

A young man and woman are shown in a close, romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man, on the right, has short brown hair and a tattoo on his neck. The woman, on the left, has long brown hair. They are both wearing white shirts. The background is a textured wall covered in graffiti, including a large green and yellow 'V' and a guitar neck. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a romantic atmosphere.

WILL LOVE LEAD
HER BACK WHERE
SHE BELONGS?

RANSOM

RACHEL SCHURIG

Ransom

Rachel Schurig

Copyright © 2014 Rachel Schurig
All rights reserved.

Kindle Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

To find out more about her books, visit

Rachel at rachelschurig.com

[Join the mailing list for updates and
exclusive content!](#)

Visit her author page on [Facebook](#)
(<https://www.facebook.com/RachelSchurig>)

Follow her on [Twitter](#)
(<https://twitter.com/rem3330>)

To Andrea and Maddie, in honor of
many hours of fun and ridiculousness as
we “followed the band!”

And to Jessy, for her beauty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Lynn McNamee at Red Adept Editing for all of your help and advice. This book is much improved thanks to your hard work!

Thank you, Najla Qamber, for yet another awesome cover!
najlaqamberdesigns.com

Chapter One

Daltrey

“What’s your name?”

I look up from the stick I’ve been trailing through the dirt. The girl standing in front of me appears to be around my age. I decide I like her right away. Her hair is brown and twists around and around like tiny Slinkies. There’s a word for the way her hair looks, but I can’t remember. I like the way it seems so messy and different from mine. Curly, that’s the word. No one in my family has curly hair. And she’s wearing a Batman shirt. I love

Batman.

“I’m Daltrey,” I tell her.

She sits on the edge of the broken sandbox. “Dal-trey,” she sounds out, nodding a little. “I’m Daisy.”

“Like a flower?”

She laughs. “Yup. My momma named me after her favorite flowers.”

Momma. I duck my head, not wanting her to see me cry. My brothers always tell me boys shouldn’t cry.

I must not have done it fast enough because she pats my hand and asks, “Whatcha crying for?”

I turn away, looking at the sandbox. There’s not much sand in it. It’s mostly filled with sticks and rocks. I don’t think anyone has played here in a long time.

Daisy follows my gaze. “The people who lived here before didn’t have kids. And my daddy wouldn’t ever let me play in here.”

“My dad said there was a sandbox. Before we moved. He said there was a nice big yard, and we’d have fun playing here.”

“I bet he could fix it up,” she says, picking up her own stick to twirl in the dirt. “Maybe there’s a place where you can buy sand.”

I nod. I bet there is.

“You got any sisters?” she asks.

“Nope. Just three brothers. I’m the littlest.”

Her face lights up, and I decide she’s very pretty. “Four brothers? Wow. I

don't have any brothers. Are they bigger than us? What're their names?"

"Yeah, they're all bigger. Lennon is six, Cash is eight, and Reed is nine."

"How old are you?"

"I'm five."

"Me too! You're so lucky to have brothers. I just have my dad, and he's not home very much." She nods toward the house next door. "I have a new babysitter today. She's been on the phone *forever*."

"You don't got no mom?"

She turns back to me, her face serious. "No. She's in heaven."

I don't know much about heaven, but Daisy looks pretty sad about it, so I'm not certain it's a good place. I decide I

can tell her about my mom. “My mom’s gone, too.”

Daisy nods solemnly. “Did she die? My mom died when I was three.”

“No. She’s just... gone.”

Daisy wrinkles up her nose. “What do you mean? Where is she?”

I shrug. “Dunno. She left a few months ago. Dad says she didn’t want to be a mom anymore, so she just left.”

Daisy’s mouth drops open a little. “You can decide not to be a mom anymore? That sounds crazy.”

I shrug again. It sounded pretty crazy when they told me about it, but Reed said I should shut up and stop asking so many questions.

“She doesn’t want us anymore,

dummy,” he told me, punching my arm.

Then we had to move so my dad’s sister could help out. I wasn’t sure what we needed help with, but Dad said it was important.

I miss my old room. I’m crying again, but this time I don’t try to hide it. I think Daisy knows how it feels to be so sad.

“I’m sorry your momma is gone, Daltrey,” she says, her voice soft and close to my ear.

“I’m sorry your momma is gone, too.”

We sit like quietly for a few minutes. It’s a sunny day, and pretty soon, I don’t feel so sad anymore. “You wanna play something?”

She sits up straight, giving me

another of her pretty smiles. “Yeah. What should we play?”

I think for a minute. Most of my toys are still packed. “You got a bike?”

She juts out her chin and does something with her eyes that Cash is always doing when he thinks I’m being dumb. “Of course. Who doesn’t have a bike?”

I jump up. “Last one to the stop sign is a rotten egg!” I take off, running to the garage.

“Cheater,” she yells, but she’s laughing.

When I get to the garage, I stop short. My dad is standing next to his car, keys in his hand.

“Hey, little man,” he says. “Time for

practice.”

“Aw, Dad. Now?”

He nods, shaking his keys a little.
“Aren’t you excited to meet your new teacher?”

I want to stamp my feet on the concrete. I don’t want a new piano teacher. I liked Miss Carol, my teacher back in our old town, just fine. In fact, I liked everything about our old town. Why’d we have to move to this stupid place anyhow? And now I can’t even play with Daisy.

“Does Lennon have to come too?” I ask, frowning.

“Yup, we’re all going. Hurry up now.”

“I gotta go tell my friend first,” I say

quickly, running out of the garage before he can stop me. My dad doesn't like it when we're late for our lessons.

I find Daisy sitting atop a bright yellow bike at the stop sign.

"Hey," she calls when she sees me. "I beat you! Where's your bike?"

"I have to go to piano lessons," I tell her, kicking the grass. I wish I could stay and play with her. Talking to Daisy was the first time I've had fun since we moved here.

"You play piano?" she asks, her eyes wide.

I nod. "Yeah. All my brothers do. I'm still learning."

She looks really excited. "I love music. Will you play me a song

sometime?”

I shrug. “Sure. I only know a couple.”

“Wow. I’ve never met someone who could play piano before.”

I look at her bike, wishing I could go ride with her. “Do you think we could ride bikes tomorrow instead?”

“Sure. Just come knock on my door.”

I hear a horn and look over to see my dad’s car approaching the corner. I sigh. “That’s my dad. I gotta go.”

“Okay. See ya tomorrow, Daltrey.”

“Bye.”

The car pulls up next to us, and Lennon throws open the door. “Hurry up, dummy.”

I climb in and buckle my seat belt. As we pull away. I turn to the window,

looking back at Daisy. She stands at the stop sign and waves before climbing on her bike. I watch as she pedals down the street, her yellow bike glittering in the sun, until I can't see her anymore.

Chapter Two

Fourteen Years Later

Daisy

It's been more than a year since I've seen that face. Daltrey Ransome was my next door neighbor from the time I was five years old right up until the day he left town last year. It feels like there has never been a time when I didn't know that face.

So it comes as quite a surprise to see it splashed out over two pages in the glossy magazine someone from the last class left on my desk. My breath catches in my chest as I stare down at the photo

of him. God, he looks exactly the same. A shock of golden hair sticks out from beneath a grey beanie. The photographer caught him just removing his black Ray Bans, and his icy-blue eyes are stark against his tan skin. He's not wearing his eyebrow ring today, so the little scar I know so well is visible just above his eyelid. I rub my finger lightly over the blemish. I put that scar there with a mishap involving a hockey stick when we were fourteen and goofing off in his driveway.

“All right, people. We're continuing with our discussion on Keynesian theory today.”

I blink and look up at Professor Bartlet. I almost forgot where I was. I

slip the magazine under my notebook and pull out a pen, trying to focus on the professor's monotone. Macroeconomics is boring enough, and Bartlet does little to breathe any interest into the topic.

And it certainly doesn't help my concentration to know that a picture of Daltrey is hanging out right under my notebook. There's probably an article about him, too. My breathing quickens. It's so tempting to just slide the notebook over a bit so I could—

“Miss Harris?”

The professor is staring at me, along with about half of the class. The other half are paying about as much attention as I had just been.

“Yes?”

A slight titter ripples through the class. Bartlet's face tightens, and I feel heat flood my own. I have clearly missed something, and I'm sure I look like a total idiot.

"I asked you to please name the effect that Keynes tells us will magnify small decreases in consumption."

I stare at him, feeling something akin to panic. I have no clue what he's talking about. "Uh..."

He turns away from me, clearly annoyed. "Would someone who has bothered to pay attention like to improve their participation grade today?"

A hand across the room shoots up. I don't bother to listen to the answer. I take deep breaths through my nose,

focusing on the blank page of my notebook. My heart rate slows to normal, and I feel the heat fading from my face and ears. I make a conscious effort to unclench my fingers, feeling the sting where my nails cut into skin.

I'm not upset about not knowing the answer. I couldn't care less about macroeconomics. In fact, if my father sees my complete lack of aptitude in the subject, maybe he'll allow me to stop taking so many business classes. A bad grade will only help my argument there.

No, the thing that has me so worked up is the way everyone was looking at me. I shiver a little under my thick black hoodie. I hate when people look at me. I should have sat in the back, but I was

late, and my normal row was full, so the only choice was the middle of the room.

I spend the rest of the class trying to be invisible. Resisting the urge to slide the magazine back into view, I pull my sweatshirt sleeves down over my palms and sink farther into my seat, determined to do nothing else that will get me noticed for the rest of the class.

We're dismissed twenty excruciating minutes later. I sigh in relief as I start to gather my things. I know taking the magazine back to my apartment is a mistake, but I can't help myself. I need to read that article.

"Oh my God," an unfamiliar voice says to my left. "Is that Daltrey Ransome?"

I turn slightly, instinctively lowering my gaze to her desk so that we don't make eye contact. "Uh, yeah," I mumble.

She sighs. "I *love* him. Don't you just love him? He's *so* hot."

Don't you just love him? I could laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation. This girl has no clue. I shrug noncommittally and return to my things, sticking the magazine between the books in my bag before I sling it up over my shoulder.

To my dismay, the girl is waiting for me at the end of the row. She falls into step next to me as I make my way to the door.

"That was pretty brutal in there," she says. "I would have freaked out if it was

me.”

I shrug again, wishing she would head in the other direction once we reach the hall. No such luck.

“He’s such an ass,” she goes on, her voice lower. “I mean, why can’t he just call on the people who volunteer? If someone’s hand isn’t up, they clearly don’t feel like sharing, you know? And who the hell gives a shit about Keyes, or whatever the dude’s name is?”

I smile in spite of myself. “I sure don’t.”

She stops and holds out her hand. “I’m Paige.”

I look at her for the first time. She’s taller than I am, which isn’t saying much, and decked out in tight, hot-pink skinny

jeans and a black leather jacket. Her hair is a mess of ebony curls that brush against the multiple piercings in her eyebrows, ears, and nose.

“Daisy.” I shake her hand, feeling shy. Will she be able to tell that she’s the first person I’ve introduced myself to the entire semester?

“Nice to meet you, Daisy. Hey, you going to lunch now?”

A shot of panic rushes through me. She seems nice enough, but I don’t think I can handle eating with her. Before I can come up with an excuse, her purse starts ringing.

She pulls out her phone and answers it. “Hey. Yeah, I just got out. Meet you at Subway? Come on, Karen, I can’t eat

that crap. No. No. Fine. I'm bringing a friend." She winks at me. "Yeah. Okay. See you." She slips her phone back into her bag. "That was my friend Karen. She'll meet us outside the food court."

I shift my backpack to my other shoulder. I hadn't agreed to join her, but what could I say? Paige was already off on a tangent, something about the offerings at the food court and how hard it is to find decent, nontoxic food anywhere on campus.

"At least it's better than the dorms, I'll give them that," she says, brushing her hair behind her ear.

I'm starting to get a headache. Paige talks fast, throwing her hands around as she does so, and this is the first time I've

tried to hold an actual conversation with a peer in months. Had talking to strangers always been this exhausting?

“We live in Hale,” she says. “What about you?”

“Uh, I’m not in the dorms.”

Her face clouds a little. “Really? Are you in a sorority?”

I nearly choke, the laughter hits me so hard. “No,” I say as she thumps me on the back. The very thought is absurd. How would *I* get into a sorority? “I have an apartment off campus.”

“Wow!” Her eyes flick across my face. “Are you an upperclassman?”

Shit. I should have just lied. Eastern Tennessee University has a strict policy about freshman living in dorms. I do not

want to have to explain my situation to her. I realize I'm playing with the straps of my bag and lower my hands. "No, I'm a freshman. I... uh, got permission to be off campus. It's a long story." I mentally cross my fingers that she doesn't ask to hear it. There's no way I'm getting into that with a stranger. She watches me for a moment, and I feel the heat start to inch its way up my neck again.

"You're lucky," she finally says, looking away. "The dorms are hella lame."

We continue toward the food court, and I feel increasingly awkward. I should have made up an excuse, any excuse, to get out of this.

"So what's your major?" Paige asks.

I feel a fresh wave of embarrassment. She must feel the awkwardness as well, to resort to such lame small talk.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I say, fiddling with my bag strap again. “My dad is making me take a bunch of business classes. He wants me to be a business major.”

Paige makes a face. “That sounds painfully boring.”

“What about you?”

“I’m into drawing, so I might try graphic design. Or advertising. Definitely something creative.”

I rack my brain for possible follow-up questions. I know the polite thing, the *normal* thing, is to ask her about her classes, or why she’s interested in

graphic design, or... something. But my tongue seems to stumble over the words. I can feel another flush coming to my face, and shame wells inside me. I'm completely hopeless. Pathetic.

I thank my lucky stars when we reach the Student Center. Paige's friend will be here, and I'll be off the hook conversation-wise. Sure enough, Paige waves to a tall blonde waiting by the entrance.

When we reach the girl, Paige gives her a quick, one-armed hug. "Hey, Karen." She gestures at me. "This is Daisy. She suffers through the hell of Bartlet's class with me."

Karen smiles. "Hey, Daisy, nice to meet you."

I give Karen a quick wave, hating the way her eyes flick up and down my figure. I had expected her to be a clone of Paige with her bold clothes and multiple piercings, so I'm surprised by her relatively unobtrusive flowery sundress. Her hair is straight and falls halfway down her back, and her teeth are so perfectly white and even that she could be in toothpaste commercials.

"Let's get in line," she says, turning away to enter the building. "We decided on Panda Express, right?"

"No, we did not," Paige says firmly. "I said I wanted Subway. And it's my turn to pick."

"I'm tired of Subway. It's all you eat. I need some fucking grease, okay,

Paige?”

I wasn't expecting Karen to have such a mouth. Do beauty queens talk that way?

But Paige laughs, clearly used to this kind of language from her friend. “Let's just get pizza.”

“Score,” Karen says happily, leading the way to the pizza line. “I can get sausage and pepperoni, and you can get whatever green healthy shit you want.”

“You know, you'll eventually gain weight, eating the way you do,” Paige says. “Then you'll be begging me for my healthy tips.”

“Keep dreaming.”

I follow them over to the line. It's hard keeping up with their flurry of

conversation, but I would rather listen than join in. And if I can manage to shovel down my pizza fast enough, I should be able to get out of here in ten minutes. My good luck lasts about as long as it takes to get our pizza and find a seat in the busy food court.

Paige says, “Daisy and I bonded over your favorite thing on earth, Karen.”

“Yeah?” Karen asks, turning her brown eyes to me. “What would that be?”

I look at Paige, at a loss, and she grins. “The hottie.”

Karen’s face lights up. “Might this have something to do with my favorite rocker?”

Oh. That.

“It does indeed.” Paige closes her eyes, a dreamy expression on her face. “The one and only Daltrey Ransome.”

I shift awkwardly in my seat. I really don’t want to talk about Daltrey.

“I just love him,” Karen gushes. “He’s so insanely hot.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, picking up my pizza.

“Get out that magazine,” Paige says, gesturing at my bag. “I want to see the sexies.”

With growing dread, I pull out the magazine. I can’t very well refuse. I would look even crazier than Paige probably already thinks I am. I lay the tabloid on the table then flip through the pages until I find him. Daltrey.

Both girls sigh as we stare down at him. Saying he looks good is an understatement, like saying the surface of the sun is warm. He's beyond gorgeous.

"What's the article about?" Paige asks, reaching for the magazine. "The tour?"

"Who cares?" Karen slaps Paige's hand away. "I want to see if there are more pictures." She flips the page.

Several more pictures of Daltrey cover the next two pages. Daltrey walking into a recording studio. Daltrey ducking into a cab. Daltrey leaving a restaurant with Lennon, Cash, and Levi. A knot has formed in my stomach, and I'm sure I'm about to start crying. This is why I've avoided most media this year. I

knew I wouldn't be able to deal.

"I can't believe we get to see him in a few weeks," Paige says happily. "What's the countdown?"

"Fifteen days until Ransom," Karen replies. "It can't come too soon."

"You're seeing them?" I ask, confused.

"Yeah, we're spending a few weeks following the band. Starting in Boston. We're road tripping."

The tour... of course. The girls are going to see Ransom in concert.

"You should totally come," Paige tells me. "We're following them up and down the east coast for two weeks. It's going to be *amazing*."

Her causal offer has the effect of

making my urge to cry intensify. My eyes start to water.

“Hey, are you okay?” Paige asks.

I try to smile, but I have a feeling it comes out much more like a grimace. “Yeah,” I manage. I reach for my Coke, hoping to dispel the lump in my throat. I need to hold it together until I get back to the peace of my apartment. I have a feeling my self-imposed Daltrey-information-fast is about to go out the window. I’ll probably be gorging on pop-culture websites within the hour.

Then again, there’s probably no better source for information than his fans. “Is it a big tour?” I ask, trying to keep my voice casual. “I’ve been so busy with school that I haven’t really

heard much about it.”

“Yeah, they keep adding dates,” Karen says, leaning over to get a better look at Daltrey’s tattoo-covered biceps. “These guys are so on fire right now. And they get more popular every day.”

“Whatever,” Paige scoffs. “Bandwagoners. We’ve been fans from the start.”

“Hey, those bandwagoners are good for us,” Karen says. “The bigger Ransom gets, the more tour dates they add, and the more chances we have to see them.”

“That’s true.” Paige takes a bite of her pizza. “And the more attention they get from paparazzi.” She points at the magazine. “This totally made my day. They can invade his privacy all they

want.”

Karen laughs, but I feel sick. This conversation is dancing far too close to way too many forbidden topics. I need to get out of here.

“I should get going,” I say, throwing my napkin onto my half-finished pizza. I stand and gesture at the magazine. “You guys want to keep that?”

“Nah,” Karen says, pushing it in my direction. “I get that one delivered. It will probably be at the dorm when I get there.”

I don’t want to admit how relieved I am as I slip the magazine back into my bag. “Thanks for inviting me to lunch.”

“Any time,” Paige says. “And you should really think about coming on the

tour. It's going to be so much fun."

I give them both a small smile and turn to go. It was nice of her to offer, but the last thing I need to do is to go running off after Daltrey Ransome. He's not a part of my life anymore. And the only way I'll manage to hang onto my thin grasp of sanity is if it stays that way.

Chapter Three

Daltrey

I wake up, alone in a dark hotel room, my heart racing, scared out of my mind. When I finally figure out where the hell I am, I rub my aching chest. I'm glad I'm not on the bus, glad there's no one in here to see me like this. I'm pretty sure the wetness I feel on my cheeks is tears, and my brothers would never let me live that down.

Knowing sleep isn't going to return anytime soon, I climb out of bed and head for the mini bar. I grab a cold beer, even though I could probably use

something stronger. *You're too young for a drinking problem. So-called rock star or not.*

I take the beer to the small balcony of my room and lean against the railing, looking out over the lights of Memphis. We played a kick-ass show, and I should still be on a high from it. The crowd was amazing. Everything felt right in the world, for a few brief hours. I could forget about the knowledge that I'd traveled halfway across the country without actually seeing any of it. Forget the fact that the tour bus, though more luxurious than our old van, was cramped and starting to make me feel claustrophobic. Forget about how tired I was and how my throat hurt pretty much

every day now. When we played like that, when we somehow managed to tap into that almost magical, synched-up, out-of-body place I can't even describe, I could forget about all the shitty stuff and remember why we were doing this in the first place.

I had felt that tonight, for the first time in weeks, and the sensation had been fantastic. I should have slept like a baby. But here I was again, drinking a beer by myself at three in the morning.

I keep having dreams about her.

Which is pretty fucking ridiculous because I haven't talked to the girl in about a year. Daisy made it perfectly clear that, for whatever reason, she was done with me—just like that, years of

friendship, gone. And I don't even know what the hell I did.

Okay, so I left, but she always knew that was going to happen. We planned for it, for Christ's sake. Worked for it. *Both* of us. She had every bit as much to do with our success as anyone in the band. She was our biggest supporter, our loudest critic. We never performed a song without her hearing it first, never played a gig without her there. She was with us on that first horrible so-called tour, riding around Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana to all those dingy dive bars. She helped us plaster the towns with our flyers and sell our homemade CDs, just waiting for our big chance.

And when it came, when we got the

call from Grey Skies that they wanted us to open for them, she was there then, too. She sat at our kitchen table, just like she had a thousand times before, waiting with bated breath for my dad to get off the phone with their manager. When he finally hung up and confirmed that our big break had appeared, she was the first person I grabbed as the kitchen erupted around us. She was happy for me—not the fake kind of happy that you think another person wants to see. She was genuinely, honest-to-God, screaming-her-face-off-while-hugging-me happy.

The only bad thing about those hectic, heady weeks before the tour was leaving her. I wanted to tell her then, the thing I'd always known but been too afraid to

say, but I didn't. I couldn't imagine saying those three words—finally saying them, out loud, not just in my head where I imagined it constantly—and then leaving. So I held my tongue, and my tears, as I hugged her one last time before heading for the airport.

Maybe I should have said it. Maybe then she wouldn't have disappeared the way she did. But I had a plan, damn it. I was going to come back, take her to her prom, the way we always talked about, and drop the bomb that I wanted us to be more. The way it played out in my head was that she'd be so happy she'd be willing to leave with me. She would forget about the business school she never really wanted to attend to come on

tour with us. I wanted to experience this with her. I wanted to show her the world.

Taking another sip of beer, I wonder—not for the first time—what in the hell I could have done to piss her off so much. She stopped taking my calls about three months after we left for California. By then we'd recorded our album and started to tour as the openers for Grey Skies. I used to call her every night, eager to tell her all about life on the road in a proper tour. We had a lot more free time back then, and I was actually getting a chance to do things in the towns where we stopped. Was that it? Was she jealous?

But that wasn't like Daisy. I cannot

imagine that she would throw away a thirteen-year friendship out of jealousy. It didn't make any sense. But one day, she didn't answer when I called. And didn't respond to my voice mail. Or my increasingly panicked text messages. My emails went unanswered, too.

I tried for weeks to reach her, calling her house, her phone, her dad's phone. He told me flat out she didn't want to talk to me, but I still couldn't accept it. Even when her cell number was disconnected, when my emails started to come back with the message that there was no such address, I didn't get it. It wasn't until she finally called me to cancel our prom plans that I realized what she'd been trying to tell me: She

didn't want to have anything to do with me.

I replay those weeks all the time, wondering what I could have done differently. I always come back to the same thing: I should have gone home. I should have told my dad to screw himself and gotten on a plane. They could have managed without me for a few days. Even if they couldn't, even if it would have jeopardized our chance to open for Grey Skies, I should have done it anyway. Daisy was worth it.

But I didn't. And now she's away at college, probably having the time of her life, forgetting all about her old friend. I can see her so clearly, sitting on a green lawn, surrounded by friends, like some

fucking commercial, her brown curls blowing in the breeze as she laughs. The image makes my chest ache again. *She's gone, man. Accept it.*

I look out over the city again, my beer bottle empty. She is gone, hundreds of miles away, totally out of my reach. And I'm here, alone in the middle of the night, haunted by memories of the only girl I ever loved.

Chapter Four

Daisy

As we near the end of the semester, the weather is warming. I've noticed a definitive uptick in my anxiety level in the past few weeks, and I've been trying to keep my mind off the reasons why for days now.

In my apartment, my sanctuary, I don't have to worry. I keep it cool enough to hide the change of seasons. There is nothing in this space to remind me of my past, of old friends, or of once-familiar places. To most eyes, certainly those of girls like Paige and Karen, I'm

sure my place looks depressingly sterile with its white-and-cream color scheme and bare walls. I have no pictures on the walls and no knickknacks or mementos on the tables, nothing to distract me from the quiet and calm that I crave above all else.

I head to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. On my way back, I pick up my laptop from the counter before sitting on the couch. I sink into the cushions and slip off my Converse so I can pull my feet up and tuck them underneath me. The laptop remains firmly closed while I sip my water, contemplating what I know I'm about to do.

The laptop has very strict filters. Having them installed was the only way

I would agree to having a computer in the apartment at all. Of course, my father insisted I needed one for school, and the assistant dean we worked with on my admission agreed.

Doctor Jacobs, my therapist, encouraged me to leave the filters off entirely. “You need to learn to trust yourself, Daisy,” she said.

In the end, the four of us compromised with the social media filter—to which only I had the password. Dr. Jacobs insisted that I be the one who had the control should I decide to head out into the wild.

I shiver in spite of my totally weather-inappropriate hoodie and jeans. I replace the cap on my water and set the

bottle on the table beside me. Am I really going to do this? Am I really about to open myself up to all the fear and pain I know is contained in that little button for my web browser?

I know my fear is not normal. My generation seems to be constantly online, hooked in, networking, heads bent over phones and laptops and tablets all over campus. Most nineteen-year-olds have probably spent several hours online already today. But I am not a normal teenager. The Internet is not a fun place for me, not a place to chat with friends and look at pictures and procrastinate when I don't want to do my work. At least, it isn't anymore. It hasn't been for the past year.

You can do this, Daisy. The voice in my head sounds suspiciously like Dr. Jacobs. *You can go online and look up Daltrey and his brothers without anything bad happening to you. You are strong enough to stay away from the things you're afraid of seeing.*

With trembling hands, I unlatch the MacBook and hit the Power button. Within moments I'm staring at the access page for my filters. My fingers hesitate over the password box. *Moment of truth.*

I quickly type the passcode before I can change my mind and sigh in relief once it's done. That wasn't so bad. Next, I open a search engine and type in Daltrey's name, holding my breath for

the split second it takes for the results to return.

There are more than a million hits. I gasp, shocked by this proof of the enormity of their success.

When I went into my self-imposed radio silence last summer, Ransom was getting some good buzz online and on the entertainment shows. At the time, they were touring with Grey Skies, one of the biggest names in the alt-rock scene, and their album had just dropped. I could tell, even in those early days, that they were about to hit it big.

Of course, I haven't been able to completely escape news of them over the last few months. They are occasionally mentioned even on the

“safe” websites and TV shows I frequent. Every so often, I would see their faces smile out at me from a magazine rack at the drugstore. The weirdest thing was when I started to see the name Ransom scrawled out across the chests of classmates. The band had apparently reached the point where their names were on T-shirts.

It still felt totally surreal to click on the link for their name on Wikipedia. They have a freaking *Wikipedia* page, for God’s sake. These are the boys I grew up with, the boys I shared a hundred family dinners with, the boys who used to moon me and pull my hair. They were same boys I listened to for hours as they practiced in their garage. I

sat giggling with Daltrey and Lennon on the upstairs landing the first time Cash had gone on a date, trying to peek over their heads to see if he'd kiss the girl. And now I'm looking at him, his hair professionally tousled, posing with his brothers, as they all stare moodily out at me from some photo shoot. It's beyond weird.

I quickly move to the more gossip-happy entertainment sites. I soak in information about the boys as if I can't get enough of it. Their album hit number one on the *Billboard* chart a month ago and is holding steady. They've done appearances on Letterman and *The Tonight Show*. Apparently, Reed is dating some actress—I snort at that—

and Cash is frequently seen with a dizzying array of models and reality stars. When I find no mention of who Daltrey is dating, I start to feel more comfortable. I'm not sure I could handle seeing him draped all over some pop starlet.

I click on a link that takes me to the band's ConnectMe page. I haven't been on my generation's most popular social media site since everything went down last year, and I remember why as soon as I click on the familiar yellow M icon. I barely register the fact that the boys have more than a million fans on their page before I see it—*her* name—right there, front and center on my screen. Joanie was the last person to comment

on the band's page.

Can't wait to see you in Cleveland again! It's been way too long since you've been home!

There are dozens of responses to her post, no doubt from other Cleveland fans looking forward to the band's homecoming performance at the end of the summer, but I'm transfixed by her name and the tiny picture next to it. Joanie Hartfield. She used this very website to make my life a living hell only twelve months ago.

I close the browser and slam the laptop closed. Images are racing through my mind. Horrible, evil, hateful words. Pictures of me. Threats. All of the things that Joanie and her friends had flung at

me, relentlessly, gleefully even, for months, until I finally broke, until I went to pieces and decided sheer nothingness would be preferable to living in the kind of world where people could be so cruel.

My breathing has become heavy, and beads of sweat pop out on my forehead. I know a panic attack is imminent. How could I be so stupid to go to that site, of all places? And what are the odds of her posting there on the one day that I actually logged on? Can the universe hate me any more?

I half-laugh at the thought, because the universe has made its opinion of me quite clear in the past year. But the strangled laugh actually manages to calm

me somewhat. I grab my water bottle from the table and take a long gulp before beginning my counting exercises.

It's one thing to want to be strong, to want to move on and just get back to normal. But to actually do it is a different thing entirely. The truth is, I'm not normal. I shouldn't have to keep reminding myself of this, not after everything that has happened. The fact that I'm sitting here, alone, in an empty apartment without a single friend to my name should be all the proof that I need. I am broken, and I'm not going to be fixed any time in the near future.

The sooner I finally accept that, the better off I'll be.

I don't expect to see Paige again until our next class, so I'm surprised to find her sitting in my usual seat in my twentieth-century lit lecture the next day.

She, however, doesn't seem surprised to see me. "I thought it was you," she says, smiling broadly. "I usually sit back there"—she points across the room—"and I remembered seeing someone in this row with hair like yours. After we met yesterday, I wondered if maybe it was you. And it was!"

I smile, feeling nervous. I had planned to hide away in the back row of econ next week, hopefully avoiding her

for the rest of the semester. No such luck.

“Sit down,” she says, gesturing to the empty seat beside her.

Not seeing much choice in the matter, I do as she asks, pulling my sweatshirt sleeves over my palms as I do. Instinctively, I hunch into my hoodie, wishing she would stop looking at me.

“So you’re pretty shy, huh?”

I gape at her, momentarily forgetting how uncomfortable I am. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as bold as this chick is.

“Sorry.” She gives me a rueful smile. “Karen is always telling me I need a filter between my brain and mouth.”

“It’s okay.” I stare at the space just

below her chin. I'm really bad at eye contact, which I guess kind of proves her point. "Yeah, I'm pretty shy."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I should probably work on being more shy, you know?"

I laugh a little, feeling slightly more comfortable. "No, it's better to be confident, believe me."

She sighs. "There is a such thing as too confident. Sometimes I fall into that category. It's gets me into all kinds of trouble."

I think about the history class I'm failing. "Shy gets me into trouble too."

I stopped going to class midway through the term when I found out I would be required to work in a group

and give a twenty-minute presentation in front of the whole class. I just couldn't do it. My father had been furious when I finally admitted it to him. If I would have called him when I found out, he could have talked to someone in the counseling office and gotten me excused from the assignment. I knew that, but I was just so sick of him making "arrangements" for me. I wanted to show him that this whole college thing was out of my league.

The professor starts her lecture far below us in the hall, and I'm relieved to have an excuse to stop talking to Paige, but I really hate this class. Professor Davis is an ancient-looking, soft-spoken woman who spends the entire lecture

hunched over the podium in the center of the room. I can barely hear her half the time, and the murmuring of classmates who know they can get away with goofing off is very distracting.

“So,” Paige whispers, “have you thought at all about coming with us? I think you’d have fun.”

“I don’t know. I’m probably taking classes this summer.”

Her look of horror almost makes me laugh out loud.

“Classes in the *summer*? Are you insane?”

I don’t answer, keeping my eyes firmly on the professor. Maybe Paige will get the hint.

She doesn’t. “You have to have a

summer. It's like, human rights or something. Taking classes would be way too depressing."

I make a noncommittal noise. The lease on my apartment is for a full twelve months. I'm not exactly looking forward to summer school, but if I stay here and take classes, I won't have to go back to my dad's place. And missing the first semester already has me behind the rest of the freshman class.

"That's all the more reason for you to come with us," she says, her voice firm. "I'm not going to take no for an answer, Daisy."

I have a sinking feeling she isn't joking. How am I going to get out of this mess? "I... um... I really can't. I've got

some other—”

“Have you ever been on a road trip before? With your friends, I mean? ’Cause it’s like, my very favorite kind of trip. Seriously, Daisy...”

I know that she’s still talking, but in my head, I’m hundreds of miles away. I’m in the back of a van, smushed between Daltrey and Lennon’s amplifier, while Cash tries in vain to navigate the unfamiliar streets of Pittsburg. Daltrey calls out a steady stream of abuse, making me laugh, while Lennon moans from the front passenger seat. He always got the worst motion sickness. I wonder how he’s doing now, since their road trip has morphed into a full-out cross-country tour.

“Daisy?” Paige whispers, nudging my arm. “You okay?”

I shake my head, dispelling the memory. “Yeah.” I hunch over my notebook, scrawling down every word I can make out from the professor’s lecture.

From the corner of my eye, I see Paige lean back in her chair, her eyes still on me. But she doesn’t press and, eventually, her attention falls to her own notebook. I release a relieved breath. It’s been a long time since I let myself wallow in those memories. Seeing all those pictures yesterday really sent me for a loop.

When the professor finally releases the class, I’m hopeful that Paige will

leave without talking to me. Surely she can see that there's something not quite right about me. It usually takes most people much less time than this.

Apparently, Paige is not most people. "Look," she says, standing and throwing her bag over her shoulder. "You should come have dinner with us tonight in the dorm. We'll order takeout or something, and Karen and I can talk you into coming with us."

I can't figure out why she's trying so hard. Though I've made an effort not to be rude, I'm clearly not reciprocating her friendliness. I'm just too awkward, too damaged to be of interest to her. So what's going on? A shiver runs through me. Could this be part of some kind of

joke? Does she *know*?

My curiosity is strong enough to risk making eye contact. I look up at her, searching her face for any sign of malice or judgment. “Why are you trying to convince me? I’m obviously not... not the most social person you’ve met this week. If you guys need someone to split costs, I bet there are a hundred girls on campus more... that you’d have more fun with.”

She watches me for what feels like minutes. Just as my panic is about to get the best of me, she smiles. “I don’t know, Daisy. I just get the feeling you could use a little fun in your life. And maybe some people who are nice.”

I’m so floored by that comment that I

can't even formulate a response. Before I manage to close my gaping mouth, she pats me softly on the shoulder.

“See you tonight? 306 Hale. Say, seven?” She grins. “Karen gets cranky if she doesn't eat on time, so don't be late.”

Then she turns on her heel and heads to the door, leaving me to sit and stare after her, wondering what in the hell just happened.

Chapter Five

Daisy

I spend the rest of the day trying not to have a panic attack. Paige's words set off something inside me, and I have a terrible feeling my life is about to head into majorly complicated territory.

When I feel tears welling at the sight of a pair of girls giggling together in my trig class, I finally give up and pull out my phone. I'm going to need a session with Dr. Jacobs if I have any hope of making it through the week without a total breakdown. Her receptionist works me into the schedule without a hassle,

another benefit my father has arranged.

I make it through the rest of my classes then hop on a city bus. Dr. Jacobs's office is located on a bustling downtown street dotted with restaurants and retail spaces. I try to enjoy the spring sunshine as I make my way from the bus stop to her building.

"Hello, Daisy," the receptionist says when I enter. "I'm glad you're here today."

I give her a weak smile, sign in, and sit in the half-full waiting room. Trying to dispel the silly idea that everyone is staring at me, I get up and search through the magazine rack for something to use to hide my face. I think I catch sight of Daltrey's eyes peeking out at me from

one of the tabloid glossies. Looking at that would not be a good idea right now, so I grab a home decor magazine and settle down to wait.

“Daisy?”

I look up and the receptionist is smiling at me.

She gestures at the door. “Come on back.”

I ignore the glares of all those who have clearly been waiting for longer than I have and slip into Dr. Jacobs’s office.

“Hello, Daisy. It’s good to see you.” She smiles.

I feel marginally more at ease. I connected with Dr. Jacobs pretty early on when I moved out here, and she’s been a big help to me. I don’t think I

would be in college without her—for better or worse. “Thanks,” I mumble, taking my seat in the comfortable armchair opposite her.

She watches me, waiting, I know, for me to look up and make eye contact. The eye contact thing is big for her, and she’s always bugging me to work on it. “You’ll feel more confident when you act more confident,” she says. *Yeah, right.*

Still, I raise my head and meet her eyes. “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

“No problem. You can always stop in, Daisy, you know that.”

I return my attention to my sleeves, knowing she won’t hassle me about it

anymore this session. She lets me do whatever I need to feel comfortable enough to talk to her. It's one of the reasons I like her so much.

When I first met her at the Horizons Recovery Center, I was having a hard time talking to any of the doctors. Group therapy was a nightmare—ten sets of eyes staring as people waited for me to talk. Dr. Jacobs had seen right away how counterproductive that setting was for me and worked to get me excused from the sessions until I felt more comfortable. I owe her for that, big time.

“So,” she says, after we’ve sat in silence for a few moments, “what brings you in today?”

I sigh. “I’ve been having an...

interesting week.”

“How so?”

“I... met someone. A girl. In one of my classes. She invited me to have lunch with her and a friend.”

“Did you go?”

I nod, and I can hear her almost inaudible intake of breath. She’s surprised. I don’t blame her.

“That’s wonderful, Daisy. I’m proud of you.”

I snort. “You know, when you say stuff like that, it just shows me how fucked up I am. You’re proud of me for going to lunch with a couple of girls in my class. Think about how pathetic that sounds.”

“Who cares how it sounds? You and

I both know what you've been through. No one else is entitled to judge your experience or your journey." She pauses. "The truth is, Daisy, having a positive interaction with a peer is a big deal for you. And the fact that you willingly extended that meeting to a lunch is a great step. Now, tell me, how did you feel?"

"How do you think? I was awkward and weird, and they were probably super relieved when I left."

"That may be the case, and, if so, you can't control their reactions. But that doesn't take away from the step you took."

I burrow slightly farther into my hoodie. "The weird thing is that they

didn't *act* relieved. At least, Paige didn't. She's the girl I met in class. Turns out she's in my lit class too. She was waiting for me there today."

I look up in time to see Dr. Jacobs's eyebrows rise slightly. "Really? Did you speak with her again?"

I tell her all about it, how Paige was so nice and how they even invited me to road trip with them this summer. I pause, not knowing how to bring up the real crux of the issue. "But here's the thing; this wasn't just a random meeting."

"What do you mean?"

"She started talking to me in class because she saw me with a magazine... with a picture of Daltrey."

"Ah. She's a fan, I take it?"

“Yes. That’s what the road trip is all about. They’re following the tour on the east coast. And they want me to come with them.”

“And how do you feel about that idea?”

I laugh bitterly. “Obviously, it isn’t going to happen. How could I go? I’d have to see *them*.”

“And that would be a bad thing?”

I gape at her. “Come on. You can’t expect me to actually see those guys.”

“Why not? They were once very important to you. And your relationship with them has little to do with everything else that followed. It might be a good thing for you to see them.”

I shift uncomfortably. I have the

feeling she's about to start encouraging me to do something I don't want to do. Dr. Jacobs is a master at bugging me until I agree to go along with her crazy plans.

"I went online last night." I say it fast, so fast I'm not entirely sure she hears me. But she doesn't ask for clarification so I barrel forward. "Without the filter on, I mean. After I saw that picture and talked to Paige, I had to see what was going on with them, so I went online and searched for them."

"How did you feel, being online?"

"I was scared, I guess, at first. But then I kinda forgot about it. I just was too caught up in... them."

"They're doing well, I take it?"

I nod. “Really well.”

“How do you feel about their success?”

I do my best not to get irritated with her. I know it's her job, but I get tired of that question. *How do you feel? How did that feel? How did you feel then?* Sometimes I wish I could just tell her what happened without having to dig into the emotional stuff of every single experience. “I felt... really proud of them. And it felt kind of surreal, that it was them, you know? These kids I knew so well were on *The Tonight Show*. It was weird.” I pause. “I also felt a little sad, I guess.”

“Why do you think that is?”

I'm quiet, trying to isolate the feeling

from last night. “Because I wasn’t there with them. Because they did it without me. I didn’t even know most of these things were happening.”

“Daisy, I think you miss them.”

“Of course I miss them.” My voice is sharper than I intended. “I haven’t seen them in more than a year.”

If she catches the annoyance in my tone, she doesn’t let on. “And in that time, you went through things no person should have to deal with. And you did it without your best friends.” I feel tears prick at my eyes, but she continues. “And then, once you started to heal, you had to deal with the effects of your experiences.”

I know she’s talking about the fact

that I have no friends at school—or anywhere else for that matter. I can't even have a conversation with someone my own age. I sit in class alone every day before going home, alone, to sit in a silent apartment until it's time to go to bed.

“You've been very lonely for a long time, Daisy. It's natural that you should miss the last real friends that you had.”

I wipe my eyes. “I went on their ConnectMe page,” I say, my voice small with shame.

She has always been the one advocating that I be trusted to go online, that when the time came I could be strong enough to stay away from the sites that were a trigger for me. I worry she'll

be disappointed that she was wrong.

“And?” she asks, surprising me with the lack of judgment in her voice. “Did you feel okay?”

I tell her about seeing Joanie’s post, and my reaction to it.

“So what you’re telling me is that you went to a site that in the past caused you great pain.”

I hang my head.

“And while on that site, you saw something that upset you. So in response, you turned off your computer, practiced your breathing exercises, and managed to calm yourself down. Does that sound accurate?”

I’m so surprised by her summation that I look up at her, right in her face.

She's smiling a little. "Can you not see what a positive thing that is? Can you not see how proud you should be of such a reaction?"

I blink, trying to wrap my mind around it in that way. "I... I guess."

"Well, I'm certain of it, Daisy. I want you to keep thinking about that, particularly when you're inclined to be upset about what you see as your lack of progress. You're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for."

I sit in silence, letting those words run around in my mind.

"I think you should explore this relationship with Paige and her friend. They sound like nice girls, and it's high time you allowed some fun in your life."

“So you think I should go with them? On the tour, I mean?”

She shrugs. “That’s entirely up to you and certainly not something you should decide lightly. I do think, however, that you should seriously consider getting in touch with Daltrey and his brothers, one way or another. You’ve punished yourself long enough.”

I stare at her. “You think I’m punishing myself?”

“Why else would you be cutting yourself off from one of the most significant relationships of your life?”

I leave her office feeling more confused than ever, but I’m also calmer. I’m seriously starting to wonder whether she’s right—maybe I am making

progress. And maybe it's time I stop being so hard on myself about everything.

Back on the bus, I check the time. It's getting close to seven. A big part of me wants to go home, put on my pajamas, and get lost in a movie or a book so I don't have to think anymore. But that's the way I've dealt with pretty much everything since I got out of the hospital.

Instead, I get off the bus when it nears campus. I have twenty minutes to get to Paige and Karen's dorm, and I don't want to be late.

By the time the Thai food arrives, I'm shocked by how much fun I'm having.

“You go get it,” Paige tells Karen after the delivery guy calls up to the room.

“No way,” Karen says. She’s lying on the floor, waving her legs around in the air in an effort to dry her pedicure. “I went last time.”

“Karen, my nails are still wet,” Paige says, waving her bright purple fingernails. “If I have to root through my purse for cash, they’ll be ruined.”

“Should have thought of that before you painted them, shouldn’t you?” She looks up at where I’m perched on the edge of the futon. “The fetching schedule is sacred,” she tells me, her voice serious. “It’s a simple rotation whenever we need to go down to the front desk.

My turn, her turn. If we turn away from the schedule over something so common as painted nails, it will be mass chaos. We cannot have mass chaos.”

I laugh. “I’ll go.”

“Oh, no,” Paige says. “You’re our guest. Besides, she’s right. It’s my turn.”

I stand, holding up my hands. “Yeah, but my nails aren’t painted.”

I arrived in the middle of their manicpedi schedule. Paige squealed when she saw me, apparently having been convinced that I would be a no-show. They offered to paint my nails as well — “I’m, like, totally an expert manicurist, Daisy!” — but I declined. They might be nice girls and all, but there was no way in hell I was going to

let one of them touch me. I never let people touch me. Instead, I sat and watched, more entertained than I thought possible, as they finished their tasks, gossiping and laughing the entire time. They kept the door open, and loud giggling could be heard from their dorm mates up and down the hall. I had imagined being there would overwhelm me, but so far, I was handling it well. A break, however, wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Paige looks like she's going to argue some more, so I grab my purse and take off before she can say anything else. Paige and Karen live on the third floor. There are no elevators, so I head down the hall to the staircase. A few girls pass

me, and I keep my eyes firmly on my Converse so I don't have to make eye contact with any of them. Safely in the stairwell, I breathe a sigh of relief.

When I reach the first-floor landing, I nearly stumble into another girl coming through the door. I tense, certain she'll be annoyed.

But she merely pats my shoulder and grins. "Sorry!" Her voice is cheerful as she squeezes past me. "Not watching where I'm going."

I shake my head. *Not all girls are bitches. You need to relax.*

I make my way toward the front desk. As I near the end of the hall, a familiar voice drifts out from an open door, and I freeze. *Daltrey.*

He's singing a song I don't know, probably something off the new album they wrote after leaving home. But I'd recognize that voice anywhere. My chest tight, I rush the remaining distance to the lobby to grab our food.

I still feel shaken when I get back the girls' room. It's crazy how the sound of his voice can take me back so quickly. It almost feels, for just a moment, as if no time has passed, as though I can just head next door and see his face, hear him sing, and watch him and his brothers play.

"You okay?" Paige asks.

I realize I'm standing motionless in their doorway and force my feet to move. "Yeah," I say, trying to smile.

“You guys hungry?”

Karen takes the bag of takeout from me and plops down on the carpet in the center of the room. “Mmm,” she says, opening a carton of pad thai. “Yummy.”

I join her on the floor while Paige grabs sodas from their mini-fridge. As we dig in, I take the opportunity to look around their room. When I first entered, I was immediately assaulted by a Ransom poster over Karen’s bed. I’ve done my best to keep my eyes down since then, but I figure the worst is over. Besides, this is my first time in a college dorm room, and I’m curious.

There are no other Ransom posters, thank God, and as long as I avoid looking above Karen’s bed I don’t have

to see Daltrey's piercing blue eyes. Instead, I check out the myriad of photos of Paige and Karen, both together and with other groups of people, lining the wall by the door. Paige has a series of what appears to be hand-drawn pictures around her desk, and I remember her telling me that she likes to draw.

They both have bright and cheery-looking bedspreads, Paige's is a vivid purple with geometric shapes, while Karen's is multicolored and flowered. A fuzzy hot-pink throw is balled up on the futon amid several yellow pillows. Candles are scattered all over Paige's side of the room, and Christmas lights are strung along the ceiling. Shoes and clothes overflow from the closet. The

place is messy and cozy—basically the exact opposite of my apartment. I'm surprised by how much I like that.

"We're T-minus ten minutes," Paige says, looking at her phone. "Just FYI."

"Oh, good," Karen says. "I almost forgot in my foodgasm."

"Gross." Paige kicks at her. "Don't say foodgasm. We have company. And Daisy isn't used to your dirty gutter mouth."

Karen rolls her eyes. "If Daisy is offended by my potty mouth, I apologize."

"I'm not," I say. "The food *is* pretty orgasmic."

Karen cackles. "That's my girl. I knew you weren't a prude."

Her praise fills me with warmth, which I know is ridiculous, but I can't help it. I didn't have a lot of experience hanging out with girls even before everything got so messed up. My best friend was a boy ever since I was in preschool. And that particular boy's good looks and ridiculous talent didn't do much to endear me to the female population once I got to junior high. I learned at a very young age that girls can be awfully jealous. I should have remembered that lesson.

“Are you a fan, Daisy?” Paige asks.

I look at her blankly, thinking she's talking about Ransom again. But she points at the TV, and I realize she means whatever it is they're counting down to.

“Uh, I’m not sure. What’s going to be on?”

They both gape at me.

“Eight o’clock on Thursday?” Paige says. “Do you honestly not know what’s about to happen?”

I rack my brains and come up with nothing. “Sorry.”

Paige shakes her head. “It’s the finale of *Engaged*. We’ve only been waiting for this for, like, months.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” Karen says, leaning over me to grab the gangai carton.

I immediately tense at her proximity, and spend the next thirty seconds trying to relax and barely listening while Paige explains the premise of *Engaged*. From

what I manage to take in, it's a dating show where the male finalists compete for the affections of the female lead. If they decide to get married in the finale, they'll win a grand prize of a hundred grand each.

"Uh, with that much money at stake, what's to stop them from getting married and just divorcing later?" I ask.

Karen snickers. "Exactly."

Paige makes a face. "You guys just aren't romantic enough. I bet she picks Aiden in the end, and they *don't* take the money."

"Why the hell wouldn't they take the money?" Karen asks.

"Because they're really in love." Paige's face is lit up with a dreamy little

smile.

It's kind of funny—if I just look at her without talking to her, I would probably think she was a certain way, with her piercings and leather clothes and wild hair. But so far, she strikes me as really sweet, almost innocent. Karen, on the other hand, looks like the epitome of the corn-fed, girl-next-door, Midwest beauty. Yet her personality has a much sharper edge.

“You’re fucking naive, Paige,” Karen says, pointing her chopstick at her friend.

“Whatever. Just you wait and see. I’m *totally* right.” Paige catches me watching her, and her face falls a little. “Of course, we don’t have to watch it if

you don't want to, Daisy. When I invited you, I just assumed you'd be a fan because, like, everyone I know is. But we can do something else if—”

I hold up my hand. “No, it's fine. We can watch.” I usually avoid reality television. The cattiness and downright nastiness of many of the contestants reminds me too much of my senior year. But I figure it's a night for trying new things.

Watching a show with Paige and Karen turns out to be nothing like I expect. From the way Paige was so excited, I figured she'd watch in rapt attention. But she doesn't. Instead, they talk constantly. Every word said by the contestants must be discussed, every

action analyzed, to the point that I'm surprised they can follow what's happening at all. Karen keeps up a running commentary of how stupid all the men are, making fun of them with glee, and Paige laughs along with her.

Even though I have no basis of reference for any of these people, I find that I'm still enjoying myself. And that surprises me most of all.

In the end, the star does choose Aiden, just as Paige predicted. Of course, the supposedly blissful couple goes for the money—"To start our life together," the star says, her eyes bright. I'm sure, with the promise of a hundred grand.

I feel kind of bad when I laugh along

with Karen. Paige looks genuinely upset, as if she had more faith in her romantic idols than that.

“Face it, babe,” Karen says, nudging her friend with her foot. “People are generally selfish, self-centered, and not to be trusted.”

“You got that right,” I mutter without thinking.

They both look at me, clearly surprised.

I quickly grin and point at the TV. “Who would really turn down a hundred grand, though? I wouldn’t.”

The girls debate for a few minutes if they would take the money, which leads to a larger discussion of what they would do with such a fortune. I, of

course, do not mention the trust fund of nearly three times that amount that I'll have access to in a few short years. I never talk about money if I can help it. It makes people treat you differently.

"I've got it," Karen says, smacking her hands together. "The ultimate! I'd take the money and use it to pay off Ransom's body guards so I could get backstage to see them."

I've been having so much fun with the girls that I almost forgot the reason I met them in the first place. Is it too much to ask that I get through one dinner without having to think about Daltrey?

"Oh, absolutely," Paige says. "And I'd spend the rest to follow the tour in style. Not just a few stops on the east

coast—I'd go all out.”

“Yeah, we could fly from city to city instead of schlepping it in your P.O.S. '98 Cavalier.”

“Hey! The Cavi has seen us through some good times.”

“True,” Karen agrees. “I don't think I would have made it through high school without that thing as a getaway car.”

“You guys went to high school together?” I ask then realize they did look a bit younger in some of the pictures.

“Oh, God, yes,” Karen says, rolling her eyes. “I've been stuck with this bitch since kindergarten.”

“You mean you've been blessed with me.” Paige smiles beatifically before her

voice takes on an edge that better matches her multiple piercings. “Right?”

“Oh, absolutely, that’s what I meant.”

“What about you, Daisy?” Paige asks. “Where did your best friend end up?”

I stare at her, sure for some reason that she knows about Daltrey. “Uh, I... what?”

“Did she go to a different school? Is that why you aren’t rooming with her?”

“I... um... yeah. My best friend doesn’t go here.”

They’re both watching me, and I feel a bead of sweat trickle down my back.

“Where are you from, anyhow?” Paige asks. “I looked for you last night on ConnectMe and couldn’t find you. I

don't think I know anyone who doesn't have a page."

Shit. "Uh, yeah. I don't really like all that stuff. Too much drama." I try to keep my mind off the things she would have found a year ago had she looked me up on that site. "Drama" didn't begin to cover it.

They're both still looking at me, and I rack my brains to remember the first part of Paige's question. Had she asked where I lived? I can feel the panic attack closing in. Why can't they just look away? "Jonesboro," I finally blurt. "In Ohio."

Their eyes immediately go wide and I realize, belatedly, what I've done in my panic. There is no way these two

girls, of all people, won't realize the connection.

"Jonesboro, Ohio?" Paige asks in a shrill voice. "As in the hometown of Daltrey Ransome?"

Oh God. How could I be so stupid?

Before I can come up with a denial, or an explanation, or anything, Karen points at me. "That's right, isn't it? You totally come from the same town." She pauses before continuing, her voice dropping. "Do you *know* them?"

"Ohmygod, ohmygod!" Paige squeals. "You totally do! I can see it in your face! I can't believe this!"

They both look as though Christmas has come early. I, on the other hand, am trying to keep my pad thai from coming

back up.

“How well do you know them?” Karen asks, sounding awed. “You’re the same age as Daltrey. Were you in school together?”

I might start crying. What can I do? They know, and I can’t think of any way to convince them otherwise. Maybe if I was calm I could talk my way out of this, but my brain is just too muddled with fear.

“I know them a little,” I manage to say, struggling to keep my voice calm. The girls stare at me, enraptured. “We went to school together. But they were always pretty busy with their music. And I haven’t talked to them since they left last year to go to California.”

“Wow,” Paige whispers. “That’s incredible. I can’t believe you’ve actually, like, met them in real life.”

“Why didn’t you tell us yesterday?” Karen asks.

“Duh! Isn’t it obvious?” Paige says. “She knew we would freak out.” She smiles at me. “Sorry about that, by the way. It’s just so amazing!”

“Holy shit!” Karen suddenly yells so loud she makes me jump. “You *have* to come with us now! You can, like, introduce us and stuff!”

“Karen, stop,” Paige says. “You’ll make her think we’re, like, using her or something.” Paige turns to me. “I swear, Daisy, it wouldn’t be like that, not at all —” She stops mid-sentence. “Daisy?”

What's wrong?"

"I can't do this," I whisper, standing up. "I'm sorry. I... I can't."

"You don't have to do any—"

But I'm already sprinting for the door, grabbing my purse on the way out. The panic has hit now, waves of it rushing over me. I know I'll be sobbing and gasping any minute. My heart is already racing so hard that the hallway is spinning. I can't do this, can't be this way, not in front of them.

"Daisy!" Paige calls.

I barely hear her as I rush down the hall. All I can do is pray that my crazy brain will wait until I'm alone before it sends me over the edge.

Chapter Six

Daisy

I spend the weekend holed up in my room, not talking to anyone. I watch my favorite Disney films—*Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan*—on an endless loop and tried to pretend nothing happened.

By Tuesday morning, I feel slightly better and even consider facing Paige in Econ, but I chicken out at the last minute. Instead, I go to a cafe across from campus and try to study for my trig final.

“There you are!”

I jump at the sound of Paige’s voice behind me. I spin in my chair to face her,

but she's already coming around my table to take the seat across from me.

"Do you have any idea how hard you are to find? Karen and I have been looking for you everywhere."

I swallow, my throat dry. Embarrassment and guilt are coursing through me. "I'm sorry," I squeak.

She waves her hands dismissively. "You don't have to apologize for anything. I should apologize. I should have known better than to freak out on you like that."

Confused, I narrow my eyes. "What do you mean, you *should have known*?"

She sighs. "You have panic attacks, don't you? That's what all the shyness is about. And the freaking out in our dorm.

You were about to have an attack.”

I’m so dumbfounded I can only stare at her.

She smiles slightly. “I saw you that day in Bartlet’s class. After he called on you, I watched you. The way you were breathing and clenching your palms? You were trying to avoid an attack, weren’t you?”

My surprise is so great I forget to be embarrassed. “How did you know that?”

Her expression falls a little. “My little sister gets really bad panic attacks. Just about anything can set her off. I’ve watched her react that way more times than I can count.”

“Wow,” I mutter. Her seemingly random befriending of me suddenly

makes a lot more sense. “That’s why you talked to me, isn’t it?”

She shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “It’s not like it was some kind of charity effort or anything. I meant it when I said it seemed like you needed some fun. But you did remind me of my sister, and that’s probably why I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I feel the tears on my cheeks before I even realize I’m crying. She wanted to make sure I was okay. When was the last time someone could describe me as *okay*?

Paige hands me a napkin so I can wipe my eyes. The tears keep coming, though, as if a damn of some kind has burst.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice shaking.
“You don’t have to stay.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, like I’m leaving. We’re friends, Daisy. Friends don’t just walk away.”

“We are?” I don’t know why her words surprise me so much. She obviously wouldn’t have spent so much time looking for me if she didn’t consider me a friend.

She smiles. “Duh. You don’t share pad thai and *Engaged* with someone and not end up friends with them.”

I grin through my tears, suddenly feeling better than I have in ages. I have a friend. Who would have thought?

“So here’s the deal.” She lays her hands flat on the table. “Karen and I both

feel terrible. We hate that you're thinking we would use you to get close to the band. We want you to know that if you come, we won't say a word about you introducing us. We promise."

"I'm not coming," I say quickly.

"Why not? You said you like their music. Besides, why would you pass up the opportunity to hang out with me and Karen?" She shoots me a grin. "We're like, the coolest girls ever."

I laugh. "True. But I can't go with you. There are... there's history with us. Me and Daltrey. I can't see him."

Her eyes widen, and I can tell it's killing her not to ask me what kind of history I have with her favorite rock singer. I sigh, knowing I have to tell her.

In fact, the idea of confiding in Paige actually doesn't make me feel sick, which is weird in and of itself.

"We were good friends, actually. Like, really close. Since we were kids. And then he left with his brothers to record their album and go on tour, and... things got complicated."

"Wow," she whispers. "I want you to know that I'm very compassionate toward your issues but... holy shit! I'm sitting next to someone who is close friends with Daltrey Ransome."

I laugh. "Yeah, well, I wasn't lying when I said I haven't talked to him since he left last year. Everything changed after that, Paige."

"He ditched you," she summarizes.

“No, it wasn’t like that. I’m the one who cut off communication.”

She stares at me. “Sorry, but are you fucking insane? Why would you do that? Have you *seen* him?”

I smile sadly. “Remember when I said that things got complicated?”

She nods.

Oh, what the hell. I have to tell someone besides Dr. Jacobs someday. “I was really lonely when they left. Daltrey had this plan that I would join them on tour for the summer when school got out, sell T-shirts or something. But in the meantime, this guy asked me out. Justin. I thought he was nice.” I take a deep breath. “I was wrong. Really, really wrong.”

She wrinkles up her nose. “I’ve had a few of those myself.”

“Yeah, well, he dumped me. And that’s when the rumors started. He told people stuff about us... private stuff. And it became a pretty hot topic around school.”

She holds up a hand. “You don’t have to say anymore. People talked shit about me in high school, too. Bastards. Karen calls them slut-shamers—people who think it’s okay to make fun of girls for having sex but idolize the boys involved. It’s so stupid and hypocritical.”

I gulp. “Yeah, but in my case, he had... there were pictures.”

Her mouth drops open, and I feel a flush creep up my neck. She could rail

against slut-shamers all she wanted, but there was no way I could tell this story without feeling like the world's biggest slut.

I need to just get it over with. "I thought he was just messing around when he took them on his cell phone. I freaked out, of course, and told him to delete them. He promised me he did." I stare down at the table, willing the churning in my stomach to stop. "I'm the dumb-ass that believed him, I guess."

"Don't you say that." She reaches across the table to take my hand. "He's the asshole, Daisy. It's not your fault. You're not the first girl who trusted the wrong guy."

The touch of her hand feels odd

because I haven't allowed any physical contact for so long. I savor the sensation for a moment before freeing my hand by using the excuse of picking up my coffee.

Tears threaten, and I blink them away. "It seems like there was a certain group of girls just waiting for something like that. Probably the ones who were jealous of my friendship with Daltrey." I smile sadly. "He was always such hot shit, you know? Even back then. Everyone wanted a piece of him."

She grins briefly. "I have absolutely no problem at all imagining that."

I take a sip of my now-cold coffee, wondering exactly how much more I should tell her. "It got... it got really nasty. The pictures were all over the

Internet, on people's phones. They even photocopied them and passed them around at school." I swallow hard, willing myself to keep it together. "Then they started sending me messages. Texts, stuff online. They threatened me and called me terrible names. Encouraged me to just... you know, be done with it."

She swears softly. "Daisy, I'm so sorry that happened to you. People are assholes."

I shrug. "Yeah, well, I didn't handle it very well. I left school before graduation, and I wasn't really ready to start college in the fall. I was supposed to go to Ohio State, but it was just too close to home. And I knew a bunch of people from school were going there."

Like Joanie.

“So you ended up way out here in the mountains,” Paige says. “I’d certainly say you got your distance.”

It wasn’t some random coincidence that I was going to school in Tennessee. This university was the closest one to Horizons, the hospital my dad had put me in after everything got so bad. When I was finally released, it seemed like a good idea for me to stay here, close to my doctors. But I figure spilling my guts about being a giant skank is enough for one day. She doesn’t need to know about what happened after. I nod and say, “Yeah. It’s pretty far.”

“I’m glad you ended up out here,” she says, placing her hand over mine. She

pulls her hand back after a moment, as if she can sense I don't like being touched, but I appreciate the gesture all the same.

She grabs a napkin from the dispenser and begins to shred the edges. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what does all of that have to do with Daltrey? I mean, I totally get that it sucks, of course. But why does that mean that you couldn't talk to him anymore?"

I pull my sleeves down a little, liking, as always, the comfort it provides me to pretend I can shrink from sight, if only a little. "I was embarrassed. I didn't want him to know what people were saying about me... or for him to see anything." I shiver a little. My worst nightmare in those early days was that he

might see a picture of me online. Later, the nightmare changed to him finding out what I did afterward. Either way, it seemed prudent to cut ties with him.

“He never found out about any of it?”

I shrug. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Wasn’t he still friends with anyone at home?”

I shake my head. “Not really. Not anyone he would be in touch with. Once they got to L.A., they were busy with the album. Then they went out with Grey Skies, and things got even crazier. There wasn’t a lot of draw to come back to Jonesboro, you know?”

She nods. “Did he try to talk to you?”

“He used to call, yeah. When things got really bad, I stopped answering.

Then I moved and stopped going online. So that was pretty much the end of things.”

“Wow,” she whispers. “Do you think he’s mad at you?”

I try not to think of the day I finally returned one of his calls. We agreed, years ago, that we would go to prom together when the time came. It was our way of promising each other we’d avoid all the silly drama of high school romance, focus on the things that mattered to us—friends, music, and having a kick-ass time. When he dropped out of school so he could leave with his brothers, it became an even more vital promise—that we’d be reunited, that we’d have one last

celebratory event to remember our high school years by before he went off to conquer the world. Calling him to cancel had been one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But there was no way I could have let him come home, not then.

“Daisy?”

I give myself a little shake, willing myself to stop thinking of the sadness and betrayal in his voice, of the way he had begged me to tell him what was wrong, why we weren't talking. That was the last time I talked to him. Not long after that, I left Jonesboro forever, my old address, phone number, and email abandoned.

“I think he's probably pretty mad,” I say, my stomach turning at a new

thought. “That is, if he even thinks about me anymore. His life is so different now. He probably forgot all about me.”

“I doubt that. He’s way too sensitive and sweet to forget about an old friend like that.”

I raise an eyebrow.

She looks abashed. “I mean, at least that’s the impression I get when I see him on TV.”

I laugh. “Yeah, well, that’s kind of the point, isn’t it? He’s on TV now. And all over the Internet and the radio. You saw what happened when a few people turned to look at me in econ. I obviously do not have the capacity to get anywhere near his world.”

“I think you underestimate yourself,”

she says. “When you’re comfortable with someone, a lot of that stuff goes away. You’re already acting much more natural with me, and we’ve only known each other for a week.”

“I am?”

She nods. “You’ve barely stared at your hands once in the last ten minutes. You’re making eye contact and everything.”

Dr. Jacobs would be so proud. “I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Like I said, you feel comfortable. That gives you more confidence. I think you’d be fine face to face with Daltrey.”

“Then why does the very idea make me feel dizzy?”

“Um, because he’s like the hottest

guy ever?”

We both laugh.

“Thanks, Paige.” I gesture between us. “This, uh, this was really nice for me. I haven’t really... I mean, I don’t have any friends here. Like, at all.”

She waves a hand. “No worries. And you do now. Karen and I are loyal to the point of obnoxiousness. You won’t be able to get rid of us even if you try.” I open my mouth to tell her how glad I am to hear that, but she keeps talking. “Now, about Daltrey. I totally think you should call him, and this has nothing to do with me or Karen or the tour. I think you really miss him, Daisy.”

“Why do you think that?”

She snorts. “You should have seen

the way you were looking at that picture of him in econ. You actually, like, stroked his face, you know?"

I shift, uncomfortable that she had read me so well. "It's been a while since I let myself look at him."

She crosses her arms and gives me a stern look. "You miss him. And for all he knows, you just totally ditched him for no reason at all, right? Don't you think he deserves to hear from you now that you have things under control?"

The idea that I could ever have things under control is so preposterous I almost laugh out loud, but something in her expression stops me. I did just sit here, with a girl my own age, for the past twenty minutes and have an honest-to-

God conversation, a serious one, too, where I opened up about some pretty embarrassing stuff. This would have been unheard of a mere eight months ago. What had Dr. Jacobs said? *You're stronger than you give yourself credit for.*

Maybe they were both right.

Chapter Seven

Daltrey

“Dude, what the hell was that?” My brother’s voice is angry and tense.

I try to close my eyes tighter, but it’s no use. He knows I’m not asleep. I’ve never been able to put anything over on Reed. “What the hell was what?” I ask, not opening my eyes. He shoves my arm, and I try not to react.

“Like hell you don’t know what I’m talking about. We had a majorly influential reporter in there, Daltrey. What the fuck were you thinking, walking out like that?”

“I figured you guys had it covered.”

He punches my shoulder.

“Fuck, dude.” I open my eyes, pissed because I know it’s the reaction he wanted. “You wanna explain to Dad how I can’t play tomorrow ’cause you bruised the shit out of my arm?”

He gives me a look that says he isn’t buying it. “Stop being such a pussy. Sit up and talk to me.”

I pull myself into a sitting position on the couch. I had escaped to the tour bus shortly after our set. I was aware that Dad had arranged the interview with Meghan Gerber, and Reed wasn’t messing around when he said she was one of the most influential music reporters in the business. I just knew I

couldn't keep it together for an interview, essential or not. I was exhausted, a fact I've been telling my father and brothers for days, and being tired always makes me grouchy. I probably would have done the band more harm than good had I been in there.

"What's going on with you?" Reed asks, sitting across from me. "You've been acting like a little bitch for weeks now. You need to snap out of it."

"I need a break."

"This is what we signed up for, Dalt. You wanna go back to Ohio? Keep playing shitty local gigs?" He gestures around at the over-the-top luxury of our bus. "Or would you rather be shoved together in that van, busting ass all over

the Midwest to get to dives where no one even remembered we were coming?”

His words have the opposite effect from what he intended, I'm sure. Because while our current situation may be exponentially better than our past, we are missing one thing from that ill-fated mini-tour two summers ago. One person, rather.

Out of all of my brothers, I look the most like Reed. Lennon and Cash are dark haired and stocky, filling out the chests of the tight T-shirts they like to wear on stage. Reed and I are blond, tall, and lanky, though he wears his hair much longer than mine. I tried the long-haired rocker look once, but Daisy had

made so much fun of me I cut it back to its former, tousled mess.

Daisy. There she was in my thoughts for the second time in the last ten seconds. Not that such an occurrence was anything unusual. When *wasn't* she on my mind?

He runs his hands through his shoulder-length hair. "I'll talk to Dad, okay? See if we can get a few days off soon."

I nod, knowing it will have no effect. We've been promised vacation time for months. But something is always coming up—some opportunity, some show, some interview that we would just be crazy to pass up. So it goes, on and on, until I can't even remember what city

we're in anymore.

Reed watches me for a minute as if trying to decide if he should say something else. Finally, he sighs and gets up. "Get some rest, man. We're taking off in a minute."

I close my eyes again and sink into the pillows, trying to get the image of laughing green eyes and curly brown hair out of my head. Why does she have to keep showing up like this, jumping into my thoughts when I least expect it? It's been a whole year. Isn't it time I moved on?

I hear the other guys in the front of the bus. Someone turns on the radio, and the noise level doubles. I'm pretty sure I can hear some female voices, too. They must

be continuing the party from backstage. A moment later, the bus starts to move.

Are we going to the hotel? Or is it a travel night? I can't even keep any of it straight anymore. We're in St. Louis tonight, I think, which would mean we're sleeping here before heading out in the morning. Or was St. Louis tomorrow? Cursing, I pull out my phone. I may as well accept that my life is now completely dictated by the itinerary Dan, our tour manager, sends out each morning.

“Hey, man.”

I look up to see Levi ducking through the curtain into the back lounge. He has two beers in his hands, and he passes one over before taking up the seat

vacated by my older brother. His appearance doesn't fill me with the same annoyance. Unlike Reed, my old friend rarely feels the need to punch or lecture me.

"Thanks." I raise my eyebrows at him. "Hey, aren't you a little young for this?"

He laughs. "Apparently, trivial matters like legal drinking ages don't apply to rock stars."

"Really? So what's your excuse?"

"Oh, burn." He rolls his eyes and takes a swig. "So what's got your panties in a bunch?"

I ignore him and concentrate on my phone. Scrolling through the messages in search of the link to the itinerary, I

notice a marked increase in the amount of unknown callers. I'm going to need to switch numbers again, which really pisses me off. It seems like no sooner do I memorize a new phone number than it somehow leaks to the public. We tried to figure out where the leaks were coming from, but we eventually just decided it was inevitable that I'd be changing my number every few months.

"I'm trying to figure out where the hell we're going," I tell him. "Did we check out of the hotel this morning? How fucked up is it that I can't remember that?"

He gives me a sympathetic look. "No, we're staying one more night before we head to St. Louis."

I shake my head. “So tonight was... Kansas City?”

“Yup.”

I toss my phone aside, feeling irrationally angry.

“Hey, man, don’t sweat it,” Levi says. “We’ve been adding so many dates I can barely keep track anymore. But I’ll do a better job of reminding you of the schedule. You’ve got a lot on your plate. It’s not a big deal if some of the details are slipping.”

I nod, looking away. I don’t want him to see how down I’m feeling. He’s told me a million times that he wouldn’t trade places with me for anything, but I still feel like a dick, complaining about my supposedly golden life in front of my old

friend.

Levi moved to town around the time I hit junior high. A year older than I am, he started off as my brother Lennon's friend. But once he began hanging out around the house, it didn't really matter. We were all pretty tight, regardless of age.

Levi is a huge music fan, the only person I know who can hold his own when my dad gets going on the subject of musical influences. But the dude can't sing or play an instrument for shit. He has zero rhythm, and he's pretty tone deaf, too.

Still, he hung out while we practiced, learning about our equipment and the basics of sound production. When he

graduated, he planned to go to school to study sound design, maybe to work in a theater. But then we got the call to make our album and tour with Grey Skies. There was never any question that he would come with us.

He makes a hell of a roadie. He seems to know what we all need, anticipating every problem, without any of us having to say a word. Cash's string breaks? Levi shows up with a replacement before Cash can even ask. Reed's going through sticks too quickly? Here comes Levi with a few suggestions on how to keep better grip control. The little brother's feeling sorry for himself? Levi to the rescue with a beer and a shoulder to cry on. He's an

indispensable part of our team.

“You need a day off, man,” he says after a few moments of silence.

I laugh. “That’s only what I’ve been telling people for the past three weeks.”

“I’m serious. How do they not know that all these interviews and extra performances are shit on your voice?”

I decide not to mention that my dad told me just yesterday that my hoarseness improves the natural rasp of my singing voice.

“You could finally pass for a blues singer, Dalt,” Dad said, then he laughed and slapped my shoulder as if it was a big joke. I don’t tell Levi that because it would just piss him off, and there’s no point in both of us acting like whiny

bastards. I had that one covered all on my own lately.

“You still not sleeping real good?” he asks.

I look up, wondering how he knows that.

He shrugs, unabashed. “I’m in the bunk right over yours, dude. You think I don’t hear you getting up all the time?”

I scowl. The illusion of privacy is just that—an illusion. “No, I’m not sleeping much.”

“You need to sleep, Dalt. Being tired can’t be helping you.”

“I don’t wake up on purpose, Levi. It’s kind of beyond my control.”

“We could get you something,” he says softly, “to help you sleep.”

I glance up at him sharply. We have one iron-clad, long-standing rule in this band—no drugs. My dad looks the other way when we party after shows, even with Lennon and me being underage, as long as we stick to alcohol. Anything beyond that is a strict no, and we've all agreed. We're not going to end up like so many other musicians.

Levi looks slightly embarrassed. "I'm talking about from a doctor, dude. A prescription for sleeping pills, that's all. No biggie."

"Right. Because depending on a pill for essential functioning has never turned into a bad thing for anyone in my profession."

He holds up his hands. "Fine. It was

just a suggestion. But you do need to sleep more. I'm going to talk to your brothers. Maybe if we all approach your dad together, he'll get that your next day off needs to be an actual day off."

I shrug, slumping back into the pillows of the couch. "If you wanna try."

"You should come up front, man," he says. "Hang out with us for a while."

"Nah. Thanks." I can perfectly picture the front lounge. Someone will have invited some girls from the show to join in on the drinking and partying. I'm not in the mood.

Levi gestures at the TV over my head. "Wanna play some Halo?"

I shake my head. "Go ahead, man. I'm fine."

He watches me for another moment, as if he thinks he can't trust me. I return my attention to my phone, not really caring if I'm being rude. I just don't want any company right now.

After a beat, he stands. "We'll be there in a few."

I nod absently, clicking on the email button. A long line of band-related subject lines fill the screen. I rarely get personal emails. Who would send them? I haven't kept in touch with anyone from school, and my friends have generally consisted of the people on this bus, with that one important exception.

But then my eyes land on an unfamiliar address. HarDai@ETU.edu. The subject line just says *Hello*. It's

probably spam. Or maybe fan mail. So why does my heart start to beat so fast? The seemingly random letters in the address are somehow familiar.

I touch the screen to open the email. I scan the first lines quickly, and my heart feels as though it's going to beat right out of my chest.

Daisy.

Chapter Eight

Daisy

When I finally click Send, I feel sick to my stomach. I spent about two hours writing the thing, trying desperately to strike the right tone between apologetic and friendly. And normal. That's pretty important, too, that he not be able to tell right away what a freak I've become.

I had another session with Dr. Jacobs today. I told her about my conversation with Paige and what I was thinking about doing. She was very encouraging and talked me through several possible outcomes. I came home feeling

optimistic and resolved, but now that the thing is written, I just feel ill.

Dr. Jacobs reminded me that there was a chance he wouldn't be using the same email address anymore. His life has changed tremendously since the last time I heard from him on this old account.

I close my eyes and wish that it would be true. I'm already regretting sending it. The idea that he might never read it makes me feel better.

I get up and head to the table, planning to do some homework to take my mind off of it. *Yeah, right.* Within minutes, I'm back at the laptop, reading my words for the twentieth time.

Dear Daltrey,

I hope this email finds you well.

That sounds stupid and formal, doesn't it? But I don't really know how else to start. It's been so long since we've talked, which I know is completely my fault. Maybe we could just pretend that we have all the stupid politeness and formality out of the way. Would that be all right? Then I can just come out and tell you what I want to say.

What I want to say is this: I am so, so sorry that I dropped off the face of the

earth. Please know that you did absolutely nothing wrong. God, I hope you haven't been thinking it's your fault. Don't ever think that, okay? I was going through some stuff, but it honestly had nothing to do with you. I hope I didn't hurt you.

I've been trying really hard to deal with the aforementioned "stuff" better. I won't bore you with all the details. But I do hope you'll accept my apology for being such a shitty friend. If you don't want to, that's okay. If you're pissed at me, I

completely understand. I deserve it.

If you're not pissed—no, scratch that, even if you are pissed—I'd really like to hear from you. I don't have your number anymore, or I would have called to apologize. If you want to talk, even if it's just to tell me how terrible I am, please call me. My new number is down at the bottom.

I'm so proud of you, Dalt. Please know that. There hasn't been a day that's passed that I haven't thought of you and been so thankful

*that you're living your
dream. Congratulations, from
the very bottom of my heart.*

*Love,
Daisy.*

I deleted and rewrote the word “love” about a dozen times before I finally decided to keep it. Now I’m regretting that decision. And what was that whole thing at the beginning about being formal? God, I *did* sound like a freak. That was such a bad idea.

I go back to my books, wishing with all my heart that he won’t read it. Maybe the next time I check, the email will have been sent back to me, the address undeliverable. I open my econ book.

I've really gotten behind with my schoolwork since I met Paige, between hanging out with her and Karen and dealing with the ensuing emotional breakdown. I really need to buckle down and—

My phone rings. I've become conditioned to fear ringing phones since last spring, but tonight, my fear is for a totally different reason. I check Caller ID: Unknown Number.

Oh, God. What if it's him? I glance at the clock on the microwave. It's eleven o'clock, far too late for it to be my dad—not that he'd call from an unfamiliar number anyway. The phone rings again, and I answer it in a panic. If it's Daltrey, I can't risk letting it go to voicemail. I

did that far too often last spring when I was ignoring his calls.

“Hello?” My voice sounds strange, strained and breathy. Would he even recognize it?

“Daisy?”

Something in my chest seems to melt and expand at his voice. It’s been so long since I’ve heard it, even over the phone, that I feel like crying, as though I’ve come home after a long trip. “Hi,” I squeak out. I clear my throat and try again. “Hi, Daltrey. It’s... it’s good to hear your voice.”

“You hope you didn’t *hurt* me?” he barks, clearly angry.

The melty thing in my chest hardens. “What?”

“I’m reading this email. You hope you didn’t hurt me?”

“I... yeah. I mean, I hope I... I’m *sorry*, Daltrey.”

“You didn’t hurt me, Daisy, because *hurt* doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

I bring a shaking hand to my forehead. I knew anger was a probability, but it still sucks to have our first words in so long be shouted. “I’m really, really—”

“Don’t you say you’re sorry again. You have no idea what that felt like. My best friend just suddenly stops taking my calls. Stops answering my emails. Stops talking to me completely. How could you do that?”

Because my heart was breaking.

Because my entire world was falling apart, and I didn't want to ruin the best thing that ever happened to you. "I was going through some stuff, Daltrey. That doesn't excuse my behavior—"

"You're damn right it doesn't. What you did was inexcusable. I needed you, Daisy. Everything was changing, and I was going through all of this shit, and you were just gone—with no explanation. What kind of a person does that?"

A few months ago, I would have wilted under his anger, certain I deserved it, that his feelings were more valid than mine. But some of the things Dr. Jacobs has been telling me for the past few months are finally starting to

sink in. I *am* stronger than I used to be. And though he does have a right to be angry at me, he doesn't know the whole story. He doesn't know what *I've* been through.

No one else is entitled to judge your experience or your journey. “I know that you're mad, Daltrey.” I try to keep my voice as calm as possible. “You have every right to be. But you also knew me better than just about anyone else in the world. So I hope you understand that if I did something like that, something so unlike me, it must have been for a pretty damn good reason.”

He's silent for a long time. Finally, he sighs. “Will you tell me what it is?”

“I can’t.” The words come automatically, but they are true. There is no way I can explain, not right now. He starts to say something, sounding angry again, but I cut him off. “But I’d really like to be able to one day.”

He’s quiet again. “And I just have to accept that, huh?”

“No. You could decide you’re too mad to talk to me. I would deserve that, and it would be something that *I* would just have to accept.”

The silence is much longer this time. Just when I figure he’s going to hang up, he clears his throat. “I don’t want to be angry, Daisy. I want to talk to you.”

I release a relieved breath. *Thank God.* “I’m glad.”

“So, uh... what’s new?”

I laugh, the tension broken. “Not a whole lot. I’m in school, but not OSU.”

“Really? Your dad was cool with that?”

My dad wouldn’t have let me go to OSU if I went crazy and decided I wanted to. “Yeah, he was fine.”

“So where are you?”

“You’re not going to believe this one. I’m in Tennessee.”

“What the hell? Where’d that come from?”

I chuckle. “Things got a little crazy after you left. I like it, though. It’s quiet out here, and the mountains are pretty. I’ve really gotten into hiking.”

“Are you sure this is Daisy? Is this

some crazed fan posing as the little girl next door who hated exercise with a passion?”

I snort. “Nope. But speaking of fans, how’s all that going? Where are you?”

He starts to tell me about the tour, and pretty soon, our conversation actually feels natural. I can picture him so easily in the cities he tells me about, performing with his brothers, the venues now quite a bit bigger than they used to be.

“You guys will be doing a stadium tour in no time,” I say.

“Yeah, right. I don’t think we’re quite the stadium-tour types.”

“Oh, come on. I bet you could convince Cash that a laser light show is

just what you guys need.”

He laughs, and my stomach actually aches at the sound. God, I miss him.

“I might come see you,” I say in a rush, scared of how he might react.

He’s quiet on the other end of the line.

“Your show, I mean,” I say, a blush coming to my cheeks. “A few girls I met here are going to road trip to the east coast once school gets out and follow the tour. I thought I might go with.”

“Really?”

I can’t read his voice. It sounds kind of flat, disengaged. “Yeah. I mean, if you didn’t want to hang out, I would totally understand. I could just enjoy the shows with everyone else. But I’d really like to

see you guys again.” I grimace. He’s giving me nothing to go with here. “On stage or, uh, off. If you want.”

The silence is deafening. Finally, he clears his throat. “I’d like that, Daisy. To see you. I hope you come.” But his voice is still flat.

“Yeah?”

“Of course. You’ll forgive me, though, if I don’t get my hopes up.”

I cringe, feeling ashamed. “I get that. You don’t have to trust me, Daltrey.”

“Will you let me know?” He sounds warmer now, with maybe a note of hopefulness. “When you decide for sure?”

“Of course,” I say quickly, feeling better right away. Maybe he really does

want to see me. “Of course I will.”

Chapter Nine

Daisy

“We do not need those,” Karen says, crossing her arms and giving Paige a stern look. “I mean it. Put them down.”

Page pouts in the middle of the aisle. “Why not?”

I stifle a giggle at the look on Karen’s face.

“Why in the world would we need balloons, Paige? Seriously, give me one probable scenario in which a balloon would be necessary over the course of this trip.”

Paige thinks for a moment. I’m glad

we decided to make this shopping run late at night, though the timing was due to Karen having to work the night shift at the grocery store. Wal-Mart is fairly empty right now, which prevents us from receiving the kind of attention we'd be getting otherwise.

We've spent the last hour picking out snacks and supplies for our road trip. Or rather, Karen and I have been picking out snacks and supplies. Paige has been choosing increasingly ridiculous items that she deems essential for fun on the trip. While Karen has been trying to ensure we'll have the necessities, such as caffeine and tampons, Paige has picked up pretty much every shiny, pink, or noise-making item in the vicinity.

“Well, what if we meet new friends waiting in line for one of the shows?” Paige asks. “And we end up staying in the same hotel as them. And then one of them has a birthday. We would want to decorate their hotel room door, wouldn’t we?” She grins and holds up the plastic bag. “Thus, balloons!”

I’m pretty sure Karen’s head is about to explode. Shopping with these two has been eye opening. Paige may be a little more ditzy than I first gave her credit for. I’m starting to wonder how someone as no-nonsense as Karen puts up with her.

I decide to try and smooth things over. “Well, if that happens, we could just take the car out in whatever town

we're in and find balloons. I'm sure there are Wal-Marts pretty much everywhere we're heading."

Paige's face falls. "I guess you have a point. No balloons then." She sets the bag down, looking pretty sad, until she spots a set of sparkly gel pens. "Oooh!"

"Let's get out of this aisle," I say quickly. "I want to get a car charger for my cell phone."

We head over to electronics. Thinking about my cell phone makes me wonder how many times my dad has called since I set it to silent. I slide it from my purse and glance at the screen. Five missed calls. I stifle a sigh. I had to add an extra session last week so that Dr. Jacobs could help me build up the

courage to tell him about the road trip. He reacted exactly the way I thought he would: with a flat-out refusal.

“No. You’re not ready for something like that, Daisy,” he said.

“Dad, come on. It’s been almost a year since Horizons. I have to start making friends sometime.”

“Friends are one thing. You traveling halfway across the country with complete strangers is another. Besides, I’m not sure I like the idea of you spending time with the Ransomes. They’re pretty high profile. What happens if you end up in the public eye?”

I shuddered, not wanting to admit to him that I had the same fear. I couldn’t

get the image of photographers out of my mind. What if they followed Daltrey wherever he went? I couldn't be seen with him.

He might not even want to be seen with you, I thought. You need to minimize your expectations. You'll probably chat a few times, maybe get to say hi to his brothers, and that's it.

"This isn't about Daltrey," I told my dad, ignoring the niggling voice in my head that said that wasn't exactly true. "It's about doing something that sounds fun with some girls that have been really nice to me over the last few weeks. I want to do this, Dad. I feel like I need to."

He was quiet on the other end of the

phone for a long time. I pictured him sitting in the kitchen of his empty condo, probably still dressed in his suit from work. The image made me feel sad. “I don’t know, Daisy. I don’t like it.” He doesn’t have to tell me that he doesn’t trust me for me to hear those doubts in his voice.

I decided it was time to pull out my ace card. “Dad, Dr. Jacobs thinks it would be really good for me. She asked if she could give you a call.”

He had no argument for that. My dad trusted Dr. Jacobs implicitly. It was no coincidence I went to school only a few blocks away from her private-practice offices instead of back in Ohio near his place. I knew he remembered the early

reports from my treatment at Horizons. The way I was silent and refused to participate in any kind of therapy, how I refused my meds and had to be housed in a totally “sharps-free” environment. Dr. Jacobs was the person to first inspire some progress in me, so he looked at her as a savior. The fact that she was a very expensive doctor added to his respect. In my dad’s eyes, price was an indication of value.

Later, Dr. Jacobs called him and convinced him normal social interactions were an important part of my recovery. She also casually mentioned that helping me to feel trusted would likely make me behave more trustworthily. So he changed tactics,

calling me several times a day to encourage me and give me tips on how to handle myself and how to stay safe.

I know he's just scared, and I don't blame him. When I was at Horizons or settled in my apartment, he knew exactly where I was and what I was doing. Using his well-paid contacts at the university, he could keep track of me and my well-being without ever having to see me or deal with me on a personal level, which I'm sure was a big plus for him.

"He's still calling a lot?" Paige asked, watching me put my phone back into my purse.

"He's freaking out," I say. "It's kind of annoying."

“Well, you did the right thing. Putting the phone on silent and pretending it doesn’t exist is exactly how I like to deal with my parents.”

We join Karen by the display of car chargers, and I manage to find one that fits my phone. “So that’s about it for me,” I tell them.

Karen peers into the cart. “Me, too. We have tampons, snacks, and an extra memory card for my camera. I’m good to go.”

“I guess I’m ready, too,” Paige says, though she doesn’t look happy about ending our shopping trip. She’s been sending me shopping-related texts with lots of exclamation points and smiley faces for the past week. “Shopping is an

essential part of the road trip process,” one read. “It encourages excitement and helps build anticipation.”

“So I guess we’re ready now,” I say, feeling a little lurch in my stomach. In less than twelve hours, the girls will show up at my house in Paige’s Cavalier to pick me up. Then we’ll start our twelve-hundred-mile journey.

Over the last few weeks, I’ve come to really enjoy hanging out with Karen and Paige. We spent long hours studying for finals in the library, hung out in their dorm, and met up at the Student Center for lunch nearly every day. I feel more comfortable around them than just about anyone else in my life right now, which, granted, isn’t saying much, considering

my interpersonal interaction is currently limited to phone calls with my dad, lectures from professors, and sessions with my shrink.

Still, I have fun with these girls. Paige does her best to run interference for me, distracting me from things that she can see are upsetting me, or even more importantly, distracting Karen when she sees a panic attack is imminent. Having an attack in front of other people is terrible. I feel exposed and judged, which in turn, makes the panic worse. Paige does her best to give me time to get away from the curious eyes of her roommate, and I'm beyond thankful for it.

But now we're not talking hanging

out several times a week. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to be with them nonstop, pretty much twenty-four/seven. I don't know how I'll deal with that. I'm used to having the emptiness and quiet of my apartment to decompress. What if I can't handle being social for more than a few hours at a time?

And then there's the matter of who we might be seeing on this tour. I'm pretty sure I'll see Daltrey at least once; that just seems logical. What will I say? Will he still be mad? Will he be able to tell that I'm different now? I automatically pull my sleeves down, feeling close to sick.

"We're going to have the best time," Paige says. Her voice is casual, but

she's looking right at me, as if she knows exactly what I'm thinking. "I have my playlists all set up on my iPod. There's going to be so much Ransom in that car it will make your ass hurt."

Karen laughs. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"A lot. It means a lot."

Karen shakes her head. "Personally, I'm more excited about all the greasy fast food we're going to eat."

Paige makes a face. The girls have a deal that Paige isn't allowed to mention anything relating to a food's healthiness level—or lack thereof. She's supposed to happily munch on chips and fast-food burgers for the duration of the trip. I can't tell yet if she's excited about it or

pissed. She certainly seemed pretty eager to pick out snack food, almost as if she's been imagining what self-restricted foods she'd be "forced" to eat for quite some time. From the way Karen is smirking, I have a feeling she thinks the same thing.

We go to the registers to pay for our loot. I'm kind of shocked by how much we've racked up in snacks and soda, but Karen assures me it's just part of the proper road trip experience. They drop me off my apartment around eleven.

"I cannot believe I still have so much to do," Paige says, turning to face me from the front seat. "I've barely packed a thing."

I've been done packing since three

days ago. But then, my social life is not nearly what Paige's is. What else was I supposed to do all the nights I've been here alone, if not obsess about the trip? It's also pretty easy to pack when you live exclusively in jeans and hoodies.

"Good luck," I say. "Try to get some rest."

"Yeah," Karen says. "Because the drive schedule is nonnegotiable."

I laugh. I've found that Karen and Paige are kind of obsessed with schedules and lists. Much like their food-fetching turn-taking schedule, they determine ahead of time whose turn it will be for just about any task imaginable. Buying groceries, stopping by Red Box for their Wednesday movie

nights, picking up coffee before their only 8 a.m. classes—all are scheduled ahead of time. Driving during the road trip definitely falls under the category of Things That Must Be Scheduled.

“Ooh, speaking of tired.” Paige pulls out her phone and opens a memo app. “I need your coffee order for tomorrow. It’s my turn.”

I grin. “I’ll take a caramel latte with an extra shot.”

“Skim, half, or whole? Vente or Grande?”

I stare at her in bemusement. “Um, I don’t know, Paige. I just want a giant-ass coffee with lots of caffeine.”

Karen cackles. “She’ll figure it out.”

I open the door. “Bye, guys. Thanks

again for asking me to go. I'm really excited."

"You should be," Paige says, grinning. "We're awesome."

"See you tomorrow," Karen calls as I step out onto the sidewalk. "Sleep good!"

"You too." I head up to my apartment, my plastic bags full of goodies in hand, wondering if I'll be able to sleep at all.

"Ooh, we should stop there," Paige squeals, her face pressed to the glass of the passenger-side window.

"What? Where?" I take my eyes off the road to glance in her direction. All

I've seen is rolling fields for the past two hundred miles.

"That sign." She turns around, her face alight with excitement. "It said there was a salt and pepper shaker museum at the next exit."

I stare at her, not sure if she's serious or not. "Are you kidding me?"

"What? I think it would be cool. And how many times in your life do you get to say you've been to a salt and pepper shaker museum?"

"No," I say firmly. "Absolutely not. I'm not stopping."

She flops back into her seat, pouting. "You sound just like Karen."

I have to laugh at that. It hasn't taken very much time at all for me to start

reacting to Paige in a very Karen-like way. After a full day in a contained environment, there's only so many times one can hear someone beg to stop the car at the slightest provocation before patience runs thin.

"Well," I say, peeking in the rearview mirror; Karen appears to still be sleeping. "What do you think Karen would say if she woke up and found that we were at a salt and pepper shaker museum?"

Paige giggles. "Good point."

"Are you really that bored?" I ask. "Didn't you bring like, two stacks of magazines?"

"I read them all this morning."

"Which is your own fault," Karen

says from the backseat without opening her eyes. "I told you to save some for when you were bored."

"I couldn't help it!" Paige retorts. "This morning, I was too excited to sit still. I needed something to distract me."

"Well, now you're too bored to sit still, which I'm pretty sure I warned you about. So you're just going to have to put on your big-girl panties and deal."

"I'm not sure, Karen," I say. "I'm kind of changing my mind. It might be fun to visit a salt and pepper shaker museum."

"You guys are the worst," Karen says, cuddling up against her pillow. "Wake me up when it's my turn to drive. And don't you dare stop at that museum."

Or anywhere else ridiculous enough to attract her attention.”

“Come on, Karen,” Paige says, leaning across the middle console to poke her friend’s arm. “You promised you’d entertain me. I’m bored.”

Karen groans. “Listen to your iPod.”

“We can’t get a signal out here,” Paige says. “Your transmitter thingy is crap.”

“Sorry we don’t all have new cars with iPod jacks,” Karen says. “Oh, wait, this is *your* car. Shut up.”

“Karen, come on. Get up and talk to me.”

“Oh, fine.” Karen throws off the sweater she was using as a blanket and sits up. “I was saving this for a disaster,

but I suppose now is as good a time as any. Let's do a talk list."

"Yay!" Paige yells, clapping her hands. "I love talk lists!"

"What the hell is a talk list?" I ask.

"Oh, my gosh, Daisy, you'll love it. It's this thing Karen does when I'm bored or getting all cuckoo." Paige lowers her eyes a little. "I don't know if you noticed, but I get a little wired sometimes. I have ADHD."

Well, that makes a lot of sense, considering how excitable and distracted she often seems. And maybe that explains why Paige was so quick to treat me with compassion when she found out about my panic attacks.

"You don't get cuckoo," I tell her.

“You just seem to enjoy yourself. We could all stand to be a bit more like that.”

“Thanks, Daisy!” She grins.

“Anyhow, the talk list. So Karen gets out a piece of paper, and we make a list of things we have to talk about, serious or really silly or whatever. And then we have to talk about everything on that list.”

“Uh... okay?”

“You don’t get it?”

“No, I get it. I just don’t get why it’s a thing. I mean, why don’t you just, you know, talk about those things as they come up? Why do you need a list?”

“Because it’s so much more fun this way!”

I meet Karen's eyes in the mirror.

She smiles kind of sheepishly. "It is fun. I have no idea why. And sometimes it helps Paige when she's feeling a little scattered."

I suddenly realize that Karen's obsession with lists and schedules might not be quite as random as it seems. Maybe all of these things were created with the purpose of helping Paige find some elusive order in her life.

I smile. "Okay, I'm sold. Let's make a talk list."

Karen retrieves a piece of paper from her bag. "Me first. Um... let's discuss... what is the hottest thing we can imagine each member of Ransom doing?"

I groan. “I cannot do that. I can’t imagine Reed Ransome doing anything sexy, I’m sorry.”

“Too bad,” Karen singsongs. “No one is allowed to veto an item on the talk list. All subjects are equally worth discussion.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever.”

“Okay, my turn,” Paige says, clapping her hands. “Um... how do you think the world would be different if dinosaurs had never gone extinct?”

Karen laughs as she scribbles it down. “Good one. Daisy?”

“Uh...” I’m at a complete loss. It probably doesn’t help that I’ve had very few conversations in the past year to draw from.

“It can be something totally random and silly,” Paige tells me. “Obviously. Or it can be something real. Whatever you want.”

“Okay. How about... what’s your favorite vacation and why?”

“Nice,” Paige says. “That’s a good getting-to-know-you-better question. Karen?”

“My next subject will be... what is the sexiest thing that you want to do with a member of Ransom?”

“You have a one-track mind, Karen,” I say drily.

She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Paige?”

“Would you rather replace your ears with toes, or replace your hands with

giant noses? Discuss.”

Karen and I both crack up.

“Paige is the best at making talk lists,” Karen says, writing it down.

“That’s a lot to try and follow,” I say. I decide I may as well embrace the silly. “Okay, here’s mine: Describe, in detail, what your zombie apocalypse plan is.”

“Our what?” Paige asks.

“You know, what’s your game plan should the undead walk the earth? When the outbreak first starts getting going and the shit hits the fan, what’s your plan? Where would you go? What would your priorities be?”

“I like it,” Karen says. “Okay, my next topic: food.”

“Food?” Paige asks. “What about

it?”

Karen shrugs. “I just like food. I want to talk about it.”

For some reason, that cracks me up even more than Paige’s body-replacement question. I realize that the girls had a point: Talk lists are much more fun than regular old conversation. We go around like that for several more rounds until Karen is finally satisfied.

“That ought to be just about right,” she says, capping her pen.

“How do you know when you have enough topics?” I ask.

“You just *know*,” she says solemnly.

It takes us more than an hour to go through the topics on the talk list. I’m surprised to learn that both Karen and

Paige have a sexual preoccupation with Cash. I had assumed that they, like most of the girls our age, would be into Daltrey.

“He’s totally hot,” Paige says, when I mention this. “But he’s so... I don’t know. Good. Cash, on the other hand, has a bad streak. You can just tell.”

“That’s definitely accurate,” I mutter, thinking of the long string of girls I’ve seen disappear across my lawn and into his basement window over the years. “But why is that attractive to you?”

Paige grins. “I don’t know. Sometimes, you just want them to be bad, you know?”

I laugh. “Fair enough.”

“What about you?” Karen asks.

“What’s the sexiest thing you can imagine one of them doing?” She has a wicked glint in her eyes, knowing this is uncomfortable for me.

“I think it would be pretty sexy if Cash stopped being such a womanizing bastard and actually got serious with someone.”

“Boo,” Karen says, and I laugh.

We are all in agreement that the best zombie-apocalypse plan is to somehow steal a boat from the rowing team so we can navigate by river and avoid roads then make our way into the wilds of the mountains.

Paige says we need to get to her friend Phil’s house. “He collects a bunch of weird stuff, like old gas masks and

weird Japanese weaponry. We'd totally be able to find useful stuff there."

Karen shakes her head. "You know some weird-ass people, Paige."

Paige grins happily. "He has a lot of weed, too." I burst out laughing and she shakes her head at me. "It would probably be valuable, you know, to sell."

"Yeah, I'm so sure that's what you had in mind."

Once Karen has had the chance to wax nostalgic about the best meals in her life, we reach the end of the list. "Ooh, there's one more I forgot to mention," she says, her voice overly casual. "And it's a specific one for just one person."

"What?" Paige asks. "That's not in

the rules of the talk list.”

“Too bad. This question is for Daisy. What’s the deal between you and Daltrey?”

I make a face at her in the rearview mirror. “Paige says it’s not in the rules to ask person-specific questions, so I’m not answering. The rules of the talk list must be obeyed.”

“Uh, no, actually,” Paige says quickly. “You totally can ask person-specific questions. I just, uh, forgot. So, *what is* the deal between you and Daltrey?”

I sigh. “What are you talking about?”

“Just like, every time you mention him, you get this dreamy look on your face—”

“I do not!”

“And your ears get all red whenever we talk about him, particularly when the topic is his fine ass. So what’s the deal?”

“He was my best friend since I was five years old.”

“Karen’s been my best friend since I was ten, and you don’t see me blushing when I talk about her.”

“This is totally unfair,” I mutter.

“Come on. We just want to know if you have a crush on him,” Paige pleads.

“And whether you ever got a piece of his ass, and if so, how was it?” Karen adds.

I snort. “Fine. He was my first kiss.”

Paige falls back into her seat, her

hand over her heart. “Holy shit! You get to say that. For the rest of your life. That your first kiss was Daltrey Ransome. Holy shit!”

I laugh. “It wasn’t that special. We were eight, and we both wanted to know what it felt like. Afterward, we played freeze tag.”

“Still. His lips were on your lips.”

I don’t tell them about the other kiss we shared. It’s stupid, really, that a pity kiss at the age of thirteen, during Seven Minutes in Heaven no less, should feel sacred to me, but it does. I don’t want them giggling or sighing over that one.

“You guys never dated? In all those years?”

I shake my head. “We decided in our

junior year that high school dating was stupid. Some girl had just broken Lennon's heart, and he moped around the house like an invalid for about a month. We thought it was the dumbest thing—like they would have ended up together anyhow, you know? So we made a pact that we were done with stupid high school drama.” I don't mention our prom plans. It still makes me too sad.

“Bummer,” Karen says. “You could have said he was your first lay, too. Wouldn't that be a story to tell?”

That leads the girls into a discussion about their own less-than-toe-curling first times, and I'm relieved that the person-specific portion of the conversation is over.

What does it matter how I feel about Daltrey? He never gave any indication that he felt the same way. Besides, I've probably screwed things over so much that he's lost most of his platonic feelings as well. *You'll be lucky if he even wants to talk to you. No sense in worrying about anything more than that.*

Chapter Ten

Daltrey

“Dude, you’re completely flat,” Reed says.

Cash promptly flips him off. “Whatever, punk. I’ve never been flat a day in my life.”

I join Reed in laughing over that one. “Sure, bro. That’s why it took us, what, twenty-five takes to get the backing vocal on the chorus of ‘Timeframe’?”

“Fuck off,” Cash says, pulling off his guitar and leaning it against his amp. “What does it take to get a fucking beer around here?”

“You could *ask* Levi to go get one for you,” Lennon suggests, “instead of bitching about it.”

“Let’s take a break,” Reed says, looking down at his watch. “I could use a beer myself.”

My three older brothers leave me in the hotel conference room where we’ve been practicing and head out in search of beer, and in Cash’s case, a pretty girl to serve it. I decline the invitation to join them. I got a text message during our rehearsal, and I’ve been dying to check my phone to see if it’s from Daisy. We have a very strict band rule about phones during rehearsals, one I generally support, considering Cash would be sexting all the time without it. But Daisy

and I have been messaging each other quite a bit lately, and it's a kind of torture to think I might have missed one of her messages. So as soon as they exit the room, I check my phone.

Remember that hotel in Youngstown?

I smile. We stayed in Youngstown for a night between shows on our first tour, and the hotel was so filthy we all elected to sleep in the van instead.

Of course, I write back. Don't tell me you've found one to match it?

No, thank God. The place we're in is clean. I was just thinking about that night.

I woke up in the middle of the night to find that Daisy had snuggled up

against me in her sleep. I could still remember the way her soft body felt against mine, her shoulders moving gently as she breathed.

I'm quite happy to say that sleeping on the bus is a much different experience, I type. Where are you, anyhow?

Harrisburg. We should hit Boston after lunch if we get right up and go.

These past few weeks, I've been feeling some butterflies in my stomach just from talking to her, but her words turn them into something that feels more like writhing snakes. Daisy will be at the Boston show tomorrow.

She told me from the beginning that they'd be there—they had tickets and

everything—but I somehow never really believed it until that moment. She’s really coming. She traveled hundreds of miles, and I’m going to see her tomorrow.

My heart pounding, I text back, trying to keep my tone casual. *It should be a good show. Let me know when you get here.*

I will. Have a good night.

Levi chooses that moment to join me in the conference room. “Rehearsal done?”

“They went to find beer,” I tell him.

“Ah, so the outlook for the rest of the evening is uncertain.”

I laugh. Once my brothers start drinking, God knows what could happen

next.

“You’re in a good mood,” Levi says.
“Was it going well?”

I shrug. “Cash is still flat on the refrain.”

He rolls his eyes. “Cash? He’s never been flat a day in his life.”

I snort. “Right.” A thought occurs to me. “Hey, do you have the schedule for the next few days?”

“Sure.” He pulls out his phone.
“Why?”

“Daisy is going to be here tomorrow.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Daisy Harris?”

“Yeah. Crazy, huh? She emailed me a few weeks ago and told me she’s coming

to some shows with her friends. A road trip or something.”

His expression is shrewd. “And how do you feel about that?”

I shrug. “I’m not a hundred percent sure, to be honest. I’m excited, you know. But I still feel a little...”

“Pissed?”

I shrug again. I don’t like the idea of being mad at Daisy, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.

“She ditched you for a year, man. It’s fine to be a little ticked off about that.”

“I know. But she said something on the phone. She said that I knew her better than anyone else, so I should know that if she did something like that, she must have had a damn good reason for it.” I

frown, pulling my beanie off so I can fiddle with the edges. “That just keeps running over and over in my head. That she must have had a damn good reason.” I look up at Levi, who’s wearing a stricken expression. “Do you think something could have happened to her?”

He shakes his head. “Man, I don’t know.”

“I keep thinking if it was something bad, we would have heard about it, you know? But then again, how many people from back home do we talk to?”

“Not many.”

“That’s an understatement. I don’t think I’ve talked to anyone from home besides Daisy.”

Levi’s quiet for a moment. “She

didn't tell you what's been going on?"

"She said she couldn't, but that she wanted to someday."

"Can you deal with that?"

I toss my beanie away, frustrated. "Guess I don't have much choice, huh?"

"I guess not if you want to hang out with her."

"Speaking of that, what's the schedule like?"

He consults his phone. "Pretty busy man. Not many blocks of time."

I sigh. "I had a feeling you'd say that. I'll just have to hang out with her backstage and stuff."

He shakes his head. "Daisy Harris is going to be around again. That's crazy, man."

“You’re telling me. I might need your help, too. You can keep her occupied if I get called away to do an interview or whatever stupid shit my dad comes up with.”

He has kind of a strange look on his face, but he nods. “No problem. Who knows? Maybe her friends will be hot.” He laughs, but it sounds forced.

I wonder if maybe he has some kind of issue with her that he’s never told me about. I push that thought away. He’s spent nearly as much time with her as I have, what with sitting in on rehearsals and being at all of our gigs. They’ve always been friends.

“I kind of can’t believe it,” I say. “After all this time, I’m actually going to

see her. It's nuts."

"Yeah." He shakes his head. "Totally nuts."

My brothers return in a cacophony of noise, as usual. Reed is yelling at Cash about something, and Lennon is laughing.

I roll my eyes. "The fine, upstanding Ransome boys are back to work like the professionals they are."

"Shut it, little brother," Cash says, handing me a cold beer. "Don't think you're too important for us not to beat the crap out of you."

"Yeah, it's been nearly a week since we put your hand in warm water while you were sleeping," Lennon says.

I laugh. "Good point. You guys ready to get started?"

Lennon raises his eyebrows. “You’re in a pretty good mood. What’s that about? You’ve been hella whiny lately.”

“Yeah,” Cash adds. “A giant pussy. King pussy, even. We almost got you a crown.”

“I’m in a good mood because we’re almost done with this damn rehearsal,” I say. “And I’ll finally be able to get away from you assholes for a few minutes.”

“Good point,” Cash says. “I could use some alone time with that hottie from the bar myself.” He gets his guitar, and the others follow suit.

Levi is still looking at me strangely, probably wondering why I didn’t just tell them. My brothers love Daisy like a little sister. They’ll be nearly as excited

as I am at the prospect of seeing her again.

It can wait till tomorrow. I'll tell them when she texts to confirm they made it to Boston.

After all, *it is* still a little hard to believe she's going to show up.

Chapter Eleven

Daisy

The closer we get to Boston, the more nervous I get. I have no idea how I'm going to get through the next few hours. I could be seeing Daltrey *tonight*. I'll definitely be seeing him on stage, but I could see him face to face. How can I deal with that? What will I say? I pull the sleeves of my hoodie down over my fingertips and stare out the window at the increasingly urban landscape.

“We’re getting close!” Paige squeals, tapping the steering wheel.

Karen adjusts the GPS. “This doesn’t

even make any sense. It's sending us around in a circle."

"Stop being such a downer," Paige says. "This is the day we see Daltrey Ransome for the first time. You will not ruin it."

"Yeah, but you might if you miss this turn," Karen says drily.

"Oops!" Paige pulls the wheel hard, cutting off about three cars behind us as she darts across two lanes to make her exit.

In the back seat, I try hard not to cover my eyes. Paige is not the world's best driver. I wish either Karen or I had insisted on doing the city driving. But the girls have their driving turn-taking schedule and, as with their other

schedules, they stick to it religiously.

When it becomes clear that we are hopelessly lost, Karen pulls out her phone and starts trying to direct with its map feature. Unfortunately, her directions are the complete opposite of the ones from Paige's GPS, and Paige is having a hard time deciding which to follow. The result is that we almost get killed as she hovers indecisively between lanes and tries to take sharp turns at the last minute.

"You dummy," Karen finally yells, grabbing the GPS from the dash. "You punched in directions to the venue instead of the hotel. No wonder this isn't matching up with my phone."

"Oh!" Paige slaps her forehead.

“Whoops.”

“*Whoops*,” Karen says, shaking her head. “Good God.”

“Well, on the bright side, that looks like the venue down there.” Paige points ahead. “Wanna swing by and check it out before we get back on track?”

I squint out the windshield. A couple of blocks away is a brick building surrounded with people. The line stretches halfway down the next block. “It’s only three thirty,” I murmur, shocked. “What are they all doing here already?”

“General admission,” Paige says. “They want to make sure they’re up close and personal.”

“We’re going to be way in the back,”

Karen moans. “We’ll hardly see them.”

“The venue isn’t very big,” Paige says. “We’ll be able to see. Besides, from here on out, we’ll be able to be one of the early ones.”

“Great. I can hardly wait to sit outside on the sidewalk all day.”

Karen has a point. As we pass the front of the line, I see fans—mostly girls—stretched out on blankets and sitting in camp chairs. They look as though they’ve been here for a long time already.

Karen turns off the GPS and insists Paige follow her phone’s directions to the hotel. We get there in less than ten minutes.

“We’d be in line already if you

would have listened to me an hour ago,” Karen mutters as Paige parks.

Like the one we’d stayed in the night before, the hotel is nothing fancy, a little run down but clean. Paige booked us a room with two double beds and a roll-away cot.

“I’ll take the little bed tonight,” Paige offers, plopping her suitcase down on the thin mattress. “We should get ready and get over there.”

The girls start pulling out makeup bags and arguing over the shower schedule. Since I have no plans to change from my jeans and hoodie, I get out my phone to send a quick text to Daltrey.

We’re at the hotel. You should see

the line outside the venue. Is it always like that?

He responds almost immediately. *Duh. Haven't you heard? I'm like, a huge star now.*

My nervousness switches to excitement at the prospect of seeing him again. My mood has been doing this all week, flipping from scared to excited. It's starting to feel like emotional whiplash.

My phone beeps again, and I look down. *If your friends don't mind, you guys could come backstage before the show. I'll send Levi out to get you, so you don't have to wait in line.*

I look up at Karen and Paige, who are currently arguing over which shirts

to wear. I grin. *If your friends don't mind.* Yeah, right.

They'll freak out, I text back. *You just made me the most popular girl in the room.*

LOL. I'm happy to help. See you around seven?

Great. Thanks, Daltrey.

No prob. Just look for Levi and text if you can't find him. See you soon.

I slip my phone into my hoodie pocket. Paige and Karen have been so sweet about not mentioning meeting the band. I think they get how tenuous things were between Daltrey and me, and I'm sure they're trying to make sure I don't feel used. Knowing they aren't just hanging out with me for my connection

makes me happy, and sharing this news will be fun.

“Hey, guys,” I say casually. “Guess who I just talked to?”

They both look at me, their expressions blank.

“Who?” Paige asks,

“Oh, just Daltrey. He wanted to know if we’d like to meet the band before the show. I told him you guys probably weren’t interested.”

They both stare at me for a beat before all hell breaks loose.

“Oh. My. God!” Karen jumps up onto the bed. She holds her hands over her face as if she can’t bear to look at me. “Are you serious? Seriously? Oh, my God!”

Paige throws her arms around me. “You’re kidding, right? You didn’t actually tell him that? You didn’t, did you?”

I laugh, not even minding that she’s hugging me. “Of course not. He said to be there at seven.”

The screaming and laughter that follows is unlike anything I’ve ever heard. Karen and Paige jump around on the beds like maniacs.

Then, Paige grabs my hand and pulls me down on the bed with them, throwing an arm around me and squealing in my ear. “I’m so excited I think I peed a little!”

That sends us all into another giggling fit.

“Okay, okay, we need to calm down,” Karen says, sitting up and brushing back her hair. “This changes things. I thought we had plenty of time, but now...”

“True,” Paige says. “We have serious work to do.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, rolling over on my side to look at them.

“We have to get ready,” Paige says, as if it should be obvious.

“For what?”

They both stare at me.

“You’re joking, right?” Karen raises her eyebrows. “We have to get ready for the show. And if we’re actually meeting them”—she puts her hands up to her face and waves them around for a second

—“our efforts need to be adjusted accordingly.”

“But... why?”

“Daisy, these are famous rock stars.”

Paige’s tone is that of one explaining something very simple to someone very dim.

“Famous *hot* rock stars,” Karen adds.

Paige nods. “Yes, famous hot rock stars. We can’t go in there looking like we just got out of the car after a sixteen-hour drive.”

“But we did just get out of the car after a sixteen-hour drive.”

“Yes, but we don’t want *them* to see that,” Paige explains.

“We want to look hot for the hotties,” Karen says.

They walk over to their suitcases and begin throwing clothes all over the bed. After a moment, Paige glances over at me. “Well? Aren’t you going to pick out something to wear?”

I look down at my clothes: straight-legged jeans, black Chucks, and a black hoodie. “I’ll just wear this.”

Paige snorts, while Karen gapes at me and says, “No. No, you won’t.”

“Why? I’m comfortable in this,” I say.

“Daisy, sweetie, come on. You haven’t seen Daltrey in ages. Don’t you want to look nice?” Paige stops and blushes. “Not that you don’t look nice, of course. I would never say—”

“You look schlumpy,” Karen

interrupts.

Paige punches her arm. “Karen!”

“What? She does.” Karen turns back to me. “No offense. You just look like you’re going to class, not like you’re going out to a concert. Especially not like you’re going to a concert with backstage passes.”

“I always dress like this.” I’m starting to feel uncomfortable with both of them staring at me.

Paige holds up her hands. “If you want to wear jeans and a”—she gulps as if the next word is hard for her to get out—“a *hoodie* to a Ransom concert, that’s fine. If you’re really comfortable and don’t feel like dressing up at all, we’ll leave you alone. But if you change your

mind, we'll help you."

Karen nods and looks sadly at my hoodie, which I have to admit is looking a little ragged. I listen while they discuss their choices. Karen is debating between a skirt and a dress, while Paige can't make up her mind about leather pants versus hot pink jeans. I consider what Paige said. This *is* the first time I'll be seeing the boys in months. I wonder if I'll look different to them. I know I've lost some weight. For a while there, my hair was getting really lank and dull, but it seems to have improved a bit lately. As far as my clothes, back in high school I pretty much lived in jeans and T-shirts, not that different from what I have on now.

With their clothes chosen, the girls start to argue over accessories. I've never really been into the choosing of the every minute detail of an outfit. But watching Karen and Paige, I start to wonder if maybe it's not a little bit fun. What would it hurt to get a little dressed up? I'm supposed to be trying new things.

As I climb off the bed to ask them for help, I try hard to believe my decision has nothing to do with not wanting to be the only not-cute one when Daltrey sees us.

Two hours later, Paige shoos me out of the bathroom to go get dressed. "The

outfit I picked is on your bed. You'll love it, I promise."

I look at her uncertainly. I'm not a fan of the "Daisy can't see what she's wearing" plan.

She raises her eyebrows at me when I don't go right away. "Have I given you reason to doubt me so far?"

She has a point. She and Karen have spent the better part of the last two hours helping me get ready. After my shower, they dried and straightened my normally spiral-curled hair. After it was straight and soft, Karen used the biggest curling iron I've ever seen to give me soft, gentle waves. The idea of straightening my hair just to curl it again seemed kind of strange to me, but I have to admit the

end product is pretty great. She then did some complicated braid thing at the crown of my head so that my hair would be out of my face but still loose and long. I really like it; I might even ask her to teach me how to do it myself.

They also applied my makeup. I never thought I'd be the type of person to wear body glitter, but Paige assured me it was more like a shimmer and it looked good.

Karen, however, put her foot down when Paige tried to put her trademark candy-red lipstick on me. "That's not you," Karen told me firmly. She stepped in with a darker, brownish-pink that I much preferred.

"Daisy, come on," Paige says,

pushing me gently toward the door. “I need to finish my makeup. Just go get dressed.”

I walk out into the room, crossing my fingers. Paige is dressed in black leather pants and a skin-tight hot-pink tank top with leather boots up to her knees. Karen, on the other hand, is wearing a little black tank dress that’s so tight I’m not sure how she can move. I warned Paige that I’m not that bold, but she assured me it’d be fine.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I see her choices. Laid out on the bed are a pair of short black shorts, a baggy purple tank top, and a black vest. The shorts are a lot shorter than I’m used to, but otherwise, the outfit’s not that bad. I slip

into the clothes and check the mirror. I definitely look as though I could fit in with the girls we saw at the venue, but I don't feel too overdone, either. Then I look down at my bare arms, and my stomach sinks. I plop down on the edge of the bed, tears in my eyes, seconds away from a full out panic attack.

Paige comes out a few minutes later "What's wrong? You don't like it? We can find you something else!"

I shake my head. I'm having trouble getting my breathing under control. I hear the blow dryer come on in the bathroom. I try to focus on the noise. Sometimes that helps.

"You're okay, Daisy," Paige says, her voice soothing. "Everything is fine."

“It’s not,” I gasp out. “I can’t wear this. I can’t wear any... anything without...” I hold up my arms, wanting her to understand. “I need *sleeves*.”

Her face clouds in confusion. “What do you mean? You have great arms—” Her eyes widen.

She’s quiet for a moment, and the panic redoubles in my chest. I don’t want her to know, I don’t want anyone to know, and I really, really need her to stop looking at me.

“No biggie,” she suddenly says, standing up. “I have just the thing.”

She casually walks to her bag as if she hasn’t just discovered my biggest secret and roots through it. I stare at her back, totally shocked by her reaction.

When she turns around, she's holding something small and black. Her face is kind, unworried. I see no pity or fear or disgust there.

“Here we go,” she says, sitting next to me again.

She gently takes my hand and pulls it onto her lap, leaning over slightly so she can snap the leather cuff around my wrist. The cuff is black and imprinted with swirling designs. A delicate black braiding is laced around the edges. It's perfect, the kind of thing I could wear every day if I wanted. She snaps a matching one on my other wrist. Best of all, they completely cover the jagged scars.

“Better?” she asks.

I look up at her, overwhelmed and so grateful.

Her smile fades, replaced by a fierceness in her eyes I've never seen before. "I'm so glad you're here, Daisy," she says quietly.

I know in my heart she doesn't just mean here with them in Boston. I nod, my throat full of tears, and her smile returns.

I've spent so much time ashamed of those scars, of what they said about me. Now, looking at my bare arms adorned with Paige's jewelry, I feel a weight lift from my chest. Something shifts inside me, some awareness of myself and my own strength. She starts to get up, and I grab her hand—the first time I've

willingly initiated contact with another person since the day my father had me admitted to Horizons Recovery Hospital.

“Thank you,” I whisper, hoping she knows how big a thank you it is, how many kindnesses it covers. I had come to think of all humans as cruel, as calculating and selfish, to be feared and never trusted. Then I met Paige. It’s not every day someone so completely restores your faith in humanity.

Paige flashes her now-familiar cheery smile. “You’re very welcome.”

Chapter Twelve

Daltrey

I'm pretty sure I'm going to kill my dad. Or maybe I'll quit the band or punch one of my brothers. I have to do *something* because I'm starting to feel as though I'm going crazy. It's now six forty-five, fifteen minutes before I'm supposed to meet Daisy, and we're still in this interview in the green room—an interview my father promised me would be cancelled. He either forgot or straight-up lied. Either way, it's looking as though I'm not going to be seeing Daisy before the show.

I step away from the interviewer and motion to Levi out on the stage. Cash is talking, so I figure I'm okay, though Reed shoots me a death glare.

"What's up, man?" Levi asks.

"Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure. I was just going to head out to look for Daisy and her friends. Seven, right?"

I shake my head, the anger swelling in my chest. "Yeah, about that. I don't know if I'm going to be able to get away before the show. Can you take her and her friends to the dressing room and make sure they have food and stuff to drink?"

"Sure, dude. No problem."

I look at my watch again. "Shit. And

if I don't get back there in an hour, take them to the reserved seats upstairs, okay?"

"On it."

Levi heads out, and I return to my brothers, smiling apologetically at the reporter while I seethe inside.

I've been looking forward to this show for the past week, ever since Daisy called to confirm that she was, in fact, coming to see me. Strangely, after that call, I started sleeping better. The old nightmare, the one where she was hurt somewhere and I couldn't find her, hasn't returned all week. Not having to worry about what happened to her when she disappeared from my life lifted a weight from my shoulders that I barely

noticed I was carrying.

I was angry when I got her email, really ticked off. The fact that she didn't even realize how much she had put me through truly ticked me off. And I'm still mad now... a little.

But my desire to see her far outweighs my anger. As the day went on, my nerves ratcheted up notch by notch, until I was pretty much a seething mess of anxiousness—not the best state of mind for a show. And then I was hit with this stupid interview.

I concentrate on taking deep breaths through my nose when the questions aren't directed at me. I could answer most of these in my sleep. I would think the reporters could get a little more

creative than the constant rumination about our influences, or how we got our names. Seriously, how is it not obvious that we were named after musicians? My brother's name is Lennon, for God's sake.

Sure enough: "Reed, you and your brothers have some interesting names. Could you tell me a little bit how you got them?"

I want to scream, but Reed only nods seriously, as if this is the first time someone ever asked. "Well, Jeffery, my dad always knew he wanted his kids to respect the musical greats he grew up loving. So we were named after those he considers to be some of the most influential musicians of all time—Johnny

Cash, Lou Reed, John Lennon, and Roger Daltrey. I guess you could say music was part of our fate since the day we were born.”

Everyone chuckles good-naturedly, and I struggle not to roll my eyes. Reed is really good at this whole public eye thing. I wish he could just handle all the interviews. Cash shoots me a pissed-off look, and I know I’m pushing it. The reporter can probably read my antagonism from a mile away. I shake my head, trying to get it together, before the interviewer turns to me for the next question. Maybe if I can get through this with a smile on my face, he’ll leave us alone, and I’ll have time to see Daisy.

At seven thirty, Dad finally comes

over to cut off the interview. The opener is going on soon, and the noise from the crowd outside is starting to pick up. I turn toward the back hall, intending to try and catch Daisy before Levi takes her to the seats, but I'm stopped by my father's hand on my arm.

"You need to get it together," he says in a low voice. He doesn't sound mad, just serious. "There's a lot riding on the press for this tour."

"You think I don't know that?" I yank my arm away and continue to the door.

"I mean it, Daltrey," he calls after me. I resist the urge to flip him off.

My heart sinks when I reach the dressing room. She's not there. Levi must have already taken them to their

seats. I curse the interviewer, my father, and every one of my brothers as I sink into one of the couches. At least none of them are in here, and I have a little privacy.

“Sorry, Levi,” a familiar voice says from outside the door. She sounds out of breath. “I think I left it right by the...”

She trails off as she enters the room and catches sight of me. For a long moment, we just stare at each other in silence.

Finally, I clear my throat and stand. “Daisy.”

Her hand comes up to her mouth. She looks off balance, almost shocked. I shove my trembling hands into my pockets and resist the urge to go to her,

grab her arms, touch her.

Before either of us can say anything else, Levi appears behind her in the doorway. “Did you find it?” He catches sight of me across the room and seems to freeze, his expression almost annoyed, before his normal smile reappears. “Hey, man. Daisy left her purse. I take it you guys are finished?”

I nod, my eyes back on Daisy. I want Levi to go; I want the crowd beyond the green room to disappear. I want to be alone somewhere with the girl in front of me, away from all the people who are constantly trying to get at me. I don’t know what I would do if we were alone, though the idea of hugging her sounds pretty good. All I know is that I wish it

was just me and Daisy, even if only for a few minutes. I've missed her even more than I ever realized.

Levi's eyes dart back and forth between the two of us. "Uh... sorry, guys, but we really should go if we want to get you back to your seat. The opener is about to start, and I have a bunch of work to do." He looks at me uncertainly. "Unless you want someone else to take her out?"

I hear loud voices in the hallway—my brothers. The sound shakes me from my daze. "No, you're right. I'll walk with you."

Levi leads us out into the chaotic hallway, darting around roadies and God knows who else to clear a path. I fall

into step next to Daisy, who seems to be concentrating very hard on her feet. She's wearing ankle boots with heels, a far cry from her usual Converse. In fact, her entire outfit looks very un-Daisy-like. She's in some tank-top-and-vest combo that actually looks kind of rock and roll. And shorts—really, really short shorts. I realize I'm staring at her legs, and I swallow and look up at her face.

"It's good to see you," she says softly, her eyes still aimed at the floor.

"You too." I want to take her hand but settle for brushing my fingers over her forearm. She visibly shivers. "We'll talk after the show, okay? You guys will come back?"

"That sounds great."

We've reached the end of the hall. Levi stops a few discrete feet away, and she finally looks up at me.

I feel my breath hitch in my chest. I've known that I loved Daisy since we were fourteen years old. I've spent hours watching her when she didn't realize my eyes were on her. I know her face better than my own. But in the past year, as fear turned to anger then anger to resentment, I wondered if maybe that love had broken, if maybe I would see her one day and she would actually be unfamiliar to me.

I realize it was stupid to doubt something so elemental as my feelings for her. As I look down at Daisy in the crowded hallway, hundreds of miles

away from home, months since I've last spoken to her, I realize that my love is every bit as strong as it ever was.

And this time, I'm going to do something about it.

Chapter Thirteen

Daisy

I feel strangely numb as Levi leads me back to my seat. Seeing Daltrey like that, so unexpectedly, has rendered me mute. I stumble a bit as we make our way into the private box situated in a far corner of the balcony.

Levi steadies me with a hand on my back. “You okay?” he yells into my ear. The opener has just started their set, and the crowd below us is ramping up into a frenzy.

“Yeah!” I respond, thankful that Levi is here. I’m not sure I would have made

it through the last hour without him.

He settles me in my seat and squeezes my shoulder before heading off to do whatever pre-show jobs he has to complete.

“You get it?” Paige yells, and I hold up my purse. She smiles and turns back to the stage.

Finally free from anyone’s attention, I sit back in my seat in the dark theater and take deep breaths. The night was already a rollercoaster of emotion before I even saw Daltrey. From the excitement and nervousness while we got ready to my horror at Paige discovering my secret, I was on shaky ground before we even got here. Then my excitement ramped up at the idea of

seeing my old friend—only to crash down again when I instead came face to face with Levi.

He found us outside by the Will Call box. His face lit up at the sight of me, and I couldn't help but grin back, my nervousness abated slightly. I've always loved Levi.

“Girl, you're a sight for sore eyes,” he said, wrapping his arms around me. I stiffened slightly, a habit I was sure would take a long time to break, and he released me quickly, giving me an appraising look. “Where the hell have you been?”

I shrugged. “School, life. How's it been going?”

“Well, besides for the fact that

you've left me completely alone to deal with all the drama of the Ransome boys, pretty good, I guess."

I laughed. "Break up any fights between Cash and Reed lately?"

He rolled his eyes. "You have no idea."

I remembered that Paige and Karen were next to me and turned to introduce them. "Guys, this is Levi, roadie and band assistant extraordinaire. Levi, this is Paige and Karen."

After shaking hands with the girls, Levi turned back to me. "So I kind of have bad news."

My stomach sank. Daltrey must have decided he was too pissed to see me after all.

“The boys are in an interview. Dalt isn’t sure if it will be over in time to meet up before the show.” Paige’s and Karen’s expressions fell, but Levi continued. “So he asked me to bring you back to the dressing room. There’s food and stuff back there. If he hasn’t showed his ugly mug before the show starts, I’ll take you out to your seats and come find you at the end so you can see him later. Okay?”

“That sounds great, Levi,” I said.
“Thank you so much.”

“Just following orders.”

I snorted. “Yeah, like any of those boys would dare boss you around.”

When Levi led us into the building, I noticed both Karen and Paige sneaking

glances at me, but I ignored them. I couldn't be thinking about seeing the boys and worrying about Karen and Paige at the same time.

Levi took us through the lobby, behind an inconspicuous door, and down several more winding hallways until we finally reached what appeared to be the backstage area. People were milling about, some rushing around with pieces of equipment or clipboards. I thought I saw a few scantily clad blondes being shepherded into another room, and I tried very hard not to think about what that might mean.

The dressing room was spacious and comfortable with a stereo pumping out some classic rock that I knew Mr.

Ransome favored. Levi stayed and told us stories from on the road, which Karen and Paige totally ate up. I enjoyed myself quite a bit and even forgot to be scared. But still, Daltrey didn't show up.

With a mixture of relief and disappointment, I followed Levi out to our seats. Karen and Paige went on and on about how great the view was, how happy they were that we weren't down in general admission with the masses that had apparently been let in during our time backstage. I didn't realize I'd forgotten my purse until after we sat down. I felt bad, knowing Levi was busy, but he only smiled and ushered me back to the dressing room.

To Daltrey.

I just stared at him, shocked, until we were somehow back in the hallway. I couldn't tell if he was mad or hurt or annoyed that I was looking at him like a fish gasping for air. All I could think was how *beautiful* he looked, how much I had missed him, and how I wanted him to wrap me in his arms and help me find my way back to a place where things made sense again.

Instead, we had said goodbye at the end of the hallway, with promises to meet up after the show, and Levi took me back to Karen and Paige.

“They’re pretty good!” Karen yells.

It takes me a second to realize that she’s talking about the opener. I force my eyes back to the stage. They do seem

pretty good, but for all I care in that moment, they could be a polka band.

When they leave the stage, I'm surprised. How had so much time passed already? *Because you've been mooning over Daltrey.* I feel as if every nerve, every muscle is tensed for his arrival on stage. My desire to see him again is becoming a physical ache. This feels so familiar, sitting in a darkened theater, waiting for Ransom to take the stage. How many times have I done this? Dozens, probably.

There's a break of about twenty minutes after the opener finishes. Karen and Paige occupy the time by using the restroom, checking on their makeup, and talking ad nauseam about how excited

they are and what songs they hope to hear. I think they can both tell that I'm not really in a chatting mood, because they mostly leave me alone.

Finally, the break is over. The lights dim before cutting off completely, plunging us into complete darkness. The crowd roars. Anticipation and excitement are heavy in the air, along with that unnamed sensation of a mass of people being so totally in sync, of every brain and heart in the room waiting for and wanting the same thing in the same moment.

Someone starts a rhythmic clapping at the back of the theater. "Ran-som! Ran-som! Ran-som!" The chanting and clapping spreads until the noise is

deafening.

The little hairs on the back of my neck stand. Even if I didn't know the boys, even if my only connection to this band was as a fan, I'm pretty sure I would feel the same way—happy, excited, overwhelmed, anxious. A delicious shiver runs down my spine.

“This is it!” Paige yells.

She has the same wild look, the same uncontrollable grin on her face that I know I do. On her other side, Karen is leaning over the balcony rail, screaming along with the crowd. In this moment, I'm so grateful to be here with these two girls, so thankful that Paige went out of her way to pluck me from my loneliness and obscurity.

For the second time today, I reach over and squeeze her hand. “Here we go!”

The music starts before the lights come up, a sudden loud, thudding pound of Reed’s bass drum that sends goose bumps up and down my arms. The screaming reaches a fever pitch as Cash comes in on guitar with a steady strumming chord that hits me right in the chest. Then the lights suddenly blaze, illuminating the stage.

And there they are, the Ransome boys, my oldest friends in the world. Lennon’s head is bent over his bass, his long brown hair covering his face, but I’d recognize him anywhere. Cash stands front and center, grinning lazily out at the

crowd, the ease of his face not matching the intensity with which he's hitting his chords.

The piano bench is empty, and Daltrey is nowhere in sight. Lennon and Cash step up to their mikes and begin to croon in perfect harmony. Their melodic "Ooh-la-ooh-la" causes a lump to form in my throat. The opening of "Heartache" always got to me, from the first moment they played it for me in their garage.

Daltrey appears, walking across the stage as if he owns the place. The crowd goes *insane*. I thought they were loud before, but now I realize that I never really understood what loud could be because the noise level is out of control.

Daltrey's face is closed, seemingly unaffected, as he sits down in front of his piano. For one brief moment, the drums, guitars, and backing vocals cut out, the band silent. He places his fingers on the keys then looks up to scan the balcony. Just as his eyes meet mine, he starts to play.

“Lonely, lost, and broken, babe,
I'm looking only for your face, babe.

You are my heartache. This is my
heartbreak.”

I know these words by heart, could sing them in my sleep, but never have they gotten into my heart the way they do right now, staring down at Daltrey, watching the entire theater adoring him, knowing he's made his dreams come

true. Am I imagining the pain in his voice? The intensity of his gaze in my direction? Everyone else fades away, just for that brief moment. It's just the two of us, and he's telling me something so true and vital.

Then the band kicks back in, and Daltrey looks down at his piano, his hands flying across the keys as the drums and guitar ramp up behind him. Karen and Paige are screaming next to me, their voices melding with those of the other fans around us.

Ransom goes straight into their next hit, "Sunshine Girl," without pause.

"How are you not screaming?" Paige asks, clutching my arm. "They're fucking incredible!"

I can only nod. I'm too busy drinking them in, and I want to hear every note, watch every action on stage. By the third song, I realize that this concert is going to blow all the other performances I've seen out of the water. The boys are putting on an amazing show, better than I've ever seen them. I can't tell if they've gotten exponentially better in the months I've been away, or if the adoring crowds push them to new heights. Daltrey alternates between his piano and guitar, sometimes abandoning both to stride across the stage with only a microphone, his voice so perfect it's almost painful. Reed is a mad man behind his drum kit, his arms flailing so fast they're little more than a blur.

Lennon keeps his head down a lot, but every time he looks up, a huge grin stretches across his face; whether at the sight of the crowd or from the sheer enjoyment of playing, I don't know. And Cash, gorgeous, cocky Cash, is a veritable sex god singing soulfully to the crowd, driving the girls wild. I can only laugh when I look at him doing his thing. This is the boy I once teased mercilessly for still sleeping with a teddy bear at age twelve.

They complete three full sets and an encore before the lights go up for good. Karen and Paige, along with the rest of the crowd, are still screaming. They've been dancing and jumping around for most of the night and look slightly

disheveled and sweaty. Somehow, it only adds to their beauty. They look happy, energized, and a little bit wild.

“That was amazing!” Paige yells, grabbing Karen’s arm. “I can’t believe how good they are!”

The crowd finally starts to disperse as the roadies hit the stage to break down the equipment. I feel a brief dip in my stomach as I realize Levi is not with them. Does that mean he’s coming to get us?

I wait for the nerves to set in. I’m going to be seeing the Ransome boys up close, probably any minute now. But the nerves don’t come, even when I see Levi smiling and waving as he makes his way across the balcony.

I picture Daltrey on stage, the haunting sound of his voice, the flash of blond hair as he ducked his head over the piano, the lithe movement of his body as he played, the energy as he joined Cash at his microphone, the two of them jumping in tandem, huge, goofy grins on their faces. Then I picture the look in his eyes when they locked with mine before he started playing.

I'm not afraid. I'm not scared or anxious. All I feel is desire, deep and strong. I'm going to see Daltrey again. And I can hardly wait.

“Well if it isn't Miss Daisy Harris.” Cash accosts me first, picking me

straight up off the ground in a huge bear hug.

“You’re all sweaty!” I squeal, forgetting for a moment that he’s now an internationally known rock star and not just my slightly annoying but totally loveable next-door neighbor. “Cash!”

When I start to hit his shoulders, he puts me down, laughing. “My brother said you might be here. What the hell, Daisy? Where have you been?”

I remember where we are and that Paige and Karen are next to me, their eyes bugging out of their heads. “I’ve been busy,” I say, feeling stupid.

He’s watching my face too closely. Was he hurt, too, when I disappeared from their lives? Were the rest of them?

“Too busy for family?” he asks, his voice a little sharp.

I hear Karen’s intake of breath next to me and realize how serious his words must make our relationship seem to her—more serious, probably, than I had let on. I need to figure out how to lighten this up.

“Well, yeah,” I say, flashing him a smile. “I’ve been way too busy to follow a bunch of sweaty, stinky boys around the country.”

His eyes are intent on mine, as if searching for something. *Drop it*, I beg in my mind.

After an awkward moment, he smiles again. “Fair enough. Get in here.” He starts to move back into the dressing

room when he realizes I'm not alone. His eyes flick across the girls, and his grin grows more sincere. "And who would this be?"

I try not to roll my eyes. He's always been such a player. "Cash, this is my friend Karen. And this is my friend Paige."

It's kind of hilarious, watching them react to him. They are both wide eyed, their mouths slightly gaping, as he leans in to kiss them each on the cheek. When he pulls back, I'm pretty sure Paige is about to have a heart attack. I can practically hear the words screaming in her head: *Cash Ransome kissed me!*

"Go on inside, Daisy," Cash says, moving to stand between my friends. He

offers them each an arm, which they take eagerly. “Go say hi to the boys. I’ll make sure your lovely friends get to meet everyone.”

I hesitate, not knowing if I should leave them. Then I remember that this is Cash, and there’s no way anything bad will happen to either of them with him. Besides, neither of them is complaining in the slightest. I give them a quick wave and step into the dressing room.

“Daisy!” Lennon is lounging on one of the couches, a beer in one hand and the other raised in welcome. “Is that you? Get over here.”

He stands as I walk over, holding out his arms for a hug. I step into them wordlessly, suddenly feeling as if I

might cry. I've always loved Lennon in a slightly different way from his brothers. He was the quietest of the Ransome boys, and probably the most sensitive. He was the brother I went to when I wanted some calm, a listening ear, or just someone to *be* with.

In his arms, I immediately feel that same calm. I clutch his shoulders tightly, wishing I'd found a way to let him know what was happening with me.

"You okay?" he whispers in my ear. No accusations, no anger. Just Lennon, being his sweet self.

I nod against his chest, not trusting myself to speak.

"Please tell me if I can help you at all, okay? I've missed you, Daisy."

Thinking I really might cry now, I pull back, not meeting his eyes. I should have known he'd realize there was something really wrong.

"I mean it." His voice is still soft as he lifts my chin with one finger, making me look up at him. "Don't disappear again. Just talk to me."

I nod, wiping at my eyes.

"Why are you making her cry?" Reed asks, coming up behind Lennon. He pushes his brother out of the way and gives me a hug. "Glad you're back, baby girl. I have a song I'm having some trouble with. I could really use your ear sometime soon, okay?"

"Sure."

He looks at Lennon. "God, I hope this

means our little brother will stop moping around.”

Lennon rolls his eyes. “Leave her alone, Reed.”

“Are you talking about... is Daltrey moping?” I can’t picture it. Daltrey has never been one for moping or feeling sorry for himself. He’s too busy, too full of energy and big plans for that.

“God, yes,” Reed says, ignoring the glare from Lennon. “He’s been like a pissy little girl—no offense, Dais. It’s really getting old.”

I meet Lennon’s eyes, but he just shrugs. “Do you know where he is?” I ask.

He nods to the other side of the room, and I turn. Daltrey is standing against the

wall, a bottle of water in his hand, watching me. My breath hitches, my legs suddenly heavy. I should go to him, say hello properly, but part of me just wants to stand there all night, drinking him in.

Reed laughs. “Oh, God.”

His words hardly register. All I can focus on is Daltrey. I’m halfway across the room before I realize I’m walking.

I stop a foot away from him. His eyes are locked on mine, unreadable.

“Hi,” I whisper, doubting he can hear me over the noise of the room. It’s pretty full, mostly with people I’ve never seen before. I don’t spare them a second thought, though, because Daltrey steps forward and pulls me into a hug.

It doesn’t feel like a hug from one of

his brothers, though. It feels one hundred percent like Daltrey. Before he even touches me, I know what his arms will feel like, how his chest will feel against my cheek. I know what he'll smell like, how his heartbeat will feel, where his hands will clutch me on my lower back. Hugging Daltrey isn't like hugging anyone else. It's like finally coming home.

The tears that have threatened are coming now, fast and uncontrolled down my cheeks. "I need—" I gasp, fearing this might get bad. "Dalt, I need out of here."

He seems to understand without asking. He pulls me quickly under one arm, my face toward his chest, and

guides me to a door on the back wall. I barely have the chance to silently pray no one will notice before he has me through the door, away from the crowd, into an empty, quiet side room.

“It’s okay,” he says softly, pulling me back into a hug. “It’s okay, Daisy. I’m not mad. We’re okay.”

I cry into his chest, wishing it were that simple.

“Come on,” he says, rubbing my back. “You know I hate it when you cry.”

“Sorry.” I pull back so I can wipe my eyes then give him a watery smile. “I probably got your shirt all wet.”

He’s changed clothes since the show. His white shirt is clean and dry, except

for the small wet patch from my tears. His hair is wet, and I realize with a dip of my stomach that he took a shower. Did he get cleaned up for me?

Don't be such a loser. He just performed for two hours. Of course he wanted a shower.

Realizing he's watching me intently, I look away, feeling uncomfortable about my outburst. I turn and check out the room. It's a lot smaller than the one we just left, consisting of only one couch and a small table. "Where are we?"

"We change back here," he says, gesturing to a second door. "There's a shower in there. It's a little more private than the main dressing room."

I don't know what to do with my

hands. I feel awkward and clumsy suddenly.

“Come here,” he says, taking my hand and leading me to the couch.

I sit next to him, looking at his feet. He’s wearing worn black Vans, and I’m pretty sure they’re the same pair he had when he left last winter.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. “You seem like... scared of me or something.”

I look up into his familiar blue eyes. “No! Of course I’m not, Dalt. I’m just... I don’t know. Feeling bad. I missed you.”

“But you’re here.” He smiles. “So nothing to miss now, right?”

I giggle. “True.”

“So I’m freaking out here a little bit,

Dais. You haven't seen us perform in more than a year, and after your first concert, you burst into tears as soon as you see me. How should I take that?"

I laugh heartily. "I was just slightly horrified that you played that cover of 'Long Train Running.' I mean, the Doobie Brothers, Daltrey? Seriously?"

He smacks my knee. "We kicked ass on that cover."

I shrug, nonchalantly looking at my fingernails. "If you say so."

"Come on, Daisy," he says, his tone mock-serious. "Tell me you loved our show, or I'm going to have to go cry into my beer."

"You were... okay. I guess."

He throws his hands over his heart

and grimaces. “You are cruel, woman.”

I grab his hands, laughing. “You were insane! Seriously, Dalt, I’ve never heard you guys like that before. How’d you get so good?”

His whole face lights up, making him look a lot more like his fourteen-year-old self. “You liked it? Really?”

“Of course I liked it! I’m serious. You guys have improved like crazy. What, are you taking some kind of musician steroids or something?”

He chuckles. “I think we learned a lot from Grey Skies. And it helps to have better equipment and sound systems, you know? Things weren’t really top of the line back when we played at Dave’s Bar and Billiards Emporium.”

I smile at the memory of the dingy little dive the boys had played in Stubenville. It seems like ages ago. “It was more than that. More than just better sound quality. You guys were tighter. More energetic. There was just something... more.”

He looks a little shy. “I think the audience does something to us. Amps us up or something. I don’t know how to describe it, but it feels better up there, you know? And tonight...”

“What about tonight?”

He meets my eye. “Tonight was our best show in ages. Maybe the whole tour.”

I laugh a little. “Well, then, I guess I got lucky when the girls picked the dates

they wanted to—”

“No, Daisy. It was better because you were there. I was better. Because I knew you were up there. I mean that.”

Heat rushes to my face. He’s looking at me so intently. It makes me feel scared, deep in my chest, but it’s an entirely different kind of fear than I usually feel when someone is looking at me. I get the feeling that he’s trying to tell me something, something really important. I can only stare back, frozen in the power of his gaze.

“What happened to you, Daisy?” he whispers. “Where’d you go?”

“Things got bad, Daltrey. After you left.” I’m not sure why I’m telling him this. I was planning on putting it off for

as long as possible. But in this moment, I feel I owe him at least some small part of the truth.

His eyebrows pull together in a frown, and I can't help but notice the little scar above his eye. I'm tempted to reach out and rub it with my finger, the way I did with the magazine photo.

Instead, I close my eyes and blurt, "People started talking shit about me. I know that doesn't sound like all that big of a deal, but... it got really bad. I couldn't go online, couldn't answer my phone. It was constant." I hear him release a sharp breath and open my eyes.

His face is tight with anger. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Like hell it doesn't."

I shake my head. “Please, Daltrey. Let me just tell you what happened, okay?”

He nods. “Okay.”

“I didn’t want to tell you anything because I knew you would come back, and I couldn’t do that to you. But it got... it messed me up. I started to have a really hard time when people would look at me. Or talk to me. I was nervous all the time. Really weird and anxious about stuff. I had to... I had to leave school before graduation.”

He jumps to his feet. “I want to know who did this, Daisy. Who the fuck... what, bullied you? Who was so bad you had to leave school?”

“Daltrey—”

“No, don’t try to calm me down. This is a really big deal.”

I almost laugh at that. As if I don’t know how big of a deal it was. “Dalt, please sit down. I’m not done yet.” I grab his hand, tugging until he sits down again. “My dad got me into therapy, and it really helped. I decided to go to school somewhere far away, someplace where no one knew me. That helped, too. I’m feeling much better now, and I would honestly rather just try to forget about it, okay?”

“Daisy, how could you have kept this from me? I understand you not wanting to distract me from the tour, but once it got to the point that it was affecting you so bad, you should have told me. You’re

my best friend.”

“I wanted to,” I say. “A lot of times. But once you started to get famous, I just couldn’t, Dalt. I couldn’t do that to you. And I couldn’t do it to me, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, look at this life of yours.” I gesture at the closed door and the noises of party behind it. “A few months ago, there was no way I could handle this. All these people. All those eyes. I would have lost it. Jesus, Dalt, I failed a class because I was supposed to give a presentation. I couldn’t even handle having my classmates look at me for ten minutes. How could I have been around you, been around all this?”

He shakes his head. “I would have

figured out a way to help you without getting you involved in all this.”

I smile, rubbing the hand I still hold between my own. “But I figured out how to get through it on my own. And I’m probably stronger for it.” I don’t know if that’s true, but I can’t stand the idea that he feels guilty because of my weakness.

He releases a huge breath. “Fine. I guess I can accept that. But you need to promise me that the next time something shitty happens, you tell me about it. You can’t be keeping stuff like this from me, Daisy. Look at what happens. We completely stopped being friends. That’s not okay with me.”

“You’re right.” I feel terrible now, knowing that there are still things I’m not

telling him. But how can I bear to mention Justin or the pictures or the reasons I ended up at Horizons? He watches my face closely, and I wonder if maybe he suspects that there might be more to my story.

“So are we...” He pauses. “We’re okay now, right?”

I grin, pushing my guilty thoughts away. “Yeah, Daltrey. We’re okay.”

Chapter Fourteen

Daltrey

It takes everything I have not to try to figure out who put Daisy through such hell while I was away. From what she said about not being able to go online, I'm assuming they attacked her through social media. I've never gotten into any of that stuff, though the band does have accounts on all the major sites. Still, it would probably be easy to do a little sleuthing and discover who the culprit was.

But Daisy asked me to drop it, and we are supposed to trust each other. I

know she'll be mad if I go behind her back. But how am I supposed to just sit around and do nothing? She was in therapy, for fuck's sake. I have a feeling things were even worse than she described. I'm pretty certain she was holding something back last night.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the doubts and anger. The important thing is that she's here now. I haven't lost her. In fact, she's going to follow the tour with her friends for the next three weeks. And I plan to make sure she sticks around even longer than that.

I'm whistling when I meet Dad and my brothers in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. We're staying on in Boston for another show tonight, and I'm

grateful for the chance to be in one place for more than twelve hours.

“Oh, God,” Cash mutters as I pull out my chair. “Look at you. Yesterday you were being a giant, whining bee-otch. Then Daisy shows up, and you’re all sunshine and roses. Pathetic.”

I give him my sweetest smile while flipping him off.

“Her friends are pretty hot, though,” he goes on. “Especially that Karen girl. Remind me to thank Daisy later.”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate that,” Lennon says.

“Okay, enough,” Dad says. “We need to go over your schedule.”

We eat bacon and eggs while Dad briefs us on the upcoming essentials. I

can't even manage to be annoyed by our packed afternoon of radio promos. We're scheduled to have a few free hours once we get to the venue. I plan to challenge Daisy to a Halo death match on the bus.

After breakfast, my brothers and I run into Levi waiting for an elevator. "You guys going up to pack?" he asks.

"Yeah," I tell him. We're checking out today. After our last Boston performance, we'll be driving through the night to reach New Hampshire for our next show.

"Me too."

The elevator arrives, depositing a trio of blond, scantily clad women. They all giggle, clearly recognizing us.

“Excuse us, ladies,” Cash says, grinning in that way that tends to send women overboard. To add to the effect, he gently guides the closest woman away from the elevator with his hand on her back. He can’t just go around her like a normal person. The girls’ giggling continues until the elevator doors finally shut between us.

“What’s wrong, Cash?” Reed asks, giving him a sideways glance as he pushes the button for our floor.

Cash’s cocky smile was replaced with a confused, thoughtful expression behind his Ray-Bans. “Those girls reminded me... I’m trying to remember if I left a blonde in my bed when I came downstairs this morning.”

“Maybe it was one of them,” Reed says, and the two of them laugh.

“What about you, little brother?” Cash asks, turning to me. “You’ve pretty much been a monk for the past six months. Now that Daisy’s back, think you might actually get some? Start acting like the rock star you are?”

I feel Levi stiffen next to me, but I just roll my eyes. My brothers have been teasing me about getting together with Daisy since we were kids. Reed and Lennon backed off in recent years; I always got the feeling that they eventually realized I really did have feelings for her and considered their casual teasing to be off limits. Cash, of course, was not nearly as decent; nothing

was off limits for him.

“You better not tease Daisy like that,” Lennon tells him. “She seemed a little off last night.”

“And there’s the fact that none of us has heard from her for months,” Reed adds. “Did something happen to her?”

They’re all watching me, and I’m relieved when the elevator doors open on our floor. I don’t think Daisy would want me blabbing about what she told me last night. Besides, my brothers would want to go kick some ass at home if they knew someone messed with her.

“I don’t really know,” I say as we step out into the hall. “She said some people were acting like dicks to her after we left. Teasing her and stuff. I

think it messed with her head a little.”

Reed’s face clouds up. “That’s fucked up. Is she okay?”

“I think so.” I’ve reached my room, and I slide my card into the key slot, happy for an end to the conversation. “See you guys downstairs.”

“I’m just about done packing. Can I come in for a minute?” Levi asks as my brothers head toward their own rooms.

“Sure.”

Levi follows me in and plops down on the couch across from my bed. “So what’s going on with Daisy? I got the feeling you were being intentionally vague out there.”

I start shoving my discarded clothes into a duffle bag. “I just figure it’s her

business if she wants to tell people.”

“Did she tell you anything?”

“She pretty much told me what I said. I didn’t tell them how bad it was, but I figure that’s her call if she wants people to know.”

He watches my face closely, as if trying to figure something out. Finally, he relaxes back into the cushions. “Yeah, you’re right. So, what do you think? She gonna stick around for a while?”

I zip my bag. “I hope so. We always planned for her to work on the tour with us last summer, you know?”

He nods. “And you’re feeling good about this?”

I look down at him, exasperated. “What the hell, man? I didn’t realize I

signed up for therapy sessions with Dr. Bullshit.”

He laughs. That’s the thing about Levi. I can never really insult him because everything just rolls off his back. He’s the most easygoing person I’ve ever met.

“I’m just curious,” he says. “I wasn’t sure if you were pissed she dropped off the face of the earth without a warning or if you were happy to see her—or if it was some combination of both.”

I collapse onto the couch next to him, throwing my feet up on the coffee table. “I don’t know. I mean, I’m totally glad she’s here. When we talked last night, it was like nothing had changed, you know? Like she’d never even left. But at

the same time...”

“She did leave.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, reaching for my beanie and pulling it onto my head. “I just want to have fun with her and pretend like nothing ever happened. But I also want to shake her and make her tell me exactly what *did* happen.”

“I would definitely avoid shaking her if the goal is to get her to stick around.”

“Thanks,” I say drily.

“Look, man, maybe just try to keep it light. Have fun with her and keep it casual. The resolution of the serious stuff will come when it comes.”

“You know what, Levi? That’s actually pretty good advice.”

“I’m as shocked as you are.”

He leaves then to go grab his own bags. I sit on the couch for a minute, thinking about what he said, before I pull out my phone.

Halo death match, I text. You and me. Tour bus. Four p.m.

She responds almost instantly, and I wonder if maybe she was waiting to hear from me. *Halo, huh?*

If you're not too scared.

You're a dead man.

I'm grinning like a fool as I text her to meet Levi in the same place as last night and assure her it's fine if her friends come, too.

Hey, so you have any smelling salts? she asks.

I frown at my phone. *I don't even*

know what that is.

They give them to fainting ladies. I think I'm going to need some for Karen and Paige.

LOL

You can laugh, buddy, but I'm not kidding. These girls have far too high of an opinion of you and your brothers. Think it's time I break out the pictures I have of you in braces?

Only if you show them the ones of Cash's headgear first.

Okay, I'm seriously cracking up now. I'm going to go tell the girls. See you at four.

See you then. Prepare to be destroyed.

You wish.

I laugh, slipping my phone back into my pocket. There's a knock on my door.

"Let's go, son. We have a lot of work today."

Even that doesn't break my mood. I do, however, make sure to wipe the totally whipped grin off my face before I go out to meet my family.

We're late getting back to the bus. Of course. First the radio appearance ran over, making us late for our next interview. By the time we're dropped off at the venue, it's already five, which means I only have an hour with Daisy before sound check.

Trying not to show my irritation, I

stomp onto the bus, only to hear giggling coming from the back lounge. “Hello?”

“Hey!” Levi calls. “We’re back here.”

I make my way through the kitchen and bunk section to see Levi, Paige, Karen, and Daisy gathered on the couches in the back. All four hold XBox remotes. I asked Levi to keep the girls company until I got here. So why does the sight of his hands on Daisy’s fingers, helping her pick up some move combination, cause my vision to be tinged with red?

“Hey!” Daisy says, looking away from the screen for a moment. “How’d it go?”

“Got you!” Paige yells, standing up

and jumping up and down. “Ha! You picked the wrong time to look away.”

“No fair,” Levi mutters. “You can’t distract your opponent with famous rock stars.”

“I didn’t distract her!” Paige cries. “It’s not my fault he walked in.” She looks over at me, and something in her face changes, almost as if she’s just realized who I am. “I... uh... I mean, um...”

Daisy laughs. “You can say hello, Paige. You’ve met him already, you know. He’s just a normal person.”

“Normal?” I ask, putting my hands on my hips. “How dare you!”

The girls all giggle, and I decide I don’t really care that Levi was touching

Daisy. But I do make sure to slide right between them when I take a seat on the couch. “So, what have you guys been up to? Sorry I’m so late. The interviews ran over.”

“It’s okay,” Daisy says. “Levi took good care of us.”

There’s that shot of jealousy again, but I try to ignore it. I realize that Karen and Paige are both staring at me, their mouths slightly open.

Daisy picks up on it too and rolls her eyes. “Seriously, you guys. He’s not really all that special.”

“I’m not,” I assure them. “You should see how gross my feet are.”

Daisy snorts. “He does have the grossest feet.”

“And backne,” Levi adds helpfully. “Dude has a wicked case of the backne.”

That makes Karen laugh, though Paige is still looking distinctly star-struck.

“I also can’t do long division,” I say. “Or scramble eggs.”

Daisy nods wisely. “True. He burns his eggs. And his toast.”

“Every time,” Levi says. “And he pours way too much milk in his cereal so that it spills when he puts his spoon in. Doesn’t matter how many times you tell him he doesn’t need so much, he does it anyway.”

Daisy is clearly trying not to laugh. “And he thinks... he thinks... that Canada is a U.S. colony.”

Okay, maybe this has gone a bit too far. "I do not!"

"You used to," she says, laughing. "You totally did."

"When we were kids."

"Or sixteen," Levi mutters.

Paige starts giggling.

"I change my mind," I say sullenly. "I liked it better when you were all impressed by me. Let's go back to thinking I'm an awesome rock star."

"Nice try," Karen says. "We'll never be able to see you the same way again."

"Yeah," Paige adds, though she still seems a bit shy. "The illusion is totally shattered now."

"You should hear him snore," Levi says.

“Hey, buddy, don’t you have work to do?” I ask, elbowing him in the side.

“Not until sound check.” He gives me his biggest grin.

“Are we playing Halo or what?” Daisy asks.

We break into teams, me and Daisy against Levi, Karen, and Paige. Daisy and I win handily, having played countless hours of Halo with each other over the years.

When the game is over, Karen stands and stretches. “Huh. I thought the life of a rock star was supposed to be all glamorous. This didn’t feel too different from hanging out with just about any geek back at school.”

I laugh. “After the show tonight,

we'll show you how rock stars really party.”

Daisy shakes her head. “We have to drive to New Hampshire tonight, remember? Some of us don’t have the luxury of a tour bus to bring the party with us.”

I frown. I would much rather Daisy rode with us on the bus. I’m going to have to figure out a way to make that happen. “After the show tomorrow then,” I say. “Promise.”

“Daltrey?” Reed calls from the front of the bus. “You back there? We have sound check.”

I groan, totally not ready for the responsibilities of my real life to intrude. This has been the best hour I’ve

had in weeks.

“On our way,” Levi calls.

“We should go get in line anyhow,” Daisy says. “We’re already going to be in the back of the venue.”

“No way,” I say. “Why don’t you come watch sound check? I won’t be able to hang out after, but you guys could go back up to the seats you had yesterday if you want.”

“Yeah?” Karen asks, her face hopeful. She glances quickly at Daisy, who nods. “That would be great. Thanks.”

“Yeah, thanks!” Paige says. “We had the best view last night.”

“No problem.”

We make our way out of the bus and

across the lot to the venue. I really don't like the idea of saying goodbye to Daisy right now. I know it's only a night, that I only have to trust her to get from here to New Hampshire, but after the year I've had, I don't like the idea. What's to stop her from disappearing all over again?

I reach for her arm. "You'll stop by after the show?" I ask, my voice soft so that only she can hear me. "Before you guys leave?"

She looks up at me, her green eyes wide and maybe a little surprised. I feel an ache deep in my chest. I want to smooth the hair out of her face, run my finger along her cheek, all the things I've always dreamt of having the freedom to do. Instead, I simply tell her Levi will

come fetch them later and continue on to the building.

But I hold her elbow for just a few moments longer, savoring the connection for as long as I can.

Chapter Fifteen

Daisy

“I’m still not one hundred percent sure why we’re doing this,” Karen says, adjusting the sleeves of her pale-blue cashmere sweater.

Paige bends down to tie her shoelaces. “Because we want the full fan experience!”

“And that includes freezing our asses off outside?”

Paige turns to me in exasperation. “Tell her, Daisy.”

“Don’t you want to experience the show the way all the other fans do?” I

ask Karen. “When we drove by the venue the other day, you said it looked like everyone was having fun. This is our chance to have fun, too.”

“You know what I think is fun now?” she asks, crossing her arms. “Getting to sit in VIP seats and hang out with the band backstage.”

“Karen!” Paige hisses, shooting me a concerned look.

Karen rolls her eyes. “Daisy knows I’m not using her, for God’s sake. I’m just saying, if Daltrey offered us passes again, why in the hell are we turning them down?”

“Because,” Paige says, it’s important to me that we have the—”

“Full fan experience,” Karen

interrupts. "I know, you've said it like five times. Fine. Let's just go so we can get in line. If I have to sit on the concrete all day, I at least better get a good spot."

Paige picks up the musty quilt she took from her car and folds it over her arm. "Everyone have everything?"

We leave our room and make our way down the dark, twisty hallway toward the front door. Our hotel in Hampton Beach came as an unpleasant surprise when we arrived late last night. The ceilings were low, the wallpaper peeling, and the mattresses poked me with their loose springs every time I so much as breathed. It was everything I could do to not call Daltrey and beg him to let us take him up on his offer to sleep

on the tour bus. I was glad I hadn't told the girls about that conversation. I'm pretty sure Karen would have committed several minor crimes in her willingness to get out of that hotel.

The place is close to the venue, though, which is particularly helpful considering the day is cold, grey, and drizzling. Karen grumbles about how stupid this is the entire way. Less than three blocks from the hotel, we turn the corner, and the venue comes into view, along with a staggering view of a stormy-looking ocean.

"Holy crap," Paige says. "Did you know this place was actually on the beach?"

"I didn't even know New Hampshire

had beaches,” I say. “New Hampshire touches the ocean?”

“Could have fooled me,” Paige says.

Karen sighs. “Seriously, you guys? Of course New Hampshire touches the ocean. And why did you not figure this out from the name of the town—Hampton Beach?”

Paige smiles sheepishly. “I thought it was, like, just a name.”

I burst out laughing. The entire situation strikes me as completely hilarious—how cold and pissed Karen looks, the fact that it’s only eight in the morning and the line is already stretched down the building, the idea of sitting out here all day in the cold with the wind and salt from the ocean only a stone’s

throw away. And, of course, Paige's and my complete inadequacies in the area of U.S. geography.

"Let's go get in line," Karen says, leaving Paige and me still giggling on the corner.

It quickly becomes apparent that none of us are properly dressed. What felt like a chilly, wet day at the hotel is about ten degrees colder by the water. The venue is situated on the other side of the street from a long boardwalk. Beyond that is a stretch of sand leading right up to the ocean. The cold of the pavement goes right through our thin quilt, and the small awning overhead does little to keep out the mist and salt from the sea. I'm wearing my normal

hoodie and jeans, and I'm freezing so I can hardly imagine how Karen must feel in her thin sweater and open-toed sandals. Paige has taken off her leather jacket out of fear that the dampness will warp it, and she sits shivering against the brick wall of the venue.

The cold is doing little to deter the Ransom fans, though. Within moments, at least ten more people have sat down behind us. Up ahead, someone is playing the album on iPod speakers, and laughter can be heard over the wind.

"See?" Karen asks, her teeth chattering. "We're still not having the normal fun fan experience because we're the only dumbasses here that didn't dress for the weather."

“We could go back to the hotel,” I offer. “Come back later. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if we’re standing in the back of the venue.”

“No!” Paige says, the impact of her vehemence slightly lessened by the blue tinge of her lips. “We’re having a normal fan experience, damn it!”

“I have an idea.” I pull out my phone and call Levi. I cross my fingers that he’s up already.

“Hello?”

“Levi, hey. It’s Daisy. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

He laughs warmly. “Nope. If I was sleeping, who would make sure the guys don’t do something stupid?”

“Are you super busy?”

“No, not at all. What do you need?”

“Well, we’re waiting in line—”

“Yeah, Dalt told me you guys were going to hang with the little people today. What’s up with that?”

I try not to roll my eyes. “Some of us think it’s an important part of our tour experience—”

“It is!” Paige calls out.

“Anyhow, we weren’t quite prepared for how cold it is out here. Have you started unloading the merchandise yet? Is there any chance I could get my hands on some sweatshirts?”

“No problem. Where are you? I’ll bring them right over.”

I grin at the girls. “Levi, you’re a lifesaver.” We arrange to meet around

the side of the building, and I hang up. “Score!”

Karen points at Paige. “Don’t you dare say she shouldn’t be using her connections to get us some warmth.”

“I’m not,” Paige says, holding up her hands. “Tell Levi we said thanks, okay?”

Ten minutes of shivering later, I meet Levi on the side of the building. His arms are full; he definitely has more than just hoodies.

“What is all of that?”

He grins at me over his loot. “I grabbed a few blankets off the bus, and hats and gloves. Oh, and I have a thermos of hot coffee here, too.”

“You’re the best!”

I reach for the blankets and hoodies, but he shakes his head and says, “I’ll come around with you.”

We fall into step next to each other. “How did you find hats and gloves? I didn’t see those for sale at the show last night.”

“They were in the merch boxes. They’re prototypes for fall. We’ll start selling them when it gets colder. Probably should have had a few ready to sell tonight, huh? I had no idea it would be this chilly.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t even realize we were anywhere near the ocean.”

He laughs. “Geography was never your strong suit. I have vivid memories of you trying to help navigate through

Indiana in the van.”

I stick out my tongue at him, but I’m smiling. It’s hard to ever feel offended by someone like Levi. “Anyhow, I really appreciate it, seriously. I thought I was going to freeze to death.”

“I’m quite happy to help. Besides, I was told in no uncertain terms to do anything I can to make sure you have a great time.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Really? And who gave those instructions?”

“Who do you think?” He looks over at me, only the top of his face visible over the pile in his arms. “Dalt really wants you to enjoy yourself. I think he’s scared you might take off again.”

I look down at my feet,

uncomfortable.

“Sorry, Daisy. I didn’t mean anything by it. Except... well, I think we all agree that we want you to stick around this time.” His eyes meet mine, intense and serious. “I mean it. You tell me if you need anything, okay?”

I nod, feeling a lump come to my throat. “I promise.” I’ve been so focused on missing Daltrey I sometimes forget all the other things I gave up, like my relationship with Levi. He was a good friend for a long time

“Good.” We turn the corner of the building to find that the line now stretches down nearly this far. “Now, tell me. Have you met any crazy-assed fans yet?”

I shush him, but he continues, sounding gleeful. “Seriously, there are some scary people here. I know. I’m the one who has to deal with them trying to get backstage.”

“People try to get backstage?”

“That’s minor. People try to get on the bus, into the hotel rooms. They all think they’re the next Mrs. Ransome. I’m telling you, bat-shit insane.”

I laugh briefly, stopping myself when I catch sight of the glare I’m getting from the nearest Ransom fan. “You’ll get me in trouble,” I tell him, my voice low. “We’re supposed to be out here with them for the rest of the day.”

“You say the word, lady, and I will come and get you all and bring you

inside where it's warm."

I moan a little at the thought. "Don't tempt me."

We reach the girls, who both jump up to hug Levi when they see all that he's brought.

"Coffee, too?" Paige asks, holding the warm thermos between her hands. "You're the sweetest."

"There's more of that on the bus," he says. "You just let me know if you need more."

Karen makes a strangled sound of desire, earning a glare from Paige.

"Thanks." I wrap my arms around him.

He hesitates for a moment before hugging me back. "I mean it," he

whispers into my ear. “You call me anytime. For anything.”

I nod, pulling away. He gives me one last smile before waving at the girls and heading back down the sidewalk.

“This is amazing,” Karen says, pulling on a black Ransom hoodie. “Hats and gloves, too!” She looks at me. “I’d be your friend regardless, Daisy, but I’m particularly glad that I’m your friend right now.”

I laugh, pulling the hoodie on over the one I’m already wearing. I probably look like the Michelin Man, but I don’t care—I’m warm.

“You seem different,” Karen says. “Since we’ve left school, I mean. You laugh a lot more.”

My cheeks heat up a little, and I look down.

She points at me. “And that—you look away a lot less. When I first met you, it was like you couldn’t make eye contact to save your life. You look at people now.”

“Leave her alone,” Paige says.

“I’m not teasing,” Karen insists. “I swear, Daisy. I mean it as a compliment. You seem happier, is all.”

I look up to see Paige smiling. “It’s true,” she says. “You seem much happier.”

“And you hug people, now,” Karen adds. “I couldn’t believe it when you hugged all the boys the other night. It was so automatic.”

My face feels really hot now, but I force myself to keep my head up. “Yeah, well, I guess I just fell back into old habits when I saw them. I kind of... forgot about everything else.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Paige says. “It’s nice that you’re happy. And it’s obvious that you’re really comfortable with them.”

I shrug, not knowing how to respond.

She grins slyly. “Particularly Daltrey.”

I shush her, looking around. “Someone will hear you!”

She smirks. “When we asked you about him in the car the other day, you failed to mention that you were *crazy* about him.”

“Paige!”

“What? You’re supposed to talk about your crushes with your girlfriends. That’s like, the point of having girlfriends.”

“She’s right,” Karen says, wrapping a blanket around her and leaning against the wall. “Oh my God, that feels so much better.” She looks at me expectantly. “So? Come on. Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill. And I don’t have a crush.”

“Yeah, right. I saw the way you were looking at him during the show.”

I gape at her. I thought they’d both been too into the concert to pay me any attention. “How was I looking at him?”

“The way everyone else in that

theater was looking at him—like you wished you had a few minutes alone with him, pants optional.”

Paige giggles.

I’m horrified. “I was not.”

“Okay, sure. Whatever.” Karen peers over her blanket at me. “What about backstage then? Huh?”

“What about it?”

She looks over at Paige, and they both roll their eyes.

“He was like, staring at you, sweetie,” Paige says, “while you were talking to Lennon.”

“He was?” My voice sounds squeaky in my own ears.

“Definitely. It was like, laser beams homed in on just you. Super intense.”

“But... that’s just... it was probably just because we haven’t seen each other in so long.”

Paige shrugs. “Maybe. But it didn’t look that way.”

I have no idea what to do with this information. She’s got to be exaggerating. That’s what Paige does. But a quick look at Karen shows that she’s in total agreement. “What did it look like?” I whisper, not sure I want to know.

“It looked like he was head over heels for you.”

I stare back and forth between the two of them, certain one of them will start laughing any minute now. When they don’t, I gulp heavily. “That can’t be

true.”

“Whatever,” Karen says. “I know what I saw. The boy’s into you.”

Paige nods. “The only question is, what do you plan to do about it?”

“Do?” My voice has reached all-time high levels of shrillness.

“Yes, *do*. Daltrey’s clearly nuts about you, and you’re clearly nuts about him.”

“Excuse me.” We look up and see a girl about our age, decked out in head-to-toe Ransom merchandise, standing at the side of our blanket. She has an accent I can’t immediately place. Australian, maybe? “Are you guys Heartbreakers?”

Karen, Paige, and I share a confused glance.

“Sorry, what?” Paige asks.

“Heartbreakers! You know, the number one RPG group in like, the entire fandom?”

“What’s RPG?” Karen asks.

“Role playing game?” The girl laughs a little. She’s definitely Australian, and I’m once again struck by the surrealism of the situation. This girl traveled overseas to see the Ransome boys. “You guys are role players, right? You keep talking about Daltrey, and I thought I heard you say Lennon’s name a minute ago.” For the first time, her smile fades. Without it, she looks slightly off, almost a bit... disturbed. “Are you messing with me?”

The surreal feeling is replaced with

confusion.

“Uh, no,” Paige says quickly, obviously a little freaked out. “We *were* playing a... what’d you call it?”

“RPG?”

“Yeah, that. But we’re not on a website. We kinda, like, do our own thing.”

“Yup, we’re independent role players,” Karen says.

“Oh.” The girl looks disappointed. “Okay. That just sounds like a really good scenario.” She turns to me, intensity clear all over her face. “If I was playing a character that Daltrey had feelings for, I would like, totally tell him how I feel.”

I have literally no idea what this girl

is talking about, so I simply smile and nod. She gives us a little wave and walks off, leaving us in bewildered silence.

“Um,” Karen says after a beat, “what the fuck was that?”

Paige has already pulled out her phone and is opening a search browser. “I used to date a guy who did RPG stuff, but it was like, Dungeons and Dragons, that kind of thing. What would that have to do with Ransom?” A moment later, she gasps and holds the phone out to me and Karen. “You have to see this!”

I peer down at the screen, which shows the Heartbreakers site.

Karen grabs the phone. “Holy crap! They go online and pretend to be the

boys. Like, they act out all these story lines and scenarios. Do you think the guys know about this?" She clicks around on the site for a minute. "Ew, ew, ew! This one is about Daltrey and Cash being, like, in love with each other!"

I don't know whether to laugh or cry at the absurdity of it. Of all the things that have happened since my friends became famous, this is by far the most bizarre. The girls click around on the website, laughing and reading out the wilder entries.

"Excuse me, where did you get that hat?" Another girl, this one several years older than us, is glaring at us.

"Excuse me?" Paige asks.

"Your hat. Where did you get it?"

Because it's not the hat they sold on tour last winter. And it's definitely not the hat that came out in the exclusive fan club membership pack. I want to know where you got it."

Paige looks over at me, wide eyed, but Karen says bluntly, "It's none of your business. Goodbye."

The girl doesn't budge. "I've never seen you guys before. Is this your first show?"

"Again, none of your business." Karen's voice is sharper now. "Would you mind leaving us alone?"

The girl takes a step closer. "You're clearly new. If you're going to be around, you should learn to be more respectful of the *true* fans." Her eyes

flick up and down our blankets. “I bet you’re not even in the fan club.”

“Dude, what is your problem?” Karen asks, moving to stand up.

Paige puts a hand on her arm. “Get the hell out of here.”

The girl gives us one last glare before stalking off.

“What the hell?” Paige asks. “Is it bat-shit insane day, and we missed the memo?”

I remember what Levi told me and suddenly start giggling.

“What?” Karen asks.

“Levi warned me that some of the fans who wait all day are a little... colorful.”

“Yeah, well, that makes sense,”

Karen mutters. “You’d have to be crazy to sit out here all day.”

We play cards for a while until the mist turns into flat-out rain. Even with a blanket and two hoodies, I’m still freezing. The idea of retreating to the bus is sounding better and better by the minute.

Paige is adamant, though, that we keep our place in line. “We’ve sat here all day. We’ve endured not one but two psychopaths to keep this spot. We’ve *earned* this spot.”

In the end, it’s not Karen or me or even the weather that convinces her. She reaches her breaking point around three p.m. when a girl walks past in a denim jacket. Paige gapes after her retreating

back. “Is that... tell me that’s not an embroidered portrait of Cash on the back of that girl’s jean jacket.”

I laugh at the horror on her face, but Karen grins gleefully. “It’s not. It’s a bedazzled, embroidered portrait of Cash on the back of that girl’s jean jacket.”

Paige stands up. “That’s it,” she says, gathering up her blanket. “Call Levi. I’m out.”

“Seriously?” I ask, relief rushing through me at the thought of the warm dressing room.

“Dead serious. I can handle a lot of things, but I cannot handle *that*.” She starts shoving things into her bag, muttering about crimes against fashion.

Karen and I smile at each other over

her head as I pull out my phone.

Chapter Sixteen

Daisy

“Hey, Karen, do you have any more of the black V-necks over there?”

“Which black V-neck? There are three.”

“The one with Daltrey’s face in shadow.”

“Hang on.” Karen bends down under the merchandise table to open a cardboard box. “Yeah, there’s a whole mess of them here. What size?”

I turn back to the girl on the other side of the table. “What size do you need?”

“Medium, please.”

Karen tosses the shirt to me, and I hand it to the girl, who grins as if I’ve just given her the best Christmas present ever.

“Thank you,” she squeals. “I tried to get this one at the show in St. Louis, and they were sold out.”

“We got a new shipment yesterday,” I tell her. “We can’t seem to keep that one in stock. You’re lucky to get your hands on one.”

She does a little happy dance and thrusts a twenty-dollar bill at me. “Thank you so much!”

I grin back. Her excitement is endearing, even with a line stretching out at least twenty people deep behind her.

“You’re welcome.”

The next customer steps up. Karen, Paige, and I are starting to develop a good rhythm. When Levi first suggested we sell merchandise before concerts, I had my doubts. I saw the kind of lines the merchandise table generated. Though I’ve actually sold plenty of CDs and shirts at their old gigs back home, this is a whole different league. Plus, there was the not-so-minor issue of my difficulties with interacting with strangers. I wasn’t sure how I would do with that many people looking at me, talking to me, asking me questions. It didn’t seem like the best job for a girl with so many social-related freak-outs under her belt.

But I was determined that the girls

and I earn our keep, and they agreed with me. After our retreat to the warmth of his dressing room at the Hampton Beach show, Daltrey convinced us that we should consider ourselves part of the backstage crew for the duration of the tour. He'd get us all passes, and we could hang out whenever and pretty much wherever we wanted. We'd also be able to continue on with the tour as it made its meandering way down and back up the east coast rather than leaving after the three weeks we'd budgeted for.

Karen and Paige freaked out, of course. They were basically being offered carte blanche to be with their favorite band. The setup irked me, though. Everyone else in the backstage

crew was there because they were actually *part* of the crew. When Levi called to tell me that he'd made arrangements, at Daltrey's request, for us to stay at the same hotels as the band, I knew we needed to do something in return. Karen's suggestion that we turn into groupies was not what I had in mind.

“Call me a whore if you want,” she said, “but I have zero qualms about servicing any of those boys in any way they need. Even if they weren't going to pay for our hotel rooms.”

Paige said, “Hush, Karen,” but there was something in her eyes that told me that if push came to shove, she would totally agree with Karen's assessment.

“Daisy, you don’t have to do anything,” Daltrey told me when I brought it up. “You’re here as my guest, and that includes your friends. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not going to let you pay for our hotel room, Dalt. Not without us doing something useful.”

He grinned. “Why can’t you let me just flash my money around, huh? I haven’t been able to show off to anyone since I hit it big.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can buy me a really big cheeseburger for lunch tomorrow, okay?”

He laughingly agreed and instructed Levi to find work for us.

Levi immediately begged us to help

sell merchandise. They've been slammed the entire tour with the demand for Ransom shirts, posters, and even playing cards far exceeding their expectations. He'd had to pull another roadie off the job to help, and the lines were still uncontrollable, to the point that they'd been getting some flak from fans online. Because he genuinely seemed relieved to have the help, I agreed, reservations about my anxiety be damned.

And to my surprise, I'm enjoying it. The lines are crazy, which keeps me way too busy to worry about my anxiety. Working with the girls is fun. They argue over everything, Karen insisting on setting up an organized system for

dealing with customers and handling the merchandise—a system which invariably falls apart the minute Paige gets to talking with a fan and forgets that she's supposed to be taking product out of specifically numbered boxes.

I also really like talking with the fans. In spite of our experiences with the crazies from the beach, I soon find that most of the Ransom fans are pretty cool. They all seem so happy to be here, so excited about the music and hanging out with their friends. I've chatted with quite a few, and it's amazing the sheer size and scope of the fan base the band has built. The population of the fans skews slightly female, not surprisingly, but there are plenty of male fans as well.

And they come from all over, some on road trips, some from the different venue areas.

It gives me a strange little rush of pride, interacting with the fans, knowing how devoted they are to the band. Even after a year away from my friends, there's still a sense of ownership in my heart when it comes to their music. I was a part of this thing from the beginning, in my own small way. Seeing how far they've come is surreal.

The lobby is starting to empty, and I look down at my watch. "Ten minutes to the opener," I tell the girls.

There are some downsides to our new job. The table is busiest right before and right after the show, meaning

we no longer get to hang out in the dressing room with the guys at either of those points. Karen and Paige are pretty mollified, however, by the fact that we're now traveling on the bus.

I might have argued with this set-up when it was first mentioned by Levi, but he was smart. He told me when the girls were present, knowing I'd be unable to put a wet blanket over their excitement. Actually, excitement is probably an understatement. They went nuts.

"We get to travel on the tour bus? Like, with the band?" Paige asked, her normally pale skin several shades whiter.

"Well, you might be on the crew bus. We'll have to see which has more open

bunks.” Levi paused. “Are you disappointed?”

Karen gaped at him. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Then there had been a lot of screaming and jumping and hugging. It hurt my ears, but Levi just laughed.

“Don’t you think about arguing with me,” he said, pointing at me. “This is procedure. If you’re working for us, you travel with us. Period.”

“Levi—”

“I mean it, Daisy. Every single person who works on this tour is in the bus. It’s part of your contract. We don’t pay great, but we do provide room and board.”

By that point, Karen was practically

crying with excitement, shrieking that her life was turning into the movie *Almost Famous*. How could I argue with that? So Levi put Paige's car into storage and moved our things onto the bus. At first, they talked about putting us onto the second bus, the one for the roadies, tour manager, and Mr. Ransome, but there weren't enough bunks left for all three of us. We ended up sleeping about two feet away from one of the fastest rising rock bands in the country. And Levi, of course, but I don't think he was the reason Paige and Karen could hardly sleep at night from excitement.

I think I may even be enjoying it more than they are, if that's possible. Of course, my reasons are different. It

doesn't really matter to me that the guys are famous or that half the girls in America would be insanely jealous of us. That's not what puts such a big smile on my face every morning when I wake up and remember where I am.

I feel like I'm home. I know that's kind of cheesy, but my dad moved from the house I grew up in shortly after I entered Horizons. I can't say I blame him. That house was full of nothing but terrible, heartbreaking memories. Without me there to finish my senior year, there wasn't really much point in staying.

After I was released from Horizons, I went straight to the apartment off campus. I went to his place for two

awkward days at Christmas, but sleeping on a futon in the guest room of his new downtown condo could hardly be counted on as being home.

Here with the Ransome boys, I feel like I've finally regained a little bit of the home that I left behind. I laugh with them, much more than I've laughed all year. I don't eat alone anymore, either. Instead, my days are filled with listening to them practice, playing video games with whichever ones are free, joking and teasing and working. For the first time in ages, I have a real life, not the cold shadow of one that I lived for so long.

"How's it going?" Levi is squeezing his way around the small side table that we use to hold equipment and to keep

people out of our space. “Good haul tonight?”

Paige leans against the wall. “Crazy. Bigger than last night.”

Levi rubs the back of his head. “I think word was getting out that our lines were too long. People didn’t want to wait so long. Now that it’s getting better, our profits will only grow.”

“So what you’re saying,” Karen says, “is that we’re incredibly valuable, and you can’t imagine how you lived without us for so long.”

He nods solemnly. “Oh, absolutely.”

I turn to deal with a last, straggling customer. Through the doors to the theater, I can hear the opener start and the crowd ramping up in response.

“Guess that’s our cue,” I say, depositing the customer’s twenty into the cash box. “Time to load up.”

“I don’t see why we have to load this all up just to unload it when the show’s over,” Karen mutters, bending to open a box.

“At least we don’t have to take it all back out to the bus to get locked up,” Levi says, helping us stack the T-shirts from the table display. “When we first started, Mr. Ransome was paranoid people were going to steal shit. It took him a while to realize we were at the point where we could afford security guards.”

I shiver a little, thinking of Frank and Benny, the two burly guys who ride on

the other bus and shepherd the guys into every venue and appearance. I don't like thinking about the purpose they serve.

Levi moves to stand next to me. He starts helping to refold the shirts that the fans have messed. I watch him out of the corner of my eye for a few seconds then laugh. "Levi, who taught you how to fold? You're terrible at that."

He gives me a sheepish smile. "I guess that's why my clothes are all wrinkled as soon as I pull them out of the drawer."

"Move." I bump him with my hip to take his place. "I'll fold; you put in boxes."

He glances over his shoulder. "Is Karen going to be mad at me if I mess up

her system?”

“Yup. But do it anyway, more comic relief for me.”

He laughs, making me smile. Levi has always been quick to laugh, and I like the sound of it. Back home, he broke up tons of fights between the brothers with his easygoing nature.

“I missed you,” I say abruptly.

He stops folding. “Yeah?”

I blush, looking down at the shirt I’m holding. “Yeah. I mean, well, sorry I didn’t call. I’ve apologized to Daltrey about a hundred times, but I don’t think I ever told you. You’re my friend, too, Levi. I shouldn’t have just cut off communication like that.”

He’s quiet for a long moment.

“Daisy, I don’t know how to say this.”

Something in his tone sends a cold shiver down my arms. I look up at him. His gaze is intense, the normal laugh lines around his eyes gone. “What?”

He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I think I know what happened.”

For the first time in weeks, I feel my mouth go dry, my heart rate increase, and the sweat pool forming at the base of my spine. “What?” I say again, a whisper this time because I’m about to start gasping for air.

“Hey.” His eyes widen. “It’s okay. Relax.”

I automatically fumble for my sleeves, forgetting for a moment that I’m

wearing a T-shirt. I tug on my leather cuffs instead, trying to breathe deeply.

“Hey, come here.” He reaches for my arm, but I pull it away. I can’t let him touch me right now, not when the panic is bearing down on me.

He holds up his hands. “Okay. I won’t touch you. I just want you to come with me.”

I nod, turning away from the table.

“Can you guys finish up?” Levi calls over his shoulder.

I don’t hear if the girls respond, the whooshing ocean of sound in my ears blocking everything except for my heartbeat. I stumble toward the doors, and for one terrifying moment, I can’t figure out how to open them. I need to be

outside, need the air.

Levi knows. And if he didn't get it from Daltrey, from the careful version of events I shared with him, then it stands to reason that he heard it from someone else—someone who knows all of it.

Levi, still being careful not to touch me, pushes the door open, and I practically throw myself out into the dimming light of the early evening.

There are still fans in the area, the stragglers who don't mind missing the opener, so I force myself to walk calmly around the building. Finally away from the fans, I collapse to the pavement, leaning against the brick wall. I bring my knees to my chest and shove my head between them, taking deep breaths. I

sense Levi nearby, but he doesn't touch or talk to me. After a few minutes, my breathing returns to normal, the rushing sound in my ears gone. Shakily, I raise my head. Levi is sitting a few feet away, watching me.

I give him a bitter smile. "Sorry you had to see that."

He shakes his head. "Don't be. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"What... uh... what exactly is it that you think you know?"

He brushes his wavy hair behind his ears. "Look, I wasn't prying okay? I just... I was worried. Daltrey was so upset and—" He cuts off at my grimace, scrunching his nose apologetically. "I was scared something might have

happened to you, you know? I mean, the older guys were saying that they thought you probably started seeing someone and didn't want to break Dalt's heart—"

"Wait. What?"

He waves away my interruption. "I just didn't think that was like you. I figured there had to be some good reason so I... I asked around."

I close my eyes. *That's it, then. He does know.*

"I called a few old friends. I don't keep in touch with many people from your class, so I wasn't sure if they would know anything—"

"Everyone knew," I say, clenching my hands into fists, "the whole town."

"Yeah, well, it didn't take too long to

figure it out. And when I heard your dad sold the house and you weren't in town anymore—”

My eyes snap open. “What did they say about that? Did they know where I went?”

His gaze immediately flicks to the cuffs that cover my wrists. “There were some guesses.”

Levi knows everything, knows about my suicide attempt, knows about the pictures. Oh, God. What if he saw them? Despite the court order, I know they're still out there, somewhere. “Did you... did anyone send you the—”

“No,” he says firmly. “Of course not. And I never looked for them.”

I let out a relieved sigh, thanking God

for small favors. Then I think of something else. “When was this?”

He looks away, not meeting my eyes. “In June.”

My mouth drops open. “You’ve known a whole year? And you never told Daltrey?”

He shakes his head. “I went back and forth every day for weeks. I knew he would want to know. But then I would think about the way you cut off all communication, how you even had your dad tell him you didn’t want to talk. It wasn’t my secret, and it obviously was a secret you weren’t comfortable talking about. So how could I tell it for you?”

My eyes watered. “That’s one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard.”

He shakes his head. "It didn't feel sweet at the time. Mostly, I felt guilty that I knew what was up and Daltrey didn't."

"Still, I appreciate it."

"But it doesn't matter now, right? Didn't you say that you told him?"

I hunch my shoulders. "I told him a little, that people started bullying me and I didn't want to be at school anymore, that I was in therapy. I didn't tell him about Justin or the pictures." My gaze falls to my wrists. "Or the hospital."

"So it was Justin, huh? That's what I heard. Damn it! I want to beat the hell out of that kid."

I can't muster a laugh. "Yeah, well, he wasn't even the worst of it." I think of

Joanie and the things she put on my ConnectMe page. I can still picture the website she created. I close my eyes again.

“Are you okay now, Daisy? I mean about the, uh, hospital stuff?”

“Yeah, I mean, obviously, I’m still totally fucked up. You saw what happened in there.” I tilt my head toward the theater. “But I’m not... suicidal anymore.” I barely get the word out; it’s always been so hard for me to say.

“What was that, exactly?” He jerks his chin, indicating the theater.

“I have panic attacks. They started around the time the, uh, pictures got out.”

He grimaces. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned it in there with people

around. I've just been debating whether or not I should tell you that I know. If I had known it would trigger—”

“No, it's fine, really. A lot of times I get them just because people are looking at me. You should have seen me trying to navigate college when I finally started. I was the freak girl who couldn't talk to anyone. You didn't do anything wrong by bringing it up.”

“You're not a freak, Daisy. Don't say that. Besides, you made friends with Karen and Paige, didn't you?”

I laugh. “That was a total fluke. I'm sure when they met me they would have agreed with the freak part. But they were nice enough to keep trying.”

“Is that why you never called him?”

You thought he was too high profile?”

I shrug. “That’s part of the reason. Embarrassment was a big one, too. And not wanting him to feel like he had to come home. But the crowds were a big part of it, yeah.”

He gently places a hand on my knee. “For what it’s worth, Daisy, I think you’re doing great.”

“Thanks, Levi.”

“You ready to head back in there? Show’s about to start.” He stands up and holds out a hand.

I take it without hesitating and follow my old friend back into the building.

Chapter Seventeen

Daltrey

We play a kick-ass show in Raleigh. Maybe that sounds arrogant, but it's true.

It's one of those shows where my brothers and I just click. I never feel as close to them as I do when we're playing well. We're not an emotional, touchy-feely family. I can count on one hand the number of times I've ever heard one of them mutter the words, "I love you," to one of the others. We're just not *like* that. Reed told me once that it was different before Mom left, but I have no memories of that time. I like to think that

we express that stuff through our music, and the best performances are the ones where we're subconsciously telling each other that we're a unit, a team. Family.

Tonight was a show like that.

In fact, there's been a general uptick in my own performance over the last few weeks, and I'd be stupid to pretend that I don't know the reason. I've just been *better* since Daisy came back into my life. I'm happier in general, and that makes me care more about my music. I feel an optimism that was missing for a while, a sense that things can be really good in my life. Band success or not.

There's also the simple fact that I always play better when she watches. Call it hubris or showing off, but it's

true. I want to impress her, want her to think that I'm as good as all the screaming girls in the crowd claim. I want to make her crazy, the way the other fans go crazy. And it's been like that since long before we even had other fans.

The mood is high in the dressing room. My brothers feel the difference, too. Amongst much high-fiving and *Hell yeahs*, my dad joins us.

"Good show, boys," he says, grinning. This is pretty high praise from him. "Real good show."

"Damn straight," Levi says, flicking the cap of his beer off on the edge of the counter. "We were on fire."

Dad waits while we all congratulate

each other a bit more, then he clears his throat. “I have some big news.”

We quiet down immediately. Rarely does my dad refer to anything as “big.” He usually downplays everything, not wanting us to get complacent.

“I took a call while you were on stage. It was from a producer at MTV.”

I wonder, briefly, if our video is doing particularly well, before I remember that MTV doesn’t really play music videos anymore.

“They want you to play at the Video Music Awards.”

The room goes dead silent, as if we’re too afraid to even breathe. Reed is the first one to react; he bursts into laughter.

“What?” Dad asks. “This is a pretty big deal, you know—”

Reed holds up a hand. “Oh, I know. Believe me. That’s why I’m laughing. Because—the VMAs, guys. Us. On the VMAs.”

Cash starts to laugh, too, and Lennon and I look at each other, bemused and smiling.

“It’s just so... surreal,” Reed manages. “We’re a fucking garage band from Podunk, Ohio. Two years ago, we showed up at a gig only to find they’d closed the bar without telling us. And now”—he starts laughing again—“and now, we’re going to be on the motherfucking VMAs.”

Lennon and I join in on the laughter.

It is ridiculous, when I think about it that way, totally, mind-blowingly, can't-wrap-my-mind-around-it ridiculous.

Dad shakes his head, grinning. "It may seem surreal to you now, but I assure you I am in no way surprised."

We stop laughing, our eyes on our father.

He looks around, making eye contact with each one of us. "You've made it, boys. Never let that go to your head. Never take it for granted. But it's also okay to enjoy it. You've *made* it."

A lump comes to my throat, and I look down. Crying in front of my brothers would be a disaster. But from the corner of my eye, I see Reed and Cash approach Dad, and the three

embrace. I look at Lennon. He rolls his eyes, but I know he feels the same way. A second later, he joins the group hug.

“Get over here, little brother,” Cash calls, his voice muffled by someone’s arm but not so much that I can’t hear how gruff it is. I join them, hugging them all, soaking in the moment. It’s like my dad has given us permission to really think about how far we’ve come. And it’s a pretty long way.

“Am I interrupting something?” Levi asks from the doorway, and we release each other. “That looks a little too cozy for my comfort.”

“Shut up, dick,” Reed says. “We’re going to be on the VMAs. A little hugging is called for.”

“*Manly* hugging,” Cash corrects.

“Oh, it looked like very manly hugging,” Levi says seriously before breaking into a huge grin. “The VMAs? Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” Dad says. “I have a few calls to make. Have fun tonight, boys.”

“Hey, Dad,” Reed says. “Thank you. Seriously. For everything.”

We all nod. Dad waves a hand at us and leaves.

“So we need to party tonight,” Cash says. “All of us. We haven’t been to a club in forever.”

“You think Daisy and the girls will want to go?” Lennon asks me.

“I’m sure of it. Hang on a second,

guys,” I say. “I’ll be right back.”

I jog out into the hallway just in time to see my dad turning the corner ahead. “Dad! Hang on!”

His head sticks out from around the corner. “Daltrey?”

I jog over to him. “Can I talk to you?”

He looks down at his watch. “I do have a couple calls to make, Dalt. Can we talk in the morning?”

“This’ll just take a minute.” I take a deep breath. “I know we’re going to have a bunch of extra rehearsals and responsibilities with this VMA thing.”

He nods. “That’s true. But it’s months away, nothing we have to worry about now.”

“Just listen for a sec, please. I’ve

been saying for weeks now that I need a break. I'm exhausted, and my voice and performances are suffering for it."

I can tell he's struggling not to roll his eyes. "Your performances have been better than ever this week—"

"Yeah, because I've been having a little fun. I've had friends here to hang out with, people to spend my down time with. I've had a personal life."

"Son, I know this is hard—"

"I'm not complaining about the work, Dad. I understand that we need to work hard, and I'm happy to do it. But I need a break every once in a while. And there's nothing wrong with that. I'll be *better* for it."

He watches me carefully. "I can

make an effort to schedule more free—”

I’m shaking my head so hard he stops mid-sentence. “No. No more crap about making an effort or trying.” His eyes narrow, and I swallow. I never talk to my dad this way. But I need to get through to him. “It’s too easy to commit to stuff when you put it like that, Dad. There’s always some last-minute interview, some appearance you couldn’t pass up. It’s not good enough.”

He looks angry. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want an entire day off between shows when we get to New York.”

He stares at me for a beat before a smile breaks over his face. “Nice try. Now, seriously, what do you have in

mind?”

“I’m not joking, Dad.”

“Daltrey—”

“Look, we’re in New York for five full days.”

“Yes, because it’s the entertainment capital of the world. You have two concerts, several radio appearance, stops at MTV, VH1, and a performance on Letterman.”

“All of which is fine. But if you want me to be at these events, you’re going to need to schedule them on four of the days. Because I’m taking one day off.”

I can practically see his brain whirring, trying to come up with an argument that I’ll respond to. “Look, Dad. You’ve always told us that the

worst thing that can happen to a musician is to lose his passion, right? That's why you're always so adamant about us not taking drugs. Think of all the friends you've lost from the old days because they were too high to give a shit about their music.”

His face tightens. “Are you telling me that you're experimenting with drugs, Daltrey? Does this have something to do with Daisy?”

I laugh at the absurd idea of Daisy bringing me into the dark world of drug use. “No. I'm not on drugs. But I am worried that if I keep going at this pace, I'm going to be burned out by the time this tour is done. Like, seriously burned out. There are already days when I wish

we could just go home, when the idea of picking up my guitar makes me feel ill. That scares me.”

He stares at me. “That scares me a little too.”

“Music is all I know. I don’t want to lose it just because I couldn’t take a damn day off. My brothers are feeling the same way, though maybe not as intensely as me. We need this.”

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll have to move a few things around, but you guys won’t have any band responsibilities on Wednesday of that week.”

I feel a warm wave of relief rush over me. I wrap my arms around him for another hug, so happy that he finally listened to me, that he actually heard me.

I see the look of surprise on his face right before I go in for the embrace, but he hugs me back.

“Thanks, Dad.” I pull away. “Really, this means a lot to me.”

“We should have scheduled it a long time ago, huh?” he asks, still wearing that slightly confused expression.

I laugh. “Yeah, probably. And just so you know, I *am* taking the day off. If anything happens to be scheduled, either by accident or on purpose, I will not be there.” I turn to leave.

He calls after me, “You know I’m proud of you, right, Daltrey?”

I turn back to face him. “Um... yeah, Dad. Sure I do.”

He nods once, his eyes on the floor.

“I know I work you guys too hard. I... I don't mean to. I just know how important it is for your careers that things go a certain way, that we take all of our opportunities. I never want you boys to live with regret the way that... the way that I do.”

My chest constricts a bit at his words. My dad could have been a big deal back in the day. He'd left his band over a fight with the lead singer—an argument over my mother. He'd given up his big break for her. And look at how she repaid him.

“We all know that, Dad. We want this just as bad as you do. I think we all... well, we hope someday you won't have that regret either because you'll

look at what we've done and know it wouldn't have been possible without you."

His head snaps up, and I'm pretty sure there's wetness in his eyes. I start to get really uncomfortable. Dad clears his throat, a signal that he feels the same.

"I'll see ya in the morning," I say, turning again.

"Okay, son."

My brothers and I are pretty much on a high from the show and the VMA news. Our good mood has carried over to the girls and Levi.

Levi arranged for a limo. Cash and Reed supplied it with champagne and

whiskey from the dressing room, and they're both well on their way to being tipsy by the time we get to a club downtown.

"I am so ready to get dah-runk tonight!" Cash yells, pouring champagne for the girls. "What about you, pretty Paige? You wanna get drunk?"

She laughs. "I think you're already drunk." She gently pushes his hand off her knee.

I'm impressed. She appears to be over the star-struck thing and is treating my brother just like any other drunk jerk she might meet.

"Good point," Daisy adds. "Like, when are you not drunk, Cash?"

"Hey." He pouts. "I am often not

drunk.”

“Yeah, sure,” Reed says. “I don’t think you’ve been fully sober since before the tour started.”

“You guys are pansies,” Cash says mock-sadly, shaking his head. “Am I the only one here who realizes that we are fucking rock stars?”

“You’re fucking a rock star, Cash?” Karen asks. “Who?”

Everyone laughs, including Cash, though he also flips her off.

We all pile out, Benny in the lead. He, Frank, and two bouncers form a loose wall between the limo and the door of the club, but many of the people in line recognize us. A few of the girls start screaming, and I instinctively put

my hand on Daisy's elbow to guide her ahead of me. I don't like being this close to fans, not after the last time one got a hold of me.

It was back in Miami, right when things were starting to blow up, and we hadn't yet seen the need to hire security. One night, we were accosted coming out of the hotel. A girl grabbed me, pulling so hard on my wrist with her talon-like nails that I had a bruise the next day. In the pulling and shouting that followed, I ended up getting knocked down and kicked pretty hard by a stiletto. It had been a pretty frightening experience; we hired Benny and Frank the next day.

"You okay?" Daisy asks, looking over at me as we enter the club.

“Yeah. Just didn’t want you to get separated and swallowed up in the crowd.”

She smiles, and I realize how close she’s standing. The side of her breast grazes my arm, and a shiver runs down my back. When she looks up at me, her lips are only a few inches from mine. It would be so easy to just lean down and —

“Come on, Daltrey,” Frank says from behind me. “Let’s keep up with your brothers.”

I shake myself and hurry my pace, trying to ignore the way Daisy seems to be keeping her body pressed against mine. The club is crowded, but we’re attracting a lot of attention. Frank is

right; we need to stay with the group.

I catch sight of Benny standing beside a raised platform and guide Daisy in that direction. My brothers, Levi, and the other girls are sitting in a sprawling booth on the platform. We join them, Daisy sliding in first to sit next to Paige. There's not much room left for me, and my leg is pressed right up against hers when I take my seat.

A waitress already stands at the table, smiling, a bottle of Patròn in her hands. "For the table," she says, placing it in front of Cash.

He gives his best cocky smile and passes her a hundred-dollar bill.

"You think you're such hot shit!" I have to shout over the music.

He flips me off. “I am hot shit. I’m going to be on the VMAs, baby!”

“Yeah.” I gave him my biggest smirk. “Standing behind me.”

“Now, now, boys,” Levi says, holding up his hands. “I propose a toast.”

Daisy takes the bottle and starts pouring shots for everyone. She has to lean across the table to do it, and I’m having the hardest time not staring at her ass.

Once we all have a glass in front of us, Levi raises his. “To Ransom,” he says. “For coming a long fucking way.”

“And to those who’ve made it possible,” Lennon adds, nodding at Levi. “We couldn’t have done it without you,

brother.”

I nudge Daisy. “Or you.”

“To us all,” Reed calls. “To this crazy life.”

“And enjoying every minute of it,” Cash finishes.

We all clink glasses before throwing the shots back. I’m feeling pretty buzzy already, a combination of champagne from the limo, the shot, and the nearness of Daisy. She grins at me, and I have a feeling she’s tipsy, too.

“I want to dance,” Karen says, standing. “Someone come and dance with me.”

Cash and Reed get up to join her and Paige, leaving Daisy, Lennon, Levi and me to continue on with the bottle of

Patròn.

I pour Daisy another shot, laughing as she eyes it warily. “Come on, Dais. I’ve never known you to be a lightweight.”

She raises an eyebrow at me, lifting the glass to her lips without breaking eye contact. Then she tips her head back and swallows the shot in one go. “Who are you calling a lightweight? I believe I’m one up on you, buddy.”

I grin and rectify the situation.

“MTV, huh?” she says. “That’s pretty cool, Dalt.”

I nod. “I kind of can’t believe it.”

“I can. I always knew you guys would make it big. I’m not joking. From the first time I heard you play.”

“We were, like, six the first time you

heard me play.”

“I mean the band,” she says, bumping me with her shoulder. I try to ignore the little fission of heat that shoots up my side at the contact. “The first time I heard you all play together, we were ten, and we were out in your garage. I’ll never forget it. Lennon looked so tiny under his bass.”

I chuckle. “And he got so mad because he wanted to play guitar.”

She nods. “I think he cried.”

We both laugh, looking across the table at my brother. He’s deep in conversation with Levi, though, seemingly oblivious to our discussion.

I lean a little closer to Daisy. “Do you remember that one time he got stuck

under the bridge when we were river tubing? And he cried for, like, a half hour afterward?”

She slaps my arm playfully. “You’re mean. He was just a kid, and he was legitimately scared.”

“Yeah, because he thought there were spiders under there.”

She laughs. “That boy does hate spiders.”

“Didn’t he call you up to his room to kill one once?”

She hits my arm again. “You’re not supposed to know about that. I was sworn to secrecy.”

“Hey,” Lennon says, and Daisy jumps, looking guilty. “We’re going down to the dance floor. You coming?”

I look at Daisy, and she shakes her head a little. “No. We’ll stay here.”

Levi and Lennon get up and step off the platform.

I turn back to Daisy. “You usually like dancing. What’s up?”

She shrugs and looks uncomfortable.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

She sighs and says something.

“What?” I lower my head so I can hear her better.

She leans toward my ear. “There’s too many people.”

I think about what she said about being anxious around crowds. “I’m sorry, Daisy. We didn’t have to come out tonight.”

“Of course we did. We’re

celebrating.” Her face seems to flush a little under the flashing colored lights. “Besides, I like it here. With you, I mean.”

I feel a swooping in my stomach that I know has nothing to do with the alcohol. “Yeah?”

She looks right at me, her green eyes bright. “Yeah.”

I want to kiss her so fucking badly. It’s all I can do to keep from grabbing her face and pressing my lips to hers. I know exactly how she’ll taste, how her little breathy gasp will sound.

She looks away first, reaching for the bottle and pouring another shot. I think her hands tremble a bit as she brings the glass to her mouth. Is she feeling what

I'm feeling?

She chugs the shot and puts the glass back on the table. "Do you ever feel like you just can't communicate with someone?"

I frown. "I don't know. Like who?"

She waves her hands around. "Just, like, anyone. Ever since... well, since I started college, I guess, I feel like there's this wall in my head. Like there are all of these thoughts swirling around in there, things I want to say. But when I try, it gets all jumbled. All confused. Until pretty soon I don't even know what I wanted to say in the first place." She shakes her head. "It's frustrating."

I reach for the bottle. "I know exactly what you mean." I pour my shot but don't

drink it, twirling the glass between my fingers for a minute. “Is that why you didn’t call?” My voice is quiet, maybe too quiet for her to hear, but I’m nervous about bringing up such an upsetting subject.

“Yeah. Partly, anyhow. I didn’t know what to say.”

I suddenly feel scared that I’ll somehow lose her again. I reach over and take her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “You can tell me anything, Daisy. You know that, right?”

She nods.

“I mean it.” I bend a little closer, my eyes on her lips. “Even if it’s just to say that you don’t know *what* to say, you can still call me.”

“I know,” she whispers.

“Can I tell *you* something?”

She swallows heavily and nods.

“I really want to kiss you.”

“You do?” Her voice comes out all high pitched and squeaky, and I’m pretty sure it’s the cutest thing ever.

“I do.”

She takes a huge breath and blows it out. “Then I think you should.”

My stomach drops again, and I can hear a rushing in my ears. I lean forward, watching her wide eyes the entire time. Just before my lips touch hers, her eyelashes flutter downward.

“Hey, Daisy!” Paige yells.

Daisy jumps back so fast she practically knocks over the tequila

bottle.

“Come dance with us!” Paige has appeared at our table, grinning and disheveled. She appears to have no idea of what she’s just interrupted.

Daisy presses a hand to her heart, apparently just as affected by the interruption as I am. “No, Paige,” she says in a shaky voice. “Thanks, but I’m fine up here.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Paige places a hand on the table as if to steady herself. “I’m actually a little woozy myself.”

“Are you okay?” Daisy asks.

“Yeah.” Paige sinks into the booth across from us. “I think I just need to slow down. I didn’t eat much tonight.”

Daisy looks at me, clearly worried,

then slides around the booth so that she's sitting next to her friend.

I raise a hand to get the waitress's attention. "You should eat," I tell Paige. "I'll order some food."

Daisy shoots me a grateful look, and I try to take solace in that. So I didn't get to kiss her. At least she thinks I'm a good guy for taking care of her friend.

The waitress comes over, and I order plates of fries for everyone plus a few Cokes. As she heads off to put in our order, I glance back at Daisy. She's rubbing Paige's back, still looking concerned. My gaze drops to her lips, and I curse silently.

Her thinking I'm a good guy is great and everything, but I'm fooling myself if

I think it's anything close to being as good as kissing her would have been.

Chapter Eighteen

Daltrey

We drive into New York City at night. I'm happy for the timing, since Daisy has never been here before. It's exactly the way I would have chosen for her to see the city for the first time, all lit up before us as we travel across the Queensboro Bridge.

“Wow,” she whispers, her face pressed against the glass. “This is pretty incredible.”

“Right? Just wait until you get outside. It's unreal, the way it just stretches up and around you, no end in

sight.”

“Pretty far cry from Jonesboro, huh?”

I snort. “You could say that.”

Because we’ll be here for such a long stretch and driving and parking in the city is such a hassle, we leave the bus at a lot in Queens, opting to use a few vans for transport around New York. Sitting in the van with Daisy feels a lot like it did back in the old days when we rented a van to get to our gigs. This one, luckily, doesn’t act as though it’s about to break down any minute. And the seats are covered in leather, instead of ripped, stained upholstery.

Our hotel is in the middle of Midtown. Daisy is mostly quiet as we make our way through the city, craning

her neck to check out the buildings, but every once in a while, she'll turn to me, a huge smile on her face, to point out something.

"Karen and Paige are probably going nuts," she says. "They're obsessed with *Sex and the City*."

"I think there's a tour they can do if they want. I can have Levi look into it."

She laughs. "Poor Levi. Ever since we showed up, he's had to play babysitter to college girls. Probably not his idea of a great time."

"Yeah, because twenty-year-old guys hate having to hang out with college sophomores."

"Does he have a girlfriend?" Daisy asks. "I don't really remember him

dating much after he broke up with that girl... what was her name? Kelly? Katie?"

"Kaitlin. The horrible bitch beast broke his heart and ruined him for all women, ever."

"Poor Levi." Her eyebrows go down, a sure sign she's thinking of something. "I wonder if he might like Paige? I could see them together."

"So maybe it's a good thing that I keep asking him to keep an eye on you guys."

She grins mischievously, scrunching up her nose . She looks so cute it takes everything in me to keep from kissing her. Instead, I turn back to the window on my side, watching as the Rockefeller

Center goes by.

I can't stop thinking about kissing her. Ever since our almost-kiss back in Raleigh, it's been eating me up that I missed my chance. We haven't had many other moments alone since then, and the longer I wait, the more convinced I am that it needs to be special. But that doesn't make it any easier to get the idea out of my mind.

I've kissed Daisy exactly twice in my life. The first was when we were eight years old. We had just caught Cash making out with a girl behind the bleachers at the middle school during his track meet. We were fascinated. We'd seen kissing a lot on TV and movies and stuff, but neither of us had parents who

were together, so we hadn't seen much real life kissing.

Wanting to know what it felt like, we decided we would try it. As she leaned toward me, I suddenly felt very scared, so I slammed my eyes shut. I remember being surprised by how warm her lips were, and how soft. She had pressed them against mine for a good ten seconds before she burst into giggles and ran away. I had laughed too—Daisy laughing always made me join in—before running after her. After that, we went back to playing freeze tag and never talked about it again.

The second kiss was a bit more memorable. We were thirteen and had been invited to our first boy-girl party,

which always seemed strange to me. With Daisy as my best friend, my entire life was boy-girl. I couldn't figure out why it was such a big deal to everyone else, but the other kids were acting as if it was a major of rite of passage or something.

We sat on couches in Joanie Hartfield's basement, the girls on one side and the boys clumped together on the other. I kept catching Daisy's attention and rolling my eyes. She would smile and hide her face, probably not wanting the other girls to know that she had an ally in the enemy camp.

Eventually, Joanie got tired of the "mingling" phase and suggested we play Spin the Bottle. Kissing someone for no

good reason seemed stupid to me, but everyone else got excited, so I didn't complain. Daisy, though, was clearly uncomfortable. She sat next to me in the circle, fidgeting and playing with the cuffs of her sleeves and shoelaces. Every time a boy spun, I would hold my breath, not wanting the bottle neck to point to her. I told myself it was because she was so nervous, but in reality, I just didn't like the idea of her kissing another guy.

After a half hour or so of awkward pecking, shrieks, and giggles, Joanie declared Spin the Bottle to be a baby game. "We should play Seven Minutes in Heaven."

Daisy's face went beet red. I hated

the idea of her having to go into the laundry room with some stupid kid from our class, knowing that she would be teased if she refused.

We all wrote our names down on pieces of paper, and Joanie put the boys' names in one bowl and the girls' slips in another. She picked from the boy's bowl and told the guy he had to pull a name from the girls' bowl.

"And you get two vetos," she said, "in case you pull someone totally awful." She giggled.

Daisy's face fell. I thought it was the stupidest, most boring game. Three guys were picked before me, and each one went to the bowl, looked at the first girl's name, laughed, and put it back

before picking again. Without fail, every one of them went through two vetos, which I was sure was a symptom of them being embarrassed and uncomfortable with the whole thing. I crossed my fingers each time that none of them would choose Daisy.

When it was my turn, I went to the bowl and peered inside. Some of the slips were open slightly, and I could make out Daisy's handwriting easily. I pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Daisy." I rolled my eyes as catcalls sounded.

Safely in the laundry room with the lights off, I finally relaxed. I leaned against the washing machine. "That was close. I was worried I wouldn't be able

to find your name.” In the darkness, I heard a snuffle. “Daisy?”

“What?” Her voice was clogged up, as if she had a cold or something. Or maybe...

“Are you crying?”

Another sniff. “No.”

“Yes, you are. I can tell. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to kiss any of those boys!”

“That’s why I got your name, silly. So you wouldn’t have to.”

“But none of them want to kiss me!”

I was stumped. “Why do you care? You just said you didn’t want to kiss any of them.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I want

them to not want to kiss me!”

I tried to wrap my mind around that. Girls were so weird sometimes. “How do you know that none of them want to kiss you?”

“Because the only one who tried to get my name was you.”

I sighed. “Maybe I want to kiss you.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. Thanks, Daltrey.”

“I mean it! What if I want to kiss you?”

“Yesterday, you thought it was hilarious to show me your funky booger, and today you want to kiss me? Okay. Whatever.”

We both laughed, and I was happy to see that I’d calmed her down. I never

liked it when Daisy was sad.

I pressed the button on my watch to make the screen glow. “We’ve been in here for three minutes already. Four to go.”

Daisy sniffled again.

“Where are you?” I asked, extending my arms so I could feel around in the dark for her.

“Over here. By the shelf.”

I managed to find her without tripping over anything. I took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I thought my funky booger made you not sad anymore.”

She made a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a sob. “I know that Joanie’s gonna want to know what we did. She’ll tease me forever. No one

kissed me in Spin the Bottle, and no one kissed me in the laundry room.”

“We could tell her we kissed.”

She ripped her hands from mine and let out another noise that sounded like a sob.

“Daisy, don’t cry. Joanie is a stupid bitch. Everyone knows that.”

“She likes you.”

“Yeah, well, who doesn’t?” That earned me a smack. It was true, though. Since we started junior high, I’d been noticing that a lot of girls teased me a lot, a sure sign that they liked me, according to Cash. “Seriously, Daisy. You shouldn’t worry about Joanie. She’s the worst.” My eyes were adjusting to the dark a little, and I thought I saw her

wiping her eyes.

Daisy sighed. "I know. It just makes me sad that no one likes me, not even a little. No one wanted to kiss me, Daltrey. I could just tell."

I did it without thinking, without worrying about the consequences. All I knew was that I didn't want her to be sad anymore, didn't want her to think that she was somehow less than all the stupid girls out there. So I put my hands on her shoulders, leaned in, and kissed her.

She gasped a little against my lips, making her mouth open slightly, and that made *me* gasp. Just like when we were eight, her lips were soft and warm. But she didn't just press them against mine. I

was really kissing her, and she kissed me back.

I was suddenly desperate to know what it felt like to run my tongue against her lips, so I did it. She gasped again, and I think I moaned a little, which should have been totally embarrassing—it was Daisy, after all—but somehow it wasn't. I just wanted to keep kissing her, keep making her gasp like that.

So I pushed my tongue forward until it brushed against hers. I felt her hands on my shoulders, grasping my shirt tightly, and I moaned again. It was *awesome*. Why hadn't we been doing it for years?

A sudden blast of light sent Daisy jumping away from me, but not before

everyone saw what we'd been doing. Cheers and squeals erupted. I stared at Daisy, eyes wide. Her hands were pressed to her red cheeks, and her eyes were as wide as mine. I could tell right away that she was embarrassed and scared to walk out there, so I did the only thing I could think of. I plastered a giant, arrogant grin on my face and took her hand, leading her back out to the party amidst the giggling and catcalling.

“Is someone next, or are you all too chicken?” I asked, effectively taking the attention off of us.

They went back to determining whose turn it was, and Daisy and I melted into the back of the crowd.

“Why did you do that?” she

whispered.

“Because I wanted to,” I said.

She looked at me, her eyes still wide, but with a hint of a smile. “You did?”

I nodded. “Plus, now I can tell everyone what a good kisser you are. You won’t have to worry about anyone not wanting to kiss you ever again.”

She was full-out grinning. “Thanks, Dalt.”

“You’re welcome.”

I didn’t lie to her, not really; those were the reasons I kissed her. And she *was* really, really good at it. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell any of the stupid assholes in our class about it. The idea of any of them kissing her the way I just had made me feel something like

rage deep in my chest. I didn't want to think about why, so I ignored it.

“Daltrey?”

I shake my head to dispel the memory and look over at Daisy. Her eyes are on me, and the view through the glass behind her of Times Square is dazzling.

“Sorry, Dais. What'd you say?”

“I asked you if it was always that crowded out there. Are you okay?”

I smile. “Yeah, just daydreaming. Yes, Times Square has been at least that crowded every time I've seen it.”

“It's crazy.” She turns her attention back outside. “How do people manage not to kill each other with all these cars and pedestrians just walking in the middle of the street? I don't think I could

drive here.”

“Maybe you get used to it.”

She turns back to me. “So what were you daydreaming about? I said your name twice before you looked up.”

I look at her face, wondering what she’ll think about my reminiscing. What does she remember about that night? “I was actually thinking about Joanie Hartfield’s party, in seventh grade. You remember?”

Her entire body goes rigid.

I wonder if it’s because of the kiss or —*shit*. “She was one of the people that gave you a hard time, wasn’t she?”

Daisy nods and drops her chin to her chest.

“Sorry, Daisy, I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s fine.”

She turns back to the window, and I can’t get over the difference in her, as though a hard shell has come up around her. Tentatively, I reach out to touch her shoulder, and she jerks away as if I’ve burned her.

“I’m fine,” she says, her voice dull, almost robotic.

“Daisy—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Her tone effectively cuts off any further communication.

I feel a little stunned. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a strong, physical reaction from just the mention of a name. There’s a sick feeling in my stomach. What, exactly, did Joanie do to her?

My phone starts buzzing, and I sigh, slipping it from the pocket of my jeans. The text is from Levi. *Band meeting cancelled until tomorrow. Want to take a walk? Karen and Paige are dying to get out into the city.*

I look over at Daisy's back, wondering how she'll respond. From the way her shoulders are moving, she appears to be taking deep breaths.

"Uh, Daisy? Levi just texted, and our meeting is cancelled tonight. We have a few free hours. Wanna take a walk with Levi and the girls?"

There's the slightest of pauses before she turns back to me. Her face is more relaxed, though still closed off. She gives me a small smile. "That sounds

great.”

We arrive at the hotel, our three vans lined up in the circular drive. Several bellboys rush over to unload our bags. I reach for Daisy’s duffel, but she elbows me out of the way to grab it herself.

“Whatever, Miss Independent,” I say.

She laughs, sounding slightly more like herself. I’m relieved. A bellboy has already picked up my bag, so I hand him a twenty and follow Daisy into the lobby.

It’s starting to get easy to be jaded about this kind of stuff, but Daisy’s dropped jaw tells me I should take another look around me. The hotel is pretty spectacular, with marble and chandeliers and all that other stuff that

rich people tend to like. We mill about, attracting quite a bit of attention, while Dan, our tour manager, and my father go to check us in.

A skinny teenager dressed in khakis and a Ralph Lauren polo shirt approaches me, looking both scared and excited. “Are you Daltrey Ransome?”

“Yeah, how you doing, man?”

His entire face lights up. “Good!” His voice cracks on the word, and I try not to smile.

Against a far wall, a well-dressed couple is watching us. They don’t seem too happy. I can practically feel their stares zero in on my eyebrow ring.

“I’m a huge fan,” the kid says. “I have all your music, even the early stuff

when you weren't signed yet."

"Thanks, man. That's really cool."

He beams, all embarrassment gone. "Could I get a picture with you?" He holds up a fancy smart phone.

"Of course."

Daisy steps forward, a goofy smile on her face. "I'll take it."

"Thanks, ma'am," he says, and Daisy and I both stifle our laughs.

I stand next to the kid and put my arm around his shoulder as Daisy snaps the picture.

"Thank you," he says, looking down at the phone. "This is amazing! I can't believe it."

"No worries."

He looks up at me. "I, uh, play too. A

little. Piano, I mean. But my parents won't let me take lessons in anything other than classical."

"That's okay. All my lessons were in classical, too. It's the best way to get the technique and skills down." I glance at the couple, understanding their stares now, since they must be his parents, and lean toward the kid. "Just practice whatever shit you want when you're on your own. Billy Joel, Ben Folds. That's who you should listen to if you want to play pop and rock songs."

"And you," he says, grinning so much I feel like Santa Claus on Christmas morning.

"Sure, I guess."

"Henry!" the woman calls. "Come

on.”

His smile doesn't fade. “Gotta go. Thanks again, man. I really appreciate it.”

“Good luck, dude,” I say, bumping my fist against his before he scurries off.

“Wow,” Daisy says. “That was interesting.”

I turn to her. She's smiling broadly, all remnants of her reaction in the van gone. “Are you still surprised I have actual fans?”

She shakes her head. “No, I'm surprised by how much you clearly enjoyed that. You're grinning about as big as that kid was.”

“I am not.” Self-consciously, I reach up to my face to feel my smile.

She snorts. “Sure you’re not. Don’t be embarrassed. It’s sweet.”

I shrug. “I just like it when kids come up to me to talk about music, you know? Instead of just screaming about me being hot or something.”

“Yeah, I bet you just hate it when people scream that you’re hot.”

I push her shoulder. “Shut it, you. I’m being serious.”

Her eyes soften. “I know you are. And I meant it when I said it’s sweet.”

Dan comes around to pass out our keys, and we can finally head up to our rooms.

Daisy falls into step next to me on the way to the elevator. “You never know, though. That kid could have thought you

were hot. He didn't spare a glance at Karen, and her boobs are practically popping out of that top."

I laugh. "It wouldn't matter if he liked Karen or not. My hotness transcends sexual orientation."

I love the sound of her laughter, love being the one to cause it. I'm grinning like an idiot as we step onto the elevator with Daisy's friends, Levi, Dan, and my dad.

"Where should we go?" Levi asks the girls. "Or are we just going to wander and see what we see?"

"Let's wander," I suggest. "Be spontaneous."

"What are you talking about?" Dad asks. "Are you going out?"

I turn to him. “We’re just going to take a walk.”

He frowns. “I cancelled the meeting because I wanted you boys to rest. We have to get up early to be at the station.”

I struggle to keep my temper. “We’re not going partying or anything, Dad. We’re taking a walk. It’s not a big deal.”

He looks as though he’s going to argue, but luckily, the doors open on our floor. I quickly grab Daisy’s hand and make my escape.

Dad calls after us, “Don’t be out too late! I mean it.”

I give a thumbs-up over my head before turning the corner with Daisy, the girls, and Levi.

“Wow,” Daisy whispers. “That was

a little tense. Are you guys not getting along?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say, hoping I don’t sound too short. It’s not that I don’t trust that Daisy would be a good listener. I just don’t want anything else to spoil one of the few chances we have for fun.

“So let’s get settled and meet in the lobby in fifteen. Sound good?” Levi asks.

We all agree and head to our respective rooms.

Daisy stops at my door, touching my elbow as I move to open it. “I’m glad I’m here,” she says, looking down at the floor. “I’m sorry if I got weird in the van. I just want you to know...” She

swallows before looking up and smiling slightly. “I’m glad I’m here.”

My chest constricts. “I’m happy you’re here too.”

She gives me one last grin before jogging down the hall to catch up with her friends, leaving me to wonder when in the hell I am going to get up the courage to tell her how I feel.

I wash my face and head down to the lobby. I’m surprised to see Lennon there. He usually spends hotel nights shut up in his room watching movies. Lennon is a sci-fi geek and loves nothing better than being by himself and watching whatever show qualifies as his new obsession.

“Mind if I tag along?” he asks. “It occurs to me that for all the times we’ve

been here in the past year, I've never actually seen the city."

I laugh. "Funny how that seems to happen everywhere we go, huh? 'Course you can come."

"Is it okay for you guys to just go out like this?" Karen asks. "On your own?"

Lennon laughs. "Yeah, we're big boys now, you know."

She scowls at him, which I find hilarious, considering how star-struck she was just a few short weeks ago. "I just meant, you don't need security or anything for all the crazed fans and paparazzi?"

I shrug. "We can usually get by okay with hats or hoodies, so long as all four of us aren't together."

We step out into the cool night air. We're nearly into July, but summer seems to be taking forever to settle in. It's been mostly rainy and cool, except for the stops farther south.

Lennon gestures at the street. "The fact that there aren't any photographers here is good. That means they don't know what hotel we're at, yet."

"You don't worry about just, like, running into them on street?" Paige asks, looking around.

"Usually, they wait at places where your presence is pretty much common knowledge: hotels, venues, recording studios, stuff like that. If one catches you out on the street, at a restaurant or something, they've usually been tipped

off that you're going to be there."

"Who would tip them off?" Daisy asks.

"You'd be surprised," I say. "Usually, it's someone on the team who thinks the publicity would be good, for whatever reason. So they tip someone off, and next thing you know, you have a dozen photographers outside of the deli where you tried to get lunch."

"Not always, of course," Lennon adds. "Sometimes the paparazzi are really just being stalking dick faces."

Everyone laughs.

"Can I quote you on that?" Karen asks.

We're walking aimlessly toward Times Square, the noise and light level

steadily increasing.

Paige claps her hands together. “I’m so excited! I’ve never been to a big city before!”

“Paige, you’ve been to tons of big cities in just the last few weeks,” Daisy reminds her.

“Yeah, but none of them were *New York*.”

Times Square is even more dazzling in person than it was from the van. It’s packed with people milling about, taking pictures, and waiting at street corners in huge, teeming masses. We make our way to the Duffy Square steps, where we stop to take pictures. I wrap my arms around Daisy, and she takes a selfie of the two of us. When she shows

me the photo, my heart constricts. We look so happy, like a couple. I suddenly can't wait until Wednesday. I've been making plans for more than a week. I have an entire day of sightseeing all arranged, complete with a private driver. I had to pull some strings to make sure Daisy gets to see New York the way I want her to, and I really hope she has a good time.

"This is insane," Karen says, stretching her legs out in front of her on the step and tilting her head back. "I can't see a single star."

The rest of us join her and peer up into the night sky. Our view is dominated by the buildings and neon light of the square.

“Okay, guys,” Levi whispers. “I’m seeing three different girls staring at you pretty closely. Might be a good time to move on.”

“They’re staring at you, Levi,” I tell him as we stand and make our way back down the steps. “They think you’re really hunky.”

“I am quite hunky, thanks.”

We meander around the city for the next hour. We stop at the Rockefeller Center Plaza, where they ice skate in the winter, and tell Karen and Paige all about the skating rink we used to build in the backyard at home every year. As we pass the CBS studios and the marquee for the Letterman show, Daisy stops to grab my hand.

“What?” I ask.

“I just got the most overwhelming rush of perspective,” she says. “Talking about your backyard, walking around like this, it feels just like the old days, hanging out with Levi and your brother.” She turns to me, and I’m surprised to see her eyes are watering. “But tomorrow night, you’re going to be performing there. On the Letterman Show. It’s insane. You *made* it, Daltrey. You really did it.”

There have been several moments like this for me over the past year, the big moments where I realize just how far I’ve come and where I am. My dad and my brothers were always there for those times, to grin and nod in

acknowledgment. But there was always something missing. Daisy.

So I do the thing that I would have done if she'd been with me all along. I pick her up and spin her around, holding her tight, letting it all hit me all over again.

Chapter Nineteen

Daisy

I love New York City. It surprises me a little, the strength of my reaction to the place. I've never really thought of myself as a city person, but after only two days in Manhattan, I know that I'm in love. There's something about the bustle of the streets, the way everything seems to be right at my fingertips, even the sheer magnitude of the masses of people. I was worried that I'd be uncomfortable around so many strangers, but I find the opposite really. I love the way I can be in the middle of the crowd

but still feel alone, the way no one really looks at me, the way I can melt away into oblivion right in the middle of all those people.

The first concert in the city will be happening later tonight. We've spent the past two days heading from appearance to appearance. The boys performed on Letterman, visited radio stations, met with an interviewer from *Rolling Stone*. Somewhere in the middle of all that, I fell right back into my old role. I would go with them and, along with Levi, help do whatever needed doing: from tying Reed's tie at a photo shoot to running out to get sandwiches when they got held over at an interview and didn't have time to eat. I was starting to feel like

part of the team again, so comfortable it was scary. I had no idea how long it would last. The tour had to end sometime, and college awaited me in the fall.

“I want to move here,” I tell Daltrey.

“I could see you here.” He narrows his eyes a little as he takes me in. “Maybe in a little apartment in the Village. Or something really cool and trendy in Brooklyn.”

“What’s the Village?”

“You would have seen it on *Sex and the City*. The blond chick lived there. It’s actually crazy expensive.”

“We can count that one out then.”

“It’s still worth seeing. We’ll go tomorrow.”

I scrunch up my eyebrows. I haven't seen the itinerary for tomorrow yet, but I assume it's every bit as full as the last two days have been. "What's tomorrow?"

A huge grin takes over his face, and I get the impression he's been waiting for me to ask that question for a while now.

"Tomorrow is our day."

"What do you mean, *our day*?"

"I mean, no work, no brothers, nothing. Just me and you running around the city."

I stare at him. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. I have the entire day off. Seriously. Not a single obligation."

My grin is now probably as big as his. "That's awesome! What are we

going to do?”

“I have a few things planned. Any special requests? I know you and the girls did a bit of sightseeing while we were running around with band stuff.”

“We haven’t seen much,” I say. “Oh, man, I want to do everything! Can we go to the park? And see the Empire State Building? Oh, my gosh! I’m so excited!”

“We’ll do all of that,” he promised, his voice low and just husky enough to put goose bumps on my arms. “It’s going to be great.”

After we separate in the lobby, I head up to my room, hoping the girls are there. We have about an hour until we’re supposed to leave for the venue, and I really want to tell them about tomorrow

without a ton of people around. My excitement hasn't wavered in the slightest, but it is colored a little bit by a weird sense of expectation. Is something going to happen tomorrow between me and Daltrey? Do I want it to?

"Hey, Daisy," Paige says when I open the door. "How was the shoot?"

"Good. A little boring. What'd you guys get up to?"

Karen is lying flat on the bed, an arm over her face. "Levi had us loading boxes at the venue for hours. It sucked big time." She moves her arm and grins at me. "I mean, totally worth it for this extended fantasy we're on, of course."

I laugh and flop onto my bed. "So something kind of interesting just

happened.”

Paige sits up straighter in her chair and sets aside the bottle of hot-pink nail polish she was using on her toes. “Yeah?”

“Daltrey has the entire day off tomorrow. All the guys do. And apparently, he’s taking me out to see the city. Just the two of us.”

“It’s about time,” Karen says, propping herself up on her elbow.

“What does that mean?”

She smirks. “It means we’ve been waiting for him to make his move since Boston.”

A trickle of fear pierces my excitement. “You think that’s what this is? No, it can’t be. Can it? Oh, my God.”

“It’s okay,” Paige says. “Everything will be fine.”

“You’ve never actually told us, you know,” Karen says, one eyebrow raised. “How you feel about him, I mean. We’ve danced around it a few times. Do you like him?”

“Of course I like him. He’s my best —”

“Your best friend, yeah, yeah, we know,” she interrupts, waving her hands. “But is that all he is? Is it all you want him to be?”

I look down at my feet. For as long as I can remember, people in my life have assumed I’m romantic with Daltrey. I don’t blame them, not really. The two of us have always been much closer than

most boys and girls would be without dating. But in all those years, nothing's ever happened, minus a couple of innocent kissing experiments when we were kids.

But even so, people assume. And those who know we aren't dating always seem to think that I want to be with Daltrey. People like Joanie. The bitch dated him for three months our sophomore year and hated me every minute of it. She hated that he still hung out with me, that he talked to me, that I was close with his family. She could see, I was sure, the thing that Daltrey always missed when he looked at me, the feelings I kept just below the surface, that ones I tried so hard to cover and

keep secret.

“I’ve been in love with him forever,” I say, my voice shaking slightly. I’ve never admitted that to anyone.

“Awww,” Paige says, holding her hands up to her face. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Even Karen is smiling a little dreamily. “So what’s the problem? Why don’t you just tell him?”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes talking. “No, I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Because things are way too complicated. What if he doesn’t want me? God, I just got him back. I don’t think I can deal with losing him all over again.”

“Why do you assume you’d lose him?” Paige asks. “I’m telling you, Daisy, it’s all over his face. The boy is crazy about you.”

“Yeah, don’t you think it’s a little weird we never hear about him linked with anyone?” Karen asks. “There are pictures all over the Internet of all three of his brothers with random chicks, not to mention what we’ve seen in the dressing room. Why hasn’t Daltrey been out man-whoring, huh?”

“Because he’s pining after you,” Paige finishes for her. “Obviously.”

I look down at the cuffs of my sleeves and sigh. “Even if that’s true, that still doesn’t mean that we’re right for each other.”

“What?” Karen asks, laughing. “Are you kidding me? You’re perfect together. Just tell him—”

“There are things he doesn’t know.” I look up and meet Paige’s eyes. “Things I haven’t told him.”

Her face softens. “You should tell him.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. I know I can’t.”

“What in the hell are you guys talking about?” Karen asks.

“Daisy went through some crap last year,” Paige says quickly.

I shake my head. “It’s okay.” I turn to Karen and tell her everything, about Joanie and the pictures and my selfish “solution” to the problem, about my time

at Horizons and how I dropped out of school.

When I'm finished, she stands up, pulls up her sleeve, and thrusts her arm in front of my face.

"What?" I ask.

She points at a small white scar, high up by her elbow. It's very thin and hardly visible. Now that she's pointed it out, I notice more of them, at least a dozen.

"I used to cut myself," she says. "I was really messed up back in high school. I was pissed at my parents, so I acted out by sleeping around. I felt bad about the sleeping around, so I cut myself. Oh, and I threw up ninety-five percent of what I ate."

I stare up at her, unable to resolve the image she's painted with the gorgeous, confident person standing in front of me.

"My point, Daisy, is that people have fucked-up stuff in their past. It doesn't make them weak, and it doesn't make them unlovable. The fact that you went through that and came out on the other side makes you strong. The *opposite* of weak."

"She's right," Paige says.

"And if he disagrees," Karen goes on, "then he was never worthy of being your friend in the first place, let alone worth giving your heart to."

I smile up at her, my eyes watering. "You know, I always wondered what this would be like."

“What?”

“Having girlfriends.”

She laughs and leans down to hug me.

“You’ve got them now, lady.”

“You guys,” Paige cries, jumping up to join our hug. “You’ll make me cry.”

“Oh, like that would be any different than usual,” Karen scoffs.

I close my eyes, letting myself enjoy the moment without worry or anxiousness. Maybe Karen is right. Maybe *everyone* has messed-up stuff in their past. Maybe it doesn’t make me weak. Maybe the point is that I got through it.

And if getting through all of that made me stronger, maybe it also made me strong enough to finally put my heart on

the line and tell Daltrey how I feel.

Chapter Twenty

Daisy

If I wasn't already excited about our day out, Daltrey's good mood certainly would have gotten me there. "You look like a kid on Christmas morning," I say as I join him in the lobby. "Seriously, you have a goofy-ass grin on your face. Is my company that exciting?"

"Dream on," he says. "I'm just excited about having a day off. I could be spending it with Cash, and I'd still be this happy." He pauses. "Scratch that. I can't even *pretend* that I would be this excited to hang out with Cash."

I laugh. “Well, who would?”

“You mean besides half the female population of the United States?”

“So what’s the plan?” I ask. “Or are we going to stand here in the lobby making fun of your brothers all day?”

“Oh, there’s a plan, miss. Just you wait and see.”

He holds his arm out, and I take it, enjoying the silliness. We walk through the lobby, and I can’t help but notice the number of eyes on him. The word has definitely gotten out that the band is staying here. The hotel security has done a great job so far of ensuring the band’s privacy, but there’s been a pretty steady stream of photographers camped out on the sidewalk outside the main doors. We

head to the back of the lobby, where one of the band's security guys is waiting for us at the entrance to the underground parking garage.

“Hey, Benny,” Daltrey says, bumping fists with the much taller man. “Thanks for doing this, man.”

“No problem, Daltrey. Morning, Daisy.”

I give him a little wave, feeling shy. Benny and Frank intimidate the crap out of me. They're both very nice and professional, but they're also both gigantic, towering over everyone else, their muscly arms barely contained in tight black T-shirts. Of course, intimidating is a pretty important characteristic for a security guard, but I

still feel as if I'm standing in the shadow of a giant whenever I talk to one of them.

"Benny's going to drive for us today," Daltrey tells me. "I was kind of hoping we could get away with using public transportation because that would be way more fun, but I just don't think it would be possible."

"I don't know," I say, as we descend into the stairwell. "I think being chauffeured around town sounds like fun enough."

In the garage, instead of a van, Benny leads us to a sleek black town car.

"Swanky," I say as he opens the door to reveal a roomy leather bench seat. "Thanks, Benny." Once we're settled in our seats, I look around and shake my

head. “We so do not fit the surroundings.”

Daltrey looks down at his clothes. “You think we’re not posh enough?”

He’s dressed in classic rock star jeans—tight, riddled with holes, and held up by a studded belt. His black Led Zeppelin T-shirt is about a million years old, and his grey hoodie and beanie add to the general unkempt impression.

I’m not much better. My dark pencil jeans and black Chucks have seen better days, and my hoodie is plenty baggy and faded. “Yeah, ‘not posh’ is kind of an understatement.”

Benny pulls out of the garage, and we’re immersed in bright morning sunshine. It’s only just past nine, but the

sky is already a clear, bright blue, no clouds in sight. I wonder if we're finally going to get some summer weather, and I'm relieved I remembered to put my cuff bracelets on under my hoodie, in case I need to take it off.

"So where are we going?" I ask. "Or are you going to keep me in suspense all day?"

"I thought we'd get some breakfast first."

"Oh, are we getting bagels?" I had my first taste of bagels and lox from the hotel restaurant earlier in the week, and I was hooked.

Daltrey shakes his head. "Nope. Something better."

I raise an eyebrow, but he doesn't

say anything else. Traffic is pretty heavy, but Benny is a pro at navigating through it. I wonder again how anyone manages to drive in a big city like this.

“So this place is kind of out of the way,” Daltrey says. “We’re going to need to come back up this same way when we’re done. But I thought it would be worth it.”

“What’s so great about it?”

“It just so happens to take your favorite food in the entire world and turn it into a breakfast food.”

My eyes widen. “Mac and Cheese?”

He laughs. “Yeah. They do mac and cheese pancakes. I figured there was no way we could be in New York and not eat that.”

“Holy shit.” I’ve been known to live on macaroni and cheese for weeks on end. The very thought of eating it in pancake form makes my mouth water.

“This place has a reputation. Very good food, like, a ridiculous amount of menu choices, and very strict rules.”

“Rules?”

“Yeah. Your party can’t be any bigger than four. They will straight up kick you out. You also can’t request to share your meal. Everyone has to order something. And they do not make exceptions for people in fairly famous rock bands, F.Y.I.”

“Do you know this from experience?”

He nods. “Yeah. We had heard the

thing about no large parties, so we split into two groups. But then dumbass Cash tried to pull a chair up to our table because he was pissed at Reed about something and didn't want to eat with him."

"Did you guys get kicked out?"

"Cash did. We told the waiter we had no idea who he was."

I burst into laughter. "He had to leave? All by himself?"

Daltrey grins. "Yup. The rest of us enjoyed our food and let him wait outside for us."

"You're mean," I say, laughing.

He shrugs. "It was good for him. He thinks he can get away with whatever he wants just because girls think he's hot."

“Well, to be fair, he usually can.”

Daltrey shakes his head. “Yeah, when we went out to meet him, he was totally hitting on some girl in the parking lot. So he still got a number out of it.”

We get to the restaurant and manage not to break any of the rules. Daltrey was absolutely right about the food. It’s incredible.

“There needs to be a way for me to eat this every day,” I say.

“I don’t think your cholesterol levels would like that much.”

Afterward, Benny drives us back uptown so we can see Central Park. We wander down the paths, pausing to look up the buildings that surround the vast green spaces.

“It’s so weird. When I turn my back and just look out over this”—I wave my hands to encompass the lawns and stones around us—“it feels like we’re a million miles away from the city. But then you turn around and it’s all around us.”

“That’s the beauty of Central Park.”

We make our way around to Strawberry Fields, the John Lennon memorial. There’s a small crowd taking pictures and milling around the Imagine mosaic. A man sits on a bench, playing “In My Life” on his guitar. We pause to listen; he’s very good. When the guy finishes the song, Daltrey pulls two twenties from his pocket and tosses them into the open case. Their eyes meet, and I get the sense the man recognizes him.

Guitar man nods slightly in thanks, and we move on.

“You sure like throwing your money around,” I tease.

“That’s the most fun part,” he says, his tone serious, “being able to brighten someone’s day a little bit. To leave a nice tip just for the hell of it. To pay someone’s bill without telling them. It’s seriously the best perk of this entire experience.”

I shake my head, marveling at this boy. He just spent the night in one of the swankiest, most expensive hotels in New York City. He drives from city to city on a luxurious tour bus that puts most middle-class houses to shame. He spends the day sightseeing with a private

driver. But tipping a busker in Central Park is the highlight of his day.

I love him so much.

I've had to push those feelings down for such a long time. When we were teenagers, Daltrey always had a girlfriend. Few of them were ever serious, horrid Joanie lasting longer than most, but there was generally always someone. After the band recorded their first demo in a local studio the summer before our junior year, he seemed to get a lot more serious about things in his life. He stopped flirting and going through girlfriends as if they were candy and started focusing more on the band and where they were headed.

But still, even with the endless string

of girls out of the picture, I couldn't tell him. A lot of it was cowardice, pure and simple. The idea of laying my heart bare to him scared the hell out of me. But I also didn't want to do anything that would mess up the opportunities that were starting to come his way. The band was getting interest from record producers and managers. He didn't need complications.

So holding in my feelings has become second nature. I'm used to being around Daltrey and wishing we were more, wishing we were holding hands instead of walking side by side, wishing I could brush his hair from his face, touch his lips, bury my head into the little dip of his shoulder. I'm used to wanting those

things, but doing nothing about it. I've had years of practice.

So why is it getting so much harder all of a sudden?

Maybe it's the absence, the being without him, that has dulled my abilities to cover my desire. My heart feels like a desperate thing. I'm like a person who has been denied water so long that her thirst has become overwhelming.

We eat lunch in a Midtown deli, a little place Daltrey heard about from one of the venue staff before the first show. Walking around all morning has made me ravenously hungry, and the thick cuts of turkey and ham on soft-baked white bread are heavenly.

"What now?" I ask, wiping my hands

on my napkin.

“I have an idea,” he says, giving me an appraising look. “But I’m not one hundred percent sure you’ll be into it.”

“No strip clubs,” I say automatically.

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, ’cause that was what I was going to suggest.”

“What then?”

“What would you think about getting your tattoo today?”

My mouth drops open. That was the last thing I was expecting.

“Come on, Daisy. We always said we would go right after graduation, right? That it would be a rite of passage. But we never did it. I think now would be a great time.”

It was true. We had plans to get

tattoos together for ages. Daltrey already had several, along with his eyebrow piercing and several holes in his ears. My dad, however, was always strict about it, telling me in no uncertain times that I wouldn't have one while living under his roof. Daltrey promised me that we'd get it done before I went to college. Once the supporting tour had been lined up and we agreed that I'd come along to work for them, we changed the plan to right after graduation. The tattoo was supposed to represent my independence, my taking control of my own life from my overly strict dad.

“What do you think?” he eventually asks.

Am I at a point now that should be celebrated? Do I want to mark the journey of the last several months? *A rite of passage*, I think to myself. *A celebration*. “Hell yeah!”

Daltrey grins his old child-like, free smile that lights up my insides. “I was hoping you’d say that. I booked us both an appointment at a shop I know.”

I laugh. “That’s awesome. Oh, my God! I’m so excited. I have no idea what I should get. What are you going to get?”

I know I’m babbling, but I can’t help it, and Daltrey doesn’t seem to mind. We’re like kids again, wild and getting into trouble. It feels *great*.

“They have idea books, and the guy we’re going to see is phenomenal. He

can help you choose.”

“When’s the appointment? Can we go now?”

“Of course we can.” He stands and holds out his arm. “After you.”

I jump from the booth and head to the car with Daltrey, my brain spinning with the possibilities.

“You always said you wanted your first one on your shoulder, right? Is that still what you’re thinking?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I thought that was what I wanted, but I won’t be able to see it there, you know? Not without looking in the mirror. Maybe my hip? But then no one else would be able to see it either.”

“My first one was one was on my shoulder. But on the front side, where I

could see it.”

He has the lyrics to “Baba O’Riley”—his favorite song by The Who, sung by his namesake—on his shoulder. Three lines of print, a simple, clean font. It’s my favorite of his half-dozen tattoos.

I realize, immediately, what I want and where. “I got it.”

He raises his eyebrows. “That was fast. You know, this is going to be on your body for the rest of your life.”

“When you know, you know.”

“Yes, you do.” His eyes stay on mine just a beat longer than necessary.

The tattoo parlor is in Brooklyn, and we have to fight heavy traffic to get there. But it gives us time to search for

tattoo designs on our phones. The more I see, the more I feel confident in my decision. Daltrey is going back and forth between song lyrics and adding some tribal designs to his sleeve. He asks me several times what I'm going to do, but I only smile and tap the side of my nose.

I feel comfortable in the tattoo parlor the moment we step through the door. We're greeted by a short, bald guy who appears to be in his late twenties. He and Daltrey do that half-hug, bro-back-slap that guys do. When Daltrey introduces me, Carlos's eyes widen a bit.

"So this is Daisy, huh? I've heard so much about you." He leans forward to kiss my cheek, and I give Daltrey a

questioning look over Carlos's shoulder. Daltrey only smiles.

"Hello," I say, trying not to feel awkward over a stranger touching me. I'm still not great with the human-contact thing. I hope it doesn't make this more difficult. I really want the tattoo now.

As it turns out, I have nothing to worry about. Carlos is easy to be comfortable around. He seems to know Daltrey pretty well for someone who lives so far away, a mystery that is cleared up within minutes of us sitting down at his station to look through his books.

"You'll see one I did for Dalt right there, Daisy," Carlos says, pointing at a cluster of music notes and swirling

clouds in the lower corner of the book.

I look up, surprised. “Really? I’ve never seen it!”

Daltrey’s face seems to pinch slightly. “I have a few you haven’t seen. That I got in the last year.”

“Oh.” I look down, feeling shitty. Of course he would have gotten tattoos this year. He loves body art and has a tendency to get something new every time he has something to celebrate. And there’s been a lot of that in the past year. I just haven’t been around to see it.

“I did that one for him the first time they came out here, back when they were still opening for Grey Skies,” Carlos explains, ignoring the awkwardness. “He came back again a few months later.

What was that for? When you guys were recording?”

Daltrey nods, his eyes on me.

“Well, after that, he realized how he couldn’t live without me and started flying me out to meet them on the road whenever he wanted more ink.”

“He’s done all the guys,” Daltrey says. “Even Lennon.”

“Lennon has a tattoo?” I ask, shocked. I cannot for the life of me picture it.

“Barely,” Daltrey says. “We all got one of the album title when it went gold. We kind of bullied him into getting one. Cash said we’d kick him out of the band otherwise.”

I shake my head. “Mean brothers.”

“So what are we doing today?” Carlos asks. “Who’s first?”

Daltrey looks at me. “Want me to go first, so you can watch? See what it’s like?”

I shake my head. “No, I think that will scare me more. I just want to get it started.”

“I like that,” Carlos says. “You’re brave. Just jump in and go for it.”

I smile, liking the sound of being called brave.

“So what can I do for you?”

I try to ignore Daltrey’s eyes. “I want some words. I like this font, here.” I point at the book.

Carlos peers at where my finger rests on the page. “No problem. Why don’t

you tell me what the words are, and I'll practice the print."

I swallow and look up at Daltrey, meeting his eyes, before reciting the lyrics of the chorus of "Heartache." As I speak, I see his eyes get bigger.

"Wow," he whispers when I'm through. "Daisy that's... that's pretty cool."

I shrug, feeling embarrassed. "That song is pretty damn important to me. It was always my favorite of yours."

He swallows several times. "Mine, too."

Carlos has finished the print, and he shows it to me. "Like this?"

I nod. "Perfect."

"And where are we doing this?"

“Here?” I ask, pointing to my left side. “Like, over my rib cage?”

“Perfect. Okay, I want you to lie down on your side. I’m going to trace it out first to make sure I have the spacing right. It might feel cold.”

Daltrey helps me to hop up onto the table. “You sure about this?” he asks.

I nod. I haven’t been so certain about anything in a long time.

The pain is as bad as I thought it would be, but Daltrey distracts me by telling stories about his brothers and how they had each reacted to their tattoos. “You’re doing much better than Cash,” he says. “He moans and groans like a little baby.”

“It’s true,” Carlos agrees. “Total

wimp.”

I laugh, and Carlos chides, “Don’t move.”

“Then stop making me laugh.”

It takes about forty-five minutes. When he’s done, he gives me a mirror so I can see it. The print is large, each letter about a half-inch high, and the tat stretches from just below my breast down over my ribcage, spanning around my side.

“Perfect,” I whisper. My skin is red and swollen, but my tattoo is still one of the coolest I’ve ever seen.

“You handled it like a pro,” Carlos says. After he wraps up my side with plastic and tape, he stretches. “I’m going to take a little break, then we’ll get

started on you, Dalt.”

Daltrey nods and helps me down off the table. “Impressive,” he tells me. “You barely flinched.”

I nod nonchalantly. “Yeah, I’m a badass.”

He laughs. “I’ll say.”

“So what are you getting?”

He shakes his head. “Oh, no, you’re going to be just as surprised as I was.” He pulls out his phone and taps something in.

“What?”

“Just finding an image.” He slips the phone back into his pocket. “So how’s your dad going to react to this?”

I shrug. “I doubt he’ll ever see it.”

“What if you wear a bathing suit?”

I try to imagine a time when my dad and I might take a happy family vacation to the beach, and I just can't. I don't know if the thought makes me want to laugh or cry.

"You okay?" Daltrey asks. "Are you guys getting along okay?"

I fiddle with the cuffs on my wrists. "We haven't seen each other in a while. Like, Christmas. It's been... I don't know." I sigh heavily. "It's been a weird year."

Carlos returns. "Ready to go?"

Daltrey whips his phone out and shows Carlos the image. "I want this, about three inches high, right here." He points to the inside of his forearm, just below the crease where it meets his

upper arm.

“Sounds good.” Carlos peers at the image for a minute before sketching it on a piece of paper.

Daltrey blocks my view. “Perfect,” he tells Carlos.

“Then let’s go.” Carlos positions Daltrey’s arm on the table and pulls a can of shaving cream and a disposable razor from below his station. “You’re a little hairy there,” he explains, shooting the cream into his hand. After he has the area shaved, he gets out his pen and begins to trace the image of what appears to be a young boy on Daltrey’s arm.

“So what’s the story here?” he asks as he makes more detailed strokes.

Daltrey looks at me. “Carlos here is big on stories. He always wants to know why his clients choose the tats that they do.”

“It’s a big deal,” he argues. “I’m putting something permanently on their body. That creates a bond, you know? You can’t mess around with that.”

Daltrey nods. “True. So when I was a kid, before my mom split, she used to read to me every day.” He looks up at me, his eyes sad. “And when she took off, I really missed it. It was one of the few things that was just for us, not my brothers, and I was so sad when it was gone. No one else in my family ever read to me.”

I feel a lump come to my throat. He

rarely talks about his mom.

“But then we moved, and there was this little girl living in the house next to us.” He smiles at me, his expression less sad now. “A real brainy little thing, total know-it-all.”

I make a face at him, and he laughs softly.

“One day, I saw her reading a book on her lawn, all by herself, without any grown-up helping her. I couldn’t believe it. My brother Lennon couldn’t even read yet, but here was this tiny little thing in pigtails reading like a damn adult.”

He looks back at the sketch, which Carlos is now adding shadows to. “So I ran inside, all excited and found my favorite book—*Where the Wild Things*

Are. My mom used to read it to me all the time, and we'd act out the wild rumpus thing. She would call me her own mad man, just like Max in the book." He gets quiet for a moment, and I realize I'm hardly breathing. I think I know where this particular story goes.

"So I bring the book out to our neighbor, and I ask her if she can read it. Of course she said yes because she totally wanted to show off." He shoots me another smile. "And she read it to me, the whole thing, just like my mom would have done. Didn't even mess up any words."

There are tears in my eyes as I stare at him. That little moment of our shared past seemed so inconsequential at the

time.

“But it made me sad, in the end, you see,” he goes on, his voice softer. He’s telling me the story now, the part of it that I never knew. “Because at the end of that book, the little boy gets tired of being with the wild things. He hears his mother calling him, and he goes home. But my mom was never going to call me home. She didn’t have dinner waiting for me. And I think that was the day I realized she was never coming back.”

“Daltrey,” I whisper, crying in earnest now.

Carlos has finished sketching, and a perfect representation of Max, in his wild thing costume, is on Daltrey’s arm.

Daltrey shakes his head. “I cried,

right there in front of a girl. How embarrassing, you know? But she never teased me, not at all. She just pulled me up from the grass and told me we should pretend like we were the wild things. She made us costumes out of pillow cases and the end of an old mop, and we played and played until I didn't feel sad anymore."

I bury my face in my hands, unable to look at him any longer. I had no idea that day affected him like that. I never understood why he asked me to read to him long after he'd learned to do it himself. I hear the legs of his chair push across the tile floor, and then his arms are around me, pulling me into his chest.

"Thank you for that," he says, a sad

sort of laugh in his voice.

“You’re welcome.”

He rubs my back for a minute or so while I try to calm down. When I’ve stopped crying, he pulls back and looks down into my face. “You okay?”

I nod. “Go get your tattoo.”

He tweaks my nose and goes back to his chair. “She cried more for my tattoo than her own,” he tells Carlos. “Aren’t girls weird?”

Carlos chuckles. “The weirdest.”

“Come sit with me,” Daltrey says. “Come make me forget how bad this hurts.”

I know he’s just joking, but I can’t help but read the double meaning in his words. That’s what we do, after all.

Since the first day we met and learned that we shared the sad distinction of being motherless, we help the other one to forget about the pain.

So I go and sit next to my best friend, just like I did when he cried about his mother, and I hold his hand until it's all over.

Chapter Twenty-one

Daltrey

Some pretty cool things have happened to me over the past year: performing at the Hollywood Bowl, meeting some of my musical idols, touring the country with my band. But this day, here with Daisy in New York, is the most fun I can remember ever having.

After we get our tattoos, we head back out into the city. I show her the Village and Washington Square Park. We take a stroll through the Met, window shop at Barney's, and spend a full hour browsing the books at the

Strand. We even take a river cruise before making our way over to Little Italy for a very late dinner.

As the day goes on, I can feel a delicious sort of tension building between the two of us. It's like we're hurtling towards something, something out of our control, and I don't know if I should be exhilarated or completely terrified. When I realize, over gnocchi and wine in Little Italy, that Daisy is actually flirting with me, I have to fight to keep from cancelling the rest of our plans so I can take her back to the hotel that very minute.

But the last event of the day is the one I've really been waiting for. I had to shell out an absolutely obscene amount

of money to make it happen, and I can only pray it will be worth it.

We have a bit of time to kill so we wander around Midtown again, visiting the fountain at the Lincoln Center, all lit up for nighttime.

“We should go,” I tell her eventually, taking her hand and pulling her toward the steps. “We can’t be late.”

“Where are we going now?” She sounds breathless, happy.

I wish, once again, that I could wrap her up in my arms and kiss her right now. But I want this to be right, have waited too long for it to be anything else. Daisy deserves perfect. “You’ll see.”

Benny drops us right at the foot of the Empire State building, and I think she

knows what's up as soon as she gets out of the car.

"I thought you forgot," she says, shaking her head at me.

"Nope. I just had something special planned."

A woman is waiting for us inside. I've spoken to her several times on the phone, arranging everything.

"Hello," she says, shaking hands with both of us. "My name is Natalie. I'm happy to welcome you to the Empire State Building tonight."

"Thanks," Daisy says, looking at me questioningly.

"Won't you follow me?" She leads us through the packed lobby to the elevator.

“What the hell is going on?” Daisy whispers. “Are you playing the rock star card to get special treatment?”

“Yup.” I watch her face, wondering how she’ll react. “We’re going past the main observation deck, up to the one-hundred-and-second floor. We’ll have the entire place to ourselves.”

She stops, staring up at me. “How’d you manage that?”

I shrug. “I have my ways. I may have slightly exaggerated in the park. There are some other really nice benefits to being in a rock band.”

She shakes her head. Natalie has reached the elevator and is waiting for us.

“Come on,” I say, taking Daisy’s

hand. “Let’s go up.”

In the elevator, Natalie explains that we have the smaller observation deck for twenty minutes before they’ll have to open it to tourists again.

Daisy shakes her head again. I think she might be shocked speechless.

The upper observation deck is quite a bit smaller than the main one down on the eighty-second floor and entirely enclosed by glass rather than open to the elements. Natalie leads us to a door beside the elevator, opening it to reveal a flight of stairs.

“Uh,” Daisy says, looking at me uncertainly. “What the heck is above this?”

“It’s kind of a secret floor,” Natalie

explains. “You’re about to see something most people in this city never will.” She gives me a somewhat stern look. “And we usually don’t do this at night, so please stay right next to me.”

I nod and hold Daisy’s hand all the way up the steps, feeling a little nervous myself. I’m not crazy about heights.

“Holy hell,” Daisy murmurs when we exit the stairwell.

Holy hell is right. We’re on a narrow ledge, nothing but a small barrier between us and the night sky. The view is incredible.

“I didn’t even know this existed,” Daisy says.

“Many don’t,” Natalie replies. “It’s not exactly on the regular tour.”

We're on the top of the world. The island is all lit up below us, the buildings looking like nothing more than toys. I'm relieved Daisy seems content to hang by the door. The thought of her leaning on the barrier makes my palms sweat.

Natalie gives us just enough time on the ledge to take a few pictures before she hustles us back down the stairs. Daisy keeps thanking her profusely. I'm relieved when we reach the enclosed observation deck on the next lower floor. It feels much safer down here.

"I'll wait here by the elevator," Natalie says. "Let me know if you need anything."

I'm still holding Daisy's hand, so I

pull her over toward the windows. As we approach the glass, I see that Natalie has set up a small table with champagne and strawberries for us, just like I asked. We look out over the city. Behind the safety of the glass, I can much better appreciate how beautiful it is.

“You okay?” I ask. “Is it too much?”

Daisy turns to me, eyes wide. “It *is* too much,” she whispers. “How much did it cost to shut down the entire observation deck? You didn’t need to do all this for me.”

I shrug, worried now that she’s unhappy or freaked out. “I just know you love that movie so much. The one where they’re supposed to meet here.”

She smiles. “*An Affair to*

Remember.”

“Yeah.” I laugh at the memory. “I know this isn’t the space you see in the movie, but there’s no way I could have gotten them to shut down the main observation deck for us, rock star or not. I’m sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*?”

I shrug. “It’s your favorite movie. You made me watch it so many times. I used to pray all the time that my brothers would never catch me watching it. They would have crucified me.”

“But you did it anyway,” she says.

I sense that she’s tense, can feel the strain in her hands. She looks rigid, on edge. “Of course I did.”

“Why?”

“Because it made you happy. Because it was *you*.”

Her eyes widen further. “What does that mean?”

Can she really not see? Is it possible that after all of these years, all this time, she hasn’t realized what she means to me? Is that why she left for so long? “Come on, Daisy. You know what it means.”

She shakes her head, looking close to tears. “No, I don’t.”

It’s now or never. There’s a feeling I get in my gut right before I step on stage. It’s a mix of excitement and adrenaline, fear and utter joy. The first step is hard, walking out into the light, but I know, deep down, if I can just take that first

step, the result will be so worth it.

This feels a little like that, the same adrenaline and excitement. But this fear is worse. If I mess up on stage, it's one song. It can be fixed. I can get back in the game. But what if I mess this up? There's no going back, no fixing the disaster that would occur should I break this. But I know that the result, should it work out, will be worth it. Because Daisy is worth it. Daisy is everything. So I take that step, out into the light.

"I love you." My voice is stronger than I expected, no shaking or doubt. The words have been in me for so long, waiting to be freed. Waiting for her. Waiting for this.

Her eyes, so wide just a moment ago,

slam shut, and she takes in a shaky breath.

“I have for years,” I continue. “Forever, probably. Look at me, Daisy, please.”

Her eyelids flutter open, and I see an unfamiliar look there. Panic? Before I can ask, she reaches up and touches my cheek, her fingertips so soft I have to sigh. Then she rises on her tiptoes and kisses me.

It's strange how familiar it feels. It's been years since we've kissed, and it was only a moment at that. So why does this feel like the most natural, normal thing in the world?

If normal means the absolute best feeling I've ever had. If normal means

there are flashes of light shooting off at random in my brain. If normal means every nerve in my body is coiled tightly, arching toward her, aching for her touch, aching for more.

“Daltrey,” she whispers against my mouth. I feel the corners of her lips curling up into a smile. “Daltrey.”

“I love you,” I say again to make sure she heard, make sure she knows.

I want to hear her say it back. Please, *God*, let her feel it, too. But my lips decide they want to kiss her more than they want to hear her speak, so I press them against hers again, parting her mouth with my tongue, feeling as if my heart might explode from the sheer amazingness of it.

Her hands are still on my face. My arms are wrapped around her waist. I don't remember grabbing her, but I still manage to be careful of her newly tattooed side. My hands must have acted on their own accord, needing her as badly as the rest of me did. But I want to feel more than just her back through her hoodie. I dream of her skin sometimes, of the way it feels when I accidentally brush against her. The idea that I get to touch her now, on purpose, makes me giddy.

I slowly rub one palm up over her back, around her shoulder, and down her arms. When I reach the hem of her sleeve, I gently push it back. There's a swatch of leather beneath my fingers,

and it takes me a moment to realize it's that bracelet she sometimes wears. As I allow my fingers to slid past it, to the soft skin of the inside of her wrists, she jerks her hand away as if burned.

“Daisy?”

She practically leaps out of my arms so that her hip hits the wall beside us. She's breathing heavily, her eyes wide and panicked, her face red.

“Are you okay? Did something—”

She turns away from me, her hands going to her face. I watch, stunned, as her shoulders rise and fall with each gasp of breath she takes. Is she having an asthma attack? Daisy doesn't have asthma.

“What's wrong? Did I hurt you?” I

can't imagine what I could have done, what could cause this kind of reaction, but she won't turn back to me, and I can't see her face. "Daisy?"

"I just," she gasps, her voice high pitched and reedy. "I just need a minute, please."

I gingerly reach out to touch her shoulder, thinking I should comfort her.

She jumps again. "Don't touch me!"

I stare at her back, aghast.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It's not your... not your..." She's taking in huge gulps of air, the sound so tortured I'm getting scared.

I turn in a panic, thinking of finding Natalie, of calling for help, but Daisy reaches out a hand, stopping inches

before she makes contact. "Please. Just give me a minute."

"Okay."

Turning her back to me again, she sinks to her knees, leaning heavily on the wall. She takes deep breaths, which slowly sound less and less tortured until I could almost describe them as meditative. After what feels like an eternity, she stands and faces me. Well, her body faces me. Her face is trained directly on the ground. I'm desperate to see her eyes, to get some sense of what is going on in her mind right now.

"I'm very sorry," she says, raspy and low. "That was not your fault."

"What happened?"

"I can't tell you."

“Daisy—”

“No, I mean I *can't*. Not right now. Not without it happening again. Please, don't ask me right now, Daltrey.”

I'm torn. I'm desperate to know what's wrong, yet I want to protect her—even from my own questions. I risk just one. “Was that a panic attack?”

She nods, her head still down.

Since when does she get panic attacks? Is this what nearly happened in the van a few days ago? How could I not know about this?

“Will you take me back to the hotel, please?” she asks, her voice sad. “I'm sorry to ruin such a nice evening.”

“You didn't ruin anything, Daisy.”

Her eyes flick up briefly, to the

champagne on the table and the view beyond it, and I'm pretty sure I see tears on her cheek. But she just shakes her head again, either at herself or at me, and turns toward the elevator.

We ride home in silence. I have no idea what to say to her. I want to comfort her, hold her, but I'm afraid anything I do will set her off again. And I couldn't stand that. I already feel like the worst kind of shit for bringing on that reaction once. I don't think I could handle breaking her again, not like that.

When we're close to the hotel, I lean forward to ask Benny to drop us off at the front, thinking Daisy should get inside quickly, but she interrupts me with a strangled cry. "No!"

“What—”

“The photographers. The fans. They can’t... I can’t. Not right now.”

Benny meets my eyes in the rearview mirror, and I can tell he’s concerned. I nod, and he turns for the parking garage entrance. Daisy has her seatbelt unbuckled before Benny even turns off the car.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, to him or me or both of us, before pushing open her door and running toward the stairs.

“Daisy!” I call after her.

“Is she okay?” Benny asks as I fumble with my seatbelt.

“I have no clue,” I mutter, finally freeing myself so I can follow her. But I’m too late. She’s not in the stairwell,

and she's not in lobby. She's gone, leaving me to wonder, yet again, how in the hell I messed everything up so badly.

I walk, dejected, to the elevators. The day was perfect, one of the best I've ever had in my life. My belief in Daisy and me, in the kind of relationship we could have, was solidified today. We would be so beautiful together, I knew it. And I thought she knew it too. I felt that in her kiss. So why in the hell did she run away from me again?

The elevator doors open, and Lennon steps out. He looks surprised, then his expression quickly turns to concern. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, having no idea how to even begin answering that question.

“Where’s Daisy?”

“I’m assuming she’s in her room.”

“Let’s get a drink.”

I know he can tell something’s wrong. Lennon’s always been good at that kind of thing, and I’m shitty at hiding my feelings. I follow him to the hotel bar, ignoring the stares of the patrons who recognize us, their eyes following us all the way to the bar. Lennon orders two shots of whiskey, and I’m relieved when the bartender doesn’t ask for his ID—I’m sure we’re getting the rock star treatment. Lennon is of age, but I’m not. Drinks in hand, we find a table in a quiet corner.

“What happened?” he asks, sliding one of the shots over to me. “I thought

the two of you were supposed to be spending the day together.”

“We were. And it was... it was great. But then I did something that freaked her out, and she took off.”

“What’d you do?”

I sigh, not really wanting this to be public knowledge.

“Did you tell her how you feel?”

I look into my older brother’s face.

He smiles a little. “I know, Daltrey. It’s pretty obvious.”

I grab my shot glass and down the liquor in one gulp. “Yeah, I told her. She looked a little freaked, but then she kissed me, so I thought...” I feel a horrible ache in my chest, thinking of that moment when she had kissed me

back, when I thought maybe, just maybe, she felt the same way I did. That hope is gone, leaving behind an emptiness that physically hurts.

“So she kissed you then freaked out?”

“Pretty much.”

“Something’s going on with her, Daltrey,” Lennon says. “I’m sure of it. She’s different than she used to be. I could tell the minute I saw her. Besides, her disappearing last year is not like her.”

“All she would tell me is that she had a hard time with kids at school and ended up in therapy. But tonight... she had a panic attack, Len. Just ’cause we kissed. It was... it scared the hell out of me.”

“There’s got to be more to it,” he says, idly running a finger along the rim of his glass.

“Well, if there’s more to it, she’s not talking.”

He looks up at me, his gaze sharp. “And you’re just going to be okay with that?”

“Of course I’m not, but I can’t force her to talk if she doesn’t want to.”

“No, you can’t force her. But you can sure as hell try.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Daltrey, after she stopped returning your calls last year, what’d you do about it?”

I wish I hadn’t drunk my whiskey so fast. “I didn’t do jack about it.”

“And haven’t you felt like shit about that ever since?” he asks. “Haven’t you spent the last year wondering what you could have differently?”

“Yeah, Lennon, I have. Thanks for bringing that up.”

“I’m just saying, little brother, that it looks to me like you’re repeating history right now. Something freaked her out, she took off, and you let her go. That’s what it really comes down to, you know? You letting her go.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I’m getting pissed now. Is it too much to ask that he just be supportive? Couldn’t he just get me drunk and be done with it?

“Hey, look at me. This is important,” he says, his voice low and serious.

“You’re supposed to *fight* for her, Daltrey.”

He’s right, totally, completely right. How many times over the past year have I wished I could do things differently, go back and convince her to give me another chance? Didn’t I promise myself I would never again let her go without a fight?

“I have to go,” I say, standing. “I have to go talk to her.”

He nods once. “Good luck, man.”

The elevator takes forever, and repeatedly pressing the button does nothing to hurry it. When the doors open, what seems like a dozen people file out, every one shuffling at a painfully slow pace. It’s all I can do to not scream at

them to hurry the hell up.

I know it only takes a minute or so for the elevator to take me to Daisy's floor, but it's still an eternity. When the doors finally slide open, I'm facing Paige.

I hold back a groan. "Hey, Paige." I move to go around her, but she takes my sleeve.

"I think Daisy needs you."

My stomach sinks. "Is she okay?"

"She's packing."

"No," I whisper. "She can't go."

"Did something happen today? Because she won't talk to me. She's just... crying. I left to see if I could find you."

"Do you think she'll let me in?" I ask,

panicking.

“Here.” Paige slips her key into my hand. “Just in case.”

I’m standing in front of Daisy’s door when I even realize I didn’t thank Paige. Oh, well. I knock quickly. No response. I knock again. “Daisy? Let me in, please.”

She still doesn’t answer.

“Oh, fuck it.” I slide Paige’s key into the slot and open the door.

Daisy gapes at me. “How’d you get in here?”

“Paige gave me a key. She’s worried about you. What are you doing?”

She goes back to shoving things haphazardly into her bag. “I need to go, Daltrey. This was all a big mistake.”

“How can you say that? Daisy, please don’t do this.”

She pauses, and her hands are shaking. “I have to. I’m so embarrassed. I’m obviously not strong enough to be here. I’m sorry.”

“Stop it. Just stop. You have nothing to be sorry or embarrassed about.”

Her face crumples. “Of course I do! The one thing I always dreamt of finally happens, and what do I do? I freak the fuck out.” She raises her hands to her hair, her face so tortured I can barely register the fact that she just described our kiss as something she dreamed of. “Why can’t I just be normal?”

I step forward and grab her hands. “Stop. Please just tell me what’s going

on. I want to help you.”

She shakes her head, more tears running down her face. “You can’t. If I tell you, you’ll hate me.”

I smile sadly. “Not possible.”

“It is, Daltrey. You’ll never look at me the same way. And I don’t think I can stand that.”

“So you’d rather leave? You’d rather I *never* looked at you instead?”

Her body seems to sink in on itself, as if she’s crumbling. I pull her into my arms, rubbing her back and whispering into her hair.

“Daisy, I love you. I’ve always loved you. I need you, please. I don’t think I can handle it if you run from me.”

Her entire body shakes with her sobs.

“I need you, too. I’m so scared, Daltrey.”

“You don’t need to be scared. Whatever it is, I’ll help you.”

She pulls back, wiping at her eyes. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to—”

“Stop apologizing. Seriously. Let’s go to my room. I can make you some tea.”

She lets me take her hand and lead her into the hallway. I’m grateful that we don’t run into anyone else. Safely in my suite, I push her down into the couch and go to the wet bar to try to figure out how the fancy individual-serving coffee/tea maker works.

Once I’ve brewed her a cup of questionable-strength tea, I join her on

the sofa. She seems a lot calmer, her breathing returned to normal and her tears mostly stopped.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, Daisy, but I need you to know that you can trust me. And I think it would help if you just tell me what’s going on.”

She releases her breath in a rush and holds out her cup. “Will you hold this?”

I take her tea, a little puzzled. She pushes up both her sleeves, past her elbows. She goes for the clasp of her right bracelet then pauses, her fingers trembling.

“What?” I ask, confused.

She shakes her head, takes off the cuff then removes the left one. I can tell she’s holding her breath as she holds out

her hands, palms up.

My first thought is that she's lost more weight than I realized. Her wrists look tiny, fragile, and her pale skin is practically translucent. Then I see the scars.

My breath leaves me, and my heart stops beating. "What is that?" My voice sounds like a stranger's, high pitched, panicked. I can't wrap my brain around those scars, around the meaning of those scars. Daisy, my beautiful sunshine girl, did that to herself?

She's crying again, but there are no sobs this time. Silent tears stream steadily and unchecked down her cheeks.

"Why?" I whisper, the pain of what

I'm seeing almost strangling me.

"After you left, Justin D'Angelo asked me out." Somehow, even through the tears, she keeps her voice steady and flat. "I figured why not, you know? He seemed nice, and I'm not going to pretend I wasn't lonely." She glances up then averts her eyes again.

It's strange than even in the horror of this moment, I can feel jealousy stabbing through me like a hot blade, at the idea of her with another guy.

"We hooked up a few times. He took pictures of me one time, when we were together. I thought he was just messing around. I made him delete them, and he said he did but..."

"Oh, God."

“He dumped me not long after. I think it was a game for him, you know? See if he could get hotshot Daltrey Ransome’s girl. The pictures started going around the school less than a week later.”

I stand abruptly, spilling hot tea onto my hands. I forgot I was holding her mug. The scalding barely registers. I don’t know what I’m going to do exactly, but I have to do something. Preferably get on a plane and go kill that son of a bitch.

“Dalt, sit down. Please.”

Only the sound of her voice, pleading and needy, could get through to me in this minute. I release a long breath and sit, setting the mug on the coffee table. “Sorry.”

She stares down at the couch. “It was... pretty bad. There were some girls who were thrilled to be able to take me down a few notches. They put the pictures all over the Internet.” She swallows hard, closing her eyes for a moment. “Then they started... they called me a lot, sometimes in the middle of the night. They’d call me names and threaten me. If I didn’t answer my cell, they’d call the house. I didn’t want my dad to hear—”

“So you answered.”

She nods. “I started getting freaked out about things. Everyone was always talking about me and looking at me. Pointing. And they’d all seen... they all knew exactly what I look like. I... I had

panic attacks when people would look at me. They thought that was hilarious. It got really hard to be at school.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I ask, feeling sick to my stomach. All of this happened to her, and she’d been alone. She shouldn’t have been alone.

“At first I didn’t want you to know because I was embarrassed. And I didn’t want you to worry when everything was going so well for you. I know how important the band’s success is to you. I wasn’t going to be the one to ruin it.”

“Daisy—”

“And then you got so famous, and I started seeing you on TV. There were always crowds around you, always people. I knew I couldn’t be near that. I

could barely make it through a day at school.”

“I would have come home. I would have kept you away from it all.”

“I wouldn’t have let you.” She shakes her head. “Eventually, it got back to my dad. You remember Mrs. Goodwin, the math teacher? She saw someone passing one of the pictures and realized what was going on. That was the worst part. Mrs. Goodwin went online, her and the guidance counselor, and they found everything.” A shudder goes through her body. “Once the school found out, I figured it would get better. But there was no way for the school to police how those kids talked to me. How they looked at me. And the school said they

had no authority to do anything about the kids' online behavior."

"What the fuck?" I know my voice is too loud, know I need to calm down, but I'm so beyond angry at everyone who allowed this to happen.

She goes on as if I didn't interrupt. "My dad got a lawyer, and there were court orders for the pictures not to be distributed. Then he made me go to therapy. When we first met the doctor, she wanted Dad to be there and she... she asked a bunch of questions about our family." Her voice is shaking again, and I wonder what other terrible thing she could possibly have to tell me. "And I found out... I found out my mom..."

I realize what she's going to say the

moment before the words leave her mouth, and I feel a crashing wave of despair wash over me.

“She killed herself, Daltrey. That’s how she died. He lied to me all these years. She didn’t have an accident, and she wasn’t who he told me she was. She was too weak and broken to stick around for her kid.” Daisy lets out a little moan. “She didn’t love me enough. And she wasn’t strong enough.”

I can’t listen to her voice sounding so broken and anguished for a second longer. I reach for her. She falls into my arms, and I pull her onto my lap.

“All I could think was that she was weak, and so was I. I had her blood in my veins. I could hardly make it through

the day. I didn't trust anyone anymore. Everything in my life was cruel and heartless. What if it was always that way? What if there was no hope?" Her tears keep falling. "And all I could think was that if she couldn't get through it, neither could I. She had a husband and a baby, and she couldn't deal. I had nothing."

"You had me." I'm crying now, too, crying for the girl I love and all she's lost. And I'm crying some for myself because I don't know if I'll ever be enough to make her forget. "I thought about you every single day, wished for you and prayed for you. All I wanted was you, no matter where we went or what we did. You had me."

“I needed you, Daltrey. I needed you so bad.”

“You have me.” I kiss her again, her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids. “You’ll never lose me. You have me, Daisy, and you won’t ever be alone again.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Daisy

What in the hell were we waiting for?

That's the only cognizant thought I can come up with as my lips find Daltrey's again. How much time have we wasted when we could have been doing *this*?

I told him everything, showed him the scarred, broken part of me, and he didn't run or push me away. Instead, he held me and cried with me until I was sure I would break with the pain of it. And after all of that, he still wants me.

I can feel it in the way he kisses me

so desperately, as if he can't get enough. He trails his fingers across my face and holds me tightly to him until I'm sure I won't be able to breathe. Daltrey wants me. He *loves* me.

"I don't want to waste any more time," he says, pulling back so he can look into my eyes. "I want this with you. Forever."

I nod, reaching for him again, but he turns to grab a tissue from the side table. He brings it to my face, wiping away my tears so gently it somehow makes me want to cry all over again. He grabs another tissue for himself.

"Better?" he asks. "Or do you want more tea?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

“Your poor little eyes,” he murmurs, running his fingertips beneath them. “I hate it when you cry.”

“I’m sorry I look so gross. I imagined this moment a lot of times, but I never imagined it with swollen eyes and a red face.”

He laughs. “Do you really not know how beautiful you are to me right now?”

“Whatever—”

“No, not whatever, Daisy. You’re perfect.”

The look in his eyes tells me he actually means it. A man so gorgeous his face is plastered on magazines actually thinks *I’m* beautiful.

He gives me that ridiculous smile that takes my breath away. “Now kiss me

again.”

My lips find his, and I can't help but exhale against his mouth. I feel so relieved. Relieved to be here, finally, where I've always wanted to be. Relieved that he, somehow, wants me too, even after everything I've told him.

“Daisy,” he whispers, and there's relief in his voice too. “Finally.”

“I need you. I need you, Daltrey.”

He moans and presses his lips harder against mine. Then his tongue is gently running along my mouth, and I open for him, greedily taking him in. I whimper the moment my tongue touches his, the sensation better than anything I could imagine.

Suddenly, his hands are everywhere,

as if my whimper was the permission he'd been waiting for. They press into my lower back, against the swell of my ass, up over my sides, so gentle over my tattoo, until he's cupping my breasts. I press my body against him, wanting more.

He pulls away, and I gasp, my need for him almost painful. He falls to his knees in front of me, his head tilted back, so he can stare up at me. Slowly, he lifts his hands to the hem of my shirt and begins to push it up over my belly. Impatient, I grab my shirt and pull it over my head.

"You're so gorgeous," he whispers.

I laugh a little, but the sound comes out broken. "You've seen me in a bikini

before, Daltrey.”

He shakes his head. “Not the same.” Then he presses his lips to my stomach, kissing my skin softly.

I gasp, threading my fingers into his golden hair. He kisses a trail across my skin as far as he can reach. Heart pounding, I reach behind me and unclasp my bra. He makes a strangled noise in his throat and reaches up to grasp the straps on my shoulders. He pulls them down so slowly I think I’m going to explode from the anticipation. Finally, the cups fall away from my chest.

Daltrey goes very still. “You have no idea,” he says gruffly, “no idea how long I’ve wanted this.”

I can only shake my head, knowing he

can't understand the depth of my yearning for him. I've been waiting for this moment my entire life.

I take his hands, and place them over my breasts. He groans, squeezing gently before he releases me and takes my hands. I'm disoriented, and it takes me a few seconds to realize that he has brought my wrist to his mouth. First one and then the other, he kisses my scars.

"I love every inch of you," he says, his voice thick. "Every joy in your heart and every mistake in your past. I love you, Daisy. All of you."

I'm crying again, and he stands, pulling me against him. He kisses the tears from my eyelids before kissing my lips again. He walks me backward until

the backs of my knees hit the bed, and then we're falling into the mattress, Daltrey on top of me, his lips trailing paths of fire across my cheek, my collarbone, my breasts. I struggle to free him from his T-shirt, my hands getting tangled in the fabric until he helps me.

Once he's pulled off his shirt, he hovers over me, his bare skin inches away. I run my trembling fingers up over his belly. The muscles contract at my touch until I reach his chest. And then I register what I'm seeing. An unfamiliar tattoo, a small, simple flower I've never seen. One he must have gotten in our year a part.

A single daisy, right over his heart.
"Daltrey."

He smiles down at me, but there's pain in his eyes. "I told you, you always had me. No matter what."

I reach for his face, needing his lips on me, and he eagerly complies. My entire mind is focused on him, my whole heart caught up in his movements, his kisses, his fingers. He unbuttons my jeans and pulls down the zipper. When his fingers slip into my panties and brush against me, I cry out and grab his shoulders. I come hard, just from his touch.

He smiles down at me, the most beautiful, triumphant grin I've ever seen. "We're going to be so good together, Daisy. I've always known it."

I can only continue to cling to him,

knowing I'll be lost if I let go. He kisses me while he removes first my jeans and then his own. Kisses me while he tugs my panties down. Kisses me while he slides deep inside of me, finding the place he should have always been.

"I love you," I gasp, looking up at him. He's gorgeous, moving inside of me, so much concentration and joy and ache in his face. I tell him so. "You're beautiful."

He gives a short laugh. "You have no idea what beauty is, Daisy." His eyelids flutter closed. "My Daisy."

He's wrong, though. I do know beauty, because I know what it is to love him, this kind, loyal, talented, passionate man. There's never been beauty like

him. I lived in the world without him, colorless and cold, for far too long to doubt that.

I try to tell him, but I can't form words. It feels too good, Daltrey on top of me and inside me, surrounding me, overwhelming me with his body and his kisses and his whispers of love. I can only whisper his name as I hold him and fall into oblivion, him right behind me.

Chapter Twenty-three

Daisy

I wake up to bright light, which is strange because Karen is fanatical about shutting the blinds before she goes to sleep. I open one eye. A heavy arm is draped across my waist, a tattooed arm that most definitely does not belong to Karen or Paige.

Everything that happened last night comes back to me in a rush. Kissing Daltrey at the Empire State building. Coming back here and telling him everything. The way he held me and told me that he loved me, how we kissed,

how his hands felt on every inch of my body.

Holy shit! I slept with Daltrey last night. After years of dreaming about him, wishing for him, it had actually happened. He said he loved me, that he wanted me, and we had sex.

“You awake?” he whispers.

I turn slightly and look up to see him smiling down at me. “Good morning,” I whisper, my cheeks going hot.

His grin grows, taking on a bit of an arrogant turn. “Good morning. You’re pretty when you blush.”

I smack his arm. “No teasing.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me against his body. “Oh, there will be plenty of teasing. Just like there’s

always been.”

I snuggle into him, kissing his shoulder. “I guess that’s okay with me.”

“Nothing’s going to change, Daisy. You and I will continue to be best friends who tease each other and have ridiculous amounts of fun together. Only now there will be more kissing.”

I laugh against his chest. “I can handle that.” I yawn loudly. “What time is it, anyhow?”

“It’s pretty early. Go back to sleep.”

“When do you need to get up?”

“We have a band meeting in a few hours. I’ll try not to wake you.”

“It’s okay,” I murmur, warmth from his body spreading through me. “I don’t mind if you wake me up.”

I try to stave off sleep for as long as I can, enjoying the feeling of his bare skin against mine far too much to want to miss a moment of it. But it's so comfortable here in his bed, his fingers brushing through my hair. And after all of our walking and all of the emotional purging of yesterday, I'm pretty tired.

The next thing I know, he's leaning over me, kissing my forehead.

"Daltrey?"

"Shh. I'll be back, okay? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Have a good meeting," I whisper, my eyelids fluttering closed again. The last thing I feel is his lips on mine before sleep claims me again.

For the first time in a long time, all

my dreams are happy ones.

“Are you whistling?” Karen asks, staring at me from the doorway of the crew bus. “I’ve never heard you whistle.”

Paige peeks around from behind her. “Daisy! There you are. We were worried about you.”

“Seems like we worried for nothing,” Karen says, crossing her arms. “She looks pretty damn happy to me.”

“You’d be happy too,” I say, leaning back in my seat, “if you’d spent your night being ravished by a famous rock star.”

After a moment’s pause, they both

start shrieking.

Paige practically knocks Karen over in her hurry to get into the bus. “Oh, my God!”

“You little slut!” Karen cries, laughing, as she throws her arms around me.

“Shut up,” I say, around my own giggles. “Everyone will hear you.”

“Who cares?” Karen says. “If I slept with a member of Ransom I’d want the whole world to know.”

I shove her away, rolling my eyes. “Well, I don’t.”

“Oh, Daisy,” Paige says, looking like she might cry, “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’m pretty damn happy, too.”

“So what happened?” she asks, pulling me to the couch. “When I saw you packing, you seemed so upset.”

I tell them all about the day Daltrey and I shared, pausing to allow them to squeal at all the romantic parts. When I tell them about freaking out, and how I told him everything, they both get quiet, squeezing my hands.

“But then it didn’t matter, not really, because he loves me anyhow,” I say.

“Aww,” Paige sighs, while Karen says, “A point which he made clear by boning you all night?”

“Karen!” Paige yells.

But I only laugh. Nothing’s going to bother me, not today. Everything seems a hundred times funnier, the world around

me brighter, cleaner, more beautiful. It's a world in which Daltrey loves me, and nothing can change that.

After they've drilled me for as many details as they can get, I decide we should start earning our keep. "We need to get going," I say. "There's work to do."

We grab the boxes of extra merchandise and make our way into the venue. There's more in the storage areas under the bus, and it takes us the better part of an hour to get everything into the building. I don't see anyone from the band while we work.

I slipped out of Daltrey's room before he came back from the band meeting, so I haven't seen him since he

left this morning. Even though I know it's ridiculous, I miss him already.

I thought that finally being able to kiss him, to touch him however I wanted, would dull the desire I've felt for him all these years, but I was wrong. If anything, having a taste of him makes me want him all the more. By lunchtime, I'm seriously regretting my decision not to wait in his bed for him to come back. I should just live in his bed.

"Hey, Levi," Paige calls.

I look up from the stack of hoodies I'm folding to see Levi striding across the venue lobby toward us. I smile in greeting, but it slips from my face when I see how serious he looks.

"Hey," I say as he reaches the merch

table. “What’s up?”

“Have you seen Daltrey?”

I frown. “Not since this morning. I saw him before the meeting.” I can’t help the blush that floods my cheeks, but he gives no indication that he notices.

“No one’s seen him *since* the meeting,” he says, running his hands through his hair. He looks stressed, a fact that sends a chill through me. Levi is never stressed. He takes everything as it comes, the calm center of the storm for all the band members.

“What do you mean no one’s seen him?” I ask.

“He left the meeting to go upstairs to his room for a few. We were supposed to meet back in the lobby to get to the

photo shoot, and he never came down. When we went up to his room, no one was there.”

“What?” I’m definitely scared now.
“Did you call him?”

“He’s not answering. I got a text from him about a half hour later telling me that he was fine but taking care of something and to tell his dad sorry.”

“*What?*”

He shakes his head. “That’s exactly what I texted back. But he never responded, and he hasn’t answered anyone all day.”

“Did he take Frank or Benny with him?”

Levi doesn’t answer immediately, and I realize he’s scared too. Sure, he’s

stressed and probably worried about work-related repercussions, but below that, he's afraid. "No," he finally says. "He didn't take either of them. As far as we can tell, he's alone."

"Let me try," I say, pulling out my phone. I press Dalton's number on my Contacts list, and put the phone to my ear. Straight to voicemail. Frowning, I send a text.

Where are you?

I stare at my phone, expecting to hear from him any second. Daltrey never makes me wait. But he doesn't text back.

After a few minutes, Levi sighs. "Let me know if you hear from him, okay? Everyone is pretty pissed. We had a full schedule today."

I shake my head. “I don’t understand. What could he have to take care of that he wouldn’t want us to know about?”

Levi shakes his head. “All I can say is he better be back before the show. I might be able to hold off one or two, but I don’t think I’ll be able to stop all of his brothers from killing him.”

I try to stay busy, hoping it will keep the anxiousness at bay, but I’m fighting a losing battle. What could Daltrey possibly be doing? It’s not like him to take off without a word, and it’s definitely not like him to shirk his responsibilities to the band. It took him weeks to build up the resolve needed to get yesterday off from work. Why would he follow that with a vanishing act?

A cold feeling of dread begins to wind its way through my stomach. What if there's a good reason for him taking off? What if it has something to do with me? Could he be freaking out about what happened between us?

I'll be back as soon as I can. Those were his last words to me this morning. What the hell could have happened between then and now to change his mind?

The girls and I finish up with our prep work about an hour after Levi drops his bombshell. I still haven't heard a word from Daltrey.

I'm relieved when Levi returns as

we're leaving the venue. But my hopes that he might have news are dashed as soon as he gets close enough to see his face.

"Hey," he says, his hands in his pockets. "You guys finished?"

"Yup," Karen says, rolling her shoulders. "We're going to be short on styles twenty-three and seventeen in the next few days."

He takes out his phone and enters the information. "Thanks, I'll talk to Dan about the orders."

"What are you doing?" Paige asks, peering at his face. I can tell that she reads the same thing from his expression: he's stressed out.

"I was just going to start inventory on

some equipment,” he says. “You guys want to help?”

“Sure,” Karen says. “All of this physical work has done amazing things for my arms. I haven’t had to work out in weeks. This shit is better than a Jillian Michaels DVD.”

Levi leads us to the equipment trailer. Once he has the girls started on counting various cords and wires, I grab his arm and pull him a few feet away. “Still nothing?”

“Nothing. Everyone is freaking out. They had their second session with that *Rolling Stone* interviewer today. They had to tell him that Dalt was sick, and they would make sure to set up a time for a one-on-one interview later in the

week, but the guy was not happy about it.”

“I just don’t get it,” I say. “Did something happen at the meeting? Was he fighting with Cash or something?” I once again remember him promising that he would be back. “Did he, uh, say anything about us?”

Levi looks at me sharply. “Like what?”

I shrug, totally uncomfortable. “We spent the day together yesterday. I just wondered if maybe I did something to upset him.” I think of freaking out all over his beautiful Empire State Building surprise and of all the things I confessed last night. My stomach clenches in embarrassment. What if he decided in

the cold light of day that I was too broken to deal with?

“Did he seem upset to you?” Levi asks, his eyes boring into mine.

“No,” I say quickly. I’m not about to tell him about spending the night with Daltrey.

He looks as if he wants to ask something more, but Mr. Ransome approaches us from the other end of the parking lot.

“Daisy,” Daltrey’s dad says, his voice brisk, “I’m glad I found you. Do you have a minute?”

I look at Levi helplessly then nod and follow Mr. Ransome over to the band bus. He and I have never been particularly close, even in all the years I

spent hanging around his house. He tolerated me for the most part, I think, because he knew how much Daltrey relied on me. Beyond that, though, I was pretty sure he considered me someone who was just in the way. Since I rejoined the boys on the tour, he's barely spoken two words to me. Then again, he always seems to be rushed, so maybe it's not personal.

Or maybe it is. As soon as we step onto the bus, he turns to face me. The anger and suspicion are clear in his eyes.

"I'd like to know what exactly happened between you and Daltrey yesterday."

I clear my throat. I'm having trouble

meeting his eyes, all my insecurities flooding back at the first indication of anger. “Um... we spent the day sightseeing in New York.”

He waves a hand. “I know that. I mean, what happened when you went running away from him in the parking garage?”

My eyes widen with surprise. Daltrey told him that?

“I talked to Benny this morning,” he says, and I feel slightly better. “He told me the two of you appeared to have some kind of fight, and you took off running. Is that true?”

In spite of my growing anxiousness, I feel a slight flare of annoyance. “I don’t really see how that’s your business.”

His face hardens further. “Really? I think the reasons behind my son’s disappearance are very much my business.”

“He didn’t leave because of that,” I say, though I’m not entirely sure myself. “We talked. We’re fine. I saw him this morning before the meeting, and he wasn’t upset at all.”

“Did you sleep with him last night?”

I take a step back, shocked by his rudeness. “That is *definitely* none of your business.”

“Listen to me, Daisy. I always had my concerns where you and Daltrey were concerned. I never thought it was a good idea that he spent so much time with you. When you completely cut him

off last year, I knew I was right.”

My cheeks flame. I can't believe he's actually talking to me like this.

But he goes on. “He was a mess after that. It really affected his playing. You nearly ruined all of this for him, Daisy. Do you realize that?”

I swallow, tears coming to my eyes. I'm determined not to let him see me cry, so I dip my head and focus on the sleeves of my shirt. I pull them down a little out of habit, before I look up at him again. His eyes, too, are on my sleeves. When he meets my gaze again, I have the strangest thought: he knows.

“I'm sorry for upsetting Daltrey,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “It was a hard time for me, too. But he and I

have worked through it, so I really don't think it's right for you to throw it back at me right now. It's between me and him."

He's quiet for a moment, and it takes all of my strength to hold his gaze. "Let me just say this, then. If you have any idea, any idea at all, of where he might be, I highly suggest you tell me right now."

"If I had any idea of where he might be, I would go out and find him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." I stumble from the bus and out into the sunshine. It's another gorgeous summer day, but that does nothing to ease the chill in my veins.

"Are you okay?" Levi asks as I approach the trailer.

I wonder if I look as freaked out as I feel. I nod and immediately set to work, not wanting to talk about my conversation with Daltrey's dad.

It's hard not to think about it, though. It's clear to me that Mr. Ransome no longer just tolerates me; he actively dislikes me. He thinks I'm bad for his son and bad for the band.

You nearly ruined all of this for him. I suck in a deep breath as my eyes begin to sting. The problem is, he's right. I know what I put Daltrey through when I stopped talking to him. And I know what I put him through last night. I can't even be sure that I'm *not* the reason he took off today.

He promised me he'd be back. For

the rest of the afternoon I repeat his words over and over in my head, holding onto the memory like a lifeline as I work. He promised me he'd be back.

Daltrey does come back, but not for many hours. Shortly after my conversation with Mr. Ransome, word starts to get around to the rest of the crew and the venue staff about what's going on. There are rumors that the show will need to be cancelled. In fact, about an hour before the doors are supposed to be open, everyone is kicked out of the dressing room so the band can decide what to do.

As I follow the rest of the crew into the hallway, Reed takes my arm. “You really don’t know where he is?” he asks, his eyes searching mine.

“You think I wouldn’t tell you if I did?” I ask, stung. It’s one thing for his dad to doubt me, but Reed is my friend, practically family.

His face softens. “If he asked you not to, you wouldn’t. The two of you would have each other’s back until the end of the world.”

I smile a little. “I’m scared, Reed. I don’t know where he is, I promise you. I’m going out of my head here.”

“He’s probably just rebelling, Daisy. You gave him a taste of the free life yesterday, and he decided he’d like a bit

more.”

Before I can respond, his dad barks, “Reed, let’s go!”

I slip into the hallway, closing the door behind me. I hear a phone ring down the hall and turn to see Levi putting his cell to his ear.

“Where the hell are you?” he snaps.

A balloon of relief swells up in my chest. It must be Daltrey.

Levi strides toward the dressing room, shaking his head at me as he passes. “You can tell him yourself, ass. Don’t put me in the line of fire.” He throws open the dressing room door and marches in, slamming it behind him.

I know it’s completely juvenile, but I press my ear to the door, desperate to

know what's going on.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?” Mr. Ransome yells. There's a long pause then he says, “Just get back here. Now!”

There's a loud outbreak of grumbling, and I imagine that he must have hung up.

“Did he say what was going on?” Lennon asks above the tumult.

I don't hear the response, just more indistinguishable arguing punctuated by the occasional shout or curse from one of them.

A moment later, the door opens again and Levi slips out, shutting it behind him. “That kid, I swear to God.”

“What's going on? Where is he?”

He takes my hand and tugs me down the hall to a small, unoccupied office space. “I have no idea. All he would say is that he’s on his way, he’ll be here before the show starts, and don’t call it off.”

“That’s it?”

Levi nods, running his hands through his hair. “I thought his dad was going to put his fist through a wall.” He gives me rueful grin. “Mr. Ransome is not the type of person to be appeased easily.”

“He wasn’t fond of the lack of information, I take it.”

Levi snorts. “Not much.” He looks down at his watch. “Well, if the show’s going on as planned, I guess I have work to do.”

“Do you need anything?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Better get out to the table, though. They’ll be opening the doors in a few.”

On my way back to the table, my phone buzzes with a text. *So sorry, babe. I’m on my way back. I hope you didn’t worry all day. I’m fine. We’re fine. I love you.*

I breathe a sigh of relief as I shove my cell back into my pocket. I desperately want to know where he’s been, but at the same time, I no longer feel anxious or scared, certainly not mistrusting. If he says he had something to do, I believe him.

“What’s up?” Karen asks as I approach the table.

“Game on,” I say, joining them. “He just called.”

“Oh, thank God.” Paige looks toward the door. “I would not want to be the person who has to go out and tell that crowd the show’s off.”

“Yeah,” Karen says. “You’d be mauled. So where was he?”

I shrug. “Levi says he just told his dad that he was on his way and not to cancel. He sent me a text apologizing but not giving me any details.”

“Hmm,” Karen says thoughtfully. “So he’s just been gone for what, seven hours? And no one knows where? That’s a long time to just be taking a break.”

“I know.” I lean against the table. “Last night was really intense, you

know? I told him everything. I even showed him my scars. That's a lot to take in. Maybe he just needed to think it all over."

"I guess so," Paige says, but she doesn't sound convinced. I don't blame her. It doesn't sound anything like Daltrey.

The doors open a few minutes later, and we're inundated with a steady crowd in no time, the throngs of Ransom fans having no idea how close they came to missing seeing their favorite band play. After a while, the opener starts inside the theater.

"I wonder if they get tired of playing the same shit over and over again," Karen asks, as the familiar strains of

their first song drift out to us. The Pat Johnson Band hasn't changed their set list much in the weeks we've been working on the tour.

I don't fully relax until we're finally able to close up and go backstage. I pray I get the chance to see Daltrey before they go on. It's been hours since he left me in his bed, hours of doubt and worry and fear. The only thing that will relax me is his lips on mine.

We reach the back hallway and walk right into a madhouse. All three members of the band are being held back by various roadies, each one screaming and yelling. And there, in the middle of the hall, is Daltrey.

He sees me, and his face lights up.

He pushes past the roadies and his father, who is also yelling, and strides toward me.

“Where are you going?” Cash yells. “Get back here so I can punch that smug little face of yours!”

“Rain check, Cash,” he calls over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off me, seemingly oblivious to the drama he’s caused. “Hey, girls,” he says to Paige and Karen, before grabbing my arm and pulling me into the same abandoned office Levi and I had talked in earlier.

He shuts the door behind us, and before I can say a word, he has me pressed against the wall, his body flush against mine. His lips attack me with a passionate fervor. I moan, the fire of his

mouth making me forget all about the mess he's created.

"Sorry," he whispers against my mouth. "I'm sorry I didn't call."

"Where were you? You scared me."

His face falls. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just needed to take care of something, and it took longer than I planned. Can I tell you about it later?"

I look up into his gorgeous blue eyes, so serious and pleading. I think of how long it took me to get up the courage to tell him my secret. "Of course. I'm just glad you're back."

He smiles, looking over my shoulder at the door. "I don't think everyone out there would say the same."

I laugh. "Your brothers are going to

murder you.”

“You joke, but I think they actually might.”

“Tell them to suck it. They can’t go out there without the great Daltrey Ransome to sing his pretty songs.”

He laughs, and as his head tilts back the light hits his face differently. I spot a reddish shadow around his eye. I reach up and brush my finger across the skin then jerk back when he winces. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing.” He releases me and moves back a step. He reaches up to pull off his beanie and runs his fingers through his tousled hair. There’s blood on his knuckles.

I gasp. “Daltrey?”

“Later, right?” he says softly. “You said we could talk about it later.”

I can't force him to tell me, and I need him to know that he can trust me, the way he proved I could trust him. “Okay.” I say, though a sick feeling of worry has lodged in my stomach. “Okay.”

Someone pounds on the door, and Daltrey seems to relax, which is kind of funny since it's probably his dad or one of his brothers coming to kick his ass.

“You really ought to be more afraid of them than you are,” I tell him. “They were pretty pissed.”

He shrugs. “Whatever. I can handle those ass clowns.”

I think about what his dad said to me

and suppress a shudder. As long as we're keeping secrets, there's no reason for Daltrey to find out about that conversation. I have a feeling he wouldn't be pleased.

"Daltrey!" Levi yells. "You need to get on stage."

Daltrey leans in for one last kiss, his tongue trailing softly along the outside of my lips, making me shudder for entirely different reasons. "See you after?"

I nod, breathless, and he grins that cocky rock-star grin of his. It makes my heart constrict. I love him so much. Levi pounds on the door again.

Daltrey opens it, smiling at his friend. "Hey, dude, what's up?"

"What's up is that it took everything I

have to get your asshole brothers out of this hallway. So move your ass.”

I smile as I follow Daltrey into the hall.

Levi frowns when he sees me behind Daltrey. “Sorry, Daisy. I need to get him out there.”

“Go.” I make a shooing motion with my hands. “Be gone.”

Levi frog marches Daltrey down the hall. I watch until they turn out of sight. There’s a weight in my chest that I can’t seem to shake. Something bad happened today; I’m certain of it. A bruise on his face and blood on his knuckles? Who was he fighting? And why doesn’t he want me to know about it?

Chapter Twenty-four

Daisy

The family-and-friends area in this venue is down on the main floor with the rest of the fans. There are heavy barriers around it to keep people away, but I'm still not crazy about the idea of being out there in the throng. Plus, I would have to find a bouncer to take me over, and I'm not really in the mood to talk to anyone. At the same time, I really want to watch Daltrey perform tonight. I'm worried that he's not as okay as he says he is. And after an entire day of being scared for him, I know I won't feel better unless

I keep him in sight.

In the end, I make my way up to the left of the stage. Most of the roadies are on the other side, so I pull up a stool to watch the show from the wings. Daltrey's piano is closer to this wing, so I can see him clearly. He appears no worse for the wear. In fact, it's one of his better performances. I'm mesmerized by his hands as he plays, memories of last night flashing through my mind. It's strange, how different it feels to watch him now that I know what those hands feel like on my body.

After the first set, the guys exit stage right to grab water and towel down. No one talks to Daltrey except the roadies, and I wonder how long his family will

stay mad at him. As they take the stage for the second set, Daltrey spots me. His face lights up with a huge smile, and I can practically hear the girls in the crowd swooning from the pure beauty of it.

He takes his seat at the piano and shifts the bench slightly so he can keep me in his sights. He then spends most of the set staring straight at me while he sings and plays. His gaze changes from playful and amused to downright smolderingly intense and back again. I'm squirming within the first few songs. I finally understand why girls have been throwing themselves at rock stars for decades. Nothing is more sexy than this man on stage, controlling the sound and

the crowd, playing one off the other, ratcheting up the tension then releasing it over and over again. My heart races, and my cheeks are aflame. I want nothing more than to leap onto stage and jump him.

And he knows it. His eyes hold a glint of wicked amusement as he leans closer to the mic, so close his lips graze its edges.

I think maybe Daltrey will take his break on this side, but when the set ends, he heads back to the right wing with his brothers. He's doing it on purpose. He knows I want a kiss. He's torturing me.

Sure enough, when he comes out for the last set, there's laughter in his face. I cross my arms and give him my best

glare, making him laugh out loud. Communicating with him like this is thrilling. All these people surround us yet remain outside of our little bubble.

Just before the end of the set, I notice a commotion in the opposite wing. Lots of shadows are moving around over there, shapes of people I can't make out. One of them seems to be holding the others back. Confused, I shift to try to see better, but it's dark, and the band blocks my view. I do manage to make out Mr. Ransome, who is gesturing wildly with Levi at his side. I feel a trickle of unease.

The guys finish the last song and head to the front of the stage to take their bows. With them out of the way and the

stage lights fully up, I finally have a clear line of sight to the other side.

I gasp. Two police officers appear to be arguing with Daltrey's dad.

The bows are fast and perfunctory; everyone knows Ransom always comes back out for an encore. But I have a feeling things might be different tonight. I watch in horror as the boys move to the wings, and the police officers push past Mr. Ransome, heading straight for Daltrey.

Then the lights go out, and I can't see Daltrey anymore. The encore chant begins, and I break Levi's biggest rule. I jump off my stool and run across the stage. I'm sure no one can see me, and if they can, they'll probably mistake me for

a roadie.

The band members are all shouting at once. The officers are clearly getting more and more agitated. Only Daltrey seems calm, standing in the middle of all of it.

“Dude, just let us finish the show,” Reed pleads. “We’ll have a riot on our hands if we don’t go back out there.”

“We’ve already waited,” one officer snaps. “Your brother is under arrest.”

I gasp, and Daltrey turns to see me standing behind Lennon. Only now does he look upset. “I’m sorry,” he says to me, his words barely audible over the crowd.

“What are you apologizing to her for?” Cash yells, smacking Daltrey’s

shoulder. “We’re the ones you’re screwing over!”

Daltrey hangs his head, and the second officer pulls out a pair of handcuffs.

“What’s going on?” I yell, pushing through the guys. “What is this?”

“Apparently, Daltrey took the day off to go beat the hell out of some guy today,” Reed says, looking angrier than I’ve ever seen him. “I can’t fucking believe you, man.”

I look at Daltrey. “Daltrey?”

But he doesn’t raise his head. I can’t believe this is happening, can’t believe he’s actually being arrested. And his dad is just standing there.

“Do something!” I yell at Mr.

Ransome.

He shoots me a steely, unconcerned look then turns away. “Boys, you need to get back out there. Cash, you make an announcement that Daltrey’s sick. Add an extra song to make up for it.”

“Who the fuck is supposed to sing?” Cash asks.

“You. Just do it. We don’t have a choice.” He looks straight at Daltrey. “Your fans deserve better than this.”

The boys turn as one and trudge back onto the stage, only Lennon sparing a glance at his soon-to-be-incarcerated brother. The lights come on, and the crowd starts screaming, but all I’m aware of is the officer handcuffing Daltrey.

The other cop said, “Daltrey Ransome, you are under arrest for the assault and battery of Justin D’Angelo.” He pulled a card from his pocket and read, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say...”

The sounds of the concert and the officer’s voice fade as a heavy buzzing fills my ears. I’m vaguely aware of Levi’s hand steadying me and of Daltrey looking at me sadly. The words repeat over and over in my head. *The assault and battery of Justin D’Angelo. The assault and battery...*

Then the officers are leading Daltrey away, and I’m left alone in the darkness with only Levi to keep me from falling.

After the concert, Levi arranges for a cab and takes me straight back to the hotel. "The girls can handle the merchandise," he tells me firmly.

He has an arm around me as he leads me through the back hallway. I see Mr. Ransome frantically conversing with Dan, the tour manager, but I can't hear what they're saying. The rest of the crew is standing around dazed, no one knowing what they're supposed to do.

"What about you?" I ask. "What about your job?"

"Someone else can do it," he says shortly. "I'm getting you out of here."

I feel numb as the cab winds through

heavy traffic. “Did you know? Where he went?”

Levi sighs. “I had a feeling.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I hoped I was wrong.”

“So... what? He flew home, kicked Justin’s ass, and flew back?”

“It would seem so.” He pauses. “You have to give him credit; he’s a multitasker.”

“Not funny, Levi.”

He grimaces. “I know. Sorry.” He’s quiet for a minute. “What the fuck is wrong with him? I understand the wanting-to-protect-you thing, believe me, but how could he be so stupid? Like the thing you need is for him to get put in fucking jail.”

I shake my head. “This is all my fault.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. This is not what you need.”

I stare out the window. I can’t believe Daltrey did this. After everything that happened last night, everything I told him, the way we comforted each other. The way we made love... I thought it was finally the beginning of something new for me—freedom from the past months and all the pain they had contained. I woke up this morning—God, was it just this morning?—feeling happy and peaceful for the first time in ages. Hopeful, even. And now...

“So I take it you told him

everything,” Levi says.

I nod, not turning to him.

He sighs. “When?”

“Last night. I thought he... I thought he was okay with everything. When we went to sleep—”

I hear his sharp intake of breath and blush. “Sorry, I guess that was TMI. I just... I thought we were happy. I woke up feeling good today, you know? And he woke up and went to beat the hell out of someone.”

“Like I said, stupid,” he mutters.

We approach the hotel, and I cringe at the sight of the normal crowd. Is it my imagination, or is it bigger than usual? There definitely seem to be more reporters. My heart starts to pound. Has

the news about the arrest already gotten out? We have no one from security with us. None of these people will have any idea who we are, but I wish I would have thought to ask to be taken through the garage instead.

“Can you stop here?” Levi asks the driver, pulling out his wallet.

The driver pulls over and takes the money. Levi hops out of the cab then comes around and opens my door. When I climb out, he puts his hand lightly on my back.

“Just walk fast,” he says. “Without the guys here, they shouldn’t pay any attention to us.”

I nod, leaning into him more than I normally would, wanting to hide. We

head toward the front doors.

“Hey, it’s her!”

My head snaps up. They aren’t talking about me. They can’t be—

“Daisy! Daisy Harris! What do you think about Daltrey’s arrest?”

Suddenly the photographers and reporters are converging on us, surrounding us completely. I can’t even make out the door in front of us through the crowd.

Levi gasps. “What the hell?” Then, his voice is blocked by the yells from the paparazzi.

“How do you feel, Daisy, knowing he did this for you?”

“Did you ask Daltrey to attack Mr. D’Angelo?”

“Is the tour off?”

“Do you feel like justice has been served?”

“Is it true you spent time in a mental institution? Does Daltrey know about it?”

“Do you love Daltrey Ransome?”

I know we need to get out of here, know I have to fight my way through these people, but I’m frozen in place, terrified, as they hurl their questions at me. One thought manages to work its way into my shocked and overloaded brain: They know everything.

“No comment,” Levi yells. “Get out of our way. No comment.” With his arm wrapped around me, he tries to force his way through the crowd.

I bury my face into his shoulder, every instinct screaming to hide. The lights from their cameras flash brightly through my closed eyelids. Finally, we seem to make some progress. I hear other voices shouting, ordering the throng away. Security from the hotel must have figured out what's going on and come to help. They manage to hold back the reporters, forming a path for us to reach the door.

“Daisy, one picture!”

“Daisy, how do you feel?”

“Daisy, do you feel responsible for this?”

“Has Daltrey seen the pictures?”

With one final push from Levi, I'm inside the lobby. The noise from outside

immediately fades a bit when the glass doors close behind us. I hear the remaining security guards yelling that everyone needs to back off, that they're trespassing, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I peek out from Levi's chest and see the desk staff and several guests staring at us. I close my eyes again and allow Levi to lead me to the elevators.

"Okay, Daisy," Levi whispers into my hair. "It's okay."

I hear a ping and open my eyes as I'm pulled into the elevator.

The guards come with us. "Are you okay?" one asks.

I nod, burying my face into Levi's shirt again. I take deep breaths, the

familiar smell of him washing over me, calming me slightly.

“What the hell was that?” Levi asks the guards.

“I have no idea. The crowd out there was bigger than normal, but I figured it was because it was the last show. We didn’t hear anything from the band indicating we should be on higher alert. We weren’t expecting any of you to be back for a while.”

“There was an arrest tonight,” Levi says, his voice soft as if he can stop me from hearing it. “One of the band members. We came back early.”

“If someone would have called,” the guard says, sounding upset, “we would have—”

“I’m sorry,” Levi tells him. “Don’t worry. None of this is your fault.”

“Can we expect more of the same when the band gets back? We have a call in to the police.”

“I’ll tell the band manager to call,” Levi responds.

The doors open with another ping. I need to get off this elevator, away from these security guards. I can’t hear any more of this, can’t think about what’s happening. I just need to get away. I pull away from Levi and rush down the hall to my room, fumbling with my key.

He catches up to me just as I manage to get the door open. “Daisy—”

“Leave me alone, Levi.”

“Yeah, right,” he mutters, following

me into my room.

I collapse on the couch, my head in my hands. The reporters' words are chasing each other through my brain on a constant loop. They know. They know about all of it: that I'm the reason Daltrey got into that fight, that I spent time in a mental hospital. *Did Daltrey see the pictures?*

"Oh, God," I moan. If they know about the pictures, does that mean they found them? Are they going to be published? Will everyone see?

I thought that the worst thing that could happen to me was for the kids at my high school to see those pictures, pass them around, and put them all over the Internet. But that is far from the worst

thing. Because this is a completely different level. National entertainment reporters. Magazines. Websites.

“I’m going to be sick!” I barely make it into the bathroom in time. I kneel in front of the toilet and empty the contents of my stomach.

Levi crouches beside me, holding my hair back and rubbing my back. “You’re okay,” he murmurs. “It’s going to be okay.”

I can’t even argue with him. I continue to dry heave long after my stomach is empty. I know I should get up and call my dad, let him know what’s going on. The pictures are supposed to be sealed. Maybe there’s something his lawyer can do to stop all this before it

gets out of control.

Before it gets out of control. As if we're not already miles past that point. I let out a strangled laugh and raise my head. Levi looks at me as if he's worried for my sanity.

I shake my head. "Sorry."

"What can I get you? Sprite? Juice?"

"Sprite would be great."

He rushes out into the main room, and I lean back against the tub, wiping my mouth.

Levi returns, Sprite in hand. "Here you go." He grabs a tissue from the counter and sinks down to the floor, handing me the tissue then the glass.

"Thank you, Levi."

He sits next to me while I carefully

sip the soda. My breathing is still way too fast, so fast the room is spinning. I know from experience that I'm in danger of fainting if I can't calm down. I concentrate on taking slow and steady sips with deep breaths in between, trying to keep my mind empty and blank.

The shrilling of my phone breaks the silence. I pull it from my pocket and see my dad's name. My stomach immediately plummets, and I fear I might start gagging again soon.

"Ignore it," Levi says. "You can call him later."

I shake my head. "He'll freak out if I don't answer. Why don't you call Dan and let them know about the press outside."

He still looks uncertain, but when I bring the phone to my ear, he sighs in resignation and leaves the bathroom.

“Hello?”

“Daisy? Is that you? What’s going on? Are you okay?”

The sound of Dad’s voice sends a lump straight to my throat. As I expected, he sounds frantic. “I’m okay, Dad.”

“People are calling here, reporters. And the news says Daltrey got arrested, and you’re involved. What did he do to you?”

“He didn’t do anything to me, Dad. He... had a fight. With Justin.”

After a beat, he says, “So he thought he’d be all big and tough, huh? And he pulled you right into the middle of it.

Did he consider, even for a minute, what this attention would do to you? I knew I shouldn't have let you go out there."

"Dad, please..."

"I'm booking you a plane ticket," he goes on, ignoring me. "Right now. I'll call you when I have the details."

"No! I'm not leaving."

"Daisy, of course you're coming home. You think I'm going to allow you to stay there? With the media and God knows who else at your door? Absolutely not."

I know he has a point, and I have no desire to be within a hundred miles of the band right now. But I also know I can't go home. "I can't be there either, Dad!" My voice is way too loud, but I

can't seem to control it. The idea of being so close to Joanie and Justin right now makes me break out in a cold sweat. "I'm not coming home. I refuse."

"Your apartment then," he says. "I'll book the ticket for Fayetteville."

But that won't work, either. If everything is getting out, if people are talking about me, it won't be long before they know where I go to school. "Dad, I need to think. Just give me some time to figure out what I want to do."

"Daisy, you listen to me. I want you out of there. I'm not kidding—"

"I'll call you back." I hang up before he can protest further.

I bury my head in my hands. What am I going to do? I can't stay here. My dad

is totally right. His condo back home isn't an option, nor is my apartment. I feel trapped, cornered, hopeless. I have nowhere to run.

Levi clears his throat, and I look up to see him standing in the doorway. He looks so concerned. I think of all the times this summer that he helped me out, looked out for me. He didn't even hesitate tonight, putting my well-being before his responsibilities at work. He's been a good friend to me, one of the best I've ever had.

"Levi," I say, reaching out for him, "I need your help."

He's next to me in the blink of an eye, grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. "Of course," he says. "What do you

need me to do?”

“I need you to get me out of here.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Daltrey

Well, I really messed up this time.

I run my hands through my hair, staring down at the concrete floor of the holding the cell. *The holding cell*. I can't believe I'm actually in jail. It just doesn't feel real.

On the bright side, my brothers can no longer give me a hard time about not being rock and roll enough. What's more rock and roll than getting arrested backstage at your own concert?

I pretty much knew all along that going to see Justin would come back to

bite me in the ass. Even as I booked the plane ticket this morning, I knew I was making a mistake. But I couldn't seem to stop myself.

When Daisy finally told me what happened, I thought I was going to go insane with the anger. I wanted to throw things, to rip out my hair, to absolutely destroy someone or something. The thought of them hurting her like that, for no reason, just because they could... I can't understand it. She's never done anything to anyone. Why would anyone be so cruel? As her words sank in, I felt sicker and sicker. That bastard took pictures of her. She trusted him, trusted him with her kisses and her touch and her body, the very things I would have

died to have. And what did he do with that trust? He sold her out. He made it possible for people to attack her, to wound her.

I wanted to kill him.

When she showed me her scars, and I realized how close I had come to losing her, actually losing her forever, everything else went away. The anger and the hate receded to a deep place within me, so my entire heart and mind could focus on her—on loving her. On healing her. Daisy needed me, and I needed her right back.

But the next morning, as she slept in my bed next to me, the anger started to simmer again. I watched her fragile little shoulders rise and fall with each breath,

and I imagined those same shoulders shaking with sobs. Because of *him*.

My phone was on the bedside table, and I picked it up carefully so I wouldn't wake her. It was easy enough to find him online. Scrolling back through his ConnectMe history took a while, but I eventually found some references to Daisy. I clicked on a post from Joanie Hartfield and switched to her profile.

Joanie's references were much more overt. I always knew the girl was a bitch, but I never imagined she could be so downright evil. She'd posted a slew of nasty comments, jokes, made a website, a Picturebook account, all to torture someone who had never done a thing to her. A lot of the content had been

removed, but there was enough for me to know that Joanie, too, deserved to have her ass kicked.

I felt almost guilty when I went to a search engine and typed in Daisy's name. I knew she wouldn't want me to see what they did to her, but I couldn't help it. I had to know.

Someone obviously went to a lot of trouble to get the pictures removed from the Internet. It was a full ten minutes before I came across one. Her body was pixelated out, thank God, but I felt sick, knowing it hadn't always been that way. Her face broke my heart. Her head was half turned toward the camera, her eyes wide, the remains of a smile on her mouth. I got the feeling she'd been

laughing about something before being caught unexpected by the camera. She looked surprised, as though she'd been interrupted in a happy moment.

I knew that I had to do something. If I didn't, the anger would build up until I really did kill him. Besides, I needed to make sure that the pictures really were sealed, inaccessible. That they could never hurt her again. So, ill advised though it may have been, I booked a ticket to go home.

I found Justin enjoying a liquid lunch at a local restaurant with a bunch of his douchebag friends. At first, I thought I'd be able to get out of there without violence. His eyes got pretty big at the sight of me, so he knew why I was there.

That, if anything, made me even angrier. He agreed to join me in a private booth to talk, where I told him in no uncertain terms that I now had more money than God, and if the pictures of Daisy ever got out, I would make it my mission in life to make sure that his children's children continued to pay for it. He nodded, silent and sweating.

"And just so we're clear," I added, leaning across the table. "You're a fucking asshole, and I hope you rot in hell."

"Hey, man," he said, holding up his hands. "It all just got out of hand."

"You think taking pictures of someone without their permission is out of hand?" I snarled. "And then

distributing them without her consent?
Are you fucking kidding me?"

His face went red. "Hey, she was into it, too. It's not like I forced her."

"Watch what you fucking say right now, man."

He scowled. "Just 'cause you're pissed that I got some of the ass you always wanted and didn't get, it doesn't mean she didn't want to be there with me."

I lost it.

I don't regret jumping him, but I do wish I would have checked to make sure his asshole friends weren't capturing it on their cell phones.

The officers told me he was hospitalized, necessitating the arrest, but

I'm calling bullshit on that one. Okay, I might have broken his nose, but the bastard will be fine.

“Mr. Ransome, your lawyer is here.”

I look up to see the officer who had booked me standing in front of the holding cell. I bite back a groan. If my lawyer is here, I'll bet anything my dad is with him. I know I have to face the music eventually, but I was hoping that eventuality could wait until morning.

I'm led to a small conference room where a tall man in a suit—the lawyer, I assume—is sitting at the table. Instead of my father, Reed is there. They stand as I enter the room.

I stop just inside the doorway, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m trying to help your ass,” Reed says, scowling, “which is totally not what I feel like doing tonight, by the way. So your thanks is appreciated.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just... I wasn’t expecting you. Thanks for coming.”

The lawyer holds out his hand. “John Dwyer. I’m on retainer with your record label.”

I raise my eyebrows. “The record label keeps criminal lawyers on retainer?”

Reed shakes his head at me.

I hold out a hand to John. “Uh, thanks for coming. I’m Daltrey Ransome.”

John gestures to the table and we sit. “Well, Mr. Ransome, I’ve been in

contact with the prosecutors in Ohio. The location of the incident adds quite a bit of complication to our situation here, but we're working on it."

"What do you mean?"

"The state of New York is not the prosecuting entity, but they are required to provide for your extradition to Ohio, where you would be charged. Technically, Ohio has thirty days to decide whether or not they want to come and get you."

My mouth drops open.

"He can be here for thirty days?" Reed asks, sounding equally shocked. "Can't he just post bail?"

"He hasn't been charged with anything yet. And he won't be until he's

extradited back to Ohio.”

“Which can take thirty days,” I mutter, resting my head in my hands. I feel sick. “Shit.”

“Yes, well, we’re going to try to make sure that doesn’t happen. We’ll recommend waiving your extradition rights, which can speed up the process, but we’ll work to get you released even sooner. My colleagues in Ohio will be speaking with a judge first thing tomorrow. Our goal will be to arrange for your release with the promise that you will present yourself in Ohio.”

“Yeah,” I say quickly. “I totally will. Whatever I have to do.”

“In the meantime, is there anything I can get for you? Are you comfortable?”

You haven't had any issues, have you?"

I shake my head. They put me in a private holding cell, which I'm thinking has something to do with my name. I'm not complaining.

"You are within your rights to have access to your attorney at regular intervals," John says, handing me a card. "That's my direct line."

I take the card without looking at it. "Thanks."

"We'll get you out of here, Mr. Ransome." John smiles for the first time. "The label has a great amount of interest in getting you back on stage as soon as possible. No expense will be spared."

Somehow, this makes me feel worse. I'm letting a heck of a lot of people

down here. "Thanks," I mumble.

The lawyer starts to stand.

"Can I talk to him for a few minutes?" Reed asks him.

John looks toward the door, where the officer who escorted me stands on the other side. "That should be fine," he says. "I'll wait outside."

Once he's gone, Reed lets out a deep sigh. "So. You really fucked up, huh?"

I laugh bitterly. "I was just thinking that." I look at my knees. "Dad didn't want to come?"

"He probably didn't want to get arrested himself."

"He's that pissed?"

"Pissed is an understatement."

"I'm really sorry, man. I wasn't

thinking, you know? I mean, I knew I could get into trouble, but I didn't think it would be this fast. I thought maybe once we got back to Ohio or something..."

"The press got a hold of it. Someone posted cell phone footage online, so it's all over the news. And that Justin punk is insisting on pressing charges. Law enforcement was probably feeling some pressure to take action, not look the other way because you're a celebrity."

I swallow hard. "I went out there because he has pictures, Reed. Of Daisy. I had to make sure that he knew I'd come after him with the full force of the best lawyers money could buy if they ever got out again."

“I know,” he says, his voice sad.

My stomach sinks. Daisy must have told them all what happened. She shouldn't have had to do that. I'm such an asshole.

“We've got people on it,” he adds.

“What do you mean?”

“Dad's got some lawyers looking into it. We'll make sure those pictures stay hidden if we possibly can.”

His words bring a rush of warmth to my chest. My father may be too angry to come visit me in jail, but at least he's going to do his best to protect Daisy.

“What all did she tell you?” I ask.

He looks at me blankly. “What do you mean?”

“Daisy. She told you about the

pictures, right? What else did she say?"

His face falls. "Man, I don't know how to tell you this. Daisy didn't tell us anything. We heard it on the news."

The room seems to get very quiet all of a sudden. I can hear the blood pounding in my ears. "What?"

"It's all over the news that you beat up Justin because he passed around nude pictures of your girlfriend."

No. This can't be happening. "Do they have her name?" He doesn't have to answer. The look in his eyes tells me everything that I need to know. "Do they have the pictures?"

"No, not yet. The lawyers are talking to Daisy's dad. It looks like there was some threatened lawsuit at the time, and

the pictures were sealed. But a lot of people had them, man, so there's no guarantee it will stay that way."

I close my eyes. This is all my fault. Daisy's name is in the news. People know about this terrible thing that happened to her, this thing she tried to keep a secret for so long. It's my fault. And it's also my fault that I'm not there with her right now to help her deal with it.

"Who's with her?" I ask, my eyes still closed. I can't get the image out of my head of Daisy at the top of the Empire State Building, so scared and panicked that she couldn't even breathe.

"Levi took her out of the hotel. There was press there and..."

My eyes snap open. “The press?”

He nods, looking miserable. “They went back before any of us, bro. She and Levi didn’t have anyone with them.”

I picture Daisy trying to get through the throng of reporters with no one to help her but Levi, and suddenly, I’m sure I’m going to be sick.

“But Levi got her out of there, man. He texted Lennon to let him know.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Levi wasn’t sure where they were gonna go, yet. I think they’re just driving. For now at least.”

I nod, feeling marginally better. If Levi is with her, she’ll be okay. He’s been looking out for her and her friends ever since they joined the tour. But one

thing is certain. I need to get the hell out of here.

“Reed, you have to get me released. I’ll do whatever I have to do, pay whatever bail they want. I’ll go straight back to Ohio to be charged tomorrow. But I have to get out of here. She needs me.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Not that I doubt that, Dalt, but there’s also the little matter of our tour, you know? We have several more shows left.”

I grimace. The tour is the last thing on my mind. “Then use that angle to press the lawyers. Don’t allow them to let up.”

“We won’t, man.”

There’s a rapping on the door, then John sticks his head back in. “We’re out

of time.”

I look across the table at my oldest brother, feeling terrified. They’re going to leave me here, alone. And I’ll be spending the night in jail. I know it’s not the end of the world, know I can handle it. But it’s still not an idea I like very much, particularly not when I know Daisy is out there even more scared and alone than I am.

Reed surprises me by pulling me into a hug. “It’s going to be fine, man.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter into his shoulder. “I know I’m screwing things up for you guys.”

“Let’s just focus on getting you out of here, okay?”

I nod, pulling back and avoiding his

eyes so he won't know how close to tears I am.

"We'll be in touch tomorrow, Daltrey," John says, shaking my hand. "I'm sorry we weren't able to get you released tonight, but I promise you it's our top priority."

"Thanks."

The officer escorts me back to my cell. As I walk back down the dingy hallway with the grey peeling paint, I think about how I woke up this morning with Daisy in my arms. It was literally a dream come true, something I've wished for for years. Yet less than twenty-four hours later, I'll be sleeping alone on a cot behind bars.

I messed up the tour for my brothers,

for all the crew that works for us, and for the fans who we owe everything to. But none of that even compares to what I did to Daisy. With one stupid swing of my fist, I not only put her directly into the spotlight she abhorred, I also left her alone to deal with the consequences.

The officer locks the door of the holding cell, and I flop down onto the cot. I really, really screwed up this time. And the people I love are the ones who have to pay for it.

Chapter Twenty-six

Daisy

Levi arranges a car to meet us in the parking garage, far from the eyes of the press and the gawkers. We drive straight out of the New York, Levi behind the wheel, allowing me to sit in numb silence.

After an hour or so, I ask, “Where are we going?”

“Where do you want to go?”

I stare out the dark window. “Somewhere far away,” I whisper, not caring how stupid that sounds. Levi has a job with the band. I can’t ask him to

take me away. But maybe he could get me to an airport or something.

He nods. "I thought you might say that. What do you think about northern Michigan? My family has a place. It's quiet and private."

"Michigan? That's like, a day away."

"Isn't that the point?"

I try to make out his expression, but all I can see is shadows in the dashboard lights. "Can you just leave? Don't they need you?"

"Daltrey would want me to take care of you. So just let me worry about that, okay?"

I know I should argue and tell him that I can take care of myself. But I really don't know if I can. I haven't felt

like this in months, not since before Horizons. The way I'm feeling scares me. And there's really nowhere else for me to run.

I leaned back into my seat. "Okay."

We stop at a motel somewhere in Pennsylvania so Levi can get a few hours' sleep. He books adjoining rooms and refuses to allow me to pay. "This is coming out of Ransom petty cash." He grimaces. "It's the least Daltrey can do for you."

The rooms are simple and clean, though pretty outdated. I like knowing Levi's right next door, but I don't manage to sleep much at all. I dream about the reporters and the panic in my dad's voice when he called.

We check out of the motel early, and Levi drives for the rest of the day, stopping only twice for gas and food. We don't talk much as Pennsylvania turns into Ohio and eventually Michigan, rolling fields and suburbs slowly giving way to heavy forests.

Levi pulls off the freeway. After a few more turns, we're on a back road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

He turns off the radio. "My family owns a little cabin on the shores of Lake Huron. It's off in the woods. From the front door, you can barely see the foot of the driveway. The neighboring cabins aren't close enough to be a problem."

I start to tear up a little. "Thanks so much, Levi. I don't know how—"

He holds up his hand. “Just listen. The cabin has no phone and no Internet, and getting a cell signal is pretty much impossible. There isn’t even a cable hookup. Basically, it’s the perfect place to hide.”

Hiding. That’s what I’m doing. I left my phone in the bathroom in New York. My dad has no idea where I am. I didn’t even tell the girls that I was leaving, though I bet Levi let them know.

Since we’d grabbed a fast-food dinner at our last stop for gas, we go straight bed when we arrive at the cabin. As Levi leads me to my room, I notice enough of my surroundings to assume that the cabin is pretty rustic and basically furnished. There’s a set of

French doors leading from my room to a balcony, and I can hear the waves crashing distantly on the shore.

Levi pauses at my door as I move to take off my shoes. I have a feeling he wants to say something, but eventually, he sighs and simply tells me to sleep well.

I spend my second restless night in a row. Every time I wake up I feel a rush of panic, not knowing where I am. After several hours, I give up and climb out of bed. Moonlight peaks through the curtains, and I decide some fresh air would be nice.

The balcony is small, just big enough for a chair and side table. I lean against the railing for a moment, staring out into

the night. Either my eyes are starting to adjust to the darkness, or it's closer to dawn than I thought. I can now make out the rolling waves of the lake. Lake Huron is vast, a grey void that I can imagine disappearing in forever, slipping below the surface until I fade to nothingness.

You have to stop thinking like that. You can't get to a headspace where nothingness seems like a potential alternative. You've come too far for that.

But have I really? I'm basically behaving exactly the way I did a year ago. Shit hits the fan and I run away. But what choice do I have? I couldn't have stayed there. The band is way too

visible, too many people watching them, following them, talking about them. And now those same people are talking about me.

I wonder where Daltrey is. Is he out of jail? Are they already on their way to the next city, the next show?

Beneath all the fear and anxiety, a deep ache has pulsed with every beat of my heart. I miss him, plain and simple. I was on the verge of finally having all my dreams come true, and it was all snatched away from me.

You didn't have to leave . He went to jail for you. The least you could do is be there for him.

"I couldn't," I whisper, trying to silence the voice in my head. Daltrey

would understand why I had to leave, wouldn't he? But what if he doesn't? What if he blames me?

I can't worry about that right now. I need to figure out what the hell I'm going to do next.

I stare out at the water as the sun slowly peeks out from behind the waves, transforming the sky from steel grey to light pink. By the time I hear Levi stirring from within the house, I'm no closer to having any clue of how to fix this mess.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Daltrey

I step out of the car, and I'm immediately surrounded by reporters and cameras.

"Daltrey, where's Daisy?"

"What was jail like?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Is it true she dumped you?"

"No comment," I mutter, pulling my beanie lower on my forehead. "Excuse me, please."

Even with the combined size and strength of Frank and Benny trying to clear a path through the paparazzi, I still have trouble getting into the building.

Over the past year, I've gotten somewhat used to press and reporters, but this is much worse than usual.

"Move back," Frank bellows. "You all need to take a step back, now!" He manages to make a slight inroad into the crowd.

I squeeze through and into the lobby. "Holy shit." I turn to Frank. "That was worse than yesterday. Thanks, man."

He shakes his head. "It's my job to keep your puny ass from getting squashed like a bug."

I manage a grin. "How else could a meathead like you manage to make a living?"

"Daltrey?" My father sticks his head through the doorway to the practice

room. “We’re waiting for you.”

“We had some trouble getting through the press mess outside,” Benny explains, but Dad’s already ducking back into the room.

“Don’t bother,” I tell Benny. “He’s having far too much fun being pissed at me.”

“Good luck, man.”

I slap Frank on the shoulder as I pass. “Thanks again.”

My brothers and Dan are all waiting in the practice room where we’ll hold our team meeting.

“Hey, Dalt,” Lennon begins.

My dad cuts him off. “Heather just called. She said the interview went well?”

I nod. Heather is a press secretary with the label. She accompanied me to the interview I just completed with a *Rolling Stone* reporter. The only positive thing about my arrest is the way we have been able to smooth things over with *Rolling Stone*. After I had missed the group interview the morning I went to Ohio, my dad had promised them a one-on-one with me, but they weren't happy about it. After the arrest, that interview turned into an exclusive and quite a big coup for them.

“Good.” Dad turns to the rest of the band as if dismissing me.

I try not to bristle. It's been this way pretty much since I got out of jail last week. True to their word, the lawyers

worked with the Ohio judge and prosecutor to get me released less than twelve hours after the arrest. All in all, the whole jail experience was quite a bit easier than dealing with my family.

“Okay,” Dad says. “Dan is going to walk us through the new schedule. It’s pretty tight, so I want to make sure you’re all on the same page.”

Pretty tight. In other words, they’re going to work our asses off. Cash shoots me a glare, and I feel that familiar swoop of guilt. Dad and Dan have been riding us pretty hard, and I know my brothers blame me. They have every right to do so. We’ve cancelled three shows, thanks to my stupidity. We’ve been doing extra radio spots, interviews,

store appearances, and even a live-streaming concert on the Internet. The reactions have been mostly positive. Dan tells us ticket sales are actually up for the remaining dates of the tour. I have a feeling part of that might be simple curiosity. People seem really into the “Rock Star Defends His Girlfriend’s Honor” storyline.

Girlfriend. I frown at the thought. I wish I could say that Daisy is my girlfriend. But I don’t even have any idea where she is.

I’ve come full circle. I spent the beginning of the tour missing her and wondering where she was. And it’s looking more and more as though I’ll spend the end of it still wondering,

though the missing part has gone from a feeble ache to an incessant, pounding, sharp pain.

I know she's with Levi. He texted Lennon right away when he got her out of the hotel, telling him that they were taking off. We didn't hear from him again until two days later. Two days of unanswered texts and calls. Daisy's cell phone went straight to voicemail. By the time I finally heard from him, I was a panicked mess. I was dealing with the lawyers and trying to figure out if I'd be able to finish the tour before my court date in Ohio, but all I could think about was Daisy. This obsession and my inability to focus on repairing the band's image had done little to appease my

brothers or father.

When Levi called, he apologized and explained that he took her up to his parents' cabin in Michigan, where there was no cell phone service.

I was shocked. "What the hell do you mean you took her to Michigan?"

"She was freaking out, man. She wanted to go somewhere off the grid. It was the first place I thought of."

I wondered if that was guilt I heard in his voice. "I want to talk to her."

"She doesn't want to talk, Dalt. I'm sorry."

"What the hell, Levi?"

"Dude, what do you want me to do? She's having a rough time."

"That's why I need to talk to her."

Fuck it. I'm coming up there."

"Daltrey, your father will kill you. You can't leave again. It's not fair."

I felt so torn. I knew there were people counting on me, lots of people: the venues we were booked in, our crew, family and friends, fans, even some important, very rich executives who had just spent a considerable amount of money to get me out of jail. I wanted more than anything just to go get Daisy, but Levi was right. It wouldn't be fair.

"Why the hell did you have to take her so far away?" I muttered. "Couldn't you have just found a hotel to hide out in?"

"Yeah, that would have been

brilliant. We definitely should have stayed in the New York area, the media capital of the world.”

I realized that I must have imagined the guilt in his tone. If anything, he sounded pissed now.

“Do you have something you need to say to me, man?” I asked.

“I just think it’s ridiculous that you’re criticizing how I handled things when you were the one who got her into this mess. And you were gone. I was the one who was there to clean up your mistake, Daltrey.”

I gaped at the phone. Levi had always been one of my closest allies. I had never heard him so angry. “Levi—”

He interrupted. “I’ll call you in a few

days. She's safe, okay? She sits on the beach all day, and she reads or watches movies. This is good for her, Daltrey. I wouldn't have brought her here if it wasn't."

"Well, thank you for that," I said, feeling chastised.

He hung up without saying goodbye. Since then, he had texted a few times to give me updates. She was still okay. She wasn't ready to talk or leave.

"Daltrey!" My dad's voice is sharp, and my head snaps up in surprise. I had totally gotten lost in my thoughts, not paying attention at all. "Unbelievable," he says, narrowing his eyes. "Did you hear a word I said?"

"I have some things on my mind," I

snap, tired of the way he's been talking to me.

"You would think that you would care a little more about this stuff, considering the situation."

"You mean considering it's all my fault? I get it, Dad. I messed up. You're all pissed. Fine. I've been doing everything you asked me to since I got out, even though this isn't where I want to be. I'm still showing up every day."

"You could at least listen—"

"What's the point? Do I have any say in the schedule? Of course I don't. So I will be at every one of the stupid interviews and appearances you schedule. Forgive me if my mind wanders while you go over the orders."

My dad stands, anger radiating off him. Not for the first time in the last few days, I think he might actually punch me.

But Dan gets up and puts a hand on Dad's shoulder. "Actually, I think we're done here, Will. Let's step out so the boys can start their practice."

I almost wish Dan hadn't stepped in. Dad should just take a swing at me and get it over with. But he allows Dan to lead him out of the rehearsal space, and my brothers start setting up their instruments.

"Hey," Lennon says, coming over to me. "Just give him time. He'll get over it."

"Yeah. Like you guys are getting over it."

“No one’s kicked your ass yet, have they? I think we’re all being pretty understanding, considering.”

I deflate, the anger replaced by worry for Daisy.

Lennon reads my expression. “Still haven’t heard from her?”

I shake my head.

“She’s okay, man. She just needed to get away from all this for a while. And judging by the fucking paparazzi I had to fight my way through to get in here, she was probably right.”

“I’m not saying she should be here. I just feel like I should be with her. It shouldn’t be Levi keeping her safe right now. It should be me.”

“But aren’t you glad she has Levi?”

Wouldn't it be worse if she was alone?"

I haven't really thought of it like that. Instead, I've been pretty busy resenting Levi for being with her while I can't be. But then... "He sounded weird, Lennon. The last time I talked to him. I can't... I can't put my finger on it."

"Dude, come on. You can trust Levi. He does everything for us. He was probably just mad because he had to leave the glamour of all this." Lennon gestures around the stark rehearsal space, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah. Maybe."

"If the two of you are finished chatting, I'd like to get started," Cash calls out.

"Don't worry about him," Lennon

mutters. “He’s just pissed because you’re stealing some of his bad-boy rep. He can’t compete with going to jail. I bet he’s losing out on tons of tail over it.”

I laugh for the first time in days and go to join the band. As I pick up my guitar, I realize I feel slightly better knowing that Lennon at least seems to have forgiven me. The other boys will come around. Besides, there’s only a week left of the tour. Maybe what my brothers and I all need is some time apart.

And maybe I’ll finally be able to get Daisy to talk to me again.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Daisy

“I was thinking barbeque for dinner tonight,” Levi says, coming to sit next to me on the back deck. He places a cup of coffee in front of me.

I smile at him. “Thanks. And barbeque sounds fine.” I direct my attention back out to the lake. I think I hear him sigh, but he doesn’t say anything. “Okay, I’m ready,” I say. “Give it to me.”

“There was no mention of you on People.com or Instyle,” he says. “TMZ has some pictures of Daltrey going into

rehearsal with a blurb about the situation, but nothing new. There's some Twitter gossip, and a few things on the band's ConnectMe page, but it's definitely decreasing. All in all, not too bad."

I release the air from my lungs. This was our new routine. Levi would go into town in the morning, so he could get a cell phone connection. He would then check the gossip sites and report back. He said it made me a masochist, but I assured him that in my unfortunate experience, it was better to know than to imagine.

The first few days were the worst. There were stories on nearly every major news site, both celebrity centered

and not. Levi tried to convince me that the stories were actually fairly positive. Reporters had found a lot of the garbage that had been written about me in high school. They were portraying me as a cyber-bully victim—no argument here—and Daltrey as my righteous defender. As far as we could tell, no one had the pictures. Yet.

“Thanks, Levi,” I say, reaching for my coffee.

“It was nice, you know. Being in town. There are cute little shops and stuff. Restaurants. Maybe we could spend some time there this afternoon.”

I snort over the paper rim of my cup. Levi has been trying to get me to go into town since we got here, thinking it will

be good for me to get out. Every day is the same, him thinking of some new “plus” and presenting it to me as casually as he can.

He laughs. “I’m not fooling you, huh?”

“You can never fool me, Levi. You’re just not a natural actor.”

He places a hand over his heart. “You’ve shattered my dreams.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you’ve been dreaming of stardom all this time.”

The laughter falls from his face. “Actually, I think I may have had my fill of being close to celebrities.”

I gape at him. “What are you talking about? You love working for Ransom.”

“I don’t know. I might be over it.”

I shake my head. “I can’t believe that. This was just a blip, Levi. One weird week that got out of control.” I clear my throat, knowing I need to say the thing I’ve been trying to say all week. “You should really get back to work. I can’t keep you away from your job like this. I’ll be okay on my own.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Out of the question. I’m not leaving you.”

I glance at his phone lying on the table. Since there’s no reception out here, he called my dad and Paige on one of his first trips into town. I’ve been surprised to find that I’m actually dying to talk to my dad, though he’s never been the one I turn to for emotional support.

But the desire is not strong enough that I want to risk going into town myself.

“I could go down and stay at my dad’s,” I say, though it’s pretty much the last thing in the world I want to do. I would be too close to home there—my old home, the place where the world fell apart around me. The very thought makes me shudder.

“You should see your face right now,” Levi says, smiling sadly. “As soon as you said you could go to your dad’s, you looked like you were about to be sick.”

I stick out my tongue at him. “I did not.”

“Uh huh. Okay.”

“I mean it, Levi. You should be

working. You put so much into that tour. It sucks that you're missing the end just because of me." I debate whether or not I should ask him if Daltrey expressly told him to stay here with me. We don't bring Dalt's name up very often. I think Levi can tell how much it hurts me to think about him. Levi told me when Dalt got out of jail—part of his daily media round-up—and mentioned that he had spoken to him. That was the extent of our Daltrey-related conversation. I was too afraid to ask if Daltrey was angry at me for taking off the way I had.

"It's the thing you always wanted to do," I say softly, looking out at the water again. "Working on a tour like this."

"Things change, Daisy."

I look over to see him staring at me, an unreadable expression in his eyes. “Like what? You don’t like working in the music industry anymore?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “No, of course not. I just... I’m pissed, okay? I’m pissed at him for what he did.”

I widen my eyes in surprise. “You’re mad? At Daltrey?”

“Of course I am! He totally screwed you over, Daisy, in case you haven’t noticed.”

I gape at him. “What? No he didn’t. He messed up, but he was just trying to help—”

“He was trying to help himself. He was mad, and he thought beating up Justin would make him feel better.

That's all that was about. He wasn't thinking about you at all."

"Levi—"

"No, it pisses me off. He didn't consider how you would feel that day he disappeared. And he sure as hell didn't consider what it would do to you if the media got a hold of your story." He gestures angrily at his phone. "He just assumed I would take care of it. Good old Levi does whatever one of those guys asks."

The venom in his voice is horrible. Does he really resent being here that much?

He catches sight of my face and quickly shakes his head. "No, Daisy. I didn't mean it like that."

“You could have said no,” I say, struggling not to cry, “when he told you to take me out of there.”

“No, Daisy.” He reaches across the table and takes my hand. “He didn’t tell me to do anything with you. I mean, I figured he’d be glad I was looking out for you, but he didn’t like, instruct me or anything. I left with you because I wanted to.”

Something about the way he’s looking at me makes me feel strange, but then his normal, no-worries expression returns.

“It just makes me mad that he does stuff like this. Like all the times he asked me to check on you because he was too busy with the band. I was happy to do it.

Hell, I would have done it even if he hadn't asked. But why didn't he ever take the time to do it himself? And all his bitching about missing you last year. Why didn't he man up and just go find you?"

"Levi..." I don't like this conversation or having these things about Daltrey thrown in my face. Tears tickle the corners of my eyes.

Levi stares out at the waves. "The day you told me what happened, the last thing I wanted to do was walk away from you. I would have never gotten on a plane, no matter how much I might have wanted to beat the crap out of that slime ball myself."

This is sounding a little

overwhelming. Levi and I have been friends for a long time, but I'm not completely sure this is friend-level intensity.

"If you were my... well, I wouldn't have left you if I was him." He looks over at me and seems to realize what he's saying. His face falls a little. "I just think it's shitty that he left."

"Levi..." My stomach is churning. "Are we... are we okay?"

His smile returns, but it seems muted. "Of course we are. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be ragging on him. I just..." He takes a deep breath and looks right into my eyes. "You deserve better."

I have no idea how to respond to that or how to feel about the look in his eyes

right now. Before I can figure it out, I hear the crunching of gravel. A car is pulling up into the driveway.

My first thought is that some reporter has found us. I freeze in my seat. This place is supposed to be safe, the perfect hiding spot. They can't take it away.

Levi is up on his feet before I can even react. He pulls open the screen door and rushes into the cabin. A moment later, I hear voices from the front of the house.

“Daisy?”

That's not a reporter.

“Dad?”

He comes striding out the back door, Levi following. He spots me sitting on the deck, and his face seems to crumple,

a combination of relief and anger washing over it. "There you are."

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question. We need to talk."

Levi is standing behind him, looking awkward. I wonder if he tried to stop my dad from coming back here. I wouldn't put it past him with this protective streak he's displaying lately.

"Let's go for a walk," I say.

I stand up and Dad comes over, Levi on his heels.

"It's okay, Levi," I say quickly.

He looks as though he doesn't want to leave us, but then he nods and sits in his chair. I look up at my dad. He's staring at my face as if he can't believe

I'm really there. It's strange. He usually avoids eye contact.

"Come on," I say, starting across the lawn to the beach.

We walk in silence for a few minutes. It's a beautiful day, the sun glinting off the blue water of Lake Huron. Dad is dressed in jean shorts and a T-shirt, and I notice how young he looks. I try to remember the last time I saw him in anything but a suit and can't.

"I'm very angry at you, Daisy," he finally says, but his tone is neutral. "You have no idea what this week has been like for me."

I want to laugh. What it's been like for *him*? "Were you embarrassed, Dad? Having my name in the papers? Were

people talking about me around town again? God, that must have sucked for you.”

He grabs my elbow, pulling me around to face him so fast my head spins. “A year ago, I find out that my daughter is being bullied so badly she can barely go to school.” His voice is very low and controlled, as if he’s afraid to give it any leeway. “Which I had to find out from a guidance counselor, by the way. A few weeks after that, I find her in the bathroom with her... her wrists...” He lets go of my arm and turns his head. “You have no idea, no idea what that was like. After your mother...”

“Dad.” I don’t what to say to him. Of course, I knew that my suicide attempt

affected him. He's clearly worried about me, doing everything in his power to keep me alive and in school, sparing no expense. But I've never seen him get emotional about it. I always perceived his feelings as being more stress focused. It was his job to keep me safe, but he would rather not have to deal with me one on one.

"I'm sorry," I say softly. "Of course I know that was hard for you."

He releases a huge breath and plops down on the sand, pulling his knees up toward his chest. It strikes me that I sit that way too when I'm upset. After a moment, I join him.

"I should have told you about your mom ages ago. I can't help but wonder,

if you wouldn't have found out during such a vulnerable time... I was never good at the feeling stuff, Daisy.” He’s still not looking at me. “When I met your mother, it was the first time that I... that I ever really experienced that.”

“What?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Love. Kisses and hugs. Touching. When I was growing up, we just didn’t do that in our house. When I met her...” He trails off, his eyes on the water. A small smile comes to his lips. “She burst into my life like lightning—bright and loud and a little bit scary, unlike anything I had ever known before. I was captivated by her, I couldn’t get enough. She taught me about loving someone, about showing that

love.” The smile fades. “Then she was gone, and I was left with you, a beautiful little girl with that same ability to flash through my life. But I was scared. What was the point of all that feeling if it made you so vulnerable to pain?”

For the second time that day, tears come to my eyes. Wasn't that pretty much what I had been afraid of that night I decided to give up? That there was no point? That the pain always won out in the end?

“I wasn't loving enough with you, Daisy. I know that. I think I was trying to protect both of us. But it was wrong.”

“You did your best, Dad,” I say, my voice thick. “I had everything I needed.”

“Yeah, you had a nice house and lots

of things that money could buy. But you didn't have a dad around. You were so starved for attention you had to find it in the family next door."

I shake my head, though he still isn't looking at me. "It wasn't like that, Dad. Daltrey and I were both sad because of our moms. That's why we bonded the way we did. It wasn't because anything was... lacking with you."

He finally turns to face me, and I'm shocked to see his eyes glistening with tears. "That's nice of you to say, but I don't believe you. You needed someone to talk to about your day. To hug you. To play games with you. And I was always at work."

I can't really argue with that, so I

look down at the sand.

“After you... after your...” He swallows hard. “When you went to Horizons, I literally didn’t think I had the capacity to help you. I had failed your mother, and I had failed you. I was so scared, Daisy. You have no idea, the panic... I thought if you went there, those people could help you. And I could get you into school at ETU and make sure you had anything you needed. I had no idea that what you needed was the same thing you always had. Of course you went chasing off after those boys this summer. They always gave you what I couldn’t.”

I have no idea what to say to that. Did I chase the Ransome boys because

my father wasn't affectionate? And if that's true, should it change the way I view my relationship with Daltrey? Was it somehow not as real?

"It's a problem for me, Daisy, that when something goes wrong in your life, your response is to go to someone who isn't me. That you would rather come here with some kid I barely know than let me help you."

"It's not like that." I dig my fingers into the sand. "I just... I couldn't come home and be so close to where everything happened. It wasn't about you at all."

"Then I should have been the one to help you find a safe place. Do you honestly think that I wouldn't have taken

time off work? That I wouldn't have come to get you and take you away?"

"I just... I just feel..."

"You can say it, Daisy."

"I just feel like you would rather throw money at my problems than deal with me as a person." I say it in a rush, feeling like a bitch the whole time. It's a terrible thing to say to my father. But it's also true.

"Daisy..."

"Like, when you were taking me to therapy, you couldn't even look at me. And after my... suicide attempt, you were so eager to send me off to that hospital that was so far away. And for me to stay in Tennessee for school once I got out."

My dad puts his arms around me. “I love you more than anything else in the world. If something would have happened to you, if I hadn’t gotten there in time that night, my life would be over, Daisy. I would have nothing. I might not have reacted the right way—I know that—but all I could think about was getting you help. Making you safe.”

I can tell from his voice that he’s crying, and the knowledge shocks me more than anything else I’ve heard today. My dad never cries.

“I missed you. Every day that you were gone. I missed your voice and your face... and your...” His body shakes with sobs. “Your smile. I missed you. I still do.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut. All the guilt I’ve been feeling for the past year is crashing over me, making it hard to breathe. Every bit of shame I’ve felt for the weakness of that night is piling up on my chest. “I’m so sorry you had to find me like that.”

“It’s not your—”

“It *is* my fault. I tried to call out to you right before I passed out.”

“Daisy, I heard you. That’s why I came to the bathroom. Didn’t you know that?”

I shake my head. “All I could think about was that you were going to find me, just like Mom, and I hated myself for it.”

“Shh, sweetheart. I never blamed you. You were sick, Daisy. And going through terrible things. That’s not something to be ashamed of.”

I pull back, wiping my face with my shirtsleeves and shaking my head. “Of course it is. I feel ashamed every day. All I could think about that night was how weak I was, how I was just like her. And I was right. I am weak—”

“Stop it.” His voice is low, almost angry. “You are not weak. And neither was she. She was sick, Daisy. That’s all. I’ve spent half my life wondering why I couldn’t help her. And you know what? That’s gotten me nowhere. The only thing I got from blaming myself is a distance between myself and my

daughter.” He meets my eyes. “I need to give up that guilt, Daisy, and so do you. You need to forgive yourself.”

“But look at me, Dad.” I hold out my arms. “I still don’t have my shit together. Things got nuts, and what did I do? I ran. I ran and I hid.”

He shrugs. “So that’s what you needed to do to deal with it in that moment. It doesn’t mean you’ll hide forever.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You sound a lot like Dr. Jacobs.”

He smiles a little. “I may have talked with her a few times this week.”

I grin, the thought amusing me. “Did she give you pointers in talking to emotionally volatile teenagers?”

“She gave me pointers in talking about emotional stuff,” he corrects. “Something I plan to continue to work on.”

“Yeah?”

He looks embarrassed, but nods. “I’m going to start seeing a doctor of my own. I think it’s time I start dealing with some things.”

“Wow. I think that’s great, Dad.”

We’re both quiet for what feels like a long time, staring out at the vastness of the lake. For the first time that I can remember, though, the silence isn’t awkward. It actually feels nice to sit here with him.

“I meant what I said before. You told me the same thing, that night.” His voice

sounds sad, the hopefulness of the last few minutes absent. "I should have told you about your mom a long time ago."

I swallow. I recalled that therapy session, the night he had finally told me, the night I tried to kill myself. I would never forget those words leaving his lips.

"Your mother didn't die in a car accident," he'd said, his voice flat, unemotional. "She dealt with depression for many years and committed suicide when you were three."

I stared at him in horror, feeling as if the foundation of my entire world had been taken away. As he tried to explain all his reasons for keeping it from me, I sat in silence, my anger and pain

growing.

I finally screamed, “You’re a fucking coward, and you should have told me!”

He and the therapist talked to me for a long while after that, but those were the last words I uttered to him before I woke up in the hospital the next day.

“You told me I was a coward,” he says, shaking his head. “And you were right. I can tell myself that I was trying to protect you all I want, but the truth is, I was a coward. I didn’t want to take away the image you had of her.”

I realize that my head is pounding, a surefire sign that I’ve been crying too much. I’m tired of crying, tired of feeling sad and overwhelmed. I stand, brushing the sand from my jeans. “Let’s get out of

here.”

He looks up at me in surprise.
“What?”

“Let’s go somewhere. I don’t know, get lunch or something.” I shake my head. “I think we’ve covered enough heavy shit today, don’t you?”

“Language, young lady.” But his lips are turning up at the corners. “Yeah, let’s go get cheeseburgers.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Daisy

After stopping by the house to tell Levi where we're going and get my dad's car, we drive into town. I see that Levi had a point—the place is pretty quaint, in a kitschy touristy sort of way. I'm momentarily worried about the heavy foot traffic, but I feel safe with my dad. Besides, I can't hide in the woods forever. We find a diner fairly easily and order burgers and fries. My dad surprises me by ordering a milkshake. I wonder if Dr. Jacobs gave him tips on being more spontaneous, too.

“I really think you need a plan, Daisy,” he tells me while we wait for our food. “I get you wanting to hide away for a while, but it’s been more than a week. What’s next?”

I grab a napkin and start tearing at the edges. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“School starts in a few weeks.” When I don’t respond, he leans forward. “Are you worried about going back? Dr. Jacobs said we would have to deal with the loss of your anonymity.”

I can’t help but smile at his quoting my therapist. “I don’t know, Dad. Part of me is scared. People will probably know me now. I don’t know if I’ll deal with that very well. But...”

“But what?”

I chance a glance up at him. “It’s more than that. I don’t know if I really want to be in school at all.”

“Daisy, we’ve talked about this. You can’t just hang out at home. You’re far too bright—”

“I don’t mean sitting around at home. I’m not talking about my anxiety issues right now. I’m saying that even if I was a totally normal girl, I don’t know that I would want to be in school.”

His eyes narrow. “What do you want to do?”

I shrug. “I have no interest in business. I’m sorry. I just don’t. I was bored out of my head in half of my classes last semester.”

I’m glad the waiter chooses that

moment to appear with our food because I'm totally terrified of his reaction. He's always wanted me to go into business, like him.

He waits until we've both taken a few bites of our burgers before he speaks again. "So what do you want to do? Even if it's not business, Daisy, you'll be hard pressed to find a good job without a solid education."

"Do you know when I'm most happy?" I ask, staring at my fries so I don't have to look at him. "I'm most happy when I'm working with the band. I love it. I love being a part of a team like that. I love the travel. I love interacting with the fans, which you know is really saying something considering my recent

history.” I set down my burger. “By the end there, I was helping out a lot with all kinds of things. Their photo shoots. Their rehearsals. They asked for my advice on lots of stuff. And I was *good* at it. I think I made them better.”

When he doesn’t respond for several minutes, I finally look up. He has a strange look on his face.

“Well, that’s what you should do then.”

“Wait. What?”

“You should work in the music industry.”

I wouldn’t have been more shocked if he told me he thought I should become a professional juggler. “Are you serious?”

“Daisy, did you just hear yourself?”

You said working on the tour was a time when you were most happy. You were *happy*. That's the only thing I have ever wanted for you." He smiles ruefully. "I mean, I'm not going to pretend I don't think a background in business will provide for you best. But after everything we've been through, you telling me that you're happy is the only thing I want to hear." He reaches across the table and brushes his fingertips across my hand. "The *only* thing I want to hear."

"Wow." I shake my head. "You're full of surprises today."

He rolls his eyes and goes back to his burger. "So," he says after he finishes chewing. "Does that mean you're going

to go back on tour?”

The very thought sends a shot of panic through me. “I don’t know. Everything is different now. They’re so high profile. There are always crowds and press around them. How am I supposed to deal with that?”

“The same way you deal with anything else. You make a plan. You talk to Daltrey and to me and to Dr. Jacobs, and together, we figure out solutions to whatever issues come up.”

I stare at him. “You make it sound easy.”

“I’m sure it won’t be easy. But if it’s what you want to do, you’ll figure it out.” He eyes me over his burger. “Because really, Daisy, what’s the

alternative? If working in music makes you happy, you need to figure out a way to make it work. You say you're good at it, so start there. You can make a contribution to this band. So what's the next thing you need to tackle?"

For so long, I've thought of my life in terms of what I can't do. I can't be around people. I can't let strangers look at me. I can't get through a stressful situation without a panic attack. I can't, I can't, I can't. Why don't I ever start with what I can do and go from there?

We finish our lunch then stroll out to my dad's car.

"What are you going to do?" he asks. "Do you want to come back with me now?"

I shake my head. “I think I need to work a few things out first.”

“Okay.” He holds open the car door for me, waiting while I climb in. “I’m going to stay in town for a few days. Get a hotel here.”

“You don’t need to do that, Dad.”

“I know. But I’m not quite ready to be far away from you yet.”

He shuts the door and heads around the car to his side. I realize that I’m smiling. I don’t think that I’m quite ready to be far away from him yet, either.

Levi is still sitting on the back deck when I get to the cabin. He switched from coffee to beer at some point while I

was gone. He barely looks up when I join him at the wicker table.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he says, nodding in my direction. “How’s your dad?”

“He’s okay. Actually, I think *we’re* okay.” It still feels strange to think of our relationship as something that can be described as *okay*, but I do think we’re going to get there.

“I’m glad.” Levi’s attention seems to be set pretty firmly on the lake, and I wonder if he’s looking for privacy. Just as I’m about to excuse myself to go up to my room, he clears his throat. “So, I screwed that up pretty bad, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Earlier today. I think I let the cat out

of the bag a bit sooner than I intended.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Levi—”

“I’m crazy about you, Daisy.” He still doesn’t look at me, and it takes a minute for his words to sink in. “Always have been.”

My face immediately feels warm. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that.

He finally turns to look at me, a small smile playing around his lips. “Oh, come on. You can’t be that surprised. I thought it was painfully obvious.”

“Levi, are you saying that you... uh, like me?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Oh, Daisy. What is this, junior high? Okay,

yes, I like you. In fact, I *like you* like you.”

In spite of my surprise at the inherent awkwardness of the situation, he still brings a smile to my face with the Leviness of his response. “I guess that did sound pretty silly. I just... I’m surprised. I had no idea you had... feelings for me.”

He lets out a frustrated sound. “Yeah. I did a pretty good job of covering it up when we were in school. I thought Daltrey had some claim on you.” He shakes his head, looking bitter. “Stupid of me. If I had any idea he was going to run off and leave you on your own—”

“That’s not what happened,” I say, the need to defend Daltrey automatic.

“He had to go. It was the chance of a lifetime.” His face still looks hard. “Come on, Levi. You know that better than anyone.”

“What about this time, though? Once again, he put his feelings, his needs, first and left you on your own.”

I have no idea how to argue with him. I do wish Dalt had never left me in that room in New York. But I also don't believe for a minute that his motives were selfish. The bigger problem, though, is the pure anger I see on Levi's face while he talks about Daltrey. “Levi, Daltrey is one of your best friends. I don't want you to be mad at him, especially not over me.”

He shakes his head. “That's the

really annoying thing. I'm mad at him, but I still get it. I wish *I* could have done it. The truth is, no matter what stupid thing he does, I always seem to forgive him. Taking you for granted way back in high school. Being a pissy brat on tour. Leaving everyone else to deal with the consequences of his actions." He nods toward me, looking very sad. "Getting the girl." His eyes meet mine. "Even that, I'll end up forgiving in the end. It's just how it goes. Daltrey gets all the things he wants and good old Levi is there in the background whenever he needs me."

I grab his hand. "It doesn't have to be like that, Levi. It shouldn't be."

"Yeah? Well, I told you I had

feelings for you about ten minutes ago, and you still haven't responded. So I'm pretty sure my assessment of myself as the background boy is well founded."

I release his hand, feeling terrible. "I'm in love with Daltrey. I'm sorry, Levi."

"Don't be sorry. Really, Daisy, there's nothing to be sorry for. I knew you loved him years ago."

Tears come to my eyes. "But I am sorry. I don't want you to feel bad. You deserve better."

"And what about you, Daisy? You think you don't deserve better?" He picks up his beer with a shaking hand and takes a long gulp. He sets the bottle down on the table, hard. "What are you

going to do now? Go back on tour? Follow him around? Spend every day wondering if he'll take off again?"

I shake my head, overwhelmed. "It's not *like* that."

"Really? 'Cause I'm pretty familiar with how those boys operate. It's all about the band. It always has been. What happens if you can't deal with the press? If they keep digging into your background, writing about you? What happens if you need to get away from all the crowds, all the people? What do you think he's going to put first? When his dad is pressuring him and his brothers are giving him a hard time, do you think he'll be strong enough to stand up to them?" He reaches out and takes my

hand, his grip firm. “You deserve better than that, Daisy. You deserve better than being his second place.”

I start crying. He’s voicing what I’ve worried about since the first day I saw those pictures show up on my ConnectMe page last year. I had a lot of reasons to stay away from Daltrey and the band, but part of me, a part I never admitted to, was really just scared that if I went after him, he wouldn’t be there for me. It was easier to hide than take the chance that he’d reject me.

“I’m sorry,” Levi says, but he doesn’t let go of my hand. “I don’t want to make you sad. I don’t ever want to do that. But I know you, Daisy, and I know what you’re about to do. And I need you to

know, before you make that choice, that it *is* a choice. That you have options.”

“What options?”

He gives me that sad smile again. “Me. I could be your choice. I would take such good care of you. We have fun together. We could travel or find a place to settle far away from the bright lights and screaming fans of Ransom.” He rolls his eyes. “You would never have to worry about people trying to get a piece of you. I would take care of you.”

“Levi—”

“Don’t say no,” he says quickly, a bit of fear in his eyes. “Not yet. Just think about it. I know that you love him, I do. But have you ever even let yourself consider that he might not be right for

you? What do you think would happen if you opened up your eyes a bit more, just for a while? Give yourself time to think. Time to plan a life you really want, not just a life of following him around fulfilling his dreams. A life you *want*, Daisy. Anywhere you want. Would he still be the one you choose?"

"I don't know," I whisper, because it's true. I never once, not in all these years, imagined a life that didn't include him. When we were apart, I stopped dreaming entirely rather than dream of someone else.

For a moment, I imagine it. What would my life be like with someone like Levi? We could get jobs or maybe go to school, live somewhere quiet and

private. There would be no fans trying to get a peek at us, no reporters, no one to throw our biggest mistakes back in our faces for sport. I think back over the week we've spent here, and I realize that, in spite of what sent me off to hide, I've enjoyed my time with him. We do have fun together. In fact, it's pretty much impossible not to have fun when Levi's around. I've been comfortable here. I've been safe. And when I asked him to take me away, he didn't hesitate for a second.

"I'm not going to bother you about it anymore," he says softly. "I just want you to think about it, okay? It doesn't have to be with me." His eyes twinkle in that familiar way of his. "Though I'd like

to give myself my own hearty recommendation. But regardless of whether you want to be with me, I want you to think—really think—about what you want.”

I nod, dazed. He watches me for a minute, his eyes intense on mine. Slowly, he moves forward in his chair, leaning toward me until his face is close enough that I can make out the tiny freckles on his nose. I watch, wide eyed, unable to react, as he swallows heavily. Then, he brushes his lips against mine, so softly I barely feel it.

“You deserve *everything*, Daisy,” he whispers. He stands and turns for the house, leaving me alone on the deck, more confused than I’ve ever been.

Chapter Thirty

Daltrey

“Stop!” Dad calls from the back of the theater, waving his arms over his head. “Stop!”

Cash’s guitar cuts off, the drums and bass following. I take my fingers from the keys of my piano.

“What now?” Lennon asks.

Dad points at me. “You’re off, Daltrey.”

I stare out into the dark void of the seating area. “What?”

Dad starts walking toward the stage. “You’re off by a quarter beat. You need

to listen for the drums.”

I flex my fingers over the keys, struggling to keep my temper. “Fine.”

He reaches the front row. “What did you say?”

I glare at him. “I said *fine*.”

He crosses his arms. “Do you have something *else* to say?”

“No, Dad, I don’t. You said I was off. I don’t think I was, but I will try to keep on tempo. Can we just get this over with?”

“That right there is the attitude that’s messing us up,” he says, gesturing at me.

“What, that I said I would try?”

“No, smart ass. The ‘just get this over with’ part.”

Oh, God. I don’t think I can sit here

and listen to this lecture again; I really don't. I grit my teeth, staring at the white and black keys, and don't reply, knowing that if I do I'll only end up yelling.

"You've been off all week," he continues. "Your energy is low—"

"Everyone's energy is low, Dad," Lennon interjects. "We're in the final week of the tour. We're tired."

"It's different with him," my dad insists. "And you know it. Daltrey, you're acting like you'd rather be anywhere but here. You think the fans can't read that?"

"Damn it, Dad," I mutter. "I'm doing my best."

"You are not. I've seen your best, and this is not it."

“I’m doing my best under the circumstances.”

“The circumstances, Daltrey, are of your own making. So maybe instead of moping your way through these shows, you should figure out how to change them.”

I’m just about at my limit. Changing the circumstances would require leaving the tour to go find Daisy, which just so happens to be the very thing I want to do. But it’s not an option right now, and I’m doing everything I can to hold it together so I can live up to my responsibilities. For him to throw it back in my face right now...

“Are you listening to me?” he asks.
“Because you owe your brothers and

your fans a much better effort than you're
——”

“That’s it.” I stand, knocking my piano stool over in my haste. “I’m done with rehearsal. I’ll see you all at sound check.”

“Daltrey, you get back here!”

But I’m already stalking off into the wings. My heart is pounding so hard it feels like it might hammer its way out of my chest. I’m angry at my dad, angry at the tour, angry at myself. We only have two shows left, but I’m not entirely sure I’ll be able to get through them. We’re finishing the tour up in Cleveland, our big triumphant homecoming show.

I snort at the thought, pushing open the door to the green room so hard it

bounces off the wall and nearly hits my shoulder on the way back. *Homecoming, my ass.* The local press is having a field day. I made my court appearance yesterday, a minor assault charge, but from the way they're acting, I may as well have committed murder. They all seem obsessed with where we go and what we do, and why Daisy hasn't been seen with us. It's bad enough that I can't stop worrying about her. Having them shout her name at me every time I go outside is not helping.

“Where do you think you're going?” Dad asks.

I close my eyes and groan. I keep my back to him, remembering how Daisy calmed herself with those huge deep

breaths of hers. Before I get the chance to try it, his hand is on my shoulder, spinning me around.

He looks livid. “I asked you a question.”

“I’m done, Dad. If the guys want to rehearse, that’s fine. But I’m done being lectured. It’s not doing me any good.”

“You think you get to dictate what—”

“Yes. I will dictate the conditions under which I perform. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m having a hard time tapping into my creativity right now. Being made to feel like a stupid little boy is not helping.”

He takes a step back. “I’m not trying to make you feel like a stupid little boy. I’m trying to snap you out of this. You

have responsibilities, people counting on you.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? Damn it, Dad, if it was up to me, I would have left two weeks ago to find Daisy. It’s all I can think about. Levi won’t talk to me anymore. I don’t even know if she’s okay! The only reason I’m here at all is because I’m trying to be *responsible*.”

“It all comes back to her, doesn’t it?”

I turn away. “Seriously? You know how I feel—”

“Stop right there. We are not done with this conversation.”

I sigh but don’t walk away.

“I know you think you love her, son.”

I face him. “I *do* love her.”

“Daltrey, you don’t have the luxury of acting like some high school kid with a crush.”

I could punch him. I really could. “Do you think that’s what this is? She’s not a crush, Dad. She’s my best friend. She’s been my best friend since I was five years old. She was the one I went to when I was sad and lonely and scared after Mom left.”

“And did you learn anything from that?” he asks. “From her leaving? Because I learned something, Daltrey. I learned that you should never put a girlfriend over your work.”

I narrow my eyes. “I’m sorry you regret leaving your band, Dad. I really am. But this is not the same.”

“How is it not the same?”

“Because Daisy would never *ask* me to leave!” I yell, my temper officially shot now. “She wanted this for me as much as I did, and she would never ask me to give it up.”

“She might not ask you to, Daltrey, but she could still make you lose it all.”

“How?” I can’t believe him. He, of all people, knows how much she’s helped us, how much of her own time she’s put into our success over the years.

“She was hospitalized. She’s clearly not stable. What if she can’t deal with all of this?” He spreads his arms wide as if to encompass the venue, the band, and even the fans outside. “What will you do then?”

“We’ll figure it out together.”

He shakes his head. “You’re being naive. She’s not fit to be here or to be a part of this—”

I promised myself after Justin that I wouldn’t ever hit someone in anger again. But I decide shoving doesn’t count. My hands meet his chest, and I push hard. “Shut the hell up, Dad. I mean it.”

His face goes three shades redder, and he points a finger at me. “You better watch yourself, Daltrey.”

“No, *you* should watch yourself. Insulting the woman I’m in love with is not the way to get me to fall into line.”

He rolls his eyes. “Give me a break. You’re twenty years old.”

“And I’ve loved her for as long as I can remember. She’s the one that was there for me, Dad, when you were so busy building your band. She was the one that cared about *me*. She never equated my worth with my ability to play piano and make my family famous.”

“How dare you?”

“What do you want from me? I’m here, okay? I will be here through the end of the tour—”

“And then what? You go chasing after her? I knew she was trouble for you, knew it was for the best when she took off last year. The minute her father told me that she was in the hospital—”

“Wait—*what?*”

He looks away, the anger seeming to

seep out of him ever so slightly.

“Did you just say her father told you she was in the hospital? When was this? When did you talk to Mr. Harris?”

He wears a distinctly uncomfortable expression for a moment, then he lifts his chin and looks me straight in the eyes. “He called me last June.”

“He... he called you? What the hell did he call *you* for?”

“He wanted me to give you Daisy’s contact information in the hospital. He thought it might help her, that she might respond if you tried to get in touch again.”

I have him up against the green room wall so fast I hardly realize I’m doing it. “Are you telling me that you knew she

was in the hospital last year? And you didn't tell me?"

He tries to push me off, but my anger gives me strength.

"You were recording your album, Daltrey. The last thing in the world that you needed—"

"I needed *her*! And she needed me! Her dad actually reached out to us? And you kept it from me?"

Suddenly, strong arms are pulling me away from my father.

"Okay, man," Cash says. "That's enough."

"Did you hear him?" I yell, struggling against my brother. "I can't believe you, Dad! You could see how broken up I was about her—"

“That’s my point! She’s too much drama for you. It’s not what you need.”

I finally succeed in pulling away from Cash and shove a finger into my dad’s chest. “You don’t have any idea what I need. And it’s certainly not your right to decide it for me.”

“Okay, let’s just take a break.” Reed’s calm voice sounds from the doorway to the wings. “Everyone needs to chill out.”

I spare him a glance and see that Lennon is behind him. I’m so mad I’m actually scared. The only time I’ve ever felt like this was when I went off on Justin. My hands are shaking. “I’m done,” I mutter, holding out my hands. “I’m fucking done.” I turn for the door.

“Daltrey!” Dad calls.

But I don’t pause. I slam out of the green room and into the dressing room, bypassing the main sitting area for a small back room. I sink into the closest chair, burying my head in my hands and trying to get a handle on my rage.

He knew. I can’t believe it. He knew that she was in the hospital, knew that she had tried to kill herself. And he kept it from me. For what? The band? What kind of father did something like that?

“You okay?”

I don’t bother looking up at Cash. “Don’t, man. Seriously. Just leave me alone.”

“Nah, I think we need to talk.”

That wasn’t Cash. I look up to see

that Reed and Lennon have joined him in the doorway.

“Is he out there?” I ask.

“No.” Lennon pulls up a chair and joins me at the table. “We told him to go chill out in the bus.”

“He can go fuck himself in the bus,” I mutter.

“He was way out of line,” Cash says. He folds his arms and leans against the doorway. “No way should he have kept something like that from you.”

I’m surprised at how relieved I feel, knowing that he’s on my side. From the looks on the other boys’ faces, I have a feeling they agree with Cash.

“I can’t believe him.” I pound my fist on the table. “She went through all of

that alone, and she didn't need to. I should have been there."

"You can't blame yourself," Lennon says.

"I'm perfectly happy blaming him right now," I snarl, and he laughs.

"Look, man," Reed says, mirroring Cash's position against the far wall. "That's fucked up, what he did. I get that. And maybe Len is right, maybe you shouldn't blame yourself. But at the same time, you're not completely innocent here."

"Fuck, Reed! Really? Look, I get that I messed up. I get that everyone had a worse tour because of me. I'm sorry."

"I'm not talking about getting arrested," Reed says. "I'm talking about

Daisy. Would you have gone home if you knew what Dad knew?"

"Of course."

"So if you knew she was in trouble, you'd drop everything and go make sure she was okay?"

"Yes."

"Then why the hell didn't you?"

"Because he didn't tell me—"

"So you didn't know the specifics. But you knew she wasn't calling you. You knew you couldn't reach her. You knew her dad moved and that something was going on. Why weren't you worried about her?"

"I was," I argue.

"So were you just too pissed to care? 'Cause I gotta tell you, man, if I loved a

girl the way you say you love her, I'd make damn sure she was okay if I had the slightest reason to worry about her."

His words seem to sink into my stomach, making it feel both heavy and empty at the same time. Lennon said something pretty similar back in New York, didn't he? He was right, and Reed is right now. I should have gone home.

"And I'm doing the same fucking thing right now," I mutter, more to myself than to him. "The exact thing."

"Except this time, you know she's safe," Cash says. "You know she's with Levi."

I shake my head. I don't know she's safe, not really. Levi isn't talking, and she hasn't called me. For all I know,

she's completely melting down. Levi seems to have some problem with me right now and doesn't seem inclined to keep me up to date.

"That's not the point," I say. "The point is that she's going through something, and I'm not there. Again."

"You have a job, man," Cash starts, but I wave him off.

"I know I do. And I'm going to do it. I'll be here for the shows in Cleveland. But when they're done, that's it. I don't care what Dad wants from us, I'm going to find her."

"Are you sure you shouldn't give her time?" Cash asks. "To figure out what she wants?"

"She can have all the time in the

world,” I say. “But she’s going to know she can count on me, that I’m going to put her first.”

“Daltrey, what if she doesn’t want to come back?” Cash asks, sounding hesitant. “What if she doesn’t want anything to do with this life after what happened?”

He’s just voiced my greatest fear, that Daisy won’t want me. All those years ago, she was the person to fill the hole in my heart after my mom left. I’ve been relying on her ever since. The idea that she, too, might decide she doesn’t want me—that terrifies me. And maybe, really, that was the reason I didn’t go after her last year. I think, deep down, I was scared that she would choose to

walk away forever—just like my mom.

But Daisy is nothing like my mom. She's nothing like her mom, either, despite her fears. She is strong, kind, and loyal. She's so much braver than she ever gives herself credit for. She's worth any fear, any risk, any chance I'll have to take. Because I love her, completely and overwhelmingly.

I smile, feeling sure for the first time in ages that I'm doing the right thing. "That's a bridge we'll cross when we come to it. But we'll cross it together."

Chapter Thirty-one

Daisy

I wish Paige and Karen were with me. They'd help me figure out this mess. Then I realize that I could just call them. I manage to smile at my continued hopelessness when it comes to the social norms of kids my age.

Levi left his phone on the table, so I pick it up, sure it won't have bars. I'm surprised to see it's getting a full signal.

I frown. Levi's been telling me all week that he doesn't get cell service out here. Is this a fluke, or has he been lying for some reason?

I find Paige's number in the Contacts and press Send. I nervously tap my fingers on the table while it rings.

"Levi?" she asks, sounding as if she ran to answer. "Is that you?"

"No, it's Daisy."

"Oh, my God! Daisy! Where are you? I've been going crazy! Are you okay?"

I hold the phone away from my ear, her squealing acutely painful. When she seems to have quieted, I try to get a word in. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Where are you? We're worried sick!"

"I'm at Levi's parents' place in Michigan."

"You're in Michigan? What's going on? Daltrey keeps asking us if we've

heard from you—”

I frown again. I was under the impression Daltrey was getting regular updates from Levi.

“—and you haven’t returned any of our calls, and everyone is just really upset and worried.”

“I want to tell you what’s going on, Paige, but you need to let me talk first.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“Where are you, by the way? Are you near any of the guys?”

“No, I’m in my room. Karen’s out shopping, so I’m totally alone.”

I’m relieved at that. I wouldn’t mind talking to Karen, but I can do without Paige insisting on relaying everything to her.

“So what’s going on? I really miss you! I’ve been so worried.”

I lean back in the wicker chair. “I miss you, too,” I say, my voice shaking a bit. “I wish you were here.”

“So you’ve just been hiding out with Levi?”

“Yeah. His parents have a place up here by the lake. It’s actually been perfect. Totally secluded. It was exactly what I needed after... everything.”

“Oh, Daisy, it’s been nuts around here.” She then proceeds to tell me about all the increased attention Daltrey has been getting since his release and the extra work the boys are doing to try to make up for the scandal.

I close my eyes, feeling horribly

guilty. “If I would have just kept my mouth closed, none of this would have ever happened. Daltrey would have never gone after Justin.”

“That’s silly, Daisy. He’s a grown man. He needs to be responsible for his own decisions.”

“That’s what Levi keeps saying. He’s pretty pissed at Daltrey.”

“What about you?” she asks. “Are you mad?”

I pause, considering that. Since I’ve been here, most of my worrying has been about my pictures getting out and about being in the public eye. I’ve even been worried about Daltrey being angry with me for running. “I don’t know. I really don’t. When Levi talks about how Dalt

should have known better, I guess that makes sense to me. But at the same time... like, these things happened to me, and I reacted in a very emotional way, you know? I ran away from New York. Before that, I hid from Daltrey. Before that, I tried to... end things. Should I be judging anyone for letting their emotions dictate their behavior?"

"I don't know if you should, but I also understand if you do. His actions led to the press finding out about you, Daisy. You're allowed to be mad about that."

"I guess so," I say uncertainly.

"Honestly, I just assumed you were, and that's why you haven't called him."

"I haven't called him for the same

reason I've messed up everything else. I've been too scared."

"Why would you be scared? He's going crazy waiting to hear from you! Levi told him you didn't want to talk, but then Levi—"

"Wait. Go back to that. Levi told him I didn't want to talk?"

"Yeah. He said you were still processing everything, and you didn't think it would be good to talk to him yet."

"I never said that." Something cold sneaks into my belly. Has Levi been lying to me this whole time?

"Well, then Levi stopped calling, and Daltrey's *really* been freaking out."

I've been so stupid. I assumed Levi

was calling Daltrey every time he went into town to get a signal. “This is all such a mess,” I mutter. “And now Levi is telling me he has feelings for me and making me even more confused.”

“Hang on. Levi said he has feelings for you?”

I take a quick look over my shoulder to make sure I’m still alone. “Yeah. He said he always has, but he assumed I’d end up with Daltrey.”

“Um, did he really think this was the time for that kind of admission?” She sounds incredulous.

I smile. “I think he was fully aware of the inopportune timing, yes. But he said he was afraid I was going to go straight back out there after Daltrey, and

he wanted to make sure I knew my options.”

“Wow.”

“He seems to think I don’t consider my choices, that I’ve just assumed I’m supposed to be with Daltrey for so long that I have my eyes shut.”

“What do you think?”

“I’m confused as hell, Paige. But I think he’s probably right. My whole life, all I’ve ever wanted is to be where Daltrey is. Whether that was playing with him in the backyard when we were kids or watching his band play when we got older. It was all I wanted.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because he makes me happy. He makes me laugh. He knows my stories,

and I know his. When I was lonely and missing my mom, he got that and never tried to make me feel stupid for it. And when he plays, there's something that draws me in, like I can see some... I don't know, some deep down inside place in him. I think it's so brave, the way he lets himself be so vulnerable and expressive on stage. And he's beautiful, you know, really beautiful." I think of our walk in Central Park, what he said about money and helping people. "Inside and out. His heart is the only thing I can imagine being more beautiful than his face—"

Paige laughs softly on the other end of the phone.

"What?"

“Oh, Daisy, you’re not confused, honey. You’re madly in love with him. You should *hear* yourself.”

I laugh too, imagining the way that monologue must have sounded to her. Something in my brain seems to shift. *It doesn’t have to be so hard.* “Yeah, I am.”

“So get your ass back here, girl. What are you waiting for?”

“What if I can’t handle it, Paige? What if I freak out again?”

“Then you freak out again. It’s not the end of the world.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“I’m sure it won’t be easy,” she says. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t think you can do it.”

“You’re a really good friend, Paige,” I say, wishing I could hug her right now.

“Well, duh.” She chortles. “I told you that from the very beginning, didn’t I? About how lucky you were to be friends with me and Karen?”

“You did. I’m sorry I left the two of you there alone.”

She snorts. “Oh, yeah, it’s been absolutely terrible, staying in nice hotels and hanging out with a famous rock band.”

“I don’t know how you’re carrying on.”

She sighs dramatically. “We do our best.”

“I should let you go.”

“Will you call me soon?”

“I promise.”

I hang up and look down at the phone, knowing what I need to do. I think I’ve always known, really. I just let the scared part of my brain get so loud it drowned out my heart. But not anymore. I type in a quick text to my dad before setting the phone back on the table.

“Daisy?”

I turn to see Levi by the door.

“Sorry to bug you,” he says. “I just realized I left my phone.”

I hold it out to him. “I called Paige. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” He reaches for the phone, but his hand falters slightly as he realizes what I said. “Oh.”

“Yeah, it’s funny because there was a

full signal. I was under the impression that never happened.”

He instantly looks guilty. “It’s usually not very good.”

“Levi...”

He sighs. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I exaggerated the no-signal thing so you wouldn’t feel pressure to talk to anyone until you were ready.”

“You also didn’t tell me that Daltrey has been asking to speak to me.”

He looks out at the water. “I didn’t think you were ready for that yet, either.”

“You know that’s kind of bullshit, don’t you? You keeping things from me?”

“I just wanted you to be okay,” he says sadly. “God, Daisy. You should

have seen your face that night in the hotel. It was... you were so scared and so upset. I just wanted you to be somewhere private and safe.”

“I’m grateful for you bringing me here. You have no idea how much it means to me. But it was wrong of you to lie to me.”

He finally meets my eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says, his voice low and intense. “I really am. I didn’t mean to lie to you. I just wanted what was best.”

Looking at the stricken face of my old friend, I realize that this is a huge part of my problem. I love Levi for caring so much, just as I love my dad for being so worried about me. But for the past year, I’ve been letting too many people make

decisions for me based on what *they* thought was best—from my dad enrolling me in school in Tennessee to Levi cutting me off from Daltrey. People were making *my* choices for me, and I let them, without complaint, because deep down, I still considered myself too weak and broken to make those choices myself. And no one is going to believe that I can take care of myself until I start to show them that I can.

I stand, a slight glimmer of something like anger growing in my chest. I'm surprised by how good it feels. "I'm going to go stay with my dad tonight."

"You don't have to do that," he says quickly. "I can leave if you want. This place is good for you."

I shake my head. “It’s time for me to stop hiding from something that was never my fault in the first place.”

“Daisy—”

“Look, I appreciate everything that you did for me, I really do. But I don’t need you making choices for me. It was wrong of you to lie to me about the phone, Levi, and to tell Daltrey that I didn’t want to talk to him. You doing that is *not* okay with me. It wouldn’t be right for me to keep staying here.”

He hangs his head. “I really fucked this up, huh?”

“I know you did what you thought was right. But it’s time for me to make those choices myself.” I place my hands on his shoulders. “I’m sorry, Levi, that I

don't feel the same way you do. I really am. You deserve someone totally amazing in your life." I lean forward and kiss his cheek. "Thank you. I might be a little mad right now, but I still really appreciate you bringing me here." I pull back and see, finally, that he's smiling that old Levi smile of his, though his eyes still look sad.

"At least I can say that I tried, right?"

I shake my head. "It wasn't ever something you needed to earn, Levi. You're wonderful, one of the best, kindest people I know. But my heart had already decided ages ago." I hold his gaze. "He's one of your best friends. It would make me so sad if you stayed mad at him over any of this."

He takes a deep breath. “I guess we’ll just have to see.”

I realize there’s nothing I can do to make up his mind for him, just like there was never anything anyone else could have done to change my mind about Daltrey.

I start to remove my hands, but he pulls me into a hug. I wrap my arms around him. “Thank you,” I say again. “From the bottom of my heart.”

I go into the cabin to grab my things, figuring my dad will be here soon. I’m a little surprised by how much it hurts to walk away from Levi. I could never love him the way he wants, but I do love him. I can only hope that this doesn’t have to be the end for us.

But if it is, I'll know that it was his choice, and I'll respect it. I've come to learn that people have all different ways of reacting to the hard things in life. Even though we might not always agree with them, we can't change them either.

But I'm done reacting to the hard things by running. I'm done hiding. I'm done blaming myself for the cruelty of others. I *deserve* to be happy and with the people that I love. And I'm never going to let someone else take that from me again.

Chapter Thirty-two

Daltrey

My bags are packed, and I couldn't be more ready to go.

Granted, they would have been packed anyhow, seeing as how tonight is the last show, but I still feel satisfied because I know what they represent. When the show is over tonight, I'm getting in a car, and I'm driving until I get to Daisy. Levi might not be happy to see me, but I don't care anymore. Daisy is the only one who can tell me to stay away.

There's a knock on the door. I finish

zipping my suitcase and go answer it.

“Hello, son. Can I come in?”

I give him a weary look but move aside so he can enter.

“You’re packed already?” he asks, seeing my bags. “We’re not checking out until tomorrow.”

I shrug, not wanting to get into an argument. We’ve been avoiding each other since our fight, Dad relying on Reed or Dan to get any instructions or information to me. The lack of contact has helped with my stress level, and that paired with my excitement at seeing Daisy soon has really helped my performance.

He’s still looking at me questioningly, so I say, “I’m leaving

tonight.”

He watches my face closely. “You’re going to find Daisy?”

“Yes,” I say tersely.

He holds my gaze for a minute. “You know, it’s hard being a single father, Daltrey.”

I don’t know what I was expecting him to say, but it certainly wasn’t that. “I know, Dad.”

“I tried to do my best with you boys. I really did. I know it might seem sometimes like I’m just pushing you for my own purposes. But I hope... I really hope you know that everything I did, I did for you boys.”

“I do know that.” I pause, not ready to let him off the hook. “But that doesn’t

mean it was okay, what you did. You should have told me what you knew about her. That wasn't fair, Dad."

He holds up his hands. "I know. Your brothers have all told me the same thing, and I get it. I really do. My own excuse is that I was worried about you. Like I said, it's hard to be a single dad, hard to know what your kids need. I... I'm sorry."

I wouldn't have been more shocked if he told me he was leaving to go join the circus. I don't think my father had ever apologized to me. "Uh, thanks. Thank you for saying that."

He shoves his hands into his pockets. "I felt really guilty for a long time, Daltrey, feeling like I had failed you

boys. That I was... I was the reason she left. And I knew how hard it had to be, especially for you.” Something spasms across his face. “You were so little.”

“Dad—”

“And I knew I couldn’t give you what you needed. I couldn’t give you that mother’s love. I felt so damn bad about it, son. So I tried really hard to be good at the things I *could* do—providing for you, guiding you in your careers.”

“You did great with all that,” I say, my voice suddenly thick.

“But you still needed someone to love you,” he says, shaking his head. “I never got it, I guess, that Daisy gave that to you.”

“You gave us love too, Dad.”

He looks at the floor. "But I wasn't good at showing it. I'm glad you had someone who was." He looks up at me. "Good at showing it, I mean. I'm glad you had Daisy."

"I'm glad I had both of you."

"So," he says, looking up and giving me a shaky smile, "drive carefully, okay? If you get into any trouble with photographers or anything, just call."

I nod. "Sure."

He stares at me for a long moment before finally turning. "Okay. Well, I have some work to do before the show. We're, uh, planning a band meeting in a week."

"A week?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, I figure all you

boys could use some time off before we start rehearsing for the VMAs.” He meets my eyes. “But if you’re not ready in a week, we’ll play it by ear, okay?”

I shake my head, kind of overwhelmed by the change in him. I wonder if he could sense how close I was to walking. There were moments in the last week where I came close. Maybe that finally scared some sense into him. Or maybe he just finally really realized how much I needed this.

“Have a good show, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He nods once before he pulls open the door and disappears into the hallway. I sit heavily on the bed, trying to wrap my mind around everything he

said. That was as close to a heart to heart as we've ever gotten. And it wasn't even that hard.

There's another knock, and I squeeze my eyes shut, praying he hasn't come back to ruin it. I walk back to the door and open it, ready for a fight, only to see Daisy standing there.

It takes me a good long moment before I can speak. I'm sure I look ridiculous, staring at her while I open and close my mouth, willing sound to come out.

"Can I come in?"

I nod. "Of... of course you can," I finally manage.

She squeezes past me, close enough that I can smell the familiar earthy scent

of her shampoo. It makes my stomach ache; I want to bury my face in her hair so badly.

She walks to the center of the room and turns to face me. “Daltrey, I’m sorry.”

I barely register her words. I’m still shocked to see her. “How did you get here?”

“My dad brought me. The girls told me what hotel you were at.”

I shake my head, trying to process the fact that she’s here. “Wait a second.” I hold up my hand as something occurs to me. “Did you just apologize?”

She nods. She looks terrified, but she’s holding my gaze steadily. “I’m so sorry for running away like that. Again.”

I cross the room in two steps to stand in front of her. “Are you kidding? This was all my fault. I’m the one who screwed up, Daisy. I didn’t go there to beat him up. I just wanted to make sure he knew I was on your side, to try to protect you. But I got so mad when I thought—” I take a deep breath, trying to get some control. “You have to know that I had no idea any of this would happen. I should have. I should have guessed, but I didn’t, and I’m so, so sorry.”

She holds up her hands. “I know you didn’t mean any harm, Daltrey. I’m not angry at you.”

“You’re not?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m really

not. I am angry at myself, though, because I shouldn't have run."

"No one could blame you."

"I want you to know something," she says, her voice low and almost husky. It sends goose bumps down my arms. "I'm done running. I'm done hiding. I'm done letting other people's actions control my life. From now on, I'm going after what I want."

"And what's that?" I hold my breath.

She looks up at me, her green eyes blazing. For one second, I think I see a glimmer of fear, but then it disappears as if she pushed it away. "I want *you*, Daltrey."

I pull her into my arms, the need to feel her there, safe and whole,

overwhelming. She wraps her arms around my back, squeezing me tighter than I would have thought possible.

“I love you,” she says.

“God, Daisy, I love you so much.”

Her hair is pressed against my cheek, the soft curls that I’ve always loved somehow making me want to weep. Then she goes up on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine. Her mouth is warm and demanding, and I’m pretty sure I let out some kind of strangled, triumphant cry before I’m kissing her back.

We’re on the bed within seconds, her hands tugging on my shirt. After I help her pull it off, she leans forward to kiss the daisy on my chest. I return the favor,

taking off her shirt and running my lips gently across the tattoo of my song lyrics on her side, making her skin erupt in goose bumps.

“I can’t tell you how much I love that this is on your body,” I whisper, “that my words are with you forever, no matter where you go.”

She shakes her head, her eyes warm and full of something that looks like joy. “They always were, Daltrey.” She places my hand directly over her heart. “Right here.”

Then she’s kissing me again, and I lose my ability to think clearly. All I know is Daisy, the taste and smell and feel of her. I need to be inside her, need to consume her the way she’s consuming

me.

When I finally move inside of her, it's everything I remembered from that one perfect night we shared. Her skin soft under my hands. Her body arching up to meet mine. My name on her lips. Her breath in my ears. There's nothing that I need more than this, nothing in the world that could compare to loving this girl.

We come apart together, clutching each other tightly, crying out. My last cognizant thought is that Daisy will be here when it's over to help put me back together again.

"We need to get up," she says into my

chest twenty minutes later.

“No way.” I tuck the sheet more firmly under her arms. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“You have sound check.”

“Fuck sound check.”

“Terrible language,” she admonishes. “What are you, into that evil rock and roll music or something?”

I laugh. “I want to stay right here, all night.”

“Me too. But you really do have to get out there. You have a show.”

I groan. I know she’s right. In fact, I should have been there ten minutes ago. But how am I supposed to move when Daisy Harris is here, naked in my bed? It’s cruel and unusual punishment.

She leans up to kiss me, her long hair trailing around my face. "I'll be right here when you get back."

"Well, that's pretty motivating."

She laughs and kisses me before rolling over and swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

"Where are you going? I thought you were going to be here when I got back?"

She looks over her shoulder at me, a little line of confusion down the middle of her brow. "I'm going with you. To the show."

I sit up, pulling her into my lap and wrapping my arms around her. "There's a lot of press. Outside and at the venue. Maybe you should stay here."

She straightens her shoulders. "I told

you, Daltrey, I'm done hiding. If I see reporters, I'll deal with it. But I'm going to be wherever you are."

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone, you know."

She smiles. "Actually, I do. I want to show everyone in the world that it takes a lot more than some assholes on the Internet to break me."

I thought I couldn't love her more, but I was wrong. Every time she shows me just how brave she is, just how beautiful, how kind and perfect, I fall a little more. "I love you." But the words are inadequate. I could tell her a million times, write a hundred songs to her, make love to her every day, and it still wouldn't be enough to really show her.

But when she grins, her green eyes alight and happy, and says, “Well, duh,” I get the feeling that maybe, somehow, she really does know.

Epilogue

Daisy

“You’re doing amazingly well,” the reporter says, giving me her toothpaste-ad smile. “We’ll take five, okay?”

I nod, returning her smile, and she leaves us sitting on the couch.

“She’s right, you know,” Daltrey says, squeezing my arm. “You *are* doing amazingly well.”

I flip my hair over my shoulder. “Piece of cake,” I say, in my best bored-celebrity voice.

Daltrey laughs. “I mean it. You’re composed and calm. I would never

guess that this is the first time you've done a TV interview."

I shake my head a little. Does he really not get how easy he makes it for me to do pretty much anything just by sitting next to me?

A young woman with a headset comes over to bring us fresh water, which is quite welcome under these hot television lights.

"Thank you," Daltrey tells her, grinning.

The woman blushes and mumbles something as she practically runs away. I try hard not to laugh at the poor girl, but I can't blame her. His smiles affect me the same way.

The producer approaches us next, a

very kind but busy and fast-talking woman named Gina. She consults her clipboard. “We’re nearly done. I think we’ve covered pretty much everything about the initiative and the fundraising.” She checks a few things off on her sheet.

I feel a rush of relief. For all my swagger, this is taking a toll on me. Daltrey and I are doing this joint interview to launch our anti-bullying initiative, so it’s only natural that we’ve been asked so many questions regarding my experiences. But that doesn’t make it any easier to relive.

The morning after the final show in the tour, we jumped on a plane for Mexico. We spent a week, sleeping, making love in our suite, and talking for

hours and hours about everything we had been through in the past year. It was both exhausting and strangely calming to get it all out there. When I told him about how alone I had felt, how hard it was to speak up and ask for help, how little the school had been able to do, his face had gotten stony with anger.

The very next day, he asked me if I would be interested in helping him to set up an anti-bullying organization. With his money and profile and my experiences, he thought we could help a lot of people. I was hesitant, not really wanting to open myself up to all of that. But the idea nagged at me until I finally relented.

And I was so glad I did. I was

working hard, both on the organization's launch and on helping Ransom get ready for their next tour, which was starting in a little less than a week. I fell into bed every night, tired but happy, feeling as though I might actually be able to make a difference. It also helped that I was falling into bed with Daltrey most nights.

“So since we have most of the details down,” the producer went on, “would you mind if we asked you a few questions about your relationship?”

Daltrey looks at me, eyebrows raised. “Doesn’t bother me.”

I nod. “Okay.”

A few minutes later, the makeup team has touched up our faces with powder, a fact I promise I will never let Daltrey

live down. The reporter returns to resume the interview.

“Daltrey,” she says, wearing that big smile again, “it’s so obvious to everyone who sees you how much you care about Daisy. You’ve known each other for a long time, right?”

He nods, looking over at me. “Yeah, we have. Since we were about five.”

“And how would you describe your relationship?”

He looks away, and I can tell that he’s concentrating, wanting to get the words just right. “You know, I never liked the term ‘soul mate.’ It inevitably has romantic connotations, and Daisy and I have always been more than that.” He returns his gaze to me, and it’s steady

and sure. “So much more than that. She’s my best friend, my greatest supporter, the person who knows me better than anyone else in the world. She is, quite literally, the matching part of me, the other half of my soul.”

His words hit me right in the chest, bringing tears to my eyes. I couldn’t have said it better. He is the other half of my soul. And he always has been.

The reporter turns to me, but I laugh and wave her away, too overcome to talk. I lean against Daltrey, his arm strong around me, and listen while he handles the rest of the interview like the pro that he is.

I never could have imagined that things would turn out like this, which

isn't to say that my life is perfect. Paige and Karen have returned to school, and I miss them both desperately. I still struggle with my panic attacks, though Dr. Jacobs and I have started having sessions over Skype, which helps a lot.

Maybe worst of all, I'm still not sure Levi will be joining us. I struggled for a long time over whether or not to tell Daltrey about what happened at the cabin. I finally decided the only way our relationship would be successful is through honesty, so I told him everything. To say he'd been pissed at Levi was an understatement. If possible, he got even angrier when I told him that Levi had confessed to having feelings for me. I'm not sure they'll ever be friends again.

It makes me sad. Dr. Jacobs assured me it was okay, healthy even, to have feelings of anger toward Levi for lying to me. For the most part, though, those feelings have faded. I can never forget the way he took my hand in the hotel that night, agreeing to help me without a second thought. I figure a person like that is the kind of friend both Daltrey and I need in our lives. Lennon has been trying to convince Levi to resume his role with the band. I hope he comes around. I really can't imagine being out there on the road without him.

But I do know, with every fiber in my being, that I'll have the strength to get through any of these challenges and whatever else the world wants to throw

at me. I have Daltrey, and his support makes me braver than I ever knew I could be.

It's more than that, though, more than just having a great boyfriend or a job I enjoy. I've been through some terrible things in the last two years, but I've come out on the other side, strong and sure of myself. My friends helped me, as did my dad, Dr. Jacobs, and Daltrey. But in the end, I'm the one who did it. I'm the one who got through it, every day, no matter what.

I used to worry that there wasn't any hope, that I would end up like my mother because I was weak and the world was cruel. The world *can* be cruel, but it's also full of wonderful, beautiful things.

Like good friends. Music. Laughing until you cry. The view from the very top of the Empire State Building. Things like love.

And as long as I can remember all of those things, I will never lose my hope again.

The End

[Join the mailing list for updates and exclusive content!](#)

More From This Author

**Love New Adult Contemporary
Romance?**

**Don't miss the *Escape* series,
available now!**

Escape In You Jet Taylor is the quintessential bad boy. The type of guy most girls do their best to avoid. But Zoe Janes is no saint herself and the more time they spend together, the harder it is for Zoe to stick to her “fun only” mantra. Jet is getting under her skin, making her believe things could actually be different, that freedom might be

possible. And that makes him the most dangerous boy of all.

Escape With You Ellie is not a serious relationship kind of girl and Fred has made a career out of worrying. When the two start hooking up they're both ready for nothing more than some no-pressure, worry-free fun. So long as they stick to the plan, both can get out unscathed. So long as they stick to the plan, both can get what they want. But life has a way of messing with the best of plans...

**Interested in reading more from
Rachel Schurig?**

Her best-selling romantic comedy series are also available for ebook and in paperback.

Three Girls Series

Come along for the crazy ride as Ginny McKensie and her best friends deal with an unexpected pregnancy in *Three Girls and a Baby*.

Follow Jen Campbell as she struggles to plan the perfect wedding—and find her very own happily ever after in *Three Girls and a Wedding*.

Join Annie Duncan as she continues her search for the perfect leading role—and

the perfect man to go along with it in the third and final book of the series, *Three Girls and a Leading Man*.

Reunite with Ginny, Jen, and Annie and catch up with Kiki Barker-Thompson as she attempts to create the perfect fairy tale life in *The Truth About Ever After* (a *Three Girls* book).

Ginny, Jen, and Annie are back for the next chapter in *Three Girls and a New Beginning*.

Love Story Series

In Search of a Love Story is the first in

the three-book series, in which you meet Emily Donovan, a self-described romance novice, as she searches for her very own love story.

An Unexpected Love Story, is the second in the Love Story series, where we follow along with Brooke Murray as she attempts to save her parents' inn, find true love, and run a business-all while wearing the perfect pair of heels!

In the final book in the Love Story Series, *An (Almost) Perfect Love Story*, we learn more about Ashley Phillips. She has always believed in love, but does she have what it takes to fight for love when her perfect love story turns

out to be not so perfect after all?

Lovestruck Series

Lovestruck in London

When Lizzie Medina settles in London for a year of post-graduate studies, she's sure she'll be able to start a whole new life. But falling unexpectedly in love with up-and-coming actor Thomas Harper causes Lizzie to re-think... everything. When Thomas's career suddenly explodes to superstar levels, Lizzie finds herself forced to navigate the fame game of red carpets, catty co-stars, gossip magazines, and paparazzi in *Lovestruck in London*. When she wished for a new life, she had no idea it

would be anything like this!

Lovestruck in Los Angeles

Lizzie Medina is living a fairy tale life. Ever since she left home for an adventure in London—and fell in love with movie star Thomas Harper in the process—her world has become brighter. More exciting. The kind of life she's always dreamt of. When Thomas is required to temporarily move to Los Angeles for his new movie, Lizzie joins him without hesitation. But it doesn't take her long to realize that in Hollywood, not everything is quite what it seems. Will she and Thomas succumb to the pressures inherent in their new life? Or will they find a way to create a

perfect Hollywood ending of their own?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Schurig is the best-selling author of the *Three Girls* series, available now in paperback and ebook. Rachel lives in the metro Detroit area with her dog, Lucy. She loves to watch reality TV, and she reads as many books as she can get her hands on. In her spare time, Rachel decorates cakes.

To find out more about her books, visit Rachel at rachelschurig.com

[Join the mailing list for updates and exclusive content!](#)

Visit her author page on [Facebook](#)
(<https://www.facebook.com/RachelSchu>

Follow her on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/rem330)
(<https://twitter.com/rem330>)

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More From This Author](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)