



# Our Harmony

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**Description:** "My life was definitely smack dab in the middle of a monsoon season."

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What is it like to feel that passionate about something?

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Their night of passion was never supposed to be more than a one-time fling, but now Melany can't get Kendra out of her head. How can Melany, the entrepreneur who's never been in a relationship in her life, convince Kendra to give her a chance? Will Kendra be able to get over her fears and find love and music again?

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## Summary

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What is it like to feel that passionate about something?

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Their night of passion was never supposed to be more than a one-time fling, but now Melany can’t get Kendra out of her head. How can Melany, the entrepreneur who’s never been in a relationship in her life, convince Kendra to give her a chance? Will Kendra be able to get over her fears and find love and music again?

Kendra

They say when it rains, it pours. If that's true, my life was definitely smack dab in the middle of a monsoon season.

I stared up at the weekly schedule tacked on the cork board in the restaurant's back room, counting and recounting my posted hours. They couldn't be right—I'd only been scheduled for two shifts that week, a drastic cut down from my usual. That was only six hours of work. Even with tips, that was barely anything. I was scraping by as it was, so how the hell would I afford rent now? Or food?

My co-workers, who were also gathered around to look at the schedule, grumbled to themselves and shuffled away. It seemed like I wasn't the only one who had time cut.

I know exactly when my monsoon season started, and like any decent monsoon, the rain came down hard right from the get-go. It was seven months ago when I decided to take a spontaneous weekend trip back home from Rosebridge to Manchester to visit Max, my then-boyfriend. I showed up at the bar he played gigs at—Max was a bassist—and I hoped to give him a surprise in the back room. Only, it was me who got the surprise. I burst in, a big bottle of our favorite Belgian beer in my hands, and there he was on the couch with his dick in some groupie's mouth.

I don't think I'll ever forget the way he reacted. How his eyes barely widened, and how he said "Kendra, what are you doing here?" so nonchalantly as he continued to sit there, making no effort to stop what was happening. The girl doing the sucking looked my way and actually started going harder—slobbering, gagging, the whole deal. She was putting on a show, like this wasn't the first time they'd been walked in on in the back room.

For a brief moment, the bottle of beer felt disturbingly close to becoming a deadly weapon. Instead, it exploded on the ground next to my feet and I was out the door

without looking back. I don't know if I'd ever felt such intense rage and sadness all at once. I was never going to go back to that town.

Max and I met in our high school orchestra class. I was a drummer who also played timpani percussion, and Max was a bass guitarist who also played the upright bass, and we decided to form our own rock band with some friends. Things between Max and I started to become more than friendly, until eventually we were officially boyfriend and girlfriend—our firsts. I can't remember who was the one who initiated it, but after being cheated on, I started wonder why I'd been with him in the first place. Max wasn't super attractive or anything. He was a good musician, and that's probably why I'd felt something for him, but honestly, I wasn't that even into guys in the first place. Had I loved him? I thought I had, but now I wasn't so sure. Now I wasn't so sure I even knew what love was.

After that, the rain continued to pour on my sad little life.

It felt like all of my focus went completely out the window. My grades dropped in all of my general ed classes, and drumming, something that'd always come so easily, now felt distant and unnatural. I couldn't keep tempo. I couldn't focus. I kept fucking up even the most basic rudiments. Dr. Adler, my drumming mentor and the man I respected the most at Beasley University, told me I was losing it. I failed the class and got put on academic probation. I lost my scholarships. At the end of the last fall semester, I was forced to drop out.

And now, four months later, my work hours were slashed. It rains, it pours; monsoon season.

I stuck my head into my manager Herschel's office and cleared my throat to get his attention. He looked up from a laptop surrounded by receipts and paperwork. "Hey, Kendra," he said, pushing up his glasses and smiling weakly. "I know why you're here."

“What happened, Herschel?” I asked. “Two shifts?”

“Everyone had to take cuts. You’ve seen how slow things have been the past two months. It isn’t getting any better. I’m doing all I can to keep everyone on staff.”

“You’re thinking of letting people go?” I asked, shocked.

He sighed. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Just keep your fingers crossed that things pick up.”

“Herschel, I can’t lose this job.”

“If it were up to me, we’d all get raises and I’d make it rain hours,” he said. “But it’s not up to me. Anyway, you do realize you’ve missed a lot of work the past few months? And you’ve had a problem mixing up orders—I see you zoning out sometimes. What happened, Kendra? What’s going on with you?”

I winced. “Nothing is going on. Just some personal stuff.”

Herschel eyed me. “Well, nothing is happening yet. But really, Kendra? Little bit of life advice here. If you can’t afford to lose a job, then don’t wait until things hit the fan to try and secure it, hm? I’m a nice guy, but there’s only so much I can do when Mr. Miyaguchi steps in.” Mr. Miyaguchi was the place’s owner.

His tone pissed me off, but there wasn’t an excuse I could give that wouldn’t have been a blatant lie. It was true—I’d been screwing up at work. It was probably a lucky thing that I hadn’t been let go already.

“Right,” I said, nodding. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

I turned to leave.

“Kendra, hey. I don’t mean to come off as a dick. Just keep your shit together and I’ll do what I can,

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if the time comes, alright?”

“Thanks, Herschel,” I said honestly, and went out to start my shift.

If I lost this job I’d be absolutely screwed, but even as it was, I couldn’t count on fate or luck to get me more hours. If this was how things were going to go, I wouldn’t be able to afford living in my apartment. There was no way I was going to leave Rosebridge. There was no way I was going to go back home to Manchester to live with my dad.

I would choose life on the street over that.

I need to make more money.

This was a wakeup call. I had to get my life back on track. I had one area of expertise. Could I get back on the drums? I hadn’t been able to sit at a drum set in months. I fell apart when the sticks were in my hands. But what else could I do?

When I got home from work that night, Monica, my roommate, was on the couch deeply involved in a video game. “Fucking son of a bitch! I’ll fuck your mom, asshole. I’ll pee in her fucking butt.” She pulled off her headphones and gave me a wave. “Hi, Kendra,” she said pleasantly, her tone doing a complete flip. “How was work, my dude?”

“Fucked,” I said. “My hours got cut. Can we talk?”

“Give me five minutes. Let me just fuck these noobs up, and I’ll be right with you.”

She slipped her headphones back on.

I went to my room and changed out of my work clothes, then went to the bathroom to wash my face. I let my hair down from the ponytail I liked to keep it in, and brushed it out. What am I going to do? I thought, looking at myself in the mirror. My eyes had bags underneath them. It seemed like all I'd been doing was sleeping these days, but I still felt tired.

I had to get back on the drums. It was the easiest way I could make money. If I could get back on the drums. If I could play, then I might be able to find a gig in a band somewhere, or at the very least, give lessons.

Lessons.

The thought literally made me feel sick. How could I even think about giving lessons when I couldn't even stay in school? How could I give lessons when Dr. Adler said I wasn't any good anymore? It just wouldn't feel right to charge anyone to learn from me.

I splashed some cold water onto my face, trying to fight away the sickening despair that always seemed to be lurking in the back of my mind. I was doing everything I could not to break down crying.

Deep breaths.

When I went back out to the living room, I found the couch empty except for Monica's headphones, and I could hear the microwave going in the kitchen. I sat down on the couch to wait for her to come back. In the opposite corner of the room from the couch sat my drum set. Covered up by one of my bedsheets, it looked like some unwanted troll wrapped up in rags, banished to the corner. I stared at it, and found my pulse starting to beat faster. Shit, I was getting anxious just looking at my

drums.

Drums had been a part of my life since I was young, and they were probably the one thing my parents did right for me. I was immediately drawn to the way they made me feel physically when I played them, not only the impact that the sound had on my body, but the energy that welled up inside of me as I found the rhythm.

They were the perfect way to let out the frustration I felt from my parents' constant fighting. I could drown out the noise of my dad's drunken curses. I didn't have to hear about my mom's infidelity, or the walls getting smashed and dishware breaking. I could just exist in my own little world, drumming away in the garage. It came to the point where I hardly missed a day drumming. It'd become a part of me. Starting in fifth grade, I always had drum sticks tucked into my pocket or my backpack. I joined the marching band and the school orchestra. I was good—damn good—and everyone at my school knew it. People who didn't know my name still knew me as “that drummer girl.”

Having such an integral part of who I was suddenly crumble away felt devastating. No, beyond devastating. The drums had been my refuge, but after Max, everything just went weird. I couldn't do anything without seeing that scene in the bar replay in my head. My drumming just wasn't the same after that, even after that memory had stopped haunting me. And after Dr. Adler told me I was losing my touch... well, I really did lose it. I couldn't pick up a pair of sticks without having a low-key panic attack.

The microwave beeped, and Monica came back to the living room with a plate of pizza rolls. “You want one?” she asked, sitting down next to me on the couch.

“I'm okay,” I said. “I ate at work.”

“Right on. Must be nice, getting to eat Japanese food for free every day.”

“It’ll be twice a week now. They cut my hours.”

“Ow, fuck, that’s hot.” She covered her mouth and spat out a steaming, half-chewed piece of pizza roll. “Son of a god damn monkey fuck, that burned my mouth. Shit! They cut your hours? That’s fucked up. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. But I’m already digging into my savings as it is. I’m worried. I don’t know how I’m going to afford rent if things stay this way.”

“Damn,” she said, making another attempt at the pizza roll. “You need to get a second job, like, now.”

“I know,” I said. “Any ideas? Do you know anywhere hiring?”

“Why don’t you give drum lessons? You never play anymore. It sucks that you dropped out, and shit. You were awesome at playing.”

The word “lessons” made me shiver. “No, I don’t think I could give lessons. Not right now.”

Monica raised an eyebrow. “Alright. It’d be easy money for you, you know.”

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“I can’t even play.”

“Look, you gotta do what you gotta do. Just make sure you get the rent check to me at the end of the month, alright? I honestly don’t get why you’re so choked up about your drums and shit. I know you had some shit go down with your ex, but that was months ago.” She set the plate down and licked pizza sauce off her fingers. “Kendra, I know I ain’t the picture of productivity and like, success and shit, but come on. I remember when you moved into this place, I thought to myself, ‘damn, this bitch has things together.’ What happened? You need to snap the fuck out of it.”

“Hey, I’m trying, alright?” I felt defensive.

“I know we’re just roommates, but I’m worried about you. You know what? You should go to the Riverwalk. There’s a bunch of restaurants and shit down there. Maybe one of those places will be hiring. But I’m telling you, drum lessons are gonna pay way better.”

“I’ll figure something out, Monica,” I said. “I just wanted to let you know what’s going on.”

“For sure, my dude. You got this. You’re smart.” She held the plate up to me. “You sure you don’t want a pizza roll?”

“I’m good.” I stood up to go back to my room.

Monica picked up the headphones and controller from the couch to continue her game, then she held up her hand to stop me. “Oh, Kendra! I know!”

“What?”

“Fuck the restaurants at the Riverwalk. People go down there all the time to play music. Buskers, you know? You could totally do that and blow everyone’s cocks off. I can guarantee you the people walking around there will have never heard a Beasley-trained, award-winning drummer before.”

“That is a good idea, but I can’t sit in front of a drum set without having a panic attack. That’s the big problem here.”

“Then screw the drum set. You know what I do sometimes when my kill to death ratio in Rise to Duty starts to get all fucked?”

“No,” I said.

“I go reductive. I don’t play it anymore. I go back to the games I used to kick ass at when I was a kid. The simple shit. Maybe you need to do the same. Like... you could get some pots and pans and beat on those instead. I’ve heard you play; people would still drop money to see you bang on a pot.”

Street drumming on pots and pans. I’d honestly never considered doing that. I had watched a lot of street drumming videos before, and it had looked like a lot of fun. Would it make a difference? “I’ll give it a shot,” I said. “I guess I ha

ve nothing to lose.”

“Exactly.”

“Thanks, Monica,” I said. She smiled and raised her fist for a fist bump, which I returned. My drum set continued to leer at me from the corner in the room, but something about the idea of street drumming on a makeshift set of drums wasn’t

triggering my anxiety. I would try it. Regardless of what happened, I needed to find a second source of income within the next few days. The end of the month was coming up, and if I couldn't pay, I'd be out of here.

Frankly, I'd been hoping that Monica might've offered to cover my rent for next month. I felt shitty about it—I'd never been a freeloader in my life—but I felt like I was nearing my wits end. After the fact, I was glad that she hadn't. She had, however, given me the second wakeup call I needed.

I would go to the Riverwalk and try to drum again.

After Monica left for work the next morning, I fished out my drum sticks from where I'd hidden them away inside my closet. It was strange to feel them in my hands again. I rubbed them between my fingers, taking in the texture of the wood and the little nicks and notches dug into them from practicing. My palms started to sweat. These were the sticks I'd last used when everything started going to shit, and I found myself getting nervous.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I took a deep breath and went out to the living room. I hadn't played for months, so I wasn't sure what would happen when I tried my hand at drumming away on a set of buckets. There was a pretty high chance I'd sound like a manic chimpanzee who learned she could make noise with a pair of sticks. A part of me—the old, perfectionist musician Beasley student part of me—wanted to make sure I was practiced and prepared, but I just couldn't bring myself to pull that sheet off the drum set and face the music. Instead, I stood and stared at it sitting there in the corner as my heart raced. When sweat started to prickle on my forehead, I turned heel and escaped to the garage to look for things to build my new, low-pressure, “reductive” drum kit.

I had a pretty good idea of what kinds of things would make a good set. I needed at least one large, four-gallon bucket to use as my main drum. I'd probably want to get a couple of other, smaller sizes to add some variation to the sound, and then I wanted to get some metal pieces to stand in for cymbals and bells. A lot of street drummers seemed to make their kits entirely out of buckets, resulting in a fairly uniform sound that I wasn't a fan of. To me, a good drum solo had plenty of variation in tones.

Monica had inherited the house from her grandparents, and apparently had never bothered to do any cleaning in the garage. The place was filled with decades worth of junk. I searched around and quickly found some plastic paint buckets, but they were still full of ancient, molasses-thick paint. After sneezing my way through piles of gardening supplies, old clothes, and storage boxes, I finally found a large bucket filled with trowels and shovels. I dumped them, ignoring the flurry of startled spiders that fell out with the lot, and set the bucket aside. I discovered two paint cans that had a bunch of old batteries and rusty nails in them, and after emptying them out, I added them to my kit too. I wanted a couple more metal objects to fill in for my cymbals and bells, so I pulled out one of my sticks and started to test them on things. I found a rectangular metal piece that might've been part of a drain gutter, and an old cooking pot.

Satisfied with my kit, I fit everything I could into the big bucket and the rest into a faded tote bag embroidered with "Beasley University Class of 1965", and went to my car to drive down to the Riverwalk.

The Riverwalk was a stretch of restaurants, cafés, and boutiques that ran along a grassy area in front of the water, shaded with trees and lined with old brick and cobblestone. Quite a few of the buildings here were historic and dated back to the early 1800s. A mix of street music always seemed to fill the air here, from classical violin to Peruvian pan flutes, the area was a prime spot for busking.

I won't say that I felt embarrassed or shy lugging my makeshift kit down the

Riverwalk, even with the big bucket rattling and clattering with the items inside—I was used to performing in front of crowds—but I did feel slightly out of place here. I'd never busked before, and I wasn't sure of the etiquette. There were plenty of other musicians around doing their thing, and I didn't want to intrude on anyone's territory, or something like that. Did buskers even have territory? Who knew.

I found a nice spot in front of a bronze statue of Clifton S. Beasley, the founder of Beasley University, far enough away from any other musicians so that I wouldn't be interrupting anyone with my drumming. Families and couples strolled by, not even giving me a second glance while I unpacked my kit and laid it all out onto the brick. I sat cross-legged, with the main bucket directly at my front, the paint cans to my left, and the metal whatsits to my right. I left the tote bag open at the very front for tips.

I pulled out my sticks and swung them in the air, miming a beat, trying to figure out what I was going to play. My heart started to pound, and my palms began to sweat. I exhaled, and rubbed them dry on my jeans.

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You can do this, Kendra. No pressure. This is just for fun.

I tapped the sticks against the bucket, testing out the sound. Rattatat-tat-tat dock-dock dock. I found if I lifted the bucket up slightly I could get a bassier tone out of it. Then I moved to the paint cans. Tung-tung-tung-dak-tungatung-tung. Okay. Then the metal bits. Ping-ping-ping-pingpingaping. Dangdadadang-da-dangdanga-kong.

The people continued to walk by, not paying any attention to me. I realized I was sweating, and I wiped my forehead with the back of my forearm. My heart was thudding hard—but I wasn't having the anxiety explosion I would've had sitting at my drum kit.

Dum-dum. Dum-dum. Dum-dum. I could hear my pulse racing.

Fine, I thought. I'll go with that. I inhaled—and then brought the sticks down onto the side of the bucket.

The rhythm of my heartbeat pulsed out of the plastic makeshift drum. A girl passing by shrieked and laughed, startled by the sudden burst of noise.

I continued to drum out that deep beat, readjusting to the feeling of having the sticks in my hands again. It was coming back quick, and I had to admit—it felt good. I wasn't feeling any of the crippling pressure, and the unfamiliarity of the instruments meant I needed to learn how to make them sound good. I zeroed in to the way the sticks vibrated and responded in my hands, how they ricocheted off of the plastic, and how the bucket responded in turn. I moved to the paint buckets, then to the metal bits. Then I tapped a rhythm on the brick ground itself.

Okay. I got this.

I burst into a fast tempo that would've been right at home in a techno or EDM song—something catchy that would continue to have your toes tapping the beat hours after hearing it. I focused in on my instruments, paying close attention to how they reacted to me. I felt myself loosening up, and I was amazed by it. For the first time in months, I was playing. Sure, it wasn't a real drum set, but I was actually using that part of me again.

I heard the tinkle of coins, and looked up as a little girl dropped money into my tote. She ran back to her parents, and I was surprised to see that I already had an audience of five or six people watching me. I couldn't help but smile.

I suddenly realized that I was slightly rushing the tempo, and tensed and missed a beat. My audience didn't budge, or even seem to notice. In fact, someone else came forward and dropped a five-dollar bill into my bag.

Okay. This is awesome. I'd forgotten how good drumming could make me feel, and right now, it felt amazing. I was fucking up all over the place, but it didn't matter. This was street drumming. It was like learning a brand-new instrument.

I let myself get involved in the beat I was creating, opening up things inside my heart and my mind that had been held closed for a very long time. I didn't stop drumming—I changed up the rhythm but kept it going as one continuous song. The sticks dug into my un-calloused palms, but I didn't care. I enjoyed it. It was a good kind of pain. The pain of progress. I was making progress, and for the first time in ages, I felt like things might actually be okay. Like maybe, just maybe, the rainy season was starting to clear up.

The crowd grew. People stopped to take videos of me. I watched with humbled amazement as the money started to fill my bag. Some of the people danced, some

kept the beat with their toes. The faces kept changing, but each one of them was zeroed in on my performance.

Then, after about forty minutes of straight playing, I realized that not all of the faces were changing. There was one girl who stood dead center, slightly behind the rest of the crowd, but I could see her watching, nodding her head slightly along to the beat, and tapping her finger against the cup of coffee she held. She'd been watching my performance for at least half an hour, longer than anyone else.

She looked to be around my age, but from the way she was dressed she seemed older. She wore a trim, expensive looking blazer and a pencil skirt, with perfectly on point makeup that made her look like the type of woman you'd see fitting right into a corporate boardroom. She was like a yuppie—or one of those really rich trust fund kids that you sometimes saw at Beasley. What stood out to me the most was her amazingly intense gray eyes. They were focused on my sticks, following their rhythm as she tapped her fingers along to the beat. From the way she accurately followed it, I could tell that she was a fan of drumming—or maybe she was a drummer herself.

I played until my hands were screaming and the beat was at a fever pitch. I didn't want to stop. There was a part of me that was terrified that the moment I did, I would lose it entirely again; that I wouldn't be able to play on any drums at all. This felt too good. I didn't want to let it go.

Fat beads of sweat dripped down my face. Harder. Faster. I didn't look, but I was sure that my palms must've been ripped and bleeding by now. It definitely felt that way—they were on fire.

Keep going. Don't stop.

I doubled the time, then tripled it. I heard the crowd murmuring.

Don't lose it, Kendra, don't—

With one whip of my hand, my left drum stick hit the hardened edge of the overturned bucket and splintered with a loud crack. The crowd gasped as the broken tip of the stick flung away—and whipped right dead center into the gray-eyed stranger's left boob. Her hand shot up to grab it, and she bounced around cringing.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she squeaked.

There was scattered laughter. Someone asked if she was okay. People applauded and dropped money into my bag.

She shuffled backwards and sat down on the edge of a stone planter, her coffee still clutched in her hand, her breast in the other.

I tossed my sticks aside and hurried over to her. “Oh, my God, I'm so sorry about that. Are you alright?”

She tilted her head back to take a few deep breaths. “Well, that is definitely going to go viral,” she finally said, still massaging her chest. “Damn, that thing had some velocity.”

“I'm really sorry,” I repeated.

She turned to me, her gray eyes meeting mine, and gave me a reassuring smile. “No, it's not your fault. Anyway, I'll take a stick to the tit any day if it means getting to see an awesome drum solo like that.”

I laughed, half in relief that she wasn't angry, or threatening to sue me or something like that. Plus, it was pretty hilarious. The more I thought about what had happened, the more I cracked up, especially because she was laughing harder than I was. It felt

like I hadn't laughed that hard in... well, seven months.

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“You’ve got to be a pro, or something, right?” she asked. “You’re really good.”

“Not a pro,” I said. “I’m —was—a student.”

“Jazz?”

“No, not exclusively. I studied at Beasley. We have a comprehensive percussion program.”

“Who’s the instructor?”

“Dr. Nathan Adler,” I said, suddenly feeling reserved. I didn’t want to talk about Beasley, and wished I hadn’t said I was a student. I tried to change the subject. “Are you a drummer?”

“I’m not. Haven’t got an ounce of musical ability in me. Big fan of music, though, especially rock. I’ve got crazy respect for a good drummer. Most people pay attention to the guitars or vocals. The melodic shit. I love a good beat.” Her eyes flashed, and she stuck out a hand. “My name’s Melany. Melany Crawford. I’m a Beasley grad too.”

“Kendra Ellings. I’m actually not a graduate.”

She shook my hand. I was surprised how strong her grip was. “You’re working on your undergrad?”

“I kinda dropped out,” I said. I didn’t want to talk about it, but it was difficult for me

to lie or skirt around things when asked directly about them. Thankfully, it seemed like Melany could read the discomfort on my face.

“Gotcha,” she said. “Well, I’m no expert—just a drum fan—but I think you’re pretty damn good. Who needs school?” She stood up. “I’ve got to get back to work. Is this your first day playing here?”

“How did you know?”

She smiled. “I walk here during my lunch breaks and grab a bite to eat and some coffee. Will you be playing here again?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The truth is, I haven’t drummed in a long time.”

“Sure doesn’t seem that way. I’d love to talk some more with you, in private. I’ll kick myself if I come back tomorrow and you’re not here, so how about you give me your phone number?”

Had it been anyone else, that question would’ve totally caught me off guard—normally I would’ve exchanged business e-mails when it came to someone interested in my playing, but she was charming and it’d been a while since I’d felt so good about myself. Her compliments had really buttered me up. Also, she was gorgeous.

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Shit,” she said. “I don’t have my phone on me, and I’ve got a pen but no paper.” She held the pen to her hand. “Mind writing it on me?”

I shook my head and took the pen. It was heavy and looked expensive. I held the back of her hand in mine, and wrote my number onto her palm.

“Thanks,” she said. “I promise that I’m not usually this unprepared. It was great meeting you, Kendra. I’ll be in touch.”

“Sure,” I said. “See you.”

She gave me a little grin and walked off.

I stood there for a moment, feeling slightly bewildered. Suddenly, a thought occurred to me as I recalled what Melany had said. “I’d love to talk some more with you, in private.” In private?

No way. In the excitement of it all, I hadn’t even stopped to consider that Melany might be a lesbian. Had I just been asked out?

I snorted. Yeah, right.

I went and picked up the tote bag to see how much I’d made in that first hour, and I was shocked at how much was in there. Not rent money for sure, but it was better than nothing and definitely more than I expected.

With my sticks broken I’d have to end the day early to go get more, but I felt positive. Things had worked, and as long as my “day job” held up, I might actually be able to survive another month. And who knows? Maybe I could somehow get back on my real drums.

I packed up my makeshift kit, noting to myself what new pieces I should add to further expand the sound.

Yeah. Things are looking up.

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Melany

My coffee had gotten cold, but I sipped on it anyway. I strolled up the Riverwalk back to where my condo was on the edge of downtown Rosebridge, my thoughts on the hot-as-fuck drummer I'd just met. I usually didn't ask for numbers unless I was fairly certain they were gay, but I'd ignored my rules this time and went for it anyway. Something about her did give me the feeling that she was into women—call it my gaydar—but I couldn't be certain. Either way, it didn't matter. If she was, then I'd take her out, learn more about her awesome playing, and then see if she was down for me to throw something at her tits. Namely, my face. If she wasn't queer then I'd be perfectly happy with the conversation. The girl was an amazing drummer.

It'd been a long time since I'd hooked up with anyone, let alone went on a date, and I was feeling a little lonely—more than usual, I mean. I actually felt excited for once. When was the last time I'd felt excited about something? A long time ago, too.

I tapped my key to the panel at the front of the building to unlock the door, and took the elevator up to my loft condo. Even though I worked from home, I still treated my workspace as if it were a real office. I made sure it was immaculately decorated and cleaned, stocked with the amenities I would expect in a corporate office, and I always dressed for work. I'd made it a habit even back in business school when I was writing code in the tiny, grungy-ass apartment I shared with three other Beasley students. I was convinced that feeling successful, professional, and produc

tive was a key to achieving those things, and two years ago, I saw my efforts come to fruition. Design a killer app, and it could turn into a goldmine. I had designed three, and it'd made me a millionaire in months.

I threw the rest of my coffee down the drain and sat at my desk, which faced the big floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over downtown Rosebridge. I woke up my computer, and pulled up the app I was working on. When I put my fingers to the keys, I found myself unable to type. Kendra, the hot drummer, filled my head and wouldn't leave.

I usually liked to wait at least five hours before messaging a potential date, but it looked like I'd be breaking another one of my rules for this girl. I copied her number from my palm into my cell phone, and wrote her a text.

> Melany: Hi, Kendra. This is Melany. What are your plans for tonight?

I set the phone down and turned back to my work. I didn't expect to get an answer back from her anytime soon, so when my phone chimed just two minutes later I couldn't help but smile in surprise.

> Kendra: Hi, Melany. No plans.

> Melany: Then make some with me. How about the King's Tooth on the Beasley campus? For memories of our school days.

A reply didn't come back for a little while.

> Kendra: Okay. Not the King's Tooth though? Would prefer not to be on campus.

Huh. What had happened that'd made this girl dislike Beasley so much? She'd gotten uncomfortable about the topic earlier, too. She'd said that she'd dropped out—maybe the school screwed her over in some way.

> Melany: Certainly. Let's meet at the Riverwalk, then. I'll be done with my work at 4PM. How does 5PM sound?

> Kendra: Great. Do you mind if I eat first? I'm a little short on cash.

> Melany: Don't worry about it. It's on me.

> Kendra: That's really nice of you, but I can't accept that from someone I don't know.

> Melany: We'll get to know each other over some food. It's alright, really. Think of it as payment for allowing me to talk to you about your drumming.

> Kendra: Ok, sure. See you at 5.

I sat back in my chair, smiling to myself. Yeah, it didn't matter where this went, or what her orientation was. I just wanted to talk to her again.

To get some of my productive juices flowing, I went over to my entertainment center where I had all my records, and I pulled out one of my favorite jazz records, All Star Sessions with Jo Jones, Art Blakey, the great Max Clarke, and Wes Landers on the drums. I put the vinyl onto my turntable and soon my loft filled with the warm swell of jazz. I'd always loved all kinds of rock ever since I was a little kid, but Dad introduced me to good jazz.

Clicking a finger in time, I danced barefoot across the stone floor to the kitchen where I poured myself a glass of Japanese whiskey—Yamazaki, 18 year—and returned to my desk. I took a moment to look out the window at Rosebridge spreading out in the distance, and reminded myself that life was good.

Only, there was one thing that had been constantly tugging at me the past month, and it was big.

My goldmines were running dry.

The three apps I'd made that'd hit it big were each starting to lose their customer base—something not entirely unexpected when you didn't have complete control of the market—and not one piece of software I'd developed since then had broken four figures. I'd always told myself that having been a top graduate at Beasley's business school gave me an edge over other developers without any marketing or business experience, but now I couldn't help but wonder if my lack of official programming training was handicapping me. I just couldn't figure out what was wrong. By all rights, all of the new software I'd developed should've been winners.

Time was ticking, my income was dropping, and my funds were draining. Instead of trying to develop small mobile apps, I decided to put all my stakes into my current project—a new mobile operating system poised to compete against the big dogs. The leader in the industry, BluTech, had been destabilized with the departure of their CEO, so I saw an opportunity.

Yeah, it was a huge risk, not to mention an insane job for one person to accomplish, but I figured the only way to succeed and push myself over whatever block I had was to go big. To go for a challenge.

And fuck, what a challenge this was. Nothing about the software seemed to be going right. I'd completed two builds and scrapped both. They were good pieces of software, but they weren't new. There was nothing exciting about them, nothing inspired. They might cause a couple ripples in the pond, but ultimately, I knew in my gut that they weren't what I was looking for. And what was I looking for?

Greatness. Pure and simple.

## Page 7

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I sat down at my computer and started to work, mulling over the designs I'd made for the operating system and testing code out. The track playing on the record was "New Blues Up and Down," a frenetic and fast-paced jazz that seemed to perfectly match what was going on in my head at that moment. I zoned out, the music fading away to the background until I wasn't paying attention to it at all.

My whiskey sat untouched in its glass. I only realized I'd been working for several hours when the orange glare of the setting sun flashed into my eyes. I looked up, bewildered, and then went to pull the needle off the silent, crackling record. I went back to my desk and stared at the work I'd done.

"Fuck, this is garbage," I muttered to myself, scrolling through the code. "What the fuck was I thinking?" Inelegant. Boring. Useless. Unoriginal. This still just seemed like a clone of BluTech's current phone OS. I groaned and fell into my chair. What the hell was I doing? I looked at my phone. Christ. Five hours of working, and this was what I had to show for it?

This was how it'd been for a while now, and nothing seemed to be helping. The least I could do was stick to my routine, stick to my guns, and trust that I hadn't lost whatever talent I once believed I'd had.

Life is good. Look around.

I looked. I lived in an awesome penthouse loft downtown. My bank account still had two commas in it. I had everything I could possibly want to buy. So why did I feel so empty? Why did I feel like I had nothing, and that this was all going to come crashing down any second?

Five hours of working, and no progress made.

Five hours.

“Fuck!”

I shot out of my chair and ran to the bathroom. It was fifteen minutes past five. I gargled some mouthwash before shooting Kendra a text message.

> Melany: I’m on my way right now. Got caught up in work, so sorry about that. If you’ve already left, I understand.

A text arrived back nearly immediately.

> Kendra: No problem.

I cursed under my breath. Well, so much for making a good impression.

I grabbed my keys and bounced into the elevator down to the parking garage. I could’ve walked, but I wasn’t going to waste any time.

Kendra was waiting for me right by the spot where we’d first met. She wore a black leather jacket over an olive, military style button-up, and ripped jean shorts with combat boots. Androgynous and hot as fuck. Her hair was pulled up into a ponytail, and she wore a stoic expression on her face. Kendra had dark brown eyes, and I hadn’t noticed just how deep they were. Not the color, but the feeling in them, like they were focused on some far-off dimension, deep in her thoughts. It was incredibly sexy. Such a musician. She snapped out of her distraction when I walked up, and a faint smile flicked over her lips.

“Sorry again,” I said. “I got caught up with my work.”

“No worries,” she said. “Now I won’t feel so bad about you buying dinner.”

I laughed, and touched my hand to the small of her back to guide her. “Come on, I know an awesome Indian place nearby.” If I wasn’t sure about a girl’s preferences, the guiding touch was one of my first tests to get an idea of whether she was receptive to being with another woman.

Typically, I could feel the energy change with a straight woman, though sometimes it could be difficult to tell. Usually she’d keep some distance, and sometimes, on rare occasion, she might actually get angry and defensive. It was always good to know those types early, so I wouldn’t waste my time. Girls like that had no value to me, no matter how interesting they might’ve been. If I did detect any discomfort, I wouldn’t move on to my phase two, which was increased physical interaction. A touch on the arm here, a lingering touch on the waist. Nothing that could be mistaken as just friendly. Third phase was deep eye contact, and that usually sealed the deal. Either they were in or out at that point, and I could always tell.

Normally I didn’t care so much one way or the other if phase one failed. If it turned out the girl was straight, we’d usually have a good time out anyway, and I’d end up with a new friend. Right now, though, I actually felt a little nervous. I anticipated her reaction, silently hoping that she wouldn’t pull away. And she didn’t.

I snuck a glance at her face to read her expression. She was looking straight ahead, and didn’t seem to even acknowledge t

hat I’d touched her in a sensitive area. Orientation verdict? Still unknown. Too early to tell. She obviously had a lot on her mind, and I was curious to find out what.

“Have you ever been to Malabar before?” I asked, holding the door open for her.

“Never,” she said. “It’s a little pricier than what I’d normally eat, which is instant

ramen and a boiled egg.” She smiled sheepishly. “How’s your, uh—” She gave a little nod towards my chest.

“It looks like I have a bowling ball on my chest,” I said, laughing. “It’s all black, now. No, it’s fine, really.”

“I still feel terrible about that. I mean, what if the stick had hit some kid in the eye? I need to pay more attention to what I’m doing next time.”

“Drumming on stones and stuff isn’t like drumming on drums, I’d imagine,” I said. We walked up to the host’s stand. “Table for two, please. Outer balcony, if you have room.”

“Certainly, miss,” the host said. “Please follow me.”

Malabar’s outer balcony had an incredible view over the water, and the twinkling string lights that crisscrossed all along the patio’s canopy gave it an incredibly romantic feel. It was probably my top spot to woo.

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We sat down, and I ordered us a bottle of wine. Down below us, the lights from the Riverwalk's restaurants glimmered off the surface of the water. Couples strolled up and down the walk, and the sound of a street violinist drifted from somewhere off in the distance. Kendra looked around, her dark eyes wide.

"This place is nice," she said. "I wasn't expecting to come somewhere so fancy. I thought we were going to go for McDonald's, or something."

I laughed. "Hell, no."

She eyed me. "I'm sorry, is this..." She paused when the waiter returned to the table with two glasses and a bottle of Riesling. Kendra smiled politely as the waiter poured a glass, waiting until he'd gone to finish her thought. "Melany, is this a date?"

"It can be, if you'd like," I said, picking up my glass. "Cheers?"

Kendra hesitated and shifted in her seat. I found myself tensing in anticipation for her to up and leave, but she didn't. "This isn't a date," she said, finally. "I'm not looking for anything like that right now."

I smiled. "Sure. Cheers to new friends, then?" I was disappointed, but not deterred. She was into women, and single.

"Cheers. Sorry again about the, uh, chest."

After we placed our orders, Kendra asked me what I did for a living.

“I’m a software developer for phones. I make apps.”

“Anything I’d know?”

“Not unless you’re in real estate, are an amateur pilot, or a long-haul truck driver,” I said. “They’re fairly specialized.”

“So, your office is nearby here?”

“You could say that. I work from home. I’m self-employed.”

“Wow,” she said. “That must be nice.”

“Hey, you are too,” I replied. “You’re a musician.”

She smiled and scratched the back of her head, looking shy. It was pretty damn adorable.

“Today was my first day doing the whole street drumming thing. I work at a restaurant as my day job. If you could even call it that.”

“Shitty pay?” I asked.

“Shitty hours. I just got my shifts cut down yesterday, which is why I decided to try the street drumming. It sucks.” She gulped the rest of her wine down in one go, and looked at the empty glass with some embarrassment.

“Don’t worry, we have a whole bottle,” I said, pouring another glass. “I’m sure you can pull in some good money with the drumming. You’re really good.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Earlier you said that you haven’t drummed in a while. Why is that? If you don’t mind me asking.”

She fidgeted and sipped on the wine. “It’s a long story,” she said. Code for “I don’t want to talk about it,” which of course only made me more curious.

“We have a whole meal and a bottle of wine,” I said. “Bring on the long stories. It doesn’t have to be that one.” I took a long sip from my glass. “I’ve seen a lot of drummers here on the Riverwalk, but you’re definitely the best. I’m shocked that was your first time. It can’t be easy to get that kind of variety and precision from makeshift instruments.”

“I don’t know about precision,” she said. “But when you’ve played for long enough, you know the kind of sound you want. I just picked the right objects for the job.”

“Right,” I said, nodding. “Makes sense.”

By the time our food had come, we’d polished off our glasses again. I refilled them, and then ordered a second bottle.

“Shit, you don’t have to,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

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“It’s expensive. I wouldn’t feel right. We don’t even know each other.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” I repeated. “Money isn’t a problem. We’re getting to know each other right now. Seriously, Kendra.”

She seemed to relax. “Okay,” she said, smiling. “Thanks, Melany.”

We dug into our food, and I told Kendra about my interest in rock and roll drumming as a kid, and about my favorite musicians. The wine flowed. Kendra loosened up more, and so did I. She was definitely more than a pretty face and a talented set of hands. The girl was soft-spoken and a little shy, but when we started delving into the topic of music, her passion really emerged. It was surprising at first, seeing the way she talked about it. It was like she turned into a completely different person. She became animated and excited, her expression glowing with energy and electricity. I kept my mouth closed, just enjoying watching her speak. I loved good music, but Kendra was on a completely different level. It was obvious that she lived it. It made me wonder...

What was it like to feel that passionate about something?

The conversation continued to favorite albums we owned, and Kendra told me that she’d left most of her records at home.

“Good chance my dad got rid of them,” she said. “So now, most of my music is on my laptop.”

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“Because he’s an asshole,” she said plainly.

“I see. That’s really too bad. I’d destroy anyone who fucked with my records,” I said.

“Do you have a lot?”

“A good amount,” I admitted. We finished the second bottle of wine, and I felt pleasantly buzzed. “Hey, why don’t we go for a walk down there?” I nodded out towards the Riverwalk. “Walk off this buzz a bit before heading home.”

“Did you drive here?” Kendra asked.

“Would’ve walked, but you know. Lost track of time. How about you?”

“I took the bus, but I can walk back if need be. I’m having a good time, surprisingly.”

“Surprisingly?”

Kendra nodded. From her cheek’s pinkish glow, I could tell that she was buzzing too.

“Yeah. Let’s go down to the Riverwalk, and I’ll tell you more.”

I didn’t need to think about it. “Check please,” I called.

3

Kendra

We walked side by side along the Riverwalk, and my body thrummed from the wine. It felt great to be talking to someone new, and Melany was really charming and easy for me to get along with. And hot. Definitely hot.

This isn't a date, I reminded myself. You said it yourself.

I hadn't given any thought to dating or romance or even sex since the incident with Max, and I had actually actively avoided situations that might put me into any contact with another potential relationship. I just couldn't deal with it, and I definitely didn't want to fall in love again. So why had I agreed to meet with Melany, a random stranger from the street? Sure, I found her attractive, but the real reason was simply because I'd felt good about myself for the first time in ages.

Talking to her over dinner about music felt fantastic, and it also helped that she wasn't a musician her

self. She knew her stuff, and seemed to have impeccable taste, but she didn't have the ego that so many musicians I knew had. I was sure I had a pretty big one of my own back then, before it'd gotten completely destroyed and trampled into the dirt.

In the three years that I'd lived in Rosebridge, I'd actually never come to the Riverwalk in the evening. I'd never had a reason to do it. If Max had come to visit me, I probably would've taken him there to go on a date, but he'd never bothered making a trip out here. I realized, bitterly, that he'd probably been too busy fucking around.

Goddamn Max.

I'd sacrificed so much time, energy, and money for him, to keep our relationship together. He promised me the distance wouldn't be a problem, and I'd spent hours on the road going back home—a place I would've gladly never returned to if it weren't for him—and spent money I could've used to pay my fucking rent.

He'd fucked up so much for me. So much.

I felt a warm push against my arm, and snapped out of my thoughts. Melany had nudged her forearm against mine. She was looking over at me, her gray eyes twinkling with the golden lights of the Riverwalk promenade. “Everything alright? You looked super intense there.”

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“Sorry,” I said. “My mind sometimes goes to... places.”

“Happens to the best of us,” she said. “So why is it such a big surprise for you to have a good time?”

I sighed. “I’m warning you, it’s a long story.”

“It’s a beautiful night. If it gets too late, I’ll give you a ride home. Don’t worry about it.”

Melany’s eyes searched mine and I looked away, my heart pounding like a kick drum. No, Kendra. Don’t.

She was so hot though, and that wasn’t the alcohol talking. It’d been such a long time since I’d felt any kind of romantic spark with anyone, and I couldn’t deny that something was going on here. But I knew I couldn’t get involved. I didn’t want to. I couldn’t handle having feelings for someone else, and I knew I didn’t want to just hook up, either. I wasn’t ready for anything like that. I didn’t think I could handle it.

How far back do I go with this story? How much do I want to tell her?

I started with Max’s story, but once I started going, everything just started to spill out of me. I ended up telling her the entire story; about how I’d been cheated on, how it’d killed my ability to drum, how I’d lost my mojo. I talked and talked, venting seven months of pent-up stress, and Melany listened quietly. By the end of it, we’d stopped and sat on a bench looking out over the river.

“And, yeah. I’m pretty much fucked if I can’t make up the amount of money I’m losing.”

“Wow,” she said.

I cringed, suddenly feeling incredibly self-conscious. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Hearing about the baggage of some person you just met is probably not your idea of a good date.” She looked at me, and I realized what I’d said. “I mean... It’s not a date. It’s... oh, fuck me.” I buried my face in my hands.

Melany laughed, and I was surprised to feel her reach around my shoulder and give me a hug. My body pressed against her—she was warm, and her touch was oddly comforting. “You have nothing to apologize for,” she said. “I asked for the long story, you gave it to me. And we don’t need to call this anything. We’re just two girls who haven’t been on a date in a long-ass time enjoying each other’s company. I don’t know about you, Kendra, but I needed this. It’s always nice to vent, and I needed a distraction from my work. I’m glad we’re out on our—whatever this is.”

She released me from her embrace, and I straightened up. My heart was still beating hard, but it wasn’t in an anxious way. I felt relaxed.

“Me too,” I smiled.

“So, I guess you’ll be out drumming again, then? I know you’ll make a killing doing it.”

“Yeah, I will. I don’t have a choice, unless I can find other work. But it’s hard to find a job around here—even the restaurants aren’t hiring.”

Melany nodded.

I looked around. It was a weeknight, so the dinner crowd had thinned out, and now only a few late stragglers strolled around the walk. “Wow, I was talking for a while. I didn’t even realize how late it is.”

She looked at her phone. “Mm. You’re right.”

My heart skipped a beat when she reached down and gave my thigh a playful squeeze. “We could continue this conversation back at my place, if you’d like? We could pop open another bottle of wine, and I’d love to show you my records. I have a great sound system we can play them on.”

Dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum. My pulse raced. “No, I’m okay.” The words rose to my lips, but then they got stuck there. I was so accustomed to turning people down.

Instead, I said, “Yeah,” and smiled. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

Melany grinned. “Awesome.” She pointed with her thumb. “My car is parked over there. Shall we?”

The moment we pulled into her building, I found myself wondering about just how successful Melany was. The place was in an old brick warehouse that had been renovated into modern, luxury condos. Just from the lobby, I could tell that this was a place I’d never be able to afford to live in—I mean, she had a private elevator for a front door! When we got up to the condo, I did my best to seem unaffected by just how damn nice the place was.

It had a huge, semi-open floor plan, with polished stone floors and huge windows that overlooked the city. The lights in the place slowly lit up on their own, and Melany went over to the kitchen and got out a bottle of wine from a special wine cooler that rose out of the floor. Out of the floor! Over by the windows was a sectioned off office space, and in the middle of the condo was a large leather sofa set in front of a gas

fireplace bordered by shelves of vinyl records. On the opposite side of the condo from the living room area was a metal spiral staircase that led up to a bedroom up above.

“I love your place,” I said.

“Thank you,” Melany replied, handing me a glass of red wine. “Small portion, just to keep our buzz going.”

“Thanks.”

She walked over to the living room area and tapped the back of her couch. “Take a seat. What do you want to listen to? I’ve got everything from jazz to Japanese alt-rock to Norwegian death metal.”

“It’s not drums, but you got any George Benson?”

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“Hell yeah, I do.” She ran her fingers along the rows of records, pulled out a sleeve, and then from it placed a vinyl onto her turntable. The rows of vacuum tubes on the amplifier glowed a warm orange as the equally comforting and sensual tones of George Benson’s guitar filled the loft.

I sat down on the sofa. Typically, I would’ve felt slightly uncomfortable being in a stranger’s apartment for the first time, but I actually felt fine. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was because Melany was the first person I’d opened up to in so long, or maybe it was the fact that I was actually feeling attracted to her. I wasn’t an idiot—she’d invited me back to her place, and I accepted. I knew what she wanted. Maybe I’d subconsciously gone to George Benson for a reason—his slow, sexy jams were perfect for that. Maybe I actually wanted it too... It’d been a long time, and today had been an actual positive in a long line of negatives. Why not indulge? It could be a one night stand. People did one night stands all the time.

What is this track? Oh, right. “Use Me.” That’s fitting.

I sunk further down into the sofa, and downed the glass of wine. Melany came over and sat down next to me. Her thigh rubbed up against mine, and I caught her faint, delicious scent. My stomach was full of butterflies, and I felt a swell of excitement rush between my thighs. Yeah, it’d be nice to get laid again. I could use this. It’s just a one night deal, it’s just for fun. I realized then just how horny I was. I could feel that I was already wet. Well, that’s something I haven’t felt in a while.

“You know,” she said, leaning a little closer so that our shoulders were touching. “I wasn’t expecting to connect so well with you. Tonight was a lot of fun.”

Her hand slipped onto my thigh, sending trembling shocks through my legs to my stomach. I pressed my thighs together in some attempt to contain my excitement. I had no idea if she could see it or not. I didn't care. At that moment, I really couldn't have cared less what Melany had to say. I just wanted to see what she looked like with her clothes off.

"Mm," I said. Fuck it, I'll go for it. I put my hand on hers and quickly leaned in to press my lips to hers. Melany seemed to freeze for a split second before she returned the kiss full force. I pushed her back, spl

itting away from her, and went for the buttons of her shirt. It wasn't long before both of our shirts were tossed aside, and Melany had me down on the couch, her lips running all over my body. I moaned, pushing my fingers through her hair with one hand as I undid my jeans with the other.

"We can go slow, if you want," she murmured.

"No," I breathed. "No, I don't want to go slow." Let's not beat around the bush here. Let's do what we came to do.

I wiggled out of my jeans, and as Melany brought her lips back to mine, she thrust her hand down the front of my underwear and curled her fingers up to meet my wetness. I gasped and threw my arms around her neck, pushing myself up towards her. Fuck, it'd been so long since anyone had touched me. Especially a girl.. I was practically aching for release, drowning in the pleasure of another woman's touch. Yeah, I really did need this.

"Wait." I pushed her back and got down on my knees on the floor between her legs and undid the clasp of her skirt. I wanted her first. I drew down the zipper and shimmied it down her thighs. It was like I was unwrapping a present. I didn't waste time being coy—I slipped my fingers under the band of her panties and pulled them

down. She opened her legs for me, revealing her loveliness for me to admire. Damn, she's gorgeous all over.

"Oh shit," she moaned as I brought my tongue to her. "That feels so good."

I pushed two fingers inside and massaged her as I made circles around her clit with my tongue, enjoying every little jerk and shudder of her body in response to me. She slid her hand around the back of my head, urging on my motions as she twisted her hips against me, moaning all the while.

"My turn," she breathed. "Turn around, bend over. Let me lick you from behind."

"Go easy, okay?" I said. "It's been a while for me."

"Anything you want, Kendra," she murmured, and I felt her lips dance across my ass cheeks, and I flinched in surprise when her tongue played over my pussy. My eyes fluttered back when her lips drew over my clit as her tongue flicked all over. Max had refused to go down on me, so it felt incredible to experience the sensation of Melany's mouth on my pussy. I moaned when I felt her push a finger inside. Holy shit! It was just one finger, but the way she moved it made it feel like more. She knew exactly where and how to put pressure. She was slow and precise, unlike Max who loved to use his fingers on me like a fucking jackhammer.

"Mm..." I pressed my face into the leather cushion.

"Just a warmup," she said, and I let out a breath as I felt her insert a second finger inside of me. She moved them slowly, curling them slightly to press against my spot. I was so wet, but I couldn't hold back a shout. My fingertips clutched at the slippery leather of the couch. "Oh, God," I cried.

Melany knew just what to do with both her fingers and her tongue. God, did it feel

good.

“Okay,” I breathed. “Wow, yeah...”

“Midnight Love Affair” was playing on the stereo now, accented by the sound of her fingers playing deep inside of my wetness. It didn’t take me long to become a quivering, orgasmic mess.

I stayed bent over the couch, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath. My world spun around me, and I finally regained control of my body, which was still tingling with the orgasm.

Wow. That actually happened.

Suddenly, with the intoxicating effects of lust wearing off, I felt awkward and self-conscious. I scooped up my clothes from the floor.

“You were amazing,” Melany said. “Did you like that?” When she came over to kiss me I avoided her by quickly bending down to grab my shirt from where it had fallen onto the coffee table. I pulled it on, and Melany made no comment about my avoidance of her affection. Don’t worry, I’m sure she’s used to it. Probably has done it plenty of times. I grabbed my jacket from where I’d draped it over the back of a chair.

“You’re welcome to stay the night, you know,” Melany said, finding her clothes.

“It’s alright,” I said. “I’m actually not too far. I can walk it.”

“Like hell you are. Don’t worry about it, I’ll give you a ride home.”

We drove to my place in silence. I was glad that she’d driven me—I was actually

quite far and would've had to walk through a seedy part of downtown—but I still felt awkward. It wasn't that I regretted what had happened, because I didn't at all. I definitely had wanted and needed it. But it just felt strange. I hadn't been with anyone in such a long time, and even though Melany and I were just a hookup, she was incredibly attractive and if I weren't so fucked up I could've seen myself wanting to be with her.

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Or maybe I felt strange because I was a little regretful that this was just a hookup. Maybe I did actually wish that I could start something with her. I wasn't ready for something like that though. The thought of opening myself up to another person after what Max did to me, it'd be emotional suicide. Especially with someone as smooth and sensual as Melany. I was certain that our evening out was just part of her usual routine.

"This is me," I said, and she pulled over. I could see a bluish light flashing from behind the curtains of the living room window—Monica playing a game.

"I had a great night," Melany said with a smile. "I'd love to do this again sometime."

I smiled back apologetically. "I don't know. I wasn't thinking this would be anything more than a one-time thing."

"Right," she said. She seemed disappointed, which surprised me. Was this how she was with everyone she slept with? "Okay, sure. Well, I hope you don't mind if I come by to hear you play again?"

I shook my head. "No, of course not. Thanks for the encouragement, Melany. It really meant a lot to me."

"Sure thing."

"Well, bye." I slipped out of the car and hurried up to the front door. Melany waited until I was inside, and then drove away. Monica was on the couch, eyes glued to the TV.

“Sup,” she grunted as I crossed in front of the TV to peek out of the living room window.

“Well, that was something,” I said, sitting down on the couch next to Monica.

“What, that triple kill? You know I’m a fuckin’ boss.”

“No, what just happened to me.”

“You went to dinner with a girl who watched you drumming.” She jerked up straight.

“Oh, shit. No way. You guys... are in love?”

There was an explosion on the TV, and Monica’s character somersaulted through the air. “You Died” appeared at the bottom of the screen.

I shot her a baffled look. “What? No. No, we hooked up.”

“Oh,” she said, sinking back in the couch. “Damn. Congrats. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Seven months. Not since my ex, Max.”

“Uh-huh. Right on. You’re officially getting more action than me. I haven’t gotten any in like, a century. So, you guys gonna keep fuckin’, or what?”

“No,” I said quickly. “It was just a one-time thing.”

“Gotcha. Well, it’s good to hear you’re out of your dry spell. I know you were having a hard time. Give me a high five.” She held out her hand. “Come on, don’t leave me hanging. Okay, at least give me the fist bump.”

I sighed and bumped Monica's fist. "I'm going to bed. I'm going to go back and play at the Riverwalk again tomorrow."

"Right on. Goodnight."

After taking a shower, I went to my room and slid into bed. When I closed my eyes, I could see Melany. I could smell the scent of her, taste her on my tongue, and I could still feel the way she'd touched me. My body was still tingling from the orgasm. Are you sure you don't want her again?

I quickly pushed the thought of my mind. It was just a one-time thing. I've got so much else to think about. This is just the start of things.

Before I finally drifted off into sleep, I could only think about Melany.

4

Melany

None of this made any fucking sense. After dropping Kendra off,

I ended up sitting on the couch where we'd fucked, staring at the wall with my chin in my palm. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

She was just a hookup, so why couldn't I stop thinking about her?

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I'd broken so many of my rules today. I'd asked her to stay over. I'd gone for a kiss after we did it. Hell, I'd told her that we could take things slow. "Take things slow" was not something you suggested to a hookup. And that's all Kendra was: a hookup.

Right?

When I woke up the next morning, I found a bit more clarity. I jumped into my daily routine: I did my morning workout, showered, ate breakfast, listened to a record, and got dressed for work. Following the routine helped keep my mind on track, and the confusion of the night before seemed to be gone.

It wasn't until I sat down in front of my computer that I realized it was anything but gone.

My fingertips sat motionless on the keys, and I couldn't summon a single creative idea to my mind. The only thing that seemed to come forward now was the thought of Kendra.

Enough of this shit, I thought. I got up and poured myself a whiskey. I'd never been in a relationship before, and things certainly weren't going to change now. Life was too busy for romance. I had my work to concentrate on. My business was the only relationship I needed.

I was able to churn out a bit of code, but my mind continued to hop back to Kendra. I went over program functions in my mind and how to implement them, only to have those thoughts fade away and be replaced by repeating memories of the things we'd done last night. The weirdest part was that it wasn't the sex that I was remembering.

To reminisce over a night of amazing sex wouldn't have been so unusual for me, but I was thinking about her. The dinner, the conversation, the way she talked so passionately about her music, the way her eyes lit up when she spoke, and the way she moved so quickly from passion to shyness. My thoughts were all about her.

She was an interesting, unique person, so of course I'd think our conversation was memorable. That was it, or at least that's what I tried to tell myself. So why did it feel like more than that?

It's not more than that. That is all it is. Concentrate on work, and she'll slowly fade from importance.

I put on a record and dove back into work, forcing myself to push forward. It felt like she was tugging at my mind at every moment. Once the afternoon hit, I'd managed to churn out a fair amount of progress, but once again felt unhappy with what I'd done. I decided to go for lunch—a walk might help clear my mind. And maybe if I got to see her again... I could put an end to these ridiculous thoughts.

I stopped at my favorite Greek restaurant near the end of the Riverwalk promenade and got myself a gyro, and after eating I walked towards where Kendra had been set up the day before. Why the hell was I so nervous? My heart was racing, and it only got worse the moment I caught the steady sound of a drum beat from off in the distance. From the skill level of that rhythm, I knew immediately that it was her.

The crowd was even bigger than yesterday, and I pushed my way through so that I could get a view of her. She sat cross legged, her eyes closed as her hands blurred across the variety of makeshift instruments she had in front of her. I noticed she'd added two more new pieces to her kit—a small plastic bucket and a block of wood.

Her playing was incredible. I wished I could hear her play on a real drum kit. It was such a fucking shame that she couldn't do it. I thought about the story she'd told me

the night before, and wondered how a mentor could put a student down like that, to the point where she'd fail and be unable to play again.

Stop worrying about her. Stop involving yourself.

I tried to remind myself why I was here.

See her, listen to her, then forget about her forever. A bit of closure, and that's it. We don't even need to talk. She's a stranger. She's no one, and all she'll do is get in the way of work.

I took a breath and backed out of the crowd before Kendra had a chance to open her eyes and see me.

Alright. That's it. Now you never need to see her again.

I walked home from the Riverwalk, my heart feeling unusually empty. I was miserable, and I couldn't understand why she'd had this effect on me.

Over the next three days, I was able to make steady progress on the program, mostly fueled by the panic I felt when I saw that the user numbers for my most popular app had experienced a massive drop. Still, despite my productivity, I wasn't happy with the work I was doing. Something was missing. I also broke my daily routine and avoided going back to the Riverwalk. Kendra had refused to leave my mind, and seeing her the other day had definitely not made it better. So now I figured I ought to just avoid seeing her altogether in order to "reset" myself, and get back to normal.

I wondered if she was having the same thoughts about me. Was I torturing her as much as she was me?

On the fourth day, I gave in.

Years of routine, of being completely in control of myself, gone. And all because of a street drummer. I returned to the Riverwalk, this time with the intention of talking to her again. As I walked, I started to get nervous, and then I got excited. I wanted to talk to her. It didn't matter if she wasn't interested in seeing me again, I just wanted to talk to her. And then, maybe I could finally be rid of this thing.

When I neared Kendra's usual spot, it dawned on me that something wasn't right. Over the bustle and chatter of the Riverwalk's afternoon crowd, there was something missing: Kendra's drums.

Why didn't I hear her drums?

The spot was occupied by a duo: a girl on an acoustic guitar accompanied by a violinist. They'd attracted a sizeable crowd, and were playing a lively Celtic style song. An elderly couple danced, while a toddler jumped around to the music. They were damn good. I stopped to listen to the rest of the song, and dropped a twenty into the guitar case that was open on the ground.

"Hey, thanks," the guitarist said.

"Do you guys happen to know the drummer that was set up here a few days ago?"

The guitarist shook her head and turned to her partner. "Brienne?"

The violinist—Brienne, I guess—shrugged. "Didn't know there were any street drummers here."

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“They must be new,” said the guitarist. “We play here pretty often.”

“I think she only just started playing here this week. Anyway, thanks. You guys kick ass, keep it up.”

“Thanks! Here, hold on a second.” She went over to the guitar case and pulled out a flier. “Come check us out this weekend. We play shows here regularly. There’ll be food and art. It’ll be a good time.”

“Beasley Illustration Graduate Show,” the flier said. “Shadetree Collective.”

I wasn’t so much into the whole pretentious artsy-fartsy scene, but I folded the flier neatly and gave it a pat of acknowledgement before slipping it into my pocket. “Thanks,” I said, and as I left to patrol the rest of the Riverwalk, the two of them broke into a cover of Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love.”

I walked the length of the Riverwalk promenade, but never once caught the sound of Kendra’s drums. When I passed Malabar, I caught the spicy aroma of their food and flashed back to our dinner. So, she hadn’t come to play today. She’d told me that she worked, so maybe that was why she wasn’t here. I felt surprisingly deflated.

Come back tomorrow, I thought. Talk to her then.

But what if she wasn’t here tomorrow? What if she decided street drumming wasn’t her thing? What if she decided to go somewhere else in the city?

Then you never have to worry about her again.

My ability to psyche myself up and mentally motivate myself through difficult situations was one of my strong traits. It was what gave me the ability to write software and start my business while finishing grad school with top marks, helping me to defeat the crippling self-doubt that prevented so many other, more talented peers from succeeding. It was the one thing I could count on when the going got rough—and it disturbed the hell out of me that it wasn't making me feel any better right now.

I considered the possibility that maybe I'd just shut myself in for too long. It'd been a long-ass time since I'd gone on dates or hooked up with anyone, and it'd been even longer since I'd gone out with a friend. I'd practically cut off all non-business related connections when I'd decided to take on this project. Maybe that was all I needed.

When I got back to the condo, I pulled up the contact of an old friend from school—one of the girls who was on the same page as me and was always reliable for a fun time. She was straight, but had an uncanny ability to pick out the bisexual—or bicurious—and lesbian women in a bar and hook me up with them. I wasn't looking for a wing-woman, but Denise was probably the best friend

I had. A little depressing, considering I hadn't been in contact with her in one and half years.

“Hello, Denise Hoover speaking.”

“Sup, girl. How's it going?”

There was a silent pause. “Oh, shit! Is that who I think it is? Melany Crawford, it's been a long time. I thought I'd never hear from you again after I lost my phone with your number in it.”

I laughed. She hadn't changed, it seemed. “I know, I kind of vanished into thin air. I

feel like shit about it, but you know how it is.”

“Right, right. I know your business got off the ground while we were still in school. I don’t blame you. Go with the money, as we used to say.”

“Yeah, the work really took me. So, how’ve you been?”

“Oh, good. Good. I’m still in Rosebridge, working for an import/export company.”

“Awesome. I’m glad you’re still in town, because I wanted to see if you’d be down to go out for a drink. Catch up.”

“Oh, bitch! You know I do.” She lowered his voice. “Actually, I just got engaged, so I gotta keep my head down. The fiancé doesn’t know about the rager side of Denise. But I got you. Just like the old days.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry about it, Denise. I just wanted to grab a drink and catch up, no booty chasing for me.”

“Damn,” she said, sounding surprised. “Really? Oh, I got it, you’re in a relationship too. Wow, Melany P. Crawford in a relationship. Things have changed.”

“No, still single. I just want to catch up.”

“Huh. Okay. It’ll be awesome to see you again, Mel.”

We made arrangements to meet that night at a bar downtown, and after we hung up I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself. Denise Hoover, engaged? That was definitely a surprise for me. Denise was like me—she’d always been so focused on work and success, never bothering to make time for romantic relationships other than getting laid. She’d even told me once that she planned to die single in a bed of money,

surrounded by a harem of the world's hottest male models.

That evening I drove to go meet her, and found myself making a quick detour to check out the Riverwalk. Kendra wasn't there.

"Stupid," I muttered to myself, and went back to my car.

"There she is!" Denise jumped off her stool and pulled me into a tight hug. "It's good to see you."

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“Likewise, Denise,” I said, grinning. “Let me get our drinks. What’ll it be? An Old Fashioned, just to keep it old-fashioned?”

“Sounds good to me. Thanks, Mel. Next round is on me.”

We sat at the bar, and the bartender mixed our drinks. “So, engaged? I wasn’t expecting to hear that one.”

“I know, I know,” she said, fingering a cocktail napkin. “You know me. I never could’ve imagined that happening.”

“So, what changed?”

“Two Old Fashioneds.” The bartender placed the glasses of amber drink in front of us, and I put down a fifty.

“Keep the change,” I told her.

“I met someone,” said Denise, sipping her drink. “Mm. Good shit.”

“Okay, but you’ve met dozens of someones,” I said, laughing.

“Yeah, but this someone was different. He—Marc—wasn’t like anyone else I’d been with before. He wasn’t like any man I’d ever met before. It was fucking weird, but I somehow knew that he was right for me.”

“Shit, he must’ve been special for you to have given up on your business projects.

You work for someone now? What happened to starting that landscape maintenance company you always talked about? You were so sure you could strike it rich in that niche.”

She shrugged. “Things changed. Marc became my life. And who knows, I might even cut back so that I can have a kid.”

I shook my head in disbelief, and took a swallow of my drink. “Crazy.”

“Tell me about it. It came out of nowhere.”

“What was it about him? Is he an entrepreneur? Someone in finance?” I could imagine Denise being interested in someone who she could talk business with—though so many guys could be insufferable when it came to talking business with a woman. Always patronizing.

“Librarian,” she said. “Works for the Rosebridge City Library.”

“Shit,” I said, stunned.

“I met him at an associate’s wedding. He was sitting at my table, and we talked, and something just clicked between us. I couldn’t get him out of my head.”

An image of Kendra’s face flashed through my mind. I tossed down the rest of my drink, and Denise ordered us two more.

“I’m happy where I am, anyway,” she continued. “My career rocks, and I’m helping Marc with a project idea he had for cataloguing books. Honestly, Mel, I didn’t know what I was missing. Everything feels so much more rewarding with him by my side.”

I laughed. “Jesus. Denise the romantic. I never could’ve imagined.”

Denise laughed too. “So, what’s new in the life of you? Still making your weekly catches, you little minx?”

“Not anymore,” I said. “That’s long behind me now.”

“Because I’m not there to wing for you?” She smacked my arm.

“Business, Denise, business.”

“You were one of the few who actually made it right out of school,” she said.

“In school,” I reminded her. “I started on a new project. I’m going big this time, no more small apps.”

“Big for you must be really big. You’ve got my attention.”

“I don’t want to give too much away, because I’m still working on a first build. But I’ll say this much: think BluTech.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s a good time for that. Damn good time. If I knew how to code, I’d offer to give you a hand.”

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“No, you wouldn’t,” I teased. “You have a fiancé to think about now.”

She smiled. “Well, if there’s anyone from our class that could succeed in taking on a company that big, it’s you. I’m sure you’re killing it with the alpha builds. It’s probably amazing.”

“It’s getting there,” I said. No, it isn’t.

“So, you haven’t been seeing anyone?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Well, hell, girl. I could hook you up with someone tonight, I’m sure. I may have been out of the game for a while, but I know I still haven’t lost my touch.” She leaned in close and spoke in a private voice. “The bartender. She’s into you.”

“No way. She’s just happy because I gave her a generous tip.”

“Trust me, Mel. She definitely wants your generous tip. Or tips.” She swatted my boobs.

I groaned and turned away to shield myself from any more gropes. I was still a little tender from Kendra’s ballistic drumstick.

“Want me to get the ball rolling?” she asked.

The bartender was tall, with olive skin and a model-perfect face. In fact, I wouldn’t

have been surprised if she were a model. Her dark hair was pulled up in a neat little ponytail, and I thought again about Kendra.

Fuck. Maybe I needed this to get my mind straight again.

I shrugged coolly. “Fine. Show me your magic hasn’t faded, Denise.”

She smiled and patted my arm. “Leave it to me.”

I walked out into the night and pulled Denise into a hug. “It was really great to see you,” I said. “It was great to catch up.”

“Definitely. We should do this again sometime.”

I agreed, but we both knew that this would likely be the last time we’d see each other unless somehow business brought our paths together again. We were both in completely different places in our lives now.

She leaned in and squeezed my arm. “Have fun tonight.” She winked.

Denise hummed as she strolled off into the night. It was nice to have caught up with an old friend, but it had left me feeling strange. Denise was getting married. Her story about finding Marc, and how she’d known he was special—I could never have imagined that happening to her. She always seemed like

she was at her top form when she was invested in her business and living the wild single life, but, I had to admit... I’d never seen her this happy. It was something I could just feel that was different about how she was acting, and her energy was different too.

What did this mean for me?

Nothing.

What about Kendra?

The question floated through my mind like a whisper.

What about Kendra? She was just a girl I'd met, and that was it. She was just like...

"Hey there, stranger."

I turned and saw Alysia, the bartender, coming out of the bar. She wore a black zippered hoodie over her work clothes, and I thought about Kendra's leather jacket. She looked so good in that jacket.

"Hi," I said, pressing a smile onto my lips.

"So, my place or yours?"

"Mine is fine."

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“Cool. I was hoping you’d say that. Mine is a pigsty at the moment. Where’d you park?”

“The lot over there.”

“Me too.” She slipped her arm around mine. I felt nothing. “Let’s go.”

We started towards the lot, the glow of the street lamps casting yellow circles on the cracked sidewalk. A foul smell drifted up from somewhere, and I realized that someone had puked all over the wall. I gritted my teeth.

“So, what do you do, Mel?”

“I’m a programmer,” I said.

“Ooh, like with computers?”

“Cell phones, actually...”

“Uh huh. I overheard you two talking in there. You have your own company?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t feel like expanding. Or conversing at all, really.

“That’s so hot.” She leaned closer to me. I could smell her perfume—she’d applied way too much, and it was overpowering. “And different, for a woman.”

We walked into the parking lot, which was empty except for our two cars. Alysia

unlocked her car, and I walked her over to it. She stopped at the driver's door, and then turned around and pulled me into a kiss. Her perfume was really strong.

"You are so hot," she said, and she grabbed the collar of my jacket and swung me around, pushing me against the car. She planted a messy kiss on my lips. "Fuck waiting for your place. Let's fool around right here in the parking lot."

My face twitched, and I suddenly felt repulsed. I thought of Kendra, and how I felt when she'd kissed me on the couch. How my heart had leapt so high, and how it felt like I never wanted to stop kissing her. You call that a hookup, Melany? Is that what it's like to kiss just a girl? Someone who means nothing?

It made no sense, but it was obvious. She wasn't like anyone I'd been with before. Kendra was different.

Alysia's hands crept beneath my skirt and to tug at my underwear.

"You know what?" I said, grabbing her wrist. "This is a bad idea."

She looked puzzled. "Too public? That's fine, we can go..."

"No, I mean everything. Sorry. I have to go now."

I walked away, feeling confused and embarrassed.

"Really? What did I do? Hey!"

I slammed the door of my car and roared out of the parking lot. I needed to meet Kendra again.

Kendra

Finally, after so many agonizing months, it felt like the storm clouds that had followed me everywhere were finally clearing. Things were finally going my way—I was drumming again. Sure, it wasn't on a real drum set, but it was still drumming, and I was making money doing it. The street drumming didn't carry the same stabbing anxiety that lessons did. It felt free and low-pressure. People didn't care if the performance wasn't perfect. They loved everything I did, flaws and all. And damn, did it feel amazing to perform for a crowd again.

Could I just be in the eye of the storm? Maybe, but it didn't matter to me at that moment. The important thing was that I actually felt hopeful again. Things were working out.

And then there was Melany. I'd thought about her occasionally over the past week, and on the day after our fling I admit that I was hoping to see her again. When she didn't show, it was a sharp reminder of my priorities, and what the whole thing was. One time.

I reminded myself that it was probably a natural thing to have her on my mind—after all, she'd been the first since Max. Of course I'd think about the first person I'd been intimate with in nearly a year.

Yesterday, my manager had called a staff meeting and told us that the owner of the restaurant was going to be coming in over the week to check up on things. Apparently, there'd be a chance for some of us to receive more hours, so we all needed to perform at our best. From the way that he'd broken the news to us—quickly and eager to retreat back into his office—I read into it as “some of you may end up being fired.” Still, I wasn't deterred. I could be on my game.

I gathered up my street kit and prepped to hit the Riverwalk for the day. Monica

slumped in her usual spot on the couch, her mouth slack-jawed.

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“I’m going drumming,” I said.

She made a grunt of acknowledgement.

As I went towards the front door, the specter of my sheet-draped drum kit stood out in the corner of my eye. I paused, and then set my bag onto the floor. I walked over to the kit, my chest tight, and gripped the edge of the fabric. Then I inhaled and pulled it off.

My heart pounded, and I stood face to face with my kit. Its chrome glistened, and the golden waves of its cymbals winked in the morning light. My heart thudding against my chest, I reached out to touch it.

My fingers rested on the cool metal. Then I came around to the stool and took a seat behind the kit. My palms were sweating. I looked up and saw that Monica had stopped paying attention to her game and was watching me.

“Are you going to play?” she asked.

I swallowed and shook my head. This was great progress, but I still felt the anxiety standing in my way like a gigantic brick wall. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. There was still a fist around my heart, and I couldn’t pry it off. But at least it was loosening, just a little bit.

“No,” I said. I covered the set back up and picked up my pack. “Not today. See you later, Monica.”

She shrugged and went back to the game.

It was a beautiful day. The weather was getting much warmer, and summer was definitely here. It was my first Saturday playing at the Riverwalk, and it was bustling with people. My usual spot was occupied by a juggler, so I walked a bit and found a good spot directly across from the Indian restaurant I'd gone to with Melany. I set up my kit, which I'd expanded and refined since my first day playing, and did a few warmups. A small audience started to gather, and once I was satisfied that I'd gotten enough ears tuned, I started to play.

The first day out, I'd just kind of played. Any beat that came to my mind, I went with. It was like clearing off the cobwebs and knocking off the rust. After that, I started thinking about what kind of things would draw people in. After a couple days of experimentation, I learned that bigger crowds were attracted to full beats you could easily dance to, rather than impressive speed drumming. I'd looked up some popular EDM and techno songs, and searched for more pieces for my makeshift kit that could stand in for a variety of electronic drum beat sounds, and focused my performances around making up my own techno style street songs.

It was the kind of music that was looked down upon by the professors at Beasley, and the kind of style that students might've made on their laptops in their dorms but never brought in to the rigorous, conservatory style classrooms of the music department. I'd never done any beat-making on the computer before, nor had I really been interested in electronic dance music, so it was a nice surprise to find out how fun it was to do. It was simple, and that was exactly what I needed.

A crowd gathered quickly. Two young guys came up and asked if I could throw down a rap beat, so I did, and they performed a freestyle rap with me. After that, I went back to the dance beats, and a few kids hopped around enjoying the music. My tip jar was filling up. I'd been making pretty decent money—it wasn't anything near what I would make in tips on a busy night at the restaurant, but it was definitely a relief to

have a second source of income. And if I was able to get my hours up after this inspection, then things would be good again.

I had my eyes closed—a habit of mine when I really started to find the groove. I could feel the beat vibrating through my body, projecting out through my hands into my kit and ricocheting back through

me in turn. I'd quickly come to love the roughness of street drumming, and the lack of precision. It was all improvisation—my senses were tuned to feel out the imperfections of my instruments and make them work to my level. I had the kit spread around me in a circle and had memorized the positions of each piece, shuffling and turning around on my butt to reach them all.

Suddenly, I caught something in the air that made my eyes snap open.

Her perfume.

It was faint and vanished in a second, but it was there. Distracted, I skipped a beat in the tempo and had to stop for a moment and start over. My head swiveled, looking around for the source, and then I saw her. She stood on the edge of the crowd, in a short black skirt, black blazer and white button up, a Louis Vuitton handbag hanging off her shoulder and her hair framed by a black, large brimmed felt hat. She looked like such a yuppie fashionista. I couldn't help but smile.

Melany caught my glance and smiled back, giving me a little wave. I spun my drum stick in the air in a little move of private recognition, and then wound down the song. The audience applauded and whistled, people dropped cash into my jar, and Melany pushed forward through the crowd. My heart started to beat a little faster.

She pulled out what looked like a fifty from her wallet and dropped it into my jar.

“Not from you,” I said, returning it to her. “Though I’m flattered.”

“You were awesome. What’s wrong with me giving you a tip?”

I shrugged. “Just... feels weird.” Because we did it?

“We’re friends, right? Don’t feel bad about getting a tip from a friend.”

I smiled. “Really, Melany. Thank you, but I can’t accept it from you.” Are we friends? What do you call a one night stand you just met? I suddenly started to feel awkward and anxious. “Thanks for stopping, though. It’s, um, it’s good to see you again.” I moved to sit back down.

“I came by the other day, but you weren’t here,” she said.

“Oh, really?” I tried to play it off, but I felt oddly pleased to hear she had come by before after all. “I was probably at work.”

“Since you won’t let me give you a tip, how about you let me take you out to dinner? And we could go to this...” She pulled out a small rectangle of paper out of her bag and handed it to me. It was a flier for an art show at the Shadetree Art Collective. I’d heard of it before. It was a place founded by one of the professors at Beasley, and a popular spot amongst the arts and music majors at the university. I’d been told it was a good place to mingle and make professional connections.

“Melany,” I said quietly—the crowd was still around waiting for me to play, but I noticed people were starting to leave. “I thought it was clear that was a one-time thing.” The anxious, tight feeling was growing. I didn’t want to have this conversation in public, and I didn’t want to lose my audience.

“Well, I thought so too. But I realized that I needed to see you again. So, maybe we

can start over. Just a friendly date, that's it. No expectations.”

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I chewed my lip. A million thoughts were rushing through my head, and most of them were negative. Melany was amazing, and I couldn't deny the chemistry I'd felt with her during our night together. On the surface, she seemed like she'd be prissy and stuck up, but she was the complete opposite. She was a total sweetheart, she was interesting, she had amazing taste in music... But then again, Max had also been those things. His true colors hadn't shown until later.

You're gonna get fucked again, and not in the good way. Don't do it.

And yet, I felt something that I thought would be gone from my life forever—longing. I would've liked to go out with Melany again and get to know her better, to see where things would go... But I just couldn't get past the warning alarms. I'd learned my lesson. I couldn't bear to go through that hurt again. The wound in my heart was still fresh and gaping.

"It was a one-time thing, Melany."

"Kendra..."

"I should to get back to my performance. My audience is leaving." I held the flier out to her.

"Keep it," she said. Her gray eyes flashed over mine, and I could see the disappointment in them. "In case you change your mind. I'll be there."

"Okay," I said. I put the piece of the paper into my pocket and sat back down on the ground, averting my gaze as she left. She was just a one night stand. I don't even

really know her.

So why do I feel so stupid about this decision?

I drew in a quick breath, raised my sticks, and then let everything out into my beat.

When I got to work that afternoon after my time at the Riverwalk, Patti, one of my co-workers, pulled me aside in the employee break room as I was putting my backpack away in a locker.

“He’s here,” Patti hissed.

“Who?”

“Brandon Miyaguchi.”

“Who’s that?”

“The owner, dummy. He’s doing his inspection today.”

I nodded, but in truth I was only half-listening. I’d been distracted the entire day since Melany had re-inserted herself into my life. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. The two sides of my mind were fighting over how I felt about the whole thing.

She’s just a stranger, and it’s time to forget about her. You’re feeling weird because she was the first person you’ve been with since Max, but that’s it. Follow through and she’s bound to hurt you.

And yet, it felt like I wanted her image to come into my mind. I kept fighting the thoughts but they returned, carrying warm excitement with them. When I went out to start my shift, my thoughts were bouncing between daydreaming about her and

berating myself over feeling anything for her.

“I’ll have the Melany ramen, with extra Melany, please.”

I stared slack-jawed at the lady, my pad and pen in hand. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You wanted the...?”

“The maximum miso ramen, with an extra side of chashu.” She held up the menu and pointed to it.

“Oh, right. Will that be everything?”

“Do you guys do crab Crawfords here?” her husband asked.

I blinked. “Pardon?”

“Crab. Croquette. Crab croquette. Do you have them?” He gave me an incredulous look.

“Yes, sir,” I said quickly. “We do have an excellent creamy Crawford—I mean, croquette. Would you like one?”

“Okay. One of those, and please, if you could tell me about your toro tuna sushi? Where is that sourced?”

“Um.” Huh?

Suddenly, I heard a George Benson song start playing on the restaurant’s radio, sending my thoughts flashing back to Melany’s apartment. If I focused hard enough, I could recall the taste of her lips on mine, the feeling of her hands on my body... I remembered the way I felt walking the Riverwalk with her—how comfortable and

open I was.

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The man stared at me. Sourced. I'd known this. All the servers were trained to know where our fish was caught, what kind of drinks paired well with them, and all sorts of other random information, but right now I just couldn't bring any of that to mind.

"Well, it's... fresh caught... uh, today. From the Atlantic Ocean. Very fresh, very good stuff. Would you like to order a plate of it?"

He cleared his throat, not looking impressed. "No, thank you. That will be all."

"Thank you," I said, and headed back to the kitchen to drop off the orders.

Fuck, I need to concentrate.

I stuffed my hand into my pocket to check my cell phone for the time, and my fingers brushed against a piece of paper. The flier. I pulled it out and looked over it.

"Art, live music, and drinks," it said. "Celebrate this year's class of Beasley illustrators."

It started an hour before I got off work. I could go, if I wanted to.

If I wanted to.

But I didn't.

Right?

“Order,” I said, and handed off my order sheet to Preston, that night’s head cook.

“How wa

s Miyaguchi?” he asked. “Heard he’s intense.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I must’ve missed him.”

“The hell are you talking about?” He waved the sheet in front of me. “This is his order, ain’t it?”

My heart tumbled out of my ribcage and dropped all the way down to my feet. “What?” I spun around and saw the man I’d just served saying something to his wife while scribbling in a little notebook. She nodded and looked over my way. I clenched up and quickly looked back at Preston. “That’s Brandon Miyaguchi?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you recognize him?”

I felt the storm clouds rumbling overhead. Fuck my life.

“No, obviously. Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

Preston eyed me and then handed the order sheet back. “You wanna double check this and make sure it’s right?”

I looked over the order sheet. Fuck, why didn’t I read the order back to them? I always read the order back! “One order of spicy tonkotsu ramen, one maximum miso with extra...” I flinched and quickly scribbled out “Melany” and wrote “chashu.” Had he ordered something else? The creamy tuna croquette? Or had he said he didn’t want one? No, he had wanted the croquette.

I scribbled an order for a creamy tuna croquette and handed the sheet to Preston.  
“There.”

He gave me a look and retreated back to the line. When I went back out to the floor, I made sure to be as attentive as I could. I hurried around, grinning so stupidly it felt like my mouth was going to come off, making sure to loudly recall all the menu recommendations and pairing information so that Brandon Miyaguchi could hear just how on point I was.

“Alright, folks,” I said, returning with their order, my stupid smile still plastered on my face. “I’ve got a spicy tonkotsu ramen for the gentleman, a maximum miso with extra chashu for the lady, and an order of the creamy tuna croquette.”

“Tuna croquette,” he repeated, looking at it.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He looked up at me and smiled. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Anything else for you both?”

“That will be all.”

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“Wonderful. Just let me know if you need anything at all. Enjoy your meals.” I hurried away, wishing this shift would just be over.

Why, to go to Shadetree?

No, I wasn’t going to do that.

And yet, the idea continued to burn in my mind. I could go just to see the show. It would be interesting to see the musicians playing there. I could chat with Melany—or even just ignore her.

But maybe I want to chat with her.

It wasn’t like anything had to happen. We could just talk and then go our separate ways. Maybe we could be friends? Friends couldn’t hurt me in the same way that Max had.

But would I be able to see her as just a friend? After what we’d done together?

I peeked into Herschel’s office to ask whether or not I should give Brandon Miyaguchi and his wife a bill, and he told me to continue treating them as if they were normal customers. I went back out to clear away their bowls and offer them dessert, and noticed the croquette still sitting untouched.

“Did you want me to box this up for you?” I asked.

“No, that’s fine,” he said.

“Oh,” I said nervously. “Was there a problem?”

“Well, I ordered a crab croquette.”

Shit.

“Oh, my goodness,” I said. “I’m so sorry. This was a tuna one, wasn’t it? I can go replace it for you right now...”

“That won’t be necessary. Thank you, though. We’ll take the check now.”

I stood there trying to find some way to fix what I’d done, but it was too late. I’d screwed up.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Miyaguchi. Again, I’m so sorry about that.”

I hurried away, wanting nothing more than to disappear forever.

“Turn me into sushi,” I groaned to Preston. “Just take that giant knife and turn me into sushi.” I explained what had happened.

“It could’ve been worse,” he offered. “You could’ve dropped the food all over them.”

I watched from the kitchen as Herschel saw Brandon and his wife out the door. They were chatting, and I wondered if maybe Brandon was telling him how terrible a server I was. Yeah, there were storm clouds overhead, and I could smell the rain coming. I kept my head down the rest of my shift. Herschel never said anything to me. In fact, it felt like he was avoiding me.

After work, I sat in my car in the parking lot and stared at the steering wheel. For once, my mind wasn’t occupied with Melany—instead I was repeating my screw-up

over and over and over, scrutinizing every moment, wondering if maybe, just maybe, I'd been polite enough for Mr. Miyaguchi to forgive how badly I'd fucked up.

God. Not only had I messed up the order, I wasn't even paying attention to him. I'd blanked on the tuna source question and had completely made up my answer, and he definitely would've known it. He was testing me, after all.

My chest was so tight with anxiety it felt like I couldn't breathe.

"Fuck everything," I said to nobody. I was trying not to cry.

I pulled my car out of the lot and drove for home. About halfway there, I remembered the little rectangle of paper that was still stuffed in my pocket. The event had only just started, I realized. I could go right now.

I gritted my teeth, tightened my grip on the wheel, and diverted my course to take me to Shadetree.

The place was surprisingly lively, with a crowd of people milling around outside the front snacking on hors d'oeuvres. The atmosphere felt almost festival-like, with the crowd and drinks and the food trucks. I wandered through the building and went out back to where the majority of the crowd was. There was a small performance area set up, complete with lighting and sound amplification. There was a drum kit, and in front of it someone was playing the cello. Wooden slats had been set up all around and were lined with student illustrations, ranging from commercial graphics, to movie style concept art, to fully rendered life drawings. I made my way through, half checking out the artwork, but mostly just keeping an eye out for Melany. Then I spotted her.

She was chatting with a young woman around my age, the two of them sipping from clear plastic cups of red wine. Melany leaned in and said something, and the girl

tossed her head back and laughed, and then nodded in agreement.

A sharp twinge inside painfully brought me back in time seven months. I gritted my teeth, not wanting to look. I thought about just leaving.

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Why am I jealous? Don't be crazy.

I hurried over to the catering bar and ordered a wine, sneaking glances over my shoulder at Melany and the mystery girl. Why are they getting along so well?

I reminded myself that this was probably the normal Melany. I'd known that from the start, that she was a flirty, smooth playgirl who probably treated me the way she treated every woman she wanted to bang. Why had I forgotten that now? Why was this getting to me?

Gulping down my wine in one go, I asked the bartender for another. Then, I saw another girl join the conversation. She came up to the mystery girl and wrapped her arm around her waist and gave her a quick kiss in greeting. I felt my body relax.

Jesus, Kendra. You're being ridiculous right now.

Gathering my courage, I headed straight over. The mystery girl looked over at me as I came up to them, which made Melany turn around to see who was there. When she saw me, her eyes widened, and her lips pulled back into the brightest smile I'd possibly ever seen.

"Kendra! You came."

I smiled sheepishly. "Hey," I said.

She pulled me into the group, putting her hand on the small of my back. I shivered, remembering how she'd touched me there the first night, when we'd first met.

“Kendra, this is Kaitlyn. She was the one who invited me to this thing. And this is... I'm sorry, we hadn't been introduced yet.”

“Emily, pleased to meet you.”

I greeted them both, shaking their hands.

“Your girlfriend?” she asked Melany, and I felt my face go molten hot.

“Oh, no,” Melany laughed. “Just a friend. Actually, Kendra is the drummer that I mentioned to you.”

“No way!” said Kaitlyn.

“Kaitlyn is playing tonight with her street performance group,” Melany said. “Guitar, violin, and a drummer.”

“Melany told me that you do street drumming,” Kaitlyn said to me. “At the Riverwalk?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Only just recently.”

“Cool. That's where we play too, I'm surprised we haven't seen you yet.”

“Oh, I've only been at it for a week,” I said.

“Do you play a normal drum set, or like, a bucket kit?”

I nodded. “Buckets, pots, those kinds of things, yeah. Though I played a normal kit

before that. I used to be a music student at Beasley.”

“My music partner is a Beasley student,” Kaitlyn said. “Violin major. They’ve got a good program, I’ve heard. So, you must be classically trained, and all that? Can play lots of styles?”

“Basically anything,” I laughed. “Though I haven’t played on a normal kit in a while.”

“Oh, really?”

I started to shift my weight nervously from foot to foot. “Yeah. Bit of a creative block...”

Kaitlyn nodded. “Well, sometimes it’s good to step away and do something different.”

“Hey,” Melany said, touching my arm. It felt like a shock of electricity to my system. “Kendra, you haven’t had a chance to take a look at the art yet, have you?”

“Not yet,” I said.

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“There are some really cool ones in the main gallery. Want to go check them out?”

“Sure.”

“We’ll be back for your set,” Melany said to Kaitlyn. “How long?”

Kaitlyn looked at her phone. “Twenty minutes. After the cellist.”

Melany and I strolled back inside together. “I’m not usually into the whole gallery thing,” she told me. “This place is pretty badass, though.”

“It is,” I said, nodding. “I’ve never been before. It’s pretty great that this was all set up by a Beasley professor.”

I finished the rest of my second wine, and Melany drained hers too. “Refill?” she asked, and I nodded gratefully.

“To be honest,” she said as we took two new cups from the catering table, “I don’t know how cool the art in here actually is. I just wanted to talk to you alone.”

My heart did a flip.

“I’m glad you came,” she said. “I’ve been thinking about you all week, actually. I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“You have my number,” I said. “If you wanted to talk to me, why didn’t you just text?”

She looked embarrassed. “I didn’t think you would respond.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right, I probably wouldn’t have.”

“This is all a little weird to me,” she said. “I’m not used to this.”

“To what?”

“How I feel about you.”

I looked at her, and her gray eyes gazed back at me so intensely that a shiver ran through my body. “What are you talking about?” I said, my heart racing. Hearing that from her thrilled me, but it made me want to run. “Melany, I told you...”

“I know, I know. Friends. One-time thing. But, fuck, Kendra. I just can’t get you out of my head, and this has never happened to me before. I just want to know the honest truth—you don’t feel the same way at all? There’s nothing? Because it wasn’t the sex that made me feel this way. You’re different.”

I felt scared—scared to admit the feelings that were so plainly running through my body. “Right,” I said. “I’m sure you say that to every girl you bring to your house. Why me, Melany? You already fucked me. What else do you want? Just get another girl. Rosebridge is filled with them.”

She looked hurt, and I regretted what I said immediately. “This is the honest truth, Kendra. I’m not going to pretend and say you’re the only woman I’ve been with, because yeah, I’ve had a lot of partners. But I do feel differently about you. From that first evening just talking with you, I realized that you’re different from anyone I’ve ever met. It’s been fucking killing me this past week, trying to understand it. All I know is that you’re special. So tell me—is there really nothing?”

I shook my head. “I-I don’t know. I can’t... There’s just too much for me to handle, and it scares me. I’m still all fucked up from my ex, and I can’t even be sure what I feel anymore. I’m just fucking broken, Melany.”

I hung my head down. I felt so small, and I just wanted to disappear. Then I felt Melany’s arms reaching around me, pulling me into a tight hug. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’m sorry. I should’ve realized. I know you’re still dealing with some rough shit right now. Take it slow. I can wait.”

The knot in my chest slowly began to loosen. “Okay.”

She rubbed my arm. “For tonight, let’s just enjoy the event. How does that sound?”

I nodded. I felt horrible for unloading on her, but I was scared. These feelings were bubbling up so quickly and so strongly that I didn’t know what to do with them. I didn’t know how to address them. I wanted to trust Melany, but to take that leap of faith felt like the most difficult thing in my life. Even more difficult than playing the drums again. No, that felt easy compared to this.

Maybe I just need to... let go.

Just let go of everything. Every fear, every worry, everything.

Could I do that? Could I live like how I felt when I played the drums? Completely and entirely in the present?

I need to stop being afraid. I can’t let the fear ruin my life.

We walked around the gallery and looked at all the illustrations on display. Melany threw out the occasional “Oh, this is nice,” or “This is a pretty interesting looking one.” I tried my best to forget about things and just enjoy the night out, but it was

difficult. There was a lot that I wanted to know.

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“I’m sorry,” she said. “If this were music I’d have something more interesting to say.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m sorry. I’m not being very fun right now.” I drained my wine and suggested we go back for more. It felt somewhat pathetic to rely on alcohol to loosen my tongue, but I needed it, and Melany also seemed to be happy to drink more.

“I have a question,” I said, as we stared up at a large, gold-framed illustration of a pink duck wearing a tuxedo.

“Would I hang this in my house? The answer is yes.”

We both laughed, and I felt a little more at ease asking what was on my mind. “No... I wanted to know, what was your last relationship like? I told you all about mine, but you never talked about yours.”

“My last relationship,” she said, trailing off. “My last relationship. Well, I had a boyfriend for a month in high school.”

“A boyfriend,” I repeated, surprised.

“Yeah. I think it’s obvious why that didn’t work out. After that... I dated around in college. Never anything serious.”

“Seriously? So, you’ve never been in a real relationship before?”

“No, I suppose not,” she said.

“Why not?” Normally I wouldn’t have prodded, but the wine was definitely loosening me up.

“Well... success has always been the most important thing in my life. I put making my fortune above everything, and sacrificed a lot for it.”

“I see,” I said. “What is success? To you, I mean.”

“Greatness,” she said without a moment’s thought. “Greatness in anything you do will always lead to money. And money is my end goal.”

“So, having a lot of money is what you want?”

“That is a priority of mine, yeah.”

Greatness. That was the idea I’d been chasing after too, with my drumming. It was what I aspired to, and what I thought could bring me fulfillment. I’d wanted perfection. Now? Now I didn’t know. I guess all I wanted now was to be happy again.

“So, when will you know when you’re there?” I asked. “When will you be successful? I mean, I look at you and think, damn, this girl has her shit together. So where is that line?”

She looked at me with a puzzled expression, like she’d never considered the question before. “I... don’t know,” she said. She was quiet for a for a moment, lost in thought. “I’ve been questioning it all lately. I’ve charged after that goal like a horse with blinders on for so many years, never thinking about what I was doing until now.”

Melany, who'd seemed l

ike she'd never lack in self-confidence, suddenly looked embarrassed. She rubbed the back of her neck and chewed on her bottom lip. "The truth is that my business is not doing well. I knew my apps wouldn't be profitable forever; that's just not a realistic expectation. But I was certain that when that time came, I'd just have something new out making money. I had that confidence in my skills. Now, I'm not so sure. So, I wonder—what happens if I lose everything I have? Everything that's made me, me?"

"The other day, I met with an old friend from college. She was the one person who was on my level in school, the one person who was just as focused on the dream as I was. I was sure that even after we went our separate ways, she'd continue to do whatever it took to make her millions. Well, it turns out that she's getting married, and she gave up on her business. She tells me that her priorities changed. That her fiancé became the most important thing in her life. Now she's working for some company, on her way to an ordinary life. And you know what? I'd never seen her that happy before."

"You say ordinary," I said quietly. "But if she discovered what made her happy... Isn't that extraordinary?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'd just never before considered that anything in life could do that."

"So, what? You gonna give up the business and search for new meaning?" I smiled at her.

"Hell, no. My business is as important to me as playing drums is for you. I could never give it up."

"Maybe... you do need to do a little searching. Go back to the basics. Find out what

really makes you happy. Then come back stronger.”

Melany looked at me, her gray eyes thoughtful. I wondered what she might be thinking about. After a few moments, she pulled out her phone to look at the time. “Oh, we should go outside. You gotta hear Kaitlyn and Brianne play, they’re really good.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

We filled our wine cups one more time, making sure to visit a different catering spot to avoid any judgement glares from the bartender, and made our way back outside. The cellist was packing away her instrument, and the audience chattered amongst themselves. Everyone was wine'd up and in a good mood. An older woman came up to the performance area, thanked the cellist, and took the hand microphone.

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“Good evening, everyone. I hope you’re all having a good time. Our next guest is a very talented group—they don’t have a name, but if you’ve been to the Riverwalk you might’ve seen them performing. Give them a warm round of applause—”

She was cut off by Kaitlyn, who came up and whispered in her ear. The woman looked surprised and then nodded. “Okay, they’ll be up in just a couple minutes. To remind everyone, the artwork you see throughout Shadetree is produced by students of the art department at Beasley...”

Melany and I went up to Kaitlyn, who was speaking closely with a girl holding a violin, who I could only guess was her music partner.

“Everything alright, guys?” Melany asked.

“Oh, hey guys. Everything is fine,” Kaitlyn said, with a distracted smile. She turned back to Brienne. “It’s not a problem. We just play our stuff as a duet, like before. Nothing has really changed.”

“It just fucking sucks to give up the songs we’d practiced. Dammit, how embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I found the guy, I feel responsible.”

“Anything we can do to help?” I offered. “What’s going on?”

Kaitlyn looked over at me, and then his eyes widened. “Oh, shit. I don’t want to put you on the spot, Kendra, but our drummer just bailed.”

“He was arrested for drunk driving,” Brianne chimed in grimly.

“This girl, Kendra, is a Beasley drum student,” Kaitlyn told her.

“Oh, shit,” said Brianne.

“Kendra, maybe you could step in and help us out?”

All three of them turned to look at me.

“Uhh... uhh...”

“It’d be a cinch for someone from our music program,” Brianne said. “We can improvise. Do loose versions of the songs we were going to perform.”

“What do you think?” Kaitlyn asked.

I looked to Melany, and she shrugged. “Guys, Kendra has kind of been...”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

Melany looked stunned, and then broke into a wide grin.

“Fuck, yeah,” Kaitlyn said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Oh, my God, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Thank me after I play,” I said.

Melany

I watched Kendra sit down behind the drum set, and my pulse started to race nervously for her. I knew that this was the first time she'd played real drums in months, and I could see the anxiety in her eyes. She looked around at the kit in front of her, like she only just realized what she'd agreed to do, and slowly picked up the sticks sitting on top of the kick drum.

"You can do this, Kendra!" I shouted. "I know you can do it!"

She looked up, saw me, and then smiled.

"Is that your girlfriend?" a girl next to me said.

"Oh, no," I said. "No, she's, uh..."

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“A potential?”

I laughed. “Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” It was the first time I’d vocalized that desire to anyone, and it made me feel strangely warm inside. “At least, I’m hoping.”

The girl smiled and extended a hand. “Nice. I’m Margie. I’m dating Brianne, the violinist.”

“Oh, no way. Nice to meet you, Margie.” I thought about it for a moment and then chuckled. “That’s funny.”

“What is?”

“They’re all lesbians. Funny coincidence.”

“Oh. Right? Did you know that the professor who started this collective is queer too?”

“Huh. Must be something in the water here.”

We both laughed.

“Hello,” Kaitlyn said, taking the mic. “My name’s Kaitlyn, this is Brianne on the violin, and we’d both like to welcome Kendra, who we literally just recruited into the group five minutes ago. So... we should have an interesting show for you tonight.”

The crowd murmured with laughter.

“Alright, so keep on checking out that artwork, and remember, every piece is for sale. Enjoy.”

She went over to Kendra and whispered something to her. Kendra nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

You’ve got this, Kendra, I thought. Show me what you can do.

I felt the breath suck out of me like a vacuum as Kendra raised her sticks into the air to count time.

Here we go...

Tak, tak, tak, tak—

Kendra’s hands dropped into a blur. The beat exploded outwards as the sticks flurried around the drum kit, and the three of them broke into an amazing rendition of “Don’t Let Me Down” by The Beatles.

There had been a small number of people who were already watching the stage, but most were looking at the artwork or otherwise preoccupied with their own conversations. The moment the sound of Kendra’s drumming hit the air, there was a startled gasp with some laughter from the people who’d been caught off guard. As the song went on, I saw a lot of the stragglers detaching from the walls to come watch the performance. Some people started to sway with the beat, and others started to sing along, pumping their fists in the air with the chorus, half-empty cups of wine hanging in their free hands.

The expression on Kendra’s face made me laugh—her eyes were wide and she stared

at her hands moving in front of her, like she couldn't believe what she was doing.

She was absolutely fucking amazing. The drums for "Don't Let Me Down" were fairly simple, but Kendra was adding a flair to them and making them her own. I could easily hear that same precision and variation from her street performance, but now that she was on a real drum set, now that she was home, it was sublime.

"They are really good," I shouted to Margie.

She nodded. "Dude, Kendra is way better than the guy they'd found before. Holy shit!"

The crowd burst into applause when the song ended. I waved at Kendra, and she grinned and pointed one of her sticks at me, and a little thrill whizzed through my heart. Whoah. That does not happen often.

"Damn," Kaitlyn said into the microphone, grinning. "It seems like the gods of rock and roll have graced us with a miracle. Kendra, do you know "Don't Stop Me Now" by Queen?"

There were some hoots from the crowd, and then cheers

when Kendra gave a thumbs up.

"Badass," Kaitlyn said. "Because no one can stop us now."

As the performance went on, Kendra's expression changed from amazed shock to calm focus. Then her eyes closed and her head tilted back, her face in an expression that transported me back to when I had her on my couch. I felt a shiver of excitement and longing for her, and it was at that moment that I knew for certain that I wanted to be with Kendra.

I noticed that people were starting to wander outside from the gallery, drawn by the music and the crowd's cheers. What was meant to be side entertainment for the art show had suddenly become the main event, with Kendra's explosive drums as the backbone and catalyst. People were dancing now, the crowd moving and churning. Unable to wipe the goofy-ass smile off my face, I started to move my body too.

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This is ridiculous. I don't dance.

But I couldn't help it. I let myself go and danced along to the music.

"Thank you for letting us do another show, Professor Barley," Kaitlyn said to the older woman who'd introduced them. We were some of the last people out of the building, a few volunteers still shuffling around with mops and brooms.

"I think we're going to have to organize your own night here soon," Professor Barley laughed. "So many people asked about you tonight."

"That would be amazing," Kaitlyn said. "But we haven't spoken to Kendra about playing again with us. She was just filling in..."

"I'd love to play with you," Kendra said, her face glowing. "If you'll have me."

"Um, yes?" said Brianne. "Are you kidding? You were amazing. That was the most fun I've ever had playing a performance."

"Thank you," Kendra said, beaming. "It felt incredible to play again."

Kaitlyn clapped her hands together. "Well, shit. It's settled then. We ought to exchange numbers."

"I'll be in contact with you all," Professor Barley said, and turned to leave.

"Oh, Professor," I said, stopping her.

“Yes?”

“I’d like to inquire about purchasing a piece of artwork from the show tonight...”

Soon, Kendra and I were walking out to our cars together, the painting of the tuxedoed duck all wrapped up and held firmly under my arm. I opened my trunk and slid the painting carefully inside. Kendra leaned against the back of my car, her hands stuffed into the pockets of her leather jacket. I came up next to her and leaned against the car too. There was something different about her now—she looked more confident, surer of herself.

“You were fucking amazing in there, you know? Blew me and everyone else away.”

She smiled and looked away, shyly. “Nah. I’m so rusty. I’m just happy I didn’t drop my sticks. Or let one fly into your boobs.”

We laughed. “Yeah, it’s best you don’t do that,” I said.

“Kaitlyn and Brianne are the amazing musicians. They were completely on point, and they disguised all the mistakes I made.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” I said. “The three of you were great. For real, I wouldn’t have known that was the first time you’d all played together. I’m not exaggerating, and you know I’ve got an ear for music.” I tapped my ear for emphasis.

“Thanks,” she said.

Our shoulders touched, and I felt the overwhelming desire to reach out and take her hand. How was it that one woman, a virtual stranger, had awoken these feelings in me? I’d never felt this way before about anyone. What was it about Kendra? I tried my hardest to come up with a reason, with some trait that explained everything, but I

couldn't. It was a mystery—all I knew was that I wanted to be with her.

It made me feel like I might be going a little cuckoo, but for the first time in my life, work didn't seem so important.

My heart jolted in surprise when I felt Kendra lean into me, instead of away. Maybe she...?

I wasn't going to let this moment just disappear. I had to take a chance. I reached out with my pinky finger and slowly let it slip around her. I waited for the rejection—but it didn't come. Our fingers stayed intertwined, and a deep silence came around us, except for the sound of our breathing. Then Kendra let her fingers intertwine with mine, taking my whole hand in hers.

"I've thought about it," she said softly. Her dark eyes held mine, shining in the patio string lights that were twinkling over the edge of Shadetree's back fence. Then she leaned in and pushed her lips to mine.

It felt like I'd been plugged in, like all the lights inside me had been flipped on. The exhilaration was unreal. I pulled her into me, reveling in the feeling of her lips against mine again. We tasted each other and drank each other in. Her hands reached up pushed through my hair, pulling me in as our tongues met and danced together. I was swimming in ecstasy, and all from a kiss.

I continued to plant little kisses on her lips, never wanting the moment to end. Then we pressed our foreheads together, our breathing quick and excited.

"Wow," I said. "This is crazy."

"What is?" she asked.

“How I feel. I feel like I can do anything. I’m so happy. You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted to kiss you again, Kendra.”

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She drew her hands around my neck. “I realized that I’ve been wanting it too. But, Melany... can you be patient with me?”

“Of course,” I said.

“I might get anxious about things.”

“That’s fine. I’m going to need a little patience, myself. This is all new as hell to me.”

She looked into my eyes again. “So, what does this mean?”

“Well, I’d...” Now I felt shy. “I’d like you to be my g-girlfriend.” I struggled to get the foreign word off my lips.

Kendra laughed and hugged me. “Sure. I’d like that too.”

We stood outside Shadetree in each other’s arms for a long time, neither one of us wanting to be the first to let go and say goodnight. Finally, Kendra was the one to say we should go.

“I’ve got an early morning tomorrow. Riverwalk performances.”

“I’ll come by during my lunch break,” I told her.

“It’s Sunday tomorrow,” she said.

“For me, it’s still a work day,” I said.

Our last kiss lingered until we finally separated, and Kendra hurried off to her car, giving one final glance over her shoulder at me. I smiled at her and then got into my car. For a while, all I could do was sit there smiling.

I have a girlfriend.

I laughed, and then repeated it out loud to myself. “I have a girlfriend. Kendra is my girlfriend.” I shook my head, the grin still plastered to my face, and then pulled out of the parking lot.

When I woke up the following day, the feeling of amazed disbelief continued. I felt like I was walking on air. I went through my routine, and even though it was the same stuff I’d done day in and day out for years, today it felt like everything that I did was the most awesome thing ever—even eating a bowl of regular old cereal.

I sat down at my desk to get some work done. I pulled up my designs and the code, and went over them slowly.

“This is trash,” I said to myself.

I thought about Kendra’s performances, especially the one from the night before, and just how inspired they were. Her passion for what she did was evident in her music.

Where had my passion gone? When I looked at the work I’d done, all I saw was uninspired, derivative garbage. What had happened to the inspiration I’d had with me when I’d first started? My first apps were magic, and I remembered how easy creating them felt, even when I was balancing grad school at the same time.

I couldn’t proceed with what I had. Maybe Kendra was right. I did need to do some searching.

I made a decision. I would scrap what I'd completed and start completely fresh, but only when I felt I had the inspiration to move forward. I'd be patient with myself, and take as long as I needed. I'd let go of my attachments and redefine what wa

s important. I had money—enough to last for a long time if I changed my lifestyle. If that was what had to happen, then I'd do it.

I turned off my computer and looked at the time. It was only mid-morning. Typically, I wouldn't be taking a break for another four hours.

The routine is no longer applicable, I thought. It's time to change things up.

I put on a record and paced around the condo, unsure what to do with myself. I made a cup of coffee and then decided not to drink it. I stared at my cell phone, wondering how Kendra was doing.

Hold on, you can just go see her right now. I wasn't confined to my schedule. I could go to the Riverwalk now and see her. Hell, I could spend the whole day down there if I wanted. I couldn't help but be a little intimidated by the thought. My routine had been gospel for so long, with it all revolving around the goal of work productivity, and to just toss it all out felt bizarre. I felt lost.

Why is this so damn hard?

I continued to pace. "Just go," I told myself. "Stop being dumb and just go. It's okay not to be working. Remember what your new goal is."

Finally, I changed out of my work clothes and into something more casual. Then, after a few more minutes of anxious pacing, I threw myself into the elevator and mashed the button.

7

Kendra

Had it all been a dream? Because that's definitely how it felt when I'd woken up. I spent nearly an hour lying in bed staring at the ceiling, going over the events of the night before. Everything seemed so unreal.

I'd gotten up on stage with a band and played the drums again without having a complete anxiety attack.

Oh, and now I had a girlfriend.

I repeated our kiss in my mind over and over, still in complete disbelief that we were actually together. The kiss had felt unreal then, too. It hadn't been like anything we'd shared the first night we'd spent together, no, it was way better than anything we'd shared. Even the sex.

How could a kiss be better than sex? I had no explanation for it, but it was. The moment I touched my lips to hers, it felt like fireworks were exploding above my head. It felt like I'd been zapped with a bolt of lightning that excited every single cell in my body. The only thing that could compare to it was the feeling of being on stage, performing in front of people.

No, this was ever better than that. And it was only a kiss.

I wanted to tell someone about what had happened, but Monica had driven to

Manchester for a video game convention, so I had the house to myself. If I told someone, I thought it might feel more real.

Once I see Melany again, it'll feel real.

I thought of calling her, but I didn't want to bother her while she was working, so I headed out to the Riverwalk to start my day. I'd been out there for a couple hours when out of nowhere, Kaitlyn and Brianne showed up.

"Hey, Kendra," Brianne said, shaking my hand. They both had their instrument cases with them. "We were hoping you'd be out here today."

"You guys are playing today too?" I asked.

"Yup," said Kaitlyn. "We usually play right around here, or down by the ice cream shop."

"Let's play together," I suggested. "We could probably just do the same stuff we did last night. People would love it."

Kaitlyn grinned. "You read my mind."

"I'm totally down," agreed Brianne.

They set down their cases and started to prep their instruments. Last night, Kaitlyn had been on an electric guitar, but today she had an acoustic. Brianne's violin was also unamplified, so I made a mental note to temper my volume.

"I have to say again that I'm super happy we found you, by the way," Kaitlyn said. "It's like, destiny."

“It really was an amazing coincidence,” I said. “It’s hard to believe that last night even happened. I hadn’t been in front of a real drum set in months.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Actually, it was this street drumming that helped me get over the blocks I was suffering from. I’d been literally unable to play on my drum set. Every time I tried, I’d get these horrible anxiety attacks.”

“What happened?” asked Brianne, and I filled them in on what had happened at Beasley with my professor.

“You know, I’ve known a lot of people who have gone through similar things,” she said. “I was in the music program too. It can be really, really tough. The competition can get to people sometimes. It’s terrible that your mentor said those things to you, though. I wonder where he was coming from.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’d already been going through a rough patch in my life so my self-esteem was not in the best shape in the first place. So, I couldn’t even bring myself to stick around to try and find out. I just kind of withered away slowly.” I sighed. “I must sound pathetic.”

“No,” said Brianne. “Not at all. I understand. The pressure can be crippling, sometimes. Personally, I’m just glad I have my girlfriend to support me.”

“Yeah, fuck school,” said Kaitlyn. “All that rigidity stifles creativity. I mean, to each their own, of course. But I think you’re a damn good drummer as it is.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Would you ever go back?” asked Brianne.

“Fuck that,” I said without hesitation, and Brianne laughed. “I don’t want to see that professor again.”

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The truth was that I had considered going back, because deep down, some masochistic part of me did want to see Dr. Adler again. Part of me wanted to know why he'd destroyed my self-esteem and threw me out to the wolves, even though I knew that finding out would just crush me again. What kind of mentor did that?

But I wouldn't go back. I couldn't, and besides, I couldn't afford tuition even if I really wanted to. Even with all the restaurant hours and street drumming cash in the world I couldn't afford Beasley tuition, not without my scholarships, and I wasn't about to pull out loans.

"So, same set as last night?" asked Kaitlyn.

"Yeah," I said. "Will you be okay singing without an amp? I'll temper my drumming."

"I'll be fine," she said, with a grin. "My voice is fucking powerful."

The three of us laughed. I really liked Kaitlyn and Brianne. It was nice to have new friends, especially ones that I had musical chemistry with. I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed playing with other people.

It wasn't long before we'd gathered a large crowd of people, way bigger than anything I'd been able to draw on my own. Practically everyone had their phones out, recording us playing. I loved how raw our performance was. Last night we'd been on mic'd and amplified instruments, so everything had a very clear and defined sound. Today, we were fully unplugged, and the combination of acoustic guitar, violin, and makeshift street drums was visceral and exciting. Even though we'd played these

songs together before, it felt off the cuff and almost improvisational, even more than it had last night.

We were in the middle of our third song when I suddenly felt a presence that made me open my eyes and drew me out of my concentration. I was surprised to see Melany standing in the crowd, smiling as she watched us. My heart nearly flew out of my mouth, and I almost let go of one of my sticks. I struggled to restrain a laugh as I imagined nailing her with the drumstick again.

When we finished the song, Melany came over, wrapped me up in a hug, and planted a kiss on my lips.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Isn’t this a bit early for lunch?”

“I decided not to work,” she said. “I’ll explain later.”

“Whoah, whoaaah,” said Kaitlyn. “Just friends, huh? Looks like we missed something after we left last night.”

“Yeah,” laughed Melany. “We’re kind of together now.”

There were some scattered awws from the crowd and one “that’s so cute.”

“Yeah, let’s give this new happy couple a hand, folks!” Kaitlyn said, clapping.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say hi,” said Melany, giving me another kiss that made the butterflies flutter inside of me. “I’m going to watch you guys play.”

She retreated back to the edge of the crowd, who parted to allow her a front spot, and the three of us burst into our next song.

We played for three hours before Kaitlyn and Brianne both had to leave. They asked if I would still be here later in the day, but I told them I wasn't sure. If Melany wasn't working, I wanted to spend the day with her instead.

"Let me treat you to

lunch," I told her. "I made pretty good money today. Playing with Kaitlyn and Brianne is really going to be good."

"You guys are awesome," Melany said. "But you don't have to do that. You should hold on to that money. Use it for your rent."

"I want to treat you," I insisted. "I'll be fine."

"Okay," she said, and smiled. "Where do you want to go?"

I grinned apologetically. "McDonalds?"

We sat and chatted over Big Macs and a pile of French fries, and Melany explained her revelation and how she planned on holding off on her projects until she felt she was ready to work again.

"I need to find my soul again," she told me, munching on a ketchup-dipped fry. "Just like how I suspect you needed to find yours again for your drumming. A creator can't create something worthwhile without her soul behind it."

"Mm," I said, chewing down a mouthful of burger. "I do agree with that, but I don't know if I agree that I'm playing with my soul."

"Come on. Every time I see you play, it feels like I'm seeing a bit of your soul. You're amazing."

“I don’t feel that way, though. It was still a bit of a struggle, playing last night. The alcohol helped, but the anxiety is still there.”

“I see,” she said. “Then what do you think is missing?”

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I shook my head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if I could get myself in front of a drum set again. I’m afraid that last night was just a fluke.”

“Well... why don’t you try again?” she asked. “Try to play your drums again.”

Play my drums again.

Thinking about it, I could feel the faint bubbling of anxiety from deep down inside me. It wasn’t as bad as it had been before, but it was still there. Could I even do it?

“I don’t know,” I said. “What if I can’t?”

“Then you keep working at it. You can’t be afraid forever, Kendra. Tell you what. Why don’t you play for me? I’ll be your moral support.”

“I don’t know,” I said again. “Maybe.”

Melany took my hand and squeezed it. “I’m not going to give up on you, Kendra. After hearing you play last night, there’s no way I could ever let you just give that up. The street drumming is badass and all—you’re an amazing street drummer—but hearing you play on a real kit was sublime. So how about this? We go to your place, and you can see how you feel there. If you can’t play, then... we can make out on the couch or something.”

I laughed. “Alright, alright. You’ve convinced me. Can we make out on the couch anyway? My roommate is gone.”

“Well, fuck. Screw the drums, let’s just make out for the rest of the day!”

After finishing lunch, we drove back to the house, and I struggled to keep the anxiety from churning its way up and taking its hold in my chest. Melany seemed to sense it, and she wrapped her arm around me and pulled me close against her as we walked up to the front door.

“Nice place,” she commented when I let us inside. “It’s very cozy.”

“It’s my roommate’s house,” I said. “Her parents own it.”

Melany plonked down onto the couch, and then patted the space next to her. “Come on, it’s make out time.”

I laughed and joined her. She drew her arm around me, and I leaned in to kiss her. I immediately felt all the tension unwind from my chest as I melted against her, slipping my arms around her. I felt electric, like energy was buzzing between our lips and tongues as they touched.

“Is that it?” she asked, nodding towards my sheet-covered drum kit.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“I’d love to hear you play it.”

I breathed out a sigh. “I really have to do this, don’t I?”

“Yes. I’m not leaving you alone until you try. It’s important, Kendra. We could get a bottle of wine, or something, if that would make it easier.”

I shook my head. “No, if I’m going to do it, it has to be sober. I can’t keep using

alcohol as my crutch.”

“Okay. Fair enough.”

I stood up and walked over to my drums, and then yanked away the sheet. It billowed in the air and fluttered to the ground. I walked around behind my kit, and then dropped myself down onto the stool. Melany watched eagerly from the couch. My heart thudded as I picked up my sticks.

I can do this. I think I can actually do this.

“Give me a moment to tune the drums,” I said. “They haven’t been played in a while.”

“Yeah. Take your time, there’s no rush.”

I went through and tuned each piece of my kit, going slowly. It was strange to hear its familiar sound again.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s see.”

I hovered the sticks above the pads, and I realized my hands were shaking. Suddenly, I could hear Dr. Adler’s voice in my head telling me I was no good. The shaking grew until my whole body was trembling.

Come on, Kendra. Come on.

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“You can do this,” Melany said. I looked up and saw her smiling at me. “I believe in you.”

I exhaled a breath. Gripped the sticks. And then played.

At first, the beat stumbled out of me in a twisted mess, like I was tripping over myself. I resisted the urge to throw my sticks aside, and kept playing. My heartbeat raced with nervous excitement as the muscle memory associated with my drum set started to return to me. It'd been so long since I'd played on my set, and she sounded excited to be awake again.

Fuck, I'm actually playing again. I'm really doing it. Last night wasn't a fluke.

I was making mistakes left and right, but I was actually playing my drums again. I increased the complexity of my rhythm, breaking away from the safety of the rudimentary beat I was playing, and started to have fun. My hands flew. I closed my eyes, and a smile pulled across my lips. I could feel the music starting to well up inside me, overflowing out like a spring.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw that Melany had risen to her feet, her gray eyes wide and excited. She tapped her foot and bobbed her head along with the beat, imitating my playing with her hands. My smile widened into a laugh. Something else happened too—something that had never happened to me while playing before. I felt heat aching between my thighs.

I ended my improvisation with a snap of the crash symbol, and its brassy hiss rang out into the room, slowly fading away. Melany and I just stared at each other, like we

were waiting for the last bit of sound to disappear before either of us spoke. I was thrumming with excitement, and it felt like another part of me that'd been long dormant had suddenly woken up.

“So, tell me again you can't play,” Melany said, grinning.

“Well, I guess I was wrong,” I said.

She spread her arms and came towards me. I tossed my sticks aside and pounced on her, throwing my legs around her waist. She stumbled backwards and fell onto the couch with me on top of her. I threw my arms around her neck and kissed her. The adrenaline from playing was pumping through my body, and I pushed myself up against her, needing her touch, and she responded eagerly. I was aching with want, rubbing myself up against her. Her hands moved down from my back and cupped my ass, pushing my hips even closer into her.

I stripped my jacket off and tossed it onto the floor, and Melany helped me pull my shirt off. Her hands explored up to my breasts, and unhooked my bra. Her fingertips danced across my nipples as she caressed me. Then they drew around the back of my neck and pulled me forward. She kissed all around my breasts, avoiding my nipples until the very end. I sighed as her tongue slowly circled around my erect nipple, sending little shivers of pleasure through my body. I gasped when she nipped them with her teeth.

“Ow,” I said with a grin. “More.”

Melany smiled and raked her teeth over them again. Then she grabbed me by the waist, picked me up, and flipped me on the couch so that she was on top. She pulled off her top, revealing her gorgeous body. I felt my mouth water for her, and I ran my fingers along her curves. She leaned

down and kissed me on the lips, and then started to kiss down—my chin, my neck, my collarbone, my chest, my stomach...

She got down on her knees in front of me, and popped open the button of my shorts. “I’ve been looking forward to this,” she said, and slowly pulled down my shorts. She lightly ran her fingers over my underwear, which had darkened from my excitement. I squirmed, wanting more. She ran her palms along the inside of my bare thighs, stopping just before she reached my spot. Then she did the same thing with her lips, planting slow, teasing kisses along my thighs, starting from my knees and working her way inward. I was dying for a little of her touch. It was almost too much to handle.

When she finally made contact, I was unable to stop a desperate groan from escaping my lips. “Stop teasing me,” I begged. “I can’t take it.”

Melany gave me a mischievous little grin, and gripped the band of my underwear between her teeth and slowly pulled them down until I was free. The room’s cool air kissed my opening—God, I was so wet. Melany teased me more, kissing so close to my opening, then slowly licking the excitement that was dripping out. I stared in wonder at the silver strings of my lust that clung to her tongue.

I let out a satisfied groan, my eyes fluttering back as she pressed her tongue to my clit. I pushed my fingers through her hair as she licked me. Her steady rhythm and talented tongue were already drawing the climax out of me, and I had to fight with everything I had to keep it inside. I wasn’t going to let this go by quick. This was nothing like what we’d done that first night together. That had felt raw and emotionless, like it’d only been to serve a bodily need. Now, I ached for her. I didn’t want it to stop. I wanted to be here with her forever. I wanted her arms around me, her lips on me, and I wanted to know that I was hers, and hers alone.

The spring inside me was gushing now. Playing my drums again had opened a door

inside of me, and I could see a bright future that I'd forgotten could exist. I felt potential inside of me, I felt passion, I felt love. I wanted to open myself up for Melany, and I finally didn't feel afraid to do it.

I watched her doing everything she could to make me feel amazing, and when she brought her gray eyes up to meet mine I had to stop her from continuing. Her gaze was just too damn enthralling, too damn powerful, and it would've made me come right then and there if I hadn't pushed her away. I slid down off the couch onto her lap and slowly pushed her onto her back. I pressed my lips to hers, giving them a flick with my tongue. I could taste myself on her, and it made me even more excited. I reached down and unbuttoned her shorts, and she helped me push everything off so that she was lying naked on the carpet. Kneeling over her, my eyes locked with her, I started to pleasure her with my fingers.

Melany's eyelids fluttered, and she let out a low moan. "Fuck, that's good." She looked down to admire my handiwork. "How are you doing that? Oh, my God."

"I'm pretty good with my hands," I said, grinning.

Melany laughed and kissed me. "Damn right, you are."

I spread my legs and moved my hips forward to join with her. The feeling of her warmth against me, her wetness mixing with mine was incredible. I used my thumb to massage her clit, and I could feel her throbbing with pleasure. We kissed, our tongues dancing against each other as we moaned and drank in each other's breath.

"Just a second," I said, getting an idea. I went to my room and retrieved a pink vibrator from my drawer. It buzzed warmly as I pressed myself back to her opening, and then brought the tip of the vibrator down so it touched both our clits. Melany jerked and moaned, and we rocked our hips against each other as I held the vibrator in place. She held out her hand to me, and I took it, clutching it tightly as I felt the

early waves of climax start to wash over me. We went slowly. I kept my eyes on hers, reveling in the changes of her expression. Her lips parted into a silent moan, her forehead crinkling up in a look like she was in disbelief that anything could feel that good.

We synched the rhythm of movements, sending tremors of pleasure through me with every single twist and grind of our hips. It felt amazing to be perfectly in sync with her like that, with each shivering moan from my lips.

I cried out her name, unable to hold back my climax any longer. It rocked through me, wrenching control from my body as everything was replaced with white-hot bliss. My legs shuddered and the arm holding me upright gave out, and we fell into each other's arms. I could feel Melany's body trembling and knew she'd come too.

For a long time, all we could do was stay frozen there as we tried to catch our breaths. When I finally regained the use of my legs, I slowly untangled my thighs from hers and collapsed to the floor, my chest heaving. Melany laid next to me and drew me into a kiss.

"That was insane," she said. "That was the best I've ever had in my fucking life."

"Me too," I said.

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She wrapped her arms around me and held me close. The steady swell and fall of her chest was soothing, and I realized how incredibly safe I felt.

“Melany,” I murmured, nuzzling into her neck.

“Kendra.”

“I really trust you.”

She kissed me on my ear, and then my cheek. “Thank you.”

“I realized that I needed to not be afraid anymore. If I didn’t stop being scared, I’d regret it. I’d regret not being with you.”

“I know how big this is for you,” she said. “We’ve only known each other for a short amount of time, but I’m so proud of you. I know you’ve overcome a lot.”

“And I still have a way to go,” I admitted.

“I’ll be right there with you,” she said.

“I want to do what I can to help you, too.”

She squeezed me. “You already are helping me. Now I know what it’s like to fall in love with someone.”

I looked at her, surprised. Her gray eyes flashed, and then looked shy. “What?” she

asked. “Kendra, you’re making me feel embarrassed.”

“Can you say that again?”

“You’re making me feel embarrassed.”

I nudged her side and grinned. “Not that. The other thing.”

Her face flushed. “I’m in love with you. I know, it’s crazy... but I think I knew it from that first night. Can that even be possible?”

I couldn’t help but laugh—seeing her look so embarrassed was adorable.

She frowned. “Hey...”

I quieted her with a kiss. “I love you too,” I said.

Melany stayed over at the house that night. She went through my fridge and cooked up an amazing pasta dinner with the meager ingredients I had, while I serenaded her with jazzy drum solos. Afterwards, I brought out my laptop and played some of my favorite music for her while we lounged together on the couch.

“I had no idea you were such a good cook,” I told her. “How are you so perfect?”

She laughed. “You don’t make wealth by spending money. In college, I was a real cheap-ass. The only time I went out was if it had to do with business or, um...”

“Picking up girls,” I filled in. “It’s okay, it doesn’t bother me. I know that’s behind you.”

“Yeah. So, I taught myself out of necessity.”

“I mean, I learned some basic cooking too. But I was watching you. You looked like you were on a cooking show, or something.”

“I guess that’s just how I do things.”

“Never halfway, huh?”

She nodded. “But I think it’s the same with you. If you didn’t do things with everything you had, there’s no way you’d be as good a musician as you are.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m definitely not that way with everything. And even drums. I quit, after all.”

“You quit school, not drums. There is a difference.”

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“I don’t know. I think I’m always going to feel like I’m stuck, no matter how much I play. I know it probably doesn't make sense, but I just feel that way.”

“Maybe you should go back? Finish what you started?”

I shook my head. “Not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

“It took me this long with this much struggle just to get out of the rut that I fell into when Dr. Adler shut the door on me. I can’t deal with that again.”

“Have you spoken to him since?”

“No,” I said. “I don't want to see him again.”

Melany eyed me. “Getting an answer might help you,” she said.

“I’m not going back,” I said firmly.

She was quiet for a moment. “Okay. I understand.”

Things were finally going right, and I wasn’t going to risk losing it all a

gain. I might always feel like a piece was missing, but that was fine. I could still play, and play well.

The next day after cooking us an awesome breakfast, Melany left to go back to her condo with the promise that we'd see each other sometime later in the day. Kaitlyn gave me a call and asked if I wanted to meet with her and Brianne to have a jam session and discuss future performances, so I invited them to come over to the house that afternoon before I had to go to work. They arrived an hour later with their instruments and amplifiers, and we set up in the living room by my drums.

"This is exciting," Brianne said. "Playing with a real drum set again."

"So, the first order of business," Kaitlyn said, setting up her microphone. "Professor Barley contacted me yesterday evening, and she told me that she's organizing another art show at Shadetree in two weeks."

"Awesome," I said. "She wants us to play?"

"Well, that's the thing. Our performance was so popular that she wants to make music a main focus of the event. She's going to feature other students from the music program at Beasley, and she wants us to be the final performance."

"Bad ass," I said.

Brianne took her electric violin out of its case and plugged it into its wireless transmitter. "The question, then, is what do we play?"

"I bet the audience is going to want covers like last time," I suggested.

"Right," Kaitlyn agreed. "So, do we resign ourselves to always playing covers, or are we going to do original, improvisational stuff like we used to do?"

"Improvisation is a specialty of mine," I offered.

“Okay,” said Brianne. “Then why don’t we alternate?”

“Down,” said Kaitlyn.

“Sure,” I said.

“Alright. It’s settled, then. Alternate between covers and freestyle improvisation. That was easy.”

I laughed. “The three of us are in sync, it seems.”

Kaitlyn nodded. “The best musical collaborations can never be forced. I believe they can only occur when all the elements line up just right, and strangers cross paths at exactly the right time.”

“Fate,” said Brianne.

Fate. When I thought about it, it did feel like everything that’d happened to me had occurred because it was supposed to, like fate or destiny was guiding the way. Everything had happened to lead me up to this point, so that I could meet Melany and play with Kaitlyn and Brianne.

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The three of us spent the rest of the day just freestyle jamming. Since it was our first official practice together, we didn't want to bog ourselves down with deciding on specific music just yet. We had amazing chemistry, but it was important that we spent time learning each other's styles and quirks, and tuning our performances so that we could be in sync. That said, it did seem to come extremely easy for us. I'd played in quite a few amateur rock bands before, as well as jazz performance bands in school, and none of them had been as easy to sync up with as it had been with Kaitlyn and Brianne. Our first performance together had been amazing, but I was certain that with real practice, our second would be absolutely incredible.

We played until the late afternoon and I had to get ready to go to work. When the two of them left, I went and checked my cell phone and found a missed text from Melany.

> Melany: Hey. Hope the practice is going well. I love you.

My heart skipped a beat reading those last three words.

> Kendra: Sorry for the wait! Practice was amazing. We've been invited to play again at Shadetree. What have you been up to? I love you too.

My heart skipped another beat typing out the last four.

I changed out of my clothes and dug into my closet for my work outfit. After putting it on, I went to the bathroom to make sure my hair was okay. I untied my ponytail, brushed out my hair, and then re-tied it. My phone started to ring on the bathroom counter. Melany, I thought eagerly.

I picked up the phone and felt a pang of disappointment when I saw that the screen said “Work.”

“Hello?”

“Uh, hi, Kendra?”

It was Herschel, and there was something in the tone of his voice that I detected immediately that made my heart drop. He’s not happy. Bad news. What bad news?

“Yeah? What’s up? I’m about to head out.”

“Listen, I just want you to know that I did everything I could, but this decision came from Mr. Miyaguchi after he did his inspection.”

“What?” I said breathlessly, my heart pounding.

“I’m sorry, Kendra. We have to let you go. It’s nothing personal, really. I’m sorry.”

“W-wait. Herschel, I can’t. I really... this job is paying for most of my rent and food, I can’t—”

“I’m really sorry, Kendra. Really sorry. But the decision has been made. So, I’m sorry, but you’re no longer an employee here. We’ll make arrangements to send your last paycheck.”

I tried to think of something to say, my mouth moving soundlessly. There was nothing I could say, so I hung up.

My pulse echoed loudly in my ears. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, staring openmouthed back at me.

Fired.

How would I afford next month's rent? I was barely going to cut it as-is, and now I'd lost the rest of the income for the month. If I didn't find something fast, I'd be fucked. Absolutely fucked. My mind was racing, trying to think of a solution, but the terrible reality was becoming obvious. I'd already searched for jobs all over town and found nothing.

You'll have to move back home to Manchester. Back home with Dad. Away from Melany.

My phone buzzed in my hand and I nearly dropped it onto the floor.

> Melany: That is amazing news, Kendra! I can't wait to see you guys play. I know it's only been like five hours, but I fucking miss you. I've been doing work, re-examining my project. Looking forward to seeing you tonight.

Just when everything was going so well, of course this happens. And it's all my own fucking fault.

I felt hot tears welling up in my eyes, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't choke them back. They poured down my cheeks, my body shaking with violent sobs.

8

Melany

I'm in love.

It was crazy as hell, almost too bizarre to believe, but it was true. I'd actually fallen in love, and it was the most amazing-ass feeling I'd ever felt in my entire fucking life. I

felt so free and unhindered by everything, like the future was open to any possibility I could dream of.

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I spent the afternoon totally demolishing my office. I tore down the cubicle-style dividing wall I'd put up and tossed it into the dumpster in the alleyway behind my building. I cleared my desk and moved it away from its spot so that the floor-to-ceiling window was completely open and free, and the clear, blue sky could take up the entire wall of my condo. I stood back, my hands on my hips, and admired the wide and spectacular view in front of me.

This is how I'll work, I decided. Screw the confines of the mini prison I'd made for myself in my home office, or the rigid-ass schedule I'd been following for years. I'd start over from scratch, and go at this thing free form.

After finding a set of dry erase markers, I pulled a step stool up to the window and wrote in big, bold letters across the top of the glass, "PROJECT FREESTYLE." Below that, I wrote "Crawford Mobile Operating System, workflow ideas."

I drew a large circle and labeled it, "Guidelines to follow." Then I pulled out a big pad of sticky notes and started to write elements I knew I wanted this project to have. "Intuitive use," "free-flowing interactivity," and "a rhythmic experience" were the first things to form in my mind. I realized that I didn't just want this software to be extremely functional—it needed to be as intuitive as someone freestyling on the drums, allowing them to jump seamlessly from idea to idea, desire to desire. BluTech's software was utilitarian and perfect for business, so I would design something that fostered a creative, organic, and

artistic experience.

I knew that this would be a new experience for me—organic and artistic wasn't

exactly my natural state. I wasn't an artist, I fully recognized that this would mean leaving my comfort zone and abandoning all the foundations I'd built for myself in order to reach a new way of thinking. Such a crazy task would've probably left most people feeling overwhelmed, but I was confident that I could do it. That had always been one of my strengths—I had complete certainty in myself.

There was one critical element that I'd forgotten to put up on in my guidelines circle. I wrote "LOVE" in block letters on a post-it and placed it right in the middle of the circle. Then, rolling up my sleeves, my dry erase in hand, I set to work brainstorming ideas for the project.

It was late afternoon when I'd filled up the entire wall of glass with my notes. Kendra had texted me to tell me that she'd be playing another show at Shadetree, and I was excited to see her once she finished work in the evening. I took several photographs of what I'd written, and then picked up my eraser and started to refine my ideas, wiping away things that on second glance seemed unnecessary.

My phone chimed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Kendra's name on the screen. I smiled and answered it.

"Hey, you," I said, continuing to wipe away at my idea board. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Melany," Kendra said. Her voice was thin and distant.

"Kendra? What is it?"

"Can I come over?"

Kendra sat glumly at the dining table, her chin in her hands. Everything about her looked down and depressed; even her adorable ponytail seemed to be drooping. I

retrieved my bottle of Yamazaki 18 Year from my liquor cabinet and poured us both generous portions, and then took a seat across from her.

“Try some,” I said. “It’s my favorite. Single malt from Japan is the best in the world right now, they say.”

“I can’t believe they fired me,” she muttered, and took a long swallow of whiskey. She looked at the glass. “This is good.” Then she sighed. “I mean, I can. I totally fucked up the inspection, so it’s my own damn fault. Not to mention all the other times I screwed up. Fuck, I’m useless. Can’t even keep a job at a shitty restaurant.”

“Hey,” I said, tapping the table with my knuckle. “You are not useless.”

“I needed that job, and I dropped the ball,” she said. “Everything was dependent on that job. My performance money was only supplementing it.”

“You said it yourself. It was a shitty restaurant. You can do better than a place like that. Besides, someone as skilled as you should be making money playing music. There’s no reason why your performance earnings aren’t going to go up. Especially now that you’re playing with Kaitlyn and Brianne. Keep performing. Put all your time into that. Let it become your full-time job, like it should be.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Melany, I can’t afford my rent based on what I’ve been making playing music. Monica is a nice person, but she’s not the type to let me stay rent-free. She’s already giving me a really good price on the room, probably the best I’d be able to find here. I’ll have to move back home to Manchester, and live with my piece of shit dad again.” She looked up at me, her dark eyes deep with distress. “Melany, I’m going to have to leave. Leave Rosebridge and everything behind. I’m going to have to leave you.”

I stood and came over to her, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and pulling her

tightly against my stomach. She buried her face into my shirt and squeezed me around the waist. I could feel her warm tears through the fabric, and I stroked her hair.

“Shut your face,” I said, giving her ponytail a playful tug.

She looked up at me, her eyes puffy and red. “What?”

I smiled. “Come on, Kendra. Do you think I’d let that happen? You might not have noticed, but I own this huge-ass condo all to myself. You’re not going anywhere. Move your shit out of Monica’s place, and move in with me.”

She blinked at me, and I saw that Kendra had honestly not even considered this option. At that moment, I realized I understood her personality and way of thinking a little better than before. I’d known that Kendra was a very emotional person, it’d been obvious from the beginning, but now I realized just how emotional she could be. It was what fueled her passion for music, and it was also what had crushed her after her last relationship and caused her to spiral into anxiety, to the point where she physically couldn’t even play music. She was also extremely proud, and when her mentor had rejected her, it’d shattered her perception of herself. This pride was also what prevented her from even thinking about asking if she could live with me. She had to take everything on herself.

“I couldn’t do that,” she said. “I’d feel shitty about it. I don’t want to freeload off of you.”

“Kendra, you wouldn’t be freeloading. First off, I love you. I want you to be here with me. Second, you’re working on your career. Eventually, you’ll be making bank, and if you want to move out or whatever, you can.”

She looked hesitant—her stubborn pride again.

“I’m deciding for you,” I announced. “We’re moving you in. In fact, we’re going to do it today.”

“Wait, what?”

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I stood up and went up the spiral staircase to my loft room to get changed into something more appropriate for doing moving work. Kendra followed after me.

“Hold on, Melany!”

“What?” I said, putting on a t-shirt.

“I... but how? It’s almost the evening. We can’t move... I mean, I don’t have much stuff, but still. All the big things, it’ll take at least a day, and I’d need to pack everything.”

“We’ll get help,” I said.

“Who is going to help us with something like that at the last minute?”

I smiled at her. “Kendra, I say this in the humblest way possible. I’m a millionaire. I’ll find somebody that will do it. Come on, let’s go. We’ll take your car. I’m going to need to make some calls.”

An hour later, we had a full moving team packing and moving Kendra’s furniture into a truck, while she and I put her smaller belongings into cardboard boxes. Kendra must’ve asked me at least ten times if I was sure I was okay with this.

“Trust me, I’m okay with this,” I said. “End of story, okay?”

Monica poked her head into the bedroom. “Man, I go away for the weekend and I miss everything. You know you paid for this month’s rent already, dude. You don’t

have to leave like, right away.”

“I know,” Kendra said.

“I’ll refund you prorated for the rest of the month,” she said. “Damn. I can’t believe I missed you jamming out on the drums again. I’m bummed.”

“I’m going to be playing a show next weekend. You should come check it out.”

“For sure, my dude. I’ll be there.”

The last to go was Kendra’s drum set. Kendra disassembled it, and then the three of us watched as the team of movers carefully took each piece of the kit out to the truck. By the time that everything had been loaded and was ready to go, it was early evening. The sun hit the horizon, throwing orange light across the street and against the windows of the houses down the block. A mourning dove cooed from the overhead power lines until it was startled away by the clatter of the moving truck’s rolling door being pulled shut.

“That’s it,” I said.

Kendra went up to Monica and gave her a hug. “You’ve been a real great roommate, Monica,” she said. “I wanted to thank you for encouraging me to get out there and play again. If it weren’t for you, I would never have been able to get back onto the drums.”

Monica grinned. “Hey, it was my pleasure. I’m looking forward to seeing your shows.”

We got into the car and waved goodbye as we pulled away, the moving truck following behind us. Kendra let out a long breath.

“Wow,” she said. “I didn’t realize just how much stress I was dealing with, worrying about the rent and all of that. I suddenly feel so much lighter.”

I took her hand and squeezed it. “Now you can concentrate on what matters. Get to greatness.”

“Thanks, Melany,” she said. “I don’t want to seem like I’m ungrateful for letting me move in with you. I’m so thankful for it, I just have a hard time getting over myself. When I moved away from Manchester, I told myself I’d stand on my own two feet. I had everything all planned out, with school and all of that. I didn’t want to have to rely

on anyone else. I guess I wanted to prove to myself I could do it on my own.”

“I’ve realized that everyone needs a hand sometimes. Sometimes, certain goals are just too great to get there on your own.”

“You haven’t had any troubles doing it all on your own,” she said.

“No way,” I laughed. “You’ve taught me a lot. You have no idea how much you’ve helped me.”

“Me? I’ve helped you?”

“It wasn’t until being with you that I realized what direction I needed to go with my project.”

“Really?”

“When I realized that I’d fallen in love with you, it changed something fundamental inside of me. I’d never been in love before. Having this love and sharing just a small

amount of your passion opened my eyes to looking at my work in a new way. I realized I was going about it with entirely the wrong mindset. Greatness isn't about creating something that will make the most money, it's about creating something that people will love. I want to do that. Just like how your performances resonate with people, I want to have that in my work."

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We moved most of Kendra's furniture into a long-term storage unit, set her drums up on a sheepskin rug next to the couch, and then spent the rest of the evening unpacking her boxes. She really didn't have much—a very minimalist wardrobe, some sheet music, a few books on drumming. The biggest percentage of her belongings were drum-related—spare drum heads, sticks, drum keys, and other little parts. I also had few belongings, so finding storage space for her things wasn't much of a problem.

I cooked dinner for us—chicken thighs braised in turmeric and fresh lime, served over a bed of couscous—while she continued to organize her things. We enjoyed our first dinner living together with a nice bottle of wine, and George Benson's liquid-smooth guitar licks playing over the stereo. After eating, Kendra went back upstairs to finish putting away her stuff. I poured myself another glass of wine and went to the window to look at the mass of ideas I'd written out across the glass. It was a promising start, and definitely a change from the work I'd been doing before. I had direction again.

Struck by a sudden bolt of inspiration, I exchanged my wine glass for a dry erase marker and started to jot more notes and ideas onto the window. All sorts of exciting possibilities for the project were coming into my head now, and the more I wrote the easier the ideas seemed to flow from my hand. I thought of Kendra playing the drums, and how she'd close her eyes, completely immersed in the passion of the music. I tried to channel that energy now.

"This is good," I said to myself as I took a step back to examine my work. I set the marker down on my desk and realized that I'd been at it for almost an hour. The lights of nighttime Rosebridge sparkled between the scribbles of text, and I could see the Beasley University Library off in the distance, a huge, 19th century brick building

with a pointed clock tower.

I grabbed my glass and swallowed down the remainder of the wine, and then I went back to the kitchen to put it in the dishwasher. The gleam of Kendra's drum kit in the living room caught my eye, and I found myself drawn over to it. I walked around it, taking in its gorgeous shimmering chrome frame. I reached out and slowly, reverently, touched the tom-tom's battered head. It was thrilling to touch Kendra's drums, knowing her amazing skill. They felt almost holy.

Not too long ago, I would've thought what I was doing right now was completely insane. I never would've thought I'd be in a relationship with a woman, let alone be madly in love with her, and living with her—all in such an insanely short amount of time.

Life is crazy. Who could've thought things would ever go like this?

I'd always been so sure I knew how my life would go, and so certain about my values and views on things. I realized now that anything was possible. Anything could happen—and it felt remarkably liberating. The thing was, I hadn't even known I'd been a prisoner.

I went upstairs to see how Kendra was doing, and found her sprawled face down on the bed asleep. She'd knocked out in middle of organizing her things. I smiled—seeing her sleeping there on my bed made me feel ridiculously happy. I went up and sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair.

I love this girl, I thought, awed. I want to know everything about her. I want to be by her side and help her meet her potential. I want to help her succeed and do everything she wants to do.

I suspected that Kendra needed closure, even though she was so adamant that she

didn't want to return to school. She was stubborn as hell, after all. Whether or not she actually needed to finish with her schooling and get a degree, I didn't know. I felt like Kendra could make her way as a professional drummer already, but it was possible she'd always carry a block with her the rest of her life if she refused to confront her teacher.

There had to be some way I could help her, but I knew I couldn't force her to go back to school, even if I did offer to pay for the tuition.

Kendra stirred and looked up, sleepily. "Hmmm? Oh, no. Did I pass out?"

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "It's okay. You had a pretty intense day today. I bet you're drained as hell."

She nodded. "Yeah. Man. What a crazy day."

"Just sleep," I said.

"No, I'm all dirty from doing the moving." She sat up and smiled groggily at me. "I need to shower first."

"I don't know," I said. "I kind of like you dirty." I leaned in and kissed her.

"Mm, yeah?" She drew her arms around my neck and pulled me on top of her. I slid my hand between her legs and could feel her warmth. She gasped.

"Seems like you're awake," I said, grinning.

Kendra didn't waste any time going slow. She dipped her hand into my underwear, and I was immediately wet for her.

“You too,” she said.

I pushed her pants down her thighs and returned the favor, massaging her with my fingertips. We kissed as we touched each other, and Kendra moaned against my lips as the fingers of her free hand clawed at my back. She pulled me closer and nipped at my ear, and then sucked and kissed my neck down to my collarbone.

I wanted to taste her again, so I flipped myself around and positioned myself so that she could go down on me at the same time. I couldn't see what she was doing, so when I felt her tongue glide across my opening, I groaned out in surprise. Kendra ran her palms along my ass and pulled me down closer to her face, alternating between sucking my clit and probing her tongue into me. It was hard for me to concentrate on what I was doing. She would do something crazy to me with her tongue or her lips, and I'd lose myself to a desperate moan.

I found myself feeling a little competitive. I wanted her to feel as good as she was making me feel—after all, I'd had more practice than she had—but it seemed like no matter what I did, Kendra was taking the trophy for technique. I continued to be surprised about how naughty and creative she was. Even though she was fairly reserved normally, her technique in bed was like her drumming—passionate and unreserved.

“W-wait,” I stammered, rolling off of her. “Keep that up, and I'm and I'm going to come right here. You're too fucking good at that.”

Kendra turned onto her stomach and then pushed her ass up in the air, like a cat stretching. “You're not done, are you?”

“Hell, no,” I said, jumping off. “How do you feel about trying out some more toys?”

“Sounds fun.”

I opened a drawer and retrieved a double-sided dildo.” Kendra’s eyes widened.

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“Is this okay?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Hm,” she said rejoined her on the bed. “This doesn’t feel right, though.”

“What’s wrong?”

She smiled at me. “We’re not on a couch.”

I laughed and gave her a playful smack on the ass. I grabbed her waist with one hand, the middle of the toy with the other, and slowly guided it into both of us as I pressed my hips towards her.

Soon we’d gotten the toy all the way inside. Ken

dra grasped my hand where it held onto the dildo, and we worked a rhythm, pumping it in and out between us.

“Fuck,” I moaned, doing everything I could to delay my orgasm.

“Oh, fuck,” Kendra moaned. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop, I’m going to come soon...”

We kept going, our thighs pushing together, moving in perfect synchronization. Kendra cried out my name, and shouted that she was about to come. Climax hit me too, rocking over me like an unrelenting tidal wave of pleasure. We collapsed onto the bed together, the haze of the orgasm thrumming through my body. I wrapped her up in my arms and pulled her against my chest, nuzzling my nose into her neck.

“You tired?” I whispered to her.

She shook her head. “Are you?”

“Not one bit,” I said.

“Go again?”

“Go again,” I agreed.

That night, I learned just how much stamina drummers had.

Kendra continued to do her performances down at the Riverwalk, often spending the entire day there playing. Kaitlyn and Brianne joined her whenever they were free, and I would walk over whenever I needed to give my brain a break from work. In the evenings, Kaitlyn and Brianne would come over to the condo to practice for their upcoming show, sometimes with their girlfriends Emily and Margie in tow. The other girlfriends and I would drink wine, watch them practice, and then cook dinner, after which we’d all go to the garden terrace on the rooftop of the building and eat. There was a fire pit up there, and we’d lounge around together chatting about our lives. Occasionally, we invited Kaitlyn and Brianne’s group of friends to come over for dinner and drinks, and we’d all sit on the rooftop while the three musicians played for us.

Progress on my work was going better than I could’ve imagined. I was still in the planning phases, drawing out detailed charts and maps of how I wanted the system to run, but I was happy with the ideas I was coming up with. I also decided that if I was going to take this project all the way to greatness, I needed people to help me. I hired a user interface designer to help me with the visual aspects, and an assistant software engineer to bounce ideas off of for the code. I also gave Denise Hoover a call to ask if she would be available as a marketing and business consultant, and she agreed to

come work on her off hours.

In the last few days leading up to the show, Kendra skipped going to the Riverwalk to stay at home and practice. I continued to work, using noise-canceling headphones so I could focus, and sometimes sat and listened to her while taking a break. Kendra was practicing her fundamentals, or rudiments, which I'd never seen her do before. The rudiments were a series of forty basic drumming patterns which formed the foundation for all the more complex stuff. All the playing I'd heard before had been loose and free, and her demeanor had matched that, but with these drills she became tensely focused. Her eyes never closed like they usually did when she got into the groove. I could see her grinding her teeth, her forehead dotted with sweat.

"Everything going alright?" I asked her, two days before the show. I set my headphones on top of a stack of prints of user interface mockups and went to the kitchen to pour the both of us glasses of water. Kendra sat at her drum set, looking weary and tired.

"It's not perfect," she said.

"What's not?"

"Oh, nothing." She sighed and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I'm just struggling with the higher BPMs. I keep screwing up, not getting the tempo right. Dr. Adler always used to get on my case about it. I guess I'll always have this issue."

"Come on. You know that's not true. Besides, you sound fucking amazing when you play your performances. Isn't that what matters?"

"I shouldn't be screwing up like this in the first place. I should be nailing it every time. I don't know why I can't."

I handed Kendra the glass of water. “You’re thinking about him, I bet. Your old mentor.”

“I can’t help it. I bet every student her thoughts about what criticisms their teacher would say to them when they’re playing. It’s always in the back of the mind.”

“He’s not your teacher anymore. You don’t need to worry about what he’d think. Everything you do is from your own ability as a musician. I used to think about what my teachers would say too, and I had quite a few who I really respected. But after a while I realized, what good was that doing me? I was at a point where I knew my own skills. I knew what I was capable of, and knew my ideas were valid. I stopped making decisions based on what my teachers would’ve wanted me to do, and just did what I thought was right. And you know what happened? My teachers stopped being mentors and started being colleagues. They came to me for business advice.”

Kendra nodded. “I don't know. I’m trying.”

She was being held back by this specter of her old mentor. I could tell that she’d heard what I said, but she didn’t really, truly understand what I’d meant. She didn’t how to apply it to her own situation. She was trapped in that student mindset, and it was holding her back from rising to the next level in her abilities.

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How could I help her understand? I was at a loss—after all, I wasn't a musician. I could only relate my own experiences.

Maybe Kaitlyn and Brianne might know what to do. They were both extremely talented and skilled, as much as Kendra was, and surely had been through their own struggles in music. Plus, Brianne was a Beasley music student too. I knew I needed to speak to them.

That evening, the two of them came over for their usual practice time. It was obvious that Kendra was stressing out about the performance. Where their playing had been fairly effortless during all their other practices, today she would constantly stop mid-song, apologize, and ask if they could take it from the top. I was concerned that she would have troubles during the actual show, and I could see that Kaitlyn and Brianne were worried too.

After they finished, I walked the two of them to their cars while Kendra continued to practice.

“Everything okay with Kendra?” Brianne asked. “She’s been having a little trouble playing.”

“Actually,” I said. “I was hoping to speak with you two about that.”

“What’s up?” asked Kaitlyn.

“Kendra is still struggling to deal with the feeling of incompetence she’s had since her falling out with her old mentor, and having to drop out of school.”

“Ahh,” they both said in unison, nodding.

“She feels like she’ll never be able to play well enough. I want her to understand that she isn’t limited by what other people think about her playing, even if it is someone she respects, but she’s trapped in that mindset. I want to help her, but I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s tough,” Kaitlyn said. “I think it’s something every artist goes through. Maybe every creative person. Even the most confident is insecure about their work.”

“Yeah,” Brianne said. “I completely get it. It’s pretty common to see in school.”

“I’m worried that she won’t be able to perform,” I said. “That she’ll freeze up and have an anxiety attack, or something.”

“She played with us before,” Brianne said.

“I think that was different,” I replied. “The circumstances of that night were just right for her to get behind a drum set again. It was spontaneous.”

“No,” Kaitlyn said. “I’m not worried about her.”

“You aren’t?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I’m certain that she’ll pull through. Being up on stage, in front of the audience, it’s a different energy. The pressure will push her, and the response from the crowd will feed her. I am worried, though, that she could eventually break down if she’s unable to overcome this block.”

“It’s a fragile place to be,” said Brianne.

“What can I do?” I asked. “What can we do?”

“We can’t do anything. I don’t think there’s anything we can say to her that hasn’t already been said.”

“Yeah,” Kaitlyn agreed. “But there is someone who can do something for her.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Her old professor,” said Brianne. “I think if Kendra can get everything off her chest, she’ll have some closure. It doesn’t matter if the professor doubles down on everything she said about her, or if she apologizes. Either way, I think it’ll help Kendra move on.”

Dr. Adler. I somehow needed to convince Kendra to talk to her again. But how?

Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Brianne,” I said. “I need your help.”

9

Kendra

I continued to practice all the way to the afternoon of the show, before a van came to cart my drum set off t

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o Shadetree. It was kind of ridiculous how much I'd practiced, considering how casual this performance was going to be. This wasn't some prestigious collegiate competition or audition, this was just a fun show at an art gallery. I'd done shows with far more pressure in the past, but this was my first real planned show since I'd started playing again and I was afraid I'd somehow drop the ball.

Melany did her best to calm down my tense nerves—before we left she gave me a back massage and asked if I wanted a quickie, but I was too nervous.

“Kendra,” she told me as we drove to the gallery. “I want you to do something for me tonight when you're playing.”

“Hm?” I said, distractedly, trying not to freak out when I saw that we were nearly there.

“First off, take a few deep breaths. You look like you're going to pass out. Second... I want you to imagine that you're playing for Dr. Adler.”

“What?” I coughed. “Oh, god. That'll just freak me out even more.”

“I want you to imagine that you're playing to prove him wrong. Think about all you've accomplished since you left. Think about the performances you've played that have gotten people on their feet and moving. Think about the last show at Shadetree, and how it moved the owner to set up a special show just for you guys to perform. Play like you don't need his approval.”

I took a deep breath. “I'll do my best.”

During lessons, I'd always played my best to show Dr. Adler I was good enough, but that was different from playing just to show him how good I was. One came from a place of hesitance— from needing approval—the other came from confidence and knowing I was good. Of course Melany would think that way and suggest that—she had to be one of the most confident people I knew. But could I do that? Could I play from a place of confidence and pretend I was shoving my performance in Dr. Adler's face?

We rolled past Shadetree, which was already bustling with guests, and turned into the parking lot next door. Kaitlyn texted me to tell me that she, Brianne, Emily, and Margie were already inside.

"I... I think I'm going to wait in the car for a little bit," I told Melany. I was too nervous to go in and be around the crowd. "I'll wait till before the set to go in."

"Okay," she said, squeezing my hand. "I'll wait with you."

I smiled appreciatively, and she gave me a kiss. "You'll be fine. You're going to kill it tonight, I know it."

"Thanks, Melany," I said.

I texted Kaitlyn back to let her know I was going to wait in the car for a while to try and calm my nerves, and a short time later there was a knock on the window. It was Kaitlyn and the others.

"Hey," she said, holding out a glass of red wine. "We brought you some liquid courage."

"I appreciate it," I said, "but I'm going to do this without any drinking this time."

“I’ll take it,” Melany said.

We got out of the car, and Melany chatted with the group while I lay out on the hood and looked at the sky, which had turned a deep shade of purple. I could hear the sound of a violin and cello duet drifting out from Shadetree over the excited chatter of the guests.

Play to prove him wrong, I thought. Channel the things he made you feel into the performance. Let it all out.

I’d zoned out completely when Melany touched me on the shoulder. I turned to look at her, and she leaned over the hood of the car and kissed me. “Time to go in,” she said. “You guys are up soon.”

I slid off the hood and took Melany’s hand. The group was still gathered in the parking lot chatting. Everyone looked so relaxed.

“You guys didn’t need to wait out here with me,” I said.

“It’s too noisy in there,” said Margie, Brianne’s girlfriend. “We snuck enough wine out to have our own party.”

“Yeah,” Kaitlyn agreed. “We have time to check it out after the set. I’m with you, anyway. Being in there will only make me nervous. I needed to calm down a bit.”

It made me feel better to know that I wasn’t the only one who was nervous.

The illustration work from the last show had been replaced with a mixture of fine art paintings, pottery, and photography, all done by local artists. We went to the outdoor area, and I could see my drum set sitting up on the stage, gleaming like a beacon in the lights. My heart pounded so heavily I felt like I could hear it over the sound of the

crowd.

We went up on the stage, and I took my place behind my drums. I rubbed my palms on my shirt, but they seemed to immediately clam up again with more sweat. No problem. You aren't going to screw up.

I picked up my sticks and tested out each of my drums as Kaitlyn greeted and addressed the crowd. Just like last time, people seemed to be only half interested, and most of the guests were chatting amongst themselves, enjoying the free alcohol. It was to be expected; we weren't famous or anything, after all.

You can do this. Play with everything you've got. Play to prove him wrong.

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I had come a long way since my life took a downturn. I'd not only found my way back to the drums, but rediscovered them in a new way. I'd also fallen in love again. Despite my fears and everything that I'd convinced myself about relationships, I'd managed to fall for Melany. I was so glad that I'd taken a chance on trusting her. I believed that she and I were meant for each other. The fact that we both felt so strongly about each other, and had both affected each other's life so much in such a short amount of time was proof enough to me that it was true.

Fuck it.

If I was going to play to prove someone wrong, I'd do it to prove them all wrong. Max, my dad, Dr. Adler, hell, even Herschel and Brandon Miyaguchi. I'd raise one big middle finger to them all with the best performance of my life.

Kaitlyn turned back and made eye contact with me and Brianne. Brianne nodded and looked at me. I nodded to the both of them.

Here we go.

I inhaled, clacked my sticks in the air, and then let it all explode.

As soon as I made contact with the drum pads, any anxiety and nervousness I'd had vanished into thin air and was replaced with the single thought—prove them all wrong.

We opened with a cover of David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust," and our playing tore through the gallery, turning heads and vibrating the walls so hard that I saw a framed

photograph fall from the wall and shatter on the floor. The crowd started to fill out as people made their way out from the gallery. People were moving to the music, nodding their heads and tapping their feet, and when Kaitlyn and Brianne broke into a badass alternating guitar and violin solo, the audience broke out into cheers and whistles.

When we started our second song—an improvised salsa style tune—the outdoor area had mostly filled up to its capacity.

The three of us had had plenty of jam sessions over the past two weeks, but none of them had been like this. With the electric energy of the crowd backing us, we reached a whole new level of synchronicity. We could only communicate with our eyes and the movements of our bodies, giving each other cues to how to change the song, but we did it so seamlessly that anyone watching wouldn't have believed it was all on the fly.

Sweat poured down my face, and on a break when Brianne took over the song with her violin, I tugged my shirt off down to the tank top I wore underneath. I was flying. I'd never felt such energy while playing before.

Show them how far you've come.

And that's when I spotted him in the crowd.

I nearly dropped my sticks in surprise, thinking that I was seeing things, but I managed to keep it together without even missing a beat. I looked hard, and realized I hadn't been mistaken. It was him.

Dr. Adler was there, watching the show.

I felt the swell of anxiety rise up in me—but I quickly pushed it down. Show him.

I was in the zone, and nothing was going to take me out of it. Not even him.

Kaitlyn took over the song next, doing a fingerstyle solo on her guitar, and then nodded over to

me. I let it all out in the wildest drum solo I'd ever done.

Throughout the rest of the set, I forgot that Dr. Adler was even there. My drumming consumed me, and I was focused on listening to the music and watching Kaitlyn and Brianne for cues.

I played my fucking heart out.

It may have just been a random show, but to me, it was the best I'd played in my entire drumming career.

The crowd cheered as we waved and walked off the stage, and we were immediately rushed by admirers wanting to talk to us. Kaitlyn and Brianne started to chit-chat with our new fans, but I had only one thing on my mind. I pushed my way through the crowd to where I'd seen Dr. Adler standing, but he wasn't there anymore. Looking around, I saw him standing near the doorway going back into the gallery, speaking to Professor Barley. I made my way over to them.

"Dr. Adler," I said, coming up to them.

"Excuse me," he said to Professor Barley, who nodded and walked away. "Ms. Ellings."

Suddenly, I was at a loss for words. So many things were going through my mind.

"What a show," he said. "What a performance. You played excellently. The

originals—that was improvisation?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Spectacular. And you know me, I don’t say that lightly. You’ve progressed immensely since you were my student.”

“You know, Doctor,” I said, “I don’t think you ever once gave me such a high compliment when I was your student.”

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He looked at me quizzically. “Is that what you required, Kendra? High compliments?”

“It would’ve been encouraging to hear from time to time.”

“You’ve always been a fantastic drummer,” he said. “And one of my best. I admit that losing you as a student is one of my biggest disappointments.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Sir, you told me I was no good. I was already going through all these personal hardships, and when your recognition would have meant the world to me, you told me I wasn’t good enough.”

“Kendra,” he said, his voice stern. “Your drumming was worthy of praise at that time. I didn’t know about whatever personal issues you were going through then, and for that I apologize. But if my criticism was enough to cause you to flunk your classes—then you weren’t ready to receive my praise.”

I stared at him, speechless.

“A musician needs to push forward without the approval of others, standing on his own two feet to play what is in his soul. And it seems like you’ve been able to reach that point now. So, tell me—is my praise still that important to you?”

“No,” I said, slightly awed at the change in feeling within me. “No, I guess it isn’t.”

“You played a killer performance tonight—one far more impactful than anything that could’ve been done on the stage for senior recital. You’ve surpassed yourself, and I

hope you realize that.”

I bowed my head and nodded. I felt the final knot of tension around my heart loosen up and disappear. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“Call me Christopher.” He sighed. “And listen. I feel it’s unnecessary for someone of your skill, but I know the importance of finishing what one starts, so if you request it of me, I’ll submit a petition and personal recommendation to have your scholarships and enrollment at Beasley reinstated.”

I looked at him, shocked. I realized that not too long ago, I would’ve taken that offer in a heartbeat, even though I wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone. Now, I immediately knew what my answer was.

“I’m honored you’d offer that, Doc—I mean, Christopher,” I said. It felt weird as hell calling him by his first name, but also strangely satisfying. “But I think my time at Beasley is finished.”

He smiled. “I thought so.” He stuck out his hand, and I took it. “I look forward to seeing where you go, Kendra.”

I felt a touch on my back, and turned to see Melany. She put her arm around my waist and gave me a kiss. “Fucking incredible show, Kendra. I told you could do it.”

“Hello, Ms. Crawford,” Christopher said, reaching out and shaking Melany’s hand. “I wanted to thank you again for convincing me to come tonight. Kendra, both of you, take care. It’s getting late, and I should be heading home.”

I watched as my old mentor disappeared into the crowd, and from view. I felt dumbstruck again. “Melany, you...?”

She grinned. “Hope you aren’t pissed.”

I shook my head. “No. God, no.” I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her. I could feel warm tears of relieved happiness welling up in my eyes. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, her gray eyes twinkling. “I love you so much.”

My heart felt so light and free, like I was a new woman. The future was brimming with music and love and possibility, and I had Melany by my side to experience every moment with me. We would move forward into a new life together, our passion and love as steady and powerful as a heartbeat.

More from H.L. Logan

All of my stories can be read by themselves, but if you’d like to stay in the loop and see which characters are going to be next to get their very own happily ever after, be sure to sign up for my newsletter! <http://eepurl.com/cx0keT>

Pitch Perfect Series

Rhythm - Kaitlyn and Emily’s story

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Turn the page for a preview of my book, Lost Hearts!

Preview: Lost Hearts

Read Lost Hearts Now!

Chrissy

I'd driven west across nearly the entire country to leave my hurricane flooded home behind, and of course I end up smack dab in the tail end of the biggest monsoon that Arizona had seen in over fifty years. That was just my luck the past month, I guess. My "career" was going nowhere (if an entry-level job working in a soul-sucking call center could even be called a career), my apartment complex had turned into a submarine, and my parents stopped returning my calls ever since they found out the reason why I wouldn't be getting a boyfriend any time soon. But hey, at least I had Henry.

"Right, Henry?" I stole a quick glance down at the space in front of the passenger seat where the little black cat was huddled, his eyes like giant saucers and the fur poofed up on his arched back. The poor guy was terrified of the rain, which was drumming madly on every window of the car, seeming to pound in from all directions. We hadn't encountered any rain at all in the four days since leaving Georgia until today, when we entered the northern part of Arizona. Not only was it a surprise to get soaked, it was a shock to go from miles and miles of flat desert, to seeing trees and forests again. I hadn't done much research before setting out on this journey, and so I'd expected to see nothing but barren landscape in the west all the way to California.

I found Henry a week ago—five days, actually—when I was wading through waist deep water, lugging my duffel bag on my head. I heard a tiny meow and saw this black bundle of fur, soaking wet, clinging on to a tree branch for dear life. I figured the poor guy had to have been up there for at least a couple days without food. I sloshed over to him, and he just jumped right on down onto my bag and stayed there

as I made my way to the higher ground where I had parked my car before the storm hit.

Henry hadn't had a collar or tags, and I guessed he was a stray. He was small, and was probably about four or five months old. Driving out of town, I'd thought about finding a shelter to turn him over to, but seeing him sleeping soundly on my passenger seat, with no home or family to go to, I fell in love with the little guy. We were both in the same boat, after all.

I'd always been a dog person my whole life, so I named him after my childhood dog, who'd also been small and black. The funny thing was that Henry (the cat, Henry) had almost dog-like responsiveness. He was completely relaxed being in the car, and at the first rest stop just outside of Atlanta, Henry jumped out of the car, strolled around, did his business, and then came back when I called to him. I'd been scared he was going to disappear somewhere, but at every single stop we'd made he'd always come back when I called.

Thunder rumbled overhead and Henry let out a stressed out yowl as he pressed himself further into the passenger foot well. "Sorry, baby," I said, my fists gripping the wheel so hard that I wouldn't have been surprised if it snapped off in my hands. My wipers were slapping madly, barely doing anything to clear away the torrents of water coating my windshield. The beams of my headlights only illuminated the wall of rain in front of me and not much more.

I cringed as I passed through a large section of standing water on the highway. Don't spin out, don't spin out, I thought as I felt the back wheels losing traction. Trees shot by on the right, and a pair of headlights seemed to appear out of nowhere on the left. I managed to regain control of the car just before smashing in

to a spin that would've either wrapped me around a tree or sent me into opposing traffic.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. My heart threatened to burst from my chest and I knew that I really needed to find a place to pull over. What I should’ve done was stayed back in Flagstaff. There wouldn’t be another city for a quite a while, and driving through this storm at night was just a terrible idea.

Henry meowed sadly.

“I know,” I said. “The next exit, I’ll turn off.”

Lighting flashed in the distance, throwing a stark light across the pine and fir forests towering on both sides of the two-lane highway, and casting them in a jagged silhouette. My headlights flashed across a sign that read “Armstrong Rd, 1 MILE”, with a smaller blue sign below it showing symbols for gas and food.

Thank God, I thought. If there were a gas station and places for food, it would probably be a good place for me to stop for the night. I’d found that café parking lots were fairly decent places for me to park my car to sleep, especially if they were the all night variety that attracted truck drivers. Parking right in front of the entrance of the restaurant where people could see me always made me feel safer. I could stay here until morning and hope that the storm would let up a bit.

The headlights of another passing car dashed across my windshield, glimmering through the thick blanket of rain, and I braced myself for the tidal wave of water sent up by its wheels. It battered the entire length of my car like a hundred angry fists, and Henry meowed again. I was beginning to realize that leaving this journey up to the winds of fate had been a very naïve idea. My cash reserves were dwindling, and were only enough to pay for a month’s worth of food and gas. The road wouldn’t just take me to where I needed to be. That sort of thing didn’t happen in real life.

What would I do once I reached California? One big city was not much different from the rest, and if I were lucky enough to find a new job there, it’d likely be as

fulfilling as the last. I really had no plan. I didn't even like city life.

The Armstrong road exit sign appeared suddenly out of the storm, and I quickly jerked the car off the ramp as lightning lit up the sky like a flashbulb. The road was small and worn, and in the downpour and darkness, it was hard to see where it ended and the forest began. I brought my speed down to barely a crawl. There were spots where small streams had formed and were pouring across the road, carrying debris with it, and every time I drove through one, I prayed that it wouldn't somehow be much deeper than it looked. After a couple minutes, I passed a wooden sign that was carved with green painted trees and the words "Welcome to Armstrong, Arizona." Ahead, I could see the glow of the gas station's sign and the lights from its overhead canopy. It was a small, locally owned station that had an attached minimart and garage, and the parking lot was empty except for a single pickup truck. I pulled up underneath the canopy and stopped by one of the pumps, thankful to be finally under shelter. The light inside the minimart was on, and through the window, I could see the attendant watching TV, his legs kicked up onto the counter.

"Okay, Henry," I said to my frightened furry friend, who was still lodged underneath the dash. "We're here." I silently prayed that I'd be able to find a place for him to do his business—I really didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night to a smelly mess in the car.

I opened the door, but Henry refused to come out from underneath the dash. "Henry, you gotta come out. Come on, do your business." I crouched down on my haunches and held my hand out to try to beckon him over, but he only stared at me wearily, his pupils huge. I sighed. I'd been lucky with him, I realized. Extremely lucky. If he were like most cats, this journey would've been over a long time ago. "Sorry, Henry, I'm gonna have to pull you out of there," I said, and I reached in and grabbed him under his arms and lifted him out. He didn't fight me, but his fur was still puffed up and he didn't look happy at all. I looked around for a dirt or grass place he could go to the bathroom, but the only spot was off away from the gas station and out in the rain.

Maybe if I go over to the trees, I thought unhappily. They were swaying in the wind and I wasn't in the mood to get wet or hit by a falling branch, and I knew that Henry wouldn't be very eager about it either. Suddenly, a huge bolt of lightning streaked across the sky above the station, lighting the whole place up stark white. The immediate thunderclap was so loud that it vibrated the metal canopy. I shouted and dropped to a crouch, and Henry leapt from my arms and bounded right back into the car. I'm sure if he were able, he would've shut the door and locked it right behind him, too.

"Shit," I breathed. "Please don't poo in the car." I shut the door, pulled out an umbrella from the back seat, and walked toward the gas station market's entrance. A huge lake of water seemed to stretch out between the overhead canopy and the front door, and the ground was so dark that I had no idea if it was an inch deep or a swimming pool. There was no getting around it. I sucked in a breath, opened my umbrella and fought to keep it under control from the wind, and went for it.

It was definitely not just an inch deep.

Water sloshed over the top of my shoes and I cursed under my breath as I did a weird little dance trying to touch the ground as little as possible, but it was no use. By the time I reached the entrance, my feet and the bottom of my jeans were completely soaked. I should've worn shorts. One more item to my list of stupidly poor planning.

A chime dinged as I pulled open the door. I closed my umbrella and plodded inside, the wet soles of my sneakers squawking noisily on the tile floor. The clerk, an older man with white hair peeking out from beneath a worn baseball hat, looked up from the small TV that was playing "America's Got Talent".

"Good evening, young lady," he said. "Wasn't expecting anyone in here. You got in just at the right time. I was about to shut the pumps down and close up shop."

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir,” I said. “I’m doing a little cross country road trip and am gonna be sleeping in my car tonight, and I wanted to ask if I could park underneath your canopy there to keep out of this storm.”

The man turned and looked over his shoulder out the rain-streaked window to get a look at my car. “Sleep out there, by yourself? In this storm? Keep driving a ways to the next town and there’s a motel, you know?”

I smiled sheepishly. “Well, I didn’t exactly budget for lodging. Plus, I’ve got a cat.”

“Hm.” He looked me up and down and seemed to be sizing me up. “Listen, I’ll do you one better than the overhang. You can go ahead and park your car in the side garage here. Safer than keeping it out to the elements, plus you can let your cat roam around, too. I used to have an old cat, Pinky—she passed away couple years ago now, but I still got a bag of her kibble and a litter box.”

I hesitated. Of course I was thankful and surprised by his sudden offer, but... A girl on the road had to be cautious. He sensed my concern and smiled.

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“Take a look at the place first and see what you think. If you don’t feel comfortable, I can give you directions to the police station. The sheriff wouldn’t mind you parking in the lot there. He’s a good man, I know him well. What’s your cat’s name?”

“Henry,” I said. I immediately felt more at ease.

“Henry can use all that stuff, if you decide to stay. How long you in town for?”

“Just till tomorrow, if the storm lets up a bit. Thank you, sir,” I said with no restraint of gratitude in my voice. I’d honestly been the closest I’d come to the end of my rope since those hellish last few days in Atlanta—even then I’d gone through everything with a kind of zoned out acceptance. Today’s events had really dug in deep. “I’d love to stay in the garage. You have no idea how much that means to me. My name’s Chrissy Seitz. Sorry if I seemed suspicious.” I gave him a sheepish smile.

“Reynold Golden,” he said, shaking my hand. “It’s nothing. I can’t have you sitting out there alone in this monsoon. Then it’d be on me if you washed away, or somethin

g.” He laughed. “Well, go ahead and pull your car in. I’m gonna lock up soon. You hungry, Chrissy?”

“I’ve got some food in my car,” I said. Really, I just had half a turkey sandwich and a snack bag of chips, but I wasn’t going to let the old man offer anything more to me, and I wanted to save as much cash as possible. I could deal with being a little bit hungry tonight. I ran back into the car, my pants getting doubly soaked as I splashed through the lake outside the front door. Henry had gone back to his spot lodged underneath the dash.

“Guess what, buddy? We got a place to stay tonight.” Henry just stared back at me with his saucer eyes. I started up the car and swung it over to the garage where Reynold was standing with his hands on his hips. He flagged me forward onto the car lift that sat in the middle of the small garage, and then pulled the rolling door closed. The place smelled of grease, metal, and gasoline, and it brought me back to the garage at my parent’s house where my dad would work on his car. It made me nostalgic, and slightly sad as I remembered that my parents had refused to speak to me since I’d come out to them. I had to wonder if Reynold still would’ve offered all this hospitality to me if he knew I was a lesbian. Thinking that way made me feel bad—I’d much rather think the best of people—but I couldn’t really help it. Small town folk tended to be on the conservative side, after all.

“Just a second,” Reynold said, opening up a tall metal cabinet. “I still use the kitty litter to soak up oil spots.” He pulled out a bag of litter and a rectangular box, and filled it up halfway with the stuff. “Kibble’s inside. It might be a little stale, but it should still be fine. I’ll be right back.”

I opened the door, and Henry finally poked his head up over the side to look around. His nose twitched as he sniffed, and when he seemed certain that everything was A-Okay, he hopped out onto the concrete floor of the garage. I slid the litterbox over to him with my foot and then crouched down next to it and tapped it on the corner to draw his attention. His yellow-green eyes were still wide and curious, and he slowly trotted over to the box, sniffed at it, and then hopped inside. I smiled with some relief as he immediately began to chuff at the sand to do his business.

“Things are okay,” I said to him, though really I was talking to myself. I walked around my car to inspect the garage. It had enough room to work on two vehicles, the other spot unoccupied except for a dark patch of grease in the middle of the gray concrete floor. A few long fluorescent tube lights hung overhead, and one of them flickered occasionally, a moth flitting around it. Tools lined the walls, along with shelves of spare parts, tires, jugs of oil and other fluids, and other mechanic things

that were foreign to me. There was a small desk with a chair and one of those office water dispensers next to it. It was definitely a garage. Not glamorous at all, and the rain pounded noisily on the roof, but to me the place felt like a five-star hotel. I could even lay my sleeping bag on the floor if I wanted—it'd be nice to stretch out completely instead of sleeping in the front seat.

The door that connected the minimart opened, and Reynold came in lugging a big bag of kibble on his shoulder. I hurried over to help him with it. Henry, who was cautiously exploring the area around the litterbox, looked up at the sound of the food bag and meowed.

“Oh, he's hungry, isn't he?” Reynold said. “Do you have a bowl for him?”

“Yeah,” I said, and pulled out two small metal dishes from the back of the car. Reynolds opened the kibble and scooped out some food into the bowl, and then filled the other with water from the dispenser. Henry immediately went for the food.

“Sorry, buddy,” I said, stroking his back. He raised his butt up into the air and allowed his tail to slide through my hand. I normally would've fed him much earlier, but the storm had made it difficult.

“Well, I'm gonna lock up here,” Reynold said. “Restroom is back there. I'll leave the door to the store open, just in case you do get hungry. Just leave a couple bucks on the counter. Another fella named Lee will be opening up shop tomorrow. I'll give him a call to let him know you'll be in here. I just live right down the road here, if you go east off Armstrong and then take your first left. Only house on the street.” He walked over to the desk and jotted something down onto a post-it. “Number's here, in case of emergency.” He smiled. “Well, good night, Chrissy. I'll see you when I come in tomorrow, if you haven't left yet.”

I nodded and shook his hand. “Thank you, sir,” I said. I was in a slight daze from his

kindness and willingness to help me. “I really appreciate this. Really.”

“It’s nothing,” he said. He left through the minimart, and a moment later I heard the roar of the pickup’s engine outside, just barely noticeable over the drumming of the rain on the metal roof of the garage. Headlights crossed over the small window slits of the garage door, and then it was just me, Henry, and the sound of the storm. Henry was still chowing down on the food when thunder boomed overhead like a bomb going off, rattling the metal garage door and vibrating all the parts sitting on the shelves. I winced and fought the instinct to drop to a crouch, but Henry must’ve leapt ten feet in the air. He hit the ground running and darted off to hide beneath one of the shelves, his eyes the only thing visible.

I pulled out the little towel that he had adopted as a bed, and laid it down by the front of the shelf where he was hiding. Then I changed out of my wet pants, pulled my sleeping bag out along with my half sandwich, and spread my bag out by the front of my car. I ate the sandwich as thunder continued to rumble and the rain kept up its relentless downpour. It was nine thirty, and I was exhausted. I stretched out in my sleeping bag, and thought about what the gas station owner had done for me. Reynold had let a complete stranger stay in his place of business, without even a second thought. A product of a time gone by, maybe. Or maybe I’d just gotten used to the way people treated each other when living in a big city. Whatever the reason, it was a nice change from what I was used to.

I looked over towards the shelves where Henry was still hiding. “You sure are lucky you’re a cat,” I whispered. Then I closed my eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of the garage door rolling open. At first, I thought it was thunder. It had rocked the building so many times during the night that I had started to dream about it, but when gray daylight poured over my eyelids, I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. A robust silhouette filled the garage entrance by my car, and when the figure walked forward, I saw a man around Reynold’s age,

with a full white beard and big belly. The first thing I thought was that he looked awfully like Santa Clause.

“Morning there,” he said. “You must be Chrissy. I’m Lee.”

“Morning,” I said, sleepily.

“Care for some coffee? Gonna get the machine started up.”

“Sure.” I rubbed my eyes again and got out from my sleeping bag. I was surprised to see that the rain had stopped.

I glanced back behind me toward the shelves. Henry’s towel was still empty. Crouching on my knees, I peered beneath the shelf. “Henry,” I called. Nothing. He must’ve found another spot somewhere and was sleeping soundly.

Lee came back with a paper cup of coffee and a donut, and held them out to me. “Thank you,” I said, taking them gratefully.

“That storm must’ve kept you awake,” Lee said.

“No, actually. I was exhausted. I’d been on the road for seven or eight hours when I hit it, and driving through that thing absolutely wore me out.”

“You’re lucky you’re in one piece,” Lee said, sipping his coffee. “So you’re just passing through, huh?”

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“Since it seems like the rain has finally let up, yeah, I think I’ll be moving on. I’m heading to California.”

Lee nodded. “Not much for a young person like yourself to do here. What do you have going on in California?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Nothing,” I admitted. “Guess I just picked it because it seemed like the furthest from home.”

“Where you from?”

“Georgia,” I said, and Lee laughed, his cheeks going pink.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Lucky the flooding didn’t hit Armstrong—sometimes we get mudslides and such, but we were lucky this year. You should see what happened to Phoenix.” He whistled. “Be careful on the road, I’m sure you’ll encounter some hairy shit out there. And you’re bound to encounter more rain. It’s not over yet.”

“Oh, great.”

“No rush. Stick around for a while. Reynold wouldn’t mind having you stick around for a few days, I’m sure.”

“Thanks,” I smiled, “But I probably should get going. Sooner I get to California, the sooner I can figure out what the hell I’m doing.”

“Right.” He juttred a thumb towards the minimart. “I’ve gotta get the shop all set up and the pumps turned on.”

Lee went off to do his thing, and I stood in the garage doorway and surveyed the town of Armstrong in the daylight. Dark gray clouds hung overhead, and with the forest of pine trees surrounding the station and Armstrong road, the little sunlight barely made it to the ground. It almost felt like it was reaching evening rather than the morning. The pavement was scattered with debris and trails of muddy water flowed down the road carrying branches and pinecones and other things ripped loose from the storm. I heard thun

der rumbling off from somewhere in the distance.

Further up the road, I saw a crossroads with a bent stop sign, and past that I could just make out what looked like a few shops or other businesses lining either side of the street. That was probably the entire town right there, if it could even be called a town. A community, more like it. A stop for people on the way in to the national forests to refuel and maybe get something to eat, and for people to retire to.

I went back inside and found the big bag of cat food that Reynold had left out. “Henry,” I called, shaking the bag up and down. He always seemed to meow when he was about to be given food, and I listened out for his call—but heard nothing. “Henry?” I filled up the bowl and then shook it, but he still didn’t show. I frowned, and crouched down to peer beneath all the shelves and cabinets. I looked under the car, then popped the hood to see if he was hiding up in the engine. Nothing.

“Henry!” I called. Now I was getting nervous. I walked around the garage, searching for places he could hide. Surely, he wouldn’t have gone outside. He’d never wandered away from me before—I mean, I’d only had him for a few days, but every time I’d let him out of the car he’d always stick close by. I ran to the garage door and took a quick peek outside. Again, nothing.

“Hey, Lee,” I said, peeking into the minimart. He was watching the TV.

“They’re talking about the CEO of that company BluTech who resigned,” Lee said, gesturing to the TV. “Can you believe she just up and left? Must be nice to be a multi-millionaire if you can just quit your job.”

“Oh, really?” I wasn’t distracted, and not really interested in the news at that moment. “Hey, you didn’t happen to see a cat when you opened the garage, did you? Small, black.”

“A cat?” He shook his head. “No. You have a cat with you? I was wondering why Pinky’s old litterbox was out. No, I didn’t see any cat coming in. But I wasn’t exactly paying attention...”

“Okay,” I said. “There are no ways a cat could escape, are there?”

Lee frowned, slowly getting to his feet. “No... Not other than the garage door. You can’t find him?”

“No,” I said, the panic starting to show in my voice. I hurried back to the garage with Lee following behind me. I dropped back down to my hand and knees and did another look under the shelf and the car. “Henry? Henry where the hell are you?”

Grabbing the bowl of food, I went out front, shaking it and calling his name. Lee was rifling around the garage in all the same spots that I had checked before, but Henry wasn’t there. He must’ve gotten out somehow. This whole time I’d thought that he just wasn’t the kind of cat to wander off on his own, but I’d assumed way too much.

“Henry!” I shouted desperately as I ran around the gas station, dropping down into the mud to peer under bushes and the big propane tank that was out back. He wasn’t there. I’d only had him for four days, but I loved the little guy like he’d been with me

for years. That little black ball of fur had trusted me and looked to me for help when he was in trouble. I'd rescued him, but in a way he'd rescued me too, when I was at the lowest point in my life and thought that nobody would ever need me. I'd wrapped him up in his towel and fed him canned tuna, and silently promised him that he'd never be cold and wet again. And now...

I came back to the front of the garage, where Lee was still looking around for Henry. "Anything?" I asked. He shook his head. Suddenly, thunder boomed overhead, and I flinched as fat raindrops began to patter down noisily onto the roof of the garage.

2

Lucy

I stood in the old sunroom that I'd designated as my new pottery room and stared silently at the empty wheel, its surface completely spotless. Nothing had been made on the thing in over a year now. Even in New York, when I was still able to produce work, I'd barely touched it. My ex-husband, Charles, ran the company and it seemed like all the clients wanted clean, clean, clean—ornate but in a completely predictable, cookie-cutter way. It was all stuff that was simpler to design on the computer than to throw by hand on a wheel, and so that's what I'd done.

The rain drummed down on the roof. It'd been going for about an hour now, and the forecasts said to expect another storm shower later in the day. It was a good thing I'd moved back in and done so much needed upkeep. With my parents long out of the place, and none of my siblings willing to take care of it, the old Duncan home had basically fallen to shambles. With this crazy storm, it probably would've washed away if I hadn't come back.

I set up all my supplies by the wheel and pulled up a stool, exhaling as I sat down. I rubbed my face and stroked my chin, eyeing the clay and willing it show me its

hidden form. It'd been a week since I'd had the courage to sit and try again, and a year since the block had firmly settled into my body, preventing me from doing anything meaningful with my work. Or maybe it'd been much longer than that—when Charles and I had formed Lucy Duncan Ceramics and I'd been churning out those shelf-stocker pieces. The thing was, despite my traditional education and background, despite all the awards I'd received for my pottery, I'd felt completely happy with what I was producing. It was paying the bills—no, far better than that, truthfully—and it was still somewhat creatively fulfilling even though I wasn't pushing any boundaries. Challenging, though? Perhaps not.

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After tying my hair into a bun, I started the wheel and wet my hands in the reservoir of water, and then, with a moment of hesitation, started to work the clay. It formed in my hands, slowly pulling upwards before I pushed it down into a more spherical shape. I worked at it, doing my best to create something interesting, something beautiful, and after twenty minutes, I realized I was breaking out in a cold sweat. I wiped my forehead with the back of my forearm and continued to work at the shape, willing it to become something better than what was sitting there in front of me, but at this point I knew it was like I was wrestling with a wild animal. I didn't think I'd felt this kind of frustration even when I'd first started learning ceramics.

“God damnit!” My vision blurred with a flash of anger, and the side table went flying across the room, the plastic bowl of water tumbling over the floor. I stared down at the wheel and the horrible little mess that sat on it, and I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. “God...” I muttered, and looked around the room, embarrassed. I never got angry, not like this, but what good was an artist if she couldn't make her art? What if I'd lost my ability entirely? How had this even happened?

I went inside the house, the old wood floor creaking beneath my shoes, and retrieved a mop from the closet. It was probably the gloom from the storm, but house seemed to be extra empty and lonely today. I mopped up the water on the sunroom floor and straightened up the side table, when a random urge struck me to go outside and stand in the rain. That was probably what I needed—a good soaking to cool my head. I tossed the mop aside and without any further thought, pushed open the sunroom door and stepped outside.

It was really coming down now. I was immediately drenched, but I had to admit that it did feel liberating. When was the last time I did something like this?

I walked out from the back, through the woods in the direction of the street that ran up to Armstrong Road where the gas station was. I didn't know where I was going, I guess I was just aimlessly wandering. At thirty-four years old, strolling in the rain just for the sake of getting wet and enjoying it somehow felt rejuvenating. Was that what I was lacking? Youth? Had middle-age sucked up my talent and inspiration? Or was it because I'd married a man nearly twice my age?

Or was it because I hadn't loved him?

No, that wasn't true. I loved Charles—as a companion, a friend, a mentor... but just not as a lover. Not in a romantic way.

I made it through the short sprawl of pines that sat at the edge of the property and came out on the street. There was so much water flowing by the curb that a trash can had been carried down all the way from where Richardson's house was. I chuckled and craned my neck back

to the sky to taste the rain. Right at that moment, thunder exploded from what seemed like just a short distance away, so loud and intense that it set off a car alarm. I nearly collapsed to the ground in shock, instantly knocked out of my little dream world.

"Shit," I muttered, spinning around and hurrying back towards the house. "Shit, shit." I really didn't want to get struck by lightning—not unless it would somehow wake me up from my creative block and didn't fry me to death.

A noise stopped me in my tracks.

At least I thought I'd heard a noise—I could've just been hearing things. The pines stretching above me dampened the rain some, but it was still loud enough to distort things. I looked around, saw nothing, and then started toward the house.

Then I heard again. It was definitely there; I wasn't imagining it—a cat's meow. I glanced around again, walking back in the direction I thought it had come from. "Kitty?" I said. "Where are you, kitty?"

It came again from above me, and I peered up into the tree, surprised to see a small black cat clinging to the lowest branch. What is this, I chuckled to myself, some kind of bad luck omen? I didn't need any more poor luck, but I also wasn't going to just leave a scared little cat outside in the rain. "Stay there," I said, and reached up to grab it. It allowed me to take it beneath the arms and lift it down. He meowed to me again.

"Poor guy. Better get you inside."

Where had he come from? The Richardsons lived about a quarter mile up the street, and I knew they didn't have a cat. The next closest neighbor was Reynold Golden, who owned the gas station, but his house was over a mile away, and he didn't own a cat either.

Thunder boomed again, and I felt his tiny body tremble against my chest. He squirmed, trying to get loose, but I held him tight and picked up my pace until I was back at the house. "Lucky that I was out there," I told the cat as I sat him down on the floor of the sunroom. I stripped off all my clothes and carried the sopping bundle to the laundry room. When I turned around, I was surprised to see the little guy had followed me, water dripping from his fur. He immediately flopped onto the floor and started to lick himself. I laughed and then went upstairs to put on some fresh clothes, and pulled out a towel from the closet. The cat was still sniffing around at the base of the stairs, and I quickly scooped him up with the towel and carried him up to the bathroom.

He definitely wasn't a fan of the shower, and he meowled and struggled, clawing at my arms as I cleaned the dirt and mud from his fur. Eventually, he seemed to realize that I wasn't letting him go anywhere, and gave in to the bathing, sitting there with a

pissed off look on his face. When he was clean enough, I pulled him out and rubbed him down the best I could with the towel. He struggled free and scampered back down the stairs to the living room where he plopped down onto the Persian rug that lay in front of the couch, and set to grooming himself vigorously.

“Don’t piss on that rug,” I told him. “It was my mother’s, and she didn’t like cats very much.”

I crouched down next to him and scratched his ear. He meowed and licked my hand, apparently forgiving me for my offenses against him. I smiled. “Though maybe she would’ve liked you. You’re a sweet one. What the hell were you doing out in that tree?”

In the kitchen, I pulled out a small bowl and filled it with water, and then looked through the fridge to find something a cat might like. I had some roast chicken leftover from dinner, so I shredded off some of the meat into a bowl and brought it back to the cat, who was still making himself presentable. He immediately flipped onto his feet and made a beeline straight for the chicken. He scarfed it down.

“You were starving, weren’t you, little guy?” Had someone passing through town dumped him? We did have a small pet store up the street on Armstrong that occasionally sold dogs and cats, but it seemed unlikely that they’d lose track of one of them. I crossed my arms over my chest and watched him clean the bowl, and afterwards he licked his paw and wiped his face. Then he padded over to the couch and hopped up on it to gaze out the window. He turned his wide eyes over to me and let out a drawn out meow. It sounded sad and longing somehow, though maybe it was just me projecting onto him.

“Sorry,” I said, sitting down on the arm of the couch. “You’re not going back out there and besides—”

Thunder rattled the windows, sending my furry guest tumbling off the couch and scrambling for cover beneath it.

“Yeah. That.”

I went back to the sunroom to try my hand at the pottery wheel again, slapping the mound of clay back in the center and starting my routine. I’ll just do something simple, I decided. A present for my new friend. After fifteen minutes I’d made a plain bowl with a flat bottom, about twelve inches in diameter. Using a slip mixture, I added some texture to the outside of the bowl, and then designed the inside with concentric circles emanating from the center, like ripples in water. I examined the work, and thought that it was acceptable. It’d been a while since I’d had a reason to make something. Every time I’d tried to make something different or new, something that surpassed the art I’d created during the time I’d felt was my peak, I’d come up empty. Literally unable to make anything. My inability to create was the whole reason why I’d moved back to my family home. Well, besides from rescuing it from ruin. I’d thought that the peace and quiet and familiar atmosphere would help lift my mental block and nurture new inspiration... but all the move had done was bring even more frustration.

Maybe this was my fate; the cost of sacrificing my creative soul to the corporate gods. A lonely existence in my childhood home, with nothing but the companionship of a cat. Maybe I should get five cats. Or six. I could make bowls for all of them.

I chuckled to myself and put the bowl into my electric kiln, fired it up, and set the shutoff timer. Back in the living room, my guest had come out from his hiding place and was lapping at the bowl of water. I gave him a scratch behind his ears, and he let out another long meow.

“Tomorrow, I’ll see if I can find out where you came from, okay?” I figured that I would go in to the pet store, buy some supplies, and see if the owner there knew

where the little black cat had come from. If she didn't, well... maybe I would keep him. Something about him had grown on me; maybe because I'd rescued him, or maybe because he'd helped me complete the first piece of pottery I'd done in ages.

I went back to the kitchen, pulled some more breast meat off the leftover chicken, and brought it out to my guest, who was pacing around the room, rubbing his face up against the sides of furniture and stopping occasionally to inspect things of interest that were apparently invisible to my eyes. I set the dish of chicken down on the floor next the bowl of water, and smiled as he dashed to it and went to town. I was grateful to the little guy for giving me a reason to make something. Maybe that was what had been lacking—a reason. Artists created their best work when they had something to say, whether they knew it or not, and maybe I'd just run out of things to say.

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I rummaged around in the garage and found a shallow, unused plastic storage bin, and filled it up with shredded newspaper as an impromptu cat box. I brought it inside, and set it in the sunroom. “Shit in here,” I said to the cat, picking him up and placing him inside the box. He stared at me, batted at one of the strips of newspaper, and then hopped back out. “Shit in there, you hear me?” I called after him as he strolled back into the house like he belonged here. I huffed a resigned laugh and followed him.

My old childhood bedroom upstairs, along with my Dad’s old study, was packed to the brim with moving boxes filled with things from my old New York apartment. Charles and I had lived there together for five years—the duration of our marriage. We’d been together for seven, though the definition of “together” was a bit up in the air. He’d been somewhat of a mentor during my last years at Beasley University, managing at the gallery that I’d showed and sold my ceramics work in, and after I’d finished my masters he’d taken me under his wing. I stayed at the gallery, and it wasn’t long before he’d pitched her idea to me for starting a ceramics design firm. We’d start small, with me as the lead designer until we could bring on others, and we’d sell work to people interested in limited, high quality pieces that weren’t quite one of a kind, but felt that way.

I was a fan of money—still am—and so I saw the value in doing the commercial stuff. And hey, I could still retain some of my artistic integrity. I was head designer after all, and I could make what I thought was good. It didn’t stay that way, though.

The company grew, my work’s reputation grew, and soon we were getting offers from big corporations requesting designer features to use in their catalogues. Being a fan of money, it didn’t take much convincing for me to start making

my work more and more mainstream, and more consumable. By this time too, Charles and I had decided to move in with each other. He'd been the one to suggest it. I was hesitant, but my mother was sick at the time, and she was so concerned that I wasn't married yet, so... to ease my dying mother's concern for her youngest daughter, I asked Charles if he wanted to get married.

Was he in love with me? I don't know. Like I'd said, we'd made a great partnership, and he was a great friend. Maybe Charles was the type of man who normally wouldn't have been interested in marriage. He was forty when we married, and he'd never mentioned any prior marriages or girlfriends. Business and art was his life. He knew the advantages of our marriage, and he knew why I'd asked him. He'd never been interested in my body.

I'd been back here for two months now, and I still hadn't unpacked most of my things—just the tools, mostly, and some necessary clothing. I didn't know how long I would be staying here. Just until I got over this creative block, I'd told myself, but I'd begun to wonder if that would ever happen.

3

Chrissy

Lee had offered to put me up at his and his wife's house until the storm lifted enough that we could mount a proper search operation for Henry. I'd spent over an hour trudging around in the mud and rain in the woods surrounding the gas station, but I'd found no sign of him. It was when the lightning started to strike that I'd decided Lee and Reynold were right, and it would be safer for me to wait, but the thought of Henry scared and lost somewhere out there during that thunder and lightning tore me up inside. That night, Lee's wife, Margery, made a big lasagna dinner and gave me a slice of apple pie. It was the best I'd eaten since I'd left Georgia, but it was difficult to enjoy it knowing that Henry was out there hungry somewhere.

I was responsible for the little guy, and I'd let him get lost right under my nose. I figured he must've wandered outside when Lee had opened the garage, and gotten startled by the thunder and ran off somewhere to hide. The other possibility, which I really didn't want to think about, was that he had gotten snatched up by some coyote or hawk out there. He was small, so it was possible...

I lay awake in the guest bed, my eyes blurry with tears. Damnit, I thought. Please let me find him. The thought of moving on to California without Henry just killed me, and the thought of going back to Georgia was even worse. And there still remained the problem of what I would do next. Get another soul sucking job? Same shit, different town?

Maybe I could stay here. It was a weird thought, but at the same time, a pleasant one. All the people I'd met here were so nice, and there was a real sense of community. Of course, I doubted there were any apartment buildings I could move into, and the nearest city was an hour's drive, so staying here was probably not going to happen. I'd find Henry, and then move on.

Please let me find him, I thought again.

I was sad and couldn't stop thinking about him, but my body was exhausted and relieved to finally have a proper bed to sleep on, and I quickly fell asleep.

I woke to another dreary day, the sun hiding behind grey clouds. Margery had made pancakes, and the news on the kitchen television said that the storm was passing east. "Worst of it's over for us, I think," she said, drizzling maple syrup onto her pancakes. She was robust as her husband, with an appetite to match her size, and her stack of pancakes towered over mine.

The stairs groaned and creaked with Lee's heavy footsteps. He appeared in the kitchen wearing a rain jacket and holding two pairs of rubber boots. "Good morning,"

he said, dropping the boots by the front door. “You have a raincoat, Chrissy?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Finish up your breakfast and we’ll get looking. It’s just a drizzle right now. I’ve got a pair of boots you can borrow.”

“Okay,” I said, scarfing down the rest of my pancakes. “What about you? Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I’ll be fine. I’d like to get out there as soon as possible. It was eating at me all night. I’d feel better the sooner we get out looking for Henry.”

“It’s not your fault, Lee. But I appreciate your help. I appreciate what both of you have done for me.”

Margery smiled. “We do what we can to help folks in need around here. The world needs a little more kindness in it, I think.” She picked an apple out from a basket on the table and handed it to her husband. “It’ll tide you over for now.”

“Alright, you ready to go?”

I nodded and quickly brought my plate over to the sink. “Thank you for breakfast,” I said. “Hold on, let me grab my raincoat.” I dashed upstairs to the guest room to dig my jacket out of my bag, then jogged back down and pulled on the spare pair of boots. They fit me perfectly.

“Belonged to our daughter,” Lee said. “She’s in Phoenix now. Programmer.”

We pulled up our hoods and headed out the door. The rain was light—not much more than a scattered pattering. We hopped into Lee’s car and drove the short distance to

the gas station. My eyes scanned the trees in a shallow hope that I might spot Henry, but of course, I saw nothing. The woods spanned wide areas between houses and the chances of spotting him from the car were slim.

The chances of spotting him in general are slim.

I pushed the thought from my mind, and we pulled up to the gas station. We went up to the minimart, and I was surprised to see a paper flier taped up to the glass on the inside of the front door that said, MISSING: Henry. Black Cat, five months old. Call Reynold at 555-346-2311. Reynold was watching TV, his feet propped up on the counter, and he stood up when he saw us walk in.

“Morning, you two,” he said.

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“Morning, Reynold,” I replied. “No sign of Henry?”

“I’m afraid not, Chrissy. Sorry. Hey, I printed out these fliers. If you can’t turn him up looking around in the woods, then you might try distributing them up in the town. We’ve got a pet store here, so if anyone found him, they’d probably go there.”

“I’ll do that,” I said. “Thanks Reynold.”

“Hey,” he said, giving me an encouraging smile. “Keep your head up.”

I smiled back. “Yeah.”

Lee and I moved out from the gas station and started to comb the trees surrounding it. Lee split off from me to cover more ground, and he carried Henry’s bowl filled with kibble to shake and entice him out if he was hiding. Every dozen feet or so, I would call Henry’s name, stopping to look up into the overhead branches and beneath shrubs. I realized that the chances of just happening on him were pretty slim—he would need to come out and find us. There was just too much ground to cover, too many places he could be hiding.

After fifteen minutes of walking, I checked the map on my cell phone and saw that I was quite close to a street, and I followed the GPS until I reached it. I called for Henry again, and then stood there silently, straining my ears hoping to catch the sound of his meow. All I heard was the steady patter of rain on soil and asphalt, and the light rustle that came from thousands of trees caressed by the wind. I walked up the street a little ways until I reached a large wood paneled house with a white BMW parked in the front. I was surprised to see that it had New York plates.

Guess I'm not the only one from out of town, I thought, and turned to head back to the gas station. I'd have to depend on the fliers—they'd be more effective than walking around by foot, and I didn't want to keep Lee. He hadn't eaten breakfast, and he'd already done a lot more than he needed to just to help me. So far, everyone had.

I felt my eyes getting hot with tears. It was a weird mixture of disappointment in myself for losing Henry, sadness knowing he was out there scared and hungry, and amazement for how these strangers had gone so out of their way to help me and show me such kindness and hospitality. It was something that had been sorely missing from my world.

"Anything?" Lee asked, back at the gas station. I shook my head, and he patted me on the shoulder. "Nothing on my end either. We'll drive up into the m

ain part of town, and put the fliers up in the pet store, the bank and the market. If anybody's seen Henry, they'll pass through one of those places for sure."

I nodded and smiled. "Thanks, Lee. Really. I'm just blown away at how kind everyone has been to me since I've arrived. Is everyone this nice here?"

"Well, I don't know about everyone," he said, shrugging. "But I suppose most. There are a few that keep to themselves, but for the most part, Armstrong is a pretty close-knit community. We're a small place, and we're all the type of people who like simple things, so we all share something in common. Some folks have lived here all their lives."

"Have you?"

"Oh, no. We moved here when we had our daughter. Wanted to raise her away from the big city life. Of course, that's where she is now, but I'd like to think she has a wider appreciation for things after growing up here. And it's not so bad, you know?"

We're only an hour or so out from a city anyway. I've been retired for a while, but I still work at the gas station to keep busy. Reynold has been here his whole life; his father was the one who opened that gas station."

Lee opened the door to the minimart and we went back inside. "There's a few others on our side of the town," he continued. "Oh, the Duncans. Their property was unmanaged for a while after the husband and wife passed and their children moved out, but recently one of the daughters came back. She kind of keeps to herself though."

"No luck?" Reynold asked, sipping a coffee.

"None," Lee said. "Fliers?"

Reynold pushed them over the counter to us. "Hey, Chrissy."

"Yes, sir?"

"So, Lee filled me in a bit on your situation. He said that you're headed to California, is that right?"

"That's right. Though I don't really have much of a plan once I get there."

"Any reason why you chose there?" He paused and scratched his chin. "Sorry, I don't mean to pry, that wasn't my intent."

"Oh, no problem," I said, waving my hand. "You all have been so welcoming to me, you have a right to know why I left Georgia and all."

"Well, your business is your own, if you want to keep it. I just wanted to know if you had a specific reason why you were going to California. What your end goal was, that

is.”

“I left Atlanta because of the hurricane and flooding there—I know, ironic, isn’t it? But that was more of a catalyst. I’d been thinking about leaving for a while. Or rather, I just wasn’t happy with my life there. I was working a call-center job where I was supposed to be helping people, solving problems for them, but with corporate BS, all I could do was ruin days and put people in bad moods. It was the only work I could find after school, and well, frankly, I don’t even know what I want to do with my life.”

“I see,” Reynold said. “A journey of self-discovery.”

“Nothing like a quarter life crisis,” Lee chimed in, fishing a frosted donut out from the plastic box of donuts and bagels.

Reynold nodded thoughtfully. “You’re young, so it’s a good time to be thinking about that stuff. You’ve got choices available to you, so you might as well explore them. Broaden your horizons.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That was my thought.”

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“You have any family in Atlanta, if you don’t mind me asking?”

My thoughts immediately went to my parents and the hateful tirade they’d went on before excommunicating me from the family, and again I wondered if I would be as welcomed here if they knew my orientation. It made me feel terrible, thinking that, especially of people who had been nothing but the kindest to me, but the wounds my parents had given me had cut deep.

“Um,” I said, feeling slightly uncomfortable for the first time. I chewed my lip. “Not really.” It was all I could think of saying, but Reynold seemed to catch on that it wasn’t a topic I wanted to discuss.

“Well, sometimes it’s necessary for a person to venture out far from home to get to know themselves,” he said. He tapped his finger onto the stack of fliers. “Come back here and see me after you go give these out, okay?”

“Sure.”

Lee and I took the stack of fliers and went out to his car. It wasn’t raining and the shops weren’t too far up the road, but Lee suggested we drive anyway in case of a sudden downpour. I had no complaints with that, so we piled into his car and drove the short minute up to the center of the town.

Armstrong reminded me of one of those frontier towns you might see in an old western film, with the single main road lined with the general store and the saloon, and horses tied up to posts all along the way.

The drive really was only a couple of minutes, and we pulled up to the curb in front of the small pet store called “Pampered Paws”.

“I’ll go drop some fliers off at the market,” Lee said, pointing down the street. “You go ahead and take care of the pet store.”

I nodded, and went inside the shop. The woman behind the counter was probably in her mid-forties, with red hair, red lipstick and a stone washed denim jacket and jeans bedazzled with metal star sequins and tassels. She had her nose stuck in a tabloid magazine.

“Hi there,” she said, perking up. “Welcome to Pampered Paws, I’m Patty. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Hi,” I said, surprised by her bubblyness. She made me think me of one of those overly hyper lap dogs that seemed to be vibrating from too much pent up energy. “Yes, there is something you can help me with, Patty. I’m from out of town, and yesterday my cat escaped from me.”

She threw her hand to her mouth. “Oh, no! That’s horrible, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“I’ve got these fliers here...” I pulled out the stack and showed them to her. “And I was wondering if it’d be alright to hang one in the store?”

“Of course it would be alright! I’ll put them up on the window, and have a few on the counter too. You don’t have a picture of, uh...” She skimmed over the flier for his name. “Of Henry?”

I shook my head. “I rescued him just a few days ago from a flood back home, so I never got a chance to get any photos of him.”

“Oh, poor thing, one storm to the next. Well, I’ll keep an eye out for Henry too.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate that.”

She smiled and nodded, then went to stick up one of the fliers onto the window. I went back outside, and met up with Lee who was walking down from the market. The wind started to pick up again, pushing the trees into a sway and sending leaves and other debris tumbling down the street.

“Did the lady know anything about him?” Lee asked, and I shook my head.

“No... How about at the market?”

“No. Put up all the fliers though, on the bulletin board and right up at the checkout. If someone has seen Henry, they’ll know he’s missing for sure.” He looked up at the sky. “Seems like we’re gonna get another bout of it soon. Let’s head back to the station.”

As we drove down the road, a sudden flash of hard rain hit, and pounded down for a minute before letting up to a light sprinkle. Again, I could only think of Henry somewhere out there. I hoped that maybe he hadn’t gone too far, and had just found shelter and was hiding out from the storm. Maybe he would just stroll back in once the rain was gone.

Reynold was tidying up the shelves when we came inside. “How’d it go?” he asked.

“Put out the fliers,” Lee said. “Nobody’s spotted Henry, but I’m sure if somebody’s seen him, they’ll call about it.”

“Well,” Reynold said, finishing up with the shelves. “Chrissy, if you feel like you need to keep moving on with your journey, I’d be more than happy to keep you

updated, and take care of Henry when he comes back. But, um, if you feel like you don't want to move on just yet, I understand that too."

"I don't feel right about moving on at least until the storm is completely gone and I know that Henry isn't just hiding out somewhere," I said. "But I don't want to burden you and your wife, Lee."

Lee shook his head and held up his hand in a gesture that said, "no trouble at all." Reynold slung his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that," Reynold said. "This old market has an upper attic, which actually used to be a living area back in my father's time. It's just a small space—you could call it a studio—but if you want you can stay there for as long as you feel a need to be in Armstrong. All I ask is that you help out around the gas station."

His offer completely overwhelmed me. "Wow, sir, I mean, Reynold. That's incredibly generous of you. Yes, I think I'd like that. Truth is, I do like Armstrong, and I think that maybe there's a reason I ended up here. Hopefully it wasn't just to lose my cat."

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“You’ll get him back,” Lee said confidently, patting my shoulder. “I feel that.”

Reynold smiled. “You’ll need to clean up the place. It hasn’t been used for anything except storage in decades. I’ll bring in a cot from my house for your bed. If you can handle all that, the place is yours.”

“You sure you’re not just

getting Chrissy to do your tidying up for you, Reynold?” Lee laughed.

“I’m more than happy to do it,” I said, brushing a lock of my bangs behind my ear, and then tying the rest into a ponytail. Such a strange mixture of emotions rushed through me. I was excited to stay, but still broken up about Henry’s disappearance. He’ll be back, I thought hopefully. It was all I could really do—be positive. So many bad things had happened recently, but finally some good was coming my way, and I just had to believe that this was only the beginning of it.

Reynold took me to the back of the shop where, behind palettes of beer and energy drinks, a narrow set of stairs rose up to a pull-down attic door. He undid a metal latch on it and swung the door open, and then continued up inside. After fumbling around in the dark for a moment, he switched on a single lightbulb that hung from the ceiling. The place was definitely not much to look at—it was dust and cobweb ridden and packed with stacks of old storage boxes, but it was at least dry.

Reynold went over and pulled back the curtains on the room’s single window, a small rectangle that sat on the far wall opposite the entrance door. Cloudy sunlight streamed in, slanting through the sparkles of dust dancing in the air. Lee, who followed up

behind us, let out a monster sneeze.

“You can just move all the boxes into one of the corners,” said Reynold. “The old bed used to be over there.” He pointed to a side wall, and I could see that the wood floor had a slightly different color where the bed was.

“Well, I’d better get to work,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “If I want a place to sleep by tonight.”

Reynold laughed. “I’ll get you a broom and a vacuum.”

4

Lucy

I stepped outside from the sunroom to get some fresh air and enjoy the sunshine that was finally starting to peek through the clouds. I’d meant to go to the pet store the day before to buy some supplies for my furry guest, but I’d ended up getting caught by a rare burst of inspiration and spent the day churning out bowl after bowl. The cat didn’t seem to mind—he was using his newspaper cat box and was perfectly happy with being fed scraps of chicken, and spent the whole time lounging around nearby. The little guy was really growing on me, and he’d given me inspiration to work on something again, even if they were just simple bowls.

Plus, it was just nice to have some company.

When I’d found him, I’d had no intention of keeping him. After all, I was only here to try and get my mojo back, not to actually become a crazy cat lady. Now, I was starting to wonder how I could not keep him. I’d held off on naming him—I’d only get attached if I gave him a name—but I didn’t know what options there were for my little guest. I could keep him, or bring him in for someone else to adopt him.

I went back into the sunroom, and the cat bounded up to me, nuzzling his face up against my leg. I crouched down and stroked his head, scratching behind his ears and at his whiskers. He mrrred and pushed against my hand, and I smiled. I couldn't just get rid of you.

A timer dinged. I went over to the kiln, opened it, and pulled out the first bowl I'd made, which was now cool and ready for a glaze. I opened the cabinet with my custom glazes and chose something simple. I wanted to give it an overall dark stain, but with shimmers of opalescent green that would peek out around the interior of the bowl, exactly how my guest's green eyes contrasted with his dark fur.

He nuzzled up against my leg again and let out a long meow. "What's the matter, guy?" I said. He looked up at me and meowed again. "Shit," I said, looking at my watch. It was already getting to be the late afternoon, and he was probably hungry.

I got up, went to the kitchen, and pulled open the fridge.

Double shit. I was out of the leftover chicken.

The fridge was pretty much void of anything else desirable to be eaten by cat or human. I turned around and saw that he'd followed me. "Good thing you're here," I said, "otherwise we might've both starved to death." It was a good sign, actually—it'd been a long while since I'd gotten so absorbed in working that I forgot to eat.

"Keys, keys," I muttered, searching around the house for my car keys until I found them in a random spot in the living room, and then repeated the routine with my wallet.

"Don't burn the house down," I said to the cat, who stared at me as I walked out the door, his tail swishing curiously.

I drove down the street until I reached the corner with the gas station and saw Reynold, the old-timer who'd operated the place ever since I could remember, standing out front cleaning debris from the driveway and the sidewalk. He looked up, saw me, and waved. I waved back. A girl, maybe in her early or mid-twenties, came out from the gas station with a push broom and started to help Reynold clean. Reynold didn't have a kid, so she must've been someone from town. It wasn't usual to see another younger person around Armstrong, so I found myself staring with a little more interest than I normally would've. Not to mention, it'd been a while since I'd seen such a pretty face.

No, stop it. I looked away and quickly took the turn, driving off up the street towards the grocery market.

I hated when girls made me feel that way. I felt guilty about it, and I didn't want to believe that I could feel that way about another woman... but it happened so often.

Still, the thought of that girl at the gas station trailed in my mind, like an image burned into my retinas from staring at a light for too long. She was tall, with dirty blonde hair that hung in a long ponytail and bangs that swept her face. She'd had on a green, military style jacket over a v-neck shirt and ripped jeans that hugged long legs. She was very slim and fit. Younger girls were able to burn the weight so easily. 22 was when I started to hit the gym hard, because I found that the repetition and the mental discipline required was quite similar to the skills I used to create my pottery. These days, at 34, it was becoming an uphill battle to keep the weight off. I knew I was in pretty damn good shape, but it was hard not to feel flabby constantly, especially because I hadn't been in a gym in ages.

There was something else about her that stuck in my head. I'd only seen her for a second and from a distance, but there was something about the look she carried on her face... She was pretty, but that wasn't the only thing. I couldn't put my finger on it. It wasn't so much the expression, as something that lingered behind it. Maybe it

reminded me of myself. I wasn't sure. I'd only seen her for a moment, after all.

I wandered around the market in a bit of a daze, not really thinking about anything in particular, but still had that girl's image bouncing around in my head. I forced myself to divert my thoughts to my new furry friend, and the bowls that I was making. The first—the one that I would glaze the moment I got home—I'd made to use as a food bowl, but it was probably too large for that purpose. I'd made four others, all of varying sizes. One was probably a more fitting size, and the three others were just sort of random and likely would end up in the trash can later.

It'd been so long since I'd produced work that I wasn't immediately smashing into a lump.

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I picked out a whole chicken that was on sale and put it in my basket, along with some fresh vegetables. The meat was pretty expensive, but the vegetables were cheap and much better than anything I could've gotten in a store back in New York. It was one of the perks of living out here—we did have access to some great produce.

Who was she?

I put my groceries on conveyor belt and stared off into space as the elderly checkout lady scanned the items.

"Sixty-nine," the woman said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Uh, sorry?" I asked, smiling apologetically.

"Twenty-two sixty-nine. Your total."

"Oh, right."

I paused and frowned, reading the text. And that's when I saw it.

"Um," I said, pointing. "I think... you overcharged me for the chicken. It said it was on sale for \$3 a pound."

She straightened her glasses an

d double-checked a little binder of coupons she had next to the register. "Oh, you're so right. I'm sorry."

I smiled, paid the new price, and then bagged the groceries myself. It was quite warm out, so I put the bag in my trunk and drove the short distance down to the pet store. I'd just be in and out to grab some kitty litter and pet food.

"Hi there, welcome to Pampered Paws, I'm Patty. Anything I can help you with?"

The woman behind the register smiled a dazzling smile that was outlined with bright red lipstick that seemed to be twenty years out of style, and the loudest outfit I'd ever seen. "I'd like to buy some kitty litter and cat food," I told her.

"Sure thing, that's right over there." She pointed.

I selected a small bag of generic kitty litter and a small bag of dry cat food, paused, and then put them back and exchanged them for larger bags. Why shouldn't I keep him? Turn him over to Pampered Paws and he probably would never be adopted, considering the customer base here probably changed every 50 years.

I lugged the bags onto the counter, and the lady scanned them. "You a new owner? I've never seen you around before," she said, smiling brightly.

"Yeah, something like that," I said. "Actually, I found this cat just out in the storm the other day."

Patty's smile disappeared. "Really? Is he a black cat?" she asked.

I frowned. "Yes?"

"Oh my goodness! That young lady is going to be so relieved. Ma'am, I think you rescued this cat that'd been reported missing just the other day!" She whipped out a piece of paper and handed it to me.

"Missing: Henry. Black cat, five months old," I said, reading the paper. My heart was

already beating fast, but then I read the number to call. Reynold? Young lady?

My mind immediately went to the newcomer I'd seen at Reynold's gas station. My little guest is her cat? My vision blurred out for a moment as I registered what it all meant.

"Does that sound like your rescue?" she asked hopefully.

"Ah," I replied, blinking. "Yeah... I guess it does. I guess I'd better call her. Or hell, Reynold is just down the road. I'll just stop in." Stop in and meet that girl too.

I had to. After all, I probably had her cat.