color, and mermaid cut. We got it at a vintage boutique. It has a bit of an eighties vibe, but someone took off the taffeta from around the skirt, so now it’s more streamlined. Simple.

Tyler’s gaze locks on the screen for a long moment, then his fingers move over the keyboard.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Sending it to someone.”

“No!” I protest, reaching for the phone. “If you took me to prom, you could see it yourself, and then I’d get to see you in a tux.”

“You’ve seen me in a tux.”

“Yeah, and I’d like to see it again.”

His eyes change color. “I can’t take you to prom. It would be a statement to the entire fucking world.”

“What kind of statement?”

“That you’re mine.” The possession in his tone makes me shiver.

I want to be his.

It’s not as if I grew up dreaming of big dresses and dates.

Still, the idea of Tyler taking me to prom, of spending the night with him and dressing up and feeling special, sends waves of wanting through me.

I know I have bigger problems—Carly-shaped problems—and I’m working on solving them, but this would be one hell of a reward in the meantime.

Speak of the devil.

Carly waltzes down the hall and cuts in on us.

“Hi. Can I talk to you a sec?” she asks Tyler sweetly.

As if she’s not a conniving snake.

Push her away. I want him to do it so badly.

But if there’s loathing underneath, Tyler hides it better than I ever could.

“Sure.”

Ugh. I force myself to head the other way.

I get that he has a reputation to uphold. What he did in rehearsal was enough of a risk without blowing off his entire crowd for me overnight, which would not only fuck the rest of my year but his too.

Rehearsal is canceled on account of senior prom, so I run through options for dealing with Carly.

I want the letter back, but unless I can get the help of Jenna or one of the minions, that probably won’t happen.

I can call her bluff, deny everything in the letter if it gets out. My dad’s lawyers can deal with the fallout.

I don’t like the idea of that. No matter how much is true, Carly’s right—family issues should be private, and I don’t want to learn what’s accurate and not in some tabloid.

The last option is that I can step back from the musical. My stomach flips just thinking about it.

It's the most feasible but in some ways, the most gut wrenching.

It finally feels as if I have something of my own, somewhere I can belong. I've earned it, and I'm not ready to give it up.

I'm still grappling with it after school, pretending to study at the kitchen island when Haley breezes in wearing a black dress and boots, her dark hair pulled into a ponytail. "I'm off for the night."

"Where to?"

"Work meeting." She kneels down to nuzzle noses with Sophie, who's in her bouncy chair.

Dad clears his throat, and Haley lifts a brow. "You want your nose rubbed too?"

"Not exactly."

She plants a kiss on my dad that no child should ever see but pulls away a moment later and strides for the front door as if he might go after her if she waits too long.

Smart woman, my stepmom.

"I thought we could have a movie night," Dad says when she's gone.

I straighten. "Really?"

"Really. I'll even get takeout. What do you want?"

"Ziti. We should ask Tyler if he wants something."

The sound of the sliding door at my back has me smiling. "Hey, we were just going to..."

My jaw goes slack.

Tyler's wearing a tux.

A fucking tux.

He looks handsome enough it steals my breath.

My first thought is that he wants to take me to prom, that he wants to tell my dad and say fuck it to the rest of the world.

Then I take in his expression.

The firm line of his mouth, the lack of sparkle behind his beautiful eyes, sends off alarm bells.

"I'm going to prom," he answers, and my heart lifts for the first time all day.

"With who?" My dad's voice is suspicious.

"Carly."

No.

No, that's impossible.

"No takeout for you, then." Dad turns to me. "Can you watch Sophie while I pick up food?"

"Um, sure," I manage.

Once the door closes after him, I whirl on Tyler. "You're not going to prom with Carly."

Tyler heads for the hallway, giving himself a critical once-over in the hall mirror.

Jealousy is a tidal wave ripping through my body as I bound after him.

Tyler ignores me, adjusting the cuffs of his black jacket. "I'm getting your letter back."

My jaw hits the floor, both at the fact that he's so calm and that he somehow decided this without me. "That's insane. You really think she'll give you the letter in exchange for being on your arm?"

I move behind him so he can see me in the mirror, too.

"I get that you're prince of the school, but she won't buy this. She knows you hate her."

"She doesn't know I hate her." His gaze locks with mine. "Which, for once, I'm grateful for."

"So, what, you're going to pretend you actually like her?" Horror sets in as I realize the truth. "How are you going to do that? Dance with her? Kiss her? Fuck her?"

Each possibility is worse than the last. Each word slices me raw.

This feels wrong. The deepest wrong I've ever known.

It's not only because I'm jealous—it's because I know how much he loathes her. The fact that he's actually considering letting her touch him, pretending he likes it—

"I have a plan." I round to stand between him and the mirror, and he lifts a brow. "I'll meet her tomorrow," I rush on. "Talk to her, find something else she wants."

"As much as fucking with you? Not likely. You threaten everything she is. You have everything she wants."

"No, I don't," I say softly.

If you walk out that door, I don't.

Tyler's composure slips at whatever he's seeing in my eyes. His handsome face fills with regret. "It's my fault she's

been so into you. The way I cut her and Kellan down in public set her off.”

I grab his arms. “Tyler, I’m telling you I can take care of this. You don’t get to decide what’s right for me or what’s fair. If you go, in some ways, you’re no better than her.”

He shakes off my grip, eyes flashing with anger. “That’s bullshit.”

“Is it? If you go with her, it isn’t just about my letter. It’s about you needing to have control over everything.”

Tyler pushes past me, pulling on the door handle. When he speaks, his voice is flat. “A bunch of us are meeting at Carly’s.”

I’m about to argue when the sound of a car purring up the driveway interrupts us.

I follow him outside, but it’s not my dad. It’s worse.

“A limo,” I blurt.

A sound from inside the house—Sophie crying—makes me wince.

“Don’t go anywhere.” I take a step back. “I need to get Sophie, but don’t leave.”

He shifts into the car.

“Tyler. Damn it, Tyler!”

The taillights fade down the driveway, and my hands clench into fists.

I didn’t hate Tyler three months ago after he called me nothing.

Now, I remember how hot and cold he’s been.

How he won't let me fight my own battles because he can't stand the thought of me losing them.

How he makes me feel like I'm part of something bigger than myself.

I hate him for all those things.

I'm also falling in love with Tyler.

And I hate him for that most of all.

Tyler

“PASS ME THAT BOTTLE.”

I hand Carly the booze in the car. She leans over me, shoving her chest in my face.

“I can’t believe you bailed on Kellan,” one of the minions says.

“Can’t you?” Carly coos, eyeing me. “I’m glad you came to your senses. I don’t know why you’ve been hanging around that trash lately.”

Every breath takes effort. “It’s easy. I live at her house.”

It was one thing to pretend Annie was nothing when I held her at a distance, when the person I said it to didn’t know her and never would. Now, I’m saying it to her worst enemy.

I hate the lies.

I hate that I’m here with Carly, but it was the only option.

Every second the limo glides through the silent night, I remind myself why I’m doing this.

“It’s about you needing to have control.”

No way. It’s for her. If she thinks I’d be here if this wasn’t the only way to save her ass, she’s nuts.

Prom's being held at a museum. The limo pulls up outside, and I shift out first. I force myself to hold out a hand, and Carly takes it, smiling. "Aren't you a gentleman? I hope you're not a gentleman all night."

Bile rises in my throat as she steps closer and runs a hand up my chest under my jacket.

"Come on, you guys!" someone calls from ahead of us.

"I'll be right there," I tell Carly, nodding toward the doors.

She pouts but starts after her friends.

I check my phone.

No missed calls from Annie.

Some part of me hoped she'd try to reach me. She'd been furious when I left, and all I wanted to do was grab her and kiss the hell out of her.

On impulse, I pull up the image of her in that dress.

She's beautiful. Making a face at the camera, holding her hair up with one hand, the other on her hip. Every muscle in my body squeezes at once, my heart most of all.

I wanted to bring her. I wanted to ask her yesterday before I realized this was the only option to fix the problem I created.

Carly and I head inside, her hand tucked in my arm. I feel eyes on us everywhere.

"You realize it's as good as done," she murmurs near my ear.

I turn my head to avoid her lips. "What is?"

"Prom king and queen." Carly blinks as if she's surprised I'm not thinking about this.

The last thing I want to do is spend another second with her, and the more public it is, the more I'm reminded that everyone will think it's real. At least I'm doing a good job of selling it.

"I'm going to make a lap," Carly informs me.

My gaze locks on an incredulous face by the bar. "I need to see someone first."

I don't wait to hear her response as I cross to Brandon and Penelope.

Penelope looks murderous. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Dude," Brandon says, looking back to where Carly's giggling with her friends.

I rub a hand through my hair, lowering my voice. "Carly's blackmailing Annie. I'm fixing it."

The anger on Pen's face fades to disbelief. "We went dress shopping."

"She showed me the purple one."

"Did she tell you she bought it?" The sadness in her voice is a kick in the gut.

"No, she didn't." I rub a hand over my face.

I swore I'd never put myself in a position like I was with my dad, where I felt as if I owed him something, where I compromised myself for another person.

But here I am, caught between obligations. Prostituting myself for a girl I can't stop thinking about. And somehow, I feel like the asshole.

This is why you don't fall for someone. Why you don't lay yourself on the line for them. Why you don't depend on them, let them depend on you.

I need a drink. I signal the bartender, then glance at Brandon.

I figured I'd stay sober to get through this, but now, I'm not sure I can stand it. There's an ounce of relief as Brandon slips a flask from his pocket.

"You really care about her, don't you?" Pen sounds concerned as I take the spiked drink and toss it back. Whatever's on my face seems to convince her. "Then leave."

"I can't. And this is going to get worse before it gets better." I survey the room. "Carly took something that doesn't belong to her, and I need to get it back."

Pen shakes her head. "Annie's never going to forgive you."

The possibility settles into my stomach, burning at my insides like the alcohol. "I hope you're wrong."

I return to Carly's side. We mingle, and she drinks. I try to feed her alcohol—not so much as to get her incapacitated, but enough to keep her oblivious to my limited attention. I figure it's working until she drags me onto the dance floor.

"So, when do you want to get out of here?" I deliberately pitch my voice lower, trying to sound as if I'm looking forward to getting her alone and not counting the seconds until I can ditch her. "We can go back to your place."

"I'm not leaving prom early. Not even for you."

My hope fades. There's no way she has the letter on her. I need to get to her house, her room.

Which means getting close to her.

She narrows her eyes. “You don’t seem excited to be here.”

Her suspicious expression has me on alert. “It’s a dance,” I drawl. “It’s not my scene.”

“Whatever. I should’ve brought Kellan.” She looks past me. *Shit*. “I should’ve—”

I grab Carly’s waist and pull her against me.

I kiss her and hate the second her mouth softens under mine.

I hate her and every person smiling and drinking and having a good time. Everyone who wants to see and be seen and use people to do it.

Most of all, I hate myself for staying away from Annie when all I want is to hold her close.

If we both get through tonight, I’m never letting her out of my sight again.

When I pull back, Carly’s smiling and breathless, her fingers lingering on the skin above my collar. “That’s more like it.”

I want to throw up.



Annie

“WHAT IS IT WITH *ANT MAN*?” Dad gripes. “He shouldn’t be a hero.”

“He’s the Everyman. It gives us hope any of us could be exceptional under the right circumstances. Like ray guns.”

Dad looks across the sectional in our living room as the credits scroll. “You barely ate three bites of dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

I check my phone again.

“We can jump over to *Endgame*,” Dad offers, searching my face.

“Fine. I’ll make popcorn.”

I don’t want food, but I want an excuse to be alone.

Once the bag of popcorn’s in the microwave, I lean over the island and stare out the doors at the dark pool house.

It’s been hours since Tyler left and no word from him.

At first, I hoped Carly would see the ploy coming a mile away, that she’d realize there was no way he was into her.

Apparently, that didn’t happen, because he would’ve returned by now.

Now, I’m torturing myself with ideas of them together, looking beautiful and drinking and laughing and dancing.

I didn’t think there was anything worse than the anguished feeling of watching him drive away from me.

There is, and it’s the utter helplessness of not knowing what’s happening.

What if everyone thinks they’re together?

What if he forgets they’re not?

What if he'd rather be with her than—

“You fall asleep in here?” Dad hovers in the doorway.

I startle, tugging on the hem of the pajama pants I changed into earlier. “Nope. I’m coming.” I retrieve the popcorn from the microwave, dump it in a bowl, and return to the living room.

“Rehearsals going well?” Dad asks as he stretches out on the chaise section of the leather sectional, tugging a blanket over himself.

I stare at him. In light of what’s happened tonight, the musical feels like a million miles away.

I sigh. “Have you ever felt so shitty you couldn’t think about performing?”

Even with my legs out, there’s an expanse between us, and I set the popcorn in some democratic middle zone.

“No.” He reaches for a handful, and I wait him out while he chews and swallows. “That’s when all you want to think about is performing.”

I turn that over as we watch the movie.

A few weeks ago, that seemed possible. Realistic even. Now, I can’t imagine forgetting what’s happening in favor of my moment in the spotlight.

Somewhere during the movie, Haley walks in the door.

“Did you destroy ‘em?” my dad calls.

“Not that kind of meeting,” she calls back. I hear her boots land on the floor, and she pads down the hall to us. “Did I miss Paul Rudd?”

Dad rubs a hand over his face. “The guy turns into an ant, Hales.”

“And you turn into a musician. I get that the appeal’s inconceivable.” She winks at me as she enters the living room, but her smile fades when she takes in my expression. “What’s wrong?” Her gaze cuts toward the back doors. “Have you seen Tyler?”

The lump in my throat is back, burning. “He went to prom.”

Her expression fills with compassion and something I can’t read before I train my eyes on the TV again.

She squeezes my shoulders. “I’m going to check on Sophie before bed. You guys need anything, let me know.”

It’s after midnight when a noise outside has me jerking straight up. Dad’s fast asleep, and for a second, I think I’ve imagined the sound.

Until I hear it again.

The front door.

My spin straightens.

The light creak of footsteps has me leaning toward the hall, peering around the corner.

Tyler’s in the foyer, his hair messed up. He shrugs out of his tux jacket and vest, something falling from the pocket and hitting the floor with a clatter as he hangs both in the closet.

A broken crown.

Fitting.

He shoves the pieces into his jacket pocket.

Tyler's tie's long gone, the top button of his shirt undone. He rolls up the sleeves of his shirt as he starts toward me.

I don't pretend I'm not watching as he crosses silently to the couch, taking in the movie, my dad, the popcorn.

I'd thought I'd be in tears, but there's nothing, almost as if what I'm feeling is too deep to be expressed.

"I got your letter." Tyler's voice is barely audible over the hammering of my heart.

He holds out a folded piece of paper, and after a moment, I take it from him and wad it in my fist, squeezing as if I can turn it to dust.

I take a deep breath and return my attention to the TV.

I pull my knees up to my chin and tuck the edges of the fuzzy blanket around me.

Tyler sits on the couch next to me.

"What are you doing?" My throat tightens.

My dad's asleep on the other side of the couch, but Tyler presses closer.

I can't argue, can't chew him out. Dad would wake up, and Tyler knows it.

He uses it.

Without asking, he moves under the blanket, his arm brushing mine. A shaky breath falls from my lips. That smallest touch sends a shiver through me.

On screen, Thanos wreaks his well-intended-but-ultimately-misguided havoc.

Whatever. I could handle the end of the world.

Dealing with Tyler Adams is some next-level shit.

Especially when his hip presses against mine, his bicep bumping my shoulder under the too-small blanket.

I want him to leave.

I want him to never leave again.

When I lean forward an inch, he takes the invitation, shifting me so he can slide behind.

I'm lying against his chest, feeling his warmth through my back. My heart's hammering, ticking like the seconds.

I try to focus on Robert Downey Jr. I swallow a sigh and resist rubbing my cheek against Tyler's chest.

But all I can think is how over the past few weeks, Tyler's built me up, made me good, made me strong...

Then in an instant, he tore it all away.

Tyler

“SIX,” I murmur when the credits roll. “You asleep?”

No answer.

Jax hogs half of the sectional. I can’t be annoyed, because he’s the reason Annie’s breath warms my chest through my undershirt, that her hand’s wrapped around my wrist, that her legs are curled over mine.

I stop the movie and scoop her up, blanket and all, and carry her down the hall. We make it up the stairs, and I hope she doesn’t have any shit on her floor so I don’t trip as I carry her through the dark and set her on her bed. I flick on the light on her bedside table, its glow casting shadows on the purple wall behind her headboard.

Tonight’s been a mindfuck, and it’s fitting I’m the only one awake for it.

I did the right thing by protecting her. Right now, it’s hard to believe.

The closet door is ajar, so I step inside. The first thing in it is a garment bag.

I tug down the zipper, and the purple dress inside twists my guts another sharp turn.

After spending the evening at prom with Carly, I didn't think my night could get any worse.

But the look on Annie's face gutted me.

There's a real possibility Annie will never forgive me.

She wanted to go tonight. I would've given almost anything to take her.

Except I couldn't take her—for a million reasons that now seem ridiculous.

Her dad, this thing with Carly—none of it matters when I cross the room and look at her.

She's rich, and I'm poor.

She feels everything, and I guard my emotions.

She's aching to be seen, and I long to be left alone.

My chest hurts when I'm with her and even more when I'm not, and I don't know how the hell to live my life when it feels inextricably linked with hers.

Annie shivers, and I pull the covers up over her.

"I know you're upset with me," I murmur. "But I need things to be okay with us. Because if they're not, if *you're* not..." I shove both hands through my hair, at a loss to finish that sentence. "What you said about me wanting to control things—you're right. But the thing I hate more than losing control is the thought of you hurting when I could fix it."

My name on her sleepy lips has me leaning over the bed.

"Did you dance with her?" she mumbles.

I have a sudden urge to trace the curve of her lower lip with my finger but settle for brushing aside a piece of hair that's falling across her face. "Yeah."

“Did you kiss her?” Annie’s fingertips graze my bicep.

I swear it’s an accident until they linger. Then they drift up, over my chest.

My muscles leap in response, and I suck in a shallow breath. “Yes.”

Her touch moves down my chest, tracing the lines of my pecs as if drawing me through her closed eyes.

The only things between us are her thin tank top and my shirt. When her fingers reach my abs, my eyes nearly roll back in my head.

“Did you fuck—”

“No. Never.”

It’s not a statement—it’s a plea for everything to be okay, to go back to the time before I realized how much she meant, how high the stakes got when I wasn’t looking.

I can resist her innocent exploration, at least until her hand finds the hem of my shirt. When her fingers graze the bare skin over my clenched abs, right above the waistband of my pants, I want to growl.

Tonight’s a war of emotions. My dick has no business being in this game, but I can’t help it.

It wants her.

I want her.

Both of us are sick of holding back.

When she speaks again, her voice is steady, her words a vow.

“She can’t have you.”

My lips brush the shell of her ear. I love the way she shivers. “Why’s that?”

“Because you’re mine.”

I stop breathing.

I’ve told a lot of lies to survive, but the biggest one is that I can keep my distance from her.

I did something tonight, and I can never take it back. I’d go to war for Annie Jamieson, on this and any other day. Whatever I am, I would lay it down to protect her.

Whatever pieces are left of me after tonight, they’re hers to collect, to catalogue, to keep in a bottle.

Silently, I cover her mouth with mine.

Her soft lips part with the slightest pressure, as if she was waiting for me to ask, waiting to welcome me in.

Her light, floral scent is making my senses swim, deepening the conviction that I can’t survive another second without this girl in my arms.

I taste her mouth, explore her, mark her as mine.

She not only lets me, she moans when I do it.

You’re mine.

I lose it, the last of my control snapping. I unleash the need and desperation I’ve repressed for way too long.

My hand tangles in her hair on the pillow, and I tear my mouth from hers to trace her jaw, the sweet arched curve of her neck. The skin that would’ve been revealed by that sexy fucking dress in the closet, the one she bought to wear for me.

“Forgive me,” I bite out. It’s not a request, it’s a demand. My teeth drag along her collarbone, and she arches against my

lips.

“No.”

But she pulls me closer.

I shift over her, straddling her while I bring my mouth back to hers as if I can persuade her with my lips, if not my words.

She’s fully awake now, meeting each slide of my lips and stroke of skin with one of her own.

And I sure as fuck respond.

I drag the covers down and roll her so she’s on top, my greedy hands yanking her hips against mine. The softness between her thighs is torture. I want to taste her, to take her, to bury myself in her and shut out the world until I’m good and satisfied.

“That feels so good. Don’t stop.” Her sleep-filled voice is colored with arousal.

My greedy mouth trails down the front of her tank top, the subtle valley between her breasts. She arches against me like she can’t get enough.

This? I want to say.

This is nothing.

The things I’ll do to this girl.

“I’ll keep going if you forgive me.”

Her sigh makes my cock twitch. “Someday.”

“Now.” My teeth scrape along her skin, and she gasps.

“When you never leave me again.”

My heart aches, but I laugh through it as I slide a hand under her tank top, my breath hitching as I graze the curve of her breast.

It's strange how her strength makes me give but her softness makes me rough. Fierce. Damned devout.

“You realize unless I stay with you until the day we die, it's impossible to fulfill that promise.”

She pulls back long enough to look down into my face, her hair hanging in a curtain around us. “Perfect.”

My heart hammers against my back as I soak in the sight of her, flushed and beautiful and wanting.

I shift up on one elbow and cup her in my hand. The softness of her is unreal, even before I rub a thumb across her nipple. She moans, loud, and I drag her mouth back to mine to swallow the sound.

If it carries down the hall, it'll ruin all of this. All of us.

“I could make you forgive me right now,” I murmur against her lips once she's quiet again. “I could touch you until you're only mine, always mine. You'd never come again without seeing my face, fucking hearing my words.”

My voice is urgent, and she blinks down at me, her lips swollen and cheeks flushed.

“Yeah. You could.”

The truth of that hangs between us.

It takes every ounce of control in me to shift out from under her and cross to the door.

“You said you wouldn't leave.”

Her whisper has me turning to see her propped up on her elbows, hair wild, eyes bright.

I open the door and stare down the hall.

Jax and Haley's room is at the other end of the hall, and Sophie's in between.

Nothing. Darkness. Silence.

All of that could change in a heartbeat.

I shut the door.

Then strip off my shirt, my pants.

The wariness on her face is replaced with hunger as her gaze drops to the obvious tent in my boxer briefs.

I laugh through my clenched jaw. "Yeah, that's not what tonight's for."

Most promises are made to be broken, but I push that from my mind because I can't entertain any more dark thoughts.

I lay down beside her, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear before I nudge her to face the other way.

Then I wrap my arms around her so her back warms my chest and her ass nestles against my aching cock.

I drag the covers over us, a flimsy wall of protection against the harsh world.

The world can go fuck itself.

Tonight, the sheets are our shield.

And this girl is my heart.

Annie

BIRDS outside my window wake me. I glance at the clock and realize it's almost eleven in the morning. But something feels off, and I roll over and realize why.

Tyler is in my bed.

Last night comes rushing back.

My emotions are in tatters from him leaving and coming back. From everything I've made it mean.

But he's here now. He came back. He stayed.

I was enough for Tyler. I am enough for this boy I want to drag from the shadows, live in the light with.

I shift up onto an elbow. Why does he have to be so beautiful?

I lean over him and run a hand through his hair, soaking in every part of his face.

That's nowhere near enough to satisfy me, so I bend closer, inhaling his scent. My lips brush his jaw, the stubble decadently rough against my skin.

"Stop that." His voice is a sleepy groan that vibrates through me, settling between my thighs.

I grin. “No.”

I continue the exploration, moving down his neck, his collarbone, the curve of his shoulder.

My hand brushes his cut stomach where his undershirt’s ridden up, and a tug of desire pulls between my thighs.

Biting my lip, I press my palm to that skin, slide it up an inch under the hem of his shirt. I curl closer into him, taking a deep inhale at his neck, memorizing his scent.

“I mean it.”

There’s a warning edge this time.

I like Warning Edge Tyler, especially when he’s in my bed.

“Why?”

He rolls me over so he’s on top, and my heart thuds in my chest as he stares down at me.

He might be half-awake, but he’s all man, all power, all strength.

All sexy.

“Because then I’m gonna have to get you back.”

I want that so bad.

“I’m still mad at you,” I breathe.

“I’d be disappointed if you weren’t.”

His touch skims down my side. Then his mouth lowers to mine.

We’re so close to kissing when he pulls back. “We can’t keep this up,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Yes, we can.” I tip my face up, straining, and he covers my mouth with a hand.

I glare at him.

“Your dad and Haley are down the hall. We’re lucky we didn’t get caught.”

I press my lips to his palm, the same palm I read at that carnival three years ago.

His grip loosens, and I take advantage, kissing down his fingers.

“I don’t care,” I say when there’s enough room to speak, “I’d tell them it wasn’t your fault. That since the moment I walked in on you naked, I was lost to the world.”

I pull the tip of his finger into my mouth.

Tyler’s jaw clenches, and he lets out the most delicious groan.

I suck harder, and his hips shift over mine until I feel him between my legs.

Oh, shit. Yes, please.

I felt him against my ass last night, but it wasn’t enough.

Nowhere near.

“You want me to make you scream under your Dad’s roof,” he rasps.

I release his finger with a pop, my head swimming. “Or the pool house. I’m not picky.”

He tosses a pillow at me, and I laugh.

“I’m serious,” he presses, a look of fascination on his face. “Tell me what you think it’d be like.”

I stare at him. “Beautiful. Reckless. Undeniable. Painful, not because it’s my first time, but because everything with us

seems to—“

“We’re done here.” He shifts off the bed, reaching for his tux pants on the floor.

I shoot up in bed. “Because I’m a virgin?” I try to sound dismissive but can’t quite hide the vulnerability underneath. “That’s discrimination on the basis of sexual experience.”

He rounds on me, and I’m pressed back against the sheets.

“Because no matter how long we’ve been friends, when we fuck...” His voice is a dangerous promise. “I will take you apart. And when I’m done, you’ll beg for me to do it again.”

His wolfish smile is feral. His finger hooks in the waistband of my pajama pants and tugs it for a brief, beautiful moment of possibility before releasing it to snap back against my stomach.

I’m speechless.

I’m never speechless, but I am now, and Tyler seems to think it’s cute because he drops a smug kiss at the corner of my mouth before rising again.

My phone buzzes on the dresser, and I jump.

PEN: Are we still meeting to study?

SHIT. I forgot.

Movement by the window has me dropping the phone. “What are you doing?”

“Leaving.” Tyler lifts the window frame.

I trip across the room. “You’re not going out that way.”

He swings one leg out before pausing to cock a dark brow at me. “You want me to walk out of your room and through the house? Past your dad and Haley?” Each word is said matter-of-factly, but I’m starting to catch on. “We’re cool, but we’re not that cool.”

I stick my head out the window, looking down nervously at the garden one level down.

“Good thing there aren’t roses on this side of the house,” he says.

“I was thinking I hope there aren’t any music box pieces.”

Tyler swings the other leg out, chuckling. “To be continued,” he murmurs before dropping down.

“Tyler?” I call when he hits the ground.

He looks up at me, expectant, and I bite the inside of my cheek.

“I like you,” I say over the racing of my heart. “A lot. Maybe even more than cheese fries.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners. “I like you a lot too, Six.”



“ARE YOU OKAY?” Pen asks as she sinks into the seat across from me at the café. “I saw Tyler at prom with Carly. He said it was to save your ass, and—”

“I know. And it was.”

Pen shifts forward, lowering her voice. “What the hell?”

I explain about the letter from my mom, and her face looks more and more shocked. “Are you going to contact her?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I admit.

“And you and Tyler...”

“We’re good, I think.”

“If he hurts you, I’m going to cut off his balls.”

I grin. “You’re the best.”

Tyler’s letting me in. I felt it last night. But it comes with a price. Every time he lowers that shield and I get further inside, the world that’s not him gets a little blurrier, a little more out of focus.

“How was prom with Brandon?”

Her mouth curves. “It was unexpected... and nice, aside from the whole Tyler thing. The prom part and after.”

“Wait. You fucked Brandon Bowers last night?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal. Was he? A huge deal?”

Pen laughs. “Yes, and he was really sweet.”

I hang on every word, truly happy for my friend.

“All right. Enough about boys. How’s your essay for Columbia?”

I make a face. “I started it. I wondered if they had a performing arts minor. I’ve been putting so much into this musical, and now that it’s really mine, I want more.”

With the window for my application essay in the background on my computer, I do some searching online.

Vanier looks incredible. The acceptance process is rigorous, the odds of being admitted dismal.

But the tug of fascination won't go away.

"Look who it is."

My head snaps up as Carly and her minions cross the café to hover over our table.

"How was prom?" I smile. "Your date looked hot."

"Hope you enjoyed watching him walk out the door."

"Not as much as I enjoyed watching him walk back in."

Her face turns purple. She knows what Tyler did but won't admit it, not in front of her crew. "Too bad you missed the dance, Little Virgin."

I bite my lip. "The after-party more than made up for it."

Her hand tightens on the strap of her bag. I want her to know he's mine. She never had a shot, and now she never will.

"We're not done," she breathes. "This thing between us isn't over until opening night."

I reach for my tea. "You know what, Carly? I honestly wanted you to like me once. I thought if I did the right thing, you'd approve of me. I'd fit in."

Her brows pull together in surprise.

"But your family isn't perfect either," I continue, thinking of the whispered rumors about her dad's addiction, her mom's affairs.

From the way her attention flicks from me to the minions and back, she's wondering if I know. She's wondering if they do.

I won't spill her secrets. We all have them. I'd never hurt anyone like that, no matter what they did to me.

"You could have some compassion," I tell her, "but instead, you push people down so that no matter how far you fall, you're still on top."

"This thing between us is over because it takes two people to fight and I'm out."

I turn back to my computer, catching Pen's eye on the way.

Once I hear the footsteps fade as Carly and her minions leave, my friend gives in to the grin. "Holy shit, you're a badass."



THE REST OF THE DAY, I study with Pen, swim until my muscles burn, and mess around with some poetry.

But I can't wait for dinner, because Tyler texted to say he'd be there.

Now he's sitting across from me, and we're eating lasagna, and I'd give everything I have if my dad and Haley and Sophie would disappear so I could crawl across the table and ask him to please do that thing with his tongue that makes me want him so. Fucking. Much.

"You need a dye job," I say between bites. He's wearing a black Henley that hugs his muscles in a decidedly groan-worthy way, and the blue in his hair's fading.

Tyler chews thoughtfully, swallows. "You wanna help?"

His voice is sexy. All of him's sexy.

"Sure."

“How was prom?” Haley asks Tyler.

“Fine.”

“Better than fine,” I correct. “He won prom king.”

Now I’m the focus of Tyler’s deep brown eyes, and warmth starts at my toes and fills every part of me until I’m crossing my legs.

“Congratulations,” Haley says warmly.

“Doesn’t matter much if you can’t pick your court.”

My chest warms, and I almost don’t hear Haley ask me, “Are you ready for dress rehearsal tomorrow?”

“Think so.” I’ve practiced everything to death, and I’m going to go through it again in my mind tonight. I’d rather spend my time with Tyler, but that’ll keep.

“Glad to hear it. I feel as if I’ve barely seen you this weekend. What’ve you been up to?”

“Um, Pen and I worked on school applications today. Dad fell asleep and missed all of *Endgame*.”

“Not all of it.”

My gut twists sharply. I turn toward him, and there’s an intensity on his face that cuts through the dreamy haze.

Did he hear Tyler come home? See him?

My heart stops in my chest.

If he did, that could ruin everything in one moment of stupidity.

If he did, Tyler would be gone already.

The thought isn’t as reassuring as I’d hoped.

But Dad doesn't comment the rest of dinner, and the conversation turns to cute things Sophie's doing, whether I'm going to work at the library again this summer, and a new charity project my dad's taking on.

After we finish dinner, I help Haley clean up, then volunteer to take Sophie for a bit before her bedtime.

I've just put her on my hip when my phone buzzes.

TYLER: I better hear you practicing through the window tonight.

THIS ONE-HANDED TYPING thing must be an acquired mom skill, but I manage to respond without dropping my sister.

ANNIE: I'm doing a mental run-through.

TYLER: I'm doing some mental run-throughs of my own.

OKAY, so now I have to leave time for getting off before bed.

Not that it's a hardship. I'd probably be thinking of him anyway.

The sound of a guitar from my dad's office pulls me in that direction.

Normally he does paperwork there, but tonight, he's playing. I watch him for a minute, the way he and his guitar speak their own language.

It's beautiful.

Sophie's squeal has him looking toward the doorway.

"It's nice hearing you play," I tell him. "You don't do it enough."

"I'm retired." He shifts back on the stool. "It's not my life anymore. You girls are."

"It doesn't have to be one or the other."

Dad lifts the guitar over his head, sets it on a stand in the corner. "You'll understand someday."

Sophie squirms, and I shift her, stroking her soft pink cheek until she smiles. "She's perfect, isn't she? When do we get less perfect?"

Dad comes closer, folding his arms over his chest. "Tell me what's wrong."

My chest aches. "I want to take music lessons. Theory. Voice. Tyler's been helping me"—his brows furrow, and I press on—"but it's not enough. I know you don't want to teach me, and that's probably for the best because we'd fight the whole time, but I want to learn."

I expect him to turn me down, and he looks as if he's on the verge. "If I say no, you'll find a way to get them anyway."

"Yes."

He rubs a hand through his hair. "All right, then."

My chest expands.

Sophie spits out her soother, and my dad grabs it off the floor.

“If you five-second rule that right now,” I warn, “I’m going to have to tell her when she’s seventeen and wants to know why her life sucks. ‘Dirty-floor soothers.’ That’s what I’ll say.”

His eyes crinkle as he goes to his desk. “Haley’d have my back.” He pulls out a new soother from the top drawer, passes it to my fussy sister who latches on like it’s life itself. “Besides, you never had it easy, and you turned out all right.”

He looks at me as if waiting for me to disagree with him.

I can’t. Tonight, despite the emotional turmoil of the last forty-eight hours, I don’t feel like I’m bleeding out.

The road ahead isn’t easy, but there’s a glimmer of hope.

I cross to him and reach up to hug him with my free arm. He hugs me back. “Tell me one thing,” he murmurs. “Should I be worried?”

“What do you mean?” I ask when I pull back.

“Dropping classes. Staying out late. Swimming in your school clothes.”

I smile. “I’m okay. I promise.”

He searches my expression. “There’s nothing you want to tell me.”

“No. Night, Dad.”

“Annie.” I hesitate at the door, and he looks at me along time before nodding to Sophie. “Give her to me. It’s a school night. You have things to do.”

I think of Tyler in the pool house.

I wonder if he knows.

But he doesn't say anything as I pass him my sister, then turn for the door.

Tyler

THIS WEEK FEELS like I'm living a roller coaster—or a series of them, one after the other, without time to get off in between.

It's after midnight when I round the house, guitar in tow, headed for Jax's converted tour bus.

I spend a lot of time in here with Jax, but it's different on my own. I'm surrounded by memories, by history, but tonight when I take a seat on the couch, it's just me and the incredible instrument under my hands.

Is there any part of my life Annie doesn't touch anymore?

I play song after song, and while I play, I think.

About me, about her, about the future.

I want to make something of myself. Maybe more than a session musician. Jax has fame and obligations, but he also has a lot of positive impact. He employed dozens of people, inspired millions, by doing what he does best. You can't do that by playing small.

A noise has me jerking my head up to see Jax appear at the top of the stairs.

"You're up late," he observes.

"Can't sleep."

“Me either.”

Jax crosses the floor, completely at ease—he should be, this was his tour bus for the better part of a decade—but when he gets close, I see the ease is an illusion.

His jaw is tight, his eyes unsettled. “Nice guitar.”

My gut twists sharply, but I’m ready.

I set the guitar down. “I’m calling Zeke back to tell him I can’t come to New York.”

Jax takes a seat on the opposite couch, crossing an ankle over his knee. “I assume you’re going to tell me why.”

I rise, the photos on the wall drawing me closer. One of me and Annie at Jax’s old label, me wearing the Ramones T-shirt she bought me, has me lingering.

“Before you brought me here, you made me promise something.”

“To stay away from my daughter.”

“To look out for her,” I correct. “And I have. I care about her more than anything. Maybe there’s always been some part of me that wanted more than her friendship, but I didn’t believe I could have it. Sure as hell didn’t believe I deserved it.”

I take a deep breath and turn to face him. “I know you don’t think I’m good enough for her.”

“Why do you say that?”

My hands fist at my sides. “Come on, Jax. Don’t fuck with me. I’m only here because you feel guilty.”

He leans forward, and I continue.

“I know everything. That you met my dad fifteen years ago when he was stringing together whatever shitty gigs he could. Bartending to keep enough money for beer. Sometimes to keep the lights on.

“He worked at Wicked as a part-time janitor until he got fired for missing too many shifts.

“But the highlight of all of it was meeting you. You were young like him, came from nothing, and you were a success. He wanted what you had, and you gave him advice.”

Jax folds his arms over his chest, and the amber eyes so much like Annie’s glow. “What did I tell him?”

“You know.” But I say it anyway. “You told him not to let anything or anyone get in his way. That in order to succeed, he had to look out for himself.”

Emotion rises up in my throat, huge and awful and unfamiliar.

“But he had a three-year-old son at home. And he took that advice—your advice—to heart.”

My chest is tight as the memories come back, ones I’ve done everything in my power to push down. Me vying for his attention, finally realizing I’d never get it. The only time he was encouraging was when I joined the program at Wicked for troubled teens because he thought he could use my connection to the label.

When he realized he couldn’t, he decided to take from me directly.

The year before I left to come here, it all spilled out one night—how his lack of success was my fault, that he’d always blamed me for holding him back.

“I know that’s not the only reason he neglected me,” I continue, my voice rough. “You gave him permission, but the idea was his. I can’t even blame you because you brought me here. You knew and you set out to make it up to me.”

Jax shifts out of his seat, pacing to the end of the bus in slow strides before turning back. “Tyler... I have no idea who your father is.” His voice is strangely precise. “I meet a lot of people. I don’t know your dad, I don’t know what he did, and I don’t know what I told him.

“I won’t defend myself or him. All I can tell you is I was a kid with a seven-figure contract trying to deal with my own reality and I didn’t know how.”

Disbelief has me shaking my head. “So, why did you bring me here? If you didn’t feel as if you owed me, needed to make it up to me—”

“I told you. You were talented, and you fit in with my family. I saw something in you, and I trusted you.”

His words spin in my mind. It makes sense, and it doesn’t.

I thought I was here because he had a debt to repay, but it wasn’t his debt...

It was mine.

He gave me his trust, his help, his home, with nothing in return.

My brain hurts. I’m willing to believe there are good things in this world, but this is too much. Too far.

He continues, “You’re going to have a career in this industry. Your father couldn’t, but you can and you will.

“That doesn’t come easily when there are people in your life you care about. You’ll have to choose what’s right for you

and right for her, and those things will not be the same. The first time you have to choose to tour or take a gig in another city, you'll have to make that choice, and it will tear you apart."

His words paint pictures in my mind, and I try to shove them out. "No. I can take care of her."

"Tyler, protecting her in a sheltered world means nothing. You haven't seen the start of it. A single person in my circle watched you play, and he was drooling on his two-thousand-dollar shoes." There's affection and scorn in equal measure. "You can't stay for her. I won't watch you give up your future. She won't either."

"She needs me."

"She needs you because you're here. When you're gone, she'll rely on herself."

I want to argue, but so much of the shit she's been through this year was made worse by my presence—her fights with her dad, with Carly.

But I'm not ready to give up.

"What about you and Haley?"

Jax barks out a laugh. "You think what you and my daughter have is the same as what me and Haley have? I would lay down my life for Haley, no questions asked. Walk through hell and back. I'd give up everything I am, my future, my world, for her. I have done it, and I'd do it again." His face contorts in pain, and I wonder if he's going to say something else but stops. "When I was your age, I was incapable of that kind of love. It would've destroyed me."

"You were capable of having a child." I think of the letter from Annie's mom.

He nods. “At first when I learned about her existence, I denied it. Pushed her away. I was wrong to do it, but it was too much. I couldn’t deal with the demands of the life. When my manager showed me a picture of her, it all changed.

“It wasn’t how I planned it, but she was mine. She’ll always be mine.

“I know she didn’t have the perfect childhood. If I could have gone back and fixed it all, I would’ve.”

The words slice into me. I can’t stand the thought of being selfish like my dad, that I could be hurting not only myself but the girl I care about and the only man who ever looked out for me.

“If you don’t want to leave her,” Jax starts, “tell me you love her.”

My stomach drops. “What?”

“Tell me you love her like I love Haley.”

I’ve seen Jax and Haley together. Their bond. It’s something I’ve never let myself hope for, not to mention trust.

If I ever could love someone like that, it’d be Annie. I know it in my heart.

I lift my palm, search the lines a girl traced there once.

It took sixteen years for someone to tell me I’d have a bright future.

It wasn’t my dad. It wasn’t some producer.

It was Annie.

I open my mouth to respond, but Jax beats me to it. “It’s not enough. If there’s a moment’s hesitation, an ounce of reservation, it’s not enough.

“What were you thinking would happen when you started your career? When she left for school?”

Those words break me. I’ve always had a plan, always been two steps ahead or killed myself trying to be.

“I don’t want to hurt her.” My words echo in the bus.

“You can hurt her a little now or more later.”

I think of her face after prom. I imagine it amplified tenfold, a hundredfold.

“She’s stronger than you think,” he goes on. “But when it comes to you, she’s weak.”

I want to grab the photos off the wall and hurl them across the bus. I wish I could dismiss his words, but I can’t. I see the truth of them every time she looks at me.

I’m older. I should know better. I owe her better.

If Jax was forcing me to leave, I’d tell him to go to hell, but he’s asking.

Jax Jamieson, the biggest musician in a generation, the man who acted like a father to me when he had no fucking reason to, is asking.

I rock back on my heels. “If I leave, she’ll think she doesn’t matter to me. That I lied to her.”

He crosses to me and lifts a fist. I don’t flinch. I’ll take whatever punishment he wants to dole out. I deserve it and more.

Instead, he grabs my shoulder in his strong grip.

Jax’s expression is clouded with the same pain ravaging my body, my soul. “Our hearts make liars of us all. I lied to her for years, and I love her more than you ever could.”

Annie

“YOU READY TO SING YOUR face off, Miss Ariel?” Pen asks when I slide into her car with my bags for opening night.

“So ready.” I bounce excitedly in my seat.

“When’s Tyler coming?”

“I’m not sure. I texted him but haven’t heard back yet.”

I didn’t notice Tyler at school today, but I didn’t have time to look for him. I was exempted from classes for final preparations for opening night.

“But I got all these candles and snuck them down to the gazebo for tonight.”

She squeals, and my stomach flips.

Between the musical and what happens after, this is going to be the best fucking night of my life.

We get to school, and I hug my friend before taking off to do my hair and makeup backstage.

After, I warm up with the rest of the cast, doing vocal exercises and some physical stretches.

I try to peek at the audience but can’t get a good look. On impulse, I hit Tyler’s number. It goes to voicemail.

“Hey, it’s me. I’m going to pretend you’re here to say break a leg or promise me cheese fries, but I can’t wait to see you tonight.” I swallow my nerves. “Thank you for helping me with this. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

I leave the phone out, face up, while I go back to the dressing room.

“*Fifteen minutes!*” the stage manager calls.

I go to grab my costume.

It’s not there.

I ask the other actors and the stage manager, but no one’s seen it.

Then my gaze lands on Carly.

“I think I saw it over there.” She points to the corner.

Relief has me sagging as I run to get my tail, its garment bag draped over a chair.

I hold up the plastic bag and notice red liquid running down the bottom.

“No.”

I get the tail out of the bag and open it, seeing the inside stained red.

I gingerly reach out to touch it, and it’s wet.

Panic rises up in my throat. “What did you do?”

“Me? Nothing. Jenna was drinking wine a little while ago. She must have spilled. Or maybe it’s that time of the month.”

Jenna looks toward me in shock. “That’s bullshit.”

But Carly turns and walks away.

My breath sticks in my chest. *Shit.*

“Ten minutes!”

“Annie!” Jenna calls me over to her dressing table. “Do you want mine?” She bites her lip, trying to hide the wince.

I find a smile. “No, but do you have your garbage bag still?”

She helps me put it on underneath my real costume. It’s still gross, but at least I can perform without being distracted by stickiness.

“Does the fabric smell?” I ask.

She sniffs near my waist. “Only up close. If you can ignore it, Carly and Kellan are the only other ones who’ll get a whiff.”

“Perfect.”

I’m not about to let this stop me.

I take my spot in the wings as the curtain rises on the first scene. I watch it before the lights go down, and I take my mark.

When the lights come up once more, I look out at the audience. I recognize Pen’s pink sweater. She’s in a row with her parents. I find my dad and Haley. I’m pretty sure there’s an empty seat next to my dad.

I try to hit all the notes and the words, but my body feels heavy, as if I’m performing in water. My forehead’s damp from the lights.

Then partway through the first act, my gaze lands on a shape at the back of the seats, by the doorway.

Tyler.

Every part of me lifts, expands, and from that point forward, I love being on stage. I relish every second in the spotlight.

This is what I wanted, and though I sneak a look at my family once in a while, every line and song and scene makes me realize it's not for them.

It's for me.

I'm doing it for me, and I feel amazing.

The final curtain is accompanied by thunderous applause and hollering.

Everyone exchanges smiles—even Kellan pulled his shit together.

Carly tries to avoid my gaze but can't, and I wink at her as we join hands to bow.

"I owe you a drink," I murmur to her, "since I'm pretty sure your family's entire liquor cabinet is inside my costume."

"That was great, Annie," Haley says when she and my dad come backstage after the show. Her eyes land on my costume and the trash bag on top of it. "Do I want to know what that's about?"

"No. No, you don't." I smile, looking past her. "Where's Tyler? I saw him come in. He was standing in the back."

They exchange a look.

My dad lowers his voice. "Let's go home."

"I'm going with Pen."

"Annie, please."

"Okay," I relent, waving to my friend with a promise to call her in the morning.

When we get home, my dad's Bentley is already in the garage, but Tyler's bike is gone.

How is he not back yet?

I run around the side of the house, nearly tripping on the roses in my hurry to get to the pool house.

The lights are on.

I burst in the door, breathless, a smile on my face as I prepare to giddily tell him every second, to demand his reaction. Hell, I'd even take notes as long as he put his hands on me while he gave them.

But the space is empty.

Something else is wrong, too.

It takes a second for me to put my finger on it.

No schoolbooks. Not tidy stacks of clothes.

No guitar.

My stomach plummets.

I feel a presence at my back and whirl on my dad. "Where is he?"

"Gone."

Numbness takes hold of my gut, spreading to my limbs. "Where?"

"He didn't say."

"And you didn't ask? Whatever 'I'm a musician, I'll do what I want' breakfast cereal you all eat isn't charming. It isn't normal." The burning behind my eyes doesn't turn to tears. It lingers like coals that refuse to cool.

I run across the pool deck and into the house. Haley calls out to me, but I pass her without a word and pull out my phone to check for missed calls or messages.

Nothing.

Three nights ago, he slept in my bed.

The next day, we flirted at the dinner table.

I fucking bought candles.

It's not true.

It's not.

It's—

I stalk into my room and pull up at the sight of the object lying on my duvet.

The guitar I bought Tyler. Twenty-four frets, inlaid rosewood.

I stare at it numbly as if it's going to speak, but maybe it already did.

“Annie...” Haley's voice comes from the doorway.

I can barely make her out through my blurry vision.

“Go away.”

“We should—“

“Go. Away!”

I shut the door and grab the guitar, sliding my back down the side of the bed until my ass hits the floor.

I wrap a hand around the neck and squeeze. The strings bite into my skin.

“Forgive me.”

“Someday.”

“When?”

“When you never leave me.”

I shut my eyes so hard my teeth hurt.

After three years of ups and downs, of inside jokes and bitter standoffs and dreaming of things I never thought would happen, everything’s starting falling into place. My life is making beautiful, twisted sense for the first time.

“I like you. A lot.”

“I like you a lot too, Six.”

The last few days with him scroll through my mind, a movie of promises and confessions and trust and openness. Of wanting and finally having.

After so long, I have him.

Tyler is coming back.

TYLER ADAMS IS MINE. My friend, my prince, my heart.

He has to come back.

I LOVE HIM. I think he might love me too...

... He's not coming back.

Annie

Eight Months Later

“WELCOME TO VANIER AUDITIONS. We’ll call you when we’re ready.” The man at the registration table gives me some paper to fill out. “Please confirm your name and contact information here.”

I fill out the paper and hand it back to him in exchange for a number.

I can’t help noticing all the people warming up. I’d expected talented musicians and vocalists, but this is next level.

There’s a corridor beyond where the auditions are being held and a sign saying “PLEASE STAY IN THIS AREA.” I ignore it.

My feet are soundless on the tile floor that looks like marble. The hallway is full of people my age of all shapes and colors and sizes. Some are with parents, some alone wearing headphones.

This building, between the Upper West Side and Harlem, is stone. Attached to the original four-story building are

another six stories of glass. A spiral staircase goes up the middle as if it ascends all the way to heaven, though it can't be more than four floors.

My phone jumps in my bag, and I answer it. "Pen?"

"Did you go yet?"

"They're running behind. Where are you?"

"Still at Columbia," she says. "It's amazing, and I maintain you're insane for not coming, not only because your dad will murder you when he finds out you lied to him. But you've got this. Any hotties you can grab for a quick pep-talk-slash-make-out?"

I glance around. There are lots of attractive people, but the only thing I feel are nerves. "I don't think that'll help."

"Break a leg, girl. I'll meet you for lunch."

We hang up, and the reality starts to settle in.

This is it. My chance.

I've only put everything in me into this.

Every ounce of time and emotion and focus for the last year.

More than that.

I start down a hall lined with practice rooms. Between them are portraits of award-winning actors, dancers, musicians, conductors who graduated from Vanier. I know almost all of them, at least by name. They win Oscars, Grammys, Tonys.

I look in the first door interrupting the line of photographs. There's a girl playing piano, lost in her music—which I can't hear, thanks to soundproofing. I wish I could.

I continue to the next one, and there's a boy rehearsing an acting piece.

The man from the desk comes up behind me, frowning. "Excuse me? You're on deck. You should stay in the audition area."

I nod. "I'm sorry. I just needed a moment. I'll be right there."

I can't go back yet. The third door is open.

The sounds from that room invade my ears, vibrate through me, call to every part of me.

Including parts I thought were dead.

I peer around the doorframe, an inch at a time, holding my breath.

Inside, there's a man sitting on a stool.

A man with dark hair falling across his forehead who plays guitar as though he was born to do it.

My heart stops, every bodily function except my eyes and ears shutting down.

For months after he walked out of my life, it was all I could do not to picture him, to think about where he was, with whom, doing what.

His hair is jet and styled, no trace of blue. His mouth is firmer, more sculpted. His black dress shirt is crisp. Lines of black snake out from under rolled sleeves, twining around muscled forearms like an embrace as he plays.

When Tyler left, it gutted me. I can't think about the things I did in those weeks and months. The broken girl who cared

too much, arguing with the universe, wanting Tyler, wanting us.

One dark, empty, soulless day, I decided it was time to mourn both. I moved forward because there's nothing else to do, because you can keep living or stop.

But Tyler Adams is in New York. At the school that's *my* dream.

The boy who broke my heart doesn't look destroyed...

He looks *whole*.

Tyler sets down the guitar and looks up but not at me. A girl with dark, edgy hair, wearing jeans and a loose sweater, slides onto his lap. His hands—those beautiful hands I used to dream about—thread into her hair, and it's as if they're reaching into my belly, grabbing hold of my stomach, and cranking it. One vicious turn after another.

“Miss?”

I whirl as the administration guy appears near my elbow.

“They're waiting for you.”

I nod tightly, but before I follow him down the hall, I look back toward the room.

Tyler's attention isn't on the girl in his lap. His gorgeous brown eyes are wide and locked with mine.

Because my twisted muse, my rebel prince, my ex-friend...

He sees me.

And he's every bit as fucking floored as I am.

A LOVE SONG FOR REBELS

PART II

Tyler

September

A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL once told me I don't feel enough.

She was wrong.

Am I walking around with a flashing neon sign pointing at my heart saying, "Fuck me over. Here's how"? No.

But heading into the grand auditorium at Vanier with a crowd of students my first day of second year, I feel plenty.

"The demo was great, and you know it," I state into my phone, talking loudly to be heard above the noise of the crowd.

"Ty, it's not the right time," Zeke answers flatly.

I rub a hand over my neck. It still feels strange not to have hair curling over a collar, but the black Henley suits me better than Oakwood's tailored shirts.

"Is it ever gonna be the right time?"

"Some people wait a lifetime for a chance. You had a golden opportunity, and you fucked up."

My stomach clenches, but the record exec continues. “I could use you Thursday. The studio’ll reach out. You’re on my radar, kid. Don’t make the same mistake twice.”

He clicks off, and I barely resist chucking my phone into the throng of students.

“Smile, Ty. This is for posterity.” My roommate’s drawl shakes me back to the room.

Beck wedges himself next to me, his phone screen trained on us as we make our way toward some seats midway back.

“I’m Beck, and thank you for following my adventures at Vanier. We’re at twenty thousand subscribers, and I appreciate you. Today’s the first day of second year. For you math nerds, yes, that means final year for those of us in a two-year program, and it’s gonna be epic.”

He flips the camera outward to survey the scene. The auditorium’s a vast, sweeping space with a thousand upholstered seats. When you see it empty, it’s like a field waiting for battle.

The stage could be mistaken for part of that battlefield, but it isn’t.

It’s the prize.

Beck’s narrative continues. “First day of a new year means assembly, which is a chance to remind us how lucky we are to live in dorms or rodent-overrun apartments with barely enough time to practice for the survival jobs we’re gonna need when we graduate.”

His easy deadpan has me lifting a brow. Usually Beck’s a hundred percent optimism even when I’m not.

“You’re cheery after the long weekend,” I note.

“Came out to my parents. For future reference, Labor Day party in Southampton is a bold choice for announcing you’re bi.” He looks between the camera and me. “On the plus side, everything I own from home will be in our apartment by tomorrow. Including a kickass Bluetooth speaker. The bass will blow your mind... and almost make up for the fact that our fridge broke this morning.”

I want to ask him about the coming out part, but the recording light’s still on.

We turn down a row of seats partway back, moving past second years like us and the wide-eyed freshmen.

I refuse to believe we were that naïve a year ago.

“Even if I gave a shit what my parents think, there’s no going back. Guys give better head,” my roommate goes on, tripping over classmates as we pass. “Girls are enthusiastic, but a dude knows how to treat a dick.”

In the middle of the row, I grab his phone, hit the Stop button, and hand it back amidst his protests. “Beck. Seriously. Tell me you’re okay.”

His grin is lightning quick, but it takes a moment for him to respond. “I will be,” he says at last, clapping me on the shoulder.

I drop into a seat. He takes the one next to me.

“What’s new with Cap’n Z?” He nods in the general direction of the cell phone stuck in my pocket.

“Still won’t offer me a new deal.”

I could be cutting albums right now instead of busting my ass on etudes for class.

Beck frowns. “You should’ve told him what happened with your dad after you moved to New York.”

My entire body stiffens, and I flex my hand on the arm of my seat. It’s been months, but mentioning those events still affects me. Maybe it always will.

“Zeke is business. Last year was personal.”

When I left Dallas and moved to New York last summer, I’d thought there was nothing left in me to break.

I was wrong. Less than a month later, life brought me to my knees.

The one silver lining is that I poured all my feelings into music. I’m better than I’ve ever been, and I want to get the hell out of this place. I’ve had enough of school, enough of people telling me what to do and how to be.

“So, I signed up to be a peer mentor this year,” Beck announces. “Got any tips on educating the next generation?”

I shift back in my seat, scanning the rows of students. “Don’t fuck whoever’s assigned to you.”

“Appreciate the input. I’m gonna play that one by ear. You got some nerves to burn off yourself, roomie,” he continues. “You keep way too low a profile. And you’re gonna have to start paying me to keep out all the dreamy-eyed people showing up at our door. ‘Tyler around? I need to talk to him about class, the state of the Middle East, the state of my bikini wax...’”

His exaggeration makes me laugh.

Yes, I’ve had my share of offers, but it’s been a while since I took a girl up on one.

It's ironic because with all the pent-up energy that's been building lately, I could fuck someone.

God, could I fuck someone.

For an hour, a day, a month, until I forget the resentment and frustration and emptiness.

Most of the people around here would get that I don't want a relationship.

It's like the Olympic Village, an entire community of hot, young, ambitious men and women who need to burn off steam. But at the end of the day, they're here for one reason—to build a career, a future that's brighter than what we came from.

The lights dim, and we train our gazes on the stage.

Vanier is nothing if not theatrical. The college has a rolling slate of A-list guest faculty including musicians, actors, and dancers.

Today, several of them perform, and Beck's phone peeks up between the heads. I wonder what he's going to edit this into later for mass consumption.

Finally, the dean—herself a former principle ballerina with a national company—clears the stage for her remarks. “Vanier has the nation's most prestigious performing arts programs. We are steeped in tradition, a history of commitment and discipline.

“Some would say technology holds the key to the future, but we believe the arts are more important than ever in these troubled times. Where there is dark, there is also light, and we are seeking to reinterpret this world of struggle, of inequality, of burgeoning possibility and hope, through the lens of the arts.”

I'm not here to reinterpret the world.

I'm going to find a way to get my contract back if it kills me. Starting today, I won't rest until I do.

The decision fills me with resolve.

My gaze locks on two girls a few rows up, and I tune out the dean's words.

They're both pretty from the back—whatever the hell that means—but it's the dark-haired girl who has me straightening.

Her hair falls in waves, a shiny river that ends somewhere below her seatback. The glimpse of profile when she turns to listen to something the blonde whispers shows full lips, a pointy nose.

I lean forward as if doing so will let me see more of her.

She's wearing some kind of tight, dark sweater that makes me want to check the rest of her out.

Every part of my body tingles, the frustration transmuting smoothly into attraction.

I haven't felt this way since I saw a ghost nearly four months ago.

Hallucinations—another reason I need to get the hell out of here.

“Apparently, my roommate, Tyler, has taken up crack over the summer.”

I blink at Beck's phone in my face, and I realize the assembly's done and everyone's getting up to head for class or their dorms or apartments.

As we file out of our row, I scan the bodies ahead of us for the girl I was watching.

I can't find her. The disappointment is stupid because I've never even met her, but there was something magnetic about her.

Classmates stop us to say hi or ask about our summers. Neither Beck nor I have class for half an hour, so we catch up.

I think I've lost track of my roomie when Beck grabs my arm, his face lighting up. "Hey, Ty! I got someone you gotta meet."

He tugs on me. "I told you I was a mentor," he says, pulling to a stop near the doors. "Here's my mentee."

I stop next to him, and my entire body stiffens.

The girl I was checking out is wearing black boots and painted-on jeans that make my abs clench. The sweatshirt's short enough to show a tantalizing sliver of her waist.

Her hair is longer than I thought, and I'm suddenly deciding how many times I could wrap it around my hand.

But when I see her face, every muscle in me tightens.

Full lips, small nose, bright-amber eyes fringed with dark lashes. She's brand new and so familiar I ache.

If there's one small mercy?

It's that Annie Jamieson, the girl I was mentally jerking off to all assembly, looks as stunned as I feel.

Annie

“HOW MANY OF the guys here eat pussy?” Elle, the blonde girl in the room next to mine who introduced herself when I moved in last night, asks from the seat next to me when the assembly concludes.

“Half,” I decide.

“Then of the three hotties I spotted while the dean was waxing poetic about tradition, one-point-five might go down on me.”

I laugh as the house lights go up.

“I’ll even share with you,” she says generously as we rise from our seats.

“Do I get the point-five or the whole one every other weekend?”

“Depends how interesting you wind up being.”

The theater is huge and full, and I try not to be intimidated as I follow her out of our row. “So, no boyfriend you left behind in Nebraska,” I say, remembering our conversation from last night.

“Nope. I do comedy, so everything in my life gets put on display. Guys say they’re cool with it, but the first time you

tell a room of people about how you found him jerking off to Meryl Streep, it gets strained fast. You want to be a musician, right?” she goes on without pausing for breath.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me you’re not waiting to get ‘discovered.’” She uses air quotes. “Because unless you have contacts or crazy-rich parents, that shit does not work.”

My stomach flips over, the excitement I’ve been feeling tinged with dread.

“My parents don’t know I’m at Vanier,” I admit. Without meaning to, I feel for the phone wedged into the front pocket of my skinny jeans tucked into black suede ankle boots.

Elle holds a hand in front of her mouth, mock aghast. “Well, now you’re getting interesting.”

I shake my head as she links arms with me, and we flow toward the door.

When I got admitted to Vanier, I decided not to tell anyone here that I’m Jax Jamieson’s daughter.

I’m in a new city with a fresh start I desperately need. I’ve built my skills and my confidence. This is my chance to prove it to myself and the world.

But this morning’s assembly in the huge auditorium is a reminder that there are a thousand other students who want exactly the same thing, and we’re competing for mentorship and attention and funding.

On top of which... I lied to my dad and Haley about where I was going to school. The fact that he’d transferred the money for tuition directly to me, like I’d asked, made it easier.

It also made me feel guiltier.

A familiar face near the doors is a lifeline.

“Hey, Beck!” I call, and the dark-haired guy I met at orientation yesterday turns toward my voice.

He has a few inches on me, a broad and infectious grin, and sparkling eyes. He knows he’s good looking, and he wants the world to enjoy it as much as he does.

“Hey, Annie. You survived assembly. That’s the first hurdle. The next is to keep your mouth shut while these people brag about how epic they are.”

I laugh. “Be deferent. Got it.”

“Hold on a sec. Don’t move.”

He disappears, and Elle makes a noise at my side. “Who’s that?”

“My mentor. You didn’t sign up for one?”

“No. Clearly I should’ve.”

Beck returns to us through the crowd. “Annie, this is my roommate, Tyler.”

It takes a moment to notice the guy at Beck’s side. Once I do, my feet root to the floor.

Beck’s tall; he’s taller. Beck’s dark; he’s darker. Handsome. Built for sleepless nights and unhealthy obsessions.

There’s no blue in Tyler’s hair anymore. It’s raven black and spiked at the front.

He’s wearing fitted jeans, a faded black Henley rolled up at the sleeves. Same tan skin, stubborn chin, but a chest made broader by the years. Ink peeks out from under his shirt sleeve.

This spring, I walked in for auditions and spotted Tyler in a rehearsal room.

The second we locked gazes, my number was called and I took off. Somehow, I got through my audition and even made it in.

I reminded myself Vanier was a big school. We'd probably never even cross paths.

So much for that.

Tyler at twenty is different from Tyler at eighteen. If he was handsome before, he's devastating now. It's as if the boy I knew walked off the earth, fought countless battles, and returned a man, vowing never to tell a soul except for the shadows flitting behind his eyes.

He ripped out my heart more than a year ago, but it healed. Maybe it's not the same shape it was, or the same size, but I patched it up with ambition and resolve. There are no cracks in it anymore.

Now...

My chest twinges hard.

Apparently, I missed stitching a spot.

"Hi, Tyler," I say at last.

With a moment's hesitation, he holds out a hand. "Annie."

His voice. I haven't heard his voice in over a year, and it rumbles through me like thunder at a distance, a soft promise of inevitable destruction that will leave no part of me untouched.

I force myself to take his hand.

Beck and Elle have no idea we've met before, and nothing in our greeting would make them suspect.

The heat of him is familiar, but the electricity traveling from my hand up my arm to my breasts, between my thighs, has me exhaling hard.

His gaze darkens as if he feels it too.

"What are you doing here?" he asks roughly.

"Weird question, bro," Beck says, laughing, but I lift my chin.

"Pursuing the finest arts education money can buy in this beautiful free nation," I say, dropping his hand. "You?"

His gaze narrows. "Same."

"I'm Elle," my new friend volunteers cheerfully. They shake hands, then she turns to my mentor. "You're only second year. Do you really know that much?"

Beck flashes an easy grin. "You know how to score practice rooms during midterms? Get bottomless soda from the vending machine in the library? Hack the staff and faculty meet-and-greet invite list so you can get free booze and mingle with famous alumni?"

She blinks. Even I'm impressed.

"Unofficially, you can be my mentee too," Beck offers generously, stopping to scratch his head. "Wait, isn't that an animal?"

"That's a manatee," Elle says.

His eyes light up. "Right. You can be my manatees. You manatees need anything, you let me know."

"You live in the dorms?" I ask, avoiding Tyler's gaze.

“Nah. They’re mostly for first years. We live about a dozen blocks from here, and only the last four are sketchy. Just a booty call away.”

“Presumptuous, but I like your style,” Elle says. “She’s six-oh-six. I’m six-oh-four,” she volunteers before I can stop her.

“Six. Got it,” Beck continues, and my gut twists sharply as I remember what Tyler used to call me.

“We should get going,” I say. “But I’m sure we’ll see you around.”

“No doubt.”

I meet Tyler’s gaze again, and reality slams into me.

Of all the issues I thought I’d have in a new city at a new school starting a new part of my life, he wasn’t one of them.

But the guy who destroyed me a year and a half ago... he’s here. Judging by the fact that he’s my mentor’s roommate, I’m going to be seeing him.

And judging from the look on Tyler’s face, he’s as pissed about it as I am.

Annie

AFTER THE ASSEMBLY, I head to my room to grab my bag for class.

But as I get to the top of the stairs and glance down the hall, I realize my door is ajar. *What the...?*

I push it wide.

Inside is a girl with long, dark hair up in a giant topknot. She has on Beats headphones, and she's brought a backpack and a single trunk that's wedged at the end of the second bed that's been untouched since I moved in yesterday.

"Hey," I volunteer. "I'm Annie. I guess we're roommates."

The girl doesn't answer or take off her headphones but reaches for an earpiece to touch a button.

"Are you Raegan Madani?" I try again. This time, she cuts a glance over her shoulder.

"Rae."

According to the scant roommate info form that included names, contact emails, and majors, she's in contemporary music like me.

Rae opens her backpack, takes out a bunch of tiny figures, and sets them on the top of her headboard. They're little

knitted dolls with yarn hair.

Before I can ask, Rae pulls something else out of her bag. “In or out?” she asks.

When I don’t respond, she grabs a clean shirt, twists it into a roll, and lays it along the bottom of the door.

My eyes widen as she lights the joint.

“I’ve heard stories of students getting expelled for less. It would be awesome if you could do that outside.”

Rae heaves out a sigh. “Whatever.” She grabs her keys off her desk and brushes past me.

Shit. I’m not here to make friends, but I don’t want to commit social suicide on day one either. From the look Rae tosses me as she heads down the hall, my new roomie might as soon push me in front of a subway as ride it with me.

“Nice meeting you!” I call as I grab my things, then lock up.

With the help of the map on my phone, I find my way on the subway over to the Columbia campus for my first class.

The excitement that’s been missing since running into Tyler this morning slowly returns, giving my step extra bounce.

“I haven’t seen you since the weekend!” Pen wraps me in her arms when we spot one another outside our lecture hall, and I hug her back. “It sucked we came in on the same flight only to go different directions at the airport,” she accuses.

“Gah, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Whatever. Gotta pursue your dreams, right? Anyway, glad you made it early so we can grab coffee. There’s a café in

the same building as our lecture.”

We head into the building, and she steers me toward a line of students in front of a counter.

Pen and I scored the same sociology section. I have that, plus English, at Columbia on Tuesday and Thursday. Their campus is only a quick subway ride away, and Vanier has some deal with them so Vanier can focus on arts education while still producing well-rounded grads.

“My clothes don’t fit in my room,” she goes on. “I might have gone overboard now that we don’t have uniforms.”

“At least you have a single,” I tell her as we order Americanos. “My roommate showed this morning, and I managed to piss her off by telling her to smoke her joint outside.”

Pen waves me off. “Etiquette 101. Thou shalt not smoke up in thine dorm room without roommate consent. Or before eleven in the morning because it’s tacky.”

I sigh. “I missed you.”

“Have you talked to your dad and Haley?” she asks as we grab our coffees and head toward the lecture hall.

“I called them when I got in and texted Dad this morning. Which means I’ve gone nearly forty-eight hours without blowing cover.”

Pen shakes her head. “I still can’t believe you didn’t tell him about Vanier.”

“He wouldn’t have let me come. I pitched it to him five times last year. He said if I wanted his support, I would get a real undergraduate degree before deciding whether to, and I quote, ‘piss it all away.’”

She drops her bag, settling into a seat. “Daddy J is not the best recruiter for the industry.”

“I know he’s had issues, but they can’t be that bad. Even if they were, he never talks to me about them, so how am I supposed to decide for myself?”

I take the chair next to her.

“There’s something else,” I say under my breath. “I ran into Tyler Adams this morning.”

Pen’s nails dig into my arm. “What the hell?”

Heads swivel toward us.

“I told you about seeing him at auditions, but I never thought I’d see him on day one.”

Before she can respond, the professor at the front clears his throat. “Welcome to Sociology 101. If you’ll take your seats, we can begin.”

After a moment of looking torn as the prof talks us through the course outline, my friend pulls her phone from her pocket.

Mine buzzes in my bag a moment later.

Pen: AND HOW WAS SEEING HIM???

So many emotions flood me I don’t know how to respond.

Annie: Weird. Horrifying. Exciting. Scary.

The third word slips out without me meaning to type it.

Pen: Tell me he grew out of the hot badass look.

I bite my cheek. Pen’s brows rise up her forehead, and she kicks my calf lightly.

Annie: He grew into it.

Maybe you'll see his girlfriend. I flash back to the girl I saw in his lap the day of auditions, and my gut twists sharply.

She must be a student, too, but she wasn't with him at assembly.

They could've broken up.

Or they could be married.

It can't matter. Tyler Adams can date whomever he wants.

He left because other things mattered more than me. I should be grateful for the lesson—it taught me to focus on my dreams and not my heart.

This year, I won't fall for anyone. Especially not him.

When class finishes, we pack up and I check my phone. “I have English at one thirty, and you have history. Want to get lunch?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Absolutely. I'm thinking of running for student government, and I need your opinion on my platform. But first, I got you a present.”

We head to her dorm, and she opens the door to her single with a flourish. “Behold!”

My gaze lands on the twin goldfish bowls on her desk. “You got us twin fish?”

“Because we might not be at the same school but we'll always be friends.”

Gratitude washes over me. “The best.”

She grabs me in a hug, then we both turn to study the fish. “What should we call them?”

I cock my head. “Something that speaks to our enduring love. Like... the world may change around us, and we might

grow old and die, but we'll always have these fish."

"To be clear, they live five years."

A lightbulb goes on. "I've got it. You want Heathcliff or Cathy?"

Pen snorts with laughter. "Oh my God. You take Heath."

"Deal." I grab one of the fishbowls in my arms, and we head toward the dining hall.

"So, are you going to at least talk to Tyler?" Pen asks once we're outside. "You don't think he'd tell your dad you're here..."

I suck in a shallow breath, adjusting my new pet in my arms. "When Tyler left, he left all of us. Dad would've said something the last year if they'd kept in touch."

"You have to tell your dad eventually."

"I will. But not yet. I need a chance to show him he was wrong about me, and Vanier."



BY THE NEXT MORNING, I'm learning a few things about my new environment.

One, my roommate appears and disappears at all hours of the night. When I went to bed after hanging out with Pen for most of the day, doing homework in the library at Vanier, and finally meeting Elle and some other girls from our floor for a late dinner, there was no sign of her except for her trunk and dolls in our room.

When I got up to use the bathroom at 4 a.m., Rae was sprawled across her bed, fully clothed down to her white

sneakers, and snoring.

By eight, when I get up to shower and dress, she's under the covers.

I catch a glimpse of her schedule printed and lying on her desk and frown. Apparently, she has Entertainment Management Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays with me and Elle.

I cross to her bed and prod her shoulder. "You getting up?"

Nothing.

I shrug and head outside to grab Elle for class.

The professor is a young woman who reminds me of Miss Norelli from Oakwood except she's wearing a black blazer over dark jeans.

"In this class, we'll be talking about how to manage a career. The arts aren't only about talent. Plenty of talented people will never pay their bills using those abilities."

"So, once I pull down these silver jeans," Elle says, mimicking the prof's friendly tone from the seat next to mine, "you can practice kissing my ass. A skill that will serve you well in the years to come."

I swallow the laugh and return to taking notes.

I'm most excited for the remaining two classes—my private music lessons, scheduled with my faculty supervisor on Fridays, and my elective.

I chose a studio acting class, which is Wednesdays. I go to class with Elle, where maybe fifteen students are sitting in desks arranged in a semicircle.

The woman at the front has me lifting my brows.

She looks like a librarian, with pale hair twisted up in a knot on her head and a printed floral dress. Her face is wrinkled, but her eyes are sharp beneath her reading glasses.

“Good afternoon, I’m Ms. Talbot. Welcome to my studio intensive. You’re all acting students, which means this is what you—yes?” she asks, irritated by my raised hand as I look around.

“I’m in contemporary music, not theater. This is my elective.”

Her gaze narrows. “Is anyone else here in contemporary music?”

Two other hands go up—a guy named Jake I met in Entertainment Management and another girl.

“Wonderful. Dilettantes in our midst.”

Elle snorts next to me, and she shoots me a “WTF” look as Talbot turns away.

“Today’s challenge is as follows,” the professor continues. “I will hand you a sheet of paper with a scene on one side and the character’s bio on the other. Read the scene without looking at the bio. Your task is to get into your character’s head quickly and understand them from their words alone.” She points at me. “You want to be here so badly, let’s find out why.”

I head to the front of the room, squaring my shoulders.

I can do this. I’ve been in front of far larger crowds. But this feels like my first sort-of performance at Vanier, and it matters.

“I wish you’d listen to me,” I read off the sheet she hands me. “I know you think I stand in your way, but I’m not trying

to stop you. I'm trying to save you.”

A few snickers sound from my classmates looking at the back of my card. I ignore them and go deeper. I feel the pain in the words. Burrow into it as I read.

When I finish the scene, I draw a long breath.

Talbot gestures at my card, and I flip it over.

“Wait—I'm a crossing guard?”

The class bursts into laughter, and my cheeks flame as I go back to my seat.

And it's Elle's turn. She gives a more subtle performance, and I realize this is harder than I figured.

For the last year, all I could think about was coming here, how everything would be solved. Now, as I look at my talented classmates, I realize how far from the truth that is.

“That was brutal,” I blurt as we head back upstairs after class, passing a dozen practice rooms, all occupied.

“I've been booted off stage before, so I'm not going to lie to you. It was pretty bad,” Elle replies.

“I need to get out of here,” I decide as we emerge from the stairwell and head down the hall toward our rooms.

The door to my room is open, and Rae's inside, at her desk on her computer with headphones covering her ears.

“Then let's go out tonight,” Elle says, dropping onto my bed as I set my books on my desk. “I saw this place called Leo's that looks cool. They have an open mic night Wednesdays.”

“You're gonna need ID.”

We both look over in surprise at Rae's voice. She turns toward us, tugging off the headphones.

"My cousin gave me her old license," Elle says.

Rae crooks a finger, and Elle digs out a driver's license. Rae scoffs. "She's got four inches and thirty pounds on you."

"I'm an actor. It's all about posture." Elle snatches the card back and shoves it in her pocket.

"I don't have ID." I'm sure I could've figured out how to get one, but back home, there weren't clubs close by.

An idea strikes me. *Beck.*

I fire off a text. The response comes almost immediately.

Beck: Two hours. Fifty bucks. I got you, Manatee.

After dinner, someone drops off an ID at my door and waits while I get her cash.

I try not to overthink my outfit, deciding on tight black jeans and a matching tank top with my black suede boots. In case it's cold, I throw on a denim shirt overtop.

I twist my hair up in a high bun, then add a hint of mascara, plus some matte red lipstick.

By ten, Elle and I find ourselves outside Leo's. It's beautiful, industrial, like nothing I've seen back home. Like an old factory with stories to tell.

It's also packed.

"Who is Leo?" I wonder aloud as we wait in line.

"Owner's dead dog," Rae answers.

"Really?" I ask. I'm still surprised she came, but maybe this is a spot of hope.

“No fucking clue.” She ducks out of line, and we stare before trailing after her.

Rae stomps up to the door. The bouncer ignores the line of people waiting to glance at our IDs and let us inside.

“How did you do that?” Elle demands of Rae but doesn’t get a response.

The inside of the venue is exposed brick, long and skinny, and one story with high ceilings and a stage at one end. The bar’s in the center of the room, two thirds of the way from the stage. It’s round with a number of bartenders working different sections. The lights behind the bar are old-school theater style, and they spell out “LEO’S” in a burnt-orange glow.

A guy’s on stage playing piano, crooning into a microphone. He’s good, and I let myself fall into the spell he’s weaving.

“You came all the way down here to watch?” Rae tosses at me before disappearing through the crowd.

“You know what?” I call to Elle. “She’s right.”

I head toward the stage doors, Elle on my heels, and find the woman in charge of the open mic slots.

She looks me up and down, from my tight jeans to my plaid shirt to my ponytail. “We’re full.”

Dismay works through me as I crane my neck to see her list. “The whole night? Can I at least get on the list for next week?”

“We’re full every week. I can’t bump one of my regulars for you. Gotta keep this crowd happy.”

I bristle, but Elle grabs me and drags me to the bathroom. “She’s just putting you off.”

Half a dozen other girls compete for sink and mirror space, washing their hands and touching up their careful makeup. Every one of them looks different, but they're all unforgettable.

It's a reminder I've never lived on my own, never truly made my own way.

I'm in a strange city, lying to everyone about where I am and who I am...

And for what? To drink and watch someone else play music?

Fear slams into me as I stare into the mirror.

"You done?" an unfamiliar voice demands, jockeying for position.

You didn't come here to blend in. You survived getting heartbroken, worked your ass off, and now you're here. Don't let them say no.

The resolve I've built over the past year is a block of iron in my chest, heated by my frustration until it glows red. I strip off my shirt, leaving the tank underneath, and tug out my elastic, fluffing out my hair so it explodes around my head, falling in crazy waves around my shoulders.

I pull out a dark pencil and use it to rim my eyes, top and bottom, until my lashes look even thicker and my eyes pop. Then, I pull out gloss and slick it over my red lips.

"I'm not sure what your plan is," Elle drawls, "but this doesn't go with your outfit."

She unclasps my necklace and hands it to me. I hesitate before dropping it carefully into my purse.

“Thanks. Art is art,” I say, turning to inspect myself from the side. “But they need to sell drinks too.”

Elle lifts a brow. “You sure you want to do this?”

I take a deep breath. “No.”

Tyler

“WHAT’RE WE CELEBRATING?” I call over the music as Beck slides a shot down the bar at Leo’s.

“Landed an audition.” He lifts his glass and clinks mine, and we both drink.

The alcohol burns down my throat, welcome and bracing at once.

The first two days back to school are turning out to be a rude awakening but not for the reasons I expected.

Our fridge is broken, ruining the food I bought on the weekend. Our landlord is dodging me, and the guy I called today to fix it said he’d come by tomorrow between eight and whenever he feels like it.

I had my first weekly guitar lesson this afternoon with my intensive professor—the guy who’s assigned to oversee my development—during which he wanted to lecture me about the “evolution of my style.”

Which probably could’ve been avoided if he hadn’t insisted on referring to it as the “evolution of my style.”

At Leo’s, I’m ready to forget all of it for a few hours. A full third of the crowd is from Vanier, but they’re here to unwind.

Hell, maybe someone'll catch my eye tonight.

Because that worked so well the last time.

“Congrats on the audition,” I tell my friend as I set my empty glass on the bar next to his.

He tells me about the new TV series.

“You’d leave school if you got it?”

“Sure. That’s what we’re all here for.”

Apparently, that’s why Annie’s here. I can’t stop thinking about her words at the assembly yesterday.

I’ve thought about what I’d say if I saw Annie Jamieson again, but she caught me off guard, here in the last place I expected, and all I could think was how part of me that’d been dead for a year suddenly woke up.

It took everything in me not to drag her out of that hall to somewhere private and demand she tell me what the hell is going on.

“You ever think about her?” Beck’s voice drags me back.

“Who?”

“Meara. She left for LA before the summer. You guys dated.”

I shrug. “Not really. We were friends. We went out a few times.” She gave me indications of wanting to date, but we both knew the deal—there were more important things than each other.

When she landed a part in LA, I took her to the airport with Beck and some other friends, hugged her, and went on with my day.

We've texted a few times since just to say hey and see how things are going.

"So, that's not why you were brooding all summer."

I stare at him, perplexed. "I wasn't brooding."

"You were, but that means it's not over her. So, it must've been about Zeke."

Beck stares past me, and I follow his gaze to a big poster by the door advertising the annual fall showcase at Vanier.

"You want to get Zeke's attention?" he drawls, grinning. "Close the fall showcase."

I've been so focused on getting my contract back and getting out of Vanier I haven't stopped to think about what to do if I stay this semester.

It's a big deal. Everyone gets written up in the media, and whoever is selected to close gets a ten-grand honorarium.

"It's not the worst idea," I tell him.

"I'm full of 'em today. Really getting into this mentoring thing. My girl's a peach. And cute." My spine stiffens as he continues. "I know you said not to go there, but Ty, you met her. She's fucking adorable. And that voice... I wanna record her saying my name when she comes."

I step closer, my chest tightening. "She's not your girl." The words are out before I can stop them.

His grin turns smug. "She came to me needing something today. I gave it to her."

"What exactly did you give her?"

Before Beck can answer, the sound of applause echoes as performers change.

I glance at the girl taking the stage and freeze an inch from pummeling my roommate.

Even twenty feet from the stage, Annie's dark-rimmed eyes seem to reach straight into my soul.

Her hair's dark and waving over her shoulders. I stopped dying my hair, and she started.

She's wearing high-heeled boots and tight jeans and a shirt—if you can call it a shirt—that pushes up her breasts and stops halfway down her stomach.

My abs clench hard.

I can't decide which part is most responsible for my reaction: the long line of her legs or the soft shadowed dip between her breasts or the slick lips, shiny as if she's been sucking on them.

She looks ripe, like fruit you've been impatiently waiting to soften, telling yourself it's not time yet.

Annie lifts a guitar over her head, and Beck whistles admiringly.

“What do you know? My manatee talked herself into a slot at Leo's. I tell you, Ty, this girl might be it for me.”

“Put your dick back in.” My quick retort surprises both of us.

The woman on the stage isn't the girl I fell for two years ago. It should be comforting to know that.

Instead, it's disconcerting as hell.

A body bumps mine, a girl blinking at me with apology and thinly veiled invitation. I barely notice, shoving my hands in my pockets as my gaze locks on the stage.

Beck's watching me, though his phone's trained on the stage. "You want her too."

"That's bullshit." I shove both hands through my hair, trying to fight the discomfort clawing at my insides.

"Look at you. You're a mess."

The woman whose hair sways as she bends the strings of the guitar, fingers picking the opening chords of a song, isn't the girl I fell for.

Which means Annie's gone.

After leaving Dallas, I consoled myself with the fact that she was still intact somewhere, like a dragonfly in amber—the earnest girl with a disarming smile who'd bleed because that's what we're meant to do.

But she's not, and before I can process the churning in my gut at that realization, the woman on stage starts to sing.

Annie always had the kind of voice you wanted to listen to all day. This is lower, sultrier. It's an invitation and a promise, and it wraps around my spine, drags down.

Annie Jamieson just grabbed my cock in the middle of this bar.

My confusion's gone, squashed by something more deliberate.

The fact that she's here, that she's changed, that she can still turn me on without even touching me, pisses me off.

Beck hollers, and I ignore him, cutting through the half-drunk crowd to backstage.

"Wasn't sure you were coming." The woman who runs open mic night looks at her list. "You want in after her?"

I glance at Annie. “Next one.”

I stalk to the edge of the stage. At this new angle, I can see Annie swaying with her own music, the spell she’s weaving on the faces of the crowd.

Tightness works through my gut. We’re going to talk about this right the fuck now.

How she’s here. Why she’s here.

Why the fact that she’s here is affecting me so goddamn much.

My gaze lands on the small silver handbag sitting on an unused speaker. It’s familiar, and I reach for it.

When Annie comes off stage, beaming and sweating from the spotlight, her attention goes to the speaker. “Where’s my —”

I hold up the bag, and her eyes flash. When she swipes for the bag, it falls between us, the contents spilling out.

“What are you doing here?” she demands as we both drop to the ground. She reaches for her phone, her face a breath away from mine.

“Leo’s is my place. I should be asking you the same thing.” I retrieve one of the cards and hold it up in the half light. “It almost looks like you. This you. Whoever she is.”

I grab her bag and straighten. She rises too, her gaze lingering on the purse in my hands as if I might run away with it.

“What would your dad say if he could see you like this?” I press.

Annie's close enough I see her breasts heaving under her low-cut top. "I don't care."

I'm not even mad at her. I'm mad at me, at the way she affects me still, at the fact that I left her for my dreams but also so the sweet, smart girl I craved like a drug could grow up without my influence.

But she's not here. That girl is gone.

"Besides," she goes on, "he doesn't know everything that happens in the world."

A single piece in a twisted puzzle clicks into place. "He doesn't know you're here."

There's a hint of panic in those eyes, a vulnerability I catalogue, memorize.

I feel the power shift between us, like I'm suddenly gaining the upper hand.

"Where does he think you are?" I ask.

She looks like she wants to deny me, but there's no point lying. I can find out.

"Columbia."

The next act on stage is playing something down tempo. Now that she's close, I smell her. She's memories and dreams, gold and glory, and parts of me that were dead five minutes ago suddenly ache.

"You shouldn't be so surprised to see me," she goes on. "You saw me at auditions. Couldn't believe I'd actually get in?"

It's my turn to be back on my heels. "I thought I imagined you."

Her brows pull together. “Why would you do that?”

I don't fucking know. Because I wanted you here?

“Whatever,” she says, realizing I’m not going to answer. “Give my bag back.”

I open it and tuck the license back in. When I do, my fingers close on the round glass shape on a chain. I lift it high between us. When the glass flashes in the light, my gut twists.

Hard.

The pendant is flat, cut in the shape of a heart. At first, I think it’s purple glass, but when I look closer, I see it’s two pieces of clear glass edged with dull gold binding the edges together around the dark-purple thing inside it.

To preserve it.

I can’t place it, but familiarity and nostalgia wash over me in uninvited waves.

“What is this?” I demand.

“A reminder that I’m not the person I was. That’s the last question of yours I’m going to answer because I don’t owe you anything. You walked away from me.”

The pain and accusation in her voice has my chest tightening, but I remind myself she’s fine. She got over me fast.

“I know Beck’s my mentor and he’s your roommate,” she goes on, “but we can stay out of each other’s way.”

The way she looks when she says it, the hint of vulnerability in those dark-rimmed eyes, the waver in those gloss-slicked lips, tells me the earnest, honest girl I knew isn’t gone. Not entirely.

It makes her ten times harder to ignore.

I steel myself, unwilling to show what I'm feeling as I drop the pendant into the bag and hold it out.

"He likes you," I mutter grudgingly as our hands meet on the fabric.

"Beck?" Her brows lift. "I like him, too."

But her gaze drops down my body before flicking back up. "Don't worry about me. I'm sure your girlfriend is more than enough to keep you occupied."

"My what?"

Doubt has her licking her lips. "The girl who was climbing you in that practice room."

Knowing it bothered her has adrenaline surging through me. I should correct her assumption, tell her Meara wasn't my girlfriend then and isn't now.

But for some fucked-up reason, I need to remind her what went down between us might be over but it happened. More than that, it mattered.

I step closer, inhale her scent as I brush her hair back behind her ear. To her credit, she doesn't back away.

She's all grown up? Fine. I'll treat her like it.

"You want me to pretend I don't know you?" I murmur against her ear. "That I never kissed that mouth? Never slept in your bed?"

Never made you laugh. Never stared at you in utter awe for how beautiful you were, the way you saw the world.

I force those thoughts away because they're stirring up feelings I can't stand.

“Never watched those eyes get big when you imagined me fucking you, when you practically begged me to do it?”

The little shiver that overtakes her has me wanting to drop my lips to her jaw, see if it’s as soft as I remember.

Applause in the distance tells me the previous performer has wrapped up, and someone shouts at me to take the stage, but I can’t move.

She pulls back first, tucking her bag under her arm and sucking in a breath. “That’s exactly what I expect. This is my fresh start. No one’s going to mess it up. Not even you, Tyler.”

As she disappears down the stairs, I don’t feel anything like vindicated.

The only thing I can think is that I’d give everything I have to hear her say my name again.

Annie

“YOU WERE great at Leo’s last night.”

I look up from my notebook the next afternoon at the Vanier library to see a slender blond guy from class leaning over my chair.

“Jake,” he volunteers. “We survived acting intensive together with Talbot.”

“Right.” I smile back.

I don’t remember seeing him at Leo’s, but most of the night I was distracted—by my need to prove myself and by the one guy who could ruin my chances of doing that.

“Homework?” Jake nods to my notebook.

“No, actually. Just writing.”

I used to force my brain to work in logic and answers and solutions. Getting good grades meant everything needed to fit into a cogent argument.

Now, I think in feelings. Emotions.

I don’t know if it’s an evolution or a devolution.

When I feel something, I drop it onto a page. The words flow out of me, contained by the paper. It keeps them from

burning me alive, breaking me from the inside.

“Thanks for the compliment about last night,” I say. “It’s easy to get lost here there are so many good people.”

“I know, right? Did you see that guy, Tyler something? He was the best of the night by far.”

I smile tightly. “He was pretty good.”

I saw him. He waited for me backstage only to strip me bare with his hard gaze and his harder words. Then I watched him perform, reminding me he’s not only the most capable musician but magnetic enough you’d give your soul for another minute in his presence.

And you practically volunteered that you aren’t supposed to be here.

Chalk it up to being caught off guard. Again.

It’s not enough to be in a new place trying to make my way—the one guy from my past has to be holding my secret over my head.

Next time, I’ll be ready.

But what the hell was he saying about me getting over him? Did he mean Beck? Is he jealous?

Impossible.

“Are you trying out for the fall showcase?” Jake’s words have me blinking.

“I heard only upper years get in.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t try out.” His brows wiggle under his hair. “I’m there. Figured you would be, too—you seem like the go-getter type. Auditions are in two weeks, so you better work something up.”

He takes off, and I stare after him.

Then I type a message on my phone.

There's a response five minutes later.

Beck: Meet me in P69.

It takes me ten minutes to figure out P refers to the practice rooms, not parking, but there's no 69.

It takes me another five minutes to find the closed door with a small window and P69 carved into the door.

I knock on the door, and it opens an inch. Inside, Beck's sitting in a desk chair, feet propped on a shelf.

"What is this place?" I ask. "It looks like a supply closet."

"Practice rooms are hard to come by. Sometimes you gotta grab whatever you can find."

He pulls the door open, and I wedge myself inside.

"What're you working on?" I look at his computer and the book in front of him.

"*King Lear*. And my vlog." He nods at his computer. "New episode every week."

I glance at his profile, my brows lifting. "That's a lot of subscribers."

"Half wanna watch me strip. Half are actually interested in what I have to say." He cocks his head. "But you wanted to hear about the showcase. It's the BFD. You want to get noticed in this city, that's how you do it. The biggest casting agents, producers, directors—everyone comes. You see the EGOT wall downstairs?"

I think of the portraits in the main hall. "Hasn't everybody?"

“All of ‘em not only played the showcase but closed it. And I happen to know who’s gonna close this year.” He grins.

Electricity hums through my body. “You mean your roommate.”

Beck shrugs. “The guy’s a beast with a guitar. Everyone thinks it’s going to be his year.”

“What do you think?” I ask.

He shifts back in his chair, braces one foot on the table he’s rigged up as a desk. “I might be more Shaw and Shakespeare than Stryker or the Stones, but even I can tell that dude’s gonna burn up a stage. And my roomie needs a break. Be patient. You’ll have your shot next year.”

“It’s supposed to be an open competition, Beck. Are you afraid I’ll take it from him?”

He smirks, appreciation flashing in his eyes. “I’m not worried about you beating him head to head. I’m worried about you messing with his head.” Surprise slams into me as he continues. “I saw you at Leo’s. You were good. Thing is, it wasn’t nearly as interesting as watching my roommate watch you.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Doesn’t matter. What I’m saying is Ty’s been through some shit and if anyone deserves a break, it’s him.”

Surprise washes over me. “Why? What happened to him?”

“Not my place to say. But he’s good people, Manatee. The best people.”

An ache forms low in my gut. “Here. At least let me move this box. You’ll have more room.”

He shifts over an inch, and I manage to pry a box of nails off the floor and stick them onto a shelf. When I look up, Beck's watching me.

"You think working your ass off in a supply closet isn't glamorous," he guesses. "But it is, because here's the secret."

He crooks a finger, and I humor him, leaning in.

"They *all* wanna be us. We're the rebels, Manatee. The jerks at Harvard on track to their corner offices or lining up for eighteen-hour-a-day internships on Wall Street—in thirty years, they'll look up from their fake wood desks to the fake gold clock on the fake stone mantle and think, 'What if?'"

The words are still ringing in my head when I leave.



MY PHONE BUZZES on my way back through the halls, heading for the stairwell that afternoon. I answer, dread filling my stomach.

"Hey. What's up?"

Dad says, "There you are. I was starting to think I'd have to get on a plane to talk to you." I feel the blood drain from my face before he continues. "How are your classes?"

"Good." I tell him about sociology and English, which I can be truthful about. "I'm still waiting on one that I have tomorrow." My intensive professor, whom I haven't had the chance to meet, is supposed to see me then.

I reach for the stairwell door, both to avoid the traffic in the elevators and because the reception's probably better.

“I know you were disappointed when I said you couldn’t go to performing arts school.” His gruff voice has my stomach twisting with guilt. “But I wanted to say... you’re the first one in our family to get a real college degree. And Columbia’s nothing to shit on.”

Lying to my dad sucks, but I have to do it for a while.

After all the music classes I took, I deserve to be here. Dad telling me he’d pay for any degree except performing arts was bullshit. He even said he’d pay for me to travel for a year if that’s what I wanted.

But there was only one place I wanted to go.

New York.

Last winter, after I finished a local theater production of *Avenue Q* and before the start of Oakwood’s spring musical, I decided I didn’t need permission.

I’m following my dreams. When he sees me succeed, he’ll understand. I know he will.

I just need a little time to figure out how to show him I’m right.

“How’s Sophie?” I ask as I reach the sixth floor, panting, and make my way down the hall to my room. “And Haley?”

“Sophie’s a monster. Haley’s not much better.”

“Heard that.”

I smile at the sound of my stepmom’s voice as I stop in front of my closed door.

“House is quiet without you,” he says after a minute.

“You’re not even in the house. I thought you were lobbying in Washington this week.”

“We are. But it’ll be quiet when we get home. What do you need? Money? Clothes?”

“I’m fine. Thanks.” I slide my key into the lock and turn the handle.

“Okay. Guess I’ll let you go. Oh, and don’t forget about that awards dinner.”

“What awards dinner?”

“We talked about it months ago. The flight’s booked. I sent you an email about it this morning.”

Shit. I almost forgot my dad was being honored at this big thing in LA Friday night and having a smaller friends and family thing at home Saturday. “Right. I’m sorry. I really want to come, but school’s just started. It’s hard to leave.”

“Annie. It’s two days. You won’t miss any classes. The band’s planning to come down, plus Lita and Nina if they’re around.”

I squeeze my eyes shut at the thought of all his crew, basically my adopted family. “All right. Sure.”

“Good. We love you, kid.”

“Love you too, Dad. And tell Sophie I miss her.” My throat works as I hang up.

Before I can push my door in, the door next to mine opens.

“That sounded strained.” Elle leans against the doorjamb, nodding at my phone. “Your parents?”

“My dad,” I admit. “I need a way to show him coming to Vanier was the right decision.”

As I say the words, a lightbulb goes off.

There's no sign of Rae as I go to my computer and print something off.

"Fall showcase?" Elle scoffs when I stick the poster over my bed.

"I'm going to get in. No," I decide, "I'm going to close."

Her brows hit her hairline. "You have any idea how you're going to execute this coup?"

"Not yet," I admit. "But I'll figure it out. I didn't come all this way for nothing."

I glance at Rae's bed, the shelf over the headboard. "Wait, weren't there more of those dolls?"

Elle crosses the room, inspecting the shelf. "You're right. There was one with hair just like yours. She asked to borrow my scissors too..."

I stare her down. "Okay, you're shitting me."

With the exception of Leo's last night, when Rae disappeared and was still gone when Elle and I returned to the dorms, I've barely seen her.

"I don't think she's planning to voodoo you in your sleep."

"Ugh. I'm not so sure." I drop onto my bed and clutch the stuffed Flounder Haley got me after *The Little Mermaid*. It's a bittersweet reminder of home.

Elle's face appears over mine. "You've never had someone not like you before?"

"Yes, but..." I'd always figured it was because I was Jax Jamieson's daughter and I didn't meet what they expected of me. "Not someone who shares my towel rack."

Elle laughs, dropping down onto the bed next to me.

“What’s so funny?” I demand.

“You think people liking you or not is about you? It’s about them. Let me guess—you have a lot of damage.”

“A lifetime’s worth in eighteen years,” I confirm.

She nods. “Now imagine everyone in this entire place is walking around with the same damage.” My brows shoot up, but she holds up a hand. “For every scar you’ve got, every mean girl story, every ‘daddy hates me’ and ‘I’m not enough’ and ‘it should’ve been different’”—my chest tightens at how scarily accurate she is—“they have one too. So does Rae. I promise you.”

I turn that over. “You seem reasonably unscathed.”

Elle smiles, pointing to her face. “It’s the brows. You keep your eyebrow game on point, the world thinks you have your shit together.”

I huff out a breath as I stroke Flounder’s blue-and-yellow fur, thinking of Oakwood. “I’m not the best at making new friends.”

“Because you’re into voodoo too?”

I throw the fish at her head, and she catches it, laughing.

She looks between the stuffed fish and the goldfish bowl on the corner of my desk. “I’ve heard of a foot fetish. A fish fetish is new. I might have to use that.”

“That’s Heath.”

“Heath,” she echoes.

“Heathcliff. As in *Wuthering Heights*.” My chest warms a little as I watch him blow his introspective little bubbles. “He’s from my friend Pen. She’s at Columbia.”

“Ahh. So, you do have friends.”

I roll my eyes. “Some.”

“Well, I’ve got your back. Rae can do what she wants.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Thanks.”

My gaze settles on the trunk at the foot of Rae’s bed, which I’ve yet to see her open. “Is it wrong to want a hint of her damage?”

We look at the trunk, then each other.

Elle runs her hand over the surface of the trunk, landing on the lock at the front. “Until last night when you stripped off all your clothes to get on stage, I had you pegged as a good girl.”

“I was. I grew up.”

She lifts a brow. “Doesn’t that mean the end of childish ways?”

“No. It means accepting that we all do bad things for good reasons.”

Tyler

NEW YORK PRODUCES the kind of cold that gets into your bones and won't leave.

Today, New Yorkers brace against the fall wind with flipped collars on coats.

I'm one of them as I get my motorcycle from the tiny spot I sublet for cheap in a parking garage around the corner.

Then I head to a studio in Brooklyn to win my contract back.

"Zeke around?" I ask at the front desk.

"Not today," the woman informs me with a half smile. "You're in studio two."

I brush off my disappointment as I head to the assigned studio. Inside, I shake hands with the band. As I get out my guitar and take a seat on the stool to tune it, the singer approaches me.

"We made some changes to the first track and added a couple new ones since we reached out to you." He passes me his notes. "You need a minute to take a look?"

I scan the sheet. "No."

"You sure?"

I calmly look at him, then play the section with the changes. “We can do it like that. Or—” I redo it with some flourishes that elevate it. “Like that.”

He claps a hand on my shoulder, grinning. “Let’s keep it simple.”

When I came to New York last summer and signed with Zeke, I had a chance to be the one calling the shots. I fucked it up.

Jax wanted me to walk away from Annie and from Dallas so I could do something great.

I tried to throw myself into it, but right when I thought I was done with my father, he played one last card that pulled me away from the city and from my new gig for two weeks.

By the time I got back to New York, I’d missed deadlines, messed with schedules, and generally had Zeke cursing out my name loudly enough to be heard in Jersey.

He put me out on my ass.

Getting into Vanier through a connection was grace in the highest sense.

The throng of students who were all like me—I’d never been around people who *wanted* so fucking much—grounded me. Piece by piece, I rebuilt myself and tried to put it behind me.

Beck helped, and so did my music.

Even though I’m not where I expected, I’m a better musician than I was last year.

But it wasn’t until a girl who looked like Annie Jamieson walked through the halls last April—of course it was her, but

at the time, I swore I was hallucinating—that I pounded on Zeke’s door again, demanding he revisit our arrangement.

He “declined.” A nice way of saying “Fuck off.” I didn’t stop calling, and within weeks, I was offered my first session gig.

Today, we spend four hours running the tracks on the list. I do as I’m told, even lose myself in it once or twice.

Before I can leave, the producer calls me over. “Appreciate the help with this. I have another gig for you next week. You interested?”

Yes, I’m interested, but I want to say, *This isn’t the work I pictured. I want more. I’m better than this.*

“I’ll check my calendar,” I say at last.

After heading back to our place and making my way back to our building from the parking garage, I come across my roommate smoking a joint outside.

“Guy never came to fix the fridge,” he says tonelessly.

“I’ll call him. How was the audition?”

Beck holds out the joint, and I shake my head. “I’m not getting a callback. I was fucking De Niro in there,” he says with a wry grin. “But when I left, there were a dozen guys who looked exactly like me lining the hall. Stopped at the lobby vending machine for a Coke, and there was a guy who just had his change eaten who was shaking it. He even sounded like me. If that’s all there is to look forward to, what’re we even doing this for?”

As I take in his expression, I feel a pang of empathy.

Beck’s good at what he does, and it’s still an uphill climb every day just to get a chance at a dream.

If I was smart, I'd line up session jobs, string 'em together to make for enough paydays, but it's not enough.

The life I once told myself I wanted is within my grasp, but I'm restless. Maybe the thing Vanier's helped me realize is that I want to create something that's mine, that no one can take from me.

"It's almost your birthday," I remind him. "Twenty'll be good, Beck. More auditions, more gigs, more pretty boys giving you pretty blowjobs."

"Fuck it. I'm gonna curl up under the covers until someone notices I'm gone."

"I'll notice."

He gives me side-eye. "Not once the fridge is fixed."

I bark out a laugh, and he offers me the joint again. This time, I take it, but mostly for an excuse to stay with him.

"You heard from your parents since the party last weekend?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Nah. We always used to go to this restaurant for my birthday. Get a private room. Hell, last year I even started to think my parents were coming around to the acting thing. My mom beamed when I told her about my Shakespeare in the Park gig. My dad told me about this guy he replaced two valves on who was a big ex-producer from Hollywood." His eyes glaze. "Between the entrée and dessert, the prettiest waiter showed me his cock in the bathroom. It was a good birthday, man."

Something tells me that's not happening this year. Beck's always been a good friend, but with coming out to his family and his upcoming birthday and this bad audition news...

I need to up my roommate game.



NORMALLY, I'm a hundred percent confident walking around Vanier. But sometime between my genius idea yesterday and this morning, I've realized this is a terrible idea.

Fuck it. This is for Beck.

I take the elevator at Vanier and knock on the cracked-open door of six-oh-six at the end of the hall.

There's no answer, but I slowly push it open to reveal a girl with straw-blond hair and alert eyes perched in a chair by one of the two desks.

"I'm looking for Annie," I say.

"She's in the bathroom."

"I'll wait." I realize she's the girl who was with Annie at the opening assembly, the one who said she was in six-oh-four. "Elle, right? This isn't your room."

"Not yours either."

She's got me there.

But Elle returns to a notebook computer, and I step inside.

I know immediately which half of the room is Annie's. The cover on the bed is purple, and there's a stuffed fish on the pillow.

Fish on the desk, too. Huh.

"Working on something for class?" I ask, mostly to make small talk.

"New bits for a set. I'm a comic."

I shoot her an admiring look. “That’s thankless.”

“I get off on being laughed at. Tried eight years of therapy and learned this is cheaper.”

A standard-issue dresser draws my gaze. There are photos on top and a frame turned down. I lift it to find a picture of Annie with Jax, though he’s wearing sunglasses and a grin and is almost unrecognizable.

I set the picture right-side up.

Under it is a stack of Polaroids.

It takes me a second to realize what they are. Words in black ink on an organic canvas.

My tongue wets my lip, and I glance over my shoulder to where Elle’s typing on her keyboard.

I read the lines on the first picture, absorb them into my soul before turning carefully to the next. There’re a couple of dozen photos. I get through half before a sound drifts into my brain.

“What are you doing?”

The sharp voice has me turning.

Annie’s standing at the door, and my gaze drags down her body—her toes, painted the same purple as her bed; long, curvy legs; the dip between her breasts just above the top of a knotted towel; the long hair, darkened and piled on top of her head, a few strands dripping on her bare shoulders; that oval face, full lips and amber eyes brimming with accusation.

Desire slams into me, but I manage to slide the photos behind my back.

“Elle?” Annie demands before I can respond, but Elle looks between us, eyes narrowing in fascination.

“You have a gentleman caller,” she drawls.

Annie folds her arms over her chest. “Tyler’s no gentleman. Why are you here?”

I force my attention to her face. “I need your help. The other night you... asked me for something.” From the way Annie sucks in a breath, she gets I’m talking about keeping her secrets. “I want something from you, too.”

“Elle—” Annie starts, and I hold up a hand.

“It’s fine,” I say. “She can stay.”

“Why, thank you.” Elle grins, shifting back in her seat to study us as if we’re two different species trying to mate.

I turn back to Annie. “Beck had this audition he’s been psyched for all week. It didn’t go well. He’s also had some shit going on, and it’s his birthday this weekend. Maybe we can do a little party or a cake? The kind that doesn’t need refrigerating,” I amend.

Her suspicion is replaced by concern, and if I wasn’t sure she cared about him, I am now.

Annie sits on the bed, crossing her legs. The towel rides up, and I press my tongue against the floor of my mouth to keep from swallowing it.

“Beck needs a party,” she says.

“We could take him to a club,” Elle volunteers.

“Like Leo’s?” I ask.

Annie shakes her head slowly. “No. Somewhere you can dance.”

Elle leaps up and snaps her laptop closed. “I’m in. I want to dance my ass off. Hell, I bet even Rae would come. Sure, she’d cross the street to avoid us, but the girl likes to party.”

Annie cocks her head at Elle. “Where’re you going?”

“Funeral. I don’t know the guy,” she says as she reaches for the door. “They’re the only place to witness the full range of human emotions. And they usually have snacks.”

In a moment, Elle’s gone, leaving Annie and me in a room that somehow feels smaller than it did with three of us in it.

“Your neighbor goes to strangers’ funerals and your roommate avoids you,” I say. “Nice girls.”

“I’m pretty sure Rae’s going to voodoo me out of Vanier.”

I cross to the bed with the little figures along the back and bend to look at them. “They don’t look sinister.”

We exchange a smile that’s gone as fast as it appears, as if we’ve both realized it’s an old habit, and a bad one at that.

“I need to get dressed,” she says, watching me with an unreadable expression. “I have class.”

She’s already opening a drawer, pulling out clothes. I turn away, the photos still in my hands.

The unmistakable whoosh of a towel dropping has my head jerking upright.

Is she naked right now?

“I’m auditioning for the fall showcase,” Annie says from behind me, forcing me to focus on her words instead of wondering what color panties she’s pulling on. “Beck says I shouldn’t because you need it more.”

The rise and fall of her voice says she's moving, but I can't hear any clothes.

"You didn't need it last year. You had an offer to work for Zeke. So, how'd you end up at Vanier?"

My chest tightens. I'd rather be tortured by her undressing behind me than talk about this, but I force out a response. "The contract didn't work out."

"Why not?"

I thumb through the photos in my hands, a dull ache in my chest. "It doesn't matter. Life is hard. We have to go after what we want."

"Like you did."

Pain rips through my gut. "I thought I was doing the right thing. For everyone, Six."

I didn't mean to blurt out the nickname, but I can't take it back.

In that instant, I'm remembering the time I went to see her, two months after I left Dallas.

It was after the shit with my dad and with Zeke.

I rode all night to get to there because I needed to see her, to know something in this world made sense.

She had no idea I was there, sitting on my bike, the ache of weeks of not sleeping and hours of riding heavy in my bones.

I wanted to tell her I'd fucked up—not because I lost my contract, but because I missed her and I hated that I couldn't text her funny things from my day, that I didn't get to hear her low voice in my ear... that I didn't get to kiss her, to feel her breath mix with mine.

I wanted to say Jax was wrong, that I'd be willing to do whatever it took to be the guy she needed.

I hadn't thought of what would happen when I got to her, just that when I did, everything would somehow be okay.

It wasn't. At least, it wasn't the okay I expected.

She was standing outside the library where she was working for the summer with a guy—not someone from Oakwood, or I would've known him. She was smiling and laughing, and without so much as looking at me, it was clear that we were done. She was over it.

I had to be over it too.

When she responds, her voice is lower, more vulnerable. "If you'd told me you chose your career over me, I would've understood. But you just left. I know it was high school, but one second you were sleeping next to me and kissing me and touching me, and the next you were gone. Did I do something to fuck it up?"

"No. Never."

The ache is more than physical now, as if it's pulling at the corners of my soul. Talking to each other without seeing each other feels safe, as if there are no stakes, no rules—as if every word is no sooner spoken than forgotten.

I drop my head back, shutting my eyes and remembering that day, seeing her with that guy. "You got over me," I say, needing confirmation.

"I wrote you sixty-three times. Emails, texts, letters. All summer, halfway through the fall." Her low laugh is dry. "I didn't send them, didn't try to reach you, because I didn't want to be selfish. I knew you chose your future, and that was enough for me."

The anguish rips through me, and I force myself to stop tearing at the edges of the Polaroids in my fingers. The backs of my eyes burn, and I swallow against the emotion rising up my throat.

“It wasn’t enough.” My voice comes out rough. “You taught me to want things I never let myself want. Fuck, Annie. You taught me to dream.”

Her shallow intake of breath has me turning, and once I do, I can’t look away.

Here, in a black bra and panties with wet hair sliding over her shoulders, she’s more than a dream.

My gaze drags down her small breasts, her stomach, the flare of her hips.

I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t attracted to her, but now she’s every wish and regret and ache wrapped into a single person.

I was a boy who cared too much. She was a girl infatuated with something she didn’t understand.

None of that’s responsible for the way the air crackles between us *now*, for the way her eyes widen in warning as if she feels it too.

“Tyler...”

I close the distance between us, one slow step at a time. When I come to a stop inches away from her, the blood pounds in my veins, my ears, my temples.

“Give those back.”

Her voice has an edge it didn’t a moment ago, and I blink when I realize her gaze has dropped to my hands—to what I’ve forgotten to conceal.

She lunges for the photos, and I hold them out of reach.

When her half-naked body brushes my chest through my T-shirt, she's close enough I can smell her light floral scent, and I want to drop the photos and tangle my fingers in her hair, drag her angry mouth to mine.

As if maybe that can fix what's between us, what's inside each of us.

"You wrote them about me." My voice is a rasp, and her chin snaps up, eyes flashing.

"Taylor Swift writes a song after every breakup. Doesn't give her exes the right to hear her private thoughts until she makes them public."

Her breath is light on my face, her lips close enough I could swoop down and claim them, learn whether her taste is the same or whether it's changed, too.

"One problem with that assessment." I breathe, and her brows lift. "We never dated."

She shoves against my chest. I don't budge, but I do capture her hand with one of mine, hold it there until she stops trying to twist away.

"I don't care what you call it," she retorts. "I was a kid. I was in..."

"In what?" Her palm covers my heart, and I know she can feel it hammer in my chest.

We stare each other down, neither of us ready to give in.

I want her to finish that sentence more than I've ever wanted anything, as if her saying she loved me gives permission for me to unload on her, too.

To tell her she was my entire damned world, that when I learned she was at Vanier, I was confused and frustrated, but more than all of it?

I was fucking elated.

The one thing I consoled myself with a year ago was that she'd be better off without me. I never let myself use the L-word with her, swore that whatever I felt for her was mixed up shit amplified by our circumstances.

You can't fall in a matter of weeks.

Just like you can't fall for someone who's not talking to you.

Who refuses to look your way in the hall.

And she can't fall for you.

I was wrong. I see it now.

But even if she didn't get over me as fast as I thought, even if there's still enough attraction between us to incinerate a city...

She's over me now. I know it when she pulls her hand out from under mine, and my blood cools a degree the second her touch is gone.

"The photos, Tyler."

I hand her the stack. Annie turns and sets it on her dresser under the photo of her and her dad.

Then she grabs the faded jeans on her bed and tugs them on. I don't bother looking away. She doesn't ask me to.

The desire's still there, but it's overshadowed by something bigger, an uninvited emotion filling my chest.

“So, if I help you throw this party for Beck tomorrow night, you’ll keep my secrets,” she says under her breath.

“I will.”

Annie buttons her jeans, straightening to look me dead in the eye. “Tomorrow, then. For Beck.”

I nod. “For Beck.”

But as I start for the door and she turns away to reach for a shirt, my gaze drags back to the stack of photos...

Hating that I didn’t realize how deeply I’d hurt her.

Wondering what parts of her body she inked me on.

Wishing she’d never erased me.

Annie

“HOW NERVOUS ARE YOU?” Elle asks me on the way out of Entertainment Management Friday.

“It’s going to be great. I didn’t even know Finn was on the faculty list until the fall,” I admit as we start down the hall. “He wasn’t when I auditioned.”

“Finn Harvey?”

I look up to see Jake, the guy from the library, fall into step with us.

“Lucky,” he goes on. “The guy’s a rising star. But I don’t know anyone else who got Finn. It’ll be cool to work with someone who knows how to bust in.”

Excitement works through me. “Exactly.”

Elle jerks her head toward the dining hall. “I’m this way. Annie, I’ll catch you tonight?” Her eyebrows wiggle.

“For sure.”

“What’s tonight?” Jake prompts as she leaves.

“A bunch of us are going out to this club. You should come.” I give him the details, and he nods.

“You give any thought to the showcase?” he prompts.

“Yeah. I’m auditioning for sure.” Last night I watched some video from past events. The talent level is off the charts, particularly from the people who close.

But the faculty who preside over the auditions have to choose someone. I’m already strategizing how to make sure that someone is me.

“It’ll be a first-year uprising.” Jake pumps a fist in the air giddily.

I wave goodbye, then head for the stairs to the practice rooms on the second floor. I’m five minutes early, and my swipe card doesn’t let me in. I wait in the hallway, watching people flow by.

Classes have been tough the first week, but deciding to focus on the showcase has given me an anchor, a reminder of why I’m here.

I’ll do whatever it takes to be that good. No excuses, no distractions.

Tyler coming to my room yesterday was a distraction.

Not only walking in to find him there, studying my things as if he had every right to be in my space, but the things he said...

“You taught me to want things I never let myself want. You taught me to dream.”

And the look on his face—like I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

It doesn’t matter that he sounds torn up about what happened between us. He’s the one who walked away.

My hand finds my necklace under my shirt.

After *The Little Mermaid*, I took the rose Tyler had handed me in the garden and had it preserved in order to remember what happened, to remind myself I'm not fragile and that my dreams matter more than a broken heart.

Now, every time I look at it, I think of him.

I'm not letting him in again. We can coexist, we can even be civil, but we're not going to be friends. We're definitely not going to be more than that.

I'll have my chance to practice keeping him out because we're all going out to a club tonight for Beck's birthday.

"You ready?"

My gaze snaps up as a guy maybe ten years older than me appears down the hall dressed in jeans and a denim jacket over a dark T-shirt. His hair is dirty blond and unruly, as if the wind had its way with it.

"Finn. Mr. Harvey? I'm Annie. It's nice to meet you."

"Finn's good." He retrieves something from his pocket and waves it in front of the door.

The door unlocks, and I follow him inside.

I set my bag on the floor. "How did you end up at Vanier?" I ask.

"They've got a push on recruiting people with industry experience for the contemporary program. An old friend twisted my arm."

The room is about half the size of my dorm room upstairs, and it contains a piano with a bench, three stools, a white board, and two music stands.

Finn says, “So, the next semester of lessons is supposed to improve your technique and performance, blah, blah, blah. But none of that can happen unless I know why you’re doing this. So, tell me what you want.”

His bluntness has me leaning in. “I want to be on a stage.”

“Why?”

I blink. “Because I love creating music. I love when I’m in it.”

“Why else?”

I dig deeper, thinking of what drove me to work my ass off these past couple of years.

“Because I want the world to see me.”

Satisfaction works across his expression. “Show me.”

I take a seat at the piano and play my audition piece, singing overtop.

He cuts me off three bars in. “No.”

I try something else. And another. And another.

Each time, he stops me. “Any kid in a talent contest could sing that.”

“Then tell me what you want me to sing,” I say eventually, frustrated. I rise from the piano bench and turn to face him. “I have some classical training, but I can’t give you Puccini or Strauss. Maybe someone in the next room can”—I hitch a thumb at the wall—“but this is what I am.”

He’s standing in the corner, smirking. “I wouldn’t be wasting my time here for Puccini or Strauss. I saw your audition tape. You grabbed me. You want to be seen, make me see you.”

My chest tightens. Moments before the audition, I'd run into Tyler. It was a kick in the gut. It took everything I had to make it through my piece. I was raw and desperate and earnest.

I don't know how to be that girl again.

My fingers find my necklace again, twisting the chain between my fingers. Under Finn's stare, I think of the pictures Tyler found in my room, the words I wrote when I was coming apart.

I reach for the fallboard and tug it down over the piano keys. Then I shift back onto it, perched on the edge, resting my feet on the bench.

"A heart breaking has multiple acts. It doesn't break in a moment; it breaks over years.

"It tears, not in half, not perfectly. But in layers. Like flower petals.

"Pieces, one at a time. Peeling away.

"And you can put it back together. Collect the pieces. Sew them back.

"It might even look the same, from the outside."

I lift my gaze to see Finn leaning against the opposite wall, his face impassive.

My throat tightens, and I force myself to take a breath that fills my lungs even though it's hard.

He's going to tell me it's not a song.

He's going to kick me out, say this was all a mistake, that he doesn't want to supervise me.

He doesn't.

Instead, he says, “Keep going.”



“ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?” Elle asks over the music, reacting to my grin as I dance next to her.

“Better than class,” I call back.

I’ve never been to a bar or club except for a concert. This place, with its pounding bass and neon lights and grinding bodies, barely seems in the same category as Leo’s.

If the first few days were like learning to play an impossible sheet of music, the rest of week one was like turning the page and realizing there are ten more pages, each harder than the last.

After my lesson with Finn, which improved somewhat in the last fifteen minutes in that he let me finish but still said we had a lot of work ahead of us, I started sociology homework only to realize I’ve been working from an old textbook.

Wednesday, Talbot assigned us hours of film to watch before next week’s class, which is going to be nearly impossible given I’m going to Dallas for the weekend for my dad’s celebration. Plus, I narrowly avoided slipping up on the phone when we were talking about my visit.

Once I get the showcase, everything will be okay. I repeat it like a mantra.

Auditions are in three weeks. I need to use every second I have to choose the right piece, to work it until it’s perfect.

But for tonight, it’s hard not to want to let loose and be young and alive.

“You seen Jake?” I ask Elle. “He said he’d come tonight.”

He’s the only first year who seems to want the showcase as much as I do.

Elle shakes her head. “But there’s Rae!”

She points at the DJ booth, where Rae’s charmed her way in.

I’m no closer to making inroads with her. I know she makes electronic music. Her chest has an old-style turntable and a bunch of mixing equipment. But I don’t know about her family or her dreams or anything except what toothpaste she uses.

My phone vibrates in my bag.

Beck: BAR. NOW.

Elle and I wind through the crowd to where Beck is holding court at the bar in a pale-purple dress shirt, half tucked-in. His dark hair is spiked, his grin wide.

“Shots!” he demands.

The bartender’s pouring into almost a dozen glasses, and I wrinkle my nose.

Beck passes me two, and I pass one back. “Going home for the weekend tomorrow,” I tell him.

He slides back the second shot. “Your family’s anything like mine, this might help.”

I grin as my attention skims the group of us at the bar—about ten from Vanier, a mix of first years we know and second years Tyler invited—my gaze locking on a familiar one a few bodies away.

Tyler's a dark knight all in black. His dress shirt is rolled at the sleeves, revealing curls of ink that trace one arm like venom taking over his bloodstream.

A wave of desire washes over me before I can stop it. Electricity buzzes through me—my lips, my fingers, my bare shoulders and breasts under the backless silver halter top I bought this afternoon.

Dammit, I want to know what happened when he came to New York.

I want to know what he's thinking right now.

Stop wondering.

I toss back the drink. The sweetness and alcohol burn down my throat, settling in my stomach with a not unpleasant buzz.

The next second, Elle's between us, an expression of shock on her face.

“Jake isn't coming. He got kicked out of school today. He was selling uppers from his dorm room.”

The comfortable warmth of the booze is overtaken by disbelief. “It's the first week of school.” I look between Elle and Beck.

Beck shrugs. “Sometimes you want something so bad you'll give up who you are to get it.”

My chest feels hollow.

Yes, Jake fucked up, and I won't do that, but you can be on top one moment and back on the bottom the next.

“You know what time it is, Manatee?” Beck proclaims, and I try to refocus on him. “It's dancing time.”

“I’ll be right there. Think I need that second drink after all.”

I watch him and Elle head toward the floor.

When I reach for the second shot, fingers close around my wrist.

I jerk my head up to see Tyler looming over me, holding a plastic cup of what looks like water.

“I don’t want it,” I say.

“What do you want?”

I lift my chin, suddenly angry. “I want people to stop leaving. Everyone leaves.”

I pry the shot from his hand and down it before taking off toward the dance floor.

I’d thought once I got to Vanier the rest would be easy. None of it’s easy.

Once I find my friends, I link hands with Elle and Beck, and the three of us dance.

I focus on the music.

That’s what I’ve always wanted—to lose myself in its power, to be part of it.

Elle splits off to dance with a guy from school, and Beck grins at me.

I move closer. My hand finds his shoulder, and he smiles.

“This is a good birthday, Manatee. But I’m supposed to be helping you, not the other way around.”

My chest expands. “We’re friends, right?”

He nods. “For sure.”

The song changes to something hip-hop, and when his hands find my hips, I go with it, moving closer.

My arms wind around his neck as I smile up at him.

Beck cuts a look past me, looking bemused. “Fascinating.”

“What is?”

“What’s gonna happen in five, four, three, two...”

Someone brushes my back, and Beck angles his head up, hands not moving from my body. “Hey, man.”

Tyler says something to his friend I can’t hear.

“Girl needed some mentoring, if you know what I mean.” Beck winks at me, and I laugh in response.

But Tyler’s back at his ear, and Beck’s smile dims.

Before I can react, Beck lifts my hand, presses his lips to the back in a move that’s somehow cheesy and earnest at once. “Thanks for the dance.”

A little tingle runs through me, and I bite my cheek as I watch him head back through the crowd.

“What did you say to him?” I demand, whirling to face Tyler.

“He’s not for you.” He’s a foot away, a muscle leaping in his jaw.

Everything from this week piles on top of itself until I’m feeling as if I’m in a different dimension than the carefree dancing people around me. “You don’t know that.”

“You’re already hanging with the brother of your stepmom’s best friend when you’re hiding out here. You’re gonna fuck him too?”

I blink up at him, trying to make sense of the meaning behind his frustrated words.

Beck. Serena's Beck, the one she mentioned had gotten into Vanier...

"No." They have different last names, but it's too much of a coincidence.

His gaze narrows, and I know it's true.

"Does he know who I am?" I manage.

"He hasn't put it together. But he will. Who knows? Maybe if you hook up with him, he'll keep your secret."

Someone bumps me from behind, and I step forward. Tyler's hands are there, catching me by the arm and the waist.

"You didn't used to be such a prick," I state, angry.

"You didn't used to be such a flirt. He can't make you happy."

His words catch me off guard. "Why not?"

"Because you need someone who understands what makes you tick, like those music boxes you used to collect. Someone who knows you're going to get into trouble, who has your back when you do."

I could pull away, but there's barely enough room to breathe. "And that's you?"

Tyler bends closer, his lips near my ear so suddenly I can't stop him. "It's not him."

The truth of those words hangs between us.

Since I moved here, it feels as if this new world is a dark, vast ocean dotted with sharks under the water.

Tyler is familiar—a beacon in its own treacherous tide but one I know.

All I want is a night to forget that I'm alone in this city, that people rise and fall in an instant, that the only boy I ever loved has moved on and so have I.

The song changes again, a sexy downtempo remix of “Pretty Young Thing.”

I turn but don't step away. My shoulders bump his chest, my ass hitting his thighs. I roll my body once, twice. The friction of his clothes on my ass, the bare skin of my back, makes me bite my lip.

He doesn't move.

Catching Tyler by surprise is reward enough, but I push my luck.

I reach up behind my head for his neck, brush the edge of his hair above his collar. My fingertips trail along his scalp.

Tyler responds so fast it makes my breath hitch.

He drags me closer with strong arms. His hand splays across my stomach, and when his thumb slips under the edge of my shirt, his pinkie under the top of my skirt, he hardens against my back.

Fuck. I wonder if I'm tall enough to ride this ride.

But I'm more than capable of handling Tyler Adams.

So, I lean my head back against his chest and close my eyes.

The bass in the club pulses through my heels. The pounding music drowns out everything between us, shakes

loose the hurt and feelings until there's no room for anything but this moment. Sweating, wanting, moving, living.

My fingers trace the hard forearm banding around my waist, the lines of ink. "You got a tattoo."

Tyler's face bends close to mine, and my breath hitches as his lips graze my temple. "More than one. You want to see them?"

The crowd presses in on us, and I sense Elle, Rae, Beck, and others. Friends and strangers. Celebration and oblivion.

I want to disappear into it.

"Yes," I whisper.

The hair above the neck of his shirt is damp. Not quite long enough to tug. Some part of me wants to try anyway.

His lips graze my ear, and I tilt my chin back as they drag down my jaw. Heat streaks between my thighs, weaves a rope of need that joins us together, as I move against him in the dark.

He's moving too, holding me, pressing against me.

We're action, reaction. Like musicians who've never played together, attuned to each other because this melody we're weaving depends on it.

There's nothing outside this club. My beautiful boy, my twisted muse, my rebel prince is gone, but the man holding me is here.

He doesn't give an inch, hands possessive on my hips, holding me against his hardness.

I have a sudden vision of Tyler dragging me into one of these dark corners, yanking up my skirt, and fucking me to the

driving rhythm of the bass, our sounds swallowed up by the music around us.

I turn my face more to meet his gaze, and his expression hits me square in the gut.

His lashes are half-lowered, his jaw tight with restraint and hunger, those dangerous eyes filled with emotion I can't read in the dark.

When Tyler speaks again, it's a vibration against my hair.

“Seventy-eight.”

I focus on the warmth of his skin through his shirt, the steady echo of his heartbeat. “Seventy-eight what?”

“Seventy-eight times I wrote to you and didn't send them. Once I even drove to Dallas to see you.”

My fingers freeze in shock on his neck, and my hips stop swaying under his hands.

Tyler came to see me?

Emotions blur together in my chest, my stomach, each one colliding with the next—grief, sadness, love, gratitude.

I blink back the sudden stinging.

He doesn't get to say that as if it can make everything better.

He can't take back that he left. We can't go back to a time when we were innocent and wanting. I'll never again be that earnest girl, and he won't be that guarded boy.

In the DJ booth, I see Rae watching the crowd. At the bar, Elle's talking with Beck, their gazes flicking to us, then away.

Once more, I start to move to the music.

I cover Tyler's hands with my smaller ones, threading my fingers in the spaces between his and squeezing them. I pull one hand off me and bring it to my lips, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to his palm.

I feel his reluctant groan against my back.

I do the same with the other palm, rubbing my ass against him at the same time.

This time, his teeth capture my earlobe, making me shiver. "You're teasing me."

"Then ask me to stop." I turn my profile toward him, rewarded by his hot mouth on my cheek, trailing dangerously close to the corner of my lips.

"No." His breath mingles with mine. "I want you."

I take a moment to feel those words settle into my body. My arousal swells, throbbing like the music around us.

I want him too.

But that's not what this is about, and wanting was never our problem.

I turn to face him, pulling out of his hold.

His tortured expression is full of desire and something more meaningful. It's that something that calls to me, that has me second-guessing my plan.

I ignore it and lift my chin, my heart still hammering in my chest as I take a steadying breath. "Good. Now you know what it feels like."

It takes every bit of self-control in me to turn and walk away without looking back.

Annie

I KNEW GOING HOME for the weekend would be a minefield, but it's even more treacherous than I imagined. All my dad's friends are in one house to celebrate his award, and the table is full of friends bursting with well-intentioned and dangerous curiosity.

"How're classes?" Nina, my dad's former tour manager, asks me over dinner Saturday night.

"Hard, but at least they're interesting," I say. "I have two essays and a project due before midterms." *So far, so good.* I take a congratulatory bite of fettucine, cooked to perfection by the chef Dad and Haley hired when Sophie hit two and Haley started working again full-time.

"How's Pen?" Haley asks.

My stomach untwists a little. "Already planning her platform for student government. And shopping like crazy."

"You're rooming with your friend?" Nina asks, and I take a slow breath.

"Er... no. My roommate's kind of different," I tell them. "I think she sees me as competition."

Uncle Ryan cocks his head. "Didn't figure an undergraduate degree was so ruthless."

Every pair of eyes turns to me, including my dad's from the head of the table.

"Everything's a competition, Uncle Ry." I drain my water glass before reaching for the bottle of bourbon at the center of the table.

My dad narrows his eyes as I pour into the empty glass.

"Enough," he says when there's half an inch inside.

I roll my eyes. "I'm an adult."

"You're still my kid."

The conversation turns to the lifetime achievement award my dad won, and I'm both relieved the pressure is off and fascinated by the discussion.

Across the table, Sophie plays with her pink plastic spoon, her dark hair in pigtails and her eyes bright with enthusiasm for everything. Her bow mouth lifts in an incandescent smile, and I can't resist grinning back.

It sounds trite, but she's seriously growing up so fast. She walks and babbles and tries to make sense of the world around her.

Good luck with that, Soph.

I decided on the plane home I'd use this weekend to warm Dad up to the idea of Vanier, but I haven't decided how that will work.

After dinner, I catch Dad in his office talking with Ryan. I creep up to the half-open door to hear them speaking in hushed tones.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Ryan clears his throat. “Nothing. Good to see you, kid.” He drops a kiss on top of my head like I’m still ten years old before heading out the door.

“Well?” I ask again once Ryan’s gone, squaring my shoulders.

“It’s shop talk.” Dad goes to the fireplace, kneels before it, and stacks logs inside.

Now’s my chance to talk to him.

I drop to my knees at his side. “You can talk business in front of me. If I’m old enough to drink at home, I’m old enough for that.”

He adjusts the logs, adding kindling from the bin nearby. “It’s about our catalogue. Wicked has the rights to some of our early tracks and is planning to record them with new artists. I’m trying to go through lawyers to get them back, but so far nothing.”

I grab a newspaper from the stack and wad up a sheet, encouraged by his admission. “So, write new songs.”

He shakes his head as he tucks the sheets I pass him around the edges of the kindling. “It’s not that easy, Annie. I’ve been out of the business a long time.”

He rises to get a match from the box on the mantel and lights the edges of the paper in the fireplace. The flames lick at them, trying to find their way.

I rise too. On a surge of bravado, I reach into my pocket and pull out a sheet of paper I was scribbling on the plane. “I want you to look at something.”

“What is this?”

I shift on my feet. “A poem. Or a song.”

He reads it again while I hold my breath.

I've imagined this moment so many times. I've imagined his response—surprise, admiration, pride.

“You spend all day reading and writing essays for school, and when you're done you want to do this?”

Hurt lodges in my throat. “It doesn't have to be a hobby. I could do this for real. Like you did.”

He folds his arms. “Annie, I went into the industry because an offer came and I was too young and desperate to turn it down.” He retrieves his bourbon from the desk. “You've seen the brightness of the music industry but never the dark. If you had any idea how many threats, how many lawsuits, how many people wanted to use me... I'm grateful my career brought me my family, my friends, the ability to make something that affects people—it's not a question of that. But that kind of life has a cost, and I would never want that for you.”

“Given how you grew up, I would've thought you'd want me to have the choice you didn't. And I do have that choice.”

His gaze narrows. “I don't want you to pay it without understanding what you're signing up for.”

Frustration flows through me. “But don't you think I pay it anyway being your kid? I never got to choose that part.”

The words hang between us until he holds the paper out for me. “Tell Haley and the others I'll be out in a few minutes. I need to return a call.”

I take the sheet from him, then he grabs me in a quick one-armed hug before turning back to his desk.

He doesn't get it. He doesn't see how it could be.

And tonight, there's nothing I can do to change his mind.

I ball up the sheet of lyrics and toss it into the fire before heading for the door.



“I KNOW you spent the entire weekend lying to your family,” Elle whispers as we take our seats in our entertainment class Monday.

The pen I’m retrieving from my bag falls from my fingers and rolls toward her desk. “What?”

She picks it up, cocking her head. “You pretended to be present when you were really mentally jerking off to Tyler Adams.”

Warmth floods me as I take the pen back.

“You did have some hot chemistry before you walked away from him Friday morning,” she presses. “Stone cold.”

“Seventy-eight times I wrote to you.”

In my mind, Tyler Adams had walked away and never looked back. If that wasn’t true...

I keep telling myself that changes nothing, but it means he cared. Even when he was going through whatever he was going through, he thought of me.

When I walked away, I didn’t mean to be petty, but I wanted him to feel a tiny, momentary slice of the hell he’d put me through.

“Whatever your plan was,” Elle continues, “the guy looked seriously bummed you were gone. He didn’t dance with another girl all night.”

Her words leave my body tingling. Tyler still brings up a ton of emotions in me, and it's not only about who he was. Judging from what I heard at Leo's last week, he's even more talented than he was a year ago. He's more confident too, more grown up.

We both are.

But just because he had a harder time leaving me than I thought doesn't change anything for us now.

It can't.

My gaze pulls to the door when Rae enters, scanning for a seat. The only remaining one is next to us, and she drops into it.

The instructor starts her lecture, and I try to tune into the discussion in class about how to set yourself apart while building a brand.

"So, this family weekend," Elle says to me at the end of class. "It was big?"

"Ten people, plus my dad and stepmom and little sister. Food and booze and sugar comas." I tuck my notebook away in my bag.

"My weekend was here, watching movies and living on noodles. Your life sounds like heaven."

The image of my dad reading my words and handing them back to me floods my mind—him tossing them into the fire, watching them dissolve.

"Not even close." I shoulder my bag and start for the door.

"I know you have issues with your dad," Elle says, "but if he's breathing? He shows up? Sounds like an epic father figure."

Before I can respond, she takes off down the hall, leaving me with my mouth hanging open.

Rae's appearance at my side makes me jump. "You going to her set tomorrow? She's got twenty minutes at Comedy Palace."

I shake my head in surprise. I'd figured Elle would've told me about something like that.

Rae starts to take off, but I grab her bag first.

"Hey," I say on impulse as she turns, raising a brow. "I know I'm not your favorite person. I know all you want is for me to be gone so you can have a single room. And your voodoo might even work—"

Her black-rimmed eyes round. "My what?"

Shit. "The dolls. On your headboard."

"You think they're voodoo dolls?" Her face slackens in disbelief. "They're for Etsy. I sell them."

"Oh. Fuck. I'm sorry." I flush with embarrassment. "Anyway, maybe we could go to this show together. To support Elle."

Rae flips me off, and my stomach sinks.

Three paces away, she turns to call over her shoulder, "You know where I live. You can pick me up at eight."



I FOLLOW Rae up the stairs from the subway later that night. "You got into the DJ booth at the club on Friday night. How'd you even do that?"

We fall into step together on the sidewalk. “Trade secrets,” she says, but her voice turns wistful. “I’m gonna set the world on fire. You’re not making music, you’re making a vibe. It’s all about mood and energy and tempo. Your tracks have an energy; your people have an energy. They’re like atoms. Every combination of people has its own sense, its own chaos. It’s all about finding those three people.”

“Three people?” I’m intrigued. Those are the most words I’ve heard my roommate string together in my presence, and now that she’s talking, I don’t want her to stop.

“Three people who set the tone for everyone else. You can always find three people in a crowd. No one will admit they’re watching them or even knows consciously. But they are. If you’re spinning, you gotta get to know them. Live inside them. You move them, they move the room.”

Before I can ask more, we’re outside the doors of the venue.

Comedy Palace is smaller than Leo’s, and Rae scans the foyer as if she’s looking for her three people even now.

We find a table at the back. We’re barely seated when two hands land on my shoulders and I whirl in my seat.

Beck grins down at me. “Hey, ladies.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask, feeling the smile pull across my face already.

“We were invited.”

Before I can ask who “we” is, my gaze lands on the guy next to him, and I stiffen.

Tyler’s dressed in jeans and a dark-blue button-down that makes his chocolate eyes look even darker.

But the most surprising part isn't his presence—it's how not disappointed I am to see him.

“Don't take this the wrong way, but by who?” I ask lightly.

Tyler looks between me and Rae, who picks at her leather jacket innocently.

Every combination of people has its own sense, its own chaos.

Apparently, Rae liked our brand of chaos enough to recreate it.

The guys grab chairs and pull them up to our table. Tyler's forced to tuck his in close to mine so Rae can still get out and head for the bar.

“You want?” she asks Beck, jerking her head.

“Yeah, sure.” He follows her.

“Did you tell Jax and Haley you're at Vanier?” Tyler asks me when Rae's gone.

His bluntness has me straightening. “No.”

“You're going to have to.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I care about you.” Something flickers behind Tyler's eyes. “And I care about them,” he goes on.

Before I can argue, Rae and Beck return, and the house lights dim. The first performer is a guy who talks about his pets for the entire time.

Elle's the second performer. We cheer as she takes the stage.

“Here’s the thing about being twenty in New York—everyone assumes you came from some piece-of-shit city to be an overpaid trader or an underpaid actor. I take offense to that. I came from the country to be an unpaid comedian.”

The audience chuckles as she strolls across the stage, the lights following her.

“I have three younger brothers, but my dad died when I was ten.”

My stomach falls, but she continues.

“So, I had to keep my mom laughing. Because them wetting the bed every night wasn’t doing it.”

The backs of my eyes burn as I think of our exchange in the hallway earlier about my dad, how I gave her shit for making him sound better than he is.

I’d asked her about her baggage once, and she said it was too much to talk about.

I duck my face to swipe at my damp eyes, and my gaze finds Tyler’s, holds it.

He’s feeling what I am—compassion, sadness, understanding, and I’m glad he’s here.

I force myself to focus on the rest of Elle’s set, then the remaining performers, and the heaviness gives way to laughter.

Everyone has their own pain. Elle uses it to connect people, weaves the hard times in with the good ones.

When the houselights come up, I pull out my phone to text Elle, but Rae grabs my arm. “Don’t. This wasn’t about us.”

The crowd outside is laughing and tipsy as we wind our way out to the street. I fall into step next to Beck, behind Tyler and Rae.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Beck decides.

We find a diner a block away. I hold the door for Rae, and she shakes her head, holding up a pack of cigarettes from her jacket pocket.

Before the three of us can find a booth, Beck’s phone rings.

He checks the screen and starts toward the door. “Order me a Coke,” he calls. “I’ll be back.”

Tyler and I slide into the booth across from one another.

There are people of every kind in the restaurant. There’s an elderly couple across from a young couple, and I wonder what they’re talking about, what their lives are like, if they act brave in the daylight, if questions they can’t answer start to circle their minds when the lights go out.

“I know I have to tell him,” I blurt, turning back to find Tyler watching me, impassive. “But I want him to understand why I’m doing it. I want him to see that I’m good enough to make a career at this. Last year, I was so focused on getting into Vanier. It was this singular thing I could picture. I told myself everything would be easy once I was surrounded by people who got what it meant to want this life, to be on the stage. But now that I’m here, it’s not easy. Maybe it never will be again. Do you ever feel that way?”

My voice is just audible over the chatter and clinking cutlery and plates. I sink my shoulders back against the booth.

I feel more vulnerable than when he found my Polaroids, than when I stood in front of him naked, because this it the

truth—the thing that haunts me, that I don't have an answer to. It's not my past, it's my future.

“More than you know.” Tyler shifts forward in his seat. His shoulders are tight under his button-down. “When I left Dallas for New York, I had a contract with a label. Was supposed to start in the studio a week in. But my third day here, I got a call from Philly. My dad wrecked his car driving drunk and was in a coma in the hospital.”

My body goes cold, but he continues before I can process. “I went back to Philly. Stared at his face for two days, couldn't decide whether I wanted to save him or pull the plug—because the prick listed me to make those decisions, after all we've been through. In the end, I told them to do everything they could. For a week, they did. He died anyway.”

My gut twists tighter, until all my organs are one giant knot of sadness and rage—sadness for Tyler and what he must have felt, rage for knowing he went through it alone.

“I took care of arrangements. Got a loan to cover the funeral.” He grimaces, shoving a hand through his dark hair. “I figured I'd pay the medical bills off with money from my contract. But by the time I got back to New York, I'd been gone two weeks. Zeke was calling, I wasn't answering, and when I showed up at his door, he was pissed.”

“He must've understood when you told him,” I murmur.

“I didn't tell him. It was my problem, my shame, my decision.” His voice fills with grief, and every part of me wants to reach across the table and hold him even though I know I can't.

“There was only one person I wanted to see.” He shifts back in his seat, exhaling hard, and those beautiful eyes

deepen with an emotion that has my heart kicking in my chest. “It was the middle of July. I’d been keeping my distance from you, telling myself you’d be better off and to give you space. But I couldn’t do it anymore. I needed to know you were okay, that something I cared about was right in the world. When I got to Dallas, I saw you outside the library with some guy”—the disbelief in his voice has me aching all over again—“looking like you didn’t have a care in the world.”

I swallow, trying to process even a tenth of what he’s giving me and failing. My fingers trace the placemat in front of me, across the bottom, up the sides. “He worked with me,” I offer at last.

“He made you smile. And that was what I wanted for you. I didn’t want to intrude, to make you suffer more than you already had. So, I left.”

My throat closes up. Of all the reasons I’d considered why Tyler hadn’t called, that wasn’t one of them.

I’d been feeling like shit that entire summer, was devastated to feel alone—truly alone—for the first time in a long time.

But now I understand how hard this was for him, too.

Tyler’s hands fold in front of him on the table, but they’re tense.

“Zeke terminated my contract. Told me to figure my shit out. I had a contact at Vanier and was able to get in last minute. So, I figured I’d take classes until Zeke changed his mind.

“The thing is, when I was here, I wasn’t really here. My music had lost something. That’s the problem when you start

depending on other people. Like my dad blamed me for interfering with his music by existing.”

I trace the top line of the placemat with my finger, and when I get to the center, a few inches of cheap countertop is all that keeps our hands from brushing.

I swallow the urge to bridge that distance when he continues.

“There’s a difference between caring for people and ignoring your responsibilities,” I say. “Working with people, relying on them... it’s a beautiful thing.” I cut a look over my shoulder toward the door. “Like you and Beck. He’s so loyal to you, and I can see you’ve earned it.”

His heavy gaze meets mine, and the lump in my throat expands until I can’t breathe.

“I need you to know something. That day you saw me in Dallas,” I go on, “I might’ve been smiling, but it hurt. Every smile for months was like swallowing glass. I understand why you left, but if you think for a second it didn’t tear me up, you were wrong. I wish you’d said goodbye.”

Tyler tugs on his hair, eyes squeezing shut. “Nah. See, if I’d said goodbye, I wouldn’t have gone.”

This time, I can’t stop myself from reaching for his hand. His skin is warm under mine, and his chocolate gaze finds me.

I’m living for the feel of his skin on mine.

“When I saw you walk past that rehearsal room at Vanier last spring,” he says roughly, “I thought I was hallucinating.” Tyler’s hand tightens on mine, his lips twitching with self-mocking. “I thought I wished you here. And you can hate me all you want, but I’m glad you came.”

His words slam into me. “What about the girl you were with?”

“She was a friend. We were more for a little while, but...” Tyler shakes his head. “She wasn’t you. No one’s ever been you.”

I’m drowning in emotions, and I can’t pick one out from the rest or figure out what this means going forward.

The one thing I know is that the story I told myself about how we were, how we ended, was wrong. Our past isn’t the story I told myself.

Maybe our future isn’t either.

Tyler’s eyes warm on mine, and I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing.

Beck drops into the booth, and I pull back my hand.

“Got an audition,” he chirps.

I glance toward the front door to see Elle and Rae walk inside. Elle looks startled when she sees all of us.

“You were great tonight,” I tell her when she pulls up next to the table.

Her lips curve, embarrassed. “Thanks. I didn’t know you guys were going to be there.”

“What can I get you?” the waitress asks when I shift over to let my roommate and friend in. The waitress goes around to Elle and Rae and Beck before coming to me.

I turn the question over for a long moment before answering. “How’re your cheese fries?”

“They’re great,” she answers with a smile.

“I’ll take a small.”

“Make it a large,” Tyler says smoothly, and I sneak a look at him under my lashes.

His expression is filled with an intensity that steals my breath, but for the first time this year, it doesn't leave me feeling tortured.

It leaves me hopeful.

The waitress leaves, and my friends start to talk about one of the other performers from tonight's show.

I train my attention on Elle's animated face, but I'm only half listening when something brushes my leg.

Tyler.

His calf against my knee.

It was probably an accident. Even with the five of us in this booth, it's not crowded.

Except he's not moving. The single innocent touch has my entire body heating.

All it would take would be a tiny shift on my part to break that connection.

Instead, I stretch out my other leg and link my feet around his ankle so neither of us can move away.

Tyler

“WHERE YOU GOING THIS EARLY? Breakfast at Vanier?” Beck’s voice comes from the kitchen Thursday morning.

“Nah, I can make use of the now-functioning fridge,” I reply. “There’s some non-moldy cream cheese in there.”

I pack my guitar in its case and give myself a quick once-over in the bedroom mirror on the badly painted dresser that came with the apartment. My shirt is not only clean but ironed, and my hair’s doing more or less what I want.

I’ll take it as a win.

“Yeah, but there’s nothing to put it on. Except an overripe banana.” Beck peers inside as I pass him, guitar in tow.

“Figured you’d be into that,” I say as I head for the front door.

“Overripe is a problem,” Beck says. “I prefer them young. Firm.”

“And I will never ask again.” I drop my guitar case and set my phone on the counter to grab my jacket.

The fridge has been fixed since Monday, but we haven’t gotten anything resembling groceries.

We’ve been busy.

Beck landed a string of auditions and even won a commercial. I've started working on my showcase audition in earnest. I have a song in mind, but I'm not satisfied it's what I need to land the closing spot and score the visibility and ten grand that would put a dent in my dad's hospital bills.

My phone buzzes, and Beck grabs it before I can. "Tyler: 'Got a line on a rehearsal room at 8 a.m.'"

I shrug into the coat, his gaze cutting back to me. "Wait," he says, "You not only scored a rehearsal room but you're willing to share it with someone?"

I reach for my shoes. "It's not a big deal."

"Annie: 'Long as it won't cramp your style to practice with the competition.'" Beck hollers. "Oh, you're trying to move in on my girl."

One shoe on, I snatch the phone back. "I told you, she's not your girl."

"You're so far into her it's a wonder you can speak. Because your lips are glued to her ass," Beck explains at my blank stare as I tuck the phone away and put on the other shoe. "Or other places."

A week ago, Beck would've been right. I was fighting the attraction. Her dancing with me on Beck's birthday—even if she did it to prove a point—meant I couldn't fall asleep all weekend without jerking off to the thought of her.

But the night at Comedy Palace changed things.

"I understand why you left, but if you think for a second it didn't tear me up, you were wrong."

The way she looked at me, the way our hands brushed when we walked side by side on the way home, gave me

something I haven't felt in a long time.

Hope.

Since vowing to win back my contract, I've been running on determination, conviction, even a need for vindication.

I didn't realize how dark those feelings were until I had something bright to compare them to.

"We've been texting all week," I tell him. "And we've had lunch twice at Vanier."

"Sounds serious." He flutters his eyelashes.

"She's the first girl I ever fell for."

I reach for my bag, but Beck's groan has me look up.

"Slow your roll," he says. "I knew you knew her before this year. A high school girlfriend from Philly?"

"No." I exhale hard. "She's Jax Jamieson's kid."

His jaw hits the floor. "Well, fuck me. She's the one who messed you up before you came here. I get it. She's pretty fucking great." His response has the hairs on my neck lifting. "But I'm not gonna go there, because you guys have some major unresolved shit."

"It's past tense."

"Really? Because I saw how you looked at her the other night," Beck says. "That wasn't a 'past tense' kind of look. That was a 'present perfect' kind of look."

"You don't know what that means."

"Sure, I do. You'd like to *have been getting some* for the last two weeks."

I shake my head as I start out the door. “Just eat the banana, Beck. I’ll catch you tonight.”

Our neighborhood’s not the safest, but in daylight it’s fine. I don’t notice any of it this morning on my way to Vanier. Instead, I’m thinking of Annie.

Beck’s right. The past tense feelings are blurring with the present tense ones. The more I talk to her, the harder it gets to convince myself there’s nothing between us.

But just because I’m attracted to her doesn’t mean I’d jump into a relationship with her or that she would with me.

I have to think twice before letting someone in again. I fucked up my career when I moved to New York last fall and spun out, and while some of it was about what happened with my dad? A lot of it was about her.

I can’t afford to set myself up for that again.

I head to school, and an hour later, I’m in the rehearsal room running my audition song when a knock comes. I get up from my stool, guitar in one hand, and open the door.

My breath sticks in my throat.

Annie’s dark hair is piled up on her head, a few pieces loose from the bun I want to tug out just to see it fall in waves around her shoulders. Her cheeks are flushed. She’s wearing leggings and a denim shirt with the top two buttons undone, and the way her backpack straps tug on the fabric reveals a tantalizing glimpse of the curve of her breasts. A chain disappears beneath the clothes.

I want to follow it with my tongue.

“There’s a price to enter,” I say, my voice remarkably level.

She angles her chin up. "I'm not going to blow you."

All the blood in my body goes south.

I take back every thought about wanting to rewind time, to get back the girl I knew a year ago.

I want *this* Annie Jamieson, the one with dancing eyes who says she's not going to blow me as if she's actually considered letting me stick my cock between those beautiful lips.

As if the right circumstances might make her consider it again.

Oblivious to my thoughts, she holds out one of two coffees. "My final offer."

I take one with my free hand and let her in.

She crosses the room, dropping onto the piano bench. "I thought we could pause the competition thing for an hour. I could play my piece, and you could play yours. You know, give each other notes."

I shift onto the stool. The rooms aren't big, so I'm only a few steps away from her and the piano.

"Deal," I say. "You start."

She turns to the piano and begins. The melody is pretty, but her voice grabs me and won't let go.

I'm glad she's facing away because I don't need her to see what her art does to me.

And it is art, what she creates. Every note and inflection, every breath, all of it spills between us, shapes something new and magical I couldn't resist if I wanted to.

"Those words," I say when she's done. "I recognize some of them from the pictures in your room."

Annie shifts on the bench. “I decided I might as well use them for something.”

“It’s a good song.”

“But it’s not right.” She grabs her lower lip in her teeth. “Let me hear yours.”

I hesitate only a moment before picking out a song on my guitar.

It’s not the one I’ve been rehearsing, but something new.

Annie leans closer, listening. “I like it.”

Riding a wave of impulsiveness, I add my voice overtop.

Her words. The ones she just sang, but the music’s different.

She doesn’t say anything for a verse, then another.

Finally, I stop playing and meet her gaze, my heart hammering in my chest.

Her lips are parted, her expression coloring in awe. “What did you do?”

“I changed it a little.”

I half expect her to freak on me, like the guys at the studio do when I mess with their work.

Instead, Annie grabs a pen from her bag and drags the piano bench over to my stool, close enough our thighs touch.

If she feels me tighten next to her, she doesn’t acknowledge it. My sleeves are rolled up, and she takes my arm, holding my hand, and starts to write.

“I have more words since I took those pictures,” she explains as she works. “Better ones.”

Her skin's warm on mine as she fills my bare forearm with ink, wrist to elbow. I don't stop her.

Each phrase has my heart thudding dully in my chest, has me looking between her bent head and my skin, has me longing for something I don't understand and don't need to.

"There." She shifts back onto the bench.

I want to reach for her, but instead I reach for my guitar.

Then I play.

The words are music, flowing from my fingers like water.

My thigh's still touching hers, our bodies inches apart, as she joins in singing at the chorus.

Her attention is on me, not the guitar. I can feel her gaze—I've always felt her gaze.

It's like the sun on a summer day.

I thrill to it, thrive on it.

When we finish, we both exhale hard.

"Tyler," she murmurs. "That was..."

Spectacular. Raw. Fucking incredible.

I can't voice the words because they're too big and too small for what I'm feeling.

She straightens in her seat, pressing her lips together. Her face is tight, but her eyes are bright, expressive. "I can't perform that. It's your music."

"Sure you can."

Annie seems to wrestle with it. "If I land the closing spot, I'll give you the money. You said you have bills from your dad. That would help."

“No. It would be yours.” Still, the fact that she’s thinking of me makes my gut twist.

There it is. The reason I can’t ignore her.

She makes me feel that I’m more than I am, like I matter just for being here.

“What about your song?” Annie prompts.

“It needs work.”

“I can help.”

“No.” She looks hurt, so I explain. “Being here with you like this... it feels like old times.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. We had some good times,” she murmurs.

They weren’t bad at all, and that’s the problem.

I can’t say that it reminds me of the easy intimacy we used to have—letting each other in, working together, relying on one another.

Craving each other.

My attention drops to her necklace. Despite the voice in my head insisting this is a terrible idea, I hook a finger around the chain, drawing it out of her shirt. Her breath catches as it drags up her skin, revealing the glass pendant.

The troubling familiarity shifts into recognition, a key sliding into a lock as I turn the pendant in my fingers. “Your dad’s roses.”

“The day after I got grounded, we hung out by the pool, and you carried me up the driveway, and you gave me that rose.”

Surprise slams into me—that she remembers it, that she kept it, that she wears it.

“You were a jerk that day,” Annie goes on, oblivious to the emotions roiling inside me.

When I reply, my voice is an octave lower. “I was a jerk because I wanted you so much. Wanting you makes me grumpy.”

She arches a brow, her full lips twitching. “Then I guess it’s a good thing we never slept together.”

My next breath is ragged. “I said wanting you made me a jerk. If I’d had you, I would’ve been...”

I trail off, but her half-lidded gaze roams my face before falling to my mouth.

“What?” she murmurs.

Whole.

The word fills my mind without permission.

“I think you would’ve been happy,” she finishes.

The truth of her words echoes through my chest. It’s impossible to rewind to a time before this girl knew me.

If we were dust in the air, her soul would call to mine.

I drop the necklace, reaching up to play with a strand of hair that’s escaped her bun. “I used to wonder if you went to prom. How you would’ve worn your hair if you did.”

“I wore it up.”

My chest tightens. “Did you go alone?”

“No.”

I wrap the strand around my finger, tugging. “Did you dance with him?”

Her eyes darken. “Yeah.”

“Kiss him?”

Annie nods slowly, and I know she’s not thinking of her prom—at least, not only.

She’s remembering the night I took Carly to prom when she asked me the same thing.

I inch closer until we’re nearly touching so she’s forced to tilt her face up to hold my gaze.

The next question isn’t mine to ask, but neither were the two before it.

“Did you fuck him?”

Those expressive amber eyes color with something I can’t name.

The answer’s there on her face, and I hate it. I hate knowing I could’ve been her first and wasn’t. I have no right to expect she would have saved herself for me, but the thought of her with another guy drives me crazy.

“Tyler—”

“I wanted to give you that night. So many times in my head, I did.”

Her lips part, and I want to devour them. Her unsteady inhale makes my cock twitch.

We thought life was so complicated a year ago. Nothing was complicated.

But no matter what I resolved when I walked away from her on that sunny day in Dallas, I won’t pretend she didn’t

leave her mark on me.

“You better play me your song,” she says at last, her voice rough at the edges, “or we’re going to run out of time.”

I unwind the hair and tuck it behind her ear.

Then I reach for my guitar.

Annie

“YOU GOING TO ‘PRACTICE’ with Tyler again?”

I’m walking past Elle’s open dorm door with my bag and jacket when her voice has me pulling up.

I step into her doorway, taking in the sight of my friend reclined on her bed, notebook in her lap. “What’s with the finger quotes?” I ask.

“You’ve been spending every second together all week. If your strategy is to get close enough to backstab the competition, you’re running out of time.”

“We’re competing, but our biggest competition is the dozens of other people auditioning.”

She cocks her head. “You realize there’s only one closing spot.”

Which is why even though we’ve practiced together a few times, those long looks and teasing touches have been as far as it’s gone.

“I wanted to give you that night. So many times in my head, I did.”

The recipe for a sleepless night starts with Tyler Adams telling you he thinks about all the things you never did

together. I've spent a few hours wrapped in sweaty sheets thinking of them, too.

But I'm thinking about why I'm here at Vanier and my goals. With the auditions happening Monday, the closing spot is close enough I can taste it.

My phone jumps in my pocket with a text.

Unknown: It's Finn. Meet me out front of the school in fifteen minutes for intensive.

Annie: I thought we were meeting tomorrow?

Unknown: Change of plans. If you can do right now, it'll be worth your while.

I tell Elle about the message. "Is this normal for faculty to take students off campus for weird evening sessions?" she asks.

"I'm not sure Finn follows the rules." But I'm intrigued.

"We're all still going out tomorrow night, right?" Elle asks as I start toward the hall.

"Yeah. My friend Pen and the guy she's seeing suggested a place they like."

I go down to the first floor and turn toward the main lobby. A black car's pulled up at the curb, and the window buzzes down, revealing Finn inside the backseat. I shift into the car, pull the door behind me.

"Some people think being double-booked is a conflict," he says once I'm in. "I think it's an opportunity. I'm playing a show tonight. Figured you could keep me company."

I glance out the window as the city passes us by. “I haven’t been to a show in... months.”

“Then you’re in for a treat.”

Two hours later, we’re at a venue in Jersey. The audience is a few thousand people—loud, screaming. They’re not here for me, but from the moment I take up a post in the shadows backstage, I close my eyes and pretend they are.

This is what it feels like to make a name for yourself.

Finn runs off partway through, sweating, and checks the set list while he gets touch-ups. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“What’s that?”

“That the purpose of your intensive at Vanier is to hone your craft, not mine.”

“Well, yeah, but this is fun,” I admit.

With a grin, he points at the next track on the set list. “You know this track?”

I nod.

“Drop in on it.” There’s a cocky angle to his grin, and I blink at him in astonishment.

“I’m not warmed up, I’m in the wrong clothes, and I don’t have performance makeup.”

But he jerks his head as he jogs back on stage, and I slowly follow him. His bassist steps back, gesturing to the mic. So, I take it.

I’ve been on stage a dozen times in the last few years, but none of the small productions I’ve done have felt like this.

This is freedom—an orgy of lights and sound and love and feeling.

It's not my song, but the audience sings along, pulsing right there with me.

Backstage after, Finn downs a bottle of water.

“That was incredible,” I gush.

“This is the contemporary music program. Not ‘break your back bending over your violin for twenty years until someone lets you play second in a symphony.’ You saw that crowd. You think they’d pay two hundred bucks a seat to see Mozart?”

“Mozart’s dead.”

“Exactly.” He grins.

“Listen,” I start. “I want to run my audition piece for the showcase by you once more. I’ve been making some changes, and I’d love your input. Would you have time tomorrow?”

Finn cocks his head. “You didn’t hear.”

“Hear what?” My heart kicks in my chest.

“First years are being disqualified from auditioning this year. ” He reaches for his phone, swipes through a few screens. “Looks like it was just in a faculty email that went around today. The first years who signed up will be contacted tomorrow.”

“But... why?”

“One of the professors adjudicating landed a last minute gig and can’t sit for the full number of auditions. The dean decided to focus on second years, since that’s who the showcase is for anyway.” He shrugs.

Disbelief has my throat swelling, my chest tightening. This was my chance, the perfect opportunity to prove why I'm here and get noticed for my own talent, not my name.

"That's bullshit," I blurt. "Some of us need this chance."

"I'm with you." Finn holds the door for me, and I force myself to walk through. "Oh, one more thing— I'm gonna be gone the week after the showcase in November. Playing three gigs in LA and San Francisco. I could get you tickets if you're interested."

I try to focus on his words, but I can't bring myself to care, because my dreams are going up in smoke.



"THIS IS WHERE YOU HANG OUT?" Rae cranes her neck from her spot in the booth to peer around the packed bar the next night.

Pen nods. "It's mostly Columbia students."

"There's no stage," Elle notes.

Rae, Pen, Elle, and I are crowded around a booth Saturday night. I'm trying to enjoy the atmosphere, but it's hard given I'm still reeling from the fact that all my work this semester—hell, for the last two years—will come to nothing.

I need this showcase to remind myself I made the right choice. That I'm at Vanier for a reason and that I have a chance of making it in this business on my own merit.

I glance toward the bar, catching a glimpse of the guy Pen's seeing with Tyler, Beck, and a couple of guys from school. "Dave seems cool," I say, forcing myself to think of my friends.

“He is. I never thought I’d date an engineer. I always figured they’d be too...”

“Cocky?”

“Reductionist.”

The guys at the bar are all objectively good-looking. Pen’s guy is cute and preppy, Beck’s got that “I’m hot and I know how to use it” look, but Tyler’s the most commanding, his Henley pulling tight over his shoulders and chest. He’s still the rebel prince, but he’s opened up. Whether he knows it or not, he’s let this place in, let Beck and the others in.

Some girls interrupt the guys, talking and flirting, and my hand clenches around my glass.

“Oh, I wondered how long this would take,” Pen drawls.

Elle leans in. “What?”

I stare at my high school friend pointedly, but she waves me off.

“Tyler and Annie go back.”

Rae narrows her eyes, and Elle scoffs, “This is new information.”

“Yes, *Penelope*,” I warn.

Pen holds up a hand. “Don’t try to scare me with your four syllables. I’m not talking out of turn here. Just saying you guys have some especially angsty baggage.”

My attention drags back to the girl smiling at Tyler.

“She’s thinking about dragging that girl across the floor by her hair,” Rae deadpans. Elle laughs, and Pen grins.

I have no right to feel that way, but as we’ve rehearsed together over the past week, it’s gotten harder and harder not

to feel something for him.

“What’s he like in bed?” Elle asks, and I choke on my drink.

“We never slept together,” I say when I stop coughing.

“Oh, that does explain the tension.” Elle cocks her head as I squirm in my seat, tugging the hem of my skirt that’s riding high up my legs.

“I bet he’d learn everything you like, memorize it, use it all against you to get his way.”

Rae’s words have me flushing, averting my gaze.

Forgive me for not bringing a change of underwear to this venue.

My gaze drags from the girl and over to Tyler, his strong shoulders, handsome profile.

He’s beyond sexy. Thinking about him is sexy. Talking about him is sexy.

Breathing the same air in the same room is sexy.

The guy in question turns his head and catches me staring. His gaze skims down and back up, as if he can see me press my thighs together under the table.

I can’t look away.

If I’m honest, I still have feelings for Tyler.

But even if I think there’s a chance he feels the same way, that’s not why we’re here. We have our dreams, and we’ve both given up things to pursue them.

The waitress comes by to see if we want more drinks. “You guys are Vanier students. I was one. Acting.”

“Do you work?” Rae says.

“Mostly, I’m here. I get good hours.” She winks, but her smile seems forced.

We order another round, and she disappears.

That’s the reality, I remind myself. It’s easy to want this life. It’s harder to make it happen. Especially when your plan for getting it done—the showcase—gets yanked out from under you.

Before I’ve taken another sip of my drink, hands settle on my neck. I jump as something soft brushes my ear.

“You’ve been quiet tonight.” Tyler’s not in my line of sight, but I feel his touch on my bare skin, smell his familiar cedar scent.

Before I can respond, he lifts me out of the booth and sets me by his side.

“Tell me what’s up.”

“What’s up is you win. Congratulations.” I pull my phone from my bag and hold out the email I got from the dean’s office today.

I shove a hand through my hair, looking past him while he reads it. “They’re not letting me audition,” I say under my breath. “New policy.”

“This isn’t happening.” The edge in his voice does nothing to soothe my frustration.

I take the phone back and tuck it away. “Whatever. It was a long shot anyway.”

I try to brush past him, but he cages me in with his arms. “Tyler... there’s nothing we can do.”

“Audition with me.”

My mind goes blank as I take in his angry face. “Wait, what?”

“We can do your song together.”

“They won’t let us—”

“Then we’ll make them.”

“But what if they disqualify you?”

He narrows his gaze. “Let them try.”

My chest expands with emotions I can’t name. “You want to change your audition with three days left to rehearse.”

“Yeah. I do.”

I study him, trying to figure out where Tyler went and who this reckless man in his place is.

But all I see is the same guy I’ve always known, with a flash of rebelliousness in his dark gaze that has a shimmer of hope starting low in my stomach.

I throw my arms around his neck, inhaling his familiar scent and trying not to be distracted by the heat and hardness of his body. My eyes burn. “Thank you.”

His arms wrap around me, too, and my heart feels lighter than it has in two days.

“We can rehearse all day tomorrow. We can use the apartment. Beck will understand.”

“I promise I’ll do you proud.”

“I know you will.”

Over his shoulder, I notice a pool table at the other end of the bar. “But since we’re not rehearsing until tomorrow... look

what I found.”

He turns to look, and his chuckle warms me. “You wanna play pool, Six?”

“With you? Always. I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“I can’t believe you got that email today and didn’t tell me,” he chides, following me to the table.

“I didn’t want to bring you down or distract you from your own rehearsing. I actually found out yesterday when I went to Finn’s show.”

He takes two cues off the wall and passes me one. But when he responds, he’s guarded. “What part of that’s in the curriculum?”

My jaw goes slack with incredulity as I twist the chalk over the end of my cue. “Come on, Tyler. It was a trip. Have you ever heard him? There’s a reason Finn Harvey has a gold album.”

I brush past him to rack up the balls. I’m bent over, lining up my break when his hand settles between my shoulder blades. “We need stakes.”

I shiver, turning to feel his lips brush my ear. “You sound like you’ve got something in mind.”

“I win, you kiss me like you mean it.”

I twist so his arms are around me. Tyler tucks a piece of hair behind my ear, sending a jolt of electricity humming through me while his gaze roams my face.

The man who offered to share the spotlight with me. *For* me. No questions asked.

I make a decision there's no going back from.

“Fine. But if I win... you kiss me like you would've if you hadn't walked away that day outside the library in Dallas.”

His hand stills, heat flaring behind his eyes.

He gets what this means, that it's an admission I want him, that I want to play out whatever's between us—that I'm every bit as frustrated from the tension that's been building all week, all year.

“Deal.”

At a glance, it could seem as if the stakes have vanished, but they're higher than ever.

He wins and I have to show him how much I want him. I'll be the one who's vulnerable, and every part of me that I'd believed had grown up will be tested.

If I win... I get to see what kind of man Tyler Adams has become since he left me. Because somehow, I know the first touch of his hands, his mouth, will tell me more than the last month has about where he's at.

I want that. So badly.

I take my first shot and sink two. Another three go down as I circle the table before I miss.

“So, tell me about this kiss I'm about to win,” Tyler asks as he lines up his first shot.

“It'll have tongue.”

Across the table, he lifts his gaze, mouth curving. “I assumed.”

I soak in the sight of his powerful body, the simple grace in everything he does. He's masculine and utterly captivating.

“And an ass grab.”

Tyler leans over the table. “I didn’t ask for an ass grab.”

“It’s a BOGO kind of deal.”

He sinks his target smoothly, and I bite my cheek as he goes on a run of his own.

“You worried?” he muses after sinking the next three.

“Nope.”

“You should be.”

But eventually, he misses one.

I walk in front of him to find the best angle on the final ball. Once I have it, I toss a look over my shoulder to catch him staring at me.

“I might need help,” I say.

His eyes darken, and he closes the distance between us, setting his cue on the edge of the table.

I wait for him to bend over me, his strong body wrapping around me.

Yes.

I press my ass against him. My teeth sink into my lip as his scent hits me. I arch my back. “How’s my angle?”

His heavy exhale at my ear is pure turn-on. “Shoot already.”

The cue slips through my hand...

And I miss.

Now that he has a shot to win it all, the stakes are sinking in.

If he wins, it's going to be more than a single kiss.

Once he touches me again, he'll know how I feel. I won't be able to hold back, and he'll realize I'm torn between wanting him and focusing on my future. I'll be vulnerable in a way I haven't let myself be, not even this past week.

"Annie." Tyler's voice has me turning back to him. "Watch."

My hand squeezes the cue, my palms getting damp as he lines up his shot.

It's harder than the one I had.

He could miss it.

He draws back the cue, then slides it through his hand.

Smooth. Sure. Practiced.

My breath catches as I watch the ball roll across the felt, tap the two, and drop it right into the pocket.

Tyler straightens, slow.

My heart flutters in my chest. "I guess you want your kiss."

"No." A hand on my waist has me turning back, catching myself against his chest. Too-knowing chocolate eyes bore into mine. "I want it on our date."

"Our date?" I echo, a step slow.

"Yeah. See, the last time I tried to date you, I fucked it up. We were too young. And I lived in your house. And I don't know if there's a right way to do this, but I want to try."

I search his face, trying to understand the words coming from his lips. "But... dating is a thing people who have time

and want to fall in love do. Not people on the edge of finally reaching their dreams after giving up so much to do it.”

His gaze sharpens. “You don’t think we can have both?”

Of all the things I wondered with Tyler, that he’d want to take me out never occurred to me. It’s a beautiful idea, but part of me says it’s impossible, that believing that is something the girl who got her heart broken last year would’ve done, something I’m too smart to do now.

“Tell you what,” he says when I don’t answer. “We’ll have this conversation after our audition.”

I nod, swallowing with relief. I take his cue and hang it up with mine. “We should get back to our friends.”

“Wait.” He catches my wrist before I can pass him. “I changed my mind about that kiss.”

His voice is low, a sensual promise as he tugs me against him.

“You want it here?” I look around us.

He backs me against the pool table until my ass rests on the edge.

“I want it here,” he agrees.

My dress rides up indecently high, and he’s pressed between my thighs. Every inch of me lives for the feeling of his body on mine.

But it’s dangerous.

I’ve survived this long, kept myself focused, because I haven’t let myself give in to the desire to touch him, to have him touch me.

“Come on, Six. Don’t back out now.” His voice is a low murmur.

I take a breath and thread my fingers through his hair, tugging him closer. Our lips hover close enough to touch, and I’m aching for him, the need pulsing low in my stomach wanting to drop us out of this bar, out of this city, to a place where it’s him and me and everything we’ve never said.

I can’t close the last millimeter between us.

As if he knows, Tyler does it for me.

Oh, God.

I’d thought I remembered what it felt like to kiss him, but I was wrong.

He’s warm and firm, heat and desire, and the second he parts my mouth with his tongue, I sigh against him.

It’s supposed to be my kiss, but Tyler’s fingers tangle in my hair, tilting my head as if he can’t stand to sit back. His other hand finds my hip, angling me against the pool table so he can press closer to my center, forcing my legs apart.

He kisses me like he owns me, like he misses me, like he never wants to let me go.

My fingertips trail through his hair, my thighs squeezing as if I can entice him into me.

I want him in me. God, if he shifted me up onto this pool table right now, slid inside me and claimed me in front of this entire room, I wouldn’t say no.

I don’t know how long our hungry lips hitch and slide, our greedy hands touch and tease, but I tear my mouth away first, leaning my forehead against him while I struggle to catch my breath.

“Remember that guitar you bought me in high school?” he murmurs against my lips.

I nod, my throat too swollen to answer.

His hands skim up my sides, thumbs resting under the curve of my breasts as if they have every right to be there, as if I’m the instrument built for his hands.

Tyler’s head turns a fraction of an inch so his lips brush the corner of my mouth. His next four words, whispered against my skin like a brand, stop my heart.

“I want it back.”

Annie

THE REST OF THE WEEKEND, I'm a bundle of nervous energy—practicing with Tyler and alone.

Because of the tight timeline, we're all business. Every minute, from dawn until midnight, we write and rewrite, play and sing, go over every section of my vocals and his guitar until the result is real and powerful and moves me from the first chord.

Monday morning, I can barely listen during Entertainment Management, my stomach flipping over as I stare off into space and go over the arrangement in my head.

On my way out of class, I notice a missed call from Haley, plus a voicemail.

Annie, we sent you flowers for midterms, but the florist couldn't deliver them because there was no one with your name at the dorm address you gave us. I told them to try again, but here's the number—

I write down the number, then hang up on the voicemail.

This is bad.

I call the florist, who's super confused and asks if there's another address to deliver to.

I don't want to give her the Vanier one, so I go down to the shop and get them myself, calling my dad on the way back.

"Hey," I say when he answers, panting as I take the steps up from the subway, the big arrangement of purple orchids and roses heavy in my arms. "I got the flowers. Thank you, guys, that was very sweet."

"The florist said they couldn't deliver them." I can hear him frown over the phone.

"It was a mix-up. Everything's fine. There's actually something else I wanted you to send me." I tell him, and he pauses.

"If we send it to the same address, it'll arrive."

"For sure," I tell him.

After hanging up, I text Pen to remind her I gave her dorm as my address and that if someone happens to show up with a package, she should sign for me.

"It's a little early for congratulations flowers. You haven't even auditioned," Rae points out from her desk chair as I push open our door.

"They're from my dad and stepmom. The card says, 'Good luck on midterms!'" I set the arrangement on my desk, still wrapped, and Heath swims to the glass to check it out.

I drop onto the bed, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes. "*Fuck*, I'm an asshole."

"Not the usual response to flowers."

I roll onto my side to look at her. "My dad doesn't know about... the showcase."

“Parents don’t need to know everything,” Rae says, folding her arms. “Mine don’t.”

“You never talk about your family. You’re not close?”

Her dark brows lift. For a moment, I think she’s not going to answer, but she does. “My parents are both doctors. So’s my brother. They’re not thrilled I’m here. I told them it’s better here than Ibiza, where I spent last summer.”

“You were never tempted to be what they wanted? Or to pretend?”

Rae opens her notebook computer in front of her. “I’m not gonna tell someone else’s story. I’m going to be the biggest DJ in the world. And every person who thinks that’s not true gets to be wrong about me.”

An expression of sheer determination crosses her face, and I can’t help being inspired by her resolve.

“This sounds stupid and self-centered,” I start, “but did I do something to make you not like me? Because I really wish we could start over.”

She shifts in her seat. “Just because I like my space and my resting bitch face is on point doesn’t mean I hate you. I mean... I fed your fish the other day.”

“Really?”

Rae shrugs. “He looked hungry.”

That lightens my heart. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being you.”

She shakes her head before turning back to her computer, but I swear there’s a trace of a smile on her lips too.

“Whatever. What time’s your audition?”

I check my phone. *Shit*. “In an hour. I need to go warm up.”

I get off the bed, grab my things and start for the door.

I’m halfway down the hall when I hear her call, “If you fuck it up, I’m sending the flowers back.”



HE’S NOT HERE.

I’m in the grand auditorium twenty minutes before our scheduled time, and Tyler’s nowhere to be seen.

I call him, text him, but nothing.

I pace in the hall until the door cracks and an admin assistant sticks her head out. “Mr. Adams?”

“That’s me.”

“You’re on deck.” She looks at me dubiously but lets me inside.

I head in the back door and into the wings as the current performer, a pianist, continues his audition.

“Next. Tyler Adams.” The disembodied voice comes through a microphone.

Wiping sweaty palms on my pants, I take the stage.

A panel of adjudicators sits half a dozen rows back, representing each of the faculties. Their faces are familiar—Talbot, Finn, the dean, plus a man whose name I don’t know who’s a classical music teacher.

“Miss Jamieson,” Talbot observes tightly. “You’re not on our list. What are you doing here?”

“Tyler and I are auditioning together.”

The judges exchange looks.

“Where is Mr. Adams?” the dean asks.

My stomach twists as silence falls over the auditorium.

The thought that rises up is involuntary, and awful.

He left. He left again.

When I’m about to open my mouth, the doors of the auditorium burst open, and Tyler strides in, guitar on his back.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” he says loudly enough the judges can hear too as he makes his way up the aisle. “One of our first-floor neighbors was broken into, and he cut himself on the glass. I called 9-1-1 and got him into an ambulance.”

My jaw slackens. “Is he okay?”

“I think so.”

“We’ll give you a few minutes to warm up,” the dean decides, turning to the admin assistant. “Let’s get the next person, please.”

I shut my eyes, heart still hammering as we head back to the wings together and a ballerina crosses our path for the stage.

Tyler squeezes my shoulders. “I wouldn’t leave you,” he murmurs, reading my expression. “I won’t. Not again.”

I study him, the nerves warring with gratitude in my body as he quietly tunes his guitar.

“Mr. Adams,” a voice calls moments later when the dancer finishes. “Are you ready?”

We take the stage, and the dean nods. “Miss Jamieson, you can accompany Mr. Adams, but if you make the showcase, you won’t be credited for the performance. It would be unfair to the freshman students who were not permitted to audition.”

Before I can argue, Tyler’s on it. “She’s not my backup. She wrote the song. She’s in this every bit as much as I am, and if you won’t let her audition, I’m not auditioning either.”

Could my heart expand any more?

My gaze trains on the four adjudicators.

“I say we let them do it. If it’s not good enough, we say no,” Finn weighs in.

“All right,” the dean decides.

I turn and close the distance between Tyler and me. He gives me a nod of encouragement.

“Thank you,” I murmur so only we can hear before returning to take my place at the other mic.

The song is magic.

I don’t need to watch the faces in the audience, because in my heart, it’s not for them. It’s for us.

Our performance is a blend of who we were, who we are, who we’re becoming—the imperfect synergy of Tyler and me and what we could create together.

It’s poetry. Every lie, every struggle, every moment, makes sense in this instant.

When we’re done, the stone-faced adjudicators tell us we’ll hear back as early as tonight.

I trip off stage after Tyler, and as he sets down his guitar in front of him, I leap onto his back, throw my arms around his neck.

“That was so good,” I pant in his ear, loving the feel of his warm, hard body under mine as he catches my legs.

He chuckles. “You were great.”

I drop off his back, and he turns to face me. “*You* were great,” I echo because I can’t find other words.

Now, staring at him, the emotion slams into me. “What you did for me today,” I start, “what you risked...”

“You’re worth it,” he murmurs.

I’m thinking about that kiss Saturday night. From the way his eyes darken, so is he.

“What are you doing now?” he asks.

I groan. “I have a sociology assignment to finish for tomorrow, then Elle and I got free tickets to the symphony tonight.”

“Keep your phone on.”

I sigh out a breath of excitement. “Yeah.”

He shoots me a look that’s pure wanting, and my entire body tingles as he strokes a thumb down my cheek before turning to lead the way out of the auditorium.

It’s so good, and not nearly enough.



“THAT BETTER BE A BOOTY CALL,” Elle whispers over the symphony.

I flip my phone to hide the light in the darkened theater. “I’m waiting for the showcase results,” I whisper back.

I don’t want to be that asshole interrupting a public event, but I’m waiting for the biggest news of my life.

All of the emotional turmoil I’ve felt this semester I put into five minutes with Tyler. Four choruses. Three verses. One bridge.

The symphony orchestra is amazing, *The Planets* a work of art, but I’m fidgeting, picking at the hem of my black dress.

When it’s done, we applaud, then I hit refresh again.

“It’s here!” I say hoarsely as the email subject line imprints on my brain.

The patrons in the next several seats look over.

I scan for my name or his. A breath whooshes out when I finish.

“Well?” Elle demands.

Emotion wells up in my chest, and I shake my head. “We didn’t get in.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I mean, we didn’t only get in. We’re closing the show. Me and Tyler.”

I hold up the phone so she can see both our names.

Her face splits into a grin. “Damn.”

I scan our row and the one behind, recognizing a couple dozen Vanier students. Since we’re at intermission, I race out of the row and sprint to the subway.

I debate texting Tyler, but this requires a face-to-face conversation.

My fingers drum the pole until the doors open at his stop. I bound up the stairs, and the city lights blend with the throbbing in my gut.

These aren't the heels for sprinting, so I half jog, half limp down the street to Tyler's. In the dark, there're a few sketchy-looking people, but they can't crush my high. I ignore them, ignore everything until I'm under the streetlight in front of his building.

I hit the intercom, the buzzer ringing on the other end.

No answer.

I take off toward Vanier. I'm going to have serious blisters from these shoes, but within minutes, the familiar building looms over me, graceful and stately in the dark.

The glass doors give under my hands, the light of the hallways beyond. My feet ache, and my lungs burn, and I don't know what I'm running toward until a hoarse voice from down the hall has me grinding to a halt.

"Annie."

He's dressed in the same clothes as earlier, and he fills the hall despite the trickle of students moving past him. His face is full of emotions—maybe the same ones I'm feeling that create this impossible expansion in my chest.

Tyler closes the distance between us.

"You weren't at home," I say as he comes to a stop inches away.

"I was looking for you." His chest isn't heaving like mine, but his eyes are wild.

I must look like a mess, my hair sticking to my neck and face, my skin flushed. He doesn't seem to notice as his mouth curves with the ghost of a smile. "Congrats."

I muster a cocky smile. "Was there ever any doubt?"

He shakes his head, then before I can protest, he wraps his arms around my waist.

He's going to kiss me. Every nerve ending in my body tingles as I stare at his mouth. My hands land on his chest, and my eyes drift closed.

A moment later, my eager lips brush his cheek as he tugs me into a hard hug.

"Oh," I blurt. "Um. Thanks." I try too late for an awkward recovery.

I almost think I've gotten away with it when his chest rumbles with laughter. "What did you think I was gonna do?"

"This," I lie, my fingers still trapped against his pecs. "Exactly this."

But I can't bring myself to care about the embarrassment, because being enveloped in his strength feels like home. His hand slides around my neck, fingers tangling in my hair.

I melt against him.

God, it's good to be in his arms.

When he pulls back an inch, our lips are a breath apart.

"I could kiss you now," he murmurs, and my heart skips. "You'd kiss me back, too," he continues in that beautiful voice. His mouth moves to brush my ear, lips skimming my skin and sending shivers through me.

"You seem extraordinarily confident," I manage.

Students pass us, but I don't know if they're looking. I'm trapped in Tyler's attention.

His chest is heat and muscle beneath my hands, and my fingers flex on his pecs through his thin shirt.

Tyler turns his face, lips grazing mine when he speaks. "A man who's seen heaven is more dangerous than one who only believes. And I'll never forget how it feels to have you need me."

My fingers dig into his muscled arms. I want him so much I ache.

I cut a look past him to the students in the hallway, the ones who don't know that everything in my life has been leading to this moment. Not only because of the showcase, but because of the man holding me.

"You don't have to remember it." I take a deep breath, ready to dive off the cliff. "I need you now."

Annie

TYLER'S KISSING ME.

He's dark and warm and thrilling, and when his tongue presses against my lips, I welcome him inside. It feels as if all I've ever wanted is to have him inside me—though I often think I'm part of him instead.

I'm the stars, burning and shifting, and Tyler's my sky, the dark and velvet eternity I live for.

If tonight hasn't already changed me, I know now that it will.

Tyler's steel arms bring my hips against his.

He's a brick wall, hard and unrelenting, and I want every inch of him.

Catcalls go up from somewhere.

Tyler pulls back, his breath rough, his gaze liquid desire. I thread my fingers in his hair, grinning.

“What's that face?” he demands.

“That night we danced together, I decided your hair wasn't long enough to pull. I'm glad I was wrong.”

His growl sends heat pooling between my thighs.
“Upstairs. Now.”

We stumble toward the stairwell, and the door closes after us.

“Please tell me Rae and Elle aren’t home.” He takes the steps two at a time. I try to keep up, my fingers laced with his.

“Don’t think so.” I hope to hell Elle’s still at the performance and Rae’s... wherever she disappears to.

On six, we trip down the hall, passing only one other girl on the way to my room, who offers me a thumbs up as she takes us in.

I push open the door, relieved to find it empty, then I tug my hand from his and head for my closet.

I take a ballet flat and hang it on the door handle. “It’s not a sock, but she’ll figure it out.” I shut the door after us.

The laughter fades from his face, replaced by intensity as he realizes the same thing as I do.

It’s been five years since I had a crush on Tyler.

Two since I fell in love with him.

A year and a half since he broke my heart.

And now we’re going to do this.

Tyler backs me toward the bed until my calves hit the side.

I’m older now. Wiser. This doesn’t mean I’m losing my head or my heart.

But as he reaches behind his head and strips off his shirt, tossing it on the floor by the bed, I nearly swallow my tongue.

His shoulders are broader than I remember, his abs and pecs even more defined. Tyler's so distractingly attractive with clothes on it should be illegal for him to take them off.

"Holy... You're like art," I blurt, and his sudden smile cracks the mask of intensity on his face.

He's muscled and beautiful, and I want to trace my hand over every inch of him, especially when those muscles leap under my touch. But the ink swirling up his shoulder, across the left half of his chest, brings back a tiny portion of my brain power and has me questioning something beyond how it would feel to have his body over mine, driving into me.

"What are these?" I murmur, tracing the lines as he holds himself over me.

One looks like a flower over his pec, which connects to the vines down his arm. One beneath it looks like an old-fashioned ship rocked by waves. Farther down his ribs is a compass.

Tyler rasps out a breath. "You wanna do this now?"

He's testy and turned on, but I can't help myself. "Yes."

He inches back so I can bend to inspect him.

"This one, I got this one after I came to New York." He points to the ship. "This one after I started at Vanier." The compass. "This one this summer." The flower.

I bite my lip. "Tell me what they mean."

"Later. Turn."

I do as he asks, and he lifts my hair, laying it over one shoulder. His touch grazes between my shoulder blades, finding the zipper and working it down.

“The ink I want to hear about is all the words you wrote me on this.” He strokes a finger across my skin, and I shiver.

Cool air hits my back as the straps slide off my shoulders. The dress skims down my body, falling to the floor.

Tyler’s lips graze my ear from behind. “Show me where you put me.”

My entire body is humming when he turns me back to face him, and his expression strips away the rest of my defenses.

He’s gorgeous. A fiery prince set out to claim what’s his.

I point to my wrist. “Here.”

He lifts it, presses an open-mouthed kiss to the skin there, and I shiver.

“And here.” My finger brushes my stomach, next to my navel.

Tyler’s hands smooth down my sides, and he bends, his lips hot on my stomach. I grab his hair as I swallow, the feeling of his wet mouth sending need pooling between my thighs.

“Don’t stop now.” His voice is barely audible.

I point to the inside of my thigh. “Here.”

With a dark look, he drops to his knees.

Then he strokes a finger up my skin, close to my panties.

I sway.

I want him to touch me. I need it more than air.

He bends toward my center, my panties the only thing between his mouth and where I’m slowly burning up.

His lips graze my skin on the inside of my thigh. “Every word you wrote I’ll trace with my tongue.”

It’s too much. I’m overwhelmed.

But before I can respond, he rises and steps away, nodding at my bra and panties. “Take them off.”

He says it softly—a question, not a command—but the fact that he’s asking makes it impossible to deny him. With shaking hands, I reach for the back of the bra and unhook it. It slides down my arms and falls to the floor. Swallowing, I hook my fingers in my panties and slide them down too.

When I straighten, my knees are shaking. It’s only when his finger finds my chin, tilting it up, that I realize I was staring at his feet.

“It’s just me,” he murmurs.

“I know.” My lips curve, wavering. “That’s why I’m shaking.”

An expression of hunger and utter adoration fills his face. His hand finds my hip, tugs me close to him. “Me too.”

He presses himself between my thighs, and my eyes squeeze shut. The roughness of his jeans sends waves of sensation through me. Tyler’s hands slide up my sides. He palms my breasts as if they’re precious, as if I am. The callouses on his fingers feel so good and a little dirty.

I arch into him, wrapping my fingers around his neck and pressing my lips to his shoulder. He responds, rolling one of my nipples between his thumb and finger.

Ribbons of pure pleasure shoot between my thighs. “Oh God.”

He switches to the other breast, and the tugging between my thighs intensifies, grows from a thread of desire to a chain of need—need for this, for him, for more.

“You feel so good in my hands. The times I’ve wanted to do this, Six, just this…”

My fingers dig into his neck, urging him to continue, but he nods at the bed.

I shift back onto the comforter, and he follows me, then moves down my body. When I realize where he’s headed, his name tumbles from my lips.

“I’ve come so many times thinking of you,” I whisper.

He rubs the back of his hand across his mouth. “You’re about to again.”

Holy.

Tyler drags my ankles apart.

I want this, but I’m too exposed. I try to close my legs, and he looks up, darkly questioning.

He doesn’t correct me. Instead, he traces a path down my stomach with his fingers, and right before they dip where I need them, they turn, stroking the inside of one shaking thigh.

My thighs spread on their own—an inch, then another.

His touch traces up the other thigh, but it’s too slow and too soft. I bite my lip in frustration.

He brushes across my opening, and I buck my hips.

“You’re so wet,” he growls, his fingers returning to toy with me. “The things we could do with you this wet.”

I’m so close to whining, to fucking begging him to touch me. Maybe he knows and likes it.

“Tell me you want it,” Tyler murmurs. “Ask me with those pretty words. That voice I can’t get out of my head.”

I shift up on my elbows, my heart hammering in my chest as I stare down at him. “Tyler Adams. I’ve been waiting years for you to fuck me. *Do it already.*”

His chocolate eyes flash with heat and satisfaction before he lowers his head. His tongue hits the sweet spot between my thighs, and it’s like being jolted with an electric current.

Oh. My. God.

My head falls back against the covers as need, hot and wet, rushes over me.

He moves between the lightest touch of his tongue and slow strokes with his finger as if I’m an instrument he’s experimenting with for the first time.

My hips snap toward him. My hands fist in the sheets.

“More,” I pant, writhing, but he ignores me.

Just when I’m starting to get into a rhythm with his mouth, his damn finger takes its place, teasing and stroking, pressing inside an inch only to slip back out.

“Tyler...”

He takes pity on me, sliding that finger all the way in. The feeling is exquisite, and it’s only his damned hands.

I grab his hair and exhale hard.

If I’d ever wanted to know how Tyler got to be so good at music, it’s obvious from the way he pleasures me.

Every touch and stroke is an experiment that informs the next, one that he changes and repeats and twists into a pattern that drives me insane with need.

But I'm learning him, too, learning how to make him give me what I want.

Like saying his name.

By the time he's sucking on my skin in earnest, sliding a second finger into me, I'm making noises with every breath.

I squirm because I can't not, and that makes him groan. "All the times I got off to you, I never thought you'd be this tight. I don't know if I could have stayed away."

Those filthy words have me breaking on his lips, my hands fisting in his hair as I arch against him, crying out his name.

The last thing I see before my eyes squeeze shut is his face, full of need and satisfaction.

I ride out the waves of feeling with him, on him.

When the aftershocks rock me, he slows but doesn't pull back. He licks me clean, as if every inch of me was made for his enjoyment and he won't allow any of it to go to waste.

"Wow," I murmur, dragging him up my body so I can loop my arms around his neck. "At the risk of inflating your ego," I start, and his mouth, still wet from me, curves. "You're pretty good at that."

"Pretty good." Tyler brushes his lips across mine, and I can taste myself on him. It's the sexiest thing I've ever experienced.

"Let's see what else you're good at."

My hands drop to the button on his jeans, hovering there as I take in this moment. Him and me. Joined.

For real.

Fucking finally.

But his hand closes over mine.

“Tell me you’re going to fuck me already,” I murmur.

Tyler brushes a piece of hair out of my face, his tight jaw working.

“No. I’m not.”

Tyler

THE LAST TIME I kissed Annie Jamieson in her bed was eighteen months ago. We were different people then.

I'm reminded how different as her eyes flash up at me.

"What the hell?" Annie demands. She's naked and beautiful and, apparently, pissed.

I roll off her and onto my back. I can still taste her, and the way she fell apart under my hands and mouth left me nowhere near satisfied, but I force out the words I need to say. "Tonight was about you. Giving you what I wanted to give you then."

"You're overthinking this." She shifts over me, and I bite back the groan at the feel of her. "Stop thinking. Just be here with me. I know you want to."

She's killing me—with her voice and her intentions and the way she responds. My cock is swollen and leaking at the thought of making her mine.

But the second I make her mine, I'm hers, too. And even though I want her back, I'm grasping for some semblance of control.

She's so fucking sweet, with a new edge I love every bit as much as the sweetness.

Unable to resist, I prop myself up on my elbows and tug her lips down to mine. My fingers tangle in her silky hair, wrapping it around my hand like I've been thinking about all semester until she opens over me.

I used to tease Annie Jamieson for wearing her heart on her sleeve, but I feel as if I'm the one who's exposed.

I want to bury myself inside her so deep she can't get me out. Not now, not ever.

Her breasts graze my bare chest, making my impatient dick swell even more. This time when her hands drop to the button on my jeans, I don't stop her.

Not when she works the zipper down, makes a little groan in her throat as she sees the hard ridge of my cock, the wet spot on my boxer briefs.

Not when she reaches inside, her aroused gaze meeting mine.

My eyes fall shut as her hand wraps around my shaft. Her touch is warm and soft and a cruel tease. I want to be inside her yesterday.

“Holy fuck, Six.” I whisper it like a prayer.

She helps me work my jeans off. I get up long enough to find a condom from my wallet and roll it on while she watches, breathless.

“Wait,” she murmurs when I shift over her again.

I laugh softly. “You were the one so anxious to do this.”

“But I want to savor it, too.”

I can't speak.

So, I kiss her instead as I wedge myself between her soft thighs.

I nudge her opening, groaning into her mouth because she's so hot and wet.

Every part of me pulses as I press inside an inch at a time.

I watch her face, see her eyes go dark as she gasps when I fill her.

There's my girl.

Mine now. Always.

"You okay?" I ask when I'm halfway inside her.

She nods, swallowing. She's tight and hot and slick and perfect.

"I know. It's a lot to take in," I say.

Her hand slaps my chest, and I grin as I bend to kiss her again.

Her panting breaths mingle with mine as I sink all way in. My head drops back as the feel of what we're doing overtakes me.

When she wraps her legs around me, urging me to move, I shake my head. "We gotta go slow, or I'm going to lose control."

"I don't want slow, and I don't want you in control." She licks lips swollen from my kisses. "I want to free-fall."

Fuck. I can't hold back when she talks like that.

When I sink back inside her, she arches her back to meet me, her face transformed with desire.

I want to give her so much pleasure she can't come without thinking of me.

Every stroke is a memory I need to preserve. She's tight and soft, and I could explore the contradiction forever.

Except that tonight we've got somewhere to be. I've waited for this girl for years, and I'm not waiting another second.

I build her up, toeing the line between deliberate and reckless. This might be our first time together, but I know her. I know how she thinks, how she feels, what emotions make her lips tremble and her eyes glow.

Tonight, I'm going to learn how to make her scream.

My mouth claims hers, swallowing every sound and breath. I'm greedy for all of her, any of her, and I won't let a single element of her reaction go to waste.

Annie's hips lift to meet mine, and I lift her higher so I'm in control, so I can go deeper.

I tear my lips from hers to drag them down her jaw, the long, beautiful neck she's offering up.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God."

Her chants spur me on.

We're in this together, Six. You and me.

When she squeezes around me, her nails digging into my skin as she moans my name...

I die.

I swear my heart stops.

I never want to spend a moment on this planet without knowing that expression of delirious pleasure on her face,

without having it imprinted on my mind, in my soul.

I will destroy any man who even thinks about her like this.

I can't hold back. I come. It's everything I ever dreamed and some things I wouldn't dare.

I pulse for fucking ages, my abs clenching as I try to think of a way I can stay inside her like this forever because nothing will ever be as good as this moment.

When we come down, I reluctantly roll us so she's on top because I don't want to crush her.

We lie like that, me stroking her hair and staring at the faded white ceiling, until something buzzes near my head.

Annie twists, moving off me to grab her phone from the nightstand. "It's Rae. She saw the shoe, but she needs to get into the room."

I force my languid body off the bed, grabbing a box of tissues to clean up.

My attention lands on a vase of flowers. "Nice gift. Should I be jealous?"

"It's from Dad and Haley."

"You gotta tell them." I try for casual, but Annie stiffens anyway as she tugs a long T-shirt over her head.

I might not have earned the right to tell her what to do, but she must see how futile keeping her education from him is, how much worse she's making it with every day she puts it off.

"I will when I'm ready." She narrows her gaze. "I liked your mouth better twenty minutes ago."

“I’m sure you did.” I step closer, watch her eyes darken as I do. I want to kiss her again, but I’m afraid if I start, I’ll never leave.

My gaze lands on something—a fishbowl next to the flowers—and I cock my head. “Was he watching us the whole time?”

“Heath? Probably, but he’s pretty judgy. You guys would get along great.”

I muss her hair in retaliation, and she ducks away, grinning.

I cross toward the door, then pull the door open and hold out the shoe.

She takes it from me and taps it against her hand.

When I don’t move, Annie raises a brow. “You waiting for me to say, ‘Thank you for the orgasms. I’ll study so much better now’?”

“My ego would appreciate that.”

“Fine. That was very relaxing.”

“Relaxing?” I echo, closing in on her. “Don’t pretend you’re not rubbing one out to me in the shower later.”

She reaches up to wind her arms around my neck, pressing her body against mine. I’m already getting hard again at the feel of her soft curves.

“Feels like you miss me already.”

I bite back the groan, my eyes narrowing. “I’m going to make you beg, Six.”

Annie’s lips part, her breath mingling with mine. “Promise?”

She pulls back before I can decide whether to leave or drag up that T-shirt and fuck the smug smile off her lips.

With a last look, I head down the hall, pulling the door closed after me.

I do miss her already. But not the way she means.



“YOU’RE HOME LATE,” Beck comments from the living room when I unlock the door of our apartment.

I kick off my shoes and toss my wallet on the counter. “We’re closing the showcase. Me and Annie. The schedule gets announced publicly tomorrow.”

Beck’s face splits into a grin. He descends on me, clapping me on the back.

“You deserve it, Ty. The break. The stage. The girl,” he says meaningfully as he crosses to the couch and flicks on the TV. “You should look happier.”

I grab a beer from the fridge.

“I am happy, but people say that like you’ve arrived. Like getting what you want is a destination. Those moments don’t last, Beck.” I think of my dad, what he went through—how entitled he felt, how quickly anything he found slipped through his fingers.

“You want certainty, you’re in the wrong business, my friend,” Beck says.

I join my roommate on the couch. “Music.”

“Life.”

The TV’s on silent but playing some reality show.

“*Smackdown*,” he reminds me. “The contestants put themselves through these insane physical tests to try to win a bunch of money. Mostly they end up with bruises, sometimes broken bones, and nothing to show for it.”

“That’s messed up.”

“We do exactly the same thing.” He reaches for my beer with a smirk and takes a long drink before passing it back. “When I met you last fall, I knew you were walking around this city with a broken heart. When Annie showed up this year, the pieces clicked into place. But instead of thanking whatever god you pray to for giving you another chance, you’re thinking of all the reasons it won’t work.”

“Last time, neither of us knew what we wanted. We were kids, Beck, playing at being grown-ups. We’ve both changed. We have more than dreams—we have plans. But I lost myself in her, and it took walking away to realize it.”

Beck cocks his head. “Are you in love with her?”

“I don’t know if I ever fell out of love with her.”

The words settle between us, my abs contracting as my mind takes me back to her dorm room an hour ago. I’d barely finished touching her before I wanted to touch her again.

“Seeing her again this fall, it’s like a part of me I thought was dead came back to life. And more of me came with it, a part that helped my music and made me feel more alive than I have in a year. She always got me like no one else, and even when I wouldn’t let her in, she’d find her way.

“When I tried to work for Zeke, he said something was missing. She brings something out of me that’s not there when she’s gone.”

“One thing I can’t figure out is why she’s here. Why doesn’t she get her dad to set her up with a contract?”

“Because she wants to build her own castles. I respect the hell out of that.”

Beck’s eyes gleam. “Girl’s got you thinking about the future, huh?”

He’s pushing my buttons on purpose, but the thought of a future with her has me aching. “She’s like a song. She can be across the country, but I hear her name, or see someone who looks like her, or read something that sounds like she wrote it, and in a moment, she’s back. I’m dropped into this world of feeling, trapped in the same place. And I don’t want to leave.

“The stakes now are higher than ever. But even if I know there’s a chance of breaking her heart or her breaking mine and ruining both our lives... I want her too much to walk away.”

“Then don’t.”

We turn back to the TV, where middle-aged contestants are racing through an obstacle course built over a pool to try to win a car.

When a balding man slips on a moving disc and tumbles into the water with a massive splash, I say, “I thought we were supposed to get smarter when we get older.”

Beck holds out a hand for my beer again, and I pass it to him. “Propaganda.”

Annie

“YOU’RE quiet for someone who landed a spot closing the showcase,” Elle points out at breakfast. “It’s mind sex, isn’t it?”

I blink, ripping off a piece of my untouched bagel. “You mean fantasizing?”

“Don’t make it sound pretty. It’s hot and dirty, and you’re doing it.”

Rae drops into a seat next to us with her coffee, surprising both of us. “It wasn’t mind sex that kept me out of my room Monday night.”

It’s true, and for the last thirty-six hours, all I’ve been able to think about is Tyler.

Not the showcase we landed, but the things I want to do with Tyler that have nothing to do with music and everything to do with his hands and mouth and body.

Yesterday, we agreed to spend the day catching up on our schoolwork before launching back into rehearsing.

Still, we ran into each other accidentally-on-purpose in the halls at school, and he pulled me into a stairwell for a hot and too-short make-out.

If we hadn't both had class to go to, I know we would've ended up in my room again.

I want that so badly.

In some ways, it's a good thing Tyler and I never sealed the deal in high school. Neither of us would've graduated.

My phone rings, interrupting my daydream, and I answer without looking.

"Annie Jamieson?" the warm female voice asks.

I straighten, but Elle and Rae don't seem to be listening. "Yes."

"This is Kelly Fox from Lighthouse Representation. I saw the schedule for the Vanier showcase online."

My mind spins with a million questions at once—how she found me, how she got my number, but most of all, *The showcase lineup is posted online?*

Of course it is.

But if it was so easy for her to get it, will my dad see it?

My stomach twists as she goes on. "I assume you're Annie Jamieson, daughter of Jax Jamieson. I wanted to talk to you about your options for representation."

"You're an agent." My heart thuds.

Elle's and Rae's gazes snap to me.

"Are you calling Tyler Adams too?" I press.

I don't miss the pause before she answers. "Annie, we have to be selective about our clients."

Indignation rises up. "You need to talk to Tyler." I take a breath. "Whatever you think I can do for you, he can do more."

Come to the show. You won't be disappointed."

I hang up.

"Why would you pass on an agent?" Elle demands.

"I didn't pass," I reply before realizing I sort of did. "She should've been interested in Tyler."

"She could've been interested in *both* of you."

I frown. "Maybe. But it didn't sound like it." I spot a familiar person heading into the dining hall and wave.

Beck flips a chair around and sits astride it, grinning. "Morning, ladies."

"Tyler's not with you, is he?" I cut a look toward the doors.

"Nope."

"Good." Determination sets in. "I need you to send an email to Zeke's studio with the schedule for the showcase. Tell him Kelly Fox called asking about Tyler and you wanted to do him the courtesy of letting him know people are sniffing around."

His gaze narrows as if he's trying to figure out what I'm up to. "My boy know about this?"

"No. And you're not going to tell him."

"I'm not in the habit of keeping secrets from my roomie," he warns.

"This is for him," I promise.

After breakfast we go to Entertainment Management, where I take notes through our guest lecturer's presentation.

Next it's Talbot's class.

She checks in on the status of our term project: a monologue that blends a piece of cinema with our own inspiration.

I've jotted down some ideas, but I've been so focused on the showcase I haven't progressed further. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that of all my professors, she's the only one who seems to go out of her way to cut me down.

Elle leans over while Talbot discusses the assignment with one of our classmates. "I heard she's writing a musical," my friend murmurs.

I nearly drop my pen. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. You know she acted on Broadway on and off for like two decades."

"I remember reading that. But I had no idea she wrote, too."

I can't reconcile our tough professor with the type of person I always imagined penning for the stage, but I can't let it go.

After class, I approach her. "Miss Talbot? I heard you're writing a musical. Can you tell me about it?"

She straightens, staring at me for an extra-long beat as if looking for something new. "I'm writing the book—the lyrics," she goes on. "My writing partner does the score." She gathers up her books from the desk and starts to brush past me when I call after her.

"I love musicals. I know Broadway doesn't have the money Hollywood does or the tradition of Shakespeare, but musical theater is big and bright and raw and unapologetic and honest... There's nothing else that can make you cry and laugh in the same three minutes. Or that can make your heart expand

until you swear it's going to burst out of your ribs. It's the most beautiful, unapologetically human form of expression I've ever seen."

I'm being more candid with her than I've been all year, but it's too late to change that.

She turns back. Her lips purse and I brace myself, waiting for her to bite out something harsh.

Instead she says, "My partner and I have an off-Broadway show running right now."

When she gives me the name, I write it down immediately. "I'll go see it this weekend."

Her lips twitch at the corner. "If you're that interested, I can have a couple of seats for you Friday at will call."

By the time I dash out of class to head over to the Columbia campus to study with Pen, I'm already feeling bouncier than I have in weeks.



THAT NIGHT IN MY ROOM, I text Tyler, triumphant.

ANNIE: I scored us a practice room for tomorrow. You can thank me now or later.

THE RESPONSE COMES BACK ALMOST IMMEDIATELY.

TYLER: I can do us one better if you're willing to go to Brooklyn.

ANNIE: ???

TYLER: I'm playing a session gig for Zeke. We'll probably finish early, and we can use the studio for a bit if so.

THURSDAY AFTER CLASS AT COLUMBIA, I have lunch with Pen, catching up on both of our gossip. According to her eyebrows plastered to her hairline, I've won this round.

Before I leave campus, she hands me the oversized package that was delivered to her room with my name on it.

It's perfect timing, and I take it on the subway with me to Brooklyn.

I use the map on my phone to find the brick building on the corner. Inside, the woman at the desk gets me an escort to studio two.

The producer acknowledges me with a nod through the glass panel in the door, and moments later, the door opens. I head into the booth as my attention's drawn to the guy on the other side of the glass.

Tyler's sitting on a stool, guitar in his lap, laughing with the other guys in the band.

He's so handsome and competent, perfectly at ease, and my chest expands as I watch him.

I'm proud of him but a little envious, too.

"They're wrapping up. I'm Zeke."

My head turns toward the fit, middle-aged man on this side of the glass wearing a sport coat with jeans.

"Annie." I hold out a hand.

His gaze narrows as he takes it. "Annie...?"

"Just Annie."

Tyler comes through the door. His eyes brighten with pleasure as he sees me.

"Nice work today, Tyler," Zeke says. "I might have a gig for you. You free Tuesday night?"

His brows lift. "What kind of gig?"

"The kind that you'd change anything in your calendar for." Zeke claps a hand on Tyler's shoulder. "It's at Madison Square Garden. I'll send you the details."

I think Zeke's going to leave, but his attention homes in on the guitar case at my side.

"If you wanted a different guitar, we could've gotten you one," he says, shaking Tyler's hand before disappearing out the door, leaving us alone.

I set the case next to the board and step back.

Tyler doesn't say anything as he flips the latches on the hardtop case, lifts the guitar, and hooks it over his head.

He tunes it before striking up a melody that's haunting at first, then switches to something lively and joyful, then ending with notes of tension and resolution.

It's breathtaking.

He sets the guitar back in its case, then drops into a chair, leaning back. His eyes darken. “Tell me something—were you ever tempted to return it?”

“Yeah,” I half groan, half laugh. “For a while, it was all I wanted.”

I reach for a chair of my own, but a restraint closes around my wrist. I glance at Tyler’s strong grip in surprise.

“I appreciate the guitar, Six. But it’s not the only thing I want back.”

I lift my chin, studying the intensity on his face. “I know.”

He tugs me into his lap, and I don’t fight it.

I drape an arm over the back of his chair, his hair brushing my hand.

His body is hard under me. I give in to the urge to trace my finger along his rounded shoulder, stop short of hooking it in the rounded collar and burying my face in his neck to absorb the scent of him like I want to. “We’re here to practice,” I point out, but my voice is low.

He pulls me closer, brushing the hair back behind my ear to drop kisses up my neck. “We will. But first, I’m saying thanks for the guitar.”

My head drops back. “You’re so”—I bite back a moan as his teeth find my earlobe, arching my ass against his crotch—“welcome.”

God, I want him right here in this room, and from the hardness of him everywhere, he wants that too.

“So, first a studio and second a gig at MSG?” I pull back, try to focus on work.

Tyler resists, tracing a finger along my neck, making me bite my tongue. “Yeah. Zeke called me yesterday to say congrats on the showcase. I didn’t even have to tell him. It’s weird.”

Around the haze of desire, I realize Beck’s email must have worked. Zeke got wind people were sniffing around Tyler.

Good.

“I’m sure he realized what he was missing,” I murmur, all innocence.

Tyler shifts me so I’m straddling him, and that only makes the need pulsing between my thighs worse. “Um... this is seriously distracting,” I mumble even as I link my hands behind his head.

“I’m counting on it. That way you’ll say yes when I tell you I want to take you out.”

“How’s tomorrow?” I ask, breathless.

His smile freezes as he cocks his head. “Honestly, I expected more pushback.”

I laugh. “I have tickets to a musical my acting professor wrote. I’m actually kind of excited. I know people write musicals because obviously, for them to exist, someone needed to create them... but in my mind, those shows are timeless. The idea that someone”—I almost say “I” but stop—“could actually weave one from nothing is mind blowing. So, can you make it?”

“I need to head out of town this weekend for a personal thing,” he says, regret coloring his voice.

Disappointment courses through me. I assume he means for his dad, and I squeeze his arm. “Sure. You want to talk about it?”

His expression softens. “Nah. But thanks for understanding.”

I want him, and more than that, I care about him. There’s still so much up in the air between us.

But it’s hard to be caught up in that. It’s hard to do anything but relax into his arms, surveying the room.

“Just think. In another year, you could be on contract. On tour,” I say, even though the idea of him being gone tugs at my heart.

“You might have to come with me.”

My stomach flips over. “You invite a girl on tour with you, that’s serious,” I warn.

His gaze searches mine, his hands tightening around me. “I know this showcase is everything to you. But it’s not all that matters to me. Every time I picture my future, I think of you in it.”

My heart squeezes as he leans in, brushing his mouth over mine. I kiss him back, putting all the words we haven’t said into it until he pulls back an inch.

“You need to tell your dad you’re here,” Tyler murmurs against my mouth.

My head drops back. “I will. I don’t know why it matters so much.”

His expression. “I don’t want this hanging over you.”

I sigh, tracing a finger over his parted lips. I want them on me again. “It almost seems as if this is bothering you more than it’s bothering me,” I tease.

Tyler stiffens under me, but before he can respond, an alert on his phone has us both jumping.

“Thirty minutes,” he curses. “We better work.”

I’m already missing his warmth before he shifts me off him.

Tyler

SHOWCASE AUDITIONS MIGHT BE OVER, but as the limo that picked me up at DFW pulls up Jax's driveway Saturday afternoon, I feel as if the real test is beginning.

As I step out of the car, a stinging breeze sweeps past, lifting the hairs on my arms despite my sweater and denim jacket.

When I reach the top of the familiar stairs, my fist hovers over the door, but before I can knock, it swings wide.

"Tyler!"

Haley's beaming face takes the edge off my nerves. When she opens her arms wide for a hug, I can't resist. Even though I'm bigger than her, it feels as if she's the one holding me.

"We were so glad you called."

"I know it was last minute," I say against her dark hair.

"Not at all. We live minute to minute around here. We have a guest bedroom ready for you tonight. I only wish you'd stay longer."

Something bumps against my legs, and I glance down.
"Sophie?!"

A round face with amber eyes and dark hair peers up at me, breaking into a smile that's too big, too earnest, to belong to an actual human.

“Holy shit, she's big.” I grimace as I realize what I've said.

“Jax says worse all the time. Soph, let Tyler in the door.”

I follow them down the hall toward the kitchen. It feels comfortable and strange at once.

“You look fantastic,” she says over her shoulder. “How long has it been?”

“Too long,” I admit.

“I know we've kept in touch over the past year, but it's not the same as seeing you in person.” She sighs. “Well, you're here now. Jax is sitting on the patio. I think he's trying to escape Sophie, who runs all over the house like a demon.”

I glance at the tiny person in question, her face all innocence. “We can't let him get away, can we?” I hoist her up, grunting as I shift her against my side. She laughs, delighted, as I head for the double doors.

“Want a beer?” Haley calls after me. “Or a bourbon?”

“I'm good. Thanks, Haley.”

From the expression on her face, she knows I mean thanks for so much more than the drink offer. It's a thank-you for everything—for working with me back at Wicked, for letting me into her house two years ago, for letting me remain in their lives after the chaos I caused.

“You're family,” she says before nodding at Sophie. “Go get Daddy.”

“Get Daddy,” Sophie repeats, and I grin.

We find Jax sitting in a patio chair by the glistening water.

“Daddy!” Sophie squeals, holding out her arms.

She scrambles out of my arms as I take a seat, but instead of climbing into her dad’s lap, she runs circles around his chair and mine.

“When she was a baby, I thought, ‘It’ll be easier when she gets older,’” my mentor says in lieu of a greeting. “But they change. They don’t get easier.”

“Never?”

Jax meets my gaze for the first time. “Not when they start high school. Learn to drive. Or when they start a good college across the country. You ever think about her?” he asks.

The knot in my gut twists tighter. “All the time.”

I wanted Annie to tell her dad for her own sake but also because of this eventuality—that I have to lie to her dad’s face.

I’d do anything for her, but I hate this, especially when he goes on.

“It’s hard not to have her around the house. When she first moved in, it surprised me every time I saw her or heard her. But the last couple years, I took for granted she was under my roof.

“When she was seven and still living with my sister, I learned Grace was getting bruises from her husband. I told her to leave him. She said it was under control.

“I tried to get out of my touring contract so I could get my kid—couldn’t bring her on the road with me—but the head of my label wouldn’t let me. I was already a big deal, and he threatened to sue my ass if I didn’t finish up.

“It was the first time in my life I trashed a hotel room. Broke all the furniture. I left the tour for three days to go see Annie and Grace. Grace promised me her husband never touched Annie. I hired someone to watch the house when I couldn’t be there. Check on her at school, make sure she was okay.”

“You didn’t believe Grace.”

“I believed her. But I wouldn’t risk anyone, even my own sister, being wrong about the most precious thing in my life.”

Jax’s admissions swirl in my head. The year I went without Annie in my life sucked, but I didn’t realize how much of the same Jax had endured—in the back of a tour bus, wanting nothing more than to get his kid, to make her safe, to make her his.

“I didn’t know,” I say at last.

He nods. “Before I met Haley, Annie was my entire fucking world. This industry tried to keep me away from her. I will always care what she’s doing, and I will always want her to have the kind of freedom I didn’t.”

I turn that over. I get why he’s protective, just like I get why she calls him overbearing.

I wish I could reconcile those because I care about both of them, but I can’t.

“So, why’re you here?” Jax prods finally.

“Zeke’s been friendly the last week,” I say, getting to the real reason for my visit. “I wondered if you had something to do with it.”

Jax holds out a hand, and Sophie grabs onto his wrist, giggling as she tries to continue running her laps by dragging

her dad with her. Neither Jax nor the chair moves an inch, even when she screeches.

“He might’ve called me to ask if I’d trust you enough for another shot.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Yes. Obviously.”

“Thank you,” I say and mean it. He waves me off.

“I know things weren’t easy when you moved to New York. What happened to your dad... You could’ve fallen off the map. Instead, you went into your craft. I wish I’d done the same.”

Gratitude washes over me, clashing with the guilt. I shouldn’t be keeping secrets from this man. He’s the closest thing I’ve had to a father.

But if Jax suspects something, he doesn’t let on. “Talking to Zeke gave me a distraction from the legal headaches I’ve been dealing with.”

I straighten in my seat. “So, you’re still trying to get your IP back from Wicked?” I recall the conversation we had over the summer, which was the last time we spoke on the phone.

“It’s looking more and more unlikely.” He grimaces. “Fuck studios. If I was starting over today, I’d start my own label. Not an outreach program like Big Leap. A real studio with clout.”

I cock a brow. “Still could.”

He stares at me as if I’m joking, a slow smile splitting his face. “You know, I don’t spend much time wondering when I fucked up. But sending you away might’ve been one of those

moments. I said I sent you away for you, for her. But it was for me too. I was afraid for you both.”

My chest tightens at his words.

Sophie babbles at Jax’s knee, and he scoops her up. But even as she presses her face to his chest, his serious eyes are on me.

“You remember Tyler,” he murmurs to his daughter.

“Tire,” she repeats evenly. There’s no hesitation in it, no self-consciousness.

Kids have this way of being completely honest. They don’t know how much pain the world can cause. They don’t know what will be expected of them. I envy them.

“If you and Haley had met when you were starting out, do you think you two would’ve ended up together?” I ask.

Jax is quiet so long I think he’s forgotten my question as he gazes toward the house. “I would love Haley in this lifetime or the next. I’d know her if I was deaf, dumb, and blind.” His eyes crinkle at the corners. “I don’t credit the universe with much, because I’ve built everything I have. But could I have fought for us like I did if we’d met at a different time, a different place? That I don’t know.”

I stare out over the pool. I think of our times here, the party Annie held for the musical, the night she brought me that guitar, a million nights in between.

I wanted us then, but maybe it wasn’t our time.

I want us now. The truth of that rings through me.

But I can’t be honest with Jax today, and as much as I hate that, I have to live with it. I care for him like he’s my own

father. This man is the only person I've leaned on when it comes to my music, my future.

But I care for Annie, too. Maybe it proves how much I care for her that I'm willing to risk not once, but twice what I have with him for that chance at something with her.

"I will never forget what you've done for me," I say at last.

Jax rubs a hand over his jaw, eyes glinting. "That sounds like an apology."

I don't answer.

He shifts out of his chair, hitching Sophie up on his hip. "You're staying for dinner."

It's a statement, not a question.



I'VE HAD some big moments in my life—ones that filled me up, made me feel like more than I am.

The gig at Madison Square Garden Tuesday night blows them out of the water.

"That was unreal," the bassist says, congratulating me in the wings after the show and clapping a hand on my shoulder. "You play it better than Randy."

I shake my head. "I'm sure your guitarist will be back in no time."

"Six to eight weeks to get the cast off," the lead singer comments as he passes us. "Could be six to eight months if we get to keep you in the meantime."

I take all of it in, grateful they gave me this shot and that it worked out, but I'm looking around for a familiar face.

I finally see her in the wings and take a minute to soak her in.

Annie looks gorgeous in tight black jeans and an off-the-shoulder top, her dark hair waving over her shoulders, but she could be wearing a bag for all I care. I'm so glad she's here.

"You were amazing!" she gushes, throwing her arms around me.

"I'm sweaty," I warn.

"You're perfect." The warmth in her voice cracks my chest.

I pull her against me because I need that mouth. It feels like a lifetime since I've had it, which is crazy because it's only been a few days.

Since I got back from Dallas on Sunday, we haven't had a chance to be alone together because of midterms and studying and the fact that either Beck or Rae and Elle seem to be swarming our rooms every second.

When I pull back, she looks dazed but recovers fast. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not into rock stars."

I lean in until my lips brush her ear. "Glad to be your exception."

After the show, we hang out backstage with the band and our friends, sitting around a couch and chairs in the dressing room.

A bottle of champagne arrives with a card from Zeke, saying, "To the first of many."

Elle and Beck pop it while Annie retrieves me a beer.

“Since you hate champagne,” she murmurs. I love that she remembers.

“But I don’t hate you. Come here.” I set the beer on the table and pull her into my lap on the couch.

Elle clears her throat, and it takes me a moment to realize everyone’s watching us.

“We’re gonna go find a bathroom,” Elle says.

“All of us?” Beck echoes.

“Yeah, all of us.” She grabs his arm. “We’ll catch you guys outside later.”

After they trail out of the room, I drop my head back against the couch.

“You were unbelievable,” Annie murmurs. “It’s what I wanted for you. And it’s only the beginning.”

She bends to kiss me, but I hold her away.

I want to touch her and forget everything else, but...
“There’s something I have to say.”

“Is this about where you went on the weekend?” Annie asks, her mouth pursing.

“Indirectly.” I haven’t told her I went to see her dad and Haley. It’s not exactly a secret, but I know it would raise a bunch of questions, and I don’t want to have that conversation right now or stress her out and make her think I might out her.

“My dad wanted to make it as a musician. He couldn’t, and he blamed it on me. I’ve always been afraid of doing that to someone else. Of getting in so deep in a relationship I can’t get out. Living with you and your dad and Haley? It was the first

family I had. But your dad handed me an exit and... I'm not gonna say he told me to take it, because it's all on me.

"I wanted to be enough for you. I'm not yet. But I won't stop trying until I am."

Annie's hands slide down to my shoulders. From the expression on her face, I know she sees the way I feel about her.

"Tyler." Her throat works, and her voice has me aching to pull her closer. "You were always enough for me. Even when we were friends back in Philly. I'd never met anyone like you, and I never have since. You're kind and smart and so talented, but that's not what I see when I look at you. I see the way you care for people and look out for them. I see your heart. You try to protect it, and I get why, but you don't have to try so hard."

"No?" I can barely breathe, and she shakes her head.

"I'll protect it, too."

Fuck. This girl walks around trying to prove herself when just getting out of bed in the morning means she's enough.

I kiss her because I can't not kiss this girl—this woman, the one who's grown up under my gaze and when I wasn't looking.

"I'm going to tell my dad about the showcase," she says, pulling back. "And send him an invitation."

"Good." Relief washes over me. I didn't realize just how twisted up I was about her secret until she said those words. "But first... come home with me," I murmur against her lips.

She lifts a brow. "A sleepover sounds fun."

"Wasn't planning on sleeping."

I've never let myself believe I could have everything I wanted, but between her and my music, I'm so damned close.

Annie

I WAKE up to light streaming through the window.

I'm in Tyler's bed, wearing only his T-shirt.

I inch toward the side of it, but a tattooed arm bands around me.

"Come back," the arm's owner grunts.

Before I can respond, Tyler tugs me back against his warm, hard body.

Last night I went to see his show, and he was incredible. Then we came back to his apartment, where Tyler shut the door on Beck with barely a hello.

I would have protested if I hadn't wanted him so badly too.

After the amount of sex we've had, that wanting should've worn off.

It's unreal that it hasn't.

"I have morning breath," I warn as I turn in his arms.

"Don't care."

He pulls me against him, kissing me.

He tugs the hem of my T-shirt up and off, and I run my hands over his beautiful body.

“Again?” I tease lightly as I feel him harden between us.

“Uh-huh.” His mouth drops to my breast, sucking marks into my skin, and I arch against him. “Not close to done.”

My fingers thread into his hair, but I protest because it feels like the right thing to do and because I love how he responds. “But I’ll see you at Leo’s tonight. I’ll come home with you after.”

“Too late.”

I squirm against him. “I have Entertainment Management in ninety minutes.”

“Don’t need it. You’re dating a rock star.”

I slap a hand against his shoulder, and he chuckles, his mouth vibrating on my skin. “Your hands aren’t that good,” I try.

“Really? You thought they were last night.” His fingers brush between my thighs where I’m already wet, and it’s game over.

After reaching for a condom and rolling it on, he turns me on my side, slipping behind me and pressing between my legs.

“Good,” I mumble. “I’m sick of your face too.”

Tyler nips my neck in retaliation, and I hitch a breath.

He presses inside me, one inch at a time. I try to keep quiet because Beck’s in the other room, but when Tyler’s fingers find my clit, I can’t hold back the moan.

“Knew you liked my hands,” he murmurs in my ear. “What do you like best—my hands, my mouth, or my cock?”

I arch my ass into him, grinding because I need more even though he’s already filling me everywhere. “I like your hands

busy, your mouth quiet, and your cock in me.”

“Good answer.”

Then words are gone because he’s chasing me into a wicked rhythm that drags us both to our peak way too soon and not soon enough.

After, I put on panties and the T-shirt so I can get up to use the bathroom. Tyler tugs on sleep pants, knotting them distractingly low around his hips, and follows me out.

Beck nods at us from the kitchen with a grin. “You want a third? I’m down to party.”

I laugh, and Tyler shoots him side-eye.

It takes all of ten minutes to throw on my clothes and get ready to go.

“Don’t walk home by yourself. Shower here, and we can go to school together,” Tyler offers.

“I’m fine,” I insist. “The neighborhood’s not that bad, and I need to go to my room before class.”

Beck holds out a bagel. “Parting gifts. Please come again.”

I take it from him with a grin. “I’m sure I will.”

With a last look at Tyler, who’s watching me like he might drag me back to his room if I linger too long, I head outside and walk home.

The sunlight is amazing. Life is amazing.

Each block I travel lifts my spirits more.

As I’m finishing my bagel, my phone buzzes.

“Hi, Dad,” I answer as I turn the corner, just able to catch a glimpse of the Vanier building a few blocks away. “I was

actually just thinking about you. I need to send you something. It's an invitation, actually."

"Well, you can tell me about it in person. I had some business in New York and thought we could meet. Surprise."

I pull up fast enough someone bumps me from behind. "No way. You're... um... here now?"

"Yeah. I have a couple things to do this morning. Figured we could hang out after your classes."

"Great." My mind races, trying to piece together the truth and the lies. I press a hand to my suddenly damp forehead. "But let's meet somewhere. With midterms and all, I'm dying to get off campus."

When I get to the front doors of Vanier, I spot someone who has no business being here.

My stomach plummets as I pull up and my dad's gaze meets mine.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt.

There's no shock in his eyes.

"I want to know the same thing." Even as he tugs the baseball cap down on his head, he leaves the sunglasses off—which tells me he's really pissed if he's willing to risk being recognized.

I swallow, staring past him. "How did you find me?"

"An old industry contact thought he recognized you at his studio. Then he saw your name on a lineup for a showcase and sent it to me."

Fuck. "Dad, I—"

“How long have you been planning this behind my back? And Haley’s?”

I’ve heard my dad yell before, but this is different. His voice is low and precise and scary as fuck.

“It wasn’t a plan. I auditioned in the spring,” I admit.

His anger is a living thing, scorching the fall air between us. “I’ve asked you questions, Haley, too, about your classes, your residence—all of it. You lied to our faces.”

Righteousness shoves out the guilt. “I told you I wanted to get more involved in music. I pitched you Vanier half a dozen times.”

“I thought you were taking an interest. I thought you had priorities. Instead, my own daughter has been lying to me for months.”

I drop my book bag on the pavement. Part of my brain insists I need to go to class, but I shove it aside. “You’re acting as if people never lie. Everyone does. You do.”

“About what?”

“You knew about me for a year and wouldn’t acknowledge me.”

His tight jaw goes slack, but it’s the shock in his eyes I feel the most. I wasn’t planning to tell him I knew that, not ever, but now that it’s out, I can’t take it back.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Dad’s voice is unusually rough.

“I have a letter from my birth mom. She tried to contact me two years ago.”

He exhales hard. “Annie, listen to me—you’re my kid, and everything I’ve done was for you.”

I shove both hands through my hair. “I get that you were the biggest star on the planet and you left because of me. Because you had a kid to take care of. I know you’ve made sacrifices”—I swallow—“but I’m eighteen. You can stop now.”

His eyes, the same glowing gold as mine, deepen. “You want to be a grown-up? To face the world on your own without help from the people who care about you? Then I can stop sending tuition money. I assume this is where it’s been going rather than Columbia.” He gestures to the building behind me. “I should’ve been suspicious when you asked me to send money for tuition and your other expenses together and that you’d take care of getting everything paid. But you’ve always been a thoughtful kid and I trusted you. Hell, I was proud of you.”

The blood drains from my face, guilt warring with devastation in my stomach.

Normally, I embrace every emotion I’m feeling. Today, they feel like weakness, and I need strength.

I know I’m in the wrong here, but he is too.

The Vanier building isn’t only the backdrop of our argument. It’s the reason I risked everything I am, everything I have.

I swallow down the emotions so I can find my voice. When I do, it’s stronger than I expected.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to get in here?”

He shakes his head. “That’s not the point.”

“Of course it’s not. The point is you think I’m not good enough for this life. You never felt that way about Tyler.”

Dad holds up a hand, gaze narrowing. “This isn’t about Tyler. But it will be—”

“You tell yourself you want to protect me,” I continue, raising my voice, “because when you were eighteen, you signed a deal with Wicked. You went on tour. You had *me*.”

I’m losing ground in the battle with my emotions, and they’re threatening to spill over.

“Just because you fucked up your life at eighteen doesn’t mean I will.” Tears burn down my face as I spin, grabbing my book bag and lunging for the doors. I pull up for a moment at the figure I see just outside them, looking between us with shock.

Rae.

I stalk past her, making my way through the halls. I skip the elevator to take the stairs two at a time. On my floor, I pass Elle’s open door, where she’s grabbing her books for class.

“Aren’t you going to Entertainment Management?” she asks.

“No.” I unlock my door and shove myself inside.

Footsteps sound behind me, but I don’t look up. I grab the photo of me and my dad off my dresser and chuck it under my bed.

I drop onto my bed and press the heels of my hands to my eyes.

“Whoa. What happened?” Elle’s voice is concerned.

I blink to see her and Rae hovering in the doorway. “Don’t worry about it. You guys have class.”

They exchange a look. “Fuck it. It was a boring topic lecture anyway,” Rae says.

A grateful breath trembles out of my lips as she takes a seat in her chair, Elle dropping onto my bed.

So, I tell them both everything, starting with my dad and how I auditioned and that I kept who I was a secret.

When I finish, Elle doesn’t look pissed, she looks perplexed. “So, why’d you hide it?”

Rae answers for me. “Because in high school, people knew who she was, and they either hated her or wanted something from her.”

“And you thought that’d follow you here,” Elle interprets.

I nod.

“There’s a problem with your logic,” she replies. “High school’s full of assholes.”

My lips twitch despite my heavy heart.

Rae asks, “Why was he so sure he should’ve known you were here?”

“I don’t know. He’s never so much as mentioned Vanier in a conversation.” But Rae’s comment has me remembering something my dad said.

“This isn’t about Tyler. But it will be.”

He sounded angry, and not only with me.

But when Tyler left a year and a half ago, Dad didn’t give any indication they were still in touch. And this fall, Tyler would have told me.

Right?

“So, are we still going to Leo’s tonight?” Elle prompts.

I suck in a breath, making a decision. “Yeah, we’re going to Leo’s.”



Tyler

MY PHONE’S on silent for most of the day, through my classes and guitar lesson. I leave it off while I’m messing with part of the song Annie and I are doing for the showcase.

When I unlock it back at home after grabbing a quick bite and showering to change for Leo’s, I pull up in the middle of the living room.

The voicemail button shows a new message, and my phone shows three missed calls from the same number.

I hit play on the voicemail, my abs clenching even before Jax’s voice barks from the speaker.

“Why is my daughter at Vanier, Tyler? And don’t bother telling me you didn’t notice. You sat at my table last week and acted like nothing was wrong.”

Jax left me this voicemail this afternoon, which means...

Annie.

I try her number but don't get an answer.

So, I grab my coat and head for Leo's as quick as I can, turning over Jax's call on the way.

I get that he's pissed, but I'm pissed too. He didn't tell me she was struggling last year. He made me believe she was better off without me.

Jax might be my mentor, but I will always have Annie's back. Whatever she told him or didn't, that's their business, just like what's between her and me is ours.

I get to Leo's and use the back door to get inside. The place is already filling up, and as the act on stage finishes to applause, I crane my neck to look around the bar.

Impatience clashes with worry in my stomach until I spot her through the crowd. I press between bodies to reach her.

"Annie. Wait." I catch up to her near the stage doors. She's wearing dark jeans and a tank top, her hair down in waves around her head, but even in the darkness, I can tell her eyes are puffy.

I reach for her arms, but she steps back, her eyes filling with accusation. "My dad showed up today. He was pissed because he thought you should've told him I was at Vanier. Since you guys are so tight."

"Six," I say, careful. "I didn't tell him anything."

"So, you were in touch. How often? Once a week? Only on holidays?"

My hands fist at my sides. "I don't know... Every couple months?"

“While I was crying over you, you were talking to my dad as if nothing was wrong.” Annie shakes her head, expression full of disbelief.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Like what? Like you chose him over me? Because that’s how it feels.”

My gut twists, hard. She can’t possibly see it like that. “I’m sorry for hurting you. I can’t ever tell you how sorry. But I realized something this fall—we’re not over.” I step closer, and she angles her chin up to hold my gaze. I thread my fingers into her hair, cupping her neck in my hand. “We’re a song. You and me. What happened before was the first verse, and there’s so much more.”

Her fingers wrap around my wrist, but she doesn’t try to move away. “Don’t you ever wonder if maybe we’re meant to be alone?” Her voice is stilted, and every muscle in me strains against the urge to crush her against me. “The liars, the rebels, the dreamers. Up there on the stage, in the spotlight, we bleed to make other people feel. But in order to bleed, we have to be broken.”

It takes a moment for me to catch up to her words. “No. I don’t think that.” I jerk my chin toward the door. “Let’s get out of here. Come back to my place. Or yours, I don’t care. We’ll talk.”

Annie sucks in a breath. “I don’t need to talk, Tyler.”

The firmness of her voice hits me squarely in the chest. “I’ve wasted months—years—pretending I don’t care about you,” I insist. “I’m not doing it again.”

Annie’s eyes shine as she steps out of my hold, brushing her thumb across my palm before she drops my hand and

moves closer.

“I care about you too. But my dad was right about one thing—it’s easy to be shortsighted. This showcase is my first real chance. And it’s your second, which matters even more.”

“What are you saying?” The words feel hollow.

“That maybe we should take some room to breathe while we get through the showcase and focus on our dreams.”

The clawing feeling in my chest wants to argue with her that we can do both, but the look on her face stops me.

It’s not a goodbye, but it fucking feels like it. Anything but her coming home with me tonight is suddenly insufficient.

When Annie turns to head for the stage doors, my heart goes with her.

Annie

“HAVE YOU TALKED TO YOUR DAD?” Elle whispers from her spot next to me in the last row of pews.

I shake my head. “And the deposit that usually comes to my account isn’t there.”

Elle takes the Bible in the pew in front of her, fingering the pages. “That sucks.”

We’re at the funeral of a man I don’t know—a banker, apparently, who loved fly fishing. No one seems particularly torn up he’s gone except for a woman we passed on the way in who said she was his granddaughter. I gave her the entire stash of tissues from my bag, and the guilt I felt for being here was washed out by the gratitude on her face.

It’s been nearly a week since my dad showed up in New York and I told Tyler I needed space.

Since then, we’ve rehearsed together three times at school, separately between that. I haven’t been to his place, and he hasn’t come to my room. He doesn’t try to pressure me when we’re together.

I’m grateful. I know deep down I can’t blame Tyler for having a relationship with my dad, but I can’t go there right

now—not with the showcase looming. It’s the biggest chance for both of us to grab what we’ve wanted for so long.

“It’s fine,” I tell my friend. “I’ll get loans, and a job. I just wish everyone didn’t suddenly know who I am and whisper in the halls. I thought Rae and I were getting along, but I don’t know who else would’ve spread the word.”

Elle huffs out a breath. “I asked him to take down the video.”

I blink. “What video?”

The service concludes, and I grab Elle’s sleeve, tug her after me down the row and out the door into the gray day.

My friend pulls up her phone, and I see an entry on Beck’s vlog captioned: “Jax Jamieson’s daughter crushing it,” accompanied by a video of me performing at Leo’s.

“Are you kidding me?”

I hit his contact on my phone.

“What’s up, Manatee?” Beck drawls.

“You put me on your vlog?!”

I can hear the confusion in his voice. “Come on. People spotted your pop at Vanier this week. It’s public knowledge now. Besides, I’m proud of you.”

The backs of my eyes burn, but he continues. “What were you gonna do? Lie forever?”

“Maybe.” I realize how dumb it sounds.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t think it’d be such a big deal. All we want in this place is to have someone notice us, and you have an excuse right there in your name and you don’t use it.”

“That’s exactly why I don’t,” I insist. “Come on Beck—would you want that? If your dad was your ticket to being noticed, but he still disapproved of you, would you want that to be the very thing that makes your dreams come true?”

He turns it over. “No,” he says at last. “It wouldn’t be my dream anymore.”

“Exactly.”

The truth of it hangs between us for a moment before Beck speaks again. “I’ll take it down.”

“You know what? Don’t worry about it.”

It’s too late to do much more damage, and some part of his words are right—I can’t hide who I am forever.

I’m going to have to be this much more committed to being noticed on my own terms.

“Listen,” Beck starts again, “I don’t know what’s happening with you and Ty, but Zeke put our boy on ice.”

That has me paying attention.

“He promised Tyler a meeting after he slayed that show last week. But it was mysteriously canceled two days later and not rescheduled. Zero explanation.”

Shit. Tyler never mentioned it.

I’d never stopped to think about what my dad would do to Tyler. If my dad pulled his support or said something to Zeke to make him doubt Tyler...

“The showcase will fix it,” I say, half to myself and half to Beck. “He’ll crush it, and someone smarter than Zeke will recognize how talented he is and give him a chance.”

“You think so, Manatee? They might be more interested in Jax Jamieson’s kid.”

It’s the validation I wanted but for the wrong reasons, and the cost...

I hate that it could cost Tyler his chance.

I hang up and find Elle behind me, arms folded. I relay what Beck told me.

“So, your dad can say one word and Tyler’s shot is gone,” Elle comments.

The unfairness of it has resolve hardening in my gut. “No,” I decide. “He can’t.”



THE MORNING OF THE SHOWCASE, I wake up to a text.

TYLER: Hey, I was thinking about you last night. Not about you in my bed, though I swear I can still smell you on my pillows, and I hate the thought that it might fade before you’re back, but about how you look when we’re practicing. How strong you are. How much I believe in you. Whether today’s the start of something or the end, there’s no one I’d rather be up there with.

I GET out of bed and stumble to the bathroom. I take a hot shower and wash my hair, letting the heat scald every inch of me.

It's not until I'm halfway through drying my hair that I realize what I have to do.

I send a text back to Tyler.

ANNIE: I can't do the showcase.

MY PHONE RINGS while I'm pulling on jeans.

"What happened?" Tyler's voice is full of disbelief and concern.

I take a steadying breath. "With everything going on with my dad, I just can't. I'm sorry, Tyler. You have to do our song yourself. You can sing it and play it. You know it inside out."

There's a pause before he replies, "We need to talk about this."

"We don't. You'll do great."

"Annie—"

I click off, squeezing the phone in my hand hard enough it leaves marks in my palm.

The fall showcase is attended by a few thousand people. Each seat is filled by someone from industry, all of them eagerly anticipating the new crop of talent, hoping to discover the flame that will take their career to the next level.

That afternoon, I stand at the back of the auditorium, out of sight, and watch the first half dozen performers. I'm the only one here, which is why I'm lingering by the back doors.

Also, I can make a quick escape if I need to.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were performing.”

Pen’s incredulous voice has me sagging against the wall. She folds me in a hug while I explain.

The disbelief and sorrow on her face are everything I’m feeling.

“A, this was everything you wanted.”

“I thought it was,” I admit. “But I couldn’t stand the thought of him not getting what he wanted when it was my fault. When I could help him.”

As if he hears my thoughts, Tyler appears on stage. From the distance, I search his face and body for signs he’s lain awake this week as much as I have. I study his broad shoulders, his easy grace as he takes the microphone.

Tyler scans the audience as if he’s looking for someone. My chest contracts more.

I’m here. I’ve got you.

When he plays, his fingers rest heavier than usual on the strings. Each chord reverberates through my soul. But when his low voice joins overtop, my heart stops altogether.

In that moment, I realize a truth, one I hate as much as I love...

Tyler’s not broken. He’s beautiful.

There’s a crackling in the audience, a kinetic energy. Emotions chase each other through my chest. My fingers find the rose under the neckline of my shirt, and I squeeze it hard enough the edge bites into my palm.

My prince is playing our song, and from the first words, it's not our song anymore—it's his.

From the first chorus, he's not mine anymore.

He's theirs.

I don't know if I envy him or the audience. Both, I think, everyone part of that experience I'm suddenly outside of.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes.

Something bumps my hip, and I glance over to see my friend. "Let's get out of here for the weekend," Pen murmurs. "You and me."

My chest thaws a few degrees. "I love you. But given my dad put a stop on next semester's tuition, that's probably not the best idea."

"Pssh. I went to Columbia like my parents wanted. I'm flush. You pick a place, anywhere you want." She gives me another squeeze. "Think about it. I have to go pee."

I show her to the bathroom up one level, which is quiet even during performances.

Everyone's at the showcase, and the only sound up here comes from the open door of a rehearsal room.

My feet carry me there, and I lean in.

"Why aren't you at the showcase?" I ask Finn.

He glances up from the piano. "Why aren't *you* at the showcase? Figured Jax Jamieson might come."

I step into the room and lean my elbows on the ebony wood. "So, you heard."

Finn lets out a low chuckle. "I don't care what your name is. I'm thinking about the three shows I'm doing in LA in the

next week. I need to get out of New York. It's too cold, the weather and the people.”

“Hey, Finn,” I say, feeling impulsive, and he cocks his head. “You made me an offer the night I sang with you to get me tickets to your shows in LA.”

“Still stands.”

“Thank you. But it's not tickets I want.”

Tyler

“ANNIE. OPEN UP.” I pound on the door at the end of the hall on the sixth floor.

The third time I knock, it swings wide to reveal Rae. “She’s not here, lover boy.”

“Do you know when she’s getting back?”

She shrugs, glancing over her shoulder. “Few days, I think. She asked me to feed Heath.”

The goldfish circles his tank as if everything’s right with the world.

It’s not right.

I shove both hands through my hair. “I’ve been calling her all day since the showcase.”

“Bet it’s hard. Sounds like your phone’s the one blowing up.”

She’s not wrong. The thing jumps in my pocket every damned minute.

The performance was good—better than good.

But it wasn’t *right*... because she wasn’t with me.

I head back to my place, my breath huffing in the November air, and find a new slew of texts and voicemails.

One missed call from Annie has me relieved because it means she's not avoiding me.

This time, I get through. "I've been calling all night," I say when she picks up.

"Sorry, it's been kind of crazy. I wanted to tell you how great you were."

I tune in to the background noise, realize she's keeping her voice down.

"I watched from the back," she goes on. "Like you watched *The Little Mermaid*."

My throat works. "Best seats in the house."

"They are if you're on your way out of town."

I exhale hard. "You're going home to talk to your dad and Haley. That's good, Annie. It'll be good."

"No. I'm going to LA with Pen. I'm going to play a few gigs with Finn."

Her words have me pulling up in the middle of an intersection, which I don't realize until a horn honks at me and I force myself to keep walking.

"You bailed on our performance, but you're playing gigs in LA with Finn?" Anger seeps into my tone even though I don't know what I'm pissed about.

Maybe that we put all this work in, that I did this for her, and she walked away like it didn't matter.

"It's not like that, Tyler." I wish she was here so I could look her in the damned eyes, so I could grab her arms and tell

her not to leave. “It’s something I need to do for myself. You were really great. I’m so proud of you.”

She clicks off before I can argue.

The street signs say I’m halfway between Vanier and my apartment, yet somehow I’m utterly lost.



I’VE NEVER STALKED someone on social media before, but there’s a first time for everything.

All day Saturday, I’m scanning Annie’s feeds. She doesn’t post often and is careful when she does, so it’s not surprising I come up empty, but Sunday morning, I switch to a new strategy.

“Look at you, creeper.”

I look up from the kitchen table as my roommate comes in the front door.

“You can’t tell I’m a creeper from ten feet away.”

“It’s called a logical inference. You were creeping when I left; ergo, you’re more than likely creeping still.”

I glare at my roommate, holding up the phone. “There’s a picture of him on stage, the fucking prick. And she’s next to him.”

He crosses to me, narrowing his gaze on the screen. “Ah. It took you a day to switch to the best friend’s feed? Rookie.”

Annie’s not tagged, but I see her, and I want to throw the phone across the room.

Beck pulls a stack of mail out of his jacket pocket and passes me an envelope. “This came for you. I had to sign for it

and everything.”

Halfheartedly, I open it and glance inside. “A check for ten thousand dollars from the showcase.”

I glance at Beck’s lighter on the counter.

“You are not burning that check,” Beck drawls as he shrugs out of his coat and hangs it by the door. “You earned it. You lit that auditorium up, and no one who witnessed it could deny that fact.”

I tug on my hair. “I don’t know why she’d work so hard for this, then bail. She wanted it. It was her moment too, her fucking song.”

He drops into the chair across from me. “You really have no clue why she’d put you on that stage alone.”

I straighten, not liking the sound of those words. “No. Tell me.”

A guilty expression crosses his face. “I told her Zeke pulled your meeting. She knew you lost your shot because of her and Jax and if she did the showcase, you might lose that too. She didn’t screw you, Ty. She saved you.”

Emotions collide inside me—disbelief and frustration and longing.

My head falls back on a groan. “Dammit, Beck!”

I shove out of my seat and grab my phone, hurling it across the room so it slams into the living room wall.

I whirl to face him, staring him down as if this is his fault. “She wanted space, and I let her have it.” I stalk across the room, intending to grab the phone, but when I get there, I take a pillow off the couch and hurl it toward the kitchen instead.

“How does she do this?!” I shout.

Beck eyes me as if he’s watching some strange creature never before discovered by humans as I continue to rant.

“She’s always a mess of feelings. She can take it, but me? I can’t hold it in, wall it up, or shove it down.” I scan the room, feeling more than a little unhinged.

But I know I could throw everything in this entire apartment and it wouldn’t be enough.

“Fuck this. I’m going after her,” I decide. “I won’t be the guy who left her again.”

I start toward the front door, but Beck grabs my shirt.

“You’re not the guy who left her,” he says as I stop angrily next to him. “You’re the guy who’s giving her what she asked for.”

“You want me to sit here like an asshole.”

“Or you could deal with your damned emotions like everyone else.” He holds up a finger, telling me not to move.

I exhale hard as he goes to my room, comes back with the guitar Annie bought me. Twenty-four frets. Rosewood. Made to fit in my hands.

I take the neck in my hands, turn it over.

It’s mine. Today, maybe it’s the only thing that is.

I carry the guitar to the kitchen table and drop onto my seat. I don’t know what I want to play, but my fingers do until one song slips into the next.

In the spotlight, we need to bleed. We need to be broken.

Eventually, the emotions rise to the surface, one chasing the next until I’m bent over the guitar.

I'm playing and singing and who the hell knows what else,
but I'm pouring all of me out, everything I can't contain.

When I lift my head, I see Beck's intent expression trained
on me, along with the camera of his phone.

I don't care.

I do the only thing I can.

I play until my fingers are raw.

Annie

“So, then he moons the cops and runs ten blocks with his pants around his knees,” Pen says, clanking her glass on the side table in the dressing room for emphasis.

“And this guy’s running for treasurer?” I reply.

“Apparently.”

We’re backstage after Finn’s second show in LA. The past two days have been nuts between rehearsals and soundchecks and hanging out with my friend.

It feels strange not doing my own material after all my work for the showcase.

But I’m working—as a singer. Finn’s people not only paid for the hotel—I’m actually getting compensated.

“Annie! That’s Annie Jamieson. Jax Jamieson’s kid.” I turn to see the guys bent over the coffee table, and Finn waves me over.

“You must’ve grown up backstage,” one of the guys drawls. “Bet you have some great stories.”

I cross to them, the cowboy boots I changed into after the show clacking on the hard floor. “Honestly, I was a kid the last

time he toured. And the best stories I have of him are personal.”

I haven’t talked to my dad since coming to LA. Haley called me last night, but it was a short conversation. I can tell she’s disappointed, which hurts too, but she said she’d work on him as far as tuition. Clearly, she doesn’t agree with his position, but I don’t see her going behind his back unless I really need something.

“We’ll take personal stories,” Finn says with a grin, slinging an arm over the back of the couch.

My dad’s name is currency here. It gives me renewed appreciation for the way Tyler was always chill about it.

More than that, he lied for me.

I shove the thought away.

“You know what?” I ask. “You should be remembering nights like tonight instead of asking for old stories. Someday you won’t be asking me about him. You’ll be asking him about *me*.” I arch a brow, and a round of hollers goes up.

I cut a look back at Pen, and she nods. “We’re gonna get out of here. Thanks for the gig,” I tell Finn, starting for the door.

Pen goes to grab her things while Finn follows me toward the hall. “Don’t take it personally. Someday you’ll have stories. Until then, the sexiest thing about you is him.”

I size him up. “Did you know who my dad was when you took me on? Before it came out at school?”

He grins. “I did my homework. Can’t fault me for that.”

Some of the joy I felt about making it to LA on my own merit falls away, but I refuse to let it vanish entirely.

Beck's right. I'll always be Jax Jamieson's kid, and I need to make peace with that.

Even if my dad and I can't find a way to make peace with each other.

Pen joins me, and I nod to Finn. "I'll see you tomorrow for the final show."

I grab my friend, and we take off back to our hotel.

"I'm glad you came with me this weekend. It means a lot," I say.

"Of course! I can afford to make a DIY long weekend by blowing off a single day of classes."

November in LA is balmy as hell. I stick my hands in the pockets of my jean shorts as we pass palm trees.

"I've been wondering if I made the right call in going to Vanier instead of Columbia. The highs and the lows are a kind of extreme I've never experienced, not even when I learned Jax was my dad or when Carly tortured me."

"Well, if you ever decided to transfer to Columbia, obviously I'd be supportive," Pen says. "We'd have a fabulous apartment with a wine fridge, and I'd be the best sommelier-slash-roommate ever."

My chest expands. "I'll miss you when you go back tomorrow. And I'm taking you to the airport whether you like it or not."

"You'll spend the whole day in traffic," she warns. "You should just fly back with me."

I kick a stone on the pavement with my boot, thinking about everything that's gone down.

“Nah, I’ll stay and do the final show tomorrow night. But I do want to see Elle and Beck. Hell, maybe even Rae.”

“And Tyler.”

“Definitely Tyler.”

His handsome face appears in my mind. I wish I had him to talk to. I know what I’d say.

I miss you.

I shouldn’t have blamed you.

I’m sorry I fucked up your chance in this industry.

Back in the hotel, Pen’s sprawled across the other double bed when my phone buzzes on my nightstand.

Elle: You need to see this.

It’s a link for Beck’s vlog. Something’s glitchy though, because the number of followers is off by a few zeroes.

I reload the page, but it shows the same thing. It’s not only the follower count that’s off—it’s the views.

The top video is one called “Unhinged.” Most of Beck’s videos are ten or fifteen minutes, but this one’s nearly an hour long.

I hit Play.

It’s Tyler sitting on his bed with his guitar. My heart sticks in my throat. A few seconds in, I hear Tyler’s voice, humming over the chords.

He’s riveting. From the comments, a lot of people think so—hundreds of thousands of likes, more than one million views.

“Shit. Is that him?” Pen drops onto the bed next to me. I didn’t know she was still awake.

I turn up the volume. Then Tyler sings, and I recognize the words.

Because they’re mine.

The words are from our showcase song at first, then another and another.

Comments from people saying he’s talented, he’s gorgeous, and I stop reading the comments because they’re meaningless. The only thing that matters is him.

“Pen, I’m in love with Tyler.”

The words hang between us. The only backdrop is the music continuing to stream from my phone.

“Well, obvs.”

My chin snaps up as I seek out her gaze in the dark. “What should I...?” I shove a hand through my hair. “I need to tell him.”

“That might be a good start,” she says with a half smile.

I pause the video and open a text window, typing a message to Beck with shaking hands.

Annie: Your vlog exploded. What’s going on?!

Then I pull up a browser window.

“I need to look for flights,” I say under my breath. “Maybe I can get on yours.”

Finding a Monday flight on Sunday night is hit or miss, but there are a few options since it’s a popular route. But before I can book anything, my phone buzzes with an incoming call.

“Beck,” I say breathlessly.

“Hey. Ty had a meeting with Zeke today.”

“On the weekend?”

“Guess they saw the video and decided they couldn’t wait. They put a contract in front of him and everything.”

Emotions wash over me. There’s pride, overwhelm, happiness. “That’s... wow.”

Pen shakes her head, eyes wide. *What?* she mouths.

I hold up a finger as Beck continues. “Yeah. I’m sure he’ll want to tell you himself.”

“I can’t wait.”

“But... don’t hurry back to New York, all right?” Beck says, and it sounds like a warning.

What’s going on? Is Tyler doing better without me? Did he say something to Beck about wanting space, too?

I swallow the disappointment that rises up. “Okay. Can you tell him... tell him I’m so happy for him. And if he wants to talk, I’m here.”

“Ah. Sure. It’s early here, Manatee. I gotta get ready for class.”

I swallow as I hang up, reminding myself to be thrilled. Tyler’s getting everything he ever wanted, and that’s enough.



THE NEXT DAY, I take Pen to the airport and hug her for ages. “Text me when you get home, okay?” I say when I pull back. “Thank you for everything.”

“No prob. I needed a few days of sunshine and drama after midterms anyway.”

When I get back to the hotel, I spend the afternoon swimming and working on some homework, trying not to check my phone to see if Tyler’s called.

But there’s nothing.

Not before I head to the venue to get ready for the gig.

Not after.

Not when I get back and order delivery from a restaurant down the street before I take a hot shower and steam the makeup off my face.

“Well,” I say in the silent bathroom. “Here we are.”

I booked a flight back tomorrow after the final show using my credit card, which I’ll have to pay for—and I will.

Skipping the showcase was a setback, but it’s not the end. I’m more determined than ever to succeed.

I’ll get a job. I’ll see if there’s anything part-time at Vanier or maybe the library at Columbia. I haven’t waited tables, but I could do that, too. I’ll do anything. I’ll learn to stand on my own feet.

I pull on clean underwear, then reach for the sleep T-shirt on the counter and tug it over my head.

Staring at my reflection, I suddenly remember wearing the Ramones T-shirt the night after Tyler saved me at the cast party.

Now, I’m grown-up enough to save myself. I’m also grown-up enough to know that what I feel for Tyler isn’t some

passing thing—I love him. I miss him. I crave his company. In the silent hotel room, a wave of longing hits me.

The knock on the door makes my stomach growl.

I switch off the bathroom light and cross the hotel room.

When I answer the door, every thought evaporates.

A gorgeous guy with a day's scruff blocks the light from the hallway. In a bomber jacket and faded jeans, his hair falls across his face as if he's been running his hands through it all night.

“Hi, Six.”

Tyler

WHEN ANNIE OPENS the door of her hotel room, her face slackens in shock.

But what I notice most is how damned beautiful she looks in her gray oversized T-shirt, her hair falling in wet curls around her shoulders. Her face is bare, her lips full and enticing as she takes me in.

“You’re not the delivery guy,” she murmurs.

“You were going to open the door looking like that?”

My gaze drags down her body, the way her damp hair leaves wet spots on her shirt, dripping down across her breasts. Her legs are miles long under the hem, begging a man to sell his soul for the chance to wrap them around his waist.

Her lips curve. “I was really hungry.”

She moves to let me in, and I follow, the door clicking shut behind me.

“I saw your video on Beck’s vlog,” she says as I take in the modest but tidy room with two double beds. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks.” Her praise warms me in a way no one else’s can.

“Do you want to sit?” she gestures around us, but the only place is the bed. I shake my head. It’s safer to talk like this, standing up, a few feet between us.

“Nah. I’ve been sitting on a plane all day.”

She nods, weaving her hands together in front of her. “What are you doing here? Beck told me you took a meeting with Zeke and he offered to sign you again. Congratulations.”

“I didn’t sign.”

Annie lifts her chin, eyes widening in surprise. “Why not?”

Because you’re my business. More so than any agents or producers.

I want to close all the distance between us but settle for half of it.

“I was sitting in the chair across from him and thinking about what happened the last time I signed, and I realized something.”

I take a slow breath, not missing the significance of this moment, of what I’m about to say—of what I can’t keep inside any longer.

“I didn’t go off the rails because of my dad or the contract or New York. It was because I was finally starting to believe in my dreams and you weren’t there for it.”

Annie’s eyes shine, and I force myself to keep going because I have to get through what I came here to say, and if she breaks down, it’s gonna be even harder.

“I know you think I chose Jax over you. But I chose you a long time ago. Over everything and everyone. And you chose me.”

I shove both hands through my hair, the emotions rising up.

“When you gave me that guitar in high school, you gave me you. I was too young and stupid to understand that. I was convinced our feelings would fuck up your life or mine. But twice I’ve had that moment where my dreams are about to come true, and twice it’s been meaningless without you. And I know I’m stubborn, but I won’t make the same mistake.”

The distance between us is unbearable, so I close it, wrapping my hands around her bare arms under the T-shirt sleeves. “I see you, Annie. I’ve always seen you. At your best, your worst, everything in between. And even when you fuck things up, I want a front-row seat because it’s so damn beautiful.” My voice cracks. “I love you, Six. You’re the only song I wanna sing, the only movie I wanna watch, the only”—now I’m grasping—“food I wanna eat.”

Annie sucks in a trembling breath as her gaze searches my face as if she’s looking for evidence of my words.

She’ll find it. On every inch of me, she’ll find it.

“Beck told me what you did by stepping back from the showcase for me,” I continue, needing to finish. “I wish you hadn’t, and I would have tried to stop you if I’d known, but I can’t seem to stop you from doing anything. It’s maddening, and it’s one more thing I love about you.””

I brush a thumb across her lower lip because the pull between us is too strong to resist. She doesn’t try to stop me, and the softness of her skin, coupled with the way she lets me touch her, has conviction and possessiveness rising up.

“Now it’s my turn to do something you don’t want. You asked me for space, and I tried to give it to you. But I won’t let

you push me away because you think anything, anyone, matters more to me than you. You'll always be wrong."

We're standing flush, her chest brushing mine in a way that reminds me she's practically naked.

Her expression's colored with caring and something more than that, something bold and edgy, and it tugs at me.

"You want to eat me?" she asks softly.

I slide my fingers into her damp hair, cupping her face. "That's what you took from my speech?"

She bites her lip, and my thumb strokes up her soft jaw in a way that makes her eyes darken.

"I love you too, Tyler."

Holy fuck.

My chest expands until it's near breaking. Her throat works, her hands wrapping around my wrists. But instead of pulling me away, she just holds them. Her dark lashes flutter as her attention drops to my mouth.

I never expected hearing those words would hit me so hard, but it does.

Maybe I've been waiting to hear them for longer than I thought.

"That's it?" I whisper even though I'm shaking, adoration blurring with the desire her touch stirs in me. "No poems, no songs, no anything?"

She shakes her head. "We don't need them."

She's right.

But there is something we do need, something that has my abs clenching, my entire body aware of every inch of hers.

“Tell me again,” I mutter.

“I love you.” Annie’s response is instant, her gaze searching as if the answer I gave her is only part of what she’s looking for.

She’s mine—her heart, her soul, her body. I know it, but I want to prove it, want to show her I’m hers every bit as much.

My mouth claims hers, possessive and needy at once. She shifts up on her toes, wraps her arms around my neck, and crushes herself against me. Her body heat through the dampness of her T-shirt turns the fire inside me into a blaze.

She’s as hungry as I am, teasing my tongue with hers, dragging her nails across my scalp in a way that has me groaning.

I lift her in my arms and carry her to the bed, dropping her on the covers. In an instant, she’s on her knees to meet me, reaching for my clothes.

I’m already hard for her. On a growl, I catch the backs of her thighs so she falls back on the mattress, and I follow her down.

My mouth drops to her waist, and I lift the hem of her shirt, pressing kisses against her hip at the edge of her panties.

I kiss my way up her ribcage. When I can’t go any farther, I grasp the hem of her shirt and tug it over her head.

I take in every inch of flushed skin. I’m going to memorize the scent of her, the taste. I’m going to touch her until it’s what she expects, until every second I’m not touching her, she’s looking for me.

When I drop my mouth to her breast and suck, the way she fucking bows against my mouth says I’m on the right path.

I tease her for as long as we both can take it. Her hands are in my hair, dragging me closer, a demanding contrast to her soft floral scent and warm skin.

She's sweet and greedy, vulnerable and unconquerable.

I'm going to fuck this girl until she's ruined for anyone else.

My fingers slip between her legs, rubbing the panel of her panties.

It's soaked.

"Oh shit, Tyler."

My mouth is at her ear, my body flush with hers so I can absorb every shiver, every shudder, every muscle straining to get closer. "Say it again."

"Tyler."

I shove two fingers under her panties and press them inside her heat.

Annie's head falls back on the pillow, her damp hair fanned across the white sheets. She's my mermaid, my siren, the woman whose call I'll answer when I'm dead.

"I see you, Six," I mutter as I stroke her, finding that spot inside that makes her gasp. "I don't care where you're going as long as I go with you."

When I rub a circle over her clit, she says my name as if she's trying to finish a marathon and I'm the only hope of getting her through. Her nails dig into my biceps hard enough to leave marks.

Her touch grazes my abs above my jeans, her gaze meeting mine from under her half-lowered lashes.

The sound of my zipper and the brush of her fingers against my cock through my boxer briefs is a warning. She's writhing and panting with every stroke, and when she wraps her hand around my cock, I swear she gets wetter.

My abs clench, and I'm leaking all over her. I want her hands, her lips, her pussy—all of it, a never-ending carousel until we're both dizzy and spent.

But there's something I need first.

Her breath is a shallow pant, and my teeth find her earlobe, tugging hard enough she shakes.

“Come for me.”

I growl the words, and she responds, her body bowing up, her hips grinding and squeezing on my fingers.

Forget music. Her orgasm is the most gorgeous thing I've ever experienced.

She comes down, and I stand up off the bed, stripping out of my clothes before getting a condom from my wallet.

I start to roll it on, but she reaches for my wrist. “I'm on the pill.”

Her mouth sets in a firm line as the seriousness of this slams into me.

I've thought about how it would feel to have nothing between us but only in a fantasy kind of way, like I've thought about fucking her in her pool in Dallas, her skin slippery from the water, or on top of the piano in a rehearsal room at Vanier, her legs spread so wide I can see six octaves between her calves.

My chest tightens. “I've never gone without.”

Her hands cup my face. “We don’t have to. But I’d like to, if you would.”

“Why?” The word is hoarse, barely audible.

A breath trembles out of her lips, but she continues. “Because I love you and I want to be so close to you it’s impossible to tell where you end and I start. Because I want you to come inside me, for you to know that some part of you is in me... even though I know you always have been.”

If she was planning to say something else, I’ll never know because I cut her off.

I claim her lips with mine because I have to kiss her when she talks like that.

I’m a thousand feet tall—and harder than I can remember being—when I position myself against her entrance, where she’s so wet from my touch, every easy slide of my cock on her skin a filthy promise of what’s to come.

Right there with you, Six.

I memorize how she looks, feels, sounds, smells. Her fingers dig into my ass as I lower over her, our lips brushing. “You know something?” I murmur. “You’re the only person who’s ever made me want to believe.”

Her voice is rough at the edges. “You’re the only person I’ve never stopped believing in.”

Those words break me.

I slide home, swallowing her cry as she takes every inch of me.

She feels so good—better than I dreamed.

This girl is everything. My past, my future. The home I never knew.

I'll bury myself so deep she'll never get me out.

I nudge us into a rhythm, but her body's greedy, barely letting me pull back so I can give us both the pleasure of stroking back in.

We're a tangle of need and feelings and sweat and hope. I'm torn between the need to draw this out for fucking hours and the drive to see how many times I can claim her before we leave this bed.

When my hand slides between us to find her clit, she gasps, eyes flying wide.

I draw nearly out of her, darkly thrilled by her moan of protest.

When I speak, my voice is a rasp.

"I..."

I press back inside on a long stroke, only to pull out.

"Dream."

Again.

"Of."

Again.

"*This.*"

Annie comes, and the feeling of her gripping me drags me there too. She shakes in my arms, and I hold her tight, knowing nothing in life has ever felt this good... and for the first time, believing it's possible to keep feeling this way.

Annie

SEX CAN'T CHANGE A PERSON. I get that intellectually.

But as I lie next to Tyler in the hotel bed, I want to argue with that statement.

A smile tugs across my face, and it's reflected in Tyler's expression as he shifts over me. "Hi," he murmurs.

"Hi."

His body's beautiful, strong, and muscled. As I trace the lines of his bare shoulders, his pec, his bicep, the ink has me staring again.

"Your food get lost on the way?" he asks.

I glance past him at the door, thinking for the first time in a long time about my meal. "Maybe they heard the noises and turned back."

Tyler presses his smiling mouth to my shoulder, and I grin too.

My fingers dig into his arms, holding him still as my attention drags back to the ink on his chest. "I can't believe you've had all these done since you left. Tell me about them?"

"Pick one and I will."

I bite my lip. “The boat and the waves.”

“I got it after I left Dallas and spent the week at my dad’s bedside. I remember feeling as if I was being tossed about in the storm. One night, all I could think was, ‘I can’t control the storm. I need a bigger boat’.”

I trace the lines of the ship. “So, you got one.”

“I can’t control the world, but I can control myself. That there are things life can never take from me.”

“Maybe you should write the songs,” I murmur. “That’s kind of beautiful. How do you come out with that?”

He leans down on both elbows, caging me in. “How do you write the lyrics you write?”

I wet my lips under his heavy stare. “Easy. When the boy you love leaves, there’s an infinite supply of heartache to go around.”

Pain flashes in his eyes. “Never again.” He lowers his lips to my jaw, and I thread my fingers into his hair. “But don’t diminish yourself. You might’ve written when I left, but I’m not the reason. You have a talent that goes beyond the words. It’s how you see the world.”

I smile. “I love writing. Maybe even more than being on stage.” It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud.

Tyler doesn’t look at me as if I’m nuts. In fact, he doesn’t look surprised. “If that’s what you want, I’m all in.”

Warmth washes over me. “Can we stay here forever?” I take in the mountain of plush hotel blankets. “We could build a fort.”

He skims lower, to my breast, and my laugh is cut off. “Go nuts, baby. I’ll be right there.”

God, he's good at touching me. Was he always this good, even without the practice? Or is it me—that I've wanted him so bad for so long that even the slightest reward has me going off? My body is a shimmer of sensation, the pleasure from his hands tracing a leisurely path down my sides to my hips blending with the lingering high from the orgasms.

When his hot mouth closes over my nipple, the sharp tug of need makes me moan. Judging from the way his hands get impatient and one slips between my thighs again, teasing me where I'm still wet from him, he likes that too.

There's a knock on the door.

Tyler ignores it, until it comes again.

"My food," I mumble.

With a groan and a blanket around his waist, Tyler goes to answer it. A moment later he comes inside, setting a paper bag on the desk.

He peers inside before cutting me a look, one brow lifted. "You ordered cheese fries without me."

I laugh. "Clearly, I knew you'd be coming."

Before I can tell him to forget the food, that I need him back here with me, Tyler's phone rings.

He rubs a hand over his face before hitting a button. "Hey, man."

"Did she leave?" Beck demands over the speaker.

I'm already missing Tyler's body heat, but when he cocks his head, grinning at me, I can forgive him. "She didn't leave. She's here."

“Hi, Beck,” I call, shifting off the bed naked and crossing to grab one of the cheese fries off the desk before it gets cold.

Fucking yum.

“Hey, Manatee. Listen, Ty, your studio boys want an answer. They’ve been buzzing at the door all day.”

“They’ve been blowing up my phone, too.” Tyler paces the length of the room, phone in one hand, rubbing the other through his hair until it sticks straight up.

God, he’s beautiful. I still can’t believe he didn’t want to sign before talking to me.

I cross to him. My hand slides around his neck, feathering the hair at his nape, and he stops. He doesn’t move, just lets me touch him as he watches me with pure and simple love.

“They sent one of those edible arrangements with fruit and chocolate and shit to the apartment,” comes Beck’s disembodied voice through the phone, reminding me he’s still with us. “Not just the crappy cantaloupe, but strawberries and pineapple—”

“Thanks, Beck,” Tyler says, his gaze locked on mine. “We’ll catch a flight back tonight, so we’ll be back in the morning.”

“You guys really need to—”

Tyler clicks off and tosses the phone past me without looking.

I ask, “Are you going to take that offer?”

“What do you think I should do?” His hands find my sides, skimming slowly down my hips in a way that makes me suck in a breath.

“I think you should read it. With a lawyer—”

“You’re cold.”

I frown. “Tyler, that’s what they do for a living. I’m surprised you haven’t—oh.” I follow his gaze down to my pebbled nipples.

“Keep talking.” He pulls my hips against his, where he’s already getting hard again. His length is pinned between us, but the glimpses of his cock have me swallowing.

“Um... do you have a copy of the contract with you?”

Tyler backs me against the wall, grinding himself between my thighs as his mouth finds mine. “Uh-huh,” he mutters between kisses.

His fingers stroke down my stomach, up the inside of my thighs.

I suck in a breath and try to concentrate. “There are probably some clauses to look out for.”

I remember overhearing Haley and my dad talk about one of his contracts, but the moment Tyler’s fingers slick across my skin and dip inside me, I can’t for the life of me remember the details.

“Good.” He sinks to his knees, nudging my legs wider while he lifts his gorgeous face to meet my gaze.

Holy hell.

“What are you doing?” I pant.

“While you’re making sure they don’t fuck me, I’m gonna fuck you.”



TYLER and I catch a red-eye back to New York. We spring for in-flight internet and look up lawyers on the way, and by the time we land, he has a meeting with a Midtown entertainment attorney to review Zeke's deal.

Tyler insists our car drop me off first and walks me to the doors at Vanier. "Have fun today."

"Thanks." With the flight and transport from the airport, I missed Entertainment Management and Talbot's class. The first isn't a big deal, but I'm going to apologize in person for the latter. "Good luck meeting Zeke."

Tyler kisses me long and hard before pulling back, brushing his thumb across my jaw.

I watch him go, biting my lip as he slides into the car. Is it ever going to sink in that he's mine? I hope not.

I take my bags upstairs, but no one's there—probably because it's still the middle of the day.

Sure enough, the dining hall's half-full with the pre-lunch coffee crowd when I pass on my way to the classrooms.

I linger by the door of Talbot's class until it lets out.

"Hey, traveler," Elle chirps when she sees me.

I grab her in a hug. "It's really good to see you."

"You too. Did you hug Rae like this? I'd pay to see that."

I pull back, smiling. "Haven't seen her yet. Just dropped my bags off."

"Miss Jamieson."

My good mood fades a little as I look over Elle's shoulder at Talbot.

"I'm sorry I missed class. I—"

“Please come see me at my office in thirty minutes.”

“Um. Okay.” I hadn’t expected it to warrant an entire meeting, but I nod as she passes us, books in hand.

“That sounds ominous,” Elle says.

“Right?”

“You missed a crazy few days,” she continues as we start down the hallway. “All hell broke loose after the showcase. A few people got approached by agents, but the shit with Tyler was the craziest. Beck told me their entire apartment is full of gifts from people who want to meet Tyler.”

“That is crazy.”

“You guys good?”

I grin. “Yeah, actually. We are.”

When I head to the central administration on the third floor, the admin assistant offers me a chair while I wait, and I wave her off with a smile, perusing the full-color photos on the wall. All are of people on stage: musicians, dancers, actors. There’s grace in what they do, and competence, and triumph.

None of the blood and sweat and tears are in these photos. I know the personal toll it takes. We’ve lost students this year who’ve dropped out. I’ve seen the dancers with their bleeding feet weep when they sustain an injury, when normal people would be grateful for the reprieve from constant torture. Actors get contorted into so many roles and forms they don’t know where they end and their characters begin. And the musicians...

Well, we spend our days and nights chasing something fleeting. The perfect song or verse or moment of connection with an audience—one that will be gone the moment it

happens, unless like Beck with Tyler, someone managed to capture it.

We bend over backward to create something extraordinary.

None of us fit in, so we trade our souls, our bodies, our egos, our emotions, for a chance to stand out.

“Miss Jamieson.”

The admin assistant motions me into Talbot’s office, and I follow her, gathering myself and smoothing down my outfit. Talbot looks impassively at me as I take a seat across from her.

The door clicks quietly closed before she speaks. “Do you know why you’re here?”

“I assume it’s about missing class today. I’m sorry. I had a chance to perform with Finn—Mr. Harvey—in LA. I promise I won’t miss any more classes this semester.”

She rounds the desk to take her seat, folding her lined hands in her lap and levelling me with cool eyes. “And what about the showcase? What’s your excuse for missing that?”

“That was... a bold choice,” I concede.

“You turned your back on an opportunity every student waits their entire life for.”

“I did it for someone I care about. And I’d do it again.”

“Why?”

“When I came to Vanier, I wanted to prove myself, and I thought that meant getting attention at all costs. But some things matter more than the spotlight.”

Her brows twitch, but I continue. “Since coming here, I’ve learned there’s a lot more than a bunch of talented people who want to be famous. Everyone has their own reason for being

here”—I think of Tyler, of Beck and Elle and Rae—“but we all want to connect to something. To be part of something bigger than us.”

I shift forward in my seat. “I don’t just want to make people see me. I want to make people see themselves. To believe in something more than they think they can.” I take a deep breath. “I want to write. Like you do.”

If I’d thought it was impossible to surprise my acting professor, apparently, I was wrong. Her eyes are wide and unblinking, as if I just spit a string of colorful curses onto her desk.

But she recovers, straightening.

“Your showcase piece,” she says at last. “It was very moving. Writing, in the long run, is less about the words and more about the writer. A fresh voice, an interesting perspective. How honest they’re willing to be with an audience.”

I nod. “I understand. At least I think I do,” I go on at her expectant look.

“Good. In that case, as penance for missing my class, I’d like you to write something for me.”



MY PHONE BUZZES with a text as I head out of Talbot’s office.

Tyler: It’s done. I’m signed.

A wave of excitement rolls through me.

Annie: That’s huge. We should celebrate. Tonight?

Tyler: I have a midterm tomorrow. We go out tonight, I'm getting zero studying done.

I can't resist teasing him.

Annie: I could have you in bed by midnight.

Tyler: I could have you against my dresser, in my shower, on my kitchen table.

Tyler: You could play me a song on my own guitar while you sit in my lap and I fuck you from underneath.

Holy. It takes every ounce of strength not to melt into a puddle in the middle of the hall.

Annie: Right. Ummm... tomorrow then?

Tyler: Deal. And I've got plans.

On impulse, I head to P69 and knock on the door. There's no answer. I'm turning away when the door cracks and Beck looks out at me in surprise.

"Hey, Manatee. You get the good word about my roomie's deal?"

"He just told me." I step inside and look over Beck's shoulder at his computer. "Damn. Half a million followers now. Are you going to keep posting about Tyler?"

He rubs a hand through his hair. "It's what they want."

There's a bit of sadness in his voice, and I fold my arms. "Well, I knew how good Tyler was, and I still followed your vlog for you."

His eyes crinkle at the corners. “Oh, I’m good with it. We sign up for the thousands of hours in places like this”—he gestures around the closet—“in the hopes that someday it’ll come together. That someone’ll see us and say, ‘He’s the one we’ve been looking for.’” His mouth curves. “I’m glad it’s happening to Tyler.”

I reach out a hand and run my fingers through his dark hair. “I see you, Beck. Don’t give up.”

“Back at you.” He checks his watch. “It’s still early in the day. My big break is waiting.” His wink has me grinning. “Yours could be, too.”

Annie

“YOU LOOK GOOD,” a familiar voice comments from the doorway as I step into my high heels.

I look up to see my roommate.

“Thanks, Rae.” I glance between her and the fish on my desk. “I appreciate you looking out for Heath while I was gone. You didn’t have to clean his bowl, too.”

“I didn’t.”

I rise from the bed, smoothing down the silver dress that ends halfway down my thighs. I fold my arms across my chest. “Yeah, you did. But it’s cool. You don’t have to admit it.”

She rolls her eyes, and I continue. “DJ Payne’s playing in Brooklyn this weekend. I saw him on your playlist. Elle and I want to go, and we want you to come.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Her mouth purses. “Where are you going in the ‘fuck me’ dress?”

I grin. “Tyler’s taking me out.”

Rae arches a dark brow. “You guys have cool energy together. Don’t take it for granted.”

“Trust me, I won’t ever take what we have for granted.”

With one last look in the mirror, I head down for my date.

The last twenty-four hours after returning from LA have been a whirlwind.

After meeting Talbot yesterday, I got to work on her revised assignment. I was up all night and sent it by email at four in the morning. She wrote me back at five with a response that had my jaw dropping.

Now, it seems the surprises aren't over.

The limo outside the front doors can't be for me. But as Tyler emerges from the back seat, I know it is.

The driver gets out to hold the door, but Tyler waves him off.

“Are you kidding me?” I laugh, but before he can respond, I pull up short, taking in his pants, shined shoes, and tailored winter jacket. “Damn. This *is* a date. I'm impressed you found a peacoat. What's under it?”

Tyler unbuttons the coat with one hand and holds it open. The suit jacket underneath has me sucking in cold air that burns my lungs. “You dressed up. I'm kind of shocked.”

His gaze roams up my bare legs, ending on my long jacket. “Your turn. Unless you're not wearing anything under that coat, in which case, fuck the date, we're going upstairs.”

I unbutton the front of my coat, put both hands on my hips, and pose.

“Damn, Six.” His voice is reverent, and I'm glad I sprung for the new dress. “You're stunning.”

I feel myself flush in the dark. “Thanks.”

His gaze drops to the necklace hanging between my breasts.

“Like your bling too.”

“First boy I ever loved gave it to me. Never forgot it, or him.”

Tyler’s face fills with emotion as he helps me into the car. We talk on the ride, but he refuses to tell me where we’re going. When the car pulls up and the driver holds my door open, I step out into lights as bright as day.

“Broadway!” I huff out a happy sigh.

Tyler shifts out after me, and as the car pulls away, he links his warm fingers through mine. “You asked me to a show a couple weeks ago, and I passed. I wanted to make it up to you.”

The marquee on the theater has my eyes bugging out even more. “*Hamilton?* You’re joking.”

I start toward the doors, but our linked hands tug me back.

Tyler’s eyes shine as he stares at me. “I love that about you,” he murmurs.

“What?”

“You could have anything you want, and you’re still thrilled by the world.”

“The best things aren’t about money,” I remind him, smoothing a hand down the soft fabric of his coat. “Though if this is some male ploy to get me to sleep with you at the end of the night, it’s not going to work.”

The exposed bulbs cast Tyler’s face in half shadow, and he has the decency to look offended.

“Don’t sleep with me because I took you to *Hamilton*.” He steps closer to let a stream of people past us, bending toward my ear and lowering his voice. “Sleep with me because you want to. Because even though the world’s been offering you things this entire week, all you really want is to be alone with me.”

I pull back to look him in the eye. “How about because I’m not wearing underwear?”

Tyler threads a hand into my hair, kissing me hard and hungrily.

“Fuck *Hamilton*,” he grinds out, and I suck in an appalled breath.

“Absolutely not. We’re going.”

Tyler’s groan vibrates through me. “Fine. But I’m feeling you up at intermission.”

The theater is beautiful, and I love everything about it. It’s opulent yet intimate, with plush red seats and arching gold decorations. Our seats are in the second row.

I point it all out to Tyler, and we discuss it until the lights go down.

From the opening number, I’m rooted in place.

So many stories are powerful, but this one grabs me and refuses to let go.

It’s about building a legacy.

Taking action.

Fucking up.

Every word, every song, fills me as if I’m the one singing, and my lungs expand until I think my chest will burst.

It's beautifully, achingly human.

By the end, I feel reborn.

"Well?" Tyler asks when the ovation finishes and our row files out.

I don't move, staring at the stage after everyone's left our row. "This is it," I state. "This is what I want to do."

I cut a look up at Tyler's amused face. "Talbot sent me part of the book she's cowriting for a new musical. It's nearly finished, but she's been stuck on a couple of songs. I sent her some lyrics, just some spur-of-the-moment ideas, and she actually liked them. There's a chance I could work on it with her."

His grin is dazzling. Tyler wraps an arm around me, and we head down the aisle for the exit, my program tucked safely in my little bag like a perfect memory of tonight.

After the theater, the car takes us to a bar.

"Don't wait. We'll find our own way home," Tyler tells the driver when he lets us out, and we watch the car glide slowly down the street.

We reach the bar, and he holds the door. Inside, it's charming and funky, and we weave through the hip crowd and snag two stools.

We order from the bartender, and he returns a moment later with our drinks.

I lift mine as I consider. "To big dreams."

"To being so good they can't look away." Tyler's mouth tugs at the corner as if he's remembering the moment a year and a half ago when he gave me those words.

I take a sip of my drink, humming with pleasure at the smoothness as I glance around the bar.

“You hear anything from your dad?” Tyler asks.

Sadness edges into my excitement, though if I’m honest, a part of it’s been there the past week, lingering in the corners of my mind, my soul. “Just Haley.”

Tyler reaches over to rest a hand on my thigh. “He’s not perfect, Annie, but none of us are. I know you’ve had your issues, and I don’t agree with everything he does, but he loves the hell out of you.”

Tyler’s words have me sighing. “I know. And I probably should have told him. But I’m stubborn and so is he, and we both suck at backing down.” I turn that over. “I told him about the letter from my birth mom. He was shocked. He almost looked... guilty. Like I caught him doing something he shouldn’t.”

“You could reach out to her.”

“Maybe I will.”

I scan the bar over his shoulder, the dozens of people drinking and laughing and joking. Is she somewhere doing the same thing right now?

I shake it off as my attention comes back to Tyler. Tonight’s not for that—tonight is for us. “So,” I start, my mouth twitching, “what does the future look like for Tyler Adams now that he has a record deal?”

His thumb strokes my thigh absently, sending little ripples of awareness through me. “Zeke wants me to record an EP to start. A combination of my own songs and a cover or two. I told him I wanted to record our songs, if you’d be open to that.

The one from the showcase, and maybe we could work on more together.”

Disbelief washes over me. “Tyler?! Yes. A million times, yes.”

He grins at my response. “There’s more, though.” The brightness in his eyes dims a few watts. “The band I played with loved my sound, and they have a slot for an opener on their tour in a couple months. They want me to go with them. I have a couple days to decide.”

My jaw drops. “Wow. That’s huge.”

“Two months ago, all I wanted was to get the hell out of Vanier. Now, I don’t want to leave my friends or New York.” He inspects the contents of his drink, then tosses it back in a single gulp before setting the glass down with a thud and meeting my gaze. “I don’t want to leave you.”

My chest warms at his admission.

“I feel as if I’ve always wanted you,” he goes on, “and this is the first time I have you.”

He reaches for my hand, and instead of threading his fingers through mine, he flips my palm. His thumb traces the lines of my palm in a way that feels far too intimate for public.

“Nothing can pull us apart if we don’t let it,” I promise softly, and his jaw tightens.

“Good.”

He reaches into his pocket for something, holding it up. It glints between his fingers, the size of a nickel, but it’s gold.

“What is that?” I ask.

“A promise.” His voice goes rough as he stares at me. “I told you once I’d never leave you. I might have moved to New York last summer, but my heart never left you. I meant what I said. I mean it still.”

My breath trembles out, unsteady.

“You are the only person I let under my skin,” he goes on, his voice rough. “I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. The way you see the world, the way you care, the way you try, the way you get up when you’re knocked down.”

My throat is tight with emotion, and every word adds to the sensations overwhelming me.

“I choose you, Annie,” he says. “Over uncertainty, over fear, over doubt. I will always choose you. Whether you’re next to me or a thousand miles away, when you look at this, you’ll know it’s true.”

I take the ring from him, and it’s cool and heavy despite the narrow band. The inside is smooth, the outside scarred.

No, carved.

The band is engraved with flowers.

“It’s beautiful,” I manage.

Tyler rounds my stool and unfastens my necklace, then slips the ring over the chain and refastens the clasp. I adjust it, and the ring settles between my breasts along with the pressed flower. My fist closes around it.

I twist in my seat, needing to find his gaze. Once I do, it’s so full of love and awe I never want to let it go.

I never want to let *him* go.

He claims my mouth in a long kiss that's searing and tender at once. By the time he pulls back, I'm tugging at his hair, needing to feel his body on mine.

"Let's get out of here," he murmurs. "That dress is killing me."

"I thought you liked it."

"I'm going to like taking it off you more."

We pay for our drinks before putting on our coats and stumbling outside.

"Let me call a cab."

"Come on," I tease, "we can walk."

With everything that's happened tonight, I could use the air.

I could inhale an entire city's worth of oxygen right now.

"So... sign, join, or jilt?" Tyler drawls as he holds the door, reminding me of our old game.

"Who?" I retort.

"Me."

I don't realize how late it is until we get into the street.

"Well," I say, pretending to consider. "You're already signed, so unless I lure you away from your label—"

"Which you could do in a heartbeat."

"Really?" I trip over the pavement, falling against his side with a laugh. "I have nothing to offer you."

His low chuckle buzzes through me. "Your mouth is remarkably persuasive."

“You’d leave Zeke for a blowjob?” I demand, mock aghast. The idea of Tyler coming apart under my hands, my mouth, is impossibly sexy.

He groans. “I’m walking home in the middle of the night with a fucking hard-on, and it’s all your fault.”

I laugh as we stumble down the road toward Tyler’s place. He takes my hand as we talk about all kinds of things, our voices raised from the alcohol.

Nothing can break the beautiful imperfection of this moment. Despite the rift between me and my dad and the uncertainty of my future, Tyler’s finally getting what he deserves, I’m learning to stand on my own feet, and we have each other.

We’re a few blocks from his apartment, and I’m already imagining the things we’re going to do together when a rough voice interrupts my fantasy.

“Give me your purse.”

I glance at Tyler, sure I’ve misheard. “What did you say?”

But the words didn’t come from him.

I spin to see a guy in black from head to toe. He’s half in the shadows of the alley, which is why I didn’t spot him. “Your purse. And phones.”

Tyler moves between the guy and me, stilling when something under the guy’s jacket glints in the streetlight.

My body goes cold. I don’t know what it is, a knife or a gun, but every part of me’s focused on that silver flash.

“Give it to him,” Tyler says calmly, reaching into his pocket and holding out the phone.

Give what? Shit. My bag.

I swallow and force myself to hold out my purse with my phone inside. The man takes it and shoves it in his jacket. He hasn't touched me, but I feel violated, as if someone's burst our perfect bubble.

I cut a look down the street. The closest major intersection is five blocks away.

“Wallet too.”

Tyler reaches slowly into his pocket and holds it out.

The guy takes it, flips it open to check for cash. “Got any jewelry?”

“No,” Tyler answers steadily.

How can he be so calm?

“What about her?”

I shake my head fast. The man's gaze drops to my chest. My fingers close around the gold necklace.

“It's nothing,” I say softly. “It was a gift.”

“Hand it over.”

My eyes burn as the ring and the rose warm in my hand. I can't move.

“Give it!” He makes a threatening gesture, and I hiccup a breath as I reach for the clasp with trembling fingers.

“No.” Tyler's voice has an edge this time.

Something silver flashes again, and Tyler moves, every bit as fast as the other guy.

“The fuck you doing?!” the other guy shouts as Tyler lunges.

They're on the ground, and I'm watching in horror as they roll.

I want to scream, but it's stuck in my throat. It's like seeing a car crash. I can't call 9-1-1; he has my phone.

They roll over and over, and there's panting and grunting. Then the guy's out from under Tyler, sprinting down the sidewalk.

A sickening groan pulls me back.

"Tyler!" I drop to the ground next to him. One hand's still on my necklace, and I force myself to let go in order to roll Tyler onto his back.

The second I do, there's blood. The smell of it invades my nose, and I fight nausea as I search wildly for the source of it in the dark, patting his chest through his black dress shirt, rumpled and dusty from the fight.

"Tyler, oh my God. Say something."

His lips are parted, and the only thing that escapes is a grunt of pain.

Relief edges in as I shove Tyler's sweat-damp hair off his face, searching his half-lidded gaze.

I feel dampness around my knees, and my chin jerks down.

There's a bloom of red pooling at my leg near Tyler's side, and the moment I realize what's happened, the knot in my throat loosens.

Now, I scream.

A LOVE SONG FOR DREAMERS

PART III

Annie

I'VE NEVER WATCHED a ballet with blood before.

But that's what this is.

The two EMTs move around Tyler in a dance they've rehearsed, one I've never seen and have no part in. He's strapped to a stretcher and lifted into the back of an ambulance. One of the techs, a woman, asks me questions about what happened.

I try to answer, but I can't take my eyes from Tyler—not when they put a mask over his face that hides his shallow breathing or when the lights inside the vehicle make his pale face look yellow. After the stretcher is locked in place in the ambulance, the vehicle takes off.

I want to hold him, but there's so much blood. It covers his dark dress shirt, making it stick to his torso and his arm...

My stomach lurches.

They've got his shirtsleeve up and his arm lifted in the air.

I perch on a stool near Tyler's face, but his eyes are closed. I clutch my necklace hard enough my knuckles go numb, as if I can rewind time, can bring us back to the restaurant or the theater before a man I've never met ripped my reality in half.

“Hey, you,” I murmur, brushing Tyler’s damp hair away from his forehead. “It’s going to be okay.”

My heart’s in my throat. I used to hate how it raced for him. Now I’d give it to him if it would bring color back to his pale face.

They hook him up to something, and a monitor beeps in slow intervals in the corner.

The vehicle bumps every now and again, and every time, the gurney jumps with it. I want to tell them this should be easier on him, but they’re working away, one on each side, and the monitor continues to beep, and I can’t even watch them.

In minutes or hours, the vehicle stops. The back doors swing wide, and a serious-looking man in scrubs eyes the scene inside the ambulance, his gaze finding me.

“Miss, you need to move out of the way.”

I stumble out of the ambulance and watch them lower Tyler to the ground, adjust the bed, and wheel him inside. I follow until they swing through a set of double doors, where I’m stopped by the same man from outside.

“I need to stay with him,” I insist.

“Are you family?”

“He doesn’t have anyone else.”

His eyes soften. “Can you help with medical history?”

I follow him to chairs in the waiting room around the corner, answer his questions as best I can.

Still, I don’t know if Tyler’s parents or grandparents had heart disease. If he’s ever had a reaction to medication.

What I do know is that he's strong and resilient and brave. That his smile fixes every problem I've ever known.

I know I love him and if he's not okay, I'm going to stop breathing.

Finally, the man sets down the clipboard. "Thank you. We'll let you know when we have more. If you need to leave, please see the administration desk first." He nods toward a window on one side of the room.

I pace the hallway. There are people in beds outside of rooms. *Is that what's going to happen to Tyler?*

I find my way to the desk. "I'm here with Tyler Adams. He's in the emergency room."

"I don't have any updates on Mr. Adams at this time."

"I know, but... he needs the best care available."

She pulls up a file on her computer. "Of course. All of our patients receive the best care our hospital can provide. Does he have insurance?"

My throat works. "I don't know. But it doesn't matter what it costs."

This shouldn't be happening. Everything was working out—*with me, Tyler, our lives...*

"Miss, are you feeling light-headed? You look pale."

"I'm fine." I force a smile and turn back down the hall, ignoring the people passing me.

I want to call my dad. He'd know what to do. More than that, I'd give anything to see him and Haley and Sophie brush through those doors.

A tear escapes down my cheek.

I open the contacts on my phone and hit his number. Each ring has my stomach twisting tighter, ready for the next second when he'll answer. I'll tell him I'm sorry for everything, that I'll make it up to him if only he'll help me with this one thing.

But there's nothing.

After four rings, I get his voicemail.

I try to formulate words to leave on a message.

Someone attacked Tyler with a knife.

He's bleeding like crazy.

We're at the hospital.

I don't know what the fuck to do.

It's all my fault.

A girl younger than me walks down the hall with a cast on her arm. Her parents are with her, but when she gets closer, I notice the scratches along her face, the bruises. She meets my gaze, and her face is composed.

Pull it together. For Tyler's sake.

The beep jerks me back, and I hang up without saying a word.

I swipe at my cheeks before making another call.



“IS HE OKAY?” Beck demands as he stalks inside, Elle and Rae in tow. The clock on the wall says it's two in the morning.

I tell them what happened. As I'm finishing, a man in a suit enters the ER doors, searching the waiting room.

I rise to meet Zeke, the record exec who signed Tyler less than two weeks ago. “I told them to spare no expense, but...”

He understands immediately. “You don’t think they’ll take you seriously.”

Zeke nods and goes to the desk, starts talking with the woman there.

“You called him?” Beck demands, coming up behind me.

“I need to know he’s going to be taken care of. Zeke’s interests and Tyler’s are aligned. At least right now.”

Rae strips off her sweatshirt and holds it out to me.

I stare at her, confused as to why she’s offering me clothes when I have my own.

But when she keeps holding out the shirt, I look down at my dress and jacket, caked in blood.

When I start shaking instead of reaching for Rae’s sweatshirt, Elle takes my hand and walks me to the bathroom. Rae’s close on our heels.

Inside the clean six-stall ladies’ room, I strip off my jacket and shove it in the garbage, revulsion taking over. Then I wash the blood off my hands, from under my fingernails.

The liquid soap doesn’t do the best job, and I wish I had one of those bar soaps or an old toothbrush or something.

“It’ll come out later.” Rae’s voice is calm, and it takes the edge off as I meet her steady gaze in the mirror.

I pull the sweatshirt over my dress, grateful it’s at least hiding the blood.

Elle leans against one wall, looking paler than usual.

“You okay?” I ask her.

She lifts a shoulder. “My dad died in a hospital. It took a long time.”

I hug her, for both of us, and she hugs me back.

Rae watches, and even though she’s not part of this impromptu group hug, it feels like it. She’s part of the moment, and their presence gives me strength.

When we get back outside, the waiting room includes Beck, a handful of strangers, and Zeke.

The ER doctor comes into the waiting room. “Miss Jamieson?”

But we’re all on our feet as one while I say, “How is he?”

“He lost a significant amount of blood through a deep laceration in his forearm and hand. We’ve cleaned them, stitched them up. Not life-threatening. Your quick thinking helped keep it from getting there.”

If it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have been there. We wouldn’t have been walking home. If I hadn’t worn his ring around my neck, hadn’t made him fight for it, we would be back at his place right now.

“Miss Jamieson.”

“What?” I blurt, shaking myself.

“Is Tyler right hand dominant?”

I nod.

“That should make recovery easier. He won’t be doing anything with his left hand for some time.”

A noise makes me realize I’ve dropped my bag on the floor.

Zeke answers for me. “The kid’s a guitarist. He’s going on tour in two weeks. He needs to play.”

The doctor stares down the executive. “We’ve moved him to a private room. In time, he’ll be able to look at options for reconstructive surgery. But playing guitar in two weeks is out of the question.”

The reality of it settles around us, leaving the air heavy and cloying.

“Aside from pain,” the doctor goes on, “there may be numbness in the arm and hand, limited to no mobility.” My stomach sinks further. “But you can see him now, if you like.”

“Yes.” I look around at our friends, and they nod.

“You go,” Beck says.

I follow the doctor down the hall and pause outside the room.

I listen through the door. There’s the beeping of a machine. His heart rate.

No other sounds. No raging or groaning. Just silence.

I square my shoulders before heading inside. Tyler fills the bed with his broad frame, and it’s shocking to see him so still. He’s always full of life. Even when he’s contained, there’s a latent energy. Tonight—this morning—there’s nothing. And that terrifies me.

I stop beside the bed, peering down at his pale face. They’ve taken off the mask, and there are traces of lines on his face from where it sat. A thick white bandage covers from mid-forearm to his hand. His pale fingers stick out the end.

I lean over him. “Hey, handsome. How’re you feeling?”

His eyes open half an inch, and his mouth moves a moment before producing a raspy sound. “Good as I look.”

A breath whooshes out of me to hear him speak, as if I thought I might not again. “Beck and Elle and Rae are here. And Zeke. Do you need something else for the pain?”

Tyler shakes his head. “I can’t feel my hand. It won’t move. I can’t...” His eyes close.

My gaze drags to his hand again. There’s no hint of a rusty red stain through the white gauze, but my stomach turns anyway.

I can’t imagine what he’s going through. Not only physically, but the shock and hearing the doctor relay any part of what he told us.

The idea of him not being able to pick up his guitar tomorrow, to do what he’s always done, washes over me in a wave of grief.

I want to hug him, or kiss him, or even cry. Instead, I force myself to be strong for him. For us.

“I’m glad you’re okay. You’re going to be okay,” I amend. I start to reach for his good hand, then see a spot of blood I missed on my wrist and tug Rae’s sweater down to hide it.

“Am I?”

He says it so quietly I almost miss it.

Tyler

WHEN MY EYES CRACK OPEN, the world is black and empty.

Maybe I'm not awake after all. Maybe I'm dead.

But as I turn my head, something cool and soft glides across my cheek. Satiny sheets. They're over me and under me, and my head is cushioned by a fat, fluffy pillow.

The green numbers on the digital clock next to my bed read 11:51.

I've woken up plenty and not known where I was, but as the hotel room comes back to me, I realize I've done it two mornings in a row. The blackness from the heavy curtains doesn't help.

My arm is numb. It's an improvement over the first time I woke up this morning, when it felt as if each muscle was being peeled from my fingers to my elbow.

Once when I was a kid, a brick from a construction site my friends and I were screwing around at fell on my hand from a stack a few feet high.

I couldn't feel my fingers for a couple hours. It sucked.

I'd give anything for that feeling now. What I have instead alternates between pain and numbness. Hell's see-saw.

I shift out of bed, the rest of my muscles aching. I can't shower because of the bandages, but I drag my body to the ensuite bathroom to take a bath.

When the doctor told me what happened two nights ago, the mess of painkillers kept me in a dizzy state of denial.

Lacerations. Severed tendons. Long-term damage.

All of it means I can't play guitar.

The emotions blur together like the sensations. There's panic, clawing at my throat. Disbelief, hammering in my head. And underneath it all, a grief I can't look at too closely yet because it means something I'm not ready to accept...

That no matter how long I sleep, in no world will I wake up and have everything be okay.

When I get out of the bath, I go to the drawer of clothes Beck brought over yesterday from our apartment. I grab boxer briefs and sweatpants and tug them on before heading out to the living room of the hotel suite. The smell of coffee is a small mercy, as is the shape of the girl in the kitchenette.

"You're back," I croak.

Annie turns and smiles, and the awful knot in my chest loosens a bit. "I went to class and picked up some supplies. Saw the nurse was here to change your bandage while I was gone."

I glance toward the table where a note the nurse left says just that. Without asking, Zeke hired her to check on me once a day in the hotel room he insisted on paying for "as long as I need."

The fact that he's keeping such a close eye is unsettling, but calling Zeke to demand why he's still treating me like an

investment given how far my stock has plummeted in the last two days feels low on my priority list.

Annie looks at home in tight jeans and bare feet, a sweater zipped up over her tank top because I cranked the air conditioning. Her hair is twisted up in a knot on her head, Annie's method of keeping it out of her way when she's got bigger things to worry about.

She crosses to me, searching my face for signs of... I don't know. Trauma. Depression. General fucked-up-ness.

I wish she'd stop.

"Nurse wanted to give me a sponge bath too." I try for a joke.

Annie's gaze drags down my bare chest to where my sweatpants hang low on my hips.

"I told you I'd change the bandages for you." There's concern in her voice but also a note of something that makes my dick twitch.

"Nah. Then my girlfriend wouldn't get all jealous."

"Do I look jealous?" She tilts her head, lips curving.

"Yeah. You do." I reach for her with my good hand. It still takes conscious effort not to move the other one, but I grab her waist and tug her against me.

Her cool palms flatten against my chest. She's a reminder not everything in this world is upside down.

Annie tips her face up for a kiss, but I turn away at the last second. "Ah. Forgot to brush my teeth. Be right back."

I head into the bathroom and reach for my toothbrush.

Last night was my first full night out of the hospital, and Annie refused to sleep next to me, afraid to risk grabbing my arm.

But she wouldn't sleep at the dorms, either, instead opting for the pull-out couch in my hotel room.

She's been glued to my side since I got out of the hospital, but I haven't told her everything.

Like the fact that I can't stop thinking about that night.

It happened so fast, but when I replay it, it's slow. All the things I could've done. Should've done.

All the different ways we could've gotten home.

Shoving it away doesn't work, so I've tried starting the memory earlier, at the musical I took her to or in the bar when I gave her that ring.

The problem is it feels as if those memories are getting fuzzier and further away and the ones in the dark alley are getting sharper and closer.

A knock on the suite door outside as I finish brushing my teeth has my ears perking up.

"I'm here with reinforcements." Beck's cheerful voice echoes from the other room, and I step toward the barely open bathroom door to listen. "Male strippers."

Annie laughs, the first time I've heard her laugh since the hospital. It makes my chest hurt.

"How is he?"

"The pain seems more manageable."

"That's not what I mean."

She doesn't answer.

“I can hear you,” I taunt as I head back in to find Beck seated on the couch.

“Dammit. Even the part where I made out with your girl?”

I narrow my gaze on him. “Try it and you’ll lose more than a hand.”

He chuckles. “I talked to your profs about getting extensions on your term projects.” He runs me through the list of accommodations they’ve made for me. “Even printed out your study notes for finals.”

“Thanks,” I say, and mean it. “I’ll get to it eventually.”

I rise and go to the kitchen, where Annie’s looking over her shoulder at me.

“You don’t want to take a look today?” she says. “You must be getting sick of watching Netflix.”

“Doesn’t seem so urgent.” I survey the bowl of marshmallows and box of Rice Krispies cereal someone must’ve brought, because I’m pretty sure they weren’t in the hotel cupboards.

“This, though—this is a priority.” She smiles. “Here, lemme help.”

I take the bowl and stick the marshmallows and butter in the microwave. When I grab a spatula and turn, I bump into her, jostling my arm. I hiss out a breath of pain.

“Shit. I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “You should sit down.”

“I can microwave marshmallows.”

“Evidently you can’t, bro,” Beck calls.

Every muscle in my torso tightens, but I grab my coffee and sink into the chair across from Beck.

I watch Annie make the squares as Beck catches me up on stuff from school.

“This is a nice place,” he says after a few minutes. “Zeke’s taking care of you.”

Annie comes over and sets a plate of squares on the table. “He knows you’re going to recover. There are options for reconstruction. The doctor said so himself, and physio—”

“Physio won’t do shit when what’s in my hand is sliced in two,” I state.

Annie and Beck are quiet while I take a bite of a square. It tastes familiar, but everything else has changed.

“You’re still a musician,” Annie says. “This doesn’t change that. Zeke believes in you.”

“He gets a paycheck when people bring in money, which I don’t see me doing. He has a tour leaving in ten days, and if I can’t play, there’s no way the invite still stands.”

My voice has a new edge. The anger’s not directed at Annie, but she stiffens.

Beck looks between us before rising from his seat. “I’ll leave you guys to it. One for the road?”

I don’t say anything as Beck takes a treat and leaves.

Once the door’s closed, I shove out of the chair and say what we’re both thinking.

“I’m sorry. I’m being an asshole.”

I drop onto the couch, and Annie shifts onto the arm, tucking her feet up in front of her as she watches me.

“It’s understandable,” she says softly.

“It’s not. None of this is understandable.”

A wave of panic rises up, and I fight to keep it down. It's a losing battle.

I've never felt out of control. No one has ever made me out of control. They can take things from me—home, family. I'll survive. But this...

I've always managed myself. I'm the one I can count on. But now I'm broken. Someone took *me* from me.

The worst part is I never saw it coming. I was prepared to lose everything, had felt that before between walking away from Annie and then having my dad die in front of me and losing my contract after.

But how can you prepare for the possibility of losing *yourself*?

The question is still spinning in my mind when Annie shifts over me, careful not to bump my bandaged arm. Her weight settles across my thighs, and suddenly my attention's on her, not my fucked-up life, not my fucked-up hand. It's impossible to think of anything but her floral scent and the way she feels pressing against my groin.

My bad arm's off to the side as if I can forget it by keeping it out of sight. With my good hand, I brush the hair back from her earnest face, tuck it behind her ear.

No matter what's going on, I have this girl. It feels like a small mercy, but I know it's more than that. It's everything.

"Don't give up on me," I murmur.

Her eyes turn liquid. "Never."

Her lips find my neck, and I shift, giving her better access.

Maybe if I pretend hard enough to be normal, it'll happen.

“Back when we were kids,” I start, “I used to check you out. I didn’t admit it to myself. I’d tell myself I was curious what you’d come up with next, but I really wanted to stare at those lips. I was obsessed.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” she murmurs, kissing down my chest. “They’re obsessed with you, too.”

My heart kicks. So does something else, because she’s squirming in my lap. There’s no hiding how hard I’m getting under my sweatpants.

“You’re gonna kill me,” I murmur at the ceiling as my head falls back on the couch. Cool air flows around my groin, and before I know it, a smooth hand fists my cock.

“You seem healthy to me,” she replies.

My tortured groan ends on a laugh. “Annie—”

“Relax. You’re supposed to be healing.”

She works the pants down my hips, and I lift to help as my cock springs out.

The first stroke of her hand from tip to hilt has me hissing out a breath.

Fuck, yeah.

The second has my ass tightening, my hips thrusting up into her grip. Sharp pangs of pleasure jolt up my spine, pulling my balls tight. The blood flows through my veins, and I’m throbbing.

My arm throbs too.

It’s been days since we’ve done this, and I haven’t forgotten the need I have for her.

She's eager and open. She meets my gaze with a look of wickedness, silently telling me exactly what she's going to do next.

Yes.

This beautiful girl with a heart the size of the world is going to make me see stars.

But I can't kick the throbbing down the left side of my body.

Her tongue finds the head of my cock, licking the bead at the end, and that's what I need to forget everything.

I want to flip her over and drive into her until I'm so deep she'll never get me out. I want to spread her wide and eat her until the only word she knows is my name.

I can't.

So, I let her fuck me.

"Harder," I grunt.

She resists, licking down the underside of my dick while giving me a little squeeze at the bottom.

"You're saying you don't like this?" she teases before pulling my head into her mouth and sucking slowly.

I groan. "Annie." There's arousal in my voice, but the frustration has her brows pulling together. "Quit dicking around."

With a moment's hesitation, she moves back down my body and there's no dicking around this time. She fists me with both hands and takes me as far down as she can.

Yes. This is what I need.

I need her.

I need this moment. Everything's okay in this moment.

I catch her hair in my hand, twist it behind her head to keep it out of her way—and to tug on her, to pretend I'm dragging her toward the inevitable conclusion of this when she's the one dragging me.

A piece falls back in her face, and I capture it, tugging it into the makeshift ponytail. Doing that jerks the necklace out from under her shirt.

The rose and the ring.

My heart twists.

I'm so close to coming, and the blood rushes in my veins as thoughts rush to the surface of my mind. They're incongruent, but they *feel* true.

I wish she'd never kept that rose.

I wish I'd put that ring on her finger.

I wish I hadn't stayed with my dad in the hospital and bailed on my first contract.

I wish I'd made us take a cab home.

I wish I'd never let her talk me into believing I could be more than I am.

When I come, she takes everything—my release and my anger and my devastation.

As I sag back into the cushions, Annie settles herself on my thighs once again. She kisses me, and I taste my own salt mixed with her.

“How does it feel now?” she asks, pulling back.

It sounds like a casual question, but it's not. She needs to make me whole again. It might as well be scrawled on her

cheek, words she wrote herself.

“Better,” I lie.

It’s the one gift I can give her, and we’ve lost enough this week.

Annie

“TELL me why you want this job busting your ass for people who couldn’t care less if you were born unless you forget the refill on their Pellegrino.”

Beck’s rapid-fire question has me leaning across the kitchen table in his and Tyler’s apartment.

The first of my two final exams isn’t until tomorrow, but already, I feel as if I’m being grilled.

“Because I need money to pay next semester’s tuition and living expenses and my rock star dad cut me off for failing to tell him I was at performing arts school.”

He cocks his head. “Cute. One more time.”

I square my shoulders. “Because I’m a hard worker, I don’t give up, and I’ll wait whichever tables you tell me to for as many hours as you want.”

“Good.” Beck rises from his chair and goes to the fridge, where he pulls out two Coke cans and hands me one.

I pop the tab and take a long drink. “Thanks for helping me practice for interviews.”

The reality that I need to provide for myself is sinking in. I’ve submitted resumes to at least twenty places—a few

administrative positions, plus serving since there seem to be more of those available.

“Give them the answers they want, and someone will give you a chance.”

My gaze scans the apartment, landing on the guitar leaning against the wall. “Think I should take his guitar to him at the hotel?”

“So he can play it with his teeth?” Beck’s laughter dies when he sees my expression. “Manatee, he’ll ask for it if he wants it.”

That statement bothers me. Tyler’s been doing his best to assure me he’s okay, but it doesn’t feel right.

“I ran into the nurse on my way to school this morning. She said his hand seems to be healing, but I don’t know about the rest of him. Have you noticed anything strange in the last couple of days?”

The way Beck shifts against the counter, frowning, doesn’t ease my mind.

I turn my soda can in my hands. “I know it’ll take time, and this is part of the process. He’s been through a traumatic event, and—”

“You both have.” Beck crosses the distance between us, tilting his face down to search my expression. “Tyler dropped one of his classes rather than rescheduling the final.”

My brows shoot up. “What?” He didn’t say anything this morning in the hour it took me to get up, shower, put away the pullout couch and leave for Vanier.

Beck shrugs. “I think he figured he had enough on his plate. The pain’s been bad again.”

Something else he didn't tell me. My hand tightens on the can until it makes a crunching noise, and I set it on the counter.

Beck lays a hand on my shoulder. "He's gonna work it out. It'll take time. More than four days."

But I hate the thought of Tyler lying to me. If he wanted to keep me from worrying, it's having the opposite effect.

I get why he kept things from me back in high school, when he was trying not to want me.

Now, we're together. We don't need secrets. They'll only keep us apart.

The door opens, and Tyler starts inside before pulling up, looking between Beck and me. "Hey. What are you doing here? I thought you were studying."

Beck's hand slides off my shoulder.

"Beck's helping me with practice interviews for jobs," I respond. "I'm surprised you're here."

"Needed some more clothes."

He hasn't been back since that night.

This is good. A step forward.

"Let me help." I follow him into his room. "Beck said you dropped a class."

"You're talking to Beck about me?" Tyler turns, arching a dark brow.

Before I can answer, Tyler closes the distance between us and presses me up against the door.

The expression on his face turns hungry in a heartbeat. He drops his mouth to mine, kissing me hard. There's an edge that

didn't used to be there, as if he's proving a point. To me or himself, I don't know.

"We should talk," I protest even though my body's already loving his new plan.

"You don't want me." He says it like a statement, not a question, but when he pulls back to study me with dark eyes, there's a wariness underneath.

I take his face in my hands, struggling between giving into his immediate intention and forcing us to talk. About school, or what's in his head, or what I can do to help erase the dark shadows under his eyes.

Tyler's said himself he's a doer, not a talker. Besides, the fact that he showed up here is progress.

I can try to understand that instead of getting hung up on the fact that he's not telling me every thought in his head.

I can meet him where he is, get him through this however he needs.

"I always want you."

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back. He reaches under my skirt to grab my tights, and I take over, working them down my legs. When I have one foot off, he pushes my hand back against the door and grinds into me.

I work on his jeans, get them and his boxer briefs down. He's positioned himself between my thighs, his mouth hungry on my jaw, my neck. I shut my eyes as my head falls back against the door, but we can't get the right angle.

"Bed," I murmur, and he tugs me toward it.

He drops down first, and I move over him. If this is what he needs, what we need, I can do it. Having tons of sex with

my crazy-hot boyfriend is not a hardship.

He's breathing shallowly, eyelids at half-mast and gaze smoldering. "Feels like you're doing all the work lately, Six."

"If this is work, sign me up for overtime."

His shirt is halfway up his chest, revealing cut abs and smooth skin I want to trace with my lips and tongue.

His slow smile grips my heart. "I owe you one. When this is all over, I am going to lie you down on this bed and eat you until you scream."

"Deal."

If I wasn't already wet, I'm soaked now.

I position him at my entrance, brushing him through my slickness once before I sink down on his cock.

We both groan at the feel of it, and I move to thread my fingers through his, hitching a breath when I realize I can only grab one.

His fingers tangle with mine, gripping hard, and I arch my back to take him as deep as he can go.

His heavy exhale is satisfying, but the look in his eyes isn't.

He's not here.

And it hurts.

I thought I could reach him without words, meet him the way that he understands.

But if he's not here when he's inside me, I don't know where to find him.

I don't know how to bring him back.



“HAPPY START OF EXAMS,” Pen singsongs as she grabs my waist.

I lose my balance and wobble on the skates. “Only you would get excited at the prospect of high stakes written evaluation,” I say once I right myself. “I only have two, but I might not survive it if you take me out and I end up concussed. I have a very high center of gravity.”

“Hope you’re talking about your huge brain... because your tits aren’t that big.”

I laugh, the cold air rushing down my throat.

The ice rink in Central Park is full on a weekday afternoon. Elle, Rae and I decided to take a break from cramming for finals in the Vanier library to meet up with Pen. It feels like a spot of brightness in the horror of the past week.

“Your parents must be stoked you’re going home,” I comment.

“My dad’s been asking for weeks what food I want for the holidays. Knowing my mom, she’s probably making it in small quantities so I don’t get fat. Have you talked to your dad?” Pen prompts.

“No.” I think of the unanswered call I made from the hospital a week ago. “But Haley sent me an ‘exam emergency kit’, with socks and notebooks and a huge Starbucks card. At least she’s in my corner.”

Pen’s brows rise. “Did you tell her about Tyler?”

I stare past her at the dozens of people skating happily around the rink oblivious to what’s going on with us. “Not

yet.”

Pen slides to a crisp stop thanks to the figure skating lessons she took freshman year of high school. “How is he?”

“The wound is healing. But the cut only tells half the story. I found a list of the best physical therapists in New York, but Tyler says he can’t afford them. I told him that’s the only way he’ll be able to play again, but he shut down.”

Motion catches my eye, and I see Elle waving from the boards with cups of something on the railing in front of her. Rae’s there too. I head for them, Pen gliding smoothly beside me as we weave through the skaters.

“I’m on to desperate measures—having sex just to get him to talk to me.”

“We’re talking about sex now? I would’ve put Baileys in this hot chocolate,” Elle comments as we pull up next to the boards. Rae hands me a steaming cup.

I’m relieved to see them. Their comfort has been steady. If there’s a silver lining to what happened, it’s that I have real friends here to support me. Not only that, but they understand the pressure Tyler’s facing, because they signed up for it, too.

“Right now, it’s the only time I feel connected to him. Tyler’s never been the most talkative person, but... he used to talk to me. I think he talks to Beck. But I can’t help feeling like he’s slipping away. When we’re together, I don’t know if he’s lying there thinking ‘I’m lucky I’m not dead,’ or ‘I can’t believe this happened to me,’ or”—I take a breath—“‘There goes my future.’ I keep thinking it could have been worse. I could have lost him. But in a way, it feels like I already have.”

It's the first time I've said those words out loud, and they gut me. The idea that he might not come back the same from this is horrifying.

It also feels selfish. How could he be the same? Tyler will have to live with the physical consequences of that night. Even if, through some miracle, they can repair his hand and he can play the way he used to, it'll be a long road back.

Two empathetic faces peer back at me from under knit hats, Pen's from between her earmuffs.

"He loves you. That much hasn't changed, and no one can take that away," Pen reassures me.

When Pen heads for the benches to take off her skates, chatting with Elle as she goes, Rae stays behind, pulling something out of her jacket pocket.

"I got this for you."

She holds up a little souvenir Statue of Liberty figurine on a short chain.

I take in Lady Liberty's resolute expression. "Is this a reminder I'll always be a tourist?"

"No. It's a reminder that New York welcomes people, even if it doesn't always feel that way. And that grace and strength aren't opposites. Sometimes, having both is the only way to survive."

Touched, I take the tiny figure and throw my arms around Rae before she can protest.

"Thank you."

"It's not a big deal," she mumbles back, squirming. "It was five dollars."

I think about the way Tyler acted after the showcase. He went inside himself and came out with the performance Beck recorded that ended up scoring him the contract with Zeke.

Maybe he needs a reminder of who he is, what he does.

“You guys want to go to Leo’s tonight? I know we’re all studying, but only for an hour. Two, tops,” I ask as we catch up to Elle and Pen by the bench.

Elle cocks her head, intrigued. “You have something special lined up?”

“Not yet.” Conviction surges through me. “But I will.”



“YOU CAME!” Elle calls from where she’s perched next to Beck on a stool at Leo’s.

She hugs Tyler, and he wraps his good arm around her for a second.

“I heard that due to your condition, you got an extension until January to write your exams,” Elle says.

“The gifts never end,” he drawls, but his mouth lifts at the corner when he looks back at me, and my heart lifts with it.

It’s not the only reason to be in a good mood. I emerged from the library after skating to find two calls about interviews for serving jobs. Plus, I’ve started investigating both student loans and scholarships to help cover tuition and living expenses next semester.

Rae orders drinks for the crew—alcohol for all of us except Tyler, who’s still on medication and gets a Coke—and we catch up through a few of the open mic acts.

Some Vanier students stop by to talk, and the tightness in my chest eases every time Tyler lets them draw him into conversation. I'm thrilled to see him talking and laughing with our friends.

Beck said Tyler would need time, and he was right.

I catch Beck's eye and he lifts his glass almost imperceptibly. I smile, sighing out a big breath I've been holding for ages.

It almost feels like old times.

Almost.

"Come on, I have a surprise for you." Excitement bubbles through me as I take Tyler's good hand and lead him backstage.

"A surprise. Are we going to have sex backstage?"

"Better."

"No such thing."

I nod to the woman who does the bookings, and she smiles.

"Heard you had a little setback," she calls to Tyler. "Nice to see you back in action."

"You call this action?" he tosses, lifting his arm.

"Chicks dig scars."

The current performer finishes, and I jerk my head toward the stage. "Let's go."

He balks. "Go where?"

I head out to the stage and pull a guitar over my head, nodding to the other mic. A cheer goes up—not for me but

from the people who spot Tyler in the wings.

I lean into the mic. “So, this is the performance that’s been delayed a few weeks. But it’s the one we planned.”

I play the first few chords of our showcase song, and a new round of hoots goes up.

Tyler doesn’t move.

I step back from the mic, continuing to play as I cross to him in the shadowy wings. “Come on! I’ve never had to drag you onto a stage before.”

But whatever’s going on behind those shuttered eyes is dark and private.

“You want me to sing,” he says at last.

“Yes. You sang at the showcase. You were amazing.”

His expression grows darker. “I’m not a singer, Annie. I’m a guitarist. So, give me the damn guitar.”

My fingers still on it. “What?”

“You heard me.”

I lift it over my head.

The crowd’s gone silent.

He takes it with his good hand, shifts it over his head. He tries to hold the strings with his bandaged hand, his face contorting from the effort or the result.

I suck in a breath. Tyler’s pain is mine, and it’s awful. “It’ll take time—”

“It’ll take a fucking miracle.”

He shoves the guitar into my arms and walks off stage.

I chase him into the wings, grabbing his shoulder to make him turn back.

“All I wanted was to be a studio musician, Six. I didn’t used to believe in dreams, but you made me. And I wish to hell you hadn’t.”



IT COULD BE WORSE.

That’s my mantra right now as I curl up in the stacks of the library at Vanier studying.

Yes, my boyfriend got stabbed and he hates music, and maybe me. After last night at Leo’s, he went back to his hotel and I didn’t follow him, staying in my dorm room for the first time in over a week.

But hey. I survived my first exam this morning and in another forty-eight hours, I can apply myself with renewed energy to the cause of finding money to stay in school.

I’m setting down the notes for my Entertainment Management exam tomorrow when my phone vibrates in my bag.

The number has me stiffening.

“Hello,” I answer under my breath.

“Hi.” My dad’s voice is rough. “You called.”

“Nine days ago.”

I pack up my things and head outside so I don’t disturb the other students taking up study cubes and lounging in comfy chairs.

There are a few students out here, too, but not any close enough to listen, if they'd even care. The hype around my dad has all but evaporated. Something else to be grateful for.

He huffs out a breath. "I needed time to think about what happened. Haley said I might have overreacted in New York."

"You think?"

My voice is sharp enough a girl halfway down the hall lifts her head, and I turn away.

"You lied to me, Annie. To both of us." I can hear him trying to get control of himself.

But as I lean against a wall, I can't bring myself to care.

"Tyler got hurt. We were walking home at night. Someone jumped him." I take a breath. "He's going to be okay."

"Jesus. Annie, what about you?"

"I'm taking care of him."

"That's not what I meant." He curses. "Come home. We'll deal with all of this once you're back."

I want to. If he'd answered last week when I called and told me he'd fix it all, I would've taken him up on it in a heartbeat.

My fingers find the little Statue of Liberty keychain and I turn it in my hand.

"You told me life in this industry never goes the way you plan, and you're right. I came to New York to pursue my dreams. You may not agree with them, but you don't have to. I'm not giving up."

I think he's going to argue, but he doesn't.

"Haley and I will pay your tuition if that's what you want."

My chest expands in relief. *I don't need to get a job, don't need to struggle to figure out how I'm going to stay here.*

But my gaze plays over the students in the hall. They're from all walks of life, all of them here because they can't imagine being anywhere else. What they all have in common is they're here on their terms.

The realization that hits me is sobering and freeing at once.

“You taught me how to swim. You taught me how to love music. But there's one thing you taught me without meaning to, and it's how to make it without giving a fuck what anyone thinks. I don't need your approval or your money. You started out in this industry when you were my age, and you made it on your own. I will too.”

There's silence on the line, punctuated only by hoarse breathing.

“When are your exams finished?” he asks at last.

“Next week.”

“Come home. Bring Tyler.”

I run a finger over the ridges of the tiny figurine's torch, her gown, her pedestal. “I am home, Dad.”

Annie

“THERE’S A PROBLEM WITH YOUR WRITING,” Ms. Talbot informs me, looking up from the computer in her office.

It’s quiet at Vanier since exams finished yesterday. Only a handful of students staying for the holidays remain, plus a number of the faculty.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“It’s better than any other student’s I’ve seen. These lyrics you wrote are meaningful and specific.”

My shoulders relax. I didn’t realize how much tension I was holding until she said those words. “Thank you.”

“I’d like you to help me finish the book for this show. It doesn’t pay much, but it’s a good learning experience. And you should consider auditioning, at the right time.”

Excitement surges through me. “I’d love to.”

I could be in an off-Broadway show. One I helped write.

“But,” she goes on, “I need your commitment. You pulling out of the showcase was shortsighted and foolish.”

“I understand. This is my dream. I’ll do whatever it takes to see it through.”

“Good.” Her gaze narrows. “On another front, I heard about Mr. Adams’ injury. I’m sorry. He was a tremendous talent.”

“Is,” I correct. “He can’t play yet. But he’s still the same person he was.”

In the days since Leo’s, I haven’t slept at Tyler’s hotel.

I wanted to help him. Wanted him to open up.

He did, didn’t he?

He said he wished I hadn’t made him believe in something bigger.

“Life changes us.” Talbot’s voice brings me back. “It can happen over years or in an instant. He may never be the same person. But there’s another risk, which is that you might lose yourself in trying to find him.”

I want to reject her words, but my throat is too tight to produce sound.

“How old are you?” she goes on.

“Nineteen.”

Her clear eyes crease at the corners. “Life will change you in more ways than you can imagine, good and bad. Now, you have an opportunity. Don’t let that go to waste.”

I nod. “Thank you, Ms. Talbot.”

“Annie.”

I don’t realize the tear has streaked down my cheek until she holds out the tissue.

“Call me Miranda.”

On my way out, I make a decision.

Tyler and I need to talk. Maybe he's wrong and maybe I am, but we're going to figure this out together.

The whole subway ride over to Tyler's hotel, I'm torn between thoughts of him and the opportunity I've been given.

When I get up to street level at the other end of the line, there's an incoming call on my phone.

"Miss Jamieson, this is the financial aid office at Vanier. I know the last time we spoke there wasn't anything available, but we have new funding that hadn't been added to our online system. It would cover tuition, plus a stipend."

I pull up in the middle of the street, the backs of my eyes burning.

"Miss Jamieson? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here." I swallow.

I could stay in school and have this huge opportunity.

"Are you interested in applying?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you."

After hanging up, I bound to Tyler's hotel.

When I get to his suite, he's gone. But a note scrawled on the hotel stationary on the counter says he went to a meeting at the studio.

I hope they're not kicking him out.

Although, maybe it would be for the best if he went back to his apartment. He needs to get back into his routine, his life.

If this is your last time here, you might as well take advantage.

I write a note back to Tyler, then put on my bathing suit, which I'd brought over last week and hadn't had a chance to use, and head down the elevator.

The swimming and fitness area is quiet midafternoon. As I dive in the deep end, the feel of the water on my body is heaven. I front crawl the length of the space, then back. Again.

I put in a dozen laps, then another dozen, until my muscles burn and my head is clear.

When I finally lift my head and take off my goggles, pulling myself up with my forearms to rest on the edge of the pool, a pair of shoes fills my vision. I peer up those denim-clad legs, the dress shirt, the towel under one arm.

There will never be a day when seeing Tyler Adams doesn't make me happy.

"Hi," I say, smiling. "How was your meeting?"

"Surprising." He drops the towel on the deck and crouches down.

I notice a slip of paper in his hands. "Are they kicking you out of the hotel? We knew it'd happen eventually. I can help you move your stuff home."

I shift forward to take the paper, my damp fingers leaving drops on its surface.

"It's a first-class ticket to London. Leaving tomorrow." My brain struggles to do the math. When I put the pieces together, they leave me breathless. "He still wants you on the tour."

Tyler grimaces. "I can't play guitar worth shit. But he wants to capitalize on my fifteen minutes of fame after the video from Beck's vlog as the frontman of some manufactured band."

“By performing music,” I emphasize. “This is a good thing.”

He turns away.

I set the ticket carefully on a dry part of the deck before hoisting myself out. I wrap the towel around myself as I straighten, grabbing the ticket again. I follow him as he paces the length of the pool.

“So, you’re okay with it?” he tosses over a shoulder. “You want me to live out of busses and planes with a bunch of dudes. To flirt with women who think more about what it’d be like to fuck me than the music I’m making.”

Jealousy rises up, and I shove it back down. “That’s not what this is.”

If he goes on tour, it won’t matter if he plays guitar or sings or juggles on stage with his feet. He’ll make it work. The audience will love him because his intensity, his seriousness, his capability, will shine through.

He pulls up, still facing away. “With a guitar in my hands, I’m better than anyone at Vanier. Better than Jax. Or I was—two weeks ago. They took it from me.”

The rawness in his voice guts me. I move in front of him, cupping his face and forcing him to look at me with angry eyes. “No one can make you less than you are. And there are plenty of ways to make music, Tyler.”

But his cynical expression makes me sick.

Talbot’s words come back to me. *Am I the one who’s deluded?*

These last two weeks have been a nightmare.

His hand is healing, but the rest of him is dying.

I've tried everything to pull him out of it, to show him I'm here for him and we'll get through this together.

He still tells me he loves me, but if he turns down this tour and moves out of the hotel, is this what our new normal will be? His bitter accusations? Me walking on eggshells?

The other night at Leo's, the way he looked at me and at the guitar... That was not the man I love. If he doesn't love music, I don't know who he is.

I press the ticket against Tyler's chest, my eyes burning. "You should do it."

"What?"

For the first time, the anger leaves his face and he's my Tyler again. The curious, thoughtful boy with the fast hands and the slow smile.

He looks past me, watching a family emerge from the changing room to get into the pool behind us.

"You made me promise once to never leave you."

"I'm asking you to."

The words hang between us.

My hands fist at my sides hard enough my nails dig into my palms. "Miranda—Talbot," I go on at his confusion, "wants my help with the musical. She says I should audition when it's finished."

Tyler reaches up to tug on his hair. "Wow. Congrats. Your dreams are coming true when mine are going up in smoke."

"I know you're going through something unimaginable, but don't accuse me of holding my success over you."

His gaze works over mine as if he's trying to see through my words, trying to understand.

"I didn't mean it like that," he says at last, gesturing toward the doors. "We should go upstairs."

We head up to his room, and I shower quickly and throw my clothes back on.

He doesn't try to join me.

If I expected the tension to have dissipated by the time I'm back in the living area, it hasn't.

Tyler's standing by the window. He cuts a look toward me when I emerge. "If I go on tour, what happens?"

"You get to light up a stage."

"I meant to us."

I count the beats of my heart, the slow, steady rhythm reminding me the world is still turning, even though it feels as if everything's stopped.

I reach for the necklace I put back on after the swim, but it feels too much like a tell. So, I force my hand down to my side as I cross to him at the window, my gaze lingering on the ticket on the coffee table as I pass it.

When I stop in front of him, he hooks a finger in my belt loop to fit my hips to his. That tiny gesture nearly breaks me, and when I look up to see Tyler's handsome face full of frustration and confusion, that only makes it harder.

Miranda's words come back to me. There's so much ahead for both of us. We've always been striving toward greatness, no matter how far away it feels and no matter what gets in the way.

I want this chance for Tyler.

I want it for me, too.

“I know this isn’t what you wanted,” I start, “but it’s still an opportunity. And even if it doesn’t feel like it right now, you will hate yourself if you don’t try.”

I will hate myself if I let you quit trying.

The tears are threatening to spill over. For once, I shove the emotions down.

Instead, I kiss him. It’s deep and hard, and every second that my lips move over his, I’m fighting the burning behind my eyes with everything in me.

When he pulls back, my panicked thought is that it’s too soon. I need more of him, need his lips on me and his comfort in me, and even if he’s not quite my Tyler, he’s here and that’s enough.

“I’ll go.”

His words make my stomach drop. The relief I was expecting never comes, but I nod anyway.

“It’ll be good,” I promise. I press up on my toes to wrap my arms around him in a fierce hug. “I’m so proud of you. Call me from London, okay? I don’t care what time you get in.”

Tyler exhales hard, and when I force myself to pull back, the beautiful gaze I know better than my own moves between my lips and my eyes.

“Six...Why does this feel like goodbye?”

The nickname makes my heart swell and shatter at once.

I force my mouth to smile, and every muscle hurts. “It’s not.”

But I know the truth.

Deep down, I know it is goodbye.

Annie

Two and a Half Years Later

“WHY IS it always prodigal sons and never prodigal daughters?” Elle’s voice comes over the phone as I shift into the limo outside the terminal at DFW.

“Maybe women are smart enough not to go back.”

“Or they didn’t leave it so long in the first place.”

As the car pulls away, I slide my sunglasses up my nose. “Going home might be the worst idea you’ve had since becoming my roommate.”

“It wasn’t my idea. Haley invited you on behalf of her and your dad. I just played the dead dad card and reminded you that it sucks not to have a dad in the first place.”

“You’re right. And I’ll be back in New York first thing Monday. You won’t even notice I’m gone,” I say as we wind our way through the mass of ramps and overpasses.

“Well, someone noticed. He’s been knocking on the door again.”

Just what I need. “I’ll handle him.”

“Oh, I don’t care about that. But I think he’s upset you’re *not* handling him.”

Silence grabs the line for a beat, two.

“It’s only been a month,” Elle goes on, softer this time. “You okay?”

“Emotionally, yes. Ian and I are over. But dating someone you work with—someone you can’t stop working with even after you split—is like getting bangs. It seems like a great idea and then three months later, you’re crying into a bucket.”

Elle’s delighted laughter makes me smile. “You’ve been living with me too long.”

We hang up, and I settle into the drive, unsure of whether I want it to go faster or slower as we pass familiar buildings and streets.

I have a career in entertainment I’ve built myself. Playbills with my name on them, even if I was only onstage twenty minutes a night. An actual apartment in New York. Friends I can count on.

But life is about to ask me a question.

I feel it in the air.

And right now, the air has me tingling.

Too soon, the car pulls up the driveway, and I punch in the gate code. The winding drive is the same as I remember, but now there’s a second laneway that runs parallel on the other side of the fence. It runs up the property and around the house.

Interesting.

On that loop, a valet is parking cars, and there are at least fifty—mostly expensive late-model, with a few classics

thrown in.

“Go to the front,” I instruct my driver.

By the time I’m out of the car, Haley’s already emerging from the double doors. She’s wearing a yellow dress that’s feminine and no-nonsense at once and looks gorgeous with her dark hair. I can’t help but grin.

But my gaze lands on her round stomach, and I suck in a breath. “You look ready to pop.”

“And you look great.” She beams and folds me in a hug.

It feels good to hug her. These past couple of years, we’ve gotten closer even though I’ve been away. Strange how you can feel close to someone you never see except on occasional video calls.

“Annie!”

I pull back to see a tiny human in the doorway in a green dress, pigtails in her dark hair and fists on her waist.

“You came for my party,” she states.

The air vanishes from my lungs. My half sister isn’t a toddler anymore. She’s got Haley’s bow mouth and amber eyes like mine and the last time I saw Sophie in person, she couldn’t say a complete sentence.

All of which makes it hard to respond in kind.

“Sure did. But I heard it was Dad’s party.”

She shakes her head vigorously. “It’s for me. Those are my friends.” She points back over her shoulder and I swallow the laugh.

Her eyes brighten as she inspects me. “What’s in there?” She points to the weekender bag the limo driver set by the

door.

“A party dress. You want to see?”

“Uh-huh.”

Then she turns on her heel and takes off back into the house.

Haley rolls her eyes. “Well, that’s Sophie. She broods like your dad and laughs like me but we still don’t know where the energy comes from.”

“I’m sure we’ll have time to hang out later. Anyway, sorry I’m late. We sat on the tarmac two hours because of a baggage issue. Looks like the party’s started,” I say as I nod toward the cars.

“It has, but the path to your room is clear if you’d like to get changed.”

Haley starts to grab my bag, but I step in. “Don’t you dare.”

She leads the way through the house. Sounds of the party drift through the hallways, but aside from glimpses of stylish figures wearing casual suits and chic summer dresses in the kitchen and living room and patio beyond, there’s no one in our path as we head upstairs.

“We’re so glad you came,” Haley starts. “I know you’ve been busy working on your new show.”

“It’s not every day Dad launches a music label. I never thought he’d go through with it.”

“Me either. He’s talked about it long enough, but I figured it was his way of complaining about his former label when he sees Mace and the guys from the band.”

When I push open the door of my old bedroom, I freeze.

It's exactly the way I remember.

My music boxes line the shelves, the same duvet covers the bed.

I set my bag down and swallow the emotion that rises up.

I had been expecting it to hit when I saw the house, but for some reason, it's coming now with my stepmom watching me, one hand on her swollen stomach and her lips softly curved.

"This will always be your home," she says firmly. "No matter what."

"Thank you," I say and mean it.

Haley leaves, and I turn back to my suitcase, pulling out the backless purple dress with a deep V neckline and the strappy sandals that show off my legs, toned from dancing.

Thanks to being on stage eight times a week, I have makeup and hair down to a science. Once my eyeliner is done, my lips are slicked a coral pink in honor of summer, and my hair waves down my back, I step into the dress.

This place may not have changed, but I have. Now that the run of my show is over, my hair's back to its natural dark red and starting to grow out, still a couple of inches past my shoulders. My body was always lean, but now it's strong from dance and long hours of rehearsing. I don't have ready access to a pool since the building Elle and I live in doesn't have one, but I do try to hit the gym three days a week and eat well in order to sustain the pace of my lifestyle.

Because if there's one thing I've learned about being in this industry?

You have to want it—more than anything.

Even then, your dreams find ways to mess with you.

When I head downstairs, there are a ton of people in the great room and spilling out to the patio. I scan the room, but most faces are only vaguely familiar at best. I don't see my dad or Haley or even Sophie.

At the bar, I accept the offered glass of champagne from the attractive bartender who checks me out with a grin as he passes me the glass, but I'm thrown when two strong arms band around me from behind.

I spin around and delight surges through me. "Uncle Ryan!"

I fold him in a hug.

"Good to see you, kid. How long are you staying?"

"Just for the weekend. I couldn't miss the party."

"I didn't know you were coming."

Surprise works through me, but before I can comment, there's a light clinking of glasses and we follow the crowd through the open doors to the patio.

My dad is standing in the center of the crowd, a polite circle formed around him.

My hand tightens on the stem of the champagne flute.

He's wearing a dark jacket over his jeans, his hair casually styled without any hint of gray. The hard cut of his jaw and nose haven't changed, but I swear there're more lines when his eyes crinkle against the sun.

I haven't been home since first semester at Vanier, though I talk to Haley on video or audio calls at least once a month. Sophie makes appearances almost every time, but my dad does

drive-bys only on occasion—as if he, like me, knows things between us aren't okay.

I know he offered to meet me halfway after Tyler got hurt, but it felt as if he saw what happened to Tyler as proof I fucked up by moving to New York, by straying from his protection.

So I focused on achieving my dreams on my own. I've survived months I didn't know if I'd make enough money to keep the lights on, weeks of ice baths after endless dance rehearsals until my limbs ached. All for the chance to be on stage.

Even though I'm not yet sure what I want to say to him, he must have some idea what he wants to say to me since he invited me here.

That he was wrong would be a good start.

“Thank you for coming,” he says to the crowd. “The music industry is changing in ways it never has. The old labels have consolidated, adapted, but they're not meant for this new world. They put money in the pockets of executives. This new label is going to change all of it. Put the music and the musicians back in the...” His gaze meets mine, and his words trail off as an expression of disbelief takes over his face.

I suck in a slow breath as I connect the pieces.

Haley's emphatic words.

Ryan's surprise.

My dad didn't invite me. He didn't even know I was coming.

He clears his throat and continues. “Back in the middle, where they belong. Enjoy yourselves today and celebrate with

us. Not only for the label, but for music.”

Applause and cheers rise up, but I barely hear them.

The patio is suddenly too loud, too stimulating.

I need to get out of here.

I turn away, taking a long, urgent drink of champagne as my gaze lands on the pool house.

Except it's not a pool house anymore.

There's a decorative iron gate—open, for now—between the patio and the structure, and the building itself has been renovated, expanded to twice its original size.

I head toward the building, winding through the crowd, and a parking lot on the other side comes into view through the hedge of shrubs angled to afford privacy and separate the two areas. The main entrance to the building is off the parking lot, meaning the door by the pool is a side entrance, likely intended for family only and accessible solely from this direction.

My dad would never want someone else's business in his backyard. But his business, with a literal door he can close, a way to access it anytime and close it just as easily...

That he'd like.

The door is etched glass, and I turn the handle, expecting it to be locked, but it gives.

For all the noise outside, it's quiet inside. I step inside to find sleek off-white carpet with geometric designs.

I follow the short hallway that opens into the old pool house bedroom, which is now a lobby unlike any I've ever seen. Display cases line the walls, but instead of rows of hard

seats, there's a couch and comfy chairs, plus two more hot-desk workstations on the far side.

A more permanent-looking desk—probably for reception—is where the bed used to be.

Feelings slam into me, the scent of sun and cedar I must be making up from memory.

It takes a second for me to notice a curvy, dark-haired woman younger than me behind the desk. Her hair is in braids, her smile wide. “I know you. You're Annie Jamieson. I recognize you from photos,” she says, her voice vibrating with excitement. “I'm Shay.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You must've come to look around. Good idea to wait until after the rush.” She gestures toward the desks. “These are for visiting artists and staff. On each side of the hall there's a studio, an office, and a meeting room. It's for music, not luxury. Function, not form. But I think it's beautiful.” She says the last part under her breath, as if she's rebelling by merely voicing the words.

“You saw it before the renovations,” Shay goes on. “Do you miss what it was?”

Feelings slam into me—nostalgia, longing, regret. “Sometimes. But things are meant to change.”

I walk down the hall and try the handle of the first studio door. It's locked.

When I look across at the second studio, I see movement on the other side of the door. I try the handle, and it gives, opening soundlessly. Laughter fills my ears.

There's a man standing straight, a woman pressed close to him. I clear my throat.

They both turn toward me.

The woman's beautiful, but it's not her I'm looking at.

It's him.

Strong legs are encased in indigo jeans. Broad shoulders stretch the black jacket, which is rolled up at the sleeves to reveal swirls of inky tattoos. The top two buttons of the matching shirt are undone. And above that...

There's a face so familiar it hits me in the gut.

Not because it's impossible to scan an entertainment newsfeed without seeing him.

No, the gut punch is because I've kissed that face. Dreamed about it.

I've felt it between my thighs.

He was a man when he left on tour, but he's more than that now. I see it in every hard line of his body, every shadow on his face.

"You surprised us." The woman laughs, reminding me we're not alone. She keeps talking, but I don't get any of it.

Tyler's dark eyes intensify as he takes me in. His chin drops as he starts a slow survey at my heels, drags up my legs, lingering at the top as if he can see what's beneath my dress.

Or he's remembering it.

There shouldn't be so many feelings colliding in my chest.

"And you are?" the woman asks me, jerking me back.

I should've had something to eat on the plane. That feeling in the air, that sense of unease lifting the hairs on my neck...

He's standing in front of me wearing black and an unreadable expression.

Tyler Adams might've changed in two years, but so have I. I'm better at hiding my heart instead of wearing it on my sleeve.

But that doesn't stop me from draining my champagne before answering.

“Too old for this shit.”

Tyler

THERE ARE different kinds of famous.

There's the famous that puts asses in seats at your latest show and fan pages in your results when you type your name into an internet search bar.

Then, there's the famous where you can't cross a street without being ambushed. Even industry insiders rush you, only they do it with air kisses and stories rather than with selfie requests.

After a year of touring and an EP, I'm still closer to the first camp. But the man hosting this party will always rule the second.

The patio's decked out with high-end décor and higher-end guests. The king of rock has come out of retirement to start a label, and everyone wants a front-row seat.

It's not Jax I'm looking for.

I search the crowd for Annie, and I finally spot her at the bar. It takes a few minutes for me to get to her, as I'm slowed by industry types who try to suck me into conversations.

"I didn't think I'd see you," I comment once I fight my way through.

At the sound of my voice, Annie turns.

I've played big stages, but the moment those golden eyes fringed in dark lashes find me, I'm a fucking newb.

At being a musician.

At being a man.

Her dark-purple dress hugs her figure, and I can't stop staring. Not because she looks fantastic, though she does, but because it's been so long since I've seen her in person.

"I didn't think I'd walk in on you in the pool house with a girl. Again." Her voice is low and smooth, with a hint of self-mocking. "Somehow, that wasn't the most awkward encounter I've had this afternoon."

Annie looks past me at the crowd.

I follow her gaze but don't see where it's landed. "In that case, I owe you a drink."

"It's an open bar."

"Fine, I'll buy you two."

That earns me a reluctant smile as Annie orders a sparkling water and I get a ginger ale.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here, either," she admits as she takes the drink from the bartender. "Heard you were in the studio in LA."

"I'm on a break."

"For?" She sidesteps to let a man brush past her heading toward the bar.

I turn it over before answering. "Sanity."

The fabric of my dark jacket absorbs the sun, and I'm heated from that and her attention.

She lifts her glass. "To sanity, then."

"Amen."

We both drink.

I swore if I saw the first woman I ever loved again—*when* I saw her again—it would be like seeing an old friend.

But as my gaze runs over her pale skin and slick lips, it doesn't feel like that at all.

It feels like every scar I've ever had is new again.

"Ooof," comes a noise from knee height as something slams into my legs.

Sophie peers up with bright eyes from under dark bangs. Her little elbows try their best to clamp around my knees. "I got you, Uncle Tyler."

"And what will you do with me?"

Sophie's round face scrunches. "Cheese."

"You're going to turn me into cheese."

"No." Giggles rack her little body, vibrating through my legs. "There's cheese up there." She points to a high top table a few feet from the bar, lowering her voice as if we're conspiring together.

Then she shrieks, delighted, as I boost her up on my hip.

"Does Annie like cheese?" Sophie asks as I walk us to the table.

"I have watched your sister inhale her body weight in cheese fries."

I let Sophie pick out a few chunks of cheese with a toothpick before setting her back down.

“Want anything?” When I start to pass Annie a plate, her fingers brush mine.

“Be careful. Tyler has an ouchie,” Sophie intervenes from around a bite of Manchego.

Annie takes the plate but stares at the black rose on my hand, the vines winding down over my knuckles. “I heard it was three months before you started playing.”

When she saw my hand last, it was a mess of still-red gashes. Now, it’s covered in white lines, but the ink is all most people see.

“I was reduced to singing for eighty-six days. The guys I toured with mocked me endlessly. Got my first surgery when we came back to the States.”

There was still pain, but at least I had more control of my fingers. I remember the hope that came from the surgery, thinking it would be a cure-all, only to realize it had made a modest difference at best.

“Did you tell the band to suck it?”

“Among other things.” My lips twitch at the corner and hers curve to match.

Suddenly, I’m remembering the feel of them under mine. I’m thinking of the things that mouth has done to me. The things I never had a chance to do with it.

I wish I could say we made it work with me on tour and her in New York, or even that we tried.

But that would be a lie.

She didn't want me.

Not that she said as much. But overnight, our relationship was reduced to stilted texts, rushed phone calls squeezed into the margins of our lives.

The shows and the work and the relentless schedule were something I ended up grateful for because they kept me from thinking too much about what could've been.

I was going through some shit—trauma, plus shock, chased by some depression. Some days felt fine, like cracked pieces of broken ground after an earthquake settling together over time. Some days, it was hell.

“How hard was it to learn to pick with your other hand?” Her question brings me back.

To the rest of the world, I'd diminish it. The long hours late at night, early in the morning, learning my craft from scratch until I was better than most, if not as good as I once was.

“Hard.”

Her eyes color with compassion over the rim of her glass.

I'm not the same person I was two years ago. Most people would agree that I'm more, given my career, my recognition, the gold album I recorded with the help of half a dozen nimble-fingered studio musicians.

But in some ways, I'm less.

We've both moved on, and I don't blame her for our breakup. I was impossible to be around.

Still. I wish she hadn't been so quick to ask me to leave, and so willing to accept when our schedules made it harder to connect.

Because she didn't want us as much as I did.

So maybe I do blame her.

My gaze drops to a chain glinting dully in the sunlight and disappearing beneath the already-low V of her dress.

When she shifts, I catch a glimpse of the end of it. Instead of a ring and a rose, there's pearl-encrusted pendant.

Because it's not my chain.

And she's not my girl.

There are plenty of women who'd beg for a chance to satisfy me, including the one I met at this party who was exploring the studio with me when Annie walked in.

I clear my throat. "I heard you're writing a new show." I haven't been keeping tabs on her, but I get the big developments from my roommate in LA, since she and Beck are still friends.

"We're pitching funders later this summer, but there've been some problems." A frown crosses her face. "I wasn't sure I should come to the party at all because of my deadline. Now it turns out Haley invited me and my dad didn't know I'd be here."

I blink. "You're joking."

She shakes her head, her hair slipping over one shoulder as she scrunches her face in embarrassment. "No. I guess two years is a long time to be gone."

The pieces click into place.

That was her other surprise today.

Jax hasn't mentioned her to me since he and I reconnected after my tour, but I figured it was for my benefit, not because

he hadn't seen her either.

Someone calls Annie's name and she looks past me.

"Looks like Uncle Ryan wants to catch up. I should go."

"It was good to see you, Six," I say and mean it.

I don't know why I slide in the nickname. Habit.

Not to see if there's a flicker behind her eyes.

"You too, Tyler."

But as she brushes past me, I can't help thinking Annie's the one on the outside looking in.

And it feels wrong.



"CONGRATS," I tell Jax after Haley takes Sophie for some quiet time. The party has started to die down, and only Jax's closer contacts and friends remain.

I lift the glass of bourbon he pushed on me to toast him at the bar inside the house. "You have everything you could want. A beautiful family. A bourbon brand. And now a label, the great 'fuck you' to the studio that fucked you first."

The man of the hour has stripped out of his jacket and is now wearing a black T-shirt and black pants and cowboy boots. When I first arrived, I offered to get him a hat, and he smirked while Haley laughed and murmured something that sounded like "midlife crisis."

"You've been in this business long enough to know this life doesn't come without sacrifices." He shakes his head. "Speaking of, how's recording going with Zeke?"

I frown. “I’m halfway through an album, but I’ve been slowing down.”

The past few months in studio, I’ve gotten down four finished tracks. But they don’t make me happy the way music used to make me happy.

“Come record with me.”

I swirl my drink. “I’m on a five-year contract for three albums with a studio option.”

“Which means your ass belongs to Zeke.”

“My ass belongs to no one.”

I’ve paid off my dad’s medical bills, and I’m planning to buy a place by the ocean where it’s warm. Zeke’s sending me new songs I have zero interest in recording. Plus prods about self-promotion. Like even on break, I can placate the record execs by dropping a few poolside selfies. Hashtag tortured artist or whatever the PR team emails.

I rub my left hand over my neck, mostly to feel the mess of tingling and soreness that sets in from flexing my fingers.

Jax’s gaze narrows. “It hurts.”

“Scar tissue’s a bitch. It doesn’t like the cold or vibration or days that end in Y.”

I could write for days about the moods of a damned appendage, one that intermittently has numbness and searing pain, that makes me regret I ever took for granted a second of what I used to do.

What I’ll do again soon.

“I head out the doors to the patio, the easy laughter of the stragglers standing in familiar groups drawing me toward

them. When my gaze lands on the former pool house beyond, I stop.

My mentor pulls up at my side.

“You should’ve started this label years ago,” I say.

Jax only shrugs. “Things happen at the right time. May not be your right time or mine, but they happen when they’re meant to.”

I crane my neck towards the gardens edging the patio. “There a Buddhist statue around here I haven’t seen?”

Jax laughs, his deep voice rumbling. “Problem with the label is I’ve got some guys booking the space, but we need new sounds. New voices.”

“You haven’t found anyone.” I’m surprised to hear that because I know dudes who’d fly from LA in a heartbeat to record at Jax’s studio.

“I have one kid, but he’s got an attitude, and with all the legal and financial red tape, I haven’t had time to work with him. Sophie’s been acting out lately, and Hales is due in six weeks.”

“Supervising a teenager can’t be that hard. I practically taught myself.”

He eyes me up. “If it’s that simple, you try getting him to lay down something good.”

I’m only half listening, my gaze finding Annie across the patio. She’s standing in a group that includes Mace, Jax’s former bassist Brick, and Brick’s fiancée, Nina.

“Haley invited her.” Awe and weariness twine in Jax’s multimillion-dollar voice.

“How long is she staying?”

“No clue. Haven’t got my wife pinned down long enough to ask her which direction the sun’s rising and setting in, either.”

I take a sip of the bourbon. It’s actually not bad. “You and Annie should’ve made up sooner.”

“I’ve tried.”

“Try harder.”

“Kids aren’t that easy, Tyler. Someday, you’ll see.”

I always figured the rift between them came from Annie’s “try anything twice” attitude and Jax’s fierce protectiveness, along with a dose of stubbornness on both sides. Regardless, I hate that Jax and I made up when he and his own daughter haven’t.

I could fix it.

The thought takes hold and won’t let go.

I turn to face my former mentor. “Give me two weeks. I’ll get a decent track out of your aspiring artist in the studio.”

Jax chuckles. “I assume you want something in return.”

I drain the rest of my bourbon and set the glass on the nearby table the caterers have started cleaning.

“You take care of your problems with your real kid. Tell Annie you’re sorry,” I go on under the weight of Jax’s stare. “That you’re an idiot and you fucked up two years ago and fans can’t buy you a scrap of perspective when it comes to the people in your life.”

When his amber eyes spark, and it’s unsettling how much they’re like Annie’s. “You’re serious. Why do you care

enough to give me two weeks of your time?”

“Because I made things harder for her.”

“That’s the only reason.”

“That’s the only reason,” I echo.

But as he turns to go back inside, I yank off my jacket, feeling overheated once again.

Annie

I'M RIPPED from my dreams in my former bedroom the next morning. For once, it's not because I've got an idea for a song or a line I need to write down.

It's because of shrieking in the distance.

I tug on tailored black shorts and a white tank top I brought from New York and head downstairs, but by the time I get there, it's quiet. The morning sun spills in through the huge kitchen windows and the slider doors. The only sign of life is Haley moving around the cavernous space, making coffee in a flowing black top.

"Everyone alive?" I ask.

She turns, smiling. "Your dad took Sophie to daycare. She's always loved it, but recently, she's not a fan. Oliver doesn't like her and she doesn't like Teddy."

She's moving slowly toward the fridge, either from tiredness or her gigantic belly, and I spring into action. "You sit down. I'll make breakfast."

I grab a carton of eggs, some bacon, and cheese for good measure, plus a huge frying pan from a cupboard, before turning on the gas.

“Why did you invite me without telling Dad?” I ask over my shoulder. “I shouldn’t be mad at a pregnant woman. But I am.”

“It was kind of a dick move, but my heart was in the right place. I wasn’t sure I could get you both here with your guards down otherwise.”

I drop four strips of bacon into the pan. “I shouldn’t have lied to him—to both of you—about school, but he overreacted when he found out.”

“I get why you feel that way. I do. But if you look for evidence to be angry with someone, you’ll always find it. What kind of place would the world be if we stopped weighing and measuring mistakes, and using those measurements to define our relationships? Maybe we’d be able to choose how we want to feel about other people from love instead of judgement.”

I crack eggs into the remaining half of the simmering pan, watching the whites spread.

“How come Dad has eight years on you, but you’re the sensible one?”

She snorts. “The question for you,” she continues, “isn’t whether you want to be part of this family, but how you want to be part of it. I’m the one with the least say, but for what it’s worth, I’d love for you to be here to celebrate days like yesterday. To feel like this is your home when you need one. I want to see you and your dad laugh when Sophie names her trucks after eighties bands and races them down the hallway. I want all of us to raise a glass to you when you conquer the world, or when you go down trying.”

I don't know how I'm going to settle things with my dad, but hearing how Haley talks, seeing the three of them together, knowing I'll have a new half brother or sister soon, I want to be a part of it.

The plates are in the same cabinet they used to be, and I retrieve two.

I finish cooking our breakfast and set both plates in front of us. Haley chuckles as she takes in the flower design I made on her plate with syrup.

"I figured no one's done this for you lately."

She smiles. "You'd be right. Does this mean you're not mad anymore?"

"Jury's still out."

I drop into the seat across from her, and we dig in.

"How's the musical coming? You told me you're working with mostly the same team, but you and your writing partner are leading this time instead of following." She reaches for her mug.

Nervous energy has me swallowing an extra big bite of egg. "It's going to be amazing. Creatively, it's been going well until now. We have ten songs written, but I'm struggling to drag it across the finish line. It's not like I can't write anything. But nothing seems to matter enough. Nothing feels good enough or big enough or *true* enough."

I've spent hours a day trying to get myself out of this rut—reading, going for walks, brainstorming... I even bought a dream journal which, so far, succeeded in telling me I spend way too much of my subconscious thinking about pastries.

"The end is always the hardest."

“Right? And I’ve been distracted because the funders...” I savagely bite into a piece of bacon. “The money is complicated. We have a reading scheduled with prospective funders at the end of the summer. Miranda and I thought it would be a slam dunk, but it’s looking harder every day.”

Because Ian was supposed to fund this.

Ian was not, however, supposed to fuck another woman, particularly the afternoon I walked into his apartment unannounced.

My stepmom takes a long sip of decaf, staring thoughtfully at her empty plate. “You need a change of scenery.”

I lift my brows in surprise. “Here?”

“It’s a huge house. There’s plenty of room without stepping on anyone’s toes. Plus, you always loved the patio in the summer.”

Dad and I might kill each other.

But my gaze drops to the hand she rubs over her stomach. “This guy or girl has been keeping me up. They’re not due for another six weeks, but I don’t think we’re going to last that long. Sophie’s started waking in the middle of the night, and your dad’s been busy with unexpected administration issues for the label.”

Compassion washes over me.

“Let me help,” I hear myself say. “I can’t stay for six weeks, but maybe two? I can flex my work around watching Sophie and whatever you need.”

Her face relaxes. “I’d love that. And your dad would, too.”

“Let’s not go crazy,” I say dryly, and she laughs again.

I take our plates to the dishwasher and look out the kitchen windows over the patio. There are a couple of cars I can make out through the hedges separating us from the small tree-lined parking lot. “Who’s at the label this early?”

“Probably Shay. Maybe someone’s booked in to record.”

“Okay. I’ll catch up with you later.”

I head outside and go to the label, letting myself through the side door and into the lobby.

The girl behind the desk is the same one from yesterday. She’s facing away, humming a catchy song. She turns around and spots me, startled, and pulls off her headphones. “Annie! Can I help with something? I’m supposed to make sure everyone signs in. I know it’s weird to ask you to, but... I got a new book and everything,” she says proudly.

I write on the fresh sheet of paper. “Sure. No one else has signed in yet?”

“Studio One is booked all week starting at noon. Your dad is holding studio two for his own artists. Today you’re our first guest.”

I head down the hall, bracing myself as I glance into Studio Two.

I know I won’t see the same thing I saw yesterday—that woman and Tyler—but my stomach tightens anyway.

The studio is empty.

I continue to the offices. The door of the one with Dad’s name on it is closed, but the second’s is open.

It’s sparse but stylish. There’s a desk, a potted palm in one corner, and a beautiful piano.

Unable to resist, I cross to the piano, skimming a finger over the ivory keys and playing a few bars of the song I've been working on all month.

“Don't stop now, it was just getting good.”

I jump at the sound of Tyler's voice, spinning to see him emerge from under the desk wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a crooked grin.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Trying to plug in. I need to hardwire the internet for a virtual meeting later. I'm babysitting your dad's new shining star, who is coming by”—from under the edge, I see him check his watch—“twenty minutes ago, supposedly.”

Some musicians make their fans feel welcome, invite them into their lives and homes on social media.

Tyler's always held them at a distance.

The paparazzi love him. The cleverer he gets at evading, the more they stalk. I empathize with both sides—him wanting privacy and fans dying to know more about this man who lights up a stage with his earnest talent.

They want to know who Tyler Adams is.

Can't say I blame them.

Seeing him at the party affected me. Not in a jealousy kind of way, but because catching up with him after reminded me of the deliberate, thoughtful guy I grew up with. Except there was a new dimension to him, too. An ease, with himself and the world, that he didn't have when we were together.

Just because we've barely spoken in two years doesn't mean we can't be civilized adults now. There's no rule that says you need to hate your ex.

“Let me try.” I brush past him and tug the phone from the pocket of my jean shorts and set it down.

It’s a tight fit under the desk as I crouch, but there’s a hole to thread the cord through, and I work away at it.

“Thanks. Didn’t know this office came with tech support,” Tyler says, his voice muffled from above the desk.

I flip him off and he chuckles.

My phone rings on the desk.

“Ian,” he reads off the display, and I stiffen.

“Do not get that.”

“You playing hooky from work?”

I stick my head out, glaring up at him. “Tyler, I’m serious.”

“Not a work call. Boyfriend, then. Wonder if he knows you’re ducking him.”

The casual words drag me back to the past.

The first time we broke up, when he left me after high school, it was a rip. A violent tear.

The second time was a loosening, little by little. Day by day. My heart wasn’t ripped from my chest; it was pried—with a blunt, persistent instrument—worked under one edge at a time, until nothing remained to hold it in its place.

Unreturned phone messages thanks to demanding rehearsals. Half-hearted texts after long flights. Two months of slow descent, the beginning of the end.

But it was what I wanted when I told him to take that tour. For his life to go on, and mine too.

We've both moved on. I resist the urge to rub at my chest, the dull ache there as my fingers rush to finish what I started so I can get out of here, get relief from the way his presence affects me.

The cord finally clicks into place, and I grunt with triumph before I rock back on my heels to take him in.

“What about you?” I challenge, thinking of how I walked in on him yesterday. “Is that why you never post on social—so you can keep a bunch of women in different cities who want to think they're the only one? It's not original, but it's effective.”

Tyler drops into the task chair. He props an elbow on the armrest, displaying the threads of ink that wind up his arm. I swear there are more than there were two years ago. I try to ignore the fact that his perfect denim-clad hips, those strong legs, are at eye level.

“I don't post pics with women because it's not my 'brand'.” The self-mocking in his voice and the air quotes make me blink. “Marketing sent me a sheet with these adjectives about how the label thinks I should appear.”

I stand, then sink my hips back against the desk. I realize too late I'm still practically in his lap. “Let me guess—you're mysterious but earnest. Intense. Maybe even repressed, except when you're on stage.”

“How'd you get a copy?”

I can't help laughing, and Tyler grins too. The familiarity of it washes over me.

“I didn't. But I know you. I know how you are on stage and when you're alone in a room. I know why fans go crazy for you, and I know the things they'd go crazier for if they knew.”

The laughter in his eyes fades at the intimacy of my words.

Okay, acting civilized is one thing. Don't let this get weird,
I chastise.

“So when are you heading back to LA?” I ask, dragging a finger along the surface of the desk for somewhere to look that’s not his handsome face, the lines of his strong arms, or the hand covered in scars and new ink.

“I promised to help your dad out with his new protégé for a couple of weeks while I’m on break.”

My gaze snaps to his. “You’re not staying at the house.” The horror in my voice would be funny under other circumstances.

“I have a hotel.”

Relief has me sagging against the desk. “I might be sticking around a couple of weeks, too.”

Those chocolate eyes spark so fast I almost think I’ve imagined it.

I’m here to clear my head for work and help Haley.

Tyler could be a distraction.

You think?

I can handle being around him for a few days. I’ll probably barely see him.

It’s not like high school, where we were bumping into each other in the kitchen, by the pool, every day in class.

“This place is pretty epic,” Tyler notes, looking around.

“Right? It’s so new. Haley told me they stripped it down to almost nothing before rebuilding.”

“Not nothing.” Tyler nods toward the ceiling.

I crane my neck to look up, spotting the same thing he has.
“The rafter.”

One of the beams from the original pool house is still visible, painted to match the white ceiling and spanning this office and the next one.

“You can always start over, but you can never erase the past,” I murmur.

“Do you want to?”

I look back at Tyler, one brow lifted under a fall of dark hair.

Those words have me thinking of us again. How we might have grown up and moved on with our lives, but we can’t forget what we were.

“No,” I say at last. “I don’t.”

Tyler tugs at a drawer, which glides open to reveal nothing except a container of paper clips. He pulls out a paper clip and unbends the end of it. “This Ian of yours. He meet your dad and Haley?”

I frown at the sudden change in subject. “No.”

Tyler moves the chair toward me an inch, two, then hooks the end of the paper clip in the belt loop of my jeans. “A real man meets his girl’s parents.”

He’s close enough his scent invades my senses. It’s the sunshine and cedar I remember, with a smoky edge.

“Does a real man sneak out her window so her parents don’t find out he spent the night?” I counter, thinking of prom,

when he took Carly to the dance—when I slept in his arms after and made him promise not to leave.

Tyler's gaze narrows.

If I didn't know it was crazy, I'd think he was worked up about Ian.

I don't need to tell him we're broken up, because that'll only invite more questions when it's none of his business and I really don't want to talk about it with Tyler.

He rises from his chair, leaning in to murmur at my ear. "The next time I visit your room at night, I promise I'll use the door after."

He walks out, leaving the paperclip dangling from my shorts.

Tyler

“YOUR PINCH HARMONICS ARE SLOPPY,” I state.

From his seat on the stool across the studio, the kid Jax recruited stares at me with dead eyes. “Can’t you fix it with the board?”

“I could. But you’re playing it wrong. Play it right, no one’s gotta fix it.”

It’s my first day of babysitting, and the analogy’s not far off. I figured I’d help the kid get the guitar and vocals for a track, but everything’s either wrong or a pain in the ass.

When he gets up from his stool, I demand, “Where are you going?”

He holds up his hands. “Need a smoke break.”

Was this what I was like working with Jax?

No. No way.

Could be I’m pissier than usual. Probably because my hand’s been hurting more in the months since I left the tour—or maybe I have more time to think about it—and Zeke called and left a belligerent voicemail to say he hadn’t heard back from me about the songs.

I followed up with an email telling him I'd thought he sent them as a joke and I was still laughing.

Fifteen minutes later, there was an email from marketing noting I hadn't posted anything on social since a picture Beck took in LA and I'm overdue.

I go out to the front room to ask Shay about the schedule, and she pulls her headphones off her ears.

"What're you listening to?" I ask.

"Local artists. There's a lot of talent here. One of my favorites is actually playing tonight at Valor. And," she goes on, both brows rising up her face, "they have two for one drinks. I can text you the details."

"Thanks." I'm not planning on going to a local gig and the appeal of two for one drinks has long stopped being a motivator, but I can't shoot down her enthusiasm.

She punches my number into her phone, but I'm already looking up as the kid comes back in the front door, smelling like smoke and brushing past me to the studio.

I follow him in. "Let's try the track again. And clean it up this time."

"You wanna show me what you had in mind with your fucked-up hand?" the kid drawls.

I narrow my gaze. "Give me the guitar."

He does, and I hook it around my neck.

I'm going to regret this for the next two days, but I don't even care.

I play the passage like I'm on stage at MSG with no one to cover my ass—including the pinch harmonics.

My hand is on fire, and not in a good way. It hurts like hell. If I had to play an entire set like this, the muscles would give out and I'd have cramps for days.

Thank God I don't. Only enough to shut this dumb kid up.

It won't always be like this, I remind myself.

When I'm done, he's silent.

I shove the guitar in his face. "I can play it with my fucked-up hand, so you can play it with your fucked-up attitude. Again."

By the time we have something passable, it's after dark, and I'm beyond ready to get away from this asshole.

For a moment, I debate calling one of the guys I toured with or the friends I met on the road. They'd remind me what it's like to be around people who take their careers seriously.

On the way to my car, I almost run over the kid, who's leaning into the hedge that runs along the iron fence separating the pool.

My gaze fixes on Jax's patio, and I take in what he's staring at—a woman swimming.

Naked.

The visual hits me like a knockout punch—not because it's any woman, but because it's one in particular.

"Keep walking." I bite out the words, and he jumps, eyes widening as if he's listening for the first time today.

"Chill, man. She's swimming naked. Clearly she wants someone to look."

"Let me guess. You don't have a girlfriend."

He shrugs. "Like to keep my options open."

He heads for his car, where I should be going too, but I reverse directions and go back into the studio, using my swipe key to go out the side door.

Because I should tell her she might be spotted. Not for any other reason.

I let myself in the gate and cross to the cabana. I grab a towel.

When Annie rises up out of the water, shoving her long hair out of her wet face in a way that makes my throat dry, I'm there. "Run out of clean suits already?"

Annie takes me in, hands gripping the edge of the pool as her eyes widen in surprise. "It's late. Needed to clear my head, and I didn't think anyone would notice."

"Just my shit-for-brains kid in the studio. You made his day."

She smiles, a flash of white in the dark.

Earlier when she told me she was sticking around, I was glad and frustrated at once.

Because even though there's nothing between us, sharing the same space with her felt right. As if part of me that'd been missing suddenly clicked back into place.

No matter what Jax said, I can coexist with the woman who ripped my heart out.

I can even do it without staring at her ass as she bends under the desk. Or peering over the edge of the pool to see how much of her body is lit by the soft blue lights.

"You coming out?" I ask lightly.

"You turning around?"

“Nothing I haven’t seen.”

“Maybe it’s changed.”

Those three words have me dying to know if she’s right, if she’s different since the last time I touched her, held her, made her pant my name.

I shut my eyes and hold out the towel.

I hear the sound of water dripping as she shifts out, then her voice, inches away. “Thanks.”

She steps closer, and I wrap her in the towel. “You’re not wrong, though. I only packed for a weekend. I’m going to have to raid my old closet, assuming anything in there still fits.”

Her breasts are nearly pressed against my chest through the towel, and I imagine using the terry fabric to drag her body against mine.

“I’ll give you ten bucks to wear your Oakwood uniform for a day.”

She laughs. “Make it twenty and I’ll think about it.”

I open my eyes to find her studying me. Water drips over her shoulders, and there’s a drop on the middle of her lower lip I want to brush off.

It’s hard to remember why I can’t, especially with the visual of her in a pleated skirt and tight shirt firmly in my head.

“So, how’s it going in the studio with my dad’s protégé?” she prompts, and I force myself to focus as she takes the towel from me and knots it around her breasts.

“Brutal. Kid’s a pain in the ass. So why’d you need to clear your head? Your dad? Or the boyfriend?” I ask.

The boyfriend was not part of the updates Beck gave me, something he’s going to eat shit for the next time we talk.

Though now I’m wondering why he didn’t tell me. If he thought I’d be jealous, I’m not. Not even close.

I’m over us, but that doesn’t mean I want her with some guy who doesn’t deserve her. And if she’s avoiding him, it means something’s wrong.

I will always want the best for her, because I loved her once. For a time that feels boundless, until I remind myself it’s over.

Annie pulls her hair over one shoulder and wrings it out, sending drops of water splattering on the patio.

“Both,” she answers at last.

It sounds like what she really needs is to get out of her head. I know that look, not because it’s classic Annie, but because it’s classic *me*.

I can be around her without rehashing the reasons we broke up, without obsessing over the messy perfection of the times we were together.

I’ll prove it.

“Shay told me about a local concert. Go with me.”

“Like a date?” Her brows shoot up.

“No, music police,” I chastise. “Like I’m going out of my mind and something tells me you are too.”

It’s not an invitation—it’s a challenge. She lifts her chin, like she knows it too. “Fine.”

Annie meets me in my black Lexus nine minutes later.

As she shifts inside, I run my gaze over her black skinny jeans, little heels, black tank. Her hair's still wet and piled on her head, but it looks intentional, especially with the addition of the dark rims around her eyes and red lips.

Play nice.

I force my attention to the driveway.

It's a quiet drive to the music hall, and we talk about easy subjects like who was at Jax's party, the crazy new sponsors Beck got for his Hollywood Life vlog, and whether Haley's new baby will be a boy or a girl.

"It's a boy," I tell her. "I have guy intuition."

"Definitely a girl," Annie decides. "Then Dad will have three and his head will literally explode."

I grin.

So far, so good.

I pull up halfway across the parking lot as I see the line of music fans waiting to be admitted. "I'm going to get mauled."

"You're not that famous," she scoffs.

"I'm pretty famous." I say it mostly to watch her roll her eyes.

I grab a jacket out of my car and drag it on over my T-shirt and jeans.

She inspects me and frowns. "The hair..."

"What's wrong with my hair?"

Annie dives into her little bag and comes back with something that looks like gel. She slicks back my hair. "There.

No one would ever recognize you without this mess all over your face.”

“Tell me how you really feel.”

She laughs as we head for the doors. In the heels, she’s tall, almost as tall as me. She nods to security, and it takes me a second to realize she’s actually protecting me, standing between the line of people and me.

It’s oddly sweet.

There are people whose job it is to keep me safe when I’m on the road. But when Annie does it, it feels different.

Once we get in, we head to the bar.

“The real reason I brought you is the two for one drinks.”

“I see. Are you drinking tonight?”

“No. More for you.”

She laughs and we both end up ordering water.

It feels good to get out. Having Annie next to me doesn’t suck either.

No one knows me here, or her for that matter. It’s freeing in a way I haven’t felt free in months.

The headline act starts to play, and I focus on their up-tempo opening number instead of the woman at my side.

“They’re not bad,” I say to her when they pause between songs.

“They’re better than not bad. Look how much they want to be up there. It’s pouring off them.”

I study the band, their energy. “Maybe these kids need a deal. I could fire Jax’s dumbass kid and take them instead.”

“Miranda Talbot, my writing partner, always says to find someone with a voice. That the rest you can develop.”

“It’s not enough to want it. You have to put in the work.”

“Whatever your recipe, it’s effective. I’ve seen your show.”

I straighten in an instant. “Where?”

“London. Paris.” Her mouth purses. “Seattle.”

I’m speechless.

“I had to know you were okay,” she goes on as if explaining herself.

It doesn’t explain shit.

“Tell me why the woman who wanted me out of her life followed me around the world.”

Her groan has the hairs on my neck standing up. “I didn’t want you gone, Tyler. I wanted...”

“What?”

“I wanted you *back*. I wanted you to feel like yourself again.”

I take a drink of water, wishing it was something with a kick.

“Sometimes, I wonder what would’ve happened if you’d come on tour,” I tell her. “Or if I’d stayed in New York. If we’d still be together now.”

Annie shoots me a look. “It would’ve been a different end, that’s all. You held me at a distance. You were the one who was hurt, but I was the one who felt helpless.”

When I imagined her with me, I never considered that I wouldn't let her be with me the way she wanted to, the way she needed to.

The reckoning I had to have with myself was steep. The work and music and touring gradually broke me down, healed me.

I couldn't have done that with her there. I would've taken it out on her, used her, abused her.

We would've split anyway—if she hadn't stayed in New York, if I hadn't left.

Something loosens in my chest. I glance over at her, her face lit up in the lights as she watches the band, breathless and engrossed.

I lean in at the next break. "Tell me about your show."

Annie's face transforms. Any angst disappears, replaced by anticipation and genuine delight. "It's a fantasy story about a girl born without a heart, but she doesn't want anyone to know. So, she goes on a quest to get one—not because she wants to feel, but because she's worried her body will give out without it. And on the way, she meets all these people, including this guy who makes her realize she wants to feel after all."

I'm sucked in already. She's always had the power to fascinate me, to take my world and wrap it around her, like that towel by the pool, so she's at its center.

"And you'll star in it."

She shivers, her eyes sparkling in the dark. "I want that more than anything."

I want to press her, but she's scanning the room.

A number of people have their phones out, but the cameras aren't pointed at me.

"This show will make for some great clips," she says absently.

"They're at a concert and they're not even watching."

"They're involving people in their experience. It takes two seconds. No wonder you drive your marketing people crazy. Give me your phone."

I unlock it and hold it out.

"Now put an arm around me and look at the stage."

"You Annie Leibovitz all of a sudden?"

But I do as she asks, pulling her against me.

Instantly my body's on alert. She's slow curves and I want to drag the hem of that shirt up and trail my fingers along her skin. Turn my face into her neck and lose myself in her rose scent.

"Broody enough for your brand?" she teases, holding the screen out.

The image is a kick in the gut.

In it, Annie's looking at the camera, though in the darkness, it's hard to recognize her.

I'm watching the music like I'm distracted—by it or the girl in my arms, it's impossible to tell—but it's tense and natural at once, as if she's part of me, an extension of me.

I want to back that photo up, to save it. To preserve it somehow so I never lose it, or her.

"Marketing's gonna come in their pants," I say at last.

As I tuck the phone away—I'll post the pic when I get back to the hotel, because otherwise, we'll get swarmed—more than a few pairs of eyes are on us.

It's understandable. We might not be dating, but she's still fucking awesome. She's got the same wonder at the world, plus a confidence that's new. It's fascinating, and sexy.

“It's late,” she says when the show wraps up and the patrons stream toward the doors. “I shouldn't have stayed out so long. Sophie's already not sleeping. I don't want to wake her up.”

A warning flashes through my brain, one I promptly ignore thanks to the concert or her closeness or the fact that it feels as if we're the only people in the world despite the rest of the giddy crowd dispersing to the parking lot.

“My hotel's close. You can crash. I have to be at the studio early tomorrow anyway.”

She doesn't answer, and when I clue into why, my abs tightening as the shitty reality comes back to me.

Not only is she not mine, she belongs to someone else.

“If it's the boyfriend you're worried about, I promise I won't touch you.”

“Ian and I broke up.”

If she didn't have my attention before, she does now. “What?” I glance back toward the building. “That time you went to the bathroom an hour ago?”

She waves a hand. “We ended it last month.”

“And you didn't tell me about it yesterday because...”

Annie shakes her head. “Because it didn't matter.”

I don't believe her.

It's not my business, but it feels as if it is. The concern I felt for her, the irritation and contempt towards this faceless guy is still there, but it's competing with something I've been ignoring.

The pull I've always felt when she's around.

Knowing she was with someone made it easier not to stare at her too long, to think about what used to be.

"Do you still have your bike?" she asks as she shifts inside the rental car.

"Yeah. It's in LA."

Annie shakes her head as she reaches for the seatbelt. "I always imagined you taking me on it."

Adrenaline surges through me.

"I imagined taking you on it too."

The way my voice drops leaves no question as to what I'm imagining.

Her hands freeze on the seatbelt, those full lips parting.

I force my attention out the windshield before she can reply, but as I pull out of the parking lot, it's all I can think about.

Her on my bike.

In my lap.

Bending her over my arm while I rock my hips into her, against her, that red hair trailing over the handlebars.

Because the moment she told me she was single, the rules changed.

Not the rules for what happens next between us, but the rules for what goes on in my twisted head.

We go back to my place, and she heads for the pullout couch in my suite.

But I stop her, tugging her toward the bedroom. “You’re not sleeping on the couch.”

I go to the dresser and grab a clean T-shirt, tossing it at her. She lifts her hands in surprise, catching it. “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

I reach for the bottom of my shirt and strip it over my head, tossing it on the nearby armchair.

Her eyes widen on my body.

The last times we were together physically, I took my pain out on her. My fear. My frustration.

I want a chance to prove I’m not that guy anymore. Not because we have a future together, but because I want to show her the man I became while she wasn’t looking.

I want to know if I can still make her scream.

“What’s that?” Annie’s attention drags to something across the room.

I turn and see the object leaning against the wall by the dresser, the one that’s so familiar I barely notice it anymore.

“My guitar.”

“You still have it.”

“Of course I do. Twenty-four frets. Rosewood. I fucking love that guitar. Some love lasts a lifetime.”

“Just not ours.” She blinks fast. “I’ll change in the bathroom.”

She heads that way, closing the door quietly behind her, and I rub my good hand over my neck and wonder what the fuck I was thinking bringing her here.

I shift into bed in my boxer briefs and exhale the breath I’ve been holding for longer than I can count.

The way Annie looked at me a second ago, it was almost as if she was accusing me. Like the way I loved the guitar she gave me outlasted how I loved her.

It’s not true. The words feel as if they’re coming from inside me and outside at once.

But it is. I’m over her. I told myself that for the last two years, since before I believed it.

Eventually, I started to.

She returns a moment later, crawling in next to me. Her light floral scent has me itching to reach my good arm around her and tug her body against mine.

Instead, I fist my hand at my side.

I remember every time we’ve shared a bed.

From the first time after her party in high school when I wanted to know she was okay to the time after prom.

The time in her dorm room at Vanier when I made her come for the first time.

The hotel in LA when I showed up at her door, swore she meant everything, and we made love for hours.

I think about the beds I lay in alone, nameless hotels in cities I barely remember.

Getting to perform for big crowds, having money and fans and influence for the first time—at least a backup band that listened to me for once instead of the other way around—mattered, but not nearly as much as it should have.

In months of touring, the only woman who ever got me off was Annie Jamieson. Her face, her voice, her damned memory was the only one I wanted in my bed.

I never told anyone, and I'm sure as hell not going to tell her as we lie next to each other, staring at the ceiling, still buzzed from the music.

But her closeness has my heart thudding hard enough to bruise my ribs.

“I was thinking about what you said. How we wouldn't have lasted on the road, and it wouldn't have worked if I'd stayed.” My words echo in the dark. “You found yourself in New York and I lost myself there.”

For a moment, I wonder if Annie's already asleep, until I feel the bed sink as she turns toward me.

“I replayed it in my head a thousand times. What I could've done differently. Giving you more space, or less. Trying to make it work from a distance.”

I exhale hard. “No. I wish I'd been better in those moments. The last few times we were together... it wasn't good. I hate that you'll always remember me like that.”

I feel her inch closer, her breath lightly fanning my lips. “I remember we used to dream about this. You having a recording career and me being on stage. And now we are. So it all worked out, right?”

The question in her voice has my chest tightening in a way that's dangerous.

“Yeah. It all worked out.”

Annie

“I DON’T WANT to wear that.” Sophie gives me pre-schooler side-eye, then runs across the room toward her toys.

I sit back on my heels, the dress clutched in my hands, and wish for caffeine.

I offered to take my half sister to daycare today before starting on my work, but it’s proving harder than expected.

I scan her room, looking at the white furniture, the rainbow bedspread, the corner box of toys and puzzles where she’s currently pulling things out, one after another.

“Hey, let’s play a game,” I decide. “If you can pick out all your school things, I’ll sing you a song in the car.”

Miracle of miracles, it works.

After dropping her off, I head to the café that used to be my favorite in high school and open my tablet.

When I emailed Miranda to say I’d be in Dallas a couple of weeks working, she agreed. I promised we’d email every day or two to talk progress.

There’s another person I need to update, and I’m less optimistic about the response I’ll get.

Most of the musical is scored, but some of the lyrics aren't finished. In particular, there's a song between the two main characters I can't get right.

Back in school, it always seemed that emotions flowed through me, desperate to get out. All I had to do was put them on a page.

But writing a musical isn't only about feeling—it's about story—a narrative that was born to be told through song, one that can only be fulfilled in that format.

Even though I was involved in this show from the earliest days—the idea was Miranda's and mine, and it started being crafted back the first semester we worked together on the other show—it's not something you can half-ass like an assignment for course credit and cross your fingers for a good grade.

Getting a new musical to the stage requires millions of dollars, and while there's not one way to get it right, there are so many ways to get it wrong.

Which is why I need to call Ian.

He didn't leave a message when he called yesterday, which is Ian-speak for "I'm too important to leave a message." But I can't put this off.

I hit his contact on my cell, my stomach clenching. The line rings, and I turn the coffee cup in my hand.

Voicemail kicks in and I take a breath before starting.

"Ian, it's Annie. Elle said you were looking for me. I wanted to let you know I'm staying in Dallas for a couple of weeks while I finish the book for the musical. Once Miranda and I are satisfied with it, we'll send it to you and the three of us can discuss it in advance of the reading. Despite...what happened between us, I assume you're still interested in being

a primary funder, which is why I want to keep you as informed as possible. If you have any questions or concerns, you know where to reach me.”

I click off, satisfied I got my point across.

It’s a moment before I realize someone’s stopped near my elbow. I glance up and nearly knock my tablet off the table.

“Pen!” I squeal as my friend breaks into a grin. I jump up and hug her familiar form, dressed in a cute black jumpsuit and wedge sandals. “What are you doing here? I thought you were traveling to cover entertainment news at the newspaper!”

“It’s my parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and a bunch of our family’s in town. So, I’m home for the week.” My friend cuts a look toward the menu, and I scan the pastry cabinet while she orders. “What are you doing here?”

I tell her about my dad’s party, that I decided to stay. “But my dad and I haven’t really talked,” I finish.

“Which is why you’re here at the café, avoiding him and wearing clothes you bought junior year?”

“Not avoiding. Working.” I glance down at my white tank top tucked into denim shorts. “And I didn’t really pack for an extended stay, so I raided my high school clothes. They’re tighter than I remember.”

“Yes. And also, you look amazing.”

I laugh.

Pen gets her drink, and I order a croissant.

“So, you using your dad’s new studio while you’re home?” she says once we’re sitting back at the table.

“No, but Tyler’s working with my dad.”

She nearly spits out her coffee, laughing. “Tyler Adams, international music sensation, Prince of Oakwood, King of Vanier, Duke of Annie Jamieson’s heart, is in Dallas.”

She has the decency to lower her voice when she says it.

I break off a piece of the croissant and shift in my seat. “We went to a concert last night.”

When he showed up at the pool, all frustrated and gorgeous and making me remember how things used to be, I wanted to go with him even though it was a bad idea.

Plus, we had fun. God, we had so much fun, more than I’ve had in a long time.

His intensity’s still there, but he has this new relaxedness too. He was always sure of how to act in the world because he figures out everything and everyone, but now it’s like the wheels in his head aren’t turning quite so fast, as though he’s not so busy judging everything and everyone.

“I’m glad you guys are making nice. I remember how hard it was on you when he left.” Pen’s voice pulls me back. “Would you ever get back together?”

“No.” The word comes out fast. “I’m not going near men for a long time.”

Even if Tyler’s more gorgeous than ever, and everything about him beckons me closer.

Lying in bed next to him last night, hearing his steady breathing, feeling his closeness, was not something I’d planned. But we’d had such a good time and I didn’t want to wake up half the house by getting home late.

Saying yes to the innocent offer to crash left me with more than I bargained for.

“I know you and Ian dated for six months,” Pen goes on.

“Meaning?” I arch a brow and she lifts both palms.

“Hot rebound sex. Hear me out,” she goes on at my expression. “Tyler’s fire. Always was, and he’s only gotten hotter with age and the whole famous thing.”

“He’s not *that* famous.”

She cringes. “If you’re in Rolling Stone, you’re famous. If you’re playing a benefit concert this weekend in LA with four other Grammy-winning acts? You’re famous. The point is, you’re both unattached. You’re in Dallas, and he’s living in the pool house.”

“Helping at my dad’s studio,” I correct. “The universe doesn’t want us to get back together.”

“Maybe the universe wants you to bang for old time’s sake.”

Shivers run down my spine, settle in my breasts and between my thighs.

Sex with Tyler is a terrible idea. Not because I’m not attracted to him. Seeing him strip off his shirt last night to reveal miles of cut pecs and abs covered with swirls of ink... It took everything in me not to melt into the carpet of the fancy hotel suite.

Is that why I didn’t want to tell him about Ian—because I was afraid I couldn’t handle him if he knew?

I shove the thought down. I can handle Tyler.

All of him.

He’s changed over the past two years, and so have I. I’m not a kid anymore, I’m a grown woman with a career and the

ability to know what's right for her.

Pen gets up and hugs me again. "Well, I need to go check in with the caterer. It was good to see you. We need to get lunch when we're both back in New York."

"Done."

She waves and vanishes out the door, and I glance at my phone.

I had it set to silent, but the voicemail is lit up, and the number has my good vibes evaporating.

Ian's smooth voice flows out of the speaker when I hit Listen.

"Annie. When you called, I was having breakfast with a couple of colleagues who'll be attending the reading at the end of the summer. Given how soon that is, I need more than a promise to share the book when it's finished. Not only am I hosting this reading, but I'm inviting funders from my own network. It may be your work, but it's my reputation on the line." Pause. "I don't want you to turn what happened between us into an excuse to be unprofessional. What happened with that woman wasn't personal, and it had nothing to do with you and me. Maybe you're too young to understand the difference. Someday, you'll—"

I hang up without listening to the rest.

I'm being unprofessional? You fucked some actress who wanted your connections.

Unreal.

I rub my forehead.

Looking back, I know why I was attracted to Ian. He was older and confident and knew the business. When he advised

me, it didn't come off as controlling, it was helpful.

Turned out he liked to advise more than me.

I walked in on him in his apartment with an actress who was, apparently, even more desperate for his mentorship than I was.

Fuck it. I have bigger things to worry about than him.

The café is filling up, and I'm not getting done what I need to here.

I remember the piano in Tyler's office at the studio.

Maybe having the instrument in front of me will help.

On impulse, I buy a second coffee and take that one, plus the one I'm barely halfway through, with me in Haley's car.

Once I get back to the house, I head around to the patio, letting myself in the side door of the studio. Shay's not at the desk, and my hands are too full for signing the visitor's log, so I start down the hall.

The first studio is full, and I can see unfamiliar artists recording inside.

The door to the second is open. I move toward it, pulling up when a figure comes out first.

"Dad!" I exclaim when I nearly bump into him.

He looks as surprised as me. "Annie."

We haven't spoken alone since I've been here.

I guess we're speaking now.

"I was checking on my investment." He cuts a look over his shoulder toward the studio, as if expecting someone to appear, but turns back to me almost as fast.

“Thank you for offering to help with your sister,” he says. “We started building the label before Haley got pregnant again, and she didn’t want to hold things up.”

“Sure.”

“You came to watch too?” Shay appears at the end of the hall, bouncing toward me. “They’re so good.”

She balks when she realizes my dad is there. “Mr. Jamieson, I’m sorry. I didn’t see you come in.”

“Shay, call me Jax.”

“I can’t. It’s weird.”

He frowns, uncomfortable. “Well, get over it.”

Dad looks between us then heads for the door without another word.

“God, I fucked that up, didn’t I?” she breathes.

“It’s fine. My dad doesn’t know what to do with candid women who aren’t intimidated by him.”

“Is that why he married Haley?” Her mouth rounds. “I didn’t mean it the way it sounds.”

But I’m laughing. “Exactly.”

I reach for the door and head inside. Tyler’s on the other side of the soundproof glass, arms folded as he listens to the guy that must be my dad’s new protégé play his guitar into the mic.

The levels bouncing on the computer screen tell me they’re recording something.

My attention is all on Tyler.

He's gorgeous and breathtaking, and parts of me that felt like they were asleep these past months are suddenly awake again.

The kid catches us watching and grins, cocky. His attention still on us, he messes up and Tyler shifts off the wall and jerks the door between us. "Get out," he says to the boy.

"Jax wouldn't—"

"I don't care what Jax would. You have a problem, you can go take it up with him. But I promise you, he gives less fucks than I do."

The kid stalks out the door, kicking a wall on the way.

Tyler emerges next, and he's more frustrated than his charge.

I know the feeling. Since Ian's voicemail, I'm on edge, ready to rip into someone.

Tyler's gaze warms as he spots me. I resist the urge to run my hands over my clothes before his attention lands on the cup in my hands.

"You brought me a present."

His words strokes over my skin, tugs between my thighs.

"Assuming you take it more cream than coffee, yes. It's a thank you for using the piano in your office. Which isn't technically your office, but I wanted to be polite. I thought you might not even be here given you have that benefit concert in LA tomorrow night."

"I'm leaving in the morning." He hits a few keystrokes on the computer setup, frowning.

"But you're coming back?"

Not that I care. I'm being polite.

"The day after. When'd you use the piano?"

"I'm about to." I take a sip of my coffee and make a face.
"The coffee's a bit cold."

"I'll microwave it for you!" Shay grabs the second cup from me and dashes out toward the kitchenette.

When she's gone, I say, "You've got yourself a fan club."

Tyler shakes his head. His mouth curves in a gorgeous half smile as he finishes working on the computer. "The girl knows music. But my heart's unavailable."

My chest caves in a little.

Tyler let me in once. The idea he hasn't let anyone in since feels tragic.

My hand strays to one of the buttons in front of us and Tyler's fingers close over mine. "Don't touch my board."

"You used to like it when I touched your board."

His eyes darken, in arousal or warning or hell, maybe both.

Pen's words come back to me.

Hot rebound sex.

I shove them down.

He swipes my cup before I can protest, inspecting the label. "Double espresso. Someone didn't sleep last night."

I grab it back. "I was up late," I grumble, turning and heading for his office.

Tyler follows. "Not that late."

He closes the door behind me, his shoulder brushing my chest and giving me a hit of that cedar and sunshine scent.

“It was hard to sleep in an unfamiliar bed with an unfamiliar person next to me.”

“Bullshit. You know every inch of me.”

He looks even better today with messy hair, second-day stubble, a button-down rolled at the sleeves, and dark jeans that hug his hips and legs. Tyler’s every bit the rock star, gorgeous enough to send legions swooning, but he has the credibility to back it up.

All of it adds to the frustration from my morning so far.

“Apparently I don’t know anything,” I blurt before I can stop myself. “I’m young and naïve and can’t be trusted with my own feelings, not to mention to finish a musical.”

I brush past him to put my coffee cup on his desk before taking a seat on the piano bench, setting out my notebook.

“According to who?” his measured voice comes from right behind me.

I close my eyes. “It doesn’t matter. I need to work on this song.” I set my fingers on the keys but don’t press them. He waits me out as I count my breaths, my mind still spinning, my chest tight with anger and something that I can’t name.

“Tyler...” I start before he can leave. “I need to ask you something. Promise you won’t read too much into it.”

He doesn’t answer, so I keep going.

“Tell me you’re still attracted to me.”

Tyler’s heavy exhale is the only response for a long time. His hands find my shoulders, the bare skin revealed by my tank top.

“I’ll be attracted to you when we’re dead.”

Our conversation last night comes back to me in a blur of emotions, past and present and through it all, a kind of need and regret and impatient arousal.

I can't fix the first two, but maybe I can fix the third.

I turn on the bench to find his belt at eye-level. "You said you wished things were different between us at the end." I think of the times we were together, when I was hoping the physicality would bring us closer and it only drove us further apart. "Before you left for tour, you said you owed me."

He lifts my chin to stare into me, through me. "And?"

"And I want to collect."

The inscrutable expression is gone, replaced by heat and arousal.

"You want sex."

"Yes."

He wants a chance to make amends, and I want to prove I can handle myself. That I'm not some child who loses my heart at every turn.

But the look on his face has me second-guessing my idea.

"Tyler! Your coffee's here." Shay bursts through the door, and Tyler steps back. "I'll put it on your desk," she decides, smiling our way.

"Thank you," he answers. "And Shay?"

"Yes?"

"Knock next time."

Her brows pull together. "I did."

"Knock and wait, next time."

“Oh. Sure. Sorry.”

With a wave of apology, she ducks out, the door clicking after her.

I exhale hard. “I shouldn’t have...”

My words trail off as Tyler steps back in front of me, his fingers threading in my hair.

He’s living this as much as I am, his eyes darkening to whiskey mixed with earth.

It’s an answer. Adrenaline surges through me as I reach for his jeans, my fingers working on the snap. It’s not until the zipper’s halfway down that his hand closes over mine.

“Those weren’t the terms.”

“What do you mean?” My head snaps up.

“I didn’t owe you my cock, Six. I owed you my mouth. Take it or leave it.”

His words startle me. They’re a rough piece of fabric stroking across my skin, making me resist and aware of every inch of him at once.

We’ve been intimate, sure, but there’s so much we haven’t done. I realize that now from the way he’s looking at me.

“I’ll take it.”

I may live to regret it, but it’s the only answer I have.

Triumph flashes in his eyes. “Good. Spread your legs.”

My brows shoot up but I do it, my knees bumping the corners of the bench.

His hand is right there between my thighs, rubbing the seam of denim.

“These shorts look familiar.”

I bite my cheek to keep from moaning under his touch. “They’re from high school. I stopped short of putting on the Oakwood skirt.”

“Too bad. Would’ve been even easier to do this.”

I never thought of him being careful with me before, but when he slips two fingers under the edge of my shorts and beneath my thong, sliding them along my wetness before pressing all the way inside on a long, undeniable stroke, I know it’s true.

He’s not careful now.

My body squeezes around the invasion, and I gasp as I fall back against the piano, my elbows banging on the keys.

He touches me like that, stroking with those fingers while he circles my clit with his thumb.

Unlike the last times we were together, he’s all in this. Present, in this moment.

So am I.

He builds me up with that simple touch. I’m panting by the time he pulls back.

“You know what you want. Say it.”

God, he’s sexy. All of it makes me stronger, bolder.

“I want your filthy mouth on me.”

His chuckle is half groan. “That makes two of us. Take off everything except your thong. Kneel on the bench and brace your elbows on the piano.”

There’s a hint of something earnest under the command, something that reminds me of last night—how good it felt to

be close to him, how he might have something at stake here, too.

It's enough that I don't argue as I shimmy out of the rest of my clothes and his hungry gaze drags over my body.

My nipples are hard buds, and I've soaked through the last remaining item of clothing as I lean over the dark wood, my forearms resting on the cool surface.

Tyler palms my ass. "The show you saw in London. Tell me you fucked yourself to sleep after and wished it was me."

He presses a thick finger inside me and I fall forward, my eyes squeezing shut. Emotions clash in my chest, but I don't want to lie to him. "Yes."

Instead of continuing, he pulls out and plants a kiss on my bare shoulder.

This was a bad idea.

The tension inside me is stronger, bigger, tighter. He's making it worse, not better.

If I ever questioned what happened to the quiet, repressed teenage boy I loved...

He turned into a man. One who won't be denied.

Tyler's fingers comb through my hair. "Wider."

My knees ache from the hard surface but I force them apart another inch. "Happy?"

"Ecstatic. Tell me something. Are you young and naive?" he asks.

I look over my shoulder to meet his gaze. It's hot and hungry and steals my breath.

"No."

I drop my forehead back to the piano and wait.

Tyler drops kisses down my skin, soft but deliberate, one after another. “No, you’re fucking not.”

He spreads my ass and doesn’t hesitate, not even there, until finally, his lips press where I’m hot and wet and aching for him.

“Oh shit, Tyler,” I moan.

His scarred hand covers my mouth the next instant. It’s all I can do to keep from crying out as his mouth settles between my thighs and he devours me.

Yes.

It might be his mouth on me, but we’re equals in giving, in taking. The energy flows between us, tension and relief. We’re two musicians improvising together, inspired by one another’s actions and reactions.

Nothing in the last two years has felt like this.

Nothing has *ever* felt like this.

My back arches hard, the pressure between the hand on my mouth and his lips where I’m wet and aching forcing me to coil like a tight, needy spring.

It’s only physical.

I repeat it like a mantra, hoping I’ll believe it.

“Your legs are shaking,” he rasps, his hot breath warming my already-heated skin. “I bet it’s been years since you came so hard you forgot your name.”

I shudder into his hand.

“Bet it’s been even longer since you came so hard you forgot *my* name.”

Fuck.

When we had sex before, there was always a sweetness to it. A reverence. As if we were afraid we'd lose each other.

Now it's as if the last shred of protectiveness between us broke.

This isn't sweet.

It's anarchy.

We're not in love.

We're at war.

My first crush, my first love, my first heartbreak... He's back, and he's fucking me with every inch of our baggage.

Tyler builds me up with his lips, his tongue, his fingers.

I'm mindless, my hands sweaty on the piano, to keep my balance or my sanity as I drown in the pleasure.

"Scream if you want," he murmurs against my slick skin, the hand not covering my mouth tracing wet lines down the back of my thigh before gripping possessively around the top. "I've got you."

I don't scream.

But I do come.

In a shaking, sweaty mess of past and present, of bittersweet memories and shocking desire, I break.

Pleasure washes over me in waves, each one rippling further, echoing more faintly, as my cheek sticks to the polished wood.

The tremors leave me smooth and fresh, like sand after the tide goes out.

This was what I needed.

I almost believe it until Tyler leans over me, brushing back my hair to graze his lips across my cheek.

Sweet. Chaste.

Except that if I turned to catch that mouth with mine, I'd taste exactly what he did to me.

I don't remember my name.

But I remember his.

Tyler

“Do you have questions about recovery time? The procedure? Anaesthetic?” The surgeon spreads his hands on his desk.

He’s for sure taking for granted the range of motion in those fingers, those palms. The sixty-something man might be a doctor, but he’s pure California. In living here the past year and a half, I’ve learned Angelenos can take for granted almost anything.

I shake my head. “I’ve done it before, at some of the best clinics in the country.”

“Well, I like to think we have the best team here at UCLA. You’re on the schedule for three weeks from now. I sincerely hope we can get you the results you’re looking for in terms of both mobility and pain management.”

“Me too.”

I leave the clinic and head outside into the sun and get into the waiting car.

It’s not my first surgery, but I’m hoping it’ll be my last. Beck calls it my obsession, but I think of it as relentless focus.

Since the night a single blade destroyed what I’d worked twenty years to build, I’ve been aching for the day when I can say I’m back to myself.

I have a few hours before I need to be at the venue for sound check for the benefit concert tonight. I scan the set list, which I'll go over again with my band once I get there.

For the most part, I do vocals and some light chords. The lead guitarist who plays with me is probably good enough to play harder assignments than what I give him, but it makes me envious to hear him do it.

To deal with the monotony of traffic, I go through my email, firing off responses to anything urgent and leaving most of it where it is. After, I open the list of demos Shay sent through from local bands.

I listen to the first, then skip to the next.

Another skip.

I let the third one ride a moment. It's sultry and raw.

I glance at my phone to see what it is.

It's Shay. Not another band, but her.

It's simple, but catchy, and the vocals feel fresh and real.

I file that away as the car reaches my destination, a toy store in La Brea.

Inside, I tell the clerk, "I need a present for a friend's kid. She's four and a half."

"Get her a book on manipulating guys," comes a familiar voice from behind me before the clerk can respond. "It must be some secret coming-of-age thing, because all chicks seem to know it by the time they're twelve."

I turn toward Beck and grin, clapping him on the back. He looks every part the actor in jeans, boots, and a white T-shirt. His aviators are shoved back on his head.

“Thanks for meeting me,” I say. “Tell me you haven’t burned down the apartment yet.”

“Nah, but you might want to stay in it sometime.”

I shake my head. The two-bedroom place we share is way bigger than the New York apartment we had until I left on tour and that Beck kept until graduation.

“I’m heading out again in a couple of days. I made a deal to help Jax out with his new studio.” I huff out a breath as I scan the shelves for a gift for Sophie.

“You’re supposed to be in *your* studio. Recording at *your* label,” he reminds me. “The one who pays *your* income, which covers half of *our* rent.”

“Thank you for that lesson in pronouns. I have three weeks until my surgery so I’m taking a vacation.”

I pick up a puzzle. Maybe Sophie’s into these. Something with fish or birds, exotic ones she wouldn’t see in Dallas.

“A vacation with Annie Jamieson. I saw your post the other night. You might not’ve tagged her, but you’re so busted.”

“Nothing to bust. We hung out.”

But my abs clench under my shirt at the sound of her name.

The purple dump truck on the shelf triggers my memory that Sophie’s into things with wheels. I lift it off the shelf as Beck grins. “I bet you did.”

I cut him a look, but my retort dies on my lips. My roommate’s the one person other than Annie and Jax who can see through my bullshit.

Still, I'm not about to tell him I lost control the moment she peered up at me with those doe eyes wanting to collect on what I owed her.

Turned out I was on the receiving end of something priceless.

I'm man enough to admit that the best moments of my life have been spent holding that woman.

And yesterday, she was wild. From the second I found her under those tight shorts, soaked and squirming, it was a breakneck descent into madness.

I wanted nothing more than to free my swollen cock and sink into her as far as I'd go, to see her beautiful body arch and writhe on that dark wood backdrop.

But I spent the last two years knowing Annie and I ended because she got over me first.

Still, the way she looked at me, the way she asked me for it...

It took everything in me to remember we're not together.

Beck squeezes a stuffed toy hard enough it squeaks. "I'm relieved to hear it's nothing serious. Because you were fucked up after it ended. You *both* were."

I round on him, boxing him in against the shelf. "Go on."

"She couldn't go with you, and you couldn't stay. Someone had to be the bad guy. Otherwise, you wouldn't have moved on—not just from her, with your life."

Hearing it spelled out is bringing up old feelings.

Not even the bitterness of leaving, but the things it's taken me two years to appreciate.

How fucking incredible she is.

How much I loved her.

How much she loved *me*.

“You didn’t tell me she was seeing someone,” I say. “Did you think I’d be jealous?”

“Did I think you’d look like you’re looking right now? Yes.”

“But they broke up,” I say, pouncing.

He frowns. “I heard. He’s some big producer type. And—please use this for good, and not evil—apparently he cheated on her. A casting couch situation with some actress.” Beck reads the disbelief on my face. “Fucking tool, yeah. You know our girl has always had some issues believing she was enough. With all she’s accomplished, I hope she sees it and never gives the guy another look.”

I turn that over as I start toward the cash register, dump truck in tow.

I hope to hell she didn’t fall for Ian because she thought she needed him. The fact that he hurt her makes me want to crush the only good fist I have left into his face.

But thinking of the ex has a dark thought occurring to me.

I liked the idea she wanted me yesterday, wanted another shot at how we’d ended things.

Was he the reason she was questioning herself in the first place?

I’m not stupid enough to think what happened between us was some kind of a sign—we’ve both moved on, I’ve got an

album to make and she's finishing a show—but fuck it, I need to know.



“TYLER.” Zeke walks into my dressing room after sound check, and I shift back in my chair.

The guys from the band are around me, talking amongst themselves, but when he enters, they nod deferentially before ducking out into the hall to make themselves scarce.

The exec drops onto the arm of the couch. “You’ve been posting on social.”

“You proud?” I drawl.

“The venue you tagged is in Dallas.” He frowns. “There’s a strict competition clause in your contract. You can’t record for any other label.”

“I was visiting an old friend. Remember, I’m on the first vacation I’ve had in two years. Once I get through this surgery, I’ll be back in the studio to finish the album.”

“You know your career has nothing to do with your hand.”

I shift back in my seat, a humorless smile pulling across my face. “You’re saying that day Jax and I went to your house senior year, if I hadn’t been able to play, you still would’ve offered me a deal.”

He narrows his gaze. “Two hundred years ago, men figured out how to make music with machines. The player piano. The music box. Everyday people could have music when they wanted—accurate, predictable, perfect.

“Being proficient in playing doesn’t make you a good musician. Being proficient in feeling—in believing what you’re doing so much it makes someone listening, someone watching, connect with it—that’s what it’s fucking about.

“That’s what I saw in you that day. A quiet, gives-zero-shits kid who came alive the second he picked up a guitar.”

His words are unsettling, though I’m saved examining them too closely when my phone buzzes with an incoming call from Annie.

“Regardless of the outcome of your procedure, I expect you back in studio the next week or you’ll be paying for missed time out of your royalties,” Zeke tosses as he heads for the door.

“Always a pleasure.”

Zeke and I have always had a rocky relationship, but my relentless focus on being the best I can clashes with his “make money first” approach.”

He disappears down the hall and I go back to my phone, hitting Accept.

“Everything okay?” I answer, concerned.

“Yes. Fine,” Annie says, a little breathless. “I just called to say good luck tonight.”

I’m still on edge from Zeke’s threat, my hand tightening on the phone.

I haven’t spoken to her since yesterday in the studio, and the sound of her voice has every part of me tightening as I remember the way she fell apart under my hands and my mouth.

But despite my physical response to her now, I can't help thinking of all the times she didn't call to wish me good luck when I was on tour. The times I didn't text her because I knew she was busy.

She's calling now.

Which means nothing. Tell her goodnight. Get moving.

"How was your day?" I ask instead, shifting out of the chair and leaning over the bureau, pressing my bad hand on the surface. The fingers won't straighten all the way.

"Less exciting than yours. Took Sophie to daycare. Met Pen for coffee before she headed back to New York. Worked on the musical. Went for a swim. With the bathing suit this time," she adds lightly.

I turn over my hand and inspect the tangle of black vines and thorns and roses, the white lines beneath. Layers upon layers of ink and scars, like the layers of lies and feelings and decisions that litter our past.

I should be hanging up, both to get on with my prep and because talking to her like this feels too good, too much like something I could look forward to.

"I was listening to a demo Shay sent in the car today," I hear myself say. "She's good. I'd love to cut the punk loose and put Shay in the studio instead."

"Then do it."

Her direct reply takes me by surprise. "This isn't my fight. It's not my music."

"Diving into someone else's mess can be the best way to get out of your own. Maybe you need something bigger than yourself to believe in."

My bassist sticks his head in the doorway, calling my name and jerking his head toward the stage.

I take a last look in the mirror at my stage getup, the makeup, the hair—all done by professionals to craft a man who looks like me but isn't quite.

“Tell me yesterday wasn't you trying to fuck your ex out of your head.”

My blunt words have her pausing. But there's a cord of strength in her voice when she responds. “I think I needed to feel alive in a way I haven't felt in a long time. I wanted to feel in control, which I know is a weird way to think of what happened, but it's true.”

Maybe I haven't been alive these past two years despite the crowds and the music and pressing past every challenge that's been leveled at me.

Maybe I didn't feel in control until I had her heated skin under my lips, her hot breath on my hand, her tight body squeezing me when she broke apart.

When I answered her call, I wanted to prove my heart doesn't beat for her.

But now, it's hammering harder than ever.

“You are the most alive person I've ever met,” I say. “I saw your show in New York four times. I couldn't see opening night off-Broadway because we had a gig in Colorado. But the second night, I flew in. And your first night on Broadway. I even saw it once without you in it, because there was something I suspected but wanted to know for sure.”

I block out the noises from the backstage crew, the chatter and footsteps in the hall, until all I hear is her soft breathing. “What's that?”

“It was better with you.”

Everything's better with you.

Annie

THIS MORNING, there's no alarm to wake me to start working.

There's no screaming from downstairs, no sound of Sophie shrieking, no daycare.

But I'm awake and warm and itchy.

I've been at Dad and Haley's for four days. The first couple of nights, I slept through without waking. Since Tyler left for LA, though, I've been restless and turned on.

I still haven't found the breakthrough I need with my final song, and I know Ian's breathing down my neck. Soon Miranda will be, too.

So, this morning, I give myself this one thing.

I slide a hand down the front of my pajamas, where I'm already wet.

It's a bad idea to fantasize about a man you can't have.

I didn't let myself do it when we were apart, save for a couple of times when I gave myself a pass on account of being too tipsy to regulate my fantasizing or having a really brutal day of rehearsing or, once, when he did a spread for this magazine where I swear he was looking right at me and seeing

every dirty thought I've ever had about him—when we were together and since.

A few sweaty minutes in the studio—no matter how earth-shattering—doesn't change anything.

What about you calling him before his show?

I did it to prove that all the months he was on the road, I hadn't held him at a distance because I wanted him out of my life.

But it didn't play out the way I expected.

It was better with you.

It sounded as if he didn't only mean the show. I wanted him to mean that.

But I can't fall for Tyler Adams again.

My heart wouldn't survive it.

When he comes back later today, there'll be no more longing looks, no more flirty winks, and definitely no more thinking about how the only thing terrible about having his tongue in me was that it wasn't his cock.

As a consolation prize, I give myself the best solo orgasm I've had in years.

The release seems to shake loose a few ideas, and when I get out of the shower, I jot down half a page of notes in the notebook on my desk.

Then I dress and go downstairs to grab coffee with Haley, who's sitting on a chair with her feet on another.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Fine. Your dad was hoping to talk to you. He's staining the gazebo. I swear he went out and made millions of dollars

so he could live like he had his own home reno show.”

“You love it.”

She grins. “Yeah, I do.”

I turn that over as I go to find him.

I weave through the manicured lawns on the other side of the house, around a grove of trees.

Sophie’s playing with her trucks in the grass a dozen feet away from the gazebo my dad built for Haley with his band’s help.

“Annie! Play trucks with me. This one’s Boom. And that’s Mice.”

“Mouse?” I ask.

“Mice.”

“She named it after Mace,” Dad weighs in from where he’s painting one of the beams, sweat dripping down his face.

“Annie, you’d be a red truck.”

“Perfect.” My gaze drifts back to my dad. “Haley could use some love.” My dad cocks a brow, and I shudder. “Not like that. Just... whatever, you do you.”

I take in the gazebo, its graceful beams and arches. “Didn’t you just build that five years ago?”

“People think building things takes effort. But maintaining them is harder.” He takes a seat on the top step, balancing the brush on the edge. “When something’s in my care, I keep it a certain way. Maybe it’s the right way, and maybe it’s not. But I can’t apologize for doing things the best I know how.”

“Can you apologize for hurting the people you love?”

He doesn't answer, but I see the strain in the tight lines of his face.

"There's something I need to say to you," he goes on at last, and I hold my breath.

This is it. An apology.

"The scholarship you got at Vanier that covered the rest of your tuition and living expenses through graduation. That was me."

I stiffen. "What are you talking about? I told you I didn't need your help."

"And I didn't accept that."

My mouth works. "All you had to do was say you were wrong. Instead you had to control the situation again and manipulate me into taking your money."

He leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "That's not what it was."

"No?"

His groan has Sophie looking up over her trucks, her curious gaze cutting between us.

"I don't want your money. I mean, it helped," I concede, shoving a hand through my hair. "I can't pretend it didn't. But all I ever wanted was for you to respect me. To see me as an equal."

"You're not equal to *anything*. You're my child. You will always mean more to me than anything in this world has a right to mean."

My throat swells at the emotion in his words. "I just want you to know that I can handle myself. That you'd bet on me if

I wasn't your child. I want you to think I've grown into the kind of person you'd believe in."

I hold out a hand for the paint brush. "Go hang with Haley. I'll finish it."

His gaze finds mine, surprised. "And watch your sister?"

I lower my voice. "I've pulled together changes from a whole host of writers. I can handle a four-year-old and a paint brush."

My dad looks as if he's about to say something, but in the end, he hands me the brush.



AFTER FINISHING up at the gazebo, I scrounge some lunch for me and Sophie before taking a call with Miranda while my sister plays.

We talk about the work, catch up on Ian. I let her know he's pushing me.

"I emailed and told him I'd send him what we have next week."

"What did he say?"

I huff out a breath. "Nothing, yet. But I have to go," I say to my writing partner as I look up to see Sophie climbing on the windowsill and jumping on the seat.

"I know you're dealing with family issues, but we need to finish that song."

"I will."

If my voice has an edge, it's in response to the urgency in hers. "I have a version, Miranda. And it's good. But it's not

right.”

“You have good instincts. If there’s something more you can get from it, I trust you to try.”

“Thank you. I know it’s your dream to co-write a show from the beginning. We’ll make it work.”

What happened with Ian was my mistake, not hers, and I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt us.

After hanging up, I get Sophie off the windowsill.

“I want to swim,” she decides, peering up at me.

“Okay. But after, we need some quiet play time so I can work.”

I get her changed, and she insists on bringing the trucks with her.

My gaze cuts toward the hedges and the parking lot beyond.

“That’s Tyler’s car,” Sophie informs me.

“Yes, it is.” His flight was supposed to get back from LA around noon, and I chastise myself for being so obvious a toddler could figure it out as I usher her toward the pool.

“Why’re you so into trucks?” I ask as she’s clinging to the ladder, her water wings keeping her afloat.

“They get things done. Like Mommy.”

I laugh. “Not Daddy?”

She wrinkles her nose. “No. Daddy makes messes. Mommy cleans them up.”

“That’s true.”

I coax her off the ladder, stabilizing her with my hands as she kicks wildly.

“Where’s your Mommy?” she pants.

Her question catches me off-guard, and I stare at her freckled little face. Apparently Dad and Haley have had this conversation with her—or at least part of it. “Um. I’m not sure.”

“Why not?”

“Because she lives somewhere else. I haven’t really talked to her.” Not since the letter she sent me.

“Why not?”

I lift my feet from the shallow bottom, sculling with my hands. “Because she’s not really part of my life right now.”

“Do you think she gets things done or makes messes?”

“I don’t know, Soph. I guess I always picture her getting things done. Like your Mommy.” I shake my head. “Come on. We should get out, or we’ll turn into prunes.”

We get out, and I help her get the water wings off.

She tosses them on the patio with a scrunched-up face. “I hate those.”

“Then why’d you want to swim?”

Sophie peers up at me, squinting against the sun as she grins. “Because you like it.”

She says it like it’s obvious, and my heart melts.

“You will always mean more to me than anything in this world has a right to mean.”

I swallow as I think of my dad’s words.

I can't pretend I know how hard it would be to have kids, how they test your patience. But the way she's looking at me, I know there's nothing I wouldn't do for her.

"Stay put," I tell Sophie, "I need to get towels."

She heads for her trucks under one of the patio chairs while I go to the cabana on the other side of the patio.

The top shelf is empty, but there should be extras below. I'm rummaging around inside and finally spot a stash tucked behind some other supplies when I hear a splash behind me.

"Sophie?" I call over my shoulder, grabbing two towels.

No answer.

My veins turn to ice.

I whirl and bolt from the cabana, my gaze scanning the patio where she was a moment ago.

No sign of her.

Until I spot her form beneath the surface of the pool.

"Sophie!" I scream.

I need to get to her. I know it in my mind, but my legs won't cooperate.

My throat tightens, every part of me numb.

Go. Go. Fucking go.

Suddenly I do, springing toward the pool.

But in the same moment, a form leaps over the fence from the direction of the studio and dives into the pool headfirst.

My head thuds dully and my nails dig into my palms as Tyler cuts through the water.

It feels like a lifetime before he emerges with Sophie, who's coughing. He lifts her out and sets her on the side of the pool before hefting himself out, his jeans, T-shirt, and jacket soaked and his hair black and dripping.

I race toward them, my arms wrapping around her wet form. "Oh my God. Are you okay?"

I pull back to look in her pale face. She's breathing, though blinking and disoriented.

When her coughing relents, she mumbles. "My red sister truck was in the pool."

I look over the edge to see the red truck on the bottom. My stomach plummets as I wrap one of the towels still clutched in my hands around her.

Tyler's voice is low, shaken. "I'll get her toy."

He wrenches off his drenched jacket, but before he can shift away, I clamp a hand around his wrist. I can't stand the thought of him going anywhere right now. "No."

"Annie, I'm soaked," he protests.

After a moment, his arms go around both of us. I don't give a shit about his wet clothes. I need him here.

"Are *you* okay?" Tyler murmurs.

I shake my head. "I couldn't move," I whisper. "I panicked, and I couldn't do anything and..."

The backs of my eyes burn as my gaze drops to his hand, scarred and tattooed.

His face fills with understanding and an emotion I can't name.

"It's okay, Six. It wasn't your fault."

Sophie squirms, and I shudder out a breath. “Let’s go inside and make a snack. How do Rice Krispies squares sound?”

“I don’t like squares. Can we make them circles?”

Tyler’s face is pale, but his lips curve up in a ghost of a smile.

“Yeah, we can make them circles,” I hear myself say before dropping Tyler’s hand and rising. “You come inside too,” I tell him.



“IT’S SO STICKY.” Sophie’s digging into her first circle with fascination—I used a cookie cutter to make them—when Tyler comes in, his hair damp from the shower in the guest bathroom.

He’s dressed in a black T-shirt of my dad’s and jeans an inch too short, but he still looks handsome as ever.

“I bet this is what you came back from LA for,” I tease, trying to keep it light. “Lifeguard duty.”

He steps closer, scanning my form. I’m still in my bathing suit, a towel wrapped over it. “You must be cold. I can watch Sophie if you want to shower.”

“Thanks. But I don’t want to let her out of my sight.”

I wrap my arms around myself and cut a look towards my sister.

She’s turning the pages of a picture book, happily dressed in pajamas in the middle of the day.

A week ago, I was barely part of this family. Now, it's all I can think about.

This family and him. The boy who's always been in me, with me.

Suddenly, I can't hold the feelings in anymore.

"Tyler." The moment I look back toward him, those dark eyes are on me. "How do you know when something's over? Is it when the world tells you it is? When you decide it?"

He's silent, but I can see the wheels turn behind his eyes.

"I know when you went on tour," I go on, "things were messed up. But there was never a time I didn't want you," I tell him. "You didn't seem to think you were whole anymore, and I hated that I had contributed to that."

His expression fills with anguish as he steps closer, his body a breath away. "Annie, none of it was your fault. You have to know that."

Despite my vows to keep my distance, I can't keep from reaching my arms around his neck to play with the damp hair that curls at his collar. My gaze runs over his chest, the hard lines under his shirt—not because I'm checking him out, though his closeness is making me ache for his touch, but because I can't meet his gaze.

"In acting class my final term at Vanier, we had to prep monologues about our heroes. Elle talked about her mom. Some people chose public figures. I chose you."

He stiffens under me, and I force my eyes up to his because I need to see his face. His expression is filled with longing and something I'm afraid to name.

I'm trapped in his stare, the tension twisting me, wringing me out like one of the wet towels by the pool.

“You will always be my hero, Tyler Adams. The way you try, the way you fight no matter what life sends your way... you are everything I want to be, and it has nothing to do with your music and everything to do with who you are in here.”

My hand covers his heart, his chest warm through the borrowed T-shirt.

“Everyone okay?” Haley asks as she and my dad enter the room.

We step apart, but not before Haley's gaze turns knowing and my dad eyes us suspiciously. “Yeah. Everyone's good.”

A distinctive ringtone from my phone on the coffee table has me stiffening in his arms.

“What is it?” Tyler asks.

I know before I answer. “Real life.”

Annie

“YOU’RE NOT GOING BACK to New York for your ex,” Tyler states from behind me as I throw my makeup and toiletries into the tiny suitcase on my bed.

“It’s work,” I insist. “I’ve been here a week, and even though I told my collaborators what’s going on, they need assurances. Especially Ian, because he’s central to the funding of this entire venture.”

The past two days, we’ve been hanging out around the house and the studio. I think he’s worried about me since Sophie fell into the pool, waiting for me to fall apart.

I won’t, but I like having an excuse to spend time with him.

Once I’ve got my essentials into my bag, I zip the thing closed and drop onto the bed.

Tyler crosses to the edge of the bed, leaning over to stare down at me with broody eyes.

“I don’t trust him. He’s an asshole.”

“Ian?” I laugh. “How do you know?”

“Beck—”

“Beck told you?” I shift up on my elbows. “When did you talk to Beck about me?”

I think he’s going to deny it, but he only tugs on his hair. “In LA. I hate that someone hurt you.”

My chest twinges. “You’re a grown man now. You going to beat him up for me?”

“If you want.”

The earnestness in his voice makes me ache.

I shut my eyes, not against him, but against the feelings.

I can’t have them. Not because I don’t think he feels something too, but because giving into them is dangerous.

I nearly lost myself when I had to let Tyler go the last time. It would break me if I had to do it again.

I feel him shift over me, the bed denting under his weight.

I blink my eyes open to see him hovering inches away, studying me from under his thick, dark lashes. Every nerve in me tingles with anticipation.

Not only between my thighs, but *everywhere*.

“I need to get to the airport,” I say, my voice breathy.

Neither of us moves.

The past few days with him, the familiarity creeps in everywhere—the inside jokes, the teasing. He’ll smile or say something so classic deadpan Tyler that I have to remind myself we’re not dating.

Sometimes, I’m not sure I want to remind myself we’re not dating.

He always made me feel things no other guy could, but now he's making me feel things I didn't know I was capable of.

Physically. Emotionally.

And that's the problem.

I care about Tyler more than I should, more than it's safe to care.

But I shove that aside because even if he feels it too, I can't give in.

We're ships passing, him and me. Even if we can find common ground, how long can it last—a day? A week?

The only thing we have in common is that neither of us belongs here, and neither of us can stay.

Even if we could, we've never been able to stay together for an extended period of time without spinning out. Tyler won't let me in—truly, deeply let me in—to see his hurt. I can't be with someone who'd choose to bear his wounds alone.

“You can leave after you kiss me,” he says.

My fingers find his forearms, digging in. His firm lips are inches away.

I want them on me.

“No,” I whisper. “Because if I kiss you, I can't pretend we're friends right now.”

“As opposed to what?”

We stare each other down.

That I never stopped loving you.

That I'm falling for you again.

Tyler shifts back, his face unreadable.

I get out from beneath him before I change my mind.

“When’d you get the ink on your hand?” I ask over my shoulder as I grab the hair dryer I nearly forgot from my bathroom.

“In between shows on tour. I wanted to cover up something ugly with something beautiful.”

When I return from the bathroom, he’s reclined on the bed.

I tuck the dryer in the front pocket of my bag before straightening.

“You’re beautiful, Tyler. You will always be beautiful.”

I reach for his scarred hand and lift it to my lips.

His skin is rough and warm, and I want more of him—all of him.

“Whatever’s between us now...” I take a long breath. “It can’t stop me from going to New York. And neither can you.”

He pulls his hand back and rises from the bed, his clothes tugging across the strong, deliberate lines of his body. “I know. I’ll take your bag down to the car.”



AFTER MY FLIGHT arrives at La Guardia, I stop by my apartment to drop my things and change. It feels strange to be back after only a week away. It’s my space, filled with things Elle and I love, but suddenly I’m noticing what isn’t here—big, bright windows everywhere letting in natural light, the

sound of Sophie's feet thudding on the carpet as she tears into a room or out of it.

Elle texted to say she's working all weekend, hustling out some gigs with a new agent, and might not be back tonight.

In my tiny room, I change into a fitted red dress that ends partway down my thighs. The neck is a V, and I open my jewelry box to search for a chain to wear with it.

My gaze lands on one in particular, and my stomach knots.

It's still there, curled into one of the compartments, the rings preserved in time like the rose.

My fingers itch, and I think how easy it would be to slip it over my head.

In the end, I can't decide on another necklace, so I go without one.

Ian wanted to meet at my apartment, but I told him we'd meet at a restaurant. I should've known something was up when he gave me the location. It's the hottest place in town, inside a shiny, recently reopened Midtown hotel. It's glass and minimalist elegance. The sky-high ceilings and white space scream money, as they're meant to.

Ian's waiting at a prime table when I arrive.

My ex is the opposite of Tyler, though I never realized it until now. He's quick with a smile, the life of a party, grew up with everything handed to him. His father's in real estate; his mother in the arts. He did a combination of things, running galleries, but his real interest is in performance arts.

Ian wears a suit like a skin, as if he fell out of bed and slid effortlessly into the tailored wool.

“Annie. You look gorgeous,” Ian says easily as I cross to him.

I smooth a hand down my dress. The nude open-toe heels were the perfect addition for a business dinner somewhere fancy.

I put the outfit on feeling as if I was going into a negotiation, but the way he’s looking at me, he’s not thinking of fighting.

Ian steps close, hands resting on my bare arms. I turn my cheek so his kiss lands there, and I step out of his arms smoothly as the waiter holds my chair.

“Thank you for booking the restaurant. I’m glad we have an opportunity to talk business.”

“Thank you for coming. Let’s order first.” He gets steak, and I order salmon. Once the waiter disappears, Ian grins. “Tell me what you’ve been up to with your family in Dallas. I hope I didn’t drag you away.”

A glass of wine appears without my ordering it, and I take a sip, grateful. “My family is fine, thank you. I hope yours is too.”

“You know my mom. It’s the middle of fundraising season, so she’s in her element.”

I smile tightly. “The show’s nearly completed. As you know, I’m working on the lyrics for the last couple of songs. Honestly, I hoped it’d come faster. But they’re the most important.”

Ian’s smile doesn’t waver. “Annie, I know we planned to more formally discuss my involvement in funding after the reading next month.” The event is a tradition, taking place at Ian’s apartment, involving half a dozen actors plus the writing

team and a host of prospective funders from Manhattan's elite circles. "But I think we can move sooner."

My heart kicks in my chest. "Really? You never sign on to a project until all the pieces are in place and you have a chance to discuss it with people you trust."

"But this is your project." He lifts his glass in a toast. "If I commit first, getting the rest of the funders lined up will be simple. We can get this where it needs to be. Together."

Suspicion crawls up my spine. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means we'll meet every few days while you're finishing the book. In New York, obviously. I'd like to be on top of my investment."

"With Miranda."

Ian hesitates. "I don't see the need to use her unnecessarily."

There it is. I shift in my seat as he continues.

"I know how shows are developed. I'm experienced, and you're talented. Together, we make a good team."

I shiver as I feel his leg brush mine under the table.

Our meals come, and he digs in immediately, but I can't.

"We're not getting back together, Ian."

He stops chewing halfway through a bite, brows lifting on his handsome face. After he swallows, he plasters on a smile I've seen a thousand times. "You're getting emotional. Reading something into this that isn't there."

"I didn't read into the part where I walked in on you fucking an eighteen-year-old actress on your couch."

When I rise, he's out of his seat too, reaching for me. "Hey. Come on."

His hand grips my arm. I stare at that hand until he releases me.

"This isn't about me," he bites out. "It's about *him*."

"I'm not seeing anyone." Except as I say the words, they don't feel entirely true.

"Maybe you never touched another man while we were together. But you held back. It's my job to see the beauty in things. That's what attracted me to you. On stage, you're this wild thing. Full of emotion and passion, unrestrained. But you were never that woman with me."

I'm shaking my head, but he continues.

"At first I thought I wasn't doing the right things to bring it out of you." He cocks his head, studying me in a way I can't deny him. "But that was a lie. Which meant you were saving it for something else. Someone else."

His words trip me because he's never said them before, not while we were together or after we broke up.

"There's always a silver lining to these situations," he continues. "I believe in your voice, and I have all the connections in the Manhattan arts community. I can make it easy for you to get this show produced. Or"—he adjusts the cuffs on his jacket—"I can make it difficult."

Cold washes over me at his barely veiled threat.

I know I could work with him, turn away his advances. I trust myself, and I know he has the money and connections to make my dream a reality.

I fold my napkin and set it on the table next to my plate.

“You’re right, Ian. There is a silver lining.”

His eyes soften, as if he knows I’m seeing reason.

“What is this wine?” I ask him.

Ian balks a moment, surprised, but tells me.

I nod. “It’s great.” I make a note to get Pen a bottle as I lift my glass to him before taking a long sip, letting the flavors play over my tongue. “But dinner was a mistake.”

He glances around, as if suddenly unsure of what’s happening.

“You can take your funding and your contacts and your threats and go fuck yourself. Yourself and every other person in Manhattan if you like. But you won’t be fucking me, in bed or out of it.”

I drain the last sip of wine before setting the glass back on the table.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening.” I turn on my heel and head out toward the front of the restaurant.

I’m pissed—pissed at his nerve, even if I shouldn’t be surprised by it.

I don’t regret what I did, but I can’t shake the feeling that it could cost me.

Ian’s not bluffing. He has the contacts to make my life easier or harder.

I’ll deal with it. I’ve dealt with everything else that’s come my way. This project is too important to go down because of him.

I pass the separate bar area of the hotel flanked by floor-to-ceiling glass windows and chrome chandeliers. My gaze

catches on a man in a black sport coat and jeans at the bar.

My steps slow and I change directions, cutting a straight path for him. “What are you doing here?” I ask as I pull up next to him.

Tyler turns at the sound of my voice.

His gaze drops down my body, eyes warming with appreciation. “I couldn’t stop you from coming. But I could come with you.”

He turns a crystal lowball glass filled with ice and clear liquid in one hand, eyes crinkling with satisfaction and something like amusement.

A moment ago, all I wanted was to get out of this restaurant, but his presence is like an escape valve, a life preserver.

“How’s dinner?” he goes on as if this is a completely normal situation.

“Well.” I shift in next to him at the bar and drum my fingers on the surface. “I found an amazing red wine.”

I tell him the name, and he nods to the bartender for two glasses.

“And the company?” Tyler presses as he turns back to me, his gaze more serious.

“It’s rapidly improving.”

I lift the wine and hold it out to him in a toast. He grins as he clinks his glass lightly with mine, and my heart kicks in my chest.

The wine tastes delicious on my tongue, comfort down my throat.

“I’m guessing the fact that you’re here instead of with him doesn’t bode well for your show.”

“It does not,” I concede. “But I will figure it out. I always do.”

“Yes, you do. And I have a gift for you.”

I’m intrigued even before he pushes a paper bag down the bar.

“Is it millions of dollars?” I quip.

“Better.”

I open it and peer inside, the scent of potatoes and oil making my stomach growl. “Oh my God. Cheese fries.”

“From the diner near that comedy club we used to like. I watched you through the glass for the last ten minutes,” he admits. “Didn’t see you pick up your fork once.”

Tyler’s not trying to touch me, to grab me, to make me do anything or be anything. He’s just here, bringing me five-dollar French fries in a five-star hotel.

God, I missed my friend.

I know my heart was broken when we parted ways, when I chose both our dreams over our future together, but I downplayed how much it hurt not to have this—the calm, dryly funny, quietly charming guy I’ve adored since before I knew what charm was.

We eat every last fry and talk about everything. Tyler and Beck’s life in LA. Elle’s new show and whether she and her agent have something going on. How I’m stuck on the last few verses of the most important song for this musical. The fact that he got Shay into the studio before coming to New York

and was rewarded by something better than he could've imagined.

"I told your dad I wanted to swap his dumbass kid for Shay."

I grin. "How'd that go over?"

"Not great."

It's kind of nice to know I'm not the only person who argues with him.

I gaze past Tyler at the sparkling people and tables.

A couple of tables still cut looks at us, one discreetly trying to take pictures.

"We're going to be on the internet in thirty minutes, if we're not already," I murmur.

Tyler reaches for the wine glass. "Do you care? Because I don't."

I shake my head, smiling as he drinks. The way he fills out his unfussy jacket is a tailor's wet dream. The dark, messy hair makes me itch to run my hands through it.

Ian's words come back.

You're saving yourself for someone.

I was.

Maybe I still am.

"For an unavailable guy, you're acting pretty available," I comment after we've finished the bottle of wine and I've won rock paper scissors for the last stub of a fry in the bottom of the greasy paper box.

Tyler frowns, confused. "What do you mean?"

“When I said Shay had a crush on you,” I remind him, “you said she didn’t have a shot because you’re unavailable.”

Understanding dawns. The fact that he doesn’t argue with me has my stomach sinking.

“Please tell me you’re not seeing someone. That there’s not some woman who thinks she’s yours.”

The idea is unbearable.

Tyler pulls his bottom lip between his teeth. “No,” he says at last. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

Relief washes over me, and I can breathe again. But the fear spiking through me a moment ago also reminds me how only a few days with him has me wanting things I have no business wanting with him.

Tyler swipes the bill for the drinks before I can, but the laughter’s faded from his eyes, replaced by something serious and maybe even sad. “Let me drive you home.”



“YOU GOT QUIET,” Tyler observes in the town car as we cruise through the city toward my apartment.

The lights penetrate the back windows, creating strips of illumination that run over his body and mine.

“There’s not enough quiet in the world.” I lean my head on his shoulder, and Tyler huffs out a breath.

When we pull up in front of the building, I have to force my legs out of the car because I don’t want it to end.

“Walk me to my door?” I say on impulse.

He shifts out of the car after me, a dark presence at my side. Like a dog who looks menacing or unapproachable to a stranger, he's the comfort no one will ever understand.

They don't have to.

In the hall outside my apartment, I fish my keys out of my bag. There's a note on the door from Elle.

If you're coming home with NT, I'm going to kill you.

Tyler lifts the note off the door, frowning. "Who's NT?"

"She means Ian. It's an inside joke." I take the note, crumpling it into a ball. My stomach tightens as I think about what the nickname means.

"Annie." Tyler steps between the door and me before I can slide the key into the lock. "Why did you date him?"

I've asked myself the same question so many times these past few days.

"I thought he was what I wanted. He didn't look at me like I was crazy when I told him about my dreams. Though I guess he liked it because he could take advantage."

"I have always believed in you."

I nod. "I know. That's the other reason I was drawn to him."

"Why?"

"Because he was safe. Because I didn't love him the way I loved you."

Tyler's body relaxes, and I peer up into his face. There's urgency that wasn't there at the hotel, but he's holding back.

"Say it," I demand. "Whatever it is that has you looking all broody after I thought we had a good time."

He captures my wrist, and I suck in a startled little breath as he strokes his thumb across my skin. The electricity between us that was content to sit back over dinner and drinks springs to life once again.

Tyler turns my hand and skims his thumb across the lines in my palm, so different from the lines on his. “The reason I’m unavailable isn’t because I’m seeing someone else.”

When his gaze meets mine, the emotion in his eyes hits me square in the chest. “It’s because my heart has always been yours.”

Tyler

I DIDN'T COME to New York to tell Annie Jamieson I love her. I came because I couldn't let her go off to see some dickhead who hurt her without having backup. I know I've been that dickhead, but I won't be him this time.

She's flushed in the hall lights, a warm, lush shade that makes me want to kiss her everywhere. I want to capture her with my hands, my mind, so I can have her like this whenever I want.

"My heart has been yours since you walked into the pool house to steal my towel senior year at Oakwood," I continue.

Annie's lips part, those amber eyes blinking as she sucks in a slow breath.

If she tells me to leave, I will. I'll walk out of here and never come back, never insert myself into her life again when she hasn't asked for it.

Instead, she holds out a hand. "Give me your phone."

I take it out, unlocking it for her.

She opens my contacts and hits a number, telling the driver downstairs he can leave.

Her meaning sinks in, and my body gets heavy—hard.

I turn us so it's her back against the door, my hips colliding with hers. She doesn't resist, doesn't do anything but angle her face up to mine.

"Listen to me." I plant my hand on the wall next to her head instead of threading it into her hair like I want to. "If this is about blowing off steam, about you being pissed at your ex or the world, I can be your friend. But I won't fuck you tonight."

Confusion clouds her expression. "But you said—"

"I know what I said," I interrupt. My breath is too shallow for the words I need to say, but I say them anyway. "It's not enough to know you're not his, Annie. I need to know you're mine."

The words settle between us.

She weighs them as if each is worthy of its own assessment.

It's what I wanted, for her to take me seriously, but Annie thinks on those words for so fucking long it's going to break me.

"Tyler..."

Her arms wind around my neck, and she holds me tighter, hugging me with every ounce of strength in her. I breathe her in, but every part of me knows she's going to say something I don't want to hear.

"You're right. I did find myself in New York. I've learned how to be tough. How to take care of myself and go after my dreams. I wouldn't have become that person without everything that happened, and a lot of it is thanks to you.

“I’m not sure I can give my heart to you the way you’re asking. But,” she continues before I can pull away, “I loved the boy you were then. I love the man you are now.”

I understand everything she’s saying. It’s more than I had a right to hope for.

I have her as much as anyone can.

“I tried to cut you out, Annie. I wanted to forget you but I couldn’t. You’re so deep inside me I can’t get you out. I never touched another woman on tour. When you’re close, there’s no air. But when you’re gone... I don’t care if I breathe again.”

Her gaze searches mine as if she’s trying to figure a way through this moment.

In my life, I’ve started taking the things I want, stopped making apologies for it. Now... I wait. For the first time in two fucking years, I wait.

Her hands slide down my chest and rest there. She inches forward, closing the distance between us.

She’s close enough I can taste her slow exhale, smell her shampoo.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I want to do it for her.

I haven’t kissed her in two years, and I know it’s because she’s been holding back.

The moment she decides, my heart stops.

When Annie’s lips brush mine, it’s honest and vulnerable. It’s a plea. It’s a promise. It’s all the words and all the actions ever invented rolled into the subtle slide of her skin on mine.

She shifts up on her toes to worship my mouth. My hands slide down to hold her waist, lightly, chastely, while she paints possibilities with her tongue.

It's sweet. It's hot. The soft moan that escapes her turns me on like crazy. I want to bury my face in her neck, inhale her floral scent, lose myself in all she is.

It's so fucking good, but it hurts, too. She's inside me, everywhere, and half of me wants to push her out while the other half wants to open up, to let her in.

The second she threads her fingers in my hair, tugging greedily for more access, my control snaps.

She can't promise me all of her forever, but I'll take all of her tonight.

I press her up against the door, and with everything in me, I kiss her back.

Under the dress, she's slow curves that yield under the growing evidence of how much I want her. Annie's lips part, her breath coming in short gasps.

I reach for the keys in her hand and take them from her, fumbling to get the door open. We trip inside, her heels clicking on the wood floor. I turn her, press her back against the wall as the door closes behind us.

Before we broke up, I felt powerless. In the moments we'd lost ourselves in physicality, trying to connect in any way we could, we somehow missed each other.

This is the opposite.

I kiss her in the kitchen while she kicks off her shoes, in the living room as I unbutton my shirt. I kiss her in her

bedroom, ignoring the desire to look around. Curiosity can wait. We've waited long enough.

I unzip her dress, slide the straps off her smooth shoulders, and watch it fall to the floor.

The way she looks at me, hungry eyes filled with lust and emotion, makes me want to hurry.

I don't.

I've never had a problem with patience, but I've had a problem with appreciation.

I won't take a moment of this, of *her*, for granted again.

I strip away the rest of our clothes, piece by piece.

My shirt and pants.

Her bra and panties.

I'm covered in ink, the words I could never say painting pictures across my body like she used to do with her pen.

She's slim and unmarked, a blank canvas that's familiar and fresh at once.

I touch every inch of her, cupping her breasts that fit perfectly in my hands, sucking her dark nipples until she moans my name.

My lips caress her shoulders, her throat, her waist, her hips.

I make love to her the way I've wanted to for weeks, years.

For the first time, I'm not afraid of what's between us. I take it all.

I touch her body as if she's mine forever instead of just for now.

She kisses me with the openness she's always had, the confidence that's new.

Her palm slips between us to wrap around me, forcing a hiss from my throat as pleasure spirals up my spine. Every muscle in me clenches, right down to the hand I spent two years hating...

And I want more.

I want her around me, so tight I can't breathe.

Inside me, in the space between the atoms that make up my muscles and skin and bones.

When the fire inside me won't be checked, I walk her toward the dresser, lifting her. She studies me with half-lidded eyes under dark lashes as our lips brush.

"Are you..."

My words are hoarse, the first sound in the silence that's not the slide of fabric or the pant of breath or the moan of a sigh.

Annie nods. "Do it," she whispers.

Four words.

They're all we need tonight.

When I press inside her, it's slow. I thank a god I've never prayed to before as every inch of her takes every inch of me.

I memorize the way her eyes change color when she's full of me. I devour her sighs and moans.

This is home.

This is love.

This is everything I've missed, everything I've wanted and never dared to name.

I'm lost with her, but for once, lost doesn't feel like panic. It feels like trust.

When she shudders in my arms, her mouth coming back to mine as if she can't stand to be apart from me, I know the truth.

I told myself I could make do with her giving me all of her tonight.

But it's not enough. It will never be enough.

Annie

TYLER ADAMS IS A SORE LOSER.

We play games on the plane back from New York. It's been a while since I traveled first class, but with him, I wouldn't care if we were stuffed in with the bags. Sitting next to him, hearing him laugh and seeing him smile, is amazing and maddening.

"It's a word game app," he argues, jerking his chin at my phone in his hand for emphasis. "You're going to win by default."

"That's not true," I say, wrenching the device away from him. "Man up and compete already."

He narrows his gaze. "You're going to attack my masculinity in the middle of a commercial flight?"

Then I feel a tickling at my waist and stifle a surprised shriek. "Sorry," I say to the flight attendant and the cabin in general as I shove his hands away and face the front of the plane, flushing.

To him, I murmur, "You are a menace to society."

His curved lips brush my ear. "That's not what you called me last night."

My thighs squeeze together at his lowered voice because I think I'm wet again. We had sex three times before falling asleep, and twice more this morning.

How either of us is still horny defies logic and biology.

“You promised not to do that on the plane.”

“Do what? Distract you with thoughts of what else we could be doing right now? Forgive me if two years is a long time and I'd rather be so deep inside you—”

I clap a hand over his mouth because if he finishes that sentence, I'm going to come right in the middle of first class.

I shove my phone in my bag because there's no way I can concentrate on a game now.

After the flight attendant comes around to offer us drinks—we both opt for water, which comes in individual bottles with fancy glasses on the side—he asks, “So how does Mr. Douche Ex not being involved affect your show?”

“If Ian's not the first investor, I need to line up some alternatives. And the truth is he was our best chance because he knew us and knew our work.”

I pull out my tablet and open up the files I started to pull while we waited for our flight.

“Bios,” I explain as he looks over my shoulder. “On every other funder in Ian's circle of friends.”

“Blackmail?”

I laugh. “Not quite. I know what they've invested in, what their history is. Ian's not going to do me any favors, but I'm hoping he won't interfere. Still, on the chance he won't...I need a Plan B.”

His slow grin has me arching a brow.

“You’re sexy when you’re plotting,” he decides.

I laugh, realizing we haven’t talked much about serious stuff in the past week. “Thank you. What about you? Why are you chasing women to New York instead of working on new music?”

Tyler leans in. “I told you, I’m on a break. I’m getting surgery.”

“But you’ve already had surgery.”

“This’ll be the fourth time.”

My heart squeezes as the pieces click into place.

He’s still trying to fix it. He might be past holding a grudge against the world and more relaxed with himself, but he doesn’t believe he’s as good as he was.

“Listen to what Zeke sent me.” He digs out his phone, and I pop in the wireless headphones he offers.

The track streams out, and I listen. “How much did you contribute to this?” I ask after the first chorus, pulling out the headphones.

“I didn’t.”

“There’s your problem.”

Tyler looks past me, idly scanning the first-class cabin as if he’s reaching for patience. “I’m not going to write something if I can’t play it.”

“Why not? Music is in your head and your heart, not your fingers. Especially when you live and breathe it. You could lose every sense you have and still feel it.”

I pop the headphones back in and listen to the chorus once more, making some notes on the cocktail napkin in front of me.

“I don’t know why you’re trying to take a studio song and make it work for me. I can’t make the music I want.” He rubs a hand over his jaw. The morning scruff is giving me all kinds of ideas of where I’d like to feel it.

“Maybe you can make something better. You know,” I go on when he doesn’t respond, “It’s cute how much you care about putting Shay in the studio.”

He picks at his armrest. “I don’t.”

“But you do. You barely know her, but you want her to succeed, because she’s talented.”

The Tyler I knew before wouldn’t have been as invested in someone else. It gives me hope.

Not only for Shay, but also for him.

“What about you and your dad?” he comes back. “You still look stiff when you’re in the same room together.”

“I told you I found out Dad paid my tuition through an anonymous scholarship. Which means he didn’t think I could do it on my own.”

“Or he didn’t want to watch you struggle. He loves you, Annie. Maybe he doesn’t express it right, or use the words you want, but he does love you.”

“What does that mean—like how you’re all action and I’m all talk?” I tease.

“That’s part of it. But I meant more like the way you can imagine your mom loved you, even though you’ve never met her.”

The words land between us, and I blink to make sure I heard him right.

“That’s not true.”

Tyler’s eyes soften but he doesn’t press.

“If it was a big deal,” I go on, “don’t you think I would’ve contacted her? I don’t need to. I didn’t even know about her until I got that letter four years ago.”

“Yeah, but the difference is now, even if you don’t mean to, even if he doesn’t know it, you’re comparing him to her.”

I fold my arms over my chest, staring at the water glass, the liquid vibrating slightly with the movement of the plane.

“So what? You think if I want to square things with my dad, I have to contact her?”

Tyler’s hand covers mine, and he tugs it toward him, threading our fingers together. Warmth spreads through me. “You don’t have to do anything. But I don’t want to see it eat at you.”

I shift in my seat. “Did you make peace with your dad and what he did to you? The bills he left you with after?”

Tyler’s head drops back against the headrest, but his eyes stay on me. “Yeah, I did. It took a long fucking time, but I did.”

I turn that over the rest of the ride back to Dallas.



WHEN THE PLANE ARRIVES, the car drops Tyler off at his hotel, then takes me back to Dad and Haley’s. I walk in the door and immediately know something’s wrong.

“Sophie, we need to go.” My dad’s voice is harsh as he stalks into the hallway.

“I don’t wannoo. I’m playing.”

My attention goes to Haley, who’s hunched over by the stairs.

“What happened?” I demand, rushing to her.

“I’ve been having some headaches, which isn’t a big deal except I don’t normally get them,” Haley says weakly. “Today I’ve been having stomach pains, too. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I’m not,” my dad responds. “We’re going to the hospital now.”

My dad and Haley take one car, and I drive Sophie in the other, following them. At the hospital, they take Haley and my dad into a room. Sophie and I wait outside.

I debate only the briefest moment before calling Tyler to tell him what happened.

“I’ll be right there,” he says immediately, and some of the worry ebbs away knowing he’s coming.

I try to keep Sophie occupied, but she races to the door that opens to where Haley is. I’m a beat late chasing her.

Inside, the doctor’s trying to kick out my dad. “We need to run some tests. It will be more efficient with only me here.”

“Fuck efficient.”

“Jax, it’s fine,” Haley insists, wrapping a hand around his wrist, which seems to soothe him. He seems more worked up than she does. “Go sit outside. How would you feel if someone was in your studio telling you what to do?”

Dad finally relents.

The three of us walk into the waiting room just as Tyler stalks around the corner.

“How is she?” Tyler asks, his gaze flicking between us.

“We’re trying to find out,” Jax answers grimly.

“Hey, Sunshine Sophie.” Tyler’s attention lands on my sister wandering down the hallway and tracing a finger down the wall. “Let’s go find some trucks outside.”

She runs for him, and I shoot him a grateful smile.

After Tyler departs, my dad lifts his hands to his face, and I frown. “Are you biting your nails right now?”

He rubs a hand over his neck. “Haven’t done that in a long fucking time.”

Beneath the grumpiness, there’s something deeper, a worry that barking at people can’t fix.

I think of my conversation with Tyler on the plane about loving people, and how we show our love in different ways. Dad definitely has the protective kind down.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s go find snacks.”

We head for the vending machines.

“Remember when we used to get BBQ Pringles for road trips?” I say, pulling out a bill and feeding it into the machine. “I haven’t had them in years.”

I punch the button and watch the silver spiral thingy turn. It stops with the chips hanging from the edge. “Crap.”

My dad shakes the machine, and I laugh as I feed it another bill.

He grunts. “It’ll eat your money twice.”

“It might not.”

We both watch as if this is the most important thing in the world. The gear turns, dropping the first chips.

The second...

Nope. Stuck.

I drop into a chair, and he takes the one next to me.

I grab the tin and open the lid. “You do the honors.”

He pops it and takes the first chip. “How was New York?”

The question is forced out, as if it takes an unusual amount of energy for him to expel the words.

“I had a minor setback with work,” I say carefully, knowing my career hasn’t been something we could talk about in the past. “A personal contact was going to invest in the new show. It got messy, and he’s not the right fit anymore.”

“It’s a big deal, producing a show.”

“I know.”

I reach for a chip and crunch into it. He sits in silence next to me.

“Tyler kicked my kid out of the studio and wants to put Shay in his place,” he goes on after a moment. “I didn’t bring him on to scout talent. I brought him on to rein it in. He was always sensible at that age. Mostly sensible,” he amends. “I put a lot into this label. My reputation. My money.”

I cock my head. “If you lose everything, Haley has her business. She can support you.”

He shoots me side-eye, and I can’t help smiling.

“Everyone thinks dating musicians is awesome,” I say.
“But it sucks.”

My dad follows my gaze down the hall to where Tyler’s playing with Sophie.

“Am I the reason you’re not with Tyler?”

The words are so quiet I almost miss them.

“No. We’re...I don’t know what we are,” I admit. “But after he got hurt, we needed space. I told myself he needed something I couldn’t give him. But I wanted my dreams too. I wanted to prove I could make it.”

“And now?”

I exhale hard. “I don’t know, Dad.”

“He cares about you.” He looks over at me. “Haley will be the first to say I’m not patient. Loving someone doesn’t mean you’re a different person every day. But it means you’re willing to try to be better.”

I offer him the last chip.

He shakes me off. “It’s yours.”

I break it in half, and he takes the other part.

“You know which album is the most important?” he muses after finishing and brushing his hands on his jeans. “It’s the one you create next. It’s not just about the money. It’s my reputation.”

“That’s why you should trust Tyler about Shay.” I glance toward the man I love entertaining my little sister down the hall, and my chest expands until it threatens to crack my ribs. “Because he doesn’t go all in every day. But when he does... it’s magic.”

Tyler

“THAT THING you wanted me to keep an eye out for? I’ve got a lead on it,” Beck says over the phone as I shift out of my car at the studio the next day. “Four bedrooms. Ocean view. Floor-to-ceiling glass. Don’t drool on your shoes.”

I shake my head as I grab the front door and head inside. Shay waves at me, and I nod. “Get the realtor to chase it down for me.”

“Done. Long as I get first dibs on bedrooms.”

I’ve been saving for a place on the beach. My plan is to get my surgery, fix my hand, and get back to my album in warm weather—no more cold winters that make my hand feel useless and broken.

But that’s not the only reason for my upbeat mood.

I could chalk it up to my surgery coming up soon, but it’s not that.

It’s the time I’m spending with Annie, but also creatively, helping Shay.

Hell, I even started work with the songs Zeke sent me, though I’m not about to admit it until I go back to LA.

Which I have to do soon.

But it's been easy to push that from my mind in light of the chaos of the past few days.

I hang up and glance at Shay, who's unpacking her things at her desk.

"Ready to work?" I ask her.

"Absolutely." Her face lights up with enthusiasm. "First, though, you have guests waiting in your office." I frown, and she hurries to add, "They said they knew you."

I start back there, annoyed someone's in there without me. I push the door wide and stop in my tracks.

Annie's inside, looking like everything right in the world in a flowy blue dress that makes me want to press her up against the wall and find out if she's wearing anything under it.

"Hey, beautiful. How's Haley this morning?"

"Resting but good. No more pains. And the headaches have subsided."

Last night we got back from the hospital around midnight, after the doctors ran a bunch of tests and diagnosed Haley with preeclampsia. Given she's not due to deliver for another month, they gave her medication and advised her to stick to bed rest and return if things worsened.

I go to kiss Annie, but she pulls back. "Slow your roll, Romeo. We've got company."

She moves out of the way to reveal Rae slouched in my task chair.

I arch a brow at Annie's former roommate. "You look comfortable."

“Lumbar support is important,” Rae deadpans. But she rises from her chair and I grab her in a one-armed hug she reluctantly allows.

Annie says, “She’s stopped over on her way to Miami for a DJ gig.”

“Damn. I was just talking to Beck. He’ll be bummed he missed you.”

“What were you talking about?” Annie asks, and my chest tightens as I think about the house.

“Ah... nothing. You wanna see Jax’s new artist?”

I lead them to the studio where Shay’s getting set. I nod at her to start.

Through the glass, Rae watches intently. She and Annie are both looking for different things than I would—I can tell from the way they watch, the way they listen. It’s the beautiful thing about music—everyone gets something different from it.

Rae folds her arms over her chest. “She any good in front of a crowd?”

“She’s playing tonight,” I say. “You should come. Both of you.”

When Annie and her friend take off, I hold her back for a moment in the hallway to kiss her until she melts under my hands.

“Mmm,” she murmurs when I pull back. “What was that for?”

“Your dad texted to give me the green light on Shay. Funny how that happened when he was completely opposed to it yesterday.”

Her eyes sparkle. “So weird.”

It means she and her dad are talking, and Jax is holding up his end of our bargain.

I kiss her again, hard, before letting her go. “Thanks.”

Annie tosses me a look over her shoulder as she heads for the door. “Any time.”

Since New York, things between us have felt good.

We haven’t had a “where is this headed” conversation, which doesn’t feel right given we’re finally spending time together again.

But even though I don’t know the specific answer, I know I don’t want to lose her.

After I finish working with Shay, I open my email to find a brutal reality check.

The note from Zeke’s office is brief but outlines expectations of my contract once I’m back in LA—which I’m supposed to be in another week. There are a dozen attachments. I only open the first two—a schedule for studio time, tens of thousands of dollars’ worth, plus an invitation to a party.

The last few weeks, I have been checked out. I needed the time.

I need more time.

My gut twists.

The email is a reminder this is all temporary, that I’m heading back to LA soon—not just for my surgery, but for my life.

I'm heading across the parking lot when Annie's voice from across the fence stops me. "Where are you going?"

"Home for a shower and to change before Shay's show." I cross to where she's standing, slide a hand between the fence posts, and wrap my arm around her waist.

Her lips curve. "I got some good writing done today."

"Sing for me?"

Annie laughs. "You listened to musicians all day long."

"None I wanted to fuck."

Her gaze drops down my body. "You have a change of clothes in the office? You could have dinner with us at the house. Shower after."

Twenty minutes later, we're arranged around the table in Jax's dining room. Sophie's devouring chicken fingers while the rest of us have grilled salmon.

"Forgive the catering," Haley says. "It's been a busy few weeks, and it's getting busier before it gets easier."

"This is great. Thanks, Haley," I say, and she smiles. "Shay's set is tonight," I remind Jax. "You could come."

He turns it over, glancing at Annie. "It's fine. My wife could pop any minute."

Haley rolls her eyes. "Jax, I'm not going to pop."

They share a smile that makes me cut a look at Annie.

"How's work going?" Haley asks Annie.

"I'm so close to finishing the last song. The reading is scheduled for the first week of September. It's a chance for a number of people to show off new ideas. Ian's assistant

organizes it and he hosts, but there are lots of other contacts there.”

“Ian’s the ex,” Jax says gruffly.

“He’s one of those guys who wears suits for fun,” I add before Annie can speak.

Jax’s gaze narrows. “A douche.”

“First-class.”

Annie’s jaw drops, and Haley hides a smile behind her napkin.

“Thank you for those uninvited opinions on my love life. You don’t know anything about him,” Annie tosses.

My muscles tighten in response, my voice lowering. “I know he had you and he let you go.”

Silence falls over the table as I hold her stare.

I remember what Jax asked me once: whether I loved Annie the way he loved Haley.

I do. I know it, which only makes the reality of our situation harder.

“Anyway,” Annie goes on at last, a flush crawling up her cheeks that makes me want to drag her to the nearest room or closet or front-fucking-lawn and devour her. “These funders like to go in on things together. But, I’ve learned that a few of Ian’s friends have invested independently in the last ten years. So I’m going to focus on them.”

After dinner, Annie crooks a finger at me and I follow her down the hall.

“Where are you going?” Jax asks.

Annie tosses him a look. “Tyler and I are going to hang out, Dad,” she says in a mock-whiny-teenager voice.

He grumbles something inaudible before heading back toward the kitchen, and I laugh under my breath.

“He wants to make sure we’re not having sex in the shower,” I tell her as we ascend the stairs.

At the top, she turns, peering up at me. “You don’t want to have sex in the shower?”

Her innocent voice sends every ounce of blood to my dick.

“Fucking yes, I do.”

She laughs as we get to her room and shut the door behind us.

As I strip off her clothes and make her mine, one slow drugging kiss at a time, I wish I could shut the door on LA and my fears just as easily.



AFTER DINNER, we meet Rae at the venue where Shay’s playing.

Thanks to a delicious dinner and the fact that I made Annie come twice in the shower and once more in her bed, tonight’s already feeling like a solid win. Now, I try to push the email from Zeke from my mind as I get ready to share the night with the woman I love and her friend, watching an artist that I found and nurtured.

As we crowd around a high top table, Annie pries stories from Rae her life on the road as a DJ trying to make it. The

woman's always been hard to get a read on, but I'm fascinated hearing her experiences.

Unlike me, she sounds like she could travel forever.

"You okay?" Annie asks, leaning over.

I slide a hand over her knee, resting my fingers on the inside of her thigh as I brush my lips across her jaw. "Yeah."

I look up as the band starts, and Shay takes the mic, but she's not looking at the crowd—she's looking at the floor.

Alarm stirs low in my gut. I can't put my finger on the warning feeling, but I know something's off.

"What is she doing?" Rae asks.

She misses her cue, and the band keeps playing. Eventually, they stop. Annie and I exchange a look, but we both know.

Shay's frozen up.

I'm cursing her for it even as I weave through the crowd to the foot of the stage. I shoot security a look as they spring into action, but they stop when they recognize me.

Shay's eyes widen as she sees me leap onto the stage. "I'm sorry," she whispers hoarsely when I stop in front of her.

"It's fine. You got this," I say.

"I know. I thought I did, but... Just don't go anywhere, okay?"

I nod to the confused band, and they restart.

I step back into the wings and nod at her.

Her gaze is locked on mine as she sings the first line. It's tentative.

The guitarist is eyeing us warily, so I grab his unused mic and join in.

Shay's smile lights up the entire place.

I keep going, and she finds her stride.

By the time we hit the chorus together, the audience is loving it.

It feels good to be up there, better still to help her.

My hand might be fucked but the way Shay's looking at me from the stage and Annie's looking at me from the audience, it's hard to believe anything is missing in this moment.

After, I head back down the stairs, surprised to see Annie and even Rae holler and applaud as I rejoin them.

"Well, that was a disaster."

"It was averted, and you made something even better together," Annie corrects.

I search her gaze, my chest expanding. "You're good for my soul," I say simply.

She grabs my arms, her hands digging into my biceps. "I know you don't like thinking of yourself as depending on other people or having them depend on you..." she goes on, "But you matter. To your friends. To me. To Shay. You can make a difference here. With my dad and in people like Shay's lives."

My chest tightens. Not her life.

I tuck her hair behind her ear. "When I was on tour, I realized I couldn't blame what happened to me for how I felt. But I also promised myself I'd do whatever it took to be as

good as I was before. And while I was at it,” I go on, my mouth tugging up at the corner, “I’d get a house on the beach. Somewhere warm. Somewhere I’d wake up every day and make music I love and not owe anyone anything.

“It’s the security I’ve always wanted, Annie. The freedom. And you helped me get it.”

She stiffens, love and sadness competing on her face. “I’m glad.”

“Before I left for tour, I told you I wished you’d never made me dream. That’s not true, and I never should have said it.”

“Tyler...it’s okay.”

“It’s not. Because I need you to know that I still dream. And when I dream, I dream of us.

“You telling me about your work on the couch while we watch the sun set after a long day. Me getting you roses because you love them even when you have no earthly reason to. You swimming naked in our pool until I’m so turned on I have to take you right there.”

Her eyes darken, and I wish we weren’t in public so I could show her how fucking good it could be.

“Is that all?” she murmurs at last, looking understandably overwhelmed.

No.

I want kids who glare at us with your eyes and scream at us with my mouth.

I want you and me forever.

I want you to want it as badly as I do.

But I can't ask because there's a huge hole in my chest even with her standing right in front of me, one that'll get bigger the moment she says that's not what she wants.

"Yeah," I say instead. "That's all."

Annie

THERE'S nothing like the morning after a night that doesn't end.

Last night I rewrote the final song for the musical completely while staring at the studio before falling asleep in my chaise lounge, my notebook on my lap.

The fog I've been wrestling with cleared and I accomplished what I've been trying to for months.

I was so sure of it, I took a screenshot and sent it off to Miranda last night.

When the sun comes up, a slice of vibrant orange on the horizon, the paper is on the patio next to my chair. My phone buzzes with a message from my writing partner.

It's short and sweet.

MIRANDA: That's it.

SATISFACTION AND PRIDE settle in me as I shift out of the chair, rubbing a hand through my hair.

The tile cool under my bare feet, I stretch my sore muscles, thinking of the routine I've established since I returned from New York.

Helping with Sophie in the morning, taking her to school.

Hanging with Haley when my dad's working, half to keep an eye on her and half because she's fun and super smart and the kind of woman I want to be.

Dropping in on Tyler around lunch—midafternoon if I can wait that long—to hang out, which often ends with us sweaty and naked.

But yesterday he played me Shay's track, which is sounding freaking awesome, plus a couple of new bands he's thinking about sending to my dad. I teased him about being a wannabe A&R guy.

"When I dream, I dream of us."

When he said the words, I wanted to wrap my arms around him and never let him go.

Because I love spending time with him. I love how he is with Shay, how she's slowly dragging him out of his own head where his music is concerned.

He's so different than he was when we broke up, and better still for having spent these weeks here.

And so am I.

I'm more comfortable with myself. I don't have every answer, and I'm okay with that. I'm not afraid someone will accuse me of not being capable enough to write a musical, or star in a show, or be unreasonable because I want to be in the spotlight and be part of a family.

Dad and I can have a conversation one-on-one, not just be civil for a meal, I like helping Haley and Sophie, and most of all I love that the only guy who's ever owned my heart is right here.

I considered walking away from my dreams to run after Tyler two years ago, and it would've been a mistake. He needed the space to figure out a new normal, and I needed to prove to myself I could hack it in the city.

So what if this time is different?

I head upstairs and take a shower, luxuriating in the hot steam for a few minutes before I pull on jean shorts and a tank top and head to Sophie's room. I crack the pink curtains before dropping to my knees next to the bed.

I tickle her face. "Good morning. Time for daycare, Soph."

She wrinkles her nose and swats my hand. "It's not."

Her sleepy mumble has me laughing.

"It is."

"Sing me a song." I start to, and her eyes blink open. "I don't know that one."

I brush the hair back from her face. "No one does yet. I wrote it."

"Sing more."

"When you get up."

She's out of bed in a second. If my audiences are as receptive as Sophie, maybe this new show has a shot.

She picks out her clothes, and I pull her hair back and braid it, the only part she'll let me do.

When we get downstairs, there's a figure looming at the sliding doors.

"*Tyler!*" Sophie runs over, pressing up on her toes to stubbornly work the lock until she can let him in.

"Thanks, Sunshine Sophie." His hands are full of a huge basket with fancy decaf and other treats, which he lifts. "For Haley."

"What about for me?" Sophie prompts.

I'm about to tell her we're making her cereal, but Tyler frowns and rummages in the basket, pulling out a purple plastic truck. "I don't see anything for you."

She jumps on the toy.

"I got it in LA, but it's been living in my hotel room ever since," he murmurs to me.

My stomach twists, every part of me tingling.

"I love you," I blurt.

Tyler's smile freezes. He squares to face me, his handsome face surprised and pleased. "I love you too."

The words sink into my skin, my bones, my soul.

I want to hear him say it again.

"I love you both," Sophie says solemnly, and I can't help laughing as Tyler ruffles her hair.

"All right, time for cereal," I say, heading for the cupboards.

Sophie runs toward the front door before I can argue, comes back a moment later with shoes, and drops them at Tyler's feet. "Shoes first."

Apparently, she's decided she wants him at her beck and call.

Can't say I blame her.

"Shoes at the same time," Tyler counters.

She hops into her chair and puts on her bib.

"Sing your song for Tyler," she commands as she starts to munch.

I sing, pouring a black coffee for me and one with cream for Tyler. When I turn back to him, mug in hand, he's watching with fascination.

"That's it," Tyler murmurs when I finish.

"Funny. Miranda said the same thing."

As Tyler and I drink our coffees and Sophie finishes her cereal, my dad comes down the steps and takes in the scene.

"Daddy!" She scoots out of her chair and into his arms. "Annie wrote a song. It's the best song."

"Annie writes all the best songs," Dad responds.

"How would you know?" I toss.

"My favorite is this one."

He starts to sing one from my other musical and Sophie squeals in delight. "Let's get you to school, kid," he tells Sophie once he finishes.

I'm still struggling with the emotion that comes from realizing he knows one of my songs.

It never occurred to me that he did.

But as my gaze finds Tyler's, I know he can see it all on my face.

“How’s Haley?” I ask Dad as Sophie finishes her breakfast and goes to grab her backpack.

“Tired but in good spirits. I shouldn’t be going to this party in LA.”

I cross to him and squeeze his arm. “It’ll be okay. Serena’s coming tomorrow to stay, so she, Haley, Sophie, and I can do a girls’ night. Besides, everyone’s going to this party, right?”

“Yeah.” He nods in response, giving me a one-armed hug.

“So, maybe Shay should go.”

Dad looks between me and Tyler as I hold my breath.

“Yes,” Dad decides. “Shay should go.”

Tyler shoves both hands in his pockets. “I’ll let her know.”

They leave, and I jump on Tyler. “I’m so glad Shay’s working out.”

“Thanks to you.”

“No, thanks to you,” I point out. “You’re the one who pushed for her. I just helped move things along.”

I plant a kiss on him, then take the treats he brought up to Haley, who thanks me.

“No treats for you?” I ask Tyler when I’m back downstairs.

He looks up from his phone before tucking it away. “I have very discriminating standards.”

“Bullshit.” I grab a bowl and the box of Rice Krispies. “You’d fuck someone for Circle Krispies.”

He groans as he crosses to me. “If that someone is you?” he murmurs against my neck, wrapping an arm around me to drag my hips against his, “I’d fuck you for dryer lint.”

I laugh, but every part of me lights up. I reluctantly pull back and pass him the bowl of butter and marshmallows. “We should probably make some Circle Krispies for Sophie.”

“The kid’s going to be a walking marshmallow.”

“Didn’t hurt us.”

He chuckles and melts the marshmallows.

“Why don’t we get sick of these after so many years?” I ask. “I can’t decide if it’s the sweetness or the chewiness.”

“It’s because we always made them together.”

God, my aching heart.

I cast a look over my shoulder, thinking about the email sitting in my inbox since yesterday, the one I’ve read a dozen times. “I emailed my mom. She’s in LA. She said she’d meet me.”

Tyler closes the distance between us. “Wow. That’s huge. You could come to LA with us when we go for the party. You don’t even have to tell your dad the reason.”

I turn that over. “Maybe I will. What kind of activity says, ‘We’ve never met, but let’s connect as grownups’?”

“Fly fishing.”

I laugh. “Or drinks. Somewhere quiet but not so quiet you can feel the awkwardness.”

“I can suggest a few places.”

“Thanks.” We share a smile.

“You’re so good with Sophie,” I can’t help saying. “You want kids?”

“Depends who with. I figured you and I’d have three. The first one to practice. The second would be the refined model. The third, just because we were so fucking good at making the first two.”

I nearly drop the wooden spoon.

The microwave beeps, and he removes the bowl before turning back to me. “We didn’t have great childhoods, but we wouldn’t put our kids through that. It doesn’t mean everything would go smoothly, but we’d love the hell of out of them.”

Tyler sets the bowl on the counter and takes the spoon from between my fingers, as if he didn’t blow me apart a second ago with this wild and enthralling idea of us procreating.

We’re too young to think about it, but I know Tyler would be a great dad. He’d be caring and patient and consistent. He’d always take an interest, have a sense of humor about things too.

“Are you asking me to have your kids?” I try to make it a joke, to hide the longing in my voice.

He traces the handle down my forehead, my nose, my lips. “I’m telling you I’ve thought about it. With you, I’ve thought about everything.”

My heart squeezes and I try to make sense of the jumble of feelings and thoughts swirling inside me.

“So you’ll come to LA when we go?” he asks abruptly before I can respond.

“I don’t see why not. But aside from hitching a ride on the charter, what’s the rush?”

He heaves out a breath. “Because after this party...I’m staying in LA. My hand surgery is next week and after that, I’m scheduled to go back into the studio.”

“Oh.” The backs of my eyes burn.

He threads the fingers of his good hand into my hair, pulling me against him.

I want to tell him not to go, but that feels petty and childish. I know it’s not only the logistics that are keeping us apart. The last time I went all in on him, I lost him. We’re older now, smarter, but the possibility of him changing his mind, or of the lives we’re building coming between us, is the most awful thing I can imagine.

He moves behind me, wraps his arms around my waist. “Sing me that song again.”

I close my eyes and give in to the feeling and do as he asks.

I pretend for a moment it could always be this way—him asking for things, me knowing I can give them to him, that I can make this man happy. This man who, by breathing, gives me so damned much.

“It’s beautiful,” he says. “What happens when this pitch session goes well?”

Needing to distance myself even a few inches, I mix the cereal into the bowl, then spread the mixture into a pan, pressing it down with a wooden spoon.

“*If* it goes well,” I amend, “we get commitment to move forward.” I take the pan to the freezer and return to him. “Then, if we keep meeting stage gates and the reception is strong... we could be off-Broadway in one year. On Broadway in two or three.”

“Years. In New York.”

Hope swells inside me, but it’s bittersweet. “That’s the dream. And it is a dream, Tyler. For so long I’ve wanted to be in the spotlight. I thought it was about me, but after doing the first show, I learned it’s more than that. When you’re performing live, you get to be intimate with people. Whether it’s a few hundred or thousands, they’re not a crowd. You’re touching every person in that audience. People like us who are questioning if they’ve got it figured out, or who know they don’t and can’t see a way forward. People who need a flash of inspiration, something out of the ordinary. People who need to feel something real.”

He watches me steadily as he strokes a thumb down my cheek. “I have a call with my label this afternoon, but if you want someone to rehearse with first...”

“I’d love that.”

Tyler’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “Then let’s go to work. I’m all yours.”

But my chest aches because I want the second part of his vow more than the first.

Annie

“TABLE FOR ANNIE JAMIESON,” I tell the woman at the front of the trendy restaurant in LA.

I follow her back to a table tucked into the corner.

“You requested something with privacy. How’s this?” she asks.

“Perfect. Thank you.” I sit facing the door and watch people drift in.

The full weight of my attention is on this meeting.

I don’t even know this woman, but I want to like her—and I want her to like me.

I smooth the skirt of my simple black dress and wonder if I should’ve worn my hair up instead of down.

The nerves didn’t hit me when I confirmed the meeting time, not even on the charter flight with my dad, Tyler, and Shay earlier today.

They’re hitting me now.

A waitress comes by and offers me the drink menu. “Would you like something?”

“Sure, I’ll have a glass of pinot grigio.”

I recognize her the second she walks in. Her hair is red like mine, and her mouth pulls into a startled smile.

“Annie. Oh my God.”

I shift out of my seat as her gaze runs over me. “You’re beautiful.”

Her eyes mist, and I let her hug me.

“Hi... Fiona.” I can’t say “Mom.” The word sticks in my throat. “Thank you for meeting me.”

She’s beautiful too, early forties and still completely fresh-faced and slender, her black jumpsuit revealing long, tanned legs.

“I was surprised to hear from you after all this time.”

“I’m sorry it took so long. I wasn’t ready.”

Her brows pull together. “Of course.”

The waitress comes by to offer wine, and Fiona jumps at it.

“Tell me everything,” she says once the waitress departs to get our drinks.

“I’m not sure where to start,” I confess with a smile.

“Wherever you want.”

So I tell her about how I grew up in Dallas, then attended Vanier for two years before getting a gig working with Miranda Talbot writing a new show for the stage.

“You’re writing for Broadway,” she gushes as two glasses are set in front of us. “I always wanted to be on Broadway. Do you think you’d have a role for me?”

I shift in my seat. “We haven’t even gotten funding, not to mention cast it. But maybe? It will be a lot of work until

previews.”

“Oh, I see.” Her face falls. “You must know everyone in the business.”

I start to say “no,” but I stop at the last minute. “I have worked with a lot of people. I’ve kept pretty busy since school. And every person I meet teaches me something.”

“I’m sure. There are so many rich, handsome men in New York,” she insists.

“Right.” It takes effort to hold my smile in place. “But tell me about you. How long have you been in LA?”

“Ages. I’ve done commercials. And guest appearances on a couple of network shows,” she says with pride. “But I’ve always known there’s something bigger out there for me. Do you feel that way?”

My chest expands at her description. I know that feeling. I’ve lived it.

Maybe it didn’t come from the world.

Maybe it came from the woman in front of me.

“Yes. I do.”

Her eyes glint as she reaches over the table and covers my hand with hers. “How’s Jax? I heard he launched a label recently.”

“He’s excited. He’s actually in LA, too, for an event later tonight.”

The second the words are out, Fiona sucks in a breath. “And you’re going? I’d love to see him again. And meet some of your friends.”

The way she says it has me hesitating. “From the letter you wrote to me, I figured you and my dad hadn’t parted ways on the best of terms.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ve all moved past it now. He’s quite a charmer. We’d have plenty to laugh about now. Is his wife at this party too?”

I slide my hand out from under hers to reach for my wine even though my stomach is suddenly unsettled.

“She’s not. And as for the party—I don’t know the host well enough to invite a friend. Dad’s focused on promoting a new artist.”

She seems to sense me shutting down and leans in. “Well, I bet the money is better in music than the stage.”

“Probably,” I concede. “I don’t think people go to Broadway for the money. But if you want to be part of something incredible and touch people every night, it’s the place to be.”

Fiona laughs. “It sounds exhausting.”

I try to keep the conversation on her because every time it comes back to me, I end up feeling as if she cares more about what I can do for her than who I am, what I like.

We finish our glasses of wine, and I make my excuses before putting her in a cab to go home with a hug that’s shorter on my end than hers, one I wish I could lean into but can’t.

By the time the car pulls away, I’m actually aching to go to an industry party with the people I love.



“HOW DID I score two handsome dates to this event?” I ask.

“Correction. *I* scored two handsome dates.” Beck shifts across the back seat in the limo and hooks an arm around my neck.

Five of us are in the limo—Dad, Shay, Beck, Tyler, and me. High-end carpooling isn’t usually feasible in LA, but Beck surprised us by showing at our hotel, so he came with us.

Despite the weird meeting with my mom and the fact that tomorrow, I’ll be on a plane leaving this city without Tyler, I’m grateful for the company tonight.

My dad looks up from his phone for the first time and shakes his head.

“Haley will be okay,” I insist. “Serena’s with her.”

“You won’t miss your kid being born, Big J,” Beck states.

We get out of the limo, Shay lingering behind.

I grab her arm and whisper in her ear, “You recorded a single this week that’ll be the first release from my dad’s new label. This is your coming-out party.”

“I’m not sure I want one.”

Her uncertainty has empathy rising up.

“He didn’t either,” I say, nodding toward Tyler, his confident strides eating up the sidewalk.

At the doors, Tyler turns, looking for me. “You ready?”

“You bet.” I take his arm.

We make our way past security into the house of a huge producer. I’ve been to these parties in New York, though a Chelsea loft party has a different feel than a house in the Hills.

This is spacious, like our house but with a killer view. The house is modern, all glass, with doors swept wide open out to a marble terrace with an infinity pool. A five-piece band is playing on one side of the pool.

When my dad takes Shay to meet the head of the biggest music magazine on the planet, Tyler huffs out a breath next to me.

“She’s not ready.”

“She’ll figure it out.” He holds my stare, but Beck and I drag him toward the bar. Beck insists on champagne all around.

“I have news,” he declares, looking handsome in a pale-blue dress shirt that sets off his dark hair and eyes. “My pilot got picked up. We have a ten-episode run. We start filming Monday.”

“That’s amazing!” I hug him.

“Yeah. I play a cop with psychic powers.”

“Wasn’t that Jennifer Love Hewitt?”

He shrugs and settles his hands on my temples while Tyler looks entertained. “I see you going home with me tonight, gorgeous.”

“Stick to acting.” Tyler grabs Beck’s arms and shoves them away.

Beck’s eyes dance, and he looks past us. “Oh. No, I’m going home with him.”

He takes off, and Tyler turns toward me, stepping close enough his jacket brushes my bare arm. “How are you? We haven’t had a chance to talk alone since you met your mom.”

I eye him in the twilight. “She was perfectly nice.”

“But.”

“But she wanted things other than me.”

His expression clouds. “I’m sorry.”

“I should’ve known. You were right. I thought she’d be good in all the ways he’s not. Patient. Easygoing. Flexible. But it’s easy to forget your parents’ pluses.”

Like that my dad cares about family way more than money.

The band plays Sinatra, and Tyler glances toward the half-full dance floor. He shifts so the railing is at his back, the soft lights playing over his handsome features.

“I want to ask you to dance. But if we do, everyone in here is going to know we’re together. They’ll be like, ‘Who’s that handsome asshole with Annie Jamieson?’”

I throw my head back and laugh. “No, they’ll be like ‘Who’s that bitch with Tyler Adams?’”

He shakes his head. “He’s probably in love with her,” he continues in a mimicking voice.

I snort champagne up my nose, and the bubbles sting. “He’s probably using her to get to Jax,” I say in the same gossipy tone, searching out my dad and Shay on instinct.

“Except we know the truth.”

I arch a brow, waiting.

“Her dad’s not the prize. It’s always been her.”

My body tingles. He’s watching me intently, intensely.

We're standing on the edge of the world, and it has nothing to do with the balcony or the view or the people.

My heart's telling me this moment is right—he's right. That in all the times I lost faith, I always came back to him. I love him. Not then. Now. Always. Tyler's the dream I never gave up on, and I never want to leave his side.

I thought my dream was this musical—it was the final way to cement my belonging in this industry in a way that felt right to me.

But I know I belong. Tyler helped me see that.

And listening to my heart, I know I have another dream.

Him. Us.

Maybe I could stay.

I take a slow breath, my heart pounding.

But before I can respond, my phone rings.

It's Miranda Talbot. "I have to take this."

I squeeze Tyler's arm, and he frowns but nods as I duck toward a quiet corner.

I answer her call. "Hi. What's up? It's after midnight where you are."

"Ian killed the reading."

Ice settles into my veins, and I blink back my surprise. "Wait, what? It's been scheduled for months."

"He just sent a private email around to tell the other funders to say he's lost confidence in the direction of the show and won't host the reading."

Shock slams into me. "Shit. Can you reassure them?"

I have all their contact information from the research I've been doing.

"I can try, but my words will only go so far. I have other news. I didn't want to worry you until we knew for sure, but I've gotten a breast cancer diagnosis."

I nearly drop the phone as fear seizes my gut. "Miranda, are you okay?" My eyes squeeze shut. "Of course you're not okay. Tell me everything."

She explains how they found it, that they're looking at options. All I hear is that my writing partner and mentor's health is at risk.

We may not be the kind of friends who braid each other's hair, but since we began collaborating more than two years ago, I've learned so much from her. She's never let me down, and I'm not about to let her down.

And if we don't get this show, it would be letting her down. She's helped write others but this one is hers and mine. She never had children and this show is her baby.

"I'll come back," I promise, though my chest feels as if it's caving in. "This weekend. I'll talk to the funders and find us a new host." The business side isn't my strength, but I'll make it work. "I promise I won't let you down."

When I go back to the party, I don't see Tyler. Panic is rising up in my chest, my throat.

I trip toward the exit, murmuring a quick "I'm fine" to the concerned security who asks if he can help on my way down the stairs.

At street level, I stagger outside and suck in air. The sounds of the music still drift down here, though aside from the soft lights of the house, it's mostly dark.

Talbot's news reverberates in the back of my mind.

I shove both hands in my hair and pace the road in front of the house, passing expensive cars parked along the way.

I have to finish the show—not for myself, but for Miranda, for the people who need it.

I have to...

I pull up as a shadowy figure emerges from the same door I left through a minute ago.

“Dad.”

“I saw you come down and wanted to check on you.” His voice is gruff, but there's an undercurrent of worry.

“Someone's trying to sink our show before it gets started.”

He closes the distance between us, and I swallow, a million feelings colliding in my chest.

Disappointment. Worry. Despair.

“Tell me how I can help.”

My exhale is shaky because those six words are *everything*. It's not like my dad to be so open without an agenda or without inserting his opinion.

But he's asking.

“Do you want to dance?”

His hand finds my waist, and I fit my palm in his.

He asks me about options, and I tell him what contacts I have, the timing that was planned and how we could make it up. He suggests some paths I hadn't thought of and listens.

By the time we're done, the song has changed twice, but we're still moving.

“I always saw the dark side of this business,” he says. “But you find ways to make it brighter, to make it better from the inside out. It’s easy to want to be a part of that. Hell, I wouldn’t have started this label if it wasn’t for you. What you’ve done made me rethink the industry. I realized I have more to contribute, and I can make it better instead of living under what it is.”

The gentleness in his tone, the compassion, makes the backs of my eyes burn. “You mean it?”

Dad nods. “Our children have a way of being better than we are in ways we couldn’t have imagined. When you have kids, you’ll see it too.”

He glances down at our feet. “You’re pretty good at this dancing.”

My lips curve. “I had to take so many classes. I felt like I was drowning.”

“You never looked like it on stage.”

Surprise works through me. “When did you see me?”

“Any time I could. Opening night. At the holidays. On your birthday.” My fingers dig into his shoulders, and I force them to relax.

“But you didn’t say anything.”

“I knew I’d fucked up, and I didn’t know how to fix it. You went through so much as a kid, and I always wanted to keep you from hurting more, so I tried to protect you. To insulate you. Instead, I made it worse.”

The words come out stilted, as if he’s confessing something he’s held in for too long. I study his face in the half

light. This is hard for him, harder than taking Tyler's advice on his new artist. Maybe even harder than starting a label.

It means that much more because it's hard.

"You didn't make it worse, Dad. I wouldn't be who I am if you hadn't been who you were. I remember going to one of your shows when I was a kid. We had front-row seats, and I was the only person under the age of sixteen. I was buzzing from the second the lights went down, and when you came out on stage, the way you looked..." I sigh. "I wanted to be that. I wanted to be you. I used to think it was because everyone loved you. But now, I think it was because even before I found out you were my dad... some part of me knew."

In this moment, I forgive him for all of it, because I know he's fighting to do the right thing, just like I am.

Even if he doesn't get it all the time...none of us do.

But a relationship isn't forged in a moment, and it isn't demolished in one, either. There's always something to be saved, if you want to save it.

"I love you, Dad," I say softly. "And I know I'm lucky to have you in my life."

His eyes shine, and if Jax Jamieson starts crying right now, I'm going to lose it.

"I love you too, kid. You get yours," he says gruffly. "This time, I'll be in the front row."

Tyler

THE MORNING AFTER THE PARTY, I wake up to the sound of my phone buzzing. I shift out of bed, taking a second to admire Annie next to me, her red hair splayed over the hotel pillow.

Last night, we got back from the party late.

I know it's been a lot for her meeting her birth mom and the pressure of finishing her show. I'm so damned proud of her even as I admire her for doing what she needs to even when she's afraid.

It's one more thing I love about her.

I tug on boxer briefs and head out to the balcony to answer the call from my realtor.

"What's up?" I say by way of an answer.

"That property you wanted is a go. You ready to make an offer? If you don't, it'll go on the market, and there's no way you'll get another shot at it."

I tug the sliding glass door behind me.

It's what I've wanted for ages, and this is my chance. "I'll call you back."

"Today. I'll try to hold them off, but you're going to lose this place."

When I head back inside, Annie's in the shower.

I set my phone on the nightstand, and the text that came through while I was talking to my realtor has my abs clenching.

"Hey," Annie says when she gets out of the shower. "You ready for breakfast?"

I take a second to memorize the way her hair hangs in wet waves around her shoulders, how the towel leaves miles of her legs exposed.

"Yeah. Your dad said the charter is leaving at four. He hadn't heard from you, so he wanted to make sure you got the message."

Her smile fades as she realizes the same thing I do.

Today's our last day together, and it just got shorter.

"Tell me what you want," she murmurs. "We can stay in bed all day. I'll call the front desk and book the room for another night if we have to. Or we could go to the beach. We could shoot pool. I don't care as long as I'm with you."

I can't breathe because this feels so right, spending the day with her without an agenda.

But it also feels wrong as hell to know it's the last time we'll do it this summer.

"I want to show you something," I tell her.

I drive her to the house in Santa Monica and park outside.

"This is it?" she whispers.

"Yeah. Did you want to go inside? I can call the realtor. Have him meet us here."

Her eyes fill with tears.

“Shit,” I mutter, shifting across the console to wrap an arm around her. “This is not what I was going for.”

“It’s not that. Last night, I wanted... I dream of you too, Tyler.” she swallows. “This show in New York, it’s not only my dream. It’s other people’s. I need to see it through—not because I want to prove I can, but for them.”

I heave out a breath. I’ve never been willing to have people rely on me like that, but I love her for it.

“I hate this,” I confess. “Not this time with you. I hate that I can be a part-time brother or friend or son. I can move in and out of Jax’s life or Sophie’s or Beck’s or even Shay’s. I can stop by for a weekend or a vacation, and we can catch up, and it’s like old times. And thanks to you, I want to. I know what it’s like to have people in my life I care about and who care about me.

“But I can’t be with you part-time. You need someone with you always. Someone who’s all in. Someone to wake up with, to laugh with. Someone to hold you when you’re freaking out.”

Her soft face, full of love and sadness and hope, has my chest caving in. “Maybe not. I could be in New York, and we could go back and forth.”

“You *deserve* that, Annie. I couldn’t live with the thought of you having less than you deserve.” She’s too bright, too creative, too connected. “And this sounds selfish as fuck, but letting you in... it’s hard for me. To do that, I need you with me. To see your face, to hold you, to know everything’s going to be okay.”

“I keep feeling,” she starts, swiping at her face, “like it’s not our time. Like I’ve been waiting for years and I only get

glimpses of it, and we have to fight for every single moment. I just want it to be our time, Tyler. Just once, I want today to be our day.”

I tug her against me, dropping my lips to her forehead. “Then let’s make today our day.”

So, we do.

We stroll LA like tourists.

We laugh and dance and make out like we’re in high school.

I have my best friend, the woman who makes me feel more alive than I’ve ever felt.

I hate letting go of her hand when I drive her to the airport.

Watching her walk away is a million times harder.

I stay at LAX, staring at the departures level until someone honks loudly from behind and I eventually pull out.

On the way back to my place, I roll down the windows.

When I thought of being in LA, staring at the ocean, I dreamed of freedom, but now the air feels colder, and I’m left thinking freedom never felt so lonely before.

Annie

THERE'S nothing like having professionals read—and sing—your script, especially if it's the first time you've heard it out loud.

The SoHo loft is chic and spacious by New York standards. It's still cozy with eight of us sitting in a circle, chairs from the table and stools from the bar pulled around so we're all facing each other.

I've always loved the tradition of a reading. It's like being on stage, nerve-wracking and thrilling at once. It's not unlike reading my poem in front of Carly, though the stakes are much higher. It's personal because my work is personal.

I sit back, pull the pencil from behind my ear, and tap it lightly against my leg as the actors sight-read a song.

The dark-haired woman singing the lead stumbles over a part of the chorus—partly because it's tricky and partly because everyone's flagging a bit after three hours of working on this show.

I hold up a hand. “Let me fix that. Ten-minute break?”

Everyone nods, and I scribble the change I want on her version on the book. If it works, I'll put it into my version, the master.

When I finish, I check my phone. Sure enough, there's a message from my writing partner.

MIRANDA: How's the reading going?

ANNIE: A few rough spots. I'll keep you posted. How are you feeling?

MIRANDA: My body's rebelling. Have a drink for me.

MY THROAT CLOSES UP. Her chemo started this week, and she wanted to come today, but I told her to take care of herself.

It's another reminder of how much is riding on this.

A drink appears at my shoulder, and I look up.

"You need a break too," comes a kind, masculine voice.

Jeffrey is tall and pushing sixty-five, with a receding hairline and sharp blue eyes. After reviewing the information on the funders, I knew he was my best chance. The man has three granddaughters and a history of seeing potential in unusual projects.

"This is amazing," I tell him. "Thank you for being so receptive when I asked if we could move the reading to your place. I know Ian usually hosts."

"My pleasure. Can't let him have all the fun. Besides, your pitch was persuasive."

“That’s a kind way of saying I showed up at your office unannounced and sang you one of the songs.”

His smile is gentle, but his eyes sparkle as he nods toward the balcony. “Let’s step outside. It’s a nice night.”

I follow him out, and he pulls the door shut after us.

“My first musical, we were workshopping it for months,” he says under his breath. “Ran three years off-Broadway and —”

“Ten years on it,” I finish.

A Broadway show costs millions to stage, and most don’t make that back. Then there are the unicorns, the ones that resonate—*Phantom of the Opera*, *Rent*, *Hamilton*. They cover all manner of things, but they stay with us.

“They’re not all like that,” he goes on at my expression. “A production has to capture people in the right way, at the right time. Most never do that.”

“That’s why we try. Not because it’s easy, but because it’s hard.” I lean over the railing, staring out at the bright lights of the city as I continue.

“I used to think being in the spotlight was about talent or worthiness or luck. But it’s more than that. It’s a thousand choices to try something when you’re afraid, to say yes when it’s easier to say no, to believe in what you’re doing on those days you don’t believe in yourself.

“Do you believe in this enough to fund this?” I blurt, turning toward him.

His face goes blank, but I’m not here for validation. There’s something more I need from him.

“I’m sure people ask you for money every day,” I say. “But I’m not asking you to invest in me. I’m asking you to invest in this.” I gesture behind me. “This idea, this story, this possibility. If you honestly believe it will move people—that’s what we’re all trying to do. I know I’m enthusiastic. But don’t mistake it for naïve. I’ve seen a lot of this industry. I understand you need to make a profit. But I also know you wouldn’t be in it if there was anything else that would satisfy you.”

I take in his impassive face, my hands fisting at my sides as my heart falls into my stomach.

But after a moment, Jeffrey laughs softly. “You must have been influenced by your father.”

Once the question, the deflection, would’ve made me angry. It doesn’t anymore. “We’re always influenced by the people in our lives.”

“Would he be attaching himself to this?”

I shake my head. “I won’t ask him, and neither will you. It’s not his story.”

He turns that over as I stare out over the street, the people laughing and the cabs passing below.

“Well,” he says at last, “we’ll reserve him tickets.”

My glass slips, and I fumble to grab it before it hits the patio. “You mean you’ll fund it?” When I look up, he’s smiling.

“It’s a fabulous story, and I have a couple of directors in mind. But I won’t pretend some of the appeal isn’t standing right in front of me. Your talent, energy, charm... You’ll make a stellar lead.”

My heart kicks as I drop into one of the chairs on the balcony.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

“Just waiting for the blood flow to return to my head.”

I want to tell Tyler. As the conversation inside drifts through the glass, I want to call him. It’s everything I wanted.

But also, it’s not.

It’s been a week since I came back to New York. Tyler’s back in LA now, finalizing the deal on his new house. We left things in a good place but agreed it was best to keep some space between us for a while, which is why I haven’t reached out to him and he hasn’t reached out to me.

I’m still reliving our time together this summer, the days and nights in Dallas and LA. I decided to write them out like a diary, to preserve them like the perfect memories they are, but every time I start, it’s too fresh and it hurts too much, so I close the book.

“Are you all right?”

I blink to see Jeffrey, his glass raised.

“I’m great.” I rush to clink my glass to his.

Sadness makes this moment bittersweet. I try to focus on the good, but my heart’s still heavy.



“HOW’D IT GO?” Elle jumps on me when I enter our apartment. It’s two in the morning, and I’m ready to fall into bed, but I give her the news, and she shrieks, wrapping her arms around me. “Shit, A, you’re making a show!”

“Apparently.” My grin stretches across my tired face.

“So, you did it, and NT wasn’t even involved,” she muses. Before I can argue, she heads for the kitchen and pours shots of bourbon. “Cheers.”

We toss them back, and the warmth burns down my throat.

I think of Miranda’s reaction when I called her on the way home, how ecstatic she’d been despite the late hour. I debated whether to tell her tonight or tomorrow, but hearing her reaction, I was glad I didn’t wait.

“You tell Tyler yet?” Elle’s gaze over the shot glass is full of meaning.

I shake my head.

“He deserves to know—it’s his story too,” Elle goes on.

I pour us both another shot and pass her one. “I feel like I pulled it from the air.”

We toast and toss this one back too.

“Come on.” Elle sets her shot glass on the counter and leans a hip against it, her lips twisting. “A girl who thought her heart was stolen and that’s why she couldn’t feel goes on a journey with the help of a boy who shows her what it means to live and learns she had it all along.”

I’m shaking my head before she finishes. “The female lead is nothing like me. She doesn’t have a heart. She doesn’t think she’s missing anything until someone points that out. I’ve never had that problem. I feel way too much.”

“Obviously. But you’re not her. Tyler is.”

I wash the shot glasses and cast a look over my shoulder. She tips her chin down, staring at me as if I’m being

deliberately slow.

My hands still in the sink, bubbles filling the basin.

“You’re the other lead,” she goes on. “The boy who shows her what it means to live, and love, and take chances.”

I turn off the faucet and watch the water drain out. The shiny dish soap glints on the surface as the bubbles spiral around and around, finally slipping down the drain.

I set the glasses on the drying rack. When I face my roommate, I brace a still-wet hand on the counter. “That’s not true.”

But my chest squeezes. The next breath is harder than the last.

It’s *our* story. Mine and Tyler’s. Not all of it of course, but the core.

I cross to the couch and perch on the arm. Elle’s face fills with empathy as she follows. “He’d be proud. You should send it to him.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since you started telling me about it a year ago. Does he know you love him?”

I shove off the couch and pace the width of our apartment. “Yes.” I pause by the window. “But Tyler has always chosen freedom, to do his own thing and rely on himself. New York isn’t what he wants. And I want this show, Elle. Not only for me, but also for everyone involved. For everyone who’ll get to see it if we keep going.”

“You want it enough to let Tyler go? Not that I want to lose you *and* Beck to LA”—her lips curve in a sad smile—“but you could write.”

I return to the counter for the shot glasses and pour half a glass more for each of us.

“We always stayed true to our dreams, for better or worse, and I love that about us. But a career isn’t made or broken in one perfect moment. It’s hundreds of choices over thousands of days. What if love is the same, Elle?” I think of the ups and downs with my family, my dad. “Maybe we were meant to be apart for a couple of years, and that decision wasn’t wrong, it was just one more choice that helped us grow and learn and become more of who were supposed to be. Maybe we have more choices ahead of us, starting right now, and nothing in the world can keep us apart if I find ways to choose him.”

The ideas start coming in a rush, all at once. “If I can find the right person to play the female lead, I can finish the show without having to be in it.”

Her eyes widen. “You’d give up playing the lead for Tyler.”

A surge of energy takes me over, and I know in an instant what I’m thinking is right.

“I wouldn’t be giving up something I want. I’d be choosing something I don’t want to live without.”

He’s my best friend, the only man I’ve ever loved.

The only man I *will* love.

Taking up a Broadway stage might have been my dream, but I have another dream that matters every bit as much.

Us.

Tyler

I GET my bike out to ride to Santa Monica, navigating the ever-present traffic on the way to the address I know by heart.

The property's a house with ocean views—three bedrooms, white stucco, sunshine for days. When I get there, Beck's leaning against his car.

“Nice of ‘em to let you come see the place again,” my friend comments.

I pass him to get to the door, punching in the code the realtor gave me. “For the price, they should.”

I put an offer in last week before the house was scheduled to go on the market, but we built into the conditions that I get another look at it.

He follows me inside.

It's beautiful, open concept with high ceilings. Too much white, but something tells me that's by design.

I never pictured myself living in something so stunning.

I head through the living room to the patio on the other side, a pool and a deck with a glass wall around it.

“How's it look, pool boy?” Beck laughs.

“It's not bad,” I admit, leaning my elbows on the railing.

He takes up a post next to me, sliding his aviator sunglasses off the top of his head and up his nose. “Why do you look so bummed? There are a dozen reasons to be satisfied this week.” He counts them on his fingers. “I have a ten-episode series coming to a streaming network near you. You got your dream house, and Annie got her show funded.”

I jerk upright, whirling to face him so fast he jumps.

“What did you say?”

A guilty expression crosses my friend’s face. “You didn’t know.”

My hearts aches. “No.”

Because we decided not to talk for a while, I remind myself. It was mutual. So, why does it feel like shit?

Since she left, I’ve been trying not to think about her, but I can’t help it. I’m going about my life, but I see her on street corners, I picture her smile at night, I hear her voice whispering in my ear.

When I went on tour, I promised I wouldn’t look her up on social.

I’ve stuck to that now, too.

But I keep looking at the photo of us in that bar in Dallas.

It’s not cheating to stare at the curves of her lips in that picture, to remember how it felt to have her next to me.

I turn to head inside, Beck’s footsteps at my back as I wander through the kitchen. Even the microwave is a stainless steel thing of beauty.

You could make some bitchin’ Rice Krispies squares.

I pull on a drawer, then let it slide back in on its special hinges.

Something occurs to me. “Just tell me that douche NT isn’t the one funding her show.”

Beck laughs, but there’s a hint of sadness underneath as he tugs on the door of the fridge to inspect the inside, sliding the sunglasses down his nose to peer overtop. “You heard about Elle’s nickname.”

“What does it mean?”

“Elle called him Not Tyler from the time they started dating because she knew anyone who wasn’t you wouldn’t measure up.”

Forget shutting out the pain. It washes over me in a wave.

I cross to the glass doors again, pressing my nose and forehead against the smooth surface as I shut my eyes. It’ll probably leave marks.

I give zero fucks.

“I wanted to be with her, Beck,” I bite out through my clenched jaw. “So fucking much.”

He snorts. “The Tyler from Vanier wouldn’t have stood by and watched his girl walk away.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “The Tyler from Vanier was volatile. All I could think about was getting out from under the weight of my dad, his resentment.”

“But you’ve let it go. The past is the past. The things you were, the things you wanted... you don’t owe them anything. That includes this dream of hiding out here alone in the sunshine.”

“It wasn’t about hiding out. I wanted to fix my hand, get another album done, and buy my security. It was about—”

“Freedom? How’s that feel? Without the people you love, freedom’s pretty fucking quiet, Ty.”

Silence hangs between us.

“I have you.”

“I won’t fuck you.”

“Pretty sure you grabbed my ass once when you were drunk.”

“More than once,” he concedes. “But I wouldn’t try anything because you and my Manatee...you’re it. What we all want. I know New York’s cold with a lot of memories, but you gotta see both sides.”

I arch a brow.

“You could be cold outside in New York or cold inside in LA.”

I stare at my palm, the web of scars on it.

“A long time ago, this girl told me I had a bright future because of my fate line,” I say. “I can’t see it anymore, bright or not.”

Despite the heaviness in my chest, I won’t be the same man I was, and it’s not just because of what happened two years ago. It’s because of Annie. She’s made me better, more caring and considerate.

Like music, she opened me up. Because of her, I’m the kind of person with friends I count on and who count on me. I have people like Jax looking out for me, kids like Shay who look up to me.

I couldn't have tolerated it, not to mention sought it out. Once, letting people in was like being scorched by the hot sun.

But every day, Annie exposed me to her brightness, whether I wanted her to or not. And eventually, I stopped turning away from it and started turning toward it. "And it's a problem that your life's not what you expected?" Beck asks.

"No." Conviction grows deep in my gut. "It's not."

I'll always love her, but I want more than a fucking feeling. I want to be with her. I want a front-row seat to every success and failure she has for the rest of our lives.

My phone buzzes and I glance at it.

It's an email from Annie with an attachment.

I click it open, zoom in on the lines of the script.

"What are you—"

I hold up a hand at Beck as I read the first scene.

Then I drop onto the couch and scan the second.

After the third I jump up, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Beck calls, emerging from the back of the house.

I snap my head up and head for the front door. "There's somewhere I need to be."

Beck points back toward the rest of the house. "But you haven't checked out my future bedroom."



"I ASKED FOR AVOCADO," Zeke tells the waitress on the patio that afternoon. His voice is cordial, but his eyes narrow as he

squints against the sun.

She disappears through the doors of the restaurant, past the palm trees blowing in the breeze.

“Hard to get everything you want, isn’t it?” Zeke leans forward over the table between us.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

He grins. “The guys said you were at the studio yesterday with some suggestions on the tracks. Glad you’re coming around. You can meet marketing next week.”

I stare at the burger in front of me, waiting for his food to return. *Fuck it.* I take a mouthful of mine.

After swallowing the first bite, I say, “I’m meeting them right after this.”

Zeke’s brows shoot up in surprise. “I’m pleased to see you’re enthusiastic.”

“That’s not the word I’d use. I’m leaving LA and I don’t want any talk that I’m not fulfilling my contract.”

He laughs. “You’re not leaving LA. You just got back.”

I mentally review the points that came together quickly once I’d decided on my next move. “I know I haven’t been the easiest to work with, but that’s going to change. You’ll still have input on the songs and production for the rest of the album. But I will record it at the studio of my choosing.”

Zeke shifts back in his chair, folding his arms, but I’m not done.

“I will commit to being a better collaborator. Including paying for someone at the label to coordinate promotion, which, as we’ve established, isn’t my strength. In return, what

I do on my own time is my own business. It won't compromise the label or its brand."

"Tyler. This is impossible."

"The word you're looking for is 'unorthodox,'" I supply. "The label's ownership is in this to make money. You saw that in me. You gave me a chance and it paid off. Now I'm offering you a chance. If you don't like it, you can sue me for breach of contract, which will be time consuming and expensive and make us both less valuable."

He blinks at me. "Is that all?"

His voice makes it clear he thinks I've lost my mind.

I rise from my chair and toss a fifty on the table for my half-finished burger. "A summary of what I'm proposing is in your email. You can send me any comments over the next forty-eight hours. After my surgery, I'm leaving town."

I start for the door, but Zeke calls after me. "Where are you going?"

I heave out a breath. "Where I should've been all along."



THE DOOR OPENS to reveal screaming children and a tired-looking thirty-something woman who straightens in recognition when she sees me.

I rub a hand over my neck. "I'm looking for Jax."

"He's in the yard. Are there any more musicians coming?" she calls after me hopefully as I head through the house, a sprawling, new-looking ranch that's not as big as Jax's but still screams money.

It's been two days since my hand surgery, and though the surgeon said it went well, it's too soon to know if this will make the difference I'm hoping for by taking away most of the pain and stiffness.

But no matter what happens, for the first time, I'm not lying awake at night, willing this to be the thing that fixes me.

As I head out the back doors and into a sprawling yard filled with bright colors, children's entertainment, and clusters of adults, I don't have to ask where to find Jax—it's clear from all the moms staring at him. He's in one corner, talking to a man who looks like the only other dad here.

When Jax looks up and sees me, it's his turn to do a double take.

I shouldn't have shown up in Dallas unannounced, but it was a good thing Jax wasn't home when I got there. That gave me more time to get ready for what I have to say.

"Haley said I'd find you here," I say when I pull up next to him.

"Usually Hales does party duty, but she's still on bed rest."

The other man takes Jax's stare as his cue to leave, and I swallow my amusement as I look across the sprawling yard with a jungle gym, a gated-off pool, a bouncy castle, and tables with snacks and desserts. "How many kids come to these things?"

"Too many."

It takes me a moment to spot Sophie at the top of the slide in overalls and a lime-green T-shirt, her hair in pigtails with matching green ribbons. She's not looking for her dad. She's focused on the ride she's on, and her face splits with a smile as

she slides down to the bottom, bumping into the last kid—who failed to clear the landing zone in time—with a little shriek.

The woman who answered the door approaches, her gaze moving between us. “Would you like a hat?”

“Love one. Jax too.”

I take two party hats from her and hold one out for Jax. He shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Please say you came to relieve me,” he states when she’s gone.

“I did come to tell you something, but it might not be a relief.” I take a breath. “I’m going to marry your daughter.”

Jax stiffens, his gaze never leaving the throng of kids on the jungle gym. Sophie chases another kid, running under the slide and lunging. “Sophie’s a little young.”

“I’m serious. I’m in love with Annie. I have been since before I knew what that meant. She fucking loves me too.”

A little boy whose shoe fell off as he tried to dash past us looks up from refastening the Velcro, eyes round with delight. Then he takes off toward his parents, hollering.

“She’ll always be yours, and I’m not trying to take her away from you,” I go on. “But she’ll always be mine too.”

Jax rubs a hand over his square jaw. “And if I don’t accept that?”

My body stiffens as I turn the paper hat in my hands.

“You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a father. You trusted me and let me into your family. But if you’re going to make me choose, Jax—I choose her.”

The truth of those words rings through me. I choose Annie over certainty, over safety, over money, over fame. No life I could lead is as full without her, and if being with her means putting everything I am, everything I've been, on the line? I'm ready to do it. For now and for always.

“What about your contract?” Jax asks.

“Zeke and I came to an agreement for how I'll finish the album. I also committed to more public appearances, and paying for a PR rep on the label's staff since I don't do enough 'fan engagement', in his words.”

“I'm impressed. Did you negotiate that collaboratively or drop an ultimatum on his desk?”

“Something in between.”

Jax stares me down. “Listen to me, Tyler.”

I wait him out, my breathing steady, prepared for whatever he's about to say.

He takes the party hat still in his hands and sets it on my head, snapping the elastic down around my chin. “If you marry my daughter, I'm not taking your kids to any fucking birthday parties.”

Annie

“HERE WE GO,” I say as the woman I’ve been on the phone trying to land for the last few days takes the stage for her audition.

Jeffrey’s on one side of me, Miranda on the other. I don’t look over to see their reactions while the actress performs the song we sent her.

But I’m sitting bolt upright.

She’s good—really good.

When she wraps up, we thank her, and she heads out of the theater.

“We’re screwed.” Miranda Talbot’s blunt tone has me cutting her a look after the actress is gone.

“What do you mean? She was great.”

“She wasn’t right,” Jeffrey agrees.

My stomach flips. “Come on. She’s a household name. I bent over backward to get her”—even using one of my dad’s contacts, which I’d decided was worth it given the circumstances—“and she’ll definitely get the show attention.”

We’ve been running auditions at a small off-Broadway theater all day to cast the main roles for our show. Even

Miranda refused to miss this, insisting the worst of the reaction from her most recent chemo session was over and tearing up a few headshots from wannabe actors would help her feel better anyway.

“It’s a no,” Jeffrey says crisply, glancing my way.

“We’ve identified great people for four characters,” I point out.

“But not the leads.”

“There’s another group after lunch, right?” I ask our production assistant.

She shakes her head.

Shit. “I could’ve sworn there were more...” I riffle through the papers in front of me.

Jeffrey sighs. He’s done this a dozen times before, but I can tell he’s disappointed. “We don’t have a lead, we don’t have a show. Frankly, I’m concerned you’re in such a hurry to distance yourself from it.”

“It’s not that. I love this show more than I thought I’d love anything,” I promise. “But there’s something—*someone*—I love even more.”

His face unreadable, he gets up and reaches for his phone, hitting a contact as he heads down the aisle.

We’ve thrown ourselves into preparing for this.

I figured today would be more like a victory lap, but it’s turning out to be hell. *How can it be so hard to find the right person?*

“Knock, knock.” Elle sticks her head in the door before coming into the theater bearing a brown paper bag.

“Is that something to numb the pain?” Miranda asks dryly as Elle stops next to our row.

“Hoagies,” my roommate explains.

“That’ll work.”

“You want Annie’s too?” Elle asks, passing them out. “She likes the pain. It’s cleansing.”

I shoot my friend side-eye. My phone buzzes, and I glance at it. There’s a text from my dad, and the tension in my chest eases just a little.

I walk toward a dark corner and hit his contact, and he picks up on a video call.

“Thought you had auditions this weekend,” he says.

“We do. We’re at a theater right now.” I flip him around to see the space, then back to see me. “Unfortunately, we haven’t found the right actors yet.”

He frowns. “Don’t give up. Sometimes the best things come from the last place you expect. Like Tyler finding Shay. Her single releases next week.”

“That’s great, Dad.” I swallow. “Have you talked to Tyler? I sent him something a few days ago, and I hoped I’d hear back by now.”

My dad’s expression shifts, and I can’t read the strange look on his face. “I think he misses you.”

The backs of my eyes burn, and I’m glad I’m in a dark corner. “I miss him too. Well, I should get back to it.”

Dad nods. “We’re proud of you. All of us. Let us know how your casting goes.”

“I will.”

I hang up and head back toward Miranda, who has already unwrapped a sandwich and is in conversation with Elle.

“I want to do this show where the audience sits on stage and I’m watching them from the floor,” Elle’s saying, and Miranda’s studying her with a raised brow.

They both look at me when I return, and Jeffrey comes back down the aisle.

“We have one more to see.”

“Who?” I ask, frowning. Every headshot in front of me is familiar. We’ve seen each of these people on stage already today.

But Elle stiffens next to me, grabbing my arm. “Holy shit.”

Someone walks past us up the aisle. I lift my head slowly, tingles starting low in my stomach and spreading to my arms, my legs, my toes.

The man takes the stairs to the stage as if this were his house, not an audition. He’s confident, relaxed, in dark jeans and a shirt rolled up at the sleeves to reveal swirls of black ink.

Tyler hits center stage and turns to face us. I’m so floored it takes a moment for me to catch up when his gaze meets mine.

Jeffrey shifts into the seat next to me. “Well?”

I blink. “Well what?”

“Go with him.”

I shift out of my seat, nearly forgetting the book before I trip toward the stage, take the steps, and cross to Tyler. I stop in front of him.

Even under the lights, he takes up the stage, takes up the room.

“What are you doing?” I shake my head in disbelief. I’m so happy he’s here I almost don’t want to know the answer.

“I’m auditioning. You sent me a script.”

My jaw hits the floor. “I wanted you to read it. I wasn’t asking you to audition.”

His mouth twitches. “You should’ve been more specific.”

“But…” My mouth works, nothing coming out. “You can’t be auditioning on Broadway.”

“Someone told me you don’t need your hands to make good music. That it can come from your head and your heart.”

Tyler cuts an expectant look toward my colleagues. Jeffrey folds his arms, and Miranda smiles broader than I’ve seen her smile since I returned from Dallas.

Tyler nods to the pianist in the corner, who plays the arrangement. The song moves through me, the accompaniment to the song I spent this summer writing.

Tyler sings the first part of the duet, and I melt into the floor.

I can’t move.

Can’t think.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t live.

Except I am living, and his voice, his presence, is the only thing responsible for it.

Music is a language that makes sense when all the others don't. And right now, there's no greater expression of life's promise than what's happening around me, inside me.

Hearing Tyler as the dreamer makes my heart explode. I almost miss jumping in at the female lead's part, but once I do, I focus on the song and match him tone for tone, measure for measure, phrase for phrase.

Every verse and chorus I'm vibrating, caught between the stage and the words and the man in front of me.

When we finish, the final notes of our voices and the piano fading, Jeffrey, Miranda and Elle are all standing silently.

They don't need to say it was good.

Because it wasn't good.

It was *right*.

It was everything.

Jeffrey's the first to move, nodding. "Tyler. You understand we're looking to do previews in three months, then move it to off-Broadway with an initial twelve-month run."

"I have other commitments, but I can fit them around this."

I'm still trying to catch up. "You'd have to move back to New York. You hate New York."

"I can't hate it. It has you." My heart expands.

"Good. We have a show," Jeffrey says.

"I have a condition," Tyler interjects. "Annie has to do it with me."

I can barely breathe through the tightness in my throat. "It's our show. It always has been. But I've been trying to find

the right people to play the leads so I didn't have to be in it. So I could be in LA with you."

His forehead presses to mine, and I reach up to tug on his hair, at a loss for words.

"If it's our story, it seems fair we should do it. At least for the initial run."

I shake my head. "But what about your record deal? The house in LA?"

"I withdrew the offer. And I've pulled some strings with the label to give me more flexibility."

"You really want to do this," I whisper.

"I really do. Just tell me one thing—why'd you give them this ending?"

"Because if I got to create my own world... we'd be together in it. Every single time."

My gaze falls to his mouth, his full lips, and I need them on me.

Tyler kisses me, and it's everything—we're everything.

A throat clearing has me pulling back before I can do something about it—Miranda.

Elle's devouring a sandwich, eyes glued to the stage, and even our funder looks entertained.

"If you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make about marketing. This"—Jeffrey nods to us—"I can sell."

My stomach flips as I take Tyler in again, the rest of the room falling away.

There's a tic in his jaw, and he looks hesitant for the first time since he got here. "The ring I gave you—do you still have

it?”

I reach into my neckline and pull out the chain, the ring I’ve been wearing since I returned to New York dangling on the end.

“That’s from our past. I have something to give you for our future. And I want a future with you. I even talked to your dad about it.”

So that’s why Dad was acting so weird on the phone. “I bet that was interesting.”

Tyler chuckles softly. “I told him I’m never letting you go again, and if he has a problem with it, he can go through me.”

He reaches into his pocket and produces a box.

My heart hammers against my back, and I’m feeling lightheaded.

Then he kneels.

I’ve always felt at my most powerful and powerless on a stage, but this moment with Tyler Adams on his knees for me puts every other moment to shame.

“Annie, you’ve always been the best part of my life. Even when I tried not to let you in, you were there. So bright, so damned fresh, and you believed in me when no one did. When I didn’t.”

His beautiful voice cracks, and I’m trembling from his words, from anticipation of what he’ll say next.

“I might have come from nothing, but I’ve been around the damned world. Which means I can say without a doubt that you are the best part of it, Six. I know we both have dreams, but mine aren’t worth living unless I can live them with you.”

He flips the lid on the box, and the sparkling contents almost blind me.

“I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. I will do whatever it takes to convince you to spend your life with me.

“I’ll trade you. The old ring for a new one.”

It’s gorgeous, reflecting every bit of light in this space, shining every emotion in his eyes back at me.

“No.”

Tyler’s face tightens in alarm. “No what?”

I rush on. “No, I won’t give you the old ring back. Because our past is part of us.

“But you’re my best friend. The only boy I ever loved. The person who challenges me, who’s there for me, who makes me feel like I am everything I ever need to be. So I guess I could marry you.”

Tyler’s face is so full of fierceness I could explode.

He slips the ring onto my finger, and it feels like forever.

Then he rises, grabbing me again in a kiss that’s hot enough I might melt onto this stage.

“Jewelry whore!”

I reluctantly tear my lips from Tyler’s and cut a look toward Elle in the audience.

“You trying to steal my roomie, Adams?” she calls.

“It’s done.” I love the satisfaction in his tone, the possessiveness.

“I love you so damned much.”

My blood heats. “I love you too.”

Something lands on the stage, and I realize it's a sock.

"For your bedroom door," Elle tosses as she turns back up the aisle with a wave.

Tyler's grin is delicious. "Tell me we're done here."

I meet Miranda's gaze. "I think we've accomplished what we set out to."

"Agreed," my mentor says. "Annie, we'll talk tomorrow. Congratulations, Mr. Adams. And I don't mean about the role." She smiles and turns to head out.

I don't get to see her leave because Tyler's yanking me against him.

"Come here," he murmurs against my lips.

Then he's kissing me, and my brows shoot up my face.

But I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back with everything in me.

I'm here on a damned New York stage, and all I care about is the man holding me, the one who's always held me up, always made me feel like enough.

Like we're enough.

And despite how far we've come, something tells me we're only getting started.

Annie

I WAKE up in the morning, and the bed smells like Tyler.

I roll over to find him gone, but there's a sticky note on the pillow.

MORNING, Six.

I GRIN as I shift out of bed, tugging down the hem of my T-shirt and stepping around the overnight bag he brought. I head out to the living room.

“This for me?” I hold up the sticky note.

Tyler turns from where he's standing at the counter, the smell of coffee wafting through our place. “Mhmm. How'd I know you'd have the ingredients for Rice Krispies squares?”

“It's a bribe, isn't it?” I shift in front of him, winding my arms around his neck. “So I don't tell my dad I woke up in your bed.” I cock my head. “Okay, technically my bed. But still.”

His hands slide down my sides, making every part of me wake up under his touch even before he presses his lips to my

jaw. “You’re going to wake up in my bed every day, always.”

He hitches me up on the counter and kisses me, taking his time. I press myself against him, threading my hands into his hair. He tugs me closer to the edge, my panties the only thing between us.

And they’re getting damp fast.

“Elle could walk in,” I protest half-heartedly.

“Elle’s out for the day,” Tyler mutters between kisses. “And we have to make up for lost time. I’m going to have you on every surface of this apartment.”

Holy.

His fingers trace a path up the inside of my thigh, and I hiccup a breath when they slip under my panties and tease me.

“Oh.”

“Oh what?”

“Ohhh, I’ve missed that.”

He chuckles before pressing two fingers inside me. My nails dig into his shoulders as my body contracts around him.

“You’re so wet. Think I’m going to slide right in.”

“Do it,” I mumble.

Tyler works off his jeans, no boxer briefs underneath. He’s already impressively hard, his abs flexing as if it takes all of him not to impale me right now. He pulls me to the edge of the counter, brushing his tip against my needy skin.

I kiss him with love, with need, with the desperation that never seems to be far away when it comes to us... but with a kind of comfort that’s new.

We have nothing but time.

Tyler eases into me as if he believes that too. I'm balanced on the edge of the counter, my legs tight around him, holding on to keep from falling in more ways than one.

"Nothing's has ever felt as good as you," he murmurs against my mouth. "You're made for me, Annie."

Every stroke is beautiful satisfaction and torture at once, and I need more. He rasps as he builds us both up, fingers digging into my ass as he fucks me.

It's beautiful. It's messy. It's us.

When I come around him, he can't hold back, and he comes too, groaning his release against my shoulder while my fingers play in his hair, the last of the aftershocks running through me.

"Well, I feel better," I murmur.

He grins. "Same."

"Good, because we have a busy day."

"We do?"

"I have to do work things."

"You can't take today off? Because I'm going to need you again in two hours max."

Arousal washes over me. "No. But you can come with me. Maybe we can fit in a quickie at lunch."

"Bring your fiancé to work' day. Sold."

I bite my cheek because the thought of bringing Tyler to my anything as my fiancé makes me so insanely happy.

"Tell me you're done by five," Tyler says.

I trace his handsome jaw with a finger. “Should be possible. Why?”

“Because I have a realtor lined up to show us a couple places. I love Elle too, but we can’t live here long term.”

“The rent is great.”

“I don’t care. I’m getting us something nice for as long as we’re in New York.”

“Fine. Are you going to record here?”

“I thought I might get involved in your dad’s label. Both as a business proposition and for my own music. But only if it won’t come between you.”

I shake my head. “Not at all. He’d love that. And I would too.”

Something buzzes from across the room—my phone.

“Shit. It’s Dad.”

We didn’t call him back after getting engaged last night because we wanted a few moments to ourselves.

“He knows you’re here. If I don’t answer, he’s going to think we were having sex.”

Tyler’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “Please don’t answer.”

I pull down my T-shirt and straighten my hair. Then I squeeze past him and grab the phone, sliding the bar so the video call connects.

“Hey, you guys!” I say but frown as I take in the unfamiliar backdrop, my dad’s pale face, and Haley’s sweaty one. “Did you paint? Oh my God! You’re in the hospital. You had the baby!”

“Once we finally got here, he was out in three hours,” Haley sighs.

Tyler appears behind me, and my dad’s eyes narrow while Haley looks delighted, the baby in her arms.

We gush over baby Mason and get all the details.

“Nice work,” Tyler says, and my dad grins.

He looks beyond proud. “How about you two? Any news we should know?”

“Well, we cast someone in the lead for the musical.”

I swear my dad looks disappointed. “Thats it?”

“And...” I hold up the ring.

“Tyler. Tell me you didn’t go down on one knee,” Dad snorts.

Haley shoves his shoulder. “Don’t act like you’re too cool for that. You’ve done it. You even cried.”

My jaw drops.

“I didn’t cry,” he says.

“Your eyes were shining.”

“Trick of the light.”

“Anyway.” Haley rolls her eyes, turning back to us. “We’re so happy for you both.”

“Thanks Haley, we’re happy for you, too. All of you.”

Tyler clears his throat. “Jax, we have a couple of weeks before we really gear up for the musical. I’d like to use your studio if I can book time.”

“You got it.”

When we hang up and I toss the phone back on the table, feeling the only man I've ever loved pull me against him again, I've never been more content.

"I'm ready for those Rice Krispies squares now," I sigh.

Tyler's eyes crinkle. "Only if I can eat them off you."

EPILOGUE

Tyler

“IT’S GONE. It’s actually gone,” Annie mutters, lifting pillows to search the couch in our living room.

I roll up the cuffs on my dress shirt as I cross the bright, airy apartment from the master bedroom. “Six, tell me you haven’t lost your ring.”

She crosses to me, her face a mask of shock.

Then she pulls her hand out to show me the diamond glinting on her finger.

Relief slams into me, along with pleasure.

Every time I see it on her hand, I feel that way. Even though we’ve been engaged for three months, I haven’t gotten over knowing she’s mine.

Beck teases that it won’t go away until she’s signed the certificate and she can’t back out.

The truth is I know it won’t go away even after that.

“Why do you look so happy?” Annie asks, planting a hand on her hip.

I tear my gaze away from her teasing face to take her in, from her purple-painted toenails to her long legs to the curve

of her hips, the dip of her waist, and the valley between her breasts, all outlined by the tidy black dress.

It should be cute.

It's not. It makes me want to drag her against me and do unspeakable things to her.

"Because you're marrying me."

Her eyes darken, and she tucks a piece of the hair she finished curling in our huge en suite bathroom an hour ago behind her ear. "But I can't find my phone, and how the hell am I supposed to buzz people up?"

"I'll call it in a second. We'll find it."

I back her toward the windows, and her eyes widen. "Tyler, we have guests arriving any minute."

"You already lost the phone. Can't buzz them up. Let's call it off."

Her back meets the window, and she sucks in a breath.

I drop my mouth to her neck, loving her soft floral scent and the way she arches, offering up more of her—all of her.

I'll devour every inch.

"We can't call it off," she pants even though her fingers thread into my hair. "It's our engagement-previews-housewarming party."

"Fuck it. They'll just bring booze and say how happy they are for us. I can tell you how happy I am for us."

My hand sneaks under the hem of her dress and under the scrap of lace she calls panties.

"You're so wet," I tell her as if she doesn't know. "How long have you been like this?"

“Since you walked out wearing that shirt I bought you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I like knowing I get to dress you. You’re like my own broody rock star Ken doll.”

I sink two fingers into her in retaliation, and she moans, squirming.

“We’ll have lots of time for that when we’re married,” Annie protests, but I know she’s joking because her hips lift to meet every stroke of my hand.

I glance at the clock. “We have at least ten minutes.”

Annie’s lips curve. “Well, in that case.”

I fuck her against the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I will never, ever get tired of her sounds, the way she feels around me.

This woman owns me.

She’s built me up, made me more than I thought I could be.

And everything I am, everything I will ever be, I’d give it to her.

I didn’t think it was possible to love another person the way I love her, but she’s shown me giving your heart can be worth it if you give it to the right person.

When we finish, we clean up quickly and track down her phone before our guests start arriving.

“This building is beautiful, Annie. I swear the entire thing is windows. And you!” Haley gushes as we open the door to the hallway, Sophie bounding beside her. Jax has the baby carrier in his arms.

“You’re glowing,” Haley goes on as she steps inside.

Annie’s face goes red. “Thanks.” She passes me the huge flower arrangement Haley gives her. “Can you take these to the dining room?”

“Sure.” But I can’t resist brushing my lips over her ear. “I love that *now* you’re blushing when I was inside you ten minutes ago against those windows.”

And as I head for the kitchen without waiting for her response, I love that I’ll be inside her tonight after everyone goes home, that I’m the one who gets to make this beautiful, strong woman soft.

Over the next hour, everyone filters in and mingles around our new apartment.

Elle’s here, plus Rae, plus Pen, and Beck. Elle catches us up on her stand-up performances and the news that she’s made it to the third round of a nationwide comic breakout competition. Rae’s been DJ-ing in New York and Miami but made sure she could be here for our party.

Even Beck’s sister, Serena, came since she lives in New York, with her boyfriend, Wes.

“Holy shit,” Wes states, unselfconscious as he takes in the views. “How big is this place?”

“Two thousand square feet,” I supply.

“My bedroom could fit in your bathroom,” Rae deadpans.

Annie doesn’t feel badly in the slightest. “Hey, that was my bedroom,” she points out to the woman who took over her spot in Elle’s apartment when Annie moved out.

“This is what Broadway money buys you,” Beck jokes. “And you’ve only started previews for the show.”

In reality, a good part of our income is from my royalties. The new album I'm finishing contains the best music I've made to date.

The surgery helped with the pain in my hand, but not my ability to play guitar.

Still, I care less than I used to. Annie helped me realize I can write amazing music and let other people help me perform it.

Serena laughs and shoves at her brother. "You can't talk. I have people texting me photos of you from online magazines every other week naming you the hottest new actor in Hollywood."

"Hottest," he points out with a grin. "Not richest."

His show started releasing weekly last month, and it's all anyone can talk about. It's all but guaranteed to get renewed for a second season.

Annie sneaks up on me with a glass of champagne.

I make a face at the drink. "Do I have to?" I joke as I take it from her.

"I know you hate bubbles. But Dad wants to make a toast." She smiles.

Annie and her dad are back on solid ground, and it seems I'm in his good graces, too.

I think he has finally appreciated what I learned a long time ago—Annie's going to do whatever she wants, and she'll probably crush it, too. I don't need to protect her from the industry.

If anything, we should protect the industry from her, as evidenced by the fact that she's dragged a show from

practically conception to previews—with her and me in the leading roles—in less than three years.

“Is everyone here?” she asks me. “What about your friend from London?”

I invited a couple of guys I met on tour and stayed in touch with off and on. Annie’s been excited to meet them.

There’s a knock at the door. “That must be him,” I tell her. “Apparently they don’t have clocks in the UK.”

I go to open it, expecting to see Harry’s tall, broad frame.

But instead of Harry, it’s a giant ice sculpture on a dolly with a uniformed delivery man.

“Mr. Adams? Mr. King sends his regards.”

The delivery guy wheels the sculpture in, and Annie has him put it in the center of our marble kitchen island.

“What kind of a man sends an ice sculpture?” Rae muses, fascinated.

“Let me call him.” I go to our balcony, stepping out onto the long patio and hitting his number.

He answers on the fourth ring. “Yeah.”

“It’s Tyler. What the hell happened? Are you coming to the party?”

In truth, I don’t care so much about the party, but it’s odd of him to not do what he says he will.

There’s a groan and some cursing, as if he bumped into something. “You haven’t heard.”

His voice is so dead I’m worried. I google his name. “Jesus. Are you alright?”

I see page after page of articles on my real estate and entertainment mogul friend, and his girlfriend—now ex-girlfriend—going off the deep end after they broke up.

“Swearing off women for life,” he vows.

“Hang in there. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I click off, trying not to let worry set in. Harry wouldn’t have been at the helm of a massive empire without having his shit together. Hell, he’s one of the people whose advice helped me get through life on tour.

I owe him one.

But for now, I push it from my mind and head back to the living room.

“Everything okay?” Annie asks when I rejoin her.

“Yeah, nothing to worry about.” I brush my lips across her cheek.

Glasses clink, and we all look up from where we’re standing to see Jax holding up his champagne and looking slightly uncomfortable.

“This is a strange day. It would be normal to feel as if I have two children starting their lives.” We all look at the baby and Sophie, who’s swinging her legs on the couch. “But it feels as if four of my children are.”

Annie’s hand squeezes mine hard, and I swallow.

“I’m blessed to have the people I have, and I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve it. But I know Tyler and Annie deserve each other.”

By the end of the toast, Annie’s in tears and Haley’s smiling so broadly it looks as if it might crack her face.

I drink my champagne, and for once, I don't even mind the fucking bubbles.

My fiancée goes to hug her dad, and when he pulls back, he looks at me.

“We have a little something special planned,” I say.

A buzz starts as I go to our second bedroom—a music room now—to retrieve the guitar Annie bought me, plus my second favorite.

I pass the latter to Jax, and we do a song together.

Everyone listens and cheers when it's over.

“What are you guys doing for your wedding?” Elle asks after we've finished a drink and cake and Sophie's taken off around the apartment to run the perimeter, trailing a finger along the ornate baseboards.

Annie and I exchange a look.

“We were thinking somewhere warm,” she says, shooting me a smile.

Haley shifts forward, beaming. “LA?”

“An island,” I say. “Of course, you're all invited.”

Cheers go up.

“What's that look on your face?” Annie murmurs much later, once everyone's gone home except Jax and Haley and the kids in the guest bedroom.

It's just the two of us on the balcony, and I pull her against me.

“I'm happy,” I admit, brushing a curl out of her face as I drink in the sight of her warm eyes, the curve of her lips. “So fucking happy, Annie. Everything we've been through came

full circle for me today. It reminded me this is what it's like to have family. And I'm not afraid anymore. Whatever happens, we've got it covered."

"Even a new album and a Broadway show and..." she trails off, brows lifting in mock horror, "an island wedding?" she teases.

I drag her mouth to mine, kissing her breathless before I pull back.

"Can't wait."



Thank you for reading RIVALS! Tyler and Annie have etched a place in my heart, and I hope you love their story as much as I do.

This world and its characters are crafted from pieces of my soul. I believe that we deserve love, friendship *and* our dreams. That's why I write about real, flawed people pursuing exactly that.

If you loved RIVALS, please consider telling a friend, sharing on social, or leaving a quick review on your fave ebook retailer. It takes a few seconds, and might help a new reader find a book they need in their life right now.

I love connecting with readers! Hit me up with any comments at:

piper@piperlawsonbooks.com



Did you know RIVALS is also available as a special edition paperback and as audiobook narrated by Teddy Hamilton and Rose Dioro? Click below to experience the story in a whole new way.

[Rivals Paperback](#)

[Rivals Audio](#)



If you'd like to stay in touch, you can join my VIP list at www.piperlawsonbooks.com/subscribe. I'll reach out to you a couple of times a month with exclusive scenes, limited deals and other cool stuff I think you'll enjoy.

Finally, if you're new to my stories and wondering where to go next, you can grab a reading order at www.piperlawsonbooks.com/start

Love,

Piper



P.S. In case you're missing Tyler and Annie already, I've added an extra Rivals holiday short story, A Wicked Holiday Surprise, as a special gift for you.

Turn the page to read it now.
(It's right after the Acknowledgments.)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, thank YOU for picking up this book. I appreciate you trusting me enough to let me into your heart.

This series happened because after I finished writing the Wicked trilogy, I couldn't get Tyler and Annie out of my head. At first I thought they needed a book, but once I got into their story, I realized it was more involved.

Some of the best love stories take time to tell—time in my life to get it on paper, but more importantly, time in the characters lives to grow up, to make mistakes and learn, and for everything to align so they can finally get their hard-won reward.

That's why these two get a trilogy. I hope their love, loss, and angst will tear you apart and make you whole again like it's done to me.

This series wouldn't have happened without the support of my awesome advance readers. Extra shoutout to Beth, Tammy and Michelle for doing an early read! You ladies rock.

Books and Moods, thank you for the gorgeous alternate cover.

Becca Mysoor, thank you for your on-point advice. Cassie Robertson and Devon Burke, thank you for questioning,

polishing, and catching all the little things.

Thank you Nina Grinstead and the Valentine PR team for getting the word out about my stories. And Annette Brignac and Kate Tilton: you keep me sane and organized... I would not be able to get these books to the people who matter most without your help.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. The best part of author life is having YOU in it.

xoxo

Piper

A WICKED HOLIDAY SURPRISE

A RIVALS STORY

This short story includes characters from the Wicked and Rivals world: Tyler, Annie, Jax, Haley, and more.

It originally appeared in a charity anthology titled Mistletoe Kisses.

These events take place sequentially after *A Love Song for Dreamers*.

Enjoy!

ANNIE

“I CAN’T BELIEVE we’re here,” I gush, leaning over the console between our first-class airline seats.

The man I love cocks his head, glancing around the cabin. “Me either. We were supposed to be on a charter.”

The holidays are my favorite time of year. My rock star fiancé, Tyler... not so much.

We both had tough childhoods, but his was worse.

Now, I’m his family. My dad and Haley are too, along with our friends.

“We’re going to Dallas to see family. It’s not as if we have to walk,” I tease.

He rubs a hand through his dark hair. He’s itching for a guitar—I can tell from the tension in his strong jaw, the glint in his gorgeous chocolate eyes, the way he’s idly tapping one foot on the carpet. Any time the man’s not touching a guitar is a damn waste.

Unless he’s touching me.

“Besides,” I continue, “it’s been a long time, and we both need a break. Four whole nights.”

Broadway is demanding, and even though I wrote and coproduced the show, it was a marvel I got us four nights off together.

“You think spending four nights with your family will be a break?” His beautiful mouth lifts at the corner.

“Sophie will be running the house at age five. Baby Mason will be keeping Haley up. Dad will be running between the label and the kids.” Maybe it is a lot going on, but it’s family. And this is the first year things have been on solid ground.

I shift in my seat. “And you haven’t even seen what I got you for Christmas.”

Every part of me buzzes with anticipation because it’s an epic gift. I can’t wait to see him open it.

“You don’t need to get me anything,” he answers, his voice a husky whisper. “I have you every day. That’s more than I ever thought I’d have.”

My heart kicks. Even in an airplane cabin, surrounded by strangers and holiday madness, I’m crazy about this man.

We’ve been engaged six months and haven’t made plans for the wedding. At first, it was a decision we agreed on. We had other things to figure out. Now, we’re living together in New York, hustling out our dream.

Tyler threads his fingers through mine, shooting me a look that has my toes tingling. “There’s something I want to talk with you about.”

Excitement bubbles through me. “That sounds mysterious,” I say coyly. “Do you want to talk about it now?”

“Not in public. Later.” He squeezes my hand, and my heart skips a beat.

“Looking forward to it.”

Being with family will be the perfect time to talk about our wedding. Sure, my dad and Haley, plus my half sister and baby half brother, are a handful. But Tyler and I have handled packed houses and international rock tours. Nothing in Dallas could get in the way.

I play with the ring on the fourth finger of my left hand, staring at the gorgeous diamond before I fix my gaze on the snow coming down outside. “It’s beautiful. It almost never snows in Dallas. I can remember twice ever at the holidays. I’m going to miss the snow in New York.”

He cocks his head. “You mean that shit that stops traffic?”

The snow coming down in New York is the reason our small private plane was canceled and we had to switch to commercial at the last minute.

Sometimes, I have to remind myself that as full as my schedule is, his is fuller. He does it all without complaining, but the way he passes out when we go to bed, takes longer than usual to get up with the alarm, the way he rubs his eyes when he thinks I’m not looking and mainlines caffeine, shows me he’s been stressed with finishing his second album. He’s been oddly secretive about it, and I pretend it doesn’t hurt a little that he’s unwilling to share with me.

Still, he’s working his ass off, and I want to make things easier on him.

I unfasten my seatbelt—we’re still on the tarmac—and start to get up.

A flight attendant is at my elbow in a second. “Excuse me. We’re about to take off.”

“Of course.” My best embarrassed and earnest “I’m following the rules” smile is on display.

I wait for her to head back to the front before I duck across the barrier between our seats, wishing I could do away with it entirely. Tyler’s mouth is firm when I kiss him. It’s a light brush of lips, a reminder of the way I love him and that I’m glad to be spending today with him.

Before I can pull back, he threads his fingers into my hair, deliberate and languorous as he holds me against him. He’s completely confident in his effect on me, slanting my mouth over his in a way that makes me tingle everywhere.

“I needed that,” he murmurs, pushing me lightly back into my seat. “If we were on a charter, we wouldn’t have had to stop.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “You want to fuck me on an airplane?”

“I want to fuck you everywhere.”

Groan. Damned hot musician fiancé. I melt into the seat and take my hand from his to refasten the seat belt.

“So what made it special?” Tyler asks.

“Hmm?”

My dazed expression elicits a slow, sexy grin from him. “The snow.”

“Oh! It was the year after Dad and Haley got married, after we moved back to Dallas from Philly. I was going through some stuff...”

From his knowing expression, he’s well aware of where I’m going with this.

“See,” I say, tapping a finger against my lips, “this guy I liked ghosted me. I even got him a Christmas present, and all he had to do to get it back was text me... but he didn’t get back to me. I thought we were friends.”

His expression clouds with pain and resolve. I know he’s remembering that rocky time in our relationship too. “Sounds like a dick.”

“He had his reasons.”

“Still a dick. Any guy who hurts you again is going to have to go through me.”

There it is. One of a million reasons I love this man. “Yeah, well, I went outside, and it was snowing, and I knew everything would be okay.”

His hand squeezes mine.

“This is going to be good,” I promise, thinking of the days to come and the fact he wants to talk about the wedding.

“This is the first Christmas I’ll spend with your family.”

“Huh.” That hadn’t occurred to me. “Then you’re long past due because you are my family.”

Tyler’s eyes crinkle at the corners. “Something tells me it’ll be an adventure,” he says dryly.

He’s not only been my friend for a decade, but I’ve been in love with him almost as long. He’s loved me too, but with enough twists and turns to fill a bookcase.

I’ve watched Tyler go from being an unknown guitarist with jaw-dropping talent to being discovered by my dad, himself one of the biggest rock stars in the world before he retired, to being an internationally renowned breakout in his

own right. The man next to me could have any woman in the world, and he wants me. It never stops being a trip.

Me, who feels too much, who's way too earnest, who grew up without knowing who she was or who her family was, who had the deep-seated need to prove herself. The one person I never had to prove myself to was him.

My phone buzzes with a message from my stepmom. Earlier, I'd asked her to confirm Tyler's gift had arrived in Dallas via special shipping. It had. Thank goodness. Next, I asked what we could bring.

Her response:

HALEY: Anything but chaos. We have enough here.

“WHAT'S UP?” Tyler asks.

I tuck the phone away without showing him the screen. “Nothing.”

The smile I give him feels similar to the one I gave the flight attendant, and he eyes me warily but lets me get away with it.

The plane takes off, and we're on our way toward something.

I hope it's not chaos because what I want this Christmas is a wedding.

TYLER

I'VE SEEN a lot of big houses. Jax's is one of the biggest. I still appreciate it every time I head up the driveway.

“How does it feel to be back?”

Annie's voice has me looking at her across the back seat. I squeeze her hand.

The limo that picked us up at DFW pulls up in front of the sweeping porch and double doors. It's not my home, but it does feel that way sometimes. The residents here have done everything they could to make me feel that way.

“It's good,” I say.

Good doesn't capture it as I shift out, the driver already getting Annie's door for her. After the year we've had, my feelings are nowhere near that simple.

The album I'm making is the best I've produced, and I'm pouring all of myself into it. Working with my label in LA and at Annie's dad's studio in Dallas, plus my almost-full-time commitment to her show in New York, has been a lot.

“You know,” she starts as the driver collects our bags from the trunk, “I know you didn't want to talk about the future on the plane, but I'm kind of dying to. Do we have to wait?”

I stare into her beautiful face, the girl I've loved since before I knew how. "I suppose not. I want to talk about a date."

"A date?" Her eyes brighten, and she shifts toward me as if she knew this was coming.

I guess it was inevitable, but I'm surprised she knows me so well that she's figured out what's been on my mind. "Yeah. I talked to the studio. We were thinking March."

"March!" Her voice rises an octave. "That's soon. And why's the studio involved?"

"You know they call all the shots."

"I get some say," she teases.

"Sure. Do you have something else going on?"

Her mouth works for a moment. "The show, but I guess it's always possible to take a few performances out."

There's so much anticipation in her voice. I fucking love her even more for wanting this with me. I can't resist brushing a kiss across her lips once, twice. She presses against me, right there in the middle of the driveway.

I swear the curtains in the front window move, but I can't bring myself to care.

"So, I should tell them March," I murmur when I pull back, my fiancée still close enough I can smell her shampoo. "Because there'll have to be a tour after, and summer's as good a time as any."

Annie cocks her head in confusion. "Wait, why do you need to tour so soon after?"

“So people can hear the new album.” She blinks, and I wonder if she slept last night. “The album we’re talking about dropping in March.”

Her hands stiffen on my arms, and instantly I know something’s gone very wrong. “That’s what you wanted to talk about. A date for the *album*.”

“Of course.” I frown. “What’d you think?”

She pulls back, surprise and pain in those wide, amber eyes. I hate that I’ve done something to put it there, but before I can respond Annie turns away and takes the steps one a time.

She turns the handle and pushes the door open without knocking.

I follow her into the huge, vaulted foyer decorated for the holidays, a giant spray of greenery on the table and accents of green, white, and gold in every corner and up the grand staircase.

“Hello?” Annie calls into the cavernous house.

Seconds later, Sophie comes barreling down the hall, her amber eyes wide and her dark hair in messy pigtails. Her five-year-old legs are getting long, sprinting in green tights under her matching dress. She grabs her half sister’s hand and tows her toward the living room.

“Look!” Sophie declares, proudly showing off her decorations.

Swags of gold and white grace the baby grand piano. A miniature holiday town fills three of the shelves of the built-in bookcases, and a towering tree in one corner has gifts underneath. It’s more opulent than anything I grew up with, and even though my life the past few years since making it

with my music has outdone my wildest dreams, moments like this remind me I came from nothing.

No gifts. No decorations. But looking back, what I missed most was love.

Love isn't absent in this household, and I still feel as if I don't deserve it sometimes.

"It's great, Sophie," my fiancée comments. "And it might snow tonight."

"Snow?" her little sister says. "Like in the movies?"

"Yup."

"Only promise what you can deliver because this one won't forget."

The humor-filled female voice has us turning toward the doorway to the kitchen. Haley, Annie's stepmom, hardly looks older than Annie in a black dress with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, a broad smile on her face.

The tension in my shoulders eases a degree. I've known Haley for years, since I started recording music at the Wicked label as part of an after-school program when she worked there too. The label was how she met her husband.

"Don't tell me Jax has made you stick to the kitchen for the day," I say as Annie wraps Haley in a hug.

"When was the last time Jax made me do anything?" Haley retorts evenly before giving me a squeeze.

As if on command, the man in question enters from the same direction as his wife.

Jax Jamieson might be more than five years removed from headlining tours and concerts himself, but he'll always be a

multiplatinum recording artist, and now, he's a producer too. He's clad in a dark button-down and well-worn jeans, a shadow of a beard on his face. There's a hint of grey in his hair that wasn't there a year ago, though he's not yet forty. His expression is long-suffering, but he carries himself like the man he's always been—one who can command a stadium. Hell, an entire world.

Jax's shoulders relax as he crosses to his eldest daughter. "Hey, kid. How's my Broadway star?"

Annie's lips twitch for a moment before she breaks into a smile. "Surviving."

He wraps her in a hug, and her eyes close as she hugs him back.

"Have you read any reviews?" she asks.

"Reviews are bullshit."

"They were really good, Dad."

"In that case, they should always be trusted."

Jax tosses me a look I recognize immediately. It's the "I don't care that you're practically my son, you better be fucking taking care of my daughter" look.

That's partly why I need this holiday to go well. To show myself I can be what she needs, be worthy of her and this family. Even though they've always insisted I'm part of it, I'm close to actually becoming part of not only genuine rock royalty, but a close-knit family unit that would go to the wall for one another. I take that responsibility seriously.

"Where's baby Mason?" Annie asks.

"Kid's with his personal baby whisperer. If we're lucky, he'll sleep two hours."

Serena, Haley's best friend, appears from the same direction as Haley, her blond ponytail bobbing as she eyes us over the baby in her arms. Her boyfriend, Wes, is at her side. She's in marketing, and Wes is a top scientist, but they could easily be modeling for some ad campaign.

"Well, you look very comfortable with a baby," Annie teases.

"You're the one getting married. Have you set a date?" Serena demands.

"Have you?" Annie retorts, lowering her voice as she crosses to peer down at her half brother.

"Don't change the subject," Serena says, narrowing her eyes.

At the same time, Wes says, "Soon. But I have to ask her first."

Serena turns to look at him in shock. I've never seen Serena shut up so fast, and it makes me grin.

"But when I do, it's on," Wes finishes easily, smirking at his girlfriend.

Annie watches them with envy, and a tumbler falls into a lock somewhere deep in my mind.

Fuck. I know what outside was about. She thought I was talking about a date for the wedding.

When we got engaged earlier this year, we decided to take our time. We have an apartment in New York together, and she was working on getting her show to Broadway. But she's been dropping hints lately.

I should've known. I'm pissed I didn't.

I fucked up earlier, and I need to fix it. But now's not the time, because everyone's here and Sophie's tugging on my jeans.

"Come see my tree!" she insists, and I follow to where she's pointing.

"It looks great. Nice work on the decorations." I play with one of the artificial needles. "You could probably leave them on all year since it's not a real tree."

"What do you mean, 'a real tree'?"

"A live one. One that smells like the forest."

I realize my mistake the second Sophie's smile fades.

She turns to her dad, summoning the reigning king of rock with a pleading tone and two little outstretched arms. "Daddy, I want a live tree."

"Sophie," Haley says, "there's nothing wrong with this tree. We've always had this one."

"I didn't know I could have an alive tree."

I expect Sophie to cry, but she doesn't, just crosses to the tree and plays with one of the bottom branches, pouting.

Jax groans. "It's a while still till dinner."

"It's Christmas Eve," Haley points out. "The rest of our guests are arriving this afternoon."

"The rest?" I ask. I thought this was going to be a small, low-key holiday. Evidently not.

"A few surprise additions," she says to me with a smile.

"But we have a couple of hours until the catering comes," Jax points out.

Haley folds her arms. He steps toward her, the ink poking out of the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt as he takes her reluctant arms in his hands and drops a kiss on his wife's lips.

"Our kid wants a tree, Hales." His murmur is just audible. "There's a place thirty minutes away. We'll be there and back before you know it."

"We?" she asks.

Jax tosses me a look. "Yeah. Loudmouth earned himself a ticket."

I exchange a look with Annie. We haven't talked yet about what went down outside, but we can both tell it's not the time.

Jax grabs Sophie and boosts her up on his hip. "Let's go get your tree."

I brush a kiss over Annie's cheek. "We'll talk after."

She nods. "You two strong guitarists go get the girl a tree."

But I've messed with two Jamieson girls, and while I'm going to help one, it's the other I care most about.



"YOU MEAN you cut the tree and kill it?" Sophie's horrified expression as we stand beside the sparse row of cut trees that remain contrasts with the handful of other people at the tree lot: an excited family and a harried man on a cell phone doing last-minute shopping.

"That's how it works," Jax tells her.

"I want an *alive* tree."

"And it is," he repeats.

“But alive plants need to be in the ground. Can we put it in the ground at home?” She squats next to the cut end of one wrapped tree.

Her dad exhales. “No, Sophie. In January, it goes to tree heaven.”

We’d hoped to be here and back with a tree inside of an hour. Now, the prospect is unlikely—at least the “with a tree” part.

Until an idea hits me. “There are services that bring a live tree to your house, then replant it after the season.”

I reach for my phone, then realize I’ve forgotten it. *Dammit.* I hope I left it at Jax and Haley’s and not on the plane or something. Jax offers me his. My quick search turns up photos of trees with the root balls intact.

“Beck got one in LA last year. But I doubt we could get one same day.”

Sophie’s hopeful face determines our action before Jax huffs out a breath. “We better figure out a way.”

Normally my assistant would handle these things, but I’m not gonna pull my staff away from their families. “Says there’s a place in Dallas that does it, but they’re closing in an hour and they’ve already delivered all their stock.”

“Let me try someone.” Jax places a call and hangs up a few moments later. “Shay hooked us up.”

I stare at him incredulously. “Shay your recording artist?”

“She started as my receptionist,” he reminds me. “You’re the one who made me listen to her demo. And she’s resourceful as hell.”

Turns out Shay went to school with the guy who runs the tree place, and she called to tell him to expect us. So, we head over there in the truck we borrowed from Jax's guitarist, Mace.

By the time the three of us get to the other shop and load up the tree—which has a huge root system the guy warns should not be transplanted without mechanical help—and tie it down, my eye's on the clock.

On the way home, Sophie falls asleep in the car seat we strapped into the back. The truck is sagging under the weight of the tree.

Jax catches me watching his daughter. "You'll get there someday."

"Someday." It feels like a long fucking ways away sometimes.

"And the wedding?" he asks.

I shove a hand through my hair, staring at the near-empty road ahead of us. Jax and I don't have a lot of personal conversations, and the ones we have had tended to make things between Annie and me worse, not better. "We agreed to put it on hold for now. I've never needed to stand up in front of a bunch of people and declare my intentions."

"She might." I cut him a look, and he continues, "If there's one thing I've learned from Haley and having two girls, it's that there's always something going on under the surface. Ignore it at your peril."

I turn over his words as we bump down the road. The clock radio says almost two hours have passed since we left. We're half an hour from Jax's place, moving slowly on a quiet

back road. The temperature is near freezing, and I swear I saw a snowflake.

I'm still dwelling on that when the truck hits a pothole and swerves.

Sophie squeals.

I brace a hand on the dash, scanning the empty road for signs of danger. "What's wrong?"

"I can't steer." Jax's voice is low and tight.

I feel the uneven weight of the truck pulling and look over my shoulder through the rear window. The ropes holding the tree have loosened, and it's dangling off the back of the truck.

A moment later, we're no longer on the road.

ANNIE

“THESE WERE GOING to be done earlier in the week,” Haley says as we work together in the kitchen, making gingerbread.

The cavernous space, decked out with marble and gourmet appliances, could host a dozen chefs, but it’s just us, plus baby Mason sleeping in his bassinet. She takes the dough from the bowl and rolls it out.

I peruse the collection of cookie cutters. “Sophie didn’t want to help?”

“That was the problem. She helped too much the first time—I didn’t see her sneak half a cup of salt in place of the sugar.”

I wince. “Ouch. Who found out?”

We exchange a look.

“Jax,” she says as I say, “Dad.”

Haley’s laugh can’t solve the dull ache in my stomach, but I find a smile for my stepmom.

Today’s not going how I’d hoped either.

“Why do you make cookies anyway?” I ask as I choose a reindeer cookie cutter and shift next to Haley. My stepmom is wildly successful in her own right. She might not have

screaming fans, but she's a borderline genius who started her career designing software that optimizes songs and predicts which new ones will be hits. "You've probably been working your ass off on some computer program for your company. You could've asked the caterer to bring cookies with dinner, especially after the first batch failed."

I pick a spot and stamp the reindeer, wiggling the edges until it cuts clean through.

"I could've. But some of the painful parts of life are worth savoring."

I lift the shaped dough, making it dance in the air.

One slender leg falls off.

"Shit. Reindeer down." I lay the cookie on the sheet and try to repair it. "You shouldn't let me touch anything right now. I'm in 'search and destroy' mode."

Haley stops rolling dough and turns toward me. "What's going on? You and Tyler aren't in a good place?"

"We are. It's just... I want to marry him. He wants to release an album."

Normally, I'd love to talk with Tyler about his album's release—except that I was thinking he wanted to talk about our wedding. I cut the next cookie as emotion wells up in my throat.

I've always felt too much. I used to think Tyler and I were opposites because it was hard to know what he was feeling and easy to know what I was feeling—it's always written on my face. We're mostly over that. Still, I can't believe this whole time I've been thinking about a wedding and he's been thinking about an album—one I know next to nothing about.

Haley wraps an arm around me. She's not a touchy person, and her comfort means more because of it. "You know as well as anyone life doesn't always happen on your schedule."

I nod. She's right—growing up as the daughter of a rock star, navigating my own dreams and jealousy while falling for my best friend, a huge musician in his own right, hasn't been easy.

"I'm grateful for everything I have," I say. "But Tyler's finishing his album and I barely see him. He hasn't even played me anything from it, which he normally would. It feels as if, if we don't make wedding plans soon, I'm not sure we're going to."

"Remember, I've known Tyler longer than you have. I met him back at Wicked when he was, oh, probably fourteen? He loves two things—music and you."

I groan. "I know. But does it have to be in that order?"

Her mouth twitches as she finishes rolling the dough, passing it to me for cutting. Haley gets what it's like better than anyone, being married to someone whose life is about their music. Hell, mine is too, which I think makes it harder.

I know I'm being dramatic, but I come by it honestly. Like my dad, dramatic is my factory setting.

"Tyler's going to love your gift," Haley comments as I continue to stamp out gingerbread. "It's sitting behind the studio."

I suck in a breath, thinking of the small, partially obscured gravel lot hidden by trees. It's adjacent to the boutique recording studio housed in the heavily renovated and expanded pool house out back.

"I hope so. I spent months looking for it."

As I set the last dozen reindeer carefully on the cookie sheet—all forty-eight legs accounted for, thank you very much—she looks at the clock.

“They’ve been gone two hours. It’s crazy. When we met and he was on tour, I wouldn’t have thought twice about going hours, even days, without seeing him or knowing where he was. But now...” Haley says, not needing to finish her thought.

I feel the same way, and a ribbon of concern works through my mind. “Let me text them. They should be back by now.”

“Sophie’s probably making them look at a dozen trees.”

I’m typing out a text to Tyler when the doorbell rings.

“Is that them or the catering?” I ask, frowning.

“Go get it,” Haley suggests.

I rinse my hands, then head to the door and pull on the handle. The face greeting me instantly lift my spirits.

“Wow, they’re letting just anyone in here,” Beck drawls.

I throw my arms around my friend and former peer mentor from school. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be filming in LA.”

“Slave drivers gave us a few days off for the holiday, same as you guys. Besides, my tan was good enough. Figured I’d spend a few days out east with you pale fools.”

“I didn’t know you were coming! Tyler will be so happy to see you.” Though Tyler went to LA a couple of months ago to visit his label, he and his former roommate weren’t able to connect because of their busy schedules. “I figured you were Dad and Tyler or the catering.”

“There’s no food?” he says, mock aghast. “I’m leaving.”

Serena’s voice comes from behind me. “What he means is ‘happy holidays.’” She throws her arms around her brother.

He catches us up on his work in LA. Soon after, the catering finally arrives, the caterer apologizing and saying the roads were getting slippery.

Still, the guys haven’t returned.

I try calling Tyler and find his phone in the hall.

Haley calls Dad. Nothing.

I’m legitimately worried now, and Haley is too. With her quiet competence, she calls the tree farm and finds out there was no record of a purchase, but they remember seeing two men and a little girl more than two hours ago. Anxiety roils in my stomach, the awful feeling that something’s gone terribly wrong.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Beck insists, squeezing my shoulder. “I don’t know your dad, but how much trouble could Ty get into around here?”

A trembling exhale escapes my lips. “More than enough.”

HALEY

“IF YOU’RE NOT my family, my band, or the ghost of Jimi Hendrix, call my agent.”

My husband’s familiar recording streams out of the speaker pressed to my ear. It’s comforting even though I know it’s not him.

“Jax. I hope you guys aren’t doing something crazy.” I can’t keep the worry out of my voice. “I love you. All of you,” I add before hitting End.

I’m getting anxious but trying to hide it as I meet Serena in the dining room to finish setting the table for tonight.

“The food got here an hour ago,” I murmur, glancing back toward the kitchen.

“We can reheat it if we need to,” my friend says easily. “You still can’t reach them?”

I shake my head. “Annie said Tyler left his phone here.”

Serena looks up. “Where is Annie?”

“She needed a minute and went out back.” I glance toward the patio and the studio beyond as if I can see through the walls.

My friend steps between me and the long table decorated with sprays of mistletoe and cranberries, frowning with concern. “You could use a minute.”

I wave her off. “Let’s finish setting up here.” I nod toward the cutlery, enough for all of us. Which reminds me... “I should see if the band needs more drinks.”

An hour ago, Jax’s former bandmates showed up. It’s as if our entire extended family is here.

Serena stops me on the way to the door. “Wes can take care of it. He knows where the bar is.”

She heads toward the living room and returns a moment later. We work side by side, talking about New York.

“I need to go look for them,” I insist when we finish. “Can you watch Mason for me?”

“Of course, but I don’t think you should go out driving in the dark.”

“They’ve been gone three hours. Something’s wrong.” I could call the police, but I don’t think they’d send a car out on Christmas Eve on the basis of “They’ve been gone all afternoon.”

Wes comes in, followed by Serena’s brother, and immediately sizes up the situation. “Beck and I’ll go look for them.”

I nod tightly. “That would be great. You can take my car.”

The door opens just as they’re about to head out. Jax enters, Sophie boosted up on one hip, and a huge wave of relief washes over me.

I didn’t know how worried I was until this second.

“You’re late,” I comment, my chest tightening at the sight of my husband and daughter.

“I know, Hales. Mace’s truck went off the road”—my heart leaps into my throat—“and my phone died. I didn’t have a compatible charger in the truck.”

I take my daughter, hugging her hard. “How did you get back?” I ask over her shoulder.

Tyler’s dark head appears in the doorway. “We would’ve gotten back sooner if Jax wasn’t hell-bent on bringing our cargo with us.”

“It was your idea in the first place,” Jax grumbles.

“What was?” I ask, pulling back to run a harrowed gaze over Sophie, from her head to her shiny black rubber boots. All the important parts seem to be there.

“This.”

They swing the doors wide to reveal the tree. Two men wearing construction vests help Jax and Tyler bring it inside and set it up in the living room. I look out into the driveway and see a tow truck.

“Sweet tree,” Beck declares. “Same kind I got last year.”

“Yeah, well, tree fell out of the truck,” Tyler says wearily after they set the tree in the corner. “We went off the road. Fortunately didn’t hit anything. Some people offered us a ride, but we had to wait for not one tow but two—one for Mace’s truck and one for the tree.”

“Everyone’s good?”

My question is for my daughter, and Sophie nods, eyes wide. “The truck was going this way and that way”—she motions with her hands in a way that makes my stomach lurch

—“but Daddy saved us. Tyler walked down the road and got these guys to help us out. They saved the tree.”

I force my attention to the prize in question. “It’s growing.”

“Damn right it is,” Jax responds, tossing me a cocky look that somehow softens the edge of my concern.

Sophie jumps down from my arms and dances around the tree in delight.

“We can decorate,” Serena suggests. “What do you say, Sophie?”

She’s already diving into the box of ornaments in the corner of the room.

I make my way into the dining room, where the huge table is set for everyone. My husband finds me there.

“I’m glad Sophie didn’t bludgeon you and Tyler into the ground on her tree hunt,” I manage to say.

“Yeah. It worked out all right—the guys took a selfie with Tyler and me. Apparently they’re fans, so the kid promised to send them tickets to his next tour.” Despite everything that’s happened, he grins. “Nights like this are the best.”

I shake my head. “You don’t miss being on the road for the holidays?”

“Never. It’s perfect, Hales.” Jax brushes a kiss over my cheek. His gaze lands Tyler, who’s talking with Beck but discreetly searching for Annie. “Where is she?”

“Outside. I should go tell her he’s okay. That you all are.”

Jax catches my arm. “Let him.”

I sigh. “They’re having a tough time.”

“They’re figuring things out,” he corrects. “Like we did.”

I tilt my head up at him. “Exactly like we did? I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Jax steps between my legs, his size and hard body and closeness affecting me instantly.

“It was worth it,” he murmurs in that voice every woman on the planet dreams of having in her ear.

“This is what’s it’s all about,” I say. “Family. Connection. Belonging.”

He nods. “We all chose each other. No matter where we celebrate, or how we celebrate or when, we’re unbreakable.”

I questioned it once. I don’t anymore.

The crew is all here. Jax’s guitarist, Ryan, known as Mace to the rest of the world, is who Mason was named after. Their bassist, Brick, is with his wife, Nina, and drummer Kyle with his new girlfriend. Plus Serena and Wes. Everyone has drinks and mingles around the living room, catching up or helping Sophie decorate the new tree.

“It’s not Christmas until we play The Song,” Mace declares.

“What song?” Serena asks.

But Jax is already trying to grab the phone out of his guitarist’s hand. His former drummer, Kyle, steps in and takes it, hitting Play. My husband growls.

But his voice—younger but as charming as ever—streams out of the speaker.

“Dude. ‘It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas’?” Beck says in disbelief.

“I was twenty and bowing to pressure from the label,” Jax gripes. “They wanted a holiday EP to capitalize on my platinum album.”

“I try to get him to repeat for us every year,” I weigh in. “So far, nothing.”

The look Jax shoots me would have lesser women falling to their knees. “I’m never performing Christmas songs again, Hales.”

“Not even for your family?” I cock my head. “That’s cold. And speaking of cold, I need to reheat dinner. Excuse me.”

I head to the kitchen and put things in the double oven. I’m instantly on alert before Jax ambushes me, tickling lightly until I screech.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about our legacy,” he says.

I cock a brow. “Three kids isn’t enough?”

Annie might not be mine biologically, but she is in every other way.

“It’s everything.” The earnestness in his voice makes me melt. “But some of the people out there—Tyler, the band—are family we chose. They’re able to live extraordinary lives in part because we helped. I think of how many more people we could help.”

“Aside from our charity?” He nods, and my brows pull together in suspicion. “It sounds as if you might have an idea.”

“I just might. Tell me you’re with me.”

“You going to tell me what it is?”

A wicked grin splits his face. “There’s no fun in that.”

Before I can press him, he pulls me close, and I kiss him. He's still gorgeous, the most gorgeous man I've ever met.

I spent my life trying to be independent, to survive because I had to. But since meeting this man, clashing with him head to head in a way few people have dared, we've both changed.

I knew him before I met him, and I never could've predicted the wild ride our lives would take us on.

His tongue parts my lips, and I open on a moan, hungry for him.

"Hales, help me with some math."

"Only since it is one of my zones of genius," I agree, breathless.

"We have five sets of overnight houseguests. Ten bedrooms. Two kids."

"Right?"

"How far away can we get from all of them? Because you look hot as fuck in that dress." His expression steals my breath. He moves closer, his hard mouth brushing mine once, twice.

I cut a look toward the living room, where everyone's engrossed in warm conversation with drinks and appetizers in hand.

"Dinner has to reheat for at least thirty more minutes. I think we could steal a few minutes first."

Jax takes my hand, and I follow him up the stairs.

TYLER

“YOU SEEN ANNIE?” I ask Beck over the rim of the bourbon Jax insisted on pouring everyone after we returned.

“Not sure.”

I look around the living room, which is buzzing with conversation and holiday music from the built-in speakers. Everyone here is family. Haley, who disappeared to the kitchen a few minutes ago, was one of the first people who worked with me when I started recording through a program for kids from tough backgrounds.

Jax, who seems to have vanished too, took an interest later when he saw how talented I was. His band, standing around and cracking jokes and reminiscing, ended up being like uncles to me.

Even Haley’s friends are mine. Literally. Serena’s brother, Beck, was my roommate at performing arts school, then later in LA after he graduated and started his career as an actor while I was finishing my first world tour.

Annie’s been my friend since we were teenagers. She sees light in the darkest places. Hell, she saw it in me.

My adventure with Jax and Sophie this afternoon reminded me of that. When the truck skidded off the road and onto the

shoulder—the flatbed wound up halfway in the ditch and was ultimately stopped from going the whole way in by the tree—all I could think about was her. That she was here, waiting for me. That I’d do anything to get back to her and give her everything she wanted.

An impulse tugs at my stomach, and I glance toward the back of the house. I down the rest of my drink, then head through the kitchen to the patio doors. I slide them open and step outside, a wave of nostalgia and familiarity hitting me along with the cool air.

The patio is vast and stunning, with a pool surrounded by gardens and the pool house-turned-recording studio. Before it was a studio, I spent a semester living there and attending the same private high school as Annie when home became unbearable.

I cut a look back over my shoulder toward the house, the room that was hers.

I grew up here.

I fell in love here.

And no matter what’s changed in my life or in the pool house, I’ll never forget it.

When I let myself into the small building, there’s a single light on in the hall. My eyes adjust to the darkness.

“Annie?” I call.

I make my way through, glancing in the offices, including the one I occupied for a month last summer. I spent the odd day there this fall when I flew here to record with Jax on my new album.

Plenty of memories.

No Annie.

I head for the main doors of the studio and out to the small parking lot accessible by a parallel driveway installed next to the main one running up to Jax's house. It has a separate pin pad by the road so the studio's entrance is almost as exclusive as the house's, only letting in the small group of artists Jax works with, the up-and-coming ones he's mentoring to the kind of greatness he reached. The kind I'm reaching.

Out in the parking lot, I find what I'm looking for.

There are no cars, but there is a giant tarp covering something waist height and longer than I am tall. Sitting on the gravel staring up at it is my fiancée.

"Hey," I say softly. "You okay?"

Annie spins and looks up at me, her lips parting in shock, then relief. "You're back."

She jumps up. A second later, the impact of her body against mine knocks the breath from my chest. I grab her and hold her tightly.

"What happened?" she murmurs against my shoulder. "We were so worried."

I pull back an inch to look down into her flushed face. "I didn't mean to worry you."

I explain what happened, and she listens, her face turning pale.

She says, "I had this moment when I couldn't reach you, and it's crazy because there are a lot of times I can't reach you, but this scared me. I thought, what if something awful happened and I don't get to see you again? I don't know how to do this without you."

Her emotion wraps me up and drags me along with it. I stroke my knuckles gently down her cheek, loving her softness as much as I love her strength. “It didn’t happen, Six. But if it did, you’d get by.”

“I remember what my world was like before you were in it. It sucked.” She’s joking but earnest too.

“I thought about that too,” I admit. “I can’t control how long I’m here, but every second I am, I want to spend it with you.”

Annie threads her fingers in my hair. Her fingers are cold, and suddenly, I’m questioning how long she’s been out here. But we stand like that, holding each other, until a breeze rustles the plastic behind her.

I can’t resist asking, “What’s under the tarp?”

Her eyes widen a flash of guilt. “Nothing.”

I trace my finger along the full curve of her lower lip, intrigued. “Don’t believe you,” I tease. “You bailed on everyone inside on Christmas Eve to spend quality time with a tarp? Must be protecting something good.”

She exhales hard, shooting me a look before turning. Starting at one end, she strips the tarp back a few feet at a time, eventually pushing it entirely to the ground.

What’s underneath leaves me breathless. Speechless.

“It’s a Triumph Bonneville,” she murmurs.

I circle it, eyeing up every inch of steel. “Nineteen sixty-two.”

“Sixty-one. It took me a while to find, and it needs a little love. You sold your bike when we moved to New York. I wanted you to have one. I talked to the garage owner nearby.

He has some space where you could work on it if you have time to fix it up.”

My chest is so tight it feels as if my heart is too big. The fact that she managed to find this for me, without me knowing, and that she knew I’d want one I could work on myself reminds me how fucking special this girl is.

“How do you know me?” I breathe the words.

Her smile in the dark warms me, her eyes shining. “Life’s been crazy this year. I wanted you to have something that reminded you of who you are, who you were before everything.”

It does. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to work on an engine, but as I stroke a hand over the seat, I can’t wait to work on this. “When I’m done, I can’t wait to take you on this.”

I swoop in and grab her, kissing her hard before she can react. She laughs against my mouth, her hands fisting my shirt as she gets her balance, kissing me back.

“Needs to run first,” she replies breathlessly when we come up for air.

“Untrue.” Her eyes darken, and my gut twists with need for her. “I love how you feel. I love all of you, Annie Jamieson.”

I thread my fingers through hers. The ring I gave her presses into my hand. I don’t need physical evidence of the bond between us, but I like it.

“And,” I go on, “I fucked up by talking about the album this morning when you wanted to talk about a wedding date. The truth is I wanted to get the album figured out so that we can plan the wedding.”

Annie sighs happily. “I know we agreed to wait, but lately, it’s all I can think about. I’ll be in rehearsal and space out because I’m picturing walking toward you in the perfect dress. Or miss my stop on the subway because I’m thinking about honeymoon locations. The other night I couldn’t sleep because I was thinking if it feels this good to wear your ring, I might explode seeing you wear mine.”

She holds up our joined hands, and I feel like the one who might explode.

“Hearing Serena and Wes talk about it today made it feel even more pressing,” she goes on, her lips curving. “It’s crazy because I know you’re mine and a wedding doesn’t make you more mine, but I want you to be mine in every way. I want you to be the mine-est mine there is.”

I love how she feels everything. I treasure it. “I am yours, Six. I always have been. If it sounds like I don’t want to talk about the wedding, it’s only because when I picture it, I don’t think about the flowers and decorations. I think about growing old with you, watching our children grow. You taught me how to dream, and being married you is something I dream of.”

Her eyes gleam in the dark, and I glance back at the bike.

“So, if we’re doing presents,” I say, cocking my head, “I suppose I could give you yours.”

ANNIE

MY HAND STAYS LOCKED in Tyler's as he leads me back into the studio.

I hadn't planned to give him the bike until tomorrow, but his reaction made all the effort to find it worthwhile.

I expect him to continue through the building and out to the patio, then the house, but he surprises me by pushing open one of the studio doors. Inside the space is a range of instruments. He lifts a guitar from a rack on the far side, and my heart skips.

"You're going to play me your new album?" I ask. "You've been beyond secretive about it. I tried not to take it personally."

My smile lets him know I'm joking, but the sincerity in his dark eyes leaves me breathless.

"Take it personally. I want you to." He pulls over a stool and sits, rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt in a way that turns me liquid before he tunes the guitar.

I can't look away. He's perfectly imperfect, his dark hair falling over the face I love, curling at his collared shirt. Since the first time I saw him when I was thirteen, I haven't been able to look away.

Twelve years later, everything in our lives has changed...

Except that.

He plays, the chords tugging at my heart. When he sings overtop, that gorgeous voice with a little edge, as if I'm hearing something he's confessing to himself, I'm ripped open.

I slide to my knees in front of him, the carpet rubbing my skin through the tights. I don't care. I'm mesmerized as his eyes lock on mine and he sings me a song.

When he finishes, he says, "It's called 'My Heart.' Two guesses who it's for."

I couldn't stop the smile if I tried. "You wrote a song for me?"

"For you. About you. With you. Because even when I'm alone, you're with me."

God. If there's a way to resist this man, I don't know what it is. "I couldn't love it any more," I say and mean it.

I love that he knows me the way I know him. He knew this song would be everything I didn't know I needed, like I knew the bike would be perfect for him.

Tyler lifts the guitar from his lap, setting it aside without breaking my gaze. "I want to be where you are, and I know I've been struggling with finishing this album. But being with you, here or New York or anywhere, that matters even more."

My throat is tight with emotion when he threads his hands into my hair and kisses me.

"Okay," I murmur against his lips. "Can we still talk about getting married though? Maybe just... pencil it in?" I trace a finger over the ink on his hand, and he laughs.

“We can do better than that. Let’s do it this spring. Somewhere warm. On an island.”

A thrill races through me. We’ve been talking about a destination wedding. “Perfect. Family and friends. It’ll be simple.”

He cocks his head. “You know our family and friends. It will never be simple.”

I laugh because it’s true, and I’m good with that. We both are.

I never wanted to fall for a musician, but I can’t see it any other way.

I tilt my chin up toward the beams overhead, thinking back to a day seven years ago, before the pool house was renovated and it housed a single resident. He wasn’t a VIP yet, but even then, I knew.

“That one?” I point at the beam. “Has a big knot in the middle.”

Tyler follows my gaze.

“You can’t see it anymore because Dad had them painted white,” I go on, “but I remember looking at those one morning. I woke up in your bed, and all I could think was, ‘Shit—I got really drunk last night, and now I’m in bed with Tyler.’”

He chuckles. “I remember that morning. All the parts before it, and the ones after.”

I shift onto the floor and lie on my back, still smiling. “You were next to me. Right about here, I think.” I scoot sideways to the other edge of the studio, where the bed was. “And I thought, ‘I wish he wasn’t such an ass to me.’”

“I was an ass because I couldn’t have you, and because I hated how much I wanted to.” Tyler stretches out beside me, his shoulder brushing mine and his warmth making me tingle.

My eyes drift shut. “You always had me.”

“How about now?”

His voice is nearer, and I blink my eyes open to see him hovering over me intently. Those dark eyelashes fringe his beautiful eyes, his hair hanging across his face.

My lips part, and Tyler follows the movement—God, he notices everything. He brushes a thumb across my lips in a way that has me tingling in my breasts, between my thighs.

He kisses me slowly at first. The deceptively gentle slide of mouths that know one another’s secrets and want to relearn them. He parts my lips with his tongue, and I open for him, wanting and unashamed. The groan escaping him tells me how much he likes knowing I’m his.

I want to stand up in front of this world and let him mark me as his—so long as it means he’s mine too. Desire floods me, a sudden wave of need, and I grab his hair and tug him close.

Tyler moves over me, hand dragging down my side and his hips pressing, showing me exactly what he wants. He reaches under my shoulders for the zipper of my dress.

“Too hard,” I mumble.

“You can take it.”

“I meant the dress.” I laugh against his lips.

Tyler pulls back and winks. “Sure you did.”

I reach for his belt and work it off with frenzied hands. He gets under my skirt, struggling with my tights before shifting back on his knees long enough to rip them.

I prop up on my elbows, eyeing him with disbelief. “Okay, ‘man with the plan.’ How am I going to walk back in there with no tights?”

“Right now, there’s one plan. It doesn’t involve tights.”

His mouth claims mine again, and I kiss him back as I finish working on his pants, shoving down them and his shorts, freeing his length trapped between us. I want him inside me so damn much.

The pull is exquisite. Not frantic but powerful, undeniable.

My nipples are hard, chafing against my bra and the dress, and a moment later, cool air hits between my thighs, where I’m already wet. I’m ready for him. I don’t have to say it. He knows it the second his fingers brush that spot, the second he presses two inside and I moan his name.

He pulls back enough to watch as I writhe, his expression devout as he sees my need. Then his fingers are gone, replaced with something I want even more.

The feel of Tyler sliding home is indescribable. Every time he fills me, I question whether I can take him. Not only physically, emotionally. I’m bursting with the feelings, with him, with the knowledge that another person is the other half of me in such a profound way.

My fingers dig into his ass when he slips into a rhythm that leaves me breathless and him panting.

Every stroke builds me up.

Coming together in this place, it’s a fucking ode to us.

To our tangled past.

To our messy present.

To our unwritten future.

Eventually I can't hold it in, and I cry out, arching hard as my body squeezes around him. Tyler shudders, his gorgeous body clenching over me, the face I love tight with agony and pleasure.

When we come down, his head rests on my chest, our hearts hammering together.

“I want to build a world of our own like this,” I murmur into his hair. “Like Dad and Haley have, with all their friends and family. I don't care where we live, but I want to let go of some of the hustle and enjoy each other. And I want our kids to have moments like this. I'll wait for it if I have to.”

Tyler shifts back on his elbows to stare at me, his expression intent with love. “Does it have to wait?”

I scoff. “You saw how much work Sophie and Mason are. Hell, you wouldn't have ended up getting towed if Sophie didn't want that tree this afternoon. You're ready for that level of chaos?”

Still, the possibility has my stomach flipping with excitement.

My fiancé, who values security and planning more than I thought it was possible for a human to value those things, floors me with his reply.

“With you, I'm ready for anything.”



WE GET THROUGH DINNER, catching up on everyone's lives: Jax's label, Tyler's album, Brick and Nina's pregnancy, Sophie's school and her baby brother, a new program Haley's building for work, and my show hitting Broadway. I tell them about our plans to have the wedding this spring, and cheers go up.

"It'll be small," I warn.

Beck shouts, "Let's be clear. Are we all invited or not?"

I pretend to hesitate, and Tyler smirks at me.

"You're all invited," I say at last, laughing.

What follows is a round of rapid-fire questions about things we have to decide: location, dresses, flowers, program...

It's a lot, but I can't wait to dive in.

"Anyone ready for dessert?" Haley asks after the conversation dies down a little.

A few groans go up.

"In a couple of hours, Hales," Dad suggests. "I think Kyle ate too much stuffing."

The drummer in question is slumped in his chair, looking as if he had too much of something.

We clear the table, taking our plates to the kitchen. I like that we're a big family and no matter how much we have, in some ways, we're still everyday people. We have the same problems, the same heartaches.

"I saw it!" Sophie's shriek has us looking up to see her face plastered to the patio doors, her hands cupped around her eyes.

“Saw what?”

“Snow!”

She’s out almost before Haley can open the door. The rest of us follow.

“If you catch a snowflake, you get to make a wish,” I tell Sophie.

She runs around until she grabs one.

“But you can’t tell anyone what you wished for,” I warn.

Dad lights a fire in the fire pit. Mace brings out a guitar from the studio and plays while we all sing.

“You got your snow,” Tyler murmurs, his arm around me.

“Sure did.”

Even though it’s light and melts on the ground, the flakes are beautiful, and the patio lights shine off the tiny glistening dots.

I hold out my finger to catch one.

“You have to make a wish,” he murmurs.

“I can’t. I have everything I could ever want.”



Old friends, new enemies, entertainment’s brightest rising stars and biggest egos - together for the destination wedding of the decade.

What could possibly go wrong?

So many readers asked me about Tyler and Annie’s wedding that I wrote a new story just for them. If you’re craving more

angsty, addictive rock star deliciousness...

Grab A Love Song for Always!

Read a sample below...



Annie

Seven days until the wedding

“CAN’T WE MOVE ANY FASTER?” I lean toward the partition between the front and back seats of the limo. “There must be another road. Let me check.”

The driver shoots me a patient look. “Miss Jamieson, it’s the 405.”

From the seat next to me, Rae laughs silently. “Forgive her. She has a serious case of Tyler Adams withdrawal caused by spending too much time apart from her hot fiancé.”

Since I jumped out of bed in New York this morning ahead of the five-thirty alarm to shower and dress, every part of me has been buzzing with anticipation.

Most of my day was spent on the flight to LA with Rae, but I was too distracted to work or read.

Now, the stop-and-go traffic makes me want to roll down my window and shout at the world. Instead, I drum my fingers on the bare knee I nicked my second time over it with a razor.

“Seriously. I don’t need to crash with you and Tyler while I play my gigs this week,” Rae goes on.

“Yes, you do. There are five bedrooms.” Tyler took me on a virtual tour before he rented the house before our wedding. It gave him a home base to work on album release promotions with the studio until I could hand my Broadway role to another actress so Tyler and I could have the next month together before his tour. “Even when Dad and Haley show up with the kids tomorrow, that leaves plenty of space.”

Traffic breaks, and the car surges toward the exit.

Yes.

“Did you see the news about Wicked Records?” Rae holds up an article on her phone about my Dad’s former label.

I resolve to focus and not degenerate into a throbbing ball of need now that my fiancé is only minutes away.

“Sounds like after years of mismanagement, they’re going down fast. Dad hasn’t been involved with them for a long time. Not since he was fighting over his songs.”

“Have he or your stepmom said anything?”

“Not to me.” But we haven’t exchanged more than a rushed voicemail or emails with wedding logistics in the better part of a month given how busy things have been preparing for this time off.

My finger drumming on my knee starts again.

“Just as well you’re dropping me at the club so I won’t be there when you see Tyler,” Rae offers. “I don’t want to be within earshot when you guys... *reunite*.” She enunciates each syllable.

There’s no point trying to hide the flush that crawls up my face.

I have been anticipating all the parts of seeing my fiancé. Not only because we're getting married in a week, but because I haven't kissed him, touched him, or shared more than a sexy FaceTime call with him in a month.

I've been in love with Tyler Adams for a decade, long before he became a rock star and I wrote a Broadway show.

Now we're about to tie the knot.

The obstacles that kept us apart felt insurmountable at the time. But our love, our tenacity, and maybe a little destiny kept bringing us back to one another. Next weekend is validation of all we've been through.

"I grew up wanting to be on stage, but the whole bride fantasy skipped me," I admit.

"No parade with stuffed animals down a made-up aisle?"

I shake my head. "But the moment Tyler and I decided on a date, it was like something took me over. I wanted all of it. The guests. The dress. The cake. The music."

"The man," she finishes.

And what a man.

I swore I'd never fall for a rock star. Growing up with my dad's fame rubbed me the wrong way. I felt I had to prove myself—to him and to everyone. It took years for me to realize I belonged, that I could carve my own path without being lessened by his or jealous of Tyler's relationship with my dad.

"Our lives have been anything but perfect. This week will be the exception," I confide.

Our destination wedding will take place on a stunning island with private beaches and exquisite accommodations.

After, Tyler and I have cleared our schedules for nearly a month. There'll be nothing but relaxation and enjoy newly wedded bliss with my best friend, who also happens to be my fiancé and the hottest guy on the planet.

I've been planning it with crazed fervor.

To be clear, perfect doesn't mean glossy-magazine-worthy. It's about having time with each other and the people we love in a beautiful, private place that feels like heaven.

The car pulls up at the club, and Rae gets out before leaning in the open window. "Do me a favor and put a sock on the door if you're not done when I get back."

"Does anyone even own socks in LA?" But I wave, and the car pulls off again.

As we take the streets up into the Hills, excitement thrums low in my stomach. Tyler's been finishing his album to earn the month off for our wedding before he goes on tour. Even while living together in New York for most of a year, I didn't feel as though we had time together because we were doing eight shows a week. It was a thrilling and exhausting grind, but we decided to move him out of the lead role a few months after it started on Broadway so he could finish his album.

Now I want him to myself.

I check my phone for Tyler's texts from when I left this morning.

Annie: Can't wait to see you.

Tyler: Can't wait to taste you.

My thighs press together under my short, black dress. I could text Tyler to say we're a few minutes away.

But that would ruin the surprise.

Instead, I put on a song from his new album. His voice wraps around me, raw and sexy and the kind of earnest that makes fans go crazy.

By the time the driver pulls up, passing two parked Rolls and a Maserati on the road before turning into the gates and entering the passcode I gave him, I'm so turned on it's dangerous. The gates swing wide, and I get a clear look at the house. It's stunning, white and modern with high trees surrounding it for privacy.

The driver leaves my bags at the door at my request. The garage is open, revealing a black Lambo the owners left and a motorcycle. I bought the bike for Tyler as a gift. I hunted for ages for the vintage Triumph Bonneville. I'd considered having it fixed up before I gave it to him, but I knew he'd want to fix it himself. A way to blow off some steam.

Now it's pristine.

I trail a hand along the chrome and the leather seat in appreciation. The things my guy can do with his hands...

I open the door and step inside. My wedge sandals click on the marble as I steady my racing heart.

"That bike is hot," I call, pushing my sunglasses onto my head and scrunching a hand through the long, red hair I hope is still wavy after a day on the plane.

"If only I could find someone to take me on it."

The evidence of my arousal fills every syllable as I step out into the living room.

"And when I say, 'Take me'? I mean..."

I trail off, my throat tightening.

The man I love stands in the center of the vast room, seeming to fill the entire space with his presence.

Tyler Adams is breathtaking in profile. As gorgeous as ever in dark jeans that cling to his lean hips and strong legs, a white T-shirt that pulls across his chest and shoulders, revealing black ink that curls down his arm all the way to his fingers. His dark hair falls over his face, and when he turns to face me fully, he shoves it back.

The light from the floor-to-ceiling windows streams across his tan face, his cut jaw, and the firm mouth that tastes better than anything on this planet.

Tyler's heavy chocolate gaze locks on mine, holding me prisoner.

But it's his guilty expression that has me stunned.

And the fact that he's not alone.

**To continue reading, be sure to pick up *A Love Song for*
Always at your favorite retailer!**

THANK YOU

If you read *Rivals*...thank you. Thank you for trusting me with your time and your heart.

This series has taken me on a wild ride. It's undoubtedly the most raw, emotional story I've written. I'm so grateful for you participating in this with me. I hope Tyler and Annie stay with you for a long time to come.

My readers are the most amazing readers anywhere. You guys are positive, bold, enthusiastic, supportive, and amazing humans. I wouldn't write without you.

If you enjoyed *Rivals*, I'd be beyond grateful if you could take two minutes to leave a quick review wherever you picked it up. Reviews are like gold to us authors - especially indies.

If you do leave a review, I'd love to hear about it so I can thank you personally. Here're the best ways to reach out:

www.facebook.com/piperlawsonbooks

www.instagram.com/piperlawsonbooks

piper@piperlawsonbooks.com

Thanks for being awesome, for inspiring me every day, and for helping make it possible for me to do something I love.

xoxo

Piper

MORE NEW ADULT ROMANCES BY PIPER LAWSON

OFF-LIMITS SERIES

Crave

Collide

Claim

Tempt

WICKED SERIES

Good Girl

Bad Girl

Wicked Girl

Forever Wicked

RIVALRY SERIES

Love Notes

A Love Song for Liars

A Love Song for Rebels

A Love Song for Dreamers

A Love Song for Always

ENEMIES SERIES

Beautiful Enemy

Beautiful Sins

Beautiful Ruin

Beautiful Salvation

TRAVESTY SERIES

Schooled

Stripped

Scaled

Styled

Satisfaction

MODERN ROMANCE SERIES

Easy Love

Bad Love

Twisted Love

PLAY SERIES

PLAY

NSFW

RISE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Piper Lawson is a WSJ and USA Today bestselling author of smart and steamy romance.

She writes women who follow their dreams, best friends who know your dirty secrets and love you anyway, and complex heroes you'll fall hard for.

Piper lives in Canada with her tall and brilliant husband. She's a sucker for dark eyes, dark coffee, and dark chocolate.

For a complete reading list, visit

www.piperlawsonbooks.com/start

Subscribe to Piper's VIP email list

www.piperlawsonbooks.com/subscribe

