



Heartbeat Highway

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Category: Romance

Description: When his best friend's boyfriend spectacularly screws up, drummer Bo Harley uses an impromptu road trip to prove to Lily that she's his one true love song.

Bo

I fell in love with Lily Davila the first night I ever heard her sing.

Except she wasn't a singer then. She was in law school and letting her d*ck of a boyfriend fill her head with lies about herself.

Two years later, she's my best friend, and I've only fallen harder for her. All those nights we've spent laughing, sharing. She's the only one who knows how complicated my relationship with my dad is.

I'd do anything for her.

Now, I finally have that chance.

Lily

I'd be lost without my best friend, Bo. He's warm and funny and—not that I ever say this aloud or my boyfriend would kill me—sexy as hell with those tattoos and drummer arm muscles.

Not that we'd ever cross that line.

When I find out my boyfriend is cheating on me, everything clicks into place for me.

Bo's my getaway driver, and we escape to Saddleback, Tennessee, where everything seems to go wrong.

Until it all starts to go exactly right.

Heartbeat Highway is a steamy short instalove romance featuring rock stars, plus size representation, and friends to lovers romance that gives you all the feels. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 25

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

PROLOGUE

Bo—two years ago

Where the hell is our new lead singer?

I'm sitting at a table in a dive bar in North Hollywood, sheets of music spread on the table between me and Maxim, my friend and brand new bandmate. Maxim points at one of the song sheets, somehow maneuvering the chocolate chip cookie he's holding so it doesn't dust crumbs all over his work.

"These songs are going to slay," Maxim says. He inhales the cookie and leans forward on the table, resting his tattooed forearms against the surface. "We don't want Howl to be like every other band, right? This is going to be different."

"Our new lead singer might have things to say about that," I reply. In the background, two college-aged kids get on stage and twang their way through a country version of "Bohemian Rhapsody." No, it does not work for them.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but every time I've looked at it lately, it's been my dad, and there's fuck all chance I'm going to talk to him. Instead, I take out my drumsticks and rap them thoughtfully on the table, against the songs Maxim's written. I've known him since college, when we met at an audition for a Rick Astley cover band.

Don't judge. I was desperate.

Not for money. I didn't need the money for that and I don't need the money from playing in Howl now, scant as it is. That's one thing dear old dad is good for. He set up my trust fund and doesn't mess with how I choose to spend it.

One thing he isn't good for is his notoriety. Every audition I've ever shown up for, they wanted Bo Harley, son of the great Runner Harley, former lead singer of the 80s hair metal sensation, Crooked.

Let's just say meeting me has been a disappointment. I'm not flashy or bombastic. I stick to what I'm good at, what I love. I'm not here to be the front man.

It's meant drumming and music has taken backstage.

Until Howl. Playing with Dan, who put the band together, and Maxim has been amazing. We just didn't have a lead singer and guitarist until a couple weeks ago. He's a bit of a douche, but he's got a husky voice and a vibe audiences are going to go wild for. He's "the missing link," according to Dan.

He's definitely a missing link, just not in the way business-school-educated Dan means.

"Bo." Maxim covers my drumsticks, stopping their momentum. "Focus."

"On what?" I gesture around the bar. The "Bohemian Rhapsody" murder is over, and now a gorgeous, curvy blond woman with cream-colored skin and a new-in-the-city aesthetic climbs the stairs, hands in the pockets of dark wash jeans that cup her full ass. My gaze lingers on her for a moment before snapping back to Maxim. I don't need distractions. "K isn't here yet."

Maxim snorts and stabs a French fry into a pile of Maxim sauce. It's ketchup mixed with mustard, but woe to anyone who asks for his special recipe. "I don't know about

K, man. He's into the covers. He said something about reworking some of Crooked's songs."

"There's zero chance I'll let that happen." My blood turns to ice, even as the unmistakable opening cue for "True Colors" plays in the background. Poor woman. This crowd is not going to be into classic pop anthems. Besides us, the bar is full of Hollywood music hopefuls, guitars in hand. The woman can't be good enough to hold their attention.

"Bo—"

Maxim's protests fade into background music. The entire bar fades, and it feels like it's just me and this blond woman on stage, lit by a single spotlight.

She has a killer voice. It's not that she hits all the notes just right—and trust me, that's a rarity on an open mic night—but it's all the feeling she puts behind it. She can't be much older than the college students, yet there's an endearing sincerity in her smoky, lilting soprano.

She's captivating.

I let my gaze travel down from her face as she sings, letting her voice work itself through me. She has the body of a Raphaelite goddess, full and sensuous. She wears a loose white shirt but I can still see the outlines of her shape. Her cheeks are flushed with the song, her eyes bright and her mouth...

Even I could write ballads about those perfect, red lips. Especially the way she's cradling the microphone.

My cock stirs and I shift in my seat.

The song ends, and Maxim snorts beside me, which snaps me back into reality.

“Thank you, everyone!” The woman waves gaily—so fucking cute—and practically runs off stage.

“Need something, Bo?” Maxim pokes me with a French fry.

I swipe him away, my gaze still locked on the woman. Now that she’s offstage, some of her confidence has faded. She’s looking around like she doesn’t have a seat, doesn’t have people.

“Hey!” I call her and raise a hand. She looks over at me, a tentative smile on those kissable lips. I can almost hear Maxim’s eye roll. “You can sit with us if you want.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

She glances between me and Maxim. Blue. Her eyes are cornflower blue. Midwest, I'd stake my jaded Angeleno heart on it. Her shoulders rise in a moment of hesitation, then she settles into herself and walks toward us.

I doubt it's because of me, as much as I want it to be. Maxim is quintessential girl bait. He's almost six-four with dark brown skin, tattoos that wind from his wrists to his shoulders, and eyes that women have swooned over.

I know because I've caught them. It's a good thing drumming also works as an arm workout.

"Here we go." Maxim relinquishes his plate of fries and leans back against the fading leather of the booth.

"Hi." The woman stops at the edge of the table and holds up a hand. I love a shy girl. My last relationship was with a vitamin influencer. There's a good reason our series of hook ups ended after four months. She'd wanted the Son of Runner Harley and I wanted someone who liked Bo. "I'm Lily." She shifts from foot to foot.

"Hey." I set down my sticks. "I'm Bo. This is Maxim. Take a seat. It's hard to find one tonight."

She hesitates another moment. I'm fascinated by her. Onstage, she was so confident, so alive, and now on the ground she's timid. Then she nods once and slides in beside me. She smells like roses and something bright and citrusy. I wonder if I can take a larger whiff without looking like a total creep.

Probably not.

“Thanks,” she says.

Maxim looks between the two of us, a smirk playing around his mouth. “What do you want to drink, Lily? I’m buying.”

“I don’t know.” She blushes, and I like the color of it on her full cheeks. “Are you guys going to judge me if I say I want a fruity cocktail?”

“Absolutely not.” Maxim slaps the table. “Fruity cocktail, little umbrella if they have it. I’ll be right back.” He kicks me under the table and gives me a pointed look. I could remind him that I’ll do just fine striking out on my own.

“You guys are musicians?” Lily gestures to the sheet music and my drumsticks, strewn across the table. “It’s a little obvious.”

“Yeah. Maxim plays bass, and I’m the drummer. We’re in a new band as of a few days ago, so you’ve never heard of us.”

“Yet.” She holds up a finger, and there’s something so unpretentious about her declaration, I almost believe it myself. “It’s a good thing I didn’t know you guys were out here earlier. I never would have sung in front of real musicians. I was nervous enough.”

“You sing beautifully,” I say. “You had the whole crowd captivated.”

“Really?” Her entire countenance lights up. “I’m not pitchy?”

“Not in the least.” I drink from my half-full bottle of beer. “Are you a singer?”

“Only in my dreams.” She sighs. “I moved out to LA a couple weeks ago, for law school. I haven’t met a lot of people so far, though. The other students are all so stressed out already. It’s either let’s-drink-our-cares-away or they’re deeply entrenched in the library.” She leans a little toward me, one hand covering the side of her mouth, like she’s about to divulge a huge secret. It’s incredibly cute and somehow arousing as well. “Classes started three days ago.”

I feel the smile tug at the corner of my mouth. “You’re going to be a lawyer? That’s great.”

“Is it?” She plays with her hands. She should take up drumming. That’s how I manage my nervous habits. I went to college for graphic design, and it pays the bills along with my trust, but as much as I have no desire to live my father’s life, I kind of can’t live without music. It’s a conundrum. “Okay. This is something you only tell a stranger. So, my mom and I, in high school, used to watch *The Good Wife* all the time. It was our ‘girls night in’ special.” She spreads her hands wide, excited as she’s discussing it. I lean into her, her enthusiasm infectious. “My mom loves that show, and I loved Alicia Florrick. She was so gorgeous and confident, but still empathetic. She had this magnetism that I craved.”

Why can’t she see how magnetic she is? Whoever dampened her confidence, I’d like to rip them a new one. “I’ve never seen it, but it sounds like I need to change that right now. Is that why you wanted to go to law school?”

“I figured if I couldn’t be a singer—”

“Why can’t you be a singer?” I’ve tried not being a drummer, but no matter how hard I try, the music keeps pulling me back in. It’s why I built my walls and list of rules. If I could sing like she can? I definitely couldn’t walk away from that. Music is in some people’s DNA.

Takes one to know one.

She rolls her eyes. I've never even seen cornflowers but I swear her eyes are that color. "My parents are amazing, but they're from the Midwest." Ha. Nailed it. "Singing is something you only do in the shower and on long car trips, not a career."

"Hm." Interesting. It always surprises me how differently other people grew up. Somewhere out there is a video of me at three years old, singing in front of all of Crooked, my dadcoaching me. It was the first time he ever sent my stuff to an agent.

Not the last.

"Anyway, it's no secret that I'm not Juliana Margulies."

"I think you can give her a run for her money," I say. So I don't touch her, I pick up my beer bottle and drain it. It does nothing to calm my racing heart rate. I've never felt like this with anyone before. It's so comfortable . I want to share all my secrets. It's a dangerous and slippery slope.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“What about your family?” she asks.

Maxim arrives at that moment and deposits another bottle of beer and a martini glass filled with a bright pink concoction. “I don’t think they’ve ever made this before, but the bartender says it takes like a sunset on the Mexican Riviera.”

“Ooh, fancy. It’s not like I’ll know the difference.” Lily draws it toward her. “Thank you so much. Let me know how much I owe you.”

“On us. You can be our first fan.” Maxim looks over at me, unable to hide his grin, and then gestures to the club. “I see...someone...over there. Bye.” He abruptly disappears into the crowd.

Subtle. But I don’t hate him for it.

“So...” Lily knees me gently under the table, and the sensation flares through me like a perfectly struck chord. “Your family? Do they love that you’re a musician?”

“Ha.” It escapes me before I can stop it, and she arches an eyebrow toward me. Her fingertips dance up and down the stem of her glass.

“Something you want to share?” I love how she says my name. I can picture her beneath me, crying out as I— “Bo? You okay?”

I clear all naked Lily thoughts from my brain. It’s not only that I’m attracted to her physically. There’s something about her that feels eternal, like this night was destiny.

“I’m fine,” I say. I sip my beer, watching with my heart in my throat as she raises her glass to her lips. That mouth. “It’s just...I don’t like talking about my family.”

“Why not?” She leans closer, expectant but caring.

“It was different for me, I guess.” I shake my head. “It was always expected that I was going to go into music. My dad is a singer, and my mom...” I picture her as she was when I was a kid, wearing a Crooked T-shirt, my dad’s initials in bright watercolors tattooed on her left arm. She still hasn’t lasered it off, no matter how often I’ve offered to pay for it. “Well, she loves musicians.”

“She doesn’t sing, too? Or play?”

Interesting. Most women jump right into who’s your daddy. I kind of prefer talking about my mom. “Can’t carry a tune, much to her chagrin. For a while, she stayed home. Presumably she was raising me, but I think she really just pined for my dad while he was on the road. It was practically a profession of hers, wondering where he was, what he was doing.” Who he was doing. I overheard plenty of late-night, one-sided arguments screamed into the phone.

“That sounds rough.” Somehow she’s closer to me now. Nope, it’s my fault. It’s because I can’t mind my own fucking business and I keep intruding on her space.

“It wasn’t too bad.” I stretch backward to ensure I don’t fall straight into her lap. “I turned out okay. I chose my own path.”

“I like that.” She smiles, and it lights up her face. “I think that’s what I want, too.”

“You deserve it.”

“Really? And why do you think that?”

Because I have the sudden feeling I'm going to marry this woman. I can picture us now, with a music room in our house, turning our eight kids into a rock band. Like Sound of Music but more hard core. "Because I think we're going to be good friends."

She laughs and finishes her fancy cocktail. "You know, maybe I am going to like it here in LA. I wasn't going to come here tonight, but I'm really glad I met you."

"Same." I inch a little closer to her, and she doesn't shy away. "I'd love to hear you sing any time."

"Thanks, Bo." She tilts her head and an errant curl falls over her forehead. My fingers itch to wrap it around my hand and feel the silk of her. "Really. Is Maxim as cool as you?"

"Cooler." Hey, I'm nothing if not honest. Most of the time. I can't believe I told her something about my family. Something that wasn't preplanned by Crooked's publicist. "But he's not here."

"True." She flushes again, and she is the most gorgeous woman I've ever met. "I guess it's just us right now."

"Works for me."

We're so close now. Only a few more inches and I could kiss her, run her hair over my hands, tap her skin with my fingertips. "You're really pretty, Lily."

Something shifts in her expression. "Bo, I—"

A shadow falls over our table, and I look up, annoyed. That quickly morphs into an entire other feeling.

“Hey, babe.” Kevin, brand new frontman of Howl, pulls Lily out of her seat and into his arms for a quick and audible kiss. He separates from the woman of my dreams with a sucking sound.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

Or maybe that's my stomach falling through the floor.

"Hi, K." Lily wraps an arm around his thin waist, and my heart sinks even lower. "I met some new friends."

Ouch. That feels like a gunshot straight to the gut. Fourteen times.

"Hi." Kevin—I refuse to call him K because I hate him even more now than when we met at last week's audition-slash-jam session—holds out a hand to me. "Did you get up to sing, babe? I told you. You're a little pitchy, but we can work on it."

I drain the rest of my beer in one gulp. This guy is such a douche. I let a thin ray of hope shine through me. I don't know how long Lily has known Kevin. Maybe she met him through law school, or her apartment complex, or at the fucking Hollywood Bowl. Anything could be possible. Anything.

But what I do know is that this dickhead will let her down. One day. She and I can still be friends. It won't be forever. I just have to bide my time.

"K." Lily giggles as Kevin licks at her neck, completely ignoring me. Fine. Two can play that game.

She steps out of Kevin's grasp. "Bo, this is my boyfriend. K."

He finally looks up to see me but absolutely no recognition dawns there.

Yup. I'll just have to bide my time.

It can't be that long before he fucks this up.

CHAPTER 1

Bo—present day

A lot can change in two years. Preparations in Los Angeles for the 2028 Olympics, my favorite flavor of Takis, that little restaurant on the corner that's been three other shops and now waits for its next failed enterprise with soaped-over windows.

The one thing that hasn't changed? Lily and K—because he's now officially changed his name, the douche nozzle—are still dating.

Trust me, no one is more surprised than I am that they're still together.

K stands in front of the tour bus, his hands so weighted down with thick metal rings it's a miracle he can hold them up against gravity. He's signing some girl's wrist with a permanent marker. Howl has become more of a mainstream name than I ever expected, which drives me fucking bananas because it means my father never stops texting me, trying to get me to cross-promote.

Crooked may have fallen apart years ago, but if you listen to my dad, they're always one step away from a reunion tour.

If you listen to K—which I almost never do for the preservation of my eardrums and sanity—Howl's success is because of him. He talked us—well, Dan—into playing covers. Mostly because his vocal range can't handle Maxim's pieces, but still. Now we're a fucking glorified cover band. The only salvation is that everyone backs me up when I refuse to add Crooked songs to our playlist.

Not that K hasn't kept trying. I caught him texting Runner last week and I nearly

threw his phone into an unhoused person's loaded shopping cart. I would have loved to see him try to get it back.

"Bo." Our keyboardist and manager, Dan, claps me on the shoulder. "Is your equipment on the bus?" With one hand, he scrolls down through a checklist on his tablet. "We're scheduled to leave in ten minutes, if K can stop signing people's tits." On cue, a gentleman in a vintage Britney Spears tee approaches our lead singer. He lifts up his shirt and K does indeed sign right over the guy's left tit.

"At least Queen Britney is covering up that travesty." I tap my drumsticks together. "Yeah, Dan. No worries. I'm all packed."

"Good. I'm going to check on Maxim." Dan takes his tablet checklist to Maxim. The three of us are dressed like normal people, in jeans and tee shirts. It's Los Angeles in summer, so it goes from hot to broil in zero-point-two seconds.

But K? He's grown his long, stringy ash blond hair and beard out, and he's wearing an unbuttoned denim shirt over the black leather pants that he bragged about paying full price for. While we are around the same five-ten, he wears heeled boots to try to make himself taller. He looks like an evil orange scarecrow.

I glance around the parking lot. Surely Lily's coming to see us off. She's been so excited about it. Far more excited than finishing her second year of law school. She's supposed to start her internship this summer at a local LA family law firm, so she can't tour with us.

My cock swells at the thought of her. It's probably better that she can't tour with us. It's been difficult enough, with her living in the little studio in my backyard. Thank fuck when she goes out with K, he insists they stay at his place. I'm a strong guy, but even I can't handle the reality of close quarters with them on a tour bus for two weeks.

“Fourteen in Fourteen!” K shouts, arms above his head and hands forked into rock and roll signs. This is Howl’s first big tour. We’ve done local gigs, played in Arizona a few times, and at state fairs. But Fourteen in Fourteen is a two-week slog of a music fest, each night a different venue along Route 14, a new crowd. When Dan originally pitched it, it sounded fun.

I’m not going to make it through fourteen gigs in fourteen days, not if I have to deal with K’s shit. I should have quit the band a year ago. I had an opportunity, too, to play drums with the Vendetta while their drummer, the great Lorraine de la Vega, took time off with her new baby.

But no. I stayed for Lily.

I’m a fucking chump.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Where’s your girl, K?” Maxim asks. The guy in the Britney shirt approaches him, and Maxim signs his right tit this time. Howl fans may not be the prettiest, but damn, they’re loyal. I project my best scowl, grateful the Britney/Howl fan is completely out of tits to sign.

A shadow crosses K’s face. “Studying.” He spits the word like it’s ancient Sanskrit and he’s barely mastered English.

I mean, if the guitar pick fits.

“Ease up on her.” My drumsticks rap more quickly against my thighs. “It’s her second year exams. It’s a big deal.” Law school has not been any kind of joy ride for Lily. Beyond the slog of work and study, the social scene has shut her out. Bunch of virtue-signaling assholes, if you ask me.

“This is a big deal, Bo.” K spreads his tanned arms wide. Whatever time he doesn’t devote to practicing with the band is devoted to sunbathing and working out shirtless on Venice Beach. Since the last time he made it to practice was three days ago, he’s probably well on his way to melanoma and monkeypox by now. “It’s our first real tour. We’re practically as big as Crooked.”

This is categorically untrue, but arguing with K is like trying to force slime to maintain its shape.

A beat up silver sedan pulls into the Van Nuys parking lot, and my drumsticks fall to my sides. “Lily’s here,” I say softly.

K rips his gaze off his reflection in the bus and turns to the car.

I can't stop watching, either. Lily steps out, her hair up in a messy bun held together with pencils, an oversized UW sweatshirt hanging over her full-figured frame in indecent ways.

"K!" She waves to the both of us and runs in our direction.

K is tense beside me. "She couldn't have dressed up?" he mutters. As soon as he says it, his expression morphs into a gigantic smile and he lifts Lily off the ground in a movie-worthy sweep. "Lil!"

"I'm so glad I didn't miss you." Her gaze meets mine over K's shoulder and she moves her mouth. Hey, Bo.

Hey, Lil, I mouth back. My heart thumps in my chest.

Maxim snorts behind me, and I turn to avoid having to watch K kiss Lily.

"Something you want to add?" I ask.

Maxim glances over at Lily, shaking his head. "Just sorry for you. Haven't seen anyone have it that badly before."

I cross my arms over my chest, my drumsticks poised to tap on my left shoulder. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't."

"Guys! Seriously!" Dan barks, pointing at the open door of the tour bus. "We have to get on the road in the next five minutes or we're going to miss our first stop."

“Ooh, wait!” Lily breaks out of K’s embrace, a smile on her face. “Hold on. I got a present for you guys.”

“Is it something dirty?” K says, into her ear but just loud enough so all the rest of us can hear as well.

“No.” Lily laughs. “Just wait. I’ll be right back.”

She runs to her car, and I try to ignore the way her jeans cup her perfectly round ass. I fucking love a curvy woman.

K places his hands on his hips, even as he watches some of the groupies from the periphery of his vision. I can’t prove he’s cheated on Lily. Trust me, if I could I would have told her.

“I’m going to marry that girl,” he says.

My heart drops lower than my balls. Holy hell, I hope not.

Lily returns, holding a pink box of donuts. “For the road,” she explains, handing it to an unimpressed K. “I woke up early this morning and got the strawberry-filled ones from that place in Glendora. A little OG Route 66 love. For luck.”

K’s lack of reaction causes Lily to bluster, but then he wipes the look off his face and beams at her. “It’s perfect. Thanks, Lil. We’ll love it.”

“Have a great tour.”

“I wish you were coming.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“I would. Really. But I have finals.”

“Maybe you can meet us,” I say, and it feels like the entire band swivels to look at me. Shit. This is why I’m a drummer and not a lead singer. I can’t stand the weight of attention on me. “Your finals are over after this week, right? I can send you a ticket to Nashville. Then a road trip with us to Georgia.”

“Great idea,” K says through tight lips. “I’ll send you a ticket, baby girl.”

I don’t miss Lily’s almost imperceptible wince at the nickname. We got drunk two months ago while watching *Bridgerton*—huge mistake, by the way, I didn’t realize there was quite that much nudity; I had to watch with a damned pillow over my lap the whole time—and she confessed how much she hates it when he calls her that.

In true K fashion, I doubt he listened when she told him.

If she told him.

I swallow, reminding myself that it is not my relationship. I just wish that truth didn’t sting so much.

“Okay.” She flushes, her round cheeks almost as pink as the donut box. “I’ll meet you there. Love you.”

“Love you too, babes.” K subtly hands Maxim the donut box behind his back. “I’m going to read your texts every day. Every hour, if you send them.”

She flushes harder. “I mean, I’m in the middle of exams—”

“I know.” He kisses her forehead like she’s a toddler and I try not to retch. “But it’s because we love each other.”

“Okay.” There’s a flash of exhaustion in her gaze, but then she forces a smile. “Absolutely.”

He gives her a huge hug while still somehow holding up a hand in farewell to our fans. The guy in the Britney shirt screams his name. “Parting is sweet sorrow, baby girl.” He pats her on the head then spins and climbs the stairs onto the tour bus. Dan clucks nervously, and Maxim follows him onto the bus.

I wait for a moment, rocking back on my heels. “How’d your study group go this morning?”

“Okay.” She blows a stray lock of hair off her forehead. “I’m as prepared as I’m going to be. Tort law sucks.”

“It’s not about chocolate tortes?”

“I’d like it better if it were.” She smiles softly at me. “Are you excited?”

“Sort of.” I shrug, moving imperceptibly closer to her. She smells like coffee and freshly sharpened pencils. “I’ll miss you. Who am I going to watch slutty TV with?”

Lily eyes the groupies circling the tour bus. “I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

“Not like you.” I bump her shoulder with mine and a warm flush spreads down my side.

“Bo!” Dan barks at me. “Time to go.” He points at his watch.

I jab a thumb toward the bus. “I gotta jet. Good luck on your exams, Lily. You’re going to do great.”

“Thanks, Bo.” She gives me a one-arm hug and I like it way more than I want to admit. “Good luck on the tour. I’ll be watching it online. Howl on forever.”

I wince unintentionally. My dad provided that little soundbite when he was interviewed about my rising success. Yet another way he enjoys stealing my limelight.

“Bye, Lil.” Then I tear myself away from the girl who isn’t mine and get on the bus to do the job that is.

CHAPTER 2

Lily—one week later

“Ugh, that was brutal.” Lianna Richardson tosses her long black hair over her shoulder and sets her Burberry backpack over her shoulders. It’s too small to hold her laptop, so she has a matching computer bag over the other.

“Definitely.” I swallow, slipping my computer and water bottle into the discount tote I found at Marshalls last year when shopping with Bo. Spending time with people like Lianna—who is rich and good at everything—was a huge culture shock for me when I first moved out to LA for law school. I’m from this tiny town in Door County, Wisconsin. At first, people were fascinated by it. You have goat races? You mix cranberries and wine? The allure of it wore off quickly. Without money and status, I quickly faded to the C list.

It's a good thing I have Bo. And K, of course, though he doesn't really like hearing about my hometown, either. He went home with me this past winter break, and he was bored after a day and a half. Which I know because he talked about how bored he was for the rest of the week, until he got an Emergency Band Text and left early.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

I didn't ask Bo about the band emergency. I try to trust K, really I do. I'm sure he wouldn't have lied just to get out of spending the holidays in St. Olaf. Even if he did miss Snow Angel Fest.

When Bo visited—his mom in Sacramento travels a lot with her various boyfriends and he refuses to spend holidays with his dad—it was just pure, easy fun. We went snowmobiling and ice skating and crashed a basement party being thrown by some people I knew from high school.

I guess that's the difference between friends and boyfriends. There's more work and expectations with one than the other.

"How's that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?" Lianna and I head down the hallway toward the library, which is already crammed. Most of the first and second years bolted out of our exam only to disperse to the library and coffee shops to study for the next. Thank all the law school gods, this next one is the last. I feel like my eyeballs are about to fall out of my head.

"He's good. He's been sending me updates from the road." I pull up a video he sent me last night, of him onstage somewhere in Kansas. His sweaty hair falls around his shoulders and he's leaning into a crowd of mostly women. My throat tightens.

K is gorgeous. Ash blond and muscular. Though everyone else in the band has tattoos, K says his skin is a temple and he doesn't want graffiti.

I'm strictly sworn to secrecy that he doesn't get tattoos because he keloids, but even then he won't get one because he has a deathly fear of needles.

Lianna quirks a perfectly threaded eyebrow upward, her dark brown gaze inscrutable. “Looks like he’s loving it.”

“I know.” I bristle, but it’s silly to be jealous. K has always had women hanging over him, but at the end of the day, he always says I come home to you, baby girl.

Not literally. We don’t live together, despite me dropping hints—fine, begging—last year when my landlord wanted to raise my rent an unfeasible amount. In the end, Bo offered me the studio ADU attached to his bungalow. What a godsend. It’s ridiculously cheap, too.

“When are you flying out?” She walks through the door I hold open for her.

“Tonight. So weird they have red eye flights, but I’ll get into Nashville bright and early tomorrow morning. I’m going to surprise K in his hotel.” Butterflies churn in my stomach. K does not love surprises. I tried once before, to surprise him when he played a casino outside Palm Springs. He freaked out and practically ran me out of the hotel.

“Ooh, love that. Did you buy something cute?” She shimmies her shoulders as we walk into the library and try to find two open spots.

“I got something,” I say shyly. This is not something I’m proud of, but I’ve not been liking my body lately. Over the past year of law school, the stress and the late nights have led to me gaining almost thirty pounds. I’m learning to appreciate my new body, but I’m not used to dressing myself. I watched about ten YouTube videos before I went shopping and chose a sundress and this pretty, lacy negligee. It was a little too expensive, but it’s burgundy, and it makes my blond hair pop. The sundress is pretty, too. It flares over my hips and makes my cleavage look amazing.

“You’re going to look gorgeous.” Lianna bumps my hip with hers, then stops at a

study carrel where two underclassmen are playing paper football.

“Excuse me,” I say, but it’s like I’m whispering into a waterfall.

“Move,” she says sharply to them.

And move they do.

I’m exhausted when I finally get into my rental car in Nashville. I had to wait two hours for the guy I’m renting the car from, despite me telling him my flight got in at two in the morning. It’s fine. I get people don’t want to work during the wee hours of the morning. I tried curling up for a little rest on one of the chairs, but it didn’t help. I always have trouble sleeping outside my own bed.

The rental car is definitely the oddest one I’ve ever seen. If I had more money, I would have gone with an actual agency, but this was supposed to be cheap and easy and reliable. Sort of like VRBO, but with cars. I’m a little dubious the ignition will even work, but it does. It’s fine. It only has to work for a few days, and that whole time I’ll be following the bus, so there will be help if I get into trouble.

It’s still early enough in the morning that traffic hasn’t built up yet, and the hotel where the band is staying is close to the outskirts of Nashville. Even with my sense of direction, it doesn’t take me too long to find it.

I park in the free lot and take out my phone, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. I should text K. I know it.

But I LOVE surprises. I’ve always had this dream of missing someone and then having them show up unexpectedly with flowers or chocolates or something.

I stow my phone and grab my suitcase. Screw it. I’m going to surprise him.

When you walk through a lobby looking like a hot mess at six am, no one bats an eye. My heart pounds as I pretend I know what I'm doing.

A gorgeous lightly tanned man in a black sleeveless workout top and sweatpants hanging low over his trim hips steps out of the coffee shop in front of me. It must be the jet lag or the weird airport burrito I ate two hours ago, but my stomach does a low swoop.

Then he turns, sipping his coffee, and my whole body lights up when I see his profile. "Bo!"

He whirls fast enough that a few small drops of his drink spurt out the top of the plastic lid. "Lil?" In an instant, his arms are around me, and the jet lag fades away. "It's so good to see you. K didn't tell us when your flight was coming in."

"Oh." I giggle but it does nothing to decrease the discomfort in my stomach. "He forgot to send me a ticket. It's not a big deal. I thought a surprise would be fun."

Bo's blue eyes widen momentarily. "Right. Well, you love surprises. That's perfect." He holds me another moment, and I just want it to last.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

But he steps away. Of course he does. He's my friend, and friendship hugs are different from boyfriend ones.

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold and well aware of the numerous interested stares Bo's getting from men and women in the lobby. He seems completely immune, but I feel their scrutiny. It's the same when I'm with K. What is he doing with her?

Bo's mouth curves and he taps my chin. "What's up, Lily? Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere." I set my gaze on the elevator. "Which floor is K on?"

A shadow passes over Bo's features, but he covers it by drinking his coffee. "We're all on fourteen. Dan's idea of a joke. Come on. I'll ride with you."

He takes the handle of my suitcase without me having to ask, and I roll my aching shoulder gratefully. All that hunching over textbooks and stress over exams has only made me feel like my grandmother. Maxim's really into yoga. Maybe he can give me some pointers.

"You guys are looking great." I follow him into the waiting elevator and he hits the button for the fourteenth floor. I try not to think of the fact that since most hotels don't have a thirteenth floor, fourteen is technically thirteen. It's a good thing I'm not superstitious. Really. I rub the goosebumps on my arms, wishing I'd brought a sweater. "I saw the livestream of the last couple concerts. You're amazing."

Bo really is a fantastic drummer. Not that I would ever tell K this, but I find it

difficult to look away from Bo when he's playing. The drumsticks become more than tools; they're extensions of him. He's so beautiful, it's impossible to look anywhere else.

"Thanks." His smile is crooked, and he bumps my hip with his. There's that little frisson of pleasure that always flows through me when we touch. "Wait until you see us perform live."

"I can't wait."

"Maybe one day, you'll join us up there." The elevator doors ping open. "Don't think for a second that I forgot how amazing you are when you sing."

My cheeks flush as we walk together down the hall. "I can't believe you remember that." Like me singing will ever happen. K is right. I'm a backstage girlie, not front material. Besides. I'm going to be a lawyer.

"I can't forget it." Bo shakes his head and tosses his empty coffee cup into a trash can. "You have a gorgeous voice. No reason to hide it."

Now my entire body heats. "I don't have time to sing. I have law school. And K. I'm lucky to have him."

His jaw clenches. "Right." He stops before a door, key card in hand. "This is me. K is two down. See you on the tour bus?"

"Okay." I linger, and he does, too, the pair of us staring awkwardly at the carpet. Leaving Bo always feels like this, like there's a thread running from me to him and if I take one step too far backward, it will snap and send me into a free fall.

He raises a hand toward me then enters his room.

I swallow, walk the few more steps to K's door, and knock.

"Hold on," I hear K say through the door. My heart pounds in my ears. He pulls open the door, and he's dressed only in a towel slung low around his waist, his chiseled chest and abs—that he works on obsessively—on full display. I'm lucky he wants to be with me, I remind myself. His face freezes when he sees me, then it's the old K, the one I fell for. "Lily! What a surprise." His voice cracks on the last word, and he still stands in the door frame, arms bracketing both sides.

"Hey!" I point to my suitcase because his posture makes it impossible to wrap my arms around him. "I'm here. I'm so happy to see you." Am I? This whole thing feels super awkward all of a sudden. Like in the moment of a horror movie where the girl's about to go down into the dark basement, and all you want to do is yell, Don't go in the fucking basement.

But this isn't an ax murderer's basement. It's my boyfriend's hotel room. I have a right to be here.

He runs one hand through his hair, and little drops of water from his shower fall over me. I've always liked the scent of K's shampoo and body wash but something about it today is off. Almost acrid.

"Can I come in?" I jut my hip to the side, hoping I look somewhat sexy. Lianna does this all the time and men fawn over her. "I missed you."

His eyes widen. "Right. Um..."

My posture stiffens, but not at his hesitation. It's the sight of a thin red-haired woman with a full snake tattooed down her left side coming out of his bathroom. I can see every detail of the snake because she is completely naked.

The realization hits me like a tsunami.

My whole body contorts with rage. Without thinking, I swing my purse down off my shoulder and hit K, square in his stupid, over-exercised chest. “You lying, fuckingcheater!”

Then I turn and run.

CHAPTER 3

Bo

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“You lying, fuckingcheater!”I hear from the hallway.

Shit. What did K do?

I slip into my shoes, grab my wallet, and run into the hall, in just enough time to see a blur of Lily heading toward the elevators.

“Lily,” I whisper, a second before I run after her. The elevator doors slam closed a second before I get there, so I sprint to the staircase. I may have already run ten miles on the treadmill today, but my heart’s pounding and my feet move of their own accord.Lily. If K did what I think he did—which isn’t that off brand for him—I’m going to kill him. Or watch while Lily justifiably disembowels him.

Why I thought I could outrun an elevator is anybody’s guess, but I burst into the hotel lobby, sweaty and panting, probably looking like a werewolf as I swivel three hundred and sixty degrees, looking for her.

There. Walking toward the front door of the lobby, her back heaving as she cries. Jesus Christ, everyone in the lobby completely ignores her. How is that fair?

“Lily!” I call as I chase after her, letting the automatic doors whoosh open and close around me.

It’s already sticky and humid, even this early in the morning. There’s a haze hanging in the sky, like a reverb that lingers a beat too long.

Ahead of me, Lily crosses the parking lot, her blond hair flying behind her. She must

have bought a new dress, because it's one I haven't seen before. Knee high, printed with little flowers, the skirt fluttering around her legs. When I saw her in the hotel lobby, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

My opinion has not changed. What has is that my heart is now constricting because that fucker finally hurt her.

She stops at the driver's side of a sedan that looks like it crossed the Smoky Mountains back in 1952. Where the hell did she find that thing? Tears stream down her face as she searches through her purse for her keys.

"Lily!" I dodge a car that ignores the stop sign and jog toward her. "Wait up!"

At my voice, she turns toward me, and then collapses against the side of the car, her breath heaving. I don't stop moving until she's in my arms, her head on my chest, her hair brushing my nose. All I can do is hold her, so she can let it all out. I glance toward the hotel, but K hasn't even bothered to come after her. He probably can't find his pants, or he got distracted by a fan in the lobby.

I don't care. It gives me time with Lily, and that's all I want.

"Did you know?" She sobs against my chest, showing no signs of wanting to move. "Did you know what he was doing?"

That confirms everything for me. He is such a douchebag.

"No. I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't know. I—I guessed, but nothing was ever confirmed."

She cries harder, burying herself in my embrace, and if I could hold her like that forever, I would. "I have to get out of here," she says, her voice heavy with tears.

“Let me drive.” I hold out my hand for her purse and she hands it over wordlessly. When she looks up at me, my heart shatters into ten million pieces. She loved him. Fuck me, I never considered that she might actually love K.

“What are we going to do?” she asks. I hand her a package of tissues from her purse and she wipes her nose with one of them.

“Impromptu road trip.” I dig through the purse and finally pull out a set of keys. “We’re supposed to be in Chattanooga tonight. We’ll start that way and figure out the rest from there.”

Slowly, she moves around to the passenger side of the car. When she lifts her head to meet my gaze, her expression is broken steel. “All right.”

CHAPTER 4

Lily

Bo finds a radio station on the ancient car stereo that plays a mix of country and pop. I stare out the window as we leave the city of Nashville behind and venture further into Tennessee. It’s pretty here, more like where I grew up in Wisconsin than the beach-industrial vibe of Los Angeles. But I don’t really give a damn about the scenery.

I can’t believe K cheated on me.

Okay. That’s not true. I can totally believe it.

What I really don’t believe is that I didn’t see it before now. How many red flags did I ignore because I didn’t want to lose the illusion of being wanted? I feel like I’ve stuck my face into a bowl of ice water.

I hug my arms around myself and my stomach growls.

“Are you cold?” Bo asks. He fiddles with the temperature dial.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“No, I’m okay.” My gaze fixes on Bo’s hands, so steady on the steering wheel. Bo has amazing hands. His fingers are long and nimble, and because he’s a drummer, he has all these calluses and muscles I don’t think normal people have.

I sniff and look away again.

We pass a cheerful sign announcing our arrival in Saddleback, Tennessee. There’s a smaller billboard beside it, proclaiming Best BBQ in the State.

My stomach growls again. The way my body reacts to stress is to send all my hunger cues out of whack.

Without saying a word, Bo turns into the parking lot before a square-shaped warehouse. A neon sign hangs on one end that says Roadside 14 BBQ, and a line twenty people long stretches out the door.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Bo parks the little sedan between two massive pick up trucks. “You look hungry. You probably haven’t eaten in hours, and stress always makes you hungry. Besides. I love barbecue.” He unbuckles his seat belt and steps out of the car.

I don’t move. I’m not sure I can. Between the post-exam adrenaline withdrawal, the jet lag, and the crushing heartbreak, my muscles are mostly lactic acid.

Plus, I’m severely under-caffeinated. Trust Bo to have seen it. If I were with K—

But I'm not with K. Not any more.

Bo opens my door and stands before it, hand outstretched. "Come on. It's just food and a chance to use the bathroom. Then we'll get back on the road."

With the door open, the meaty, smoky scents of barbecue wafts into the car. My mouth waters.

"Okay." My voice sounds hollow, but I take Bo's hand and use it to get out of the car. He holds it a moment longer than necessary, a moment that stretches between us, that's filled with heat and longing and years of friendship. Why couldn't I have dated Bo instead of K?

I pull my hand from his grasp, releasing me from the futility of this musing. I follow Bo to the line, which moves quickly. Heavenly scents perfume the air. What is it about biscuits? Somehow that concoction of butter, salt, flour, and buttermilk is the perfect food, fluffy and warm and comforting.

Bo sniffs the air, tilting his handsome face toward the sky. "It smells amazing."

One of the women in front of us turns, her dark brown eyes twinkling. "It is. The pit master is a classically trained chef. Don't miss the brisket."

K always hated barbecue. When we went out, he liked going to all these scene-y places, the kind where I'd spend all this time I didn't have trying to make my hair look effortlessly chic, only to have it frizz. If I'd ask him to have a quiet night in at home, it was never just snuggling on the couch, eating popcorn and watching movies. He'd either expect sex and then he'd want to go out clubbing, or he'd invite other people over to make it into more of a party. Not to have sex together, though there was that one time, and I'd gone home after I said no, but what did he...

The red flags hit me, one after another, like a ping pong ball turned into a shank.

Bo inches forward in line. The scents of butter and spice and meat hang in the air, tantalizing and rich. “What do you want, Lily?”

“A new start.” Tears well in my eyes and my throat, and I cough to choke them down. I can’t believe I was such a fool. How did I let myself get here? I should have left K ages ago.

Bo wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes, and it feels like sinking into a hot bath at the end of the long day. “You’ll have it. You deserve someone who appreciates you.”

The woman who recommended the brisket turns to me. “Did some asshole cheat on you, honey?”

Nodding, I swallow.

The woman shakes her head. “Men are dicks.” She looks at Bo, who’s holding me up, and inspects him like he’s in contention for best in show. “Except possibly for him. He looks like a good one.” Her gaze travels down to Bo’s hands, and the drumsticks sticking out from the back pocket of his jeans. “And he’s a drummer? Honey, you got to lock that down. Not just to show what’s-his-nuts what for, but for yourself. We all deserve to live our best lives.”

Her friend elbows her. “Donna, if you’re done dispensing advice for the day, we need to order.”

“We’re just friends,” I say, my mouth feeling dry. Bo’s arm tightens around my shoulders.

A smirk crosses Donna's face. "Sure you are, honey. Enjoy your lunch." She turns to the woman taking orders at the counter.

Bo drops his arm from my shoulders, and I shiver. "I'm going to go to the bathroom," I say. "Order whatever you want."

CHAPTER 5

Bo

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

We are just friends.

I know this, really I do, but it's hard to hear it sometimes.

While I wait for Lily, I order at the counter and then take my number to an empty picnic table toward the back. Despite the early hour, the place is filling up quickly, and if my nose is any indication as to why, the food is bound to be Best of All Times level.

I slide my drumsticks out from my back pocket and sip my soda. My phone chimes with an incoming text, and I glance at the lock screen.

Dan: WTF are you? We need to leave

Shit. I forgot to tell him what happened, and all my gear is back in my hotel room. Fortunately, when Dan checks us into a place, he keeps a spare keycard for each of our rooms. Blame K for that one, since he once lost his key twice in the span of two hours.

The thought of K sends acid churning through my gut. Poor Lily. I hesitate for a brief moment—a very, very brief moment—then decide to tell Dan the truth. I don't need to protect some lying cheater.

Me: Sorry. Lily walked in on K with some other woman. I had to get her out of there.
On our way to Nooga

I have no idea if people in Chattanooga actually call it Nooga, but I also don't feel

like typing out the whole name.

Dan's reply is almost instantaneous.

R u fucking w me?

No. Saw it all go down

Three dots appear and bubble on my text screen.

I'll take care of it. See you at the concert

Since Dan is a master of handling crises, I return to sipping my soda and waiting for Lily.

She stalks out of the bathroom, her hair now up in another floppy bun, arms crossed over her voluptuous chest. My brain knows she's furious and hurt and grieving, but my cock has not gotten that message, because it really wants to come out to party at the sight of her in that sexy, curve-hugging dress. If I had Maxim's songwriting talent, I'd write an ode to whoever invented sundresses.

"Did you know?" She melts into the seat opposite me, her expression uncharacteristically dour. "You probably have some bro code with K where you can't tell me, but I thought we were friends, Bo."

There we go. Yet another reminder that even though I'm in love with her, we are just friends. "We are friends. And I haveno bro code with K." I hand her a soda. "He doesn't deserve that from me. Not when he can't even be honest with you. I didn't know he was cheating, Lily. I know he's an asshole, but I'm pretty sure you knew that, too."

She bites her lip, and a little of the anger fades from her expression. “I made so many excuses for him over the years. Why did I do that? I’m a smart person.” Her voice breaks on the last words.

“You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met,” I tell her. “Sometimes we lie to ourselves to make it easier, to make things simpler.” Like me. I tell myself I’m not really in love with her so that it’s less painful at the end of every day to watch her with K. “Over time, we get so good at the lies, that we have trouble seeing the truth underneath all of it.”

She tilts her head to the side, pensive. “I’m so sorry, Bo. This must bring up all the stuff about your mom.”

I drain my cup of soda. “If you really love someone, you shouldn’t look for something better or different. It’s not fair to anyone.” Runner Harley’s legacy. Fucking everything up for everybody.

A waiter brings over a large tray of food, plastic baskets filled with slaw and biscuits and pulled pork and glistening brisket. “Sauce is over there.” He jerks a thumb toward the end of the picnic table. “Try the whiskey one. It’s the best.” With that, he leaves.

I reach down to the end of the table and pick up three bottles: the Carolina mustard sauce, the whiskey one, and one that just says sweet on the side.

Lily nods and sticks a fork into the pile of pulled pork. “I’m done lying to myself, Bo.”

I take a piece of brisket and put it into my mouth, letting the rich, sweet meat melt on my tongue. It’s angels-singing-to-the-choirs-of-heaven good. If there can be barbecue this good in this tiny town in Tennessee, then I don’t have to let Runner Harley make

me afraid of taking a chance. “Me, too.”

CHAPTER 6

Lily

The food is beyond delicious, some of the best I’ve ever had, and the joy of eating combined with the pleasure of Bo’s company helps me to start relaxing. He goes back up to the counter to order a plate of hush puppies when he sees me eyeing the ones on the table beside us, and they’re delicious, too. Then we get into a semi-heated argument about whether *Drumline* or *Whiplash* is a better drum-based movie—which is an impossible argument since they’re completely different genres.

I feel more like myself. Pre-exams, pre-finding out K is a lying, cheating fuckhead. This is who I like to be. Fun and relaxed with my best friend.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

My best friend, who is ogled by almost every single woman in the restaurant as we walk back out to our car. I know what they see. The slash of black hair that falls over those crystal-blue eyes. The permanent five o'clock shadow. The tattoos running up his neck and arms. The easygoing, musician swagger, the way his hands move through air with confidence because those hands know what they can do.

Musically, of course.

I clench my thighs together to calm the aching deep in my core and slide into the passenger seat of the rental sedan. This is a me problem. Good food, good conversation with a very attractive man usually implies a date. But this is Bo.

He smiles at me as he turns the ignition. "You look a little better. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Still pissed at K but..." I pick at the hem of my dress, which has ridden up my thighs. Why I wore this short little dress is—well, I had a good reason. I was planning on surprising K, and having a little welcome sex in my new dress.

And by little, I mean that K has always been a taker and not a giver in bed. Still, I liked that feeling of being wanted, even if I rarely—or never—got off.

The heat of the morning works its way through the windows of the car, and sweat beads under my stomach and between my thighs. I shift in the seat to relieve some of the warmth and tension, but it doesn't leave. Not with Bo here, beside me.

I stare out the window and try not to concentrate on the swirling feelings in my gut. I

just broke up with K. Sure, revenge sex is always a possibility, but is it ever a good idea? Especially not if it will ruin my friendship with Bo. More than anything else, this friendship has gotten me through my time in LA. If I have sex with him and it messes us up, I won't have anything in California except work and school.

Which should be fine, if I enjoyed either interning or law school. Honestly, the only time I've enjoyed my life these past two years has been jamming with Bo and Howl when K wasn't around. I miss singing so much that the loss hurts worse than knowing K cheated.

That's a problem for another day.

"But what?" Bo asks.

Right. I never completed my train of thought because I got derailed thinking about Bo's hands. They're on the wheel right now, but I picture them sliding up my thigh, lifting the hem of my dress. I've always loved that kind of seduction, the feel of fabric sliding up my skin as I'm more and more exposed.

I swallow and fiddle with the air conditioner vent. "I don't know. I'm jet lagged and wrung out. At the same time, I'm pleasantly full with good food and I feel almost...relieved? Does that make me a bad person if I feel relieved?"

"Of course not." He grins at me as he pulls the car out of the parking lot and onto the road. "You feel however you feel. There are no shoulds." That sounds like something his mom would say, and it makes me want to smile.

"I suppose I should be ranting and raving and heartbroken." The air conditioner in this damn car doesn't work. Ignoring the warmth of the day settling over me like a blanket of humidity, I keep my gaze out the window. "I'm weirdly not, though. Heartbroken. I thought I would be. Mostly, I'm just disappointed."

“In him?” Bo’s voice is low and soothing, and sends shivers down my spine. Maybe it always has, and I ignored it all this time because my brain kept saying, you’re with K. But I’m not now.

I remember meeting him in the bar two years ago. I felt so alone. K was late that night, but it hadn’t mattered, because I met Bo and Maxim. I don’t usually connect with people so quickly, but they made it so easy. He made it so easy.

“A little,” I finally say. I shift again on the seat. Outside, the landscape is beautiful, lush and green, dotted here and there with little houses with trucks in the driveway. We turn onto Main Street, and shops now line the sidewalks. Tourist places, antique stores, ice cream parlors, cafes. “I’m more disappointed in myself. I feel like I lied to myself for too long, telling myself I liked him when I don’t think I ever loved him.”

That sentence makes me sit up straight. Sometimes the truth falls out of us in a torrent, and when you’re not carrying it, you can breathe again.

Bo’s hands tighten on the wheel. “Really? You don’t think you ever loved him?”

“No.” The tension in my spine eases further. “He never appreciated me. I think I was with him for so long because, with all the stress of school and moving to LA, he was familiar. Like a safety blanket, but one that’s old and scratchy and no longer really does what you need it to do.”

Bo’s mouth is a tight, thin line, and he clenches his jaw. It makes the stubble he didn’t shave this morning stand out like he’s some kind of movie star. He really is a beautiful man. “He never treated you right. You deserve someone who loves you for you.”

There’s a kernel of warmth growing in my chest. I reach over and squeeze Bo’s shoulder. The best I can, because the man has serious muscles and there’s very little

flesh to clench. “So do you, Bo.”

This brings up another question, one he and I skirt around from time to time. Why doesn't Bo have a partner? He's had a few one night stands, and I'm sure on tour he finds some companionship. I try not to think about it, because the thought of him with another woman always makes my skin itch. It makes me want to say mine, though I know he's not.

He stops the car at a stop sign and turns to me. There's something in his expression that's feral and raw and for a moment, my imagination runs away with me. My imagination tells me he's going to say he loves me, that he's been waiting for me to break it off. My imagination tells me that I'll fling my arms around his neck and kiss him with abandon, with all the pent up feelings I've caged since I met him two years ago. Two weeks too late.

What happens instead is someone behind us honks.

Bo snaps out of it and stares ahead at the road. “Sorry,” he says, but for what, I'm not sure.

Then he takes his foot off the brake, presumably pushes the gas pedal, and absolutely nothing happens.

That's when I realize that I can't hear the purr of the car's engine any more.

CHAPTER 7

Bo

I put the car in neutral and Lily helps me push it to the side of the road. The driver immediately behind us pulls around and screeches past, but an athletic Black woman in a brand-new pick up stops beside our broken-down car.

“Call Leroy.” She hands me a business card through the open window of her truck. “He’s the only game in town, so I hope you’re not in a hurry.”

My stomach curdles as I remember the volume of anxious texts from Dan, asking if I’m going to be in Chattanooga for the concert in—gulp—six hours. Still, the thought of playing behind K, watching him grandstand when he just ruined Lily’s life, also makes me want to throw up.

“Thanks.” I take the card from her. “I appreciate you stopping.”

“Any time.” She flashes us a brilliant smile then takes off down the road.

I turn to Lily, who’s texting furiously on her phone, a deep furrow between her eyebrows. Her cheeks are flushed and her jaw tight. “Shit,” she says. “I’m trying to text the guy I rented the car from, but he’s not responding. What are we going to do? You can’t miss your concert.”

Stifling my own unease, I stick my hands in my pockets and rock back on my heels. “It wouldn’t be the worst thing.” It wouldn’t. I’ll be with her, and that’s all that matters to me. Besides, this tour has been going well, almost too well. I had three calls yesterday from my dad’s publicist, asking if Howl could cover some of

Crooked's songs. I'd almost rather not show up for the rest of it.

"Bo!" She swats my chest with the back of her hand, her touch searing through my shirt. "It's your job. You can't not go."

"I don't want to play with a band that allows someone like K just to live his life after being such a fucking asshole." Wow. I hadn't realized I was that bitter about it. Of course I'm angry for Lily's sake, but maybe also a little for my own.

Lily puts her hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "I'm okay. Really. Is it a double standard? Yes. Is it fair that he'll get praised for 'just being a rockstar' while any woman would be slut shamed or called a fame-seeking groupie? Or that I'll be forgotten while he will go on to be completely and totally fine? No. Of course it's not fair." She exhales and hugs herself. "But that's life. Life isn't fair, but it's real. So what if he suffers no adverse consequences? I can't control that. But I can control myself and how I respond."

This is the opposite of how my mom reacted when she found out my dad had cheated while he was on tour. She alternated between ranting and sulking, which was justified because my dad was a dick. He still is. But I was thirteen. I wished at the time that she could still have found it within her to remember to be my mom.

Still, I grew up fine, so no shade.

I shake off the weight of the memories and hug Lily. Her arms slide around me, and this is a position we've been in hundreds of times, thousands.

This time feels different.

I'm more aware of her scent, the shape of her body against mine. It's a healing kind of touch. I want nothing more than to stay like this for hours.

Her hair brushes my cheek as she turns to rest her head against my shoulder. “Bo,” she says softly, her breath a delectable suggestion against my ear.

Lily, my body sings. My fingers itch with the need to hold her closer, but we’re already too close to crossing the friendship line. She just broke up with her boyfriend of two years. This morning. What kind of asshole does it make me if I force us over that threshold?

A horn honks behind us, and I turn, my arms somehow around Lily’s waist.

A man with a John Deere hat pulls up beside us in a tow truck. “I’m Leroy. Heard you folks needed some help?”

“It’s going to take how long?” Like a superhero, I manage to keep the panic out of my voice. I’m fine playing cool and nonchalant, but if I miss the concert, Dan will skin me alive. Maxim doesn’t need to see that.

Lily stands beside me at the garage, staring forlorn at the shitty rental car.

Damn thing. I should have kicked it to bits the minute we got to the restaurant. Then Lily and I could still be there, eating and drinking and laughing.

No, instead we’re here, being told that there is very little chance I’ll be using this shitty rental car to get to Chattanooga by tonight.

“Sorry.” Calvin, Leroy’s son who works the front desk, shakes his head apologetically. “My dad is great at what he does, but he thinks all things worth doing are worth the time it takes.”

There are only two things I can think of worth the span of time Leroy has quoted. One is music and the other...I shouldn’t think about with Lily beside me, all sweet

and soft and grieving. I have to remember the grieving. It's all far too tempting to whisk her away somewhere and show her everything I've always dreamed of doing with her.

"I'm so sorry," Lily says, and a tear rolls down one cheek. "I'm sorry to make you late, Bo. We won't make it to the concert."

"Hey." I put my hands on her shoulders and gently turn her to face me. With the pad of my thumb, I wipe away the tear and let my hand rest there on her perfect cheek for a moment. A little indulgence, just this once. "It's not your fault. I'll call Dan. Maybe the tour bus can swing through and pick us up. We'll call a cab, or a ride share."

Calvin coughs discreetly. "It's probably an hour's wait if you want to call a ride. I have a list here of local providers." He hands me a laminated sheet, clearly well-used and covered with a fine layer of grease, as so many things in repair shops seem to be.

I pull out my phone and take a picture of the list, then send Dan a quick SOS text. "See, Lily? It's going to be fine. We have options."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Okay.” Her voice is soft, but there are no more tears. “Can we wait here?” She speaks to Calvin, who snorts.

“You can, but why would you want to?” He points one hand toward the door. “There are some restaurants and shops on Main Street where it’s a hell of a lot more comfortable to wait. There’s the Sing Note, the diner.”

“What’s the Sing Note?” I ask. My hands itch to hold Lily’s, but I tell them to shut the fuck up, this isn’t the time.

“Karaoke bar.” Calvin shrugs. “People like it, if that’s your thing. They have pretty good pulled pork sliders.”

Karaoke. I think back to the night I met Lily. That night changed my life, in more ways than one.

I open my mouth to speak, but Lily interrupts. “That sounds perfect.” She scribbles her phone number onto the estimate sheet Calvin gave us. “Thanks for the suggestion.”

CHAPTER 8

Lily

The karaoke bar is half-restaurant, half-stage. There’s a silver-and-black curtain hanging on it and two microphones, looking empty and alone. There are dark corners everywhere, and neon signs of encouragement. It’s the epitome of cool, but that does

nothing to cool my nerves.

Bo rubs my back, and all it does is twist my insides further. “You don’t have to sing if you don’t want to. We can just listen.”

I bark a laugh. “To whom? We’re the only ones here besides the staff.”

“If you’re nervous, we offer two private rooms in the back.” A very attractive Black woman with gold woven through her dark hair smiles at us. Correction—she smiles at Bo. “Since it’s not prime time, we’ll offer you a discount. Fifty dollars an hour.”

“What time is Dan coming?” I ask. Not that I’m excited for Dan and the rest of the band to arrive, or to spend any time in K’s proximity whatsoever. Still, I feel so guilty for dragging Bo with me. What if he does miss this concert? He and the rest of the band only rose in popularity a few months ago, and Bo was able to cut back on his freelance hustle. Which means that if he doesn’t play, he doesn’t get paid.

I don’t know much about his finances, but surely he needs this gig, this job. I certainly would. Law school is expensive, and while my parents are helping me out, I’ve racked up more than my share of student debt. Every time I get an email from the financial aid office, I wonder, is this really worth it?

Which is horrible. I’m going to be a lawyer, like Alicia Florrick. That’s the dream, or was the dream.

I pull down the hem of my skirt, staring at the stage, picturing myself up there. Feeling free again, letting the music move through me, making me limber, making me feel alive.

Bo checks his phone and shrugs, but his spine is unusually tense. “He hasn’t gotten back to me yet. I’m sure everything is fine.”

I don't share this conviction. This whole day feels like a wash, like I should go to sleep, wake up, and I'll be back in my apartment, before any of this happened. Then I wouldn't get Bo in trouble.

Though, would that mean I'm still with K?

"What would you be more comfortable with?" Bo asks me.

I look around the karaoke bar. K would have hated it here. Bad acoustics, he would complain when he didn't hit the right notes. Drinks are watered down. Service is bad.

But I like this place. I've always liked these kinds of places. They remind me of the bars where I grew up in Wisconsin. Neon on the walls, soft leatherette couches, twangy music in the background. It smells like fried food and old liquor.

Some of the unease in my stomach lessens. I nudge Bo's shoulder with mine. "I'll sing if you will." Bo has a sexy, raspy voice, very Bradley Cooper in *Star is Born*. To him, though, he'd much rather be hiding behind his drums. He doesn't just play drums, either. He also knows guitar and piano, but his first love is percussion. It surprises me how his dad rags him to be a frontman, only to sing and not play, when I know Bo is happiest with his drumsticks in hand. "Please?" I clasp my hands in prayer and give him my best pleading puppy face.

Bo laughs, his handsome face crumpling. He has this dimple on the left side that only comes out when he laughs really hard. I've always wanted to kiss it.

Which would be inappropriate. He's my best friend. He's the only reason I'm surviving today. By myself, I would be a total and complete hot mess, likely sobbing alongside the road in the middle of nowhere. I'd get picked up by backwoods folk and adopted into their cult.

To be fair, Los Angeles probably has more cults per capita than Tennessee, but still.

“Fine.” He kisses the top of my head, his lips lingering a second too long, long enough to spread warmth all down my spine. “Today’s your day, Lil. If you ask me to sing, I will.”

“Perfect.” The hostess’s smile covers her entire face. “Why don’t you take a private room? We don’t bite out here, but it’s no trouble.”

“Done.” Bo hands over his credit card. “Open a tab. We’ll have one of everything.”

The hostess arches one perfectly tweezed eyebrow, but tucks the card away and then grabs a couple of menus. We follow her down a short corridor with bathrooms on one side and three black and gold painted doors on the other. She leads us to the furthest one from the main room. Inside there’s a small stage, another matched pair of microphones, and a large, cozy-looking booth. The bench is covered with black leatherette, and there’s a disco ball twinkling overhead. It’s kitschy and wonderful.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Do you need help operating the equipment?” she asks Bo. I don’t think she means it as a double entendre, but there’s a kernel of jealousy burning deep in my gut at the way she’s looking at him. I get it. Really, I do. Bo looks like a chiseled Noah Kahan, with tattoos sliding over his shoulders. Not that I stare at them when he’s swimming or accidentally walk into his house when he’s shirtless.

I mean, I don’t stare a lot.

There’s another pleasant surge of heat through my core at the thought, but this isn’t the time. This isn’t the place.

“We’ve got it covered.” Bo slings an arm around me and pulls me toward him. It’s brotherly, I know that, but the hostess takes it as a sign of belonging. Or maybe that’s just what I want her to think. “Thanks.”

“I’ll bring you two some drinks. Preference?”

“Your wildest cocktails,” I say, my tastebuds tingling. And not just for alcohol. “Is that okay, Bo? Before your concert?”

He shrugs. “I won’t drink much. And there are still hours to go. Let’s have fun. What the lady wishes, the lady should have.”

“Concert?” The hostess is suddenly interested again. “Are you a musician?”

“Drummer. Don’t get any ideas about my singing ability.”

“He’s selling himself short.” I don’t realize I’ve spoken until they both turn their gazes to me. “He has a great voice. Sex on a stick. He just doesn’t like being the front man.”

“Hm.” The hostess smiles again, and there’s something secretive and knowing about it. “You two are a really cute couple.”

I step away from Bo abruptly, a surge of shame rushing through me. “No, we’re not—”

“Sure.” The hostess nods, the smile not leaving her lips. “I’ll be right back with those drinks and some appetizers. The song catalog is on the table. We have some great duets.”

My cheeks burn as she exits the room, and I hide my embarrassment by flipping through the song catalog, seeing but not really reading the names.

It takes Bo a moment to join me.

“What do you want to sing?” he asks softly. His body is so close to mine, and there’s a delicious warmth that surrounds me. Not for the first time—if I’m honest and there’s no reason not to be right now—I wonder what it would be like to feel the weight of him over me, those sure and strong drummer’s hands skimming over my body, finding notes on my skin.

I flip through the book until my finger finds the perfect song. I stab the page with a ferocity I usually hide. “This one.”

CHAPTER 9

Lily

Singing again after so long doesn't automatically click with me. Before I moved to LA, I never got stage fright. Singing was a part of me, one I freely shared, one that made me feel like myself. Then I met K, and...well, now when I sing in public, I freeze up, his voice drowning out my own.

But he isn't here now.

I miss the first two notes, and I'm half a beat behind for the initial verse. But that's the thing about Pat Benatar. Her songs give you plenty of room to open up. When I see Bo, sitting in the booth, drumsticks resting on the table, his gaze only on me, warm and tender, I let go.

I let the music flow through me. Note after note of "Shadows of the Night," singing the way I remember. It's so freeing, to be up here with a microphone in my hand. Nothing in law school feels this way, so unencumbered, so un-jaded. The thrill of it all propels me through the song, throwing my hair back in my best girl-rocker impersonation. Maybe I don't hit everything perfectly. I don't care. I'm here and Bo watches me like this is something beautiful he's witnessing.

As the tinny background music plays the final chords, I'm aware of applause, and not just from Bo. The hostess has a tray under her arm and she claps for me. "You're really good. Are you in the band, too?" she asks.

My cheeks flush. "No. I'm in law school."

She tilts her head to the side. "Interesting. Have fun, you two. Let me know if you need anything else."

The adrenaline makes my whole body twitch, but I make my way off the little stage and down to the table. Bo sits there, still clapping, a broad smile deepening that kissable dimple on his cheek. Fine, I'll admit it. Performing used to make me more

than a little horny. It's K's fault he never picked up on that.

With Bo's gaze on me, I take one of the drinks, something in a fishbowl-sized glass with an umbrella, and sip it. Sugar and citrus explode across my tongue in a tangy haze.

"That was amazing," Bo says. "I love hearing you sing, Lily. You light up when you perform."

I shrug and sip my drink again. "It's karaoke. The whole point is to sing off key."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Nothing about that was off key.” He stands up and his proximity is so alluring, almost overpowering but he holds himself back. He’s seven inches taller than me. I know this because we measured once, one giggly night over the winter when it rained nonstop for four days. I love that he’s taller than me. I like looking up at him, the indent at the top of his sternum, the strong cords of his neck, the angle of his bearded chin. He’s so handsome it hurts, but in the best possible way.

“What should I sing?” he asks softly.

Gulping my cocktail, I turn away from him in a feeble attempt to calm my raging libido. “Anything. I want to hear any and everything.”

He chooses a song by Pink that, halfway through, he gets really into and can’t stop punching the air. I join him, the giddy, reckless joy of movement making me weightless and buoyant. We tumble through more songs as food and another round of drinks appear. I butcher “Mr. Brightsides” gleefully. He does a very sincere version of Dua Lipa that has me sob-laughing into my brightly colored cocktail. Then we get on a tangent of classic dance songs, and we both forget to sing. We just move and groove.

I forgot how much I missed it, being on stage, music running through my veins. It was something K took for himself in our relationship, and I spent so long trying to contort myself and my wants to be what he wanted.

Now my body belongs to me again. I move the way I choose, the ways that feel good, and it’s all because of Bo. Without him, I wouldn’t be here. Without him, I wouldn’t have found myself again.

Because he's always seen me, and appreciated me, for exactly who I already am.

He stands at the table, holding a beer bottle by the neck in one hand and flipping the pages of the songbook with the other. He's painfully handsome. The dark beard lining his jaw, the trimmed sideburns that suggest he cares just enough about his appearance to know how good he looks. For a moment, I sip my sweet and sour cocktail and let myself want. Desire unspools in my core, all calling Bo's name.

"What do you want?" he asks, his voice gruff.

As discreetly as I can, I adjust my posture to relieve a little of the tension between my thighs. It does nothing to change the fact that my panties are damp with need. "Whatever. Maybe a duet."

A wicked smile creases his face, those damn hypnotic dimples rising. "I've got the perfect song."

He cues it up, and the moment I hear the opening strains of "Open Arms," I squeal. Last year at a holiday party back home in Wisconsin, he and I did this with a karaoke machine my parents rented, and it wassomuch fun. We played it goofy and way over the top, and it's one of my best memories from the past two years.

The alcohol and the adrenaline and the pure joy of singing again, singing with Bo, rushes through me. He starts with the first verse, and I come in after the last line.

But what starts out the same as it did in the past morphs somewhere after the first chorus. There's an earnestness in his voice, a heat in his gaze, his posture angled toward me. I find myself matching his energy, thriving off it, using his energy until it swirls like an orgasm deep in my belly. Somehow we're six inches apart, crooning into each other's eyes. Then we're two inches, then one.

The pleasure builds with the crescendo of the chorus. I hold the microphone in one hand, wrap my arms around Bo's neck, and draw him to me, pressing my lips to his.

He tenses. Shit. I've totally misjudged the situation. I start to pull away, but then he grabs my waist and covers my mouth with his. The initial awkwardness—oh my God I'm kissing Bo, this is my best friend, what am I doing?—melts away the longer the kiss lasts. Then there is no awkwardness. I'm not kissing my best friend; I'm kissing Bo.

Bo, who understands me. Bo, who lifts me up. Bo, whose strong, capable hands I've dreamed about more than once.

He kisses me like he's dreamed of me, too, and if that isn't hot, I don't know what is. He tugs me closer to him, and his erection presses unapologetically against my stomach. It sends all sorts of complicated, deeply delicious hormones spiraling through me. Then one hand lifts to my breast, his thumb strong enough for me to feel the pressure against my nipple. He drops his lips to my neck and my toes curl with pleasure.

"Bo," I moan. My eyes flutter open as he kisses along my collarbone, and I see the door to the hallway wide open. Frustration and practicality twist along my spine. "Bo, we—"

He leaps away from me, panting. He pushes his hair out of his face, like clearing sleep from his eyes after an intense dream. "Lily, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have crossed the line. I—"

This man. I cup his face, letting the sharp hairs of his beard score my palms. "I just meant we should lock the door."

"Oh." His gaze, still half-lidded with lust, flicks to me and then the door. His dimple

re-appears, and this time, I don't stifle my instincts. I run my thumb over the divot and then let my lips brush it, let my tongue taste it. He shivers under my touch. "Okay. Give me a second."

He races across the karaoke room, using a moment to adjust himself before he shuts the door and flips the lock. Giggling, I run toward him, and then I'm in his arms. He pushes me back against the door, letting me feel every single one of his muscles. His cock is insistent and heavy, and all I want to do is turn around and let him fill me.

Which should be weird. It should feel different, distant, an idea but not reality.

It's none of those things. IneedBo. I crave him.

As he kisses my earlobe, sending shock waves of pleasure down my spine, I palm his cock through his trousers. He stiffens and groans.

"Sorry about that, Lil. It's so difficult to hide how intensely I react to you."

My panties might spontaneously combust. I jut my hips against his, my hand still between us, and the back of my ring finger nudges my clit. Electricity thrums through me. "Don't hide it," I say. "No more hiding. Do something about it."

There's a fire in his eyes that's enthralling. Tentatively, he strokes one hand down my side, from collarbone to breast—squeezing, testing its weight in his hand—then lower, lower, trailing down until his palm skims my thigh and lifts my skirt. I arch toward him, shameless and alive. When his hand reaches the junction of my thighs, my arousal hot and wet, he smacks his forehead into the door and groans. "Fuck, Lily. You have no idea how badly I want you. I always want you."

Enough waiting. Behind us the tinny sounds of the karaoke background music play, but I'm not in the mood to sing. I unzip his pants and reach for him, taking his hard

length in my hand. I love this control, the ability to make a man groan. There's so much power in it. Why do men think they dominate sexually when so many women have to fake orgasms? We should be able to take and have what we want.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

I knead his cock from tip to base, letting my thumb rub over the sensitive crown of his circumcised cock. Then I lean forward, catch his earlobe between my teeth, and stroke him. “I want this, Bo. We both do. So let’s stop fighting it and fuck each other already.”

His gaze is animalistic and thrilling. He removes my hand from his cock and spins me around so he can back me up against the table. Somewhere along the way, he reaches under my dress, hooks the top of my panties, and yanks them down. I shimmy them further until I can kick them off, but then Bo kisses me again, kisses me like I’m his salvation. The best dessert he’s ever tasted, and he’s a sugar addict. A Lily addict. K never kissed me like this. In all fairness, I never kissed him the way I kiss Bo, either. Kissing Bo feels like diving into a cool pool fed by a waterfall after walking through a wasteland.

He presses me back against the bench, and I lie backward, scooting, trying to find purchase.

His hands are everywhere. My hips, my breasts, under my skirt. I cry out when his thumb circles my hot, swollen clit. This. This is what I’ve wanted. Abandon. Reckless pleasure.

With his other hand, he pulls down the top of my sundress, exposing my breasts. He pushes down one cup of my bra and takes a nipple in his mouth, rolling it on his tongue and between his teeth. Every tug spirals me closer to the edge. I’ve never come this quickly before. Usually, it takes me ages of foreplay and touch.

Maybe the last two years of friendship with Bo have all been foreplay.

“I want you inside me,” I groan, my hands on his temples, gripping as he fucks my nipple with his tongue, his fingers sliding inside me. I clench around him, seeking more, seeking the edge of the precipice, the blinding oblivion that’s so often been denied to me during sex. It’s right here and it’s so close.

But Bo doesn’t move. He doesn’t stop giving me pleasure so he can search out his own. He waits until I’m ready, until I’m unspooling under his touch. The orgasm hits me like a stampede, and doesn’t let up. I don’t want it to. I ride out the pleasure as it flows through and out of me.

“More,” I say, my pussy spasming around his fingers. “More. I want you inside me, Bo. Now. Make me sing again.”

“Whatever you want,” Bo says. He withdraws his hands from me, and I feel the loss like a chill, but a single glance at him tells me I don’t have long to wait. He reaches into his back pocket, and pulls a foil-wrapped condom from his pocket. I have a contraceptive implant—Bo knows this because he drove me to the doctor and held my hand—but I appreciate the condom, too.

He sheaths his cock and then leans over me. Licking my lips, I raise my knees and put my feet on the bench, giving him a view of my exposed pussy. Who is this wanton version of me? I like her.

Bo takes another moment, inspecting me, his gaze falling on the beard burns he gave my breasts, my heaving chest, my soft stomach, my wet folds.

I love the way he looks at me. I want more, so I take more. I guide his hand to my leg and then have him press my knees up against my sides. “Spread me wide, Bo.”

Still, he takes his time. He taps his cock against my clit, covering himself with the juice of my orgasm. I squirm beneath him, trying to guide him inside.

“I’ll stop teasing you.” He chuckles, then a moment later, slides into me in one thrust. It’s jarring and I didn’t realize he was this big. I tense momentarily, then let the warmth of him relax me. As I stop clenching, he slides further in.

I groan from the pleasure of it, the sensation of finally being filled. Complete. Simultaneously comfortable and incredibly aroused. A lifetime of this floods me. I want him from behind. I want to ride him, my tits bouncing. I want to wake up with his mouth on me, or his fingers trailing through my hair.

I just want Bo.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice soft. He shifts, sliding out then in, each time sparking a new sensation inside me.

“Yes.” It comes from some dreamlike place. “Yes.” I wrap my arms around his neck and let his weight settle over me. “Don’t stop now.”

He doesn’t. It takes us a few moments to find our rhythm, but once we do, it’s like the most incredible chorus, rising around us. I can’t even tell what song is on the karaoke machine. I don’t know what I say, but I know at one point I turn my face into his shoulder and bite to keep from screaming, to keep the waitress and hostess and anyone else within a five mile radius from coming in here. I don’t want this to end. This is how I want to die, with Bo inside me, coaxing wave after wave of pleasure from my body, this body that only recently started to feel like mine again. This soft, full-figured body that Bo worships right now.

It feels like hours that we fuck there on the bench. Maybe I just want it to be hours. I want this to be timeless.

He lifts my hips off the bench, shifting position so now he’s hitting my G spot, again and again with every thrust. Oh fuck yes. I scrabble on the bench, trying to find some

purchase with my nails, but it doesn't matter. Bo has me. He holds me like it's easy, and within moments, I gasp his name as another orgasm surges through me. A few more pumps and he pulls his head back, his neck muscles straining, and he fills the condom.

He doesn't stop, not yet, not until we're both spent and wrung out and then he collapses, holding himself over me only by his forearms. As he softens inside me, I gaze up into Bo's gorgeous, lovable face. I trace his brow, his cheekbone, the line of his jaw, not wanting him to leave yet.

"Hello, friend," I say softly.

He grins and kisses me lightly. "Hello, friend." Then he rests his forehead on mine, and I don't think I've ever felt this secure in my whole life. Cradled and supported. Maybe loved.

Then there's a loud banging on the door.

CHAPTER 10

Bo

Holy hell, I just had sex with Lily. Really, really good sex. Best I've ever had, if I'm honest. I don't know what came over me—or her—but I'm into it and down for it happening as often as possible.

The knocks come again, and something sparks in Lily's eyes. Not regret, or even shame, but a flush of something naughty. She catches my gaze as she pulls away and a wicked smile spreads across her flushed face as she readjusts her clothes to cover her breasts.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Are you okay?” I ask quietly.

“I’m fantastic.” She stretches, catlike. “This has weirdly been the best day.”

“Agreed.” Our gazes lock for another moment before there’s yet another angry knock on the door.

“Is everything all right in there?” An alto-soprano voice calls from the hallway. The waitress.

“We’re fine,” I call. I remove the condom and find a trashcan, discreetly wrapping it in a cocktail napkin. We were relatively quiet, but these people are not fools. There’s only one reason someone locks a door to a private room, and it isn’t because they want to try to hit the high notes in “Defying Gravity.”

I tuck myself back into my pants, and turn to see Lily. Her sundress is back in place—shame, that, I would love to see her with it around her waist, rucked up from below as she rides me and the top pulled down to expose the soft roundness of her curves—and she stoops to pick up her panties from the floor. She examines them for a long moment, as if deciding what to do with them.

I approach her and hold out my hand. “I’ll take care of those.”

“Really?” Her expression promises all sorts of dirty things, if only we had a little more privacy. “What are you going to do with them?”

I take the panties from her and kneel at her feet. As I stare up at her, I help her put her

panties back on, sliding them up her full, soft thighs until I release the elastic and squeeze a handful of her perfect, round ass.

She giggles and lets me wrap my arms around her waist. Objectively, I know this should be awkward, and it was at first. A moment of surprise when she first kissed me—Lily’s kissing me, what do I do—but then two years of pent up want took over. Then it was all instinct, pure and unabashed and fucking thrilling.

I kiss her nose. “We should let them in.”

She frowns, her mouth a cute pout. “I suppose we should.”

“We can talk after, though? In the car.” There’s so much I want to discuss. Was this a one time thing? Does she feel even a hint of what I do? Is this all too soon and frightening? I mean, I’ve waited two years. I can wait longer, if it means we can be together like this again.

Okay, not forever. That was fucking amazing and I’m already having difficulty standing, picturing all the things I want to do with her.

The knock comes again, more insistent this time, and there’s heavy murmuring behind the door.

Fine. I roll my eyes, walk over, and pull open the door.

Behind me, Lily gasps. I get it.

I didn’t think Dan and Maxim and—oh, hells to the no—K would be standing there, either.

CHAPTER 11

Lily

My stomach plummets. Foolish me, thinking this could last. Thinking I could live a bit longer in the afterglow.

K heads straight for me. My spine stiffens and my arms cross over my chest, my breasts rubbed raw from Bo's beard. "Lily!" he says. "Thank God you're all right."

Maxim snorts from the corner. There's a chill from Bo that wraps around me and makes me wish we could rewind ten minutes into the past. I try to catch his gaze but he slouches toward Dan and Maxim at the door.

K goes for the hug, but I stop him with a palm to his chest. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Lily, come on. It's a misunderstanding." His wheedling tone grates like nails on a chalkboard. "She needed a place for the night, that's all." He goes again to touch me, and I step out of his path.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" My tone rises and I don't care. "What are you even doing here?"

"We stopped to pick you up for the concert," Dan says by the door. His voice is deceptively calm, but I can tell from the way he's clenching his tablet that the band is way behind schedule, and he's barely holding in his panic. "Is the car fixed?"

"Oh," Bo says, his voice dull. He walks past me, not making eye contact—that hurts more than anything else—and picks up his phone to check his messages. "No messages yet from the mechanic." He gestures at the food on the table. "Are you guys hungry?"

“Starving.” Maxim pushes past Dan and beelines for a pulled pork slider.

Apparently, K takes my distraction watching his bandmates as an invitation to put his hand on my lower back. I swat at his arm and step further away, toward the wall.

“Lily, don’t be like this.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“Don’t be like what? Don’t be aware? Don’t be a human being who doesn’t appreciate being lied to when I twisted myself into knots for two years to try to be the person you wanted?” The heat rises inside me now, stoked from the singing and the sex and Bo, and I have no interest in tamping it down any more. Moving to LA, dating K, and the first two years of law school may have dulled my independence, but it’s still there inside me. The old Lily, the one I was when I first met Bo at the club, is still here.

And she’s fucking pissed.

“K, I don’t love you,” I say definitively. His mask crumples for a moment, and he glances behind him at his bandmates, who are watching the entire scene. Maxim has a pulled pork slider in one hand and an avocado egg roll in the other. Dan has his arms crossed over his chest, frowning. And Bo? Bo’s looking at me like I am a miracle. “I don’t want you anywhere near me. Not now, not ever again. It may have taken me a while to wake up, but I did. You can go fuck right off.”

Dan applauds soundlessly behind us, as K splutters. “Lily, don’t do this. Don’t—”

“Stop talking. If I want to hear you speak, I’ll—never mind. I’ll never want to hear you speak again.”

His demeanor changes, his posture looming, more threatening. “What are you going to do, baby girl? You’re stranded in the middle of nowhere, Tennessee, and I’m a goddamn rock star.”

“This isn’t nowhere, Tennessee. It’s Saddleback,” I correct him. After all the

hospitality this town has shown us, it's the least we can do to remember its name. "If you're a rock star, then maybe I just became a classical music fan. Dvorák anyone?"

Bo laughs, and the sound draws our gazes together. "I have options," I say to K, not looking away from Bo. "And you are no longer one of them."

"One option," Dan says from the door and uncrossing his arms, "is to have Lily come with us. She can stay on the bus and we'll take her to Chattanooga."

"The bus is full. Where is she going to stay?" K blusters angrily, his face redder than a maraschino cherry.

"Your bunk," Dan replies simply. "You are no longer invited."

"What?" K forgets about me and now wheels on Dan. "You can't just ditch me."

"Sure we can." Maxim uses a napkin to wash the sauce residue from his fingers. "Dan and I held a meeting. Bo didn't vote, but we were pretty sure which way he swings. Were we right, Bo?"

"Hell yes," Bo says.

"See?" Dan turns back to K, a bland and professional mask in place. "You're out. She's in. Easy peasy."

"That's not how this works." K stamps his foot like the child he is. "I'm the draw. I'm the name—"

"You're a fucking letter." Dan examines his studiously clean fingernails. "Your mistake was thinking you're irreplaceable. We aren't going to tolerate people who act like shit to others in this band. Will we lose a few ticket holders? Sure. But the

majority of people who come to this tour come for the beer, being outside, and listening to music while feeling one another up. They don't give a shit about you, either."

"Plus, we think you've been holding us back." Maxim goes to the door and signals the waitress for a menu. "You're always turning down my songs, and they're good. Why should we play covers when we could do original songs and pull the songwriter card? Besides, you can make bank in royalties that way."

"This is ridiculous. I'm calling my agent." K pulls his phone out of his pocket and stalks across the front side of the room, which may still smell like sex. I can't find it in myself to care.

"Go ahead," Dan says. "But we're not waiting for you. We have a tight schedule. As it is, we'll barely make sound check. Lily, are you coming?"

Through all of this, I've watched Bo. Watched his body language, his posture, the way every time he looks at me, he smiles.

It's not that we just had sex. We've always been like this, good together, matched in a way that I didn't want to admit was real.

I'm in love with him. I've always been in love with him, and now I can finally admit it.

I have an internship starting in LA on Monday. I have to finish school. I have to take all of K's stuff out of my apartment and light it on fire. Not literally. LA has very strict fire regulations.

But for tonight? Tonight, all I want is to spend more time with Bo. To watch him onstage, the way the music pours through him and into the heartbeats of his drum.

“Yes,” I say softly. “I’m coming.”

CHAPTER 12

Bo

Too much happens at once for me to have time to think. We settle up our bill at the karaoke bar, and leaving behind a spluttering K. We pause by the garage to pick up Lily’s suitcase and exchange information for Leroy and the car’s owner so they can communicate directly.

Through it all, Lily holds my hand.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

On the bus en route to Chattanooga, the driver speeding more than a little, Lily sits beside me, not saying anything, our fingers entwined.

“Not to be the asshole here, but we no longer have a lead singer,” Maxim says, picking through a takeout container of food from the Sing Note. “Unless Bo wants to break out the pipes, but there are some deep daddy issues he should work through.”

“Thanks,” I say drily.

Maxim shrugs it off. “I know my voice is pretty good, but Dan’s a baritone. He can’t hit those notes.”

Dan shrugs. “Maybe we shouldn’t even play all the covers tonight. Why not introduce some of Maxim’s songs?”

“I love Maxim’s songs,” Lily says wistfully. She rests her chin against my shoulder, and all sorts of happy feelings bubble inside me.

Scrolling through his tablet, Dan at first doesn’t respond. “I mean, girl fronts often play well for the audience. Look at No Doubt.”

“The Pretenders,” Maxim chimes in. “Or the Vendetta. Halestorm.”

Lily stiffens beside me. “What are you talking about?”

“You, Lil.” I wrap an arm around her waist, and it’s something I’ve done a thousand times through our friendship, though now it all feels new. “I agree. Lily will be

great.”

“Awesome.” Maxim claps his hands together, the metal bracelets on his wrist jangling. “I’ll get my sheet music. We’ll put in maybe one, two new numbers?”

“Stop.” She doesn’t stand—the bus is moving and she’s not a fool—but she trembles. “I’m not Chrissie Hynde. Why can’t Maxim do it?”

“This is a good idea,” I say. She glances at me and softens. “Really, Lil. You’re an amazing singer, and I know you can do this.”

“What if I get stage fright?” Her voice is so quiet it’s barely a whisper.

“We’ll be right there with you,” I reply. I kiss the side of her head. “You have a team, Lily. You’re not alone.”

“And we believe in you.” To prove it, Maxim hands her the take out box from Sing Note and she plucks a sweet potato fry from it. “You’ve got an amazing voice, and you’re smart. Our set isn’t that long, either.”

“Plus, you’ve been to all the rehearsals, so you know the blocking.” Dan nods, as though this is the barest requirement to front Howl.

“We’re here for you. I’m here for you.” I lean over and kiss Lily’s cheek, marveling at how easy this is. There are moments here and there where it doesn’t feel real. But then she looks at me and my gut swings wildly, and I know it is.

“Okay,” Lily says softly. “I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 13

Lily

I can't do this.

We arrive at the venue with barely a minute to spare. As one, we race off the bus to make it to sound check. I had to turn my phone off while we rehearsed the two new songs we're going to add, since K cannot seem to take a fucking hint.

Sound check goes smoothly enough. Dan takes most of the microphone time, then has me sing a few notes of "Free Falling" for warm up. We tune and practice the new songs.

Being onstage like this isn't so bad. It's casual. The only people in the audience—we're playing in a field with some folding chairs set up in front and a large picnic space behind—are crew, who are setting up for the concert.

If I keep my focus on the band, I'm okay. Dan and Maxim and Bo cue me seamlessly, rolling over my mistakes and covering for me.

I'm going to screw this up. While we practice, I can drown out K's negative voice in my head, but I know it's going to come back. It always comes back.

We hustle offstage after sound check, all of us dehydrated and exhilarated.

Bo hands me a water bottle and kisses my cheek. All these little gestures from him. I hadn't realized how badly I wanted it. K was demonstrative, but it was never in a way that seemed to be for me. He was demonstrative in a performative sense. "You were great."

I don't reply, just hold the bottle in my hands and wring it, making the paper crinkle against the plastic. "I don't know. I guess it was okay, but there were only like thirty

people in the audience. What am I going to do when there's a whole crowd, disappointed that I'm not K? I'm not some hot, shirtless guy?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“We can take our shirts off if that makes you more comfortable,” Maxim says. He pulls up the hem of his tee, exposing his very fine set of abs. “It’ll be Howl’s new thing. Shirtless men and curvy goddess lead.”

Dan drains an entire bottle of water. “Could work.”

“I don’t really want Lily staring at all of you shirtless,” Bo says. “Gimmick or no.”

I can’t believe they’re even contemplating this. “Guys, look, I appreciate it, but I’m not who you need up there.” This feels like the weight of a thousand truths. I’m not good enough in law school. I’m passing, but that’s not how you make it to the big firms. Some of my friends who graduated in the low- middle of their class aren’t even practicing law. Two work at Target and the other works for his dad’s shipping business.

I wasn’t a good enough girlfriend to K. Not enough to make him not cheat.

I’m not a good enough friend to Bo. I had sex with him in a public place, and now he’s being all sweet, and I made him lose his lead singer, and I’m going to fuck this up.

“Lily?” Bo’s hand on my shoulder is warm and heavy, and I want so badly to curl up in him. “I see the spiral. Breathe.”

“I can’t.” I whirl around, looking at all the other bands assembled here. The women are all gorgeous and impossibly cool. These are musicians and artists. I don’t fit in here. I don’t fit in with Bo. “What am I going to do? Even if I sing here with you

tonight, I can't stay. I have to be at my internship on Monday." And with a thud, I realize that it's the last thing I want to do. I don't really know what I want, but I don't want to hustle at a corporate law firm all summer. I don't want to kiss ass, all while knowing I'm not good enough for them to hire me after I graduate.

But I can't stay here, either. I don't belong here. Even if I can pull it together to sing tonight, they'll find someone else. Someone better. Someone who won't break up their band.

And Bo? Bo deserves better, too.

"I need a minute," I say, and run anywhere else.

CHAPTER 14

Bo

I watch the whole spiral happening, helpless to stop it. I haven't seen her go through this since she failed one of her first exams in law school. When she takes off, I do what I did that time. I go after her.

She winds quickly through the crowd, her skirt flapping around her legs. Where the hell is she going? There are food trucks set up for the crew and performers, along with some picnic tables that are filled before tonight's show. The beauty of summer is that it's still light outside, so it's easier to dodge a whole bunch of people wearing black clothing and massive equipment.

She pulls open the door to the tour bus and I follow her inside, only a few steps behind her.

"I can't do it, Bo," she says, holding one hand to her chest and the other over her

stomach. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” I rub her back in slow circles. She’s hyperventilating, but as I continue making soothing sounds, I feel her breath ease beneath my palm. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t feel ready to do.”

She turns and buries her face in my chest, and I wrap my arms around her shoulders as she sobs against me. “I’m so sorry. I’m letting you all down. What will you do about the show?”

“We’ll figure it out.” I squeeze her closer to me. “Maybe it would help if you told me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know.” She sniffles, and I grab a tissue from a box on the table for her. “I think I need to sit down.”

We head to the couch and snuggle beside each other on it. I pull a blanket from the back to wrap over her bare legs, then wait.

She leans her head on my shoulder, and I hope we have a lifetime of this. “I just keep hearing everyone who’s ever said I’m not good enough. K, this a capella group in college.” I snort—hey, I can’t help it—and she points a finger at me. “Stop being judgy. I know you love Pitch Perfect, too. I just wanted a group where I felt like I fit.” She sniffles again and dabs at her nose with the tissue. “But they didn’t want me. Maybe it’s how I sound. Maybe it’s how I look.”

“No.” I kiss her head and inhale that sweet scent of her. “Even sweaty, post-sound check, teary, jet-lagged and after a horrible, weird day, you are still the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.”

“You have to say that because you’re my friend.”

“No.” I turn her face to mine and kiss her lips, loving the feel of her at last. “I say that because I love you. I’ve loved you for years, Lily. Because you’re gorgeous and talented and brilliant, and maybe that asshole got into your head. But I think deep down, you know it, too. You had a blow to your confidence. But you’ll find it again.”

She nestles deeper into me. “I love you, too.”

It’s quiet and soft but it also feels like the most real thing anyone has ever said to me.

I stroke one of her arms, letting my fingertips skate over her skin. “That’s why I don’t sing, too. All I hear is my dad’s voice in my head. Telling me to be great, but not greater than him.”

“That’s an impossible standard.” She wraps her arms around me and lays her head in my lap. “I’m sorry you have to deal with that. Or that your mom does. I’ve always liked her.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

I let my hands run over her, this friend who is now more. Who's always been everything to me. "She's always liked you, too. I can't count the number of times she told me to go for it, no matter how often I reminded her you were taken."

"I'm not now." She looks up at me, those cornflower blue eyes staring through me.

"Yes, you are." I bend over and kiss her gently. If we had more time, I'd take her in the back and worship her. I'd prove it to her over and over again how much I love her. "Let's just rest here for a little while. Okay?"

She nods sleepily. "Don't forget to wake me up for the show."

"Of course not."

CHAPTER 15

Lily

Bo doesn't let me sleep long, but it's enough that I feel refreshed.

Maxim and Dan are waiting in front of the tour bus when we stumble out. "Man, I lost twenty bucks," Maxim says. "We had a bet on whether or not you'd come out clothed."

"Ha ha," Bo says, squeezing me to his side.

"Also, I realize we never called dibs on K's bed, so...dibs." Maxim elbows Bo in the

ribs.

Dan shakes his head. “We all need to get ready. We’re on in thirty.”

Cold fear snakes down my back. “I don’t have anything to wear. I brought this and jeans. Nothing I can perform in.” I saw those other women backstage. They are leather and lace and effortlessly cool. I’m essentially a Midwestern dairy maid in my little floral sundress.

Maxim and Dan exchange a look. “Don’t worry. We’ve got that covered.”

They hand me off to a woman named Janelle with a spike through her nose who does backup vocals for a big band-type group that plays rock songs. Janelle hustles me onto their tour bus—which is way messier than Howl’s—and proceeds to tug and spritz and paint me until I’m mostly numb.

When I look in the mirror, though, I see me. Lily. The woman I used to be. Confident and daring, pretty and free. Janelle’s put me in a white bustier, and you can see my push up bra through it. My yellow hair is messily tossed around my head, and my lips and cheeks are blush pink. I look like I’ve just been fucked, well and good.

“Wow,” I whisper. I turn in the mirror, admiring my full ass and the dip of my waist, set off by the snug-fitting jeans.

“You look amazing,” Janelle says in a deadpan. “Don’t forget to hydrate. The stage will dry you out faster than a desert.”

A gray-haired man wearing one headset over his ears and another around his neck races past us. “Howl’s on in five. Places.”

“You had better go.” Janelle pats my arm and lights a sweet-smelling vape. “These

concerts move like molasses some nights, but today they're booking it."

"I don't know how to thank you." I turn to Janelle, wanting to hug her, but she discreetly shakes her head no.

"Just tell Dan to call me." After pointing in the direction of the stage, Janelle turns and leaves.

My heart pounds, so loud I swear I can hear it in the next county over. I join the guys backstage. Bo's eyes widen when he sees me, and Maxim gives a low whistle. Dan, being Dan, just nods approval and stares anxiously at the stage.

"You look amazing," Bo whispers in my ear, then nips at the lobe. A little thrill of pleasure chases away some of the fear.

But not a lot.

"I'm going to throw up," I say, to no one and everyone.

"If you do, do it now, and don't do it on my instrument," Maxim says.

The tour's emcee runs onstage in a spangly pink jumpsuit. I don't know how she walks in those six-inch heeled boots. "And now, with a last minute substitute that they promise you will love, here's Howl with Lily Davila!"

There's a chorus of wolf howls at that, and we all run onstage. First Dan and Maxim, then Bo holds my hand and practically drags me up there with him.

I'm frozen in the glare of the spotlight. This is so many more people than I've ever sung in front of before. People are standing and cheering, clapping wildly. Bo tries to hand me a mic three times before I take it from him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:00 pm

“I can’t do this,” I say, possibly to myself, but it’s entirely probable that the entire flipping place can hear me. My feet move backward, but I’m moving through a pit of quicksand.

Then I feel Bo’s hand on my elbow, drawing me forward. “Yes, you can. I’m right here with you.”

“I wish you could sing with me.” I don’t expect that. I don’t. It’s impossible to ask it of Bo. He never sings in public. If I have issues about it, Bo has Issues with a capital I. It isn’t fair of me even to have said it, but I had to. Just once.

Maxim plays a riff on the keyboard, and beside me, Bo mouths, “Pretend you’re only singing to me.”

Yes. That, I can do. I close my eyes and picture the Sing Note, the scent of pulled pork sliders and sweet, sticky cocktails. The feeling of singing with Bo thrums through me.

With my eyes closed, I picture the songs, the blocking. I picture K doing all of this. He made it look effortless, but I knew how long he practiced every look in the mirror. I don’t need that. I’m not him. I’m just me. I look fucking amazing, thanks to Janelle. And if Bo believes I can do this, I can.

So I open my eyes and sing.

Bo

She misses the first cue, but it doesn't matter, because after the first verse, she's killing it.

A few of the people in the crowd seem to be wondering where K is, but Dan put out the notice on all our socials earlier today, so most of our fans knew not to expect him. Lily's winning them over, though. I can feel it. There's an energy to a crowd, and this one is all in for our new sound.

It's difficult to play the drums when she looks like that. All I want to do is unlace that bustier with my teeth, let her ass fill my palms as I taste her. I suppose we have time for that.

I love watching her come alive like this, the confidence making her cheeks flush and her smile infectious. With each cheer and successful song, her posture straightens. Law school and that fuckhead K tried to make my girl cower, but look at her now.

She is a curvy goddess, and I'm the luckiest man on earth to be able to witness it.

Toward the end of our set, Dan walks back to me on the pretext of getting water. "Do the duet with her," he says, picking up his water bottle.

"I'm playing." I gesture to the drum set.

Dan shakes his head. "We'll do it with just the keyboard. It'll be sexy and hot. It'll make her a star, and you know it."

I pause for a moment, and run a towel over my sweaty face. It's true. If I get up there and sing with her—a duet with Bo Harley—Lily will be famous within seconds. She'll have options, then. She won't have to go back to law school unless she wants

to, and if she does, she'll have currency.

This whole thing with my dad has that feeling of an old feud, one that isn't serving me any more. What does serve me is to make Lily happy. Fuck my dad. Who cares when he finds out? I haven't played his game in ages. He isn't here. He isn't Howl. Dan, Maxim, Lily, and I are.

Besides, I'd love to sing with her again.

Maxim glances over at us, and I nod. A smile shoots across his face, and he starts playing the intro to his song, "In the Wings."

I unclip the microphone from my drum set and stand. The crowd hasn't realized yet what's happening, and neither has Lily. She comes in on the downbeat, just like we practiced earlier today. Though we practiced it as a solo.

With her verse done, I lift the microphone and sing.

Holding your hair back

When he lets you down

If there were a contest for suckers

I'd surely wear the crown.

Lily turns to me, her eyes bright and alive. There's unbridled joy in her expression. We come in together on the verse.

Too long I've waited in the wings

Hoping you'd see past the one

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:01 pm

Who only makes you cry.

Too long I've wanted no one else but you.

But you see me. I know you see me.

Damn Maxim. Here I thought he'd been writing from his own experience. The asshole was writing about us the whole time.

But I don't care about that. I don't care that my dad will find out, or that we might go viral. I don't care that I don't know what will happen to the band or me and Lily after tonight. I'll figure all that out later.

Right now the only thing that matters is me and Lily. This song. This stage. This moment.

We end the song with less than an inch between us. So I cradle her jaw in my palms, tell her I love her, and kiss her. She is my best friend and the love of my life.

Finally, we belong together.

EPILOGUE

Bo—Two Years Later

It's impossible to keep my hands to myself tonight. Lily smells like heaven and looks like a goddess in a black-and-silver gown that dips low over her spectacular cleavage

and fans out over her legs. She's also got on these sky-high glittery silver heels, and all I can picture is those stilettos scratching my back as I dive under that voluminous skirt to lick her.

Which would be entirely inappropriate right now. I'm sure this limo driver's seen it all, but we're pulling up to the red carpet at this very moment.

Bummer timing.

"We're here!" Lily stares out the window and clasps her hands together. "I know you don't love award shows, but this won't be so bad. They announce best music early, and we can slip out afterward and hang with the band. Janelle said she ordered a ton of food, and—"

I close the small gap between us and drop a kiss on the corner of her mouth. I don't go further. I know how long she spent getting ready for today, and I'm not going to get yelled at by her nice-but-determined stylist for messing up his creations twenty seconds before we step onto a red carpet. Even this little touchgrounds me. Being in love with Lily feels like finding my second half.

"I love you, Bo." She kisses my cheek gently. "Just let me know when you're ready to leave."

An assistant with a clipboard opens the car door. "Welcome to the Oscars," they say flatly.

I step out first, buttoning my suit jacket as I stand, then extend a hand to help out Lily. Behind us, the crowd roars and howls. I don't think we're going to win for our song, "One Ride or Die," on the sleeper blockbuster *Glorious*'s soundtrack, but that's not the point of coming tonight. I'm here for Lily and the rest of the band. We've spent two years of hard work to get to this stage, and they deserve to be celebrated.

Lily slides out of the car, her mass of skirts falling around her hips as she balances on those killer heels. Her blond hair is full Adele curls, and her lips are a kissable red. There's a tug of something low in my gut. I am the luckiest man in the world.

We stroll down the red carpet, blinded by flashbulbs and waving to the Howl fans in the crowd. It's impossible to lose my smile when Lily is beside me, both basking in and awed by the attention. I get it. These last two years have been a blur of work and Lily. Mostly Lily. Lily in my house, Lily in my bed. It's the kind of happiness I never expected to feel.

K changed his name to Kev, and the last thing he did in the public eye was a DUI arrest in Yuma. Supposedly, he's in a new reality competition pilot for Ain't Dead Yet Duets. It hasn't been picked up by any network.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I chance a look at it as a stylist pulls Lily aside for more photos. It's a text from my dad. This is another unexpected twist. After that night in Chattanooga, he called as expected. When Lily forced me to listen to the message, though, it turned out he was calling to congratulate me. He promised he wouldn't try to control anything, and so far, he hasn't. I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop, but since he's been on very good behavior—he even reached to apologize to my mom—I've been tentatively opening the door to a relationship with him.

Lily and I get cornered for interviews on our walk down the red carpet, and she deftly fields questions about our upcoming world tour as well as the modeling she's been asked to do. Some call it plus-size modeling; I say they're lucky to have her. She's as smart as she is gorgeous, and when she left law school for Howl full-time, it was her choice and on her own terms. Her parents fly out to almost every show.

I keep her hand in mine and we enter the theater, nodding and smiling at people who nod and smile at us. Another assistant with a tablet shows us to our seats, and we

settle in. Lily squeals and grabs my arm.

“It’s Julianna Margulies!” she whisper-shouts, pointing discreetly at the actress.

“We’ll go talk to her after the show.” I use the opportunity to kiss her ear lobe, and she beams. This woman.

“You two look nauseatingly cute,” Maxim says, plopping into the seat next to mine. He’s wearing a classic black tuxedo with leather and steel bracelets at his wrists. “What are the odds we’re actually going to win this thing?”

“My parents said my hometown is taking bets,” Lily says. She pulls a compact and lipstick from her purse and starts to re-apply. I could watch her do that for hours. It’s one of those little intimacies I hadn’t realized I was missing out on, but I love it. “We’re fifteen to one.”

Maxim groans and leans his head back into the seat. “I have no idea what that means, but it doesn’t sound good.”

She shrugs and stows the compact back in her purse. “It’s not bad. Where are Dan and Janelle?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:01 pm

I loop an arm over her shoulder and trace the line of her spine, my fingertips brushing her skin lightly. “Dan said they’d be backstage, making sure everything is ready for our song.”

Lily squeals, her eyes bright. “I cannot believe we are here. Not only to watch the Oscars, but that we’re performing.”

“I can. We worked our asses off,” Maxim says. He yawns and pulls out his phone. “Do you think anyone will care if I take pictures of Chris Mulroney hitting on Desi Shadow?”

“Which Chris is that?” Lily frowns. “I can never keep them straight.”

“The one from Pirate Knight,” I reply.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you made me watch that.” She shivers. “It was nothing at all like The Princess Bride. The things you do for love.”

“Please don’t start talking about love.” Maxim surreptitiously snaps another few photos of some of the other celebrities in our vicinity. “If I had to answer one more question on the red carpet about when the two of you are getting married, I was going to duck out the back and get a hot dog at Pink’s.”

Lily laughs. “Tell us about it.”

“I am invited, though, right?” Maxim says this directly to me. “You wouldn’t elope and completely forget to tell me, your best friend and band mate?”

“You’ll be the first call after Lily’s parents,” I say.

“I’d better be,” Maxim grumbles.

The rest of the night passes in a blur. We leave our seats at the designated time and go backstage to prepare for our performance, which goes better than anticipated. Lily rocks the microphone, bringing the house to its feet during the final lines of the song.

No one can take this chance but I

To tell you you’re my ride or die

We don’t win—this time—but it doesn’t matter. I’m with Lily, the woman I fell in love with the night I first heard her sing. She’s the only one I want sitting next to me on this journey.

So later, after the post-show party at Dan’s house, when we’re finally back home in our comfiest pajamas and watching cooking shows in bed, I wrap my arms around Lily and press my lips to the top of her head.

“Hey, friend.”

She snuggles into me, her body lining up perfectly with mine. “Hey, friend.”

I don’t worry about the consequences. I don’t overthink it. I let myself be happy.

“Will you marry me?”

She tilts her chin up to me, her face flushed and so full of happiness, she beams. “Hell yes. What took you so long, Bo Harley?”