



OFFSTAGE SERIES,  
BOOK ONE

# THE PIECE THAT FITS

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *OVER ME*  
N.J. GRAY

THE  
PIECE  
THAT  
FITS

N.J. GRAY

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*For anyone struggling to find their way.*

*You are never alone.*

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Her tears glisten

Like stars in a city-lit sky

Just because you can't see them

Doesn't mean she doesn't cry

# Prologue





## Avery

I was convinced that watching someone you loved die was more painful than any death you might suffer yourself.

Some deaths were peaceful, slow, and anticipated. My father's was violent, painstakingly sudden, and unexpected.

I watched him leave this world from the front seat of his car, sinking in a river, knowing I should've died too. It was the most painful thing I'd ever experienced—losing the person I loved most in the world.

But the scariest part of it all wasn't the fall off the bridge, the impact of the water, or seeing the life leave his eyes. It was learning the truth at the end of his life and knowing I could've done something to save him.

1



## Avery

Choosing what ice cream flavor to get was as crucial of a decision as deciding where to go to school.

At least, that was what my dad had led me to believe.

“Is that what you think you want in here?” He’d tap me on the head. “Or is that what you really want in here?” he’d ask, poking me in the chest.

Whether it was deciding what instrument I’d wanted to play when I was six or what color I’d wanted to paint my room when I was eight, he always made every choice feel like I was choosing my future.

In a way, I was. I was making a choice that would affect my future happiness.

There was the longer period of happiness that had faded when my lime-green walls were painted over with that ugly taupe color my mother had insisted on once I became a teenager. And then there was short-lived but immediate happiness, like the time it had taken me to finish my cookie dough ice cream cone my dad had treated me to on our way home from my piano concert that one fateful night.

After that—after the accident—I had to start making those decisions on my own. He wasn’t there for the really big moments. The ones that mattered. The ones that mapped out my future.

My mom was the complete opposite of my dad. She had taught me to use reason and to be careful. With my dad being gone for so long, I started to fear that I’d become too comfortable, using my head more often than my heart—or worse, that I couldn’t tell the difference between the two anymore.

My most recent decision, I was *sure* my heart had made because I ended up heartbroken and homeless. And if there was one thing I knew, it was that the choices made by the heart could never be trusted. But then again, choices made from the soundest mind could end in disaster as well.

The key was choosing which one to use at the right moment.



I blinked up at the brick-front home I was standing in front of. The front porch was oversize. Flowerpots filled with blue violets hung from above while a wooden swing with chipped white paint swayed in the light breeze. The place was something I imagined moving into after med school, once things settled down. The perfect place to start a family, and there was plenty of room here to do that—if that was what I wanted. Definitely not what I’d pictured a bunch of musicians living in.

“You have flowers?” I teased.

My brother glanced over his shoulder as he stepped off the curb to help unload the rest of my car. “Oh yeah. That was Lexie. She likes things to be colorful.”

A drop of sweat rolled down the seam of my back, and I cursed up at the sun resting in a cloudless blue sky. It was probably the hottest day Silicon Valley had ever seen in February, but at least it wasn’t raining. That would’ve really been a poetic way to end the kind of day I was having.

“You have a lot of shit, you know that?” Danny groaned, waiting next to the trunk of my car.

“It’s the last one, I promise.” I sighed, handing him a cardboard box with the words *pathology and biochemistry* scribbled across the side in permanent marker. I hadn’t gotten all of my belongings into my temporary bedroom yet, and I already felt like a burden.

Danny grunted when I released the full weight of the box into his hands. “Jesus! What’s in here, dumbbells?”

I laughed. Carrying my textbooks up and down the stairs at school was as close to lifting weights as I got. Considering my book bag weighed at least twenty pounds, I decided that was a sufficient amount of exercise and a good enough reason to avoid the gym.

He craned his neck to read the side of the box, and his eyes bulged. “*More books?*”

I shrugged, grabbing the one box I didn’t want Danny touching and my

hamper, full of cotton sheets and the white butterfly comforter I had saved from my first four years of college. The innocent, almost-childlike pattern made me want to shake my younger self silly, but it would work for now.

“All of my notes on those classes are in there too. I never know when I’m going to need them for reference, especially this year,” I said, following him up the front steps, eager to get out of the sun and rest.

Staying with my brother and his bandmates wasn’t ideal, but the sudden change in my relationship status had left me with next to no options. It was either this or move back home to live with my mother, and I’d promised myself I’d never do that. Once I’d walked out of that pristine six-thousand-square-foot fortress, a weight had lifted from me that I refused to carry again.

The drive to school was going to be farther than my previous five-minute commute, but my brother’s house wasn’t far from all of the college-town action.

It was a nice house. Simple but nice. Much nicer than wherever our mother had thought Danny would end up with the choices he’d made in his life and the career path he’d chosen. I almost wished he cared enough to rub his success in her face.

Mom always suspected Danny would end up like the rock-and-roll artists she’d seen depicted on television or like the ones who found themselves in the emergency room, overdosing on drugs, which she categorized as such without even knowing their story. Countless holidays and family gatherings, she warned him that the “band life” would leave him homeless and addicted to heroin or cocaine and that he’d never amount to anything without proper schooling.

After a while, he stopped going to functions altogether. I didn’t blame him.

When I walked through the front door, I could smell the only drugs I knew my brother touched.

It wasn’t a punch in the face, but marijuana had a very distinctive scent, even through the remnants of men’s aftershave hanging in the air and the plug-in fragrance trying to mask it.

“You couldn’t have stored all of this at Mom’s?” he asked, dropping the

box onto the floor in the back bedroom with fatigue.

Bedroom. That was a joke. It was as big as my walk-in closet at my ... er, my *ex's* apartment. Danny had said they used the room as an office for a short time, but when Nikko had started managing the band, he'd moved anything of importance to his house.

Piles of folded band T-shirts, dusty speakers, and a couple of guitars were placed on the floor just outside my room. Beer cans and liquor bottles trailed toward the kitchen across any random flat surface.

The place wasn't a complete mess, but it certainly wasn't tidy. Anything that could add a homey, decorative touch to it was notably absent, but I hadn't expected my brother to have welcome throw pillows on display or framed photographs hanging on the walls.

It was organized chaos, but so was my brother.

Danny was letting me stay with him until my best friend, Nina, and I could move in together, and I was grateful to have a place to rest my head. Living with his roommates couldn't be as bad as moving back home. At least it had a window, and the futon appeared to be in good shape and free of any *stains*. Though I didn't think I was brave enough to take a black light to the room. It used to be Nikko's after all.

Just to be sure, I had placed my cleaning supplies in an easy-to-reach spot.

Danny paused in the doorway as I tried to pass through it. "She doesn't know, does she?" His eyes flickered with intrigue.

I brushed him aside, checking my shoulder into his. "Know what?"

"About you and Zayn calling it quits." He grabbed a book from an open box and started flipping through the pages. "What kind of name is that anyway? *Zayn*." He scrunched his nose as he said his name, and I shook my head to try and clear my thoughts of him.

"Needing a refresher on how all that works?" I pointed at the textbook on the female reproductive system he was skimming. "You can borrow it if you'd like?"

Danny squirmed and tossed it back in the box. "You didn't answer my question."

"No, okay? She doesn't."

Danny pinched his lips together tightly, suppressing a smile.

I chewed on my lip. "What?"

"You're scared of her."

"I'm just not in the mood for one of her *I told you so* lectures."

My mother had hated the idea of me moving in with Zayn and tried to talk me out of it, even after I had. It wasn't that she didn't like him. In fact, I thought she had future wedding stationery picked out for us. Dating Senator Westbrooke's son, who was also a med student, like me, was any mother's dream. My mother's dream, however, also included me finishing medical school and finding a residency program before I could even think about living with a guy. Getting pregnant before I did all that was not part of the plan. Obviously, couples who didn't live together also remained abstinent ...

Moving in with my brother and his bandmates was going to be much more difficult to sell her on. Next to impossible actually. So, I had come up with a plan: I just wouldn't tell her.

He raised a brow. "Oh, please. Like you've gotten any of those. If you want, I can tell her for you? I'm used to her not liking what I have to say."

"No, thanks."

"I'm sure she'd be happy to have you move back in."

"Leave it alone," I exhaled.

Danny clapped his hands. "I wish I could be there to see her face when she finds out you're living *here*. She's going to fuckin' lose it."

"Danny," I warned. "Can I please have one day before you start harassing me about this? If you have a problem with me staying here, just tell me. Otherwise, I'd like to keep her in the dark for as long as possible. I have enough to deal with right now."

He stretched, looking pleased with himself. "All right, all right. I'll leave you to it then."

"You're not going to give me a tour of the house?" I asked.

"What for?"

"So, I know where things are ..."

He frowned. "Uh ... you walked through the living room. Bathroom is across the hall. The kitchen is right over there. Liam, Lexie, and I are

upstairs.” He pointed behind him at the staircase. “Tic’s room is in the basement, but don’t go down there unless one of us tells you it’s okay. That’s our studio space, and I don’t want you touching stuff.” His eyes moved about the room as he thought. “What else do you need to know? Don’t you have a five hundred IQ or something? I’m sure you can figure out where the fridge is.”

I blinked a few times. “That’s not even—never mind.”

The front door pounded open, and several voices began filling the house.

“Aye, Danny boy!” a deep voice shouted. “Where you at?”

“We brought pizza!” another added.

My stomach began to do spins on itself. I knew everyone, except Lexie, but I hadn’t seen them since high school.

“Is your sister here yet?”

“Whose car do you think that is, idiot?” a kind voice retorted.

“Of course you jackasses walk in as soon as all the heavy lifting is over!” Danny called.

The first face I saw appear around the corner was a familiar one. The light stubble on his chin and leaner facial features couldn’t disguise the only friend of Danny’s I had ever really liked. Milton Tickett. Everyone called him Tic because of his incessant need to move his hands and tap his fingers on everything like a nervous tic, but I could never bring myself to call him that. I loved his name. It was unique and cute, like him, and didn’t sound like a bloodsucking bug.

“Milton!” I smiled, peering over my brother’s shoulder.

Danny snickered into his fist.

Milton coyly waved once, making me giggle.

“Hey, Avery,” Milton said.

He had always been on the shy side, but I’d thought he would’ve grown out of that by now. I kind of liked that he hadn’t.

I hesitantly approached him for a hug, but he quickly wrapped his fully tatted arms around my shoulders and pulled me into him.

“Damn, Avery. I don’t remember your jeans being this tight in high school.”



“Gross, Nikko.” Danny’s face scrunched at another familiar voice behind me.

I turned as Nikko sucked in a breath through his teeth, looking me up and down. He was just how I remembered him—same strong build, rich skin, and shaggy hair. He had a confidence about him that was alluring to a lot of girls, but it was never enough to tempt me. My brother had been friends with him since we were kids, and I knew him too well.

“Can I get one of those?” Nikko asked, holding out his arms, seeming harmless. Unfortunately, his condescending smile hadn’t changed either.

“It’s been a while.” I nodded, keeping my feet where they were.

He had this habit of placing his hands where he shouldn’t, and I wasn’t about to see if that was something he had outgrown.

Nikko dropped his arms and smirked. “Yeah. What has it been? Four, five years? Are you eighteen yet?”

It was a question he had asked me since I was fifteen, and I hated it every time.

I shoved my hands in my back pockets and noticed a face I recognized resting against the doorframe of the kitchen, staring down at his phone. My whole body flushed with heat.

Liam Lockwood. Danny’s best friend.

It didn’t surprise me he hadn’t welcomed me like the others. Out of all of my brother’s friends, I always hated him the most, and I was certain the feeling was mutual. He was the reason I’d had to finish my senior year of high school at an all-girls private school.

I returned my attention to Nikko. “Um, seven actually ... and surprisingly, yes. I passed that age years ago.”

Nikko’s interest was piqued. “Really?”

“It’s a funny thing, that whole aging process.” I rolled my eyes, stealing another glimpse at Liam.

“And you couldn’t come to at least *one* show all this time?” Nikko asked.

Danny laughed once, and my ears warmed.

“Oh, I’ve wanted to. You guys have just been touring so much; it’s been hard to catch you when you’re playing here on a night I can go. School has

kept me pretty busy the last few years. I think I have all of the songs on my phone though. Danny has shown me some of your videos on tour when we get together for holidays and stuff.”

“She’s got more important things to do anyway,” Danny muttered.

Milton bumped my shoulder. “Oh yeah. You’re at Stanford, right?”

My lips turned up in a rehearsed way. “Second year of med school.”

“You’re a doctor?” Nikko’s eyes widened.

“Um, someday,” I said.

“Just like Mom,” Danny mocked and excused himself to join Liam in the kitchen.

My gaze dropped to the floor. Danny had a talent for making me feel guilty about something I knew I shouldn’t without saying much. That was the one and only thing he and our mother had in common.

Nikko slowly looked me over again. “I’ve never met any doctors who look like this. Maybe I need to get sick more often.”

“We’re finishing up our tour with a few more shows here on the West Coast. There’re a few in the area coming up, if you want to come,” Milton said, ignoring Nikko’s comment. “Just let us know, and we can put you on the VIP list.”

I met his kind stare. “Okay. Sure. That’d be great.”

“And bring some of your hot doctor friends,” Nikko added.

Milton stood up taller, pinching his eyebrows together. “Stop being an asshole, asshole. She just got here.”

“Calm down, Tic. I’m just playin’. You hungry, Avery? There’s more than enough pizza.”

I waved them off. “I think I’m just going to get settled. Thanks for letting me stay here, guys.”

Nikko and Milton nodded and left me in the hall.

Liam caught my gaze when I looked back up at him, and my whole body tensed when those dark brown eyes landed on me, freezing me and melting me at the same time.

He had swapped his baggy clothes for more form-fitting ones since I’d last seen him. His gray T-shirt was almost too tight for him as it stretched

over his shoulders, and the simple black jeans he wore emphasized his height somehow.

*Is he taller?*

His arms showcased a gallery of random black and gray tattoos.

My eyes moved up to his hair. It was maturer and sleeker than the long skater-boy style he'd had when we were younger. It was short on the sides now, like he'd recently seen a barber. But there was this loose, curly mess on top that was kind of sexy and—

*Oh my God, I'm still staring!*

But so was he.

I gave a half-smile, hoping we had moved past our previous hostile relationship, where he had made it his life mission to make me miserable.

Amusement flashed through his eyes without moving any part of his mouth into even a slight resemblance of a smile. He simply flicked both brows up in acknowledgment and turned his back to me.

*Guess not*, I mouthed to myself.

“Get the plates, *Milton*,” I heard Danny playfully command from the kitchen.

There was a loud smack, followed by an eruption of deep laughter.

“What the hell, Tic?” Danny screeched.

“You know damn well what that was for.” Liam’s voice carried down the hall. It was smooth and raspy at the same time but deeper than I remembered.

“You didn’t hit Avery when she said it!” Danny defended himself, his voice setting into a higher pitch.

“She’s not making fun of me when she says it.” Milton’s tone was firm.

I smiled and closed the bedroom door behind me, turning the loud voices down the hall into deep, inaudible murmurs.

The faint buzzing of my phone rang from somewhere in the room, and I frantically searched through my scattered belongings. I dug it out of my wadded-up comforter a moment too late, sending my mother to voice mail.

I smiled. *Oops*.

She must’ve had a successful surgery. That was the only reason she ever called me after dinnertime. To gloat. The most annoying thing about it was

that she had every right to. She'd saved someone's life—or at least, prolonged it. But after twenty-four years of hearing it all, it became a bit mundane, listening to the same damn story with the same damn ending.

She never told me about the patients she'd lost. For the longest time, I hadn't thought she had any. Like she was a superhuman surgeon, perfect in every way. As I'd gotten older, I'd learned that wasn't true. Most couldn't detect the difference in her cool disposition on the days she failed in the operating room, but I could.

Danny was convinced he only saw her on the bad days.

More often than not, I'd use studying as an excuse to screen her calls. It was believable and, most of the time, true. Unfortunately, she saved all of her stories to tell me at our weekly Sunday breakfasts, and I had to not only sound interested, but look it too. I was grateful to have something to monopolize our conversation tomorrow morning though. I was terrible at lying. She'd know something was wrong if she brought up Zayn.

My phone buzzed again, and I answered with annoyance. "Yeah, hello?"

"Excuse me, young lady. Don't you take that tone with me."

My irritation vanished. "Nina? Hi."

"You thought I was your mom again. Didn't you?"

I winced. "Sorry."

"You need to start looking at your screen before you answer. I expect a very enthusiastic, very excited Avery to answer when you see my name pop up on your phone."

I giggled. "I just missed a call from her."

"Another *hero* story?"

"Probably."

"You'll have to tell me about it tomorrow," Nina said, trying not to sound too interested.

She actually loved my mom's surgery stories. The handful of times she had come to breakfast with me, she and my mom would talk for hours about heart transplants and ruptured aortas. It was like I hadn't even been there.

I sank onto the end of the futon. "Why don't you start going in my place on Sundays? We could dye your hair. I'm sure she wouldn't even notice."

“I don’t look good as a brunette. You know that.”

“Okay, you dyed it *black*. Once. My hair isn’t remotely that dark.”

I shook my head, remembering our freshman year of college when Nina had gone through her first bad breakup and thought she needed to change her looks to start “fresh.” It had taken months to get her hair back to her normal gorgeous blonde locks.

I heard her sigh on the other end. “So, on a scale of one to box dye, how are you doing?”

“I’m thinking blue.”

She paused for a moment. “Oh God.”

“Nina, I’m fine.”

“No, I was picturing you with blue hair.” She giggled.

I shook my head. “I’m just settling into my new place, which will be a good distraction for me.”

“And then what?”

I picked at my chipped fingernail polish. “What do you mean?”

“You know, once that’s not a distraction anymore?” she asked with growing concern.

“I think school can fill any time or void I have. The boards will be here before we know it.”

She was silent for a moment. “So ... you’re not upset? Sad?”

“I should be, shouldn’t I?” I asked, disappointed in myself.

I should’ve been on my second box of tissues and icing my puffy red eyes after losing a guy like Zayn. But I felt nothing. Numb. Maybe it hadn’t hit me yet?

“Well, you two were together for over a year. That has to hurt, even a little?”

I inhaled slowly and closed my eyes, wishing I would just cry and get it over with.

“I can bring some food over, and we can watch a movie?” Nina offered.

“I’m good. Really.” My stomach rumbled in protest. “I have to unpack and get some sleep. Moving everything I own out of the top floor of an apartment building and into a storage unit and then the rest into my brother’s

house was exhausting.” I laughed to ease her worries. “I’ll call you tomorrow if I suddenly feel like crying into a pint of ice cream, okay?”

“Promise?”

“I promise. And, Nina?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Dark slasher-film music echoed from the living room television when I hung up. Seeing as how I couldn’t pull out the futon until I cleared some boxes and the speakers were blaring the theme song to my nightmares just outside my door, I popped some earbuds in and put myself to work.

Putting my six-cube organizer to its maximum usage, I stacked as many books as I could fit in three of the six slots and piled my most-worn jeans and tops in the rest. The windowsill was wide enough to hold a few of my recreational reads, a picture frame of Nina and me in Mexico on spring break, and some of my jewelry.

I lit a candle to make the room smell more like a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls and less like a middle school dance. It was a scent that Zayn liked, so I made a mental note to find a different one the next time I was at the store.

By the time I got the boxes out of the way of my makeshift bed, I was drained and empty. But there was one problem: the bed wouldn’t ... become a bed. I pushed, lifted, and pulled on the wooden frame of the futon with no success. After cursing at the thing in three different languages and kicking it twice, I decided to look for help.

As I crept down the short hallway, the living room was quiet, aside from the faint strum of a guitar Liam was fiddling with. I peeked over the edge of the couch and giggled to myself. Danny, Milton, and Nikko were passed out cold, taking up every cushion available and using each other’s limbs as pillows.

Liam was on the floor beside them. He didn’t look up from his fingers when I entered his peripheral. I thought about going back and sleeping on the futon the way it was, but I didn’t want Liam to think I was scared to talk to him after all these years. It was better to clear the air now than to walk around on eggshells the entire time I was here.

“That sounds nice,” I said quietly, so I wouldn’t wake the boys. It was a softer melody I hadn’t heard from the band, but it was pretty.

Liam paused and immediately changed up the progression without acknowledging me.

“Liam?” I bit my lip, growing nervous, which both confused and annoyed me. “I’m having some trouble with the futon, and I was wondering if—”

The music stopped, and Liam stood, walking past me to my bedroom.

He tugged on it the same way I had tried a hundred times, and the thing fell open like a book.

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Mmhmm.”

Before he made it to the door, I stopped him by grabbing his arm, and we both recoiled.

“I just wanted to thank you ... for letting me stay here for a bit.”

Liam shrugged. “You’re Danny’s sister.” His voice took up every inch of space between us.

“I know, but it’s all of your guys’ house, and I know it’s already pretty crowded here.”

“Well, it’s not for long.” He crossed his arms in front of him. “Right?”

“My friend’s lease is up the first week of May and then I’ll be gone.”

“May?” he choked out.

I frowned, irritated with his attitude. “I spend most of my time at school or in my room, studying, so I won’t be in the way. You don’t have to worry about me.”

He towered over me, giving me the same look as when I was seventeen, only this time, there was something more severe that flickered across his features. “Then, it shouldn’t be a problem.” He apathetically rolled over the words.

I clenched my jaw. “Okay. Well, thanks. Again.” I didn’t like the effect those few moments had had on me. Especially now, after so many years. My skin felt like it could burst into flames.

Liam turned but paused in the doorway. “What the hell is that smell?”

“You mean, my candle?”

“Jesus.” Liam scrunched his nose, finding the glass jar with a flickering flame. “Blow it out. It’s giving me a headache, and I don’t want my house smelling like a fucking gingerbread man’s asshole.”

I scowled.

“Nice bed sheets, by the way,” he said mockingly.

He left without saying another word, and I stood there for a moment, trying not to scream.

*Why is his face so inviting to my fist?*

The same light melody returned a few seconds later. I shut my door and exhaled loudly, infuriated and very much awake.



2



## Liam

A very fucking Fox.

There was no way that Danny's little sister was standing in my living room right now. I had known that she would be here by the time we got back, but Danny must've brought home another girl from the bar or something because the Avery I had expected still wore overalls and never saw the sunlight. She still had braces, wore thick-as-hell eyeliner, and always had a braid in her hair.

But the brown-haired, golden-skinned girl with a face caught somewhere between an angel and a porn star hugged my drummer, Tic, like an old friend would, and my fucking heart danced in my chest.

Nerves? Seriously? I couldn't remember the last time a girl had made me nervous. Maybe the time I had taken hot Jane behind the bleachers during one of Nikko's football games and forgotten a condom. I'd held my breath for nearly two months after that. Or maybe when ugly Jane had nearly run me over in the school parking lot after I drew a mustache over her actual mustache with permanent marker. I had been a dick back then. A lot had changed. Hot Jane was now married with three kids—luckily, none of whom were mine—and ugly Jane wasn't so ugly anymore. We'd made amends backstage at one of our concerts in Seattle a couple of years ago. I'd had plenty of condoms on hand that time.

I fished my phone out of my back pocket, finding Avery's social media account a beat later, and began scrolling through her pictures. There had to be a reason for those damn hips and perky breasts.

But her *lips*. God, her lips looked just as juicy and suckable as I remembered.

*Jesus. Danny's sister. Remember?*

I shook my head, finding no sudden change from one picture to the next on her profile. No proof of plastic surgery or fillers most girls around here

were addicted to.

Like a buzzing in the air, a static electricity formed, and I knew she had spotted me. I struggled not to look up, to catch those little doe eyes with mine and swallow her confidence whole. But that fucking heart of mine sped up again, and I took a moment to exhale, reminding myself of who she was and what she had done to Danny.

Little Fox was always the favorite. Perfect in every way. A parent's dream kid. And why give two fucks about your son who struggled with his grades, experimented with drugs, and had ADHD when your second kid was just flawless, right? Danny had become invisible to his parents, Colleen and David Fox, the moment Avery started excelling and he started failing.

As if Avery hadn't gotten enough attention with her straight As and her billion extracurriculars, taking up everyone's goddamn time, then she'd had to go and almost die in that car accident. She had become this precious survivor everyone in our part of town worshipped and tried to protect, as if she were the only one who had experienced trauma.

That might sound cold. Well ... fuck it. It was, and I didn't care.

After that, her spotlight had only gotten brighter while Danny's dimmed, even with the rising success of our band.

Danny had built up a thick skin over the years, but I would never forget rushing him to the hospital after his dad's funeral to get his stomach pumped. Alcohol poisoning had almost taken my best friend. My family. And I could never forgive his parents or his sister for that. If David had gone to our gig that night instead of Avery's stupid piano concert, like planned, he'd still be here. We all knew it. And maybe, just maybe, Danny wouldn't have to fight so many demons inside of himself.

A muscle in my neck twitched when I heard Nikko offer our dinner to Avery, and my eyes accidentally landed on her. She declined, but before I could go back to staring at my phone screen, we locked on to each other.

Her gray eyes were anything but cold. They warmed with an innocence I was sure she'd mastered after years of practice. But there was no way she was as innocent as she looked. Not with that face and that body.

My stubbornness shattered for a moment when I saw her lips move,

making my eyes fall down her face. Those perfect lips stretched into a hesitant smile, begging to get one in return.

*Was she kidding?*

Tic and Nikko shoved through me into the kitchen, shaking off my lingering stare. I stifled a laugh. Just because Danny had taken pity on his little sister and was letting her stay with us did not mean we were going to suddenly be friends.

I saw the disappointment in her eyes before I left, hearing the door to her room close shortly after.

*Her room?* That was going to be hard to get used to—having someone I loathed rooming directly below where I slept. As if I didn't have a hard enough time with sleeping already.

I thought about all the ways I could exploit her, to get under her skin, but with how long she was staying, it didn't seem worth it. Besides, from the looks of her now, she looked like she had developed a pretty thick skin herself.

Blood was the only thing she and Danny shared, but in my experience, blood didn't mean shit. Family wasn't something you were born into. It was the people who chose you above all others when your own blood betrayed you. Danny, Tic, Lexie, and Nikko—they were my family. I would do anything for them. And the best thing I could do for Danny right now was to keep Avery as far away from him as possible while she was here.

And for her sake, she'd better listen.



Discovering a new chord progression, I softly danced my fingers across the strings of my guitar, repeating the melody over and over until I was happy with the sound. I liked starting new songs on my acoustic. It sounded different than what we typically performed, but I knew if I didn't like it this way, I wouldn't like it with an electric guitar, drums, and bass. This way was

a form of therapy for me. Creating in silence, the rest of the world blocked out—or asleep on the couch. I shook my head at my boys passed out, strewn about the cushions.

This song though, it was almost there, but it was missing something. I didn't even have the lyrics yet, but I knew I needed to hear it another way.

*I could double up the progression, make it faster? Or slow it down and add a lower—*

My train of thought cut off. I felt her presence before I saw her, but I kept playing like she wasn't there.

"That sounds nice." Avery's velvety voice sent shivers up my spine, and I didn't like it.

I quickly started playing a song Danny had been working on, one I didn't think she'd like as much, but that didn't get her to leave either.

She needed help with the futon, and fortunately for her, I was the only one in the house who knew its sweet spot to open it. It was old and broken. We should've bought something else by now for guests to sleep on, but most of the people who spent the night either passed out on the couch or were in bed with one of us.

I charged into her room, hoping to get in and out before she could make it through the door but I wasn't fast enough.

And then she touched me. Her fingers felt like silk on my skin, nothing like the rough, callous ones I had been left with after almost two decades of playing guitar. I started to wonder what the rest of her felt like when she spoke again, pulling me out of a fantasy I hadn't been ready to leave yet.

*Danny's sister. That's Danny's fucking sister.*

She thanked me for letting her stay here, but it wasn't like I'd had a choice.

Danny had called us earlier to let us know Avery got dumped by her boyfriend and needed a place to stay. I thought he was joking, but that asshole always had too big of a heart for his own good. He didn't even ask us if we were cool with it. Danny had just told us she was moving her stuff in later today and wouldn't be around for too long. Something about moving in with a friend. It wasn't like she didn't have other resources. Colleen, their

mother, was loaded, and as big of a bitch as I'd seen her be time and time again, she never acted that way toward Avery.

At the end of the day, we had some space, and Danny and I had always been good at blocking out people who didn't matter. Ignoring her while she was here wouldn't be a problem. As long as she never touched me again and she kept her promise to stay out of the way.

3



## Avery

**D**rifting into consciousness, I fought away the cobwebs trying to pull me back into a deep sleep. I started taking inventory of my other senses before I could gather enough effort to open my eyes.

The sunlight shone through the uncovered window, warming the side of my face in a comforting way while the bright light nagged me to get up.

I could still smell the faint remnants of my candle mixing with the spicy cologne that had seemed to be seeping from the walls when I arrived.

My hands moved up, under my pillow, feeling the soft and cool sheets beneath me as I stretched my muscles.

For a futon, I had slept soundly, and yet I was still so incredibly tired.

*Ten more minutes.*

A crunching from the end of the bed made my eyes pop open, and I flung upright, covering my chest as if it were bare.

Sitting next to my feet was a petite Asian girl in ripped jean shorts, knee-high red boots, and a holey Eagles shirt.

She pulled a chip out of a clear bag and chomped down.

“Who the hell?” I used my palm to wipe the fallen strands from my face, simultaneously rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “You must be Lexie?”

“*Annyeong haseyo,*” she said while bowing her head.

I blinked and crossed my legs, both confused and embarrassed. Danny never said there was a language barrier.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t—”

She snickered with her mouth full. “I’m just fucking with you. I’m Lexie. Lexie Park. Nice to finally meet you.” She flung her curly light-pink hair over her shoulder and held out her hand.

I shook it and wiped the crumbs she’d left behind on my comforter. “Was that Korean?”

She stopped chewing and raised her brows. “Your brother wasn’t kidding.



You are smart.”

In middle school, we’d had to memorize all of the greetings in other languages in some repetitive and catchy song. For some odd reason, it’d stuck with me all these years later.

“Are you eating pork rinds?”

She nodded confidently.

I chuckled. “For breakfast?”

“I’m not really breaking a fast at the moment, so no. I’m just snacking, and it happens to be morning.”

“How long have you been sitting there?” I asked.

Her head teetered. “Twenty minutes?”

My eyes bulged.

“I was so sad that I’d missed out on meeting you last night. I wanted to make sure I met you *right* when you woke up!” She popped another crunchy fried pork skin into her mouth.

I shuddered at the sound that was amplified in my tiny room. “I wasn’t planning on leaving through the window. You didn’t think to wait outside my door?”

“I heard your alarm going off when I got home, so I let myself in. You look so peaceful when you’re asleep, you know that?”

“My alarm?” I patted the bed, searching for my phone. “What time is it?”

Lexie glanced at the digital clock before she handed me my phone from beside her. “Six thirty-nine.”

“Shit. Shit!” I threw the covers off my legs and began rummaging through one of my boxes. “You turned off my alarm?” I huffed.

“You set it this early for a reason? On a Sunday morning?”

“Yes!” I yipped, finding a simple white sundress with small red flowers on it. “You’re up!” I accused.

She smiled at me adoringly. “I haven’t gone to bed yet. The boys just got up though. We’re going down to the studio to start working in a bit. Coffee is on if you need it.”

*If I need it?*

I couldn’t fall asleep until well after two o’clock in the morning, thanks to

Liam and his annoying face and repetitive guitar playing.

I always set three alarms, which meant I slept through my first two, and Lexie had turned off my *just in case I overslept* alarm twenty minutes ago.

Turning to face the wall, I ripped my T-shirt over my head, slipped my arms through the dress, and shimmied my pajama pants down. I loved dresses. They made you look like you were trying with the least amount of effort. My underwear was still packed away at the bottom of a tower of boxes. That was thirty seconds I didn't have.

I stifled a laugh as I thought about going commando to meet my mother.

My new roommate seemed to have boundary issues, so I wasn't surprised when I turned around and she was still on my bed, watching me.

I shuffled past her and grabbed my makeup bag out of my purse, opening a compact mirror and swiping mascara through my thick lashes.

"So, you play bass?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

She nodded, wiping her crumby hands on her shirt.

My brother, Milton, and Liam had been playing together since they were freshmen in high school. Their previous bass player had quit a little over a year ago after knocking up his girlfriend and moving to Texas.

Milton had taught himself to play drums for the band. I still remembered him tapping his drumsticks on our kitchen cabinets, coffee table, windows, and our couch cushions for hours when I was younger. It had driven my mother crazy. I thought that was why I liked him the most.

Danny played guitar and sang backup vocals. His voice was good but wasn't anything like Liam's—as much as I hated to admit it. Liam could pick up just about any instrument and know how to play it, but the talent he had with his voice was annoyingly perfect.

Lexie nodded and chewed on her lower lip. "You should come hang out with us in the studio. It'll be fun, I promise. Liam and Nikko always end up in some sort of argument, and Milton always has to break them up," she said, like it was some form of entertainment. "I always bring down a buttload of snacks. And it would be nice to have some outside ears, someone we don't have to worry about spilling the deets of what we're working on."

I looked up at her as she made herself comfortable in my bed, lying on her

side. She was like a sexy Korean cartoon character—tiny and colorful with innocent, round eyes. Confidence radiated off of her like an obnoxious strobe light, and as uncomfortable as she had already made me, I found myself wishing I could stay in her presence a little while longer.

“I’ve never been in a recording studio. Not sure the guys would want me there,” I said.

She arched a brow at me. “You mean, your brother?”

*And Liam.* “Any of them.”

“Screw them. If they can bring company, so can I!”

“Company?” I asked, tapping a blush-colored lip balm on.

My pillow-like lips were my favorite feature, and I tried to accentuate them whenever I could even if it was the only makeup I wore. Everyone always thought my eyes were worth mentioning, but I wished they were bluer than the colorless gray irises that they were. To me, they made me look cold and vacant of emotion, which didn’t help with the resting bitch face I carried with me on the daily.

“They have a few trusted friends who visit sometimes, but I never bring anyone. I try to stay focused while we’re recording, but I’m curious about you. You can be my first distraction.” Her eyebrows rose suggestively.

“Maybe next time?” I let my shoulders sag, hoping I wouldn’t disappoint her. “I really have somewhere to be,” I said, checking my phone.

“Okay, fine. You have to answer two questions before you go though!”

“Lexie ...” I began, but her eyes narrowed impatiently. “Fine. Shoot.”

I reached for the door, the smell of ground coffee beans meeting my nose when I walked out. Her boots shuffled on the wood floor behind me as I beelined for the kitchen.

“Pineapple on pizza? Yay or nay?”

“That’s one of your questions?”

“Yay or nay?” she insisted, like it was a matter of life and death.

I laughed. “If it’s going in the garbage, I guess.”

Lexie clapped her hands together and let out a devilish giggle. I guessed I’d gotten that one right.

“And the second question?”

“What’s your favorite Quiet Peril song?”

I suddenly became fearful of failing whatever test this was. Their band had too many good ones, but my favorites weren’t their most popular or the ones I occasionally heard on the radio.

“I have two. ‘Ghost’ on sad days.” I decided to be honest rather than going for the obvious fan favorites. I looked back at her when I reached the coffeepot. For some reason, I wanted her approval. “ ‘Never You’ when I want to feel happy.”

Liam cocked his head when he heard me, sitting at the kitchen table with a plate of eggs smothered in hot sauce. His hair had been well slept on, but something told me if he ran one hand through it, he’d be ready for any stage concert. His white T-shirt draped softly across his stone-like figure, showing off a few tattoos stamped along his bicep and forearm.

“We can keep her!” Lexie shouted, as if I were a new pet that’d been potty-trained. “It’ll be nice to have another girl here with me.”

“Since when are you a girl, Lex?” Danny teased, and she whacked him with an open hand.

“Mind if I grab some coffee?” I asked the table of men shoving their faces with enough food to feed three times the number of people.

Danny nodded and pointed to a cabinet, where I found coffee mugs and tumblers.

Lexie took a seat next to my brother and stole a sip out of his mug. He scowled but went back to eating his breakfast. It was nice to see his bandmates had at least taught him to share.

“You didn’t tell me she knew Korean,” Lexie said, eyeing Danny with betrayal.

I shook my head. “Oh, I don’t. *Hello* and *thank you* are about all I know in most languages.”

Lexie pouted, shooting out her bottom lip.

“But she still knows about fifty other languages,” Danny told her, wiping his mouth.

I sighed, remembering what he thought my IQ number was. “Your number for me is highly exaggerated.”

Milton tore his eyes off his plate. “What else can you speak?”

“Um, French and Spanish ...” I began.

“And Italian, Portuguese ...” Danny began to list them with his fingers. “What else? Chinese? Russian? Swedish?”

I shook my head once, annoyed that he was making fun of me. “German. And I only know a few words in Portuguese.”

“You know German?” Milton’s mouth tilted up. “That’s kind of badass.”

“When the hell do you ever need to speak any of that?” Liam mumbled.

“*When I want assholes like you to feel inadequate.*” My German was rusty, but I got the entire table’s attention.

Lexie bounced up and down in her chair. “Again, again!”

Liam’s jaw twitched. My tone hadn’t disguised that my unrecognizable words to him were harsh ones.

The front door opened and closed, and then Nikko sauntered into the kitchen. “Mornin’!”

“Are those your new tour shirts?” My eyes lit up, scanning Nikko’s chest with the band’s album cover printed across it in red ink.

Nikko nodded, squeezing Milton’s shoulders. “Tic designed ’em. Fans of A Quiet Peril have never looked so good.”

Liam looked up at me from under his brows. “They’re not *new*. They were new six months ago.”

I ignored his retort and smiled at Milton, who had a faint look of pride in his eyes. “Can I get one?”

“For sure. We have a bunch downstairs.” Milton nodded his buzzed head toward the basement door. “I can grab you one later. White or black?”

“Give her a white one.” Nikko stuck his tongue out. “Maybe we can get her in the pool later.”

“You guys have a pool?”

Liam tossed his fork down on his empty plate. “We’re not going to make any money off of our merch if you guys keep giving them away to people.”

Milton narrowed his eyes. “She’s not just people. And we’re doing just fine.”

Liam slung his arm over the back of his chair. “I’m just saying.”

“Nikko’s been the one giving away all our shit anyway.” Danny pointed.

Nikko held his hands up. “Hey! Having hot girls strut around with your band name on their tits is great advertisement.”

“Agreed,” Lexie chimed. “All the more reason to give Avery one.”

“I’m just doing my job, guys,” Nikko added.

“Is sleeping with them part of the job too?” Danny chuckled.

I noticed Milton’s pinched face was still set on Liam as he stood. “What’s your problem, man? It’s a fucking shirt.”

“It’s fine; I can buy one. I wasn’t expecting anything for free,” I said, trying to make light of the situation.

Liam flicked his eyes up at me. “Yeah, except for rent, right?”

Milton made a loud clanking noise when he dropped his dishes into the sink. “Ignore him. I’ll get you one, Avery.”

My phone chirped.

*There’s a parking spot next to mine.*

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” I repeated, remembering I was in a hurry.

“Uh-oh. Late for breakfast?” Danny teased as I ran out of the kitchen, gripping a tumbler full of hot coffee.

If I could’ve reached him from the front door, I would’ve thrown my sandal at his face. I was already going to breakfast without underwear. What would one less shoe be? Instead, I threw my middle finger up at the wall between us. Liam saw from his place at the table, and I swore I almost saw a smile touch his lips.

Not even ten minutes on the road, and my phone rang—seven o’clock on the dot.

I answered, touching the screen on my dash. “Hi, Mom.”

“You’re usually here before me. Where are you?”

I exhaled, turning onto the freeway. “I’ll be there soon. I’m running a bit late.”

“Oh?” She paused. “How late?”

I looked at the clock, knowing I was still at least twenty-five minutes away. “Go ahead and order, Mom.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll wait.”

I exhaled. “Mom, please. Order.”

“Take your time, sweetheart. I’ll just chat up Philip while I’m sitting here.” To anyone else, she would’ve sounded completely content, but I knew better. She hated it when Philip, the host, tried to make conversation with her. He asked too many personal questions about her job and her dating life. “Hang up the phone, Avery Ann. You’re driving.”

“Fine. I’ll see you soon.”

I didn’t rush but not because she’d said not to. I never sped, even when I was in a hurry. Zayn had always insisted on driving because he said I drove like an old lady, but in my experience, you could never be too careful.

There were no available parking spots outside of the restaurant, so it took me an extra five minutes to find an open space around the block. Downtown San Francisco was always packed, even on the weekends.

I was breathing hard from speed-walking when I walked through the black French doors. Philip stood in front of a long glass case, stuffed with at least ten different kinds of croissants; personal-sized desserts, covered in glazed fruit and chocolate. The aroma of fresh-made bread filled the air.

He greeted me with a wide grin, flashing his golden back molars. “Ah! Miss Fox! Your mother is at her usual table. May I walk you over?”

I shook my head, but Philip disregarded me and led the way to the back corner of the restaurant, where we always sat. My mother preferred a seat away from the windows because of the inconvenience of the sun.

Philip asked me what I wanted to drink in French, as he always did, and pulled a light wooden chair out for me.

I sat, feeling my mother inspecting my appearance before I could look up at her. “Coffee, please? With sugar and cream?” I didn’t have the energy to practice my French today.

Philip nodded. “Anything else I can get for you, Dr. Fox?”

My mother shook her head and waved him off with pursed lips.

I fixed my dress. “Sorry I’m late.”

My mother cleared her throat. “That was rude, Avery.”

I looked back and forth, and then at her. “What was?”

“Philip and you always exchange in French. He looked so confused when you didn’t.”

“He knows English too.” I shrugged.

“I’ve always said, if you don’t use it, you lose it. That’s why I don’t remember anything. I spent a year working at that hospital in Switzerland. But as soon as I came back to the States, nothing. I had no one here to practice it with. You’re lucky to have an opportunity like this.”

I caught Philip’s attention after he was done seating a group next to us, asking him to send the waitress over—in perfect French.

*There. Happy?*

My mother sat upright in her seat, the wrinkles in her upper lip smoothing out with approval. “So? You overslept?” she asked, concerned.

I fiddled with a small tear in the white tablecloth covering our round table. “I was studying.”

“Studying at night is the worst time—you know that. You can’t retain as much information. You’d be better off not studying at all if you’re not getting enough sleep, sweetheart.”

I inhaled slowly, wishing I had come up with a different lie, but I couldn’t tell her what had really kept me up—Liam.

“What are you studying right now?” She put her hand on mine, trying to stop my fidgeting.

“Pulmonology. I have an exam next week, and I missed my group study yesterday afternoon.” At least that wasn’t a lie.

Her head tilted to the side. “Missed it?”

*Well, this is exhausting.* “I lost track of time, I guess.”

“Aren’t you writing your schedule down in that planner I gave you? Phones aren’t reliable if they die—”

“Yes, Mom!” I clipped, clenching my jaw tight.

Her eyes widened at my disrespectful tone, but fortunately, our waitress showed up with my coffee.

“What can I get you two ladies?”

I didn’t need to look at the menu. I always ordered one of two things. “Can I have the croque-madame, please? With a side of fresh fruit.”



The woman smiled as she jotted down my order. “And for you, ma’am?”

“Another coffee. To go. Add an extra shot of espresso. And could you bag me up an almond croissant? One without much powdered sugar on top.”

I stared at her for a moment after the waitress left us, watching her fold an unused napkin into a perfect triangle.

“You’re getting food to go?”

“I don’t have time to eat an entire meal *now*, Avery. And you know how much I hate wasting food.”

I glanced at my watch. “You have another hour before you have to be at the hospital.”

Her smile was tight. “I have an early patient consult this morning.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now. You got here late; otherwise, you would’ve known sooner.” She sipped her coffee with a matter-of-fact look about her.

“So ... we’re not eating together?” I sighed. “Why didn’t you order when I told you to on the phone?”

“I would’ve been eating without you if I had anyway. I come here to see my daughter and catch up. I didn’t want to be eating the entire short amount of time I got to spend with you this morning.”

“But—”

“Stop it. It’s fine. I had a late dinner last night anyway. I’m not that hungry.”

*Oh. She was mad.*

She always got short with me when she was upset. The mind games and the guilt were something I’d been conditioned to ignore or sweet-talk my way out of. A simple compliment or inquiry about a surgery was usually the trick to take the giant stick out of her ass.

I chewed on my lip and threaded my fingers through the handle of my warm mug, letting the guilt creep in despite my best efforts. “Did your surgery go well yesterday?”

She nodded, making her shoulder-length yellow hair fall over the collar of her blouse. “It did.”

I waited for the detailed minute-by-minute run-through but never got it.

The tiny waitress returned, handing my mother a small paper bag and a to-go cup.

She stood, threw a few bills on the table, and fastened her black designer handbag over her shoulder. “Philip heard all about it. Maybe he can fill you in. I really have to get going. Have a good day, sweetheart.”

“Ma, come on. I just got here ...”

I had spent more time driving here than sitting with her.

“I’ll call you in the next couple of days, okay?” She kissed the top of my head and left without another word.

The waitress returned with my hot breakfast a few minutes later, and I ate in the corner, alone.

My phone vibrated next to me, distracting me from my growing annoyance.

*I thought of a new roommate initiation. You have to come out drinking with us tonight.*

I frowned at the text from a number I didn’t recognize, which had been entered into my phone with a black heart as the contact’s name.

*Oh, this is Lexie.*

4



## Liam

I'd had a girlfriend when I was nineteen, named Rhen, who once cut off a piece of my hair and taped it to her bedpost. She said she liked to touch it before she touched herself at night. I thought it was weird, but she was a fun lay and didn't mind when I ignored her a week here and there while I was working with the band. It was hard to find girls who understood my schedule and didn't expect me to call them ten times a day. She was simple. Crazy but simple. It wasn't until I'd started seeing other people's hair taped beside mine that I ended it.

I didn't like being cheated on much, and with the growing success of the band, I didn't want to become a cheater either. There wasn't much time for relationships, and I never came across a girl I wanted to try to start one with anyway. All I needed was someone to relieve that hunger inside me, and after a few years, it was as easy as ordering takeout. The more venues we performed at, the more girls came, begging for me to devour them. A few would leave their numbers—or worse, they'd ask for mine. Luckily, most of them were just happy to have me as another notch on their bedpost, but that was better than Rhen's version.

Between my fingers, I twirled the platinum strands of hair of the girl I was fucking and jerked her head back, wondering if Rhen still had clumps of my hair on her bedpost. Maybe hair was her sick way of keeping souvenirs of the people she'd slept with. I'd have had to buy a new headboard or two by now if I had the same fetish.

“Oh. My. God. Liam!” the blonde moaned each short syllable between thrusts. Her hands slid along the shower wall, looking for something to hold on to as she began to tighten around me. Shampoo bottles went tumbling over the edge as she tugged on the shower curtain and ripped the hooks from the rod.

Dammit. That was the second one this month. Lexie was going to be

pissed. I needed to stop taking girls in the shower, but it was convenient when I was in a rush. I usually showered after sex, but this way, I could do both at once.

Her screams grew louder and higher, like a cat being shook. “Oh! Yes, Liam! Harder!”

*Am I really that good?* I wasn’t even giving her my best, so I knew she was faking at least some of it to encourage me.

I heard Danny impatiently yell something from the stairs, and all I wanted was this girl—*Melanie? No. Meghan?*—to shut her pretty fucking mouth, so I pushed her into the wall and fucked her until the theatrical moans turned into shallow breaths. After she came, she got down on her knees, pulled the condom off, and finished me with her mouth while I washed my hair.

See? Convenient.

Five minutes later, the blonde was gone, and I descended the stairs, being greeted with a cold stare from Danny.

“You couldn’t wait to take a girl home from Elevens?”

“Who said I’m not taking a girl home from Elevens?” My mouth turned up in a grin.

Danny chuckled and shook his head as we loaded up into our vehicles. Danny and I took my truck. Lexie and Tic loaded themselves into Nikko’s SUV.

“I thought you didn’t do repeats?” Danny asked as he began fidgeting with my stereo.

I slapped his hand away, like I always did. “I don’t.”

“Didn’t you take that chick home from the gym, like, a month ago?”

I frowned, trying to think that far back, and then I stiffened. Her obnoxious screams had seemed familiar. “Wait. Wasn’t that chick a brunette?”

Danny laughed. “Maybe you should start taking pictures of the girls you sleep with before they leave. If word gets out, they’ll all be wearing disguises to get with you again.”

I sighed. The problem with fucking girls more than once was that they started to think it was more than just sex.

Danny read the concern on my face. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Lexie wrote her number down on her hand on her way out.”

“Of course she did.” I rolled my eyes.

Lexie, Miss Steal Your Girl, got more action than all of us combined. It helped that she had double the contenders, but damn, she was good. Men. Women. It didn’t matter. Her room was loud nearly every night, no matter who she brought in it. On a few occasions, I’d woken up to girls I’d bagged on the couch the night before coming out of Lexie’s room in the morning. Danny had experienced the same thing.

“Schism” by Tool played through the speakers as we pulled into the lot of Elevens, taking my usual spot in the back. The place had changed since we played here back in high school but in a good way. Matt, the owner, let us play here whenever we wanted, so we could get practice performing. That ended up working out for both of us. We got more exposure, and he got more business. Now, Elevens was one of the hottest bars in the city. I’d like to think that was in large part to our band, but Matt was simply a good businessman with good ideas. The only bad idea he’d had, in my opinion, was starting up karaoke night.

So, imagine my surprise when I saw Avery walking through the doors in that sweet little sundress from this morning with an equally out-of-place blonde chick beside her.

Seeing her eye the man onstage with a fearful expression, I knew there was no way she was here for karaoke, and it definitely wasn’t a coincidence we were all here on the same night. I’d never seen her at Elevens, nor had I expected to. Fun wasn’t really Avery’s scene.

I spotted Lexie making her way toward them like she had been expecting their arrival and slammed my fist on the bar.

*Dammit, Lex.*

Danny was at the other end of the bar, talking it up with his on-and-off girlfriend, Hannah, so I wasn’t sure if he’d seen Avery yet. But I knew he wouldn’t want her here.

Great. Now, I’d have to spend my night getting rid of her.

*This shouldn’t take long.*

5



## Avery

The guilt from breakfast with my mother weighed heavily on my shoulders the rest of my day. I was annoyed that one small mistake, such as oversleeping, could make me feel this way, but every time I tried to talk myself down, I remembered how important her time was. I hated disappointing her. Next time, I would do better.

Going out drinking with my brother and his friends didn't sound like the best way to end an already-shitty day, but I figured there was a chance it could also be fun to have a night out, away from my books. A couple of beers could be what I needed to get my mind off my mother and my ex. My liver had had a long enough break from my first few years of college parties anyway, and if I was going to be staying with my brother's band for the next couple of months, it wouldn't hurt to get to know them better.

A text from Lexie chimed from my phone and appeared on the center screen of my console.

Nina read it. "It's karaoke night?"

Her shriek of excitement caused a brief ringing in my ears as I pulled up to an open spot at the curb. She'd offered to buy me my first two beers if I took her along with me, but I had planned on asking her to come with me anyway. She was safe and reliable, even in a drunken state.

"I guess." I sighed and turned off the engine, peering up at the neon-blue sign reading *Elevens*.

"Oh, don't be a downer. I'm the one with the terrible voice anyway."

I looked at her blankly. "You know I'm not singing."

Nina hugged her red purse and made a face, begging for me to reconsider.

It wasn't that I was scared of people hearing me sing. I had a decent voice—thanks to some vocal lessons I'd taken when I was younger and some tiny strand of genetics I shared with Danny's musically talented ass and our father. But I hadn't sung in front of anyone since the night my dad had died. I



certainly wasn't going to start again, after all these years, at some karaoke bar.

I laughed and shook my head. "That's not going to work on me."

"You never do what I want to do."

"I *only* do what you want to do." I raised a brow.

She pouted with more dramatic flair. "I still don't get why—"

"Stop. Please."

The bass from the music vibrated my chest, making my stomach twist as the volume increased when we stepped inside.

"*This* is what bars look like up here?" My eyes bulged when we got done showing our IDs to the doorman, taking in the plush leather couches and sleek, modern decor.

A petite girl in a bodycon dress and wedges passed us by with an equally done-up friend next to her.

"Well, I feel like a sasquatch." Nina giggled, gesturing to her ripped jeans and loose shirt that did nothing for her figure. Her already-peppy walk accelerated, and she threaded her hand through mine, so I could keep up. "I guess San Fran can compete with LA in some ways."

Nina hated San Francisco and was determined to get into a residency program anywhere in Los Angeles as soon as the time came. I hadn't made up my mind on where I wanted to end up, but after going to private school in Beverly Hills, I didn't want to be anywhere near that place.

"You made it!" Lexie appeared, wrapped in a hot-pink dress. I thought it was a dress, but it could have easily been an oversize shirt. She gave Nina a quick once-over. "Who's your friend?"

Nina flashed her a stark, full-toothed white smile that could win anyone over—not that it took much to win over Lexie. "I'm Nina!" she shouted, competing with the lyrics of a Kings of Leon song being murdered somewhere beyond the thick crowd.

I squinted at the agonizing sound, embarrassed for the intoxicated young man I could hear, slurring his words.

"You must be Lexie?" Nina asked.

Half of the crowd began booing the man onstage while the other half

screamed with encouragement, clearly enjoying the man's humiliating display.

"And you must be one of Avery's hot doctor friends!" Nikko slid between us. "I dig the glasses. Name's Nikko. What's yours, beautiful?"

She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length blonde hair and blushed. "Nina."

Nikko bent down nearly a foot to reach her level. "Nina what? I need a last name if I'm going to stalk you online."

She leaned closer to his ear, and I could only hope her last name was all she was telling him.

I rolled my eyes and watched her adjust the oversize black-framed glasses resting on the bridge of her nose.

Despite all the warnings I had given her on the ride over, she was still flirting with him. That was part of her charm though. She was nice to everybody. Sometimes a little *too* nice.

"What's your tattoo of?" she asked, pulling at the sleeve around his shoulder.

Nikko stretched the fabric up and tightened his bicep. "It's a falcon. The wings spread onto my chest and back shoulder blade. I'd have to take my shirt off to show you the rest." His eyes darkened. "Maybe later?"

When a giggle escaped from her mouth, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her away toward the bar.

"Avery!" she scolded.

"I need a drink if I'm going to listen to any more of that." I signaled to the bartender. "Two Coronas, please."

"I was just introducing myself."

I gave her a knowing glance, and a grin slowly crept onto her cheeks.

"He's cute. Sue me."

"Nikko's not a bad guy, but he's a huge player. You do you, Nina. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

"I can have fun if I want to. He's better to look at than the cadaver we stare at all day in anatomy lab."

"Interesting yardstick you're using to measure attraction." I grimaced.

“I’m just saying, we spend more time with men lying on a table without a pulse than actually socializing with the ones around us. It’s sad. And pathetic.”

“I talk to Henry. He tells me all his secrets.” I did my best to suppress a smile while Nina rubbed her temples.

“You really need to stop naming your cadavers. It’s disturbing,” she teased. “I think this is good for us. I prescribe a night out like this at least once a week. Future doctor’s orders. It’s nice to have a little distraction sometimes.”

The fact that she could even entertain the idea of a distraction at this point in our schooling was mystifying. Insane even. But things came easier to her than it did me. She could study something for an hour or two and not have to look at it again. I, on the other hand, would have to stare at my notes on the same topic for days just to memorize a fraction of what she had. It had been that way for me for as long as I could remember. Everyone thought it came easy to me, but I worked my ass off to get the grades that I did.

The bartender handed us our drinks, and Nina slid a twenty-dollar bill to him in return. I gulped down half of my beer before I noticed Nina’s face.

“What?” I exhaled, licking my upper lip.

“It’s not water, Avery.”

“Is that judgment I’m hearing?”

“One hundred percent.” She smiled before taking a drink of her own.

Hearing a roar of laughter, we both glanced back at Nikko and Lexie, who had been joined by Milton, Danny, and a girl I didn’t recognize.

“Okay, that has to be your brother. He looks just like you.”

I nodded, watching him throw his arm around the girl beside him. “Yeah, that’s Danny. You’ve seen pictures of me with him, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, but he looks ... *different* in person. You guys have really good genes. Just saying.”

“Uh ... thank you?”

“And who’s the one with all the tattoos?” She pointed.

My furrowed brows loosened. “That’s Milton—er, Tic. The drummer.”

“He’s got that bad-boy look going for him. I like it.” Her eyes danced.

Little did she know, he was the innocent one in the group. I had only known Lexie for a day, but I already had my suspicions about her and her innocence.

“You didn’t tell me your brother and all his friends were so good-looking. Even Lexie is hot. And you’re living under the same roof as all of them?”

“Well, everyone, except Nikko. He’s got his own place.” I ran my fingers through my long, wavy hair, growing bored with the conversation of my apparently gorgeous new roommates.

She wasn’t wrong though. I didn’t think they would have made it this far with their talents alone if they’d all looked like a bunch of ogres.

Interest flickered across her face. “Hmm. Independent and financially stable. I like that. Where’s the other one? Liam, right? The asshole?” She began to scan the room, searching for more prey to feast her eyes upon. “Is he hot? I bet he’s hot. The mean ones always are.”

I stared at her for a moment. “Are you in heat or something?”

Her eyes shot back to me. “Screw you!”

I grinned. “Down, kitty.”

“Am I the hot asshole you’re referring to?” Liam’s voice came from behind me.

I took another sip of my beer to help ease the ice crawling up my spine and spun to face him. “Liam ... hi. This is my best friend, Nina. Nina, Liam.”

“Hi!” she screeched, looking mortified but also distracted by the sight of him.

Liam raised his chin at her, but his impassive stare immediately found mine again.

Nina’s voice lowered to her normal register as she began to apologize. “I’m sorry. I must’ve gotten the name mixed up. She was probably talking about a Luke or Levi or—”

“You were correct the first time,” I affirmed, almost holding my breath when I finished.

His pink lips curled up at my honesty. He took a step closer to me when the bartender handed him his drink.

“What are you doing here, Avery?” He didn’t look at me when he asked.

“Lexie invited me.”

Liam glanced over at the rest of the group.

Lexie waved and then gave him the middle finger.

“Of course she did,” he mumbled.

I took a step into his line of vision. “Is that a problem?”

He seemed to grow uncomfortable with my boldness and began to watch the woman approaching the microphone. “Just doesn’t seem like the kind of place you’d hang out.”

I snarled in annoyance. “You haven’t seen me in years. How do you know where I’d hang out?”

He tilted his head. “You haven’t seen *me* in years. How do you know I’m still an asshole?”

“Oh, I have a feeling that trait of yours is like a fine wine and it got better with age.” I smirked.

A beautiful redhead and her friend came up to him and started petting his bicep. One of them shot me a less than friendly look, but I barely noticed. It was nothing I hadn’t seen before. These girls were no different than the ones who’d flocked to him in high school. The nice thing now was, Liam had his own place to take them to instead of hooking up with them in the girls’ restroom. I’d never forget walking in on hot Jane, kneeling down in front of Liam, in between the paper towel dispenser and the sinks. Though I wouldn’t put it past him to do it here. Actually, now that I was living with him, I’d rather have him go down on the redhead and her friend in a restroom stall rather than doing it on the couch right outside my room. I hadn’t thought about what that *situation* was going to be like when I moved in—living with four sexually active rock stars, one of whom was my brother.

Liam paused and looked down at the two relentless girls. He patted them off like they had actually drooled on him. “Not today, ladies,” he said flatly.

They both left with a huff but not before giving me and Nina a final once-over.

I watched the stage again, but I could feel him move closer. A wave of yummy cologne and the leather from his jacket danced beneath my nose as Liam shifted confidently. The surprisingly delightful smell distracted me for

a moment, and then he opened his mouth.

“So? Stages don’t make you want to hurl anymore, Av?”

My whole body pulsed with heat, like an ember in a fire, as I resisted the urge to smack the smug tone off his tongue, but the first syllable of my name that fell from his mouth caught me off guard.

He’d never called me that.

The only nickname he had ever given me was ‘Little Fox’, and I’d never found it endearing.

“I’m not sure stages have anything to do with it actually. I think my upchuck reflex is just higher when you’re around.”

Nina made a noise of enjoyment, nearly spitting out her drink.

“Let’s see it then.” Liam nodded toward the stage, and my stomach started doing flips on itself.

“Hey, man.” A broad-shouldered teddy bear of a man sauntered over and exchanged some sort of manly handshake with Liam. “I got you and the rest of the guys a seat in the corner.”

I welcomed the distraction with a long exhale.

“Unless you want a smaller one for you and your girl here?”

Liam and I both snapped our eyes to him in disgust.

There was a kindness about him that settled in the creases of his eyes when he laughed. “All right then. Just the one table. I’ll send over a bottle on the house.”

“Thanks, Matt.” Liam nodded, and the man disappeared behind the bar.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

Liam nodded at the rest of the band and pointed to a table at the back of the bar before returning his attention to us. “Uh, that’s Matt. He owns the place. Why?”

“I like him.”

Liam frowned. “You don’t even know him.”

“Yeah, he’s nice. I can tell,” Nina agreed.

“He seems like the kind of guy I would trust to watch my cat,” I added.

“You don’t have a cat,” Nina stated.

“Please don’t tell me you’re hiding a cat in my house,” Liam added with

concern.

“No.” I shrugged. “But if I did.”

“Do you make a habit of trusting guys you’ve never met?” Liam straightened himself, showing his full height as he towered over me a good seven or eight inches.

He must have gotten taller over the years. Or maybe he just made me feel smaller.

“And if I do?”

“I just want to know if I should expect to see random weirdos at the house that I’d need to keep an eye on.” He shook his head once. “You know that’s a really stupid way to get yourself into trouble, right?”

“Maybe she likes trouble,” Nina simpered.

“Please,” he mocked, looking down at me like a cat did a mouse.

I shocked myself when I stepped toward him, leaving only the drinks in our hands between us. “I think I can take care of myself, thank you.”

“Oh, really?”

The heaviness in his eyes made my heart rate kick up.

Liam bent down, his lips skimming against my hair. “Tell me, Miss Independent ...”

A tingle spread down my neck and exploded every nerve in my body. I couldn’t tell if his voice vibrating against my ear was making me sweat or giving me chills. Either way, I wanted him as far away from me as possible.

“When was the last time you paid for anything yourself, hmm? Did you buy that pretty little car of yours? I doubt many med students can afford a sixty-thousand-dollar vehicle. How about school? That costs a pretty penny, huh?”

I curled my fingers, gripping the neck of my bottle harder.

“Housing? That apartment you were living in with your boyfriend, was that yours or his? His, right? And, remind me, who did you have to call because you had no place to go after he dumped you?” He pulled away a few inches, and I let out a breath as I relaxed the muscles in my jaw. “Face it, sweetheart, you have no fucking clue what it means to take care of yourself.”

With a slow, sweet turn of my wrist, Liam jerked back and shouted

something incoherent. “The fuck, Avery!” was all I could understand through his threatening words.

The once-dry crotch of his jeans was now soaked with the remaining contents of my cold beer. The shock smeared across his face was so satisfying to see, and I took my time, committing every detail to memory.

“Oh, how *stupid* of me.” My stomach continued to do flips, but the words came out evenly.

Nina nearly fell on the floor, laughing, while my face remained composed.

“Could you be a gentleman and get me another? I’ll have someone pay you back because, you know, I don’t pay for anything myself.”

Nina threaded her arm through mine and pulled me away, looking proud and a little surprised by my display. “Okay, that was awesome.”

“I told you, he’s an asshole,” I said, fighting the urge to look back to where we’d left Liam.

Nina began leading us over to the table the band was waiting at, and I stopped. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What? No way. I am having too good of a night for you to ruin it now.” She tugged my arm harder.

I wiggled myself free. “Is that what I usually do? Ruin your night?”

“You know that’s not what I meant. Come on. You and I could use a little fun.” She playfully scrunched her nose, but I could hear some truth in her words.

She rarely fought me on it, but the nights we spent out together, I was usually the one to call it quits before it got too late. The few times she had suggested we leave a party early was typically after I started yawning or after I stopped drinking.

Guilt began to resurface, reminding me of how my day had started.

“Look, if you want to go, we can go. But at least give me a good reason.” Nina nodded behind me to where I was sure Liam still was. “I know you don’t like the guy, but that back there was a little hot. Intense but hot.”

“Nina.”

She smiled. “You can totally handle sitting at a table with him. After what you just did, I doubt he’ll bother you again.”



I released a long breath. “Oh, I only fanned the flames.”

Nina frowned. “I don’t understand how you two still have this stupid quarrel. This is all because of that thing that happened in high school?”

That *thing* she was referring to was my sophomore-year talent show. My brother’s band had been waiting backstage after their performance. They were seniors and a shoo-in to win, which was stupid because all you won was a lame trophy and bragging rights. But back then, that was all they really wanted. Liam had snuck some liquor in to celebrate and offered me some while I was waiting to go on. He said it would help calm my nerves. I didn’t know what I was doing. The only alcohol I had ever tried before that night was one of my mom’s wine coolers. Six pulls from the tequila bottle later, and I could barely stand upright. I was puking out my insides the moment I sat down at the piano onstage.

Liam had videotaped the entire thing and sent it to everyone in school the next day.

Nina offered a sympathetic smile.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t just that one time. He’s never liked me, and he’s never been shy to tell me that. But it’s like he hates me even more now. I don’t get it. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Have you thought about asking him about it? Clearing the air?”

“I’ve only been there a day. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t exaggerating things, but now ... I don’t even know if I should stay.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You are not moving back home to live with your mother. Just stick it out for a few months. You have so many things going on right now, and I’m sure their schedule is full with band stuff. You’ll barely see the guy.” It sounded convincing, but I knew this wasn’t going to just go away by ignoring him.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Lexie seems pretty bent on keeping me close to her.” I laughed, watching her prancing toward us.

“Where have you two been?” Lexie whined. “Who wants to go up there with me?”

Lexie eyed me for a moment, but Nina swiftly grabbed her hand before I could decline. “I’ll join you, babe!”

I gave Nina a thankful nod when Lexie was busy jumping for joy. Nina shot me a quick wink. As they started toward the side of the stage, discussing song choices, I peeked over at the band's table, filling up with more faces I didn't recognize than ones I did.

Avoiding going over a little longer, I decided to hide in the restroom for a few minutes.

Feeling some strands of hair sticking to my neck from the heat of the packed bar, I fastened it into a messy bun. I stared into the mirror in the dimly lit restroom and tried to style it in a way that all the girls in school seemed to do effortlessly, pulling small pieces out to hang daintily.

A girl walked out of a stall while I struggled. One glance at her short-shorts, tight crop top, and fake eyelashes made my reflection that much more unappealing.

I ripped my hair tie out and stomped out of the restroom, colliding with the person waiting on the other side of the door.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't see—oh, it's you."

"Sir?" Liam blinked and fixed his jacket. "How endearing."

I looked down at his empty hands and straightened myself. "I see you forgot my drink."

"Nah, they ran out. They got tequila though." His annoying smirk returned, and my patience shattered.

"You're infuriating," I said, pushing him aside. "Grow up, Liam."

"Ah!" A deep laugh echoed from his chest. "I do think we've finally broken her, folks!"

I snapped my head back.

"And only in the first inning." He grinned.

"Is that what this is? Some kind of game to you?"

His brows pulled in. "What?"

"Never mind." I shoved away from the hallway, feeling him follow.

"I wouldn't go over there if I were you."

I threw my hands up, exhausted. "And I suppose you'd rather I just left?"

"Actually, yeah. Not sure why you thought this would be fun for you anyway."

“I’m beginning to question that myself.” I bit down on my lip. “Fine, Liam. I’ll leave as soon as—”

We both glanced up to the stage, where Lexie and Nina were belting their hearts out. It took me longer than it should’ve to decipher the lyrics to the Led Zeppelin song they were singing so poorly.

“Yeah ... this is why Lexie’s not allowed to do many of the backup vocals.” Liam scrunched his face.

Nina danced and swayed to the beat alongside Lexie. My best friend couldn’t sing to save her life, but what she lacked in vocal talent, she made up for in her dancing. Every time she rolled her hips, the crowd cheered. The fact that she could do this in front of a packed bar, almost completely sober, was courageous in my book. Her fearlessness was something I envied. Then again, she’d had her own little army of four older brothers and two loving parents cheering her on with every move and every victory she made, big or small, throughout her life. No judgment or unattainable expectations. No one to tell her she couldn’t do anything. That kind of freedom could make anyone feel invincible. Powerful even. She deserved it though. Every bit of it. Nina was a ball of light in a dark room, and I was lucky to have her on my cloudy days.

“Let her stay,” Liam said, noticing my smile morphing into a yawn. “I’ll make sure one of the guys gets her home safe. Scout’s honor.” He held one hand up and made a sign with his fingers that was anything but innocent. I frowned, unconvinced, and he dropped his hand. “She’s in good hands, Av. You know that.”

There he went with the nickname again.

I pulled my keys out as the crowd began shouting for an encore the moment they finished. “Fine. Tell her I got another one of my headaches. She’ll believe that.”

I was halfway to my car when I heard footsteps coming up behind me. Before I could react, Liam snatched my keys out of my hand and pointed across the lot.

“My truck is this way.”

6



## Avery

Liam was a solid ten paces away when I realized he wasn't turning back around.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I asked, scurrying after him.

"You're riding with me," Liam threw over his shoulder as he tossed my keys up and down. "Don't worry; I'll let you ride shotgun."

As if there was another choice unless he thought I'd ride in the bed of his truck, but I wasn't about to give him any ideas.

I caught up to him as he reached his old single-cab Chevy. It reminded me of the one I had seen his dad driving when we were younger, only much nicer and matte black instead of the ugly forest-green color that had faded from the sun.

"This isn't funny. You wanted me to go, so I'm going."

"Not in your car, you're not."

"What are you talking about?"

I reached for the keys when I was close enough, but he stretched his arm above his head. I jumped up and down, regretting it as soon as I saw amusement warm his eyes.

"Did you get shorter?" His eyebrows pinched.

"No." I huffed, surprised he'd noticed the height difference too. "You're just ... taller." I had made it a point to keep as far away from him as possible when we were younger, so I'd never noticed his massive stature ... or that his eyes were more of a warm chocolate brown than the two black abyss holes I'd once thought they were. I took a step back and let out an exasperated breath.

"Look, the rules haven't changed. No one drives home if they've been drinking. Even you."

I knew their band rules. There were only three from what I could remember.

The *no drinking and driving* rule.

One of the band members had to remain sober any night they went out together. That rule had come after Danny was pulled over on his way home from one of Liam's infamous parties back in high school. Mom had had to drive him to school the remainder of his senior year because of his suspended license—something neither one of them was happy about.

The *no hard drugs* rule.

I was pretty sure Liam was responsible for that one. After his dad had been sent to prison for drug trafficking, it hadn't been a surprise.

The *anytime, anywhere* rule.

This was an unspoken rule I imagined most families had in place. And that was basically what the band was. A family. If one of them called and needed another member, it didn't matter what they were doing or where they were, they had to come. No questions asked. If one of them killed somebody, they would all help hide the body. They'd probably get away with it too.

I was sure they had added a few other rules since their years of practicing in garages and performing in bars, but the ones involving the safety and care of another member were paramount. That was why it had been so easy for me to leave Nina with them. My brother and his friends were idiots, but they weren't stupid.

My eyes narrowed into thin slits at one important key point. "I am not a band member."

He shrugged. "You're living with us now, so all of the rules apply to you too."

The idea of Danny, Nikko, or Liam running to my rescue in my time of need, following the *anytime, anywhere* rule, was laughable.

"I had *one* beer, Liam!" I gestured to the zipper of his jeans. "And I didn't even finish it!"

"I don't know your limit."

"Well, I do."

He opened the passenger door. "Get in."

I crossed my arms tightly. "Absolutely not."

He began tapping his fingers. "Now, Avery. Come on."

“I’m. Fine,” I protested firmly.

“Stop being difficult and just get in the damn truck.”

I combed my tense fingers through my hair, knowing my chances of winning this argument were slim, especially against him. “I can’t leave my car here. I have a lecture in the morning.”

“Tic can drive it back. He’s sober cab tonight.”

That reminded me of the drink he’d ordered at the bar. “And what about you? I saw your glass of whiskey inside. Are you breaking your stupid rules just to get me out of here?”

He exhaled loudly, growing impatient. “I haven’t had anything to drink. You and your friend kind of interrupted me before I could.”

I raised my brows, not believing him for a second.

He shook his head and pointed at the wet spot on his jeans. “Do you really think I want to spend the rest of the night with a wet dick? It’s not exactly the kind I was hoping for tonight.”

My lips twisted to hide my smile. “And you think you didn’t deserve it? Go dry it in the restroom.”

“Molesting a hand dryer isn’t a good look for me, Avery.” He nodded at the door he was still holding open. “Let’s go.”

“Okay, can we pretend for two seconds that you’re a nice guy?”

“Oh, I love role-playing.” His eyes darkened.

I sighed. “Please, can I have my keys? You know I’m careful when it comes to these things. I’ve never taken that risk, and I’m not about to start now. I can do all the drunk tests you want me to do if that will make you feel better.”

“As entertaining as that would be, no. I’m covered in beer, and I’m not in the mood,” he said, opening the door wider.

I stared at him and waited, hoping he would give up before I did.

Anger made his jaw twitch. “You want me to put you in the truck?”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” I laughed once and then noticed the seriousness hadn’t left his eyes.

He crouched down.

“Oh no. Don’t you even *think* about touching me—”

Before I could finish my futile threat, he lunged forward like a defensive line tackling their opponent.

I stumbled back a couple of steps, pushing on his shoulders as his arms wrapped around my waist. “All right, I give!”

My words of defeat didn’t stop him. He hoisted me over his shoulder with little effort, laughing at my pitiful kicks.

“Put me down, Shrek!” I said, smacking him three times.

His shoulders vibrated beneath me.

*He’s laughing at me?*

“You find this amusing?” I growled.

“Kind of. You’re so angry and small.”

“Just the right height to knee you in the balls. Now, put me down, so I can show you.”

He moved quickly, stuffing me into the passenger side with a careful throw. I grunted as I hit the leather seat, catching the grin on his face just before he slammed the door shut and locked it.

I bounced upright. “I can unlock it from inside, Einstein,” I shouted next to the window, flicking the silver lock upward for effect.

“That’s not to keep you in. It’s to keep others out,” he said, looking around the parking lot. “Stay here. I’ll be back in a sec.”

*What did he think I was, a dog?*

I scanned the dark shadows between parked cars and contemplated following him back inside. Making a scene would probably get me what I wanted, but it would also ruin Nina’s night and possibly Danny’s. But it might put an even bigger damper on Liam’s evening.

Decisions, decisions.

I sighed heavily, punching the lock back down after a quick heartbeat, feeling defeated.

The inside of his truck was impeccably clean, apart from the dashboard littered with guitar picks and a single black baseball cap.

A faint aroma of sandalwood and leather tickled my nose in a delightful way, the same scent that had teased me inside the bar when he got too close. On a warmer day, it would’ve seemed cozy in the cab of his truck, but the



chilled leather seat and the cool night air made shivers spread down my arms.

I cursed to myself, knowing I had a zip-up in the backseat of my car across the lot.

My phone chimed with a text from Nina the second I saw Liam walk back out the bar doors a few minutes later. She was checking to see if I was okay and making sure he wasn't taking me hostage. I mean, he kind of was, but I didn't want her to worry. I had accepted my fate of transportation for the evening, so in a sense, I was going willingly. There was no need to signal for help. Instead, I affirmed the migraine story Liam must've gone with and threw my phone on the seat beside me.

By the time Liam climbed into the driver's seat and slid the key in the ignition, my blood was still simmering on a low boil, but I didn't have much fight left in me.

There was, however, one question that bothered me enough to ask.

"Why do you care?"

Liam glanced at me as he waited for an opening in traffic. "Care about what?"

The cab was silent, aside from the low grumble of the motor and the ticking of his blinker. "Why would you care if I drove back, drunk?"

He shook his head and let out a deep laugh. "I couldn't care less what you do, sweetheart."

I pursed my lips. "Stop calling me that."

He ignored me and continued, "Danny, on the other hand, would kill me if he found out I let you leave with a few drinks in your system. He might be smaller than me, but that fucker can be scrappy when he's pissed."

"So, if I wrapped my car around a pole somewhere, you wouldn't bat an eye. Got it." It was a statement, not a question. "Good riddance, right?" I laughed to myself, though I wasn't sure why. It wasn't funny.

The question of whether or not my brother would be concerned about my safety as much as Liam thought lingered for a moment, but I pushed that notion aside, reminding myself that Danny and I were blood. Family. He was letting me stay with him, rent-free and on a moment's notice after all. He loved me. In his own way, he loved me.

I could feel Liam's stare burning into the side of my face, but I kept my eyes fixed on the red light in front of us.

When the light finally flicked green twenty-three long seconds later—I'd counted—Liam didn't accelerate through the intersection, and I couldn't stop my eyes from questioning him. I immediately wanted to look away, but I figured that would be cowardice, and I refused to be a coward around him. If I showed any signs of weakness, he would pounce on me.

The streetlights were dim but made the high points of his face glow with a yellowish tint. His prominent cheekbones and sharp jawline were a couple of reasons I found him so intimidating and why so many women fell at his feet—usually on their knees.

My heart rate kicked up as I held his stare. His eyelashes masked his eyes in a dark shadow, but I could still see him, gawking silently.

There was no one waiting behind us to go, but not obeying the basic rules of the road filled me with unease. That, and the almost suffocating tension building inside the cab. My mind kept racing with things to say to break the silence, to ask him what the hell his problem was. But the longer we sat there, the tighter my lips became.

"I don't hate you, Avery," Liam finally said.

Oxygen returned to my lungs.

His right hand, inked with the letters *L-O-C-K* across four fingers, tightened around the steering wheel. "I don't particularly like you, but ..." He paused. "I guess there's a part of me that would care if you got hurt, okay?"

My brow rose, like it had a mind of its own. "The part where your face would get rearranged if you pissed off my brother?"

"No," he answered dryly, fixing his attention back on the road.

"Then, what is it?" I pressed.

Air dragged from his throat. "Avery ..."

"Liam ..." I tilted my head, mimicking his tone.

Liam's other hand, stamped with the remaining four letters of his last name, tousled his hair in frustration. "I don't know!"

I swallowed, daring myself to leave it at that.

"Didn't know you were such a *softy*," I teased, my lips betraying me with

the snide comment.

He shook his head. “You know, I don’t remember you having such a smart mouth before.”

“Oh, it’s always been there. I’m just not afraid to say what’s on my mind anymore.”

“Another quality you got from your mother, I presume?”

Out of self-preservation, I clenched my mouth shut, so I wouldn’t scream.

Without another retort from me, Liam turned the volume up on the radio with an egotistical lift of his chin.

I wrapped my arms around my waist, trying to combat the new goose bumps dancing across my skin.

Liam noticed and loosened his grip on the steering wheel. “The heat stopped working a few weeks ago. I’ve been meaning to fix it, but it hasn’t bothered me all that much.” He began shrugging his jacket off. “Here.”

“No, thanks.”

He quirked his brow and tossed the leather back over his shoulders. “Always so stubborn.”

Twenty-eight more minutes. Twenty-eight minutes until I could get out of his truck and away from him.

“Can you stop acting like you know anything about me?” I blamed the cold for shaking my mouth loose again.

“Excuse me?” He turned the music down a few notches. The lights from passing cars steadily lit up his face in bright waves, giving me glimpses of his nose and the curve of his lips.

“You haven’t seen me in seven years. I’m not the same girl I was back then. I’ve changed,” I said.

He glanced at my face and my body, as if he was looking at the physical changes, and then quickly back at the road.

“You haven’t though, have you? You’re still the same guy who gave a scared sixteen-year-old tequila shots until she puked in front of the entire student body and recorded the whole thing.”

“It’s not like I poured it down your throat.”

I ignored him and continued, “The same guy who sent that video to

everyone to watch repeatedly until I had to be transferred to another school after being harassed so much.”

The muscles in his jaw worked, and I wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh at that or contradict it. It had been his fault; there was no way he could argue around that.

A familiar pain danced in my chest when a new song began to play on the radio. Without hesitation, I stabbed a random button on the stereo, begging for it to stop.

Liam glanced from me to his stereo, surprised I’d had the audacity to touch it.

“Jesus. It won’t happen again. Sorry,” I said.

“What do you have against Billy Joel? Because I can just pull over here and you can walk home.”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just ... bad memories.”

He looked at me like he was expecting some sort of explanation, and I knew he would keep pressing until he got one.

“My dad was a huge fan and used to sing all of his songs around the house. He taught me how to sing and play that one on the piano.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, remembering performing it that night—the last night he’d ever heard me play.

“I’m sorry.” Liam’s silky tone filled the cab sometime later.

My eyes opened and froze on a green guitar pick that must’ve fallen on the floor. *Was he apologizing? To me?*

“It must be hard, not having him around and things like that reminding you about it all the time.”

My mind fumbled for a response, but when we locked eyes for a brief moment, none was needed. He knew what it was like to lose a father. Maybe not in the same way, but he’d still lost his. There had to be reminders of his dad everywhere, like I had with music.

For the first time, I saw the stone-cold wall he’d put up begin to dissipate.

My lips curved up. “If you’re still offering, I’ll take that jacket now.”

7



## Liam

**D**addy issues. I'd never thought I'd have them, but here I was, letting that night my father had been arrested run through my head.

I blamed Avery. I knew that look on her face too well, that feeling of when something brought back an unwanted memory.

I told the guys that I'd be back at Elevens after dropping Avery off at home and a quick change, but once I walked through the door, I didn't want to leave again. Waking up early to get some hours in at the studio had left me exhausted, but that could also be because of my night with Avery.

As soon as I got out of the shower and climbed into bed, sirens rang through my neighborhood, heading down my street. The sound of police cars echoed in my ears like Avery's song in the truck, and I was thrown back in time.

Images of my dad with his hands cuffed behind his back were burned into my memory like the flickering blue and red lights. I had known he'd been selling opioids for a couple of years, but I also knew he was doing it to keep us afloat. That was why I worked so hard to get the band going—so he could stop.

Once the band started taking off, I gave my parents nearly every cent I'd earned to help them with bills. But instead of leaving the drug industry, he used my money to take in more supplies. More product. It wasn't until I found out he'd sold to Danny that I called law enforcement. I knew it meant he'd be put behind bars for a long time, but I couldn't enable him anymore, and I didn't want my mother around it. She'd already started using because of him.

I had no idea where she was anymore. My mother had stopped talking to me the moment my dad was forced into the back of that cop car. I missed her, and I hated him. But most of all, I hated that I missed him too.

As the sirens faded off into the distance, so did my memories, but my eyes

wouldn't stay closed. Frustrated, I left my room, took a towel from the bathroom, and headed out back, deciding it was better to wear out my body than to sit in bed for the next few hours, thinking.

After I swam six or seven laps, Danny appeared beside the pool with the two girls I'd shooed off at the bar earlier. His arms were draped over their shoulders like they were holding him up more than he was holding them.

"I brought you a present," Danny said.

The redhead giggled and stepped forward while her friend licked the inside of Danny's ear.

He shrugged. "I thought since you didn't come back to the party, I'd bring the party to you."

I hoisted myself up out of the pool. Water dripped from my trunks onto the redhead's shoes, but she was too busy eye-fucking me to care.

"What about Hannah?"

"What about her?" he smiled.

I looked at Danny and gave him a shake of my head.

"You're welcome," he threw over his shoulder as he headed inside with the blonde friend.

"Hey, I'm Liam." I smirked down at the girl. It wasn't like I could shoo her off here, in my backyard. I was a dick sometimes but not that big of one.

"Oh, trust me, I know your name." She giggled. "You have no idea how long I've waited for this."

I frowned as I ran my hand through my wet hair. "For what?"

She released the straps of her dress and shimmied out of it until she was standing completely naked in front of me. A smile pulled at my lips, and my cock hardened as the cold night air made her breasts perk up for me. She ran her hands up her body and tugged on the pink swells with a devilish look in her eye.

*Well, this is not how I saw my night going.*

I no longer needed to wear myself out with laps in the pool to get to sleep tonight. But something told me I wasn't going to be doing much sleeping anyway.

The pool lights lit up her face enough for me to know she wasn't another

repeat.

I nodded behind her to the hot tub. “Let’s get you out of the cold, shall we?”



8



## Avery

A foreign alarm blared somewhere close to my ear, and my eyes shot open. I winced at the awful sound and shifted. My breath caught in my throat as I tensed every muscle in my body, feeling the weight of a clammy arm draped over my waist.

A familiar high-pitched whistle of a snore came from behind me, and I relaxed back into the mattress a moment later.

The alarm continued to grow louder and louder with each passing second.

“Nina!” I groaned.

She was a heavy sleeper, and I knew it would take, at the very least, a blowhorn to wake her. When we’d shared a dorm together, I used to have to literally pull her out of her bed, and even then, she’d sometimes fall back asleep on the floor. After I woke her up once with a cup of ice-cold water, she started setting more obnoxious alarms. I’d just thought I’d escaped that when I left the dorms behind and moved in with Zayn.

I groaned and grabbed my pillow out from under me, thrusting it over my shoulder with as much force as I could manage at six in the morning.

“Myocardial infarction,” she muttered, shooting upright.

“Nina, make it stop,” I said, pointing an angry finger.

She rubbed her eyes and looked around my room. “Did you just hit me?”

“Turn it off before I do it again!” I threatened, tightening my grip on my pillow once more.

She fell backward off the bed, reaching for her phone, but it wasn’t for her lack of balance. My newly inherited bed was really only meant for one person.

Nina tried to steady herself to stand upright but tripped over the only box I had left to unpack. The one with my dad’s old journals in it.

Nina angrily shoved it under my bed with her heel. “What’s that?” she asked, eyeing the jacket hanging from the wooden armrest of the futon.

I fisted the leather and tossed it toward the other end of my bed. “What’s what?” I asked, playing dumb.

She chuckled softly, watching Liam’s black jacket fall between my mattress and the wall.

I didn’t like the assumptions she was giving me with her eyes. She knew who it belonged to and was somehow more excited than shocked that I had it in my room. I sort of was too. But Liam had been ... decent to me last night. After he took away my keys and threw me into his truck, that was. Besides, his heat wasn’t working. Offering me his jacket had been the least he could do after practically kidnapping me.

“Nina, why in the world do you set your alarm so early? And why does it sound like a dying cat?” I asked, diverting my brain elsewhere.

“It’s good to not feel rushed in the morning. A ready mind is a steady mind.”

“Oh my God. You sound like my mother. Remind me why I keep you around again?”

She flicked a knotted piece of platinum-blond hair over her shoulder. “I believe it’s my good looks, my innate ability to have a fun time, and my ginormous brain.”

I laughed. “You know you have mascara smudged all over your face, right?”

“Well, I didn’t think your brother would know where the makeup remover wipes were at three in the morning.”

“You guys were out that late?”

Nina grinned in a mischievous way.

“What?”

She shrugged and started searching through my clothes for something to wear. “Nothing. I just think you’ve been missing out all these years.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “And how’s that?”

“You warned me about Nikko on the way to the bar last night, and I’m not sure why.” She pulled her hair through the neck hole of one of my sweatshirts. “He’s a great kisser.”

*Gross.*

Imagining her with Nikko was as bad as picturing her with my brother.

*Double gross.*

“Can you stop making that face? Relax. It was *only* a kiss. To be honest, I almost kissed Lexie too. She’s, um ... really friendly.”

My brow lifted, not out of judgment, but out of surprise. I was surprised at how her night had gone in comparison to mine. She was connecting better with my roommates than I was. Though that wasn’t exactly the way I had planned on doing it.

“Whatever you do with your body and who you do it with is your own business. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you. Nikko’s no Prince Charming, okay?”

“Prince Charming is a fictional character written in a silly storybook, Avery. I don’t want something fake. I want someone who isn’t afraid to be who they are. And if they’re hot and they have a really good tongue—” She bit her lip and smiled, reminiscing on last night’s events.

I fought back the urge to curl my lip in disgust and climbed out of bed, throwing on white leggings, a T-shirt, and a distressed denim jacket. “Let’s hurry. Since we’re up early enough, I want to stop at Lemon’s before our lecture.”

“No way. Their coffee is the worst.” Nina padded her cheeks with blush and began combing her eyebrows, digging products out of her fully stocked purse.

I stuck with my basic routine of mascara and some rosy lip balm.

“But their blueberry muffins are the bomb. Come on.” I urged her toward my bedroom door when I finished.

“Hold up,” she said, grabbing my elbow.

My face was suddenly attacked with a fluffy makeup brush.

“What are you doing?” I asked, pinching my eyes shut.

“It’s your first day of facing Zayn after everything. I want you to feel good about yourself.”

“By looking like a clown?” My heart fluttered at the thought of seeing him so soon. I wasn’t ready to face him. What did you say to the guy who was in fact the very essence of Prince Charming right after you broke up?

Nina stared at me, deadpan, and then turned my face toward the mirror. My cheekbones were bronzed and defined, and the apples of my cheeks glowed with a golden-pink hue.

“You’re welcome.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling a new wave of confidence washing over me. “Would red lipstick be too much?”

Nina shook her head. “Give the guy a chance to get over you. This,” she said, gesturing to my face, “is for you. To put a little pep in your step. I know you’re beating yourself up over this, but you’re not a bad person. You hear me?”

I let out a short laugh and began picking at the skin around my nails.

Nina noticed my nervous tic and wrapped her hands around mine. “Maybe get two muffins?”

I wasn’t sure if she meant that I should give one to Zayn as a peace offering or to get an extra one for myself because carbs were always the answer. I nodded and took a steady breath, opening my door to what looked like the catwalk to a Calvin Klein fashion show.

Liam sauntered down the hall in just his boxer briefs, chewing on a piece of bacon. His chest was littered with too many tattoos to be able to take in all at once, but the black crows dipping into the two indentations of his waistline made me want to see where they were flying to, more than I was comfortable with.

“Please, no pictures, ladies.” His deep morning voice vibrated in my chest. He flashed a smug grin and tapped a finger under Nina’s chin, making her unhinged jaw snap shut. His intense eyes landed on me and lingered for a moment, the outer corners softening just a fraction. “Mornin’.”

My lips stretched into a smile, and my damn cheeks heated. I wondered if he could see them change color with all of the makeup Nina had put on me. God, I hoped not.

Other parts of my body started to react to his stare, and rather than allowing it to happen for the sake of winning the staring contest we had going on, I dropped my gaze, waiting for my state of homeostasis to return.

“Did those hurt?” I blurted out.

*Fuck.* I was looking at his stomach again. More like staring. Faint blue and purple veins protruded under the crows' wings from the tight skin stretching over his abdomen. I was too scared to look at him again, so I nervously kept my eyes on the birds hovering above his briefs.

His very *low* and *tight* briefs.

I could feel Nina watching the two of us, making false assumptions already.

Liam's stomach muscles twitched as he laughed, and I finally found the courage to look back up.

"No, Avery," he said, his smile fading. "Pain doesn't bother me."

"We should get going if you still want to stop at Lemon's." Nina's voice snapped me out of whatever trance I had been in, and I put my armor back on.

My special armor, made specifically for Liam.

As if he could see me putting my metaphorical shield back up, I watched as he did the same and headed upstairs.

Nikko was on the couch, holding a cup of coffee I was sure was spiked with something for him to be up as early as we were.

"Ladies." He nodded.

Nina cooed at him and waved.

Nikko frowned at the face I gave him, a whole new form of contempt coming over me.

"You know she has four older brothers, right?" I asked in warning.

Nina groaned behind me and shoved me out the door.



My first blueberry muffin was gone before I found a parking space at school. Another five were stored in my book bag for later. If I didn't give one to Zayn, I'd have them for breakfast the rest of the week. More than likely, they'd be eaten tonight during my cram session. I had a lot of catching up to

do after skipping my study group over the weekend.

Tossing my not even half-empty coffee cup in the bin outside the lecture hall, Nina shot me an *I told you so* look while she sipped on her vending machine coffee. She was right; Lemon's made the worst coffee. Zayn was the only one I'd ever found who enjoyed it.

*Zayn.*

As if the thought of him could make him appear out of thin air, a wave of his expensive cologne drifted under my nose before I even noticed he was the tall, blond, and handsome classmate who nearly ran us over.

I watched him find his seat from the doorway, taking the first chair in the first row, like always. His eyes never reached the two of us.

Nina nudged my shoulder with hers. "He's trying to pretend like he's not hurting, Avery."

"Well, he's doing a damn good job." I shook my head.

It wasn't like him to be this way. I'd figured he'd be upset, but I didn't think he'd just act like I wasn't even here.

"Want to sit up top today?"

I nodded and followed Nina to the only set of stairs conveniently located right next to my ex and paused beside him.

He twirled his pencil between his fingers and stared ahead through his clear-framed glasses, like I was nothing. No one. A leaf in the wind.

My jaw worked back and forth as he pushed those ridiculous glasses up his nose. They weren't even prescription because the boy had perfect twenty/twenty vision. He only wore them on days that he wanted to be taken seriously. And he was seriously trying to ignore me.

I almost reached for them to tear them off his face, but then I reminded myself that this was my fault. I'd made this difficult. I'd hurt him. This was simply his defense mechanism.

"Avery." Nina waved a few steps ahead of me.

I glanced back at him one more time, searching for the pain that had to be lingering behind his green eyes, but all I saw was the ice-cold barrier he'd put up. An armor of his own kind.

I stared at the back of Zayn's blue shirt for the first hour of my lecture,

counting the anchors on it over and over. It was my favorite shirt of his, but he knew it. Was that why he had worn it? It was the only one he owned that didn't look like he went door to door, selling Bibles. I guessed that was the kind of wardrobe the son of a senator was stuck with. He was constantly being watched and trying to impress people that he'd never met.

I'd thought that perfect act he had down so well would come off behind closed doors, but it never did in the year we lived together. That was just Zayn. Not only did he have a body and a face sculpted by the gods, but he also had the personality and manners of a fucking saint.

Nina occasionally took a break from taking notes to eye the two of us. I could've burned a hole in the back of Zayn's shirt by now if she hadn't broken my concentration by turning the page in my textbook so I could follow along. It must've been hard for her. She had been friends with Zayn before she met me, sophomore year of undergrad, so I knew she was torn between the two of us. Not that there was really a side to pick.

A pulsing pain around the crown of my head grew stronger the last hour of my lecture, and I was sure Karma had come to pay a visit.

I watched the final minute tick by on the white clock hanging on the wall, ready to spring from my seat the moment class was over.

And I did just that.

I flew out the door, holding my hand to my forehead and begging the migraine to stop before it really took over. As if that could work.

Finding my favorite spot in the courtyard, I gripped the metal railing and sank down onto the first step just outside the doors to the school. It was quiet there. My own personal sanctuary away from the mass of med students constantly feeding off each other's stress and anxiety.

But my privacy didn't last long. The door screeched open behind me right as my head exploded, like a baseball bat colliding with my skull.

I whimpered and bit down on the sleeve of my jacket.

"Avery? Are you okay?" Zayn's smooth voice almost hurt worse than my head.

I pinched my eyes shut and took a few steady breaths.

"Another migraine?"



This was the universe's way of punishing me for being so stupid. I looked up at him with tears pooling in my eyes, and his frozen shield melted away. After a couple days of thinking I was completely empty and void of emotion, it all came pouring out.

He knelt down and pulled me into his arms.

And he held me. I knew how much it hurt him, but I let him do it anyway.

Selfish. That was what I was. Selfish and stupid. But, God, it felt good to have him near me again. I was always safe when I was with him.

“Avy, you need to calm down, or you're going to make it hurt more.”

I knew that, but I couldn't hold back the tears falling onto the anchors on his shirt. “I'm sorry,” I managed, but the words were muffled against his chest.

His spicy, expensive cologne surrounded me with a familiar warmth.

“One thing at a time. Let's get you home, so you can rest. We can save the apologies for another day, okay?”

I cried harder, wanting to scream at him to stop being so perfect. I didn't deserve it.

He helped me up and walked me to his car, promising to give Nina my keys during the lab they shared in the afternoon.

I watched him for a while as he drove, concentrating hard on the road as I gave directions to my brother's place. Every left and right turn he took, bringing me farther away from his apartment, was a reminder to us both of how I'd broken us. A reminder that we couldn't go back to the way things had been.

“This one up here?” Zayn pointed to the driveway littered with cars.

I nodded, and he parked his red Tesla at the end of the driveway, keeping his eyes fixed on the steering wheel.

For a few minutes, our breathing was the only thing breaking the silence, but my head was ready to burst, and so was I.

“I'm sorry I hurt you.” My tiny words filled the car like a scream. “You have to know, I never meant for that to happen. But in two days, you went from being everything I looked forward to at the end of the day to not being in it at all. I don't know how to do that.”

Zayn let out a long breath and shook his head. “This is the only way I can handle being around you, Avy—” He stopped himself from calling me my usual pet name—*Avy baby*. “Avery.”

I flinched at the way he’d enunciated my name, like it was foreign to him.

“It hurts to breathe the same air as you right now,” he whispered.

I took that as my cue to leave, my fingers fumbling for the door handle. My head and my heart were working together to bring me the worst kind of pain, and I couldn’t hold back the lump in my throat climbing its way to the surface.

Hot tears sprang from my eyes as I hurried toward the house.

Danny was picking at the strings of his guitar on the porch when he saw me. He stood slowly. I could see the confusion on his face morphing into something severe.

“Is that, that Zayn motherfucker?” His piercing blue eyes darted over to the Tesla, and then he brought his fingers to his mouth, whistling so loud that my bones rattled.

“Ouch,” I cried, covering my ears.

Seconds later, thundering footsteps made their way out the front door.

Milton, Liam, and Nikko all looked like they were ready for a fight. I’d thought only animals had mating calls, but four men stood in front of me like they were shielding their property from another predator after hearing that whistle.

“No one messes with a Fox.” Danny’s eyes darkened with a grin.

9



## Avery

“What are you going to do? Beat him up?” I snorted.

Danny being defensive was humorous, but when he stepped off the porch with his shoulders squared and Nikko and Milton in tow, all humor vanished.

“Wait, really?” I asked in disbelief, trying to sidestep Liam.

“Let them take care of this,” Liam said, holding his arm out.

I pushed his chest, but he didn’t budge.

“There’s nothing to take care of,” I said, ducking under his bicep. I was able to wave Zayn off just before the three of them made it to his car.

Danny and Nikko threw their arms up at his taillights in disappointment.

Liam shook his head. “You should’ve let him suffer.”

Suffer? Oh, I was doing enough of that already.

“Why do you always have to ruin a good time?” Danny shouted from the middle of the driveway.

“C’mon, Avery. We were just going to have a little fun with him.” Nikko winked.

“What’d he do anyway?” Milton asked, settling beside me.

All four men circled me with questioning eyes, but the nausea and dizziness had arrived and—

I ran to the railing and threw up into the bushes below, hearing a roar of disgust coming from behind me. I craned my head back at them.

“Tic, go help her.” Nikko nodded, taking a step back.

“Why me?” he asked in a hushed tone. “I’m not good with puke.”

Danny frowned at him. “You throw up before every show.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m okay with being puked on!”

I knelt down and grabbed hold of the wooden spokes of the railing, trying to stop the world around me from crushing my skull.

Liam leaned toward Danny. “What do you think is wrong with her?”

“Stomach bug?” Milton guessed.

I groaned at their stupidity. “I’m right here. I can hear you.”

“Dude. What if she’s pregnant?” Nikko’s eyes widened with an *oh shit* look on his face.

I caught Danny looking at me intensely. A kind of look I would suspect a father would give his daughter for getting knocked up underage. Or the way my mom would look at me now, as a grown adult, if I were actually pregnant.

“You’d better not be,” Danny said, eyeing the spot where Zayn had been parked.

His warning made my lips crack into a smile. “Okay, *Mom*.”

Danny snarled and stormed inside, throwing, “Bitch,” over his shoulder.

Liam and I were the only ones left on the porch a few moments later.

“How come you didn’t join them?” I nodded toward the driveway.

Liam lifted a brow. “Do you want him dead?”

I squinted up at him.

“Didn’t think so. Come on.” His fingers interlocked with mine, and he slowly helped me to my feet.

“I’m not pregnant, for the record,” I said, pausing. Though I imagined the contractions women went through for childbirth were pretty close to the pain in my head. One of my hands covered my eyes, and the other squeezed the life out of his forearm.

*Shit*. Tears. Not in front of him.

He stared down at me, making lazy, dark locks fall over his brows. “My mom used to get migraines when I was growing up. They were never as bad as this though. She never got sick or cried.” His full lips didn’t curve into a smirk, like I’d thought they would. He wasn’t belittling what I was feeling because he thought I wasn’t strong enough. “I mean, she cried a lot, but I don’t think it was ever from the headaches.”

His mom was a strong woman, surviving being married to Liam’s dad and all. After the pain she had gone through, I was sure a migraine felt like a mosquito bite to her.

I quickly wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. “They come and go. I just need to lie down for a little while.”

I could hear a guitar tuning beneath us as we made our way into the house.

Lexie trotted down the stairs, fixing a short red wig into place. “Morning, baby doll. You look like hell,” she said, looking between me and Liam. “You didn’t have anything to do with these black streaks down her face, did you, Liam?”

“Fuck off, Lex. Go get ready. I’ll be down in a minute.”

She flipped him her middle finger, gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek, and then bounced away when I gave her a reassuring nod.

“Why don’t you take one of our rooms upstairs while we rehearse? Your door is right across the hall from the basement. You won’t hear us as loud up there.”

I was about to decline his offer when I heard Milton beat on a snare drum. It was like a woodpecker stabbing my temple. “Okay. Which door is my brother’s?” I asked, following him upstairs.

“You might want to take mine or Lexie’s,” he said, opening the first door.

My eyes shot open when I saw a naked brunette spooning a hot-pink pillow.

Liam shut the door quietly and chuckled. “Okay, maybe not Lexie’s.” He walked down the hall to the two doors opposite of each other and held the right one open.

I looked across the hall. “Danny’s is fine,” I insisted.

He chuckled and leaned against his doorframe like he was sure I’d change my mind.

And he was right.

I was in his room for a nanosecond before bolting across the hall into Liam’s, tearing off my socks as quickly and carefully as I could. “I’m going to have to burn these.”

“What for?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said, trying to erase the image of the used condoms decorating my brother’s bedroom floor from my memory. I’d spotted handcuffs, too, but I’d rather think they were a souvenir of a time he might’ve gotten arrested instead of thinking about what he actually used them for.

Liam rubbed the back of his neck as I awkwardly sat on the edge of his bed. “I’ve never had a girl in here before.”

I snorted. Loud.

Before I could retort with a witty comment, he took a step forward, carefully placing his leg between mine.

I sucked in a breath and pinched my face.

“It’s true.” He leaned down, and I couldn’t help but angle my body with his, making my elbows drop onto the mattress.

The smell of sandalwood and fresh laundry, like a cotton shirt straight out of the dryer, invaded my senses and distracted me from my pain.

“What are you doing?” I stumbled over the words, but my head was fuzzy from the migraine. It definitely wasn’t the fact that I could feel his breath on my forehead or the small fraction of his stomach lighting my arm on fire.

He stretched further but kept his eyes locked on mine, like he was testing how far he could push the boundaries we had set for each other long ago. The scary part was, we were both too stubborn to be the first to break. I didn’t know how far either one of us would go.

I let out a breath I hadn’t known I had been holding, and the smallest grin broke the line of his lips.

Did that mean I’d won? Or lost?

He jerked his arm to the right, and the room went dark, the black blinds hiding almost every bit of sunlight. Only a sliver of light from the window above the bed lit up his path to the doorway.

“Sleep tight, Little Fox. And try not to puke on anything. Okay?”

My head burst again, and I fell back onto the mattress, ignoring him.

I caught a glimpse of his face in the darkness, and it twisted with something I didn’t recognize. Sympathy? Compassion?

He closed the door before I could decipher it.



I had no idea what time it was when I woke up, but it was dark outside, and there was a glass of water sitting on the nightstand. The ice cubes hadn't melted yet. By some miracle, my migraine had vacated my brain, leaving behind the smallest of headaches.

After tossing back the water, I made my way downstairs and heard some vocals echoing from the basement.

My stomach scolded me loudly for not eating. I found my book bag and dug a blueberry muffin out of the paper sack. Sighing as I readied myself for a late-night cram session, I plopped myself onto the rug in my bedroom and scattered my notes.

The music didn't distract me much. The two doors and an entire floor separating us were enough to muffle most of the noise, but I started to hum along to the melody I'd picked up after their tenth run-through.

Okay, maybe it was a little distracting.

A few hours later, my chapter on clotting cascade factors was glowing in neon-orange highlighter, and the melody beneath me changed.

Liam's unmistakable voice cut through the house like a razor as he belted the words, "*I'm hollow again.*"

Each syllable altered my breathing in short little gasps of air. It had been a long time since I'd heard him sing live, and, my God, he did not sound like the eighteen-year-old I remembered. His singing was steady yet rough. Emotional and chaotic but secure in every key he sang in.

His heavy notes rang through the house again as he sang, "*Feeling emptier than I've ever been.*"

It wasn't one of their songs I knew, but something about it sounded familiar. *Was it a cover? An old song they were bringing back?*

*"This could be the end—"*

I shook my head. It was *too* familiar.

*"This pain is making me break; it's making me bend."*

My heart dropped into my stomach as my eyes shot to the box Nina had kicked under my bed. The box was haphazardly peeking out from the edge of my comforter. Lunging at the open cardboard flaps, I frantically checked to see if all of my dad's journals were there.



You'd think if you were going to go through someone's things, you'd at least be sneaky about it and put things back where you'd found them. Instead, they were unorganized and out of the order I'd had them in.

Irritation pricked at my skin like tiny needles setting me on fire. I flung my comforter left and right, searching for Liam's jacket, but it was gone, as I'd expected.

*"Please send me a glass or send me a friend,"* Liam sang, solidifying my theory that the familiar words weren't coincidental.

Everything went red.

Flying out of my room, I ripped the basement door open and charged down the stairs, my entire body fueled like a raging flame, following the ignition to its source.

Sitting behind a giant panel of knobs and tiny levers in their makeshift studio, Nikko and Lexie bobbed their heads to the music Liam was singing along to. All three of them had headphones on, so they didn't hear my fast approach.

*"I'm hollow tonight, tomorrow, again and again."* The emotion in Liam's last words made my hair stand on end.

I was practically running at him, and then my pace slowed for a second, keeping me from plowing him over when I finally reached him.

His eyes opened the moment my hands collided with his bare chest. "Shit! You scared the hell out of me."

My eyes narrowed into daggers. His muscles were firm under my fists. "You selfish, odious bastard!"

"Whoa." Liam frowned, letting his headphones fall around his neck.

"What the fuck is going on?" Nikko asked, pausing the instrumentals.

I pounded on his chest again. "I can't fucking believe you!"

"You watch your language, young lady," Liam scolded, finding my outburst entertaining but curious.

I wasn't sure why. He should know damn well why I was upset.

My jaw worked at the sight of amusement spreading across his lips. "Do you have zero respect for anyone but yourself?"

"Aye. We got work to do here. Do you mind saving whatever this is for

later, Avery?”

Nikko’s words didn’t exist to me.

“This is the thanks I get for letting you sleep in my bed?”

“Whoa, what?” Lexie dragged out. “You had a girl in your bed? This one?” She pointed to me.

“No way, dude.” Nikko folded his hands behind his head, impressed.

“No, no. It’s not like that, guys.” Liam flashed his full white smile, waving a hand at them. He stepped closer, bringing our bodies flush against each other. “I’ve never touched this Little Fox. She’s too uptight for that. She probably still has her virginity wrapped in a pretty pink bow. Am I right?”

I let out a wicked laugh, my inner villain making her dramatic debut.

“You”—I poked his chest and put a couple of inches between us, staring up into his dark brown eyes—“are nothing but a pathetic, hollow shell of a man.”

Muscles danced along his jawline as he lowered his chin.

“Avery ...” Lexie began.

“Stay out of it, Lex.” Liam raised his voice but kept his eyes focused on me.

“There’s nothing good inside of you. I don’t know what happened to you, but whatever it is doesn’t give you the fucking right to be such a disgusting human being.”

He stood up taller, trying to intimidate me with his size.

Well, the joke was on him because that wouldn’t work on me. Not when I had that much adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“Do you treat everyone this way, or do you specifically make a sport out of humiliating me in the worst ways possible?” He opened his mouth, but I lifted my head higher. “I don’t understand why anyone would want to be around you.” I looked him up and down once, those damn crows catching my eye for half a second. “You’re an asshole, just like your father. He’d be proud to know that—”

Before I could finish, he stalked forward and started backing me into a wall.

I’d struck a nerve.

My feet quickly shuffled across the scattered red and black rugs, trying to keep my balance. When I flattened my back against the wall, he dropped his forehead to mine and stared at me through long, dark eyelashes.

“Quite a speech, coming from you, sweetheart.” His guttural voice made my heart leap into my throat. “You want to talk about respect? Take a look in the mirror, you self-righteous bitch.”

“Liam!” Lexie shouted.

He bent down further, touching his nose to mine.

I turned my head to the side and his hot breath hit my cheek.

“If you saw yourself the way so many others see you, I don’t know how you could stand your own fucking reflection.”

My eyes burned as I struggled to keep my nerve. “I hate you,” I spat through my teeth, ignoring the fact that my hands were now trembling.

“What a shame,” he said mockingly, finally backing away.

I spotted the sheet of music he was using for reference—a page ripped from one of my dad’s journals.

His hands fell as he righted himself and looked me up and down in a distasteful way. He thrust his fingers through his hair and sauntered back to the microphone. “Get out of my studio. I’m working.”

I marched past him and snatched the sheet of paper out from in front of him. The moment I shred it into tiny pieces, I regretted it, knowing I’d never be able to put it back together again, but I was too close to crying to dwell on it. What was done was done.

“What the hell, Avery?” Nikko growled.

“If you ever come near me or my stuff again, I promise, you’ll regret it.”

Liam glanced towards Lexie and raised his brow, and then glared back down at me. “I don’t take kindly to threats, sweetheart.” His words were rough.

“And I don’t take kindly to being called sweetheart.”

10



## Avery

Needing the incessant ringing to stop, I hadn't even checked to see who was calling.

"What?" I snarled.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Mom." I took a slow breath, trying to lose the tone still clinging to my tongue from my blowup with Liam. "It's nothing. I'm tired—that's all."

"You seem to be tired a lot lately. Is there something I should know about?"

I fell back onto my bed. "I'm in med school, Mom. If you're not tired, you're doing something wrong."

"I see." I could imagine her pursing her lips on the other end. "Well, if you follow the schedule and guidelines we came up with together, you shouldn't be struggling this much. It's not Zayn that's keeping you up, is it?" she asked, as if she wasn't calling me late at night to talk about one of her surgeries.

"No." I sighed. "I can promise you, he has nothing to do with it."

"Okay, okay. Fine then. If this becomes an issue though, I have plenty of room at the house."

I was moments away from screaming at her as I had to Liam moments ago.

"I know it's a long drive, but it's quiet, and I'm hardly ever there. I can help with—"

"Thanks, but I've got it handled. Really." My words were even but clipped.

There was silence on the phone for a moment longer than I was comfortable with, and I readied myself for the reprimand coming. I wasn't sure what for, but she could find a hidden message if I said a single syllable

the wrong way.

“I guess I raised you well enough to know who and what is best for you.” My mother was so talented that she could give a compliment and then take credit for it. “I was going to tell you about the transplant I did today, but seeing as how you’re so tired, I’ll save it for another day. I don’t want to keep you.”

“I’m glad it went well,” I said, itching for a moment alone.

“Avery? Don’t make me regret what I just said. You do know what is best for you, right?”

I swallowed back sour words and pinched my mouth shut. “Mmhmm.”

“All right. I love you, sweetheart. Talk soon.”

The moment she hung up, there was a knock on my door.

“Are you kidding me?” I erupted.

“Avery, it’s me.”

I growled to myself. “Not now, Lexie.”

“Please,” she begged. “It’s ... important.”

Strands of red hair danced across her face when I threw the door open.

“What is it?”

“Liam asked me to get his jacket from your room earlier today.” Lexie’s vibrant bubble of confidence was gone. She could barely look me in the eyes. “He didn’t feel comfortable coming in here without asking you first ...”

It took me longer than it should’ve to calm my mind enough to understand what she was telling me, but my stomach twisted into a knot when I did.

Liam hadn’t stolen from me. Lexie had.

“Avery?”

“Wait. So, *you* went through my stuff?”

She winced and nodded.

I backed up until my legs hit my bed and then sank onto the mattress. “Wh-why?”

Looking down at the wood floor of my bedroom, she tentatively crossed the threshold and sat beside me. “I’ve been told I’m too curious for my own good.”

“That seems like an understatement,” I remarked.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I thought it would be fun to surprise you with the song when we were done with it. I swear, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“So, everything I just yelled at Liam was for no reason?”

Her head teetered. “I mean, he probably deserved a few of those words, but he had no idea where the lyrics had come from. Well ... now, he does. I told him I stole them from you.”

Embarrassment hit me so hard that I could feel a weight in my chest.

“You can yell at me.” Lexie took my hands and pleaded. “Call me whatever you want. I can handle it. Please.”

I shook my head, ashamed of myself for what I’d said to Liam and for trusting Lexie.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“I’m pissed actually.”

Lexie was the only other girl in the house, and in the few days I had been there, I’d felt like she had my back. Now, I was alone again.

“Then, why aren’t you screaming?” she insisted.

I found myself asking the same thing. It was so much easier for me to be mad at Liam. Maybe it was because I’d hated him for so long. Maybe he brought out that side of me. The worst side.

“Liam hurt me a long time ago, and I haven’t quite forgiven him for that. The things I said to him downstairs weren’t all because of this. It runs a lot deeper. With you ... I don’t know. I guess I had no reason not to trust you. Until now.”

The way she looked at me was like a dog looking up at you after stepping on its foot—all sad and scared, not knowing what they had done wrong. As her eyes began to pool with tears, I had to remind myself that she had known what she was doing when she went through my things. She had known it was an invasion of privacy, and she had done it anyway.

“It won’t ever happen again. I promise, Avery.”

Second chances were the most important part of learning if you could really trust someone. Everyone made mistakes, but you had to mean it when you apologized and asked for that trust back. Keeping the promise of not

doing it again was the true test. As much as I wanted to deny Lexie that chance, especially after she'd taken something that personal and sacred from me, I squeezed her hand and forgave her anyway.

"Haven't you ever heard the phrase, *Curiosity killed the cat?*" I asked.

Relief melted off her shoulders. She let out a tiny, "Meow," and jutted out her bottom lip.

I laughed and shook my head.

"Those journals ... are they yours? I saw the letters *D.F.* on the side."

My heart did about three flips in my chest, and all of the color left my face. "They're, um ... they're my dad's journals."

"Really? I didn't know your guys' dad wrote songs."

"He wrote a lot of things. Songs, poems, random thoughts ..." Why was I telling her all of this? They were supposed to be kept a secret.

Her brows knitted. "I didn't go through all of them, but the ones that I did read were beautiful and ... tortured."

She had no idea.

I'd read through his journals so many times to try and understand him better that I'd memorized most of them. It never occurred to me to put them to music. Of course, now that I'd heard Liam sing his words, I had a hard time not thinking of the poem as lyrics.

"I didn't know about them until after he passed. I was the only one brave enough to go in his office after his funeral, so I got stuck with organizing everything. I found them in his desk."

Lexie rubbed her thumb over the back of my hand, listening closely.

My stomach sank at the thought of her telling Danny I'd been keeping part of our dad from him. "Danny doesn't know about them, and as hard as it might be for you to understand, I need you to promise me that you won't tell him."

She looked at me warily.

"Please, trust me on this."

Her lips pulled up into a warm smile. "I invaded your privacy, so I definitely owe it to you to let you make that decision on your own. I don't know what the significance behind you keeping them to yourself is ..." She



paused. “But I know it would mean a lot to Danny if you shared them with him. I haven’t known him as long as Tic or Liam or Nikko has, but I do know he thought the world of your dad. He still plays one of his old guitars.”

I held my breath, waiting for her to say it.

Finally, she sighed and squeezed my hand. “I promise, Avery. I just hope you have a good reason for it.”

“I do,” I assured her.

“Food’s here!” Danny’s voice rang from the front of the house. His footsteps carried down the hall, pausing at my open door. “Sup, ladies?”

I held my breath for a moment, realizing I’d just told a secret—one I’d worked so hard to hide—to a girl I barely knew and couldn’t trust.

“Hey, Lex. What the fuck happened with the new track? Liam texted me and said we had to scrap the new lyrics for the chorus?”

Liam swung open the basement door across the hall and snatched the greasy paper bags out of Danny’s hands. “They don’t work with the song.”

“Like hell! Nikko sent me the sample. It sounded dope.” Danny folded his arms.

Lexie shot me a grin and then nodded at the two of them. “He’s right. They didn’t fit.”

“You guys are crazy. We’ve been trying to nail down the chorus on this for weeks now,” Danny said, frustrated. “We finally had something! Let’s go down and play it again. We can tweak it if we need to, but I really think—”

“I said, it didn’t work. Drop it!” Liam barked and stormed off to the kitchen without even glancing my way.

“Damn it!” Danny smacked the wall with the back of his hand. “He’s so fucking picky.”

“And we’re selling out shows because of him. We’ll come up with something else, Danny,” Lexie said.

“It’d better happen. Fast. Or we’re scrapping the song altogether. The label wants a new single out next month. We don’t have time for this bullshit.”

“You want tacos?” Lexie asked as everyone else disappeared to the kitchen. She held her hand out for me. “Danny always cleans house at the

taco shop. It's like he's trying to feed an entire stadium. There's more than enough."

When I didn't move, she dropped her hand and knelt in front of me.

"I know you're still mad, but you've gotta eat, hon."

I had been so angry and convinced that Liam was behind all of this, trying to torture me. But Lexie hadn't taken the poem for the reasons I'd thought Liam had. Would it be such a bad thing to let Danny use them in his music?

My chest tightened at the thought of him finding out, and I quickly pushed the idea away.

Liam's words echoed in my head, and I shivered. The thought of having to apologize to him made my skin crawl. With biting fire ants.

"I think it's best if I stay in here."

She patted my knee and walked out of my room, appearing again a few moments later with food for two, promising to find every way to make it up to me.

You had to hand it to her though. Tacos and beer were a good place to start.



Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the couch, I stared at the front door and waited for the band to get back from the gym. I wasn't going to chicken out like I had every other day that week. Every attempt I'd made at apologizing to Liam crumbled the moment I saw him.

But today was the day and, oh, how I *hated* today.

I wasn't mad at him anymore. Really. I was just tired of walking on eggshells when he was around. I needed to get this over with. For my sanity. And maybe his. Though he didn't seem bothered by anything he'd said to me that night. He hadn't even made eye contact with me since then. I tried so hard not to be a coward, but failed. I had made it my mission to busy myself whenever he was home to avoid confronting him. Not that I had a hard time

finding things to occupy my time.

Something I'd found myself studying, other than disgusting infectious diseases and the monotonous anatomy of a cell, was Liam's afternoon routines. The annoying part was, he didn't walk around, checking things off his planner; he was a very *fly by the seat of your pants* kind of guy. I could never predict what he was going to do or where he was going to be. It was infuriating.

The sliding door behind me opened, and I nearly jumped out of my skin, first at the thought of being murdered in my llama pajamas and then by the sight of a sopping wet Liam sporting black swim shorts and tanned skin.

I'd gotten myself so worked up about talking to him, I hadn't even taken my wardrobe into account.

*Great. Llamas. Why in the hell hadn't I changed?*

The sunlight hit the back of him like a spotlight, casting a six-foot silhouette in the doorway. Drops of water danced in the air as he shook a towel through it.

I mentally took note of Saturday afternoon swim sessions.

"My God. I thought you were an intruder."

He glanced down at my hands gripping a textbook. "Interesting choice of weapon."

I stepped around the couch. "Do you have a minute?"

Liam nodded toward the stairs. "I need to shower. Danny should be back soon if you need something."

"I wanted to talk to *you* actually."

"I'm sure whatever it is can wait."

I balled my hands into fists at my sides. "I've already waited long enough. Please."

He paused, hooking the damp towel over his shoulder. He must've been swimming laps because his abs were contracting with every hard exhale.

"Lexie told me what happened the other night. I wouldn't have said all those things to you if I had known it wasn't you who had gone through my journals. They're very personal to me, and I guess I felt betrayed. I took it out on the wrong person, and I just wanted to apologize ..."

His frown loosened as he stepped closer.

“If I hurt you.”

“Mmm.” His eyes searched mine, as if he couldn’t believe my sincerity.

“I took it too far,” I continued, glancing down at his naked chest and back up at him. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head in relief. “It means a lot to hear you say that.” My breath shook when his gaze dropped to my lips. “That night has been haunting me every day for the past week.”

“Really?”

His eyes slowly raked back up to mine, and he hooked a piece of my hair behind my ear. “Nope.”

I frowned as he retreated back with a smirk.

“You’ve certainly gained a set of lips on you, but what you think of me is the least of my concerns.” Liam laughed. “I don’t want or need your pathetic apology.”

Instead of lighting me up with that familiar red-hot rage, Liam’s words made my cheeks flush with embarrassment. I didn’t know why I had expected anything more from him. That was who he was. That was who we were together—a puzzle made of glass. No matter how hard you tried to force the pieces together, someone was always going to get hurt.

11



## Liam

I paced back and forth in the hallway outside my room, caught between washing off my afternoon swim and running back downstairs to tell Avery I hadn't meant what I said.

*But I did, didn't I?*

She could've called me all the names in the fucking book, and I wouldn't have cared, but then she'd compared me to my father and taken it too far. I was nothing like him. I'd spent years making sure of that.

I'd expected Avery to have some snarky retort when I told her I didn't care about her stupid apology. To scrunch up her nose in that cute way when she was angry with me. Something about that side of her lit a different fire in me, but seeing her face fall in defeat and her cheeks turn all rosy was like being doused in ice-cold water. I'd had the oddest desire to grab her face in my hands and ignite the heated coals still kindling between us, but instead, I'd taken off, nearly running.

*What the hell was she doing to me?*

Balling my hands into fists, I turned from the stairs, marched into the bathroom, and slammed the door behind me. And as I let the scalding hot water beat on the top of my shoulders, all I could think about was what Avery would look like, soaking wet and bent over at the waist in front of me.

I turned and twisted the knob to cold.

*Danny's sister. Danny's sister. Danny's sister.*

12



# Avery

*O*ne one thousand.  
*Two* one thousand.

My mother, and even sometimes Danny, used to tell me that baths were for children, but I never outgrew them. I showered, of course, but there was something about the silence under the blanket of warmth that was therapeutic. Zayn had a massive tub with jets and the whole works, but it had been wasted on me.

I liked the calm.

The peace.

I slid further down until my head settled at the bottom and my knees breached the surface. I continued counting, forgetting about my lectures. My midterm paper. The five missed calls from my mom. Zayn's sad eyes following me around campus all week.

And Liam. I made myself forget about him.

It had been over a week since he'd laughed in my face, but that was what haunted me the most.

*One hundred ninety-three.*

*One hundred ninety-four.*

Pinching my eyes shut, I pushed away the burn in my chest and held myself under longer, fighting to add on to my time. My record. A challenge I held for myself that only I knew about. No pressure from others to do better. No, this weight in my chest had been put there by me and only me.

My lungs greedily took in the oxygen when my shoulders were yanked out of the water.

Lexie muttered something severe in Korean.

"What the hell?" I asked, wiping water from my face.

"Okay, just so we're clear, I knocked. Loud. And I called for you, like, five times. You scared the crap out of me. What were you doing?"



“Taking a bath. What does it look like?”

“Do you usually try to drown yourself when you’re in the bath?”

I covered as much of my lady parts as I could with my hands.

“Nothing I haven’t seen, hon.” She winked.

Well, she hadn’t seen *mine*.

“That was locked,” I stated, gesturing to the wide-open door.

“Oh, that’s been messed up since Liam kicked it down.”

My eyebrow hitched.

“Not a story worth reliving right now.” She stood and wiped her hands on the towel before handing it to me. “We’re about to head to the venue for sound check. You need anything before we leave? Directions? See-through minidress and some sky-high boots?” she asked, hopeful.

“I’m covered.” I meant that physically and metaphorically. There was no way she’d ever get me in something like that. “Nina’s driving. She’s been there before.”

I thought I was the only Northern Californian resident who had never been to The Warfield. Going to see my brother play there baffled me, and seeing Lexie all done up and stage ready made my stomach twist with nervous excitement for them. I couldn’t imagine how they were feeling, but Lexie’s composure wasn’t anything different than normal. If anything, she seemed more relaxed.

“All right. Nikko will get you passes at the door, just text him when you arrive. And I guess I’ll see you later,” she said, looking at herself in the mirror a final time. She pushed up her fake lashes and padded her fingers over the glitter on her cheeks. Her wig was a long teal one I hadn’t seen before. The bright mix of blue and green on her head with the black fishnets and purple boots made her look like a punk rock mermaid you didn’t want to mess with.

“You look incredible, Lex.” I smiled, still covering my breasts.

“You too, boo.” She smirked. “I can’t wait to hear you *scream* for me tonight.”

My mouth popped open. “Lex!”

“Just like that!” She giggled and trotted away, thankfully remembering to

shut the door on her way out.

Milton had gotten me a band T-shirt when he heard I was coming to their next gig, so I ended up wearing that with some black jeans and Converse. If there was one thing I'd learned from going to as many concerts as I had, it was wearing comfortable footwear.

Nina clearly didn't care about comfort. She picked me up at eight, wearing something I hadn't even known she owned—black leather pants and the white version of the black band T-shirt I was wearing but cut into a crop top and heels. *Heels.*

“You look like Sandy from *Grease*.” I grinned. “If she were a fan of A Quiet Peril. You're not seriously going to wear those, are you?” I pointed to her toes, pinched into the black pumps.

“And you're not seriously going to wear *that*, are you?” she threw back.

I crossed my arms. “I'm comfy. You're going to complain about your feet before the band even starts.”

“I'll take them off.” She shrugged.

“You'd walk around barefoot at a place like that? Absolutely not!” Jesus. I sounded like my mother.

“Fine. I'll change my shoes if you let me—” She swiped a pair of scissors off the side table and made cutting motions at my shirt.

My shoulders sagged before I lifted my arms, letting her cut my shirt in half. I was fine with showing a little more skin if it meant I didn't have to listen to her cry in pain all night. It wouldn't be the first time. Her expression changed when she put down the scissors and ripped the fabric with her hands, like she was doing something evil and enjoying it too much.

“There. Now, we match!”

I gaped down at my shirt that was cut much higher than hers as she replaced her heels with my extra pair of Converse. “Yay,” I said, forcing enthusiasm. My face quickly turned up when I saw how happy she was and I remembered where we were going.



“Well, don’t you both look like groupies?” Nikko teased, meeting us at the venue entrance with VIP tickets. His eyes slowly rolled up Nina as he handed her a pass, biting his lip. “Don’t lose this, baby doll. It’ll get you anywhere you want to go in there, but I’m sure you can do that without a pass, dressed that way. You look fucking gorgeous.”

Nina gave him a peck on the lips, and I rolled my eyes.

We looped the lanyards around our necks and passed the line of waiting fans, stretching around the block. I had a hard time believing they could all fit in the venue, especially after seeing how many were already inside.

*And they are all here to see my brother play?*

Nina grabbed my wrist, pushing our way through the growing crowd, while Nikko left us to go backstage.

It took us until the end of the opening band’s set, but we managed to get a spot at the very front of the crowd. This was my first time seeing my brother perform at a place like this, and I wasn’t going to have some six-foot-something drunken headbanger blocking my view. Throwing elbows while being jostled between taller men and eager women became a dance to me by the time the lights lowered.

Nina spun in a circle, looking around the packed room, and then brought her lips to my ear. “Nikko just texted me this.” She held up her phone, so I could read it, awaiting my reaction.

The band had sold out the venue with over two thousand tickets.

I squealed, reading the text again. The anticipation in the giant theater was electric, and I smiled broadly, remembering Danny and his friends dreaming of a crowd like this when they’d first started playing together. A crowd packed together like sardines, as far as the eye could see, sweating and screaming their names.

A strum of guitar rang through the speakers, and the crowd suddenly erupted.

I grinned and threaded my fingers through Nina’s for support when I saw

Danny take the stage first.

Confidently strutting across the stage, he threw a smile at the crowd while continuing to play. He hadn't glammed himself up as Lexie had. In fact, he could've had on more clothes, in my opinion. The jeans he wore had holes in the knees, just like the ones he wore at home, and his plaid shirt hung open, exposing his bare chest.

I shook my head at the explicit words being shouted at him in gross admiration.

The lights shone on the front half of the crowd, and Danny picked me out, pointing his guitar pick at me with an almost-surprised expression. I'd told him I was coming, but maybe he hadn't believed I'd follow through. He gave me a smile and nodded at Nina. The girl beside her cried and stretched her arms at him, clearly thinking he was acknowledging her.

Danny took his place in front of his mic, and then the lights centered over the drum set the moment Milton hit the first drum. The bass pounded at the core of my chest as his hands swung vigorously in front of him, making the screams intensify.

Lexie was next and sprinted up to the edge of the stage, running her fingers through the crowd of waiting hands. Men and women pushed me and Nina forward, trying to touch her, but we held our ground until she stepped behind her microphone, and the fans eased up. Then, the lights went out, and the screams reached a deafening level.

I cringed and covered my ears.

"My, my, my. Don't you all look beautiful?!" Liam's voice resonated from the darkness, sending a tingling sensation down my spine.

Nina chanted his name with the rest of the girls around us. I shot her a look, and she shrugged.

"Hello, San Francisco!" The lights went up, and Liam stood in the center of the stage, wearing a ridiculously sexy smile.

His simple white T-shirt, black jeans, and combat boots were enough to make even my breath hitch. His stage presence was mesmerizing. The lights followed him like he'd commanded them to.

"My name's Liam." He paused and waited for the wave of screams to

pass. Confidence dripped off of him like the cool sweat running between my breasts. “This is Lexie, Danny, and Tic.” He pointed to each member, and they all nodded as their names were called. “And we are—”

Everyone in the audience erupted in unison, “A QUIET PERIL!”

Lexie and Danny strummed a few chords, and then Milton came in a moment later with a beat I knew all too well. The beginning lyrics to one of my favorite songs surrounded me from hundreds of voices as Liam’s bellowed through the speakers. I mouthed the words along with everyone else until Nina noticed and struck me in the ribs with a couple of stabby fingers.

“I promise you, it’s more fun if you scream it,” Nina hollered in my ear.

I peered over at Danny, who was staring down at his hands, focusing on the strings as the difficult chorus came in. Determined to keep the rest of my ribs away from Nina, I finally yelled out the lyrics as loud as I could, knowing it’d be drowned out with all of the other voices. I thought I saw the girl next to me look over, but I closed my eyes and let go, dancing and singing like the rest of the fans. Swiftly, my cares drifted off my shoulders, landing somewhere below my bouncing feet.

Nina was right. It was more fun to scream.

When I opened my eyes again, Liam was towering over me at the edge of the stage. He gripped his mic stand with long, ringed fingers and gazed around the crowd while singing the verse to perfection.

As he began to sing the final chorus, his eyes immediately dropped to where I was standing, like he had known where I was this whole time. Like he was waiting for something.

A flash of a grin was his only warning before he reached down, holding the microphone inches in front of my lips. The song was empty without his raspy, deep voice, and his eyes challenged me to fill it with my own.

I was suddenly thrown back in time, no longer surrounded by screaming fans, but at the talent show in my high school auditorium. And it wasn’t a microphone that Liam was handing me. It was a bottle of tequila. He was giving me the same daring eyes as he had then. Taunting me, like my discomfort was a drug to him.

Irritation flared, crawling up my throat and begging to be free.

Expecting my demise, Liam shook his head and started to move his mic above the rest of the crowd as they screamed the words we all knew by heart.

Nina nudged me gently, with her elbow this time, and that somehow shook loose the courage—and built-up anger—I had been holding in.

Heart pounding, I snatched his hand out of the air, wrapping my fingers around his.

His eyes flew to mine, and the moment our gazes connected, I parted my lips and sang the remaining words. Curiosity rippled through his features. He peeked back at Danny, but he was too lost in the music. Some of the crowd was still shouting the lyrics while the rest cheered for me. I tried my best to keep my voice level despite not being able to hear myself, and from the reactions I was getting, I wasn't doing a terrible job.

But I kept my focus fixed on the task at hand—shutting Liam Lockwood up once and for all.

Milton thrashed his cymbal, cueing the end of the song, but Liam sat there, crouched at the front of the stage and staring at me through a curtain of messy, dark locks.

A wry smile began to twist at my lips as I released his hand. Feeling overwhelmed with pride from the dumbfounded look I had left on Liam's face, I winked at him and, boldly enough, blew a small kiss.

*Who am I?*

Liam cut off his smile before it could appear by dragging his bottom lip through his teeth.

My stupid heart somersaulted.

Bringing his gaze back to the adoring fans, he quickly stalked offstage and appeared a few moments later with his guitar, starting the next song without pause.

I blinked, feeling out of breath and ... wanting more.

More of what? That I didn't know.

The adrenaline surging through me moments ago slowly dripped away as the band played song after song, and I fell back into the rhythm of being just another fan in the mass of faces.

Halfway through their set, they started a new song I didn't recognize.

Liam handed off his guitar to someone behind stage and came back with a single black rose, sending all of the women into a jumping fit. It was like feeding time at the zoo, the way they were all in a frenzy, but it was Liam who was now looking at the crowd with hungry eyes.

Moaning into the microphone as Lexie worked the strings on her bass guitar, Liam sensually moved the flower up and down his body, bringing it back to his nose and inhaling.

My cheeks warmed, and my pulse picked up.

He watched the mass of men and women carefully, like he was choosing his prey.

*Center of the room*

*You lift up your shirt*

*Knee-high boots*

*And a short little skirt*

*You turn your back*

*And press up against me*

*Lips so soft*

*I feel release and I'm set free*

Then, with a small pull at his lips, he suddenly jumped off the front of the stage and leisurely prowled through the sea of people with two security guards in tow.

*Vodka sour*

*You lick the rim*

*Your kiss burns just like gin*

*Oh, I want to taste your sin*

He stopped in front of a gorgeous brunette and handed her the flower, singing the chorus with his body pressed into hers.

*Lips of fire*

*Let me taste*

*All your deepest desires*

*You scream my name*

*Like a full-piece choir*

*You said you don't have a kink*

*Girl, you're such a liar*

*'Cause nice girls*

*Don't kiss like that*

My jaw nearly hit the ground when Liam crushed his mouth on hers. She was more than willing, wrapping her arms around his neck and sinking her claws into his shoulders.

Danny, Lexie, and Milton played their instruments to the upbeat melody, harmonizing with some oohs and aaahs, while Liam continued to devour the brunette.



“God, that’s hot,” Nina yelled, watching Liam.

A second later, Liam pulled away, leaving the girl in a drunken haze, and the two burly men with him began helping him back to the stage.

“*Yeah, nice girls don’t kiss like that,*” he sang, touching his fans’ hands as he passed.

He hesitated beside me when he reached the stage, ready to lift himself up, but after a breath, he tilted his head toward me and carefully guided his mouth to my ear.

I recoiled, only for a moment, thinking I was his next victim, but then his hand touched the nape of my neck, and he made it clear he wasn’t going in for a kiss.

“Nice voice, Little Fox.” His warm lips feathered my earlobe.

I inhaled sharply as a flood of desire lit my skin ablaze.

He smiled then. A full Liam Lockwood smile, and it wasn’t a mocking one. It was warmer. A sincere, silent gesture that was so brief that I nearly missed it.

He hoisted himself back onstage and continued with the rest of their set.

I shook my head, trying to clear the haziness put there by the warmth of his touch and his throaty, deep voice. I wasn’t some rock star–struck groupie or a fool getting bothered over my brother’s best friend. He’d made my blood boil for years, and that could be the only reason my pulse was betraying me.

Nina’s phone lit up my vision. Another message from Nikko, letting us know about the party back at the house after the show.

Liam’s groan rang through the speakers, and then he found me with his dark stare.

“*Yeah, nice girls don’t kiss like that.*”

13



## Avery

The house was packed full of people I didn't know. I didn't even think the band knew who any of them were, but I was sure they didn't mind having all the strange women running around their pool in tiny bikinis.

"How'd we do tonight, sis?" Danny rested his elbow on my shoulder, twirling a near-empty plastic blue cup.

I laughed, still amazed that the band my brother had started in high school had gotten so big. I craned my head up the near ten inches he had on me and gave him a look of pure admiration. "If I had one of those watercoolers full of Gatorade, I'd dump it on you."

He grinned. "Well, we don't have one of those, but we do have a keg full of beer." He pointed over to the other side of the pool as a girl wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him away toward the hot tub. "Go help yourself, Avery. Let loose for once."

I realized I had resorted to picking up empty bottles and refilling ice to avoid standing around and talking to drunk strangers.

What a bore I'd become.

Nina was having her own fun, getting cozy with Nikko by the firepit, and there was no way I'd be able to sleep through a party like this if I went to bed now.

Sighing, I picked up a plastic cup and poured the cold golden liquid into it. Finding a spot at the edge of the heated pool, I soaked my feet in the water as I downed half my drink.

"Do you know the band?" A tall, dark, and definitely not sober guy came and sat beside me, sticking his feet in the water.

I took another drink and watched him carefully before I answered, "You could say that. Danny and I have some ... history together."

"Oh, nice! Danny's the shit. My man Nikko is a longtime friend of mine. He's their manager."

“Oh yeah?” I pretended to sound ignorant.

He nodded confidently. “I can definitely work something out to get you a backstage pass to the next show, if you’d like?”

I giggled, finding his efforts to impress me entertaining. “Oh, you don’t have to trouble yourself.”

“I like helping out my special friends.”

“You don’t even know my name, and I’m one of your special friends?”

His leg brushed mine, and my muscles tensed. I didn’t like touching strangers, and I was fully aware that wasn’t a good trait to have as a future doctor.

“I’d like you to be.” He flashed a sly grin, and I had the sudden urge to leave. “What is your name?” he asked.

I pondered giving him a fake one. Who else could I be tonight? *Monica?* *Rachel?* “Avery,” I said after consideration. I might see him again at the house sometime, and I didn’t want to keep track of an alter ego.

“Well, Avery, there has to be a damn good reason for a beautiful girl like yourself to be sitting here all alone.”

“I like to think I’m an independent woman, capable of entertaining myself.” I crossed one leg over the other, so we were no longer touching but still offered him a smile because, for some reason, I didn’t want to be perceived as rude.

He moved closer—again.

“Ah, well then,” he slurred, “can I watch?”

I frowned. “Watch what?”

“You.” His eyes darkened as his lips curled up suggestively. “Entertain yourself ...”

It took my naive brain a second to pick up what he was putting down, but I resisted the urge to shove him in the pool as I shot upright. “Pass.” I grimaced.

I went to walk away, but he grabbed my ankle, knocking me over onto my hands and knees.

“There’s no need to run off. I’m just having some fun.”

I swiveled to face him. “Well, I’m not.”

He patted the concrete beside him while his other hand was still wrapped firmly around me. “Come back. I won’t bite, I promise.”

“Let go, asshole.” I kicked.

Liam’s back suddenly shielded my view of the drunken man. “Take a fucking hint, Wes!” he roared.

In the time it took me to blink, Liam’s quick fist collided with his face, sending him headfirst into the water. Liam crossed his arms and stared down at the guy with a wide smile when he came back up for air.

I didn’t feel like watching a battle of testosterone, so I hurried inside and started to get ready for bed, pretending there wasn’t a raging party going on, on the other side of my door.

The palms of my hands burned from the concrete that had nearly split open my skin, but it wasn’t bad enough to need much more than some soap and water.

I swapped my triangle bikini top with a thin tank top, and I was about to change out of my bottoms when Danny pounded on my door, shouting for me.

He walked in the moment I opened it, searching around my room. “You’ve got one of those sewing things for stitching people up, right?”

“A suture kit?” I frowned, watching him rifle through my makeup bag. What did he think I did to my face every morning?

“Yeah! You have one for school, don’t you?”

I nodded and started digging to the bottom of my book bag. “What’s going on?”

“Liam got into a fight and got a nasty gash. He said I could sew it up!” His eyes lit up in excitement.

I pulled my kit away from him before he could grab it from me. “You’re going to *what* now?”

Danny rolled his eyes and eagerly waved his hand. “He’s fine. It’s just a little cut on his face.”

“No.” I clutched the bag against my chest.

“Oh, come on. We have to stop it from bleeding.”

“Take him to the ER then!”

“And miss an opportunity like this? No way. Besides, hospitals are for pussies.”

“Do you know how strong the pussy is?”

“Gross, Avery.” Danny looked mortified.

My eyes narrowed.

“Can I please have that?”

I shook my head again. “Not going to happen.”

He dropped his shoulders and huffed. “You’re no fun. Fine. I’ll find something else around here. Will a safety pin hold it shut?”

I scowled and marched past him, racing to find Liam before Danny did something stupid.

I didn’t have to search far. Liam was sitting at the kitchen table, holding a towel to his eye. The brunette beside him rubbed his shoulders, cooing and calling him *baby* to comfort him, but he seemed more bothered by her than whatever had happened to his face.

His jaw twitched when he saw me standing at the entrance. “What’s she doing here?”

I squinted. “Other than the fact that I live here now?”

“She won’t hand it over,” Danny whined. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’re not going to do anything. I am,” I said, nodding at Liam.

“What makes you think I want your help?” Liam asked.

“I’m the best you’ve got.”

He pondered it for a moment, weighing his options.

“Danny was about to start looking for a safety pin. Would you like me to help him find one?”

Liam’s face fell, but he still looked like he was considering it.

“Let’s go.” I started walking toward the bathroom and eventually heard him shuffling behind me.

I sat him down on the toilet seat, and as he leaned over, a small drop of blood fell from his forehead onto the white tiled floor. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“How bad is it?” I asked, opening my kit up.

Liam let out a heavy sigh, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’ve had

worse.”

“Washcloths?”

“In the cabinet.” He pointed behind him.

Carefully straddling one of his legs, I reached above him and suddenly became aware of how little I had on. Everyone was running around in their swimsuits, so it wasn't like I was in the minority, but the thin white fabric covering my breasts left little to the imagination without a bra. And my red bikini bottoms were halfway up my ass.

His breath danced along the skin between the edge of my tank top and my swimsuit, and I quickly pulled away, wetting the washcloth in the sink.

“Do you know what you're doing?” he asked, his tone both equal measure of mocking and curiosity.

No. “I've practiced on some silicone pads and some chickens in class,” I began, readying my needle and nylon thread. “But I've never done this on live tissue, no.”

He stared at me as my hands shook. I hoped that was all he could see shaking because it felt like my entire body was vibrating in anticipation.

“Don't you go and fuck up his beautiful face, Avery!” Danny peeked his head in. “That's how we sell albums!”

“Piss off, Danny boy.” Liam laughed, kicking the door shut.

He removed the towel when I asked him to, and my stomach lurched somewhere I hadn't known it could go.

The diagonal cut along his brow was deep but not terribly long. Three, maybe four stitches should be good. But the more I thought about making them, the more light-headed I became.

“I can clean it if you want?” he offered, his voice filling the small space.

I shook my head and leaned in, working to clear away the crimson threatening to rid my face of all color. “Did that guy out by the pool do this? What's his name, Wes?”

Liam's deep chuckle bounced off the tiles surrounding us. “No. Wesley knows better than to fight me. If he wasn't one of Nikko's friends, I wouldn't allow him over here. But, tonight, he had a couple of extra friends with him. I had it covered until they surprised me with a beer bottle.”

“Jesus,” I gasped, looking over the rest of his face. The only other scrapes I saw were on his knuckles.

“It’s cool. Danny had my back.” He flashed a smug grin. “Those guys are probably still out cold on the lawn.”

That smile was distracting. So was the fact that his line of vision had two full breasts staring right back at him. The smile he was fighting to suppress and the hint of heat in his stare made it clear just how aware he was of his position.

My nipples responded to the attention, making my cheeks—and the rest of my body—flush. “Is that another band rule?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Having each other’s backs? Absolutely.”

“No. Defending one another from being hit on by losers.”

He looked up at me and swallowed, the prominent notch of his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Not exactly.”

A long silence passed between us as I placed my hands on either side of the cut.

“I’m surprised you cared,” I muttered as I dug the first stitch through his skin. Liam didn’t even flinch, but I couldn’t help myself from wincing. “Does it hurt?”

He shrugged. “I pierced that eyebrow a couple of times in high school, so I don’t feel much.”

“Do you have any other piercings?”

His eyes snapped up to the edge of his brow as I threaded the needle through, a smile pulling at his lips in a way that told me he knew exactly which parts of him I was curious about. Parts of him I was picturing with glistening metal. He didn’t answer me.

More silence.

I forced myself to take a few steady breaths before I punched the needle through his skin again, but my stomach still churned.

I needed more distraction. Conversation? Music? Maybe he could take his shirt off and—

“I’ve been meaning to get you alone actually.”

*Oh?* Not as good as removing his shirt, but he had my interest.



*Stop it, Avery.*

“You apologized to me last week, and I was a dick.” His hand grazed my thigh, and his gaze followed its path up to my hip, lingering on the four-inch scar peeking out from my tank top. His other eyebrow twitched with curiosity, but he didn’t ask about it.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, soaking up his touch like a flower starving for water.

He worked his jaw, angry with himself, and then his brown irises found mine again. “No, it’s not.”

I nodded and smiled, trying to seem unaffected by his touch. “You were kind of a dick.”

“Kind of?” His eyebrows crinkled into a frown. He winced at the brief pain from the movement.

“We both were,” I added.

Another stitch done.

He wet his bottom lip, smiling down at where his hand remained. He was enjoying watching me squirm. A moment later, his face slowly fell, and his eyes met mine once more. “I’m really sorry, Avery. For all of it. I mean it. I know you and I have had ... some differences, but you didn’t deserve that for trying to be sincere.”

I closed my eyes as his hand moved up at an agonizingly slow pace. It was such a gentle touch that I could barely feel his fingers, but the trail left behind a fiery path.

*Distraction—check!*

“Avery?” Liam’s hand paused.

*Was I floating?*

“Av? Are you all right?”

My eyes crept open, and a pair of warm eyes greeted me, inches from my face.

“Mmhmm,” was all I could manage as I carefully went back to looping the thread around my forceps. I opted for the simple, interrupted suture method I’d mastered in class, but it usually didn’t take me this long.

And then I swayed. Or the earth’s axis shifted. Probably the latter because

there was no way I was passing out in front of Liam.

Both his hands folded over my hips and steadied me. “No, you’re not. You’re pale as a ghost. Look at you.”

“I’m almost done. Hold still,” I insisted, thrusting my needle through his brow one final time.

“Avery ...”

“One last knot,” I argued, ignoring the lightness in my head. I tried to picture myself back in the lab, using my synthetic skin pad and not sewing up two pieces of skin that had been ripped open on a man’s face. And then the cold sweat spread across my skin, and I knew it was too late.

As soon as I cut the last suture, Liam spun me around and swapped places with me. He landed on his knees, between my legs, cupping my face. “Hey. You’re okay.”

I was sure he was using this as a way to distract me, but I didn’t know if it was out of obligation because I had just sewn up his face and he was grateful not to have a safety pin through his eyebrow or if seeing me like this was entertaining to him and he wanted to wait around longer to see if I hurled.

I held on to his forearms for stability, heat snaking up my spine.

“You’re okay,” he repeated.

I most definitely was *not* okay.

14



## Liam

“I guess being around me really does make your upchuck reflex higher.” I chuckled.

Spotting the bloodied towel on the floor, she inhaled sharply.

I looked between her and the towel once more. “Wait. Are you—”

She pinched her eyes shut, embarrassment crippling her face and sinking her shoulders.

*No way.* “Blood makes you squeamish?”

All she gave was a single nod.

What a plot twist that was; a medical student—Colleen Fox’s perfect daughter—was squeamish around blood.

It was laughable.

Ironic.

It didn’t make sense.

I saw the pain radiating through her, not just because of the blood, but also because she was ashamed of it. Of herself.

Beads of sweat covered her forehead, and I swallowed an unfamiliar lump forming in my throat.

Reaching above her, I took a rag from the cabinet and wet it in the sink, bringing it to her face. She jumped at first and then covered my hand with hers, leaning into the coolness. It didn’t bother me, as I’d expected it to. I welcomed her touch. Hell, I’d begun to crave more of it ever since she’d wrapped her tiny fingers around mine at the show.

*Fuck.*

“Thank you,” she whispered, and I couldn’t help but laugh. There was a small crease between her brows when her eyes cracked open. “What?”

“You thanking me—it sounds weird.” The skin of her thigh was like silk under the palm of my hand. I couldn’t resist moving my thumb in tiny circles.

I wasn’t ready for her to leave yet. Her color was slowly coming back, but

I knew she needed a few more minutes before I could leave her alone.

“Tell me something else I don’t know.”

She looked at me for a moment, caution washing over her features. Trust wasn’t a quality she sought out in me, but something unraveled in her eyes before she took a steady breath. “Well ... it’s not just blood that makes my stomach turn. It’s pretty much anything that involves what I’m going to school for. The human body is fascinating, but it’s really gross to look at under a microscope.”

She laughed once, but it didn’t ease the tension in my shoulders.

“Why the hell would you want to waste your time with something that makes you physically ill?”

Avery shrugged. “My mom says I’ll get used to it over time.”

“Aren’t you on your second year of medical school?” I frowned.

“Yeah, I’m not sure I’m convinced either, but I have to keep exposing myself to it and try. She’d be thrilled to hear I stitched someone up for the first time and didn’t pass out.” She chuckled again.

“I don’t know if you’re in the clear yet,” I said, sliding the rag down her cheek.

The corner of her mouth tipped up, and my eyes dropped to the soft pink flesh as I wondered what her lips would feel like. But was that so crazy? To want to know what her lips felt like against mine? To know what the inside of her mouth tasted like—even if she was my best friend’s sister? My mouth watered, just thinking about what she tasted like. Or what those rosy pillows would feel like, running down my neck. Trailing down my abdomen, finding themselves around my—

I cut that thought off the moment the image appeared in my head. But Avery’s focus was exactly where mine just had been, looking at my lips like she was wondering the same thing.

I moved an entire centimeter closer to her and her eyes widened.

“Pineapple,” she stuttered.

My brow inched up my forehead.

“You wanted to know something about me you didn’t already know. I’m allergic to pineapple.”

I nodded slowly and inched away until I was standing in the mirror. “Huh. Not bad, Little Fox,” I said, inspecting the stitches. I saw her shake her head out of the corner of my eye. “You still doing okay?”

Avery gave an unconvincing nod. “Never better.” Carefully standing, she daringly glanced at my stitches. “Make sure you clean that once or twice a day. I can take the stitches out in five days, but it still might leave a scar.”

“I’ve got plenty.” I shrugged once, remembering what my mom had told me. “They’re just our past, leaving marks on us to remind us of the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

Her hand dropped, covering the jagged white line across her hip. “Some people don’t need reminders of the ugly.”

That lump began to form in my throat again. “Is that from the accident?”

“Mmhmm,” she answered, her voice quieter. After a moment of silence, she forced a smile. “It happened a long time ago.”

It didn’t matter how much time had passed; something like that stayed with you forever. As much as Danny had tried to forget with the drugs and alcohol, it still haunted him. I couldn’t imagine what it was like, being there, but maybe the adrenaline and the impact had affected her memory. For her sake, I hoped so.

“Nine years, right?”

Her head swiveled up to meet my stare like she was surprised I remembered. “Almost ten.”

“For the record—since I’m apologizing for all the times I’ve been an asshole—”

“Oh, I don’t know if we have time for that,” she teased.

I leaned against the sink, trying not to show how much she was affecting me. “I’m sorry about what happened at the talent show. I didn’t know you hadn’t had tequila before.” Avery arched an eyebrow at me, and I laughed. “All right. I kind of expected you hadn’t, but I didn’t think you’d toss back as much as you did.”

Her mouth hung open. “It wasn’t like you tried to stop me!”

Now, we were both laughing, and I wondered why that made my heart beat faster. Pushing that irrelevant thought away, I watched as she settled

beside me with her back to the mirror.

“Do you remember what you were going to play that night?” I asked.

Her smile dimmed as she looked over her shoulder at me. “ ‘Vienna.’ ”

And then it clicked. “Billy Joel.”

She swallowed. “It was the last song I performed for my dad.”

*Shit.*

She’d nearly died after performing that song the night she and her dad went off that bridge, and then when she had been brave enough to perform it again two years later—

*Shit.*

It was my turn for all of the color to leave my face.

“Avery, I—” I didn’t have the words. An apology for something like that wasn’t enough, but it was all I could give.

She started to shake her head, waving it off like what I had done was nothing. But that single song had been capable of healing something for her. And instead, I’d split her wide open like a raw nerve.

I grabbed her wrists and pulled her into my chest. “Don’t do that. Don’t pretend it’s okay.”

Her grayish-blue irises danced around my face.

“That must’ve hurt you.”

She wet her bottom lip before she said, “Isn’t that what you wanted? To hurt me?”

Sugared citrus and honey floated under my nose when my forehead fell against hers. I breathed in her sweetness and let out a heavy sigh. Sure, I’d wanted to mess with her back then, like I had a dozen other times. If I’d had any idea the damage I was doing, I wouldn’t have sent that video to everyone. I never would’ve let that bottle touch her lips in the first place.

I was about to start explaining when there was a knock on the door.

My jaw twitched. “Occupied.”

There was another pounding before the door swung open. “Everything okay in here?”

*Damn it. I needed to fix that lock.*

Avery broke away the moment she heard her friend’s voice. “Nina, hey. I

was just finishing stitching Liam up.”

Nina looked curiously between Avery and me. “Yeah, I came as soon as I heard. I was sure I’d find you passed out cold on the floor in here.”

“Zayn?” Avery’s eyes bulged as fucking Captain America himself waltzed in behind Nina, sans the shield and tights.

“Hey, Avy. You okay?”

Avy? I scrunched my face.

“Okay? Of course I am. What are you doing here?”

“I invited him,” Nina murmured.

Avery tried to hide her woeful expression.

“I’m sorry, is this your house?” I narrowed my eyes at Nina.

“Nikko said to invite friends.” Nina twisted her mouth.

I was getting annoyed with the growing party in the bathroom and even more annoyed that they were both clearly making Avery uncomfortable.

“Who the fuck is this guy anyway?” I asked, looking up and down at the man standing less than a foot away from me.

“Zayn Westbrooke.” The blond Bible salesman sporting a fucking collared shirt and pressed pants held his hand out.

I just stared at him.

I remembered Danny mentioning his name when Avery had moved in, but even if he hadn’t, I could tell who he was just by the look on Avery’s face.

*Seriously? This was the guy who broke Avery’s heart?*

Anger bubbled in my chest, and I didn’t know why.

“Hon, why didn’t you come get me? You don’t do well with all of this. I could’ve sewn him up.” I didn’t like the belittlement in Nina’s tone. “I would’ve done his mouth while I was at it too,” she quipped.

Avery fumbled with her suture kit. “You were with Nikko. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re going on about. She did a great job,” I said.

Avery shot me a glance as Nina stepped into the bathroom, looking over my stitches. Pretty boy Zayn never took his eyes off Avery, even as I stared him down.



Nina reached up at my face, as if she thought I'd let her touch me. "Wow. Those look great, Avery."

"Don't sound so surprised, Nina." Avery rolled her eyes.

Nina shook her head. "I didn't mean—"

"Do you have a staring problem, Steve?" I interrupted, stepping closer to Avery's ex. I only had him beat by two or three inches, but it was enough.

He blinked, quickly shifting his focus from Avery to me with a tiny step backward. "No, sir. And sorry for the confusion, but it's Zayn actually."

*Okay, who the fuck is this guy?* His mannerisms were annoying, and so was his symmetrical face.

Then, he smiled. *He fucking smiled.* He was either really fucking confident or really fucking stupid. "Avery used to play me some of your music from time to time. You guys are really talented."

*Now, he was trying to win me over? Why? Was he scared?*

*Good.*

"Do you want me to clean up?" Nina asked Avery.

"I've got it," I said, keeping my focus. "Why don't you two go enjoy the party?"

"I'll meet you guys in the kitchen." Avery settled between me and her friends, placing her palm against my chest. "I'll be right there."

Zayn stared at Avery's hand until Nina looped her arm through his and pulled him out into the hall.

Avery spun and faced me, reluctantly dropping her hand. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say, you were a little protective just now."

"Do you?"

She sighed. "Do I what?"

"Know better?"

"I thought I did. But between that guy Wesley, who you beat up out by the pool, and the way you were looking at Zayn ... well, can you give me a better explanation?"

I gulped. She was calling me out for something I didn't understand myself. The only thing I could think to do was avoid it.

"Did that guy really kick you out of his place?"

“I never said he kicked me out. And you didn’t answer my question.”

*Dammit.* “I mean, he still seems pretty hung up on you.”

“Liam, answer me,” she insisted, stepping closer.

Panic danced across my shoulders as she kept her eyes locked on me. “Who the fuck dresses like that to come to a party anyway?” My voice faltered, making her lips twitch.

“He only wears slacks when he’s been with his dad, Senator Westbrooke. He probably came from one of his events or something.” She arched her brow, still waiting for me to answer her.

But I was stubborn and enjoying this way too much.

“Let me get this straight. Mr. Polite and Handsome as Fuck over there not only has a senator for a father, but he’s also going to be a doctor, *and* he’s a fan of my music?”

“He also beat leukemia as a child, volunteers at five—no, *six*—nonprofits in his spare time, has hours of community service under his belt, and has a perfectly straight and gorgeous co—”

“I get it! I get it!” I grimaced. “Damn.”

Avery giggled. “He’s single, if you’re interested.”

I shook my head, hiding a smile.

He must’ve really done her wrong because it didn’t seem to hurt her to say that. Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen her cry or mope around the house since she’d gotten here. No woman got over a man that quickly unless he’d shredded every bit of respect she had for him.

*Maybe he’d cheated?* He seemed rather pretentious, and his father was a senator.

*Maybe he thought she wasn’t good enough?*

*Ha.*

That was a theory I couldn’t believe.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re acting like a protective brother or not?”

*Brother?* That made my skin crawl.

I rubbed the back of my head and looked around the bathroom. “Go find your friends. I’ll take care of everything in here.”

“And just like that, your wall is up again, huh?” She let out a heavy sigh, her breath warming my chest, before shaking her head and giving up.

I won that round, but it didn't feel like a victory.

“Avery?”

She paused in the doorway and looked over her shoulder.

“I already told you, I don't hate you,” I said, feeling the immediate urge to remind her of that.

“Yeah, I'm beginning to think you like me a little more than you're willing to admit to yourself though,” she replied. “Good night, Liam.”

15



## Avery

The days following the party were filled with lectures, one trip to the grocery store, a surprisingly pleasant breakfast with my mother, and endless study sessions.

Zayn suddenly found the air around me a lot easier to breathe. I had given him two tickets to the band's next show as a kind of peace offering before he left the party Friday night, but instead of it being an inch in the direction of becoming friendly again, he took it as a milestone. Monday morning, he invited Nina and me to sit in our old seats during class. He even brought us coffee from Lemon's, which Nina could barely choke down, and my favorite blueberry muffins. Guilt found its way onto my shoulders when I declined his offer of driving to the show on Friday. I'd never intended for us to become strangers, and I certainly didn't want it to stay that way, but I didn't want to give him false hope of us getting back together. He deserved so much better than me.

My curiosity spiked every time I saw Liam at the house. He was more than tolerant of me—offering to share his late-night snacks when I was studying and smiling at me when no one was looking. I couldn't help but replay what had happened in the bathroom every morning I got ready in the very place he'd touched me. The memory of what his hands had felt like on my legs and my hips began to escape me, but I knew he hadn't placed them there by accident. I wanted to know why, but what I wanted even more was for him to touch me again, so I could burn the memory of it into my brain and never forget what Liam Lockwood's fingers had felt like.

Things he did started to appear more sensual to me as the days went on. Little things. Like the way he licked his lower lip every time he took a swig from his beer. Or the way he sat at the kitchen table with his legs spread and his arm hung over the back of it, like a slouchy king, waiting for someone to come and fill the vacancy in his lap. But my recent favorite had become

watching him come up for air in the pool during his afternoon laps. The way he arched his head back and raked his fingers through his dark hair was what I imagined he looked like right before an orgasm.

I wasn't blind. Liam was a tall glass of water—that I wished I could pour all over my body—with a bad-boy attitude and touched by the music gods. But I wasn't dumb enough to think that this was more than just attraction. We had nothing in common. He was simply my roommate for the time being—and a distracting one at that.

When it came time to take out Liam's stitches, I asked Nina to do it for me on a night she was over, studying. Even though he was making me question everything between us, I didn't have the time to figure him out. And I really didn't want to remove his stitches even if that meant getting to be close to him again.

When I got home from my afternoon lecture on Friday, Danny and Milton were sitting on the front porch. I recognized the melody Danny was playing on his guitar. It was the same one Liam had sung my dad's poem to.

Danny stared at the table as he stroked his guitar in frustration while Milton tapped his pen to a steady rhythm, stopping to write down ideas as they thought of them. From the looks of the thick black lines scribbled across the notebook in front of them, finding new lyrics wasn't going well.

“How's it going, guys?”

Danny closed his eyes for a half-second and ignored me.

“Hey, Avery.” Milton offered a small smile. I could tell from the crinkle in his forehead that he was frustrated too. “You got any hidden songwriting abilities? We could use the help.” He laughed, but Danny quickly shot him a look.

“I've never written a song in my life, so I can't help you there, but I have a good ear. I can listen to what you've got so far and maybe—”

“You know what would be helpful?” Danny peered up at me. “Go yell up to Lexie and Liam to be ready to leave in thirty.”

Milton scolded him, but Danny shrugged him off and continued playing.

I turned on my heels and bit my lip until it hurt. As I reached the stairs and was about to shout their names, I had an idea and started climbing them

instead.

Loud death metal music poured from Lexie's room as I passed by.

I knocked on Liam's door once. Twice. And then I called his name but got no answer. Then, the bathroom door swung open as I went to leave.

A wave of steam followed Liam as he sauntered down the hall, his grin growing wider with every step he closed in on me. "Are you lost, Little Fox?"

I tried to take in every inch of him as fast as I could, but there wasn't enough time. Despite the twisted knot tied near one of his delicious V marks on his lower abdomen, the dark gray towel hanging low on his hips looked like it was doing just that. Hanging on there for dear life. And my God, I wished it'd drop.

"Av?"

I snapped my eyes up and met his smirk. "Whatever. You know you have a nice body. It's just anatomy. Nothing I haven't seen before," I said, pursing my lips. "I need to talk to you for a sec."

He reached behind me for the handle and pushed his bedroom door open, gesturing me inside. "After you."

Liam walked over to his closet as I took a seat in the chair beside his bed.

And then that towel did just what I'd wanted it to.

I should've been embarrassed by the sound that escaped my mouth—somewhere between a cry and a shudder—but I was too busy taking in Liam's entire backside to care. "What the hell are you doing?" I managed to ask.

He stepped into a pair of black briefs and turned right as the waistband snapped into place two inches above his cock. "It's just anatomy." His smile darkened. "Right?"

My mouth watered. Why was it watering?

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder and grinned. "You want me to put a shirt on before we start?"

I held my stare, nodding once.

"All right, what is it?" he asked, stretching one of their old band T-shirts over his head. He graciously pulled on a pair of jeans too.

“I want you to use the poem for your song,” I told him, afraid I’d change my mind if I sat there too much longer.

“Your poem?”

I nodded, shaking away the discomfort of the lie. It wasn’t mine, but I couldn’t tell him that. If he knew it was my dad’s words, he’d immediately tell Danny.

“No.”

“No?”

“We’ve already scrapped that one. I don’t know why Danny keeps trying to make it work. Besides, you nearly tore me a new one over it. I’m not looking to experience that again if you change your mind.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

He looked at me hesitantly.

“Look, I know I got angry, but that’s because my personal space was invaded. Hearing it in your song took me by surprise, but it was good. *Really* good.”

“Danny doesn’t know you wrote it. I don’t know how he’d feel, playing along to his little sister’s lyrics.”

*Even better.* “Then, don’t tell him.” They weren’t mine anyway.

Liam frowned. “I mean, we’ll have to get you to sign a consent form and everything. He’s going to find out.”

“I don’t want the credit. Honestly. Just take it. Please. I can write it out for you right now if you need it.”

“I remember how it goes.” Liam frowned as he thought.

“Okay. Are we good?”

He watched me for a solid five seconds before he nodded slowly. “If you’re sure?”

“Great. It’s settled.” I stood up to leave, but he blocked my path.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

Liam’s scent of sandalwood wrapped around me like a cool blanket, but I was missing the familiar warmth the leather from his jacket gave off.

“Sometimes, people just want to help, Liam. I’m not going to hold this over your head or expect you to owe me one in return. This is something I



want to do. For Danny.”

His tense shoulders eventually relaxed. “Thank you, Av.”

“You’re right; that does sound weird.” I scrunched my nose. “I’ll see you at the show.”

“You’re coming to another?”

I nodded and then remembered I’d told him I was going to stay out of the way. But was supporting them technically putting myself *in* their way? “I don’t have to if—”

“No, please.” I swore I saw excitement in the corners of his eyes, but a few strands of his hair fell and blocked my view. “It’s always nice to have another fan in the crowd.”

“Well, there will be more than just me. Nina’s coming, too, and I gave Zayn a couple of tickets.”

Confusion pricked at his brows. “I see.”

“Well, good luck.” My gaze dragged down his freshly shaven jaw and then to his lips, which turned up the moment my eyes landed on them. I cleared my throat. “Um, Danny also told me to tell you to be ready in a half hour.”

As soon as he nodded, I hurried out the door, stopping to take a full breath just before the stairs.

“Oh, good. You’re here,” Lexie said, popping her head out of her door. “I need you.”

She yanked me into her room, holding up two dresses in front of herself. “Which one should I wear tonight?”

The first one was the perfect little black dress with two round cutouts on the sides. It’d go with anything, which was why I was surprised she was even considering it. The other one—a strapless orange bodycon dress with black accents—suited her better and matched her fiery red hair.

I immediately pointed to the orange one, and she threw the black one at me with a grin.

“Good. You wear that one.”

“What?”

“You really think I’d wear something like that? Or that I’d need your help

with my wardrobe, my little cardigan connoisseur?” Her eyes scanned my holey jeans and oversize white cardigan. “I bought that for you. You’re welcome.”

I analyzed the dress in my hands. “Is this you trying to make up for the whole journal-stealing thing?”

Lexie poked some metal through her ear piercings in the mirror. “*Sometimes, people just want to help, Avery.*” Her tone was mocking, and I realized she’d heard me talking to Liam.

“Lexie!”

She swung around and held her hands up like she was expecting me to come at her. “It’s not my fault! You both talk loud, and the door was open!”

I ground my teeth together. “You’re such a—”

“Lovable person with a generous heart and a great fashion sense?”

“Not exactly what I was going to say.”

“Don’t worry.” She made a zipping motion across her lips with her fingers. “Your secret is still safe with me.”

My eyes narrowed.

“I’m a snoop. Not a snitch.”

After promising with our pinkies, like two five-year-olds, I slipped the dress on while Lexie went to the bathroom. I had to hand it to her; she had a keen eye. It fit like a glove.

I was staring in the mirror, taking in my reflection, when a rainbow of bright colors caught my eye through her barely open closet. I quickly peeked my head in, finding over a dozen wigs in all different lengths and styles hanging on display. I couldn’t help but run my fingers across the curtain of blue-and-green strands of the wig Lexie had worn to the last show. It nearly sparkled in the light; it was so glossy and vibrant.

“Now, look who’s being nosy.” Lexie’s teasing remark made me jump. “That dress looks hot. Am I good, or am I good?”

I smoothed my palms over the fabric hugging my waist. “It’s perfect, Lex. Thank you. You really didn’t have to.”

She shrugged off my gratitude as if she bought dresses for people all the time. Maybe she did. “That’s a good color for you.” She nodded at the long,

straight teal wig. “You want to wear her?”

“Her?”

“That’s Gina. I name my wigs. Don’t ask.” She pumped the bottom of her bob with her palms. “This is Jisoo.”

Aside from the caramel-colored highlights I’d convinced my mom to let me get in the sixth grade, I’d never colored my hair. My dad always told me how much he liked my natural color, so I never thought he’d like it if I changed it. I’d never cut my hair short either. Time after time, I’d go into my salon, set on chopping it all off, but my mother’s voice would play in the back of my head and change my mind at the last second.

*“All the pretty girls have long hair.”*

For the longest time, I’d thought she was right. If you looked around at my classmates, growing up, anybody who was deemed beautiful or popular were the girls with long hair. So, I jumped on that bandwagon, scared of standing out or being anything less than ordinary, and I guessed I never jumped off. Danny was the one to stand out in our family. The one to bleach his hair at sixteen and pierce his own nipples. That nearly killed my mom—the nipple part. The hair was less of a shock after that. My dad had passed before he got to see any of Danny’s defiant side, but it drove my mom crazy. And rather than have her pull her hair out with two rebellious kids, I’d decided it was easier to blend in.

Wasn’t that what society led you to believe anyway? To be like the rest?

Wearing Lexie’s blue hair wasn’t breaking the rules though. Just bending them. And the thought of that made excitement roll through me like electricity.

Lexie saw me light up and sat me in front of her mirror, beginning her work, covering my ordinary, long brown hair.

There was a lot of hair spray, bobby pins, and ... hair glue? Apparently, that was a thing. And a wig cap that made me look bald. My eyes were watering from laughing when Danny’s voice echoed up the stairs for the third time.

“Lexie! Hurry it up, will ya?”

“Fuck off, fuckwad. I’ll be down in a minute,” Lexie shouted back,

unfazed.

My giggles cut off the moment Lexie stepped out of the way of the mirror and I saw my full transformation.

“Okay, I’m totally making this permanent. Holy shit.”

*How had she made it look so seamless?*

She leaned in behind me, fluffing the hair over my shoulder. “I knew this would look killer on you. I just can’t believe you wear it better than me.” She gave me a quick peck on the cheek. “All right, I’ve got to run, doll. Take care of Gina and have fun, okay?”

I thanked her and told her to kick ass before she left, and then I went down to my room to finish getting ready. With silky blue hair down to the middle of my back, I kept it simple with a pink nude lipstick and a small cat-eye.

Nina pulled into the driveway when I was finishing tying my shoelaces. I wasn’t about to throw out all logic and comfort because I’d changed my look.

The windows of Nina’s car were up, but I could hear her shrieking the moment I stepped out the front door, all the way to the passenger side. To spare my eardrums, I waited to climb into the car until she stopped.

“Is this you finally losing your shit over the breakup? Because you make bad decisions look good.”

“Would dyeing my hair blue really be a bad decision?” I twirled a piece of hair with a smirk.

“Obviously *not!*” Nina beamed at me. “Zayn is going to lose it when he sees you.”

I wasn’t so much fantasizing about how Zayn would react when he saw me this way as I was about Liam. I wanted to prove to him that I wasn’t Little Fox anymore, and in doing so, maybe I’d prove it to myself as well. This disguise wasn’t me pretending to be something I wasn’t, but a way of showcasing the parts of me I often masked.

I was brave.

Confident.

I was sexy.

I was everything Liam thought I wasn’t. But would he even see me? And if he did, would he like me this way?

I shook my head clear of any thoughts of Liam.

This was for *me*.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at the venue. There had to be almost double the number of fans, but it was also a larger venue. Nina and I tossed back a drink or two during the opening band, but she left me near the bar to watch the rest backstage with Nikko. I was fine alone, especially in a place like this, where everyone's attention was on the band and while wearing a wig that gave me superpowers. I wasn't sure I'd be able to find Zayn in the tight crowd and began to think he wouldn't show. About halfway through A Quiet Peril's set, I found him in the center of the room, bobbing his head to the upbeat song Liam was throwing himself around to onstage.

Zayn turned and searched the crowd around himself, inevitably looking for me a few times. He dismissed me once. Then twice. The last thing I was sure he thought he'd see me in was a bright blue wig. But on his third time through, just as he was about to turn his attention back toward the stage, his gaze found mine in the sea of faces.

Slowly, he raised his head, and a weird tension formed in the air between us. I clenched the drink in my hand, about to start making my way over to him when I saw him curl his arm around the stunning blonde woman beside him. She snuggled closer, oblivious to the show he was suddenly putting on for me. He kissed her on the top of her head and pulled her into his side, all the while making eye contact with me. He used the extra ticket not for a friend, but for a *date*.

Awkward.

*Okay, Gina. Give me all the strength you've got.*

16



## Liam

I forgot the lyrics to my own fucking song. As soon as I spotted that blue-haired—and completely off-limits—goddess in my crowd, my damn mouth dried up, and my head went blank.

Lexie had told me Avery was going to bring the entire place onto their knees when they saw her, but I hadn't thought she meant me.

I acted quick, holding the microphone out in front of the crowd with a half-smile, making a group of girls at the front wail a high-pitched scream. It was loud, even with my earpieces in. But not as loud as Avery with blue hair.

I twirled the black rose around, taking methodical steps across the stage. Hundreds of hands thrust in the air, blocking my view of Avery, which was a welcome distraction. My lungs took in a big breath of air, and then I sang the next verse, running the rose up and down my abdomen, as I had done a few dozen times. Women all over the venue screamed some versions of *pick me* and other profanities that made me chuckle.

As I neared the edge of the stage, I spotted the hot brunette with the red dress exactly where Nikko had told me she'd be before I started the song. He'd described her perfectly. Nikko was very careful about who I kissed during "Nice Girls," as he didn't want me to end up making out with a minor or a girl who wasn't interested. He would make his rounds outside before the show, talking with girls and checking their IDs. He used to make some cash back in the day, creating fake IDs, so he could spot the real ones from the fake. I thought the fans had started to catch on to what he was doing because after a while, the ones I gave the flower to always seemed to expect it. And the brunette was staring me down like she was ready to fuck me onstage.

But as I tilted my head, I had a direct line to Avery again, and my sights narrowed in on her and only her.

She wasn't watching us play though. She was staring into the crowd with her guard up. Her hand gripped her beer bottle so tightly that I thought it

might shatter. My eyes traveled up, over the swells of her breasts, seeing her shoulders tense and her face pale. Someone in the crowd was bothering her, and I was about to make it my problem.

I followed her eyes, trying to find the source of her pain, only to land on her asshole ex-boyfriend groping some chick right in front of her. My eyes darted back to Avery as I jumped off the front of the stage, making my way toward the back of the room. I ran my fingers through the waiting hands I could reach, my bodyguards doing their job as best they could, fighting off my beautiful and ambitious fans trying to claw their way to me. I nodded at the brunette in the red dress as I passed her by, and she pouted.

There was a moment, right before I reached Avery, that I came to my senses. But her body was like a magnet to mine. I couldn't resist her pull. Not now. I'd come too far, and I was at the point of no return.

*Danny's sister. Danny's sister.*

Avery looked up, her soft and gentle blue eyes captivating me. My willpower shattered the moment she parted her lips.

“Fuck it.”

With two hands cradling the sides of her face, I silenced my thoughts and curiosity once and for all. I finally got to do what I'd thought about doing since she'd sewn me up last week—hell, I'd thought about it long before that. I got to feel her lips against mine, and it wasn't anything like I'd imagined. It was better. So goddamn better. And I didn't just kiss her perfect lips; I claimed them like they belonged to me and only me.

It was strange, kissing someone who didn't know they were being kissed. Avery's entire body froze at the initial contact. And then she pushed and pushed on my chest until her hand slowly twisted in my shirt and pulled me closer.

I could feel Zayn's eyes on us, but I wasn't just doing this for him. Avery was off-limits. This was the only thing I thought would break the tension between us—something to satiate my growing hunger. Screwing random girls wasn't distracting enough anymore. All I wanted was to have her. Just once, so I could get it out of the way and move on with my life.

I knew I only had mere seconds, so I made the best of it, eagerly moving



my lips against hers. A moan, lost in the chaos around us, vibrated against my mouth. The voracious need to hear what her moan sounded like made my hands grip the back of her neck tighter.

Then, she took me by surprise, dancing her tongue along the entrance of my mouth. I let her in and slid my tongue around hers in labored strokes, reveling in the warmth and sweetness.

It took a second for me to notice Danny was nearing the end of his solo, the sound permeating the storm of desire, and I realized I needed to break away to finish the song. I let my teeth drag over her bottom lip as I pulled away and brought the microphone up between us, leaving her lips wet and swollen.

*“Yeah, nice girls don’t kiss like that,”* I sang, touching my forehead to hers.

Avery’s heavy breaths echoed into the mic, and I shot Zayn a sideways glance, knowing he was watching. He looked broken and pathetic, just as expected, and I didn’t have an ounce of sympathy for him. The guy deserved it.

The guards with me were having trouble with the growing mob, so one tapped me on the shoulder, signaling for us to go. I released Avery and hurried through the crowd, immediately feeling the ache of her absence. Her taste. Her touch. Her scent.

I pointed Zayn out to one of the guards before he boosted me back up onto the safety of the stage, telling him to escort him out. With panic in my chest, I shot Danny a side-glance, but to my relief, he hadn’t noticed I just had my tongue down his sister’s throat. Too absorbed in his solo to look, I guessed.

Tic was oblivious to anyone but the music when he was playing, so I knew he was none the wiser.

Oh, but Lexie had seen. It was written all over her wide, obnoxious grin. I ignored her, finishing the song off stronger than ever.

Unable to resist the temptation, I found Avery in the crowd again. As the lights faded out, her face morphed with regret as her eyes dropped to the floor. The flower fell from her fingertips, hitting the ground as the place went black, and when the lights shone again, she was gone.

17



## Avery

I brought my hand to my mouth as the cool night air chilled my still-tingling lips.

Liam had kissed me. And I'd ... liked it. But that could be the alcohol talking. Right?

The last one hundred seconds felt like a blur, but I could remember everything about that kiss and the way his lips had molded to mine like they had been made for me.

I took uneven, shallow breaths. Even though I was outside and away from the thick crowd, I still couldn't get enough air in my lungs. I needed to leave. I needed to be as far away from Liam as possible. But my ride was inside, and so were her keys.

The door to the venue creaked open behind me, and my heart fluttered when I checked to see who was joining me in the quiet parking lot.

Zayn and his date sauntered out, hand in hand. As soon as he spotted me, he gave her the keys and told her to wait in the car.

Gina gave me enough courage to be the one to close the space between us first.

He nodded his head at the door. "So, is that why you asked me here tonight? To make me jealous and then have me kicked out?"

"They kicked you out?" Anger bubbled in my chest, not just because of Liam, but also because of what Zayn was accusing me of.

Zayn shook his head in disbelief.

"No! Of course I didn't bring you here for that!"

"Well, that kiss looked like it wasn't your guys' first. Is that what you've been doing since you left me? Screwing your brother's friends?"

I paused, stunned. He'd never been in this situation—jealous and embarrassed. He didn't know how to handle himself, so he was lashing out, but that was no excuse.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but the last person I kissed before tonight was you. And you want to talk about putting on a show? What the hell were you doing in there before Liam showed up? Your hands were all over that girl!”

“She’s a family friend and my date! I’ll put my hands where I want!”

“Says the guy who wouldn’t let me kiss him on the cheek in public.” I laughed. “This isn’t you.”

“I’m not the one wearing a costume.” He reached for a strand framing my face and then leaned in close. The beer on his breath was palpable. “You do look beautiful in blue though. You think there are many doctors out there with blue hair?”

I swatted his hand away. “Don’t patronize me.”

“C’mon, Avy baby. This is a joke.” He gestured a hand in front of me. “You can’t expect to be taken seriously like this, can you?”

“Screw you. You’re hurt and drunk, and you’re taking it out on me.”

His face fell, but he stepped closer instead of pulling away. “I don’t mean to. I’m just ... having a difficult time with adjusting to life without you. It’s been really hard, having an empty bed all the time. An empty closet. An empty apartment. All I feel is empty.”

“I know.”

“I made you happy, didn’t I?” He grabbed my left hand and stared down at my naked finger.

“Yes. Of course you did.”

A small smile appeared on his lips before he gripped my waist.

“Zayn,” I warned, trying to twist out of his hold.

“Come on,” he urged, planting his body against mine. “I miss you. The other you.”

“Zayn, stop,” I said firmly, and he dropped his hands immediately. I glanced over at his car. Luckily, there were several cars between us and his date waiting for him. “You should probably go.”

The notch in his throat bobbed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Is your date safe to drive you guys home?”

He nodded and backed away. “Look, I hate to be a jerk or whatever because I know you’re smarter than that, but be careful.” He pointed to the door barely containing the sound of the band inside. “That one seems like the heartbreaking type.”

“The only one capable of breaking my heart is myself.”

He nodded and turned.

“Zayn?” I smiled when he looked back. “She’s really pretty.”

“She’s not you.”

It was like someone had reached inside my chest cavity and squeezed my heart with their fist.

“Good night, Avery.”

I stayed outside until the cold got to me and then went back in and found the bar. The band was finishing up their second-to-last song when I signaled to the bartender.

I held up two fingers. “Vodka. I don’t care what kind.”

“You got it.” The man behind the bar flipped a bottle over two shot glasses and slid them to me.

I wasn’t the type to drink hard liquor straight, but I was letting Gina take control of the rest of my night, and if she wanted vodka, *I* wanted vodka.

I took the first one too slow, the clear liquid burning the moment it touched my tongue. I tossed the second one back faster, pinching my eyes shut until the discomfort subsided.

The bartender’s eyes lit up as he watched me. “Damn.”

I licked my bottom lip and winked at him before joining the crowd in a jumping fit, screaming the lyrics to A Quiet Peril’s most popular song and their last of the night. The vodka surged through my veins faster than I’d expected. The buzz lasted until I was outside in the cold once more, waiting by Nina’s car.

But the bitch was taking forever.

I texted her and tried calling, but her phone went straight to voice mail. Knowing her, it was dead. I was close to calling and paying for a ride when Nikko’s SUV pulled up beside me.

Milton rolled down the passenger window, and Nina leaned over him

from the backseat.

“Don’t be mad!” she started, clearly intoxicated.

I pushed myself off her car and crossed my arms. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for you?”

Nikko slapped her ass, and she giggled, making my irritation grow.

She dangled her keys. “The boys said I can’t let you take my car because of ‘the rules.’ ” She made air quotes.

“So, you’re riding with us,” Milton added.

I shook my head. I knew I wasn’t in a good enough state to drive, but Nina had promised to be sober cab tonight. *Damn her.*

“C’mon! I told you not to be mad!” She pouted.

“Aye. You’ve got blue hair.” Danny nodded from the driver’s seat. “Looks nice. You getting in or what?”

The door opened as I approached, and Liam greeted me with a sly grin. I peered behind him, seeing a completely packed backseat. Lexie was in the very back with two handsy companions, and Nina was already cuddling up on Nikko on the other side of the car. I recognized Danny’s lady friend from Elevens sitting in the middle, and I contemplated asking to sit on her lap, but her face said, *Don’t fuck with me.*

Liam patted his thighs, and with a deep sigh, I climbed up.

“I don’t have a seat belt,” I sneered.

Without hesitation, Liam wrapped both arms around my waist as the car lurched forward. “There,” he said.

My eyes bulged, but I turned my head and pretended to be unaffected. His body heat was almost concerning, but I couldn’t help but relax into him, letting the chill from outside disappear.

Milton hit his drumsticks on the dashboard, matching the tempo of the song playing through the speakers. How was he not tired of drumming after the show?

Danny turned up the volume, rocking his head to the beat.

“Tic! How many times do I have to tell you? Not on my car!” Nikko shouted over the music and banging.

Milton changed his use of drums to his water bottle, making the beats

crackle louder on the plastic.

Nikko shot forward, cradling Nina to the side, and ripped the sticks out of his hands, but Milton just laughed and started tapping his fingers on his thigh.

I rolled my eyes. *Boys.*

We hit a bump, heading out of the parking lot, and I bounced up and down right on top of Liam's groin. I stiffened and then heard him laugh under his breath.

My anger with him resurfaced. First, he'd kissed me. What the hell was that about? He'd had a million other girls to choose from, and I would have a hard time believing he hadn't recognized me. Was it another joke? Another way for him to humiliate me? And then he had gotten Zayn and his date removed from the show completely, probably ruining the one chance I'd had at being friends with him in one fell swoop.

"Relax, Avery. It's a long drive," Liam whispered close to my ear.

Tingles spread across my skin from where his nose lightly touched my neck, awakening the goose bumps again. A shiver escaped me, making my next exhale shake.

He unlatched his hold on me and rubbed the sides of my arms. "Are you cold?"

I shook my head, feeling heat trickle down my body, all the way to my toes. "Not at all."

Liam skimmed the bumps on my arms that were slowly disappearing. Shifting me slightly, he slid his nose up from the nape of my neck to the curve of my jaw, inhaling what was left of my perfume. I could feel his smile against my skin as he knowingly made it pucker from his touch.

"Am I affecting you, Little Fox?"

I swallowed hard and squeezed my legs together as tension worked its way to my core.

But I could now feel that my small movements were affecting him as well, and my heart raced with excitement. I glanced around the car as Liam grew harder beneath me, and when I realized everyone was preoccupied, I dipped my chin low enough to graze his earlobe.

"Careful, Liam. Two can play this game."

I swiveled my hips again, earning a low growl in return.

Liam's fingers dug into my hips, caught between keeping me still and grinding against my ass.

I couldn't stop the smile creeping its way to my lips.

*Lips.*

*Oh God. His lips.*

They swept over my cheek, inches from my own.

I moved again, applying pressure to where we both wanted it most, and this time, he thrust back. A small thrust but a delicious one at that.

Desire exploded in the pit of my stomach. I wanted more.

Liam's hand threaded up the back of my head, fisting the blue hair and locking his eyes with mine. "Avery. Stop."

His throaty plea only made me want him more. I worked my hips over and over, making short but forceful movements, reveling in the way his bulge hit every nerve to near perfection.

Then, I felt his teeth drag over my jaw, nibbling his way toward my mouth.

I wet my bottom lip, ready to taste him again.

"Liam, did you remember to get that girl's number this time?" Danny's voice rang through the car like an alarm, and we both separated instantly.

Liam's chest pulsed into my side, panting.

"Well?" Danny pried.

Liam cleared his throat. "I was a little preoccupied to ask for her digits."

I laughed and then covered my smile with the back of my hand.

"Nice." Danny chuckled. "I spotted her when we opened up. Nikko did you a fucking solid, man. She was smokin' in that red dress."

In a fit of jealousy, the girl beside me jabbed Danny in the ribs, making his arm jerk and the car swerve.

I shot my hand up to the handle overhead, gripping it tight.

Danny righted the steering wheel immediately and frowned. "Aye! Not cool, Hannah!"

She narrowed her eyes at him in the rearview and went back to staring at her phone.



My heartbeat continued to thud in my ear, but it was no longer because of Liam or the split-second swerve of the car. It was that we were crossing a bridge. *The bridge.*

Danny must've taken a different route home than the one we had taken on the way to the show. Nina knew I'd almost died on the bridge—or just below it—and had probably gone out of the way to avoid it and hadn't told me.

I looked beyond the oncoming cars and saw the guardrail. It had been replaced shortly after that accident, but I could still see the curved and bent metal from the police photographs.

The moon cast a glistening light on the moving water below. It was a picturesque scene to most, but to me, it was a spitting image of the worst night of my life.

I looked to Nina for comfort, but she'd fallen asleep on top of Nikko. My eyes shot to Danny, but he was busy with the road and was no use to me. Besides, Danny was good at keeping it in. The real emotions anyway. A guy could look at him wrong, and he'd throw several curse words his way or look for a fight, but when it came to the things that cut deep, he sealed it all in. The entire month after our dad had passed, I couldn't get a word out of him. I guessed that was something we both had in common—keeping things locked up. Pretending they didn't exist.

But I couldn't be like Danny when it came to this. I'd tried to erase that nightmare with therapist after therapist, but some trauma never left, even after you accepted what had happened. Nothing could prepare you for losing someone you loved, but no one told you how much it fucked you up when you experienced it firsthand. That was a scar Danny would never wear.

Suddenly, my steel-like seat belt tightened around me like the walls of my throat, but I welcomed the feeling of safety that swiftly followed. After all, my seat belt that night was the reason I was still here today. The only reason.

“Close your eyes,” I heard through the chaos in my head. It was Liam bringing me back from the edge with those three words. “Close your eyes, Avery.”

It sounded simple, but I was trying not to blink, terrified of the images that might appear in the absence of light.

I shook my head, panic filling my chest.

His arms pulsed, getting my attention again. “Then, look here. Look at me,” he urged.

I found his warm eyes, and the world around me began to blur. The music screaming through the car faded into the background. Hannah, Nina, and the rest of the band didn’t exist. It was just me and him. My breathing evened out, falling into sync with his. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his lips move, and then his chest hummed. So, I focused on that, trying to hear what he was saying without breaking eye contact.

I listened close.

Closer.

And finally, I could make out his words. He wasn’t speaking; he was singing the lyrics to “Never You.” It was one of their songs I listened to when I wanted to feel happy.

He remembered.

I wasn’t sure how long we sat there like that while he sang to me. Thirty seconds? Sixty seconds? Liam’s arms loosened, so I knew we were at least over the bridge.

The adrenaline from the night began to wear off. My nerves were fried and my eyes heavy. I rested my head in the crook of Liam’s neck, hoping he’d be okay with it. We’d crossed several lines tonight. What was one more?

Falling asleep on Liam wasn’t something I’d imagined doing a month ago when I moved in. Hell, there were a lot of things we had done that I’d never imagined would happen between us, and I’d certainly never thought I’d like them as much as I had.

After years of hating Liam Lockwood, I was fantasizing about him and what he would do to me if I let him. If he let himself.

The thought of letting anyone in scared me, but the thought of letting in my brother’s best friend and a guy capable of breaking me even more than I was already broken scared me even more.

18



## Avery

*C*old water pours through my open window, hitting the right side of my body like an ice bath. My consciousness goes from murky to razor sharp in a heartbeat, but it still takes me a second or two to piece it all together. The last thing I remember is complete and utter weightlessness and a heavy beating in my chest. An earth-shattering collision and then ... nothing.

Soon, my clothes are soaked, and my pink Converse are full of water. I'm cold.

*So cold.*

"Dad?" I cry in short gasps of air, my lungs burning from the wind being knocked out of me.

I reach down to grip the seat belt that feels embedded in my chest. I gasp, grunt, and choke. The pain suddenly registering all over my body is overwhelming.

*"Dad, it hurts."*

I hold my head in my hand, and I think I feel something wet, but everything is wet now. It's too dark to see if there's anything on my palm when I pull it away.

My mom used to talk about patients' brains swelling when they hit something hard enough, and mine feels like it's going to explode out of my skull.

*My heartbeat is erratic, each pulse sending a sharp knife to my head.*

"Dad," I sob again, shutting my eyes and waiting for his response. "I hate it. Make it stop. It hurts so bad."

The moonlight reflects inside the car as we slowly rotate downriver, bringing the vivid red smears on the cracked windshield to light. I inhale sharply.

*Blood.*

*My eyes burn before I can even look at the hunched-over body lying*

*beside me. But I have to. We have to get out. I have to get him out. This isn't one of those times where I can just look away and hope for the best. No one is here to fix this.*

*My throat swells the moment I turn my head enough to see him. His eyes are open, but there's no life behind them. Dark crimson drips down the entire front of his face, covering the creases of his smile lines, the collar of his button-up shirt, the steering wheel.*

*It's everywhere.*

*There's blood everywhere.*

*Where are the damn air bags? Why didn't they deploy?*

*"Dad, it's okay. We're going to be okay."*

*My hands shake as I undo my seat belt, the latch releasing me like a cut parachute. I catch myself at the awkward angle right as a piece of shredded metal tears into my skin. I shout incoherent words, the fiery burn across my skin breaking through the numbing chill of the river.*

*The world turns on me, pulling the view out my window up the steep cliffside. As the car tilts in the water, I can see the car lights on the bridge we fell from, unmoving. They're stopped but so far away now.*

*"Help!" I yell, but my voice is small.*

*I look up at the speckles of light above the fading car lights. The Big Dipper looks like a spoon stuck up among the stars, and I want nothing more than for it to come and scoop me up. Being rescued by stars seems silly, but it is all I can hope for right now.*

*"Fight, Avery," I tell myself.*

*"Dad!" I turn my head and shout, shaking him with one hand and applying pressure to my hip with the other.*

*The shine of the buckle catches my eye, and I see the seat belt hanging loose against his window.*

*He always wears his seat belt. Always.*

*"Dad, wake up!"*

*My efforts are useless. His body falls limp from his steering wheel and farther from my grasp.*

*I've never felt more alone than in this moment. But I can't give up yet. I*

won't.

*I brace myself on the center console, reaching for him, but he's already halfway submerged in the water and stuck on something below the waist. It's too dark to see.*

*"Wake up! We have to go!" I grab his wrist, and I pull with all my might, but he doesn't move an inch.*

*Water pours in faster, flooding the inside of the car. I use both hands to try and save him, but the water rushing in is pressing heavily on my shoulders, and I start to lose feeling in my fingers.*

*"Dad!" I scream, my voice breaking. "Please!" I sob uncontrollably as my grip fails again and again. "DAD! WAKE UP! WE HAVE TO GO!"*

*Nothing.*

*And I know the reason why.*

*With no seat belt and no air bag, my dad was gone the moment we hit the water. I knew it, but I couldn't admit it to myself.*

*Until now, when flight begins to take over my instincts. I need to face the truth if I want to survive.*

*"Dad," I say, this time softer, "I know you didn't mean to. It's okay." My vision of him is blurry now as tears overflow. "I'm going to be okay. Okay? I forgive you, Dad. I'm sorry for ... for everything. Whatever I did. I'm sorry." I almost can't say the next words, but he's fully submerged now, and I'm out of time. "I love you, Daddy, but I have to go," I choke out. "I have to go now."*

*I lift my chin and take a deep breath before going under. I hold his hand for another moment, sinking with him in silence. For a split second, I contemplate staying. Drowning is one of the worst ways to go—so I've heard—but it seems more peaceful than the pain I am already in. My lungs are starved for oxygen, alerting every cell in my body that it is time to flee. I find the silhouette of my dad's face in the dark river water that is now swallowing us whole.*

*And then I let go.*

*Guilt crashes through my core, more painful than any of my injuries, when I push through the open passenger window and reach the surface a few*

*seconds later. The agony of leaving him behind hits me over and over like a tidal wave, and then I scream.*

*I scream for my dad.*

*I scream from the physical pain coursing through my head, my limbs, and the wide-open cut on my stomach.*

*I scream at the water that carries me away from the person I love most in this world.*

*And I scream for help.*

*I scream. I swim. I breathe.*

*I scream. I swim. I breathe.*

*A voice echoes in the distance, but I don't know where I am. I don't know how long I've been drifting. It's pitch-black now, no moon to illuminate the water, no stars to wish on. Just darkness.*

*The voice calls my name again, and my body rocks.*

*"Avery." They're closer now.*

"Avery!" Danny's concern cut through the memory, waking me from the nightmare. He knelt beside me with his hands on my shoulders, the crease in his forehead disappearing when I met his eyes.

I gripped his forearm as I struggled to come to terms with reality, barely aware of the pool of sweat beneath me.

"Hey, it was just a dream. It's not real," he reassured me.

I shook my head and wiped away tears, the grief and guilt squeezing at my heart.

A figure in the doorway shifted, and I looked up, finding Liam resting against the doorframe with a furrowed brow and groggy eyes, a half-asleep Milton, and Lexie slumped between the two of them.

*Shit.* I'd just woken everyone up.

Milton and Lexie shuffled back to bed while Liam stayed behind.

Danny sat back on his heels. "You're still having those?" he asked, referring to my nightmares.

I used to get them all the time for the first couple of years after it had happened. Danny and Mom would take turns, coming into my room to wake

me, but my mom was rarely there, so it was usually Danny's burden.

I shook my head. "When I moved out, they kind of stopped. I only get them once or twice a year, usually around this time."

Danny's eyes fell to the floor as he nodded. "Ten years next week." He shakes his head. "I can't believe it."

I noticed it was still dark outside and glanced at my watch on the window ledge. "It's five o'clock? I'm sorry, guys."

We hadn't gotten back to the house until after three thirty in the morning, and even though I'd darted to my bedroom as soon as I stepped through the front door, afraid to be around Liam any longer, the rest of the band hadn't gone to bed right away, as I had. They'd probably just fallen asleep.

Danny shrugged and patted my leg.

Liam continued to watch me intensely, like he was waiting for me to spontaneously combust. I forced a tired smile to try and ease his worries.

"You still free that day?" Danny looked over his shoulder when he reached the door.

*That day?* He'd asked about it like we were going to the movies. *That day* was the anniversary of the day our dad had died.

"Always." I sighed, remembering our yearly visit to the cemetery to visit Dad.

Rain or shine, we planned our lives around it. The only day of the year where Danny, Mom, and I were all in the same proximity of one another. And for the most part, we got along, but that was usually because we didn't talk.

Liam lingered in the doorway after Danny walked back upstairs. I gripped the sheets covering me as I held his stare.

He cleared his throat and quickly poked his head out the door before he quietly shut the door behind him. It only took him three strides with his long legs to reach me.

I stared up at him.

He jutted his chin out, telling me to make room for him, and when I did, he climbed in beside me. The bed dipped from his weight as he made himself comfortable, folding an arm behind his head to rest on.



“Liam? What are you—”

A flash of nerves sparked in my stomach as he wrapped his free arm around my waist and pulled me into his side. As much as I’d thought he was testing me when he came in, like the time I’d napped in his bed, I now thought he was actually testing himself. This was uncharted territory for the both of us, but he was battling an internal struggle on his own as he lay with me. I could see it in the crease of his brow and the indecision in his eyes. But I could also feel the pull he had to me, and I, to him.

He was choosing to cross a line. One that Danny might not approve of. And maybe one Liam didn’t want to cross but felt he didn’t have a choice.

“Liam,” I protested even though my body had already started to curve to fit his. Not that there was much room not to. “I don’t know what this is for, but if you’re trying to comfort me, I don’t need it. I’m a big girl.”

I lifted my head up when he didn’t respond.

He stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

“Liam?”

“I know you don’t need it, Av. But I need ...”

My head got tired, so I rested my chin on his chest. “What? What do you need?”

He focused on me again and wiped away what was left of my tears that hadn’t dried. “I need to be near you. All right?” He sounded annoyed that he’d had to admit that out loud.

I suppressed the smile fighting its way to my lips.

“Don’t do that.”

My mouth popped open. “Do what?”

“Smile like that.”

“I’m not,” I said, smiling wider.

He worked his jaw, fighting his own smile. “We need to talk about what happened tonight.”

My smile fell, and my mouth went dry. Why did I feel like I was in trouble? He was the one who’d started everything. “Okay. Do you want to start off by telling me what made you want to choose me for the rock-star version of *The Bachelor*? If you wanted to kiss me, you didn’t think to do it

when Danny wasn't watching us? Or, you know, maybe ask me if I wanted to be kissed first?"

"I knew Danny wouldn't see anything. His guitar solo is like meditation to him. He gets in his own world."

"So, it was planned?"

His head tilted. "Not exactly."

"Do not tell me you didn't recognize me because I saw you look at me before you grabbed my face." I couldn't stop myself from reimagining it—that first crush of his lips to mine.

"I did you a favor when I kissed you."

My brows shot up. "A favor?" I dragged out mockingly.

Liam frowned. "That asshole was all over that other girl. I kissed you so that he would fucking feel it. You saw his face, didn't you?"

I shot up on my elbow, exasperated. "So, that's why you stuck your tongue down my throat?"

"Aye, if you want to get into specifics, I believe your tongue tasted me first."

My God, the way he'd said "tasted" made me want to do it all over again.

*What? No, I don't.*

"You're unbelievable," I said.

"I get that a lot." Liam smirked at me, and I swatted his stomach.

"You're telling me, that was all for show? That you didn't want to kiss me?"

There had been a hunger in him that made my insides melt when he sucked and tugged at my lips. I could still feel it. It was hard for me to believe he hadn't felt anything ... but it was Liam. He must've kissed a hundred girls by now for that song, just to get a rise out of the crowd.

His eyes dropped to my mouth, and his smirk disappeared. "That's right."

I ran my tongue along my bottom lip, wetting it. Toying with him was fun and might be the only way to get him to admit that he had feelings for me.

"If that's true, why put on the show? Why make another man jealous if I mean so little to you?" I pressed.

There was a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes before they hardened. But I

wasn't giving up yet.

"You're a Fox, living under our roof. Family to my best friend. I wasn't going to let some douche in a button-up at a rock show humiliate one of us. Especially one who'd already broken your heart."

"Ah, so you were protecting me?"

"Sure."

"With your mouth?"

"Avery," he groaned through his teeth as he threw his head back.

"You felt nothing?"

"Not a thing," he answered coldly.

Feeling reckless, I let the curious and bold side of me take the reins. In one swift movement, I sat up and swung one leg over him, completely straddling him. The surprise in his eyes made me smile.

I bent over next to his ear. "And when I did this earlier," I whispered and ground against him. His growing length hit my center through my shorts, and I had to resist the urge to move at a faster rhythm. "You felt nothing then either?"

His breathing picked up, and his hands fell to my waist.

"Because I could've sworn, I felt something, Liam. Something I'm feeling right"—I rocked into him again—"now."

His fingers dug into my skin like he was ready to flip me over and take me. God, I wanted it. And I was only a few pieces of fabric away from getting it.

*Do it, Liam. I know you want to.*

His left hand slid up my back and fisted my hair, pulling me away enough to look me in the eye. "It could've been any other girl grinding on me in that car, and I would've reacted the same. I told you, I feel nothing for you."

Ice froze in my chest, and I stilled my hips.

I swore I saw a glimpse of regret in his eyes when I rolled off of him, but it was gone in an instant. "Get the hell out of my room," I said.

Liam re-situated himself, pulling the sheet over his legs. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You just said—"

“I know what I said, and that has nothing to do with this. I’m staying if you’re going back to sleep.”

My frown deepened. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“Someone needs to be here to wake you up from that again.”

“From my dream? Are you kidding?” I pushed my hands through my hair, anger churning deep in my stomach. “I’ve never experienced such whiplash. Jesus, fuck, Liam. You could barely look me in the eye when I got here, and now, you’re lying in my bed, ready to scare off my demons?”

He dropped his gaze to the mattress and then looked back up at me, his barrier crumbling.

“You don’t kiss someone like *that* and then pretend it meant nothing. I know it meant something, Liam. I felt it.” I climbed off the end of the bed and grabbed the towel I’d used from my shower earlier.

He sat up on his elbows. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going for a swim.” I swung the door open and glanced back at him, pointing at the bulge in his boxers. “Can you deal with that in your own bed? Thanks.”

His lips twitched.

“And for the record, Zayn never broke my heart. I broke his. So, please don’t do me any more favors. I deserved the guilt of seeing him move on. What I don’t deserve is being lied to.”

19



## Liam

I'd lied. I'd told Avery I hadn't felt anything, but I'd lied. I'd felt *everything*, and I wanted so fucking badly to feel it again. It had taken every ounce of willpower I had not to roll her over, pull her little black shorts down, and take her the other night, but I had known that would be wrong. Even if I'd thought it would feel *so right*. Despite my ferocious tendencies, I still made an effort not to be a total asshole. And screwing my best friend's sister would definitely be a monumental mistake.

I should've brought home a girl I'd met at our meet and greet after the show last week, but no. I couldn't stop thinking about Avery's mouth. None of the girls interested me anyway. They were the same as always—eager and willing to do whatever and say whatever they thought I wanted. That used to entertain me, but something about it didn't satiate my palate anymore. I wanted something real. Something worth fighting for. Someone who didn't want me because I was Liam Lockwood, front man of A Quiet Peril.

Avery was the first girl in a long time to see through the things I had done in the past and my bullshit lies. She didn't give a fuck about my rising fame. In fact, I didn't even think she had known about it until she went to her first show. But wanting her wasn't an option. I wouldn't allow myself to give in, no matter how tempting she was. I just wished she weren't being dangled in front of me every day like a delicious treat I wasn't allowed to have.

I looked up at the ceiling of the basement, where her bedroom was. Her door had been cracked open when I passed by on my way down to the studio, and I had seen her on the floor with a stack of books beside her. She'd looked miserable, but I supposed that was what most college students looked like while studying.

"Dude, you missed it." Danny's voice came through my headphones.

I turned in the booth, giving him the signal to start the bridge of the song over again. When he did, I hit the notes perfectly—unlike the last dozen

times.

I threw Danny, Tic, Nikko, and Lexie a thumbs-up, and they smiled, giving me the final playback of the verse.

“That was the best one, don’t you think?” I asked.

“They all sounded great, but that last note you hit was epic, man. I can’t wait to play it live!” Tic replied.

Danny nodded in agreement. “Yeah, Liam. This has to be our first single on the next album. I don’t know why we wasted time trying to come up with something different. What made you change your mind on the chorus anyway?”

Lexie bit her lip and raised her brows at me.

“I don’t know. I guess it just didn’t seem to fit right, and now, it does. I mean, it is a little depressing, don’t you think?”

Danny scoffed. “Dude, all of our music is either depressing or about sex. That’s what people want to hear. It’s what they connect with.”

I nodded as he pressed the buttons and started to play the song from the beginning. As soon as the chorus came in, I glanced back up at the spot of the ceiling Avery was on the other side of.

*I’m hollow again*

*Feeling emptier than I’ve ever been*

It was hard to picture her behind the lyrics. They were sad and vulnerable—two things I never thought Avery to be. But with her tragic past, I didn’t know why I thought she was so different from the rest of us. She was privileged, but that didn’t make her immune to pain or depression.

*This could be the end*

*This pain is making me break; it’s making  
me bend*

*Please send me a glass or send me a friend*

*I'm hollow tonight, tomorrow, again and again*

When the song was complete, everyone erupted in unison. Danny clapped his hands a few times and leaned back in his chair. I could see the stress melt from his shoulders as he smiled. Lexie bobbed her head to the same beat of the song Tic was still keeping tempo to with his sticks. And I swore I could see the dollar signs in Nikko's eyes when he kicked his feet up on the empty chair.

I fidgeted, hoping we were finished for the night.

"Guys, I'm starved. Can we order pizza or something?" Lexie sipped on her Red Bull and watched me with a strange expression.

The guys all patted their stomachs in agreement, finished up a few things on the computer, and headed upstairs. I stayed behind with Lexie, sensing she had something to tell me.

"What is it?" I asked when the footsteps fell overhead.

She twisted in her chair and smiled. "You like her, don't you?"

My head snapped to her. "Who?"

"Who? Seriously?" She laughed. "Avery!"

"Please." I huffed. Even if I *did*, I shouldn't.

"I'm not blind, Liam. I saw you kiss her the other night and the way you've been looking at her since."

"I kissed her to make her ex jealous. That's it. You're seein' things, Lex."

"And I suppose it's just a coincidence that you're staring up at the ceiling below her bedroom?" She stood and collected her phone and keys. "It's okay. I like her too. I mean, I don't like her the way you do. She's great though. Not what I expected. She's got that kind of twisted soul but this, like, energy you just want to be around. You know?"

Of course I knew.

"I'm going to run with Danny to get pizza. You should go up and play the track for her. I think she should hear it before we test it out onstage."

"Lex," I called when she reached the stairs. "We have rules for a reason."

And one of those rules was not getting involved with a member's family



or exes. We hadn't thought we had to make that one until Nikko slept with Tic's mom. That'd nearly ended our career as a band altogether.

"Rules are boring. Besides"—she grinned—"I can keep a secret."

I listened to the song once more, making sure it was good enough before deciding to show it to Avery. When I got to the top of the basement stairs, Tic and Nikko were on the couch, playing video games. Gunshots and explosions echoed throughout the house, shaking the floorboards.

Her door was half-open, so I poked my head in as I knocked. "Is the TV too loud? I can ask them to turn it down."

Avery looked up and quickly pulled an earbud out. "Did you need something?"

"Never mind. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She nodded and gestured to the floor covered in papers. "Sit anywhere. Preferably on my notes on infected wounds." Her lip curled in disgust, and I laughed, plopping myself right in front of her.

I paused to take her in. Her plaid shirt was unbuttoned almost halfway down, exposing the lace trim of her bra. I swallowed when she set her book down, showing me more of the sheer white fabric. This was the first time I'd seen her this close and in good lighting since I'd kissed her. She didn't make an effort to fix her ponytail that had almost completely fallen out, and her makeup was gone. If this was her, raw and unfiltered, I envied the man who would get to wake up to her every morning.

She cleared her throat, and I blinked.

"I have something for you," I said, raising my phone. After getting her permission, I plugged her earbuds into my phone and hit Play. I moved my lips to the words in silence, counting the beats in my head.

Three minutes and twenty-one seconds felt like three hours and twenty-one minutes as I waited for her reaction. There were very few songs we made that I knew would be instant hits. We were a good band, and I loved all of the music we created, but I was meticulous when it came to our songs. This was a song I didn't doubt for a second.

I watched every inch of her face, trying to decipher if she loved it or hated it. It was different to hear your own words sung back to you when you

might've heard them differently in your head.

The song had ended thirty seconds ago, and she still had her eyes locked on my hands holding my phone.

She hated it. *I knew it.*

Her lip quivered as I unplugged her earbuds followed by a single tear.

“Wait.” She sniffled and brought her eyes up to mine. “Can I listen again?”

Relief exploded in my chest. “You like it?”

“It’s incredible, Liam.” The tear curved around her smile.

“I’ll send it to you. That way, you can listen as much as you want.”

She bent forward, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her loose ponytail brushed my face. Notes of citrus and honey left me transfixed. She slowly pulled away and kissed the corner of my mouth. “Thank you.”

We both righted ourselves when we heard the front door open.

“Food!” Lexie shouted.

Avery’s cheeks flushed with the perfect rosy shade as she leaned back on her palms, exposing one of her lace breasts through the opening of her shirt.

My gaze lowered, finding the slightest outline of her nipple beneath the fabric. “Avery,” I rasped.

“Mmhmm?” She grinned knowingly.

I ground my teeth together, somehow managing to keep my composure. “Hungry?”

Her brow twitched. “Starved.”

*So am I.*

The sound of heavy boots came down the hall, so I shot up, meeting Danny at the door.

“Uh, hey, Liam,” Danny said, looking surprised.

“Hey. I was just playing ‘Hollow Again’ for Avery. You know ... to get an outside opinion.”

“Oh, nice.” He nodded his head over my shoulder at her. “Sick, isn’t it?”

Avery hid her front with a large textbook. “I love it. Liam’s vocals gave me goose bumps actually.”

All of the air escaped my lungs, not just because she’d admitted to liking

my singing, but because I also discovered I could give her goose bumps without even touching her.

“Yeah, he’s all right.” Danny clamped his hand on my shoulder and laughed. “Let’s go eat while it’s still hot.”

Everyone circled around the kitchen table, loading up their plates. Avery checked the first box, the second, and then the third, slumping her shoulders as she set her empty plate down, and then she wandered to the pantry to grab a granola bar and a soda from the fridge.

I went through each box when she went back to her room, and once I figured out what she was upset about, I snatched the slice of pizza Danny had been about to eat out of his hand. “You ordered three pizzas with pineapple on them? Seriously?”

“It’s everyone’s favorite!”

“No, it’s *your* favorite.” Lexie snorted. “I would’ve stopped him, guys, but he sent me into the liquor store while he grabbed the pizzas.” Lexie shook her head, flicking a piece of the warm fruit from her slice at Danny. “You know I hate pineapple. And so does Avery.”

“She’s also allergic, asshat,” I added.

Danny shrugged. “Whatever. She can pick it off.”

“You’re such a jackass sometimes, Danny.” I snatched my keys off the counter and stormed out of the house.

I was behind the wheel of my truck before I knew what I was doing. The nearest burger joint was only a few miles away, and I was back at the house in less than twenty minutes. I felt like a jerk, inviting her to eat with us and then not having anything she could eat without getting sick. She probably thought that was on purpose.

The crumbled-up granola bar wrapper sat beside her when I came into her room again. I threw two large sacks of food down in front of her, and she jumped.

“What’s all this?” she asked.

“Food,” I answered flatly. I realized that what I had done for her, I wouldn’t have done for just anyone, and I didn’t want to give it more attention than it needed.

“For me?”

“Yeah. Danny’s a selfish bastard. Sorry ’bout that.”

She watched me cautiously. “Um, thanks? You didn’t have to do that. I have a car. I could’ve gone and gotten myself food if I wanted.”

“Okay, fine.”

She leaned away from me when I went to take it back and opened the bag to see what was inside. “I never said I didn’t want it.” She happily popped a fry in her mouth.

“Good.” I had one foot out the door when she mumbled something with her mouth full.

“I can’t eat all of this myself!” she said, holding up a burger.

I sighed, looking back at her pleading eyes. I knew there was still pizza waiting for me in the kitchen, but something about being in here with her seemed more appetizing. My hand tensed around the door handle, and before I could stop myself, I slowly shut the door and sank on the floor beside her, unwrapping a double cheeseburger.

There was a lightness in my head, and I didn’t know if that was because I was sitting so close to her or if it was because I knew I wasn’t doing the right thing. But usually, when I did the wrong thing, there was a buzzing of adrenaline that surged through me. This was similar to adrenaline, but it didn’t feel wrong. It was easy. Besides, it wasn’t like she was in danger of me jumping on top of her when she had this weird mixture of ketchup and ranch smeared on the side of her mouth. Laughing, I handed her a napkin and watched her clean it off.

The word *Harvard* caught my eye on a frame sitting beside her laundry basket. I picked it up and frowned. “You framed your rejection letter from Harvard?”

Avery rolled her eyes. “Christmas present from my mom a few years ago. She said it’s important to keep reminders of my failures, so I’ll remember what it takes to succeed.”

I stared at her blankly for a few moments to see if she was joking. “You’re fucking kidding me, right?”

She shook her head.

“You got into Stanford, which is a hell of a lot closer than Harvard. Isn’t she happy you got into a great school and didn’t have to move away?”

“I guess not. You see, she went to Harvard, and so did my dad. That’s where they met. I grew up with Harvard posters on my wall—and not by choice. Stanford was like second place, which might as well be last in her eyes.”

I gripped the edges of the black wood encasing her so-called “failure,” seeing her relationship with her mom in a whole new light. But then I also saw Avery in a whole new light since she’d moved in. A childhood trauma and a lifetime of trying to be perfect had changed her. And yet something told me that I never really knew her at all.

I flipped the frame over and began removing the back.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes went wide, looking between me and the frame. Her delicate fingers enclosed over my hand, trying to stop me, but I swatted it away. “You can’t just go into people’s rooms and start tearing their stuff apart.”

The corner of my mouth pulled up. “Hey, it’s better than sitting in someone’s room and staring at them while they change. Talk about being objectified.”

Her mouth dropped open into a wide grin, and then I heard her laugh. And not just any laugh. A deep belly laugh that made the air charge with electricity. I couldn’t help but laugh with her.

Once I removed the letter, I held it up and read it out loud. “*Dear Ms. Fox. The Committee on Admissions has completed its regular decision meeting, and I am very sorry to inform you that we cannot offer you admission to blah, blah, blah.*”

I waved the paper in front of her, and she grabbed hold of it, still laughing. As we both pulled, a slight tearing sound made us freeze.

Her blue eyes locked on to me, and her faint smile grew.

“The only one who gets to decide your failures is yourself,” I said, letting it go.

She looked down at the paper in her hand and then gently tore it in half. A relieved smile made its way to her face, softening the tight features her

schoolwork had put there.

I leaned back, propping myself up on my elbow. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” she teased, twisting down onto her stomach.

I smiled briefly, but it fell, the longer I looked at her. “You said Zayn didn’t break your heart, you broke his. How?”

Her cheeks warmed. She hadn’t expected that to be my question. “He, um, asked me to marry him ... and I said no.”

I searched her face for a moment, trying to find regret in her eyes but there wasn’t any.

“I know it doesn’t make sense. I mean, he’s sort of perfect.” Her gaze dropped to the ground when she let out a small laugh.

There was this strange prickly sensation that climbed up my spine that felt an awful lot like jealousy.

“He was everything I thought I wanted, but when he got down on one knee ... I don’t know. I guess I started picturing what my life would be like, and I didn’t want it anymore. That whole white-picket-fence thing scared me. I wasn’t ready, and I think I knew I’d never be ready to marry him. There just wasn’t enough ...” She shook her head, trying to describe their relationship had lacked.

But I knew what had been missing between them. I knew what Avery needed. What she longed for. Something she and I had. “Of this?”

Her eyes shot to mine, and she suddenly seemed closer. “What?”

I smiled because she knew what I meant. “There wasn’t enough heat. You guys didn’t share that carnal desire to want to rip each other’s clothes off and fuck until the sun came up.”

Avery shuddered. “Is that what you think about?”

I lifted her chin and ran the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip. “It’s what we both think about, Avery. Tell me I’m wrong.”

She leaned into my touch. “If you want to kiss me again, do it.”

My hand fell. I wanted that more than my next breath.

“You’re not going to touch me because I’m Danny’s little sister.” Her eyebrow rose. “Right? That’s why you lied to me the other night?”

When I didn't answer, she sat upright and adjusted her notes we'd been lying on, letting out a frustrated sigh. "I've got some more studying to do, Liam."

I bit my lip hard, fighting every impulse I was so used to giving in to. "Listen, Avery," I started. "I betrayed my family once when I turned my father over to the police. Yes, I want you. I don't know what that means or why that feeling won't go away, but I won't betray the only family I have left. I won't do that to Danny."

She nodded her head as I rose to my feet.

"Thanks for playing that song for me," she said when I reached the door.

My back was to her, and even though we were a few feet apart, it felt like she was pressed up against me. I didn't turn around before I opened the door and closed it behind me, too afraid to look at her again when I had so little restraint left. I just needed to hold on to that until she moved out. It couldn't be that hard, could it?

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## Avery

**H**eadstones were weird. You spent your entire life creating this memory of yourself through the family you made, your work, achievements, passions ... all to be dwindled down to a few words carved into a rock above your decaying body. And people came to stare at said headstone when they had perfectly good pictures of you at home. I mean, I get it. No one wanted to think they were forgotten about after they were gone. That was why we tried so hard to leave our mark on this world. But I liked to think my dad wasn't just hanging around his grave, waiting for us to visit. I hoped he was with us when we weren't thinking about him. I hoped he was there every night Danny was onstage, playing guitar, doing what he loved most. Or when Mom danced around in the kitchen to Dean Martin as she made dinner.

I didn't know what parts of me were still parts of him anymore, but I hoped he was there anyway.

I stared at the marble slab sitting in front of me, watching my mother place the white roses below the carved words in the stone.

*David P. Fox.*

*Beloved husband, father, and musician.*

*Gone but never forgotten.*

Forty-two years, and that was how he was remembered. Well, that was how most people would remember him. I was left with a different memory of my dad. One of him in his final moments. One that would stay with me until I was lying six feet under, just like him.

My eyes wandered to the tiny little gravestone next to his, knowing I had come close to having my name stamped across it. Instead, a woman named Fiona May, who'd lived a life twice as long as my father, lay there.

Danny rested his arm over the top of my shoulders while my mother was

still kneeling with her head down.

No one said anything. We never did. Mom usually shed a few tears but hid them from us, as she did with most of her emotions, and Danny was always very quiet and solemn.

*I miss you, Dad. So fucking much.*

Danny let out a long sigh, signaling us to wrap up our visit.

“What a waste,” Danny muttered under his breath as we headed through the long grass to our cars.

Mom stopped halfway and spun around. “What did you say, Daniel?”

“I said, what a waste,” he repeated louder.

“Your father’s life was not a waste. He might’ve been here for a short while”—her voice broke—“but he was a wonderful man and an even better father to you two. And although I wish you didn’t have to take after your father in some ways”—she narrowed her eyes at Danny—“I’m glad he rubbed off on the two of you before he left us.”

The muscles in Danny’s jaw danced as he dropped his arm from my shoulders. “I didn’t mean his life was a waste. I meant, his death was.”

“Everything happens for a reason, sweetheart. Even if it hurts us.” She sighed, fidgeting with her scarf.

“Really? Fate? You’re going to chalk up Dad’s fatal fall from a fucking bridge to fate? That’s bullshit.” He raised his voice.

Mom pointed a finger in Danny’s face. “Watch your language, Daniel!”

My eyes burned with the guilt of knowing the truth. But I couldn’t tell them. I could never tell them. It was better that way. “Guys, stop it. Come on. Not today.”

Danny balled his hands into fists, contemplating his next words. “If you hadn’t had to go into work that night, if you didn’t put your job before everything and everyone else, Dad would’ve come to my gig instead of hers!”

“Here we go again.” Mom rolled her eyes. “I am so sick of you putting this all on me, but I wasn’t in the car that night!”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe if dad hadn’t loved Avery so goddamn much more than he loved me, he would’ve still come to my show anyway,” Danny

said, piercing me with a brief glare.

Tears welled in my eyes. He wasn't wrong.

"Maybe all of you are to blame," he added.

Mom took a long, exaggerated breath. "You believe what you want to believe. I'm done trying with you."

Danny let out a low chuckle. "You were done trying long before Dad died."

"Come on, sweetheart." Mom waved at me while scowling at Danny. "Looks like it will be just us two for lunch today."

Danny flashed a dark grin my way. "Yeah, whatever. I'll see you back at the house, Avery."

"The house?" Mom's eyes looked between the two of us.

I shot Danny a pleading glance. What had he just done?

"What is he talking about, Avery?" Mom pressed.

"Didn't she tell you? Avery is living with me." His grin widened.

*Shit.*

I closed my eyes and awaited my impending doom. Good thing I was at the cemetery. It was more efficient this way.

"Avery Ann? Explain yourself."

My eyes shot back open.

*Jesus. She was still using the middle name? What was I, six years old?*

I shook my head at Danny and then reluctantly met my mother's eyes. "Zayn and I aren't together anymore. It was kind of sudden, and I needed a place to stay."

*Wait for it. Three ... two ... one.*

"I told you! I told you, you shouldn't have moved in with him!"

*And there it is.*

My mother loved being right just about as much as she loved to shove being wrong in your face. The fact that she didn't care to ask why Zayn and I had broken up spoke wonders.

"Why didn't you call me immediately? You could have moved back home. You know I have the space."

"I didn't want to be that far from the campus, and Danny's house is only

twenty minutes away. Fifteen if I beat traffic.” At least it wasn’t a lie, but I wasn’t about to tell her there was no way in hell I was ever going to move back in with her.

“I don’t care if he lives in the campus parking lot; you’re not living with a bunch of drug-addicted musicians.”

My mouth dropped open.

Danny threw his head back and laughed, too familiar with our mom’s ridiculous accusations.

“I will call around tomorrow and find you your own apartment, okay?” I started to shake my head, but she held up her hand and stopped me. “I’ll increase the automatic deposit to your account to make up the cost. I don’t care where it is. If you don’t want to move back with me, you need a place to yourself, away from distractions and—”

“Mom. Stop. I don’t need more money or an apartment. I’m moving in with Nina in less than two months. I’ve worked it out.”

“That’s too far away from now, and your studies are too important. Your exam is coming up. You need to focus!”

“I’m studying every day! I told you, I’ve got it under control.”

“I won’t allow it, Avery.”

“It’s not up to you.” I carefully let out the air threatening to choke me. “I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions. I’m sick of letting you dictate everything in my life just because I’m scared of making you feel useless or unwanted. Well, congratulations, Mom. You did your job. You raised someone who is capable of taking care of herself. Two people actually, but Danny has been taking care of himself long before I started.”

She didn’t move a single muscle in her face. Her pursed lips and wild eyes had been frozen from the moment I opened my mouth. That kind of look usually scared me silent, but I could only hold so much in before I burst. Apparently, that day was today.

“Fine,” she finally said. “I don’t want to hear it when you find out I was right about all of this. When you start to fall behind in your classes or when the stress starts to get to you because you weren’t prepared. Because that day will come, Avery. And you won’t have anyone to blame but yourself.” She

walked to her car and left without another word.

Danny shifted beside me, reminding me of how annoyed I was with him.

“Damn. I’ve never heard you talk to her like that. Thanks for saying those things about me.”

“Screw you.” I gave him the worst death stare I could muster before we both climbed into my car and rode home in silence.



I got two migraines in a three-day time span, but I was lucky enough to catch one of them and take some medication before it got too bad. The other one crippled me to the point where I was lying on my floor in the fetal position. They didn’t used to be this bad, but as I’d dived deeper into studying over the last few years, the migraines worsened.

The band left me alone in the house for a few days as they traveled up to Sacramento for a show. I tried to make good use of my time in the silence of the house, but it wasn’t as helpful as I’d thought it would be. I thought I got more work done when all four of my roommates were creating havoc outside my door.

Mom didn’t call the rest of the week to check up on me or to share any of her surgery stories, and I doubted it was because she hadn’t had any successful ones. She was avoiding me. I didn’t know how far she was going to go with it until I showed up for our usual Sunday breakfast and she wasn’t there.

Danny had apologized to me again, but I couldn’t stay mad at him. I was the one who’d kept something from her. He might’ve told her out of selfish entertainment, but I was glad I said the things I did. It was time I got them off my chest. I just wished the guilt that had come with speaking my mind would eventually go away.

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## Liam

I loved waking up before the rest of the house. It was the only real quiet I got for the day. But lately, having that much peace to myself gave me too much time to think about *her*.

I'd managed to keep my distance from Avery, but there was only so much I could do when we lived together. The band had slowly been putting together the new album in between wrapping up the end of our tour, which took up a lot of my time.

Avery kept her head in her books most days. The other night, we'd invited a bunch of our friends over, and she never left her room. Not once. That was something I was beginning to realize—I was hyperaware of where she was when she wasn't in the room with me. When I was out with the band, I'd be wondering what she was doing, alone at the house. If I was in the studio, I could feel her above me, and I couldn't focus like I used to. When she left with Nina, I wanted to know where she was going and if there'd be other guys there.

I was trying so hard not to care that it became all I could think about instead. She'd started from consuming the back of my brain to every corner of it. I thought about her every night, like an addict on a high. And I'd only had a taste of her. I wanted to know what it felt like to have all of her.

I was filling my coffee mug when I heard a door fly open and footsteps thudding through the living room.

"Crap. Crap. Crap," Avery muttered under her breath as she ran out the front door.

I was pretty sure she'd just thrown on a sweater over her pajamas.

I didn't even turn back around before she charged back in.

She spotted me, her eyes crazy. "Liam! Oh, Liam, can you please give me a ride to class? I'll owe you forever! Please!"

I slowly sipped my coffee. Hearing her beg made my dick twitch, and I

was hoping she'd do it again. "Why can't you drive yourself?"

"My front tire is flat. Please! I'm so late, and my teacher locks the door on the hour. I have to go *now!*"

I sighed and set my coffee down, and she jumped up and down, as if she thought that would make me go faster. I swiped my keys off the counter and was about to walk out the door when she stopped me.

"You're not going to put clothes on?"

I looked down at my boxer briefs and naked chest. "What do you mean? I'm covering everything."

Her eyes scrolled up and down my body like she was studying it, and, dammit, I wanted to take her to a different kind of class.

"You're wearing tiny little bottoms too," I teased.

Her fingers pulled at the bottom of her silk pajama shorts. "What happens if you get pulled over?"

I shrugged. "This has actually gotten me out of tickets in the past, so ..."

She rolled her eyes. "Why am I not surprised?"

I grabbed my jacket off the back of the couch and walked past her. "There. Better? I thought you were in a hurry?"

I heard her giggle as she followed behind me and climbed into the passenger seat of my truck.

It was too early for conversation, so I turned on some music, and even though we didn't talk, I noted that she sat as far away from me as possible. But unlike the last time I had driven her, I knew it wasn't because she couldn't stand me. She was avoiding being near me, like I was avoiding being near her, knowing there was a good chance one of us would give in if we got too close.

"Where do you want me to pull up?" I asked, looking around the impressive campus. I'd driven past it a thousand times, but I'd never driven directly up to the front of the Stanford buildings.

Avery smiled when she saw me taking it all in and pointed to the curb I was coming up to. "Right here, right here." She had the door cracked open before I even stopped. "Thanks, Liam! I owe you one!"

"Don't worry about it. I owe you more than a ride to school after you



helped us with ‘Hollow Again.’ ”

A small smile lifted her lips as she glanced back at me, her long brown hair flowing back and forth with her hurried strides.

I heard giggles and whispers to my left and turned my head just in time to greet two girls approaching my truck.

“Do you know who you are?” one of the girls asked, hugging her books to her chest.

*Jesus. How did you get into Stanford with a dumbass question like that?*

“I do, but unfortunately, I don’t know your two beautiful names.” My response was pure instinct.

Their eyes glowed as they tried to hide their excitement.

“I’m Brit. This is Kate. We saw you a few weeks ago at The Warfield.” The girl with her hands free rested them on my open window.

“You guys were amazing,” the other added.

“Ah, thanks for coming out, ladies. We’re playing there again at the end of the month. You interested in a pair of VIP tickets?”

They both squealed. “Yes! Oh my God!”

I flashed a cocky grin. “All right. Let me get your first and last names to my manager. He’ll put some on hold for you at the door.”

Both girls were clinging to my side as I texted Nikko their information.

“We were just about to go get some coffee. Do you want to join us?” the more eager one asked as she bit her lip.

The way she fluttered her eyelashes and stroked my forearm with her long fingernails, I got the feeling that wasn’t an invitation to get coffee. That was an invitation to go *fuck*.

I contemplated going for a few seconds as the clouds darkened above me and rain began to sprinkle onto my windshield. The girls waited impatiently, clearly not happy about getting wet. Exhausting myself with two instead of one just might be the key to getting my mind off Avery and satiating my growing hunger. I was about to tell them to hop in my truck when my passenger door slammed shut.

Avery’s head fell back against the seat as she folded her arms tightly around herself. “I was two minutes late. Two minutes! And he locked the

fucking door,” she said, too frustrated to care that she’d interrupted my pending lay.

The rain started coming down faster.

“Maybe another time, ladies. I hope to see you at the show.” I winked at Kate and Brit—I had no idea which one was which anymore—and watched as their shoulders sank, and then they ran to shelter, holding books above their heads.

I turned my attention to Avery. “You don’t have another class after this one?”

“Nope. I only have one lecture on Wednesdays, and then I usually study in the library for a couple of hours afterward.”

Imagining Avery in a library, trying to be quiet, somehow turned me on.

“Today was not a good day to miss.” She laughed nervously. “I’ve never skipped a class before. Ever. I mean, does this even count as skipping when I actually showed up to take the class but I was late?” She laughed again. “This is kind of exhilarating.”

I raised my brow. “*This* is all it takes?”

“Hey. It’s either I laugh and think this is fun or I panic and cry.” She threw her book bag by her feet, hiding the growing discomfort.

“I don’t get what the big deal is. It’s one class.”

“And I’m missing a ton of notes. My Step 1 exam is coming up next month, and I don’t feel anywhere close to being ready.”

“Step 1 exam?”

“It’s pretty much the hardest and most important test I’ll ever have to take in my life. It decides what residency I get and what residency I go to in the future.” She sighed heavily. “And I’m nowhere near ready.”

I could see her mind beginning to race, and I started to drive, but I wasn’t going back to the house. She needed a distraction. And with the rain pounding on us, I knew exactly where to go.

After fifteen minutes of driving in the opposite direction, Avery was able to focus enough to realize we weren’t headed home. “Where are we?”

I made a quick left turn and pulled into the parking lot of a park I knew would be empty with how shitty the weather was.

*Perfect.*

“Liam?”

I let out a heavy sigh, knowing it wasn't going to be easy to get her out of the truck with how hard it was raining. “Can you just do what I say and not ask any questions?”

“Probably not.”

I smiled and grabbed her hand without warning, and then I pulled her through the truck, out into the rain.

Avery tensed and gasped at the cold drops hitting her bare skin and soaking her clothes. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

I started to second-guess bringing her out here until I caught a glimpse of a smile lifting her cheeks.

“Liam, it's freezing!” she yelled over the sound of the rain bouncing off the pavement.

I paused in the middle of the parking lot, shifting my hold from her wrist to her hand. She spread her fingers and interlocked them with mine, like it was natural.

My lips curled with satisfaction at the sight of her laughing and looking up at the sky. I squeezed her hand and caught her next glance, leading her down onto the wet ground.

She let out a high-pitched scream as she lay completely flat, soaking her backside on the cold, drenched concrete. “This is insane. What if—”

“Shut up and feel it, Avery,” I said, rubbing my thumb against the back of her hand. “Stop thinking, stop worrying, and just feel it.”

22



## Avery

The walls between Liam and me came tumbling down, disintegrating in the water beating around us. As much as I wanted to defy him, I listened to his instructions and focused on the rain hitting every inch of my body. The tiny beads of water pummeling my face, my bare legs, and my chest were overwhelming at first, but I eventually got used to it. The constant impact of the freezing cold rain began to numb my skin and, with it, my ability to care.

I let go. I felt everything and nothing, all at once. It was freeing. Liberating. The world around me seemed infinite, and I couldn't help but think about how insignificant all of my problems were. My stress with school, my problems with my mom, my worries about my future—they all were insignificant in comparison to the way I felt, holding Liam's hand in the middle of a rainstorm.

This, right here, was living. I'd forgotten what that felt like.

Turning my head, I opened my eyes and set my vision on Liam's perfectly sculpted face. Rain ran down his profile—from his nose to his sharp jawline, all the way down his neck and to the ground beneath. I watched it over and over, like a dance. I suddenly became envious of the rain and how it got to feel every curve of his body, the roughness of his unshaven stubble, the soft flesh of his lips, and the dips of his lower abdomen.

A crack of thunder sounded overhead, making us both jump.

His deep brown eyes locked with mine and then darkened when he must have realized that I had been looking at him this whole time.

Another bone-chilling jolt of thunder rang through the sky, and we scrambled to our feet, running to his truck as fast as we could.

He opened his door and let me climb in before him, and then he turned the ignition and blasted the heat as we both dripped all over the cab.

"My heart is beating so fast." I laughed. My voice was uneven from the shivers setting in. "Thank God you fixed the heater."

Liam nodded and blew into his hands, trying to warm them. “It still takes a minute to warm up. Sorry.”

His muscles under his jacket spasmed, and his abs tensed. I still couldn’t believe he was only in his underwear and leather jacket. But if there was anyone who could make it look like he was fresh off the runway and not some crazy, deadbeat man lacking clothes, it was him.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, running my gaze up and down his wet body. I caught myself staring at him again, but I didn’t care. The adrenaline surging through me sparked a fire under my chilled skin, and with every inch of him I took in, the fire spread.

Liam’s eyes drifted to mine, making my heart catch in my throat, and I stopped exploring. Something about the way he looked at me sucked me in and made my labored breaths quicken.

“Liam,” I breathed. “I know this is against the rules—” I stopped when I realized he had inched closer, not missing his quick glance down at my lips. “But maybe if we both just get this out of our system ... if we get this over with, we can stop thinking about it.”

He swiped his tongue over his bottom lip. “Get what over with exactly?” he asked to be sure.

My whole body tensed with anticipation. Just thinking about all of the things I wanted him to do to me made the feeling between my legs impossible to ignore. “You know what I want. What we both want.”

I caught the darkest grin flash across his features before he concealed it.

“You want me to get you off, Little Fox?”

For the first time, that nickname didn’t make me what to pummel him. It turned me on. All I could manage was a single nod before I lost all control and closed the small distance left between us, crashing my lips onto his.

Liam was surprised by my assault at first but quickly fell into unison with my desperate kiss. His lips were cold from the rain, but the warmth of his tongue slipped in and out of my mouth, coaxing a hum loose. It was like he had been starved. His fingers took hold of the back of my neck as he let out a husky groan that vibrated all the way down to my core. The kiss was explosive and hot, but it wasn’t enough. It was only the beginning.

I felt his other hand grip my hip with tremendous force as he leaned over me, and I knew what he wanted. Rising up onto my knees, I lifted my leg as he helped guide me down to sit on top of him. My knees dug into the seat on either side of him as his erection slid right over my sweet spot. I let out a moan right into his mouth.

*Oh, holy hell.*

He pulled away, looking up at me through hooded eyes as both of his hands dug into my hips, and he thrust up slowly, hitting me again.

I moaned louder, giving him the note he so desperately wanted to hear again. My hips rolled, building that pressure, and with how wet and thin the barrier of clothes was, I could feel the distinct outline of the head of his cock.

Butterflies came to life inside my rib cage, fluttering wildly. I looked back at him and swiftly tore my sweater over my head, leaving behind my silk green shorts and tank top I had worn to bed last night.

As I continued to work my hips forward and backward to a slow and steady rhythm, his hands trailed up my sides, finding the curve of my face.

His mouth hovered above mine. "Oh, the things I could do to you, Avery."

I gripped his hand and moved it closer, sucking his finger into my mouth. "I want it all, Liam," I said after I released him.

His wide eyes briefly searched mine as his fingers tightly coiled in my hair, and then he brought his mouth back to mine, all reservations gone.

He kissed me until I had to break for air, and then his mouth began to trail down my jaw and to my neck. His hand dropped to my shoulder, gently removing the strap of my top down my arm as his tongue caressed my collarbone. As soon as my breast was exposed, he cupped it in his hand and ran the pad of his thumb over the tender peak.

I gasped, wanting more ... so much more.

As if he could read my mind, his mouth replaced where his thumb had once been, and he pulled my nipple between his teeth.

My body exploded with sensation and desire. "Oh my God." I raked my fingers over his body and finally settled on his shoulders for stability. "More, Liam. Please."

He obeyed and quickly uncovered my right breast, giving it as much

attention as the left.

The rain hitting the truck drowned out my whimpers when his hand found the loose hem of my shorts and easily pushed them aside.

His fingers instantly found my slippery center and froze.

I looked down at him, dizzy and breathless.

“You’re not wearing underwear?” he stated.

I smiled lazily. “I never wear any with my PJs.”

“Good to know,” he said before he finally relieved me of my torture and moved his fingers.

I threw my head back, letting the pleasure take over every nerve in my body. I didn’t even know what sounds I was making anymore because I’d never felt that unhinged in my life. But I still didn’t feel completely satisfied.

As the tension built in my core, I didn’t want to come undone in his hand. I wanted to feel him. All of him.

Liam began to work faster, sensing my pending release, and it took everything in me to stop him. His eyes were almost black when I stilled his hand between my legs.

“Avery ...”

I lifted up slightly and pulled at his briefs, freeing his entire length.

My mouth parted, taking him in, and then I found his gaze, knowing I was going to cross a line I’d never thought I’d be standing in front of.

His lips gently touched mine, as if he was giving me a choice to back out. A moment to get my head straight before we let the rain wash away that line for good.

But my mind had been made up since the moment he’d kissed me for the first time at his show. I wanted him more than I’d thought was possible. It’d just taken me a long time to allow myself to fully feel that connection and do something about it.

Liam took my bottom lip between his teeth before he leaned across the cab, reaching for the glove compartment.

“What are you doing?” I giggled, trying to hold on to him.

“I think I’ve got a condom in here somewhere.”

I shook my head and pulled his face back to mine. “I’ve got it covered.



I'm on the pill.”

He hesitated before sitting back up, and then his eyes fell over the entire front of my body. “You are so fucking beautiful, Av. I'm sorry I've never told you that.”

I smiled and leaned into his ear. “What are you waiting for? Fuck me, Liam.”

And with a small adjustment, he did just that.

I screamed out as he filled me, over and over, like an animal free from a cage. He wasn't gentle, but I didn't want that. The energy building between us over the past several weeks was too powerful to simply ease into this. We needed a release as much as we needed it from each other.

I shoved my hands under the collar of his leather jacket, and I dug my fingers into his skin as we gained speed. He grunted, and I gasped as I met his thrusts with equal force, the sound of flesh hitting flesh louder than the thunder clapping above us.

Liam's hands palmed my ass, leading me to him as I felt him swell inside me.

“Avery, you feel amazing. I don't want it to end, but ...” His words drifted as he let out a low growl.

“I'm so close. Don't stop,” I cried out.

My breasts hit against his bare chest as my thighs began to tremble while I came down harder and harder until I found my release. “Yes, yes ... oh God, Liam ... yes!” My cries filled the cab of the truck as the rain eased up.

Liam fell over the edge next, digging his fingers into my hips so hard that I thought he might leave marks. But the feeling spreading from my core over every inch of my body was pure ecstasy, and I didn't care about anything else. Every part of me he touched and kissed as he came apart beneath me left me floating.

And I never wanted to touch the ground again.

23



## Liam

I hated myself for fucking my best friend's sister. I hated myself for not having enough strength to stay away from her—or at the very least, keep my hands off of her. But most of all, I hated myself for wanting to do it again.

Four days—that was how long it'd been since I'd touched her, and I couldn't stop myself from the torture of replaying every second of that morning with her over and over again in my head. I thought about it when I woke up, when I was recording in the studio, when I was driving. I even dreamed about her. The sounds she'd made for me, because of me, haunted me.

It was agonizing, having her right at my fingertips every single day, knowing what the skin of her neck had tasted like and how her nipple had hardened in my mouth when I claimed each one. Or the way she'd squeezed around me and cried out when I filled her, right down to the hilt.

I had to stop.

I tried to rationalize it, telling myself that she was just another girl. That being with her was the same as being with anyone else. When that didn't work, I thought about how stressed she'd been and how much she'd needed to let go, but then I'd have to admit that my feelings for her were strong enough to want to help her find that release. The thought I kept repeating in my head was that it'd meant nothing. That it'd just been a one-time thing. But I'd rather admit to being an honest sinner, even if it was just to myself, and save myself the pain of continuing to force those lies down my throat.

The strings of my guitar hummed as I started my tenth run-through of a song I was working on when I heard the sliding door open behind me. I twisted in the lawn chair and spotted Tic poking his head out of the house.

“Aye, Liam. Wanna give that a rest for the night and come watch a movie with us?”

“Sure. Just give me a minute,” I said, continuing to manipulate the strings. The sliding door closed, and then I heard his footsteps.

Tic stepped in front of me, holding the extra beer in his hand out. “Come on. You’ve been at it for hours. Take a break.”

*Had it really been that long?* I took the beer and set down my guitar.

“It’s sounding good, man. You have lyrics for it?” Tic asked.

“None worth sharing yet.”

He nodded and took a pull from his bottle. “What’s got you working so hard?”

“I don’t know. Just trying to stay busy, I guess.” *Yeah, so I wouldn’t fuck Danny’s little sister again.*

“We’re way ahead of our deadlines with the label, especially after giving them ‘Hollow Again.’ We can afford to take it easy—at least until our tour is done.”

“I don’t mind the work.”

“How come you haven’t played it with Danny boy yet?”

Danny and I usually did the most work in the group when it came to songwriting, and we did better brainstorming together.

“I’m not sure I have anything yet. It’s still a work in progress.”

Tic nudged my boot with his foot and smiled. “Sure sounds like you’ve got something. I think I heard you play the entire song through at least a dozen times. You want to play around with it in the studio tomorrow? We can mess around with the other instrumentals. Maybe that will help you with the lyrics.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I already had most of the lyrics in my head, but I had yet to sing them. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to have them help me come up with lyrics that weren’t about Avery. She was consuming my songwriting now too.

“Hey. You’d tell me if there was something going on, right?”

I frowned, hoping he hadn’t noticed anything between Avery and me. “What do you mean?”

The light from the pool reflected off of his face. “It’s pretty obvious you’ve been distracted lately. I don’t want to assume that’s a bad thing, but

after what happened with Danny all those years ago, I don't ever want to write off when one of us is acting a little different."

There was a sliver of relief, followed by a squeezing in my chest. I knew what it felt like to be on his end, worrying about something that might seem insignificant but could end up catastrophic if left unchecked.

"Nah, man. It's nothing like that. I promise."

He chewed on that for a second. "I don't mean to compare this to Danny's overdose. I know with everything you went through with your dad, it wouldn't lead to that. But if there's anything bothering you, you know I'm always here. Right?"

I stood and quickly hugged him. "You have nothing to worry about." I pulled away and took another sip of my beer, contemplating telling him the truth. But I feared that would make him worry about not only me, but Danny too. "It's honestly just a girl."

"No shit?" He chuckled. "I don't know if that's all that better."

I smiled. "She's got me writing songs, doesn't she?"

"I guess. Just be careful, Liam."

My smile tilted. "Relax. When have I ever had girl problems?"

He elbowed me. "Whatever, man."

"Tic! Liam!" Nikko called from the house, holding a bowl of popcorn. "Are we watching a movie or what?" he asked, stuffing a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

"Dude, that is so not rock and roll." Tic shook his head.

Nikko stopped chewing and gave us a scowl before tipping the bowl over, sending the popcorn all over the floor. He kicked a few pieces at his feet for dramatic effect.

"You did not just spill my fucking popcorn!" Lexie yelled from inside.

Tic and I erupted in laughter, knowing you should never come between Lexie and her snacks.

Nikko turned and put his hands up, as if he were being held at gunpoint. "I'll make you more! Calm down, woman!"

I bit down on my fist, seeing Nikko get jabbed in the stomach. Lexie was tiny, but she put all of her weight behind her punches.

She opened the door wider with her hands on her hips. “What are you two laughing at? Hurry the fuck up.”

We both scurried inside, afraid we might be her next victims.

“Ah, I was wondering where Danny was,” I said, finding him nestled on the couch with his tongue down Hannah’s throat. “Careful, Danny boy. You can still catch syphilis that way.”

Hannah threw up her middle finger with her lips still plastered to his.

“I thought you two broke up for the hundredth time?”

Danny narrowed his eyes at me over the top of her head. “Fuck you, man. What do you care?”

Hannah grabbed his face again and smiled. “I could never say no to this man.”

“Could you say no to anybody?” I said under my breath.

Tic nearly spat out his drink.

Hannah always rubbed me the wrong way. She was a bitch to everyone, especially Danny. She was also a freak in bed, which we all knew by now because she’d worked her way through every one of us at one time or another. But that was what Danny was into. Even if she was crazy. Maybe not my ex Rhen crazy, but she had her moments. The only reason she kept coming back to Danny was because none of us wanted her anymore and Danny was dumb enough to think it was love.

I moved out of the way as Nina came walking out of the kitchen, juggling two beers, a water, and a bag of chips. She paused when she found Nikko hunched over on the floor in pain.

She shrugged and stepped over him. “You probably deserved it.”

*Okay, I like this girl.*

But if Nina was here, that meant Avery wasn’t going to be in her room, studying all night.

A spark lit in my chest as I swiveled my head just in time to see Avery strutting down the hall. Joggers and an oversize T-shirt had never looked so sexy, but then again, she could be wearing a burlap sack, and I’d still be turned on, knowing what everything beneath it felt like.

Nina handed Avery the water as they sat down. Avery glanced up at me as

I took a seat on the opposite end of the L-shaped couch. She offered me a small smile before Nina pulled her attention away. My eyes fell to the sexy curve of her lips as she spoke. I wanted to kiss them so badly that I could barely think straight.

As soon as Nikko got back with a fresh bowl of popcorn, Lexie pressed Play, and instead of watching the movie, I watched Avery.

For the first twenty minutes, she avoided my gaze, but I knew she could feel me staring. She could feel my eyes running all over her, lingering on the two peaks hardening under her loose T-shirt. I swore I saw her shiver as I started to picture them in my mouth again, and I wondered what she was imagining herself.

Even in the dark, the television illuminated her enough for me to see her breathing was heavier, and it turned me on, knowing I could turn her on this way. Her eyes were still on the screen, but I could tell she wasn't watching it. She was squeezing her legs together, trying to contain herself while we sat, surrounded by the very people we didn't want to find us out. Luckily, they were none the wiser, too absorbed in the movie or each other to notice how badly I wanted her or how badly she wanted me.

The sudden bulge between my legs swelled when she finally looked up at me through her lashes, like the prey she was, knowing she was being hunted. Only this Little Fox wasn't afraid. She wanted the chase. It was the only thing that thrilled her right now. That thought lingered for a minute as I let the idea of her using me to fulfill her dull life sink in, but I knew Avery well enough to know she didn't make decisions without thinking them through carefully. If she wanted me, then it was enough to overlook all of the reasons why she shouldn't want me.

Avery leaned into Nina's ear and whispered something I couldn't read on her lips, and then she disappeared down the dark hallway to her bedroom without looking at me.

My heart started to beat so fast that I could feel it in my throat, all the way down to my groin.

How long would I have to wait until it wasn't suspicious? Five minutes? Ten? I made it to three before I stretched and yawned, and then I lazily stood

up from the couch.

Lexie was the only one who noticed I was leaving, and she shot me a strange knowing look before turning back to the movie. Damn her. She was too fucking observant for her own good.

When I got to Avery's door, I paused and ran my fingers through my hair, debating my morals. I didn't have enough time to talk myself out of it because the doorknob began to turn at my fingertips.

Avery cracked the door open, like she could feel me on the other side of it, and then pulled me in. She had her back to me when she shut the door as quietly as she could, and before she could face me, I pinned her against it, her hands braced in front of her.

"Took you long enough," she whispered.

A curse rolled off my tongue as my chest buzzed when I got the validation I'd desperately wanted.

"Once wasn't enough, was it?" She grinned.

My hands drifted up her shirt and teased the skin under her breasts. "Something tells me, it will never be enough." I kissed her behind the ear and then skated my lips down her neck, scraping my teeth as I went. "Maybe if I go slower this time ..."

My fingers trailed back down her stomach, and she let out a sharp breath when I slid my hand beneath her waistband.

"Liam," she whimpered, shifting so her legs parted wider.

One finger slipped inside her from my reach around, and my callous thumb circled her core. Holy fuck, she was wet.

My hands twitched as the devilish side of me told me to shred her clothes and fuck her against the door until it came apart at the hinges, but I wanted to watch her this time. The way she moved when we were connected and the sounds she made just before she cried out my name were going to be burned into the back of my mind like a song I'd never forget the lyrics to.

I spun her around and kissed her hard. She smiled into my lips and wrapped her hands around my backside, pulling me against her. My groan vibrated her mouth, giving me a fun idea.

I sank down onto my knees and hooked a thumb on either side of her



waistband, watching her as I revealed the delicate white lace triangle of her thong. My lips ran along her small scar as I continued to strip her lower half bare.

Her eyes heated as I locked my gaze with hers while I pulled at the back of her knee and swung her leg over my shoulder. Her thigh trembled as I nipped and traced my tongue up the inside of it. When she arched her back, I suddenly wished I had removed her shirt, so I could see the rest of her as I stared up in awe.

“Every inch of you is so soft. So addictive,” I whispered, moving closer to where she wanted it most. My mouth covered her sweet center at the same time I pushed two fingers inside of her.

Avery gripped my hair like she never wanted to let go and let out a cry that made me second-guess the slower method I was using. I gazed up at her again and hummed deeply. The throaty vibration and the work of my tongue and thick fingers nearly sent her over the edge with only a few movements. I was thankful the TV was loud enough to cover her heightening gasps as I stroked faster until she was bucking against my hand. She could barely stand when I stopped and pulled my fingers away from that heated part of her.

“What the hell was that?” she asked on the brink of orgasm.

“I told you”—I paused and lifted her, securing her legs around my waist—“I’m savoring you.”

“Can you savor me a little faster, Liam?” she pleaded.

Her mouth covered my wet lips as I walked over to the bed and set her down beneath me.

I stood and took off my shirt and then my pants, reveling in the way her gray eyes danced over every part of me, hungry with desire. She reached out for me when I tossed my boxers aside, but I caught her wrists and quickly pushed her back until they were pressed above her head on the mattress.

“Keep those there,” I said, releasing my grip.

My hands immediately found the hem of her shirt and pulled it up until it covered her eyes. Her panting grew heavier when she realized I wasn’t moving it any further, and she began to squirm. A shocking moan escaped her throat as I sucked in one of her soft peaks, and I had to cover her mouth

with my hand.

“Shh, Avery. You have to be quiet.”

She nodded, and I carefully lifted my hand, moving it down between her thighs. She bit down on her lower lip to avoid the scream threatening to escape as I started making tiny circles, and once I knew she would be quiet, I started exploring the rest of her body with my mouth.

I didn't make it as far as I'd thought I would because once I took her other distended bud in my mouth and saw the way she reacted, I couldn't help but focus all my energy on making her come from just that.

She thrust up to make me go faster as her moans grew desperate. I had to quiet her, but both my hands were busy, so I released her pretty pink flesh with a wet sound and claimed her delicious cries with a kiss as she came undone.

Her lips broke free, and she buried her head in the crook of my neck as I suddenly filled her with every thick inch of me. The wind felt like it had been knocked out of me when she began to pulse and flex from the overwhelming sensation still rocking through her. After a breath, I moved slowly, but my head began to spin with the intense need to pick up speed.

“You feel so fucking good, Av.”

I never had sex with a girl without a condom because I didn't trust any of them enough to take care of protection on their own. When Avery had told me she was on the pill, I'd had no doubt in my mind we'd be safe. And feeling her bare was next to being onstage. Once I'd experienced it, it was an addiction I couldn't stop craving. A high I'd never come down from.

“Oh my God.” Avery's gasp hinted at a laugh before she inhaled sharply. “Oh, Liam. I'm almost there again. I—”

I thrust faster, cutting her words short. Her hot breath on my neck encouraged me, and my eyes pinched shut as my own release built.

*To hell with slow.*

I tore the shirt over the rest of her face, so I could look into her hazy, beautiful eyes and then grabbed hold of her shoulders to help close the distance between us faster. I pumped once. Twice. On the third, my climax rocked through my body like an earthquake the same time Avery's nails tore

down my shoulders with her second orgasm. I gently pulled out of her, holding her firmly against me as I waited for my body to recover from the tremors.

After a minute, I collapsed beside her and wrapped her into my chest, craving a different kind of touch from her. This was new to me. Typically, after sex, I had somewhere to be, or I'd ask the girl to leave, so I could go to sleep. They never stayed the night. They were never even in my bed.

But tonight, I didn't have anywhere to be, and I couldn't tell Avery to leave her own bed. I didn't want her to leave anyway. There was nothing I wanted more than to hold her in my arms. I was sick of trying to rationalize it. Avery was quickly becoming my drug of choice, my weakness, and I didn't care how selfish that made me.

If I went to hell for this, so be it. At least I could say I'd been to heaven after lying with her.

24



## Avery

I woke up, tangled in between the limbs of a very warm and very naked Liam Lockwood. After a couple weeks of him sneaking into my room late at night, I'd finally snuck into his. He had the bigger bed anyway, and as much as I liked being cradled in a cocoon of tattooed muscles, I needed some space to stretch out. Especially after some of the positions he put me in before we exhausted ourselves enough to sleep.

I sat up in bed and switched off the alarm vibrating my phone on the nightstand. My fingers raked through my hair, trying to smooth out the knots Liam had put there, when two strong arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me back under the covers.

"Liam." I giggled in protest. "I have to get ready for school. I'm going to the hospital today to watch a surgery, and I don't think they're going to wait on me to start slicing someone open."

Liam hummed and squeezed me tighter. His hard chest was comforting, and I fit perfectly in his hold. "But I liked what happened last time you were late to class."

I could feel him smile against the side of my face, and my cheeks warmed as I thought of how aggressive we had been the first time we had sex.

It'd been three weeks since the rainstorm, but it felt like we'd been going at it for three months. Liam had me doing things I'd never dreamed of doing, and I found myself growing more confident in everything I did, in and out of our beds. The other night, he had taken me from behind against the kitchen counter while the band was in the basement, warming up. The idea of one of them walking in on us was terrifying and completely unlike me, but it was equally as hot and exciting. He'd had to stuff a towel in my mouth to make sure no one heard us.

We were hungry for each other every moment of the day, like newlyweds. He respected my studying time, but I couldn't focus for more than thirty

minutes at a time when I knew he was in his room above me, waiting to give me a nightcap. I anticipated it and looked forward to seeing him all day.

We never officially talked about what we were doing or what it meant, but we both knew it needed to be kept between the two of us.

It was sex. That was it. No one needed to know about something that didn't have a label or attachments with it.

Well, no one, except for Nina.

I'd already waited long enough to tell her, and today was her birthday, so I figured letting her know I was getting laid would be the perfect gift for the girl who had everything. Nina was supportive and wanted me to get over Zayn in my own time, but I knew she was itching to try and set me up with someone new.

Guilt still lingered heavily in my chest for hurting Zayn the way I had. I'd never meant to lead him on, but I hadn't known I felt the way I did until he got down on one knee. Marrying him would be any girl's dream; it just wasn't mine. What I wanted was still a mystery to me. Luckily, I had plenty of time to figure it out. In the meantime, Liam kept me busy and ... satisfied. Oh-so satisfied. Thinking about all the ways he could satisfy me made that need tighten between my legs.

"Liam, I have to go before everyone else wakes up."

He teathed my earlobe. "You say you need to leave, but your body is telling me you want something else." His hand slid down my side to my hip. "See? You're grinding that beautiful ass into me."

I hadn't even realized I had been moving, but, God, I couldn't stop.

Next, his lips gave my neck a gentle kiss. "And I can feel your pulse rising, right here."

I bit my lip, trying to remember what it was I had to get out of bed for. "I really should—"

His erection slid between my cheeks, finding my slick entrance, and I shut up.

"You're so ready for me, Avery." His words dripped into my ear like honey. "I'll stop if you still want to go, but if you stay—"

I knew what would happen if I stayed, but I wanted him to tell me

anyway.

“I’ll make you come three times before breakfast.”

I turned my head to meet his deep brown eyes. “Breakfast?”

“That’s the part you heard?” He laughed and ran his hand over my cheek. “I’ll make you whatever you want.”

That sweet sentiment, even if he didn’t follow through on it, made my heart explode in my chest. “Okay.” I smiled and teased my tongue inside his mouth. “I’ll stay.”

He kept his eyes on me. My name formed on his lips as he pushed himself inside me.

There was something different about the way he touched me this time—holding me tightly, one arm around my hips and the other just below my breasts—as he trailed tender kisses up and down my neck. He was slow and passionate with his movements until the very end.

It didn’t feel like fucking. It didn’t feel like just sex. There was a part of himself he was sharing with me on a more intimate level than pleasure alone. The connection scared me because that wasn’t part of the plan. I liked plans. Emotions and feelings would make this more than what we’d silently agreed to.

But seeing him tear down part of his walls for me to let me in made me want to shed my own armor. Without thinking, I kissed him and tried to hold on to this strange light suddenly filling the void inside me. I knew it might cause more harm than good, but right now, it was euphoric.

We stayed in bed until Liam fulfilled every sweet release he’d said he’d give me. He even kept true to his word and cooked me breakfast.

It was the best damn French toast I’d ever had.



Nina slammed the door of the car so hard that it rattled my chest, and then she started marching across the parking lot toward Elevens. This was a

twenty-four-year-old tantrum if I'd ever seen one.

"Nina? Nina, stop walking away," I said, trailing behind her.

"It's my birthday. Don't tell me what to do."

My shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. How many times do I have to apologize? It's not like it means anything."

Her feet planted firmly in the ground as she craned her neck and laughed. "You're going to tell me that you're sleeping with someone just for sex?" Her mocking tone was unnerving. "You?"

I glanced around the parking lot. "Can you keep it down?"

"Oh! And that person happens to be not only your enemy since grade school, but also your brother's best friend."

She was happy for me. *I think*. She just needed to get over the fact that I hadn't called her the moment it happened.

"Who are you?"

"It's still me. I'm just letting go a little."

"Yeah, well, the Avery I know doesn't miss class to fuck some lead singer of a rock band." Nina's eyes widened, like something had hit her square in the nose. "Oh my God. That sounds so incredibly hot."

My brows inched up my forehead as I breathed out a short laugh.

"Hot and *stupid*," she added, holding on to her anger. "I thought you hated Liam?"

I nodded. "I thought I did too. He's ... different."

"Different? Oh, honey. It must be really good sex." She sympathized.

Headlights blinded me as they entered the parking lot, and then I saw the familiar truck. *What the hell was Liam doing here?*

"Oh, did I forget to tell you I invited everyone?" Her face morphed with sarcasm. "I invited Zayn too."

My shoulders tensed.

"He couldn't make it."

She started to march up the steps when I caught her arm. "Nina, no one knows."

"No one knows about the little sexcapade you two have been having for—how long has it been again? I'm sorry. I'm still trying to grasp all the



information because I *just found out today!*”

My eyes pleaded with hers.

“Relax. I figured as much.” She glanced over as Liam, Danny, and Milton started toward us. “But you still owe me for lying to me.”

“I didn’t lie to you, Nina. I just didn’t tell you what I was doing with my spare time.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Fine. I lied.” I conceded. “What do you want?”

“First, I want to know every juicy detail.” There was a hint of a smile on her lips, and I got the feeling I wasn’t going to like whatever the second part of the deal was.

“Happy birthday, Nina!” Milton and Danny said, one after the other.

The boys took turns in hugging her.

Liam acknowledged me with a small nod, but I didn’t miss his eyes scanning my violet-colored dress before he reached us.

Danny glanced at his phone. “Nikko texted me. He said he and Lexie are already inside.”

“I called Matt on the way over,” Liam said. “He’s got our table in the corner all set up for you, Nina.”

Nina’s eyes flicked between Liam and me before she thanked him.

“Seeing as how it’s a special occasion, are you going to give in and sing tonight, Liam?” Milton nudged him.

He shook his head. “Nah, I don’t sing for free.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you don’t.”

Liam winked at me.

“Oh, come on.” Nina threw me a devilish grin. “Avery’s going up there.”

I didn’t have a pulse for at least five seconds after she said that.

“No way!” Milton’s face lit up.

Danny looked as surprised as I felt, and I didn’t bother to look up at Liam. I could feel him nearly laughing beside me.

“We’ll have to think of a song for her,” Nina said, leading the way inside with a stupid fucking pep in her step.

I grumbled a string of curse words under my breath.

“You look fantastic, by the way,” Liam whispered in my ear as we fell behind the group.

I tilted my head to give him a smile, but he quickly captured my lips in a kiss.

“Liam!” I shot my eyes up at the door to the bar and then realized we were alone.

“What? You don’t think after sneaking around as much as we have that I haven’t mastered it yet? I’m fucking Ethan Hunt at this point.” He grinned, gripping my waist with skilled hands.

“I just don’t like the idea of being caught at any moment. My nerves are always on edge.”

He dipped his head. “That’s called adrenaline, Av. Most people crave it.”

“Not me.”

Liam smirked. “Well, I know something you do crave.”

My eyes heated when they landed on his lips.

He jiggled the keys in his hand. “Want to go hide out in my truck for a few minutes?”

My eyes widened, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t consider it.

He cupped my face and planted his body against mine. “We’ve proven to be pretty fast. No one will notice we’re gone.”

“Hey, you two lovebirds.” Nina opened the door before he could pull away fast enough, proving him wrong. “We ordered a round of drinks. Get your asses in here!”

Liam’s whole body went rigid.

The door slowly closed behind her, leaving us with the quiet hum of the music inside once more.

“She knows?”

“I told her on the way here. She won’t say anything; don’t worry.”

A muscle in his jaw danced. “How do you know?”

I frowned. “Because she’s my best friend. She knows secrets about me far worse than this.”

His eyes snapped to mine, like he couldn’t believe I had a past worth hiding.

“Let’s just go inside and try to have fun. As long as I go up on that stage tonight, our secret will be safe with Nina.”

Liam’s hand trailed down my back to my ass, and then he pinched. Hard.

“Hey!” I swatted.

A wide grin stretched his cheeks. “That was for good luck.”

Then, he took both sides of my face and pressed his lips to mine.

“And that?” I blinked, desperately trying not to do it again.

“That was for me.”

25



## Liam

Avery opened her mouth to sing, and I forgot how to breathe. Not in the romantic-gesture kind of way. She didn't literally take my breath away with her voice. Her cue came in, and she didn't make a sound at all.

I could see the fear taking over her like ice climbing its way up from her feet, to her legs, and then her hands holding the microphone. I froze with her, hoping the confident girl I'd seen her become would make an appearance.

The moment I heard the first person booing her offstage, I was out of my seat, charging through the crowd. I thought I was trying to find the idiot stupid enough to boo the most beautiful girl here and beat him to a pulp, but instead, I ended up right beside Avery onstage.

Her big gray doe eyes flickered up to me, and her panic immediately began to subside. An ache formed in my chest when I knew that my presence was enough to comfort her.

The music was cut off, and the patrons started to get louder. Some complained. Some shouted in excitement when they recognized me. I looked over their heads and waved to Matt at the bar, and then I took the microphone from Avery.

"We're going to do this one together, okay?" I said, tilting my head down so she could hear me.

Matt arrived right before Nina, both waiting for instructions.

I narrowed my eyes at them. "I don't know who picked Tina fucking Turner for Avery to sing—"

Nina crossed her arms tightly in front of her and scowled.

"But she's not singing that shit. Can I get a guitar and another mic, Matt?" I leaned in towards him and lowered my voice so Avery couldn't hear. "We're doing 'Vienna.' "

Nina's arms fell, and she looked as unsure as I felt. I knew it was a song that held bad memories for Avery, but I had to try and make it a good one. I'd

messed this up for her once. I wasn't going to do it again.

Avery watched Matt hook up the amp with my guitar as I settled onto a stool beside her. "We're not doing 'Proud Mary'?" she asked.

I shook my head and leaned into the microphone. "Hey, everyone. Sorry for the holdup. My name is Liam."

Whistles and screams ensued.

"This is Avery." I grinned her way and strummed my guitar once, allowing equal time for her own encouraging cheers.

Her cheeks warmed, but she smiled and waved at all of the faces in front of her.

"Avery and I have a special treat for you tonight. It is her best friend's birthday today, and she really wanted to sing her a song. Everyone, please wish Nina over here a happy birthday!"

Nina's expression filled with surprise as the entire bar erupted for her.

I could admit, guiltily Avery into singing this song was in poor taste, especially after Nina had practically blackmailed her to be up here, but I thought it might keep her from running offstage right away. She had it in her to make it through the song; she just needed help starting it.

Avery held the mic away from her lips and asked what we were singing.

My heart pounded in my chest as I started moving my fingers to the proper notes. "I think you know this one." My voice echoed in the speakers as I shot her a wink.

The famous piano entrance sounded a lot different on a guitar, so I knew it would take an extra second for her to figure it out. The moment she did, her face paled.

Avery shook her head once and looked like she was about to leave when she spotted Nina over my shoulder.

I sang the opening line with my eyes trained on her, trying to help ease her nerves and mind. She reciprocated by gripping the microphone like she was getting ready to beat me with it.

Trying to cue her in, I nodded, but she pressed her lips into a firm line, stubbornness and uncertainty clouding her features. I swore I could feel her heartbeat in between my strums.

“Come on, Avery!” A voice sounded from the back of the room, catching Avery’s attention.

Danny stood on a chair at our table, so she could see, and then he whistled through his fingers.

That was all she needed. The crease between her brows softened, and a smile began to tug at her lips. After I finished up the first verse, I watched as she closed her eyes and started the next one.

Her singing was quiet and shaky but slowly steadied out into a clear, silky tone that sent a shiver up my spine.

*Damn.* She was even better than I remembered.

I tilted my head away from my mic stand to let her know she was finishing the rest of the song alone. This was her moment, and I didn’t want to take away from what she had already accomplished by even trying. Each line she sang was her own little victory, and it made my heart swell as I saw her fight through the pain. She fed off the energy of the crowd, letting the adrenaline fuel her performance. It wasn’t until she looked me in the eyes that she completely let go and belted the notes to utter perfection.

Her voice invaded me. Weakened me. Until everyone else disappeared and it was just me and her.

And on the last chorus, when her voice broke from emotion ripping through her, I wanted to fall onto my knees and worship her for everything that she had been too afraid to show until now.

Tears pooled over the edge of her eyelids and came pouring down her smooth cheeks that were rounded from the giant grin on her face. It was a smile of relief. Gratification. And joy. I’d never seen her more beautiful. It was only then that I realized how quickly my heart was pounding.

Something changed the moment the song ended. I wasn’t staring into the eyes of my best friend’s sister. I was staring at a girl I’d never known I wanted. I’d definitely never expected to *need* her either, but there I was, needing her like I needed air to breathe.

*Shit.*

I was falling for Avery. Hard and fast.

Dropping my guitar between my legs, I braced for her arms that quickly

wrapped around my neck. Her chest heaved against mine as she cried into my shoulder. I tried to smooth her hair back behind her ear, wanting to see her face again, but she only pulled away long enough to connect her lips with mine. She kissed me, and the rest of the world came flooding back like a fucking tidal wave.

My lips froze, and I pushed her away. She stumbled back, holding a hand over her mouth when she realized what she'd done. I looked up and found Danny's stone-cold face drop behind the rest of the crowd as they all stood and cheered.

My mind raced, trying to come up with an explanation as I left the stage to find him. I didn't have to turn around to know Avery was on my heels. Nikko walked out of the bar in a hurry, so I followed, hoping that was where Danny was. Lexie and Tic weren't far behind. As much as I knew Avery wanted to help, having her here was only going to make things worse.

"Avery, go back inside," I demanded when I stepped out onto the black pavement.

She scowled at me right before something behind me caught her eye. I swiveled my head back in time to catch a right hook to the jaw.

"Danny!" Avery shrieked. She ran to my side, but Nikko curled his arms around her and held her back.

"I deserved that," I said, working my jaw.

Danny swung again, and his fist exploded into the other side of my face.

"AH, dude!" Tic shook his head.

My hands closed into fists at my sides as I took steady breaths, trying to calm the fire burning in my stomach.

"Danny, knock it off!" Avery shouted, twisting in Nikko's hold.

"Let them work this out," Nikko muttered back.

She threw him a look I was glad to not be on the receiving end of.

I stood up tall and looked down the two inches I had on Danny. He reared back again, and I shook my head.

"I deserved the first one and probably the second. But if you hit me again, you'd better make it a good one because if I get back up, you're going down."



Danny lowered his fist and then shook it once. His knuckles were already turning pink. “Fuck you, man.”

Lexie put her hands on her hips. “Okay. Do you feel better now? Are we done with this, boys?”

“Shut up, Lex. Go back inside,” Danny told her.

“Fine. I will. Someone has to make sure Nina’s birthday isn’t ruined.” She jerked her head at Nikko. “You coming? She’s your girl.”

“My girl?” Having any sort of title or claim to a girl was a foreign concept to Nikko. He hesitated but released Avery and followed Lexie inside.

Tic stayed behind.

“This is all because I kissed him?” Avery asked, stepping forward.

Danny ignored her and narrowed his eyes on me. “How long have you been screwing my sister?”

I saw Tic’s head snap up out of the corner of my eye. “Wait. This is the girl you told me about?”

“We’re not—” Avery began.

“About three weeks,” I answered.

Danny’s eyes flickered between me and Avery, letting my honesty sink in. “Th-three w-weeks?” he stuttered. I could see his anger turning up a few notches in eyes that looked like Avery’s but were much, much colder.

“If you want the truth, I kissed her when we played at the Warfield last month. We could’ve started then, but we didn’t.”

“Are you looking for a gold star? Go to hell, asshole.” Danny’s chest puffed.

“Look, it wasn’t supposed to happen. I tried to—” I glanced at Avery and then back at him. “I screwed up.”

“No fucking shit you did!” Danny paced back and forth, giving me a look similar to the one my dad had given me when he was being handcuffed outside our house.

I’d betrayed him.

“And you ...” Danny charged at Avery.

I sidestepped and put my hand on his chest. My eyes filled with warning. “Danny, step back.”

“I thought you hated him?”

Avery didn't answer.

“You fucking bitch.”

“Danny!” I growled.

Danny stuck a finger in her face, and she looked like she was about to grab it and break it in half. “You have everything! Everything you could ever want!” Tic put a hand on Danny's shoulder, but he shrugged him off. “Why him? Why did you have to fuck my best friend of all people?”

My chest tightened at the thought of having to decide between taking his side or hers, but the choice was getting easier. I didn't like the way he was speaking to her, and I was a heartbeat away from doing something about it.

“You're right.” Avery shook her head. “I've had the world handed to me. I'm selfish and spoiled. I get it. But you'll never understand what it cost me.”

“Oh Jesus.” Danny rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You're going to whine because Mom and Dad loved you too much? What? Being spoiled and privileged is too hard?”

Avery's cheeks flamed as she folded her arms. “Do you have any idea how much I wish I could be like you? To make decisions that actually make me happy and not care what anyone has to say about it? You are living your fucking dream, Danny! You're a musician and a successful one. Someone Dad wanted to be. And you did that all on your own. I have done nothing—NOTHING—that I'm proud of. Nothing on my own. I'm Mom's puppet, and I hate it. It's suffocating and lonely.”

Danny's dark brows furrowed as he listened.

“I don't want to be a doctor. I don't want to follow in her steps. I was just too scared of losing another parent if I said no.” The heaviness of hearing her own words made her stop and take a breath. “Being with Liam was the first thing I wanted that I allowed myself to have despite knowing I shouldn't. And it wasn't out of rebellion or revenge.” She peered up at me. “I wanted Liam for myself. Plain and simple.”

I suddenly felt deprived of air.

There was a moment where nobody said anything as Avery and I stared at each other and Danny and Tic stared at us. I had the urge to reach for her

hand, but Danny spoke before I acted on it.

“Wait, so you two aren’t just fuc—” He stopped himself before finishing, too disgusted with the idea. “You guys are ... together?”

“No!”

“Absolutely not!”

I wasn’t sure which one of us had denied it first, but I’d never been so quick to repudiate something.

Danny arched a brow. “Yeah, I don’t think anyone here believed that.”

Avery and I exchanged glances, and I sensed a new challenge. It was a *who’s going to admit it first* kind of look, and I was known to be quite competitive.

“Look, whatever. I’m not happy about it, but if you guys can keep it in stealth mode, like you’ve been doing ... I don’t fucking care.” He barked out a harsh laugh. “I mean, I do, but I know no one cares for Hannah and me to be together, and you’re not assholes about it. Well, most of the time. Whatever you’re doing doesn’t come between us and the band. We come first. Always.”

“No. Of course,” I agreed, letting my shoulders relax.

“You won’t have to worry about it for long,” Avery said, dropping her eyes to the ground. “I’ll be gone in a couple of weeks.”

Her words were like another punch to the face. *Two weeks? That’s all I have left with her?* An ugly feeling snaked through me. I thought we both knew that once she left, whatever we had was leaving with her.

Danny nodded and then shook his head once. “Three weeks, man?” he muttered under his breath.

Guilt made my stomach turn.

“I’ll get Matt to get you some ice for that.” He pointed up at my face.

That was the last thing I’d expected him to offer. It didn’t hurt much, but it was probably going to leave a mark.

Tic and Danny headed inside, leaving Avery and me alone.

She tilted her head up at me and ran her finger along the healed grooves of my scarred brow. “It didn’t split back open, so that’s good.”

The side of my mouth turned up as I took her hand in mine and held it

between us. “I knew we should’ve just gone to my truck earlier. We could’ve saved ourselves from being caught, and you wouldn’t have had to sing up onstage.”

“Eh, I’d say the singing was well worth it, don’t you think?” She beamed with pride.

“You were all right.” I suppressed a grin.

She lightly smacked my arm and laughed, and then her smile faded. “I know you didn’t want Danny to find out, but maybe it’s better this way. I didn’t like being the reason you were lying to him.”

I rubbed my palm along my jaw. “I guess I didn’t see it as lying. I saw it as protecting him.”

“From me?”

I paused and then finally nodded. “Deep down, he knows you’re not at fault, but he still holds a grudge about everything that happened when you two were younger. Danny idolized your dad and just wanted to be acknowledged by your mom. He blamed you for taking them away from him. And I know that’s unfair, but he went through years of depression ... drinking, and drug abuse.”

An alarmed look twisted her face. “Wh-what?”

I shook my head. This wasn’t a good time to tell her about Danny’s past. “It was a long time ago. He didn’t know right from wrong and was just trying to feel better.”

“I didn’t know about the drugs.” Avery’s eyes fell to my chest.

“Your mom always told him that’s where he’d end up. He was ashamed she was right, and I think that’s what ultimately got him to stop using.”

“Danny isn’t the person my mom thinks he is, even with his mistakes. He’s so much more than that.”

“Well, he’s in a much better place now. I should’ve known he could’ve handled the truth about us. I just didn’t want him to discover I had feelings for his sister because he might blame you for that too.”

Her head swung up to me. “You have feelings for me?”

*Shit.* I was losing.

I ran my finger along her cheek. “Hey, you’re the one who said you

wanted me.”

She dragged her teeth over her bottom lip as she blushed. “I’ve been wanting you a lot lately.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Liam ...”

“Avery...”

She sighed in defeat. Leaning into my hand, she closed her eyes for a second before locking them with mine. “Just before the thunder hit, when we were lying in the rain, you looked over at me.”

“I remember,” I said, searching her features.

“That’s when everything changed. When you became more to me.”

“You’ve felt something for me this whole time?”

Her gray eyes dropped to my lips, and she answered with a single nod.

*I win.*

And then the game quickly changed. I was losing, the longer I stood there silently.

Her lashes swept up as she looked at me again, waiting for me to reciprocate with a response.

I opened my mouth to tell her how I felt, but I didn’t make a sound.

I never said a word.

26



## Avery

The expression on Danny's face the following days was always the same, even when Liam and I weren't in the same room. He was mad, and he had a right to be. I was just glad he hadn't kicked me out, but something told me he wouldn't have done that even if he had walked in on us in the *act*. He was too good of a person. He put up this cold front, but he was a softy through and through, and at the end of the day, he loved me despite our past.

Liam seemed distant. He still found ways to touch me or kiss me when Danny wasn't looking, but he hadn't come into my room since before Nina's birthday. And the one night I had gone to his room, he had been sound asleep—or at least, I'd thought he was.

I tried to come up with a reason. Maybe it wasn't as exciting for him now that we weren't sneaking around; the adrenaline wasn't there for him anymore. But I couldn't help but wonder if I'd scared him away after telling him that this was more to me. More than sex.

The band was busy working on the new album and finishing up their tour, and I had more than enough schoolwork to take up my time, so maybe it was better to end things this way. Slow and painless rather than quick and heartbreaking. I'd be gone on Sunday, and it would all be over. No more late-night hook-ups or morning cuddles. I'd fall asleep, surrounded by my books, as always, and wake up alone.

My lungs burned as I settled into the bottom of the pool. I pinched my eyes shut and continued counting, but I couldn't ignore the pain any longer. I made it to my personal record when my diaphragm began to spasm and knew it was time to come up.

The sound of water breaching overhead made my eyes shoot open, and I saw Liam's shape swimming down toward me. I pushed off the bottom as he circled his arms around my waist and swam us both up to the surface.

I nearly choked on the oxygen as soon as I was above the water, coughing

and heaving my way to the wall. Liam pulled me out of the water like I weighed nothing, and that was when I noticed he was still fully clothed.

“What the hell are you doing?” He seethed.

My body tensed like a coiled rope. “Swimming.”

“The fuck you were!” He ran his fingers through his wet hair, shaking his hands when he finished. “You were underwater for at least two minutes!”

“Almost three and a half.”

Liam released a dry, humorless laugh as his neck muscles twitched. “What the hell is wrong with you? You nearly gave me a heart attack! What were you trying to do? Were you trying to—”

“I was holding my breath!”

“Until you didn’t feel like it anymore?”

“I was about to come up before you jumped in!” I urged.

His chest rose and fell with labored breaths as he studied me.

“Ask Lexie! She walked in on me in the bath one time, doing the same thing.”

“I’m sure she enjoyed that.” He sat up and threw my towel over my shoulders, keeping one arm around me for warmth.

My breathing began to even out as we sat at the edge of the pool with our feet in the water.

“What’s going on, Avery?”

Knots tightened in my stomach. I wrung my long hair out, hoping to put off my answer but it was no use. He could sense something was off about this the moment I’d tried to tell him it was nothing. I knew this wasn’t normal, but I had been doing it so long that it’d slowly become normal to me.

“I would think after what you went through in the river, you’d be scared of the water.”

I shifted uncomfortably, swirling my feet in the pool. His gaze tore through me like a warm blade, leaving me exposed. It was like he could see everything for what it was with me.

“Oh. Shit,” he muttered. “Avery ...”

I shook my head to try and stop the tears from forming, but they came anyway.



Liam tightened his arms around me. “You don’t have to tell me. It’s okay.”

“The water isn’t what haunts me.” Hot tears sprang loose when I met his stare. “It’s knowing I could’ve saved him if I’d stayed under longer.”

“Oh, Avery. No.” Liam’s voice came out in almost a whisper as he pulled me into his lap. “You don’t need to carry that. Your dad wasn’t wearing a seat belt. He was gone the instant you guys hit the water.”

I sniffled and nodded. “I know that. But I’ve heard so many miracle stories about my mom fixing hearts. I guess I thought that if I’d stayed with him a little longer, if I’d tried a little harder, I could’ve gotten him out, and someone could’ve fixed his head.”

I could feel his throat bob against the side of my head.

“That’s not fair, Avery. You did everything you could. If you hadn’t left when you did, you’d be dead too.”

My voice of reason knew that was true, but I could never get my heart to listen, no matter how loud I tried to scream it.

“No more deep dives to the bottom of the pool,” he said.

His muscles started to tremble under his soaked clothes, so I wrapped the towel around us both.

“Yeah, okay.”

He lifted my chin up and brushed his lips against mine so gently that I barely felt it. They were cold and soft. I wanted to make them warm and hard.

“We have a show tomorrow in Fresno, and we’re leaving tonight. We’ll be back on Friday. You’ll be okay for two days on your own?”

I grinned. “Careful, Liam. You’re letting your feelings show. It almost sounds like you’re worried about me.”

His forehead fell onto mine. I could tell he wanted to say something, but he shook his head instead. “I’ll see you on Friday then.” He lifted me off of him and started to leave. “You’ll come to The Warfield on Saturday? I know it’s the night before your move, but I was hoping—”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t miss your last show.”

With that, he smiled and left.



I spent the next two days packing my things in between lectures. Most of them were online this week, so I could multitask and do both. Saturday was coming fast, and as excited as I was to move in with Nina, the idea of downsizing from four roommates to one didn't have me bouncing for joy like I'd thought it would. I was going to miss seeing their faces every day and hearing them rehearse in the basement. It was comforting, being a part of their chaos. I was scared that living with Nina would be too quiet and I'd be able to hear my own thoughts again.

When I got back from the library Saturday afternoon, the house was empty, so the band must have already left for sound check. With the longest sigh, I dropped my book bag onto the floor and fell back onto the mattress. My mother would have an aneurysm if she walked in here and saw the state of my bedroom. Open boxes sat, scattered about in a mess; my hamper was overflowing with laundry I still needed to do; and my notes took up any open, flat surface.

The Step 1 exam was in twenty days, and I felt like everything I'd learned in the last two years of med school had vacated my brain. No matter how much I studied, I couldn't seem to grasp any of it.

Mentally, I was fried.

Feeling a migraine coming on, I swiftly peeled myself off the bed, took some medicine, and started getting ready for tonight. Even though I knew I should stay home and study, like Nina was doing, I couldn't pass up on seeing the band perform their last show of their tour. It seemed fitting to end my stay here with them this way.

It took longer to get to the venue this time because Nina wasn't driving, but I arrived halfway through the opening band's set and settled in at the front of the crowd, where I belonged.

A Quiet Peril paraded up onto the stage a half hour later, and the fans went more insane than I'd ever seen them before. My cheering was unmatched by the deafening screams coming from every direction. Liam

swept his eyes over the massive crowd filling the theater to its maximum capacity, grinning from ear to ear. Danny shook his head in disbelief, and Milton took his place behind the drums with what I swore were misty eyes. Lexie was eating it up, sticking her tongue out and shaking her ass.

Liam's eyes finally landed on me when he stepped up to the front of the stage, and something came over me. My entire face lit up, and I couldn't stop smiling. All the bullshit I had been stressed over disappeared in his deep brown irises, and when he winked, I melted.

"You all look so beautiful tonight." His sexy voice filled the room as he slung his guitar over his shoulder and grabbed the mic. More shrilling screams erupted in approval. "My name is Liam. This is Lexie, Danny, and Tic. And we are ..."

He held his arms out like a god, and everyone shouted, "A QUIET PERIL," as they did at every show.

Liam's grin widened. "We want to thank you all for coming out to our last show of the tour. It's been a wild ride, and we're so grateful for every fucking one of you. You guys are the reason we were able to leave the small bar we used to play at on the other side of town, and now, we get to tour the country. So, as a way to say thank you, we're playing a little louder and a little longer tonight!"

I was jostled back and forth with the excitement, but I was used to it by now and could hold my own.

The band did exactly what Liam had said they would do; they played louder and longer. Liam sang and screamed every note to perfection. The band matched his energy and rocked the entire theater with their greatest hits. They even played songs that I knew weren't usually on their set list but were fan favorites from a few years ago.

Over halfway through their set, someone with a headset came onstage and swapped Liam's electric guitar with his acoustic while the rest of the band left the stage. Liam sat on a stool and adjusted the microphone. He smiled like he was nervous.

"So, uh, we've been working on some songs for the new album, and I'm sure Nikko is going to kill me for this," he said, glancing offstage, "but I just

couldn't wait to share one of them with you all."

Everyone's hands shot in the air, and the crowd went crazy.

"You see, there's this girl ..."

I stopped breathing when I saw him staring directly at me.

"I think I might be falling in love with her, but I have a really hard time finding the words to tell her that. So, I did the next best thing and put some of my thoughts into lyrics." He adjusted the mic again and strummed his guitar, chuckling at my awed expression. "It's a little different from our usual music, so I hope you like it. This one's for you, Av."

I drowned out the noises around me and focused all my attention on him. I wanted to hear every note he played and every syllable that left his mouth.

*Does the devil follow you around?*

*Or do you hide behind your books*

*Tiptoeing so you don't make a sound?*

*And do your angel wings weigh you down?*

*Fighting through the deep end*

*You need air or you'll surely drown*

His gaze flicked up to mine and watched me carefully.

*I see the way you walk through this whole town*

*Searching for something lost*

*But I think you're waiting to be found*

*Don't tell me that your hands are bound*

*Master of deflection, you fake a smile*

*Even when you hit the ground*

He strummed harder as the chorus came in.

*Tell me*

*Who are you living for?*

*How could you not want something more?*

*If only you could see what I see*

*See what you really could be*

*What you could be*

My throat burned and constricted as his words struck me like the current of a river. They surrounded me and pushed me while making me feel completely weightless. But I wasn't afraid of drowning in his river; I was too busy floating.

Danny and Lexie walked onstage and joined his melody on their guitars, playing softly. Tick followed shortly after, sauntering behind his drum set.

*Behind those gray eyes, I can see the fight*

*I know you love them*

*But that doesn't make them right*

*Girl, you can't tell me that you sleep at night*

*If you could dream your own dreams*

*Then I think you might*

*Oh, this spotlight is getting bright*

*You're going blind*

*Can you even see an end in sight?*

*So, you nod your head and say it'll be all  
right*

*But fuck them all*

*Because they steal and dim your light*

Milton beat on the drum, and my heart hammered against my rib cage like  
it was trying to escape.

*Tell me,*

*who are you living for?*

*How could you not want something more?*

*If only you could see what I see*

*See what you really could be*

*What you could be*

The instrumentals cut off as Liam started the bridge. Every inch of my body was covered in goose bumps as his voice cut through the venue.

*Only you can save yourself*

*I'm sorry, but*

*Only you can save yourself*

*So, dig those claws in*

*Only you can save yourself*

*Go on and save yourself*

*Save yourself*

*Oh, please save yourself*

Everyone was playing now. Lexie banged her head to the beat, and Danny intermittently changed his focus from the crowd to his fingers as he switched up the chord progression.

I wiped my wet cheeks as Liam squeezed his eyes shut and belted the rest of the song.

*Tell me*

*Who are you living for?*

*How could you not want something more?*

*If only you could see what I see*

*See what you really could be*

*What you could be*

*Oh, tell me*

*Who are you living for?*

*How could you not want something more?*

*If only you could see what I see*

*See what you really could be*

*Oh, oh, what you could be*

Liam grinned as his adoring eyes took in the tears rolling down my face. He hadn't written this song to tell me he loved me. He wrote it *because* he loved me.



27



## Avery

**A**fter the third attempt, I managed to unlock the front door with Liam's mouth covering mine. We fumbled inside, giggling into each other's mouths and racing to get our clothes off. The after-party was at Nikko's place tonight, and we'd opted not to go—for obvious reasons.

Without breaking contact, Liam skillfully kicked off his boots and helped me out of my jean jacket with ease. I wasted no time. Releasing my black rose Liam had given me from the show onto the ground, I unbuttoned his jeans first while his black T-shirt still remained in place.

“Avery.” He laughed at my eagerness and smiled against my lips. “I need to start writing more songs for you if this is your reaction.”

My hand slipped down beneath his boxers and took hold of him. His lips parted as he shuddered against my touch, and then he blindly led me to my bedroom.

He shoved a few boxes aside, so I wouldn't trip, but his eyes lingered on the books and folded clothes stacked inside them, reminding him of what they meant.

I slowly pulled my dress up and over my head, distracting him from his thoughts. We had tonight all to ourselves, and I didn't want to waste a second of it, being sad that I was leaving in the morning.

His heavy eyes ran down the length of my body, taking in every dip and curve. The heat left behind by his gaze was glorious.

“You're so fucking beautiful.”

His mouth came back to mine, and I moaned with delight. I parted my lips to let him inside as I pulled on the hem of his shirt. His tongue did things that I remembered him doing to other parts of me, and my whole body began to tremble and ache.

As I struggled to get his shirt off of him in a smooth manner, Liam broke away long enough to remove it and the rest of his clothes.

Then, it was my turn to take in the full sight of him. I followed the tattooed artwork draped over every muscle and every inch of his hard chest, down to the delicious indentations of his hips. Dropping to my knees in front of him, I trailed kisses along the crows etched into his soft skin just below his waistline and slid my tongue the rest of the way until I was covering him completely.

He growled and fisted my hair.

I peered up at him as he threw his head back, and—*oh my God*—was it a glorious view to feast my eyes upon. My name dripped from his mouth like a song, and I took him faster, wanting so badly for him to sing it again.

Without warning, he stilled my movements and pulled away. Curling a finger under my chin, he guided me onto my feet and then backed himself up until his legs hit the bed.

I followed his lead, settling one knee beside him and then the other until the tip of him met my center. And then I lowered slowly. One of his hands slid up my body and cradled the side of my head while the other palmed my breast. I pinched my eyes shut as the pleasure of him consumed me.

“This is all you, Avery. You’re in control,” he whispered, pulling me in for a kiss.

My moans were trapped in his mouth as I rose and fell onto him again.

Liam nibbled at the soft spot of my neck, sending shivers across my fiery skin. I rocked my hips into him again and again, finding the perfect rhythm in his arms as they constricted around me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. We were so close together that the only movements I could make were small ones, but I didn’t care. Liam was around me, filling me with every thick inch of himself. I couldn’t think of a better place in the world to be than where I was and who I was with.

“Avery,” he moaned, his hot breath hitting my neck as he panted. “Come with me.”

We both released our tight holds, so I could move freely. I leaned back, so my palms rested on his thighs, and I bucked my hips forward, coming alive from the inside.

Liam thrust and met my hips as he lowered a hand between my legs, working my most sensitive spot in sweet, quick circles.

“Your calluses might be my favorite thing about you.” I gasped.

His eyes pooled with heat and desire. “Oh yeah? I think you might like my mouth more.”

He dipped his head and took my peak in his mouth. When his teeth grazed my nipple, I cried out with my release. Liam stilled inside me as his own rippled through him, and then without pulling out, he flipped me over and started taking me again.

I loved how desperate we were for each other, clinging to every inch of flesh we could get our hands on. With the house being empty, we didn’t hold back, and because of that, I saw a whole new side to Liam I’d never seen before. He lured every last moan and scream out of me until my voice was hoarse and my breaths were shallow. There wasn’t a single part of my body he didn’t touch, kiss, or worship.

We lay under the covers, exhausted and in bliss. After a few minutes, as the sun crept through the blinds, his breathing evened out, and his body relaxed into the mattress.

I shut my eyes, trying to capture how perfectly happy I was at that moment so I would never forget it.

“I think I love you,” I whispered. Part of me hoped he was asleep while the other part was slightly disappointed that if he was, he hadn’t heard me.

A moment passed before I let out the breath I hadn’t known I had been holding, and I let my eyes close.

“I think I love you too.”

My eyes shot back open as I turned to look at him. His eyes were still shut, but he was smiling.

“Really?”

“I’ve never wanted to be someone’s someone more than I do yours.” A pair of the most gorgeous chocolate-brown eyes set on me. “Now, get some sleep. It’s already morning.”



Liam was awake before me. I wasn't sure if it had been four minutes or four hours since I had fallen asleep, but every muscle in my body ached from the delicious workout Liam had given me into the early morning hours of today. He stroked my arm with gentle fingers, and I nestled into the crook of his neck, letting him know I was awake now too.

"Morning," he rasped, kissing my forehead.

I hummed in response.

The band must've crashed at Nikko's house because we never heard them come home. They could've snuck in while we were asleep, but the odds of them being quiet and courteous were very slim. In the last few months, I'd heard them too many times, trampling through the house like wild elephants after a late show or a night out drinking.

I traced the tattooed letters on his fingers in my grasp. "I have a question."

He looked down at me and raised a brow.

"What would you be if you weren't a musician?"

He chuckled, taken off guard by my sudden curiosity. "Hmm. Probably a virgin."

My mouth dropped open into a giant grin as I laughed. "You and I both know that's not true. Look at you."

He jabbed his fingers into my ribs and tickled me.

"C'mon. I'm serious," I said.

He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know. I've never wanted to be anything else."

I chewed on that for a moment. "What's that like?"

"What do you mean?"

"To know what you want out of life and take it? No one to tell you no."

"Well, I wouldn't say I didn't have my fair share of people telling me I wasn't good enough. But I kept fighting for it because I couldn't imagine anything else making me happy."

"Huh."

He squeezed me once. “What about you? What would you be instead of a med student? Because I know you want more than that.”

There was a burn in my throat when I thought about the song he had written for me. “I have no idea. Since I graduated high school, my whole life has been about medicine. I’ve never had the chance to be good at anything else.”

“That’s a lie.” He frowned. “And you don’t have to be good at something to be interested in doing it.”

“I guess.”

“You’ve got a great voice, Avery, and a history with music. Doing something with your talent never crossed your mind?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “Before the accident, it did. Without my dad there to teach me or encourage me, I kind of lost my way.”

He took two steady breaths. “You know, I was thinking.” His fingers rubbed my cheek. “What would you think about being on the ‘Hollow Again’ track with me?”

I stiffened. “Like, singing?”

“Yeah. With me.” I could feel him smile at the idea. “Everyone was blown away by your voice the other night, and it’s *your* song.”

But it wasn’t.

“What about Danny?” I asked.

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Danny is slowly coming around to us being together. Maybe he won’t hate knowing you helped with our music as much as I originally thought. We could always test it out in the studio first before we present it to the rest of the band. It might feel good to get it out. Kind of like ‘Vienna.’ ”

I could feel my heartbeat in my throat. After everything he’d done for me, I couldn’t lie to him about this anymore. “Liam? I have to tell you something.”

His chest rose and fell with an even breath, but I heard his pulse kick up when my voice shook.

I turned my head and rested my cheek flush against his chest, too scared to look him in the eye for this. The warmth and safety of being wrapped in him

eased my nerves and loosened my tongue. “I didn’t write that. It’s not my poem—er, lyrics.”

Liam’s whole body tensed around me as he let my words sink in. “What?”

I closed my eyes. *How are you going to explain this?*

I eventually found the strength to look up at him, which was a huge mistake. There was a large crease between his furrowed brows. I couldn’t tell if he was more hurt or confused.

“You lied to me? This whole time?” Disappointment melted off his tongue.

“I was scared.”

“Scared of what?”

*Don’t, Avery. He won’t understand.* “Of you, or anyone, finding out who it really belonged to.”

*Oh God.* I’d gone too far. There was no turning back.

Sensing my nerves, he began tracing patterns with his fingers on my naked thigh. “Avery, whose lyrics am I singing?”

I swallowed and swung my legs off the side of the bed, bending down to grab the box hidden underneath. Every neuron in my head fired, telling me to run. If I ran, I wouldn’t have to explain.

But my heart told me I could trust him. That it was going to be okay.

Liam sat up on his elbow and took the box of journals holding my father’s secrets, his past, and the truth of what had really happened ten years ago. “What are these?”

I was tired of treading water alone. “My father’s journals.”

His gaze flickered from me to the leather-bound pages, stamped with the letters *D* and *F* on the spines.

For several long seconds, we sat there in silence, and I thought I might pass out before he finally looked back up at me.

“Avery, why are you hiding these?” He didn’t open them; otherwise, he would know why. “Does Danny know about this?” He held one up in the air.

I shook my head once.

“I remember your dad writing music all the time, but I didn’t think anything of his was left behind.” His jaw was firm. “Do you have any idea

what these would mean to your brother?”

A tear sprang loose down my cheek. My safety net was breaking. “You don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand, Avery? You lied to me and to Danny!”

My body shook as I tried to fight off the sob threatening to crack through me. I went to leave, but he caught my wrist and pulled me back down.

“Avery, tell me what the hell this is all about because I need a good reason why I shouldn’t give these to him the moment he gets home.”

My eyes shot open, red and puffy. “You can’t! Please!” I never thought I’d have to beg him to believe me.

“Why? What is the big deal?”

“Because no one knows!” I finally broke, falling off the bed onto my knees. “No one can ever know!”

He climbed off the bed and knelt beside me. “Know what, my love?” His voice was softer this time.

I repeatedly rocked my head back and forth. “I shouldn’t have said anything. It wasn’t his fault.”

“You’re scaring me, Av. What happened?” He stroked my back.

“He was sick. He didn’t mean to.” My steady breaths came faster and faster, and suddenly, I was spiraling. My fingers began to tingle, and a familiar chill ran up my spine. “No. No, no, no,” I cried.

Liam’s arms circled around me. “Avery, look at me. You need to breathe. Okay? Breathe!”

It was too late. My panic attack took hold of my body, and I was no longer in control.



28



# Avery

## Ten Years Earlier

I could see my dad's face in the crowded auditorium when I stood and bowed. No one was clapping harder than him. He even cried. He never cried. But he was also smiling, so he couldn't be sad. Right? I didn't want him to be sad. He was always so happy. That was my favorite part about him. And he was smiling and crying and laughing ... because of me.

I bowed again and exited the stage. When my teacher released me, I ran through the back hallways until I reached the entryway. It started to fill up as the theater doors opened, and I waited for him to come out.

"That was lovely, Avery."

"What a beautiful rendition of a classic favorite. Well done."

"Great job, Avery. Your father has taught you well."

My father emerged from the sea of people and spotted me immediately in my ring of admirers, handing out compliments.

One man patted his shoulder when he reached my side. "Well, David, it looks like you've raised a future star. She's quite the musician."

"An angel with talent," someone added.

I smiled up at my dad, only to see his own had faltered.

"She's incredible. Just like you said she'd be." A woman handed my dad a business card and nodded at me. "I look forward to working with you, Avery. You should be very proud of yourself."

Once the crowd around me dispersed, we climbed into the car and headed to get ice cream. I was glad Dad had decided to take me to my concert instead of Mom. She didn't like ice cream.

We sat outside the shop with the clear night sky above us. Dad didn't get anything to eat. He just watched me and didn't say much.

“Look. It’s the Big Dipper.” I pointed up at the speckles of light.

Dad laughed. “Is that the only one you know?”

I shrugged and grinned, licking my cone before the ice cream dripped onto my hand.

After I popped the last bite of my cone into my mouth—the best part of an ice cream cone, in my opinion—my dad and I got back in the car to head home, and I turned on the radio.

He tapped his fingers as I sang along to The Beatles. And then Blondie. And then Fleetwood Mac.

“I’m really proud of you, Av,” he said, turning the stereo down and staring at the road ahead. “Your brother too.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I looked up at him and saw his wet cheek. He was crying again, but this time, he wasn’t smiling. “What’s the matter?”

A sob broke loose from his throat.

I reached over the console and rubbed his arm. “It’s okay. What’s wrong?”

We started to go faster.

“You know I love you. Right, Avery?”

I nodded.

“You, your brother, and your mom ... you all mean the world to me,” he cried, pushing his foot down harder.

I glanced from him to the road and back to him, nodding again. “Dad?”

He didn’t blink. “I’m sorry, sweet pea. I never want to hurt you. You know I’d never hurt you, right?”

I started to cry too. “Dad, you’re scaring me. Slow down.”

“I’m so tired, Avery. So tired.” He shook his head and scrunched his face. “I don’t want to feel this way anymore.” His voice was shaky as he continued to focus on the road, but I didn’t know how he could see it anymore with all the tears he was letting go of. “I just can’t leave, knowing you’re stuck here too. You shouldn’t ever have to feel this pain. Ever. You’re too good for it, too kind.”

I didn’t understand. “What pain? Are you hurt?”

His foot touched the floor of the car. We were racing down the road,

passing oncoming traffic in a blur. I screamed when he nearly clipped the side of a truck.

Terror constricted my throat, and I gripped the dashboard. “Daddy! Stop it! I’m scared!”

“The world is scarier, Avery!” he shouted.

I’d never seen a sudden burst of anger like that from my father.

His eyes widened as we entered the bridge, and then he looked at me. “I can’t let you stay. I’m sorry. Trust me, it’s better this way.”

I rolled down my window, hoping the fresh air would clear his thoughts. There was nothing but darkness and water below. I felt something tug on my waist and looked down to see him unbuckling my seat belt. I frowned and noticed he wasn’t wearing one either. But we were going too fast to get out of the car.

My head started spinning.

Spinning.

Spinning.

Spinning.

I cried and looked over at my dad. “I want to go home.”

“That’s where we’re going.” His tears stopped, and he looked at me. “Take my hand, Avery. We’ll go together.”

Wherever he was planning on taking me was not home, and I didn’t want to go. My eyes fell to his hand. It was shaking. I didn’t want to take it. But he looked so sad.

Sad.

Sad.

Sad.

*I should take it.*

“Avery, please!” he yelled.

Panic.

Panic.

Panic.

That was all I felt as I buckled my seat belt again.

“Stop it! Stop it!” he shouted, grabbing my hands to try and stop me.

I fought against him.

He was so angry. He was never angry.

A car horn blared, and he pulled his hand back to the steering wheel and gripped it tightly. His chest was heaving as he focused all of his attention in front of him. I wasn't sure how, but we increased our speed just a fraction. The sound of the wind invading the car competed with my screams.

"I hope it's fast for you, sweet pea." Suddenly, he swerved to the left and then jerked the wheel to the right, crashing through the tiny guardrail.

And I was flying.

Flying.

Flying.

Flying.

And then we crashed.

I felt everything.

And then nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

29



## Liam

I had a pretty high threshold when it came to pain tolerance, but watching Avery fall apart in my arms was one of the most excruciating feelings I'd ever experienced. Every cry she wailed, every breath she struggled to take, and every tear that fell to the ground, I wanted to take it away. I wanted to erase her torment and her fear. But there was nothing I could do, except make sure she didn't go through it alone.

Her fingers started to curl and cramp as she hunched forward, gasping for air.

I threaded my fingers through hers and stretched them wide, kissing the backs of her hands. "It's going to be okay. Focus on my touch, Avery."

She looked so scared, so helpless, and I cursed myself for putting her in that kind of agony. I caught a glimpse of David's journals on the bed and cursed them too.

"This pain isn't going to stay, Av. It will go away real soon. You just have to get through this part," I whispered.

I brought my lips to the top of her head and held her until her hiccups and tears began to lessen. When she was ready, I picked her up and sat her beside me on the bed.

Her striking gray eyes met mine and widened ever so slightly. Reaching up, she wiped a tear from the side of my face. My own tear. Then, grabbing one of the journals next to her, she flipped it open with shaky hands.

"Whatever it is, I don't care." I shook my head. "I don't need to know if it's going to put you through that again."

"I want you to know. I need you to see," Avery said, flipping through the pages. "You were trying to protect Danny from me all this time. And I was trying to protect Danny from this—the truth."

My eyes flitted across the first journal entry. And then the next. David hadn't been organized about his thoughts. His words were everywhere, like

he didn't have the time to try and find a fresh page when he sat down to write them; he just took a pencil and found a random spot. There were no dates stamped across the top, no reference of time. Some of his entries didn't even make sense. Like he had his own language. He had written about his life like he constantly wanted to end it. I was used to seeing emotions put into words, being in the music industry. It could get pretty dark at times. But this ... this was next level.

*Jesus.*

The crease between my brow deepened as I read his poems, songs, and random thoughts. I didn't even finish half of the first one before I grabbed another from the pile. I flipped through three more, looking for something that resembled the man everyone had known and loved. These words didn't sound like their father, but the messages and stories hidden inside were *his* life. *His* family. *His* history. The tortured words weren't him. They couldn't be.

When I opened the last journal, Avery sucked in a shaky breath. After a few pages in, I knew why.

My eyes burned when I saw his words—*his plan*—written in black ink, and I slammed it shut.

“When we ran off that bridge that night, it wasn't an accident, Liam.”

Tears spilled over so fast that they barely touched my cheeks before they hit the bed.

“My dad tried to—” She shook her head clear of the images invading her thoughts and found my gaze again. “My dad tried to take my life that night, both our lives.”

I didn't try to disguise the emotion in my voice. “Who else knows about this?”

She took the journal and set it behind me with the others. “My therapist.”

“Your mom doesn't know? Nina?”

She shook her head. “Just you.”

“Wh-why?” I asked.

“Because I knew how much it would hurt to find out. I didn't want them to experience that. My dad's gone. Why ruin their memory of him?”



The strength in her words made my face crumble. It had to be suffocating, having that story, that truth, replay in your mind, knowing it would hurt anyone you told.

“At first, I thought I was crazy because what had happened didn’t make sense. You know, maybe I’d imagined the things he said before he swerved. I hit my head and was in a coma. It could’ve all been a terrible nightmare. I wasn’t sure. But then I found these hidden away in his desk, and it all pieced back together.”

A muscle in my jaw ticced at the thought of David trying to harm her.

“I’m not mad at him.” She stared up at me. “Not anymore.”

I swallowed back my anger. “It’s okay if you are.”

“He was sick, Liam. He wasn’t in the right mind. Everyone thought he was fine, but he needed help.” Her tears began to fall again. “If I had known, maybe I could’ve saved him.”

I frowned. “Avery, I already told you, you couldn’t save him from that water.”

Her head shook back and forth, over and over. “If I’d tried harder in my music lessons or done better in school or if I hadn’t been with my friends all the time ...”

I swore my heart cracked in half.

“If I could’ve made him happier—” Her voice broke.

I leaned forward and tightly wrapped her into my chest. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for that. Ever. You read what he’d written. He loved you and Danny more than life itself. If anything, you kept him alive longer.”

All of the tension in her shoulders released as she clung to me and cried. David’s demons had left her with a scar that would never heal, and his journals were a reminder that kept breaking open her wound.

They needed to disappear. Forever.

“You were never supposed to find those, Avery. That was never supposed to be your burden to bear.”

I didn’t know how long we sat there, but she eventually lifted her head off my chest and wiped away her tears.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

When I realized she was apologizing for falling apart on me, I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her. It was the softest, most tender physical act we had ever shared. “Thank you for telling me.”

I gave her another kiss on her forehead before I shifted off the bed and started to get dressed. There was a box at my feet with some of her clothes packed in it. I handed it to her so she could find something to wear, and started gathering her dad’s journals.

A hint of fear flashed in her eyes. “What are you doing?”

I cradled them under my arm. “You trust me?”

She nodded slowly.

“Come out to my truck when you’re ready.” I smiled warmly at her.

“Nina’s going to be here soon to help me move my stuff out.”

“Call her and tell her you’ll be out for the next hour or so. This can’t wait.”

30



## Avery

**F**ate. The ultimate F-word. I wasn't sure I'd believed in it until I found myself in the arms of Liam Lockwood. But as I stood over the water that nearly took my life, in his tight embrace, I'd never had more of a feeling of belonging.

I was safe.

Loved.

And although my mom had provided me with everything I could ever need to feel safe, her love only went as far as my efforts and my successes did.

Fate had brought Liam to me in an unexpected way. I never thought I would fall for my brother's best friend or that he would be the one to break through my walls and help me heal. But as he'd chipped away at my surface, some of my pain had seeped out. My darkness was no match for the light he lit up inside me.

Liam kissed the top of my head as I looked up at the cloudless blue sky. The sun was bright and warm on my face.

My tears had long ago dried from the walk here. Liam had parked on the shoulder just before we reached the bridge because he knew I needed to approach this slowly. I gripped the shit out of his hand the whole way here, but he never complained or let go.

Something had told me he would never let go.

His chest was both hard and soft against my back. "Are you ready?" He leaned his head next to my ear, his voice vibrating through his chest against the top of my shoulders.

Knots formed in my stomach. I picked up the box at my feet and shook my head. "I don't think I could ever be ready for this."

Liam's arms tightened. "You know you don't have to do this."

"No. I want to." I let out a heavy sigh. "You're right. I should've never

found these. Whoever is in these journals wasn't the dad who raised me. My dad was funny and kind. He was a happy man who loved his family and making music. He had this laugh that could light up the room." I smiled, still remembering the sound. "He didn't just teach me about music; he also taught me to think for myself and to always lead with my heart." I took the first journal in my hands and held it over the railing. "I haven't been doing that for a long time."

My grip on the journal loosened, and it fell from my grasp, down into the river.

A piece of my father gone forever.

I held on to my breath, too afraid that if I let it go, I'd realize the mistake I'd just made.

"How did that feel?" Liam tilted his head, so he could see me. His hands made a soothing motion against my arms. "Are you okay?"

Heart pounding, I nodded and held another journal over the rushing water. This time, a tiny weight lifted from my chest as I let it go, and I finally exhaled.

My thumb grazed my father's initials as I grabbed the remaining stack in both hands. I looked down at the worn leather I had been holding on to all these years, wondering if I'd regret not having them tomorrow morning when I came to my senses, but both my head and my heart were screaming at me to let them go. To let that part of him go. I needed to stop holding on to the pain my dad hadn't been able to heal from and work toward healing myself. He'd locked these in a drawer for a reason. He wouldn't have wanted to be remembered this way. Even in the end, I knew he hadn't wanted to hurt me, and these journals had done that to me long enough.

It was time I remembered my dad for the memories that made me happy. I wanted to love him for his good parts, for I had already forgiven him for the bad.

I released my hold on the journals and leaned over the railing, watching as the river swallowed them in its current. The weight of ten years of grief lifted off my chest all at once, and I had to gasp for air.

I turned and threw my arms around Liam's neck and let him hold me. It

wasn't until I looked back at him that I saw him crying with me.

"Thank you, Liam. Thank you for helping me get here."

"I'm so fucking proud of you, Av. That was incredibly brave. I can't imagine what you're feeling right now."

A smile pulled at my lips as I looked behind me at the edge of the bridge. "I feel like I can start living again."



Nina was waiting for me back at the house when we returned. She saw my puffy red eyes but assumed it was me just getting emotional over moving out.

With the entire band and Nina helping me load up my car, we were done in a matter of minutes. Liam quietly loaded up the last of my books into my trunk. His shoulders slumped as he leaned against my car and shoved his hands in his front pockets.

"You know you can always stay," he said, grinning. "I can talk to the guys."

I looped my arms around his middle, dug my chin into his chest, and peered up at him. "I'm going to miss this too."

He kissed my forehead. "How tolerant do you think Nina is with early morning visitors?"

"Not happening, Liam!" Nina shook her head from the passenger seat. "No one messes with my morning routine!"

We both chuckled.

"I guess I'll just have to spend the night."

I raised my brow in agreement.

"Tonight?" he asked.

I shook my head. "As much as I'd love that, I think Nina and I need a good day or so to get settled."

He made a pained expression. "Oh, c'mon. I think a little codependency is healthy, don't you think?"

I reached up and threaded my fingers in his messy, dark hair and kissed him. “I have a lot to process. Give me some time, okay?”

“I’ll be here.” He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear.

I sidestepped him, but he snuck in and kissed me again.

“Liam ...” I groaned, wanting more and more to stay.

“Don’t forget, Av,” Liam whispered into my lips. “*Who are you living for?*” He recited the lyrics he had written for me and then opened my car door.

“Jesus, Liam! She’s moving across town, not out of the country!” Danny shouted from the front steps.

I blushed, not realizing he’d seen us. I stuck my middle finger up in the air at him, and he threw one right back. We both broke into a laugh.

“Thanks for taking me in, Danny.”

The corners of my brother’s eyes creased as he smiled and headed inside.

Lexie’s long peach hair blew behind her shoulders as she raced to give me one last hug.

Nikko leaned into Nina’s open window and gave her a kiss before waving at me over the hood of my car. I laughed as Milton awkwardly waved from the porch. He’d given me a quick hug inside before we started loading up my car, and he actually looked kind of sad to see me go.

Liam’s chin dipped down when it was just me and him again, and I pushed him away, sneaking into my car before he could convince me to stay.

I mouthed, *I love you*, through the window as I backed out of the driveway and then headed to my new apartment.

“Well, aren’t you two adorable?” Nina’s giggle was muffled by the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

“Shut up.” I giggled with her. I could feel her eyes on me as I stared ahead at the road. “What is it?”

“You look happy. Really happy.”

After the emotionally draining and exhausting day I’d had, I was surprised I didn’t look like death.

“It looks good on you, hon.” Nina raised her chin, like she was proud of me, and then started tapping her fingers along to the music playing in the

background. “I’m so excited about this—you have no idea. I got everything of mine moved in early this morning after yoga. We’re on the bottom level, and our parking spaces are super close, so we don’t have to carry our books or groceries up a flight of stairs, which is nice.” Her eyes lit up as she listed off all of our fancy new amenities. “Oh! The bathroom is huge. I mean, *huge!* And there are two sinks, which is perfect. I hope you don’t mind, but I took over your bottom drawer because you don’t have as much stuff as me, but I can totally move it.”

“You can have all the space you want, Nina.” I laughed. After living with the band, I had gotten used to sharing my space with everyone.

She screamed and bounced when she remembered another detail. I cursed under my breath at her for scaring me while I was driving.

“My brother lent me his giant whiteboard he uses for coaching. I’m going to write out a study plan to follow for the next few weeks to help us prep. He only had a red marker, so I need to stop at Office Depot to get more colors to organize it properly.”

She gave me a sideways glance, and I knew she was going to ask if we could stop on the way to the apartment, but I quickly shut her down.

“All I want to do is unpack and go to sleep,” I said.

“But it’s only three o’clock. We don’t have to do anything too exciting, but I was hoping to go to the library before dinner. Your favorite Thai place is only a few blocks from us.” She raised her brows and did a little dance to make studying with her sound more exciting.

“Nina, I’m not going to take the Step 1 test,” I blurted out.

*Holy shit.* Saying it out loud made it real.

I didn’t have to look at her to know what her face looked like.

She was frozen and quiet for all of ten seconds, and then she turned down the music. “Are you going to wait and take it in the fall?”

I took a deep breath. “Nope.”

She glanced over her shoulder and gestured back toward the direction of the band’s house. “Do we need to go back there and find your sanity? Because I think you might have left it behind. Maybe in Liam’s bed?”

“Ha. Funny,” I deadpanned.



“You’re serious?”

I nodded slowly. “I think I am.”

“When did you decide this?”

“I mean, I’ve been doubting being able to pass that test for months, but my head hasn’t been in it for a while. I decided earlier this morning, but I don’t think it was official until just now.”

“Wow. I mean, I guess it’s not a total surprise, but still. All that work? All that studying?”

My eyes bulged. “I know; I know. Don’t remind me. I wish it hadn’t taken me this long to realize it but better now than when I’m wearing that white coat.”

“What is your mom going to say?”

I’d been avoiding that thought. “It just might be enough to render her speechless—in which case, I won’t have to worry about what she says or what she thinks.” I shrugged.

Nina looked up at me through her lashes.

“I know that’s not how it’s going to go, but a girl can hope!”

The car was silent for a few minutes, and then Nina let out a tiny growl. “Man, Avery. We were supposed to do this together. I loved the idea of becoming doctors at the same time and living in a cute little apartment until we both got married when we were thirty-something.”

“I know,” I said, disappointed I couldn’t give her that bit of happiness. “You’re going to make a great doctor one day though. It’s just not my path.”

She held my hand over the center console. “And you’re going to be great at whatever you decide to do instead.”

31



## Avery

Three days. That was how long Liam and I lasted before we couldn't stand not being near one another. We'd mastered the ability to do things to each other while staying quiet—even if that meant one of us had to muffle the other—so we didn't bother Nina all that much.

A Quiet Peril released “Hollow Again” as their first single on the new album. I heard it play on the radio for the first time when Nina and I were driving to get lunch, and I had to pull over because I was screaming so loud. I called Liam and put it on speaker, but he wasn't as enthused as I was. He just laughed and listened to my squealing.

The journals were gone, but having that song—that part of my dad—out there for everyone to hear was a perfect harmony of his pain and his passion for music that would live on forever. And his son had brought it to life.

Liam and I decided we would tell Danny who had really written the lyrics to the song when I was ready, but that was a battle for another day. I had another battle to face before then, and I was running out of time.

I'd stopped going to classes and dropped out of my program shortly after moving in to our apartment, so it was only a matter of time before my mother's tuition checks were returned. I kept trying to pep-talk myself into calling her, but every time I picked up the phone, my fingers couldn't go further than hovering over her number.

The day of the Step 1 exam finally came. Nina had already left to go take it, and I was sitting down to eat breakfast when my phone rang. It was the first time my mom had tried calling me since the cemetery. I chickened out and didn't answer.

*Coward.*

She left me a voice mail, wishing me luck on the exam, and my stomach twisted. Pushing my plate away, I started to call her back but got her voice mail.

Nina and Zayn invited me out to celebrate being done with exams, but my stomach just kept getting worse throughout the day. I tossed and turned in bed until one in the morning and decided I was going to rip off the Band-Aid before I lost my mind.

I reached my hand out in the dark and swatted the top of my nightstand until I found my phone.

Liam answered my call on the first ring. “Hey, Av. What’s the matter? It’s late.” The warmth of his tone sent a shiver from my ear down my neck.

“You’re awake,” I pointed out.

I could hear his smile through the phone. “It’s late for you, not for me. Is everything okay?”

I nodded, forgetting he couldn’t see me. “Will you come with me to my mom’s?”

“Sure, I’ll go with you. I don’t think she’ll be happy to see me, but I know it’s going to be a tough conversation. Just tell me when.”

“Now?” I winced.

He paused. “It’s one in the morning.”

“I can’t sleep.” I sighed. “I have to do this.” I knew that I’d wake up tomorrow, wishing I’d done it when I had the courage.

“Okay.” His boots hitting the hardwood floor echoed into the phone. “I’ll be there in twenty.”



Moonlight shone through the large window in the parlor, making the glossy finish of my father’s grand piano sparkle like it was new. I ran the tips of my fingers over the stunning woodwork. It didn’t have a speck of dust on it, but that wasn’t because it had been played recently. My mother never learned how. She kept a maid who cleaned the house three times a week. You could walk through the place with a white glove, and it would come out cleaner than when you’d put it on.

Liam waited outside in his truck. He was uncomfortable with coming in, and I knew my mother wouldn't be happy if she walked in on both of us in her house together. There'd be no way to reason with her if she felt outnumbered. But there was a good chance my news wouldn't end well with her, and just knowing Liam was a few feet away comforted my nerves.

I'd called the hospital on my way over to find out if I'd be waking her up or if she was working. My mother's OR nurse had told me she'd finished a surgery late and left for the night. I maybe had ten minutes or so before she got home, and my pulse felt like I'd just run a marathon.

Lifting the fallboard up, I took a deep breath and ran my fingers along the top of the keys without making a sound. I looked down at the bench, where my dad used to sit, and smiled. This was my favorite spot in the entire house. We'd play songs together almost every night after dinner. Holidays were the best. Christmas morning, we'd wake everyone up, playing "Carol of the Bells." That was one of the benefits of growing up in such a big house—the acoustics. The cold draft, however, I did not miss.

Closing my eyes, I pressed my fingers down and sank the keys in until I heard them sing. The sound bounced off the cold white walls of the house, bringing a little life back into it.

The sheet music that always lay open in front of me was gone, but I didn't need it. Somehow, I remembered the opening notes to "Clair de Lune," and muscle memory kicked in as I continued to stretch my fingers over the keys. It wasn't the most difficult song my dad had taught me, but it was the one that always put my mind at ease, and right now, I needed to be calm in order to harbor the strength I required to tell my mother I was another disappointment. Another failure. I knew that wasn't what I was, but she had a way of convincing you of being whatever she thought you were.

I held my fingers down over the last notes until the sound disappeared, slowly letting the house become its silent fortress once again.

"Avery Ann."

I nearly jumped out of my skin as my mother's voice rang from the foyer. She could've been the female version of Michael Myers just then. The way she just stood there, like a statue, her face void of any emotion, like a mask

she'd perfected wearing. All she needed was a knife—or in her case, a scalpel.

My heart came alive, and I put my hand over my chest to try and calm myself. “Mom. Hi.”

“Why is Liam Lockwood in my driveway?” She was itching to start tapping her foot when I didn't answer right away. “Avery?” Patience was never really her thing.

I looked up sheepishly. “Because I asked him to drive me here.”

Her eyes searched my face as she took in each one of my words, analyzing them carefully, and then she sighed. “You stupid girl. You're *with* the Lockwood boy now?” She tore her purse from her shoulder and stuffed her car keys inside as she stalked away from me.

I trailed behind her into the kitchen. “That *man* has made me happier than I've been in a long time.”

“You can't be serious.” She huffed, shrugging out of her jacket. She took a wineglass out of the cabinet and poured herself a glass of merlot. “Did you forget his father was arrested for selling drugs?”

“Liam had nothing to do with that.”

“His dad is in prison, Avery. Prison,” she said slowly.

I balled my hands into fists at my sides. “Are you saying, Liam isn't worth a damn because of his father's mistakes? It's not like you and Dad haven't made your own mistakes. What does that say about me?”

Her eyes fixed on me in a cold stare, as she was taken off guard by my tone. She set her glass down so hard that I was surprised the stem of it didn't break off.

“Look, I didn't come here to discuss my dating life with you.” I placed my palms on the counter.

“Why are you here then? I know your test was today. Does it have anything to do with that?” she asked, pursing her lips in a knowing way.

“That's part of the reason, yes.”

“Let me guess. You don't think you got a passing score because you haven't been focused lately, and you want to retake it again in six months?”

I took a long, deep breath. “I didn't take the test, Mom.”

Her face paled as she took in a sharp inhale. “Why the hell not?” she demanded.

I began picking at my nail beds but stopped myself. My heart rate escalated. “Because I’m no longer a med student at Stanford. I’m not finishing my second year.”

“Hold on a minute—”

“I don’t want to be a doctor,” I finished, rushing to get it out.

My mother paused and stared at me for a long moment before taking a drink from her glass. She finished the entire thing in one sitting, and then the tips of her fingers covered her mouth.

*Great. I’ve turned her to drinking.*

“You quit?” Her voice was soft enough to not echo around the room but firm enough to feel like a jab to the stomach. “Oh, Avery ...” She rubbed her temples. “Look, I’ll talk to my friends on the board, and we’ll work this out. We’ll fix this.”

My eyes darted around the room. “There’s nothing to fix. Nothing is broken. I didn’t make this decision on a whim. I don’t want this.”

“Yes, you do. You’re just confused. The stress got to you, and you panicked.”

“You’re right. I have been stressed. I’ve also been getting migraines so bad that I throw up.”

She dismissively rolled her eyes.

“You have no idea how many times I had to leave a lab or a lecture because I couldn’t take watching or even listening to the lessons about surgery. I almost passed out, just sewing up a cut on Liam’s eyebrow.”

“You’ll get past all of that.” She sighed and shook her head. “You don’t just quit school because it’s too hard. Not after everything we’ve been working toward.”

*We?*

I stiffened with anger. “You’re not hearing me. I’m not happy. I haven’t been for a long time, Mom.”

“You’ve always wanted to be a doctor. Are you sure that boy”—she pointed over my shoulder to the front door—“hasn’t gotten inside your head

and messed it up?”

“That was always your dream for me. Not mine. Liam only helped me realize my potential.”

She scowled. “Your potential for what exactly? What are you going to do instead?”

I lifted my shoulders. “I don’t know yet. And you know what? That’s okay. It’s okay to change your mind. It’s okay to not have every moment of your life planned out. If life has taught me anything, it’s that your mental health is more important than making someone else happy.”

“Do you have any idea how much it cost me to pay for your school? Your housing?”

“Oh no. You don’t get to guilt me for something you insisted I do from the start. If money is what matters to you, then I’ll set up a payment plan and start paying you back.”

“With what income?”

“I have a bachelor’s degree, Mom. I’ve already started applying for jobs.”

She pressed her lips together tightly and refilled her glass, twirling its contents around. “You’re going to regret this. Do you think you can just wake up one day and decide who you’re going to be?”

“Why not?”

All of my answers were making her angrier. “What would your dad think about you giving up? Huh?”

Smiling slightly, I thought about the fact that he’d probably be clapping for me right now or pulling me into a hug. “I think he’d be proud that I’m walking away from the wrong path.”

She stopped twirling the glass in her hand and threw it into the sink. The high-pitched sound of glass shattering was enough for me to realize the conversation was over. It wasn’t going anywhere, and she would never understand.

I turned on my heels and started for the hallway.

“Don’t you walk away from me, young lady.”

I ignored her and kept walking.

“Avery!”



I paused when I heard the emotion roll through her. I turned and saw her broken face was already hardening again.

“If you do this, if you walk out that door ...” She took a moment to gather herself.

“What? Are you going to cut me off like you did to Danny for following his dreams? Just because they’re not your own doesn’t mean they’re any less admirable.”

Her jaw tightened as she took careful steps toward me. “So, that’s it then? You’re just going to leave me?”

I closed the distance between us. “You’re the one pushing me away by telling me I’m not good enough.”

“If you walk out that door, I’m ... I’m done. I won’t speak to you again.”

“Is that what you want in here?” I gently poked her forehead, repeating my father’s words to her. “Or is that what you want in here?” I poked her chest, and her lips quivered.

It was the first time I saw fear widen her eyes.

“Forget it.” I looked down at my finger. “I don’t think there’s anything in *here* anymore.” I dropped my hand and backed away, watching her face fall. “A heart surgeon without a heart. How ironic.”

The heels of my boots hitting the white stone floor echoed around the vast entryway as I left my mother silent for the first time in her life. I opened the front door and stopped, catching one final glance at the inside of my childhood home. The white keys of the piano in the parlor made me pause before I left. Music was the last good memory I had of my father and a much better one to hold on to.

“I want Dad’s piano,” I said, looking over my shoulder.

My mother blinked a few times and swallowed back her words before nodding once. “I’ll hire someone to deliver it wherever you want.”

I gave her a small smile, glad she hadn’t fought me on it, and then shut the door behind me. I filled my lungs to their maximum capacity, holding my breath until I couldn’t any longer. And then I took the most difficult steps of my life and walked away from my mom. No guilt. No apologies. It was up to her if she wanted to be in my life now. I wasn’t going to force her to love me

anymore.

Liam was leaning against the front of his car, looking up at the stars when he spotted me coming down the steps. His smile grew as I jogged the rest of the way into his arms. My shirt rose as I stretched my arms around his neck. The leather from his jacket was cold against the skin of my lower back, but I welcomed it. Being inside with my mother had left my whole body on fire. I pressed my mouth against his soft lips and kept them there.

He started to smile, and I pulled away. “That bad, huh?”

I teetered my head side to side. “I didn’t expect it to go well, but I’m happy with what I said.”

“Good. I’m proud of you.” He walked me over to open his door.

Once I scooted over and he climbed behind the wheel, I settled into his side and chose a song on the radio.

“Do you think you guys have room for a piano at your place?”

Liam’s shoulders shook with a gentle laugh. “Um, maybe if we moved some stuff around. Why?”

I smiled up at him, tired and happy. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

The future didn’t seem so scary now. I didn’t know what to expect or where to go, but there was excitement that filled my veins instead of fear or anxiety. Maybe it was because I had so many more people supporting me. Maybe it was because of the relief of not having to become someone I didn’t want to be.

Life tended to chip little pieces of you away, the longer you were here. Shaping you. Molding you into who you were today. No one ever prepared you for when you lost too much of yourself.

You stumbled.

You fell.

Lost, without a clear path to follow, hoping to find that one person, place, or passion that made you feel whole again. The piece that fit.

I’d never thought the tattooed lead singer sitting beside me would be the one to match my broken edges, but I’d come to realize that we didn’t have a choice in who we loved or who we lost. But we did have a choice in what we did after those people entered or exited our lives. I used to think that it was

best to make those choices with your head. To be logical. Careful. But I'd recently learned that the best decisions in life were made with your heart.

# Epilogue



Liam

## Fifteen Months Later

She hadn't seen me yet. Her short brown hair bounced against her shoulders with each step she took toward me as she adjusted her book bag.

*Damn, she was beautiful. And she was mine. All mine.*

It took everything in me not to move from my spot, but as I contemplated running for her, her gray eyes finally flicked up from the pavement and widened.

Avery stumbled in her tracks and then sprinted toward me.

I pushed away from the side of the cab door with a shit-eating grin on my face and a handful of flowers.

She screamed as she jumped, wrapping her arms and legs around me. "What are you doing here?"

She claimed my mouth with a kiss before I could answer. I slipped my tongue inside, tasting her mouth for the first time in two months.

She moaned at my moves and gripped my hair.

I lowered her back onto her feet and broke away before we made too big of a scene in front of her new school. "Fuck, I've missed you."

Still clinging to me, she turned her head and pressed it to my chest. "What are those for?" she asked, noticing the bouquet of black roses in my hand.

"Well, I wasn't about to give these to some other girl. There's one for every show you couldn't be there for."

She'd traveled around to most of the western venues on our tour, but between work and her new school starting, she couldn't come to the eastern tour spots with us. I couldn't convince her to record "Hollow Again" for the album, but she had gotten up onstage in Seattle and sung it with me. I thought

that was what had finally gotten her to decide on a school after taking a year off.

I took a piece of her hair resting on her shoulder in between my fingers. “This is hot. Short looks good on you.”

She smiled and hugged the roses to her chest. “You weren’t supposed to be back until Friday.”

“I think everyone was getting annoyed with me complaining about how long the bus ride back to you was going to take, so Danny bought me a flight home.” I tilted my head and gave her a dark grin. “So ... I have the house to myself for the next three days.”

“Hmm. How lonely.” She jutted out her bottom lip, holding back her smile. “Do you want me to keep you company until they all get back?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

She scrunched her nose against mine and giggled. “Is there French toast?”

I nodded, brushing my lips with hers again. A growl rose from my throat when her breathing became heavier. “Okay, get your ass in the truck before I do things to you in front of your classmates.”

“It’s an art school. Maybe we can inspire them.” She laughed, reluctantly letting go of my shirt. “Ooh! I can use the piano at your place to practice some of the songs I’ve been working on!”

I frowned. “Aye, don’t forget what you were originally excited about playing with when I take you home.”

She grinned and rolled her eyes, stepping up into the cab.

Dark clouds rolled in overhead as I climbed behind the wheel and turned the engine over. “You finished a song?”

Warmth spread through my chest when she nodded and started smiling at her accomplishment. The spotlight never really interested her, but she loved music and had decided to give songwriting a try while we were on tour. She was shy about sharing, but she eventually showed me some of what she’d been working on before she left to go back home. I was blown away, but I definitely hadn’t been surprised she was so good at it. It was in her blood.

I arched my brow. “Can I see it?”

Her already-pink cheeks grew brighter. “Maybe you can try singing them

for me later?”

“How about we sing them together?” The corner of my mouth lifted.

Her eyes danced with joy as she placed her hand on my inner thigh.

“Well, we’ve got the rest of the day to ourselves. What do you wanna do, Little Fox?” I asked.

Thunder rolled through the clouds overhead. We both looked up at the sky through the windshield as the rain came down.

Avery’s hooded eyes landed on me. “I’ve got some ideas.”

# Acknowledgments



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## About the Author



**N**.J. Gray was born and raised in Minnesota, but she is currently exploring the Rocky Mountains with her husband and two rescue dogs, Jango and Korra. She loves to indulge herself in hard-fought romance novels and considers herself an enthusiast of all things sweet. She writes from her home in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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