

Chapter One: Catherine  
September 21<sup>st</sup>

*Ding-dong.*

I clasp a necklace, two hearts intertwined around Lyssa's birthstone, around my neck as the doorbell rings. I grit my teeth and grip the edge of my vanity. The last thing I want to do is ask Grayson for help finding work, especially at an event hosted by his parents' radio station. After everything they've put us through since Lyssa was conceived, I never want to owe them anything again. But my daughter is ten now. I can't keep losing jobs, living paycheck to paycheck, and squatting in my friend's apartment. She deserves better. We both do. And without an agent, this might be my last chance to get back into the theater circuit. I hope he told the truth about having a representative at his gig tonight.

*Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong.*

"Mom! Dad's here!"

I roll my eyes and run the brush through my mess of blond curls. "One second!"

Footsteps shuffle across the carpet. Megan peeks around the doorframe. "Need help?"

"No, no, I'm good."

I fast-walk to the closet and throw a matching jacket over my strapless tea-length dress, then cinch the bejeweled red and sea-green belt.

"Almost." I bite my lip. "Do I look okay?"

Megan laughs. "Are you kidding? That representative won't know what hit him."

I let out a deep breath. "If there *is* a representative."

Megan places a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Grayson may be a spineless idiot, but he's not a liar."

I smile. "I hope you're right."

Three more dings and she pulls me toward the door.

"Mom, come *on*!"

"Let's get that before your daughter has a heart attack."

In the entryway, Lyssa's standing on her tiptoes, stretching for the deadbolts.

Quickening my pace, I grab her wrist. "Young lady, what did I tell you about touching the locks?"

She blushes and dips her head. "Um, not to?"

"Exactly. And why is that?"

Lyssa huffs and crosses her arms. "Dad's not a burglar." Still, she backs up.

I undo the deadbolts, but my gaze snaps back when she mumbles, "Not like we'd have anything for them to steal, anyway."

"Alyssa Margaret, bite your tongue."

"What? It's true. Grandma says—"

The door swings open and my ex-boyfriend's amber eyes gleam as he offers me a crooked half-smile. The crisp, black dress shirt tucked into charcoal gray slacks brings out the olive notes of his skin.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey, yourself."

Lyssa bounds past me to leap into his arms. "Daddy!"

"Princess!" Grayson twirls her around. "Oof, you're getting heavy."

Her lower lip juts out as he sets her down and runs a hand through his dark auburn hair.

"Am not," Lyssa says, her nose wrinkling. "Maybe you're *old*."

"Maybe." His eyes meet mine as he chuckles. "How are my two favorite girls?"

I smile and comb some hair behind my ear. "We're good." I gesture toward Lyssa's brand-new black boots. "Although *your* daughter seems to have spawned quite the expensive taste lately."

"Oh?" Grayson follows my gaze and blinks. "What happened to those light-up Ariel tennis shoes you had to have, Lys? I thought they were your favorite."

Lyssa scoffs and rolls her stormy blue eyes, so much like mine. "In my closet. Grandma said they were for babies and they were falling apart."

My brows furrow. Sure, they're a little worn out, but she wears them every day. "You've had them for three months. They're fine."

“And your mom paid a lot of money for ’em, squirt,” Megan chimes in from behind me. “Maybe you can wear them tonight? Nobody’s gonna care what your shoes look like in a dark movie theater.”

I flash Megan a grin.

Lyssa crosses her arms and scowls. “These are fine. Besides, we’re not going to the movies.”

Grayson and I exchange looks. “You’re not?”

Lyssa shakes her head. “Nope. Grandma’s taking me to the ballet instead. I needed something more sophisticated.”

I press my lips together. *Of course* Evelyn changes the plan at the last minute to rub her wealth in my face. My cheeks hurt as I smile and take her hand. “Well, you look gorgeous, honey. Come on, it’s time to go.”

“Have fun!” Megan says.

“We will,” Grayson says.

I toss one more look at my roommate before stepping over the threshold. *Or, at least, we’ll try.*

After dropping Lyssa off, I slump against the seat as Grayson speeds over the slick asphalt. Evelyn gave me an earful when she found out where Grayson was taking me. “Why does she do that?”

“Who? Evelyn?”

I nod. “She thinks I’m the scum of the earth because I’m not swimming in money.”

Grayson sighs, his eyes on the road. “I don’t know, Cate. Maybe she’s trying to help?”

“After everything she did to us?” I scoff. “Yeah, right.”

Grayson turns at the next intersection. “Look, I know Evelyn can be difficult—”

“Understatement of the century.”

“But can you guys at least *try* to get along? For Lyssa’s sake. You know how much she adores her.”

“Only because you let her spoil Lyssa rotten.”

Grayson shrugs. “It’s her first grandchild. It comes with the territory.”

I grumble. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Half an hour later, we finally enter the bar. Mac waves Grayson toward the stage in the back of the room.

I weave through the rows of wooden tables, fingering the black cloths draped over their tops. There are no real table settings, but stacks of napkins embroidered with the WGBC radio logo litter every surface, and tea lights adorn the beams on top of the ten-foot ceilings, giving the room a soft glow.

A smirk twitches at my lips. The place looks good. Not quite *The Last Five Years* charming, but close.

When I reach the stage, Grayson is hauling himself over the lip and dusting off. Our eyes settle on the DJ booth and mic, which are already cued up on stage right.

“Sorry we’re late,” Grayson says. “Traffic was murder.”

Mac, his coworker and the other DJ, waves him off. “No problem. We’re all good.”

He nods at me. “Nice to see you again. What’d you have to do to make him give up the cargo pants? Threaten to take a sledgehammer to his soundboard?” He winks.

I grin, leaning against the edge of the stage. “*Maybe.*”

Mac’s cobalt suit looks regal in the dimmed lighting and brings out the gold in his forest green eyes.

“Hey!” Grayson says. “I do have *some* pride here, you know. I’m the host, after all.”

“Which is why you have to look like one.”

Grayson opens his mouth, but I hold up a hand. “And no, cargo *doesn’t* go with everything. Especially not at a cocktail party.”

Grayson groans. “Fine, you win. But next time you want to play Barbie and Ken, I’m tagging Mac in instead.”

“Hey!” Mac says. “Just because I’m your best friend doesn’t mean—”

“Deal.” I grin.

Mac laughs. His gaze darts between us. “Are you *sure* you two aren’t married? You’ve gotten *way* too good at acting like it.”

My scowl melts into a frown and Grayson’s expression sobers.

” Mac, that’s not funny,” Grayson says. Mac holds up his hands. “I know, I know.” He grimaces. “Sorry.”

I roll my eyes. Grayson and I may have been together in college for a minute, but even before Lyssa came along and the craziness with his parents started, there was only one person I had ever considered marrying. But *she’s* not an option, anymore. “It’s fine.” I shrug, softening my gaze. “You guys have a party to host.”

“Right.” Mac clears his throat and scratches the back of his neck. “I’ll go open the doors.”

I blow out a breath as he walks away. Ugh. I knew coming here was a bad idea. But I’ve been out of the performing circuit, and without a consistent income, for almost ten years. At this point, I’ll try anything.

“Catie.”

The tips of my ears burn as Grayson stares down at me. “I know you don’t want to be here, but hold on.”

My hair flops over my face as I hang my head and sigh. Lifting my gaze, I wrap my jacket tighter around my shoulders. “You know, you don’t have to help me because you feel guilty.”

Grayson cringes and unwinds the cords of the headphones behind the turntables. “I’m not.”

“Really?” I scoff. “Then why? You know I’m doing my best.”

“So am I. We both want what’s best for our daughter and—”

“And what? I’m *trying*, Grayson. What more do you want?”

Grayson runs a hand down his face. “Cate, I know.” He looks away. “You’ve been healthy for so long, and you’re still struggling. You barely earn enough to make ends meet at the diner, you aren’t having luck anywhere else, and you haven’t auditioned in years.”

My hands fist. “An injury like mine isn’t something you just bounce back from, Grayson.”

“I know, but. . .”

“Say it.”

He fingers the switches on the turntables. “What if Lyssa came to stay with me for a while?”

I blanch. “What?”

He swallows. “Well, Lys and I have been talking.”

“Oh great, now you’re turning my daughter against me?”

“What? No!”

“Secret conversations, moving plans? What’s next, you’re gonna woo her with unlimited money? Oh, wait. Evelyn’s already doing that.”

“Catherine.” Grayson climbs down from the stage and stands next to me. “I would never try to take Lyssa from you. All I’m saying is, maybe it would help, not having to worry about her as much. Focus on yourself for a bit. Save to afford a car again. Let me worry about everything else.”

My eyes narrow. “You sound like your mother. Are you telling me you agree with her? Do you think I’m an unfit parent?”

“Absolutely not.” Grayson shakes his head so fast I wonder if it’s a top

“Lyssa couldn’t have a better mother.” He throws up his hands. “You know what, never mind. I don’t want to fight. Let’s try to get through this night, okay?”

I scrape my toe along the floor. “Fine. But that rep better be here.”

Before he can reply, guests stream into the bar. The thumping of bass, loud enough to make my ears bleed, swallows my words. After a few minutes, Grayson steps onstage and adjusts the mic stand.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. I’ll be your DJ for the evening, along with my friend Mac. Before we get started, I want to give a quick shout out to WGBC radio for hosting this event. Don’t forget to drop your donations in the various boxes around the room. All of tonight’s proceeds go to fund the fall production and performance camp supporting the next generation of entertainers.”

I fake a smile and wade through the sea of guests.

*Showtime.*

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During his first set break, Grayson finds me mingling through the crowd.

“Okay, time to make good on my promise.”

He leads me to a table and we sit across from a man with brown eyes and thick black brows and umber skin.

“Cate, meet Franklin Johnson. Frank, this is Catie.”

He nods. “Frank Johnson, at your service.”

I laugh and hold out my free hand. “I’m Catherine, Catherine Klarcken. But you can call me Catie.”

“Nice to meet you, Catie.” He grips my hand in a quick, firm shake and hands over his business card.

*BRIGHT LIGHT THEATER*

289 Tremont, Boston  
MA 02116

Franklin Johnson  
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

I study the card for a moment, then stare at him. “You’re the assistant stage manager?”

Grayson grins and stands up. “I’ll let you two get acquainted.”

Once he leaves, Frank smiles and turns to me. “Grayson tells me you’re a dancer?”

I wince and jiggle the ice in the empty rum and Coke glass Grayson had snagged for me on the way over.

“I used to be.” The confession lodges itself in my throat. I’m short of breath. Flashes of that night: the blinding lights, the full house, those stupid, flimsy silks. Please, not another flashback. I can’t take it.

*Breathe, Catie. Like your therapist said. Just breathe through it..*

“Are you all right?” His hand rests on my forearm.

Itchy heat creeps up my neck as I pull away and clear my throat. “Uh, yeah. I’m fine.”

He squints. “You sure?”

My fingers leave prints on the glass as I rest it on the tabletop. “Positive.” I cough. My palms dampen with sweat, but I shake the visions away. “Thinking.”

He smiles. “Penny for your thoughts?”

A tiny coin clinks on the table and I stifle a giggle. “Oh, nothing. My last gig.” My gaze drops to my glass. “I was an aerial dancer with a big tour company.”

“Really?” His expression perks up. “Which one?”

“La Bailarines de la Vida.”

His eyes widen. “You ever toured before?”

I shake my head. “I was a musical theater major in college. Dance was the emphasis. Before I’d mostly done musicals, ones with heavy dance roles, but still.”

He peppers me with questions, and by the time he’s done, I’ve gone through my entire résumé.

“Wow.” He whistles. “You’ve done a lot.”

I flush. “I guess so. I’m kinda between jobs, though.”

“You are? Perfect.”

“Excuse me?”

His cheeks darken. “Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that. Bright Light is having an open call for a show tomorrow. Will you come?”

My head snaps up; he’s grinning. “You’re serious?”

“As a Jackie.”

I snort at the *Legally Blonde* musical reference. “That would be great.” I pause. “So, what brings you here?”

“Hells, I mean, Ms. *Helmsworth* wanted me to scout out some new blood.”

My jaw unhinges. “Did you say Helmsworth? As in, Tony Award-winning director Gina Helmsworth? From Manhattan?” Holy cow, Grayson really does have friends in high places.

Frank presses his lips together. “One and the same.”

“I heard she was here, but I thought it was a rumor.”

Frank laughs. “Nope. She’s here all right.”

Now I *know* this is too good to be true. I swallow to clear my dry throat. “What is she doing in Boston?”

“Beats me.” He flags down a waitress and motions for a menu. “All I know is, six months ago the city threatened to bulldoze the theater if our ticket sales didn’t improve enough to renovate. The next week, she stormed in and declared herself the new director.”

“*No way.*”

“Mm. Sent the old one fleeing like a madman after chewing him out.”

“Yikes.” I cringe. “And what makes you think I would work for her?”

“You’re in between jobs, aren’t you?”

*Crap.* Suddenly it’s freezing in here. I hug my arms to my chest. “Yeah.”

“So, try out. Who knows? Might be your lucky break.”

I scoff. “Yeah, right. Gina Helmsworth, hire *me.*”

The bartender brings him a menu and I ask for a glass of water.

He shrugs and flips through the menu. “Hey, you know what they say.” His chair scrapes against the floor as he rises. “There’s no business like show business.”

I chuckle dryly. “Ha, ha, very funny.”

“Think about it.” Then he disappears into the crowd with the menu tucked under his arm.

My eyes flick between his receding form and the glossy business card. *There’s no way this is real.*

Forty-five minutes later, I force myself to focus on the awful music Grayson’s pumping through the sound system, and get lost in the crowd of strangers on the dance floor. I reach the edge of the stage as Grayson announces a break before the next set.

He waves and hops off the platform. “How’d it go?”

I smile, fiddling with Frank’s card in my jacket pocket. “He invited me to the call at Bright Light tomorrow.”

“Really?” Grayson says. “Great.” He grips my shoulder. “I told you this would work out.”

I laugh sheepishly. “Yeah, thanks to you.”

He shrugs. “No big deal. You know I’d do anything to help you.”

I dip my head. “I know.”

“When is the audition?”

My heart jumps. “Tomorrow.”

Grayson’s eyebrows meet his hairline and he whistles. “Damn. Tight fit.”

I nod. “Think I can do it?”

“Are you kidding?” He squeezes my shoulder. “If anyone can do it, you can.”

I blush. “Thanks.”

He smiles and checks the time on his phone. “It’s 8:30. I’ve got one more set, then we can get out of here and I’ll help you run lines.”

I nod. “Did your parents say how Lys is?”

“Evelyn called on my last break. She’s fine. We’re keeping her overnight.”

I frown. “Next time, please ask me if you’re going to have Lyssa spend the night. She’s my child, too.”

Grayson scowls and cuts his gaze to Mac, who switched with him. “I can’t win with you. I thought you’d be happy since we have more time to prepare. This has been hard on me too, you know.”

*It takes two to tango.* I close my eyes and count to ten before speaking. “For the last time, You. Had. A. Choice.” I thank God when my voice comes out level. Grayson grinds his teeth. “Catherine, I told you—”

“I don’t care. I know they’ve done a lot for us, but you can’t let them keep bulldozing you like this.”

His eyes blaze. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh? Don’t I? Tell me, Grayson, why would you want to continue being their puppet? Why let them back into her life?” My voice cracks, but I fight to keep my features steady.

“They gave me no choice!” he bellows.

Several eyes bore into us, and Mac glances our way. Grayson stares them down and gestures for his friend to continue spinning. He does, and the crowd slowly disperses.

“There’s *always* a choice, Grayson,” I say, quieter this time. “You made the wrong one.”

Grayson drops his head in his hands. “You don’t get it.”

I scoff. “No. I don’t. But please, enlighten me.”

“They threatened my *job*, Cate! They were going to drain my inheritance. Lyssa’s too, if I didn’t do this. I had to.” He shrugs. “I wanted to protect my family.”

“Money?” I raise an eyebrow. “After everything we’ve been through together, you’re betraying me for money? How could you?”

“I know this might be hard for you to believe.” He places a hand on top of mine.

I pull away. “Don’t touch me.”

“But I do care. All I want is for both of you to have your best chance.”

“No, you don’t,” I say. “You’re 32 years old, Grayson. Learn to say *no* for once.”

“Oh, like you’re so good at that. Why didn’t you say no to those aerial silks then, huh? You were *pregnant* for God’s sake!”

A strangled gasp escapes me and I stumble back. My face burns. I struggle against the panic roaring in my gut.

“How dare you?” I blink back the sting behind my eyelids. “How dare you throw that in my face?”

Grayson’s features crumble. “Oh, God.” He grasps my hand. “Catherine, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

I spin to face the crowd. “Don’t! Just don’t.”

“Catie, please!” His heavy footfalls shuffle behind mine as I shove toward the front of the venue.

“Go back to your set, Grayson.” I clutch my jacket to my chest and glower at him as my chin trembles. “You’ve done enough.”

He winces. “Catie, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll be waiting in the car.”

Throwing open the door, I stomp across the pavement.

## Chapter Two: Adaline

September 22

The auditorium bulges with people warming up like they're convinced snagging a lead in a local theater production is one step closer to Broadway. I guess I should've known, considering we managed to acquire the rights to the eighth-longest running show on the Great White Way.

As I hunch over my binder to inspect the audition schedule for the fifteenth time, the last line of *Defying Gravity* echoes through the theatre. I wince as the girl's voice cracks on the high notes.

Samantha, our assistant costume designer, nudges me and snickers. "Ouch, right?"

I set down my pencil and roll my eyes. "I'm surprised the windows didn't shatter."

Our associate choreographer, Maddy, chimes in from the seat behind me. "Since you're so critical, why don't you go up there and try it?"

I snort and swat her arm where it rests on the back of my seat. "Yeah, right." I swing back around and resume writing, hoping that will be the end. It's not.

Logan, the apprentice lighting designer moves to sit next to me.

*Shit.*

"Tell us again, Addie," he says. "Why *aren't* you trying to snag that role?"

*Because I haven't sung outside of my shower in forever. The last time . . .* I shudder. *That's* a memory I'd much rather stay buried. Forever.

I curl my fingers tighter around my pencil. "Me? Not my thing." I press the pencil against the paper, puncturing a hole through it.

"Why not?" Sam crosses her legs and smooths the paint splatters on her black tights. "You have the kick ass vocals for it."

I whip toward her. "*What?*"

She combs a long strand of thick, straight black hair from her brown eyes, exposing pale skin.

My mouth tightens into a scowl at her smirk. "How do you know?"

Logan crosses his arms. "You sing while you work."

My ears itch when the girls start giggling behind me. "I do not!"

"Yes, you do," Maddy says. "And you rock at it."

Sighing, I toss the binder down to face her. "How would you know, with those glued to your ears all the time?" I point at the lime-green headphones entangled in her loose, white-blond hair.

Her green eyes brighten. "I have the ears of an eagle."

"Come on, Addie." Sam places a hand on my shoulder. "We're joking."

"Speak for yourself." Logan's curly, dirty brown hair bounces as he shakes his head, looking up from his blueprints. "Adaline can sing circles around most of the people in this room. It's high time she owns it."

"Yeah!" Maddy adds.

"Me? As Elphaba?" I purse my lips as a jolt of excitement sparks over my spine. "When pigs fly."

"Don't you mean monkeys?" Sam jokes.

I scowl.

Logan opens his mouth.

I slip my phone from my pocket and hold it to my ear. "Hello? Oh, hey. What's up?" I put my hand over the speaker, mouth, *Sorry*, to my friends and get up.

They shoot me looks.

I scurry away before they can call my bluff. Once out of sight, I glance around for something, *anything*, to keep me busy until this whole nonsense blows over. I settle in the far corner of the theater as Maddy calls out.

"Addie? Where'd you go?"

*What does she want now?*

She yanks me toward the director's table, my binder in her hand. "Helmsworth wants the set schedule before auditions start."

"Now? But I—"

“Come on.”

I trip as she tugs on my arm one time too many. When I glare at her, she grins sheepishly.

“Sorry. But she’ll bite your head off if you keep her waiting.”

I sigh. “Fine.”

Once again, I shove my way through the crowd, and once again, I’m stopped by a familiar voice.

“Addie?”

My spine straightens and my features harden as I slowly turn toward the sound.

“Is that you?”

I nod mutely. I must be seeing things.

“Addie?” Maddy’s voice rings in my ears. “What are you—oh.”

A mess of blond curls bounces toward us.

“C-catie?” No. No way. This cannot be happening.

Her nervous laughter floats above the crowd. “Hi?”

I blink. Open my mouth. Close it. Warmth pulses through me, but I push it away. “What are you doing here?”

She shrugs, gesturing around the room. “Auditioning. What do you think?”

My long, dyed brown hair slaps against my cheeks when I shake my head. “No, I mean, what are you doing *here*? Like, at this *local* theater? I thought you were off touring with some fancy dance company.”

It comes out harsher than I mean it. Catie’s face matches her red leotard top. She looks down and toys with a loose thread on her tights.

“Oh, um . . .”

Why does she seem so nervous? If either of us should be making this situation more awkward than it already is, it’s me.

She clears her throat. “It didn’t work out.”

My eyes bulge, but I force my features back to neutral at the tears shimmering in her eyes.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. Maddy’s eyeing me. I clench my fists. Butterflies flutter in my stomach, but I shake them away.

In my wildest dreams, I couldn’t have imagined perfect Catie Klarcken getting fired from anything, let alone the dance company that accepted her before she finished her degree.

When we were younger, our friends used to call us the Dynamic Duo; me, the diva with the boldest voice, and her, the ballerina with lightning in her feet.

I place my hand on her shoulder. She grimaces. My grip loosens, but I don’t let go. This is the closest we’ve been since . . . never mind. At least it got her to look at me. That’s all that matters.

“Those people are idiots.” The venom in my voice surprises me. *Where did that come from?*

It gets a laugh out of her, though. A real one, however short. “Thanks, Lyn. It’s good to see you.”

“Y-you, too.” Fuck my stupid, unconfident vocal chords. I used to make fun of those girls who claimed their knees went weak at the sight of their significant other. Until Catie.

She smiles, giving my outfit a once-over and planting a hand on her hip. “Where’s your leotard? Aren’t you trying out?”

My shoes scuff against the carpet. “Um, I’m not.”

“Oh? Why no—”

“I’m the assistant director now.”

“The assistant. . .” She shakes her head, blue eyes wide. “But—”

“Catherine? Catherine Klarcken?” Franklin calls from the stairs to the stage.

“Coming!” She looks back with a sorrowful expression. “Hey, um, can we catch up afterward? You know, to talk? We haven’t spoken since. . .” The sentence dies.

I flinch. She’s right. We haven’t. I haven’t seen or heard from her since she left the dance program at the Manhattan Conservatory for Music and Dance (MACMA) before graduation. My throat goes dry and my palms sweat, as all the memories of that night come flooding back.

“Klarcken? Is Catherine Klarcken here?”

Catie pushes her shoulders back and flashes a camera-ready smile. “Wish me luck!” she says, bounding toward the stage.

“Break a leg,” I choke.

Maddy steps up and elbows my side, but, thank God, waits until Catie hands her music to the accompanist before speaking. “Sam underestimated you, *Lyn*.”

I fight the urge to stiffen at the sound of Catie’s nickname for me coming out of anyone else’s mouth. I haven’t heard it in so long. It feels foreign.

“You are *much* sneakier than we thought.”

I huff, waiting for my pulse to return to normal. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. Sure you don’t.”

I don’t let my eyes follow Catie any longer, training them on the far wall. Maddy whacks my shoulder.

“Ow!” I glower at her. “What the hell?”

“Hearts in your eyes.”

“Fuck no!” I jerk my binder from her hand and march toward the director’s table. “Come on, let’s go.”

Maddy’s Chuck Taylors pound against the carpet as she races after me. “Wait, what’s with your girlfriend?”

I freeze. The scratch of my nails on the plastic-coated cover of my binder echoes in my ears.

“She’s not my girl—”

Familiar chords reverberate off the theater walls. My eyes dart toward the stage. Catie opens her mouth and the bridge of *The Life I Never Led* from *Sister Act*—our song—floats over the crowd.

It’s beautiful. Just the way I remember. Her voice is light and clear, but not nearly as mesmerizing as the graceful steps she’s choreographed. They’re nothing outlandish. An arm stretched out here, a few steps stage right there, a change of focus on a new phrase. Each time she punctures a word with a little extra emotion, it’s another stab to my heart.

I close my eyes, letting the melody take me back in time. For a moment, it’s she and I. Before, well, everything. Before my heart tap danced every time our hands brushed. Before my hopes climbed higher when she laughed at one of my corny jokes, or scooted her sleeping bag a smidgen closer to mine whenever we hosted sleepovers in middle school. Before my world crumbled to pieces in an instant of cowardice. What I wouldn’t give to go back.

As the last notes fade into the walls, Maddy’s raspy voice jolts me back to the present. “Are you crying?”

*Huh?* I raise my hand to my cheek and my stomach twists when it comes away shiny. *Shit. Shit, shit, shit.* My gaze cuts to Catie, reorganizing her sheet music at the piano. If there’s anything more humiliating than my friends seeing me cry over that stupid, *stupid* song, it’s *her* seeing me cry over it.

“Addie?” Maddy asks. “Are you okay?”

I swipe my hand across my cheeks and take a deep breath. I need to fix this. I need to fix this *now*.

I square my shoulders and open my mouth, facing my friends where we’ve crowded in the back of the theater. Unfortunately, all my brain comes up with is, “Damn onions.”

Maddy cackles—though she slaps her palm over her mouth to muffle it when Gina swings around in her seat with a death-stare.

“Next!” she screeches

I smirk at Maddy’s stricken face. We didn’t nickname her Hellsworth for nothing.

Sam, who has stepped up behind me, along with Logan, shakes her head. “You are so whipped.”

“*I am not.*”

Logan mumbles, “What onions?”

Sam’s grin widens as she claps him on the back. “Exactly.”

His mouth stretches into a ghoulish grin.

I bolt out the back doors of the theater, not stopping when Hellsworth calls my name.

Yep. I’m fucked.

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I spend the rest of the two-hour audition block hiding in the bathroom, praying Catie didn't notice my major meltdown.

I set my binder on the counter. The clap of the cover echoes in the empty room, and a flash of anger surges through me. For a moment, I contemplate tossing the whole damn thing in the trash.

Most of the time, I'm content behind the scenes. When the stage lights go down and the curtain rises on opening night, I enjoy it. But the surge of excitement that ripples through the house every time someone opens their mouth to tackle a difficult song always brings me crashing back to earth. More than once, the green monster of jealousy has perched on my shoulder.

I should've been the one receiving standing ovations, rocking those famed ruby slippers.

Sometimes, I wonder if I made the right decision. What if I hadn't thrown it all away?

No. Not when every little thing—a dance step, a melody, a song choice—reminds me of her. Of her laughter and her spirit and the life we were supposed to have together. Worst of all, it reminds me of that damn night everything went to hell.

Dad told me often enough it would've been easier to give up theater. But who am I without it? In a way, I guess being backstage is a weird kind of compromise. If I don't leave theater, I can pretend I didn't leave her.

A vibration in my pocket startles me. I head for the door as I punch the passcode into my phone. Maddy's probably leading a witch hunt for me. My brow furrows when I look down at an unfamiliar jumble of digits.

**2:13 P.M. Unknown: Saw you rush out after the song**

**2:13 P.M. Unknown: R u ok?**

I run numbers over in my head as my fingers fly atop the keys, but this one is still coming up blank.

**2:14 P.M. Addie: Who is this?**

I push into the hall and head for the double doors leading to the parking lot.

**2:14 P.M. Unknown: Catie. I got a new phone since... Anyway, one of ur crew, Sandy? Gave me ur number**

The phone case crackles in my hand. Sam, little bitch! I should've known! What the hell am I supposed to do now?

**2:15 P.M. Unknown: Look, I didn't know you were going to be here. I wouldn't have sung it if I'd known.**

I laugh out loud. Is she kidding? There are millions, *millions*, of songs she could've chosen from and she had the gall to do *that one*? And not for a life-changing part, for a *local* audition. Guilt stabs me, but I shake my head, my fingers dancing over the keyboard.

**2:17 P.M. Addie: But after you did, you shouldn't have.**

I have every right to be mad. If the roles were reversed, well, *nothing* could make me sing it.

**2:17 P.M. Unknown: I was nervous and that song always makes me feel better.**

Pfft. Of course it does.

**2:18 P.M. Unknown: I'm sorry, ok? But I need this job**

I dig my car keys from my pocket. She isn't going to let this go.

**2:18 P.M. Addie: It's fine.**

**2:18 P.M. Unknown: Lyn, I'm sorry**

A horn honks behind me, and I throw the driver a nasty look as I pull out of the spot and turn into the street. I pick up my phone at the next stoplight, growling even as my heart taps in my chest.

**2:19 P.M. Addie: Whatever.**

Even as I type, it takes all my willpower not to turn the car around to go comfort her.

**2:19 P.M. Unknown: Do you still want to meet up? Tomrw? Mario's at 10?**

Dammit. *I can't go. Not after everything.*

**2:20 P.M. Unknown: Please??**

I imagine her adorable puppy dog expression. *Swish*. A blue text bubble I have no recollection of typing stares up at me.

**2:20 P.M. Addie: Make it 10:15**

Oh yeah. Totally fucked.