



Enemies
DON'T FALL FOR
Enemies

INVISIBLE GIRLS CLUB BOOK 10

EMMA DALTON

Enemies Don't Fall For Enemies

By

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The Invisible Girls Club List of Characters

- 1) Kara Gander is married to Brayden Barrington and they have three kids:
 - Noah, 17
 - Chloe, 16
 - Rylee, 10
- 2) Dani Wood is married to Easton Knight and they have a daughter:
 - Ava, 16
- 3) Ally Bensen is married to Zack Hastings and they have three kids:
 - Evie, 17
 - Liam, 16
 - Lily, 16
- 4) Charlie Raine is married to Asher Park and they have two kids:
 - Willow, 16
 - Mia, 10
- 5) Bailey Barrington (Brayden's younger sister) is married to Zane Hastings (Zack's younger brother) and they have two kids:
 - Zoey, 10
 - Brock, 8

Chapter One

Evie

The last person I expect to get a text from this early in the morning is *him*. My unofficial nemesis.

Noah: Car broke down. Can I please catch a ride to school with you?

I grit my teeth as I dip my paintbrush into the magenta paint and apply a stroke to my canvas. Sure, he can be civil when he wants to be. Or when he *needs* me. Which is like never. So he must be pretty desperate.

This individual I'm talking about? Noah Barrington. He's the son of my parents' best friends, so we basically grew up together. No, that doesn't mean we're best friends. Or friends at all. We never were. We're just too different. Every time I'm in the same vicinity as him, I want to pull all my hair out. And I've got beautiful dark hair, so that says a lot.

But as much as he annoys me, I'm not one to leave a guy hanging. So I reach for my phone and tap a response, magenta paint staining my phone and adding to the layers of previous paint that have stained it.

Evie: The Evie Mobile is open to all.

Noah: Did you just name your car this second?

Evie: Been thinking about it for a while. Perfect, huh?

He doesn't respond. I roll my eyes and set my phone aside, continuing to work on my painting. It's for my college portfolio. I got accepted into a pretty good art college, and I've been spending every second of my free time down here in my studio in the basement, working on my portfolio. I'll be graduating Edenbury High in two months, and honestly? I don't think I'm good enough to go to that school. Which is why I'll spend every second of my time getting better.

I have no idea how much time passes before Mom yells, "Evie?!"

From her tone, it's obvious she's been calling me for a while. When I blink and glance toward the stairs, I find her rushing down.

"Evie?" she says, exasperated. "You're still down here? You'll be late for school."

I wave my hand that's holding my paintbrush, accidentally sprinkling paint on the floor. "It's okay. I have time."

"No, you don't. Your brother and sister have already left with their friends and I was just about to head out." Her eyes widen when they settle on my face and clothes. "Look at you! You're a mess. Evie, we talked about this many times. You can't let your art take over your life. You need to go to school." She glances at her phone for the time and groans. "I really wanted to get to school a little early to meet with VP Rivera." Her eyes flick back to me. "Will you get there on time or do I need to be a police over you?"

With a reluctant sigh, I put down my paintbrush. "No, I'll be there on time. Don't worry."

She keeps her eyes on me for a little bit, like she's contemplating whether she can trust me. But she probably figures this is wasting too much time because she nods and practically flies up the stairs.

Mom, Ally Hastings, is an English teacher at Edenbury High. She's been working there forever. It's her dream job because she loves books—well, all of us Hastings's love books. It's ingrained in our DNA. But my mom and younger sister, Lily, are obsessed with romance, and Lily's twin, Liam, enjoys all different genres. Me? I'm a fantasy reader.

I run up from the basement all the way to the second floor and burst into my room, glancing at my reflection. The paint on my face isn't so bad—I don't know what Mom was freaking out about. My shirt is pretty stained, but it's not too terrible. I have no time or patience to change. My jeans are pretty stain-free, though.

After quickly running a brush through my hair, I grab my backpack and sprint downstairs. The house is empty because everyone already left, including Dad. He’s a social worker and helps foster kids find good homes. When he was a teenager, he lived in pretty bad foster homes. Mom’s dad—also a social worker—helped him and his younger brother, Uncle Zane, find a home together. Dad has dedicated his life to providing the best homes for kids in the system.

I don’t tell this to my parents often because I’m not the mushy type, but I’m so proud to have Zack Hastings as a dad. And my mom, too. They had a pretty epic romance story that makes even people like me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

My stomach growls. Great, I forgot to eat. I grab a granola bar and rush to the front door, ready to throw myself into my car and hightail it to school and make it there with five seconds to spare, when I remember I left my phone in the basement. Ugh, I’m tempted to leave it there. But like any kid my age, my phone is a necessity.

I race down to my “lair,” as Sibling One and Sibling Two like to refer to it, and sweep my phone off the table. That’s when I notice I have quite a few texts.

Noah: Are you here yet?

Noah: We have to be at school in twenty minutes. You plan on showing up?

Noah: Evie, where are you?

Noah: I swear, if I’m late because of you...

Noah: Evie freaking Hastings! There are seven minutes before school starts. Your butt better be in your car or I’ll...

Noah: I should have walked. That’s what I get for relying on you.

Noah: EVELYN HASTINGS! WHERE THE HECK ARE YOU???

Geez Louise. I respond to his text as I fly out of my house.

Evie: Will you calm down? I'm on my way.

Noah: On your way when there are five minutes to class????

Evie: We'll make it.

He only lives a few blocks away. When I pull up before his house, he's pacing outside, running his hands through his sandy brown hair like a madman.

As soon as he hears the car, he dashes to the passenger door and yanks it open. "I swear, Evie..." He gets in and buckles up. "If I'm late, I'm going to kill you."

I scoff. "Maybe you should be late. That stick is too far up your butt." I press on the gas.

He glares at me. "Don't speed. The last thing we need is to be stopped by a cop." He kicks something at his feet. "My gosh, do you ever clean this place? It's a pigsty."

"The Evie Mobile is perfect just the way she is."

He dips his head as far as it can go and scans the floor. "Wrappers and take-out containers? Papers and cups and plastic utensils and...is that your math test from last year?"

"Oh, so that's where it is. My teacher docked some points because I was supposed to get it signed. How silly is it to get a 97% signed by a parent? Some teachers are ridiculous."

He just gapes at me. "You know who is ridiculous? You."

I roll my eyes. "And here it comes."

"Why are you such a mess? You haven't cleaned your car since your parents bought it for you. Am I right?"

I shrug. "So?"

"And do you know there's paint all over your face and shirt?"

I shrug again. “I didn’t have time to change.”

“Sitting in this car is making me sick.”

“You’d better puke out the window. One thing I won’t tolerate in my car is puke.”

He huffs and slams his back against the seat. “I should have caught a ride with Mateo or Wyatt.”

“So why didn’t you?” I demand. I seriously don’t need his nagging this early in the morning. Or ever.

“Because they’re driving their girlfriends to school. My luck that my car broke down this morning and not last night. I would have made other plans.”

“Trust me, that would have made both of us happy.”

He grumbles and folds his arms across his chest, staring out the window. I can hear him seething. The dude seriously needs to lighten up. I’ve known him since before we could speak and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him laugh in...*years*. How could someone live like that?

Neither of us says anything as I drive us to school, which suits us just fine. I’m not one for small talk, and having a conversation with Noah? Ha. I’d rather take five extra tests.

“Finally.” He unbuckles his seatbelt before I even glide into an empty parking space, one of the only available ones left in the student lot. The tires barely screech to a halt, and he’s already shoving the door open and slamming it shut behind him.

Lowering my window, I stick my head out. “A thank you would be appreciated!”

He doesn’t even turn around—he’s practically racing toward the school building. “Ungrateful pest,” I mutter as I kill the engine and undo my seatbelt.

There are no other students around, but I know we still have about thirty

seconds before classes start. After grabbing my bag, I hurry toward the doors just as the final bell rings. I sweep in through the doors and am about to zoom to my first class, when I bump into someone.

“Watch it there.” It’s Ms. Nelson, the guidance counselor.

“Whoops, sorry.” I’m about to sprint to my class, but she says, “Evie? I’ve been meaning to talk to you. Do you mind meeting with me now?”

“Right now? Sure.” I was planning on sketching during history class anyway.

“Great. Let’s head to my office.”

Once we get there, she motions for me to sit down on the chair before her desk and then she lowers herself in her seat. I’ve only been here a few times throughout my high school life, to discuss classes and colleges. Considering I’ve already been accepted to a school and don’t have any emotional issues (as far as I know), I have no idea why I’m here.

She smiles as she clasps her hands over her desk. “So, Evie. How is the new semester treating you?”

I shrug. “Fine. School doesn’t matter, anyway. I already got accepted into a good college.”

Her brow lifts, totally calling me out on my BS.

I groan. “Fine. With a mom as a teacher, you know I’m forbidden to slack off.”

“You’ve been pushing straight As all these years, and I’m glad to see you staying at that level. However, there is a slight problem with your transcript.”

“What?”

“You’re short a few credits.”

My heart flops to my toes. “What? You mean, I won’t be able to graduate? I’ll have to be in...*summer school*?” The words tumble out of my mouth like I ate something sour. I fall back in my chair in a total daze. “How

could this happen?” Maybe Mom’s right. I’ve been spending too much time in my art world.

“Mistakes happen,” Ms. Nelson says. “It was an oversight on my part as well.”

“Ugh, summer school. I wanted to paint and spend time with my brother and sister. Squeeze in as much as I can before I’m gone for four years. I’ll miss them so much.”

Ms. Nelson holds up her hand. “There’s no need to resort to summer school. We’re quite a few weeks into the new semester, but I can get you into an elective last minute.”

My eyes almost roll off my face. “Really? Awesome.”

“I printed out a few options for you.” She slides a piece of paper across her desk to me. “Browse the options and tell me which class you’d like to join.”

Let’s see what we have here. Videography, coding class, public speaking, debate, world languages. And then there’s this class called LRG, which stands for life, responsibility, and growth. It’s something our school offers. Students learn to cook and bake and...I don’t know what else. Liam took it last year because he loves to cook. Yeah, not for me.

“Some list,” I grumble.

“Nothing interests you?” Ms. Nelson asks.

“I don’t have patience to learn how to edit videos and coding class? No way. Public speaking? Heck no. Can I join drama? I can help with the set design.”

Ms. Nelson shakes her head with a regretful expression. “That was the first place I checked. Unfortunately, they don’t need any more help. What about LRG?”

I point at the paint splattered all over my clothes. “Do I look like I can

function in a kitchen?”

“You won’t just cook and bake. Students learn skills they’ll need to navigate life and adulthood. Along with cooking and baking, they will learn house management skills like making a budget and doing taxes. It’ll be so useful when you’re older. Trust me, every student who takes the class informs me a few years down the line how beneficial it is. And it’s not very difficult, which means you won’t feel like you’re taking on a big load.”

I perk up at her words. “So you’re saying it’s not hard?”

“Not at all. It requires dedication, but you won’t need to take tests and no one fails.”

No tests, which means no extra work that will take me away from my art. It’ll be the easiest class I’ve ever taken. “Sign me up.”

A large, relieved grin takes over her face. “Great. Classes are on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and tomorrow will be your first class. It works out perfectly because you have a free period then.” She taps something into her tablet. “Looks like you’re all set. Let me write you a late note.”

After she hands it to me, I thank her and leave her office. It’s a bummer I won’t have a free period anymore—I always worked on my sketches—but at least this class will be a piece of cake.

Chapter Two

Noah

She's chaos. It's as simple as that.

Evie Hastings isn't a thorn in my side, or an annoying zit that needs to be popped. No, she's a catastrophe. And because of her, I have detention after school.

I've never gotten detention in my life.

Shaking my anger and frustration off, I go to my locker to put my things inside before I head to lunch.

I can still feel the filth from Evie's dumpster of a car. If I had to be in there for another second, I would have lost my mind. How the heck can she tolerate that mess? I'll need to catch a ride with someone else until my car is repaired because there's no way in heck I'm going back in there.

"Hey, Noah," a girl says as she and her friends pass me on their way to the cafeteria. I answer back with a smile and a wave. A few others in the hallway wave as well. Being the Edenbury High Lion's quarterback for the past four years has garnered me attention, attention I appreciate but don't necessarily need. I'm cool with being alone in my room with my guitar, strumming as lyrics pop into my brain.

Lately, though, I've been having trouble writing and playing anything decent.

I spend a few minutes placing my books neatly in my locker. Order and structure are important to me. Some people like Evie might scoff or call me annoying, but at least I'm organized.

There are only about two months left until I graduate high school. Some kids slack off and don't bother putting in the work because they already got accepted to college. But I like school and want to end the year with good

grades and a feeling of accomplishment.

“I’m telling you, man,” a voice says. “Ever since that dumb app, my love life has been in the toilets.”

Glancing up, I find my buddy Wyatt standing there with a scowl on his face. Our other friend, Mateo, leans against the locker next to mine.

“Your love life has been in the toilets since you were born,” Mateo says with a chuckle.

Wyatt scowls at him.

“What’s up?” I ask him.

Mateo chuckles. “He wanted to pick up Casey this morning. Turns out she went to school with another guy.” He nods in the distance, where a few kids are talking and laughing.

“I know she still loves me,” Wyatt mumbles.

Mateo claps him on the shoulder. “Shouldn’t have let that app tell you that you weren’t compatible with her.”

Willow Park, my sister Chloe’s best friend, created an app that matched people. It ended up hurting some people instead of helping them. I was actually looking forward to finding out who it would match me with, but Willow killed it and changed it to a friend matching app instead.

“Anyway,” Mateo says as he turns to me. “Why were you late this morning?”

“Not worth talking about.”

The thought of that dumpster car still makes me sick.

“Heard Isla’s been asking about you,” Mateo says.

“Isn’t she your ex?”

He shrugs. “She only dates football players and you’re the only one left.”

Both my friends were on the team with me. They’ve both gotten scholarships to play for college teams.

I got accepted to play for Astor University, my dad's alma mater. Most kids are looking forward to college, but I'm dreading it.

"Dude, it's been forever since you went out with a girl," Wyatt interrupts my thoughts. "That's cool and all. Just wondering if you're good."

I force a smile. "I'm fine. Just got a lot on my mind, with graduation and everything."

Mateo chuckles. "Can't wait to leave this place and this town. To start really living, you know?"

Really living. Yeah, a life my dad wants for me. I know he's only doing what he thinks is best. Honestly, he doesn't know I'm not into football because I haven't told him. I guess I don't want to disappoint him. He's the great Brayden Barrington—a legend. My dad had an amazing football career. Now he's the football coach at my school and has been encouraging me to be the next Barrington quarterback.

Dad's older brother, Brock, who died when he was in high school, also played as quarterback. So did my Aunt Bailey when she was in high school. So yeah...major shoes to fill.

Sighing, I shake my thoughts away.

Wyatt blinks at me. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Let's go to lunch."

As we make our way to the cafeteria, three girls come out of the girls' bathroom. Evie and her two best friends Penny and Hannah.

My eyes turn hard as I take in the brown-eyed, messy-haired girl with stains on her fingers. She was most probably sketching during class like she usually does.

"What?" she demands as she takes in my glare.

I inch closer to her. "I have detention after school because of you. Couldn't you just bring us here on time like I asked? I've *never* gotten

detention in my life.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but I cut her off. “Two months. We only have two months left to school and I was *this* close to having a blemish-free student record.”

Evie rolls her eyes. “Such a drama queen.”

I narrow my eyes. “I guess someone like you wouldn’t understand. I bet you don’t care that you got detention. It’s probably your tenth one.”

“I didn’t get detention.”

“What? Your teacher didn’t care that you were late? I thought Ms. Nichols hates when students are tardy to her class.”

She shrugs. “The guidance counselor kidnapped me and gave me a note.”

That’s just great. She causes us to be late and *I’m* stuck with detention?

Grinning, Evie pats my chest. “You really need to lighten up, dude. You might explode one day.” She nods to her friends and they follow her toward the cafeteria.

Wyatt claps me on the back. “Detention? That’s rough, man. I’m guessing band practice is canceled.”

“Yeah, guys. Sorry.” I squeeze my eyes shut for a second to calm down. I won’t let her turn me into something I’m not.

I don’t have a bad temper and am usually calm and collected. It’s just that Evie gets under my skin. Good thing we’ll go our separate ways after graduation and I won’t have to interact with her again.

“Let’s get food,” I tell my friends. “I’m starving.”

Chapter Three

Evie

“What was that?” Hannah asks as the three of us head to the cafeteria. I can smell the barbecue chicken from all the way here. Mmm. School lunch used to suck, but Easton and Dani Knight, the richest family in our small town of Edenbury, Georgia, who practically own the school, have finally gotten the school to prepare us decent food.

I shrug. “Just Noah being Noah.”

“How did you tick him off this time?” Penny asks with a chuckle as we step in line with our trays. “You always find new ways to make his life interesting.”

“You mean torture him,” Hannah corrects.

I shrug again. “So I made him come late to school. Big deal. He acts as though I made him witness a murder.”

“Lost in your own world while painting again?” Hannah playfully nudges my arm.

I hold up my hands helplessly. “You know my creativity takes over every part of me when I paint. Can’t help it if I’m an artistic genius,” I joke. Because I’m nowhere close to an artistic genius. I’m just average.

“Too bad you and Noah aren’t going to the same college,” Penny says with another laugh. “Can you imagine torturing him for another four years?”

“We’ll be on opposite sides of the country, thankfully,” I say as the lunch lady places a plate with delicious-looking barbecue chicken on my tray. “I won’t have to see his annoying face ever again.” Which isn’t entirely true because in addition to our parents being best friends, we share an aunt, uncle, and two adorable cousins. My uncle, Zane—Dad’s younger brother—married Noah’s aunt, Bailey, and they have ten-year-old Zoey and eight-year-old

Brock.

“Noah is cute, though,” Hannah says, eyes trekking to where he and his friends stand at the back of the line. “One of the best-looking guys at Edenbury High.”

My jaw falls open. “Are you serious?”

She gives me a look. “Even you have to admit he’s hot.”

“I’m an artist and I know when someone has a good face. Noah Barrington? Not a good face.”

She and Penny exchange a look like I’m lying through my butt. Fine, I can admit to myself that the dude *does* have a good face, a perfect one for a portrait. When he’s not being an annoying neat freak, his eyes seem to hold a lot of emotion. Hidden emotion. Like, layers of it. But I won’t admit that to anyone out loud.

Once we pay for our food, we head to our table. My friends and I aren’t popular or anything, unlike a certain Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt who sits with the football players and other jocks next to the popular table, but we aren’t invisible, either. I guess we’re just normal. My sister, brother, and their friends sit at a table all the way in the back corner of the cafeteria, which is practically invisible. I don’t think they mind it, though. They just like being with each other and doing their own thing, just like my friends and me.

“So.” Hannah cuts a slice of chicken and brings it to her mouth. “Anyone plan to score a guy?”

“There are only two months left to school,” I say. “What’s the point?”

“The point is that Penny and I haven’t had boyfriends in months, and you’ve never had a boyfriend, Evie. You’re not missing testosterone in your life?”

“Nope.” I bite into my chicken. “I don’t need that kind of drama in my life. I need to focus on my art. Besides, what’s the point of getting involved

with someone when we'll all go our separate ways after the summer?"

"I didn't mean anything serious," Hannah explains. "Just a quick fling before the real relationships happen."

"Real relationships?" I ask.

"She means college guys," Penny tells me. "*Real* men."

I lift my shoulders. "Some of the guys here are decent. My sister's boyfriend is amazing to her, and my brother is one of the sweetest guys here. But even if there was someone dateable here, like I said—no point."

"But life will be so boring the next few months," Hannah complains as she gulps down some water. "Don't you want some fun before we have to be real adults and live in the real world?"

"Nope." I bite into another piece of chicken. "I need to focus on my art."

"You need a guy," Penny corrects.

"I need my art," I repeat.

"A guy," Hannah agrees with a giggle.

Knowing this conversation will go in circles, I focus on my food and try to block out their boy talk. I've never been into relationships like my friends. I've always been focused on my art. There's time for guys later, if I even want a guy. Maybe when I'm like thirty or something. Right now, I'm content with my life and don't feel like anything is lacking.

The bell rings, signaling lunch is over, and my friends and I throw out our garbage. As we make our way to our lockers, I pass by the famous portrait hanging on the wall. Okay, it's not really famous—I don't think many students at school even look at it—but it's my pride and joy, which makes it famous in my eyes. It's a portrait of Principal Nakamura. It was our senior gift to her, which I offered to paint. I still think her nose is a little too big, but my friends and family have assured me countless times that it's perfect.

"Admiring your masterpiece?" Penny teases.

“I still think her nose—”

“Oh my gosh, no.” Hannah puts her arm around me and leads me away from it. “It’s perfect just the way it is. You obsess way too much over your art.”

“Do not. I just want it to be perfect.”

“But it’s the imperfections that make things in life beautiful, isn’t it?”

Penny raises a brow at her. “Since when have you gotten so wise?”

I roll my eyes. “Since she got into an Ivy League school. And yeah, of course you’re right, Hannah. Imperfections do make things beautiful. But I still think her nose is too big.”

They shake their heads and laugh at me as we separate to our classes.

It’s worth celebrating that I don’t have to drive Noah home from school. He’s just so...insufferable—a word Mom and Lily love to use. Those two read way too many Regency romances.

It’s sort of funny that Mr. Perfect has detention. Okay, it’s *totally* funny. I laugh to myself in my car for five minutes straight just imagining the look on his face as he suffers through detention. I don’t mean to be a jerk about it, but for heaven’s sake, what kid doesn’t have detention at least *once* in their life? Boring neat freaks with humongous sticks up their butts, that’s who.

Maybe detention will get the dude to lighten up. Because he seriously doesn’t know how to have fun. I can’t imagine him having a girlfriend. I mean, of course he’s had plenty of girlfriends because he was the school quarterback for four years and girls like that for some reason? But I don’t think he’s been serious about anyone. Not that I keep tabs on him or anything, but our families are so intertwined, it’s hard not to hear things I’d rather not hear.

With an evil grin, I park on the side of the road and take out my phone to

send him a text.

Evie: So how's it going in dentition hell? Are you burning up and going through a rigorous cleansing process that will spit you out more squeaky clean and annoying than you already are?

Noah: I will not dignify that with a response.

Evie: You just did.

Noah: I'm going to delete and block your number.

Evie: But then who will you call when you desperately need a ride to school?

Noah: Definitely not you. Your dumpster car is a biohazard.

Evie: Her name is Evie Mobile.

Noah: You bring shame to the Batmobile with that disgusting car.

Evie: Say that again and you'll regret it.

Noah: You bring shame to the Batmobile with that disgusting car.

Evie: Gasp! You're dead in my books.

Noah: Good.

With a snicker, I toss my phone aside and focus on driving to my house. I'm usually the first to come home, since Mom is usually running some errands, Dad is still at work, and Lily and Liam are at book club with their friends twice a week. I prefer it that way because I don't like to be interrupted while I work on my art. I toss my backpack somewhere in the kitchen and go down to the basement with my phone, weaving through the stuff in my studio. Mom and Dad always complain that this place is a mess, but I disagree with them. Everything has a place and I know where everything is.

I continue the painting from this morning. It's a small city with a beautiful mountain landscape in the background. It's coming out beautifully, if I may say so myself, but good enough for my portfolio? No clue. My future college classmates are so darn talented. I don't know if I'll ever measure up

to them.

I have no idea how much time passes, but my throat feels parched. I ignore it at first, like I usually do because who has time for water? But then Mom's voice nags me in the back of my mind, telling me I need to drink or I'll get dehydrated and then I'll get sick and die. Fine, she didn't say the die part, but she was totally thinking it.

I don't need a drink. I'm fine.

But after some more time passes, I groan and drop my paintbrush. Fine, a quick trip upstairs to fetch a water bottle.

After emerging from the basement, I make my way to the kitchen. But I stop dead in my tracks when I catch sight of two individuals making out on the living room couch. It's Sibling Two—Lily—and her boyfriend, Xavier.

I lean against the wall and fold my arms over my chest. "Does Mom know your boyfriend is here?"

Lily jumps in her place, accidentally knocking her head into Xavier's nose. He groans and clutches his nose, both of them crying, "Ouch!" Then Lily glares at me. "You scared me."

"I'll repeat. Does Mom—or Dad—know that you have your boyfriend over, Lily? I won't be your chaperone."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "We don't need a chaperone."

"Should I leave?" Xavier stands, but Lily grabs his hand and pulls him back down.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Hey, dude," I say. "How's Spencer doing?"

Xavier's grandfather, who lives next door to us, has been diagnosed with cancer, and doctors claim he only has a few years to live. It sucks so much. Spencer has always felt like a second grandfather to me and my siblings.

"He's doing okay," Xavier tells me with a brave smile. "Some days are

good, some days are bad. But overall, he's doing all right."

"That's good to hear. How was book club, Lily?"

Her eyes light up. "It was awesome! We finally finished that fantasy book and started a Regency. *Finally*. The hero and heroine are soooooo sweet together." She spends a short while gushing about the book. I don't care for Regencies, but I love how animated Lily gets.

"I'm glad you found another book to love," I say. "Where's Liam?"

"He went over to Chloe's. They're going to cook dinner together."

"I hope we get to eat some."

"Duh. They're cooking for both of our families."

"Neat." I grin. "Can't wait. The two of them cooking together is like..."

"Fireworks," Lily says with bright eyes. "And they got even better once they got together."

"Yeah, yeah. The love they have for each other seeps into the food they create together. It's totally romantic."

Sibling Two gives me a face. "It is *totally* romantic. Ugh, Evie, do you even have a romantic bone in your body?"

"I prefer to put all my love into my art."

She shakes her head with a frown. "Your love is wasted on your art. If you'd love a guy as much as you love your art, you would be the happiest girl on the planet." She says to Xavier, "I've never seen anyone so passionate before. Imagine all that passion put into a guy instead."

Xavier nods. "That would be great."

"Hello? Standing right here. And that's nonsense, little sis. I don't need a guy."

"Of course you don't *need* one. But it's amazing to have one. Because being in a relationship?" She locks her fingers with Xavier's and kisses the back of his hand. "There's nothing as awesome and beautiful as it."

Xavier smiles and rubs her nose with his.

“Uh huh. Pass on that one. Now, can I go back down and leave you two here alone, or do I need to call Willow to set up a spy camera?”

With a scowl, Lily reaches for the remote and turns on the TV. “You can go down. Xavier and I will watch a movie or something.”

“Okay, cool. No kissy face, got it?”

“Whatever,” Lily grumbles, still with that scowl.

I grab a water bottle from the fridge and disappear back into my studio. I finish the painting and start working on another one. Again, I have no idea how much time passes until I hear footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Evie?” Mom calls.

I turn my head and find her pushing her way through all my stuff.

“Evie, you really need to clean this place up before you leave for college. It’s so cluttered I can barely see where I’m going.”

I wave my hand. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll get around to it at some point.”

Mom sighs as she stands next to me with a bag. “You need to try to be cleaner, sweetie. You can’t be this messy in your dorm room, especially when you have a roommate.”

“The idea is to scare her away with my mess and then I’ll have the room all to myself.”

She gives me a look.

“I’m just kidding. I’ll try to be less messy.”

“I bought your favorite snack.” She passes me a bag of gummy worms.

“Sweet, thanks!” I pry it open and reach for one, trying not to get paint on it. I almost swallowed paint a few years ago, and Mom and Dad almost lost their heads.

“This painting is beautiful,” Mom says as she admires it. “Is that Dad’s motorcycle?”

“Yep.” I nod to the photo attached to the corner of the canvas. It’s a picture of Mom and Dad making out on Dad’s bike shortly after they were married.

Mom’s eyes widen. “How did you find it?”

I chuckle. “Uncle Zane gave it to me. See the sunset in the background? The way it kind of casts a halo around the two of you? It’s gorgeous.”

Mom’s face softens as she takes it in. “I didn’t know he took this. It brings back so many memories.”

Her eyes get a little unfocused, as though she beamed herself to the past, when she and Dad met in high school and fell in love. When she gets like this, she can be gone for hours, just reliving her amazing years. She and Dad tell us so many stories of their past, though I think I can attribute that to Lily. She’s constantly begging for more info. But now that she has a love story of her own, she’s not as insistent as she used to be.

When Mom finally returns from her journey to the past, she leans forward to kiss the top of my head. “The painting is beautiful, sweetie.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t forget to do your homework. Remember, you have an essay due. It needs to be in my inbox before midnight tonight.”

I try not to groan. I may have missed an assignment or two over my high school career, and Mom has always given me crap about it. She doesn’t want to treat her kids any differently than her other students. Which is totally fair. Still sucks, though.

I salute. “Aye, aye, cap’n.”

Chapter Four

Noah

That was the worst experience of my life.

I make my way from the detention classroom out the school doors, where Mom should be waiting for me. The only positive thing about detention is that I got some homework done. But I would have rather been jamming it out with my friends.

We've been practicing a lot because we have a gig coming up and need to make sure we're flawless.

But thanks to Hurricane Evie, we had to cancel band practice.

"Hey, honey," Mom says once I get in the car and shut the door. She wears a not-so-subtle frown on her face. She wasn't too happy when I texted her earlier that I had detention. I could have blamed Evie, but I don't like throwing people under the bus. Even if she does drive me up the wall.

"I know, I know," I say as I pull my seatbelt across my body and click it into place. "You're disappointed in me."

"Of course I'm not. This is your first offense and you *are* a senior after all. I was just surprised."

"It won't happen again," I promise her. Because like I said, there's no way in heck I'm getting in that dumpster car again. Ever. "Is my car fixed?"

"Not yet. It'll take a few days."

I slam the back of my head against the seat. Driving means freedom, and as much as I love my parents, there's a lot they don't know about me. Like the band and the fact that my dream is to be a musician and not play pro football like Dad.

But like usual, I keep my mouth shut because I don't want to disappoint them.

“We need to pick up Rylee from Zoey’s house,” Mom lets me know as she turns toward Uncle Zane and Aunt Bailey’s house. “She, Zoey, and Mia had a ‘study session.’” She makes air quotes.

I lift a brow. “You don’t think they studied?”

She scoffs. “We’re talking about your sister and cousin. Fat chance.”

I chuckle. My ten-year-old sister, Rylee, cousin Zoey, and their friend Mia are quite a handful. They’re always getting into mischief. Honestly, I don’t know where Rylee gets it from, since both Dad and Mom are pretty straightforward. And my sixteen-year-old sister, Chloe, has never gotten in trouble, either.

Zoey, Rylee, Aunt Bailey, and Uncle Zane are outside their house, chatting, laughing, and enjoying the nice March weather. Mia must have gone home. They smile and wave as Mom stops the car in their driveway.

Mom rolls down her window as my aunt and uncle approach. “Please tell me she behaved,” she begs them.

Aunt Bailey waves her hand. “She was an angel.”

Uncle Zane laughs as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Only after we bribed them with a sneak peek at the book I’m working on.”

“So you got over your writer’s block?” I ask him. “Nice.” My uncle writes fantasy novels that have become quite popular. He was struggling to write the sequel to his latest and most successful book, and I’m glad to learn he’s moved past it.

“Lily helped me brainstorm,” he informs me. “Tried to convince me to put more romance and less fantasy, but that’s Lily.” He smiles at me. “How’s it going, man?”

I shrug. “Good, I guess.”

“I remember when I was finishing up high school. It was bittersweet. Sweet because I was done with school, but bitter because it was time to grow

up.”

Aunt Bailey smiles. “But you’ll be living the dream at Astor University,” she says. “Have we told you how proud we are?”

I force a smile. “Only a hundred times.”

Uncle Zane frowns. “Something wrong?”

All three adults stare at me. Rylee and Zoey, noticing their parents are occupied, skip away somewhere.

“What’s wrong, Noah?” Mom asks, concern floating in her brown eyes. My aunt and uncle look just as worried.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell them. To just get it off my chest. But I can’t do that to Dad. He worked so hard and invested so much in me. Throwing it away wouldn’t only be rude and ungrateful, it’ll make me feel like crap for being a bad son. Football means so much to my dad because Grandpa’s dad got injured when he was a teen and Grandpa had to give up football to take care of his family. So my dad, Uncle Brock, and Aunt Bailey played for him. And I want to do the same. I *need* to do the same.

“You might want to check on Rylee and Zoey,” I tell them. “I think they wandered off somewhere.”

Uncle Zane whips around. “Zoey? Rylee?” he calls as he scans the area. “What have they gotten themselves into this time?” Letting out a deep sigh, he walks around the house in search of them.

Aunt Bailey laughs. “Those kids are going to give me gray hair. And I love my hair.”

Mom frowns. “I’m ten years older than you, so I’ll turn gray way before you. Gosh, I’m so old.”

“That’s not true, Kara,” Aunt Bailey argues. “You’re not old.”

Mom wraps her arm over my shoulder, pulling me close to her. “This one will be attending college in the fall. I’ll have a *college* kid.”

“Mom,” I groan against her shoulder. “You’re smothering me.”

“Too bad. I’ll miss you like crazy.”

“I’ve still got two months of high school left. And the summer,” my muffled voice says. “Can you please release me?”

“You don’t want to suffocate Astor University’s new quarterback,” Aunt Bailey says with pride in her voice.

Mom slowly retracts her arm from around me. “No more talk of college or I’m going to cry.”

“Found them.” Uncle Zane returns to the car, clutching his daughter and niece’s hands. “They were snooping around Arnold’s backyard.”

“He’s so old and mysterious,” Rylee says. “Everyone at school talks about him. They say he’s a witch—whatever a man witch is called.”

Mom frowns at my sister. “What did I say about listening to rumors?”

“Your mom’s right,” Aunt Bailey says. “Arnold is a nice man.”

Zoey rolls her eyes. “Boring.”

“Okay, Rylee. Get in the car. Thanks for watching her, Zane and Bailey. And sorry about... you know.” Mom gestures at the girls.

“No problem. It’s a shame they’re cute or we’d give them away.”

Zoey playfully sticks her tongue out at her mom. Aunt Bailey pulls her to her chest, hugging her close. “You’re a handful, but I love you. Always and forever.”

Zane pulls her close, too. “Me, too, kid. Where’s your brother?”

“At Lexi’s, remember? Probably kissing.”

“What?” Aunt Bailey asks with wide eyes. Uncle Zane has gone sheet white.

Zoey snickers. “Just kidding! You should have seen the look on your faces.”

“Haha, funny,” Uncle Zane says. “Let’s go fetch Brock. See ya, Kara,

Noah, and Rylee.”

The three of us wave before Mom pulls out of the driveway and heads to our house. Chloe’s in the kitchen, along with her boyfriend, Liam. They jerk away from each other so quickly like repelling magnets. It doesn’t take a genius to know they were making out in there.

“Hi, kids,” Mom greets. She takes in the counters and stove where they’ve set up ingredients and pots. “What’s this?”

Chloe shrugs. “You’ve been working hard on your article, so Liam and I want to take care of dinner.” She takes her boyfriend’s hand, smiling widely at him. “Besides, he needs all the practice he can get before his internship at Chef Robinson’s restaurant.”

“I’m really nervous,” he says with a sheepish smile. “Feels like everyone is expecting so much from me.”

Mom stretches her arm around him. “No one’s putting pressure on you, Liam. We all believe in you and want all your dreams to come true. Don’t stress and have fun.”

“I’ll try. Thanks. You can rest while we take care of dinner.”

Mom kisses my sister’s cheek and hugs Liam before thanking them and heading to the living room to kick it back with a book. My mom and her friends, Ally, Dani, and Charlie—also known as the Four Musketeers—have a book club, just like they did in high school.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask my sister as she and Liam prepare the ingredients for whatever they’re making.

“He went for drinks with his high school buddies. He’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“Cool. I’ll be in my room.”

I leave the kitchen, but stop in the doorway and watch Chloe and Liam. My sister is very lucky. She found the perfect guy for her. And in high

school, just like my parents. I've never really had time for a girlfriend. In my freshman and sophomore years, I dated a little. None were serious, though.

Now that I'm older, I'd like a serious girlfriend. Someone who would love me and care for me the way Mom cares for Dad and he cares for her. They're each other's world. Chloe found that with Liam and she's only sixteen.

Will I find my special person?

I go upstairs to my room and plop down on my bed with my guitar and my lyrics notebook. Writing songs is challenging, but I like it. It gets my adrenaline pumping.

But it looks like my well has dried up and I can't come up with anything good. How do I refill it? How do I write songs that inspire other people when nothing inspires me?

I strum a few chords on the guitar, then slam my hand on it when I mess everything up. Darn it.

I need to focus and be on my game for our gig. My friends aren't looking for a music career like me. They just want to have fun. But I wish my name was out there. I wish people knew about me.

I'm pulled from both sides. One side wants me to follow the path my dad has paved for me. The other wants me to pave my own path, to choose for myself.

I'm not sure which path to take. Maybe that's why I'm having problems focusing on a new song. So many changes will be happening soon. It's like the world is moving on, leaving me behind.

Everyone is ready to graduate and start the next chapter in their lives. While I'm just...hanging on somehow.

A little while later, while I'm doing my homework, Dad knocks on my open door. "Hey, how was school?"

“Good. Did you have a good time with your friends?”

He smiles. “I sure did. It felt like we were in high school again, except some of us have kids who are about to graduate high school.”

I try not to groan. “You’re just like Mom.”

He chuckles. “And that’s why she’s the girl of my dreams. I was wondering if you want to shoot hoops later.”

“Okay, sure.”

He watches me for a little bit. “Everything’s okay, right? Mom mentioned you were a little quiet in the car today.”

“I’m good.” I force another smile.

He nods slowly. “Graduation jitters, huh? Been there. You’ll be okay. And you have a bright future ahead of you.” His eyes shine. “I know I’ve said this a hundred times, but your mom and I are so proud of you.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mutter. “Thanks.”

He claps me on the back. “I’ll let you return to your homework.” He exits my room, leaving me with my conflicting thoughts.

Chapter Five

Evie

After a long and arduous Tuesday at school doing stuff that isn't my art, LRG is my last class of the day. Which I guess is good because I'm sure I can ditch from time to time. I mean, the only things that are mandatory in the class are attendance and participation, and I'm sure I can feign illness once in a while.

Not on my first day, though. So with a huff, I make my way to the classroom. The place is pretty full—I don't know why I assumed only a handful of students take the class. It is, after all, an easy class.

I walk inside and make my way to an empty seat in the back, when my legs freeze in place. Because sitting in the front of the room, chatting with a girl, is Noah Barrington.

“Oh great,” I grumble. “What are you doing here?”

He glances up midsentence, and his lips press shut as his eyebrows dip. He narrows his blue eyes at me. “I take this class. Are you lost?”

The girl next to him snickers.

“Do I look lost? In case you haven't noticed, I've been going to this school for the past four years.”

“Much to my horror,” he mutters.

“Oh come now, Mr. Neat Freak. Are you still mad at me because you got detention? He's such a rebel, isn't he?” I wink at the girl. “Girls like rebels, don't they?”

“Evie, will you get lost and go wherever you need to be?”

“I *am* where I need to be, Einstein.”

His brows dip again. “You're taking LRG?”

“Yes, I am.” I make my way to the empty seat in the back.

“Why?” he calls after me. “You want to learn how to be a responsible adult?” He snorts. “As if that’ll ever happen.”

“It’s not a choice,” I snap at him as I drag my bag off my shoulder and sit down. “I’m missing some credits to graduate.”

He folds his arms over his chest. “Why am I not surprised? Of course you’re missing credits. You don’t have a responsible bone in your body.”

“Shut your mouth before I make you. One day in detention and he’s acting like a complete psycho,” I mutter.

“I’m the psycho?” he demands. “Just look at the paint in your hair. You look like Harley Quinn.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.”

“Of course you would,” he mutters.

“Do you ever get tired of hearing your own nagging?”

“Do you ever get tired of your own mess?”

“Is that arguing I hear in my class?” Mrs. Duncan asks as she walks into the room. “I thought there are no arguments in my class because my students are mature young adults who know how to have civilized conversations. Or do I need to dedicate another class to the topic?”

Noah’s eyes widen to epic proportions. He quickly twists around in his seat and takes out his notebook. I try not to laugh out loud. As far as goody-goodies go, that dude would win the gold medal. I swear he’s every teacher’s favorite student.

Mrs. Duncan’s eyes travel from me to Noah for a few seconds before settling back on me. She smiles. “Evelyn Hastings, right?”

“Evie.”

“Of course. I had your brother last year. He’s such a talented young man. I’m so proud of how he performed at the Young Chefs of Tomorrow competition.”

“As am I and my parents and sister. Though I have to warn you, Mrs. Duncan. Don’t expect me to be even remotely as good as him. The last time I tried to bake cookies? I nearly burned the house down. Then again, I was only five.”

It’s obvious that Mrs. Duncan is super disappointed that someone who shares Liam Hastings’s genes will suck at this class. But she puts on another smile and says, “We’re so happy to have you join our class. You missed out on a lot of vital life skills, since you’re coming so late into the semester, but I know there is still so much for you to learn. And I’m glad you decided to join our class right now because we’re just about to start a new project.”

She reaches into her bag, produces a folder, and faces the class. “For this assignment, you’ll be paired up in teams of two and pretend to be married.” She walks through the rows, passing out a paper to every student. “You will choose a job from the list provided on your paper, and then you’ll take on all the responsibilities that come with being a married couple. Throughout the next few weeks, I’ll assign various tasks you’ll complete as a married couple, and they will most likely grow a little difficult with each assignment. For today, I’ll assign you a spouse and then you’ll spend the rest of the period choosing a career. As you see on the list, there is a starting salary written next to every possible career choice. And there is also the average salary. Take that into account when choosing a career because some careers offer a lot of growth and opportunity while others don’t.”

She hands me a paper, and I quickly scan the list for an artist. Bingo. But only twenty-five thousand? I’d like to think I’d be more successful than that.

“I’ll announce the couples now,” Mrs. Duncan starts to say, but the girl sitting next to Noah raises her hand. “Yes, Mallory?”

“Why can’t we choose our spouses? Marriage is a choice.”

“You’re completely right about that,” she says. “But marriage is also

hard. People change as they grow older. I want to see how you kids will manage being with someone who might not be what you imagine the perfect spouse is.”

Mallory scowls like that answer didn't satisfy her at all. Honestly, I don't care who I end up with. This whole assignment is ridiculous. Why should I worry about marriage and adult responsibilities when I have only a few months to still be a kid? True, I'll be eighteen soon, but still.

Mrs. Duncan stands before her desk with a piece of paper—probably the partners she matched—and is about to open her mouth, but then she picks up her pen and makes a correction on her list. She starts to pair everyone up. Mallory looks crushed when she's not paired up with Noah.

“Noah Barrington and Evelyn Hastings—sorry, Evie Hastings.”

“What?!” I cry.

“Mrs. Duncan.” Noah's hand shoots up. “I can't be paired with her.”

“No, you don't get it.” I get up from my seat and march over to her. “I can't be married to him! He's the last person I'd choose as my husband.”

“We never work well as partners.” Noah joins me before her desk. “I almost failed my last project because of her.”

“I mean, just look at him,” I go on. “He has a serious problem being a neat freak. Who in their right mind could live with someone like that?”

“She's a total slob,” he says. “Waking up to that every morning would be a complete nightmare.”

“Arranged marriages should be banned from the world!” I say.

“Relax.” Mrs. Duncan holds up her hands. “I'll admit, Noah and Evie, I originally hadn't planned to pair up the two of you. But after the argument I heard when I walked in today, I decided you guys should be teamed up.”

“Why???” I nearly wail.

“Because this class is about learning. It's about growth. It's about

accepting other people for who they are and what they have to offer. Part of being an adult is having to learn how to navigate difficult relationships. You might not get along with your coworkers. You might not get along with your boss. You might not get along with your spouse's family. This is the perfect assignment for you to learn how to navigate those kinds of relationships."

She gestures to the rest of the class. "I tried my best to pair up people who may not see eye to eye. I think you all will gain a lot from this assignment."

I stand there staring at her with my jaw practically sweeping the floor. She's kidding, right? Please tell me she's kidding. Because there's no way in heck I'm marrying Noah Barrington. *No way in heck.*

Noah narrows his eyes at me. "If you even think of calling me a pet name, I'll divorce you."

"Whatever," I mutter as I head back to my seat. "Shnookums."

He whirls around and glares at me.

"Actually, I'll just stick with Mr. Neat Freak or Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt. You're not cool enough for Shnookums."

"Mrs. Duncan," Noah whines. "She'll make me fail."

"There are no fails in my class, Noah. I know you guys can overcome this. Noah, return to your seat, and Evie, please take the desk next to your husband. You need to choose careers."

A shiver of disgust passes through my body. Ugh, husband. That word should not be anywhere near my name and his.

Releasing another groan, I grab my stuff from my desk in the back and plop down at the one next to his.

He stares at the space before him, his lips pressed in a tight line. Crossing my arms over my chest, I huff and turn away from him.

A few silent seconds ticks by.

"This class is important to me," he says. "Why did you have to choose

this one out of all the others?”

I turn to him. His eyes are set on mine, though they're not filled with anger or annoyance, but worry. Like he thinks I'll mess something up for him.

“Really? Baking cookies is so important to you?”

He groans. “This class isn't only about baking cookies. I want to be prepared for when I enter the real world.”

“I heard nothing can really prepare you for the real world. Life throws curveballs at you and you have to roll with the punches. And that's what makes it interesting. You can't plan out your life.”

He doesn't say anything as he watches me. Then he puffs up his cheeks and gestures at his sheet of paper. “Let's get this over with, then. What career are you choosing?”

“Artist.”

He studies the paper. “A salary of twenty-five thousand a year and there's barely any growth.”

“I'll be so successful, I'll make a hundred times that.”

“Okay.”

“What are you choosing?”

He studies the paper again, his eyes getting a strange look I've never seen on him before. It's almost like he's yearning for something. Something he maybe can't have?

I've never been able to read the guy. He's so closed off it's like he's worried if he shows an ounce of vulnerability, the world will come to an end.

I don't get him. At all.

“Quarterback for a pro football team,” he finally says. “Salary is great and there's room for growth.”

“Predictable.”

“Any more predictable than you? We both basically chose what we want in real life.”

True. I don’t know why I thought he might want to go a little wild and choose something completely different. Then again, I am dealing with Noah. He never strays from the path. And about me choosing what I want in real life? I can’t see myself doing anything else, even in a fictional reality.

“How’s it going?” Mrs. Duncan asks as she comes to stand before us. She leans over our papers to check our careers. “Nice. See? That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Considering we didn’t kill each other...

She turns around to address the other students. “Class, good job on choosing your careers. For homework, I’d like you to get together with your spouses and complete the list of tasks I’ve written on the assignment page. You’re dismissed and have a good day.”

I start packing away my things while Noah still stares at the list of careers. That weird look is back on his face.

As I get to my feet, his head lifts. “We should meet up at one of our houses later tonight.”

“Or we can go right now. I don’t want to spend my entire night doing this project. Nighttime is my art time.” Mom’s always on my case because I stay up way, way too late working on my masterpieces. But I can’t help it.

“No, I can’t right now,” he says. “I have a thing.”

“A thing?”

“Yep.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. Just keeps staring at the paper.

“What thing?”

He glances up. “A thing. We can meet after. I’ll be at your house in two hours.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What shady stuff are you into?”

“It’s not shady.”

“Right. Because Mr. Perfect has never broken a rule in his life. You know, they say it’s the good ones you need to look out for.”

He swings his backpack over his shoulder and gives me a look. “I’ll be at your place in two hours.”

As I watch my “husband” walk off, I’m tempted to follow him to find out what he’s up to. But I’m not *that* curious and I’d rather not be a stalker. For all I know, Perfect Noah probably volunteers somewhere. It’s nice and all, but why couldn’t he just tell me?

Whatever. I have two hours to finish my other homework and get some art done before my married life begins.

Chapter Six

Noah

I hate taking the Edenbury city bus because it's always packed with people. Our town only has one bus route.

Can't wait for my car to be fixed.

After I get off the bus, I make my way to Wyatt's basement, where the guys are already practicing. I can hear his older brother, Elliot, hitting the drums, and Wyatt's bass and Mateo's guitar.

"Hey," I greet as I lean my guitar against the wall. "How's it going?"

"Something's off with the song," Elliot says. "Music's not right."

I pull my guitar strap over my shoulder and join the others. "I spent days working on it."

"Well, it's not good," he says.

I try not to grit my teeth.

Wyatt waves his hand. "It's all good. Let's start from the top and figure it out."

Mateo turns to me. "You okay? Seem bothered about something."

"Nothing. We need to finish this up fast. I'm meeting my wife in less than two hours."

All three of them gape at me.

"Say what?" Wyatt asks.

"It's for LRG class. Mrs. Duncan paired us up and we're supposed to pretend to be married and complete different tasks."

They stare at me again.

"Good thing that class didn't exist when I attended Edenbury High," Elliot says with a chuckle. "Mom would have made me take it for sure. Not you, though, Wyatt. She thinks you're a good kid." He's five years older than

his brother. He dropped out of college after his freshman year because he claimed college wasn't for him. He's a great drummer, and we're lucky to have him.

"Who's your wife?" Wyatt asks as he pokes me in the ribs. "She hot?"

I nearly choke over my spit. Hot and Evie in the same sentence? No.

I mean, she's cute and pretty and smart and extremely talented, but...no.

"Evie Hastings."

As soon as the words are out, my friends buckle over with laughter. They know just how much Evie irritates me.

"Oh man," Mateo says through his laughter. "That's awesome." He high-fives Wyatt, who chuckles harder.

I glare at them. "This isn't funny. I like that class."

"Don't they teach you to bake cookies?" Elliot snickers.

"No! They teach life skills. You know, prepare us for the real world. Why does everyone assume they just bake cookies there?"

Wyatt slings his arm over my shoulder. "Don't worry. You'll knock a girl off her feet with your *delicious* cookies."

I shove his arm off. "Shut up, man. Do any of you know how to make a budget? Or go for a job interview?"

Mateo shrugs. "Nah, man. Guess you'll be more prepared than the rest of us!"

They continue to laugh and I shake my head at them. My friends like to tease me sometimes, but I know they'll always have my back.

"We'd better start," Wyatt says. "The new husband can't be late to his wife." He makes kissy faces.

I shove his shoulder. "Elliot, give us a beat and let's try to figure out what's wrong with the music."

Two hours later, I'm in the car with Mateo, who drives me to Evie's

house after dropping off my guitar at my house. We still haven't fixed the music. I guess I'll be up all night working on it, since I was the one who composed it.

"Say hi to your wife for me," Mateo teases as I get out of the car before the Hastings' house. He's still chortling as he drives off.

I climb the stairs to the front door and ring the bell. It swings open a few seconds later to reveal Zack, Evie's dad. He has the same dark hair as her and a kind smile on his face.

"Hi, Noah. I heard you're my son-in-law."

I smile despite the dread that fills me. "Yeah."

He claps me on the back. "Evie set you guys up in her room."

We pass the living room, where Evie's mom, Ally, is reading on the couch. My mom's reading the same book for their club.

She shuts the book when she sees me and grins. "There's our son-in-law."

"Ugh!" Evie groans from upstairs.

Ally chuckles. "Try not to kill each other."

"No promises!" Evie calls.

As Zack lowers himself next to Ally on the couch, I head upstairs to Evie's room, where as usual, the place looks like it underwent a tornado. Books and papers are strewn all over. Snacks and wrappers clutter every available space.

It makes me sick to my stomach just seeing it all. I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them. "I'm not working in these conditions. Clean up or I'm going home."

"This is *my* room. You should have decided to meet at your place."

Sighing, I start cleaning up the wrappers.

"Are you serious?" she demands.

"I'm *not* working in this filth."

She watches me with hard eyes as I stack the papers in neat piles, gather the rest of the wrappers, and push her snacks aside.

“Much better.” I drop down in the second chair at her desk with my assignment. “We picked careers. Now we need to buy a house or rent an apartment.”

I’m not sure if she’s listening to me as she reaches for her papers and snacks and spreads them on her desk, undoing all my cleanup. “This is *much* better. I can’t focus when everything is neat and orderly.”

I put them back in a pile. “I can’t work in a mess.”

With every item I clean up, she makes a mess again.

I grit my teeth. She glares at me.

“Can’t you just be tidy for an hour?” I ask. “Would it kill you?”

“Yes, it would kill me.”

“This is so disrespectful.”

“What’s disrespectful is you coming to *my* room and organizing everything.”

My chest heaves as my eyes narrow at her. Her eyes narrow at me.

“This isn’t working,” I say as I rub a hand down my face. “I don’t want to argue with you all the time.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds. “Why did you have to come here and mess everything up?”

I sigh as I lean back in the chair. “I wasn’t messing everything up. I was cleaning up. We can’t get any work done if your desk is a mess.”

“I can...fine. I guess I’ll make an exception for my Shnookums.” She starts sweeping the pages into a pile.

“Don’t call me that.”

“*Shnookums.*”

“Evie!”

She laughs. “Fine. Do you prefer Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt?”

I give her a look. “Let’s just pick a house so I can go home to *my* house.”

We oddly work well together. Of course we argue a bit here and there—for example, she chooses a mansion we can’t afford and I need to talk her out of it—but for the most part, it’s not so bad.

Until her left arm bangs into my right one as we jot down our answers. Sometimes I forget she’s left-handed. We’re squished together at her desk that’s made for one person. She pushes my arm out of the way and I push hers.

This isn’t the first time our arms have bumped, and it’s just as irritating. Evie and I exchange a look before we switch seats and continue the assignment without any more issues.

“Done and done,” she says as she checks off the last few tasks we have left. “Being married is so easy.”

I take the page from her. “You spent hundreds of dollars on art supplies?”

“Talent like mine doesn’t come cheap.”

“If you exchange those supplies for a cheaper brand, you can save lots of money.”

She pouts. “Don’t you want the best for your wife?”

“You can create beautiful paintings even with the cheaper brand. We need to save money for our future. You know I won’t have a football career forever.”

“So, I’ll support us. Ugh, don’t tell me you’re one of those guys who needs to earn more than his wife.”

“No. Of course not. We just need to be responsible.”

She shrugs. “That’s soooo boring. I think we should be adventurous.”

“And that’s why we’ll never see eye to eye.” I move my papers aside on her desk to fetch the next page, when something floats to the floor.

Picking it up, I scan the drawing. Looks like a detective. “What’s this?” I ask her.

“Oh, that’s for Colt’s computer game. He hired me to do the artwork.”

Right. She mentioned that. “It’s pretty cool.”

Her eyes widen as she clutches her heart. “A compliment from Noah Barrington? I think I might fall off my chair.”

I give her a look. “Funny. But back to our marriage. I insist you switch to the cheaper art supplies so we can afford other things.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m not budging.”

I sigh. Even when things look like they’re going well, she has to be so difficult. But that’s Evie. “Fine. Only because it’s so important to you.”

“Thank you. You know, you can splurge on something, too. I won’t mind and it’ll make things fair.”

I shake my head. “I’m good.”

“Come on, Shnookums. There has to be something other than football that you’re passionate about.”

When we were choosing our careers, I wanted to pick a musician. I figured if I can’t be one in real life, then I’d be one in my pretend future. But I chose football because I need to keep my dreams to myself.

“No,” I tell her. “No passions other than football.”

She narrows her eyes at me, as if she’s studying me. Her mouth opens to say something, but then she shrugs and returns to our assignment. “We’re done. Maybe this project is over and we won’t be forced to be married anymore.”

“One can only hope.” I get to my feet. “I’m heading home.”

She starts messing up her desk and sighs in relief, like the neatness caused her anxiety. “Much better.”

I shake my head, then make my way toward the door. But I stop in my

place when I notice a snack wrapper on the floor. After picking it up, I toss it into her garbage bin. Evie doesn't even notice.

Once I'm downstairs, I wish Ally and Zack good night, then leave the house. Evie doesn't live too far from me, and besides, the walk will do me good.

All this talk about the future and careers makes me think about my own future. And the path I wish I could go on. But I tell myself not to question it anymore. Making it as a musician is hard. I've already got a football career lined up, so it makes sense which path to go on.

But why does my heart pull me in the opposite direction?

Chapter Seven

Evie

Mrs. Duncan is running a little late for LRG class this afternoon, which means more time for me to sketch. Most of the other kids are chatting or getting a head start on their homework—well, it’s really just Noah getting a head start on his homework. Though Mallory keeps trying to pull his attention in her direction.

I’m nearly a third done with my sketch when Mrs. Duncan finally shows up. “Good afternoon, everyone. I’m super happy with how well you are all doing with your marriages. I think it’s time for you to move on to the next stage in your life. Can anyone tell me what that is?”

“Getting a divorce?” a kid calls.

Everyone laughs.

Mrs. Duncan shakes her head with a smile. “We’re not holding there yet,” she jokes. “And I just told you how successful all your marriages are, so no divorces yet.”

A girl’s hand shoots in the air. “Are we ready to have a baby?”

Mrs. Duncan grins. “Yes, Shawna! After a few months or years of a happy marriage, stable jobs, and a lovely place to live, you guys have decided you want to have a baby. So, congratulations, everyone! You are now parents.”

None of us seem surprised or shocked by the news, but some of the kids look excited to start this next journey of their married life. Like Noah. Not that the guy ever shows much emotion, let alone exuberant joy, but he has a small smile on his face, which is pretty rare.

Shawna’s hand shoots in the air again. “Do we get babies to care for?”

“Only on paper,” Mrs. Duncan clarifies. “Everything you need to know

will be written on the assignment sheet.” She starts handing them out to us. “I want you to complete the baby assignment today as well as revise your budget. Now that you have a baby, you’ll have many more expenses and might need to adjust the way you spend your money. Based on your salaries, you may need to cut out some of the luxury items you used to spend money on. Every couple’s situation will be a little different.”

She hands Noah and me an assignment and we waste no time looking it over. The first thing we need to do is focus on the baby, then we’ll need to revise our budget. The last part of the assignment is to list any issues that we feel might come up now that we have a baby, since our lives will be completely changed now.

“Look at you,” I joke to Noah. “A father at seventeen. Never thought squeaky clean Noah Barrington would find himself in this kind of situation.”

“Haha. Technically, I’m older than seventeen, since I’m a pro football player.”

“And you have the audacity to leave me all alone with a newborn when you go out of state to play.”

Noah’s eyes widen. “Hey, that’s a problem we’re encountering with a baby!” He grabs his pen and jots down the problem on the bottom of the paper, next to where it’s listed “possible issues that may arise.”

I give him a look. “Are you seriously happy that we’re having problems? What’s the problem anyway?”

“Well, I’m just starting my football career and have a newborn baby. It’ll be extremely hard to leave you alone with the baby, but I can’t quit my job when we need the money...”

I hold up my hand. “One step at a time. Let’s first pick a gender and a name.”

“Okay, that’s smart.”

I raise a brow. “Did you just call me smart? Must be my lucky day.”

He sighs heavily. “You’re very smart, Evie. You’re just lazy.”

“Moving on,” I say. “I want a girl.”

“I’m totally fine with that. I have two sisters, you know. I’m down with having another girl in my life.”

I circle “girl” on our assignment sheet. “Now we have to choose a name.”

We both try to wrack our brains for a good name. Every name he suggests sounds so odd or old-fashioned and he says my suggestions are too bizarre or out there. I mean, I don’t think Palette is so bad for a girl’s name, is it?

“Well this is going great,” I grumble sarcastically. “We can’t even compromise on a name for our kid.”

“What about Melody?” he asks.

My mouth opens to once again tell him no way in heck, but my brows lift. “Hey, that’s actually not bad. It’s pretty.”

“And we can call her Melly for short.”

“That’s cute.” I write that down on the assignment sheet. “Looks like we’re all set. Now it’s time for us to revise our budget.”

We both write down the most important things we’ll need in life, eliminating some of the luxurious items now that we’ll need to spend a ton of money on baby stuff, like diapers and clothes and formula and toys. Since we’re both not rolling in dough, we don’t have a lot of opportunity to splurge.

Noah glances at my list. “I hate to say this, Evie, but I don’t think we can afford your expensive art supplies.” He totals our expenses and sighs. “We make it, but barely. I wish I got paid more, but I’m only starting my football career. I think we have no choice but to let it go.”

“I think we should look at it as an investment. With state-of-the-art supplies, I’ll paint beautiful paintings and will have a higher chance to sell them. Ergo, more money.”

Noah rubs his chin. “Yeah, that’s true. And you paint from the heart, right? You’d definitely sell your paintings.”

“Except my career apparently has no growth,” I mutter.

“How about this. Next week, your paintings will be featured in a gallery and someone will buy a few of them.”

My eyes light up. “I’m liking this scenario. So what do we spend the money on? Ooh, a trip to Paris? I want to see all the famous paintings.”

Noah frowns. “I was thinking more along the lines of saving for Melly’s future? We can start a college fund for her.”

Now I frown. “Just like you to suck the fun out of everything.”

“I’m focusing on what’s important here, Evie. I don’t need a trip to Paris. But I would like to start a college fund for our daughter. You know I’m right.”

Fine, I do. But this isn’t real life. Noah’s taking this way too seriously.

“Even so, we can’t make decisions based on a gamble. We’ll save some money every month for your art supplies. Even if you don’t sell any paintings, I’d still like for you to be able to do what you love.”

I just stare at him, not sure I heard him correctly. Did my arch-nemesis say something sweet to me?

“Careful, hubby,” I say. “If you keep that up, we may find ourselves with another kid.”

Noah’s eyes get so huge they nearly take over his face, and his cheeks and neck go red.

I laugh as I slap his shoulder. “Lighten up, dude. I’m just kidding. One kid is enough. So we finished our budget. Let’s work on the last item on the list.” I scan the words on the sheet. “Possible issues that may arise now that we have a baby to care for.”

“Right. So what about what I mentioned earlier about my football career?”

I wish I could stay home and be with you and Melly, but I don't think we'd be able to afford it. That sucks."

He frowns and seems to be in deep thought, like he's trying really hard to come up with a solution.

"Okay, this is what we'll do," he says. "I'll request to go home for a week. I'm sure they'll let me, right? They're reasonable. Then I'll travel back home as often as I can and I'll make sure to video chat every day. I won't miss a single milestone in my little princess's life."

It's kind of cute how seriously he's taking this. I mean, I don't mean Noah's cute because ew. I just mean it's cute how dedicated he is.

"I may not like hanging out with you," I say. "But I've got to hand it to you, Noah. You'll make a great dad one day."

He gapes at me. "A compliment from Evie Hastings? Must be my lucky day."

I roll my eyes. "Haha."

"Thanks," he says, offering me a small smile. "This exercise is great because it shows me what I might be dealing with if I have a football career."

"If?" I ask. "You have another career in mind?"

He shifts in his seat. "No. Of course not." He clears his throat. "I only meant...I mean..."

Why is he getting so bent out of shape?

"Anyway, this is good practice for when I'm really a dad," he says. "What other situations do you think we might encounter?"

We spend the remainder of class coming up with different scenarios. Then we hand in our assignment. Before class is over, Mrs. Duncan tells us that throughout the next few weeks, she'll throw various challenges and obstacles our way that we'll need to overcome. Some may be good, some may be bad. Life is so unpredictable and full of surprises, and we'll need to

find solutions that work best for us and our growing family.

“Well, I’m so looking forward to that,” I say sarcastically as I stand and start packing away my things. “I mean, I know life is hard, but Mrs. Duncan can give us a little break.”

“I disagree,” Noah says as he gets up and lifts his backpack off the floor. “This will help prepare us for life. You never know what will happen. It’s good to be prepared.”

“Like I told you during our last class, you can’t prepare for everything, Noah. That’s not how life works.”

He shrugs. “I can try.”

“Oh, before you kids leave,” Mrs. Duncan says. “I want you to schedule a date over the weekend. Now that you’re new parents, you’ll find it difficult to have alone time. But spending time together as a couple is very important for a marriage. I’ll email you a reminder to make time for a date. Please email me a summary of where you went for your date and what issues may have arisen. For example, were you able to find a babysitter? Did you feel guilty for leaving your baby at home? I want you kids to delve into this and see what you can come up with.”

“Mrs. Duncan, do we really need to go on a date?” I ask.

She chuckles. “It doesn’t have to be a real date, Evie. You can go out for pizza or go bowling or catch a movie. I want you guys to spend time together and really work on your relationship.”

I turn to Noah. “So I guess I’m picking you up tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, that’s—actually no. I can’t do Friday night.”

“Why?” I playfully jab my finger into his arm. “Hot date? I can’t believe you almost forgot about it.”

“No, I don’t have a hot date. But I do have plans. We can go out on Saturday.”

I'm so freakin' curious what he's so busy with, but I doubt he'll tell me. So I shrug and say, "That's fine with me. I need to finish my painting anyway."

"Okay. See you later, Evie."

"See you, Shnookums."

He gives me a look before walking out.

Mrs. Duncan walks over to me and smiles. "I'm glad to see you guys getting along much better now. I have to admit, I wondered if I'd have no choice but to let you guys get divorced."

I hold up my hand. "Don't jinx it, Mrs. Duncan. With me and Noah, you never know. I can't make any promises."

"I know you're not thrilled about being in this class, Evie, but I'm asking you to give it a serious chance. This class does a great job of preparing students for their future. You might feel like it doesn't apply to you now, but you'll see years down the road how much you gained from this class. And you'll appreciate it so much more."

I raise my shoulders. "If you say so. Have a great weekend, Mrs. Duncan."

When I leave the classroom, I find my husband texting on his phone.

"Need a ride?" I ask.

"I wouldn't get in your biohazard car even if you paid me. Wyatt's driving me."

"Suit yourself. Just know that you could have exchanged some smooches with your wifey in the car."

"Evie," he groans.

I laugh as I walk away. It's so darn fun to get under his skin.

Chapter Eight

Noah

I don't know why I'm so nervous for the band's gig at Levi's Diner tonight. Maybe because we'll be performing a new song that I'm not confident about. But I try to not let it distract me from what's important. That we're here and we'll be rocking it out and hopefully this could turn into something.

The guys and I have practiced nonstop since school let out, and we arrived at the diner half an hour ago. We've got this.

"Packed house out there," Mateo says as he peeks through the curtain. Levi's is a tiny diner with very few customers, so having a packed house doesn't say much, but the important thing is that we're *here*.

We've only been performing publicly for a little while and haven't gotten many gigs yet. Hopefully that will change after tonight.

"Let's give them a show, then," I tell my bandmates.

Elliot gestures to Aggie, the owner of the diner, that we're ready. She walks onto the small stage and waves her arms around, trying to talk over the excited chatter.

"We have a special treat for you tonight," she says. "The Rock'n Jocks are here to perform their new song. So without further ado, let's welcome The Rock'n Jocks!"

The crowd claps and cheers. The curtains are pulled aside, exposing us to the small audience. Elliot hits his drumsticks, giving us a beat, then we start jamming it out. My nerves shoot out the window and I live in the moment.

We're a rock band, but sometimes we like to change things up. Today, though, it's strictly rock. I shout the lyrics into the mic, with Mateo and Wyatt backing me up.

I know the song isn't our best, but the crowd is cheering and clapping along, and the music is great. We're killing it.

And I'm loving every second of it. I don't think about my conflicting two paths, or that I have a mountain of homework waiting to be done, or that I'm dreading college. It's just me, the music, the guys, and the crowd.

I feel like this is what I'm meant to do. Where I belong.

My eyes are shut as I belt out the first half of the song. But when I open them and start the second half, I notice the crowd glancing at one another, as if they're unsure what's happening right now.

This is the part of the song where I struggled, but I hoped the crowd would get it. From the blank expressions on their faces, I understand that they don't.

Trying not to panic, I force a smile and finish the song with a bang—at least what I hope is a bang.

The crowd, still glancing at one another in utter befuddlement, slowly claps. The guys and I exchanged looks, unsure what to make of their reaction.

"Shake it off," I mutter to myself. Clearing my throat, I force another smile and start to sing the next song.

It's one of our old ones, but no one really seems into it. I guess the vibe is gone after that awful song. Somehow, we make it through the night and rush off the stage to another room in pure embarrassment and shame.

"That was terrible!" Elliot chucks his drumsticks against the wall. I slip my guitar strap off my shoulders and slide down against the wall, covering my face with my hand. He's right. We were dying up there. I can try to convince myself otherwise, but I know the truth.

We bombed our performance.

"So we had a bad gig," Mateo says, setting his guitar against the wall. "Happens. We'll do better on Sunday."

“Sure we’ll do better,” Wyatt mutters with a scoff. “It’s over, guys.”

I lift my head. “Why are you giving up?”

He shrugs. “Not giving up, man. Just saying it’s a tough world out there and we need to be flawless.”

I glance away. “I’ll write better songs.”

“You’ve lost your touch, Noah,” Elliot grumbles.

Is that true? Have I? I know I’ve been distracted and worried about the future, but...

“I’ll try harder next time,” I tell him.

Wyatt crosses his arms over his chest. “We got a gig in two days. Think you can come up with something new?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I can.” I hope.

Elliot nods once. “Good. I’m getting out of here while I still have some dignity.”

We thank Aggie for the opportunity. She tries to talk us into staying and eating something, but we assure her that we’re okay and need to be somewhere. Truth is, we’re too embarrassed to show our faces.

We pile our stuff into the van and drive toward Wyatt’s house. None of us says or does anything for the first few minutes. Then Elliot, at the wheel, mutters under his breath and Mateo’s browsing social media.

“There’s nothing here,” he tells us. “No one’s posted about us. Maybe word won’t get out about our crappy performance.”

I’m in the back of the van, scanning my lyrics notebook, trying to figure out what I can do to improve the song. But my brain is stuck.

I have nothing.

“Maybe we should just forget this band thing,” Wyatt, in the passenger seat, says. “Seems like a waste when we’ll go our separate ways after the summer.”

I bang my head on the window. Darn it.

“Heck no,” Mateo says. “We worked too hard to just give up. Noah, say something.”

I lift my head off the window and look from one guy to the other. “It’s my fault.”

“Dude, don’t blame yourself. You wrote one crappy song. It’s cool,” Mateo says.

Elliot grits his teeth. “One song is all it takes to finish us.”

Mateo scowls at him. “Give the guy a break.”

Elliot throws his hands up. “Easy for you to say. You guys will be done with the band after the summer. I want to pursue a career in music and I can’t do that with a tainted reputation.” He turns to me. “Fix this, Noah.”

I could demand someone else take responsibility for the songwriting, but what good will that do? We’re all upset and hurt, and shouting at each other will bring us nowhere.

“Let’s take a deep breath, all right?” I say. “Shake this off and prepare for our gig on Sunday. I’ll work on another song and if it’s not ready in time, we’ll just perform our old stuff.”

No one says anything for the remainder of the drive. We stop at Wyatt’s house to empty the van, then Mateo drives me home.

“You know Elliot doesn’t mean to be a jerk,” he tells me. “He’s just... you know.”

“Stuck in a band with his younger brother and his friends because he can’t find a better one.”

Mateo nods. We all know how frustrated and stressed Elliot is. Not only is he in a band with us, but he dropped out of college to pursue a music career.

My phone beeps with a notification. It’s a text from Wyatt, giving me a

link to the popular social media app, Spill It!. The feedback is coming in now.

Everyone hated the performance.

Some reviews are helpful and constructive, while most tear us apart. I read a few out loud to Mateo, but after a bit, it gets too much and I throw my phone aside.

Mateo claps me on the back. "We'll do better next time."

Maybe my dad's right to push me to football. I'm good at it, even though my heart isn't into it. My heart breathes music, but if I'm not good enough and won't be successful, will I regret choosing that path?

Sighing heavily, I rest my head on the car window and try to forget this terrible night.

I need to focus on Sunday's gig. We can't mess up again or it's over.

Chapter Nine

Evie

When I pull up before the Barrington house for my date night with my wonderful husband, I find him sitting on the front step, staring down at his phone with creased brows and his lips pulled into a tight frown. Like I said before, Noah is extremely hard to read and I barely ever see a lot of emotion on his face, but right now? Seems he's awfully upset about something.

Rolling down my window, I stick my head out. "Hey, hubby. Everything okay?"

His head snaps up, his eyes unfocused like he was so absorbed in whatever he was looking at on his phone that the rest of the world vanished. Then he blinks and shakes his head, removing any trace of those intense emotions from his face. "Yeah, everything is fine."

He heaves himself off the step, stuffing his phone into his jeans pocket. Even though he's masking whatever he's feeling, I spy a trace of it in his eyes.

Placing a wide smile on my face, I say, "Ready for our special night? We haven't been out on a romantic date since Melly was born. And truthfully? I haven't seen a good movie in forever."

"Same." He slides into my car. "It'll be nice to have a night to ourselves without worrying about the baby. Speaking of which, the assignment said to write down who's watching Melly while we're out. I put my parents. They're looking forward to grandparents-grandbaby bonding time."

"Cool. But my parents get her next. They need some bonding time with their precious granddaughter, too."

"Okay."

I step on the gas and drive us toward the movie theater. Noah doesn't say

much on the way, just checks his phone every so often.

After a bit, I say, “What are you so preoccupied with?”

He blinks like he was once again plucked into another world. “What? Oh, nothing.”

“Looks like Spill It!. I didn’t know you’re so active on social media.”

“I’m not.” He drops his phone on his lap and glances out the window.

“Just looking at...actually, it’s none of your business.”

“Um...ouch. That was rude.”

“We’re not really married, Evie. I don’t owe you any explanations.”

“Geez, you’re in a good mood. And here I thought my Shnookums and I would actually have an enjoyable night.”

He’s quiet for a second or two before sighing and turning to face me. “It’s just that a band I’m into is getting some negative feedback online.”

I lift a brow and glance at him for a second before focusing back on the road. “Okay? I mean, it sucks, but why are you taking it so personally?”

He opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but then he purses his lips and whips back to the window. That’s Noah. Even if you *think* he may be opening up, he just shuts down.

“Well, at least there’s the movie,” I say as I slow down before the movie theater parking lot. “We could forget all of our troubles for a couple of hours.” I glance around the lot. “Do you see a spot? Ugh, I hope the place isn’t packed.”

“It’s a Saturday evening. I’m sure it’s super packed. But I see a spot over there.” He points.

“Thanks.” I park the car and kill the engine. Then I face Noah. “The point of this date night is for us to have a good time together and forget the stresses in our lives. So can we forget everything and have fun? I know that’s impossible for you to do because your middle name is anti-fun, but can you at

least try?”

“Evie, I’m not in the mood for your BS right now, okay?” He pushes the door open and gets out, shutting it behind him.

“Why did I marry him?” I grumble as I grab my bag and get out of the car.

Noah is already at the door, holding it open for me.

“Ooh, I married such a gentleman,” I say as I walk inside. “Thanks, honey.”

I giggle silently when he cringes. Then I try not to groan. Because the theater is full of families and people on dates, plus a lot of kids from our school.

“I hope *Secrets of Kyto* isn’t sold out,” I say as he and I get in line behind a college-aged couple who can’t seem to keep their lips off each other.

“Secrets of—what?” he asks as he looks up at the movie options displayed at the booth.

“*Secrets of Kyto*? Oh come on, Shnookums. It’s only the most anticipated fantasy movie to hit theaters in the last ten years. I was a little hesitant to watch it at first because there’s supposed to be this scene that—”

“Wait, fantasy? I don’t want to watch that. I thought we were going with *Speed Race Fourteen*.”

“Come again? *Speed Race Fourteen*? Oh heck no. Haven’t the last thirteen movies been enough?”

His brows shoot up. “You kidding? Critics say this is the best one yet.”

I fold my arms and tap my shoe. “I’m not in the mood to watch cars blow each other up.”

He cringes like I said the most ignorant thing. “Cars blow each other up? Oh my gosh, Evie. Is that what you think the movies are about? They’re filled with so much action and suspense and—”

I hold up my hand. "Save it, Noah. We're watching *Secrets of Kyoto*."

"Why should we watch what you want to watch?"

"Because I'm the wife and I get what I want."

He gives me a face.

"Isn't that what they teach you in bachelor school?"

"Bachelor school?"

"Yeah, you know. When guys and their buddies get together and try to figure out how to make their amazing women happy. Someone should offer a course on that."

He gives me another face. "As if guys do that. I mean sure, of course they want to make their partners happy. But to spend all of their time worrying about that? You wish."

I drop my hands to my sides. "Fine, whatever. But as the sweet and caring and loving husband that you are, you should agree to watch the movie I want to watch."

"As the sweet and caring and loving wife that you are, why don't you give in for once and let me watch the movie I want to watch?"

"Hello, who's taking care of the baby?"

"We both are."

"Wrong. You're away most of the time because of your football career. Which means the responsibility falls mostly on me—"

"Excuse me?" a woman says behind us. "The line is moving."

"What?" I ask, my eyes flitting to the line, where the college-age couple are now quite a few feet ahead of us. "Oh, sorry. You know how it is, arguing with the husband. They can be so thick-headed sometimes, right?"

The woman stares at me with a horrified expression. "You're married? I thought you kids are in high school."

"We are," I tell her with a large grin. "Check out my..." I hold up my left

hand, then realize I don't have a ring. I place my hands on my hips and glare at Noah. "You never bought me a ring, Shnookums."

Noah gives me another look and then offers the woman an apologetic smile. "We're pretend married for a school project. Don't mind my friend. She's from another planet." He takes hold of my arm and pulls me forward until we're behind the college-age couple. "Will you stop messing with people? It's not cool."

"But her face was priceless! Come on, Noah. Stop taking everything so seriously."

"You never know what kind of effect your actions might have. How something can hurt your reputation."

I stare at him. "Do you even know that woman?"

"No, but you never know. Maybe she might see my face and then realize I'm from—" He cuts himself off and shakes his head. "Look, can't you just behave like a normal person for once?"

I'm about to respond, but then I catch sight of the lovebirds standing before us. The way they're making out...holy cow.

I lean toward Noah and whisper, "Oh my gosh. Don't turn around, but the people ahead of us? I think they need a room. Like seriously."

"What?" He turns around. Then he spins back around with huge eyes. "Oh, wow."

We both stand there, frozen, not daring to look their way. We just stare at each other with huge eyes.

Then I laugh. Noah's eyes get even wider, and to my surprise, his lips lift and a small chuckle escapes his lips. The shock just makes me roll even more.

"Evie, stop," he whispers with another chuckle. "They'll think we're making fun of them."

“Maybe we should!” I whisper-laugh back. “Someone needs to tell them how disruptive that is.”

“Be my guest. After all, you don’t care how people perceive you.”

“Uh...nope. I’ll just mind my own business.”

We both laugh again. I have to say, Noah looks really good when he smiles. His whole face changes and he looks like a totally different person. One who is actually fun for a change.

Once our laughter dies down, Noah and I lock eyes for a short while. Then we tear our gazes away, none of us knowing what to say because laughing with Noah like this? Never happened before. It’s weird and...good?

“Evie?” he says.

I move my eyes to his.

“Sorry for arguing about the movie. I’m sorry if I offended you in any way.”

I wave my hand. “We’ve been like this for years. Nothing you say could offend me. But we should have been smarter and chosen a movie ahead of time to avoid this.” I tap my chin as I scan the movie options. “Maybe we could compromise on something?”

Noah’s quiet for a few seconds before saying. “Let’s watch *Secrets of Kyoto*.”

My shocked eyes spring to his. “What?”

He nods. “I want to watch it.”

“But you just said like five minutes ago that—”

“I know. But you’re right. I don’t care about my feelings. All I want is to make my wife happy, especially because she’s taking care of our daughter practically all on her own.”

Okay, that was...sweet. So sweet it makes this odd feeling squeeze my stomach.

“I’m not really raising her on my own,” I say, my voice a little shaky. “I have my parents. And your parents. Plus our siblings...”

He steps closer and reaches for my hand. “I know. But I want to do whatever I can to make you happy. If that means sacrificing the movies I want to watch so you can watch the movies you want to watch, I’m all for it.”

I just stare at him for who knows how long. Then I laugh lightly and tuck some hair behind my ear. “Whoa, Noah. That was actually really good. I should tell Mrs. Duncan what a great husband you are. Maybe we’ll get extra credit.”

“We’re not graded in the class.”

“Right.”

We’re both quiet.

Then I offer him a smile. “You know something? Let’s watch *Speed Race Fourteen*.”

His eyes bug out. “What? But you want to watch *Secrets of Kyto*.”

“I know, but I didn’t realize that I have such an awesome husband. You work so hard and are so far away from your family. It must be super hard.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“So let’s watch the movie you want to watch.”

He shakes his head and is about to say something, but the man at the ticket booth calls, “Next!” Looks like it’s our turn.

Noah glances at me and I glance at him. We didn’t conclude what movie to watch.

Before I can protest, he marches up to the booth and buys two tickets for *Secrets of Kyto*.

“I refuse to leave this theater until you take it back,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and falling back in my seat.

Noah shrugs. "I said it was cool."

"Cool? *Cool? Secrets of Kyoto* wasn't just cool. It was a *masterpiece*."

"If you say so."

I throw my hands up. "How the heck are we married when we don't agree on anything?"

"Because I'm so sweet, remember?" he says.

I roll my eyes. "That can only get you so far. Okay, what's next? I hope you have food on the itinerary, because your wife is starving."

"Itinerary?" he asks. "I thought we were just catching a movie and grabbing some pizza."

My jaw falls open. "That's it? No romantic stroll in the park? No fancy dinner? What kind of date night did you plan?"

"Evie, you know this is fake, right? You really want me to spend my money on a fancy dinner?"

"I can buy my own dinner, but you're right. Guess I went a little overboard with my roleplaying. Pizza sounds great."

"Good." He stands. "And before you say anything, we're going to *Barnie's Pizzeria*."

"*Barnie's*? But *Leo's Delicious Pizza* is fire."

"No one beats *Barnie's* fries."

"True," I admit. "But better fries do not outweigh better pizza."

"It does when you're craving spicy fries."

I fold my arms over my chest. "I want *Leo's*."

"I want *Barnie's*."

"*I want Leo's*."

"Do you expect me to give in again, Evie? Marriage is about giving and receiving."

I'm about to say something, but ugh, he's right. "Darn it, Noah. I'm so in

the mood for Leo's special deep-dish pizza."

"Guess you'll have to wait until the next time."

"I'm not sure if there will be a next time if going out on a date with you is such a hassle," I mutter. "I take it back. You're not as sweet as I thought you were."

Noah stops mid-walk, like my words offended him. But then he shrugs and continues on.

Since many of the theaters are emptying out as well, there's a mass exodus to the exit. Noah is a few feet ahead of me and it's not long before I lose him in the crowd. It's no biggie because I know the way to the doors, but then some people behind me start pushing their way through the crowd toward the bathrooms.

"Evie!" Noah calls as I'm pushed toward the bathrooms. It's in the opposite direction of the exit.

I hear him call me again, but his voice is lost in the throng of people. I try heading toward the door, but the crowd is too thick. For a second, I worry I might get squished to death.

Then a warm, strong hand slides into mine. I'm about to yelp and yank my hand away, when Noah says, "It's me, Evie. I've got you."

He leads me through an open path toward an area with less people. Where I gulp in some much-needed fresh air.

"You okay?" Noah asks.

"Yeah. Thanks for getting me out of there. I thought I was going to be made into an Evie pancake." I look over my shoulder at the crowd gathered by the bathrooms. "Sheesh, you'd think they were offering free diamonds in there."

"Yeah. You ready to head to Bernie's?"

"Okay. And you'd better treat me to their best fries."

Chapter Ten

Evie

Sunday evening, while I'm working on the artwork for Colt's game, I get a text.

Penny: What are you doing?

Evie: Drawing this kickbutt detective. Why?

Penny: Hannah and I want to go to Dynamite. You in?

I frown. Dynamite is her favorite teen club a few towns over. I've been there a few times and wasn't really into it. Edenbury has a club, too, but Penny doesn't like that one. If it was up to her, she'd go to Dynamite every night.

Evie: Pass.

Penny: Come on! Do you want to look back on your senior year and regret not having fun? We'll be in college soon. Don't you want to be a kid?

Ugh. She knows exactly what to say to persuade me. Darn it, my friends know me too well.

Evie: I promised Colt I'd finish the sketches on Detective Ret. And Dynamite is so far away...

Penny: Excuses...

My phone beeps with more texts from her, but I tune her out, focusing on my work. Colt's not paying me, but a job is a job.

My phone rings. Glancing at the screen, I realize it's Hannah.

"Did Penny call you for backup?" I ask.

She laughs. "You bet she did. And I agree with her. We haven't really been spending time together. You're always drawing or painting and now you're married with a kid. Can you find time in your *busy* schedule for your

friends? We'll just pop in for, like, a second. Squeeze in a dance or two. That's all we're asking."

I frown. "If we're hanging out, you bet your butt it'll be more than just a pop in."

"So you're coming? Yes!" She cheers. "I'm calling Penny." She ends the call.

I twist my mouth, hoping I didn't make a mistake. I don't really like crowds, but I'll do this for my friends since it means so much to them.

After all, these are our last few months to spend together before we start the next chapter in our lives.

I'm wearing a pretty purple shirt, a skirt that reaches just above my knees, leggings, dangly earrings, and some makeup. I washed and blow-dried my hair, letting it cascade down my shoulders.

Yep. I'm ready.

It's not long before Penny and Hannah pull up before my house. After telling my parents I'm leaving, I climb into the backseat of Penny's car. "I hope I don't regret this."

As Penny drives, Hannah turns around, scanning me from top to bottom. "You know we're going to a teen club, right? Not a fancy dinner."

I scowl at my outfit. I *knew* I overdressed. Why am I so bad at these things?

"Should I change?"

"No time," Penny says. "We're late."

"For what?"

Hannah rolls her eyes. "Her parents gave her a curfew because she was out too late last week. They caught her sneaking back home."

I laugh. "Serves you right for breaking the rules."

“As if you’re such a saint, Miss I-come-to-class-two-seconds-before-first-bell,” she jokes. “Anyway, we don’t have to stay long. Just get a few dances in and mingle. Maybe we’ll find ourselves some boyfriends.”

“Ha,” I snicker. “Not me.”

Penny and Hannah exchange exasperated looks. We’ve gone over this hundreds of times and they still don’t understand why I’m so reluctant to go out with guys. Breaking up with someone because we’ll go our separate ways doesn’t sit well with me. And long-distance relationships? No thank you.

The ride is kind of a long one, but the traffic isn’t too bad. We listen to music and talk about random things.

“We’re here,” Hannah announces as Penny snatches an available parking spot. Lucky us. Penny would say it’s a sign that we belong here, but I don’t really believe in signs.

Hannah has to practically drag me out of the car because I’m so not into this. Sweaty bodies pressing up against each other, guys and girls hitting on one another...is it too late to flee to the sanctuary that is my basement studio?

Hannah and Penny wrap their arms around my shoulders, leading me inside. I guess the only way to get me in here is with a leash.

The place is vibrant with people dancing, chatting, laughing, and there’s a band on stage playing loud music that will burst my ears. Geez. And there are so many people...

“Don’t look like you’re going to your death,” Penny hisses as she sends smiles to all the people—specifically guys—we pass.

“But I am,” I hiss back.

She and Hannah are still smiling at everyone as we make our way to an area with less people because they know crowds aren’t my thing.

“We should get drinks,” Penny shouts over the music. “And start mingling, guys.” She walks off, heading to a group of guys who must be

college-age. We can forget about those drinks because once Penny starts flirting, there's no stopping her.

Hannah turns to me, moving her body to the beat of the music. "You're happy you're here, aren't you?"

"What?"

She moves closer and repeats what she said. I try not to roll my eyes. "Only because of you guys."

She beams. "I'll take it!" She scans around the area for a short while before her eyes light up. "He's cute." She tilts her head to where a group of guys and girls are chatting, each holding cups with soda in their hands.

"No he's not," I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest. I have no idea which guys she's even talking about.

"Go over and introduce yourself," she urges.

I'm about to refuse, but she says, "You don't have to, like, date him or be his girlfriend or anything. Just have a fun night talking and dancing. Trust me, you'll remember it for the rest of your life."

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I scan the screen and groan. We've only been here for five minutes.

I gesture to the group where the guy who'll give me a "fun night" supposedly is. "He's all yours."

She frowns at me. "When you're old and gray and alone, you'll wish you listened to me." She walks off in pursuit of that hottie.

"I won't be alone," I say, more to myself because there's no way she can hear me. "I'll meet a guy one day and I'll fall madly in love like my parents and we'll have a happily ever after...what the heck?" My eyes widen as I take in the four guys who just walked onto the stage. I think they're the next band to perform.

What in the world is my husband doing up there? And...is that his guitar

strapped over his shoulder? I didn't know he plays publicly.

Blinking a few times to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me, I tell myself that Noah has a lookalike. Some people claim everyone has a doppelganger, right?

But as I watch him set up with the other guys, I notice they're Wyatt and Mateo, his best buddies. Could all three of them be doppelgangers? Highly unlikely.

What the heck is going on?

Scanning around, I search for Hannah or Penny to make sure I'm not going crazy, but I don't see them anywhere. They're probably dancing or kissing guys and don't even realize there's an imposter on that stage.

When the band is done setting up, Noah walks up to the mic with a smile on his face. "Hi," he talks over the crowd. "We're The Rock'n Jocks. Are you ready to rock?"

The crowd cheers.

Noah nods to the drummer and then they start to play.

Rock music isn't my thing, but I find myself dancing to the beat. It's like the music wraps around me, making me feel all these different emotions. Good emotions, like I'm floating up to the ceiling. I can't really describe it, but I've never felt like this before, not even when I paint.

My jaw drops to the floor when Noah starts singing into the mic. Wyatt and Mateo sing as well, but they're backup. Noah is totally and completely shining up there. His eyes are shut as he sways and sings, and his voice...

His voice has got to be the most beautiful thing I've ever heard in my life. And it's rock music, something I'm not sure is supposed to be beautiful, but it is.

It's like he's a different person up there. A rockstar. The way he carries himself, how the music and lyrics must wrap around him, too. If I didn't

know the guy, I'd think he was a famous musician.

And the only way to really describe him up there? Glowing. Yep, he's glowing. Like there's an aura around him.

Who is this guy and what has he done with Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt? Because that is *not* the Noah Barrington I know.

The room has suddenly gotten hot, but that's probably because of all the people here. They're cheering and dancing and basking in this music, just like I am.

Wow. Have I been converted into a rock music lover or is it because of the way Noah belts out the words?

Wait, what am I saying? It's *Noah*. Mr. Unemotional.

Yet there he is on stage, still with his eyes closed, the mic centimeters from his mouth as he sings, and his fingers strumming the guitar.

I spot Hannah and Penny dancing with many other people, and I squish through the crowd, grabbing their arms and pulling them to a semi-empty spot. They scowl at me, probably because I took them away from their fun.

"Am I seeing things or is that Noah up there?" I shout over the music.

Penny and Hannah turn toward the stage and their jaws practically drop to the floor.

"It *is* Noah up there," Hannah says. "Evie, you knew he's in a band?"

"Is that Wyatt and Mateo?" Penny points.

"Apparently," I say.

Penny shrugs. "That's cool. I'm going back to dance."

"Same," Hannah adds. "You should join us."

I wave them off, then focus on the stage and the guy belting out the words. Dang...that voice. The room is getting hotter by the second.

When Noah's band finishes the song, the crowd cheers even louder than they did before. I still can't take my eyes off the lead singer.

“Thank you,” Noah says to the crowd, smiling as he gazes around. Then they start their next song and it’s just as fabulous as the previous one.

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that it’s Noah up there, when his eyes open and roam the crowd, taking in the excited vibe from the audience. And he smiles again, a full smile, like he can’t believe this is happening. Well, that certainly makes two of us.

Then his eyes land on me and widen. He looks a little horrified to see me here. He stops singing and just stands there, like he has no idea where he is or what he’s doing.

And he doesn’t take those shocked eyes off me.

I’m not sure how long we just stare at each other, but the crowd seems to get restless and they start booing.

Noah’s bandmates try to get him to snap out of it, but he’s still gaping at me like he has no idea who I am or how I got here.

Eventually, though, he snaps out of it and resumes singing. But I guess he’s flustered because he has no idea what song they’re playing or the lyrics. Wyatt and Mateo try to help, but it’s too late. Everyone demands they get off the stage.

The guys scurry off like they’re worried the building might collapse on them.

The next band comes to set up and everyone resumes dancing and chatting like nothing weird happened.

And I’m just standing here, replaying what just happened over and over in my head. Not the part about them messing up the song, but the fact that Noah was singing.

Eventually, I get a drink and stand on the side, sipping and watching everyone else have a good time. Maybe I’ll text Penny that I’m leaving, but darn it I’ll need to catch a ride with someone. Or ask Mom or Dad to get me.

But they told me they're going out on a date. I think on Dad's motorcycle, which Mom loves. Too bad Liam doesn't have his license yet.

"We need to talk," a voice says from behind me.

Whirling around, I find Noah standing there. He looks like typical Noah, except his normally perfect hair is disheveled. And his clothes aren't as neat and pressed.

"Evie, can we talk?" he says. "Please, it's important."

He looks bothered and frustrated and angry with himself. And a little hopeless and lost, too.

"Okay," I say.

He nods and leads me out of the club and to an alley in the back where there are no people. He paces, running his hand through his hair and disheveling it some more.

When he finally turns to me, he says, "You can't tell anyone what you saw tonight."

"What?"

He paces again. "I didn't expect you to be here. Teen clubs don't seem to be your style, and this one is far from Edenbury."

"It's Penny's favorite club and she begged me to hang out with her and Hannah tonight. Can you stop pacing? You're making me dizzy."

He doesn't stop pacing. Actually, it gets even worse and now he's tearing at his hair. If he keeps at it, he'll have nothing left.

"What the heck is going on?" I demand. "You're in a band?"

He finally stills and stands with his back facing me. He doesn't say a word, his chest heaving as he breathes heavily.

I cross my arms over my chest at the cold that's not due to the weather but him. "Noah."

He finally turns around, his expression unreadable. "Evie, promise you

won't tell my parents or sisters."

I inch closer to him. "Tell them what? That you're in a band?"

Nodding, he slumps down to the ground, his hands going to his hair again.

"Unless you want to become bald, I think you should stop doing that," I tell him.

He's not listening to me.

I drop down next to him. "Okay, so you're in a band. What's the big deal? Why keep it a secret and why are you getting so bent out of shape? More than usual, I mean."

He inhales a deep breath. "Because...because..." He looks at me and his eyes narrow. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

He opens his mouth to explain, then shuts it and shakes his head. "Look, it doesn't matter why, okay? Just promise me you won't tell them."

I gesture around. "Last I checked, we're at a teen club. A public place where anyone can see you. And with social media, you can't really hide this from your family, you know."

"I know, but my parents aren't up to date with social media and Chloe kind of does her own thing with her friends and doesn't really interact with other kids. So I'm hoping they won't find out."

I just stare at him. "I still don't understand—"

He shoots to his feet. "No, you don't. Just promise me you won't tell them."

I cross my arms over my chest. "You're not giving me any info, so why should I listen to you?"

Sighing heavily, he drops back down to the ground. "Because you owe me."

“What?”

“You saw how terribly we performed tonight. It was all because of you.”

I gape at him. “Are you serious? You’re blaming me for what happened tonight?”

“Yes, I am. It was because I saw *you* in the crowd that my mind went blank. Now everyone will tear us apart online and our reputation will be ruined.”

“I can’t believe you, Noah Barrington. You mess up and you dare blame me?”

“Seeing you there threw me off.”

“That’s *your* fault, not mine.”

He shakes his head. “It’s yours. You shouldn’t have been there. You told me nighttime is your art time.”

“Yeah, well my friends begged me and I couldn’t say no.”

He bends forward, his chest heaving. “Evie, you don’t understand why this is important to me, but please, from the bottom of my heart, I’m begging you not to tell my family. Please pretend you didn’t see that. And ask Penny and Hannah not to tell them, either.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out. I might not be his biggest fan, but seeing him so broken and lost doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to hurt him further.

I throw my hands up. “Fine. I mean, I don’t know why you’re keeping such a big secret from your family, but I won’t tell them. And I’ll ask my friends not to tell.”

His body nearly collapses with relief. “Thank you, Evie.”

“Sure, Shnookums.”

He groans, banging his head against the wall.

Chapter Eleven

Noah

I still can't get the image of Evie's shocked face out of my head as I get into my car on Monday morning. I hope she keeps her promise not to tell my parents and sisters about the band.

Like I told her last night, she wouldn't understand why I'm keeping it a secret from them. She wouldn't understand the kind of pressure I'm under to be a good son and make my parents—specifically my dad—proud of me by being the next Barrington football legend.

Shaking those thoughts away, I head toward school. I don't know what's worse—having Evie know my secret or the negative feedback the band received after that dismal performance. Who am I kidding? Of course the latter is worse. I don't know why it's so important to me that the band does well when I'm clearly heading toward the path my dad has laid out for me. Two back-to-back bad gigs is *not* something aspiring musicians should hope for. I wouldn't be surprised if Elliot ditches us.

Not wanting to feel sorry for myself, I put on a podcast to distract myself from my problems. The guys and I haven't had a chance to talk about what happened. Can't say I'm looking forward to that.

Now that my car is fixed and I have my freedom back, I arrive at school earlier than usual because I like to give myself time and help teachers and faculty if they need it.

Today, I'm setting up the art classroom with new supplies. Mr. Morris asked me to help him out, and to clean up the place if I have time. As soon as I get there, I get to work.

I force myself not to think about the bad feedback circling online. Not to mention the videos posted online, where I stood frozen on stage.

All because I saw Evie.

I shouldn't have blamed her for what happened. It's my fault I'm keeping the secret from my family.

Should I just tell them?

Dad's disappointed face floats before my eyes. Ditching football—his favorite thing in the world—would be like a slap in the face, and I can't do that to him.

Sighing, I continue setting up. Maybe one day the answer will come to me, but for now, I'll do what's expected of me.

I stop moving when I hear movement on my left. My ears perk up, but the sound vanishes. Maybe it was a bird or something?

As I start cleaning the classroom, I hear that movement again. And something else that I can't identify. I look around the room, but don't see anything. When I turn the corner, I stop and stare at the person sitting hunched over on a chair.

Evie.

She's hidden behind the wall, a canvas before her with what looks like scribbles. But maybe that's art? I'm not an expert.

Sniffing, she shifts in her chair and sighs. Is she...crying?

I've seen her cry before, but it's different now. I can't really explain it. It chips away at my heart a little.

As if she feels me standing there, her head lifts and her eyes widen. She quickly swipes her tears away. "What are you doing here?" she asks, shifting in her chair again, her eyes not meeting mine.

I inch closer to her. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"You're crying."

She crosses her arms over her chest, scoffing. "No, I'm not." She sweeps

her arm over her nose, still not looking at me.

Grabbing a nearby chair, I slide it next to her and sit down. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She finally looks at me, and I notice her eyes are red, as though she’s been crying for a while. “I’m fine. Just go. If you’re here because you’re worried I’ll tell someone your secret, don’t worry. It’s safe with me.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” I gesture toward the new paint supplies. “Mr. Morris asked me to set up new supplies.”

“Oh.”

“Why are you crying?” I ask again. “Did someone hurt you?”

“No.”

I wait for her to say something, but she doesn’t. She wrings her fingers in her lap, once again not looking at me.

“Why are you here so early, anyway?” I ask. “Evie Hastings always comes to school at the last second.” I keep my tone light because she looks upset and I want her to laugh or even give me her irritated expressions. But her eyes are hollow.

I’ve never seen that look on her face.

“Came here to paint,” she says after a little while. “I was up all night because I couldn’t sleep, so I went down to my studio to paint. But I couldn’t. It’s like I was frozen. I don’t know. I figured maybe I needed a change, you know? So I decided to come here early and give myself time to paint. But as you can see, it’s garbage.” She waves her hand at the canvas.

“It’s not terrible...”

She gives me a face. “I didn’t know what was wrong with me at first. Why I was so off. But as I sat here, it came to me. And that’s why...” Her voice trails off.

“That’s why you’re so upset,” I finish for her.

Nodding, she continues to wring her fingers in her lap. “Trust me, I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Like what?”

She runs her sleeve over her nose. “A mess.”

Reaching into my pocket for my bag of tissues, I hand it to her. “You know it’s okay to cry, right? But I’m concerned why you’re upset.”

She shrugs as she dabs her eyes and nose with a tissue. “It’s silly.”

“Doesn’t look silly to me.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Look, Evie.” I place my hand on her arm. “I know we don’t get along most of the time and we certainly don’t have heart-to-hearts, but I’m here if you want to talk.” I lift a brow. “And a good husband always listens to his wife.”

That gets a small chuckle out of her. “It’s okay. You’re off husband duties right now. Really, Noah, get back to whatever you were doing.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk?”

She nods. “Classes will start soon and you don’t want to get detention again.”

She’s right. I don’t.

“Okay, see you later.”

I get up and am about to leave the art room, but stop and turn to Evie. She’s still bent over on the chair, staring at the canvas. She seems just as bothered as she was when I first noticed her sitting there.

“Coming to class?” I ask her.

She glances up, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. “I don’t know. Everything feels useless.”

I step back into the room and lower myself on the chair next to her. “Evie, what’s bothering you?”

She shrugs. “Nothing. You’ll be late for class.”

“I don’t care. I need to know if you’re okay.”

She laughs bitterly. “Do I look okay?”

“Talk to me, then,” I say, my voice soft. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, the tears dripping down her cheeks as she leans back in her chair. “I’m scared, okay?”

“Scared? Of what?” As far as I know, Evie isn’t afraid of anything. Except maybe roaches. Once when we were thirteen and were early to class one morning, there was a huge cockroach and she practically shot to the ceiling in fear. Only after I removed it did she relax.

“Graduating, the future,” she says, so low I have to bend close to hear her. “Living on my own. So far away from my parents and siblings. Being an adult.” She glances at me, then averts her gaze. “I told you it’s silly.”

Placing my hand on her arm, I say, “Of course it’s not silly, Evie. It’s normal to be scared.”

She gives me a look. “Is it normal to cry about it? I don’t even know why I’m crying. Just...I’ll miss my family so much and...” She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

“Evie, what you’re feeling is perfectly normal. I’m also nervous to graduate and be on my own.”

“Yeah, right. You’re just saying that to make me feel better. But I’m fine, Noah. You’ll miss first period.”

“I don’t care.”

“But detention...”

I scoot closer to her. “It’s more important for me to make sure you’re okay.”

She just stares at me. Then she blinks. “Oh, I see. It’s payment for me keeping your secret. But it’s fine. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Evie. This isn’t about me owing you. I care that you’re upset and I want to help you.”

She shakes her head. “I’m just being silly and immature. I’ll be fine.”

I stare into her eyes. “I wasn’t lying when I said I’m also scared. I think most kids our age are. We’re leaving the comfort and safety that is our parents’ home and our normal life. We’re embarking into the unknown. We’ll be forced to make decisions all on our own. It’s terrifying.”

She just watches me.

“But you’re smart, driven, and you know what you want,” I continue. “And you’re so strong. If anyone can make it out there, it’s you, Evie Hastings.”

She gapes at me for a long time, as if she’s not sure if she heard me correctly. Then she slowly turns her head toward the front of the room and blinks a few times, seeming to be deep in thought. When she focuses back on me, she smiles shyly. “You really think so?”

“I know so. And it’s normal to miss your family. I’ll miss mine like crazy, too. But there are phone calls and video chat and texting. You don’t have to feel far away from them just because you’ll be on the other end of the country. And you’ll always carry them in here.” I tap my heart. “They’ll always be with you, supporting you and cheering you on in whatever you do.”

Her mouth drops open as she gapes at me again. “Wow, Noah. That was actually pretty great. Thanks.”

I dip my head. “If that helped with anything.”

“It did. It totally did. It *is* scary to start a new chapter in my life, but if I don’t take that step, I could be missing out on so much.”

“Exactly. And we’ll make mistakes along the way, but we’ll learn from them and grow and do better next time. It’s scary, but fun, too. It all depends

on how you look at it.”

She nods slowly as she takes in my words. Then she grins at me. “Look at my Shnookums. He’ll be the perfect husband to a lucky woman one day.”

My cheeks heat up. “Evie...”

She bends close, eyes wide as she gasps dramatically. “Are you blushing? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you blush so intensely before. Wow. Who knew the great Noah Barrington could get flushed from a compliment? Hmm... wonder what else makes him blush?”

I shoot to my feet. “I’m out of here.”

When I reach the doorway, she says, “Noah.”

I turn around.

“Thanks for the talk.”

I nod. “Anytime.”

Chapter Twelve

Evie

As I dip my paintbrush into green paint, I try not to think about what happened between Noah and me in the art room this morning. Because honestly? I've been thinking about it all day. I don't even have time to be embarrassed about it because my thoughts are consumed with how oddly sweet he was.

I'm glad I'm able to paint again, but ugh this one is horrible. I rip the canvas off the easel and chuck it aside. Having that talk with Noah made me feel better about going away for college and being so far away from my family, and I decided I want to do something special for all of them. So for the next few weeks, I'll be working on gifts for each of them, personal paintings that hold a special meaning to them. My hope is that my anxiety about leaving will vanish.

Right now, I'm working on Mom's. It's taken from a photo where I was around five and the twins were around four. Mom is sitting on my bed with the three of us surrounding her, our eyes lit up with joy as she reads to us before bed. Those were special moments between the four of us, something we'll always remember. But the painting is so special and I can't seem to get it right. It needs to be *perfect*.

"Ugh," I grumble as I tear it off and throw it away. How do I capture such a perfect and special moment in a painting?

"Hey, Evie?" Lily calls from upstairs.

"Yeah?" I call back.

"Liam and I are heading outside from some one-on-one basketball. Just letting you know because Mom and Dad are out shopping and you're here alone."

“You can always join us!” Liam says.

“Working on a painting!”

“Is she ever not working on a painting?” He chuckles to our sister as their footsteps die down.

I absentmindedly touch the tip of my paintbrush to my chin as Liam’s words spin around in my head. He’s right. I keep worrying about the fact that I won’t be seeing Sibling One and Sibling Two much when I’m in college, and what am I doing? Spending all my time down here in my studio *alone*. I’m sure I can take an hour or two break and hang out with my bro and sis without my portfolio suffering too much.

“Hey, guys!” I call as I set my paintbrush down. But they don’t hear me because they’ve probably already left to the backyard.

I run up the stairs and head toward the backyard, noticing that they are just about to start their game. “Wait for me, guys!”

They whip around in my direction. Liam’s brow lifts. “Did the beast come out of her lair?” he teases. “She must be hungry.”

“Please don’t eat us,” Lily adds as she covers her head with her arms. “There’s enough food in the fridge.”

“But she wants human flesh,” Liam enlightens her as he, too, covers his head with his arms. “Take the girl first. She tastes better.”

“What a great brother I have,” Lily mutters. “Throwing me to the wolves like that.”

“You mean to the Evie beast,” Liam corrects.

Lily lowers one arm to whack him in the chest.

“Haha, very funny, guys,” I say. “I do come out of my studio for more than just food, you know.”

“Right,” Lily says. “You still need to go to school.”

“And bathroom breaks,” Liam reminds her.

They both laugh.

“Okay, kidding aside,” Lily says. “Do you want to play with us, Evie?”

“Yeah, I do,” I say with a smile. “Feels like forever since we’ve played together.”

“Yay!” Lily says. “It’s always more fun when you join us, big sis.”

“Agreed,” Liam says as he throws an arm around me. “I’m so happy you actually came out of your studio. You’ve practically lived there the last few months.”

Guilt eats away at me. Even though he’s teasing me, it dawns on me how much more time I could have spent with them the last few months.

Liam’s eyes widen as they circle over my face. “What’s wrong? You suddenly look sad.”

“What? Oh, sorry. No, I’m not sad. Just a little disappointed in myself because I haven’t been spending that much time with you guys.”

“That’s okay,” Lily assures me. “We understand how important it is for you to perfect your portfolio. Even though it’s beyond perfect already.”

“Thanks, Lily. But the last few days, I’ve been feeling anxious about going away for college and being away from you two. And then I realized like, duh, what do I expect? *I’m* the one who’s isolating myself in my studio. So I want to hang out with you guys more often.”

“Cool,” Liam says with a smile.

“You don’t have to worry,” Lily tells me. “We’ll video chat all the time when you’re in college. And you’ll come home for holidays, won’t you?”

“Yeah. But let’s not talk about college now. Let’s have fun.”

“Okay, but you know you have green paint on your chin, right?” Liam says.

I swipe it away with my hand. “Thanks. So how are we doing this? Not you guys versus me. You’ll demolish me with your twin telepathy.”

“What twin telepathy?” Lily asks with an overly innocent look on her face.

I playfully narrow my eyes at her. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

When it’s the two of them against me, they’re so in tune with whatever the other is thinking that it’s uncanny.

“Girls vs. guy?” Liam asks. “Think you two can take me on?”

Lily places her hands on her hips. “Of course we can! You think you’re so great, Liam Hastings?”

He grins wide. “I did help lead the Edenbury Lions to the state championships.”

I wave my hand. “Eh, they would have gotten there without you,” I joke.

He takes the basketball and gently thumps it on my head. I try to snatch it from him, but he holds it high over my head, out of reach. Seriously, the dude’s a freakin’ tree.

“Okay, Evie and me versus Liam,” Lily announces. “May the best women win.” She winks at me.

And so begins one of the most intense basketball games I’ve ever played with my brother and sister. Lily and Liam get so competitive with each other whenever they play a game, even though they swear they don’t. Lily and I nearly own Liam’s butt, but he tries really hard to put up a good fight. In the end, though, his efforts are futile because Lily and I annihilate him.

“Sweet!” I say as she and I high-five.

“Epic,” Lily says as she throws her arms around me.

“Ugh, you’re all sweaty.”

“You’re all sweaty.”

“Not as sweaty as me,” Liam says. With a smile, he wraps his arms around both of us. “That was a lot of fun. Good game.”

I squeeze both of them into my arms. “Thanks for hanging out with me, guys. I really needed this.”

“We did, too,” they say.

Chapter Thirteen

Evie

“Early as usual, hubby?” I say to Noah as I sit down next to him in LRG class. Only a handful of students are here, since class doesn’t start for another ten minutes.

Noah is vigorously writing in his notebook, but as soon as my butt hits the chair, he slams the notebook shut.

I raise my brow at him. “Were you working on a secret love note or something?” I put on a huge grin as I slug his arm. “Aw shucks. You don’t have to woo me with romantic words.”

Noah sighs as he shakes his head. “Just working on a song.”

“Ooh, that’s awesome. How’s it going? Can I see?” I reach for his notebook, but he snatches it away and shoves it into his backpack. He takes out his school notebook and flips to his LRG notes. Yes, Mr. Perfect takes notes in this class.

“No one sees or hears the lyrics before the band performs the song on stage,” he tells me.

“But I’m your wife.”

“My pretend wife,” he corrects.

With an exaggerated gasp, I slam my hand to my chest. “I’m your *pretend* wife? Oh my gosh. Are you telling me I’ve been living a lie?”

Noah shakes his head again, though this time he’s hiding a tiny smile.

“Only for the last two weeks.”

I fall back in my seat with another exaggerated gasp. “And here I thought I was living the perfect life.”

“Why are you early?” Noah asks.

“My teacher ended class early because she had an emergency. I figured

I'd come here and get in some sketches. Almost forgot my Shnookums would be here waiting for me." I stretch my arm around him and press my cheek to his. "You're the sweetest."

"Sometimes I wonder how I've managed to deal with you my whole life," he mumbles as he removes my arm from around him.

I'm about to answer, but then someone stops before our desks. When I glance up, I realize it's Mallory.

"Oh," she says as her eyes move from Noah to me. "This is kind of my seat."

"Right. Sorry about that." I'm about to get up and sweep my backpack off the floor, but then I stop and look at Mallory. "Wait. Are you hitting on my husband?"

Her eyes grow big. "What?"

"Won't your husband get jealous if he sees you hanging out with another guy? Because I would totally tear all your hair out if I caught you flirting with my sweet husband." I put my arm around Noah again. "The big man on campus is unfortunately taken. Well, unfortunately for you. Not for me, though. I got myself quite the catch." I press my lips to Noah's cheek.

His eyes nearly pop out of their sockets.

"Um..." Mallory glances from me to Noah and then back to me with a puzzled expression. "Right. I guess I'll wait for my partner over there." She glances at Noah one more time before walking away to sit at a desk on the other side of the room.

"Okay..." I say as I remove my arm from around Noah. "Did I mess up or did I do you a favor?"

"What?"

I nod toward Mallory. "She's not your girlfriend or anything, is she? Because if she is, I messed up big time. But if you don't want her around, I

just did you a solid—”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Noah says with a shrug. “And I don’t mind having her around.”

I raise a brow. “So you’re just friends?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? What do you mean you guess?”

He shrugs again. “I’ve known her since freshman year and we’ve always hung out in the same circles. But I don’t have feelings for her and I know she’s interested in another guy. Why is this your business, anyway?”

“Just wanted to make sure my marriage isn’t being threatened.”

“Evie…”

“I’m kidding! I don’t want to mess anything up for you. So if you like her, I can move to another desk.”

“Evie, I just told you like six seconds ago that I don’t have feelings for her. Sometimes I wonder if you even listen when I talk.”

“Only when it’s important,” I joke.

Mrs. Duncan walks into the classroom with a stack of papers. Great, I hope she doesn’t pile on us a hard assignment. I have so much work to do on my paintings and can’t worry about an assignment I won’t get graded on. But I know Noah would kill me if I checked out of our fake marriage.

“We have a few minutes before class begins,” Mrs. Duncan announces as she settles down at her desk. “Continue talking amongst yourselves.”

I look at Noah. “Do you have anything to tell me?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“We’ve been married for such a short amount of time and have already run out of things to talk about? My gosh, how will we ever celebrate our fiftieth anniversary?”

His brows shoot up. “Fifty years?”

“Yeah. That would be cool, wouldn’t it? To be married and still be in love after so many years.”

Noah just watches me for what feels like forever.

“What? Do I have paint on my face or something?” I ask.

“No, you...actually, yeah. You do have paint on your face. You always have paint on your face.”

“So why were you staring at me like that?”

He shakes his head. “Sometimes you surprise me, Evie.”

“That’s good! That’ll keep our marriage alive and exciting.”

The bell rings just as the last few students enter the classroom. Mrs. Duncan stands with her stack of papers and starts handing them out to the couples. “For today’s assignment, tragedy has unfortunately struck your young married lives. I have assigned each couple a unique tragedy catered specifically to their situation. So no couple here will be going through the same thing as another couple. Everyone’s experience will be different, based on your circumstances and lifestyle. This will be your first major assignment, and hopefully there will be more sometime in the near future. You will need to put your heads together and come up with solutions to your problems. Remember to take into account every aspect of your life that has been affected by the tragedy.”

She stops before my desk and lowers a piece of paper onto it. “After you hand in your assignment today, I will most likely do a follow-up over the weekend with potential outcomes based on the solutions you provided. Some of you might do such a great job that I won’t need to do a follow-up, while others may make matters worse. Which means some couples might finish their assignment days before another couple. That’s okay. We’ll see how everyone does next week and take it from there.”

As soon as she’s done explaining the assignment, I slide the paper to the

corner of my desk so Noah can read it, too.

“Wait, what?” he asks as his eyes rove rapidly over the words. “I got injured during a football game?”

“Oh no. My poor husband.”

“Even though my medical bills will be paid,” he says as he continues to read, “I’m out for the season and will have a salary cut.” He looks up from the paper to me. “This blows. It says I injured my leg and will need to be on crutches for six weeks. How will I help take care of Melly? I’d hate for you to take on so much of the responsibility.”

“That’s okay,” I say as I slide the assignment closer to me so I can read the rest of it. “I’m willing to take on the responsibility so you can heal properly—wait, what the heck?”

“What?” Noah leans forward to read the words. “Did I miss something?”

“I’m being accused of *plagiarism*? What on Earth?” I gape at the words. “It says someone saw my art displayed in a gallery and is accusing me of stealing their design. Is Mrs. Duncan for real? I would never *ever* steal someone else’s artwork. I’m a unique individual and so is my art. The nerve!”

“It doesn’t mean they’re right,” Noah says. “Look!” He points. “We had to go to court to prove they were wrong.” His eyes widen. “Wow. That lawyer was expensive. We had to use all of our savings to pay her. I guess we had no choice but to use the money we wanted to set aside for Melly’s college fund. Darn.”

“So let me get this straight,” I say as I study the assignment. “You got injured and are on crutches. You’re getting a salary cut. I not only got accused of plagiarism, but we had to spend all of our money on a lawyer. And even though we won the case, no one wants to buy my work because my reputation has been tainted. Oh my gosh, this is a nightmare!”

Noah slides the assignment closer to himself to read the rest of it. “We can’t afford to pay rent and you’re having a hard time caring for Melly by yourself. It says we need to think of solutions.”

“Oh, I’ve got a solution,” I say with a frown. “I quit.”

Noah gives me a face. “You can’t quit on life, Evie.”

“I didn’t sign up for this kind of intense drama!”

“It’s okay, we’ll figure it out,” he assures me. “We just need to put our heads together and come up with some good solutions. The important thing is that Melly shouldn’t feel like anything is wrong. I want her to have a fun and normal childhood.”

That’s sweet of him, but I don’t see how we can get out of this predicament. To be hit with so much tragedy at once? Sheesh.

“We aren’t alone,” I point out. “We have family, don’t we?”

Noah’s eyes light up. “Of course! Our families are very much involved in our lives.”

“Okay, so what do we do? Ask them for a loan?”

Noah thinks about it for a second, then shakes his head. “I don’t want to ask them for money unless we’re extremely desperate. But I think we might need to move in with them because we can’t afford to pay rent and there’s no way in heck I’m letting my little girl be homeless.”

“Of course. My parents would be super happy to open their home to us.”

Noah’s brow raises. “Your parents?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong?”

“I just thought we’d be moving in with my parents.”

“Why would we choose your parents over mine?”

He shrugs. “No reason. Just, my dad would understand our situation because he dealt with injuries, too. He’ll know how to help us.”

“Yeah, but my parents would devote all their time to helping us get back

on our feet.”

“And mine wouldn’t?”

“No, of course they would.”

Noah opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it. We both sit here quietly.

“We can take turns staying at our parents’ houses?” Noah finally suggests.

“Moving back and forth with a baby? No, we need somewhere permanent. At least until we could afford to get our own place again.”

We’re both quiet again. I glance around the room and find that most couples seem to be doing okay while others are struggling. I wonder what kind of tragedies they’re going through.

“There’s something we need to consider,” Noah says, drawing my attention back to him. “We probably can’t afford to pay for a babysitter. How can we find someone who will do it for free? Unless you want to care for her, but I’m sure you need to focus a lot of your time on building back your reputation.”

“Maybe one of our siblings would be willing to do it for free?”

Noah twists his lips. “They’re busy with their own lives. It wouldn’t be fair to thrust this upon them.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But I’m the one who will need to look for a job because you’re injured.”

“And I can’t care for Melly on my own without help.”

“Right.”

We’re quiet yet again.

“I think we should ask our parents for help again,” I say. “Maybe one of them would be willing to give up their job to take care of our baby.”

Noah stares at me. “You want to ask one of our parents to quit their job?”

“Unless you want to ask them to pay for a babysitter.”

“Are you okay with asking them to pay? Each can pay fifty-fifty.”

“I’m okay with it if you’re okay with it.”

“Yeah.” He writes it down on the assignment sheet, along with the other solutions we’ve come up with. Including the decision to stay at his parents’ house, since his dad has experience with injuries.

“Good thing we have amazing families,” I say. “We don’t need to shoulder this burden all on our own.”

He smiles. “Yeah. We’re very lucky.”

I fall back in my seat with a huff. “Dealing with these kinds of life issues is causing me way too much anxiety.”

“See how beneficial this class is for the future? We’re learning so much.”

“Too much,” I mutter.

He nods to the assignment. “Let’s write everything down and give it in. Don’t worry, wifey. We’ll punch tragedy right in the face.”

“Makes me wonder what other problems Mrs. Duncan will throw our way,” I mutter again.

Chapter Fourteen

Noah

Practice sucks after school today. No matter how much we play, we sound all wrong. It's like whatever happened on Sunday sucked the will and drive out of us. And the negative feedback online just makes it worse.

I think Elliot is taking it the hardest. He's been at the drums every chance he gets, as if the harder he practices, the more he'll wipe the memory of that night out of everyone's head.

Sighing, I strum a few chords on my guitar. The basement is quiet, except for the music. The guys and I haven't said much to each other.

"Come on, guys," I break the silence. "Are we going to feel sorry for ourselves or are we going to practice for our next gig?"

Elliot snorts. "What gig? Last I checked, we haven't booked any. And we won't."

Wyatt shoots his brother a look. "There will always be little kids' birthday parties," he teases.

Elliot chucks his drumstick at him, but Wyatt manages to duck in time and the stick slams into the wall.

"We need to do something," Mateo chimes in. "Something that'll wow everyone, show them we're better than that."

Elliot rolls his eyes. "Got any ideas? We can't even come up with decent lyrics."

He's right. Whatever I tried to write before LRG class today was pure garbage.

Mateo slumps to the floor. "So what now? We're done?"

"No," I stress. "We're not done. Let's all try to write lyrics and see what we come up with. Maybe I'm not cut out for songwriting."

Elliot holds up his hands. “No way, man. You’re our lyrics guy. You’ve written some great songs and I know you still have it in you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to let you guys down.”

“Don’t stress, Noah,” Mateo says with an encouraging smile. “You’ll get back into it. We’ve got faith in you.”

“Thanks, but are you sure you still want me to write our songs?”

“Yes,” all three say.

“All right. But let’s not let whatever happened keep us down. Chin up and let’s try again.” I head to my backpack for my bottle of water and check my phone for messages. There’s a text from Evie.

Evie: Hey, you left your notebook in LRG class. I got it for you.

Crap. My notebook. I have a history test tomorrow and planned to study with Wyatt and Mateo after practice. Those two can’t write notes to save their behinds.

Noah: Thanks. I’ll swing by soon to pick it up.

Evie: You and the guys are at band practice, right? I don’t mind dropping it off.

Noah: You don’t have to do that.

Evie: It’s okay. I’ll be there soon.

Noah: Thanks.

Evie: No prob, Shnookums.

I grit my teeth.

“What are you so busy with?” Wyatt calls from where he and the others are munching on chips. “Texting a hot girl?”

I slip my phone into my backpack and join them near Elliot’s drums. “No, just Evie. I forgot my notebook in class and she’s coming by soon to drop it off.”

“So how’s married life?” Mateo asks as he pokes me in the ribs with his

elbow. “She driving you up the wall yet?”

I give him a look. “She’s Evie. She *always* drives me up the wall. But for the most part, it’s okay. I mean, we clash a lot because we disagree on pretty much everything, but I guess the marriage works. You know, for a school assignment.”

They finish their snacks and we resume practicing. It’s going a little better, since we decided not to let the negative feedback hold us back, but it’s still in the back of our minds. I’m into it, but insecure thoughts float all around me. Should we bother if we’re not good enough? Am I wasting my time?

“Wyatt!” his mom calls from upstairs. “There’s a girl here to see you.”

Wyatt perks up. “Think it’s Casey? Maybe she wants me back?”

Elliot snickers. “Fat chance.”

Footsteps sound on the stairs before Evie walks into the basement.

Wyatt’s chest deflates, as though he was holding his breath hoping it was his ex-girlfriend. His brother snickers.

“Hey,” Evie says as she waves. “Got your notebook for ya, Noah.”

She’s covered in different paint colors, obviously from painting all afternoon. Evie’s the only one who can get away with it. I know I’ve told her more than once that she looks ridiculous, but the truth is that it’s so her and I can’t imagine her any other way.

I head over to her to take my notebook. “Thanks. You didn’t have to come. I told you I was cool with picking it up.”

She’s barely listening to me as her brown eyes roam around the room. We transformed the place into our band practice room and I’m happy to say it looks amazing.

“Cool place,” she compliments. “Makes you look like the real deal.”

She makes her way over to a chair and sits down, making herself

comfortable.

The guys and I exchange a glance.

“What?” she asks as she reaches for the bag of chips and chomps a few down. “Don’t mind me.”

Wyatt chortles. “Did you volunteer to bring Noah his notebook as an excuse to watch us practice?”

“Of course not,” she says as she crunches the chips between her teeth. “I came here because he’s my Shnookums and I couldn’t leave him hanging. I mean, he needs his notes for the test or he might not get an A on it.”

Wyatt and Mateo chuckle. “Shnookums?” Wyatt asks, laughing harder.

I glare at her. “Evie, quit messing around. We need to practice.”

She waves her hand. “Like I said, don’t mind me.” She downs a few more chips, then fetches my bottle of water and takes a sip.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” I demand. “Like paint something?”

“Nope.” She looks from me to the others. “You’re not going to kick me out, are you? Because it would be very rude of you to treat Noah’s wife that way.”

Wyatt gestures around the area. “Of course Noah’s wife is welcome here.”

“Cool, thanks. So let’s see you guys in action.” She motions for us to continue.

I keep my eyes on her. “Evie, come on.”

“You come on. After such an intense assignment in LRG class, I can use some relaxation.”

Wyatt claps me on the back. “Let your wife stay, man. What’s the big deal?”

The big deal is that this is important to me and Evie is making a big joke

about it. But I don't say anything because we're wasting time and I doubt I can get her to leave. Evie does what she wants, when she wants.

"Okay." I strum a few chords on my guitar. "Give us a beat, Elliot."

He does and we start playing. I sing into the mic, my eyes darting to Evie every so often. Her eyes are glued to us, studying us.

She frowns, leaping to her feet. "No, no, no."

We stop playing. "What?" I ask.

She hurries up on the "stage", which is the center of the room where we've set ourselves up. "Something's not right. I'm not feeling it." She faces me. "You're singing fine, but I don't see the fire in your eyes."

I rub a hand down my face, trying not to get irritated and frustrated. "I'm fine."

"No." She grabs the mic from me. "This is how it's done."

She starts singing the song, totally owning it. I have no idea how she knows the lyrics so well, but she sings it perfectly.

I know Evie can sing—I've heard her many times—but I never knew just how talented she is. Her voice isn't just beautiful, it's strong. Powerful, commanding, but in a soft, kind of way that shouldn't fit with this type of music, but it does.

I can't stop staring at her as the music touches me in a way it has never touched me before. I never feel like this when I sing or hear myself.

She finishes the song with a bang and smiles. "So? What do you think?"

"Hastings!" Wyatt bellows. "I didn't know you could sing."

She bows. "All thanks to my mom's genes."

I don't know what it is. The way the guys smile at her in awe or that she owned the song and is bragging about it. Maybe it's insecurity, or my fear that she's taking something I love away from me. But something makes me snatch the mic from her hand. "That's not how the song should be sung."

Her hands shoot to her hips. “I disagree.”

“I disagree. Watch and learn, my darling wife.”

I sing the song the way it should be sung. While Evie sang it softer, I sing it harder, rougher, scratching my voice slightly as I yell into the mic.

“No!” Evie doesn’t bother grabbing the mic back as she sings it her way. I sing it my way, and we go back and forth trying to show the other one up.

The challenge in her eyes is clear, as if telling me I’m no match for her. But I hold my head high, showing her this is *my* band. Mine and Wyatt’s and Mateo’s and Elliot’s, and she has no place telling us what to do.

“Guys! Guys!” Wyatt calls over our voices. “Do you have any idea what’s happening right now?”

Evie and I turn to each other, our eyebrows furrowed.

“Magic!” Wyatt explains. “The two of you singing together is fire. I got it! I know what we need to save the band. We need a girl.”

“What?” Evie says.

He nods, his eyes shining like he discovered the answer to life’s biggest questions. “Our band will have a new look—a better look—with a girl. You know how it is. Guys will see a hot girl up there—”

“What the heck, man?” I demand. “That’s so sexist.”

“Yeah.” Evie glares at him. “That’s so sexist. Tell him, Noah.”

“Wanting Evie in the band because she’s a girl is wrong, Wyatt.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Lots of bands have made it without a girl. What makes you think we need one?”

He shrugs. “Just saying if we have a pretty girl as lead singer, it’ll put us on the map.” He throws his hands up. “Yeah, I know it’s sexist and wrong, but it’s the truth. A pretty girl will bring in more fans.”

I run my hand through my hair.

“He’s right,” Elliot says. “We bombed two gigs, guys. The only thing that

can save us is a wow factor. And she's it."

I'm about to say something, but he continues. "Wyatt's also right that you two are magic up there. I can only imagine how incredible it'll be when you blend your voices together. So what do you say?"

I look at Evie and she looks at me.

"No!" we both say.

"She's *not* joining the band," I say, while she says, "I'm not joining the band."

Mateo holds up his hands. "I think Wyatt and Elliot are right, Noah. The feedback we got after our last gig could drown us. Could shoot us down before we even have a chance to shine. I think the only way to salvage the Rock'n Jocks is to transform us. To give us an edge. A wow factor, like Elliot said. And you and Evie together are a wow factor. You know they're right, Noah. You're just too stubborn and proud to admit it."

Evie's hands go to her hips again. "Did you not hear me? I'm sorry your band is drowning, but I have no interest in joining."

"But you have an amazing voice," Mateo tells her. "You sounded great up there. Why not utilize it?"

"Because I'm busy."

"Painting?" Elliot says in a bored tone as his eyes roam over her hair.

"It's not just painting, dude. I'm working on my college portfolio."

He nods in understanding. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Look, I know being in a band isn't your thing, but you'll be doing us a solid if you joined. Help us out, please?"

She points at me. "He doesn't want me, anyway."

"He does," Wyatt says. "He's just too proud to admit it."

I cross my arms. They have a point. Evie was amazing, but to have her join us?

“Who says Evie can save the band?” I ask. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because she can and you know it,” Wyatt says. “She’s a goddess when she sings.”

Evie frowns at him. “A goddess, really?”

He shrugs helplessly. “You’ve got a gift, Evie. Help us out and save the band. Please.”

I want to veto the whole thing, but the comments I read online flash in my head. They were so negative, so cruel and harsh. I didn’t think we could ever show our face in public again. But if Wyatt is right and Evie can help save the band...

“Please, Evie,” I find myself saying. “I *am* stubborn and prideful, but I know the guys are right. The band means everything to me. Help us and I’ll owe you forever.”

“Stop messing with me, Noah.”

“I’m not messing with you. Honest. I’m being one thousand percent serious here.”

Her mouth opens, then shuts as she stares at me. Feels like forever until she says in a softer voice, “That day when I picked you up for our date. You seemed very upset about something. Was that...?”

My brows furrow. “What are you talking about?”

She watches me for a few more seconds before shaking her head. “Never mind.” She’s about to say something else, but then she keeps her eyes on me again. I must look pretty desperate because she says. “I guess if it means that much to you...”

A breath I didn’t know I was holding escapes my body. “Really?”

She nods. “I love singing, so why not? But I have some conditions.”

“Okay...”

“I’m not wearing a sexy outfit, and I get to make my own decisions, and

no way will I do anything that makes me uncomfortable.”

I hold up my hands. “We won’t do anything without your approval. You’ll be an equal member of the band and you’ll get a cut from any money we make. And you can quit any time if you feel like it’s not working.”

She thinks it over for a little bit. “Okay, I agree to those terms.”

Wyatt and Mateo wrap their arms around her while Elliot cheers from where he sits at the drums.

When the guys release her, I hold out my hand to her for a shake. “Welcome to The Rock’n Jocks.”

She twists her nose at my hand. “Really, dude? A handshake?”

“What’s wrong with a handshake?”

Sighing dramatically, she gives me a quick hug and then walks around the room. “This is so exciting! When’s our first practice?”

“Tomorrow,” I say. “It’s getting late and we have that history test to study for.”

She grins. “See you later. Good luck studying.” She heads up the stairs and exits the basement.

“This is going to be epic, guys,” Wyatt tells us. “I know you’re still hesitant, Noah, but you’ll see. She’s the key to everything. And seriously, you guys were magic up there.”

Magic? Me and Evie? More like a science experiment gone wrong. But if the guys claim so, then I guess I’ll believe it. I just hope Evie takes this seriously and doesn’t mess it up for me.

It’s like I said—she’s chaos. But maybe in this case, some chaos is needed because our band can’t survive another bad gig.

I wouldn’t be able to survive another bad gig.

Later, after I’ve gone home and am doing my homework, I send Evie a text.

Noah: I know we already said it, but thanks for doing this, Evie.

Evie: Why are you thanking me? I'm your wife.

Noah: But seriously. Thanks.

Evie: Anything for my Shnookums.

Noah: And you had to ruin it.

Evie: Why? I know you secretly like when I call you that.

Tossing my phone aside, I don't bother responding.

Chapter Fifteen

Evie

“Say hello to The Rock’n Jocks’ new lead singer,” I announce to Penny and Hannah as we settle down at our lunch table on Wednesday. “Well, co-lead singer. Noah and I are going to lead together.”

They stare at me in utter confusion as I stab my fork into a humongous piece of lettuce. Today, the school is offering healthy food. Lots of greens and organic stuff and low fat this and that. I’m so in the mood for a juicy burger, but I have to settle for a salad. It’s not that bad actually, but I know my stomach will be eating its walls in an hour.

“Repeat?” Hannah asks as she plays around with a lightly seasoned piece of grilled chicken. “You’re *what*?”

“The Rock’n Jocks’ new lead singer,” I inform them again.

“And how exactly did that happen?” Penny wants to know.

I spend the next few minutes enlightening my friends about what transpired yesterday. When I’m done, they gape at me like they’re not sure they heard me correctly.

“What?” I say with a chuckle as I bring the massive piece of lettuce to my mouth and take a crunchy bite.

“I just can’t picture it.” Penny studies me. “You in a band? Up on stage in front of everyone?”

“You do have an amazing voice, though,” Hannah says. “It’s awesome you’ll get to share it with the rest of the world.”

“Thanks. The thought of being up on stage in front of lots of people does make me a little queasy. I’m used to hiding in my basement in complete solitude. And considering I’m supposed to be the ‘wow factor’ of the group, I know all eyes will be on me.”

I've never been super shy like Sibling One and Sibling Two, just quiet and I like to keep to myself. And I've never sung in public, not counting choirs I was forced to participate in in middle school. But something about it makes me excited. Maybe because it's so different from what I normally do and it'll be fun to try something new?

"Wait, what about a wow factor?" Penny asks.

"The Rock'n Jocks are getting a lot of negative feedback online because of their last two gigs. The first one's on them, and the second one is my fault, apparently. Anyway, Wyatt said they need something special that would put them on the map. He thinks having a girl would do that." I roll my eyes. "So sexist, right? But I guess that's how it is."

"And you agreed to help them out because why exactly?" Hannah asks.

"I don't know." I turn my head to where Noah sits with his friends at the jock table. He's smiling—well, a small one because like I said before, the dude barely smiles—and he's got some light in his eyes. But there's still a lot of doubt clouding his face. I twist back to my friends. "I guess I feel bad. I mean, you should have seen him last week when I picked him up for our date. He sat on his front steps looking so depressed. I think he was reading negative feedback on his performance. You know Noah barely shows any emotions. I can't remember the last time I saw him so...broken."

My friends exchange a surprised glance. Then Penny says, "Wow, Evie. Looks like you care about Noah more than you think."

"Yeah. Who would have guessed?" Hannah adds with a giggle.

"I'm not heartless, guys. Even though Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt drives me bananas, I don't want him to fail. So if I'm the key to saving his band, I'm okay with that. Plus, getting some of the cash is an added bonus."

"We know you'll kill it," Hannah says as she reaches over to fist bump me. "With your voice, you're sure to make millions."

“Haha,” I say as I fist bump Penny as well. “Let’s see what happens after today’s practice. Maybe Noah and I will bump heads so often that I’ll quit the band faster than you can say, ‘Rock on.’”

As Hannah and Penny take bets on how long I’ll last in the band before my head explodes, I glance at Noah’s table again. I normally don’t study him because he’s just Noah, but now that I’m actually watching him, I realize that he seems present at the table, nodding to his friends and adding in words here and there, but he’s not really present. There’s something working nonstop in that brain of his, something that seems to cause him a lot of stress. Maybe the reason why he doesn’t want to tell his family he’s in a band?

“Are you staring at Noah?” Penny yanks me out of my thoughts.

My head snaps to hers and I blink. “What? No way. Why would I be looking at Noah? That’s like asking me if I’m checking out one of the teachers.” I shiver at the thought. “I’m just wondering why Noah is the way he is.”

“Why does it matter?” Hannah asks with a shrug. “It’s hard enough trying to figure out a guy you’re into. Why break your head trying to figure out a guy that doesn’t matter much to you?”

“Hmm, good point. Thinking about him is wasting too many of my precious brain cells.”

“Exactly. So do you want to hear about the guy I met online?” Penny asks.

After she informs us about the amazing cute guy she was chatting to for hours last night, we talk about other topics and then Penny says, “So a certain person’s birthday is coming up.” She playfully knocks her shoulder into mine. “Any plans?”

I lift my shoulders. “A small affair with my family and close friends like every year.”

“That’s it?” Penny asks.

I give her a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“You’re turning *eighteen*, Evie! You’ll be an adult. That’s a cause for celebration.”

“It’s just a number, Penny. I’ll be one year older than I was last year. No big deal.”

“Hello! An *adult*.”

“Hannah’s been an adult for two months,” I point out. “And she’s the same. I mean, you’re always mature, Hannah, but you’re still you. Why are you making such a big deal about it, Penny?”

“You need to do something special. Something different.”

I wave my hand. “I’m fine with hanging out with my family and friends.”

Penny’s eyes light up and she snaps her fingers. “I’ve got it! You can throw a huge party and invite the whole school.”

“Why in the world would I do something like that?”

“Because parties are fun?”

I frown. Maybe they *can* be fun if someone else is the center of attention. But I’ve never liked the spotlight. Penny knows this very well.

“Hannah didn’t do anything special,” I remind her.

“That’s because her parents surprised her with a trip to Europe over winter break.”

Hannah’s face glows. “One of the best trips of my life.”

“And by the time you got back, we were too busy with the new semester.” Penny pins her eyes on me with a look I don’t like. “But now I can plan the perfect party for you.”

I sigh as I play around with the last lettuce leaves on my plate. “I’m not crazy about the idea, Penny. I know you want to have fun, but I won’t enjoy myself with the whole school being there. I barely talk to half of them.”

Penny looks like she wants to argue, maybe convince me how much fun it could be, but she knows me well and sighs. “Okay, fine. But can we invite some more people this time? Just so it could be a bigger celebration?”

Now it’s my turn to sigh. “Okay. As long as you plan the whole thing.”
She beams. “I will!”

“Never fear, boys!” I announce as I enter Wyatt and Elliot’s basement.
“Your wow factor has arrived.”

“Oh, great,” Noah mutters from where he stands on the stage—the center of the room—tuning his guitar. “If your head gets any bigger, Evie, your body will collapse from the weight.”

“Even with a ginormous head, I would still look mega hot,” I say with a wink.

Noah snorts, returning his attention to his guitar.

“Right on,” Wyatt says as he slaps my hand. “Hot is good. Hot will sell the band.”

“Didn’t we talk about how Evie isn’t here to attract guys?” Noah says with a frown. “And don’t call my wife hot, Wyatt.”

“Because only you can call her hot?” He raises a brow.

“Gross,” he and I say simultaneously.

Then I glare at him. “Did you just call me gross?”

“What? No, I didn’t call *you* gross. I called the fact that Wyatt thinks I think you’re hot gross.”

I scratch my head. “*What?*”

He scratches his head, too.

Wyatt chuckles. “You guys make *such* a cute married couple,” he teases.

Noah slaps his shoulder as Mateo walks in, followed by Elliot who’s holding an armful of snacks.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I sprint over as he drops the goodies on the table and start sifting through the options. “No way! Gummy worms! It’s like you can read my soul.” I grab the package and tear it open.

“Noah told me they’re your favorite,” Elliot informs me. “So I bought you some.”

My teeth slice a worm in half as I spin around to Noah. “Aw, how sweet of you. My hubby is so thoughtful.”

Noah grits his teeth. “Don’t make such a big deal about it, Evie. Elliot texted me earlier that he was going for a snack run and asked me what’s your favorite. We all deserve to snack on what we love.”

“Except you,” I say as I reach for another gummy worm and tear off its tail. “You don’t have a favorite snack because you’re boring.”

Wyatt and Mateo chuckle.

Noah frowns. “I’m not boring.”

“Uh huh,” I say as I bite into another worm.

“Aren’t you worried that will rot out your teeth?” he says.

I shrug. “Nope. My teeth are made of steel.”

“*Sure*. If you don’t care for your teeth when you’re young, you’ll run into problems when—”

Elliot claps his hands. “Are we going to stand here listening to the married couple bicker or are we going to play music?”

Noah and I narrow our eyes at each other before he says, “Yeah, let’s practice, guys. Elliot’s working on getting us a gig. We need to be on our A game if we manage to land one.” He reaches for a stack of papers and hands one to each of us. “The song I’ve been working on.”

For the next hour, we learn the lyrics and the music. It feels really good being up here with the guys. Noah and I sing some of the lyrics together and some alone, and the harmonies sound great. And it’s so much fun to move

around the stage and bob my head as Elliot kills it on the drums. But the song isn't the greatest. Something about darkness and light? I'm not entirely sure. Some of the lyrics are good, but some just sound too awkward. I can tell from the expressions on Elliot, Wyatt, and Mateo's faces that they're not feeling it, either.

As I'm singing my part, the drums suddenly go silent, and then the lead guitar and bass go next. I'm left there singing by myself with Noah playing his guitar.

He stops playing just as I shut my mouth and he turns to the other guys. "What happened? Why did you stop playing?"

With a sigh, Elliot shakes his head. "This isn't working, Noah."

"What do you mean?"

He twirls one of his drumsticks between his fingers, not meeting Noah's eyes. "The song's not good."

Noah stiffens. "I thought it's decent enough."

"Do we want decent enough or do we want a hit?" Wyatt asks.

Noah looks at him. "You too?"

Wyatt holds out his hands helplessly.

Noah glances at Mateo. "What do you think?"

"It doesn't strike a punch," he admits.

Noah shuts his eyes as a heavy breath seeps out of his nose. Then his eyes snap open to me. "What do you think, Evie?"

"Huh? You want my opinion?"

"Of course. You're part of the band."

"Right. Um..." I play with my hair, not sure what to say.

"Don't be afraid to hurt his feelings," Wyatt tells me. "We'll deal with harsher critics once we go public with a song."

I know what it's like to work so hard on something and feel proud of it,

only to be criticized by other people. I don't show my art to a lot of people because of that. I just wouldn't be able to handle them tearing it apart. Which is something I know I need to get over when I attend college in a few months. And if I hope to have a career in the field, I'll need thicker skin.

"You can be honest, Evie," Noah says in a soft voice. "Wyatt's right. I'd rather you tell me it sucks than rude strangers online."

A sigh escapes my lips. "First of all, the song doesn't suck. I've definitely heard worse."

Noah's chest deflates with relief.

"But I've certainly heard better. And if this is supposed to be our comeback, I don't think this song is going to cut it."

Mateo nods with a regretful expression. "I agree."

Noah pulls his guitar off his shoulder and walks to the couch, swiping a bag of pretzels and stuffing a few in his mouth. The room is quiet for a long time before he says, "Maybe it *is* over."

The other guys just stand there with hopeless expressions.

"Wait, are you guys giving up?" I demand.

Mateo lifts his shoulders. "Maybe it's just not meant to be."

"It shouldn't be this hard to be in a freakin' band," Wyatt grumbles as he plops down next to Noah with a jumbo-size bag of chips. "Maybe it's not worth it."

Elliot sighs. "Maybe Mom and Dad are right and I should go into business."

"Why are we even causing ourselves so much anxiety when this is just a side thing?" Wyatt says. "I mean, we're all going to have football careers anyway. Except for Elliot."

A strange expression passes over Noah's face. I can only describe it as anguish. Loss of hope. Surrender.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I say as I march over and snatch away the pretzels and chips. “Are we really feeling sorry for ourselves?”

“You heard us, Evie,” Mateo says. “We suck.”

“We don’t suck,” I correct him. “The music was spectacular and I think our voices were great.”

Mateo grins. “You and Noah sounded amazing together.”

“Thanks. So we have a problem with the song. Isn’t that the hardest part about being in a band? The songwriting?”

“For us it is,” Elliot mutters, where he’s still playing with his stick at the drums.

“Look, I listened to all of your songs last night,” I tell them. “Some of them were amazing. Who wrote them? Noah?”

They nod.

“You’re great at songwriting, Noah. Those songs really spoke to me. What happened?”

He gives me a helpless look. “I don’t know. I guess I’ve lost my touch. I haven’t been feeling inspired.”

I tap my chin. “Maybe you need a woman’s touch.”

Noah’s brow lifts. “Are you talking about yourself?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Am I not woman enough for you? Remember, you married me.”

The other guys chuckle.

Noah holds up his hand. “Of course you’re woman enough. But do you even know anything about songwriting? And we always bump heads when we try to work together.”

I run my hand through my hair. “True. But we’ve oddly done pretty well as a married couple. Maybe we’ll have success in this, too.”

Noah watches me for a little bit, an uncertain expression on his face.

“What have we got to lose?” I ask. “Let’s get together at your house and see what we can do. I may surprise you.”

Again, he keeps his eyes on me for a bit before running his hand down his face.

“You can ask for help, you know,” I say. “Don’t be so prideful that you can’t admit when you need help.”

He sighs again. “I hate failing.”

“I know. Believe me, I know how much you hate failing. But you’ll fail more if you don’t at least let me help. I know this band is important to you. Why not let us shine?”

Noah looks from one guy to the other.

“Listen to your smart wife,” Mateo says. Wyatt and Elliot nod.

Noah puts his attention on me. “Okay. But you need to take it seriously, Evie. I don’t have time for any of your antics.”

I give him a look. “I’m not playing around here. You know I can be serious when I need to be. Have some faith in me.”

He’s once again quiet as he thinks it over.

“Okay.” He stands and picks up his guitar, though his expression still seems doubtful. “We’ll see you guys later,” he tells the others.

“Have fun!” Wyatt calls after us as we head to the stairs. “Remember, more work and less kissy time. We’re counting on you guys.”

Noah freezes at the foot of the stairs and turns around to glare at his friend.

I laugh. “You seriously need to lighten up, dude.”

Chapter Sixteen

Noah

Evie follows me in her car as we drive to my house. After she pulls into the driveway behind me, we get out of our cars and make our way inside. I place my guitar at the foot of the stairs and then we head to the kitchen, where Mom and Dad are working on dinner. My family knows I play guitar, but they don't know where my passion lies.

Rylee sits on the counter, chatting about her day. As soon as we walk in, my parents greet us with warm smiles and my little sister waves.

“Hey, Noah. Hey, Evie. Guess who got suspended from school for two days?”

I frown at her. “You?”

She giggles. “Not this time. It was these two boys being stupid. Aren't you proud of me for behaving?”

Smiling, I ruffle her hair. “Super proud. Evie and I are going to my room to do homework.”

“Are you still married?” Rylee asks, her eyes lit up as they travel from me to Evie.

“Pretend married,” I correct.

Evie wraps her arm around my shoulder. “Of course we're still married. I wouldn't give up on my amazing shnook—”

“Anyway,” I cut her off with a glare. “We're going to my room.”

“Are you staying for dinner, sweetie?” Mom asks her.

“Sure, thanks. It smells delicious.”

Dad bows dramatically. “Liam's new recipe.” He twists his mouth. “Chloe's been helping him rewrite his recipes to be clearer, but I think they're more confusing.”

I glance around. “Where’s Chloe, anyway?”

Rylee rolls her eyes. “At Liam’s, of course. She’s there, like, all the time. What’s the big deal about having a boyfriend anyway?”

“I’ve asked myself that question a hundred times,” Evie tells her with a light chuckle.

Mom and Dad exchange a smile, as though they’re hiding a secret or something. I hope one day a girl will make me happy and I will do the same, just like my parents.

“So your room?” Evie asks me.

We tell my parents we’ll see them later, I grab my guitar, and we climb the stairs to my room. Evie takes a look around and her eyebrows furrow. Then she rolls her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Nothing. Just this room is so...dry.”

“Dry? You’ve been in my room before.”

“Yeah, but it’s drier than usual. I mean, look at the walls.” She gestures around. “The only posters you have are of famous football players. And they’re so squeaky clean and boring.”

“Well, I can’t have any posters of my favorite rock bands, can I?”

She’s about to say something, but I go on, “And why are you criticizing my room?”

She throws her hands up. “Oh, like you didn’t criticize mine and try to clean it up the other day?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “That’s because your room was a hazard. Still is, I bet.”

She doesn’t listen to me as she continues examining my “dry” room. Her eyebrows knit as she heads over to the small dry-erase board hanging on my wall. “What’s this?”

“My daily to-do list. Every morning, I wake up and write down my tasks for the day so I don’t forget them. I also use an app...why are you looking at me like that?”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “Why am I not surprised? That’s so *you*.”

“Yeah, it is. How about you stop attacking my room and we begin?”

Shaking her head again, she continues her assessment. “White, boring sheets on the bed. The floor is spotless. No food anywhere. No personality.”

“Evie.”

She turns to me. “What? This looks like a hospital room. Put some color, some life, into it. Your room is your place, your domain. The one place you can be totally, one hundred percent yourself. If someone walked in here, they wouldn’t know who you are.”

“Maybe I want to keep it that way.”

She shrugs. “Whoever your roommate will be at college next year...I wish him luck.”

I give her a look. “I feel bad for the person who will room with messy *you*.”

“Good thing we’ll be far, far away from each other.”

“Good thing,” I agree. “Now, can we begin or are you still not done with your criticism?”

She gestures toward my desk. “We can begin, but ugh, can I paint you something? Maybe a landscape or a portrait of you? Your family? Just to bring some life into this room.”

“No.”

“Stubborn.”

I give her a look again. “Do you always have to interfere in my life?”

“Yep.”

I sigh.

“Let’s get to work and turn that mediocre song into a winner.”

I cringe. Yeah, it was really bad.

“Don’t stress.” She gives me an assuring smile. “We’ll put our fabulous heads together and come up with something good.”

Except, she’s never written a song in her life and she’s not too familiar with rock music. But I need to have confidence in her. In us. Have faith, just like she told me earlier. Maybe if we *do* put our heads together, we’ll come up with something amazing.

We settle down at my desk and I pull my lyrics notebook out of my backpack, turning to the page where I’ve written and rewritten the new song. I slide it over to Evie. “Do your worst.”

She studies the lyrics, asking questions, offering suggestions. Things aren’t really going well because my brain is flat and Evie keeps trying to stick romantic words in there. While we *can* put romance in a rock song, I don’t think this is the right one. It’s about darkness and light...and I thought it was a good idea when I wrote it. Clearly not.

We decide to listen to rock songs for inspiration. Evie gets a better feel for the genre and we slowly come up with something.

“Make sure it’s our own original song,” Evie tells me. “We wouldn’t want to be accused of plagiarism in real life like I was accused in our pretend life.”

I find myself chuckling. “Still can’t get over that, huh?”

She rolls her eyes. “I can’t believe Mrs. Duncan made that happen. But anyway, what do you think about changing these words...?”

We continue working on the song, taking breaks here and there to listen to more songs and chatting about school and the band.

“By the way, how are you feeling about the whole college thing?” I ask

her after a little while. “Still scared?”

She rolls her shoulders. “I’ll always be scared, but it’s better, I guess. I’m trying to spend more time with my parents and siblings instead of being cooped up in my studio all the time.”

“That’s good.”

We get back to work, coming up with something we think is good. We tweak it here and there as I play my guitar and we sing along with it, but I think we have something solid.

“Nice.” Evie holds up her hand for a high-five.

I frown. “I don’t like high-fives. Seems silly.”

Releasing an exasperated sigh, she takes hold of my hand and slaps it to hers. “Someone seriously needs to teach you the word fun.”

I’m about to respond, when Dad walks in. I quickly shut the lyrics notebook and strum a few random chords on my guitar. Evie narrows her eyes at me in confusion.

Dad grins at us. “Hey, kids. How goes the studying?”

I gesture to my guitar. “Great. We’re taking a small break.”

“You’re getting good at that.” Dad nods to the guitar.

I force a smile. “Thanks.”

“Noah, I was wondering if you want to go running with me tomorrow morning.”

“Sure, Dad.”

He smiles again. “Great. Dinner will be ready in an hour.” He leaves the room.

Evie watches him go with furrowed brows as I strum a few more chords on my guitar. She turns to me, her brows furrowing more.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t get it. Your parents are so amazing and they love you so much.

Why are you hiding your love of music from them?”

I sigh and continue strumming. “Doesn’t matter.”

She places her hand on mine, stopping me. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but seriously, Noah. Your parents love you. Do they even know the real you? Does anyone?” She takes a breath. “Do you even like football?”

“Sure I like it.”

She removes her hand from mine. “But you don’t *love* it, do you?”

I continue strumming random chords. “I’m going to Astor University on a football scholarship and then I hope to have a football career like my dad.”

“But that’s not what you want. You want to be a rockstar.”

I don’t say anything. Then, in a low voice, I tell her, “No one knows this, but I got accepted into a music school.”

Her eyes bug out. “Noah, that’s amazing! Why are you torturing yourself like this? If you don’t want a football career, then why are you heading in that direction?”

I pull my guitar over my shoulder and lower it to the floor. “Because that’s what’s best for me, okay? I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I don’t care if you want to talk about it or not. Noah, you’re miserable. I see how you light up when you’re up on that stage rocking it out. And your eyes are *dead* when you talk about football.”

“I’m good at football.”

“So what? It’s not where your passion lies.”

I grit my teeth. “Evie, just drop it.”

“No, I won’t. I know we’re not exactly friends and I’m only your pretend wife, but someone needs to knock some sense into you. Why are you hiding the truth from your parents? Why are you choosing football over music? What are you so afraid of?”

I shoot to my feet, not in anger but in frustration and pain. “I’m choosing

football because that's what they expect of me! My dad wants me to follow in his footsteps and be the next famous Barrington quarterback."

Her mouth shuts as her eyebrows knit.

I pace my room. "My grandfather couldn't play football, so my uncle Brock wanted to play for him, but then he died. My dad decided to play for his dad and Brock, and then Aunt Bailey did the same. Now I have to keep the tradition."

Now she gets to her feet. "Says who?"

My mouth opens and closes, but no words come out.

"Did your dad ask you to keep the tradition?"

I plow my fingers through my hair as I continue to pace. "No, but it's been obvious my whole life. My dad has shaped me to be the next Barrington quarterback and I won't let him down. I *need* to do this for him, for Uncle Brock, and for my grandfather."

She drops back down on her chair with a huff, crossing her arms over her chest. "That's stupid."

I give her a look. "I told you that you wouldn't understand. Just leave me alone."

"Not happening, Noah. You're miserable and if you won't do anything about it, then I will."

"Yeah? What are you going to do about it?"

She throws her hands up. "Nag you and nag you until you talk to your dad." Her eyes soften. "Noah, you only have one life to live. Do you want to live your dad's or your own?"

I sink to the floor as her words touch my heart, my soul. She's right. Of course I want to live my own life. But my dad expects so much from me. I want to make him and my mom proud.

She gets up and lowers herself next to me. "I might not understand the

pressure you're under, but your dad loves you and he'll understand. Just talk to him."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I can't."

"You *can*. This is your life and your happiness, Noah. If you won't do something about it, no one will. Do you want to be on your deathbed and regret not going after what you wanted?"

I shake my head. "I could have a good, happy career in football."

She places her hand on my arm. "Or you can have an amazingly spectacular one following your dream."

I don't say anything because I don't know what to say.

She gets to her feet. "I'd better go."

"What about dinner?"

She hoists her backpack over one shoulder. "I think you need to be alone with your thoughts and with your family without me getting in the way. Tell your parents thanks, anyway." She places her hand on my arm. "I don't want to tell you what to do, but you have a special talent and it'd be a shame for it to go to waste. I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck." She smiles reassuringly and leaves my room.

As I sit here with her words spinning around in my head, I can't help but wonder if she's right. Should I tell Dad how I feel? Will I hurt him by telling him I don't want a football career like he wants me to have?

I'm not sure.

Chapter Seventeen

Noah

The next morning, Dad and I are up before the sun to go running. We used to run together all the time when I was younger, but school and football got in the way, so we didn't have as much time as we used to. Now that football season is over and I've got some more time, I'm glad we're spending time together.

But Evie's words prick the back of my mind. Should I tell my dad? I thought about it all night—couldn't sleep because of my conflicting emotions—and I decided I'll talk to him. She's right that he loves me and wants what's best for me.

Dad talks about many different things as we run side by side. The area is pretty much empty because of the early hour, which is great because I love hanging out just the two of us.

"You're quiet," Dad observes as he glances at me. "Everything okay?"

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Actually, no, there's something I want to talk to you about."

He takes a sip from his water bottle and nods. "Of course you can talk to me about anything. I know you're graduating high school soon and you'll be eighteen in a few months, but I hope you'll always confide in me."

I nod. "Yeah. So...uh..."

He smiles as he wraps his arm around me, stopping us from running. "I know what this is."

"You do?"

Did he find out I'm in a band?

"Yeah, you're nervous to graduate and go to college," he says. "I felt the same way when I was your age. And I didn't want to be so far from your

mom. But long distance worked out for us and it made seeing each other on weekends and holidays that much more special.”

I force a smile. “Yeah, I *am* nervous to go to college, but—”

He squeezes me close. “Everything will be okay. You’re going to an amazing school and you’ll meet great people and they’ll teach you and inspire you to chase your football dreams. I wouldn’t have had a successful career in football if it hadn’t been for them and I’m so glad and thankful you’ll get to experience the same thing.” He wraps both arms around me. “I’m so proud of you, Noah. And I know you’ll have an amazing life.” He goes on to talk about how wonderful college and pro football was for him and how much it means to him to have me follow in his footsteps

My heart sinks as he continues to tell me over and over how proud he is of me and what a great son he has.

I can’t tell him. I just can’t disappoint him like that. I know it’s my life, not his, but my dad is my hero. He’s been with me every second of every day since I was born. I can’t hurt him. Evie might call me a coward, and maybe I am. But it’s important to me that my dad is happy.

Maybe I can learn to love football as much as I love music. After all, a music career is looking really fuzzy right now. Evie and I fixed the song, but is it any good? And it’s so hard to make it as a musician. I’ve got Dad on my side and he has many connections that could propel my football career.

No. I’ve made my decision. Music is my passion, but football is my future.

Dad stops talking and claps me on the back. “Are you sure you’re okay? You know I’m here for you.”

I force a smile. “I know, Dad. Thanks. And yeah, I’m good.”

We continue running for a while, chatting about football, of course, and many other topics.

“There it is.” Dad nods in the distance, where there is a park full of many trees and several boulders.

I know this spot. Dad took Mom here to see the sunrise when they were in high school. They’ve told us this story more than once.

Dad’s dad also took him and his brother Brock here, too. And later, Aunt Bailey. Another Barrington tradition. Dad would love to run with Chloe and Rylee, too, but there’s no getting them out of bed this early.

Dad gestures for me to follow him as we climb onto one of the boulders and sit down side by side.

The sun is starting to rise, painting the sky with orange and red colors. I’m not a very visual person, but it’s beautiful. No wonder my parents love reminiscing about this moment.

Dad grins at me. “As you know, this park holds a very special place in my heart. I’d bring your mom here more often, but nothing could get her up before the sun these days. I was barely able to get her up the first time.” He chuckles as his mind seems to wander to many, many years ago.

I turn toward the sunrise, smiling at its beauty, and take in this moment with my dad. I know we’ll still be close after I go off to college, but it won’t be the same. I’m glad I have this memory and will cherish it forever.

After a bit, Dad turns to me with a lifted brow. “Maybe one day you’ll bring a girl here, too.”

I scoff, though inside I’m wondering if that’s true. Maybe there will be a special girl in my life one day and maybe we’ll create our own memories here like my parents.

Dad bangs his shoulder into mine. “You never know.” He holds up his hands. “But no pressure, of course. You’ll meet her when you’re ready and when the time is right.”

“Yeah. I’m just focusing on school and graduation right now.” And my

music, of course.

Dad's eyes get a bit glassy as he stares at the rising sun. He gets like this when he thinks about the future and how much my sisters and I have grown. Mom told me he was the same way when Aunt Bailey was growing up.

"Dad..."

He wraps an arm around me, pulling me to his chest. "I just love you so much, Noah," he tells me. "You and your sisters and your mom." He draws back, staring into my eyes. "You mean the world to me. And now you're all grown up and will be attending college in only a few months." He shakes his head. "Where has the time flown?" He mutters the last bit to himself. "And next Chloe will be off to college and then Rylee and then..."

I place my hand on his shoulder. "Take a deep breath and relax, Dad. I'll be away, but I won't be gone. You guys can't get rid of me that easily." I pause. "And you'll come to my football games."

His smile is wide. "Of course. I'll be the one cheering the loudest from the stands." His arm comes around me again and he pulls me close.

We remain on the boulder, watching the beautiful sight, before it's time for us to return home. Once we do, I take a shower and get ready for school. Watching the sunrise relaxed and distracted me, but everything comes crashing down as I drive. I can't stop thinking about what Evie said and what I didn't do today. I really am a coward.

Speaking of Evie, she's leaning on my locker when I walk into the school building.

"You're early again," I say.

She pulls off the locker. "I had to know how it went with your dad this morning. Did you tell him?"

Swallowing, I do the combination on my locker and pull the door open. "No."

She groans. “Noah.”

“I tried, but I couldn’t, okay? Just forget it.”

“But—”

“Evie, please drop it. It’s like you said—it’s my life. So I’m asking you not to get involved.”

She doesn’t say anything, though her eyes are ablaze like she wants to. I grab my books from my locker and head to my first class, even though it won’t start for another fifteen minutes.

I can feel Evie’s eyes on my back, but I don’t turn around.

“Hey,” Chloe says as she climbs into my car after school. She just finished working on the paper, The Edenbury High Times, with her team. As the editor-in-chief, she’s quite busy, but the work is rewarding and she loves it.

She takes after Mom, who writes for the Edenbury Press, our town’s local newspaper. Chloe’s hoping to attend a college with a great journalism program, maybe the one Mom went to.

“Thanks for driving me home,” Chloe says, pulling the seatbelt across her body. “Liam, Lily, and Evie are going to the cemetery with their parents to visit their grandparents.”

Evie’s grandparents on her dad’s side died when Zack was fourteen. I know what it’s like not to know all your grandparents, since my mom’s mom died when she was thirteen. I guess that’s another thing Evie and I have in common.

“No problem,” I tell my sister as I pull out of the student parking lot. “How was your day?”

“Good. Yours?”

Other than the fact that Evie kept giving me looks. She didn’t say

anything but the message was clear. She's disappointed with me. I don't know why she cares so much what I do with my life. Maybe because she's an artist and knows what it's like to be passionate about something. But passion doesn't pay the bills.

If LRG class has taught me anything, it's to prepare for the future. I do want to get married and have a family one day, and I need to provide for them. I want my kids to have every opportunity, just like I did. That starts with a good college and then a stable career.

"Noah? You okay?" Chloe asks, brown eyes wide with curiosity and concern. "You got all stiff and weird."

Clearing my throat, I focus on the road. "I'm fine. How's the paper going?"

She groans as she bangs her head on the window. "The hardest part is coming up with engaging stories. Keeping the readers interested. It's just... gah."

I know exactly what she means. Keeping an audience invested in my songs is no easy feat.

I offer her an encouraging smile. "But you're a phenomenal editor-in-chief and I know you'll come up with great stories."

"I think that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

I frown. "I say sweet things all the time. I'm the perfect older brother."

She rolls her eyes. "More like an overprotective older brother, but you know I love you."

"And I love you. That's why I'm so protective of you and Rylee."

"While I appreciate it, I can take care of myself."

I know she can. But she and Rylee are my little sisters. I think I'll always worry about them.

"So...how's it going with Liam?" I ask after a little while.

She beams. “Good. He’s awesome and I love him so darn much it drives me insane. He’s nervous for his internship at Chef Robinson’s restaurant this summer, but he’s also looking forward to it. I’m so excited for him. He’s living his dream, you know?”

I swallow the lump in my throat as I grip the steering wheel a bit too tightly. “I’m also excited for him.”

“I’ll tell him, thanks. Ooh, he’s texting me.” She taps on her phone. “He says thanks for being excited for him.” She grins at me. “You really are a good older brother, even though you stifle me sometimes.”

“Thanks, I guess? Are you going to miss your stifling brother when he’s away at college?”

She playfully rolls her eyes as she bangs her fist into my arm. “Of course I will, Noah. The house won’t be the same without you.”

I smile. “I’ll miss you guys, too. But you know you can always call me if you need anything.”

She nods. “Thanks.”

We reach our house and I drop her off before heading to Wyatt’s for band practice.

Chapter Eighteen

Evie

After days of busting my butt learning the lyrics to the song Noah and I wrote together and their old songs and practicing with the rest of the band every night, the moment has finally arrived! We have our first gig tonight.

Well, it's *my* first gig. But the guys sort of feel like it's their first gig, too, because they're a new and improved version of The Rock'n Jocks.

It's a good thing it's a Saturday night, so I don't have to worry about making excuses to my parents on a school night. Considering Noah is still not ready to tell his family he's in a band, I need to keep it to myself as well, because our parents share *everything* with each other.

The five of us are now riding in the van to another town. Luckily, it's not too far from Edenbury. Penny and Hannah helped me pick out the perfect outfit earlier—a dark blue dress with black boots—something that's not too sexy, but pretty enough so I don't give the band a bad rep.

"You nervous, wow factor?" Mateo asks me.

Wyatt and Noah glance at me to see my reaction as well, and Elliot looks at me through the rearview mirror.

I shrug. "Not too nervous, surprisingly. The songs are great and our music is amazing. I just hope I don't mess up and give you guys a bad name."

Someone places his hand on my back and pats it. I'm surprised to see that it's Noah. With a reassuring smile, he says, "Don't worry about that. Just focus on the songs and have fun. I know you'll be amazing."

His words cause a warm feeling to spread through my body.

Trying to ignore it, I throw a grin at Mateo and Wyatt. "My husband is the sweetest, isn't he?"

Wyatt pinches Noah's cheek. "He sure is."

Noah whacks his hand away. “Lay off me, man.”

I bend forward to pinch his other cheek. “But you are.”

“Evie!” He whacks my hand away, too.

Mateo, Wyatt, and I exchange chuckles.

“The guy who owns the club is aware of the feedback we got online,” Elliot tells us as he slows down before a red light. “Not trying to stress you out, but just be aware that he’ll be watching us like a hawk.”

Mateo puffs out some air. “How can I not stress about that?”

“Hey, you’ll be amazing,” I tell him with a smile. “You all will be. Noah gave me good advice, and you should take it to heart, too. Let’s not worry about what all the jerks are saying online and just have fun.”

Wyatt and Mateo cheer and high-five each other while Elliot smiles. Noah doesn’t smile or laugh or say anything. He seems stressed out. I want to tell him to try to let go and enjoy tonight, but I know my words won’t affect him. He’ll worry about it tonight and the whole next week.

As we pull into the club’s lot, butterflies flap around in my stomach and my head spins. Okay...I guess I’m more nervous than I thought.

The guys get out of the van and start unloading all of our instruments and equipment while I just sit here with my fingers wringing in my lap.

Mateo sticks his head through the open door. “You coming, Evie?”

I blink and look at him. “What? Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

Sliding out of the van, I wipe my sweaty palms on the bottom of my dress, my heart starting to pound. It’s so strong that my stomach somersaults. But I try to shove the feeling away and focus on helping my bandmates carry all of our equipment into the club. There’s a small stage where we could set up.

There isn’t a curtain on the stage, so many of the people watch us curiously, probably wondering who the heck we are. There aren’t any posters

on the wall informing anyone of who we are. Maybe that's for the best in case we do choke.

No, I don't want to be negative. The guys and I will knock this out of the park.

As the guys set up the heavier equipment, I head back out to the van to make sure we didn't forget anything. But when I'm about to head back inside, I hear a group of people making their way inside say, "Who did you say was playing tonight?"

"Not sure. Some band called The Rock'n Jocks? I don't think they're from around here."

"Hope they're good," another says. "I'm sick and tired of listening to all these wanna-be talentless bands trying to break into the industry. Not everyone who owns a guitar can be successful."

"I hear you..." Their voices grow fainter as they enter the club. "My voice is still hoarse from the last band I booted off the stage..."

Again, it feels like my head is spinning. I grab onto the side of the van to steady myself as it worsens. Oh my gosh, am I having a stroke or something?

I'm going to throw up. Yep, throw up every single thing I ate today.

"Evie?" Someone puts a hand on my shoulder. Through the whoosh whoosh in my head, I can tell it's Noah. "Evie, what's wrong?" He gently puts his other hand on my shoulder and turns me around to face him. His eyes nearly roll off his face. "You're so pale! Are you okay?" He reaches into the van and plucks out a water bottle, uncapping it and handing it to me.

"Thanks." Bringing it to my mouth, I gulp some of it down. It feels good. Maybe I was just thirsty?

But as I hand him back the water bottle, the same feeling returns. I clutch the front of his shirt as I start to sway.

His eyes widen even more. "Evie, you're freaking me out."

“Sorry, I just need to sit down...”

He helps me into the van and slides in next to me, eyes looking over every inch of me with the most worried expression I’ve ever seen on him.

“I’m okay,” I assure him with a weak smile. “I don’t know what came over me. I...” I glance toward the entrance to the club, where more guests are arriving. “Noah, I don’t think I can do this.”

His brows shoot up. “What do you mean? You’re not feeling well?” He places his hand on my forehead. “You don’t seem sick.”

“I think this is more of an emotional ailment,” I mutter.

“Emotional...?” He looks totally befuddled. Then his eyes light up with understanding. He places his hand on my arm. “You’re nervous.”

“What? No, I’m not...” My brows dip. “Oh. Is that it?” I take a deep, shaky breath and let it seep out of my nose. “Yeah, I guess I am. I thought I was fine, but apparently not.” I laugh softly. “So much for my confidence.”

Noah’s hand slides down my arm until his fingers intertwine with mine. “Hey, I get that you’re nervous,” he says softly. “Everyone gets nervous before a performance. Especially their first one.”

“I’ve never sung in public before,” I admit. “I mean, other than my family and friends. I guess I have more of my mom’s shy genes than I thought,” I add with a nervous laugh. She was in her high school choir and had such bad stage fright that she refused to have a solo, something she yearned for. But Dad and her friends helped her overcome her anxiety.

“Honestly, I was surprised you weren’t more nervous,” Noah tells me with a reassuring smile. “When the guys and I had our first gig, I almost didn’t show up.”

I gape at him. “Perfect Noah Barrington almost ditched his friends?”

He laughs lightly. “Just shows how nervous I was. And when I finally worked up the courage to get there—mainly because Elliot threatened me if I

didn't show up—I spent a good while in the bathroom bent over a toilet and waiting for my stomach to explode.”

“No...”

He nods. “Yes.”

I can't help but laugh. “I can't picture you sitting on the floor bent over a toilet ready to puke your guts out.”

Noah laughs, too. “Ask the guys. They'll confirm my story.”

“So how did you get over it?” I ask.

He's quiet as he thinks over my words. “Honestly? I didn't. I was terrified of Elliot.”

That makes me laugh again.

“But once I got on stage, everything and everyone disappeared. It was just me, the guys, the music, and the lyrics. And you know what happened?”

“You were such an amazing little rockstar that every female in the room fell down to her knees before you and begged you to marry her.”

Noah gives me an exasperated look. “Even when we're having a serious conversation, you goof off.”

I playfully slug his shoulder. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“You're always trying to lighten the mood,” he mutters.

“You don't try to lighten the mood enough.”

He sighs like he doesn't know what to do with me.

“So what happened?” I ask.

He gives me a sweet smile as his eyes light up with the memory. “They loved us. I was thrown back into the real world as everyone erupted in cheers. You have no idea how amazing that felt, Evie. And you can experience that, too. No, you *will* experience it. You're an amazing singer and have great stage presence. The audience will love you.”

I wave my hand. “I don't know about that...”

“Of course they will. And remember—you won’t be up there alone. I’ll be standing right next to you and the guys will be right behind us. We’re one team, one unit. We have each other’s backs.”

I take a deep breath and slowly release it as his words settle in my brain. He’s right. What am I so nervous about? I want to have fun out there. Enjoy every second of it. I want to bring joy to people, see the smiles on their faces as our music and songs touch their souls. It’s time to shove away any insecurity I have and be a boss out there.

With a genuine, large smile, I say, “What are we doing out here when we should be on that stage?”

Noah returns my smile and gets out of the van, holding his hand out to me. My gaze drops to it for a second, and then I slide mine inside. He tightens his hold on my hand as he leads me into the club, where the rest of the guys are nervously pacing.

“There you are!” Wyatt says, his tone full of relief. “We didn’t know what happened to you.” His eyes fall to our interlocked hands.

“Sorry, it was my bad,” I say as Noah and I wrench our hands off each other’s. “I was nervous and needed a minute. But I’m okay now.”

“You sure?” Mateo asks. “Take however long you need to feel comfortable. We’re not on for another five minutes.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay.”

For the next five minutes, the guys and I silently sing the songs to ourselves to make sure we know them inside out. The last thing we need is to blank on stage. Noah glances at me from time to time like he’s worried I’m not feeling okay, but he has nothing to fear because I’m good.

“You guys ready?” the owner of the club asks us.

Elliot nods with a nervous sigh. “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

Since there’s no curtain, the guy introduces us as we get settled on the

stage. There are no bright lights or anything in here, nothing to shield me from the penetrating gazes of every single person in the club. Geez, I don't think I've ever felt so exposed before.

"Remember," Mateo whispers. "Let's have fun and enjoy ourselves."

Elliot gives us a beat and we start to play. We're all a little shaky because we're so nervous, but then we get into the groove of it. Noah and I sing together flawlessly, our voices blending like they were born to be together, our harmonies impeccable. I move around on the stage like I own it, smiling as the audience cheers. Every time I manage to sneak a glance at the guys, I notice them trying to fight smiles. And Noah? Noah Barrington, the dude who barely smiles or shows any joy or enthusiasm...he's trying to battle the largest grin I've ever seen on his face.

He's in his element, his face shining like this is where he belongs. Why does he want to give it up for football?

We're totally and completely killing it. And the audience is so into it that they're whooping and cheering. Their energy fuels ours and causes us to knock it way out of the park.

We finish the last song with Noah and me back-to-back, with my arms crossed over my chest. At once, the audience claps and cheers even louder, some of them demanding an encore.

"The Rock'n Jocks!" they cheer. "The Rock'n Jocks! Encore! Encore!"

With my chest rising and falling rapidly, I glance at Noah. He has a bit of sweat gathered on his forehead and his face is flushed with so many emotions. Emotions I can *actually* see. Glee, happiness, joy, relief. And a pride one can only feel for something he is extremely passionate about.

He and I stare at each other with wide smiles, both of our chests heaving. We did it. I can't believe we did it. The audience *loves* us.

"Encore!" they continue to chant. "Encore!"

With a confidence I've never seen on him, Noah grabs the mic. "You want an encore?"

"Yeah!" they shout.

"I didn't hear you!" he says. "What do you guys want?"

"Encore!"

"You and the girl are amazing!" someone yells.

"Best music duo ever!"

"Your voices blend together perfectly!"

"Such beautiful harmonies!"

"Encore! Encore!"

With a grin, Noah turns to us. "Let's give the people what they want."

This time, we're more pumped than before and really put on a show. By the time we're done, we're all sweaty and can barely breathe, and we all look like we just won a billion bucks. Wow, Noah was right. This feels *amazing*.

The audience demands for more, but I bet we'd collapse if we try to go again. So we wish them good night and run off the stage.

"Did you see that?" Elliot grabs his brother in for a hug. "They were crazy about us."

"We're back!" Mateo hugs the guys. "The Rock'n Jocks are back and better than ever. Thanks to our amazing Evie Hastings." He throws his arms around me and gives me such a massive hug that I wonder if my ribs will crack.

"It's not just me," I say as I hug Wyatt and Elliot, too. "We were all amazing. We put everything into this, and it showed. And we have such a passionate male lead singer. We couldn't have done it without you, Noah." I fling my arms around him and hug him super tightly. I've hugged this dude in the past...but not like this. This feels different. Very different. So different that I yank my arms off him and stumble back, just as he does the same.

“Thanks,” he says, his cheeks red. “But Mateo is right, Evie. You were the star tonight. You shone brighter than any of us. Thanks so much for agreeing to be part of the band. You’ve changed our lives.”

Wyatt snickers. “Way to be dramatic.”

That causes us to laugh.

“Thanks, but we were *all* amazing,” I repeat. “And I can’t wait to perform with you guys again.”

“Celebration at Mikey’s!” Wyatt yells as he raises a fist in the air.

“Heck yeah!” we agree.

Chapter Nineteen

Noah

My bandmates and I have been celebrating at Mikey's for I'm not sure how long, but I'm not really here. Physically I am, but not mentally.

I can't forget how incredible I felt when I was rocking it on that stage. Evie and I were on fire—we totally killed it. The songs and the music were amazing and I felt like I was the happiest person on the planet. That no one and nothing could tear me down. And when the audience clapped and jumped to their feet demanding an encore, I knew that was where I was supposed to be.

But of course I can't be that guy.

"You're quiet." Wyatt throws a fry at me. "What're you so preoccupied with?"

My eyes move to Evie, who's sitting across from me, and from the look on her face, I know she's also thinking about our amazing performance. She hasn't stopped smiling since the audience chanted our names. Even though she doesn't want a career in music, it still means a lot to her because singing is a big part of her.

"Noah?" Evie snaps her fingers in my face. "You're being weird."

I dip a fry in ketchup. "I'm okay. Just got a lot on my mind. We had a great gig, guys. Our best one yet. Hopefully we'll have many more in the future."

Elliot nods enthusiastically, then takes a bite of his burger.

"You mean until summer is over," Mateo corrects.

"Right." I clear my throat. "I meant that."

Evie looks at me and I glance away from her.

"I'll have to find a new band, but this should help get my name out

there,” Elliot says. “No business school for me.” He high-fives Evie, who laughs, her eyes bright. I’ve seen her get excited over her art, but this is a different kind of happiness. Maybe because we’re a team and we all understand each other. Painting is more of a solitary activity.

Wyatt beams. “We’ll have an awesome summer. Us boys and our wow factor. It’ll be epic.”

Yeah, and then real life will begin.

Evie catches my eyes, lifting a brow. I glance away from her again, dumping a few fries in my mouth.

We talk about other things—the performance, Wyatt mentions he got a few girls’ numbers, and we’re just having a good time celebrating. I try not to think about how much I’ll miss it when it’s over and focus on living in the moment.

Elliot points his fork at me. “You’ve gotta come up with more songs, man. That new one was epic.”

I gesture toward Evie. “It was all her.”

“No, it wasn’t. You came up with the lyrics. I just…”

“Made them better?” Wyatt supplies.

Evie frowns. “Not better—”

“It’s okay, Evie,” I tell her. “I can own up to my mistakes and shortcomings. The song was bad and you elevated it.”

She shrugs. “I disagree, but whatever. If you need help, I’m your girl. Your wife will never leave you hanging.”

I nod in appreciation. “Thanks. I was thinking maybe we can move to a different kind of song. Maybe…love songs?”

The guys make faces.

I hold up my hands. “Or not. Was just a suggestion.”

Wyatt scowls. “We have a girl in the band and we’ve got a new style

now. But we're not a love song kind of band."

"Evie and Noah were fire up there, though," Mateo says. "Maybe Noah's onto something. They've got great chemistry."

Evie and I exchange a glance. I hate to admit it, but he's right. We don't always get along, but we create magic on the stage.

"I guess I'm not against the idea..." Elliot says as he rubs his chin. "We'll see how it goes. All I care about is getting gigs and putting my name out there."

We discuss other matters and then it's time for us to head home. We make our way to the exit, but I notice Evie remains at the table. I tell the guys I'll meet them outside, then return to her.

"What's up?" I ask her. "Aren't you coming?"

She shakes her head, keeping her gaze on her hands that are clasped on the table. "I just want to sit here and think for a little bit."

The diner's mostly empty at this hour, and it's quiet and peaceful. The perfect place if you want to be alone with your thoughts.

"Want company?"

She slowly lifts her head. "I guess."

I whip out my phone and text Elliot to go home without us, then slide into the seat across from Evie.

We sit in silence, her staring at her clasped hands and me watching her.

After a bit, I say, "Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?"

"It's not me. It's you." She raises her hands in defense. "I know you told me to leave you alone, but I can't. I overcame my fear today by singing in public and it was the most incredible thing ever. I felt like I was a better version of myself. A version I want to be. But then I look at you, at the fire in your eyes when you're singing up there, and then I feel so...defeated."

I'm quiet for a second or two before saying, "I don't understand why you

care.”

“I don’t either! I just do, okay? I can’t bear seeing you singing your heart out and then just leaving it behind like it means nothing to you.”

I look away from her.

She slides her phone over to me. “Someone posted this video online.”

I take her phone and watch the video. It’s the band during our performance. We look pretty much like an up-and-coming band. The crowd is wild with excitement and Evie and I are on that stage singing like pros. We look like we’re doing something we love. *I* look like I belong on that stage.

I swallow the lump in my throat as I slide her phone back to her. “I know...I felt really good up there.”

“Understatement. You were radiant. And you’re just going to throw it away for football? Football players will come and go, but talent like yours is rare. It should be shared with the world because it uplifts people, gives them hope and inspires them to overcome their problems. That’s the power you have. But you know something?” She gets to her feet. “Like you said, it’s your life, and I have no business telling you what to do.” She reaches for her bag and turns away from me to head to the door.

“Evie, wait.”

She faces me.

Swallowing the lump in my throat again, I slowly get to my feet and make my way over to her. “You’re...you’re right. I...” I squeeze my eyes shut. “I felt amazing up there.” My eyes open. “I was the happiest I’ve been in a very long time. Being up there with you, jamming it out with the guys, feeling the crowd’s energy...I want it. I want all of it, Evie. So badly I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“Noah!” She flings her arms around me. “Of course you want it. And you deserve to have it.”

Shaking my head, I pull away from her. “But my dad...”

“No. I don’t want to hear about your dad.” She glances at the few diners who are watching us. “Want to get out of here and go for a walk?”

“Sure.”

We leave the diner and take a stroll around the nearby park. We don’t say anything for a bit before she breaks the silence.

“I know making your dad proud is important to you, but you need to put yourself first. There are so many people out there who will be uplifted by your music.”

I nod slowly. “I want to inspire others with my music. I want to make them happy and take them away from their stressful lives, even if it’s only for a short while. I want to follow my dreams, Evie. I’m sorry I was so rude to you when you were just trying to help me. It’s just that the thought of hurting my dad...”

She stops and places her hand on my arm. “Why is your dad’s happiness more important than yours? He’s living his dream life. He had a fantastic football career and has a wonderful family. Now it’s your turn.”

I don’t say anything as I think over her words. “I’m not sure. My dad is my hero and I want him to be proud of me.”

“Don’t you think he’ll be proud and happy knowing you’re doing what you love?”

Sighing, I lower myself on a park bench and bend forward, running my hand through my hair. “But what if I fail? My dad has this life planned out for me. A life where I could be successful and provide for my future family. A career in music is so unpredictable. There’s no guarantee I’ll make it big. And if I choose music over football, I’ll lose my shot at a stable life.”

She’s quiet as she stares at the spot before her.

It’s silent except for the light breeze.

“You’re right,” she says after a bit. “Your concerns are one hundred percent valid. But life itself is so unpredictable. It’s messy and full of pain and uncertainty. But life is also amazing and good and *fun*. Chasing your dreams and achieving them is the most fulfilling thing in the world. I mean, look at me. My art is very unpredictable, too. What if I don’t sell a single painting? What if I can barely pay rent? But I’d rather go after my passion than have a boring job where I’ll be miserable.”

I nod slowly. “Good point. But I’m just so worried I’ll fail and disappoint everyone. What if I can’t provide for my future family?”

“Noah, you’re only seventeen. Why are you worrying about your future family? Can’t you for once in your life let go of this rigid demeanor you’ve got going on and have *fun*? I know your emotions come out when you’re on that stage. Why are you so scared to show your emotions to the world?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just not like that.” I rub a hand down my face. “I don’t know what to do.”

“What does your heart tell you?”

I take a moment or two to truly feel what my desire is. “My heart wants me to follow my dream.”

“Then that’s what you’ll do.” She beams at me. “But I think you need to tell your parents about your music. It’s not right to keep such a huge part of yourself from your family. Chances are they’ll find out anyway and they’ll be devastated that you couldn’t talk to them about it.”

She’s right. I’ve been so focused on making my parents proud of me that I’ve been hiding such a big secret from them. They *would* be hurt if they heard it from someone other than me.

“I want to tell them,” I say. “But you know what happened when I tried to tell my dad when we went running.” I rub the back of my neck. “My dad gets so excited about my future football career. I don’t want to hurt him.”

She's quiet again, though I see her eyes spinning. Then she jumps to her feet, her eyes bright as she turns to me. "I've got it! You might not be able to tell them, but maybe you could show them."

I stand up. "Show them?"

She nods vehemently. "We can have a performance. Maybe at a fancy place and have this huge show and invite your family—and maybe the rest of the Musketeers too because they love you—and you'll be on that stage singing your heart out and your parents will see you."

I rub my chin, my eyebrows furrowed. "Telling them through what I do best. Music. Honestly, I've always wanted to perform for them. This could be a good opportunity to show them how much music means to me."

"Exactly!"

I start pacing. "We'll need to find a good place and I'll need to make sure the songs and music are perfect..."

"Noah, please get out of your head and stop stressing. I'll get the guys to help me with the venue and all that other stuff. You focus on the music and the songs. And I'll help you."

I rush over to her, pull her into my arms, and spin us around. "I'm so excited, but so nervous." When I realize what I've done, I lower her to the ground. "Sorry. I guess I'm a little emotional."

She rolls her eyes before yanking me into her arms.

Chapter Twenty

Evie

The performance is tomorrow night. *Tomorrow night.*

Elliot managed to snag us a concert hall for free here in Edenbury (something about the owner owing him for almost running over his dog?) and we've invited all of our families and close friends. They don't know where they've been invited to, though, just that they need to come. The only thing left is for the band to show up and give them the performance of our lives.

Noah has been a complete mess the last few days. When not at band practice, he's cooped up in his room working on the lyrics for the new songs we hope to perform. He wants them to be perfect because he wants to show his parents how passionate he is about his music. He wants them to be proud of him. It doesn't matter how many times I try to convince him that his parents will be proud of him even if the song isn't perfect, but he doesn't listen to me. It's almost like he thinks his parents being proud of him will wash away any of the guilt he feels for not following in his dad's footsteps and becoming the next Barrington legend.

I'm almost in his room as often as he is because the dude barely eats, barely sleeps, and he almost falls behind in his homework. His *homework!* I don't think he's ever missed an assignment or test since middle school.

I can't count how many times I try to convince him to go out and get some fresh air, maybe go for ice cream or something. Take a break and clear his head or he'll go out of his mind. But he tells me—multiple times—that he doesn't need a break or fresh air. The only thing he needs is to stay planted on his desk chair and work on the songs and music.

We have a final rehearsal at the concert hall in an hour. Right now, Noah is at his desk reviewing the songs one last time to make sure they're as

perfect as can be, and he's listening to a recording of the music. In my eyes, the songs and the music are a billion bucks, but try telling him that.

"Noah! What will it take to convince you that it's beyond perfect?" I groan as I fall down on his bed and stare at the ceiling. "I bet you'll be changing the lyrics when we're on stage tomorrow night."

He doesn't say anything. He probably didn't even hear me.

"How about we have some fun before the rehearsal?" I suggest. "Ice cream run? We can get the one they serve at Bernie's. You know, with the thick, rich fudge you love so much? A sugar boost will be nice before the rehearsal."

No response from him. I might as well be talking to the walls.

"No-ah," I stress.

Still, nothing.

"Mrs. Duncan just sent me an email," I lie. "Says we're expecting twins!"

Nada.

"You forgot to do your physics homework."

Zilch.

"You don't have enough credits to graduate and you'll have to go to summer school."

Zilch times two.

"Oh my gosh, you're impossible!" I get up from the bed and march over to him, grabbing him by the shoulders and spinning him around in his chair.

"What the—?" He blinks at me. "Evie? How long have you been here?"

I stare at him. "Are you telling me you didn't realize I was here?"

"Um...no? How long were you here?"

"Like fifteen minutes. How could you not remember I was here? You even nodded to me when I walked in."

"I guess my head wasn't here. Sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but I need

to look over the songs one more time—”

“No, no, no! We’re going for ice cream to relax before the final rehearsal.”

“Evie, you’re not supposed to have dairy before you sing.”

“Ugh, seriously? You suck the fun out of everything.” I carefully snatch away the notebook with the lyrics before he can get back to them and hold it behind my back. “Look at me, Noah.”

“I don’t have time—”

“Look. At. Me.”

With a sigh, he does.

“I get that you’re nervous and want to impress your family, but this isn’t healthy for you. You’ve spent the last few days agonizing over this performance, but you have to let go. You can’t control everything, Noah. Whatever happens tomorrow night will be okay. Just have faith in yourself and in the band. And in your family.”

He keeps his eyes on me for a bit, trying to digest my words. Then he shakes his head and is about to say something, when the alarm on his phone goes off. After sweeping it off his desk, he scans the screen and stands. “We need to head to the hall. Mr. Tabbitt is going to meet us there and I don’t want to be late.”

“The owner of the hall will be there to listen to us? But I thought you already showed him one of our videos and he liked what he heard.”

Noah shrugs. “I guess he wants to hear us live? I’m going to text the guys to get moving. I don’t want to give Mr. Tabbitt any reason to be disappointed in us.”

We wait outside for Elliot to pick us up in the van. When it arrives, Mateo and Wyatt are already inside, their faces flushed with excitement.

“I can’t believe we’re putting on such a huge performance,” Mateo says.

“It’s kind of like our first concert.”

“Drive, Elliot,” Noah instructs. “I want to get there early enough to set up before Mr. Tabbitt meets with us.”

Elliot holds up his hands. “Geez, man.” He steps on the gas and drives us to the concert hall. Even though I stole Noah’s lyrics notebook, he has a copy on his phone and spends the ride looking it over.

This guy... Seriously.

We arrive at the concert hall, and with the help of the crew, we unload our instruments and equipment. Then we walk inside, each of us marveling at how amazing the place is. It’s an actual concert hall that hosts actual musicians and bands. I can’t believe we’re here.

“This is like a dream come true,” Elliot says as we start setting up. “I hope this helps launch my music career.”

“You throwing us away already?” I joke.

“Of course not,” he says. “But none of you want to pursue a music career. Other than Noah.”

Wyatt claps Noah on the back. “Football will miss you, man, but we’re happy you’re going after what you want.”

“You okay, man?” Mateo asks Noah.

He nods, his mind somewhere else.

I groan. “Come on, Noah. You should enjoy the moment and not stress out about it. Because this place right here?” I gesture around. “It’s incredible. It would be a shame to not soak in every single moment.”

He snaps in. “You’re right. I’ll try.”

“Mic test,” I say as I walk up to the mic. “Testing, testing. One, two, three. You hear me up front? Awesome. You hear me back there? Awesome. What about you guys over there? Hear me well?”

“Evie, no one’s there.” Wyatt chuckles.

“But they will be in twenty-four hours,” Elliot says with a nervous laugh.

“We’re all set up,” Noah says as he gathers his guitar in his arms. “Let’s start playing so Mr. Tabbitt could see how serious and dedicated we are.” He nods to me. “Ready?”

“Oh heck yeah,” I say.

Elliot gives us a beat and off we go singing the first song. I have to say, some of the songs Noah has written were fire, but this one? Holy cow. It’s better than anything he’s ever written before—at least from what I’ve heard. It talks about being lost and confused and wanting desperately to follow your dreams, but being too afraid to do so. It mentions wanting to make your parents proud of you but worrying you’ll disappoint them. Then it ends with making the hard and sometimes selfish decision of doing what is best for you and hoping that the people you love will accept and support you.

Obviously, it’s about Noah and is written to his parents. Even though it’s not a love song, it’s super emotional and something everyone can relate to. And the way Noah sings it with so much feeling? It’s sure to be a mega hit.

As the song comes to its conclusion, someone claps from the audience area. We all twist our heads to the right and left looking for the person—it’s so hard to see with the bright lights—and then he steps closer.

“Mr. Tabbitt,” Noah says, stopping strumming his guitar. “Sorry, we didn’t realize you were watching us.”

He waves his hand. “Nonsense. I’m glad you didn’t stop. You kids are amazing.”

Noah’s face shines with relief. “Really? Thanks. Thanks so much. We practiced so hard and—”

“Listen,” he says with a grave expression as he moves closer to the stage. “I’m afraid I have bad news.”

Noah’s face falls. “Bad news?”

He holds up his hand with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, but you kids won’t be able to perform here tomorrow night. I booked another band.”

We all gape at him like his words don’t make sense in our heads.

“You...what?” Noah whispers, completely befuddled.

“I apologize. I truly am sorry. But considering this is a favor and it won’t be bringing me in any income...” He shrugs helplessly. “It’s a Saturday night, kids. I can’t afford to put on free performances.”

“We’ll pay you,” I say. “Whatever it costs, we’ll pay.”

He shakes his head. “I doubt you can afford this place, honey.”

“Did he just call me ‘honey?’” I mutter.

“You’re just throwing us aside like an old torn shoe?” Elliot demands. “You promised me we could perform here.”

The man frowns. “I know. And like I said, I apologize. But I already booked the other band—”

“This isn’t cool, man!” Wyatt says. “We practiced our butts off. Our families and friends are coming.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing we can do?” Mateo asks.

Mr. Tabbitt shakes his head. “There isn’t.” His eyes sweep over our equipment. “I’ll give you some time to clear out the place. Please be gone within the next hour so the other band can set up.” He looks at us with a regretful expression. “Maybe another time, when you guys could afford a place like this?” He gives us a small smile before turning around and walking away.

The guys exchange glances with each other, but my gaze is on Noah. His chest rises and falls heavily, a look of extreme loss on his face. Failure. Worthlessness.

“We’re not giving up without a fight.” I grab Noah’s hand and pull him off the stage. “Mr. Tabbitt!” I call as we follow him outside into a small

hallway.

He turns around and sighs. “Look, kids, I’m really sorry—”

“Save the BS,” I say. “You agreed to let us perform here, and you need to keep your word.”

He lifts his hands again. “Believe me, if there was something I could do —”

“Do you have any idea how hard he worked to make this performance spectacular?” I throw my thumb in Noah’s direction. “He barely ate, he barely slept, he didn’t even want to go for ice cream! I’ve never met anyone as determined and dedicated as Noah Barrington. We might not bring in money tomorrow night, but I assure you that after our performance, people will *beg* you to have us again.”

“Look, kid—”

“The Rock’n Jocks are amazing,” I say. “One of the most amazing bands in the whole world. Want to know why? Because we’re talented. We’re driven. We’re young and we’re fresh, and Noah and I are magic on stage. You heard us. You know exactly what I’m talking about. And you’re throwing us away because of *money*?”

“This is the real world, kid. And in the real world, things aren’t so simple. I have a reputation to uphold. And having an unknown band perform...it’s a big risk. You’re old enough to understand that.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Reputation? Is that what you’re worried about?” I fold my arms over my chest. “I know someone who works for the Edenbury Press. I wonder what she’ll say when I tell her what went down tonight at this beautiful concert hall. Noah, you think people will be happy to hear how this guy tossed us aside last minute after promising we could perform here? After we spent *days* and *blood, sweat, and tears* working on the perfect performance? I wonder how much money this place will bring in

after that.”

Noah gapes at me like he can't believe these words are actually coming out of my mouth. Truth is, I'm not sure I believe it either. I must be possessed or something.

The guy's face is sheet white. “The...the Edenbury Press?” he stammers. “Yep.” I narrow my eyes at him. “And she can *destroy* you.”

Sweat gathers at his temples. With shaky lips, he puts on a smile. “There m-must have been a misunderstanding. Of course you kids are performing here tomorrow night. We're glad to have you and look forward to working with you again in the future.”

As shaky as a leaf in the wind, he whirls around and bolts away.

Noah stares at me with humongous eyes. “Evie...”

“The nerve of that guy. Can you believe him? Unknown band. Everyone has to start somewhere. You've worked so hard for this and he just threw it in your face—”

Noah grabs me by the waist and plants his lips on mine.

I'm startled and am about to push him away, but then my body softens and I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him back. Our lips move over each other's hesitantly, shy and uncertain and curious, but then they start to move a little fervently, as though something is building between us. Something that is new and scary and wonderful and terrifying.

Noah gathers me closer to his chest, holding me carefully and gently like I'm something special he doesn't want to lose. His arms are strong and protective, but they're soft, too, and warm and perfect.

I've never kissed anyone before, and this right here? Oh my gosh.

Then it dawns on me that I'm kissing Noah Barrington. My unofficial nemesis. The guy I'm supposed to dislike.

Noah must realize it at the same moment because we both push away

from each other.

“S-sorry,” he says, his face bright red. “I was...I mean...this was...”

“Stupid,” I say with a nervous laugh, my cheeks scorching. “Silly. Our emotions are high and we were just caught up in the moment...”

He nods so fast his head might snap off. “Yeah. Totally. Caught up in the moment. Of course.”

I nod just as fast as him, my head moments from snapping off, too.

We both stand here in silence. Extreme, awkward silence.

Noah forces a laugh. “Thanks for...you know. You saved our butts.”

“Well, I’m part of the band, so...”

He nods again, a frown forming on his lips. “You do know my mom doesn’t have that much power at the Edenbury Press...”

I raise my chin. “He doesn’t have to know that.”

Noah stares at me with wide eyes. Then he chuckles. “No, he doesn’t.” He opens the door and jogs inside, calling out to the rest of the band, “Hey, guys! You won’t believe what Evie just did.”

I slowly bring my fingers to my lips, the feeling of Noah’s lips pressed against them invading my mind. That was...that was....well, it was something all right. But it didn’t mean anything. It couldn’t have.

Caught up in the moment, just like I said. That has got to be the only explanation...

Right?

Chapter Twenty-One

Evie

As soon as I'm home after rehearsal, I make my way downstairs to my studio to work on my paintings. I still have so much to do for my portfolio and my gifts to my family.

Okay, maybe I also need a distraction so I'll stop thinking about the... the...

The *kiss*.

No matter how many times I try to push the memory and feeling of his lips moving over mine out of my head, it pushes back much harder. As though it doesn't plan to leave anytime soon, or ever. For my first kiss... wow. And with *Noah Barrington*. Geez, who knew Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt could kiss like that?

I wonder how it would feel if we would do it again—

No! No, no, *no*.

I grab a blank canvas and start working on Lily's painting. My inspiration for this one is from a photo my parents took of the two of us a few years ago, on Halloween. She desperately wanted to be one of her favorite Regency heroines and, using her freaky persuasive powers, she got Liam to be the duke and me to be the jealous other woman.

Mom helped us make the costumes and I have to say that they were *amazing*. In the photo, Lily and I stand side by side with our arms wrapped around each other, huge smiles on our faces because every single person we passed that night complimented us on our costumes. We even spoke with British accents and everything.

The reason this picture means so much to me is because it shows how much I love my sister and would do anything for her, even dress up as a rich,

snobby woman from the Regency era. We have a tight bond that I hope will still stay strong while I'm thousands of miles away for college.

I work on the painting for a while, my mind drifting—without my permission—to a certain event that happened only a few hours ago. And like before, no matter how much I try to push it away, it just fights back.

“Aren't I supposed to have control over you, brain?” I grumble as I continue to paint. “I get that you want to prove how functional you are, but maybe you can function at a lower capacity for a little while? Maybe yank other memories to the forefront so I can forget—”

A gasp escapes my lips as my gaze settles on my painting. It's supposed to be about me and my sister. But it's not about me or my sister. It's a portrait of Noah.

My palette slides out of my hand and splats to the floor, some of the paint squirting everywhere. I back away from the painting as though there's a monster inside it that will claw its way out and devour me whole. “No...” I whisper, my eyes taking in the painting like it refuses to believe it's actually there. “This can't be...”

But it is, right there in front of me. A portrait of Noah Barrington, his blue eyes intense and holding so much emotion—like he's delving into my soul—and his sandy brown hair styled in a way that makes him look super sexy, and his lips look so tempting—

“Oh my gosh.” I grab my burning cheeks when it dawns on me what kind of thoughts are flitting through my mind. It has to be because of the kiss, right? It caused my brain to short-circuit and it'll take some time for it to get back to normal. Yeah, because the kiss didn't mean anything, just happened because he and I were a mess of emotions. I bet he's not even thinking about it.

Wait. Is he thinking about it?

Oh my gosh, am I seriously freaking out whether he's thinking about it or not?

"My brain isn't working right," I say as I step up to the easel and rip off the canvas. I'm about to chuck it out the window, but my hands refuse to move. Without permission, my eyes once again move to the painting, taking in Noah's face. I painted him differently from how I see him in real life. Even though his eyes are intense with emotion, there's a softness to them as well, something inviting that makes me want to...*know* him. Understand what's going on in that brain of his and learn more about him.

"Geez!" I'm once again about to chuck the canvas, but my hands freeze. I don't know what it is, but I can't seem to destroy the painting. It's because... because even though I didn't realize I was painting it, it's a darn good painting. Something that probably should go into my portfolio, but no way in heck am I putting it there. I don't have the heart to kill it when it's a good piece, so I walk over to the corner of the room and hide it behind the wall, among other junk I have there. At least this way, it won't see the light of day.

I return to my easel and pick my palette off the floor. This time, I make sure to focus on Lily's painting and not things I *shouldn't* be thinking about.

But a few minutes into it, I realize that the outline of Lily's face doesn't match how it is in real life. It looks more like...

I gasp again. "No!" This time, I tear the canvas off and toss it away. "Why won't you leave my head?!"

I can't paint like this, not when the memory refuses to leave my head. So I march up the stairs and make my way to my room, but stop in my tracks when I notice Lily and Liam are in the living room with their friends. Each of them has a copy of the same book open before them, except for Lily because she uses an e-reader.

They stop whatever they were discussing when I walk in.

“Hey,” I say. “You guys are having your book club here?”

“We had to cancel it on Wednesday because I had an appointment,” Ava explains. “So we decided to have one here because someone is dying to finish it so we can start discussing the next book.” She looks pointedly at Lily.

Lily gives her an innocent face. “What? It’s been two weeks since we’ve read a Regency.”

Liam chuckles as he waves his book around. “I’m a little sick of this one, too. It was good and all, but I think I’m ready for another romance, too.”

Chloe looks like she has hearts in her eyes. “I love that you enjoy romances just as much as we do.”

Liam’s face gets a little red. “Romances aren’t only for girls.”

“Darn right,” Willow says. “Everyone has the right to read whatever they want without feeling shame.”

“Wait, is that *The Lost Kingdom of Ryven*?” I ask as I step further into the room. “I read that one.”

“Really?” Lily asks. “That’s so cool. We barely ever read the same books because you love high fantasy and I only read those kinds of books for the club.”

“Yeah, this one was more paranormal than fantasy, but it was pretty good.”

“Evie, do you want to join us?” Liam asks.

“Yeah, join us, big sis! It’ll be so much fun to have you.”

“The more the merrier,” Willow says with a smile, adjusting her glasses. “You’re welcome here anytime.”

“I’d love to hear your thoughts on some of the world-building,” Chloe tells me. “Some things were so strange.”

I’m about to refuse. Reading for me has always been a solitary activity, where I keep my thoughts and feelings about a book to myself. But for some

reason, I want to discuss the book with them. And that's not only because I want to distract myself from thoughts about the kiss. I genuinely want to do this with them.

With a smile, I hop onto the recliner. "Sure, I'd love to join your book club for today. But be warned, I have a lot of opinions on this book."

Ava grins. "That's what we love to hear."

They pick up from where they left off, and I add in my thoughts. Hearing everyone's different thoughts on certain parts of the book or characters' motivations are so eye-opening. And the fact that all of them are so eager to hear my thoughts feels really good.

"I've been holding back because I know this isn't the focus of the story," Lily says, eyes so bright it's like she has the sun buried in them. "But I can't hold back anymore. Let's talk about the kiss!"

"I've been wanting to discuss it, too," Chloe says with a laugh. "It was pretty epic."

"And reading Damon's thoughts on it was refreshing," Liam says. "I love how we were able to get inside his head and understand all the emotions he was feeling. It explained a lot of his previous actions."

Lily nods vehemently. "Totally!"

"I have to admit, I didn't ship them from the start," Willow informs us. "But after that kiss? Sold."

Kiss...

Warm lips pressed against mine...

Strong but gentle hands holding onto my waist...

My body lit up like it was on fire...

"K-kiss?" I blurt, nearly jumping out of my seat. "Why are we discussing the kiss? This isn't a romance novel!"

"So?" Lily asks. "It was still an amazing scene and added a lot to the

story. Actually, it changed everything.”

“But can we skip it? There are so many better parts to the story.”

Lily shakes her head resolutely. “Nope.”

I sigh. So much for forgetting...*it*.

Liam watches me closely. “You okay? You look...I don’t know. Weird.”

“I’m always weird,” I mutter.

“Weirder than usual,” he jokes.

I raise my shoulders. “I’m fine.”

Liam continues watching me, not seeming to believe me. “No. You’re acting odd.”

“Just tired,” I lie as I rub my eyes.

“Is it because of whatever you and Noah have planned for tomorrow?”

Lily asks. “What’s the big secret?”

At the mention of Noah and tomorrow, my cheeks get so hot I feel like I fell into a furnace. “Secret? Oh, nothing. I mean, you’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Oh, come on!” Lily begs. “Tell us what it is.”

“Nope.”

“We’re all looking forward to it,” Chloe tells me. “Whatever it is. The whole gang is coming, the Four Musketeers and the Junior Musketeers, and Aunt Bailey and Uncle Zane and the kids.”

“Plus our boyfriends and Aidan’s mom and sisters...” Ava adds.

“Please can you tell us what it is?” Lily begs again.

“Yeah, I’m super curious,” Liam says. “Does it have anything to do with your art?”

“But Noah’s not into art,” Willow reminds him. “Is it a school project, Evie? Do you guys have to pretend to get married for LRG class and have a fake ceremony?”

I shake my head. “We’re already pretend married. And stop trying to

sway me into telling you. You'll just have to wait until tomorrow."

"Rats." Ava frowns.

"Can we continue discussing the book?" I ask, not wanting to think about tomorrow night any more than I have to because that'll make me just think of the...incident. "And can we move past the kiss scene, please?"

"You're so unromantic," Lily whines. "Do you even have Mom's genes?"

"I think she was adopted," Liam teases.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I'm adopted because I'm so different from you guys and Mom and Dad."

There was a time in my life when I really considered it. But I was the first kid to be born to a Musketeer, so all of them are witnesses that I'm the offspring of Ally and Zack Hastings.

"Didn't your dad say you remind him of his mom?" Ava asks me.

"You're named after her, too. Maybe you have some of her inside you."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, back to the book?"

As we continue discussing *The Lost Kingdom of Ryven*, thoughts of it finally leave me alone. I just hope it remains like that forever. And if not, I'll have to pretend it never happened and act completely normal. Normal around Noah. Especially because we need to focus on the special performance tomorrow.

He has always fit into a certain place in my life, and I want him to remain there without complicating things.

Things are fine just the way they are.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Noah

The guys, Evie, and I are backstage and I've been running my hand through my hair countless times. Are the songs okay? The music? How will my parents react when they see me on the stage? Will they be disappointed in me?

A huge chunk of me knows that they won't be because they love me and want me to be happy. But the other part of me convinces me that despite that, my dad will be crushed when he learns I don't want to follow in his footsteps.

"Breathe, Noah," Evie says as she comes to stand next to me. She places her hand on my arm, giving me a look like she's here for me, like she did yesterday. "You've got this."

Nodding, I take a deep breath. We'll step onto the stage in a few minutes. My heart thumps all over my body and I swear I'm seconds away from puking.

This isn't anything like my first performance. I need tonight to be perfect. I need to show my parents how much music means to me.

All we have to do is get on that stage and sing and play our hearts out. It shouldn't be too hard. But it is.

"Noah." Evie gazes into my eyes. "Your parents will love the performance. You have nothing to worry about."

I don't say anything as my heart continues to thump all over. I can barely hear anything around me, but I can feel the crowd behind the curtain. It's just our family and friends, but those are the most important people in my life and I want to show them who Noah Barrington really is.

"Listen to your wife," Wyatt says, where he, Mateo, and Elliot stand a few feet away, putting the finishing touches on their hair and outfits. We

went all out with the clothes tonight and if one didn't know any better, we look like one of the top rock bands in the world.

And it's all thanks to Evie. I don't know what I would do without her.

My mind wanders to something else that happened yesterday, something I don't want to think about but am powerless to stop it.

The kiss.

I still have no idea what came over me. I guess I was just so excited and grateful that it just happened...

Luckily, neither Evie nor I have brought it up. Pretending like it didn't happen is the best way to go. But honestly? It *didn't* happen. Not really. Because the guy who pulled Evie into his arms and kissed her was not me. It was some morphed version that took over my mind and body for those few minutes.

Then why can't I stop thinking about her warm, soft lips pressed against mine?

"You're up!" a crew member tells us.

All four of us look at one another.

"Well, this is it," Evie says. "Days of hard work and preparation all amount to this amazing moment. Let's go out there and kill it."

The guys cheer while I want to sink to the floor. But then I see the encouragement in Evie's eyes and something changes in me. All my doubts and insecurities seep out of me and are replaced with confidence. My family is out there. They came for me, even though they don't know that fact. I want to show them my dream and passion.

I'm ready.

We walk onto the stage and get into position. I sling my guitar over my shoulder as Evie and I stand so close there is hardly any space between us.

It's a little dark back here, but my eyes shoot to her lips before I can stop

them. I never noticed before how beautiful her lips are. And that I'd like to...

My eyes widen as I pull away from her.

Evie turns away for a second as well. Is she thinking about the kiss, too? Is she truly pretending like it didn't happen?

I don't have time to linger on it because the curtains are pulled open and the audience comes into view. It's a little hard to see because of the bright lights, but I can make out some people. My mom and dad and sisters are in the front, their eyebrows furrowed as though they don't understand what's going on.

All my confidence flies out the window as I watch them stare at the stage. What if I fail? What if I make a fool of myself?

Rylee points at me, and Mom, Dad, and Chloe continue giving me confused looks. I'm sure the rest of my family and friends share those looks, I just can't see them because of the lights.

The place seems more packed than I imagined it'd be. I guess with all the family members and friends of the five of us, the hall filled up pretty quickly.

Elliot gives us a beat and we start rocking it out. Evie and I sing together, our voices blending like it's the most natural thing in the world. It's different from our other practices, more intense and...magical. Maybe because this means so much to me. To all of us. None of us have ever performed for our family before.

As we sing, the energy bouncing off one another, I glance into the audience. Mom and Dad have bright smiles on their faces as they clap and dance along with the music.

The expression on their faces? No longer confusion, but joy. Pure joy. And I notice how proud they are of me. I know the music touches their souls, same way it always touches mine.

The song is about finding your place in the world. Your path. It's about

worrying you might disappoint the people you love, but wanting to follow your dreams. It's pretty much me telling my parents that I want to follow my dream, to walk down my own path instead of the one my dad has paved for me.

I see some tears shining in Mom's eyes, and Dad is not too far behind. Their arms are wrapped around each other in a loving embrace. I think I understand the message they're trying to send me.

They understand.

This moment is just as special and important to them as it is to me. They see me as more than just the son who's been trying all his life to be perfect. As more than the next Barrington quarterback. They see me as my true, authentic music-loving self.

And I know they love me exactly how I am.

The song ends with a bang, sending the audience into a frenzy of applause. Their cheers are so loud I bet you can hear them on the other side of the galaxy.

Smiling so widely my cheeks hurt, I say into the mic, "Thank you so much for coming, friends and family." I take a moment to glance around the room. "Tonight is a very special night for me. Sorry we kept you in the dark with this huge secret. But now you know." I look at my parents. "Mom, Dad, I'm sorry I haven't been honest with you. I've been keeping this from you and that was wrong." I gesture at myself and the guys and Evie. "The truth is that I'm in a rock band. I have been for quite some time now. There's a lot I want to talk to you about and I'm sorry I pushed you away. But I don't want to push you away anymore. This performance is dedicated to you." I look around at the audience. "And thanks so much to everyone else who has come out to support us. It means so much to us."

The audience erupts in more cheers. Mom blows kisses at me and Dad

smiles widely, a proud look on his face that I've never seen before, not even when I'm on the football field.

"We love you, Noah!" he calls.

"That's my brother!" Rylee shouts.

The guys' and Evie's families call out how much they love them as well.

Evie and I begin the next song. This one is more upbeat, and we have a lot of fun with it, walking on the stage, pressing our backs together. All five of us are having such a good time that all my nerves fly out the window.

When the song ends, the crowd cheers again.

We perform the rest of the songs like we have an endless supply of energy. I don't think any of us have ever played or sung this well before.

I love this. I don't want it to end.

But of course it has to because we only have this place for a few hours. Our friends and families continue cheering, even after we bow and leave the stage.

"Oh my gosh!" Evie throws her arms around me backstage. "That was the most amazing experience I've ever had in my life." She pulls off and beams at me. "Did you see the look on your parents' faces? They were so proud of you."

"I know." I pull her close to me. "I'm so happy."

"You should be."

It takes a second for me to realize that we're hugging a bit too closely, like we're more than friends.

We quickly jerk away from each other.

I smile awkwardly, holding out my hand. "Good job and thanks for everything."

"Y-yeah." She tucks some hair behind her ear, accepting my hand. "Good job."

Elliot, Wyatt, and Mateo hug me too and slap my hands, telling me over and over how awesome tonight was.

I can't stop smiling and thanking them for everything.

"Noah?"

Mom and Dad walk into the room, with Chloe and Rylee behind them.

I head over to them, unable to hide my smile. "Mom, Dad, Chloe, Rylee. Thanks so much for coming."

Mom pulls me into her arms while Dad encloses us in a tight hug. "We're so proud of you, sweetie," Mom says. "Why didn't you tell us you're in a band? Or that you love music?"

Drawing back, I shrug. "I don't know. I guess I was afraid you'd be disappointed in me."

"Disappointed?" Dad asks. "Why? Because of football?" He hugs me again. "Let's discuss that later. But I want you to know that I'm proud of you and will love you no matter what you do."

I hold onto him, like I did when I was little and it brought me comfort. "Thanks."

We leave the backstage room and mingle with the rest of the audience. Aunt Bailey, Uncle Zane, Ally, Zack, and all our parents' friends and their kids and their boyfriends rush over to Evie and me, telling us how spectacular tonight was. Wyatt, Elliot, and Mateo's families do the same to them.

"Rockstars in the making," Asher Park says as he pats me on the back, and then Evie. "Looks like we have two new stars in the group."

Evie waves her hand. "Nope. He's the star. I'm just helping him."

"You guys are so cool," Mia says. "And Noah, who knew under all that was a hottie rockstar?"

"Ew!" Rylee makes a face. "He's my brother."

"So? He's still hot."

She and Zoey make gagging noises.

Ally tells Evie how proud she is that she was courageous enough to go on that stage and sing in front of so many people. Zack hugs her close, and Lily and Liam can't stop praising her.

"So is this a thing?" Charlie asks as she looks from me to Evie. "You guys in a band together? Because the chemistry between you two..." She fans herself.

Evie and I exchange a glance with wide eyes, then quickly look away from each other. I've always known that there's no hiding anything from Charlie, but does she suspect that Evie and I...?

No, that's crazy.

And yeah, we have chemistry on stage, but that doesn't mean anything. The kiss didn't *mean* anything.

"No!" I say. "We're just in the band until we go off to college."

Evie nods quickly.

Charlie hides a smile as she gathers her husband and kids to go home. Easton, Dani, and Ava hug us next, then leave with everyone else, including Wyatt, Mateo, Elliot, and their families and friends. Only Evie, me, and our families stay behind.

I slide my hands into my pockets. "So...thanks for everything," I tell Evie. "Like I said, I couldn't have done it without you."

She waves her hand. "You don't need to thank me. I was happy to help."

I nod slowly, trying not to think about her lips pressed to mine. Her body heat leaps onto mine, causing the room to be a bit stifling.

Evie nods to my parents. "Look at them. I don't think I've ever seen them prouder of you."

I smile as I watch them. "Yeah." There's a light in their eyes as they talk animatedly to their friends. I think they're a little relieved because lately they

must have sensed that something was off with me, but they didn't know what. Because I didn't tell them.

"What happens now?" Evie asks.

"I need to have a long talk with my parents. You were right—it was wrong for me to keep them in the dark. They're my parents. If they wouldn't want what's best for me, who else would? I'm an idiot."

She places her hand on my shoulder, then quickly drops it and clears her throat. "You're not an idiot. You just didn't want to disappoint your dad."

"But I realize now that I was just disappointing myself."

We chat for a little bit, keeping some distance between us. Then my parents bid goodbye to Ally, Zack, Lily, Liam, and Evie, and my family gets in the car.

"You know what I realized?" Rylee announces while we're driving.

"What's that?" Dad asks.

She beams at me. "I have an awesome big brother."

Later that night, after we've eaten and Rylee and Chloe are in their rooms doing their own thing, Mom, Dad, and I settle on the living room couch.

"I'm sorry I hid my music from you," I tell them. "I just wanted to be a good son and make you happy."

Dad wraps one arm around me while Mom wraps the other. "We want *you* to be happy," Dad says. "Noah, why didn't you tell me you don't want a football career? You know I would have supported you."

"Your dad and I want you kids to follow your dreams," Mom adds.

"I know. I just...you were so happy coaching me football, Dad, and I didn't want to disappoint you."

He pulls me close to him. "I wouldn't have been disappointed. It hurts

that you carried all this pain and stress and didn't talk to anyone. I'm sorry I pushed you into football, but I thought you loved it. You always looked so ecstatic when you played and it was all you talked about since you were six years old."

I release a breath. "I do like football. I really loved it when I was younger. But over the years, it started not to mean as much as it did. But I knew from a young age that I needed to be the next legendary Barrington quarterback."

Dad's face falls and he swallows hard. With a shaky voice, he says, "Did I make you feel that way? I'm so sorry, Noah. That wasn't my intention at all. I just saw so much talent and potential in you, and how much you loved the sport. And when you got accepted to Astor University, I was thrilled for you. For you, not for me. Yes, it was exciting that you'd be attending my alma mater, but all I cared about were the exhilarating things you'd experience once you got there." He pauses. "That morning when we went for a run, I talked on and on about my years at the school. Why didn't you tell me it wasn't what you wanted?"

I rub the back of my neck. "You were excited and I didn't want to hurt you. I'm sorry."

Mom squeezes my hand. "Your job isn't to worry if you're hurting me or your dad. We want you to live the life you want. I wish you would have told us how you felt. Noah, you're an amazing musician and I know your future will be bright."

I lower my gaze to the rug. "But what if it isn't? Another reason I chose football was because I'm not sure I can make it as a musician. I'm good at football, I have that path set out for me. I'm worried about throwing it all away for a dream." I shrug. "I figured I'd have a successful career in football, like Dad did, and then I'd maybe coach or something."

"But that's not the life you want," Dad says. "I know it's scary to chase

your dreams, and yes, you're a great football player. But if your heart isn't into it, then what's the point? To have a career you aren't passionate about?"

"But it's a safe future for me. Music is so unpredictable. What if I regret not following in your footsteps, Dad?"

He smiles at me. "You have the passion and the determination to make it, and I know you will. But in the slight chance that you aren't successful, the important thing is that you tried."

"Because if you don't give it a shot," Mom says, "you might miss out on something spectacular. Dad and I will support you no matter what."

I nod as their words touch my heart and fill me with warmth. "Thanks so much, Mom and Dad. You always know what to say to make me feel better. I'm sorry I didn't confide in you."

Dad shakes his head. "I'm sorry you felt like you had to keep your music from us and couldn't tell us the truth about how you felt about football. You're my son and I should have noticed you were unhappy." His face falls again like he's berating himself.

"No, Dad, please don't blame yourself. How could you have known that I wasn't happy with football when I didn't tell you? I made a mistake by dragging it out as long as I did and applying to Astor University when I really don't want to go there."

"Of course you don't have to attend if you don't want to, sweetie," Mom tells me. "But we would like you to go to college."

I clear my throat as I reach for a folded letter in my back pocket. "Sorry I did this behind your back, but I applied to a music school and got in. I don't even know why I did it. Maybe from curiosity. Maybe a part of me was hoping I'd choose music." I hand them my acceptance letter.

"Noah, that's wonderful!" Mom says, wrapping both arms around me. "We're so proud of you."

I can't stop my face from splitting into a wide smile. "Thanks. I really want to go there and learn more about music."

Dad hugs me, too. "You know we'll support you and encourage you in whatever you do. You're our world and we love you so much and want you to be happy."

I hug them back. "Thanks." I draw away from them. "The only thing is that the school is on the opposite end of the country. It's an hour away from Evie's school."

As soon as her name leaves my mouth, her face enters my mind, her soft lips pressed against mine. And the memory of us so close to each other as we kissed and the feelings it evoked in me engulf me. But I shove it aside. Now is not the right time. No, it's never the right time because it *didn't* happen.

Why was she the first thing that popped into my head when I mentioned the music school? Her school being so close to mine shouldn't mean anything.

My parents and I spend a few more minutes talking. Dad still looks guilty because he thinks he pushed me and pressured me, and it takes me a short while to convince him this was on me, not him. I'm not one to talk about my feelings, but from now on, I'll try to confide in my parents more.

I bid them good night and head up to my room to finish my homework that's due on Monday.

"Noah!" Chloe calls as I pass her room on the way to mine. She runs into the hallway and smiles at me. "So did it go well?"

I nod. "Very well. Dad blames himself and I feel bad about it. I should have listened to you months ago when you told me to tell him how I felt. I'm sorry."

She waves her hand. "It wasn't my place to get involved."

"No, you were right to. I was just too stubborn to see it."

She places her hand on my shoulder. “You were worried about crushing Dad’s dreams and hopes for you. You just didn’t want to hurt him.”

“It was wrong of me. Don’t be like me, Chloe. Don’t hide anything from them because they love us and want the world for us. Even if Dad is a little disappointed that I won’t be following in his footsteps, he wants me to be happy.”

“I don’t think he’s disappointed.”

I shrug. “He devoted and invested so much of his time into my future. And now I’m just throwing it away.”

“I know Dad and he *wants* you to throw it away as long as you’re happy.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t know why I keep trying to convince myself that he’s disappointed in me.”

She rolls her shoulders. “Probably because that’s what you told yourself for years. But we’re all rooting for you, Mr. Bigshot Rockstar.”

Chuckling, I hold up my hands. “I’m not a rockstar yet. I’m just Noah Barrington, co-lead singer and backup guitarist for The Rock’n Jocks.”

She laughs, too. “Good night, Noah.”

“Night, Chloe.”

She enters her room, then turns around. “By the way, who convinced you to finally tell Mom and Dad the truth?”

“Evie.”

Her jaw drops. “*Evie?* She’s the last person you’d listen to.”

“We get along sometimes. Anyway, she’s part of the band, too, and we’re working really well together.”

The kiss flashes in my mind. Maybe we’ve been working *too* well together.

“And she’s your wife,” Chloe reminds me. “But how did she even become part of your band?”

“Wyatt claims we’re magic when we sing together.”

Her eyes brighten. “You are. Like, I felt something when you two sang together.”

“Felt something?”

“Like energy. You vibe off each other so well it’s like you have this deep connection that goes beyond anything in this world.” She laughs. “Ironic, huh? Well, good night.”

She walks into her room, leaving me with those words bouncing against my skull.

A deep connection? Evie and me? Nah. No. Can’t be.

But if I want to be honest with myself, I felt it when we kissed. I had no idea what it was, but now I’m thinking my sister might be right.

Evie and I have a connection. For years I thought it was mutual dislike of each other, but now...

No. It’s still that. It has to be.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Evie

I hum our most popular song from Saturday night as I get ready for school on Monday. I'm in such a good mood that I actually woke up early for a change and go downstairs to join my family for breakfast. Each one of them stares at me with surprise as I walk in and wish them a good morning, planting a kiss on Mom's cheek and then Dad's, then settling down at the table. There are stacks of pancakes and waffles, courtesy of Chef Liam, and I waste no time piling them onto my plate.

"Someone's in a good mood," Liam observes with a chuckle.

"Can you blame her?" Lily asks. "She and the band were fire Saturday night. I can't stop thinking about it. You guys were such kickbutts."

"And I can't forget how beautiful you sounded out there, sweetie," Mom says with a loving smile. "It brings me back to my high school days when I was in choir."

"Like beautiful mother, like beautiful daughter," Dad says as he places his hand over Mom's and they share a silent message. No doubt they're thinking about the days when they fell in love.

Makes a certain kiss pop into my head.

"Ugh," I groan as I shove it away.

My family gives me confused looks.

"I mean, thanks," I quickly say as I stuff a pancake into my mouth. "Oh my gosh." I sigh like I just shot up to heaven. "This is delicious, Liam. It's like a gorgeous mural in my mouth."

"Right?" Lily grabs another pancake and takes a bite. "Forget the syrup. This tastes amazing without it."

"Thanks," Liam says with pink cheeks.

“And you’ll be even more amazing once you’re done with your internship. You’re going to be this bigshot chef and prepare the most delicious dishes for us.”

“I hope so,” Liam says. “But not the bigshot part. I want to still be me.”

“Of course you will,” Mom says as she gets up to take her plate to the sink. “You can still stay true to yourself while pursuing your dreams. You don’t have to get caught up in all the fame and glory.”

“Fame and glory?” He shifts in his seat. “I hope that won’t happen.”

Dad stretches across the table to rub his arm. “You’ll be fine. Don’t stress about it.”

Lily suddenly gasps so loud that Mom almost drops her dish.

“What?” we all ask.

She’s staring at her phone with wide eyes. Then she waves it before us.

“Did you see this? Your video has gone viral, Evie!”

“What video? I didn’t post anything.”

“Not you. Chloe posted a video of your performance yesterday. It got some traction, but it suddenly went viral overnight.”

“*What?!*” I fly out of my chair and bolt over to her, grabbing her phone and studying the screen. She’s right. The video Chloe posted on Spill It! has indeed gone viral. There are so many likes and comments that my head spins.

“Listen to this!” Lily announces as she reads some of the comments.

““The Rock’n Jocks are a new and upcoming band that definitely has my attention! The lead singers are such a dynamic duo, and the music is spot on! When’s their next performance? I want to hear them live!” She swallows and reads the next one. ““Love this new band! They’re so fresh and their sound is great!’ ‘What’s the guy’s name? He’s soooo cute!””

“As if,” I mutter, even though a part of me can’t help but agree. Noah does look good up there. In fact, he looks very...sexy.

The kiss invades my mind.

Ugh! I shake my head, once again tossing the memory away.

“Look, Evie! A comment about you. ‘The girl’s name is Evie and she has such an amazing voice! And she’s so pretty. I *love* her. Totally obsessed with her style.”

My cheeks warm up. “Oh, wow.”

“Look at that.” Liam grins. “I’m related to a famous person.”

I playfully roll my eyes. “If anyone will be famous in this family, it’ll be you, Chef Liam. You know we’re only a band until after the summer. Maybe Elliot and Noah will form a new one together, but the rest of the guys and I will be gone.”

As the words leave my mouth, I feel a slight pinch in my chest.

Lily frowns. “That’s a shame.”

I shrug. “We’ll need to move on with our lives. I want to pursue an art career.”

“Can’t you do both?” Liam asks.

“And be tied to Noah Barrington for the rest of my life? *No thank you.*”

Lily frowns again. “I thought you guys were getting along. You know, friends make the best romantic partners—”

I groan. “Oh my gosh, Lily! Don’t even try to play Cupid on me. You guys need a ride to school?”

After they tell me that Xavier is giving them a lift, I gobble down a waffle, which is just as delicious as the pancake, grab my backpack and jacket, and make my way to my car. Once I get in, I find the video Chloe posted and watch our performance. I should be focusing on the entire thing as a whole, listening to the awesome music and our equally awesome vocals, but my eyes zero in on Noah. The way he flicks his head to the side, causing his hair to fall into his eyes...why does that make him look so hot?

There's so much light in his eyes, so much feeling and passion. I've seen him perform many times during practice and our previous performance at the club, but I've never truly studied him like I'm doing now. He's a star up there.

This weird tingly feeling invades every part of me. Causes a shiver to run down my spine. I shake my arms, shoving that odd sensation away, and chuck my phone on the passenger seat. After starting the car and pressing on the gas, I pull away from my house.

But the video won't leave my head. Which makes the kiss decide to take residence in there, too. Geez, what does it take to gain control over my brain?

To distract myself, I put on music—anything other than rock—and sing along with it. It helps a lot, and then I'm at school in the blink of an eye.

I'm not normally this early, so it's a little strange to enter the building with many other students. Something's up, though, because many of them push and shove to get inside. Are they giving away free pizza or something? Or maybe prom tickets are on sale?

As I get inside, my jaw nearly hits the floor. Because there's a mob in the center of the hallway. A mob that mostly consists of girls, though there are a fair share of guys, too.

They're crowded around something—or is it someone?—screeching and squealing and waving pieces of paper and phones around. It has to be prom tickets, right? I know some kids go nuts over it.

I'm about to turn away and head to my locker, but a few people move aside, giving me a clear view of whatever or whoever is the cause of the massive crowd. And my eyes almost tumble off my face. Is that...Noah?

“What the...?” I move closer, close enough where I can get a better look but not get trampled.

It is Noah.

The students crowding around him are yelling for autographs and selfies. No doubt they saw the viral video and are super happy we have a famous person at Edenbury High. Or maybe they think Noah is sexy—well, they wouldn't be the first ones.

For a second, I wonder if I should push my way through the crowd and bail him out. Poor guy doesn't deserve to go through this. But because he's Noah and always does the right thing, he signs the autographs and takes the selfies, even though he looks a little uncomfortable.

I think he understands what his music and songs mean to people, and he's grateful that they're coming over to let him know how appreciative they are of him.

Well, his dreams are certainly coming true. He's officially a rockstar.

"Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is Evelyn Hastings at school twenty minutes before class starts?" Hannah's voice says.

I turn around and find her and Penny standing before me with amused expressions.

"We must have fallen into another dimension," Penny adds with a chuckle. "Because the person standing before us is not the Evie we know and love."

"Haha," I say as my eyes trek back to Noah, who's signing a girl's cast.

"So why so early?" Penny asks.

I shrug. "Too much excitement the last two days has caused me to have some insomnia."

Hannah is about to say something, but then her brows furrow as she watches the mob. "Is that Noah?"

"Yep."

"Cool. I saw the video on Spill It! You guys are like famous or something."

I roll my eyes at her. “Noah is the famous one. Almost all the comments on the video are about him.”

“True,” Penny says. “But you all were amazing.”

“Thanks.” I narrow my eyes as a girl lowers the neckline of her shirt just a little so Noah can sign her upper chest. “Do you see that? Some girls are so pathetic.” It’s obvious Noah doesn’t feel so comfortable signing there, but he can’t really say no in front of all the other people. “They don’t even know him,” I grumble. “They just see a hot guy on stage and are suddenly obsessed with him.”

“That’s how it is with musicians,” Hannah points out. “Besides, he’s already popular at school because he was the Lions’ quarterback for four years.”

“Look at that girl.” I nod to a light-haired girl who’s whispering something in his ear. “What do you think she’s saying to him?”

“Maybe she’s giving him her number?” Penny supplies.

I snort. “As if he’d go for someone like her. She’s so not his type.”

Penny looks at me with an amused expression. “And you know who his type is?”

“Someone with a stick up her butt?”

Penny and Hannah laugh.

“It’s really ridiculous,” I go on. “They don’t even care to know what kind of person he is. They’re just looking at him on a superficial level. Oh my gosh, do you see that girl? She has a boyfriend and she’s practically throwing herself at him. Look at the way the guy watches her with sad eyes.” I shake my head. “Why do girls lose their minds over musicians?”

“Evie, why are you getting so bent out of shape?” Hannah asks. “Why do you care if girls are going gaga over him?”

I shrug as I tear my eyes away from him. “I don’t. I just think our gender

can do a little better.”

Penny snorts as my eyes return to the show. “If he wasn’t Noah, I’d be in the crowd, too.”

“Me, too!” Hannah adds with a giggle.

I groan. “You two are no better.”

“And I’m completely fine with that,” Penny says, and Hannah nods.

“The crowd is just getting bigger and bigger.”

“Evie, are you...jealous?” Hannah asks.

I whip around to face her. “What? No way. Why would I be jealous?”

“Because you sound like a jealous ex-girlfriend,” Penny enlightens me.

I snort. “*Sure*. Me jealous of all the girls Noah’s paying attention to? Only in his dreams.”

Hannah and Penny exchange a look like they don’t believe a word I just said.

I throw my hands up. “He’s my bandmate. I’m allowed to show disdain at the fact that girls are throwing themselves at my co-lead singer, aren’t I?”

Hannah studies me closely. “No. Something’s off with you.”

“What?”

Penny studies me, too. “Yeah. You’re acting strange.”

“I’m perfectly normal,” I argue.

“No you’re not,” they both say.

“Did something happen between you and Noah?” Hannah asks.

“*No*.”

“You were quick to say no,” Penny says. “*Too* quick. Are you hiding something from us?”

I look from one to the other. They’re my best friends and know me really well. There’s no way I can keep anything from them because they’ll prick and prod until I surrender.

So with a sigh, I say, “Okay. Something did happen between Noah and me.”

Their eyes get so wide they nearly swallow up their faces.

With a groan because I really don’t want to bring it up or think about it, I take hold of their arms and pull them into the cafeteria, where it’s empty because everyone is in the hallway trying to kiss Noah’s royal hands.

Folding my arms over my chest because I’m suddenly cold, I say, “Noah kissed me.”

“*What?!*” Both Penny and Hannah exclaim, then basically run each other over with their words. They’re shooting out so many questions at me that I’m starting to get a headache.

“Geez Louise!” I say as I hold up my hands, silencing them. “I’ll tell you the whole story.”

I start from the beginning, not omitting any detail. When I’m done, they stare at me like they can’t believe something like that actually happened between Noah and me. Because honestly? It *shouldn’t* have happened.

“How was the kiss?” Hannah asks with huge eyes.

I shrug. “It was Boring Noah, so it was like kissing a piece of wood,” I lie.

Penny frowns. “Bummer your first kiss wasn’t good.”

I’m suddenly hit with just how *good* the kiss was. So warm and soft and tingly.

But I shove all that away. “Bummer my first kiss was with Noah Barrington,” I lie again.

“Well, at least you’ll have something to compare it to the next time you kiss,” Penny says.

I give her a look. “I don’t plan on kissing anyone soon.”

“So you and Noah...” Hannah says. “What exactly does all of this

mean?”

I shrug again. “Nothing. We’re both pretending like it didn’t happen.”

“Are you sure that’s okay, though? Did you even talk about it at all?”

“Nope. Like I said, we’re both pretending it didn’t happen.”

“But obviously you’re affected by it or you wouldn’t have reacted the way you did to all those girls going nuts over Noah.”

Now I give her a look. “Don’t look into things that don’t exist, Hannah. He and I had heightened emotions and were just caught up in the moment. Noah Barrington is the last person I’d ever want to kiss.”

Penny raises a brow. “You sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I pick my backpack off the floor and throw it over my shoulder. “So are we going to class or what? I didn’t come to school early to get detention.”

I spin around and head into the hallway before they can say another word.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Noah

Things are no different from yesterday when I enter the school building. Guys smile, nod, slap my hands, clap me on the back as I pass them in the hallway. Girls crowd around me, each pushing each other to get close to me. And I send them kind smiles, trying not to be too friendly because I don't want them to get the wrong idea.

I don't want a girlfriend.

Correction, I'm looking for someone special. Someone who'd love me for me—with all my hang-ups—not a girl who only sees me because I was the quarterback for four years or because I'm a musician with a viral video.

"Sing us something, Noah," they beg, just like they did yesterday.

One girl wraps her fingers around my bicep. "You're so shy." She giggles. "But you don't have to be shy in front of us. We love you!"

The rest of the girls cheer and giggle as well.

I spot Mateo and Wyatt further down the hall, also getting attention from girls, but not as much as me. Wyatt looks like he's living the dream, while Mateo, who has a girlfriend, Regina, seems very uncomfortable. Regina's trying to push through the throng of girls to get to him.

I hope this doesn't tear them apart. Maybe having the whole school know about the band was a bad idea.

The girl clutching my bicep steps closer to me. "Maybe we can go somewhere private?" Her gaze flicks to my lips as she bats her eyelashes.

I gently pry her fingers off me. "Sorry, I need to get to class."

She pouts while the other girls smile like they won a prize. "See you later, Noah," they say in sing-song voices.

I force a smile, wave, and make my way to my locker. A few girls follow

me. I wonder if this is how it'll be years from now if I make it as a musician. Will girls throw themselves at me? Will the woman I marry one day leave me because of it?

Shaking those thoughts away, I try to remember what Evie told me—that I'm only seventeen and shouldn't be worrying about things like my future wife and family. That I should enjoy this moment. And while I do, I don't exactly like the attention I'm getting from girls. Never even liked it when I was the Edenbury Lions' quarterback.

One thing I do like, though, is that I'm making people happy through my music.

“Hey,” Evie says as she sidles up to me, books pressed to her chest. She takes in the girls staring at me with what I'd call hearts in their eyes. “Wow. Center of attention much? It's worse than yesterday. You'd better not cheat on me, Shnookums.”

Shaking my head, I pull open my locker and rummage inside for my books. “I didn't expect this to happen.”

She rolls her eyes. “They see a sexy rockstar and pounce.” Her eyes widen as soon as the words are out. “I mean, not sexy, you know. Just...they think...” She runs her fingers through her hair. “I think I need to be somewhere. See ya.” She dashes down the hall.

I stare at her retreating form. Did Evie Hastings just call me...?

No. No. Of course not.

But she did. Why does that make this strange feeling enter my body, something I've never felt before?

I internally groan. It's that darn kiss. As much as we're trying to pretend it didn't happen, it still creeps up on us here and there. More times than I can count for me, but I'm trying not to think about it. We're in a band and we need to work together or else we'll fail.

Wyatt would tell me to use these girls as a distraction, but that would be a very jerk thing of me to do. I'd never take advantage of a girl, or anyone.

The bell rings and I head to first period. After lowering myself in a desk in the back, I take out my things and place them on my desk. As I'm reading over the notes from yesterday, I feel eyes on me. Lifting my head, I find a few girls smiling and waving at me. A few blow kisses.

I smile kindly at them before focusing on my notes.

"I didn't know you're going out with a freshman," Wyatt says during lunch. "Good going, man." He fist bumps my shoulder.

He, Mateo, the football players, the cheerleaders, Mallory, and my other friends are all seated at the table with me, though some girls have pushed their chairs close to me, even though there's no room.

I look up from my pizza. "What?"

Wyatt passes his phone over to me. There's a selfie of me and a blonde girl with her arm around me and her lips pressed to my cheek. The caption says, "Me and Noah forever" and there are hundreds of heart emojis.

I don't remember her taking that picture. Throughout the day, girls have snapped photos of me every chance they could get.

I pass Wyatt's phone back to him. "We're not dating."

He chuckles, and so do many others at the table. "I tell ya, man," he says with a wide grin. "Take the girls up on their offer. They're desperate and you want a good time."

"You know I'm not into that."

The other guys at the table tell me I'm being an idiot for shooting the girls down. I don't bother explaining to them that I'm looking for a special girl. They wouldn't understand. My dad was the same way when he was my age. He was the star quarterback and could have had any girl. But he was waiting

for his special girl and my mom came along.

That hasn't happened to me yet, but I know it will. One day.

We talk about other things until lunch is over. I make it through the day dodging girls as they continue to fling themselves at me. I've always gotten attention when I was QB, but this is completely different. Honestly, I'm not sure I know how to handle it. I feel like I'm being rude by rejecting them. But at the same time, I don't want to give them false hope. And I'm thankful for their support.

I head to my last class of the day, LRG, and a feeling of calm washes over me because this class brings me peace. Stresses me out, too, since it makes me think about my future, but it mostly calms me. Maybe because I'm learning things that will help me navigate my future life.

On my way to class, the girls once again bombard me, and try as I might, I can't get them to back off.

I'll be late for class, and I hate being late.

"What's going on here?" Vice Principal Rivera shouts over the voices. I can't even see her because of the crowd of girls. "Break it up and get to class or you're all getting detention."

Half the girls listen while the other half ignore her.

"I won't repeat myself," she warns.

Slowly, they disperse, leaving me with my back pressed to the lockers.

Hiking my backpack strap up my shoulder, I turn to head for class, when VP Rivera says, "A moment, Mr. Barrington."

I turn to face her, noting the deep frown on her face. "Yes, Ms. Rivera?"

She inches closer to me. "I understand that you're in a band and that your video has gone viral, but..." She holds up her index finger as though I'm a little kid. "I won't have this behavior at school. You're distracting the students from their lessons."

My jaw drops. “I’m sorry?”

She gestures around. “I know you’ll be graduating in less than two months and your foot is out the door, but please behave as an Edenbury High School student should.”

“I haven’t done anything, Ms. Rivera. I swear. I’m here to finish up my classes and graduate without any trouble.”

She nods. “Yes. You’re one of the top students in your class, and I know you don’t mean to distract the girls. I’m sorry to be this harsh with you.”

I hold up my hands. “It’s okay, don’t worry about it. I’m late for class.”

She nods again. “All right.”

As I turn to go, she says, “Mr. Barrington? You’re very talented and I wish you the best in your music endeavors.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

LRG class has already started by the time I reach the classroom. Looks like the couples have gathered together and are working on another assignment.

“Sorry, I’m late,” I say as I walk up to Mrs. Duncan’s desk. “I was talking with the vice principal.”

She smiles in understanding. “Of course. You know I don’t penalize students for coming late. Like I said, this class is for your benefit, not mine.”

I nod and turn to head to Evie, who’s frowning at the paper on her desk, but then I face the teacher. “Mrs. Duncan? Can I discuss something with you?”

“Sure, Noah. What’s on your mind?”

“Is it possible for me to change careers? I’d like to be a musician. That’s the career I should have chosen from the start.”

She smiles again. “Of course you can change careers. That’s an excellent addition to your assignment. How would changing careers affect you and

your football teammates? Your family? Yourself. That's perfect! Go to your wife and discuss it with her. I'd like to know what you two come up with." She pauses. "Let me give you some advice, though. You do know that if you're changing careers, you'd need to start from the beginning. You won't become a hit overnight. It takes time and determination and perseverance. Your income will be significantly reduced and you have a wife and baby to care for."

I swallow and nod. "I know, Mrs. Duncan. Thanks. But I need to do this."

She motions toward Evie, whose head is lifted and eyes are narrowed as she curiously watches us. "Please discuss it with your wife before making any decisions."

"Thanks."

Evie still watches me as I make my way to the desk next to her and plop down. "What was that about? Were you and Mrs. Duncan talking about me?"

I retrieve my notebook from my backpack and place it on my desk. "No, we were talking about us."

"Us? You're divorcing me?"

"No, why would you think that?"

She slides the paper on her desk over to me. "The couples have the option to get divorced. I was seriously considering it because I was certain you ditched me to hang out with your groupies."

I scowl at her. "Sometimes I wonder if you even know me."

She rolls her eyes. "How can I when you're so closed off? I already told you that the only time I get a glimpse of emotion from you is when you're singing on stage."

Or maybe she wants to divorce me because things haven't been the same since we kissed. Even though we're trying to move past it and pretend it never happened, things have changed.

And I also can't forget that she called me sexy today. I'd never think Evie would ever put me and that word together.

It still feels weird, but mostly confusing. And honestly, it makes that strange feeling enter my body again.

"What?" she demands.

"What?"

"You're staring at me."

I drop my gaze to the paper. "I'm not. Anyway, I spoke to Mrs. Duncan and asked her if I could change my career. So we're not getting divorced, but we're having a major life change. I'm giving up pro football to follow my dreams of being a musician."

Her jaw practically sweeps the floor. "Are you serious?"

I can't hide the small smile taking over my lips. "I am."

"Oh my gosh! That's awesome." She makes a move to fling her arms around me, but then she gets an odd look on her face and turns away, tucking some hair behind her ear.

I back away, too.

Things are definitely not back to normal. But why can't they be? We were perfectly fine at yesterday's practice. Maybe the music distracted us, or maybe she can't get the kiss or the fact that she called me sexy out of her head, either.

I clear my throat. "So Mrs. Duncan told me we need to decide together if my going after my dream is something we both want."

"Of course it is. In real life and in our pretend life."

I nod slowly. "Right. But I'll have to start from the bottom and won't be bringing in much money. And I'm still injured, so we have to take that into consideration. And you're still looking for a job, right?"

She sighs heavily. "I came up with a few options, but none of them sound

good.” Groaning, she slides down in her desk. “I hate this class.”

“But you love being married to me.” I wink at her. “Your sexy rockstar husband.”

Her face goes beet red. “You’re not sexy.”

“Pretty sure you said that I am earlier today.”

Her eyes are wide as she stares at me. “I don’t believe it. Noah Barrington is teasing me. I didn’t know Mr. Stick-Up-His-Butt had it in him.”

I scowl at her. “I wish you’d quit calling me that.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t call you sexy. You’re not sexy. Just the girls think you are.”

I tilt my head from right to left. “But you’re a girl and you think I’m sexy.”

“I didn’t...I never...” She throws her hands up as she groans. “Be quiet or I’m divorcing you!” Her face is red again. “I don’t even want to be here anymore.”

I reach for her, but she gets to her feet. “Tell Mrs. Duncan I don’t feel well. I’m going home.”

“Evie, wait. I’m sorry—”

She’s not listening to me as she grabs her stuff and zips out of the room.

I throw my back against my chair, berating myself for being such a jerk. I don’t know what came over me. She’s right that it’s not like me to tease her.

I have no idea what happened.

“What did you say to her?” Elliot asks as he twirls his drumstick between his fingers. He and the others and I have been in the basement for fifteen minutes, waiting for Evie to show up. But she hasn’t. Nor has she responded to our texts.

Sighing deeply, I drop down on the couch. “Nothing. I have no idea why

she's not coming."

Mateo glances up from where he's tuning his guitar. "You said you last saw her in LRG class. What happened?"

I rub my hand down my face. "I don't know. I think I might have offended her."

Wyatt lifts a brow. "Trouble in paradise?"

I shoot him a glare. "This is serious, man. I think I made her uncomfortable. Things have been so off with us today. Actually, things have been off with us since..." My eyes widen and I look away from them.

"What?" Mateo asks. "Things have been off since when? The performance? But you both were great up there. Why should things be off? They should be better. And you guys were fine at yesterday's practice."

Wyatt nods like he got an epiphany. "She's jealous you've been getting attention from other girls."

I shake my head. "Evie doesn't like me. We have a mutual dislike of each other. No, things went downhill after the..." My eyes widen again.

"What, darn it?" Elliot demands. "What aren't you telling us?"

I rake my fingers through my hair as I pace the basement. "I'm going to tell you something, but you guys need to swear not to say a word of it to Evie."

They nod in agreement.

Still pacing, I shut my eyes and fist my hands at my sides because I'm trying not to remember how great it felt to have her soft, warm lips pressed to mine.

"Noah?" Mateo says. "Everything okay?"

I whirl around to face them. "No, nothing is okay. Evie and I...we kissed." I drop down on the couch and bury my face in my knees.

"What the heck?" Wyatt exclaims. "You and Evie?"

“How did that happen?” Mateo asks.

Slowly, I lift my head and look at them. “It was after Mr. Tabbitt told us we couldn’t perform at the concert hall. Remember Evie threatened him that she’d get my mom to destroy him? Well after he told us we could perform there...we kissed.” I drop my head to my knees again. “And we’ve been trying to pretend it didn’t happen, and things were going well. But then today she...” I shake my head. “Gosh, I’m a jerk.”

“What?” Elliot says. “What happened?”

I tell them about the events that took place in the hallway, her calling me sexy and then me rubbing it in her face during LRG class.

“I don’t know why I embarrassed her like that,” I tell them. “I feel awful about it and now she’s avoiding me. Us.”

Wyatt grins. “She thinks you’re sexy.”

I give him a look. “That’s beside the point. I embarrassed her and I wish I could take it back. It’s not like me to do that. I don’t know. Maybe this whole rockstar thing is getting to my head.”

“No, man.” Mateo shakes his head at me. “She complimented you and that’s all it was. Now you need to go to her house, apologize, and talk her into coming to practice.”

I shake my head. “I want to apologize. Heck, I apologized more than once in my texts. Clearly she doesn’t want to listen to me.”

“Go to her house,” Mateo repeats. “Apologize to her in person and tell her the band is nothing without her. That we need her. That the people love her and want her and that we’re begging her to come to practice. Make her feel special and wanted and loved by us all.”

I sigh deeply. “You think she’ll talk to me?”

Wyatt claps me on the back. “Go for it, man. We need her and we need you guys to go back to how you were and make magic on stage.”

I get to my feet. “I’ll try. Guys, I really messed up.”

Mateo grins. “She’s your wife. I’m sure she’ll forgive you.”

As I make my way to my car, I’m not so sure. Evie is very strong-willed and hardheaded, and when you tick her off, it’s very hard to get back in her good books. Considering we’re practically enemies already...how exactly am I supposed to fix my mistake?

My thoughts are troubled as I drive to her house. Feels like forever until I get there, but when I do, I greet Ally and go down to the basement to Evie’s studio. She’s hard at work on a painting. Looks like it’s about Lily and herself.

My feet creak on the floor, and she whirls around, her eyes widening when she spots me standing in the doorway. Then she faces her canvas again.

I inch deeper into the room, keeping my gaze on her. “Evie? Can I come in?”

She shrugs. “Whatever.”

I linger in my spot. “Yes or no? Because if you don’t want me here, I’ll leave. I just want to talk to you. To apologize for what I did.”

She shrugs again. “You’re here because you want me to come to band practice.”

Shaking my head with a sigh, I walk over until I’m at her side. “That’s not true. I’m here because what I did was wrong and I want to apologize. I’m really sorry, Evie.”

She doesn’t say anything. Then she places her palette on the nearby table and turns to me. “It’s cool. Forget about it.”

“What?”

“I overreacted. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with saying you’re a sexy rockstar. It’s an objective fact.” She shrugs again. “And you should own it. Because you’re amazing when you’re on stage.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Oh, uh. Thanks.”

She smiles. “Yep. So thanks for the apology and everything.” She focuses on the canvas again.

“Are we good?” I ask as I step closer to her.

She turns to face me again. “Of course we’re good, Noah. Couples argue all the time.”

“You’re sure?”

She rolls her eyes, exasperated. “Yeah. I was upset because you made fun of me, but painting always calms me down and helps me see reason. You’re sexy up there. I’m sexy up there. We’re all sexy.”

My heart does this weird thump that it’s never done before. It’s true. She looked very sexy singing at our performances.

“Right,” I quickly say. “Of course.” I slide my hands into my pockets. “I’d hate to take you away from your painting, but the guys were kind of hoping you’d join us for practice.”

She faces me again. “So this *was* about band practice.”

I hold up my hands. “Not at all. This was about me admitting that I wronged you and that wasn’t okay. Look, if you want a break and don’t want to come to practice, I’ll tell the guys—”

“No, I’m coming,” she says. “This painting can wait.”

I take a few moments to study it. “It’s beautiful.”

She smiles. “Thanks. I’m making gifts for my family, kind of like a leaving for college present. This is Lily’s.”

I examine Evie dressed in a Regency consume. “Looks like you had a lot of fun.”

“Yep. So are we taking your car to practice?”

“Sure. We’ll also need to finish our assignment for LRG. Maybe tomorrow?”

She cringes. “Yeah, sorry about running off like that.”

I hold up my hand. “Don’t apologize.”

We make our way up the stairs and out the door of my house, not really saying much to each other. Things are still a little stiff between us, which is to be expected, I guess. She might not admit it, but she’s still hurt by what I said.

We don’t talk much in the car, either, letting the music entertain us. Evie sings along with the songs, but I mostly keep quiet because I don’t want to be distracted from my driving.

It’s not long before we reach Wyatt’s house and meet the guys in the basement, where they’re lounging and chatting. As soon as he sees Evie behind me, Wyatt jumps to his feet and cheers. “She’s here!”

The others cheer and whoop too.

Evie’s face flushes slightly. “Wow. Did you miss me *that* much?”

Mateo wraps his arm around her. “Of course!”

“You’re one of us,” Elliot adds.

She smiles at that. And when her eyes meet mine, she doesn’t stiffen or glance away from me. Like she really has truly forgiven me.

I can’t forget how much I hurt her, but I tell myself I shouldn’t be so hard on myself because I’ll be consumed with my thoughts. So I pump everyone up with excitement for our next gig. We haven’t booked anything yet, but I’m confident and hopeful it won’t be long before we do.

Evie and I walk to the center of the room and start singing. It’s a little awkward for the first few seconds, but then we get into it and it’s like nothing has changed.

“Magic!” Wyatt calls.

Evie and I exchange a glance and smile.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Evie

It was nice of Noah to come to my house yesterday and apologize, but it really wasn't necessary. Because I'm over what happened between us. It was so silly to make such a big deal about it, like I'm a drama queen. I mean, I know I could be difficult sometimes, but I like to think I'm level-headed.

Okay, maybe not. I guess it's the artist in me.

Things are okay between Noah and me now and we smile and nod to each other in the hallway at school. We don't really hang out outside of band practice, which suits us fine because we're not exactly friends—are we?—and don't hang in the same circles.

I still have no idea why I called him sexy. It just slipped out. But like I told him yesterday, he *is* sexy when he sings. I'm just trying not to think about it too much. Because ew. Sexy as he is, he's *Noah*.

Elliot texts me and the others during lunch that he can't make it to band practice after school, and Noah decides to cancel for today. I'm a little disappointed because I love jamming with the guys, but I'm also happy because I can finish Lily's painting. But before that, Noah and I need to complete our assignment for LRG class. Ditching yesterday wasn't cool of me. Sometimes my emotions get the better of me, but I'm trying to work on myself.

"Hey," Noah says to me after school as I'm taking my books out of my locker. "What are you doing after school?"

I squint at him. "Being pretend married to you. Aren't we working on our assignment?"

"Sure. I meant after that."

I shrug. "Painting, I guess. Why?"

He's wearing a sly, somewhat mischievous look on his face. A strange look on him, that's for sure. "I want to treat my wife to a surprise."

I lift a brow. "Huh?"

"I still feel bad for what happened yesterday and I want to make it up to you."

Shaking my head, I say, "I told you it's fine. We've moved past that."

"Yeah, but still. I want to." Before I can protest, he says, "Think of it as another date for our pretend married life. I'm sure Mrs. Duncan would love that. It's been a while since we've gone out just the two of us. As much as I love our daughter, she's quite demanding."

My head spins. "A date? Why would we go on a date when we're not assigned to?"

He blows air from his cheeks. "Please, Evie. Let me treat you to something special. I know you'll love it."

I cross my arms over my chest. "Fine, but I don't want you feeling sorry for me or thinking I'm pathetic."

He places his hands on my shoulders. "I'd never think that. There isn't a pathetic bone in Evie Hastings's body." He grins, and the way the light catches his smile makes him look like a Greek god.

As soon as I think those thoughts, I wrench away from him. Noah, a Greek god? What the heck?

"What?" Noah asks as he glances at his hands that are now at his sides. "Did I hurt you?"

"N-no! Of course not. I just...personal space..."

He nods in understanding. "Got it. Sorry. So what do you say about our date? We can quickly finish our assignment in the LRG classroom, then go to the special surprise."

I watch him for a little bit, taking in the excitement in his eyes, which is a

very rare sight. I don't know why it's so important for him to make it up to me—I told him we're good—but I'm super curious what the surprise is.

So I shrug and say, "Okay."

"Thanks."

We head for the LRG classroom, which is empty since school is over. We spend about half an hour figuring out how to incorporate Noah's new job as a musician into our life. I settle on an office job, something that won't necessarily make me happy, but something that will put food on the table and give Melly everything she needs. Once my awesome talented husband makes it big, I'll be able to quit my job and pursue my dream as an artist.

"We totally killed it," I tell him with a smile.

He lifts a brow. "You still hate this class?"

"Yes." My eyes drop to my desk table. "I hope my life won't be so complicated and messy."

"Believe me, it'll be even more complicated and messy."

I shove his shoulder. "Maybe *yours* will be, Mr. Stick—I mean, hubby."

"Thanks for, you know, not calling me that."

I nod slowly. "I'm sorry I did. It was a very jerk thing to do. Even though you *do* have a stick up your butt."

He groans as he leans back in his seat. "Really, Evie?"

I hold up my hands helplessly and he shakes his head.

I'm so happy we're back to how we used to be. Not weird or awkward because of the kiss and the other stuff. Actually, I haven't really thought about the kiss all day. Progress!

But now that it has invaded my mind, I think back to the feeling of his lips pressed to mine and this odd feeling zaps down my spine.

Shooting to my feet, I start gathering my things. "So what now?"

He stuffs his notebook and pens into his backpack, swings it over his

shoulder, and grins at me. “Now, I’m treating you to a special surprise.”

“How about you tell me what it is?” I say as I follow him out the door and toward the student parking lot. It’s empty, except for a few cars owned by kids who are staying for after-school activities.

He chuckles slightly, opening the door for me. “Nope.”

I place my hands on my hips. “What if I don’t like it?”

“You will.”

“You think you know me, Noah Barrington?”

He steps closer to me. “Not at all, Evie Hastings. I could spend my entire life with you and still not know you.”

“Ugh! The thought of spending my whole life with you...you’ll make everything boring.”

“At least our house would be clean.”

I narrow my eyes at him and he narrows his eyes at me.

I’m not sure how long we have the staring contest before Noah breaks his gaze and gestures to his car. “Please get in. We have to be there on time or we’ll lose our spot.”

“You made a reservation? Is it to a fancy restaurant? We can’t afford that, Noah!”

“Not a fancy restaurant. How about you quit trying to guess and let me drive us there?”

“Fine,” I grumble as I get in the car. “But if I don’t like it, you owe me.”

He slides into the driver’s seat, pulling his seatbelt across his chest. “Like I said, you’ll love it. Seatbelt.”

I groan and click it into place. “I was going to put it on, you know.”

“Just making sure.” He looks to his right and left and behind before pulling out of the parking lot and heading to wherever we need to go.

“Your car is still as boring as usual,” I observe. I’ve been in his car a few

times and almost suffocated by how *clean* it is.

He twists his mouth. “You’re dissing my car? Yours is a hazard and someone could get hurt.”

I give him a look. “The mess doesn’t get in my way when I drive. And stop criticizing the Evie Mobile.”

“Stop criticizing mine.”

I start snooping around in the different compartments. “No snacks?”

“Eating is forbidden in my car.”

“Of course it is.”

He glances at me, then at the road. “What did I say about criticizing my car? Look, I’m trying to make this special for us, so can you please not question everything?”

“Fine. But I doubt *you* know how to make a date special.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” I say.

He shakes his head. “No, it’s fine. I want us to be back to normal. With you driving me up the wall.”

“I drive *you* up the wall? Geez, man. Look in the mirror. Do you still have that lame daily to-do list on your wall?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Oh my gosh! And what does it say is planned for today?”

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel at a red light. “Go to school, finish our assignment, and then take you on a date. After that, I have homework and I need to work on some new songs for the band, and Rylee and Chloe have asked me to play some board games with them...”

I just laugh. “And you couldn’t remember that in your brain? You had to write it down?”

“I don’t want to forget anything. It’s called being organized. You should

try it sometime.”

“I think I’d die. Just the thought makes me want to puke. But there’s a no-puking rule in your car, right? The world will come to an end if it gets dirty. Well, at least we agree on that one. I don’t allow puking in my car, either.”

Chuckling lightly, he shakes his head and focuses on his driving.

I find the viral video of our performance and put it on, listening as the car fills up with Noah and my voices. Wow. We really do sound amazing together. Too bad it’ll all be over once we start college, but that’s life, right?

I look out the window and sit up sharply. “Hey, where are we? We left Edenbury?”

He doesn’t say anything, though he’s hiding a teeny-weeny smile.

“Noah! Where are we going? Tell me.”

“No. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

I guess I’ll have to take his word for it.

We sing along with our music and other songs as we continue heading to wherever he’s taking me. Noah’s very focused on his driving, which I suppose is a good thing. Wherever we’re going seems far, so he’s careful to get us there safely.

“By the way, I told Elliot to lie about not being able to make it to band practice today,” Noah admits to me.

“Because of the surprise?”

He nods.

“The guys know about it?”

“Uh huh. They think it’s for LRG class, though.”

I turn away from the window to face him. “Is it for LRG or is it a peace offering for yesterday?”

He shakes his head. “Not a peace offering, Evie. Like I told you, I want to make it up to you. LRG class is a bonus.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

I press my face to the window. We’re in Silverton, a nearby town that’s full of wealthy people. “So if we’ll be there in ten minutes,” I muse, “that means we won’t be leaving Silverton.” I tap my chin. “Hmm. The only things to do in Silverton are fancy, rich people stuff. Last I checked, Noah, you’re not loaded.”

He doesn’t say anything, hiding that tiny smile again.

The ten minutes zoom by and Noah turns into the parking lot of a building. I just stare at it, not believing we’re here.

“The Silverton Museum of Art?” I ask as I turn to him.

“Yeah. What do you think?”

My eyes nearly bug out. “What do I think? This is the greatest museum ever. It showcases so many different styles of art and I’ve always wanted to come here. The museum itself is an artistic masterpiece, with all the intricate designs and everything. But ticket prices are *insane*. How did you swing those?”

He’s quiet for a bit, the right side of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile. “You know that journalist who works for the Edenbury Press? The one you threatened would ruin the reputation of Mr. Tabbitt? The woman also known as my mom? Well, she wrote a piece on this place and the woman who owns it told her that if she ever needed tickets...”

My mouth drops. “And you’re wasting them on me?”

“Wasting? Why would it be wasting? No one I know loves art as much as you do and I figured you’d love this place.”

“Of course I’ll love it. It’s like a dream come true. For years I begged my parents to take me here, but they never had the opportunity or the money. And I understood that. This museum is so famous that people come from all

over the world, which is why you need to buy tickets months in advance.”

He grins. “I know.”

I’m so excited I want to hug him, but of course I don’t. I just wring my hands in my lap as I try to contain myself.

Noah must realize this because he chuckles lightly. He gestures toward the building. “Are you ready?”

“Of course I’m ready!”

“This is the best experience of my life,” I gush to Noah as we walk around the museum, admiring the amazing and beautiful paintings. We’ve been here for over two hours and I still can’t get enough. “Did I thank you for bringing me here?”

“Only a thousand times”

I laugh. “Sorry. I’m just in heaven.”

“I know.” He glances at the time on his phone. “Unfortunately, we need to leave in twenty minutes. I’m sorry we couldn’t see everything.”

I wave my hand. “It’s fine. This is more than enough. Thanks, Noah. Really.”

He smiles. “No problem. You know what they say, ‘Happy wife, happy life.’”

I stop gazing at a painting and turn to him. “I thought this was about making up for yesterday.”

“Yeah, it was.”

I slug his shoulder. “Ah, I see. Noah Barrington is making jokes again. I have to say, I’m liking this new you. All we need to do is get rid of your neat freakiness and you’ll be good to go.”

“Don’t push it.”

We try to squeeze in as much as we can in the last twenty minutes. I’m

actually surprised to see Noah is as into this as I am. I thought all he cared about is his music, school, and being so perfect.

It's sad when it's time to leave, but I tell myself that once I'm a successful artist and am rolling in dough, I'll buy a ticket and spend the entire day here.

"Thanks again, Noah," I say once we're making our way to the parking lot. "That was amazing."

"Anything for my wife."

I can't help myself, I throw my arms around him, a bit too enthusiastically, and he crashes into me. "Sorry! I meant to say thank you for the thousandth and one time."

He chuckles, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close to his chest. "I think that was a thousand and two. You're welcome for the millionth time."

I try not to focus on his scent or how nice and warm and protected I feel in his arms.

I realize we've been hugging for longer than we should, and he must feel the same because we stumble away from each other.

Noah's fingers brush through his hair as he glances away from me. Then he looks at me. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Good. I know a place with good food."

"Yeah. Good food is great."

It's a relatively cheap diner in Silverton. Noah and I sit at a booth in the back and we talk about random things as we eat. That hug or whatever it was dissipates like it never happened.

"So, excited for your birthday party on Friday?" Noah asks as he takes a bite of his burger.

The food's delicious, but it doesn't beat Mikey's.

"Meh. It's just a birthday. My friends think it's a huge deal because I'll be an adult."

He nods. "It's true. I'll be an adult in a few months, too. It's a little daunting, but I'm also looking forward to it. College, the future, following my dreams. You know?"

I play around with my fries. "Yeah. I'm still a little scared to leave home, but it's getting better. I think painting the gifts for my family helps."

"For sure. Mentally preparing yourself for the day you'll leave the nest." He takes another bite. "My dad's been an emotional wreck because I'm leaving for college soon. And then Chloe and then Rylee."

We chat about other things and I'm so glad that everything is normal between us. And the kiss and all the feelings I've been feeling since then? They fly out the window.

At least there's my party to look forward to. And to distract myself with in case my brain betrays me and thinks about those warm lips moving against mine.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Evie

Today is the day. I've officially turned eighteen and am now an adult.

Penny has spent the last few days working with my parents and Easton and Dani Knight to throw me a party at the Knight mansion tonight.

Supposedly, it's going to be epic. They've invited our closest friends and relatives, but since this is a cause for major celebration, the invite list has expanded to include more people. Like more kids from school, plus Penny and Hannah are bringing dates, and of course the band is invited.

Since it's a Friday night, I'm sure there's a party going on somewhere. But Hannah told me that some kids from school who haven't gotten an official invitation said they might pop in just to check it out. It's no secret that every single person in Edenbury wouldn't mind hanging out at a place like the Knight mansion. It's like a palace, and Dani's mom, Vivian Wood, is catering. She makes the most delicious food on the planet.

Now I'm sitting at my vanity in my robe, waiting for Aunt Amanda to finish styling Mom and Lily's hair. She claims she's leaving me last because she wants to take her time making me look amazing.

Aunt Amanda is Mom's older sister and she's a professional hair stylist and makeup artist. She sometimes gets annoyed with the females in this family because none of us share her enthusiasm for fashion or styling or makeup. What can I say? Lily and I take after Mom.

Speak of the devil...Lily walks into the room, also still in her robe, but her hair is styled in such a beautiful updo, and her makeup is flawless.

"How's it going, birthday girl?"

"Wow, you look great!" I tell her.

"Good," she says as she drops down on my bed. "Aunt Amanda poked

and pulled and brushed and applied...ugh, I thought I was going to die in there.”

I groan. “I’m dreading her doing me.”

“Well, she’s working on Mom now, so I think you have a few more minutes of peace.”

We both laugh.

“Are you nervous?” she asks.

I lift my shoulders. “Why should I be nervous? It’s just like my previous parties, just more extravagant and with a few more guests.”

“I meant about being an adult.”

“A little,” I admit. “I mean, eighteen is just a number, but I’m nervous for the next stage in life. Change is scary, but it’s also exciting. I’m still anxious about moving all the way across the country for college and being so far away from you guys. But Noah’s going to attend a music school only an hour away. So maybe it won’t be so scary.”

My eyes widen. Why did I say that?

“Lucky,” she says. “Xavier and I are already discussing what colleges to apply to because we want to go to ones in the same vicinity so we could be close to each other. But I know that’s not very realistic. Who knows what will happen?”

“Well, Mom and Dad managed to attend colleges in the same area. Maybe you and Xavier will have the same luck, too.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Knock, knock!” Aunt Amanda waltzes into my room with all her supplies. “Is there a birthday girl in need of a gorgeous hairstyle?”

“That’s what they tell me,” I say.

Aunt Amanda looks way too eager to get her hands on my hair. She, of course, looks amazing in her elegant updo, stunning dress, and impeccable

makeup.

I sigh like the world is coming to an end. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“What is with you Hastings girls?” Aunt Amanda grumbles as she puts her stuff down on the vanity and gathers my hair. “Other kids would kill to have a professional like me work on their hair and makeup. But with you? It’s like someone’s holding a knife to your throat.”

“You know we take after Mom,” Lily supplies.

Aunt Amanda groans. “Ugh, you have no idea how difficult she was when she was your age. She wouldn’t let me touch her hair or put makeup on her, and the one time she did, she freaked out. She’s only slightly better now.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes I still question if we’re related.”

“Where are Uncle Alejandro and Alex?” Lily asks her.

“Downstairs watching something.” She lifts my hair and frowns. “Evie, there’s so much paint in your hair. Didn’t I tell you to wash it all out?”

“You did, but why bother? I’ll just get paint in it again.”

Aunt Amanda groans again. “I swear, you girls live on a different planet than me. You’re the woman of the hour, Evie. Do you want all your guests to see you with paint in your hair?”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“It’s so *you*,” Lily says with a smile. “And we love that about you.”

I return the smile. “Thanks, Lily. That was so sweet.”

Aunt Amanda groans again. “Fine. I can work with this. Multicolor hair can look cool, I guess.”

It takes some time for Aunt Amanda to figure it out, but soon my hair is pulled up similarly to Lily’s, with the different color strands weaved into the other strands in a beautiful design.

“Wow, Aunt Amanda!” I say as I study my reflection. “I love it. You’re kind of an artist, too.”

She gives me a look. “You just figured that out now?”

I grin at her. “I guess we do share some genes after all.” I lift my hand to my hair to touch a light purple strand that looks so pretty, but my aunt whacks my hand away and threatens to cut it off if I dare touch my hair. “Geez,” I mumble.

“Now for your makeup,” she announces.

I mouth, “Help me” to Lily, and she giggles.

Mom enters my room when Aunt Amanda is halfway finished with my makeup. I try to get a good look at her, but my aunt keeps bothering me with all the stuff she’s putting on my face. From what I can glimpse, Mom looks so stunning in her elegant black dress, gorgeous updo, and perfect makeup.

“Looking good, Mom,” I tell her.

“Thanks.” Her face softens as her eyes rove over me. “Oh, honey. You look so beautiful. I can’t believe how grown up you are.” Her voice quivers.

“Are you crying?” I ask her.

“*Tears?*” Aunt Amanda whips around to Mom. “No tears! You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mom says as she walks over to me. “I’ve heard this tune before.” She stops before me and her eyes soften again as she gazes at me through the mirror. “I can’t believe our first Musketeer child has turned eighteen. It feels like just yesterday that I was telling my Musketeers I was pregnant and they all freaked out.” She rubs my shoulders. “I knew my life would change forever.” She presses her hand to her lips before resting them on the top of my head. “You’ve changed my life, Evie. I’m so proud of you. You’ve grown up to be such a lovely young woman.”

Her words bring tears to my eyes. “Thanks, Mom.”

Mom laughs lightly. “I’m supposed to say that in my speech at the party. Oh well. You just got a preview.”

“Time certainly has flown like the blink of an eye,” Aunt Amanda says as she applies the last bit of makeup to my face. “Soon you’ll be a grandma, Ally.”

Mom’s eyes widen in horror. “Not that soon!” She wags her index finger at me and then Lily. “Later, okay? Much, much later.” She rubs her forehead. “I can’t even imagine being that old—”

“Don’t touch your face!” Aunt Amanda yells at her.

Mom drops her hand to her side like she just committed the gravest sin.

“Is everyone decent?” Dad’s voice calls from the doorway.

“We’re all good,” Mom assures him.

He steps into the room, dressed in a shiny black suit, his hair styled in a way that makes him look so handsome. No doubt Aunt Amanda’s doing.

Mom walks over and tugs him by his tie. “You clean up nicely, my dear husband.”

He grins at her. “Why thank you, my lovely wife. And you look absolutely divine.”

Mom yanks on his tie, forcing him to bend toward her, and steps on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips. Considering Mom is so short and Dad is pretty tall, there’s quite a bit of a height difference between them.

Lily swoons at their display of affection while I groan and Aunt Amanda rolls her eyes.

Then Dad steps over to me, looking me over just like Mom did. Tears and all. “Oh, Evie. You’re the most beautiful girl on the planet.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You look so grown up. I remember the day you were born vividly. You were so eager to enter the world that Mom almost had you in the car.”

Mom chuckles. “You’re exaggerating, Zack. We made it to the hospital with enough time to spare.”

“But as soon as we got to the delivery room? Bam! Out she came. And remember her cry? It could have woken the dead.”

“Are you guys going to say this at the party with all those people around?” I demand. “Because if that’s the case, I hereby ban you from attending.”

Mom and Dad chuckle. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” Mom says. “We promise not to embarrass you.”

“Seriously, though,” Dad says as he bends to kiss the top of my head. “Your mom and I are so proud of you.”

“Thanks. Now are you done, Aunt Amanda? I think I’ve endured enough of this torture.”

She holds up her hands. “Done.”

“Sweet!” I jump out of the chair.

“You girls continue getting ready,” Mom says as she takes Dad’s hand and leads him to the door. “We’ll need to be at the Knight mansion in an hour.”

After our parents and Aunt Amanda leave, Lily and I get changed. She’s wearing a light pink dress while I’m wearing a royal blue dress. We meet everyone else downstairs, including Liam who looks so grown up in his black suit.

“Oh my gosh, Sibling One,” I say as I wrap my arm around him. “You look like a man.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“Since when did you grow up?” I glance from him to Lily. “Since when did both of you grow up?”

“Right after you?” Lily says.

“Please stop,” Mom says as she grabs a tissue and dabs the corners of her eyes. “You’ll make me cry and my sister will murder me.”

Aunt Amanda nods from where she's fumbling with her son's tie. "I sure will."

"What's with me?" Mom says as she fans her eyes. "I blame Kara. She and I spoke earlier today about how grown-up Noah and Evie are, and she was bawling her eyes out. It must have been contagious."

"It's okay, Ponytail," Dad says as he puts his arm around her, using the nickname he coined for her when they were Lily and Liam's age. "I'm super emotional, too. I think we deserve to be after raising such amazing kids."

Mom smiles and rests her head on his shoulder.

Per Easton and Dani's insistence, a car comes to pick us up. All five of us plus Aunt Amanda, Uncle Alejandro, and Alex get inside. The drive to the Knight mansion is a short one, and it's not long before the driver pulls up to the beautiful, massive house.

"Will they have sushi?" Alex asks his parents as he gets out of the car.

"I'm sure they'll have sushi," his dad assures him.

Aunt Amanda says to us, "We had him try it the other day and he's completely hooked. It's all he'll eat these days."

The gate surrounding the Knight mansion opens, and all of us walk through, heading up the stairs leading to the mansion. No more than a few seconds pass before the door opens and a staff member welcomes us in. My family and I are used to this because we've visited the Knights countless times, but my cousin is totally in awe. The exterior of the mansion is exquisite, but the interior is even ten times better, and he feels like he really has just walked into a palace.

"Are you sure they're gonna have sushi?" he asks.

We all laugh at that.

"Hey!" Dani calls as she descends the marble stairs that lead upstairs.

"You're all here!"

Dani has beautiful long dark wavy hair that usually cascades down her shoulders. Tonight, though, it's also pulled into an elegant updo, and her white dress sparkles.

"I want to hug all of you, but the birthday girl first!" She yanks me into her arms and squeezes me tightly. "Oh my gosh, Evie. Just look at you. Our first Musketeer baby is all grown up."

"You sound just as bad as my parents," I grumble as she continues to hug me. Doesn't look like she has any intention of letting me go.

"You'll understand one day when you have kids," she says.

"That's what they say."

"I hope you have a wonderful birthday and that all of your dreams and wishes come true." She pulls back to gaze into my face. "This is your special day. Don't hesitate to ask for anything you want. Easton and I will provide."

I perk up. "You'll give me a million dollars?"

She chuckles and taps my nose. "Don't push your luck. Seriously, though. We want tonight to be special for you."

"Thanks." I hug her again. "And thanks for hosting my party. I know I'll never forget it."

As Dani exchanges hugs with everyone else, footsteps hurry down the stairs before Ava appears. She launches herself at me as she wishes me a happy birthday, then hugs Lily and Liam, and then they spend a few minutes whispering excitedly. Ava's hair is identical to her mom's, but hers flows down her shoulders tonight.

"This is going to be so much fun!" she gushes. "Aidan and I will spend the whole night dancing. My grandma has prepared the yummiest food. Prepared to get stuffed, guys."

"Nice," Liam says. "I'm starving."

"Will there be sushi?" Alex asks with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Of course,” Ava assures him.

“You’d better be careful, Alex,” I tell him. “If you eat too much sushi, you’ll turn into one.”

His eyes bug out. “I will?”

“Stop messing with him!” Lily scolds. “Of course you won’t turn into one,” she promises him. “Don’t listen to Evie. She can get away with anything tonight because it’s her birthday.”

“Do you want a tour of the house, Alex?” Ava asks him.

“Sure!”

Easton has now joined the party, he, too, wishing me a happy birthday and exchanging hugs with everyone. Then we head to the ballroom, where the party is set up. I have to say that the Knights have gone all out. The place looks gorgeous, the tables set with white tablecloths with intricate designs, the utensils gleam under the stunning chandeliers, and the floor shines. There are a few buffet tables set up with gourmet dishes that smell delicious.

Vivian Wood is giving orders to her staff. When she notices us, she heads over to exchange greetings and hugs.

“Thanks so much for catering the party, Vivian,” Mom says as she hugs her again. “My family really appreciates it.”

Vivian grins at me. “It’s not every day a girl turns eighteen, is it? I made some of your favorite dishes, Evie.”

“You’re awesome! Thanks.” I hug her again.

“It’s my pleasure. I need to check on the food.”

“We hope you’ll have time to join the party, too, Mom,” Dani tells her. “Because you’re certainly invited.”

Her mom nods. “Thanks, Dani. I sure will.”

As we start sampling the food—which is oh my gosh to die for—some of the guests start to arrive. Uncle Zane and Aunt Bailey, along with Zoey and

Brock, walk into the ballroom, immediately searching for us. The kids spot us first and point, and then the four of them hurry over.

“I think I’m going to crack from all these hugs,” I mutter as Aunt Bailey squishes me to her chest.

She laughs. “You’d better get used to it, kiddo. There are so many people who love you and want to celebrate with you.” Her eyes get wistful as she studies me. “I remember when you were little—”

I hold up my hands. “Not you, too.”

“Okay, but can I just say one thing? Pretty please?”

I sigh. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks! I remember when you showed me your first artwork. You were only three years old, but man was that a masterpiece. I knew right then that you’d grow up to be an amazing artist.”

Her words cause warmth to enter me. “Thanks, Aunt Bailey. That means a lot.”

“And I also remember how obsessed you were with me when Uncle Zane and I got together in our junior year.”

“Obsessed? I was *not* obsessed.”

“Yes you were! You always wanted to play with me or ask me to read you a story. There was a time when Zane was jealous because he loved reading to you.”

I throw my uncle an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that.”

He chuckles as he waves his hand. “You had good taste even back then.”

Aunt Bailey clutches her heart as she gazes at her husband with nothing but love shining in her eyes. “That was so sweet, Rebel.”

“Are you surprised after all these years, Dynamo?”

“Dynamo.” She chuckles. “Haven’t heard that one in a while.”

“Are the Wests here yet?” Brock asks, craning his neck left and right. “Is

Lexi here?”

“Not yet,” Ava tells him. “But don’t worry. She’ll be here soon.”

More guests arrive, each of them wishing me a happy birthday and then heading to the buffet table for the delicious food. My grandparents arrive as well, and Grandma has tears in her eyes just like Mom did. One would think I was getting married or something. But I guess as their first grandchild, it’s pretty emotional for them.

It means the world that I have so many people in my life who love me to death.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Evie

The ballroom is getting pretty full. Brock zips toward the entrance when he notices that Aidan and his family have arrived. He wastes no time grabbing Lexi's hand and pulling her to the buffet tables, showing her the food he deems most yummy. The two of them are so adorable it's hard not to watch them. Lexi's older sister, Skylar, has a guy with her. I think she befriended him in anime club. From the way she keeps blushing and looking away when their eyes meet, it's obvious the kid has a crush on him.

And then Penny and Hannah arrive, each of them with a boy. They told me they were bringing dates, but I don't know either of the guys. After introductions are exchanged, my friends pull me aside and gush over my dress and my hair and my makeup.

"It's all my aunt's doing," I say.

"Maybe you'll catch a cute guy's attention," Penny says with a squeal.

"Who, exactly? All the people here are my friends and family."

"More kids from school will show up," she assures me.

"Maybe," I say, but honestly? I couldn't care less about catching a guy's attention. "Your dates look bored," I tell them. "You should go back to them."

"You sure?" Hannah asks. "We can hang out with you for a bit."

I wave my hand. "I'm sure. I still have lots of guests to greet."

"Okay. We'll see you soon."

As they join their boys, more family and friends come over to wish me a happy birthday. After some time, though, my stomach growls. I haven't eaten anything in hours.

When I finally get a break between all the hugs and well wishes, I grab a

plate and pile as much food as I can because I want to taste everything.

“Feeling overwhelmed yet?” Lily asks as she joins me by the salads. There are so many different varieties and no more room on my plate.

“A little,” I say. “Mostly I’m worried I won’t be able to eat anything because everyone wants to hug me.”

At that moment, a distant cousin walks over and wraps her arms around me, telling me to enjoy my special day because I only get it once.

“Thanks,” I tell her.

Once she’s gone, Lily laughs. “You’d better gobble down your food quickly before you get interrupted again.”

“I know, right?” I stab my fork into meat and am about to take a bite, but my fork slides out of my hand when I see the person who just walked in with his family.

Noah.

Oh my gosh...he’s dressed in a dark suit and his hair is slicked back. And he carries himself with so much confidence. Wow, I didn’t know he could look so sexy in a suit.

“Ugh, am I using that word about Noah again?” I grumble.

Lily glances at me. “Did you say something?” She must catch me gaping at the entrance to the ballroom because her face lights up. “Chloe’s here! Liam!” she calls as she rushes over to her. “Chloe’s here.”

I swallow as Noah’s eyes sweep over the room. Is he looking for someone? Me? Gosh, I can’t believe he looks so dashing. He’s like out of one of those romance books Mom and Lily love so much. I never thought I found guys like that hot, but...

Not that I think Noah is hot. I’m just saying that *objectively*, one might find him hot.

His eyes finally settle on me, and a smile spreads across his lips. He

makes his way over to me, and for some reason, I grab another fork and start stuffing my face with meat.

“Hey, Evie,” he greets with another smile. “Happy birthday. You look really good.”

“Thanks,” I say over a mouthful, then stuff more food into my mouth as though I’m a vacuum cleaner. “You look good, too.”

“What?”

“You look good.”

“Sorry. I can’t understand you. You know, you really shouldn’t talk with food in your mouth. You could choke.”

I swallow whatever’s in my mouth. “Right, sorry. I just said that you look good, too.”

My face heats up as the words escape my lips. I drop my gaze to my plate and shovel more food into my mouth.

“Thanks. I guess you’re hungry?” Noah asks as he reaches for a plate. “I am, too. Didn’t eat much of anything on purpose all day because I was leaving room for tonight. I love Vivian’s cooking.”

“Don’t we all? Try the chicken marsala. It’s awesome.”

“Thanks, I will.”

After he’s done filling his plate, we both stand there and eat. In awkward silence.

“Food’s great, isn’t it?” I ask, then kick myself. We both know the food is delicious because we just established that.

“It’s out of this world,” he says.

Rylee skips over and asks her brother, “Help! There’s so much food I don’t know where to start.”

“Rylee, did you wish happy birthday to Evie?”

“What? Oh, sorry.” She turns her attention to me. “Happy birthday, Evie.”

I got you a really cool present. It's a colorful bird that glows in the dark and it also sings—"

"Rylee," Noah hisses. "You just spoiled her present."

"So? She's going to open all her presents later and mine will just get lost with everyone else's. At least now it's special."

"The kid does make a valid point," I say.

"You're going to love it!" Rylee says. "It has such pretty colors and the songs are really cool, too. I made Mom swear she'll buy it for me for my birthday."

"Thanks, Rylee." I hug her. "And you look so cute in your dress."

She beams. "Thanks! Me, Chloe, and Mom match."

I glance between all three of them and notice that they indeed match. They're all wearing peach-colored dresses. "So cute," I tell her.

"Where's our first Musketeer baby who just turned eighteen?" I hear Kara's voice ask, though I don't see her in the crowd of people gathered at the tables for food.

"Over here, Mom!" Rylee calls.

"Excuse me. Sorry. Just trying to get to the birthday girl... There you are!" She and Chloe appear before me and Chloe hugs me, wishing me a happy birthday. Then she joins Lily, Liam, and their friends at the buffet tables.

The next second, I'm in Kara's arms and she sways as she cries, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe you're eighteen now! Where have the years flown? I remember when your mom got us all together to tell us the good news. Feels like it was just yesterday." She presses her lips to my cheek. "You're all grown up and ready to conquer the world."

"Um...not really..."

"And soon Noah will turn eighteen, too." She sniffs as she grabs his hand.

“And then Chloe and then Rylee and then...”

“Mom,” Rylee whines. “You’re so embarrassing.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “My mom was the same. Though she blames you.”

“Well I blame Brayden,” Kara says. “He was getting all teary-eyed at the thought of Noah graduating in a few weeks and then leaving for music school. We’ll have him to ourselves only for the summers.”

“Mom,” Rylee groans.

“You’re right. Sorry.” She wipes her eyes and straightens up, putting on a smile. “You kids are growing up and we all can’t wait to see what wonderful lives you’ll lead. Rylee, did you eat something?”

“I don’t know what to pick. There’s so much stuff.”

“And everything is super delicious,” I tell them. “I think you might have to try a bit of everything.”

Rylee’s eyes go wide. “Can I, Mom?”

“Let’s start with a few options for now,” she says as she leads her away. Only to almost collide with Charlie and the rest of the Parks.

“Charlie!” Kara flings her arms around Charlie. “You and the gang are here. Can you believe our first Musketeer baby is eighteen?”

Mia waves to me and wishes me a happy birthday before saying to Rylee. “What did you eat?”

“Nothing yet. Mom’s supposed to help me pick.”

“Let’s do it ourselves! Where’s Zoey?” They scurry away.

“Happy birthday, Evie,” Willow says as she hugs me. “You don’t have the latest phone, do you?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

I gasp. “Did you buy me the latest phone for my birthday present?”

She puts on an innocent face. “Why would you think that? If you don’t mind, I think I just spotted my boyfriend.”

“Oh tell Colt the design for his game is going well. I’m more than halfway done.”

“Sure. He’ll be so thrilled to hear that.”

After more people hug me, I release a huff and turn to the table, where I stashed my plate overflowing with food. But it’s not there. “What the...?”

“Looking for this?” Noah holds it out before me. “I kept it safe for you.”

“Thanks!” I take it from him and dig in, sighing happily as the incredible flavors explode all over my tongue. “I think you might have just saved my life.”

“No problem. Always looking out for my wifey.” He nods in the distance. “The guys are here.”

“Yo, birthday girl!” Wyatt sprints over and throws his arms around me. “Thanks for inviting us. This place is wild.”

Mateo and Elliot wish me a happy birthday and hug me as well. Then Dad calls for everyone’s attention. It seems he and Mom want to make a speech. Everyone stops what they’re doing and gives them their undivided attention.

They talk about how proud they are of me and how I’ve enriched their lives and changed them for the better. It’s quite emotional and brings tears to my eyes. Mom manages to compose herself throughout the whole thing. I know public speaking is hard for her, but having Dad by her side helps a lot, even though public speaking isn’t his favorite thing, either.

When they’re done, everyone claps and cheers, and I struggle to hold my tears from bursting out of my eyes.

Dad nods in my direction. I assume he’s talking to me, but then Noah says, “We’re up.”

“What?” I ask.

He, Wyatt, Mateo, and Elliot leave the ballroom and return a few seconds later with their guitars. Then they start to sing and play the happy birthday song, with Noah’s voice shining over the others.

Okay, I wasn’t expecting that. They play it in such an edgy tune that has every single person in the ballroom dancing and cheering. And then Mom and Dani wheel in an easel with a painting of my family, one I painted a few months ago.

I don’t get it. Why did they bring one of my paintings here?

Mom laughs when she catches my expression. “Looks pretty authentic, huh?”

I gape at it. “Are you telling me that’s cake?”

“Yes!”

“Oh my gosh. It looks amazing!”

“My mom worked with a professional to create the perfect cake for you,” Dani tells me. “It’s double chocolate, your favorite.”

“Thanks, Vivian.” I hug her, and then Dani and Mom. “Thanks for everything.”

The band continues to sing happy birthday as I cut the cake. Then Vivian takes over and cuts enough pieces for all the guests. I dig into my slice and sigh in utter bliss. Every single person in the room sighs in the exact manner. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything more delicious on the planet.

“I think I’m interning for the wrong chef,” Liam jokes.

“You’re welcome to work for me any time you want,” Vivian tells him.

He grins. “Thanks. I’m totally going to take you up on your offer.”

By now, some more kids from school have arrived. Luckily, there’s enough cake for everyone. Once everyone has had their fill of cake, Easton puts on soft music and couples start dancing.

“Come on, Superman,” Ava says as she grabs Aidan’s hand and leads him to the dance floor. “I’ve been waiting for this moment all night!”

Xavier bows before Lily like she’s a noblewoman. “May I please have this dance, my lady?”

Lily squeals as she curtsies. “Of course, my good sir!” They hurry to the dance floor.

“Nerds!” I call after them with a laugh.

One by one, couples step onto the dance floor.

“Told you I should have asked Mark’s friend to be your date tonight,” Penny tells me with a frown.

“And I told you that I didn’t want a date. Don’t feel bad for me, guys. Go have fun with your dates.”

“You sure?” Hannah asks.

“Yes.”

They take their dates’ hands and join the other couples on the dance floor. Mom, Dad, and the rest of the Musketeers—Senior and Junior—are also dancing, each of them looking like they’re having an unbelievable time.

I mean, sure in this moment I wonder what it would be like if I had someone to share this special moment with. But I know it’s not the right time for me to meet someone special. Besides, I can enjoy my party while being single, right?

At least there’s still delicious food. I didn’t have a chance to sample them all.

I grab a plate and start piling food on it, my mouth watering at how scrumptious it all looks. After stabbing my fork into pasta, I’m about to bring it to my mouth, when someone says from behind me, “Why isn’t the birthday girl dancing with anyone?”

I spin around and come face-to-face with Noah.

“Noah! Hey.”

His brows dip as he glances at my plate of food, at my face, then around the room. “Why aren’t you dancing with anyone?”

I lift my shoulders. “No one asked me. Besides, I’d rather eat all this yummy food. Have you tried the pasta salad? It’s the best one I’ve ever—”

My lips snap shut when he takes the plate from my hands and places it on the table. I’m about to demand what the heck he thinks he’s doing stealing my food like that, when he holds out his hand to me.

“Dance with me, Evie?”

I just stare at his hand like I’ve never seen a hand before.

My eyes slowly raise to his. Am I imagining things, or did he ask me to dance with him?

I think I’m imagining things.

With a sweet smile, he gently shakes out his hand. “Come dance with me.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I stammer. “You don’t have to try to make me feel better. Because I’m fine. Totally cool with my single status. Who wants to be tied down to someone on their birthday anyway? Plenty of fish in the sea and all that. Not here, though, because I’m not interested in anyone—” I clear my throat. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m sure there are lots of other girls you’d rather dance with.”

He gazes into my eyes with an intensity I’ve never seen before. “The only person I want to dance with is you, Evie Hastings.”

I gape at him, not sure I heard him right. There are so many pretty girls here from school and he wants to dance with *me*? Has someone spiked the punch?

“Evie?” His voice is soft like velvet.

I blink, taking in the equally soft expression in his eyes, and I say, “Um,

thanks.” I slide my hand into his. “I’d love to dance with you, Noah.”

With another sweet smile, he tightens his hold on my hand and leads me to an empty area on the dance floor. My heart pounds as a tingly feeling travels from the area where our skins touch to every other part of my body. The trek to the dance floor feels like it’s taking forever, but when we finally get there, Noah faces me with another smile that can melt any girl’s heart.

He takes a small step toward me and gently wraps his arm around my waist, tugging me closer to his body. His scent overwhelms me, causing butterflies to flap around in my stomach. His body heat warms me up as I slowly slide my hands up his shoulders and lock them behind his neck.

We stare into each other’s eyes as we sway to the beat of the slow song. Every part of me tingles, and my heart thumps so fast and hard, I wonder if it’ll shoot right out of my chest.

“You look really beautiful, Evie,” Noah murmurs. “I mean, you’re always beautiful, but you’re glowing tonight.”

“Glowing?” I laugh softly. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious.” He presses his cheek to mine. “Positively glowing.”

“Thanks. I think only you can get away with saying that.”

“Only you can pull off a fancy hairdo with paint in your hair.”

That has me laughing again as a new swarm of butterflies invades my stomach.

We continue to sway to the beat of the music, our cheeks still pressed together. Noah and I have danced with each other at parties and celebrations in the past, but we’ve never been this close. My body has never touched so many parts of his body before, and I’ve never been so engulfed by his heat and scent. It feels so good to be held in his arms like this, like I’ve been transported to another world where it’s just the two of us and no one else. Our own special world.

I never thought dancing with Noah could feel this spectacular.

I lower my head on his chest and continue to enjoy this moment. Because I have a feeling I'll never experience it again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Noah

I'm not entirely sure how Evie and I have ended up in each other's arms at her birthday party. I mean, obviously I asked her to dance, but the question is *why* did I ask her? Not because I felt bad that the birthday girl stood alone while everyone else danced.

There was something that pushed me toward her. An invisible force I couldn't control. And yes, I *wanted* to dance with her. Which boggles my mind because she's Evie—the girl who's so different from me we might as well live on different planets. But this moment right here, we're not two very different people. We're just two kids dancing to the soft, slow music.

Her head rests on my chest like it's the most natural thing in the world. And the way my arms are wrapped around her waist feels like the most natural thing in the world, too.

What should be wrong is so right, but so confusing as well.

"Your heart's pounding," Evie murmurs. "It's very soothing."

I laugh because I don't know how to explain my heart. "Must be from all the dancing."

"Hmm, yeah." She shifts on my chest to make herself more comfortable. "Your chest is so huge and buff."

"Years of football," I say with another chuckle. "Good thing there's enough room for you to lay your head on." I cringe. What the heck was that?

She slowly looks up at me. "What?"

"What?"

She glances around. Most people don't notice us dancing together, and since it's not the first time, no one seems to be making a big deal about it. So why doesn't my heart do the same?

What exactly is this? Feels different from the previous occasions when we danced.

Clearing my throat, I smile at Evie. “Are you enjoying your party?”

She lowers her head on my chest. “I’m loving it. But I don’t like being the center of attention.”

“It’s only for tonight, though. And you deserve to have this special moment.”

She shrugs. “I guess. You think your parents will go all out for your eighteenth birthday?”

“I hope not.”

She laughs. “I guess since you’re only the *second* Musketeer baby, you’re not that special.”

I chuckle lightly. “No. You’re the only special one.”

She lifts her head and narrows her eyes. “Kind words from Noah Barrington. Must be my special day. Oh wait, it is.”

“You could say thank you, you know.” I keep my tone light, not accusing or criticizing. There are so many things I can point out—like the paint in her hair, even though I love it, and the stain on her dress. But tonight, I’m not Neat Freak Noah. I’m Evie’s guest Noah. Here to uplift her on her birthday and not bring her down with my criticism.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I tuck a loose strand of hair that has fallen from her updo behind her ear. “Nothing. Just you’re beautiful.”

Her gaze drops to the floor as her cheeks grow bright red. “Thanks, but you already said that.”

My hand moves to her cheek. “Yeah,” I murmur. “I did, didn’t I? But I meant more than physical beauty. I’m talking about the beauty inside. What

you've done for me and the band. You didn't have to save us from failure, but you did. I think I'll owe you for the rest of my life."

She tightens her hold around my neck, resting her head on my chest again. "Is that why you asked me to dance?"

"Not at all. I already told you that you're the only person I want to dance with. *Not* because I feel like I owe you."

She doesn't say anything and we continue to sway. I hope the music doesn't change because I'm really enjoying myself and don't want this—whatever it is—to end.

I'm not sure how much time passes, with my heart still pounding beneath her head and loving the way her soft body is pressed to mine, before she lifts her head again.

"I need fresh air." She stiffens and her arms drop from around me. "It's so hot and stuffy in here. I need to go outside."

I drop my hands from her waist. "Want me to accompany you?"

She shakes her head so quickly she's blurry for a second. "No. I'm okay. I mean, it's a free country and you can go out if you want. Just...I need to be alone."

"Oh, okay. Sure."

She doesn't glance back at me as she bolts from the ballroom. I stare after her for a moment or two, then head to the buffet table for some food. I'm not really hungry, I just don't want to think about what happened between us. And why she ran. Did I do something?

I busy myself with my food, trying very hard not to relive the feeling of her in my arms, how perfect and right it felt. It makes no sense whatsoever.

A few minutes pass and she doesn't return. I know she said she wanted to be alone and I want to give her privacy, but she's all alone out there in the dark and I want to make sure she's okay.

After setting my plate of half-eaten food on the table, I make my way outside. I'll just check on her and come right back.

The gardens are very beautiful, especially at night with all the lights. They're not too bright but give just enough light for me to see where I'm going.

Some would say a stroll in the gardens at this hour could be very romantic. I'm sure Dani and Easton have done this many times.

Scanning around, I don't find Evie anywhere. Then I spot her in the distance, in the gazebo, leaning on the low fence. I can't see her expression from here, but she seems deep in thought. Concerned about something.

My instincts tell me to check on her to make sure she's okay, but I'm not sure she'd like me invading her privacy.

As if she feels me watching her, her head lifts and her gaze settles on mine. I expect her to narrow her eyes and shoo me away, but she smiles in a way that lights up her face, and gestures for me to join her.

Once I get there, she motions around. "Isn't this place beautiful?"

I smile as I take it all in. "It is. Sorry, did you want to be alone? You were gone for a while and I wanted to check if you're okay."

She shrugs. "Yeah, but it's boring here all by myself." She smiles shyly, turning away from me. "Thanks for checking on me. I just needed to get away for a bit, you know?"

Did she want to get away from me? But then why did she ask me to join her here?

"I've been doing some thinking," she tells me. "About the future and everything. And I'm ready to start the next chapter in my life. I mean, I'm still nervous—I think I always will be—but I'm ready."

Sliding my hands in hers, I smile at her. "I'm so happy to hear that. Want to celebrate with a dance?"

She glances around with wide eyes. “You mean...here?”

I shrug as I tug her closer to me. “Without anyone watching. And no stuffy ballroom. You have all the oxygen you need.”

That gets a chuckle out of her. “Noah Barrington, I would love to have this dance.” She wraps her arms around my neck, pressing herself closer to me. Immediately, I’m engulfed in her warmth.

I close my arms around her waist, pressing my cheek to hers. And we sway around the gazebo. Since we don’t have music, I start humming one of my favorite songs—a soft one, not rock.

As we circle around the small area, my humming shifts to low singing. My mouth is close to her ear as I murmur the words. Evie’s hands brush through my hair as we continue to sway and spin, not removing our arms from each other. I shut my eyes, taking in this moment.

Moving on their own, my lips trail downward and when I open my eyes, I find them inches away from hers.

Evie’s eyes are open and she stares into my eyes. Then her gaze drops to my lips, her head slowly moving toward mine.

“I’m having an amazing time,” she whispers, her breath warm on my cheek.

“Me, too,” I whisper back. The most amazing I’ve ever had in my life.

My head dips toward her lips and she lifts hers toward mine. Only centimeters separate us now.

My chest heaves, hers rises and falls heavily. Biting her lip, she gazes into my eyes again. I’m gazing into hers. Then, slowly, we bring our mouths even closer, so close that there is only a sliver of space between them.

My heart hammers wildly in my chest as I shut my eyes, dip my head even more and...

Loud laughter explodes around us. My eyes fly open. Sounds like some

guests from the party have decided to stroll around the gardens, too.

With our faces still so close, Evie and I just stare into each other's eyes, our breathing ragged. I lower my forehead to hers, releasing a heavy sigh. Lifting my hand to her cheek, I stroke it with the back of my finger.

Her nose rubbing against mine, Evie releases a breath as well, but then she wrenches away from me with a look of horror on her face. "I...I have to go."

I reach out to her, but she dashes away so quickly she's gone in a flash.

My heart is about to launch out of my chest as I stare at the space before me. What just happened? We were about to kiss again and then...

What's happening to us?

We blamed the first kiss on our heightened emotions—that we were relieved because we could perform at the concert hall. But what exactly was this?

A moment out of a fairytale, that's what.

But I'm not one to believe in fairytales.

Sighing deeply, I pace the gazebo, running my hand through my hair. My thoughts and emotions are a mess, but the one thing that I'm focused on is Evie—that I hurt her or made her uncomfortable.

She left the ballroom to possibly get away from me because whatever is happening between us is just so confusing. And then I followed her and made things even more confusing.

Evie and I have no business kissing each other. Kissing means something. It shouldn't just happen between two people who are sharing a moment.

Should it?

I remain in the gazebo for a short while before figuring someone might wonder where I am, and decide to return to the ballroom.

My eyes immediately spot Evie chatting with Lily, Liam, Chloe, and

Xavier, who are at the drinks.

Evie's gaze darts in my direction, and she and I stare at each other for what feels like hours before she tears her eyes away and focuses on whatever Xavier is saying.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I glance around the place and take in all the people having a good time. My heart has slowed down, but it still beats at an erratic pace.

Mom and Dad are wrapped in each other's arms in such a loving way that it causes something to poke at my heart. I don't know what it is, though. Not jealousy. Why would I be jealous of my parents? I'd like to have a relationship like theirs one day, but maybe I'm putting too much pressure on myself.

"Hey, man," Wyatt says as he and Mateo head over to me. "Where did you wander off to? We were looking for you because we want to tell you we're heading out."

I nod, not taking my eyes off Evie. She's doing whatever she can to avoid me. Her brother and sister have left with their partners and she's playing around with the small amount of liquid in her cup. She stares at it like it's the most interesting thing in the world.

Mateo claps me on the back. "You okay?"

I clear my throat. "Yeah, of course I am. Why do you ask?"

He and Wyatt blink at me, and then, noticing I'm still staring at the birthday girl, they turn to her.

"So you and Evie danced together," Wyatt says.

I break my gaze from her. "Yeah. She was all alone and I couldn't leave our lead singer hanging..."

I don't know why I said that. I *didn't* ask her to dance because I felt bad for her. I wanted to dance with her, and I'm glad I did. But I can't stop

thinking about what happened after that.

Wyatt slaps me in the chest. “Such a nice guy.” He faces Evie again, who’s now at the buffet, stacking a plate. “Wonder why no one’s asking her to dance.”

My brain shouts at me to leave the guys and sweep her off her feet. But I won’t do that because she doesn’t need a guy to sweep her off her feet. And besides, even if she did *I’m* not that guy. She made it quite obvious only a few minutes ago.

“You said you guys were leaving?” I ask them.

“Yeah, Elliot’s already in the car,” Mateo says. He holds out his fist and I bump it. “Later.”

“Later.”

They go to Evie, exchange a few words and hugs with her, then leave the ballroom. Evie remains standing at the table, barely touching her food.

My legs carry me over there and I grab a plate and fill it with random things. She’s at the end of the table and when she realizes I’m slowly making my way down, she turns around. And when I’m only a few feet away, she walks off, heading toward the bathroom.

I force myself to eat the delicious food, but I have no appetite. I keep trying not to think about Evie fleeing from me like I’m a zombie that will eat her brain.

But my thoughts betray me and I relive that moment in the gazebo again. How close we were to nearly...

Something crashes into me and my plate clatters to the floor.

“Oops, sorry!” Brock yells over his shoulder as he chases Lexi across the ballroom. Normally, I’d smile at how adorable those two are, but I’m not feeling it right now.

I bend down to clean up the mess on the floor, but a staff member is at

my side in an instant, insisting that he'll take care of it.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “And I’m sorry.”

He waves his hand with a smile. “It’s no trouble at all.”

I walk around the ballroom, smiling and waving at some kids and family members who are all having a great time.

Evie emerges from the bathroom just as I pass on my way to where some guys from the football team are hanging out.

She goes still and I do as well, and we stare at each other. Then she whirls around and makes her way over to where her friends are dancing with their dates.

She slows down and turns her head slightly in my direction, but when our gazes connect again, she whips around.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Evie

It didn't happen, it didn't happen, it did *not* happen.

I've been pacing my room for the last hour, since my family and I came home from the Knight mansion. I'm sure my hair looks like a nest on top of my head due to the many times I've been running my fingers through the strands.

Noah and I almost kissed. Again.

We almost *kissed*.

Kissed!

I groan as I press my hands to my scorching cheeks. What on Earth would possess us to almost do something like that? I blame the gazebo. Maybe the thing is enchanted and put a spell on us or something. Yeah, that has to be it. There's no other explanation.

I wonder what would have happened if those people hadn't interrupted us...

"No!" I cry as I grab the bottom of my hair. "No, no, *no*. Brain, quit rebelling. I still control you, okay?"

With another groan, I fall on my bed and stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore the way my heart gallops in my chest at the memory of his lips so close to mine, his warm breath on my cheek, the way his eyes lit up under the soft lights...

"What the heck!" I grab the sides of my head. "Is there any way to wipe out the memories of the last twenty-four hours?"

Paint. I need to paint. But I can't. I'll probably paint another portrait of *him*, and that's the last thing I want to do. How can I take my mind off him? And I don't mean something temporary. I need something that will

completely make me forget about him forever...

I jump up when an idea hits me. Racing over to my phone, I start a video call with Penny and Hannah.

Penny yawns as her face fills the screen. "I was just about to go to bed. I danced so much at your party that I can barely keep my eyes open."

"Same with me," Hannah says with a smile. "Tonight was spectacular, Evie."

"Yeah, it was pretty great..." If you don't count what almost went down in that enchanted gazebo...I clear my throat. "Anyway, can you do me a favor, Penny?"

"Sure."

"Remember Mark's friend that you wanted to introduce me to? You think he's still interested?"

Penny, who was basically half-dead just a few seconds ago, suddenly perks up. "What? You want me to set you up with Cam?"

"Cam? Is that his name?"

"Cameron, yes. I told you that was his name when I first brought him up."

"Yeah, but I wasn't interested back then so I didn't care."

Hannah raises a brow. "And you're interested now?"

"Yes."

She looks at me with narrowed eyes. "Why?"

Resting my phone against some books on my desk, I start pacing my room again, running my fingers through my hair for the millionth time.

"Evie?" Hannah asks.

I return to the phone and shrug. "Can't a girl change her mind?"

"Sure," Penny says. "But you've never been interested in going out with anyone before. Why now?"

"Is it because of all the couples dancing at your party?" Hannah asks. "It

looked like you were having a lot of fun with Noah.”

My eyes bug out. “W-what? I didn’t have fun with him! No fun whatsoever. You guys are seeing things that aren’t there!”

Hannah holds up her hands. “Whoa. I didn’t mean anything by it. Just, it was kind of him to offer to dance with you—”

“Can we not talk about him? Penny, will you talk to Mark or not?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you. If he’s interested, you can give him my number.”

“I’ll text him right now—”

“Wait a second,” Hannah interrupts. “Something’s not right.” She studies me closely. “What’s going on, Evie? Why are you suddenly interested in going out with someone when you’ve never been into it before? And didn’t you say you don’t want to get involved with anyone before college?”

I lift my shoulders. “Maybe I changed my mind?”

“Hannah, it’s because she felt lonely at her party,” Penny whispers to her.

I put my hands on my hips. “Actually, I was completely content not having a partner at the party. It was only after he came and *ruined* everything...” I sigh. “My life was fine until he messed everything up.”

“Who?” Hannah asks.

“Who messed up what?” Penny says.

My lips snap shut when I realize what just came out of my mouth. I shrug nonchalantly. “No one.”

“Evie, seriously. What’s going on?” Hannah asks. “I’ve never seen you so...I don’t know. On edge. Bothered. You weren’t this bad when you were biting your nails waiting to hear back from the colleges you applied to.”

I scoff lightly. “What’s college compared to this?” I mutter.

“Evie, tell us what’s going on,” Penny says. “Please?”

My eyes trek from one friend to the other. It’s not that I don’t want to talk

to them about it, I just don't want to admit it out loud. Because that would mean it's true, and there's no way in heck I'm ready to deal with it. Not now or ever.

But if I keep this inside, I might explode. So with a sigh, I fall down on my bed and hug my pillow. "Noah and I almost kissed tonight."

"What?!" they exclaim.

I keep my eyes on the floor. "Yeah. I went out to the gazebo for fresh air and then he came to join me and we danced and..." I sigh again. "It just happened. Well, it almost happened. For the second time."

Penny moves her face closer to the screen. "Did you want it to happen again?"

"Are you nuts? Of course I didn't want it to happen again! He's *Noah*."

"So?" Hannah asks.

"So he and I are enemies. And it needs to stay like that."

"Why is that, though?" Penny asks. "You guys clearly have something going on. Maybe you should go out with him and see—"

I explode off my bed. "What?! You want me to go out with...to go out with...I can't even say it."

"Why are you freaking out?" Hannah asks. "You guys have known each other all your lives. As much as you bicker, you still look out for each other. And Noah is a really good guy."

"With too many hang-ups," I mutter.

"Everyone has hang-ups," Penny says.

"Not like Noah. Don't you get it, guys? Noah and I can't...we can't..."

"Date?" they both supply.

"Yeah, that!"

"Why not?" Hannah asks.

"Because we're so different! He's a neat freak and I'm a tornado. He likes

order and I like messy. He's responsible and I'm irresponsible. He's always looking ten steps ahead while I only see what's in front of me. We're different in every single way."

"Yeah, but different could be good," Penny says. "You know, the whole opposites attract thing."

"This goes way beyond opposites. In no reality would Noah Barrington and I be a good fit. We'd bicker over everything. We'd hurt each other. And if we become serious and get married one day, we'd only hurt each other and our kids. Why bother starting something when a relationship between us is doomed from the start? I don't want to hurt him and I certainly don't want him to hurt me."

Penny and Hannah exchange a look.

"She might be right," Penny says. "They're so different and argue about the littlest things. Maybe getting together will only lead to heartache."

"Not maybe," I clarify. "One hundred percent."

"You never know," Hannah says. "Maybe you should just give it a chance and see if it works out. After all, your pretend marriage seemed to work out fine."

I laugh out loud. "Key word here is *pretend*, Hannah. There's no way we would last in real life. You both know I'm right."

Hannah thinks it over for a bit before sighing. "I guess. I don't want you to get hurt. It's easy to complain and whine about Noah when he's your enemy, but if he was your boyfriend? Everything about him that annoys you would drive you away from him. Unless you guys learned to compromise..."

"Forget it," I say. "I'm not embarking down that road because it'll lead to a dead end. I need to forget about him and meet someone else." My eyes move to Penny. "So you'll text Mark?"

"Already did. He said Cam is interested."

That causes a flutter of anticipation to enter my stomach. “Really? Cool.”
“He said that if you’re still up, he’ll call you.”

That anticipated butterfly has morphed into a nervous butterfly. “Right now? What do I say to him? Guys, I’ve never talked to a boy before. I mean, of course I’ve talked to boys, but I mean...Ugh, you know what I mean!”

“Just be yourself,” Hannah advises. “He’ll like you for you. And if he doesn’t, he’s not the right one for you.”

“Okay...” I run my hand through my hair again. “I guess we should end the call in case he calls?”

“Definitely!” Hannah says, an excited grin on her face. “Text us how it goes.”

We say good night and end the call. Then I sit on my bed and stare at my phone, waiting for a strange number to appear on my screen. He said he’d call tonight, right? Unless he’s trying to act cool and not call right away. Ugh, I hope he’s not the kind of person who plays games. I have no patience for that.

I gasp when my phone lights up with an unknown number. Holy crap, it’s him!

With a shaky finger, I answer and say, “Hello? This is Evie speaking.”

“Hi, Evie. This is Cameron. Cam. I got your number from my friend Mark, who got the number from your friend.”

“Right. I let her give it to him so he could give it to you.”

“Yeah, I was just trying to be polite,” he says with a small laugh.

I laugh, too. “Thanks, that’s sweet of you.”

“I hope it’s not too late? Penny said it was okay to call you.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Thanks for calling.”

“No problem. Oh, it’s your birthday today, right? Happy birthday.”

I glance at the clock on my desk. “Actually, my birthday will be over in

exactly one minute.”

“At least I still had time to squeeze it in before it’s tomorrow. So, did you have fun?”

We spend about twenty minutes talking. Cam’s easy to talk to and he also seems genuinely interested in what I have to say. Hmm. Maybe this could lead somewhere.

“I know it might be uncool of me to suggest this so early on, but do you want to go out Sunday night?” he asks. “I have lots of schoolwork and exams coming up next week, so I might not be able to get together after this week.”

“You’re a freshman in college, right?”

“Yeah. Busy busy,” he says with a light laugh.

“I can wait until your load gets lighter.”

“No, it’s cool. You sound very interesting and I would like to meet you in person.”

His words cause my cheeks and neck to heat up. “Thanks. You sound very interesting, too.”

“Thanks. So let’s meet at Mikey’s Diner for dinner Sunday night?”

“Sure. See you then.”

“Great. Have a great night and a great day tomorrow, Evie.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

My face hurts from the huge grin that has taken over it. Cam sounds so mature. Cool and easygoing. The prospect of meeting him fills me with an excitement I wasn’t expecting. Maybe I was wrong to swear off relationships because of college. If things work out for me and Cam and we’re endgame, we’ll figure out the whole long-distance thing.

But I’m thinking way too much into the future, just like a certain guy with blue eyes...

Oh my Gosh.

Nope. Out of my head. Hopefully after I meet Cam on Sunday, the memory of *him* will be completely and totally obliterated.

Chapter Thirty

Noah

Yesterday passed in a blur of me not being able to forget the almost kiss and the way Evie gave me the cold shoulder on Friday night. Now it's Sunday and I'm in my room, trying to write the lyrics to our next song. Lately when I'm stuck, I'd call Evie for help. Considering she's staying away from me like the plague, I'm on my own.

Either way, I'll need to get used to not having her around, since she won't always be part of the band, or part of my life. Once we graduate, we'll go our separate ways. We might see each other every so often because our schools are only an hour away and we'll mingle at family gatherings and holidays. But for the most part, we'll be living our own lives.

The lyrics are just not coming to me at all. Normally, I at least have something, but it's like my brain decided to go on vacation.

Sighing, I bend forward and rub my hand down my face. What am I going to do now? My bandmates expect a new song and I can't come up with anything.

Sometimes, it helps if I just relax and not think about it too much. So after taking a deep breath, I sink down in my seat and let my hand glide around my lyrics notebook.

Her beautiful dark hair and brown eyes float before my face, and my heart thumps just like it did at the party. Her lips are so close to mine, so inviting...

In my mind, we *did* kiss in the gazebo. And it was the most spectacular feeling in the world. I feel as though I'm leaving this world and am floating away to another. Evie's in my arms, our cheeks pressed together, our breaths mingling. We become one.

Blinking, I tell myself to get a grip. It's Evie. *Evie*. The girl I have no business having these feelings for.

When I glance down at my notebook to see what I've written, I nearly choke over my oxygen. Because right there, in blue ink, are the words "A girl with beautiful, paint-streaked dark hair and brown eyes that spins my world around and around."

My breath hitches as I take in the entire song. I've written about a girl who's a complete mystery to me, like a gift I want to unwrap. It's about someone I'd like to get to know, even though she doesn't see me that way. And at the end, I wrote that she's the girl of my dreams. And that even though we fight and argue a lot, I'm hers. Completely hers. And I'd like her to be mine.

My heart pounding so strongly I feel it in every inch of my body, I shove the notebook off my desk, watching it splat to the floor. That notebook is one of my most prized possessions and now it's on the floor like it means nothing to me.

All because of what's written in there.

I bend forward, burying my face in my hands. What in the world is going on with me? Why did I write an entire song about her?

I don't like her. I *can't* like her.

Sweeping the notebook off the floor, I turn to the song and am about to rip it out, but I stop. As much as I don't want it to exist, it's a good song and it'd be a shame to throw it out. But the last thing I want is for someone to see it. So I carefully tear out the pages and am about to stuff them in my bottom drawer. But then I freeze and read the words again.

I'm trying to tell myself the song isn't about her, but who am I kidding? I mention paint in her hair and all over her clothes. How she has the voice of an angel, is messy and drives me insane, but I love it.

Shaking my head, I shove the pages in the drawer, never to see the light of day.

It's time to write another song.

But every time I poise my pen to write, the only things that pop into my head are those brown eyes and that beautiful dark hair. And my heart pounds all over again.

“Screw this,” I mutter under my breath and make my way downstairs to get away from it all. Maybe some food or water will make me feel better.

Mom's folding laundry in the kitchen when I enter. She smiles at me. “Hey, honey.” She squints as she takes me in. “You all right?”

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest as I lean against the wall. “Fine. Actually, no. I'm not.”

She folds a shirt. “Want to talk about it?” After I nod, she gestures to the chairs and we sit across from each other. “What's on your mind?”

I rub the back of my neck. “How do you know if you like a girl or if it's just loneliness or hormones or whatever?”

Her eyes brighten with excitement. I never come to my mom or dad for dating advice, so I guess maybe she's been waiting for this moment?

“Well, how do you feel when you're close to her?” She asks. “Do you want to kiss her or spend time with her, get to know her?”

My eyebrows furrow as the kiss and almost kiss flash before my eyes. It's true that I've only started seeing her differently after the kiss, but when I think about it, I realize that I like spending time with her. I took her to the museum because I wanted to be with her. I like seeing her smile and I love singing with her. All those times I convinced myself I hated being around her, the truth is it's been quite the opposite. Evie keeps me on my toes, challenges me, makes me laugh—which is something not many people can do—but what does it mean?

I shift in my seat. “I do think about kissing her a lot,” I admit. “But I like spending time with her. I love her brain and her big mouth, and the way she just...drives me crazy.”

A wide smile forms on Mom’s face. “Is she the first thing you think about when you wake up and the last thing you think about before you go to sleep?”

“Definitely.” I couldn’t sleep at all for the past two nights because I kept thinking about us in each other’s arms, so close, so comfortable, so perfect.

She places her hand on my arm. “Seems to me that you really like this girl. But you know, even if it’s teenage hormones, it might grow into something much, much more deeper and beautiful the more time you two spend together. My crush on your dad started with hormones, but it grew to be something so much more.”

I nod slowly as I take in her words. “I just...I just can’t stop thinking about her.”

“In what way?”

The words flow from my mouth before I can stop them. “I want to hold her and keep her safe and tell her everything that lies in my heart. I want to share my hopes and dreams with her. I want her to be my everything.”

Mom smiles again. “Sounds to me like you love this girl.”

My eyes widen. “Love? No, I don’t think...no.”

“Okay, let’s not jump to love. But you have strong feelings for her.”

“But I shouldn’t. We’re so different and we can’t stand each other most of the time.”

Mom’s quiet for a bit. “Every relationship is different. Some couples work because they’re so similar. Others work because they’re so different. Have you talked to her about this?”

“No. I don’t think she feels the same way.” I can’t forget the way she fled from me after what happened in the gazebo on Friday night.

“Maybe you’re wrong. You should tell her how you feel. Be honest with her. And if she feels the same, you two might start something so wonderful and spectacular and out of this world.”

I sigh as I bend forward. “You really think I should tell her how I feel? Maybe I’m just confused and don’t understand anything.”

She rests her hand on my back. “I can’t tell you what to do. I can only advise and listen.” She pauses. “Do I know her?”

“No,” I quickly lie. “You don’t know her.”

From her expression, I think she knows exactly who I’m talking about. But she doesn’t call me out on it. “Noah, you don’t *have* to tell her how you feel, but if she feels the same way...”

I nod. “I know. We can start something special.”

There’s no denying that there *is* something between Evie and me. We didn’t kiss twice—or almost twice—for no reason.

But I’m starting to believe it’s not just teenage hormones. She’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever laid eyes on, but it’s more than that. I miss her when she’s not with me and I feel empty when she pretends I don’t exist. The feeling of her avoiding me Friday night was one of the most terrible things I’ve ever experienced.

Maybe Mom’s right. I have no idea why she ran from me, but if I don’t talk to her, I don’t know what could happen. If I don’t tell her how I feel, I’ll be left wondering what if for the rest of my life.

When I imagined a potential girlfriend, Evie never entered my mind. But everything is different now.

She’s the *only* one who enters my mind.

I smile at Mom. “Thanks so much. You gave me a lot to think about.” I get up and hug her. “Need help with laundry?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

The family wants Mikey's for dinner.

After getting in my car, I head for the diner to pick up the food. It's early in the evening and the place is mostly full. I'm about to make my way to the counter, but stop when I spot a girl with paint in her dark hair sitting at a table.

Evie.

Her back faces me, so I can't see the expression on her face. Why is she here all by herself? Has she been thinking about what happened between us as much as I've been thinking about it?

My throat tightens as I watch her. After I had that talk with Mom, I went to my room, plopped down on my bed, and thought. About everything. And I decided I can't just ignore what's happening between Evie and me. We need to talk about it, figure things out.

And maybe if she feels the same way about me...

I was set on having that talk at school on Monday, but now that she's here, sitting alone at a table, I figure now is as good a time as any.

I take a deep breath to calm my thumping heart, count to ten, squeeze my fists to my sides. I've never done something like this in my life, but I'm ready. I need to do this. And maybe something amazing might come out of this, like my mom said.

Moving one foot before the other, I'm about to walk over to her, but I freeze when a guy comes into my view. A guy sitting at her table, across from her. He was hidden before by a guest at another table.

He looks around college-age and...are they on a date?

Since I can't see the look on her face, I don't know if she's having a good time. But I see him clearly. He smiles kindly at her, listens to what she says, and seems like a decent dude from what I can tell.

Since when does Evie date? She told me she's not interested in dating in high school. And where in the world did she meet this guy?

Was she sitting alone at her table and the guy started flirting with her? Evie's not one to be so taken by flirting. I just don't understand.

But there's one thing I *do* understand. Evie doesn't feel for me the way I feel for her. The dance, the kiss, the almost kiss, it all meant nothing to her. If she could move on to another guy two days after we shared a special moment in that gazebo, then I get the message.

I can't believe I was minutes away from making a complete fool of myself by expressing my feelings for her.

Shaking my head and the feelings away, I whirl around, making my way to the counter. "Order for Barrington," I tell the guy.

As I wait for him to get my food, I turn toward Evie's table and find her eyes locked on mine.

Chapter Thirty-One

Evie

Cam is awesome.

He's cool and smart and interesting and engaging and once again seems genuinely interested in what I have to say. He has black hair and dark eyes that are so thoughtful and expressive, and he's really tall, which is always a plus.

He understands my love of art because he has dabbled in drawing throughout most of his life.

"So you never thought to pursue it?" I ask as I take a bite of my fries.

Cam shakes his head. "Everyone in my family are lawyers. It just makes sense for me to pursue it as well."

"If that's what you really want? Go for it."

He smiles. "I don't have the kind of passion you have. If I would try to pursue a career in art, I'd fall flat on my face." He chuckles. "I'm fine just having it as a hobby."

We continue to eat and talk about...I don't know, honestly. Everything. It's like there's so much to talk about that we don't even finish one subject before being thrown into another. I didn't know talking to someone about such mundane things could be so interesting. Getting to know a person I might be into is a lot of fun.

"I have to be honest with you," he says with a shy smile as he takes a small bite of his burger. "I searched you online after our conversation Friday night."

"That's okay."

"I saw a video of you and your band."

"Oh." My face flushes so fast and strong. "I kind of forgot about it."

His brows shoot up. “You have?”

“No, not really. I meant, I forgot that I should have considered it when the prospect of going out with a guy comes up. So...” I shift in my seat as I play around with my food. “What did you think of the video?”

“I think you’re a very talented singer.”

My face feels even hotter. “Thanks.”

“You have such a beautiful voice and the music was solid. No wonder you guys went viral.”

My body deflates with relief. Why does it matter so much what he thinks of the band? I guess that kind of stuff matters when you want someone to like you.

“So you’re going to be a famous artist and a famous singer?” he asks with a grin as he dips onion rings in ketchup.

I hold up my hand. “Nope. Just an artist.”

The thought of being tied to Noah makes my stomach get all twisted. We haven’t seen or spoken to each other since the incident at my party, and I’m kind of dreading band practice tomorrow.

“Cool. I think you’d be successful in whatever you do.”

That makes me smile. “You’re so nice,” I blurt. Then I mentally kick myself. “Sorry. I don’t think I’m supposed to say that to your face.”

He grins again. “I like it. You say what you want when you want. It’s refreshing.”

“Thanks.”

An awkward moment passes between us. Then Cam laughs and talks about a hard assignment he’s working on for school.

“Order for Barrington,” a familiar voice says.

My head whips in the direction of the counter, and I almost gasp. Noah stands there. What’s he doing here?

Then it hits me. Of course, he must be picking up dinner for his family.
“Isn’t that your bandmate?” Cam asks.

I twist away from Noah’s direction and force a smile. “Yep, that’s him.”
“I read online that he wrote most of the lyrics and composed the music?”

“Yeah. Most of the songs are his, but I helped write a few with him.”

“Cool. Do you want to call him over and say hi?” Cam asks.

“What?” I blink. “Call who over?”

“Your bandmate. What’s his name again?”

“Noah.”

“Right, Noah. You can call him over to say hi. I really don’t mind.”

“No!” I say, maybe a little too loudly.

Cam’s eyes widen in shock and surprise.

I laugh sheepishly as I play with my hair. “I mean, we see each other all the time. Practically attached at the hip. I don’t have to say hi to him.”

Cam shrugs. “Okay. But if you change your mind, I’m cool with that.”

My head slowly turns toward the counter. Noah is reaching over to pick up his order. Before he turns to go, his eyes jet to me. I startle for a second, then quickly tear my eyes away. But when I look at him a second later, he’s just standing there staring at me. He has an odd expression on his face, something I can’t read or understand.

It doesn’t matter that I’m here at this awesome diner enjoying a delicious meal with a really cool guy. It doesn’t matter that he and I spent the last thirty minutes having great conversations. Because the memory of the party invades my mind. It completely takes over everything else I have in my head. And then it’s followed right after by the kiss that we *did* share.

I once again tear my gaze away and stuff my face with fries. But like they have minds of their own, my eyes flit over to him without my permission. He’s walking out of the diner, clutching his bag like he has precious jewels in

there. A breath I didn't know I was holding seeps out of me.

Cam is watching me. He smiles and says, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." My voice is scratchy. I clear my throat. "I mean, sure."

"You and Noah...you guys don't have a history, do you?"

"A history?"

"You know...like, is he your ex?"

"My ex? Ha. No way. Well, I mean, we're technically married..."

His eyes nearly pop off his face.

I giggle. "I'm kidding. It's a project for school where we're pretending to be married. We also have a kid. Sorry, I couldn't resist. It's so funny to see people's reactions."

He laughs in relief.

"We do have history, though," I tell him. "Lots and lots of history. But not the romantic kind. He's my sworn enemy. Sort of."

"Sworn enemy? So you're in a band with someone you hate? That's brave."

"I don't really hate him. I..." I puff out my cheeks. "I don't know. Our relationship is complicated. Anyway, let's not talk about him. Tell me more about that nightmare assignment."

He does just that. Even though he's so interesting to listen to, I can't seem to concentrate on his words. Because the only thing I see before my eyes is Noah. The way we locked eyes on one another, the strange look on his face. I wonder if he was thinking about the almost kiss like I was. I mean, he didn't come over, so maybe he feels weird about it, too? And he didn't call or text me, either.

Ugh, why do things have to be so complicated? My life was easier before I married him.

But the only way to get over...whatever the heck is going on with me and

Noah is to move on. To better and greater things. Like Cam. I have no idea yet if there's potential with us, but it's enough that there's a possibility.

A possibility that doesn't include Noah Barrington.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Evie

When I arrive at school five minutes before class starts on Monday morning, I find Noah standing at my locker. He's leaning against it with his arms crossed over his chest and one leg crossed over the other. His eyes assess the hallway, focusing on every student who walks in. As soon as he notices me, he straightens up.

I hope he's not here to bring up a certain incident that almost happened at my party. Because I'd rather pretend it didn't almost happen.

"H-hey," I say as I open my locker for my textbook.

"H-hi."

"Um, are you waiting for me?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah. I want to talk to you about something."

I shut my eyes for a second and release a breath. "Look, about what happened at my bir—"

"Who was that guy you were with at Mikey's yesterday?"

My lips snap shut and my brows crease. "What?"

"I went to pick up food yesterday evening. You were with a guy."

It takes a second for my brain to make sense of what he's saying. So he doesn't want to talk about the almost kiss?

"Were you on a...date?"

I snap out of it and narrow my eyes. "Why do you sound so shocked? You think I'm so repulsive that no one would want to go out with me?"

His eyes get huge. "What? I'd never think that about you. I just want to know who he is."

I take a few seconds to regulate my breathing. I don't know why I snapped at him like that. Maybe because despite my efforts, the kiss and

almost kiss still haunt me nearly every second of every day. And him standing here so close to me isn't exactly helping.

"Sorry," I say. "Just stressed about a stupid assignment. The guy I was out with yesterday is a friend of the guy Penny is seeing. She wanted to set us up for a while and I finally agreed."

Noah's quiet for a bit as he contemplates the information, his brows dipping lower and lower. "I thought you're not interested in dating until you go off to college."

I shrug. "I thought so, too. Guess I was wrong."

He's quiet again.

I turn to head to first period, but he says, "Isn't he in college?"

I spin around to face him. "Yep."

"He's too old for you."

I give him a look. "Are you serious? He's a freshman. He's only a year older than me."

"Yeah, but being in college and being in high school are two different things. Why would he want to go out with a high school kid?"

"I'm not a kid. In case you forgot, I turned eighteen three days ago."

He huffs as he runs his hand through his hair. "Is he nice? A decent guy?"

"Yes, Noah. Will you quit being so overprotective? I'm not Chloe or Rylee. I'm a big girl and can take care of myself"

"I know, but—"

First period bell rings.

"I need to go to class," I say and turn again.

"Did he say anything to make you uncomfortable?"

"I'm heading to class, Noah. You should do the same or you'll get detention again."

This time, I stalk away before he can try to ask me any more intrusive

questions. What's his problem? Does he really think I'm a little kid who can't make the right decisions? I wouldn't have stayed on the date if Cam had offended me in any way or made me uncomfortable. He really is a nice guy. Trust Noah to try and spoil it for me.

Throughout my classes, I hide my phone under my desk and text Penny. I would text Hannah, too, but she got in trouble for texting a few weeks ago and doesn't want to risk it again. Penny tells me that Cam told Mark that he had a great time with me and would like to hang out again. A small flutter of delight passes through me, but honestly? I thought I would feel something more intense. Profound. Like a swarm of humongous butterflies would invade my stomach and make me feel like I'm going to puke. Shouldn't I feel immense excitement about the prospect of going out with Cam again?

Noah appears in my mind, and a tingle passes through me. It's more intense than the flutter. I silently groan and toss him out of my head. I won't let him ruin this for me.

When I leave my physics classroom, I nearly crash into Noah.

"Did he ask you any personal questions?"

"Noah, were you waiting outside my classroom?"

"What? No, I'm passing by on my way to history."

I raise my brow. "Isn't the classroom that way?" I point in the opposite direction.

His face gets a little pink. "Yeah. I was headed there." He makes a move to go, but then he spins around. "You didn't answer my question."

"About?"

"If the guy asked you any personal questions."

"His name is Cam. And of course he asked me personal questions. We're trying to get to know each other."

"Yeah, but did he ask you anything too personal? You shouldn't get so

personal on a first date. That could be a red flag.”

I sigh. “I’m heading to my next class now.”

Geez, no wonder Chloe constantly complains about him. The dude is taking his role as the protective brother to such an extreme. My date with Cam is none of his business. *He’s* the one who’s getting too personal.

I manage to avoid him and his nosy questions for the rest of the morning because I make sure to leave class at the last second. Considering he doesn’t want to come late to class, that would leave him with no option but to abandon his ridiculous quest.

And now it’s finally lunchtime. After I get my food, I make my way to Penny and Hannah, who are already seated at our table.

“We should triple date this weekend!” Penny says. “It’ll be so much fun.”

“Yes!” Hannah agrees.

“What do you think, Evie?” Penny asks. “You in?”

I take a bite of my meatballs. “Sure. But I think Cam is planning another date later this week.”

Penny hugs me. “I can’t believe you have a boyfriend, Evie! I didn’t think this day would come.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. I don’t think we’re holding there yet.”

“But you want him to be?”

The answer should shoot out of my mouth. Of course I want him to be my boyfriend. He’s sweet and smart and considerate and a good listener. Qualities I’m looking for in a guy. But I don’t feel so over the moon excited to hang out with him. Maybe as a friend, sure, but more than that? No clue.

“Everything okay?” Hannah asks me.

“What? Oh, yeah. Totally.”

“I knew you’d hit it off!” Penny says. “Think matchmaking is a possible career path for me?”

Hannah and I are about to respond, but someone drops his tray on our table and lowers himself on the chair across from me.

Noah.

What the heck is he doing here when he normally eats at the jock table?

“Did he look at you in a way that made you uncomfortable?” he asks.

“You know, at your body?”

“Oh my gosh, Noah,” I groan as I open my Coke can. “No, he didn’t stare at my body like some sleazeball. He was a perfect gentleman.”

Noah frowns. “I find that hard to believe. Most guys would do that.”

“Well Cam wouldn’t.”

“What about when you ordered dinner? Did he try to order for you or force you to buy something cheap?”

“What is going on right now?” Hannah asks as her eyes travel from me to Noah.

I roll my eyes. “Noah thinks it’s his job to look out for me. Like I’m his sister.”

“That’s sweet,” Hannah says.

Penny wrinkles her nose. “Nah. More like stalkerish behavior. Like jealous ex-boyfriend behavior.”

“What?” both Noah and I nearly shout.

“What? I’m not saying you’re a jealous ex-boyfriend. I’m just saying you need to lay off her. She doesn’t tell you who to go out with.”

“Do you even know anything about this guy, Evie? Do you know anything about his family or his background? Maybe he has a criminal record —”

“Noah, you have a serious problem. Cam’s not hiding anything. He’s just a regular guy who’s super sweet and kind.”

Noah shakes his head with a frown.

“I don’t know much about him,” I admit, “but I’m learning. That’s what dating is all about.”

“But what if you guys get serious? He goes to school nearby and you’re going to be across the country. You know most long-distance relationships don’t last.”

“Your parents’ did,” I point out. “And it lasted while your dad was playing pro football.”

“Yeah, but that was different.”

“How?”

He’s quiet for a second or two before saying in a low voice, “Because they were meant to be.”

This odd sensation passes through me. Takes over my body and makes it difficult to breathe. What exactly does he mean by that? That Cam and I are not meant to be? On what basis? And is he suggesting that there’s someone else who’s meant to be with me?

“Noah, I don’t want to be rude, but you’re driving me insane. Can you please join your friends at your usual table so I can have alone time with my girls?”

Noah glances from me, to Hannah, to Penny, his lips pressed in a firm line. It’s obvious he doesn’t want to leave, but with a sigh, he gets up with his tray.

“Fine, I’ll stop bugging you. But can I just say one more thing?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “You’ll say it even without my permission.”

“Don’t let him take you to college parties. Those things aren’t like high school parties. There’s drinking and lots of other stuff...and there’s no guarantee you’ll be safe there.”

Goosebumps pop up all over my arms. Because even though he has no

right to tell me what to do, the fact that he's looking out for me is still pretty sweet.

"She'll be fine." Penny shoos him away. "She's not a baby."

He ignores her, keeping his eyes on me. "Promise me, okay?"

I nod. "I promise."

"Thanks. I'll see you guys later."

"But not too soon," Penny grumbles as he walks away. Then she says, exasperated, "Did you hear him? He's acting like your dad."

"More like an older brother," I say.

"Exactly! What's his deal? It's not his job to take care of you."

"It is kind of sweet, though," Hannah says. "You know, in a non-stalker way."

Penny watches him as he drops down at an empty chair at the jock table and slaps hands with his teammates. "He's acting like...yeah, like a jealous ex-boyfriend."

I gape at her. "Are you crazy? Noah as my ex-boyfriend? My ex-husband, sure, but ex-boyfriend?"

Hannah raises her finger. "In another context, that would be very weird."

"Then why does he care so much about who you go out with and how he's treating you?" Penny asks.

I lift my shoulders. "How should I know? I'm not in the mood to try to analyze him."

"I think..." Hannah says as her eyes move to him. "I think despite your constant bickering, you guys care about each other." I'm about to protest, but she quickly adds. "In a non-romantic way! More like a family way. Like you said, a protective older brother."

Except, why do I feel deep inside me that she's wrong? Noah doesn't feel like a brother to me. He feels...

Like something else entirely.

I shove the thought away before it settles in my brain and forces me to contemplate it. “I don’t really care how he feels. It’s not my problem that he has this ridiculous need to look out for me. Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll leave me alone.”

A shadow looms over me. When I raise my head, I find Noah standing there.

No way in heck...

“I thought of one more thing,” he says.

“Oh my gosh, Noah. If you don’t quit doing this, I’ll—”

“Does he have a good relationship with his parents? His family? Or is he estranged?”

“I thought you’re not supposed to get so personal on first dates,” I remind him.

He grimaces. “You’re right. When are you going out with him again?”

I grit my teeth.

“The next time you guys hang out, ask him about his family. See if he gets along—”

“*Noah.*” I get up, take hold of his arm, and drag him back to the jock table. Everyone seated there stops talking and pins their gazes on me.

“Can you keep this one on a leash?” I gently push him toward them. “He keeps wandering to my table and won’t stop barking.”

Wyatt chuckles. “Have you guys been locked in the house with each other for too long? You know time apart is healthy.”

Everyone else at the table laughs. Noah doesn’t seem to care about that. It looks like his brain is buzzing with a million more questions to fire at me.

I hold up my finger. “One more peep out of you and I’m going to duct tape your mouth shut.”

I give Noah a look that says I mean business and march away.

We have band practice after school. I'm dreading it for a whole new reason now. Before today, I wasn't looking forward to it because of the almost kiss with Noah. Now there's the added annoyance of Noah and his grilling. If he doesn't stop, he'll make me lose all interest in going out with Cam again.

Speaking of Cam, he called me after school and asked me out on Wednesday evening. I told him yes and that I was looking forward to it. I hope I'll feel some sort of spark and forget about...ugh, the stupid kiss and almost kiss.

When I arrive at Wyatt and Elliot's house, Noah is the only one there, looking over the lyrics he wrote for a new song. He raises his eyes to me as soon as I enter, but I turn away and focus on taking off my bag and jacket.

"Evie?" he asks.

With my back facing him, I squeeze my eyes shut. "I'm really not in the mood, Noah. You know you're sucking away every bit of my happiness? It's like you want me to be miserable."

"What?" His voice shakes a little. "That's not true. I don't want you to be miserable."

I spin around to face him. "How do you think it makes me feel when you ask all these ridiculous questions about my date? I didn't think about any of those things until you brought them up. Now I'm wondering if maybe Cam did say something offensive but I didn't realize. Or what if I find out on Wednesday night that he doesn't have a good relationship with his parents? Or what if I notice—"

"You have a date with him on Wednesday?"

I huff. "Is that the only thing you got out of what I said?"

He holds up his hands. “No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bombard you with all those questions. I...” He runs his hand through his hair. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

I stare at him. Is...is that the reason he’s been acting this way? Because he cares if I get my heart broken?

“Noah...” I take a step closer to him.

“Hey, hey!” Mateo barges into the room. “How are my favorite people in the world doing on this fine afternoon?” He throws his arm around me and yanks me to Noah and then throws his arm over him. “I’m so stoked for the gigs we have lined up. Elliot had to cancel one because we were double booked. Dude and dudette, we’re like *famous*.”

Neither Noah nor I say anything.

Mateo glances from me to him. “Did I interrupt a lovers’ spat or something? You guys look so bummed.”

I lift his arm off my shoulder. “Just stressed about stuff.”

“Worried about the song,” Noah says.

“Bet it’s great.” Mateo grins at him. “And about the stress, Evie? Let it go. You’re too young and too beautiful to worry about life like an older woman.”

“Ha. As if that’s so easy.”

Elliot and Wyatt join us, Elliot with mountains of snacks. I grab a bag of gummy worms and throw some into my mouth while the guys munch on other snacks. Not Noah, though. He’s still looking over his song.

Then with a sigh, he puts it down. “Are we ready?”

The guys get into position, and I slowly walk onto the “stage,” parking myself right next to Noah. Well, not right next to him. I keep quite a few feet between us because if I stand too close? I know two specific memories will play nonstop in my head. I can already feel his body heat from all the way

here. Unless it's my memory conjuring it up.

"Do either of you have a contagious disease or something?" Wyatt says with a laugh.

Noah and I step closer to each other.

Mateo raises his brow and the rest of them look at us like something is wrong with us. Of course they have no idea why we're acting weird. They don't know we...

Clearing my throat, I take a step closer to Noah. He takes one closer to me. Then I take another, and he does, too. Then one more. The little hairs all over my body stand up at his close proximity. I keep my gaze trained on the area before me, trying to block the memories of the kiss and the almost kiss.

"So here is the new song," Noah says as he hands us each a paper. His hand accidentally brushes against mine, and that tingly feeling passes through my body again.

We spend a few minutes learning the song, then play the music. The song is pretty good, definitely evokes a feeling in me. It talks about staying true to yourself when everyone around you wants you to be someone else.

The song is great, but unfortunately, our male lead singer isn't. I try not to flinch when Noah sings completely off-key. I've heard him sing a million times during practice and at performances, and he was always phenomenal. I have no idea what's wrong now.

I catch Wyatt and Elliot exchange a confused look. Mateo frowns.

Noah stops singing and rubs a hand down his face. "I know. I'm terrible."

"You coming down with something?" Mateo asks. "Maybe a cold?"

"Don't think so." He puffs out his cheeks. "I'm just...I guess I'm just not feeling it."

"But the song is great," I tell him.

"Not to stress you out or anything," Elliot says. "But we got a lot of gigs

lined up. We need to be on our game or we're done."

Mateo nods with a frown. "Elliot's right. We got so much attention with the viral video. Everyone's expecting us to be amazing."

"We *are* amazing," I say, giving Noah a reassuring smile. "We'll get there."

Noah rubs his forehead and sighs heavily.

"How about we take five?" I suggest.

Noah holds up his hand. "I think we should call it a day. I don't think we'll accomplish anything now. Hopefully I'll be back to normal next time."

"All right," Wyatt says as he lowers his guitar. "Everyone, learn the lyrics by tomorrow."

After grabbing my bag, I find myself walking side by side with Noah. "You okay?" I ask.

He doesn't look my way. "I'm good."

"If you want to, um, talk—"

"Thanks. I'm okay. I really need to head home. I have a test tomorrow."

"Okay. Just, Noah?"

He stops walking and turns around.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. Everyone has off days. You'll do better next time."

A small smile tickles his lips. "Thanks, Evie."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Noah

I follow Evie into her house after school on Tuesday. We have an LRG assignment due on Thursday and we want to get it out of the way so it won't interfere with band practice. We'll be very busy for the next few days practicing for our gigs.

We settle down at her messy desk and take our school things out of our backpacks. I can't help myself and place her papers into a neat pile, causing an eye roll from her. But she doesn't mess it back up like she did in the past.

"Okay," she says as she reads the assignment. "We're in serious trouble, hubby. We got into a major fight and I'm packing a suitcase and staying with my parents for a little while. Mrs. Duncan wants us to handle the situation." She raises her brow. "You must have ticked me off super badly, huh? What did you do?"

"Maybe you ticked me off."

"I'm the one leaving, so obviously you ticked me off. Pretty typical, wouldn't you think?"

I bend closer. "Or maybe I caught you on a date with another guy."

Her lips snap shut and she gapes at me. I shift in my seat. I have no idea why I said that.

Clearing my throat, I take the paper from her and pretend to busy myself with it. "Sorry," I say after a bit. "That was uncalled for."

"Yeah, it was. When are you going to lay off me and Cam? I already told you I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself."

I hold up my hands. "I'm sorry. I won't bring him up again. But...you're happy, right?"

She pauses. Or maybe I'm imagining it. "Yeah." She clears her throat.

“I’m happy with him.”

I nod slowly. “Okay. Cool. Good for you.” I force a smile. “Right, so back to our marriage. It doesn’t matter who ticked off whom. The bottom line is that you’re moving out. How do we handle it?”

She shrugs. “Let me leave. A few days apart will do us good.”

I twist my mouth. “No. I wouldn’t let you leave. I’d do whatever it takes to convince you to stay with me and Melly.”

She lifts a brow. “Let me? What gives you the right to tell me what to do? Oh, I see. You don’t want me to leave because you don’t want to take care of our baby all by yourself.”

“No,” I stress, staring into her beautiful eyes. “I don’t want you to leave because you’re my wife, the mother of my daughter, and I love you.”

Her eyebrows shoot up so high they nearly disappear in her hairline. My eyes are as wide as the sun when I realize what I just said.

“You know, for the assignment,” I quickly sputter.

“Y-yeah. I knew that.”

“I’d do anything, *anything*, to convince you to stay.”

She doesn’t say anything as she continues to stare at me like she can’t believe I just said that. But *why* did I say that?

Maybe I’m really getting into my character of a fake husband. Or...or maybe my subconscious is trying to tell me something.

But that’s impossible. I just told Mom the other day that I don’t love Evie. So why is my heart confusing me?

Evie blinks, seeming to snap out of it. “Right. So you don’t want me to leave. You want us to kiss and make up.” Her lips snap shut and her eyes are as wide as mine were only a few seconds ago. “I mean...”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to bring up whatever happened between us. To just lay it on the table. But she’s dating someone else and it’s silly to talk

about us when there isn't even an us.

There's a thick, awkward silence between us that I wish I could make disappear.

"So...excited for our upcoming gigs?" I ask her, to change the subject.

She glances up at me. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure. Why do you ask?"

I run my fingers through my hair. "No reason. How are the designs for our ads and flyers coming along?"

"All done. Want to see the flyer? I think you'll love it."

"Sure."

She sifts through the piles of papers on her desk, and I can't help the groan that escapes my lips. Of course she can't find anything in that mess.

"I think I left it in the basement. Let me—"

I shoot to my feet. "I'll get it." I'll grab any chance to escape this awkwardness.

My mind's a mess of thoughts as I go down the stairs to her studio. What will it take for my brain and heart to stop thinking about her that way? She doesn't have feelings for me—why would she when she can't stand to be around me? Then why did she seem to enjoy herself with me at her party?

Because we were different people. Living in an alternate universe. That's why we danced and almost kissed. The real us have no business feeling that way about the other. *I* have no business feeling that way about her.

Anyway, what does it matter? She likes that Cam guy. The more I think about those two together, the more it's like a dagger to my heart. Which is so silly. Why can't I just let her go when she clearly doesn't care about me at all?

I shove my thoughts away and scan around the basement. Man, this place is ten times worse than her car and room. There's so much junk in here and I can hardly move. How can she stand being here?

Glancing around some more, I search for the flyer, but I can't find it anywhere. Maybe I shouldn't have volunteered to come down here.

As I move things aside to get deeper into the basement, I tidy up a little, just to make a path so Evie or a member of her family wouldn't get hurt.

It's driving me insane how chaotic this room is, but what drives me the most insane? There's an area behind a wall where a whole lot of junk is leaning against. All it would take is one object to fall and then it would be a domino effect.

Sighing, I make my way there and am about to put everything neatly against the wall, but I stop when I notice a painting among the junk. That's odd. Why would Evie place a painting here? As far as I know, this doesn't look like her garbage pile.

Pulling it out, I nearly lose my breath when I take in the guy in the portrait. Sandy brown hair, bright blue eyes, a kind smile on his face.

It's me.

Evie painted...me.

Why would she paint me?

As I study it, my heart galloping in my chest, I notice that she painted me very differently from how I look in real life. Yes, my features are identical, but there's something about it. A kind of light in my eyes that I don't see on myself. She made me look happy and full of hope for the future.

She captured me the way I wish I could look but am too afraid to.

Shaking that off, I focus on the fact that Evie Hastings—the girl who can't stand me, the girl who's seeing another guy—painted me.

As far as I can tell, she didn't paint Cam, or even the guys from the band.

Why me? What does it mean?

If she stashed it here, it must mean that she didn't want anyone to find it. Least of all me, I'm sure. But why didn't she just throw it out? If I don't

mean anything to her, why keep it?

Is it possible I *do* mean something to her?

No, it can't be. Why would she date another guy if she was hoping we'd...no. No. I'm thinking too much into this.

"Noah? You down there? Did you find it?" Evie calls from the top of the stairs.

I nearly drop the portrait. "Y-yeah!" I call back. "I found it. Just trying to make my way through this mess. Seriously, Evie."

"You shouldn't have offered to go to my lair."

I'm hardly listening as she goes on to talk about the basement being her place and how she can't create masterpieces if it's too clean. I just continue staring at the portrait she painted of me. My fingers trace along my features, the expression I wish I could have in real life but am too nervous to have.

"Are you coming?" she calls again. "Do I need to come down there and dig you out?"

"N-no! I'm okay!" After giving it one more glance, I carefully place it where I found it, then search for the flyer. Once I find it buried under other things, I climb the stairs.

Evie smiles. "So? What do you think?"

I blink at her. "Hmm?"

She nods at the paper in my hand. "The flyer."

"Oh." I glance at it. She designed the band's logo very beautifully, with vibrant colors and captivating drawings. "Really neat."

Her eyebrows furrow. "Are you okay?"

"What?"

"You go down there totally normal and then you return a zombie?"

I stare down into the basement like I've never seen it before. Then I get a hold of myself, feeling silly for making such a big deal about her painting

me.

She obviously dumped it there because she doesn't care about it. So why should I?

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I give her a look. "I lost some brain cells diving through that mess you call an art studio. I thought your car was a dumpster, but this is way, way worse."

"I'll take that as a compliment." She snatches the flyer from my hand. "We'll make copies of this and pass them around for our next gig."

I barely nod as I follow her back up to her room to finish our project. Turns out neither of us wants her to stay with her parents. We work on communicating our concerns and we come up with good solutions to our problems. I think Mrs. Duncan will be pleased with our work.

Evie throws her hands up. "Why are you staring at me?" she demands. I blink. "What?"

"You've been staring at me all afternoon. Do I have something in my hair? Other than paint, I mean."

My fingers itch to brush through her strands. But I quickly shake those thoughts away and get to my feet. "We finished the assignment. I'm heading home."

"You're not staying for dinner? Mom's making lasagna."

Shaking my head, I fling my backpack strap over my shoulder. "Not tonight. Got homework. And I need to work on more songs for our gigs."

"Need help?"

"No," I say a bit too sharply. She's taken aback with wide eyes. "Sorry. I meant I need to do this alone."

"Oh. Okay. See ya, I guess."

I clear my throat, glancing away because I can't stand seeing the disappointment on her face. I know she likes writing songs with me, but I

need to put some space between us or I'll lose my mind.

I was bothered that she met Cam, but I guess I was slowly accepting it. But now that I found her portrait of me, I feel like she and I...gosh she has a boyfriend. Or a potential boyfriend.

Why can't I just let her go?

"Let me walk you out," she offers.

"No. I'm good. See you tomorrow."

"Okay...bye," she says in a confused tone as I dash out of her room.

Before I leave, though, I turn my head to face her and find her staring at me. After quickly whipping around, I make my way out of the house, to my car, and go for a drive to try to clear my head.

But all I see before my eyes is that portrait of me. And the girl who painted it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Evie

My phone rings with a video call on Wednesday evening.

“Hey, Noah,” I say as his face fills the screen. “What’s up?”

He’s sitting at his desk, with his phone most likely propped against something. “Nothing much. When’s your date?”

I glance at the clock on my desk. “In an hour. I have to get ready soon.”

He drums his fingers against his desk. “Listen, Evie, I don’t want to annoy you or be, like you said, overprotective, but can I just say one thing?”

I try not to sigh. “Okay.”

“He’s picking you up in his car, right?”

“Yeah. And we’re going to Cierra’s.” It’s a restaurant in Edenbury that’s fancy enough but not too expensive. “Why?”

He releases a breath. “I know you said Cam is a good guy, and I’m sure you’ll have a great time tonight. But if you find yourself not having a good time and want to leave, call me, okay? Don’t ask him to take you home or walk home yourself. I’d be more than happy to pick you up.”

“Noah—”

“You don’t have to try to be so tough and independent. It’s okay to rely on people sometimes. It’s okay for you to rely on *me* sometimes.”

There’s so much emotion tied to his last sentence. It feels so good to have someone like Noah in my life, someone who cares about me.

“Thanks,” I say, my voice barely audible and hoarse. I clear it. “I mean, thanks. I don’t have an older brother to look out for me, and I appreciate you taking on that role. Chloe and Rylee are so lucky to have you.”

He frowns and mutters, “Brother…”

“It’s good to know you have my back,” I continue. “Though I doubt I’ll

be needing your services. Cam has shown me so far that he's a great guy and I'm really looking forward to hanging out with him tonight."

Noah presses his lips together as his gaze drops to his fingers that are once again drumming against his desk. "That's great."

"I mean, I'm not that naïve to think that he and I will fall in love and live happily ever after," I find myself blabbing. "But hey, you never know. Maybe he is the right guy for me. My parents met each other in high school and Lily and Liam have met their soulmates, too. Maybe it's in the genes or something."

"Yeah, maybe," he mutters, that frown still on his face.

I sigh. "I wish you'd be happy for me."

His gaze flicks to mine. "Of course I'm happy for you. I *want* you to be happy. I want you to..." He swallows. "Meet the right person and fall in love."

"But you're worried I'll get hurt. I appreciate that, Noah. But you don't have to worry about me. You can't wrap me, Chloe, and Rylee in bubble wrap and hope we'll never get hurt. Because we will. That's just how life works."

He nods and shuts his eyes for a second. "Yeah, I know. But I wish I could."

"Look, Chloe and my brother are soulmates. Liam would never do anything to hurt her. He's the product of my mom and dad, one of the most romantic couples on the planet. Being a good guy is ingrained in his blood."

That causes a small smile to form on his lips.

"I can't speak for Rylee because she has yet to fall in love—"

"Not for another thirty years—"

"—but she'll be okay. Even if she does go through a major heartbreak, she'll survive. Because she's strong."

“I just won’t be around to help her,” Noah says with a frown. “I’ll either still be in college or living away from home.”

“But she’ll have your parents. And she’s the kind of person who knows what she wants. She’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, I know that in my brain,” he admits. “But my heart refuses to acknowledge it.” He rubs a hand down his face. “If I’m so worried about my sisters, I can’t imagine what I’ll be like as a dad.”

“You’ll be a great dad,” I assure him. “The best in the world.”

He raises a brow. “I was so sure you’d roll your eyes and tell me how ridiculous I am for thinking about my future family when I’m only seventeen.”

I play with my hair. “Huh. You’re right. Weird.”

He grins. “I’m finally growing on you, huh?”

“Like a freakin’ wart.”

He chuckles. “That’s more like it.”

“Seriously, though, Noah. It’s great that you worry, but you also need to let go. Trust that life will be good and that things will work out. Because if you spend all your time worrying about everything, when will you live?”

“There’s time to live later...”

“When you’re ninety and can barely move?”

“Yes,” he says, then chuckles.

I chuckle, too.

We’re both quiet. Then we smile at each other.

Noah glances at his watch. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready?”

“What?”

“For your date.”

“Oh!” I totally forgot about it. I was so absorbed in talking to Noah that it completely slipped my mind.

But...I don't want to go on my date. I want to continue talking with Noah.

"We should probably end the call now," Noah says. "Unless you plan on going like that." He nods to my sweats that are covered in paint. "I mean, you can pull it off, and if Cam knows you, he'd love it. But I wonder if they might kick you out of the restaurant."

I laugh as I pull at my sweatshirt. "Pretty sure Cam would think I was a weirdo if he picked me up and I was dressed like this."

"You'd look beautiful in whatever you wear."

My heart nearly catapults out of my chest as I gape at him, my head feeling stuffy. "What?"

He shakes his head and picks up his phone, his face coming closer to the screen. "Sorry. I don't mean to hold you back. I'll let you get ready for your date. I hope you have a great time. Just remember about my offer. I'm available whenever you need me."

"Thanks, Noah," I say as I get up. "You're a good friend."

He laughs lightly. "As long as I'm no longer your enemy."

I think he hasn't been, not for a long time.

"Okay, well...good night," I tell him. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

He nods. "Good night and have fun."

He ends the call.

I press my phone to my chest and just sit on my bed for a few minutes, replaying the conversation I just had. Too many conflicting emotions pass through me, ones I don't have time to decipher. So I push them out of my head and focus on getting ready for my date. A date I'm excited for...right?

Once I'm dressed and ready, I sit down with my parents in the living room. They're watching a K-drama. Ten minutes later, my phone beeps with a text from Cam. He's waiting outside.

“Have a great time,” Mom says.

“Try not to stay out too late,” Dad adds. “It’s a school night.”

“No problem.” I get up and walk to the door, but I turn around. “Can I ask you guys a question?”

“Sure, sweetie,” Mom says.

“How did you know you two were meant to be?”

Mom glances at Dad and smiles. He slips his hand into hers and brings it to his mouth, pressing his lips to the back of her palm. “We just knew.”

I groan. “I hate that answer. How did you *know*?”

“Do you think you might feel that way about Cam?” Dad asks.

“Cam? No way. We barely know each other. It’s only our second date.”

Mom’s brows furrow. “Then who are you talking about?”

I freeze. “I-I’m not talking about anyone specific,” I quickly say. “It’s a hypothetical question.”

Mom watches me like she’s not sure she believes me and is curious what I’m hiding. Dad says, “I know that’s a lame answer, but with your mom and I, we knew. Though we were both scared to admit it at first.”

“And then you completely freaked out on me,” Mom teases.

“Because I didn’t think I deserved to be happy.” He leans forward and kisses her forehead. “But you showed me I did deserve it. That I deserved you.”

My phone beeps with another text. Shoot, Cam is wondering what’s keeping me.

“Thanks, Mom and Dad. I think. But Cam’s waiting.”

“Of course. Enjoy, Evie,” Mom says with a wave.

I return the wave and walk out the front door. Cam is parked outside my house and as soon as he sees me, he runs out of the car and opens the passenger door for me.

“Thanks,” I say as I slide in.

“My pleasure.”

Once we’re both settled in and are on our way, he asks, “How was your day?”

“Good. Yours?”

“Great. And much better, now that I’m with you.”

I smile, but my heart doesn’t flutter. Butterflies don’t storm my stomach. He has such a sweet smile, but why doesn’t that *do* anything to me?

“What music do you like?” he asks.

I shrug. “I’m fine with anything.”

“Cool.”

We talk on the drive to the restaurant, while listening to the music as well. Cam is just as attentive and interested in what I have to say as our last date, and I try to give him as much attention as possible. But my mind keeps wandering to Noah. Wondering what he’s doing right now. Is he working on the lyrics to our song? Singing in his room? I seriously hope he’s not worrying how I’m doing.

But I feel like a jerk for thinking about another guy when I’m on a date, so I shove Noah away and focus on Cam. That works for the rest of the drive and when we get to the restaurant. Which is beautiful. But once we’ve ordered and are making small talk, my mind wanders again.

Is Noah secretly hoping my date goes bad? Is he waiting by his phone for me to call him to pick me up? Or maybe I’m not even on his mind at all?

Oh my gosh, I’m so rude. What’s wrong with me?

“You okay?” Cam asks.

“What?”

“You’re twitching.”

I hold still, not realizing I was moving so much. “Oh. Just nervous, I

guess,” I say with a light laugh.

“I get that. It can be a little overwhelming to be in a nice place like this. I gather this is your first time?”

I reach for my water and take a gulp. “Truthfully, this is my second date.”

His brows lift. “Second date? You mean, Sunday night was your first date ever?”

I nod.

He grins. “Well, I’m honored to be the first one. I hope you had a good time, though.”

“Of course!” I say. “I had a great time. You’re amazing.”

His cheeks get a little red. “Thanks. You’re amazing, too.”

“Thanks.”

We talk about various things, and then our food arrives. As we dig into the delicious food, we continue chatting. Everything Cam says is interesting, and I love that he genuinely listens to what I have to say. But at the same time...I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

“I swear that was the largest bee I’ve ever seen,” Cam is in the middle of saying, laughing. “I even have a picture to prove it.”

“Let’s see, then.”

He whips out his phone and swipes to the photo, then passes his phone across the table to me. His fingers brush against mine, and I brace myself for a tingle, a spark, a shiver. But I don’t get anything.

“Indeed, it’s big,” I say with a laugh as I pass it back to him. “How did you manage to even get a shot of it?”

He grins. “Mad skills.”

Cam continues to tell me funny stories and memories, and I share mine as well, but after some time, I feel like a rotten person. Because even though he’s so nice and considerate and interesting to talk to, my mind still keeps

wandering to Noah. Replaying the conversation we had right before I left for my date. Reliving the moments when we got close to each other. Looking forward to seeing him tomorrow at school and then hanging out with him during band practice.

Cam doesn't deserve this. He deserves someone who wants to be here with him.

"Cam?" I say, dropping my gaze to my plate.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I'm a jerk."

When I peek at him, I notice he wears a shocked expression. "What? You're not a jerk. You're far from being a jerk."

I shake my head. "You're such a great guy and I'm horrible."

"Why are you so horrible?"

I drop my eyes back to my plate. "I'm not enjoying myself as much as I hoped I would." I run my hand down my face. "Sorry. I'm such a horrible person."

Cam doesn't say anything for a while, which causes me to lower my hand from my face. He looks thoughtful as he asks, "Do you like someone else?"

Every part of me urges me to say, *No, I don't like someone else! I like you, Cam. I want to get to know you better. Because you're great and I always dreamed of being with someone like you.* But the person my heart beats for? He's great, too. And I want him. More than I've ever wanted anyone or anything before.

So taking a deep breath, I look Cam in the eyes and say, "Yes. There's someone else I like. I'm sorry, Cam. I tried to push away my feelings because I really like you. But as a friend. Nothing more."

He's once again quiet for a bit before he smiles. "That's okay. Everyone deserves to be with the person they want."

“Ugh, I feel like such a jerk...”

“Don’t feel that way.” He reaches across the table to place his hand on mine. “I’m not going to lie, I think you’re cool and awesome and I would have liked to get to know you better. But I sincerely want you to be happy. And Evie? You don’t have to be afraid to tell the guy how you feel. Better to come clean than to hold it inside. It’s not healthy.”

A small smile appears on my face. “Thanks. You’re being so great about this. You really are an amazing guy and I hope you find the person you’re looking for really soon.”

“Thanks.”

We finish our meal and leave the restaurant. I can tell that Cam is disappointed, but he’s being very understanding, which I really appreciate. When he stops before my house, he smiles and says, “The guy is very lucky.”

I reach over to hug him. “The girl you end up with will be very lucky, too.”

I get out of the car and am tempted to text Noah and tell him that Cam and I are over, but my fingers refuse to obey that command. I don’t know why. Maybe because I’m scared what will happen next?

Chapter Thirty-Five

Evie

Noah and I decide to cancel band practice for today so we can work on the new song. He's been doing okay writing it on his own, but he'd like my input.

He and I have had pretty busy schedules today, so we didn't say much to each other during school. Which I was really happy about because every time I see him, my palms get clammy and my heart races. A part of me convinces me to make up an excuse to not hang out with him, but I *want* to hang out with him, even though it makes me feel like I'm going to throw up.

We get together at my house because our moms are having their book club at his house and we don't want to disturb them. They don't have as much time to dedicate to the club as they'd like, so they cherish every chance they get.

"Maybe we should have started our own book club like our parents and siblings," I say to Noah as I drop down on a chair at my desk.

Noah drags over a second chair. "Us and what army?"

I shrug. "Can't it just be us?"

He laughs softly. "We'd argue over everything."

"True." I scoot over so he can have more room.

"Thanks." He reaches into his backpack and produces his lyrics notebook. "I think it's pretty solid. I just need help with a few lines."

"I'm all yours." I freeze. "I mean, I'm all yours as in you have my undivided attention."

"I know what you meant," he assures me.

My heart starts to pound at his close proximity. I find myself staring at his profile. I never realized before that he has such cute ears...

He turns his head, and I quickly look away, clearing my throat and tapping my pen against my desk.

“Here’s the part.” He slides his notebook a few inches to the left so it sits between us. “Any suggestions?”

He’s right—the song is pretty solid. Truth is, the parts he needs help with are perfectly fine in my opinion. But I suppose there’s always room for improvement. So we spend the next few minutes playing around with different words, trying to find the perfect ones that will strike a punch.

He grins as he makes some corrections. “I almost forgot how great it is to work with you. You really do add a whole layer of depth to the songs.” He keeps his eyes on his notebook. “I’ll miss this.”

I’m as still as a statue. What does he mean by that?

He shakes his head. “Anyway, what do you think about this verse?”

After working for another ten minutes, Noah suddenly asks, “So how was your date last night?”

“Oh...um...” I shrug. “It was fine. Good.”

He nods slowly, then turns his attention back to his notebook.

“I ended things with him.”

He turns his head to me so fast I fear it may snap off his neck. “You did?”

I nod.

“Why?”

Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you.

I shrug casually. “He’s not the right one for me.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry about that.”

I playfully narrow my eyes. “Are you really?”

He presses his lips tightly together, as though something is bursting to come out. But then he shakes his head. “I told you I want you to be happy.”

“But not with Cam. You don’t want me to go out with an older guy,” I

tease. “Anyone less than twelve months older than me is fine, and so is anyone younger than me. But older than twelve months? Scandalous.”

Noah cringes, then chuckles. “Yeah, that was silly, huh?”

“Yes.”

He laughs again. So do I.

Then my cheeks lower to their natural position as I sit forward in my seat. “Actually, there’s a reason why I ended things with him.”

“There is?” he asks as he looks straight into my eyes.

My tongue gets stuck to the roof of my mouth. *Tell him*, my mind—no, my heart—begs. *Tell him. Maybe he feels the same.* And if he does? Oh my gosh, what would that *mean*?

I shoot to my feet. “I need a snack. You want anything?”

He shrugs. “Maybe some nuts if you have.”

“Sure. But I’m going to get you some candy, too.”

I hurry out the door, but he calls, “Evie?”

I stop in the hallway and backtrack to my room. “Yeah?”

“Do you mind if I clean up a bit? Sorry, but it’s driving me a little crazy.”

I playfully roll my eyes. “Why am I not surprised? Okay, if you must there’s a pile of papers over there you can throw out.”

A huge grin takes over his face as he gathers the pile.

In the kitchen, I press my back to the fridge, seeing nothing but Noah’s face. The light in his eyes when he smiles at me, the way my heart thumps whenever I’m around him. How sweet and caring he is, even when I don’t deserve it.

I need to tell him how I feel. What’s the point of holding back?

But what if he doesn’t feel the same? What if I make a big fool of myself?

But what if I don’t tell him and I miss out on something that could be

amazing? Noah wanted to kiss me just as much as I wanted to kiss him. That has to mean something, right?

I gather some snacks and make my way upstairs to my room, where Noah is on his knees before the shredder, happily shredding my papers. Geez, does he really get such a kick out of shredding paper? Why do I find that cute?

“I insist you eat some candy,” I say as I drop everything on my bed. “I’m telling you, sugar fuels the mind—” My lips snap shut when my eyes shoot to the empty area on my desk. Where only minutes ago were piles of papers.

“Wait a second.” I dart to my desk and start moving papers around. “Where is it?”

Noah looks up from where he’s shredding the last of my papers. “What?”

“Where is it?!” I frantically push papers around. “What did you do with it?”

“Evie, what are you—?”

“You *shredded* it?” My movements are more frantic as I throw all the papers on my desk around, desperately searching for it. “It’s not here! Noah, *you shredded it!*” Tears pour out of my eyes and rain down my cheeks like a thunderstorm.

“Evie.” Noah moves closer to me. “What are you talking about?”

“There was a photo of my grandparents!” I cry, more tears splashing down my cheeks. “One of the only ones that survived the fire. It was one of the *only* photos my dad has of his parents! I borrowed it because I wanted to paint a painting and give it to him as a gift, but you destroyed it!”

Noah’s face goes completely pale. “I’m so sorry, Evie! I didn’t know—”

“Why did you touch my stuff? I told you over and over again that I like the mess. That I *need* the mess. And now you destroyed one of the only things my dad has left of his parents!”

“I’m sorry.” He reaches for me, but I pull away. “You said I could clean

up that pile—”

“I didn’t mean *that* pile! It was the one next to it!”

“Evie...” He tries to reach for me again, but I yank myself away.

“Leave,” I whisper.

“Evie—”

“I said, leave!”

It looks like he wants to say more, but he nods and steps back. “Okay. I’m really sorry.” He turns around, sweeps his bag off the floor and his lyrics notebook off my desk, and walks out.

I fall on my bed and sob. Not only am I upset that I lost the photo and can’t complete my painting for my dad, but now he no longer has that photo of his parents. I feel so rotten for taking that away from him. Why did I let Noah clean up? Why does he have this need to be so neat and tidy? If he wasn’t like that, my dad would still have that photo.

I don’t know how long I remain crying on my bed like this, but after some time, my tears dry up. Along with feeling guilty for losing the photo, I feel guilty for the way I treated Noah. He’s not entirely at fault. I knew how important that photo was and I should have put it in a safe place. Not stashed it with all the other junk on my desk. Noah couldn’t have possibly known that it was important.

After a while, I hear my parents downstairs. Mom must have returned from her book club and Dad must have returned from work. I need to tell my dad what happened. He’ll be so hurt.

When I get downstairs, I find the two of them laughing at something. In just a few minutes, my dad won’t be smiling anymore. He’ll be so devastated.

He notices me standing in the doorway, and his face fills with concern.

“Evie, what’s wrong? It looks like you’ve been crying.”

“Dad...” I rush into his arms. “I’m so sorry. It was an accident. I didn’t

mean for it to get destroyed.”

“Sweetheart, what are you talking about?” he asks.

Mom rubs my back. “Take a deep breath and tell us what’s bothering you, Evie.”

“It’s the photo of your parents. The one I borrowed from you. There was an accident and it got destroyed.”

“Is that all?” Dad pulls back to look into my eyes. “That’s what you’re so worried about? I thought something terrible happened.”

“But something terrible did happen! It’s one of the only things that survived the fire. You barely have any photos of your parents. And it got destroyed because of me.”

“The memories I have of my parents are held right here.” Dad points to his heart. “Where I’ll cherish them forever. And you don’t have to worry about losing the photo. It was just a copy.”

I stare at him. “What?”

“It was just a copy. I have many more copies, and the original is in a safe place.”

“Wait...what?”

“I suggested your dad make copies,” Mom explains. “Because the photo is so precious to him and I didn’t want anything to happen to it.”

“So...so...so I yelled at him for nothing?”

“Yelled at who, sweetie?” Mom asks.

I’m barely looking at my parents as my head spins. “Even if it was the original and there were no other copies, I shouldn’t have yelled at him. I suck.”

“Evie? What are you talking about?” Dad asks.

“Never mind.” I hug Dad again. “I’m so glad you have more copies.”

I run up to my room and call Noah. But he’s not answering. I try a few

more times. Nothing.

I chuck my phone aside, my eyes brimming with new tears. I can't believe I yelled at him like that.

The first thing I do when I arrive at school the next day—early again—is scan the hallway for Noah. But I can't find him anywhere. That's weird. Maybe he's volunteering in the art room again? But when I get there, the place is empty.

I was up all night because I felt bad for yelling at him and kicking him out of my room. He didn't answer any of my calls and I didn't want to just send him an apology text because I want to *talk* to him.

But how can I apologize when he's not even here? I figure I'll busy myself with my phone as I wait for him to get here.

When there are ten minutes left before class starts, I get worried. It's not like him not to be here. Is he avoiding me because of yesterday? Noah wouldn't miss school for something like that. The guy's crazy about his perfect attendance.

My eyes light up when I spot Chloe at her locker, surrounded by her friends and their boyfriends. Rushing over, I excuse us and pull her aside.

"Hey, Evie. What's up?" she asks. Her eyes narrow. "What's wrong?"

"Is Noah here?"

She rolls her eyes. "No. He's at home, sleeping."

My eyes bug out. "Sleeping? Is he sick?"

"No. He was up all night trying to tape together some shredded paper or something. I don't know, but I told him over and over that it's almost impossible to put it back together, but he refused to listen. He stayed up *all night*. And this morning when Mom tried to wake him up, he was dead tired and couldn't move."

I gawk at her. Noah tried to tape the photo back together? And he stayed up all night?

“But what about his perfect attendance?” I ask.

She shrugs. “The dude wouldn’t have been able to stay awake for five minutes. It’s good he decided to stay home and catch up on his sleep. But he’s still a dummy.”

No. He’s not a dummy. He must have asked one of my siblings to bring him the bag of shredded paper and tried to tape the pieces together. He wanted to fix his mistake, to make me happy because he knew how important the photo was to my dad.

No one has ever done something like that for me. No one has sacrificed his health and sleep to try to make me happy.

“I need to go to your house,” I blurt to Chloe.

Her eyebrows knit. “Huh? But classes are about to start.”

“Please, Chloe. It’s important. Do you have a key I can use to get into your house?”

“Evie, what’s going on?”

I push some hair off my forehead. “I need to talk to Noah. It can’t wait, please.”

She rummages in her backpack. “Okay, but he’s probably still sleeping.”

“That’s fine.”

She looks like she wants to ask more questions, but the bell rings. She places her set of keys in my hand, I thank her, then I dash out of the school building before anyone can see me. After quickly getting in my car, I drive as fast as I can to Noah’s house. It’s silly because he’s still sleeping and no one from school is following me. But I need to get there.

After parking in the driveway, I stab the right key into the lock and push the door open. The place is so quiet, like no one is here.

Slowly, I make my way up the stairs, careful not to wake him. I wish the poor guy wouldn't have gone through all that trouble for me.

Once I reach his room, I find him sprawled on one side of his bed. He looks so at peace when he sleeps. This isn't the first time I've seen him sleep, but it's different now. Maybe because I see him differently. All I want to do is hold him and tell him how much it means to me that he tried to save the photo.

Lifting his blanket, I slide in next to him, pressing myself close to him but making sure not to wake him. I've never been in his bed before, but it's very comfortable. Peaceful, like nothing could harm me. Is it weird that I feel like this is where I want to be? And not just for now. I see myself waking up next to him many, many, many, many more times.

He shifts on the bed, rolling around but keeping to his corner. It's like his body knows I'm here even though he doesn't.

He faces me now. I scoot closer to him, gently pushing some hair out of his eyes. Then I lower my head to his chest, close my eyes, and enjoy the sound of his steady heartbeat.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Noah

My eyes open and for a second I don't know why I'm still in bed and not at school. Then I remember staying up all night trying to tape together Evie's photo. Maybe it's not too late to get to school?

Turning my head, I freeze when I notice someone lying beside me. A girl with dark hair sprinkled with paint.

Evie? What's she doing here? And she's sleeping in my bed?

Her head lies on my chest like it's her pillow. Her eyes are shut and she's wearing a smile on her face, like she's dreaming about something wonderful.

I want to reach for my phone for the time, but I'm worried I'll wake her. I still have no idea how she got here or why, but I'm not about to wake her from that dream.

My heart pounds as I watch her. I thought she was upset with me. But here she is lying on my chest like she wants to be close to me. Like we're a real couple. Like it's the most natural thing in the world.

I caress her cheek with my finger, loving the way her soft, warm skin feels. I want to kiss that cheek, but I know she wouldn't like it.

Her eyes slowly flutter open and she stares at me, her eyebrows furrowed, as if she has no idea where she is, either. But then it all must come back to her because her cheeks flush a little.

"Morning," I say as I continue to stroke her cheek.

"Afternoon, actually," she says. "I think it's almost twelve."

My eyes widen. I've never slept in this late, not even on the weekends. "You skipped school?"

She slowly sits up, brushing her fingers through her messy hair. "Yeah. So did you. I, um..." Her gaze drops to the bed, then back to me. "Chloe told

me you stayed up all night trying to tape together the photo. Well, she didn't exactly know what you were trying to tape together, but I figured that was it."

I nod, my gaze on the bed because I'm too ashamed to face her. "Yeah, I tried. I'm sorry I couldn't do it. I failed you."

She places her hand on my shoulder. "You didn't fail me. Yes, I was upset that you shredded it, but I shouldn't have treated you that way. You were just trying to help."

"No. I have to stop being such a neat freak. Look what it's done. Now you don't have a gift for your dad."

She bites her lip as she glances away.

"What?" I ask.

"That wasn't the only copy of the photo. It was so important to my dad that he made many copies."

I just stare at the spot before me, not believing her words. This has to be a joke, right?

"I didn't know you were trying to tape it back together," she says. "I would have stopped you. I'm sorry you stayed up all night. I tried calling you, but you didn't answer."

I sigh. "I was so upset, I didn't bother looking at my phone. I didn't think you'd ever want to talk to me again."

She takes my hands. "Noah, it means so much to me that you tried so hard to tape it back together. I don't know many other guys who would do the same."

I shrug. "I'm sure there are many."

"I doubt it." She squeezes my hands. "When Chloe told me why you were skipping school, I had to run over and thank you. And to apologize. That's why I'm here. I..." She brushes her fingers through her hair. "It means a lot to me that you care."

Shifting closer to her, I stare into her eyes. “Of course I care about you, Evie. You’re the most important person in my life, other than my family.”

She gapes at me with wide eyes.

I turn away from her. “But it doesn’t matter. You don’t...I mean...” I shake my head. “Forget it.”

She places her hand on my cheek, gently turning my face to hers. “You’re the most important person in my life, too, Noah. Other than my family, of course. I, um...I wanted to tell you something yesterday. When I went to get the snacks? That was just an excuse because I was so nervous to tell you the truth about how I felt. I ended things with Cam because I have feelings for you.”

I just stare at her, my chest rising and falling heavily. She gazes back at me, her chest also heaving.

There’s a thick silence in the room.

I fling my arms around her, tugging her close to me. “I’m so happy you told me, Evie,” I whisper in her ear, relief etched to every word. “I have strong feelings for you. So strong I don’t know what to do with myself. I want to be with you for real and not for a school project.” I squeeze her close, but she pushes away from me. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “We can’t be together.”

“Why? You have feelings for me and I have feelings for you. My world lights up when you enter the room, when I think about you, when you’re just near me. Why are you pulling away?”

She throws her hands up. “Because we’d never work! Look at what happened yesterday. You wanted to clean up my mess and you ruined something that meant so much to me. You like everything neat and in order. I like messy. You like everything to be calculated and precise. I like spontaneity. How can we get along if we’re so different?”

“Because we have feelings—”

“Feelings aren’t enough. This isn’t a fake marriage, Noah. This is real. And...” She groans and covers her face. “How do I even know if I like you? Maybe it’s the darn kiss that messed everything up.”

I’m quiet for a few seconds. “Something tells me you don’t paint portraits of just anyone because of a kiss. It means something much deeper than that. It’s not just a painting of some guy you kissed. You delved deep into my soul like you truly saw me. That’s something that goes way beyond a kiss between two hormonal teenagers.”

Her hands drop and her eyes shoot to me. “What? You saw the...? You went through my stuff?”

I hold up my hands and tell her when and how I spotted that portrait. “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what it meant. And then you went out with Cam and...” I puff up my cheeks. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

She tucks some hair behind her ear. “I painted it after our kiss. I didn’t know what I was doing—it was like something took control of me and I painted that. I got so freaked out that I dumped it with other junk. I guess...” She looks at me. “I guess my heart was trying to tell me something. And you’re right about me seeing you on a deeper level. I had no idea why I did that, but I think I understand now. I saw the real you, Noah. And like you said, I looked into your soul.”

I take her hands. “Look, Evie, what we feel for each other is more than just teenage hormones. I want to spend every second with you. I miss you when we’re apart and can’t stop thinking about you. I want to tell you my thoughts and dreams. Evie, I want to share my life with you.”

She blinks at me, and I notice her eyes are a little glassy. “I want that, too,” she whispers in a choked-up voice. “And in a perfect world, maybe we

could have that. But we'd just end up hurting each other. I know it and you know it. You can't stand messy me and I can't stand neat freak you." She gestures to my to-do list hanging on the wall. "I mean, I can't stand that to-do list and you live by it every day."

I get to my feet, march over to the dry-erase board, snatch it off the wall, and toss it into the garbage. Then I turn to Evie. "I don't need that daily to-do list anymore. And you know something?" I grab a few papers from my desk and scatter them around my room. "I need to loosen up and not be so rigid all the time. It's not the end of the world if my room is messy. Sometimes messy is good."

She just stares at me. "W-what?"

I gather her in my arms. "You said yourself that I come alive when I'm singing on stage. The real me comes out. All my life, I felt like I had to be perfect. That everything needed to be neat and orderly. But that's not what's important. You are, Evie. And you like messy. And while I know it won't be easy for me to let go of my obsession with order, I hope you'll be patient with me."

Shaking her head, she slips out of my arms and paces my room. "You're wrong. Having things clean and in order is very important. If I wouldn't have been so messy and careless, you wouldn't have shredded the photo. If I were neater and put everything in its place, nothing would get lost or damaged."

I'm at her side again and interlock my fingers with hers. "Then let's compromise. Meet each other halfway. I'll try not to be such a neat freak and ___"

"I'll try to be more responsible and tidy."

She smiles at me and I smile at her. Then her smile drops. "Do you really think we can do this, Noah? We're still so different and we argue over the tiniest things...what if we hurt each other?"

I wrap my arms around her. “You’re my world and I swear I’ll never hurt you.” I trace her bottom lip with my finger. “You drive me up the wall, Evie Hastings,” I whisper in her ear. “But that’s what I love about you. You’ll always keep me on my toes and make my life interesting.”

She draws back, her mouth slightly wide. “You didn’t just say…”

I nod. “I love you. I know it’s too soon, but I think I’ve always loved you. Or at least I cared about you. For years I thought you irritated me and I couldn’t stand being around you. But now I realize we’ve always bickered because we felt something for each other, something we assumed was mutual dislike. But it’s not dislike at all. You’re my soulmate, Evie. And I’ll love you the way you deserve.”

She brushes her fingers through my hair. “I think you might be right. We were determined to think of ourselves as enemies, and never even considered that it was so much deeper than that.” Her gaze drops to my lips. “I love you, too, Noah Barrington. And I’ll love you the way you deserve.”

I dip my head, she raises hers. It feels like forever until our lips touch, but once they do, we kiss like we’ve been waiting for this forever. Which technically, we kind of have. I swing her in my arms, pulling her even closer and showing her how much she means to me. She presses herself to me like she can’t get enough of me and kisses me right back, showing me just how important I am to her.

We fall on my bed, not letting go of each other, not even to catch our breaths.

When we finally pause for air, Evie smiles at me in such a sweet way that all I want to do is sprinkle her with all my love. “I’m so glad I married you,” she says.

I chuckle. “I’m the luckiest husband in the world.”

She pecks my lips. “And I’m the luckiest wife.”

“I’m luckier,” I say with a raised brow.

She frowns. “No, *I*’m luckier.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

I rub her nose with mine. “Is everything an argument with you?”

She laughs. “Better get used to it.”

I grin as I kiss her with as much love and passion as I can. “Oh, you bet I will.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Evie

I have a boyfriend.

I have a boyfriend!

Noah and I have our first official date at the Edenbury teen club, and as I drive to his house to pick him up, I'm a little nervous. Very excited, but nervous.

When I told him I wanted to pick him up in my car instead of him picking me up in his, I could tell he was hesitant. After all, he can't stand to be in my "dumpster car," as he puts it. But he told me he's trying not to be such a neat freak, and that this is a step in the right direction. What he doesn't know, though, is that I have a surprise for him.

Before I got in my car, Lily couldn't stop telling me over and over how excited she is for me and Noah. Liam and my parents weren't that shocked when I told them yesterday that we're together. Noah told me his mom suspected he had feelings for me and she must have told the rest of the Musketeers. I'm pretty sure they were all waiting for us to come to our senses and just admit we liked each other.

So now I'm only a few feet away from my awesome boyfriend's house and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. And my heart hasn't stopped pounding.

Noah's sitting on his front steps when I pull up before his house. He looks up, smiles, and my heart melts. Because Noah Barrington is the kindest, sweetest, hottest guy I've ever laid eyes on. And he's all mine

Wow. All *mine*.

He leaps off the stairs and rushes over to me, his smile growing. He looks just as excited to see me as I am to see him. We video chatted before our

date, but it seems we still can't get enough of each other. Am I always going to feel like this? I hope so because it's the most incredible feeling in the world.

Lowering my window, I wave, giving him my own wide smile. "Hey, hubby."

"Hey, wifey," Noah says as he approaches the car. "How are you this fine Saturday evening?"

"Ten times better now that we're together."

His smile widens and he bends to kiss me, but then he pauses as he takes in the car. "You cleaned up?"

I shrug. "It was about time I did. Some things were just so..." I shiver in disgust. "You were right that it was a dumpster. I want you to be comfortable in my car."

Cupping my cheeks, he places a slow, sweet kiss on my lips. "Thanks, Evie. But you didn't have to do that. I'm letting go of my need for order and cleanliness."

"I know, but my car needed to be cleaned out, anyway. And then I'll start clearing out the basement. Want to help?"

"You bet. But how will you paint if the room is too clean? You said you need the mess."

I shrug. "I'll have to get used to it. It's fine, Noah. Don't worry."

After giving me another sweet kiss, he gets in the car and buckles himself in. Scanning the car for a bit, he chuckles. "I'm so not used to this." He glances in the back seat, where I left a bag of snacks. "I see you still have your snacks."

"Yep. Can't let go of my gummy worms. Are you ready for our first official date?"

Noah slides his hand into mine. "I'm ready to begin our wonderful

journey of life together.”

I smile at him, my cheeks a little warm. “You think we’ll be together forever like our parents?”

Resting his hand on my cheek, he strokes it. “I know we will.”

After another kiss, we head for the club. We talk about everything—like our upcoming gig tomorrow, and our families being so excited for us, about school and the future. I can talk to this guy for hours and hours and it’ll never be enough.

We reach the club, which is packed. Noah holds my hand tightly, like he doesn’t want us to get separated in the crowd, and I hold on just as tightly because I don’t want to let this guy go.

This guy who only a few weeks ago was my biggest enemy, the guy I thought I couldn’t stand, and now he’s the love of my life.

Noah turns to me with a smile. “What are you thinking about?” he shouts over the loud music. The band that is performing is pretty good, but they have nothing on The Rock’n Jocks.

Squeezing his hand, I pull him to me. “Just how crazy all this is. Us being together, I mean. Crazy in a good way.”

He nods as we find a corner where there aren’t that many people dancing and gently twirls me around until my back presses against his chest. His lips trail along my ear as he whispers, “Want to dance with me?”

Turning around, I place my hands on his chest, feeling his heart thumping. “I’d love to dance with you. But let’s do it right this time. No running away.”

His smile is sweet. “I’m not letting you go, Evie. Ever. As long as you’ll have me, I promise to never leave your side.”

I bend forward to kiss him. “I’m not letting you out of my sight, Mr. Rockstar. Even when you’re famous and girls are throwing themselves at

you, I'll make it known that you're *mine*."

Wrapping his arms around me, he holds me close and we sway to the beat of the soft music. "Girls might throw themselves at me, but you'll always be the only girl I see."

I stretch my neck and kiss him. We spend a few minutes making out, not paying attention when people knock into us. We're in our own bubble, and nothing and no one can burst it.

I lower my head to his chest and he rests his head on mine as we continue to sway. I think back to the night of my birthday, how amazing it felt to dance with him in the gazebo. And of course I think about the almost kiss and how I fled from him. I was confused and scared. But I'm not confused or scared anymore. I know exactly what I want.

Noah sweeps his lips across my cheek as we continue to share this special, magical moment. I've waited eighteen years to fall in love and I'm happy to say the wait was worth it. I'm happy I'll get to experience new things with my amazing man, and I can't wait to embark on the path called life together with him.

It sucks that we won't see each other every second of every day when we go off to college. But we'll only be an hour away from each other. It's funny how only a few weeks ago, when he decided to attend Astor University, I was happy to attend a college so far from him. But I'm glad we'll be together now. Because I don't think my heart could handle being apart.

"What are you thinking about?" Noah whispers, his lips near my ear. It sends a shiver through me.

"Just about college and the future."

"Our amazing future," he says. "I can't wait."

I press my lips to his cheek. "Me, either."

We don't say much as we continue to enjoy this moment. I want to stay

like this forever, but even though we can't, I know there will be many, many more opportunities.

After a few minutes pass, Noah lifts his head. "Want a drink?"

"Okay, sure. Thanks."

He pecks my lips with another sweet smile that melts my heart. "See you soon."

I watch the other people dancing, some with partners, some with friends, and I'm uplifted by how happy and excited everyone is. There's just something about the vibe in this club that makes you not want to stop dancing.

The band thanks us for having them and walks off the stage, letting the next band perform. My eyes widen when I spot, Elliot, Wyatt, and Mateo walk onto the stage and set up.

What the...?

My eyes nearly fly off my face when I take in the last member to walk on the stage with his guitar slung across his chest. Noah.

What are they doing up there? And why aren't I up there, too? And last I checked, our gig is tomorrow, not today.

Smiling at the audience, Noah walks up to the mic. "How are you all doing tonight?"

The crowd cheers. I just gape at him.

Noah's eyes meet mine and he gives me his signature sweet smile. "Thank you for being here tonight. We're The Rock'n Jocks—maybe you've heard of us?"

The crowd erupts in more cheers.

Noah grins. "Thank you, thank you. We wouldn't be where we are today if it weren't for you guys. So thanks!"

They cheer again.

Noah's eyes meet mine again. "Tonight, I'd like to dedicate this song to a very special person. This girl has been a thorn in my side all my life. She drives me up the wall and sometimes she makes me want to tear my hair out." He chuckles. "But I wouldn't have it any other way. She changed my life. Enriched it. She's made me a better person. She's my world and I want everyone to know that." He points at me, and everyone looks over each other, searching for who he's talking about. "I wrote this song after our special moment in the gazebo. I didn't mean to write it, but I guess my heart wrote it for me. I was so shocked and confused that I hid the pages in my desk drawer. But I'm not confused anymore. I want to share this song and let the whole world know how I feel about my magnificent girl. My darling Evie Hastings, the love of my life, this is for you!"

When everyone realizes he's referring to his co-lead singer, their applause practically shoots through the roof.

Noah winks at me, then nods to Elliot for a beat and they start jamming it out.

My heart nearly explodes out of my chest when Noah starts singing the song. It's about a dark-haired girl with paint in her hair whom he can't stop thinking about. A girl who's a complete mystery to him and he'd like to unwrap her like a gift. He'd like to get to know her. She's the girl of his dreams. They fight and argue and can't stand each other most of the time, but he's hers. Completely hers. And he wants her to be his.

Everyone is captivated by the words, no one uttering a single thing and most hardly moving or dancing. I just stare at him as he moves around the stage, confidently singing into the mic. This song is very different from our usual ones. It's soft and romantic and oh my gosh, it's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard in my life.

He doesn't even finish and I'm already running onto the stage with tears

spilling down my face. I jump into his arms, kissing him like he's the air I need to breathe.

The audience cheers and whoops, but I'm hardly listening to them. The only thing on my mind is this guy—my guy, my Noah.

When we finally take a breath, I press my forehead to his. "Noah," I breathe.

His chest heaves as he tries to catch his breath. "I love you, Evie," he whispers.

"I love you, too. Thanks for the song. I love it."

He chuckles softly. "I guess my heart knew I wanted to be with you before I did. That moment in the gazebo was the start of everything."

"No," I say as I play with the hair at the nape of his neck. "The start of everything was when you kissed me."

"Actually, I think it was when we got married," he says. "Wait, are we arguing when we started liking each other? And in front of everyone?"

Laughing, I kiss him. "I guess. Noah, I thought our gig was tomorrow night."

"No. It's tonight. Sorry, I just wanted to surprise you. Are you ready to perform with me and the guys?"

"Of course I am. There's nowhere else I'd rather be and no one else I'd rather do it with."

Everyone cheers as we start singing the song Noah wrote for me. Noah and I have already vibed well together, but now that we're in love, our singing transforms into something more than magical. It's something so profound that there's no word for it. All I know is that this is the most incredible moment of my life so far and I know a lot has to do with the guy singing beside me, sending me sweet smiles as we belt out the words.

I know I want to do this with him for the rest of my life. I'll also do my

art since that's my passion, but I want Noah and me to share this. We'll have to say goodbye to Wyatt and Mateo and I'm not sure if Elliot will want to be in a band with us, but whatever happens, I know it will be great. As long as Noah and I have each other, we'll be a force to be reckoned with.

After we've killed it with the final song, the fans demand more and more. We remain on that stage well into the night and love every second of it.

I know the guys and I will have an amazing summer performing before we go off to college. And it'll suck when we have to say goodbye. But we all need to follow our dreams, and I hope we all achieve them.

After the crowd has calmed down and the next band sets up, Noah and I hang out with the guys for a bit, then we get back on the dance floor and sway in each other's arms.

"You know something?" Noah whispers in my ear. "For weeks I was stuck and couldn't write decent songs. But now? The words just flow out of me like an endless well. Know why?"

"Hmm?" I ask as I snuggle up to him.

He presses his lips to my ear as he murmurs, "Because you're my muse, Evie Hastings. You inspire me to be better, do better, to write songs that will touch people." His voice lowers, "After you left my house last night, I was up for hours writing songs. And it's all thanks to you. You're the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. Thank you."

I push away some hair that's matted to his forehead. "You don't need to thank me. I'm your wife."

He laughs, pecking my lips. "One day we'll make it official. And we'll have a real Melly."

My eyes widen. "Are you thinking way too far into the future again, Noah?"

He chuckles again. "Sorry, can't help it. Because you *are* my future, Evie.

I know we're too young to know that, but I feel it."

"I feel it, too. You know, we owe Mrs. Duncan a thank you. If not for her forcing us to get married, we wouldn't be where we are today."

He twists his mouth as he thinks. "No, I think it's you we need to thank. If you hadn't been missing credits, you wouldn't have ended up in LRG class, we wouldn't have argued, and Mrs. Duncan wouldn't have made us get married."

I laugh as I pull him by the front of his shirt and press my lips to his. "Sometimes it's good to be lazy and reckless, huh? Maybe we should be reckless more often."

He circles his arms around me, pressing his cheek to mine and releasing a soft chuckle. "Don't push it."

"Why am I up so early in the morning?" I demand as I meet Noah outside my house. It's so dark the sun isn't even awake yet.

Noah wraps me in his arms, placing a soft kiss on my cheek. "I told you, I have a surprise for you."

A yawn practically slices my face in half. "Okay, but why does it have to be this early?"

Chuckling softly, he says, "You'll see." He slides his hand in mine, leading me to... somewhere. No matter how many times I ask him where we're going, he refuses to tell me.

"This surprise better be worth it," I mutter after another yawn.

He squeezes my hand in such a loving manner that my heart melts. "Oh, it will."

He talks about different topics as we walk, but I'm too tired to pay attention. It's not until we enter a park that I perk up a little. But I still have no idea what's going on.

Noah gives me a sweet smile. “Almost there.”

We walk further into the park until we reach an area filled with many trees and several boulders. My eyebrows shoot to the sky as Noah directs me toward one of the boulders.

“Are we climbing this thing?” I ask.

Nodding, he carefully holds me close as we mount the boulder. “I won’t let you fall, trust me.”

“I do trust you. I’m just so curious what’s going on.”

“You’ll see,” he promises.

We’re at the top of the boulder and sit down side by side. There’s a light breeze blowing through our hair and I realize this place is very quiet and peaceful. Kind of romantic. No, very romantic because Noah is here with me.

“What?” he asks as his eyes circle my face.

Shaking my head, I laugh lightly. “Was just thinking this is very romantic.”

He leans forward to peck my lips. “Soon it’ll be even more romantic.”

I don’t have a chance to ask him what he means because the sky is suddenly painted in orange and red colors.

“The sunrise,” I breathe as I take it all in. “It’s beautiful.”

Noah stretches his arm over my shoulder, bringing me close to his chest. “Not as beautiful as my darling girlfriend.”

I rest my head on his shoulder. “Thanks so much for bringing me here, Noah. I love it and I love you.”

He dips his head toward my lips and I press mine to his. “And I love you. So was it worth waking up so early?”

“Totally worth it!”

He smiles so sweetly. “My dad brought my mom here when they were in high school and I always dreamed of bringing my special girl here, too.” He

gazes into my eyes as his finger traces my bottom lip. “I’m so glad and honored to share my dream with you, Evie Hastings.”

My fingers get lost in his hair as I pull him even closer to me. “And I’m so glad and honored to help make your dream come true, Noah Barrington.”

We spend only a short while kissing because we don’t want to miss this spectacular view. I wish I could freeze time and stay in this moment with Noah forever. But there will be many more sunrises in our future.

And I can’t wait to share them all with him.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Evie

Four months later.

I can't believe Noah and I are leaving for college.

Things have been so chaotic the last few hours as Mom and I scramble to make sure I have everything I need. Mom is doing most of the stressing because it's not like I'm moving to a jungle or anything. I can always buy whatever I need. But I guess it's her job to worry like this?

"Mom, it's okay," I say with a laugh as she gets down on her knees before one of my overstuffed suitcases and squeezes in another pair of socks. "I'm sure I can find a store that sells socks. Or order some online..."

She huffs as her forehead creases. "I think that's everything." Her eyes suddenly light up. "Wait, I forgot some of your clothes in the wash. They should be ready." She gets up and hurries out of my room.

I check and recheck my bag that holds all my art supplies to make sure I have everything I need. My heart thumps with nerves and excitement. This doesn't seem real. It feels like a dream or like it's happening to someone else.

"Are you all packed?" Lily asks as she and Liam walk into my room and flop onto my bed. Lily's eyes widen at all my bags. "Wow. Are you bringing your whole room with you?"

"Haha," I say.

"I can't imagine you not being in here," Liam says. "Or in the basement. It'll feel so weird."

"Well Noah and I cleaned out the basement, so it's all yours to do whatever you want with it."

“No way,” Lily says. “Your studio will be waiting for you when you stay over the summer.”

With a smile, I head over and wrap my arms around both of them. “Thanks. Ugh, I’m going to miss you guys so much, Sibling One and Sibling Two. I can’t believe I’m actually leaving for college. It’s crazy.”

“We’ll miss you, too,” they say as they hug me back.

“But we’ll video chat all the time,” I say as I straighten up and reach for one of my suitcases. “Every night if we need to.”

“Yeah, right.” Liam rolls his eyes. “You’ll video chat with your boyfriend every night.”

A large grin takes over my face as I imagine the special video calls I’ll have with my sweet Noah. “Totally.” I blink and look at them. “But of course I’ll video chat with you just as often. I want to be tight with you guys forever.”

“Same,” they say.

Mom returns to my room with some of my clothes, Dad trailing after her. After she manages to stuff the clothes in one of my suitcases, she gathers me in her arms. “I can’t believe my eldest is heading off to college. I tried to mentally prepare myself for this day because I knew it would be so exciting and difficult, but I don’t think there’s any way I could have prepared for this.”

“We’re so proud of you, sweetie.” Dad stretches his arms over Mom and me and kisses my cheek. “Never been prouder. And we love you so much.”

“Thanks.” Tears flash in my eyes. “I love all of you, too.”

The doorbell rings.

“That must be Noah,” I say.

“I’ll let him in,” Liam says as he leaves my room.

Mom plays with my hair. “You okay, Evie?”

I release a breath and smile. "I'm good."

Footsteps approach, and then Noah appears in my doorway with Liam behind him. "Hey," he says as his eyes soften with a smile. "Am I early?"

I return the smile. "You're right on time. I'm done packing."

"Can I help carry your bags to your car?" he offers.

"Thanks, Shnookums."

"Of course, Wow Factor." He winks and walks over to my largest suitcase. He, Dad, and Liam carry the larger suitcases while the rest of us carry everything else. My heart thumps even harder as I descend the stairs and step into the warm August air. Holy crap, this is actually happening.

Noah's car is parked behind mine. From what I can tell, he hadn't packed his entire room like I did.

"Anything else?" Dad asks me as they finish loading my stuff.

"Yeah, just minor things. Noah, want to help?"

"Sure."

He and I make our way back up to my room. Now that we're alone, I move closer to him and close my arms around him. He gathers me in his arms, cradling me close to his chest. I stretch my neck as he lowers his head, and we share a sweet but passionate kiss.

"Do you feel my heart?" I whisper. "It's racing."

"Feel mine." He takes my hand and places it over his heart. It is indeed, racing. Just as fast as mine.

"I'm so glad we're lucky and are attending colleges only an hour away from each other," I say as I press my cheek to his chest, loving the way his heart beats. "It makes all of this much easier."

"I agree. I can't wait to spend every weekend with you."

I chuckle. "Only the weekends? I bet we'll be driving to each other every day."

He laughs as well. “I know. I just didn’t want my amazing girlfriend to think I’m too obsessed with her.” He moves his lips to my temple.

“But what if said girlfriend is way too obsessed with her boyfriend?”

His chest rumbles as he laughs again. “I’d say her boyfriend must be pretty amazing to have someone as incredible as her as his girlfriend.”

“Trust me. He is.”

“Not as amazing as her.”

We kiss again, this one filled with so much emotion because there are so many emotions racing through our bodies. Excitement for what’s to come, but fear as well. Hope and joy and anticipation, but also trepidation. Of course I don’t need Noah to navigate the next stage in my life, but the fact that I have someone to share it with means the world to me.

“You think they’re wondering what’s keeping us?” Noah asks.

“Definitely. We should go before someone comes looking for us.”

When we go back outside with the rest of my things, I find Lily and Mom battling tears.

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” I say to my younger sister as I wrap her in my arms. “It’ll be hard at first, but you’ll get used to it. And you can call or text me whenever you need. I’ll always be here for you.”

She wipes her eyes. “Thanks. I just can’t believe you’re actually leaving. And I can’t help but think this will be me and Liam next year.”

“Yeah. Wild,” Liam says, he too carrying a despondent expression.

Reaching for him, I pull him into the hug. “You two are going to do great things one day. Lily, you’ll be an amazing marriage counselor and bring happiness to so many couples. You have such a good heart and yearn to help people. I really admire you for that. And Liam, you’re so talented and have so much to share with the world. I know you’ll be a famous chef one day with restaurants all over the world.”

Liam and Lily try to fight off my praise, but I won't have that. I'm super proud of my siblings and can't wait to see what the future holds for them.

"Mom, don't cry," I say with a teary laugh as I see her still battling tears. "I'll be okay."

"I have no doubt about that," she says as she takes me in her arms and presses a kiss to my forehead. "I've just never been so proud of you."

Dad once again wraps his arms around both of us. I close my eyes and take in this moment, relishing the feeling of being so loved by my parents. They've provided me with the best life possible and I owe them everything.

"Thanks for being the amazing parents that you are," I tell them.

"Thanks for being the amazing daughter that you are," they say.

"Before the rest of the gang comes to say their goodbyes," I say as I step out of the hug. "I have gifts for you. Noah and Liam, can you help me?"

The guys follow me down to the basement, where we gather the paintings I made for my family. All of them are wrapped, so I don't have to worry about Liam peeking. His painting is of him making the winning shot at one of his basketball games this year. He was so amazing.

I ask my parents and siblings to gather in the living room and present them with their gifts.

Dad has tears in his eyes as he takes in the painting of his parents. "Evie, it's the most beautiful painting I've ever seen in my life. Thanks, sweetheart." He hugs me and kisses my cheek.

Mom, Lily, and Liam gush about their gifts as well. I managed to hold in my tears all morning, but for some reason, they break through now and pour down my cheeks. Maybe because presenting them with their gifts is my conclusion. The end of a chapter. Now I'm finally ready to start the next chapter in my life.

"And for my wonderful boyfriend, too," I say as I pass him the last one.

“For you to hang in your dorm room.”

He tears off the wrapping paper and smiles down at the portrait I painted of him when I didn't know I was in love with him. Back then, I thought I was ashamed. I tried to hide it. But now it means so much to both of us. A symbol of everything we've been through in life, and a symbol of how amazing our lives will be from now on and well into the future. Because Noah Barrington is my soulmate, and I can't wait to see what life has in store for us.

“Hastings's?” Kara's voice calls from outside.

We walk outside and find the Barringtons gathered around. Rylee launches herself into her brother's arms. “I know I said it a million times, but I'm going to miss you so much.”

“I know,” he whispers as he pats her hair. “But remember what I told you. You call and text and video call whenever you want. I'll even leave in the middle of class to talk to you.”

She looks up at him with wide eyes filling up with tears. “You mean it?”

“Of course.”

She sniffs and then throws her arms around me. “I'm going to miss you so much, too. I can't even be mad at you that you'll see my brother more than me because I'll miss you too much.”

I laugh as I play with her hair. “You can call me whenever you want, too. And I'll make sure to record all of Noah's performances and share them with you.”

“And you'll perform with him, too, won't you?” she asks.

“Of course. We're in a band for life.”

Kara pulls me into her arms. “I already squished Noah to death, and now it's your turn. Our first Musketeer babies heading off to college. We're all super proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Brayden hugs me as well. “We can’t wait to see you share your art with the world.”

“Thank you.”

Chloe, who has just finished exchanging another hug with her brother, wraps her arms around me. “Good luck with everything! You and Noah are going to be amazing.”

“And so will you,” I say with a smile. “You’ll grow up to be an incredible journalist, just like your mother. I can’t wait to continue reading your articles in the Edenbury High Times. So keep sending them to me, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

By now, the other Musketeers and their kids have arrived as well. Noah and I spend a few minutes exchanging hugs and goodbyes with everyone.

“You’ll do amazing things in your dad’s company,” I tell Ava as I squeeze her. “You’ll change so many people’s lives.”

“Whoa, I think you’re thinking a bit too far into the future,” she says with a nervous laugh. “But thanks. I really want to help as many people as possible.”

“Like parents like daughter,” I say as I smile at Dani and Easton.

Dani puts her arms around me and Noah. “I know you both are super nervous about starting this next stage in your lives. But you’ll be okay. I remember how nervous I was to move to New York City and try to make it on Broadway. Stay true to yourselves and be the best people you can be. I know one thousand percent that you both will be successful in everything you do.”

“And remember that we’re always here for you if you need us,” Easton tells us.

“Thanks so much! Ugh, I’m going to cry.”

“Not before we get to hug you.” Charlie yanks me into her arms and then

grabs Noah. “Like everyone else, I’m super proud of you two. Never stop being the amazing people that you are.”

Asher tells us similar words as well, and then Mia flings her arms around us. “Colt let me play a short demo of his game. The graphics are amazing, Evie! You’re so cool.”

I laugh. “Thanks, Mia. Now you have a job.”

Her brows crease. “I do?”

“Yeah. You and Willow. Help bring Colt’s sister’s game to the world. Keep her memory alive by sharing one of the most amazing video games ever made.”

“Already on it,” Willow tells me as she closes her arms around me. “And Colt and I are thinking of making mobile and console versions of the game, too. I know his sister would be super proud of him.”

“I’m so thankful to be part of it,” I say. “And Willow? I can’t wait to see what you’ll share with the world with your amazing brain.”

She smiles. “Thanks.”

Aunt Bailey, Uncle Zane, and the kids stop by to wish us goodbye and good luck as well. So many of us are crowded near my house that it feels like a reunion. It takes forever until hugs and kisses are exchanged *again*, with Mom and Dad not seeming to want to let go of me. But it’s starting to get late, and Noah and I have a long drive ahead of us.

“Check in as often as you can,” Mom tells us as we head to our cars.

“Your mother means every hour,” Dad clarifies.

She gently whacks his chest. “No, I don’t.” She looks at us. “But I wouldn’t mind if you do.”

“Same here,” Kara says. “Just a text to let us know you’re okay.”

“Aye, aye, cap’ns,” I say, and Noah nods.

Everyone steps aside to give us space.

I look at Noah and he looks at me.

“Ready?” he asks.

I open the driver’s door of my car and wink. “See you at our first rest stop, hubby.”

He blows me a kiss. “You, too, wifey.”

We wave goodbye to our families and friends, get in our cars, and start the journey that will lead to the rest of our lives.

Thanks for reading!

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Chapter One

Katie

“Oh my gosh! Two hotties are moving in next door,” my best friend says from the window, where she’s peering out like a creeper. She whips around to stare at me with shining hazel eyes. “Did you know about this?”

Rising from my bed, where I’ve been diligently practicing for my audition tomorrow, I join her at the window and look out. Two guys with identical shades of black hair are carrying things from the moving truck into the Westons’ old house. They lived there practically my whole childhood, until Mr. Weston died and his wife was placed in a nursing home a few months ago.

I guess the house will be this new family’s now.

“No, I didn’t know,” I tell my best friend. Dad probably did, but it’s not like he and I talk much anymore, anyway.

Phoenix presses her face to the glass, her breath fogging it up. “They look our age, don’t they?”

I no longer have a clear shot of the guys because Phoenix is hogging the whole window. I only manage to see the top of their heads as they go to and fro from the truck to the house.

“Maybe,” I say.

“You’re so lucky,” she says, her face practically fused to the window. Any more and she’ll crash right through. “I wish two hot boys moved in next door to me. But nothing interesting ever happens on my block. All the good stuff happens on yours. Ooh!” She squeals when the two of them turn at the

exact same time toward the direction of my window. “You think they’re twins?”

Because she moved over, I have a slightly better view of my new neighbors. Their faces are pretty similar and they’re tall, but everything else about them is so different. One of them, the one with the shorter hair, is built up like an athlete. His brother is much lankier, with hair that reaches just above his shoulders. He carries the stuff a little more carefully than the bigger guy, like he doesn’t want to damage his hands. I wonder if he’s some sort of artist.

Phoenix sits back with a sigh, pushing her dark red hair away from her face. “I can watch them all day.”

“That’s stalking,” I point out.

She shoos me away and strains her neck as far to the right as possible. The guys have brought in most of the stuff and are now standing in front of their new house, trying to make order of the huge mess before them.

“I guess the show is over?” I say.

“No way.” She stretches her neck so far back I swear it’s longer than a giraffe’s. “I can still see a little from here. There’s a woman. Must be their mom. Where’s their dad? Maybe he didn’t come yet.”

I walk back to my bed and plop down with the lyrics to “Home.” I know this song by heart, but I haven’t stopped memorizing it over and over again since Miss Diaz, the director of the musical, emailed the students to inform us we’ll be performing *Beauty and the Beast* this semester. It’s been my dream to play a Disney princess since I was a little kid. I’m nervous I’ll botch up my audition tomorrow.

“Aw, c’mon!” Phoenix complains as she presses her face to the far right of my window. “I can’t see them anymore. Ooh, there’s a motorcycle! You think it’s one of the guys’?”

“Don’t you have to start your live stream?” I ask.

My words seem to fly right past her ears.

“Phoenix?”

“Ooh, I caught a glimpse! C’mon, twin hotties, go get something else from the truck so I can see your beautiful faces.”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to ogle them when you come over again. Which is like every day.” She practically lives here.

Again, she doesn’t seem to hear me.

“Uh, Phoenix?”

Nothing.

“Earth to Phoenix?” I reach for my pillow and chuck it at her, smacking her in the back of her head.

“Hey!” she yelps, spinning around. “What the heck was that for?”

“Aren’t you supposed to start your stream?”

She blinks at me. “Stream?”

“Um, your channel? Have I completely lost you to Boy Land?”

“Oh.” She sweeps my pillow off the floor and glances out the window. “I forgot all about it.” She shrugs as she turns around and heads to where she set up on my desk. “The guys have gone into their house, anyway.”

She sits down and adjusts the microphone, then puts on her headphones. After reminding her fans on social media about the live stream, she checks a few more things and is ready to go.

“Good afternoon, FireBirds! How’s everyone doing on this fine Sunday afternoon? It’s the last day of summer here. I can’t believe school starts tomorrow. How am I doing? I’m great. Don’t you love it when a hot neighbor moves in right next door to you? It’s like the gods of love are offering you a present.” She laughs as she reads some of the comments. “I know, right? It’s

like I've finally done something good this month and am getting a major reward. And I'm telling you, the guys that moved in? Total hotties. I can just melt into a puddle right here. But enough about that. You're here to watch me kick some gaming butt. So sit back and enjoy, and let's blow up some zombies!"

She loads her favorite first-person shooter and starts to take down the bad guys, talking smack and yelling at her screen like she always does. I've learned to tune her out when I'm in the middle of doing work, but usually I enjoy watching her. She's so entertaining and hilarious, which might be one of the reasons why she's accumulated so many subscribers. And the fact that she slays at video games.

But right now, I need to get this audition down. I'll be really bummed if I don't get Belle.

"Gotchya!" Phoenix throws her hands up and does a little dance in her seat. "Who's amazing? Who's amazing? We are! We are!" She sits forward to read her comments. "Yeah, you can send me a request to join my team, but please don't bombard me all at once. Last time, you crashed my game." She laughs. Her eyes rove over the comments. "Nah, it's okay if you're not the greatest player. My FireBirds are awesome no matter what." A grin captures her lips. "Yeah, of course my bestie is here. You guys know I stream at her place because my house is a total nightmare. Katie, they want you to join the stream."

I wave my hand, muttering the lyrics under my breath.

"Katie, the chat is exploding with your name."

I shake my head and continue to mutter.

"Sorry, guys. My girl's preparing for her audition tomorrow. Our school's putting on a production of *Beauty and the Beast* the musical. Poor Katie's been sitting there for hours memorizing the song when she knows the thing

like the back of her hand. She wants it so badly.” She leans forward to read the comments. “Totally! Katie, they’re wishing you lots of luck and say you’ll knock it out of the park. Katie was born to play Belle. I mean, just look at her hair. If that doesn’t say Belle, I don’t know what does.”

“I’d be wearing a wig,” I remind her. “But tell everyone thanks.”

“Katie’s super grateful to all of you!” Phoenix says. “So much that she’ll come over right now and thank you personally.”

“Phoenix,” I groan.

She motions for me to get my butt over there.

“But I look like crap,” I whine.

She rolls her eyes. “You’d look good even if you wore a skunk on your head. Now get your little butt over here before everyone murders me for not including you in the stream.”

With a sigh, I pull a chair over and drop down next to Phoenix. She’s got over a thousand viewers right now. Super intimidating. You’d think I’d be used to it...but nope.

Throwing her arm over my shoulder, she grins at the camera. “And here is the future Belle now!”

The comments fly by so fast it’s hard to read them all. But I catch glimpses here and there.

Hi, Katie!

Katie, finally! Why aren’t you in Phoenix’s streams more often?

I love seeing the two of you together. You’re hilarious!

Ugh, Katie’s so pretty. I’m so jealous. But I love you so much!

Break a leg, Katie! You’ll do awesome tomorrow.

Wow, you were totally made to play Belle! You definitely look like her.

Yay, Katie’s in the stream again finally! Can you sing some show

tunes? I miss hearing your amazing voice.

Hey, is Katie single? So freakin' hot!

And of course there are the nasty comments that Phoenix immediately deletes. All these comments...I don't know how it doesn't make her head spin. Because it feels like mine's about to roll off my neck.

Phoenix giggles as she squeezes me closer to her. "Katie's still a little camera shy. But we love having her here, don't we?" She nudges me with her shoulder. "Say something."

"Uh...hi?"

OMG, so jealous of your friendship! Wish I had a best friend like yours.

Katie is adorable! Don't be shy, Katie. We love you!

I came here to watch a hot chick play video games. So stop your yapping and play!

"Uh, excuse me, Smellysox," Phoenix says. "Yes, I called you out. My stream isn't about a 'hot chick' playing video games. It's so much more than that. So if you don't like it, get the heck out." She rolls her eyes with a groan. "Anyway, we'll let Katie go so she can practice for her audition. But you've got nothing to worry about, bestie. You've got it in the bag."

I doubt that, because nothing is sure in theater. I can practice my lips off and still not get the role. But Mom always told me to be positive. That I should face a situation with raised shoulders. But it was so much easier to do that when she was alive. This is the first audition I'll have without her...and I feel so lost.

"Bye, guys." I wave with both hands. "Thanks so much for your support."

"Yeah, I know you guys are sad to see her go. But let's get back to the game! Who's ready to kick some more zombie butt?"

I'm about to return to my bed, when I notice that Phoenix left the shade

up. I walk over and reach for the chord to close it, then realize the other window is wide open. While the air conditioner is on. Ugh, I must have forgotten to close it.

I make my way over and shut it, then reach to pull the chord, and that's when I notice one of the guys standing in the room across from mine. It's the lankier twin, with the long hair. His head immediately snaps in my direction, his eyes zeroing in on me. Releasing a silent yelp, I pull the cord and slam the shade shut.

I slap my forehead. Shoot, shoot, shoot! What the heck did I just do? How rude was that? I just *closed* the shade on my new neighbor's face. I reach to open it, but no...that would be even weirder. Ugh! Now he'll think I'm being unneighborly.

But I can't worry about that now. I need to focus on my audition. I get back on the bed and continue memorizing the song, my eyes creeping toward the closed shade every few minutes.

I'm the worst.

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About the Author

Emma Dalton is a sweet young adult romance writer. When not writing, you can find her devouring heart-melting romance novels. Her titles include the Invisible Girls Club series, the Hotties Next Door series, and Don't Kiss The Brooding Artist. She loves hearing back from her readers. Email her at authoremmadalton@gmail.com or follow her on [Facebook](#). For updates on new releases, click on the “follow” button on her Amazon author page [here](#).

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