Secrets – The Prequel

Written By

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Chapter One – Nate

The first thing I smelled was smoke. The second was beer. The third was Vanessa Parker's strawberry shampoo.

The smoke and beer made total sense, but the shampoo didn't—at least not until I climbed out of my truck and spotted her sitting on the tailgate of Tyler Morgan's beat-up Ford.

A massive bonfire blazed in the middle of the field, its flames reaching high enough to light up half the county. Music blasted from someone's truck speakers, a chaotic blend of country mixed with whatever random tracks people requested next. Around the roaring fire, kids from school laughed, drank, flirted, and acted like graduation wasn't only a few short months away.

It was small-town Oklahoma at its absolute finest.

I shoved my hands deep into my jeans pockets and headed toward the crowd. Before I could even take three steps, somebody yelled over the noise.

"Nat! Your girlfriend's waiting."

A wave of laughter erupted from the group. I rolled my eyes, not slowing my pace. "She's not my girlfriend."

"That's not what she says!"

"That's because she's smarter than you," I shot back.

More laughter followed my answer. From her perch on the tailgate, Vanessa lifted her beer can in my direction. "Tell them, Moore."

"Tell them what?" I asked, finally reaching her.

"That you'd cry without me."

"Well, that's actually true."

She grinned, and the sudden sight of it hit me harder than it should have. Vanessa always smiled like she knew a secret nobody else was privy to. Maybe she did.

She hopped down off the tailgate and walked over to me. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, a faded Falcons hoodie hung loosely off one shoulder, and thick mud covered the bottoms of her boots. Most girls spent an hour getting ready for parties like this, but Vanessa looked like she'd wrestled a cow on the way here—and somehow, she still managed to look pretty.

"You took forever," she said, crossing her arms.

"I had work."

"You work too much."

"Says the girl who spent six hours helping her dad fix fences today."

"That’s different," she countered quickly.

"How?"

She paused, genuinely thinking about it for a second. "It just is."

I laughed, and she punched my arm in response. It wasn't hard, just enough to make a point—the exact same way she’d been doing it since we were ten years old.

For a moment, neither of us said anything. The fire crackled loudly, the music played on, and nearby, someone attempted a keg stand and immediately fell over. It was a perfectly normal Friday night.

Vanessa nudged my shoulder. "You bringing your guitar?"

I pointed back toward the cab of my truck. "Always."

Her face instantly lit up with that signature smile again. It wasn't because she just wanted to hear music; it was because she always wanted me to play. There was a big difference. Most people liked hearing music, but Vanessa liked hearing me. The realization made my chest feel strange and tight, so I quickly ignored it.

"Come on," she said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me toward the fire.

I let her lead the way. The truth was, if Vanessa Parker told me to walk into oncoming traffic, I’d probably just ask her which lane.

We claimed a spot near the edge of the flames, where the intense heat felt good against the cool spring air. Someone handed me a beer, and someone else yelled over to ask if I’d play a set later. I nodded to confirm.

Vanessa settled down beside me, close enough that our shoulders brushed. Nobody seemed to notice, or maybe everybody noticed and just didn't care. Around here, it was impossible to tell where the gossip ended and reality began.

"Can you believe graduation is almost here?" she asked, her eyes tracing the sparks flying up into the night sky.

"Nope."

"You scared?"

I blinked, turning to look at her. "Of graduation?"

"Of what's next."

The firelight danced across her features. For the first time all night, her smile was completely gone, and the sudden shift surprised me. Vanessa wasn't usually the serious type.

"Why would I be scared?" I asked.

She shrugged, looking down at her drink. "Because everybody keeps talking about the future."

I leaned back, trying to lighten the mood. "The future sounds like a problem for future Nat."

That brought her laugh back. "There he is."

"What?"

"The king of avoiding serious conversations."

"I don't avoid them."

"You absolutely avoid them," she insisted.

"Name one."

"The future."

"That's not a conversation," I argued.

"It literally is."

I opened my mouth to retort, closed it, and couldn't find a comeback.

She smiled triumphantly. "Thought so."

I hated when she won arguments, mostly because she usually did.

Around us, the music changed to a slower tempo and people started singing along. A couple began to dance near the fire, and someone launched an empty beer can out into the darkness of the surrounding field. For a brief moment, I looked around at the crowd and tried to imagine this all ending. These people. This town. These specific nights.

It felt entirely impossible. Life had always been dictated by this exact rhythm: football in the fall, bonfires in the spring, lake days in the summer. Repeat. The idea that any of it could actually change seemed ridiculous.

Vanessa followed my gaze, tracing the crowd before turning her eyes back to me. "What are you thinking?"

I looked at her—at the girl I’d known for almost my entire life. The girl who had sat next to me on the bus in elementary school, who knew every single secret I’d ever kept, and who somehow managed to be my best friend without ever making things complicated.

"Nothing," I lied.

She rolled her eyes. "Liar."

Maybe I was. But I wasn't ready to admit the truth out loud. Because for the first time in my life, I wasn't actually thinking about tonight. I was thinking about tomorrow—and for some reason, that terrified me.

Chapter Two – Nate

The next morning started with a text.

Vanessa: Wake up, loser.

I groaned, burying my face in my pillow before rolling over to look at the screen. Sunlight was already streaming aggressively through my bedroom window, making it impossible to ignore the fact that it was barely nine o'clock on a Saturday morning.

I unlocked my phone and typed back.

Me: People are sleeping.

The three typing dots appeared immediately.

Vanessa: Not anymore.

Me: Why?

Vanessa: Meet me at the lake.

Me: That's not a reason.

Vanessa: Ten o'clock.

Me: Vanessa—

Vanessa: Wear shorts.

And just like that, she stopped responding.

I stared at the screen for a few seconds, knowing there wasn't a single chance she was going to explain herself. That wasn't how Vanessa Parker operated. She loved surprises almost as much as she loved annoying me, and unfortunately, she'd spent the last seventeen years perfecting both.

By ten-thirty, I was pulling up and parking near the water's edge. Vanessa was already there, sitting cross-legged on the hood of her truck with a battered blue cooler resting right beside her. The moment she spotted my truck, a massive grin broke across her face.

"You're late," she called out.

"You said ten," I reminded her, shutting my door.

"It *is* ten."

I looked down at my watch and gave her a flat look. "Vanessa, it's ten-thirty."

"Exactly."

I sighed, shaking my head as I walked toward her. "You make absolutely no sense."

"Yet here you are."

It was a fair point. I climbed up the slight embankment and stopped by her front bumper. "What are we doing?"

She jumped down off the hood, her sneakers hitting the dirt with a soft thud. "Having a summer day."

"It's spring."

"Close enough."

"You seriously dragged me out here for that?"

"Yep."

I shook my head, but before I could mutter another complaint, she stepped up and linked her arm firmly through mine. "Stop complaining."

The sudden warmth of her bare skin against mine sent an unexpected, sharp jolt straight through my chest. I immediately looked away, pretending not to notice. Unfortunately, pretending didn't make the feeling go away.

An hour later, we were both floating lazily in the middle of the lake. The bright Oklahoma sun reflected off the water, and the sky stretched in an endless, cloudless blue overhead. For the first time all week, everything felt completely quiet. There was no school, no work, and no lingering responsibilities. It was just me and Vanessa, exactly the way it had always been.

Suddenly, a wave of water hit me square in the face. I sputtered, wiping my eyes as Vanessa laughed.

"Really?" I gasped.

She just grinned, floating backward. I didn't hesitate; I slammed my hand against the surface, splashing her back. Five seconds later, a full-scale water war broke out between us. By the end of it, both of us were gasping for air and laughing too hard to even stay upright in the water.

Vanessa floated onto her back beside me, breathing hard, her face glowing with genuine happiness. For a quiet moment, I simply looked at her. Small water droplets clung to her eyelashes, and the midday sunlight caught the golden strands of her hair.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, I understood exactly why every single guy at school liked her.

The problem was, I wasn't supposed to notice that. Not her. Not Vanessa. She was my best friend, and the category should have ended right there. Instead, something felt entirely different today. Something I couldn't quite explain.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked, her eyes cutting over to me.

I looked away immediately, clearing my throat. "I'm not."

"You are."

"Nope."

"You totally are."

I groaned, splashing a tiny stream of water toward her. "You're impossible."

She laughed, and the sound of it echoed across the quiet water, my favorite sound in the world.

By the afternoon, we were sitting side-by-side on the wooden dock, eating turkey sandwiches from the cooler she'd packed. She had apparently planned this entire day out from start to finish. It was typical Vanessa.

"You know," she said, swinging her legs over the edge of the dock, "we should do this more often."

"We do this all the time."

"Not enough."

I smiled, taking a bite of my sandwich. "That's because you're needy."

Her jaw dropped in dramatic outrage. "I am not!"

"You called me nine times last week."

"I had things to tell you!"

"You saw me every day at school."

"Exactly."

I laughed, and she promptly kicked my foot in retaliation.

A gentle breeze shifted across the lake, carrying the faint, distant hum of a boat engine somewhere on the opposite shore. Everything felt incredibly easy. Simple. It was the exact kind of perfect day that people never truly appreciate until years later.

"Nat?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you think we'll be doing five years from now?"

There it was again. The future. Everybody suddenly seemed entirely obsessed with it.

I leaned back on my elbows, staring up at the sky. "I don't know."

"Guess."

"You first," I countered.

She paused, thinking about it seriously. "I'll probably be running some huge company."

I snorted. "You?"

"Absolutely."

"Doing what?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet."

I nodded, smiling. "Sounds about right."

She pointed a finger at me. "Your turn."

I looked back out across the wide water. Five years. It felt completely impossible to imagine, like trying to see beyond the physical horizon.

"Still here, probably," I said, the answer coming automatically. It was what everyone we knew did. They stayed.

Vanessa studied my face, and something unreadable and fleeting flickered across her eyes. Then she forced a smile. "Yeah."

But for some reason, she didn't sound entirely convinced.

The sun was finally beginning to set when we packed up the cooler. Vibrant orange and purple light stretched lazily across the lake, and the air began to cool down. Neither of us seemed to be in any hurry to leave.

Vanessa went and sat on the tailgate of her truck, and I climbed up to sit right beside her. Our shoulders touched, but neither of us moved away to create space. The resulting silence felt deeply comfortable, the rare kind of quiet you only shared with the people who knew everything about you.

After a while, she leaned over and gently rested her head against my shoulder.

My entire body instantly forgot how to function. She'd done it before... right? Probably. Maybe. Had she? Suddenly, my brain couldn't remember a single past detail. All I knew right then was that it felt entirely different now. Like something fundamental had shifted between us.

Neither of us spoke a word. The sun continued sinking lower, and a few birds drifted lazily across the darkening sky. For the first time in my life, I found myself wishing the day wouldn't end.

Vanessa let out a soft, contented sigh. "Best day ever."

I smiled into the dusk. "That's because you spent it with me."

She laughed softly against my shoulder. "Your ego is ridiculous."

"Yet you keep hanging out with me."

"Maybe because nobody else will."

I gasped in mock offense, making her grin. Then, the banter faded, and neither of us said anything else. We just sat there together on the tailgate, watching the sunset fade into twilight, neither one of us realizing that one day we'd look back on moments exactly like this and wish we could have them back.

Chapter Three – Nate

"You are absolutely cheating."

Vanessa laughed so hard she nearly dropped the giant, neon-pink stuffed bear hanging precariously from her arm. "I am not cheating!"

"You've won four games in a row," I pointed out, gesturing toward her growing collection of ridiculous prizes.

"Maybe you're just bad at carnival games."

"I'm not bad."

The skeptical, raised eyebrow look she gave me said otherwise. I hated that look, mostly because she was right. The county fair only came through town once a year, and somehow, Vanessa always managed to dominate every single game she played completely. Basketball toss, ring toss, balloon dart, bottle knockdown, it didn't matter. She walked away with prizes while I walked away with wounded pride and an empty wallet.

The fairgrounds buzzed with energy around us. Kids raced between the flashing neon rides, country music blasted from a distorted sound system, and the heavy, sweet smell of fried food hung thick in the warm evening air. This was Oklahoma. It wasn't fancy, and it wasn't special, but it was home.

Vanessa adjusted the massive stuffed bear under her arm, squeezing it tight. "I think he needs a name."

"The bear?"

"Obviously."

I looked at the smug expression on her face. "You named it already, didn't you?"

She smiled, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Maybe."

I groaned. "What is it?"

"Nathan."

I stopped dead in my tracks on the gravel path. "No."

"Yes."

"Absolutely not."

She laughed, the bright sound mixing effortlessly with the carnival music and the chatter of the crowd. For a second, I forgot to be annoyed, which was happening more often lately than I'd ever care to admit out loud.

"You sort of named a stuffed bear after me?" I asked, falling back into step beside her.

"You should be honored."

"I'm horrified."

She hooked her free arm through mine, pulling herself close. "Same thing."

I couldn't even find a witty comeback, mostly because she was pressed directly against my side. Lately, whenever she got this close, it seemed a hell of a lot harder to form a coherent thought.

We spent the next hour wandering aimlessly through the fairgrounds, sharing a plate of powdered-sugar-covered funnel cake, watching the little kids ride the carousel, and relentlessly making fun of each other. It was normal stuff. It was the exact kind of stuff we'd done our entire lives.

Except tonight felt different. It wasn't a big change, nothing dramatic enough to point out, just a collection of small things. It was the way her hand lingered a second too long on my arm. It was the hyper-awareness I suddenly had every single time she smiled. It was the way every guy who looked at her as we walked past suddenly irritated me.

Which was completely ridiculous. Vanessa could talk to whoever she wanted. She wasn't my girlfriend.

The problem was that my brain understood that perfectly. My stomach, apparently, didn't get the memo.

"Vanessa!" a voice called out from behind us.

She turned around, and I followed her gaze. A guy from the neighboring town's high school was jogging over to us. He was tall, clearly a baseball player based on his build, and undeniably good-looking. He was exactly the kind of guy I instantly disliked.

"Hey, Dylan," she said, offering a smile.

It was a polite smile. A generic smile. It wasn't *her* smile, the one she reserved for when she was being genuine or causing trouble. There was a distinct difference, and the fact that I was paying enough attention to know that now was deeply frustrating. Great. Just great.

The guy looked directly at her, completely bypassing me. Definitely bypassing me. "Didn't know you'd be here tonight."

Vanessa shrugged, shifting the giant bear. "It's the county fair. Everyone's here."

"True," Dylan said, rubbing the back of his neck before looking back up at her. "Hey, do you want to ride the Ferris wheel?"

I nearly choked on my lemonade.

Vanessa blinked, clearly caught off guard. She looked over at me, then back at him, her expression unreadable.

My chest tightened instantly. Why was I reacting like this? I tried to tell myself I had no idea, but that was a flat-out lie. I knew exactly why, and that realization scared the hell out of me. It meant I was starting to feel something I wasn't supposed to feel. Something friendship was never supposed to feel like.

The silence stretched between us for a heavy, awkward moment. Finally, Vanessa offered a polite, apologetic smile. "I'm kind of here with Nate."

The guy looked at me for the first time, his eyes widening slightly as if he'd just realized I existed. "Right."

His expression shifted immediately, hardening just a fraction as if he understood something. It was a look that suggested he saw something neither Vanessa nor I had completely figured out yet. "Maybe next time, then."

"Maybe," Vanessa replied.

He nodded and walked away, disappearing into the crowd. Vanessa watched him go for a second before turning her attention back to me. "What?"

I shrugged, taking another sip of my drink to look casual. "Nothing."

"You were glaring."

"I was not."

"You absolutely were."

"I don't glare," I insisted.

She let out a loud laugh. "Nate Moore, you glare at everything."

"That's not true."

"You glare at slow drivers."

"That's different."

"You glare at math homework."

"Also different."

"You glare at cows."

"Those cows started it," I muttered defensively.

Vanessa laughed so hard she nearly dropped Nathan the bear a second time. And just like that, the weird, tense moment completely disappeared. At least, it disappeared for her.

For me? Not so much. Because for the rest of the night, no matter how much we laughed or what games we played, I couldn't stop thinking about one specific image: the idea of Vanessa riding the Ferris wheel with somebody else.

And for the first time in my life, I absolutely hated it.

Chapter Four – Nate

Three days after the county fair, Vanessa showed up at my house with a mission, which was never a good sign.

I was helping Dad repair a broken section of the perimeter fence when her truck came bouncing down our long dirt driveway, kicking up a massive cloud of dust. The second she climbed out of the cab, I knew whatever she had planned for the afternoon wasn't optional.

"Nate!" she called out, slamming the door.

Dad glanced up from the posthole digger, wiping sweat from his brow. "Uh oh."

I nodded in grim agreement. "Exactly."

Vanessa marched across the yard toward us with a look of pure determination. "You're coming with me."

I leaned my weight against the sturdy fence post and crossed my arms. "No."

"Yes."

"I'm busy."

She looked pointedly at the half-finished fence, then at me, and finally shifted her gaze to my dad. "Can I borrow him?"

Dad grinned, immediately leaning the tool against the truck bed. "Please. Take him."

"Traitor," I muttered.

Vanessa smiled victoriously, throwing her hands up. "See? Your boss gave you the afternoon off."

I let out a heavy sigh, though I was already dusting the dirt off my jeans. "Fine."

"Good."

"Where are we going?"

"That's a surprise."

I hated surprises, mostly because Vanessa loved them so much, but I followed her to the truck anyway.

Twenty minutes later, we were parked on the highest point outside of town: Miller's Ridge. From up here, the entire world seemed to open up. You could see everything, vast green fields, winding dirt roads, and scattered farmhouses. The entire town looked tiny and quiet beneath the vast evening sky.

The sun was just beginning its descent, casting long streaks of vibrant orange and gold across the horizon. I climbed out of the passenger side and leaned against the front grille. "You drove all the way up here for a sunset?"

Vanessa shrugged, walking around to join me. "It's pretty."

I looked over at her, but she wasn't actually looking at the horizon. She was looking right at me. The realization hit me a lot harder than it should have.

"Why are you staring?" I asked.

She smiled, unbothered. "Why are you asking?"

"Because it's weird."

"You know what's weird?" she countered.

"What?"

"The fact that you've lived here your whole life and never come up here."

I looked around the ridge, taking it in. She had a point. The view was incredible. A warm wind brushed across the hilltop, carrying the distinct scent of fresh grass and early summer. For a while, neither of us said anything. We just climbed onto the hood of her truck, sitting side by side as the sun sank lower.

The silence felt deeply comfortable. It always did with Vanessa, and that was one of the things I loved most about her.

The realization appeared so suddenly in my mind that I nearly choked on it. *Loved.* Not liked. Not cared about as a friend. *Loved.*

My stomach dropped into a hollow pit. *Oh. Oh no.*

Vanessa bumped her shoulder against mine, breaking my sudden panic. "You okay?"

"Yep."

"You sure?"

"Nope."

She laughed, and the sound immediately made me smile, which wasn't helping my situation at all. Not even a little bit.

As darkness finally settled over the ridge, the stars began appearing overhead. First one, then another, until dozens of bright pinpricks filled the sky, the kind of view you only got when you were miles away from the city lights.

Vanessa shifted, stretching out flat across the hood of the truck to look up. I followed her lead a moment later, lying back with my hands behind my head. Soon, we were lying side by side, staring upward into the dark expanse, close enough that our arms occasionally brushed against each other. Every single time they did, my heart completely forgot how to function.

"Can I ask you something?" she asked softly into the dark.

I glanced over at her profile. "When have you ever asked permission?"

She smiled, acknowledging the fair point, but then her expression softened into something more serious. "What happened at the fair?"

My stomach tightened instantly. "What do you mean?"

"Dylan."

Of course she meant Dylan. I looked back up at the stars, a heavy feeling settling in my chest. Nothing good could possibly come from this conversation. "Nothing happened."

"You hated him."

"I didn't hate him."

"You absolutely hated him, Nat."

I groaned, unable to defend myself, and Vanessa let out a soft laugh. Then, her voice became much quieter, dropping to a near whisper. "Why?"

The question lingered between us, heavy and terrifying. Because suddenly, I knew the exact answer. I just wasn't sure I was brave enough to say it out loud. The wind drifted across the ridge, and somewhere far below, the faint headlights of a truck moved along a distant road. Vanessa waited, patient, the way she always was with me.

Finally, I exhaled the breath I'd been holding. "I didn't want you riding the Ferris wheel with him."

A long silence followed. Then, a very quiet, "Oh."

I turned my head toward her. She was staring at me now, really staring, and for the first time all evening, neither of us looked away. My pulse pounded in my ears. Everything suddenly felt too quiet, too still, like the entire world had stopped rotating on its axis.

Vanessa swallowed hard. "You didn't?"

I shook my head. "No." The word barely made it past my throat.

A smile broke across her face. It wasn't a teasing smile, and it wasn't sarcastic. It was a nervous, fragile smile, and somehow that scared me more than anything else, because Vanessa Parker was never nervous.

"Good," she whispered.

My heart nearly stopped. "Good?"

She nodded. "Because I didn't want to ride it with him, either."

Neither of us moved, and neither of us spoke. The physical distance between us suddenly felt a lot smaller, and the air grew heavier, charged with an energy that neither of us could stop.

Vanessa's eyes flicked down to my mouth for a split second before darting back to my eyes. And just like that, every logical thought disappeared from my brain. I leaned forward, moving slowly, giving her every single chance to pull back or stop me.

She didn't. Instead, she met me halfway.

The kiss was soft, a little awkward at first, and entirely perfect. It lasted maybe three seconds, maybe thirty, I had absolutely no idea. All I knew was that when we finally pulled apart, neither of us could stop smiling.

Vanessa laughed first, a breathless, nervous little sound. "Well."

I laughed too, the relief washing over me. "Yeah."

"That happened."

"Definitely happened."

She shook her head, a familiar spark returning to her eyes. "About time."

I blinked, caught off guard. "About time?"

She rolled her eyes playfully. "Nate Moore, half the town thought we'd kiss before eighth grade."

I let out a real laugh, and the lingering tension disappeared instantly. Just like that, we were us again. Except we weren't, not really, because everything had fundamentally changed.

Vanessa scooted closer, resting her head comfortably against my shoulder. This time, I didn't freeze; I wrapped my arm securely around her, pulling her in. The movement felt completely natural, like it was something we should have been doing forever.

The stars stretched endlessly overhead, and the distant lights of the town glowed softly below us. For the first time in my life, I wasn't worried about tomorrow. Right then, I had

everything I could ever want: Vanessa, home, summer, and a future that still felt beautifully simple.

I just didn't know how quickly that future could change.

Chapter Five – Nate

By Monday afternoon, everyone knew. I had absolutely no idea how. Vanessa and I hadn’t posted anything online, we hadn’t told a soul, and we hadn’t even gone on an actual date yet. Yet somehow, the moment I walked into the local diner, Tyler Morgan looked up from his menu and yelled, "Finally!"

Half the diner cheered, and I immediately regretted existing.

Vanessa appeared beside me a second later, her eyes wide. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," I whispered frantically.

"You had to do something."

Tyler pointed an accusing finger at us from the booth. "You two kissed!"

Vanessa froze. I froze. The diner absolutely erupted.

"Oh my God, look at their faces!" someone shouted.

"They're admitting it!"

"About time!"

I groaned, tossing my head back as Vanessa buried her face in my shoulder. Of course, that only made things worse; the cheering instantly got louder.

"Seriously?" I asked, looking around at the crowd.

Tyler laughed, walking past us. "Nate, my parents have been taking bets on when this would happen."

"My grandma too," someone else chimed in from the crowd.

Vanessa looked up, blinking. "Your grandma?"

"She picked sophomore year."

The entire diner lost it. I glanced down at Vanessa, expecting her to be mortified, but she was laughing so hard she could barely breathe. And suddenly, I didn't care about the teasing anymore. Because she was happy. Because she was standing beside me. Because for the first time in my life, I didn't have to pretend she was just my friend.

That felt pretty damn good.

The weirdest part about dating Vanessa wasn't the relationship itself; it was realizing that absolutely nothing had changed. We still texted constantly, still spent every afternoon together,

still annoyed each other, and still argued over the stupidest things. The only real difference was that now I could hold her hand. And apparently, I never wanted to stop.

Three days later, we were sitting in my truck outside Sonic. Vanessa's feet were propped up on the dashboard, a shared milkshake sat between us, and the radio played softly in the background. Outside, the Oklahoma sunset painted everything in shades of gold.

"This is romantic," she murmured, looking out the window.

I looked around the paved drive-in lot. "We're literally eating cheese sticks."

"Exactly."

I laughed as she reached over and stole one right off my tray. "Hey!"

"Boyfriend tax," she said easily.

"You just made that up."

"I absolutely did."

I shook my head, but she just smiled. The word *boyfriend* still sounded a little strange coming from her. It wasn't a bad feeling, just strange. It felt like wearing a new pair of leather boots, comfortable, but not entirely broken in yet.

"You know what I like?" she asked after a moment.

"What?"

"Nothing changed."

I glanced over at her. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged, leaning her head back against the seat. "We're still us."

That made me smile, mostly because I'd been thinking the exact same thing. There was no pressure, no awkwardness, and no pretending. It was still Vanessa, still my favorite person in the world. Now, I just got to kiss her, which seemed like a pretty great deal to me.

Friday night found us on a dirt road just outside of town. It wasn't because we had specific plans, but rather because that's just what people did around here, you drove, you talked, and you watched the stars.

The truck sat parked in the middle of nowhere with the windows rolled down, allowing the warm summer air to roll through the cab while country music drifted quietly from the speakers. Vanessa curled up against my side, her head resting heavily on my shoulder. I played with her fingers absentmindedly as a comfortable silence settled between us.

Eventually, she broke it. "Do you ever think about leaving?"

The question caught me completely off guard. "Leaving what?"

"Here."

I looked out the windshield. Fields stretched out endlessly into the darkness. This was home, everything I'd ever known.

"No," I answered. The word came easily, honestly. Because why would I? My family was here, my friends were here, and Vanessa was here. Everything that mattered to me was within a twenty-mile radius.

She nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on the horizon. "Me either."

But something about the way she said it made me glance over. She was staring out the window, deep in thought, and I wondered what was actually going through her head. Then, she caught me looking.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Liar."

I smiled and looked back at the road. Maybe she was right; maybe I was thinking about something. Specifically, the fact that every time I looked at her lately, I felt like the luckiest guy in Oklahoma. It was cheesy, I knew, but it was true.

The first time I told her I loved her happened entirely by accident. At least, that's what I told myself afterward to keep from panicking.

We were at another bonfire, a smaller one this time with just a handful of our close friends. Someone eventually handed me my guitar, making the familiar request: "Play something, Moore."

Vanessa immediately came over and sat right beside me. Of course she did; she always did. I started strumming a few chords, and the chatter around the fire gradually faded as the music took over. For a little while, everything felt completely perfect.

When I finished the song, everyone clapped, and a few people shouted for another one. I just laughed and handed the guitar back to its owner. Vanessa leaned into my side, wrapping her arms around me.

"That one's my favorite," she whispered.

"You say that about every song."

"Because they're all my favorite."

I smiled. Then, without thinking, I kissed the top of her head. "Love you too."

The words slipped out before my brain could even register them, let alone stop them.

Sudden silence fell, not from the people around the fire, but between the two of us. Vanessa slowly tilted her head back to look at me, and my stomach instantly dropped. Well, there it was. I opened my mouth to backpedal, but nothing came out. For the first time in my life, I had absolutely no idea what to say.

Then, she smiled. It was a soft, genuine smile, the kind meant only for me.

"I love you too," she said.

Everything inside me suddenly settled, like a final puzzle piece finding exactly where it belonged. Around us, the fire crackled, the music played on, and our friends laughed at some joke I didn't hear. For a few seconds, it felt like none of them existed. There was only Vanessa, and the sudden realization that somehow, somewhere along the way, my best friend had become the person I couldn't imagine living without.

At seventeen, that felt like forever. And at seventeen, forever seemed easy.

Chapter Six – Nate

The first couple of weeks of summer felt like freedom. There were no alarms, no homework, and no teachers, just long days, warm nights, and Vanessa. Mostly Vanessa. Not that I was complaining. Three weeks into summer break, she'd somehow become part of my daily routine. I woke up to her texts, spent afternoons with her, and talked to her before bed. Somewhere between being best friends and dating, she'd become the first person I wanted to tell everything to, and the last person I wanted to talk to every night. The scary part? I was pretty sure she felt the same way.

"You've got ten seconds."

I glanced up from the engine I was helping Dad repair. "Ten seconds for what?"

Vanessa stood beside the truck wearing denim shorts and a tank top. She looked way too pleased with herself. "For you to get in the truck."

"No."

"Nine."

I laughed. "Vanessa—"

"Eight."

Dad immediately walked away. Coward.

"Seriously?"

"Seven."

"You're ridiculous."

"Six."

I tossed the wrench onto the workbench. "Fine."

Her smile appeared instantly. "Good choice."

"Where are we going?"

She pointed toward her truck. "Lake."

"Again?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Honestly? It wasn't. The lake had become our place. Not officially, nobody had declared it, but somehow we always ended up there. Swimming, talking, doing absolutely nothing; it didn't matter as long as we were together.

That afternoon, we stretched out on a blanket near the water. The sun warmed our skin while a light breeze drifted across the shore. Vanessa rested her head on my chest, and I played with her hair. Neither of us spoke. The silence felt nice and comfortable.

Eventually, she looked up. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

"No clue."

"The day after?"

"No clue."

"The day after that?"

I laughed. "Still no clue."

She smiled. "I like that."

"What?"

"Not having plans."

I understood exactly what she meant. Life moved slowly here. Nobody rushed, and nobody worried about schedules. Summer simply happened, one sunset at a time, one lake day at a time, one memory at a time. Back then, it felt like it would last forever.

That night, a bunch of friends gathered at Tyler's house. His parents were away, which meant half the county somehow ended up there. Music blasted from the backyard, people crowded around coolers, someone started a cornhole tournament, and someone else was already drunk. It was a typical summer night.

Vanessa sat beside me on the porch swing, her legs draped across mine. Every now and then she'd steal my drink, and every now and then I'd steal hers. Nobody questioned it anymore. We were together, simple as that.

Tyler walked outside, looked at us, and shook his head.

"What?" I asked.

He pointed. "You two."

Vanessa narrowed her eyes. "What about us?"

"You make me sick."

She laughed. "Why?"

"Because you're disgustingly happy."

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Sounds like jealousy."

"It is jealousy."

Vanessa grinned. "At least you're honest."

Tyler disappeared back inside. We laughed, then settled into another comfortable silence. The stars stretched overhead as the music drifted through the night air. Vanessa rested her head against my shoulder, and I wondered if life could get any better than this. At seventeen, I couldn't imagine how.

Around midnight, the crowd started thinning out. People left in groups, and cars disappeared down dark country roads until eventually only a handful of us remained. The fire burned low, and crickets filled the silence. Vanessa and I ended up sitting alone near the edge of the yard, far enough away from everyone else that the conversations faded into background noise.

She looked up at the sky. "You know what scares me?"

That got my attention. Vanessa wasn't afraid of much. "What?"

She thought for a moment, then smiled softly. "Nothing."

"That's not an answer."

"It kind of is."

I studied her face. Something felt different, not bad, just thoughtful, like she'd been carrying around an idea she hadn't shared yet. "Tell me."

She sighed. "I think sometimes things are so good that it feels impossible they can stay that way."

The words landed harder than they should have, maybe because I'd felt the same thing lately. Not fear exactly, just awareness. Like I knew these moments mattered, and like I knew someday we'd look back on them.

I took her hand. "They'll stay this way."

Her eyes met mine. "You promise?"

The question sounded innocent and simple, but something about it made my chest tighten. Promises felt bigger when they came from Vanessa. More important.

"I promise."

She smiled, then leaned forward and kissed me. It was soft and sweet—the kind of kiss that made everything else disappear. For a moment, there was only us. No future, no worries, no dreams pulling us in different directions. Just a boy, a girl, and a summer night in Oklahoma.

When the kiss ended, she rested her forehead against mine. "I believe you."

I smiled. "Good."

Looking back now, that's the thing I remember most. Not the party, not the music, not the fire. Just the way she looked at me when she said it, like she trusted me completely, like she believed every promise I made. And at seventeen, I believed them too.

Chapter Seven – Nate

The bonfire was already raging when I pulled into the field. Music blasted from somebody's speakers, and truck headlights illuminated clusters of people scattered across the grass as laughter carried through the warm summer air. It was the same scene, the same people, and the same town. Yet somehow, everything felt different now.

Maybe it was because Vanessa was my girlfriend. Maybe it was because every time I saw her, my entire day got better. Or maybe it was just because summer was slipping by faster than I wanted to admit.

I spotted her immediately; I always did. She stood near the fire talking with a group of friends, and the moment she saw my truck, she smiled. Just like that, nothing else mattered.

Two hours later, the party was in full swing. Someone had started a drinking game, a few people were dancing badly, and Tyler was currently attempting to convince everyone he could jump over the fire. Nobody supported this plan, especially not the people who valued his eyebrows.

Vanessa sat beside me on a folding chair, her hand resting comfortably in mine. Every now and then she'd lean against my shoulder, and every now and then I'd catch myself staring at her. Neither of us seemed interested in being anywhere else.

Eventually, she nudged me. "Let's get out of here."

I looked around. The party showed no signs of slowing down. "Where are we going?"

She pointed toward my truck, and a smile tugged at my lips. "Good idea."

The bed of my pickup had become our favorite place. It wasn't because it was comfortable, it absolutely wasn't, but because it felt like *our* place. A couple of old blankets were spread across the back under the Oklahoma sky, where thousands of stars stretched overhead.

As the distant sounds of the party faded into the background, Vanessa curled against my side beneath one of the blankets, resting her head on my chest while my arm wrapped around her shoulders. For a while, neither of us said anything. We simply listened to the crickets, watched the stars, and enjoyed being together. It was simple. It was perfect.

"Do you remember third grade?" she asked suddenly.

I laughed. "That's random."

"Answer the question."

I thought for a moment. "Barely."

"You cried when Mrs. Cooper moved your seat."

"That is not true."

Vanessa sat up, looking down at me. "It absolutely is."

"I did not cry."

"You did."

"I was seven," I protested.

"You cried."

I groaned, and Vanessa laughed. The sound echoed beautifully through the darkness. God, I loved that laugh.

Hours passed as the party grew quieter. People left, the fire burned lower, but still we stayed there, talking about everything and nothing at all. We shared favorite memories, embarrassing stories, future plans, dreams, and fears, the kinds of conversations that only happen after midnight when the rest of the world finally slows down.

At some point, Vanessa became quiet. I glanced down and saw her staring up at the stars.

"What are you thinking about?"

She smiled softly. "Us."

My heart did that thing again, the thing it always did around her. "What about us?"

She shrugged, her fingers intertwining with mine. "I don't know. I just like this."

"This?"

"Being together."

I squeezed her hand. "Me too."

She looked up, and our eyes met. The world felt very small all of a sudden. The noise, the party, everything else disappeared until there was only Vanessa. There had always been Vanessa. I kissed her gently, and she smiled against my lips before settling back against my chest. We pulled the blanket over ourselves to block out the world.

The next thing I knew, harsh sunlight was hitting my face. I groaned, shifting as Vanessa moved beside me. She was still tucked against my side, still wrapped in the blanket, and still fast asleep. For a moment, I simply looked at her. The morning light caught in her blonde hair, and a peaceful smile rested on her lips. She looked beautiful, not because of makeup or clothes, but just because she was Vanessa. The girl I'd known forever. The girl I loved.

A truck horn suddenly blasted, shattering the quiet. Vanessa jumped, and I nearly fell out of the truck bed as booming laughter erupted from below.

I peered over the edge to see Tyler, of course, along with half our friend group. Every single one of them was grinning. Thankfully, we had our clothes back on, maybe not the right way, or inside out, but we were dressed.

"Oh my God," Vanessa muttered, burying her face in my shoulder.

Tyler pointed upward dramatically. "Well, well, well."

"Shut up," I called down.

"You two spent the whole night up there?"

"Shut up, Tyler."

The grin on his face only grew. "You are never beating the married-couple allegations."

Everyone laughed, and eventually, even Vanessa joined in, though her face remained bright red. Mine probably wasn't much better.

As the group continued teasing us, Vanessa slipped her hand back into mine. I looked down, and she smiled. Suddenly, I knew this would become one of those memories, one of those moments people talk about years later, the kind that never really leaves you. It felt like a song waiting to be written.

Back then, I didn't know there would be stadiums, or tours, or Vesper Five. I didn't know millions of people would one day hear the words inspired by this exact night. All I knew right then was that the girl beside me was smiling, the sun was rising, and for one perfect summer night, the world had stood still.

Chapter Eight – Nate

The next county over fair's stage wasn't much. It consisted of a few flickering spotlights, two temperamental speakers that worked only when they felt like it, and a rusted microphone stand older than I was. I'd played there every summer since I was fourteen, usually performing for a crowd of twenty people, maybe thirty, if somebody's grandma forced them to sit down and listen.

Tonight looked no different. Across the dirt lot, kids sprinted between the neon-lit rides, parents chased after stray toddlers, and groups of teenagers clustered near the games, pretending they were entirely too cool to be there. It was the same fair, the same town, and the same life I had always known. Yet, for some entirely unknown reason, standing there backstage, my chest tightened with a sudden wave of nerves.

"You're pacing."

I turned around at the sound of the voice. Vanessa was standing just a few feet away, holding out two plastic cups of lemonade.

"Am not," I lied.

"You absolutely are." She stepped closer and handed me one of the cups. "You've done this a hundred times, Nate."

"Not a hundred."

"Eighty-seven?"

I managed a small smirk. "That sounds more accurate."

She laughed, and God, I loved that laugh. It was loud and genuine, completely erasing the tension in my shoulders. "You'll be great," she promised.

"I know."

Vanessa lifted a single, amused eyebrow. "Confident today, are we?"

I shrugged, looking down at her. "Because you're here."

The brilliant smile she gave me in return nearly made me forget I had a performance to give. *Almost.* Before I could lose myself in the thought, a bored fair volunteer waved a hand in my direction, gesturing me toward the steps. Showtime.

The first song went well enough, the chords ringing out clear through the humid evening air. The second went even better. By the time I struck the opening notes of the third song, I'd

completely stopped paying attention to the crowd in front of me. That was always when music felt the best, when everything else just disappeared. There were no expectations, no looming worries, and no pressures. There was just the sound, the feeling, and the absolute freedom of it. For a few beautiful minutes, I wasn't just Nate Moore from Oklahoma. I was just me.

When the final chord eventually faded into the night, a surprisingly loud wave of applause echoed across the fairgrounds. It wasn't a crowded stadium, and it certainly wasn't a sold-out arena; it was just a small-town crowd clapping under the string lights. But it felt good anyway. Really, really good.

I climbed down off the wooden stage, still smiling from the adrenaline, and Vanessa immediately threw her arms around my neck. "You were incredible!"

I laughed, wrapping my arms around her waist. "You say that every time."

"Because it's true every time."

Before I could answer her, a deep voice cut through the noise, interrupting us. "You write those songs yourself?"

I turned toward the sound. A man was standing a few feet away in the shadows of the backstage tent. He looked to be in his late thirties, wearing casual clothes with a worn guitar case slung over one shoulder. He was definitely not from around here.

"Most of them," I replied, shifting slightly.

His expression changed then. It wasn't one of polite impression; it was genuine interest. Which, for some reason, felt a whole lot bigger.

"That's rare," he said simply.

I shrugged, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "Guess."

"No." He pointed a finger back toward the empty stage. "That's not guessing."

For a long moment, he just looked at me, his eyes tracking my face as if he were trying to figure out a difficult puzzle. Then, he asked, "What are your plans after summer?"

The abrupt question caught me entirely off guard. I blinked, momentarily losing my train of thought, and glanced at Vanessa for support before looking back at the stranger. "Stay here, I guess."

The man stared at me, deadpan, and then slowly shook his head.

"What?" I asked, a bit defensive.

He let out a short laugh. "Nothing."

"No, seriously. What?"

He adjusted the heavy strap of his guitar case on his shoulder, a faint, knowing smile playing on his lips. "Just seems like a waste."

My stomach tightened instantly at the word. "A waste?"

The man pointed back toward the stage one last time. "You've got something, kid."

I opened my mouth to respond, but absolutely nothing came out. My throat had gone completely dry because nobody had ever said something like that to me before. Not like that. Not as if it actually mattered, and certainly not as if they genuinely, truly believed it.

The man turned and started walking away, blending into the heavy flow of the fair crowd. Then, he stopped, turning his head to throw one final sentence over his shoulder.

"Don't spend your life wondering what would've happened if you'd tried."

And then, just like that, he disappeared into the sea of people, leaving me standing there in the dirt. I was completely silent, trapped in my own head. For the first time in my entire life, I found myself genuinely wondering if Oklahoma was really the only future waiting for me.

Chapter Nine – Nate

I couldn't get the guy's words out of my head. Three days later, I was still thinking about them, or rather, I was hearing them, over and over, like a song stuck on repeat. *"You've got something, kid. Don't spend your life wondering what would've happened if you'd tried."*

The worst part? I didn't know why they bothered me so much. Maybe it was because nobody around here ever talked like that. People in this town talked about staying, working, and building a life. They didn't talk about chasing dreams. Dreams were things you had when you were a kid before you grew up. At least, that's what everyone seemed to believe, including me. Or, at least, I used to.

"You missed a spot."

I looked up to find Vanessa standing in the doorway of the feed store. Glancing back at the shelf I'd spent the last ten minutes stocking, I noticed a single bag sitting slightly crooked.

"Seriously?" I asked, looking back at her. "You came all the way here for that?"

She smiled. "Yep."

I reached out and yanked the bag into alignment. "There."

"Proud of you."

I rolled my eyes as Vanessa laughed and hopped up onto the counter. The owner had long since given up trying to stop her from doing that. Honestly, half the town had given up trying to stop Vanessa from doing whatever she wanted.

She leaned forward, studying my face. "You're thinking again."

My stomach tightened instantly. "What?"

"That face," she said, pointing a finger at me.

"What face?"

"The one where you're pretending everything is normal."

I hated that she knew me so well. "What if everything *is* normal?"

She just stared at me, and I stared right back. The silence lasted all of three seconds before we both broke and laughed.

"You're terrible at lying," she said.

"Maybe."

Her smile softened, her eyes turning gentle. "What is it?"

I thought about telling her. I almost did. But I stopped myself because saying it out loud would make it real, and I wasn't ready for that. Not yet. "Nothing."

She clearly didn't believe me, but she let it go, for now.

That night, I sat on my bedroom floor with my guitar resting in my lap and my notebook open beside me. The house was entirely quiet. Dad had gone to bed an hour ago, and Mom was reading down the hall in the living room. Outside, crickets sang a steady chorus through the darkness.

I strummed a few chords, and then a few more. Slowly, something started forming. It was a melody, not perfect, and definitely not finished, but it was something. I grabbed my pen, and the words came easier than usual. It wasn't because I knew what I wanted to say, but rather because I didn't. Confusion has a funny way of turning into music.

Thirty minutes later, my phone buzzed on the carpet.

Vanessa: What are you doing?

I smiled and typed back:

Me: Writing.

The reply came instantly.

Vanessa: Liar.

Me: Rude.

Vanessa: You're thinking.

I stared at the screen for a moment before replying:

Me: Maybe.

The three little dots appeared, disappeared, and returned again. Finally, her text popped up:

Vanessa: Want company?

My answer took less than a second.

Me: Always.

Twenty minutes later, she was climbing through my bedroom window, just like she'd done a hundred times before. Maybe more. At this point, my parents barely even reacted; Mom had actually waved to her when Vanessa walked through the kitchen earlier.

Vanessa dropped onto my bed, kicking her shoes off. "Okay."

I sat back in my desk chair, resting my hands on the guitar. "Okay what?"

"Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

She pointed a finger at me. "The thing."

I laughed. "Very specific."

"You know what I mean."

Unfortunately, I did. I stared down at my guitar, the strings catching the dim light of my desk lamp. The words felt stupid now, small and embarrassing. But this was Vanessa. If I couldn't tell her, I couldn't tell anybody.

"There was this guy at the fair," I began slowly.

Her expression immediately sharpened. "What guy?"

I explained it all to her. The musician, the conversation, the comments he'd made afterward—everything. Vanessa listened without interrupting, without judging, and without a single trace of laughter. When I finally finished, she remained quiet for a long moment, processing it all.

Then she asked, "Do you believe him?"

The question hit harder than I expected because, deep down, I didn't know. Not really. Maybe. A little. Enough to scare me. "I don't know."

"Nate."

I looked up. Her eyes met mine, steady and certain, the way they always were.

"You know what I think?" she asked.

"What?"

"I think he was right."

The room went dead silent. My chest tightened. "What?"

She smiled—a small, proud smile, like she'd been waiting years to finally say it out loud. "I think you're talented."

I let out a nervous laugh, shaking my head. "Vanessa—"

"No." She shook her head, her smile disappearing into something fiercely serious. "I'm serious. What happens when you sing?"

I frowned, caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "When you sing, people stop talking. When you play, people listen. When you write songs, people feel things." Her voice softened, losing its edge but gaining weight. "I've seen it my whole life, Nate."

The room suddenly felt too small, too quiet. This wasn't some stranger at a fair anymore. This was Vanessa, the person whose opinion mattered more than anyone else's in the world.

"I don't know what that means," I whispered.

She smiled sadly. "I think you do."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The future sat heavily between us, unspoken, uncertain, and waiting. Finally, I looked away, staring out the window toward the vast, dark Oklahoma sky.

"I've never even left the state," I admitted.

Vanessa laughed softly. "Then maybe that's the first thing you should change."

The words should have made me feel excited, but instead, they made my stomach twist into a hard knot. For the first time, leaving actually felt possible. And if leaving was possible... then so was losing everything I'd ever known, including her.

For the first time in my life, the future wasn't just a distant idea. It was standing right in front of me, and it was asking a question I wasn't ready to answer.

Chapter Ten – Nate

The problem with Vanessa Parker was that once she got an idea in her head, she refused to let it go. For an entire week, every single day, without fail, she brought up my music. She didn't do it in an annoying way, which somehow made it worse. Because she wasn't pushing; she genuinely believed in me. And I honestly didn't know what to do with that.

"You should post it," she said.

I looked up from my notebook. We were sitting beneath the giant oak tree near the lake. It was our spot, the place we'd gone since we were kids.

Vanessa stole a potato chip from my bag, chewed thoughtfully, and then pointed her greasy finger at the pages in my lap. "You should post that one."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because."

"That's not a reason."

"It is if I say it confidently," I countered.

She rolled her eyes. I loved it when she did that.

"You've written like twenty songs," she pressed.

"Twenty-three."

She stared at me, her brow furrowing. "You counted?"

"I count everything."

"That's weird."

"You're weird," I shrugged.

Vanessa leaned closer, close enough that I could smell her strawberry shampoo, close enough that my brain instantly stopped functioning correctly. "You ever think maybe somebody besides me should hear them?"

I laughed nervously. "You're somebody."

"No." She pointed a thumb at her chest. "I'm Vanessa."

She said it as if that explained everything. The scary part was it kind of did. Because Vanessa wasn't just *somebody*. She was my entire audience. My biggest fan, my toughest critic,

the first person I played every single song for. If she liked something, it mattered more than I'd ever admit to her.

That night, she finally convinced me to upload a video. Not publicly, not yet. Just online. One song, one recording, one tiny step.

I spent forty-five minutes arguing against it, another thirty minutes trying to get decent lighting in my bedroom, and then another fifteen minutes just complaining. Vanessa enjoyed every single second of my misery.

"Smile," she ordered, holding up the phone.

I glared at her.

She just grinned back. "Perfect."

"I hate you."

"No you don't."

Unfortunately, she was right.

I hit record, played the song, and sang the lyrics. Finished. Done. Simple. No big deal.

Except my heart was absolutely pounding afterward. Somehow, singing in front of a camera felt a hundred times scarier than singing in front of actual people.

"See?" Vanessa said, checking the file. "You survived."

"Barely."

Before I could change my mind, her thumb stabbed the screen. She hit upload.

"Vanessa!"

"Too late," she chirped, flashing me a mischievous look. "The video is live. Well, no taking it back now." My stomach immediately dropped into my shoes.

The next morning, I woke up to twelve missed texts.

My first thought was that something bad had happened. My second thought was that Tyler had probably been arrested. Again.

I unlocked my phone, only to find the notifications were all from the same person.

Vanessa: NAT **Vanessa:** WAKE UP **Vanessa:** OH MY GOD **Vanessa:** CALL ME **Vanessa:** NOW

I sat up immediately, the sheets tangling around my legs. Before I could even type a response, the phone started ringing in my hand. Vanessa. Of course.

"Hello?" I croaked, my voice thick with sleep.

"Did you see it?" her voice practically vibrated through the speaker.

I rubbed my eyes. "See what?"

"The video."

"What about it?"

There was a heavy pause on the line. Then, she whispered, "It has three thousand views."

I laughed, tossing my head back against the pillow. "No it doesn't."

"It does!"

"No."

"It literally does, Nate! Look!"

I scrambled to open the app, my thumb trembling over the icon. When the page loaded, I froze. The counter read three thousand one hundred and twenty-seven. My pulse gave a violent jump.

"What?" I breathed.

"I know!"

"What?"

"I KNOW!"

I just stared at the screen. Three thousand people. Three thousand *strangers*. For a kid from a town with fewer residents than that, it felt entirely impossible. My hands suddenly felt incredibly shaky.

"Nate?" Her voice softened, cutting through my panic. "What are you thinking?"

The truth? Everything. Nothing. Too much. Three thousand views wasn't fame. It wasn't success. It wasn't even close. But it was *enough*. It was enough to prove that people outside our tiny town might actually care. It was enough to make a distant dream feel real.

And real dreams were dangerous because they could actually happen.

That evening, we drove out to Miller's Ridge, the same place we'd had our first kiss, the same place where everything in the world seemed just a little bit bigger. The sunset stretched wide across the horizon in brilliant layers of orange, pink, and gold.

Vanessa sat beside me on the hood of her truck; her shoulder pressed firmly against mine. Neither of us spoke for a long time, just watching the colors fade.

Finally, she smiled and nudged me. "Proud of you."

I looked over at her. "For what?"

"For being brave."

I laughed softly, looking down at my sneakers. "Posting a song isn't brave."

"It is when you're terrified."

I couldn't argue with that, because I had been terrified. I still was.

Vanessa reached down, intertwining her fingers with mine. Her hand was warm. "What if this is the start?"

The question hung in the quiet evening air. I looked back toward the horizon, trying to peer into a future I couldn't quite see. "What if it is?"

She smiled, the kind of smile that always made me feel like anything in the world was possible. "Then we'll figure it out."

We. Such a small word. Such a powerful one.

Back then, every single future I imagined included Vanessa. Every dream, every plan, every tiny possibility. I couldn't picture a version of my life without her in it. And maybe that's why I wasn't afraid yet. Because I still believed we'd be doing all of it together.

I just didn't realize that some roads begin side by side and end somewhere completely different.

Chapter Eleven – Nate

The first person who ever called herself my agent drove a Ford pickup older than I was. Her name was Jane. According to Dad, anybody who introduced themselves as an agent was probably a scam artist.

"Sounds fake," he said.

I laughed. "Her name?"

"The whole thing."

Mom rolled her eyes from across the kitchen. "You think everybody's a scam artist."

Dad pointed a finger toward me. "That's how I stay alive."

I shook my head, and Vanessa laughed beside me. We'd spent the last week talking about the county fair performance, the video, the views, the messages. Then, two days ago, Jane had called. Apparently, she'd seen the video online. Apparently, she'd been asking around town. Apparently, she wanted to meet.

Which sounded ridiculous, until she actually showed up.

Jane wasn't what I expected. There was no expensive suit, no fancy office, and no Hollywood attitude. She wore just jeans and cowboy boots, backed by twenty years of experience booking musicians throughout Oklahoma and Texas. She met me at a small diner outside Tulsa. Vanessa came with me, mostly because she'd threatened bodily harm if I didn't let her.

Jane smiled when she saw us. "You must be Nate."

I nodded. "You must be Jane."

She laughed. "Good. You're not an idiot."

That was apparently how our professional relationship began. An hour later, my head was spinning. Jane slid a notebook across the table, and inside were dates, venues, and cities. These were actual paying gigs. Not county fairs, not school events, but real shows in Tulsa, Norman, Oklahoma City, Wichita Falls, Amarillo, and Lubbock—places I'd heard of but never imagined playing.

"You serious?" I asked.

Jane nodded. "People like your music."

My stomach tightened. It still felt weird hearing that. "Enough to pay for it?"

"Enough to buy tickets."

Vanessa squeezed my hand beneath the table, a gesture that grounded me instantly because everything suddenly felt overwhelming. These weren't dreams anymore. These were opportunities, actual opportunities, the kind that could change things.

The first show happened three weeks later at a small bar outside Oklahoma City. It was nothing glamorous, maybe sixty people, a tiny stage, terrible lighting, and sticky floors. It was the greatest place I'd ever seen.

I spent most of the afternoon pacing. Jane told me to relax, and Vanessa told me to stop being dramatic. Neither suggestion helped.

"What if they hate me?" I asked.

Vanessa looked up from her phone. "What if they don't?"

"What if I forget the lyrics?"

"You wrote them."

"Exactly."

She laughed, and I groaned. "You're not taking this seriously."

"Because you're going to be fine."

The confidence in her voice surprised me. It wasn't because she believed in me, she always did, but because she sounded so certain. More certain than I felt.

The crowd wasn't huge, but they listened. They actually listened, and that changed everything. For forty-five minutes, nobody talked over me, nobody ignored me, and nobody treated music like background noise. They just listened. When the final song ended, people stood. It wasn't everybody, and it wasn't a standing ovation, but it was just enough. It was enough to matter, enough to make my chest tighten, and enough to make me realize I wanted this. Really wanted this. Not as a hobby, and not as a dream, but as a life.

The realization scared me because I suddenly understood something: the more shows I played, the more I wanted.

Later that night, Vanessa and I sat in the bed of my truck outside the venue. The Oklahoma sky stretched endlessly overhead, and the parking lot had mostly emptied. For a while, neither of us spoke.

Finally, she smiled. "You were incredible."

I laughed. "You have to say that."

"No." She shook her head. "I don't."

The seriousness in her voice caught me off guard. Then she added, "You belong on a stage, Nate."

My heart squeezed because those were the exact words I wanted to hear, and the exact words I was afraid of. I looked toward the dark highway stretching into the distance, past Oklahoma, past Texas, and toward places I couldn't even imagine yet.

For the first time, I wasn't wondering if music could become something bigger. I knew it could. The question was how far I was willing to follow it, and whether the people I loved could follow too.

Chapter Twelve – Nate

The first time I spent an entire weekend away, Vanessa cried. It wasn’t because she was upset, and it wasn’t because we were fighting. She just laughed so hard she started crying when I called her from a depressing little motel room in Amarillo.

"You paid eighty dollars for this?" her voice crackled through the line.

I turned my phone, panning the camera around the room to give her the full, dismal tour. "Look at it."

The comforter looked older than I was, the wallpaper was peeling away from the drywall in damp strips, and something was making a rhythmic, aggressive buzzing sound from deep inside the air conditioner.

Vanessa immediately lost it. "Oh my God, Nate."

"It's not funny," I said, though I couldn't stop the grin tugging at my mouth.

"It absolutely is."

I let out a heavy sigh, tossing my keys onto the laminate table. "It smells weird, too."

That made her laugh even harder. For the next five minutes, she couldn't even form a coherent sentence. I sat on the edge of the squeaky mattress, listening to her breath catch, smiling like an idiot. Because even three hundred miles away, the sound of her voice still felt like home.

The Texas shows were bigger than the ones back in Oklahoma. They weren't huge by any means, still small, still completely local, but they were *bigger*. New crowds, new towns, new people. Every weekend seemed to bring something different. One night I played for thirty people in a dimly lit dive, and the next weekend, it was a crowd of over a hundred packing the floor.

Jane acted like this was completely normal, a natural progression. I wasn't so sure it was. Because every time the crowds got bigger, so did the tightening feeling inside my chest, the sudden, dizzying realization that maybe this was really happening. Maybe music wasn't just a distant dream anymore. Maybe it was becoming my actual future.

The thought excited me. And it terrified me.

When I finally got home late Sunday night, Vanessa was waiting. Literally waiting in my driveway, her truck was parked idling under the streetlamps. She was leaning against the hood with her arms crossed, trying her best to look thoroughly annoyed and failing miserably.

The second I climbed out of my cab, a smile broke across her face. Suddenly, every exhausting mile of the drive home felt completely worth it.

"There he is," she teased.

I laughed, rubbing the back of my neck. "There who is?"

"The rock star."

"Please stop," I groaned, walking toward her.

"No."

She stepped into my space and wrapped her arms tightly around my neck. I pulled her closer, burying my face in her hair, and for a fleeting moment, everything felt normal again. Simple. Easy. It was like the last three days had never happened, like I hadn't just been standing under stage lights in another state.

"I missed you," the words slipped out before I could censor them.

Vanessa smiled against my shoulder. "I know."

"You know?" I pulled back slightly to look at her.

"You called me twelve times, Nate."

"That's not true."

She raised an eyebrow, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Fine. It was eleven."

I sighed, letting out a soft chuckle. "Close enough."

She laughed and leaned up to kiss me. It was just a quick kiss, but it was the kind that instantly made every single mile between us disappear.

A week later, we were sitting together on the hood of my truck down by the lake, one of our usual spots. The sun was setting, bleeding heavy strokes of orange and gold across the water. Everything looked perfect. It was the exact kind of quiet evening that should've made me completely happy, but instead, my mind was spinning. I couldn't stop thinking.

Vanessa noticed immediately. Of course she did.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

"Nothing."

She just stared at me, seeing right through it. I stared back, trying to hold my ground, but eventually I cracked under the weight of her gaze.

"Jane wants me to add more dates," I admitted.

Her expression didn't change, but her shoulders tense just a fraction. "What kind of dates?"

"More Texas."

Silence stretched between us. It wasn't an angry silence, but a heavy, thinking kind of quiet that somehow felt a hell of a lot worse. Finally, she nodded, looking down at her hands.

"Oh."

That single word punched a clean hole right through my chest. Because for the first time since this ride started, she didn't sound excited for me. She sounded sad. Just a little bit, but it was enough to make my stomach drop.

"You don't like the idea," I said.

She looked away, watching the sunset reflect in the ripples of the lake. "I like that you're happy, Nate."

It wasn't an answer to the question. I waited, giving her space to say what she needed to say.

Eventually, she let out a long sigh, her voice trailing off. "It's just..."

"What?"

She turned back to me, a sad, fragile smile on her lips. "You're gone a lot lately."

The blunt truth of it hit harder than I expected, mostly because she wasn't wrong. Every weekend. Every show. Every new opportunity Jane threw at me. They were all just little pieces of time disappearing, time that used to belong entirely to us.

I reached out and took her hand, lacing my fingers through hers. "I'm still here, Van."

Her fingers squeezed mine back. "I know."

But for the first time, neither of us sounded completely convinced.

That night, after I dropped Vanessa off and went home, I sat out on the tailgate of my truck, staring up at the stars. It was the same sky, the same small town, the same life I'd always known. Yet somehow, everything felt fundamentally different.

A few months ago, the biggest decision I had to make was where we were going to spend a Friday night. Now, I had a calendar filling up with show dates, people calling my phone, and crowds growing by the week. The dreams were getting bigger. And somewhere in the chaotic middle of all that expansion, I was trying my hardest not to lose the girl I loved.

The problem is, nobody tells you that dreams come with a price tag. They tell you to chase them, to fight like hell for them, and to believe in yourself. They never warn you about what they're going to take from you in return.

As I stared into the dark, quiet night, a realization settled heavily over me. For the first time since all of this started, I wasn't afraid of failing anymore.

I was afraid of succeeding.

Because success meant moving forward, and moving forward meant inevitable change. And change had a terrible way of taking people with it, even the ones you wanted to keep forever.

Chapter Thirteen – Nate

The venue in Dallas was the biggest crowd I'd played for yet. Two hundred people, maybe more. It wasn't a stadium or an arena, but it was enough faces to make my stomach twist before every song, enough people to remind me this wasn't just a hobby anymore.

The final chord echoed through the speakers, and applause followed. Real applause, the kind that still surprised me every time. I smiled, thanked the crowd, and stepped offstage.

Jane was waiting, which wasn't unusual. The expression on her face, however, was. "You got a minute?"

I wiped sweat from my forehead. "That bad?"

She laughed. "No." Then she handed me a bottle of water. "Actually, it's pretty good."

My stomach tightened. Rick wasn't the type to hand out compliments, at least not without a reason. "Okay..."

She glanced around the venue, then nodded toward the back hallway. "Walk with me."

That definitely wasn't ominous.

We ended up outside behind the building. The Texas heat still lingered even though the sun had gone down. For a while, Jane didn't say anything, which immediately made me nervous. Finally, she stopped, turned toward me, and asked, "What do you want out of this?"

I blinked. "What?"

"The music." She folded her arms. "What do you want?"

I laughed nervously. "To play."

"That's not an answer."

I looked away. The truth was I hadn't really let myself think about it, not seriously, not beyond the next show, the next weekend, the next opportunity. Because the further ahead I looked, the scarier everything became. Jame waited. Eventually, I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Wrong."

I frowned. "What?"

She pointed at me. "You know."

The certainty in her voice caught me off guard. Because maybe she was right. Maybe I did know. I just hadn't said it out loud yet.

Jane sighed, then looked toward the dark Texas skyline. "You don't belong in bars forever."

The words hit harder than I expected. I swallowed. "What?"

She looked back at me. "You heard me."

For a second, I thought she was joking. Then I realized she wasn't. Not even a little.

"Jane—"

"No," she cut me off. "I've worked with musicians for twenty years." Her voice remained calm and matter-of-fact. "I've booked thousands of shows."

I stayed silent.

"Most people are lucky if they can hold a crowd's attention for three songs." She pointed back toward the venue. "You had them for forty-five minutes."

The air suddenly felt heavier. "I don't know what to say."

"Good." Jane smiled. "Means you're listening."

For a while, neither of us spoke. Cars passed in the distance, and music drifted faintly from inside the venue. Eventually, Jane pulled out her phone and handed it to me. A photo filled the screen: a woman, professional and confident, standing in front of an office building.

"Who's that?"

"Lauren."

My heart skipped. The name sounded familiar, mostly because Jane had mentioned her before a few times. Always casually, never seriously. Until now.

"She works with our Los Angeles office."

Los Angeles. Just hearing the words felt surreal, like they belonged in a movie instead of my life.

Jane continued. "Talent development."

I stared at the photo, then back at her. "Why are you showing me this?"

Jane laughed softly, because apparently I was missing something obvious. "Because I sent her your videos."

The world stopped. "What?"

"Last month."

"What?"

"Relax."

I wasn't relaxing. Not even a little. "Jane—"

"Nate." Her voice became serious, the kind that immediately made me pay attention. "You need to hear this."

I stayed quiet.

"There's a good chance you can make it."

The words landed directly in my chest. Not because they were dramatic, but because they weren't. Jane wasn't dramatic. She was practical, honest, and careful. Which meant if she was saying it, he believed it.

"You really think that?"

Jane nodded without hesitation, without doubt. "Yeah."

My throat suddenly felt dry. She looked toward the building, then back at me. "I'm not saying tomorrow."

I nodded.

"I'm not saying next month."

Another nod.

"But eventually?" Her smile returned. "I don't think you're supposed to spend your life playing bars in Oklahoma."

The silence stretched between us, not uncomfortable, just overwhelming. Because suddenly I could see it. Not clearly, not perfectly, but enough. A life beyond Oklahoma. A life beyond Texas. A life bigger than anything I'd ever imagined. And for the first time, it felt real.

The drive home was quiet. Not because I wanted it to be, but because my brain wouldn't stop spinning. Every mile brought more questions, more possibilities, more fear.

When I finally pulled into Vanessa's driveway, her porch light was still on. She opened the front door before I even reached the steps, her smile appearing immediately and then vanishing.

"What happened?"

I laughed. "What makes you think something happened?"

She crossed her arms. "Your face."

Apparently my face was becoming a problem. I followed her onto the porch swing, the same swing we'd spent half our lives sitting on, the same swing where everything always felt simple. Tonight it didn't.

Vanessa studied me, patient and waiting. Finally I looked at her, really looked at her, and wondered how I was supposed to tell her that Los Angeles had suddenly entered the conversation. That somebody thought I could actually make it. That, for the first time, my dreams felt bigger than our town. Bigger than Oklahoma. Maybe even bigger than both of us.

"Nate?"

I swallowed, then smiled nervously. "You ever think about California?"

The confusion on her face told me everything. Neither of us was ready for the conversation that was coming, but whether we liked it or not, it had finally arrived.

Chapter Fourteen – Nate

Vanessa stared at me. The porch swing creaked softly beneath us as a warm Oklahoma breeze drifted through the darkness. Neither of us spoke for several seconds.

Finally, she blinked. "California?"

I nodded. "California."

Her expression shifted, not angry, not upset, just confused. "What about California?"

I looked down at my hands. For some reason, this felt harder than telling Jane I wanted to make music my career, maybe because Jane wasn't Vanessa, maybe because Vanessa's opinion mattered more. "A woman named Lauren," I said.

Vanessa waited, patient as always.

"She's with Jane's agency," I added.

The confusion disappeared slowly, piece by piece, until understanding settled in its place. "Oh." That single word hit harder than I expected, because suddenly she knew. Not everything, but enough. "Los Angeles?"

I nodded.

Silence stretched between us as the swing moved gently back and forth. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. The world kept moving, yet everything between us felt frozen.

Finally, Vanessa smiled. It was a real smile, small, soft, and proud. "I knew it."

I blinked. "What?"

She laughed quietly. "I knew somebody would notice eventually."

The knot in my chest loosened, just a little. "Vanessa—"

"No." She shook her head, her eyes meeting mine. "You've been doing this since we were kids. You were always going to be more than this town."

The words should have made me feel better. Instead, they hurt, because they sounded like goodbye. Not today, not tomorrow, maybe not even next year, but someday. And for the first time, I realized Vanessa probably saw it too.

We sat there for almost an hour, talking about Los Angeles, about music, about possibilities, and about things neither of us understood. Eventually, I asked the question I'd been avoiding. "What if I go?"

The words hung heavily between us. Vanessa looked toward the street, thinking. "What if you do?"

I swallowed. She smiled sadly, then looked back at me. "Then you go."

The answer came so easily. Too easily. "Just like that?"

Her laugh sounded bittersweet. "No." She reached for my hand, her fingers intertwining with mine. "Not just like that. But I'm not going to be the reason you stay."

My chest tightened, because that's exactly what I was afraid of. Not leaving—choosing. I squeezed her hand. "What if I don't want to leave?"

Vanessa looked at me for a long moment, long enough to see right through the lie. Because that's what it was. Not entirely, but enough. Finally, she smiled. "You do."

The honesty in her voice made it impossible to argue. Maybe she knew me better than I knew myself.

The next few weeks passed in a blur of more shows, more travel, and more meetings with Jane. And then Lauren called actually called. I almost didn't answer, mostly because I thought it was spam, but it turns out it wasn't. The conversation lasted twenty-three minutes, I counted. Afterward, I sat in my truck, staring at the steering wheel. Lauren thought I had *potential*. It was such a dangerous word. Not talent, not success, potential. It was a word that suggested possibilities, a word that implied a future. A future that suddenly seemed to be getting closer.

That night, I drove to the lake. Our lake, the place where everything made sense. Vanessa was already there, sitting on the dock with her feet dangling above the water. I sat beside her, and for a while, neither of us spoke.

Then she asked, "How'd it go?"

I smiled. "Good."

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "Really good."

The pride on her face nearly broke me, because she looked happier than I did. It was like my dream was becoming hers, like every good thing that happened to me was something worth celebrating. And maybe that's why I loved her so much, because she never made it about herself. Not once, even when she probably should have.

Eventually, she rested her head on my shoulder. The sunset reflected across the water in shades of orange and gold, beautiful, but temporary. Just like every sunset, just like every summer, just like every season of life.

"You know something?" she asked softly.

"What?"

She smiled. "One day, people are going to know your name."

I laughed. "No chance."

She sat up, completely serious. "Nate Moore." The way she said it made my heart stop, like she already believed it, like she could see a future neither of us fully understood yet. "One day, they're going to sing your songs."

I stared out across the lake, trying to imagine it. I tried to imagine a world bigger than Oklahoma, bigger than Texas, bigger than everything I'd ever known. The scary part? For the first time, I could. And sitting beside me was the girl who had believed it all along, the girl who had pushed me forward every step of the way, helping me chase a dream that might eventually take me away from her.

Neither of us said it. Neither of us had to. Because somewhere deep down, we both understood the truth. The future was coming, and it was coming fast.

Chapter Fifteen – Nate

Six months changed everything.

The weird part was that most days, it didn't feel like it. The town was still the same. The diner still served the same food, the lake still looked exactly the way it always had, and the bonfires still happened every weekend. Yet underneath all of it, life had shifted. It happened slowly, quietly, like a song changing keys without anyone noticing.

Except I noticed, mostly because I was the one changing.

The fundraising had become a town project. It wasn't just my project anymore; it belonged to everyone. There were bake sales, benefit concerts, silent auctions, church donations, and contributions from local businesses. People I'd never even spoken to stepped up. Everybody contributed something: a dollar, ten dollars, a hundred. Whatever they could spare.

It was enough to buy me a bus ticket to Los Angeles. Enough to pay for a place to stay. Enough to give me one month. Thirty days. One chance, one opportunity, one dream.

Now, it was finally happening. In two days, I'd be leaving Oklahoma for the first time in my life.

I should've been excited. Instead, I sat on the hood of my truck watching the sunset, wondering how everything had become so complicated. Because while my dream kept moving closer, Vanessa kept moving farther away. Not physically, but emotionally. Subtly. It was the kind of change nobody else would notice, the kind only I could see. She still smiled, still laughed, still came to my shows, and still held my hand. But something was different. The future had entered the room, and neither of us knew what to do with it.

I found her sitting on the dock. *Our* dock. It was the same one we'd spent countless evenings on, the same one where she'd told me she believed I'd make it, and the same one where I'd promised everything would work out back when promises felt easy.

Vanessa looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Hey."

"Hey," I replied, sitting down beside her.

The lake perfectly reflected the orange sky, the water barely moving. For a while, neither of us spoke. The silence wasn't uncomfortable; it was just familiar. It was the kind of silence that only exists between people who've known each other forever.

Finally, I broke it. "Are you mad at me?"

Vanessa laughed softly. "No."

"Then what's wrong?"

The smile disappeared from her face. There it was, the question we'd both been avoiding for months. She stared out across the water, thinking, choosing her words carefully.

Then, she finally said, "I'm letting you go."

My heart stopped. "What?"

She looked at me, her eyes glistening. She wasn't crying, but she was close. Vanessa was stronger than that, at least in front of me. "You heard me."

I shook my head. "No." Because no. Absolutely not. "No."

She smiled sadly. "Nate."

"No," I said, the word coming out harder this time. Suddenly, I understood, and I hated it. "Don't."

She reached for my hand and squeezed it. "I have to."

My chest felt tight, painfully tight. "Why?"

Her eyes never left mine. Vanessa had always been honest, even when honesty hurt. Especially when honesty hurt. "Because you're already leaving."

The words landed like a punch. Not because they were cruel, but because they were true.

"I'll be back," I insisted.

She nodded. "I know."

"Then…"

"But someday you won't."

The lake fell silent. The entire world fell silent. Because deep down, I'd thought it too. Every time Jane called, every time Lauren emailed, every time another opportunity appeared, that thought crossed my mind. I just never said it out loud.

Vanessa offered a broken smile, the kind that hurt to look at. "You're becoming who you're supposed to be."

I looked away, toward the horizon, toward a future that suddenly felt a lot less exciting. "What if who I'm supposed to be is here?"

She laughed, and a single tear escaped before she quickly wiped it away. "No."

I closed my eyes. Hearing her say it somehow made it real.

The sun disappeared completely, and a heavy darkness settled across the lake. Still, neither of us moved. Eventually, she leaned her head against my shoulder the way she always had, the way she probably always would if life were fair.

But life wasn't fair. We both knew it.

"We're not telling anybody," she said quietly.

I looked down at her. "What?"

She smiled, a genuine smile this time. Small, soft. The classic Vanessa smile. "No dramatic breakup."

I laughed despite everything. "Sounds good."

"No social media posts."

I laughed again. "Definitely not."

"No announcing anything."

I nodded. It sounded right. Despite everything, caught in the bittersweet reality of the moment, neither of us wanted to close the door. Not completely. Not forever.

She intertwined her fingers with mine and whispered, "Who knows what happens in the future?"

The words broke my heart because they sounded hopeful and heartbreaking all at the same time. The way real life usually is.

Later that night, I drove home alone. The roads were empty, and the stars stretched endlessly overhead. Everything looked the same, yet nothing felt the same anymore.

Two days. In two days, I'd board a bus heading for Los Angeles. Two days until I leave Oklahoma. Two days until I leave home. Two days until I left the girl I'd loved for most of my life, the girl who still loved me, the girl I'd never stopped loving.

Maybe Vanessa was right. Maybe someday our paths will cross again, and maybe they won't. The truth was, neither of us knew. All we knew was that the future had finally arrived, and it wasn't asking for permission anymore. It was waiting, just two days away.

And for the first time in my life, I was terrified to meet it.

Chapter Sixteen – Quinn

The trophy wasn't very big, even eight-year-old Quinn Miller knew that. It stood maybe six inches tall, with a crooked gold microphone mounted on top and a fake marble base that looked more plastic than stone.

But it was his.

The first thing he'd ever won.

And as he ran down the hallway of Lincoln Elementary with it clutched tightly against his chest, it felt bigger than any trophy in the world.

"Mom's gonna freak out," he told himself.

His sneakers slapped against the concrete sidewalk as he raced toward the parking lot. Students poured out of the school behind him. Parents waited beside cars. Teachers waved goodbye.

But Quinn only looked for one thing, his family.

He spotted them immediately. His mom stood beside their SUV. His dad leaned against the driver's door. And beside them stood twelve-year-old Kai Miller. Still wearing his soccer uniform, carrying a duffel bag, and somehow managing to look cool without trying.

"Mom!" Quinn shouted.

Sarah Miller turned. A smile instantly appeared. "There he is."

Quinn practically launched himself across the parking lot. "I won!" He held up the trophy.

For a second, his mother genuinely looked surprised. "You won?"

"The talent show!" His words tumbled out so fast they nearly crashed into each other. "I sang that song from the movie, and everybody clapped, and Mrs. Jenkins said I was really good and…"

"That's wonderful, sweetheart." His mom took the trophy, examined it, smiled, then handed it back.

"See?" Quinn said. "I won."

His father ruffled his hair. "Proud of you, buddy."

Warmth exploded inside Quinn's chest. This was it. The moment. The moment they'd tell everybody. The moment they'd celebrate. The moment they'd—

"Come on." His dad checked his watch. "We need to get moving."

Quinn blinked. "Moving?"

"Kai's championship game starts in forty-five minutes."

The warmth disappeared. Just a little. Not enough to hurt.

Not yet.

"Oh."

His mother opened the passenger door. "Hurry, boys."

Kai climbed into the front seat. Quinn slid into the back. The trophy rested on his lap. The entire drive, he stared at it.

Waiting.

Surely, they'd ask more questions.

Surely, they'd want details.

Surely, they'd want to hear about the talent show.

Instead…

"Kai, remember what Coach said about staying aggressive." His dad's voice filled the car.

"I know."

"That number ten kid from Burbank is fast."

"I know."

"Scouts are coming."

"I know."

The conversation continued. Soccer, strategy, opponents. Scholarships, everything except Quinn.

He looked down at the trophy. The gold microphone reflected sunlight through the window. For the first time all afternoon, it looked small.

The soccer complex sat on the opposite side of town. Dozens of fields stretched across acres of perfectly cut grass. Parents filled the bleachers. Players warmed up. Referees blew whistles. The entire place buzzed with energy.

Kai immediately disappeared toward his team. His parents followed. Quinn trailed behind. Nobody meant to leave him.

They just did.

The game started. The crowd cheered. Kai scored. The crowd cheered louder. His mother jumped to her feet. His father nearly spilled his drink. People high-fived each other.

Someone shouted: "That's your boy!"

His dad grinned proudly. "That's my boy."

The words weren't meant to hurt, but they did.

A little.

Because Quinn was his boy too. Wasn't he? He looked down at the trophy resting beside him on the bleachers. Nobody had mentioned it in almost two hours.

By the time they got home, it was dark.

Kai's team had won. Parents came over. Pizza arrived. The house filled with laughter. Soccer highlights played on television. Everyone celebrated.

Kai sat in the center of it all. Smiling, laughing, and telling stories from the game. The star of the night.

Quinn quietly carried his trophy upstairs. Nobody noticed. Not because they didn't love him. Because they were busy. There was a difference. At least that's what he told himself.

He entered his room, closed the door, then placed the trophy on his dresser. The gold microphone gleamed beneath the lamp.

For a moment, he stared at it. He should've felt proud. Instead, he felt... confused.

His teacher had said winning mattered. His classmates had cheered. The judges had picked him. So why didn't it feel important anymore?

A knock sounded at the door. His mother stepped inside. "Hey."

Quinn looked up. "Hey."

She smiled. A tired smile. "The game ran late."

"It's okay."

She walked over and kissed the top of his head. "I really am proud of you."

Then she left. Just like that, the room fell silent again.

Quinn stared at the trophy, then at the closed door, and for the first time in his life, he learned something he wouldn't fully understand for years.

Sometimes people can love you.

And still not see you.

Downstairs, everyone cheered as Kai's winning goal replayed on television.

Upstairs, Quinn picked up an old notebook and began writing. He didn't know it yet, but one day words would become the thing nobody could take away from him. The thing that was his, and his alone.

Chapter Seventeen – Quinn

The Miller family refrigerator told a story, at least that's what Quinn thought. Every piece of paper attached to it meant something. Report cards. Schedules. Awards. Photographs. Announcements.

The important things. The things worth remembering.

At eleven years old, Quinn spent a lot of time looking at that refrigerator. Mostly because he was trying to figure out where he fit on it. The answer, more often than not, was nowhere.

"An A-plus?" Mrs. Henderson's eyes widened as she held up Quinn's essay. The rest of the fifth-grade class groaned. Not because they were jealous, but because Quinn always got good grades in writing.

Math? Not so much. Science? Depends on the week.

Writing was different. Words made sense. People didn't.

"Class," Mrs. Henderson continued, "this is one of the best stories I've read all year."

Heat rushed to Quinn's face. Several students turned toward him. A few clapped. One kid dramatically pretended to bow. Quinn laughed. Embarrassed but secretly proud.

The story had taken him almost two weeks. Late nights, scrapped drafts, rewrites, the kind of effort nobody ever saw.

But Mrs. Henderson saw it. "Would you mind if I entered this in the district writing competition?" she asked.

The room immediately went silent.

Quinn blinked. "What?"

She smiled. "I think you have a real gift."

The words settled somewhere deep inside him. A gift. Nobody had ever called it that before.

He practically ran home. The essay sat carefully inside his backpack. The bright red A-plus visible at the top of the page. This was different than the talent show. Different than the little trophy. This was proof. Proof that he wasn't imagining it. Proof that he was actually good at something.

When he burst through the front door, his mother stood at the kitchen counter. "Mom!"

Sarah looked up. "There you are."

"I got something." His excitement must have shown because she smiled.

"Let's see."

Quinn handed over the essay. She skimmed the first page, then the second, then stopped. "A-plus."

His grin widened. "And Mrs. Henderson wants to enter it in a competition."

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "A competition?"

"Yeah."

"That's wonderful, sweetheart."

Relief flooded through him. She got it. She actually got it.

Then the garage door opened. Kai was home. Everything changed.

"How'd practice go?" Sarah immediately called.

The front door slammed. A soccer bag hit the floor. "It was good."

"Did Coach talk to you?"

"Yeah."

"What did he say?"

Quinn stood there, still holding the essay, still waiting.

The conversation moved right past him, like he'd never spoken, like the essay had never existed.

His mother didn't mean to, that was the worst part. She genuinely didn't realize she'd done it.

Later that night, Quinn found the essay on the refrigerator held up by a magnet shaped like a football. A smile spread across his face. There it is.

For the next three days, he looked at it every time he walked into the kitchen, every single time. A reminder, a victory, a little piece of himself hanging where everyone could see it, then Saturday happened.

Kai's team qualified for the regional championships. The house exploded with excitement. Phone calls, texts, relatives, social media posts, everybody wanted to celebrate.

Quinn genuinely was happy for his brother. He was. Kai worked hard; he deserved it, that wasn't the problem.

The problem happened on Sunday morning. Quinn wandered into the kitchen, still half asleep, still rubbing his eyes, then he stopped. The essay was gone.

In its place hung a giant tournament bracket, team schedules, travel information, and a photograph of Kai's team.

Everything perfectly arranged.

Quinn stared at it. Confused.

He opened the recycling bin, and there it was folded in half. The A-plus barely visible beneath a cereal box. For a moment, he just stood there looking, thinking, feeling something he couldn't quite name.

Not anger.

Not jealousy.

Something smaller.

Something sadder.

Disappointment.

The kind that slowly settles into your chest. The kind that stays.

That evening, his father found him sitting alone on the back patio. "What are you doing out here?"

Quinn shrugged. "Nothing."

His father sat beside him, the silence stretched. "Your mother told me about the essay."

Quinn looked up. "Yeah?"

His father smiled. "We're proud of you."

The words should've made him feel better, but instead they made him feel worse. Because he knew they meant it, he knew his parents loved him, he knew they cared, but somehow caring and noticing weren't always the same thing. And Quinn was starting to understand the difference.

"Thanks."

His father ruffled his hair, then headed back inside.

Conversation over. Just like always.

That night, Quinn dug the essay out of the recycling bin. He smoothed the creases, flattened the edges, then carefully slid it into a binder beneath his bed.

His own trophy case. His own refrigerator. A place where things wouldn't disappear. A place where his accomplishments mattered. Even if nobody else remembered them.

Years later, Quinn would forget dozens of soccer scores, championships, and tournament results. The kinds of moments everyone else celebrated. But he would never forget standing in front of that refrigerator, staring at an empty spot where his achievement used to be, because that was the day he learned something important.

If he wanted people to remember him, he was going to have to give them a reason they couldn't ignore.

Chapter Eighteen – Quinn

Quinn hated being born in June. Not because of the weather. Not because school was out. Not because summer birthdays were somehow worse.

He hated it because June belonged to soccer, and soccer belonged to Kai.

Every year, without fail.

"Thirteen."

Quinn stared at the candles on his cake. Thirteen. Officially a teenager. The age where people were supposed to start taking you seriously, at least that's what he'd heard.

The kitchen buzzed with conversation. His grandparents had come over.

Aunts.

Uncles.

Cousins.

Family filled every chair.

His mother carried the cake into the room, and everyone started singing. For a brief moment, Quinn felt like the center of the universe.

Not Kai.

Not soccer.

Not championships.

Just him.

He smiled, closed his eyes, made a wish, then blew out the candles.

Applause filled the room. His grandmother hugged him first. His aunt handed him a card. His little cousin asked if she could have extra frosting.

Everything felt normal.

Perfect, even.

Until his father's phone rang.

The entire room stopped, because everybody knew that ringtone.

Coach Ramirez. Kai's coach.

His father answered immediately. "Hello?"

Silence.

Then, "Seriously?" The excitement in his voice made Quinn's stomach sink.

His father stood.

His mother stood.

Kai looked up. "What?"

His father covered the phone. "They moved the tournament."

The room erupted.

"What?"

"When?"

"Why?"

His father laughed. "Tomorrow morning."

Kai practically jumped out of his chair. "That's amazing."

The regional tournament. The biggest competition of the summer. The one scouts were attending. The one everyone had been talking about for months. Suddenly, it was all anybody cared about.

Quinn sat quietly, watching, listening. The birthday party slowly transformed into a strategy meeting.

Travel plans.

Hotel reservations.

Departure times.

Game schedules.

His cake sat untouched on the table; nobody noticed.

An hour later, his grandmother finally interrupted. "Shouldn't Quinn open his presents?"

The room froze, for a second, everyone looked embarrassed, including Quinn's parents.

His mother immediately smiled. "Of course."

The problem was that the moment had already passed.

Everyone gathered around. Everyone paid attention. Everyone tried. But it felt forced, like they were checking a box.

Birthday? Done.

Now back to soccer.

The realization hurt more than he wanted to admit.

That night, Quinn sat on the back porch.

A wrapped present rested beside him. The last gift. The one from his parents. He hadn't opened it yet. Mostly because he wasn't sure he wanted to.

The screen door creaked. Kai stepped outside. For a while, neither brother spoke. They weren't close. Not because they disliked each other. Because Kai lived in a completely different universe. One filled with practices, games, travel, and attention.

Eventually, Kai nodded toward the gift. "You gonna open that?"

Quinn shrugged. "Maybe."

Kai sat beside him, the silence stretched. "You know they're proud of you, right?"

Quinn laughed. Not because it was funny, because it wasn't. "Sure."

Kai frowned. "I'm serious."

Quinn picked at a loose thread on his shorts. "Everybody's serious."

Kai didn't know what to say to that, neither did Quinn. The uncomfortable truth sat between them.

Eventually, Quinn opened the gift; inside sat a simple, black, expensive leather-bound notebook. A card rested on top. His mother's handwriting covered the page.

For all your stories.

Love, Mom and Dad

Quinn stared at it, then at the notebook, then back at the card. For the first time all day, his chest tightened for a different reason. Because they had thought about him. They really had.

Just...

Not first.

Never first.

And that was the difference.

The notebook became his favorite possession. He filled it with stories. Song ideas. Random thoughts. Dreams he never shared with anyone. Years later, after the world knew his name, after fans screamed his lyrics back at him from sold-out arenas, Quinn would still keep that notebook. Not because it reminded him of being forgotten. Because it reminded him that love and disappointment could exist at the same time, and sometimes that hurt more than hate ever could.

Chapter Nineteen – Quinn

The guitar had been sitting in the garage for years. Nobody knew where it came from. His father claimed it belonged to an uncle. His mother insisted it came from a yard sale. Kai once said it probably appeared through magic. Nobody cared enough to find out. It leaned against a shelf between Christmas decorations and camping equipment.

Forgotten.

Ignored.

Collecting dust.

Kind of like Quinn felt most days.

The summer Quinn turned fourteen was unusually hot. The kind of California heat that made the air shimmer above the pavement. Kai spent most of June traveling with his club team for practices, showcases, tournaments, and recruiters.

The house felt strangely empty without him. His parents spent every free moment talking about scholarship opportunities, college programs, and professional development leagues.

The future.

Always Kai's future.

Never Quinn's.

One afternoon, desperate to escape another conversation about soccer, Quinn wandered into the garage. His mother was on the phone. His father was reviewing game footage. The television downstairs showed highlights from a tournament Kai had played the previous weekend.

Every room felt occupied, except the garage.

The guitar caught his eye immediately. He walked over, picked it up, and blew dust from the strings. The instrument looked ancient. A crack ran through part of the body.
Two strings buzzed when touched; one tuning peg barely worked. Perfect.

"You have no idea what you're doing." Quinn sat cross-legged on the garage floor. A YouTube tutorial played on his phone.

The instructor smiled far too much. "Today we're learning three beginner chords."

Quinn's fingers immediately cramped. The chord sounded terrible. The next one sounded worse. The third sounded like a dying animal.

He laughed, then tried again. And again. And again.

Something about it felt different. Not easy, definitely not easy, but satisfying. Like solving a puzzle nobody else cared about.

Hours disappeared.

The garage slowly darkened around him.

For the first time all day, he forgot about Kai. Forgot about comparisons. Forgot about expectations.

There was only the guitar. Only the sound. Only the feeling.

Three weeks later, he could play an entire song.

Badly, but still, an entire song.

He waited until everyone left the house, then closed his bedroom door, sat on the edge of his bed, and played.

The notes filled the room. Simple. Imperfect. Beautiful.

A smile spread across his face, not because he was good, but because he was getting better. And nobody could take credit for it.

Nobody could compare it to Kai.

Nobody could turn it into another soccer conversation.

This belonged to him.

Entirely.

One night, his mother stopped outside his room. Quinn immediately froze. The guitar sat in his lap. A notebook full of lyrics rested beside him. For a moment, he thought about hiding everything; instead, he kept playing.

The door cracked open. Sarah peeked inside. "Oh."

Quinn looked up; his stomach tightened. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"I was making noise."

His mother smiled. "No." She leaned against the doorframe. "I didn't know you played."

Something about the sentence hurt, not because she meant anything by it, but because she genuinely didn't know.

He'd been playing for months. Writing songs. Learning chords. Teaching himself. And she hadn't noticed.

"Just started."

Her smile widened. "That's nice."

The same phrase. The same one she'd used his entire life. That's nice. Not bad. Not good. Not amazing. Not tell me more.

Just nice.

She disappeared down the hallway. The conversation lasted less than thirty seconds, yet Quinn sat there staring at the closed door long afterward. Because for some reason, "nice" felt worse than criticism. Criticism meant somebody was paying attention; nice meant they weren't.

That night, Quinn opened the leather notebook from his thirteenth birthday; most pages contained stories, characters, ideas, and fragments.

Tonight, he turned to a blank page, then wrote something different.

Not a story.

A lyric.

Just one line, then another, then another.

The words came easier than expected, like they'd been waiting, like they'd been trapped inside him.

An hour later, he had his first song. It wasn't very good, at least not yet, but it was honest.

Painfully honest.

A song about standing in someone's shadow for so long that you forget what sunlight feels like.

Quinn stared at the page, then smiled. For the first time in years, he felt something dangerous.

Hope.

Not because anyone believed in him. Not because anyone was cheering. Not because anyone noticed.

Because for the first time in his life...

He didn't need them to.

The guitar rested beside his bed. The lyrics sat open in front of him. And somewhere deep inside, a quiet voice whispered something he wasn't ready to admit out loud.

Maybe one day people would listen.

Not to Kai.

To him.

And maybe that would be enough.

Chapter Twenty- Quinn

The first person to tell Quinn his music mattered was a girl he never saw again. He never learned her last name. Never got her number. Never even knew how old she was. Yet years later, he still remembered every word she said. Because sometimes strangers leave the deepest scars, and sometimes they heal them.

"Absolutely not." Quinn stared at his best friend.

"What do you mean, absolutely not?"

"I mean absolutely not."

Manny folded his arms. "You are not chickening out."

Quinn groaned. "I'm not chickening out."

"You've changed outfits three times."

"That's called fashion."

"You've never cared about fashion."

"People grow."

Manny pointed toward the guitar case resting beside Quinn's bed. "No. People panic."

Quinn hated when Manny was right, which was often, far too often.

The local coffee shop hosted open mic nights every Thursday. Most performers were terrible. A few were decent. Nobody famous had ever stepped foot on the stage. That wasn't the point. The point was being heard, and tonight Quinn had somehow signed up. Now he was regretting every life choice that led to this moment.

The coffee shop sat on a quiet corner near downtown with a small stage, string lights, mismatched furniture, and exactly thirty-seven seats.

Quinn counted. Twice. His nerves wouldn't let him stop.

The place wasn't crowded, maybe twenty people.

Students.

Couples.

A few older regulars.

Nobody who knew him. Nobody who cared if he succeeded or failed, which somehow made it scarier.

Manny sat at a nearby table, giving him a thumbs-up, which wasn't helpful at all.

A woman stepped onto the stage and read a poem. A guy played a cover song. Someone performed stand-up comedy.

"And next up... Quinn Miller."

Every muscle in Quinn's body stopped working.

The walk to the stage felt longer than it should have. His hands shook, his stomach twisted, his heart threatened mutiny.

The microphone squealed slightly. Fantastic. Perfect start.

"Uh..."

A few people looked up, waiting and listening.

Suddenly, Quinn wanted to run, instead, he adjusted the guitar strap, took a breath, and started playing.

The first chord echoed through the room, then the second, then the third. The opening lyrics followed.

A song about shadows, about being overlooked, about feeling invisible inside your own life.

The room gradually grew quieter. Conversations stopped. Coffee cups lowered. People listened, actually listened.

By the second verse, Quinn forgot to be nervous. By the bridge, he forgot anybody else existed. There was only the music. The words. The feeling. The thing he'd been carrying around for years. And for the first time... People were hearing it.

The applause surprised him, not because there was a lot of it, but because it felt real.

No obligation.

No politeness.

Just appreciation.

His face burned. He muttered a thank you, then practically sprinted offstage.

Manny immediately stood. "Dude."

Quinn laughed nervously. "What?"

"Dude."

"You're repeating yourself."

"You were good."

The sincerity in Manny's voice caught him off guard.

Good.

Not nice.

Not interesting.

Not a fun hobby.

Good.

The word settled somewhere deep inside him, somewhere important.

An hour later, as the night wound down, Quinn packed up his guitar. Most people had already left. The stage stood empty. The coffee shop felt quieter now.

He was halfway to the door when someone spoke.

"Excuse me."

Quinn turned. A girl stood nearby, maybe his age. Dark hair. Oversized sweater. Nervous smile.

"Yeah?"

She shifted her weight, then pointed toward the stage. "That song."

His stomach immediately tightened. "Oh."

"I liked it." The words were simple, yet somehow, they meant everything.

"Thanks."

She smiled, her expression softened. "I mean it." The room suddenly felt very small. The girl looked away briefly, then back at him. "It sounded real."

Nobody had ever said that before.

Real.

Not talented.

Not impressive.

Real.

As if she'd heard something beneath the lyrics.

Something personal.

Something true.

Quinn swallowed. "Thank you."

She nodded, then headed toward the door.

Conversation over, just like that.

No dramatic moment.

No exchange of numbers.

No romance.

Just honesty, the kind that sticks.

Before leaving, she glanced back one final time, smiled, and then she was gone.

That night Quinn couldn't sleep. The house was quiet. Kai was away at another tournament. His parents were asleep. Everything felt normal, yet nothing felt normal.

He sat on his bedroom floor with the guitar resting across his lap, the notebook open beside him. For years, he'd written stories because he loved writing. For months, he'd written songs because he loved music.

But tonight? Tonight was different. Because for the first time, a complete stranger connected with something he'd created. Not because she had to, but because she wanted to.

The realization hit harder than any compliment ever could. Maybe his music wasn't just for him anymore. Maybe it could matter to other people too.

Quinn looked toward the dark window.

Toward the city lights in the distance. Toward a future he couldn't quite see yet, then he opened his notebook and started writing.

Because suddenly he had something he'd never had before.

Proof.

Proof that somebody was listening.

And once you've heard applause meant for you... It's impossible to forget the sound.

Chapter Twenty-One – Quinn

The second song Quinn uploaded got thirty-seven plays. The first had gotten twelve. Not exactly viral. Not exactly life-changing. Yet Quinn stared at the numbers like they'd been carved into stone.

Thirty-seven.

Thirty-seven people.

Thirty-seven complete strangers had listened to something he'd written.

The thought felt impossible.

At school, he blended into the background. At home, he was Kai's younger brother. But somewhere out there, thirty-seven people knew him for something else.

Not Quinn Miller.

Not Kai's brother.

Just a username.

Just a song.

Just a voice.

And somehow that felt better than anything else.

"What are you smiling about?"

Quinn nearly dropped his phone.

Manny laughed. "Dude."

"Don't do that."

"You looked guilty."

"I always look guilty."

"Fair."

They walked across campus toward their next class. The California sun beat down on the sidewalks. Students filled every pathway. Most conversations revolved around classes, parties, sports, or weekend plans. Quinn's mind was somewhere else. Specifically, his SoundCloud page. Thirty-seven plays had become fifty-two. Fifty-two had become seventy. Not a lot. Not compared to real artists. But enough. Enough to make him keep checking. Enough to make him care.

Manny bumped his shoulder. "Still doing the secret music thing?"

Quinn groaned. "It's not secret."

"You literally won't tell anyone your username."

"Exactly."

Manny nodded. "That's the definition of secret."

That night, Quinn sat cross-legged on his bedroom floor, the guitar resting against his knee, his laptop glowing in the darkness.

The account creation page stared back at him.

He needed a name. His actual name wasn't an option. The last thing he wanted was for people to connect his music to Kai. Because then every compliment would come with an asterisk. Every success would feel borrowed. He wanted something that belonged entirely to him. Something separate. Something his family couldn't touch.

Quinn typed.

Deleted.

Typed again.

Deleted again.

Nothing felt right.

Then his eyes drifted toward his notebook. A lyric stared back at him.

A shadow doesn't disappear. It just learns to live beside the light.

Shadow.

Light.

Names.

Identity.

For a moment, he thought about all the years spent standing next to Kai. Always slightly behind, always slightly out of focus, then he smiled.

One letter.

Simple.

Easy.

Q.

Nobody knew who Q was.

Not yet.

Maybe that was the point.

Three months later, Q had over a thousand followers. Quinn still couldn't believe it. Not because a thousand people was a huge number, but because they were there for him.

Well, for Q.

His inbox slowly filled with messages, vomments, requests, and questions. People asking when the next song was coming. People sharing stories. People connecting with lyrics he'd written alone in his bedroom.

Every notification felt surreal, like living a double life.

At home, nothing changed. Kai continued dominating conversations. His parents continued celebrating championships. The trophy room grew larger. Soccer remained king. Meanwhile upstairs, Q was quietly building something nobody knew existed.

One Saturday afternoon, Quinn walked downstairs to find his parents hosting another celebration. Kai had signed with a development academy. A major step toward professional soccer. The house overflowed with relatives. Food covered every available surface. People laughed. Congratulated. Celebrated. The usual.

Quinn grabbed a soda and headed toward the stairs, then stopped. His father stood near the kitchen island. Talking proudly. Bragging, really. "Kai's got a real future."

The words weren't unusual.’Quinn heard them all the time.

Then his aunt asked, "What about Quinn?"

Silence. Not long. Just enough.

His father smiled. "Oh, Quinn's figuring things out."

The conversation immediately returned to Kai.

Quinn stood frozen. A soda can in one hand. The railing in the other. Figuring things out, that was what people thought about him.

Kai had a future. Quinn was figuring things out.

The words shouldn't have bothered him, yet somehow they did because nobody knew. Nobody had any idea. While they celebrated one future downstairs...another future was quietly growing upstairs. One song at a time. One follower at a time. One dream at a time.

That night Quinn sat on his bed staring at a new notification, a music blogger had shared one of his songs. The post wasn't huge, maybe a few hundred views. Still, it was the biggest thing that had happened to him.

Ever.

His finger hovered over the share button. For one brief second, he considered showing his parents. Showing Kai. Showing somebody.

Anybody.

Then he stopped, closed the app, and locked his phone. Because deep down he already knew what would happen. They'd say it was nice. They'd be supportive. They'd smile. Then somebody would mention Kai, and the moment would disappear.

Just like always.

Quinn set the phone aside, picked up his guitar, and started writing. Not because anyone expected him to, not because anyone believed in him, but because he believed in himself.

And for the first time in his life... that was starting to be enough.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Quinn

The email arrived at 2:17 in the morning, which was exactly why Quinn almost deleted it. Nobody sent important emails at 2:17 in the morning.

Spam did.

Scams did.

People trying to sell crypto definitely did.

Important people didn't, at least that was his assumption.

Then he saw the subject line.

Open Mic Opportunity

His thumb froze. For a moment, he simply stared, then opened it.

And read it three times. A fourth just to be sure.

The email was from the owner of a small music venue in downtown Los Angeles. Not a huge venue. Not famous. Not important enough to appear on anybody's bucket list.

Still, it was real.

The owner had found Q's music online, liked it, and wanted to know if he'd be interested in opening for a local indie artist the following month.

Twenty-minute set. Three songs. Fifty dollars.

Fifty dollars.

Quinn stared at the number, then laughed. Not because it was a lot, but because it was the first time anyone had offered him money for music.

"Fifty bucks?" Manny nearly choked on his drink.

Quinn grinned. "I know."

"Dude."

"I know."

"Dude."

"I KNOW."

The entire coffee shop turned to stare at them. Neither cared.

Manny slapped the table. "That's actual money."

"It's fifty dollars."

"It's still actual money."

The smile wouldn't leave Quinn's face. For the first time, music wasn't just something he did in his bedroom. It wasn't just uploads, or comments, or followers. Someone thought his music was valuable enough to pay for. The realization made his chest feel lighter.

Marcus pointed. "You're doing it."

"Obviously."

"You weren't thinking about saying no, right?"

Quinn laughed. "Not a chance."

The problem wasn't the performance. The problem was telling his parents.

Not because they would forbid it, because they wouldn't. Because they wouldn't understand why it mattered, that somehow felt worse.

Three nights later, Quinn found himself sitting at the dinner table. The perfect opportunity. His mother discussed Kai's latest showcase. His father discussed recruitment opportunities. Kai discussed training schedules.

Soccer.

Soccer.

More soccer.

Same conversation.

Different day.

Finally, Quinn cleared his throat.

Nobody noticed.

He tried again, still nothing.

Then, "I got offered a gig."

The table went silent.

His mother looked up. "A what?"

"A gig." Quinn suddenly regretted everything. "A music gig."

His father smiled politely. "Oh."

That was it.

Oh.

His mother tilted her head. "Like a hobby thing?"

There it was, the word. The one he hated.

Hobby.

The thing people called dreams before they succeeded.

"Not exactly."

His father nodded. "Sounds fun."

Then Kai's phone buzzed, and just like that, the conversation ended.

Gone.

Vanished.

The spotlight shifted.

Again.

Quinn sat quietly, pushing food around his plate. Nobody had asked where. Nobody had asked when. Nobody had asked to hear him play. Not because they didn't care. Because they never imagined it mattered.

The venue held maybe eighty people, ninety if everyone stood. The stage was barely larger than Quinn's bedroom. The sound system crackled. The green room was actually a storage closet. And Quinn loved every second of it.

He stood backstage, gripping his guitar, heart pounding, hands sweating, the same nervous energy he'd felt at the coffee shop.

Only stronger.

Because tonight people had paid to be here. Not for him. Not yet. But still. Real audience. Real venue. Real opportunity.

A woman poked her head backstage. "You Q?"

Quinn nodded.

She smiled. "I love your song 'Shadowbox.'"

His stomach dropped, not in a bad way, in a terrifying way. Because she knew the song. Not him. The song. The thing he'd created. The thing that belonged entirely to him.

"Thanks." She squeezed his shoulder.

Then disappeared, leaving Quinn standing there.

Speechless.

The performance lasted twenty-three minutes, the fastest twenty-three minutes of his life. The crowd listened, actually listened. A few sang along to one of his songs, not many, just enough.

Enough to make his pulse race. Enough to make him smile. Enough to make him want more.

When he finished, applause filled the room. Louder than the coffee shop. Louder than anything he'd experienced before. And for one brief moment, Quinn forgot about Kai.

Forgot about comparisons.

Forgot about being second best.

The audience wasn't cheering for Kai's little brother. They were cheering for Q. They were cheering for him.

After the show, the venue owner handed him an envelope, inside sat fifty dollars.

Five ten-dollar bills.

Quinn stared at them, then laughed.

The owner smiled. "First paid show?"

"Is it that obvious?"

The man grinned. "You looked at that money like you won the lottery."

Maybe he had. Not because of the amount, but because of what it represented.

Proof.

Proof that this wasn't imaginary.

Proof that people wanted to hear him.

Proof that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't figuring things out.

Maybe he'd already found it.

That night, long after everyone else had gone to sleep, Quinn sat in his room staring at the envelope. The fifty dollars rested on his desk. His parents had never asked how the show went. Kai had another tournament tomorrow. Life continued as usual, yet Quinn couldn't stop smiling.

Because for the first time in his life, he possessed something nobody could compare to his brother.

Not a trophy, not a grade, not a participation ribbon. A crowd, an audience, a dream. And it was finally starting to feel real. The scary part? He wasn't sure he wanted to stop anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Quinn

The message arrived three weeks after the show, not that Quinn was counting.

He absolutely was counting.

Every day.

Every hour.

Every notification.

Every email.

Every stupid vibration from his phone.

Because once something good happened, he kept waiting for the next thing, and that was dangerous. Hope usually was.

"You're obsessed." Manny dropped into the chair across from him.

Quinn immediately locked his phone. "I'm not obsessed."

"You checked your notifications six times during lunch."

"It was four."

Manny pointed. "Exactly."

Quinn sighed. The worst part, Manny wasn't wrong.

The open mic performance had changed something. Not in his career, not yet, but in his head.

For the first time, music didn't feel impossible. It felt reachable. Which somehow made every day harder. Because now he wanted more. A lot more.

That afternoon, Quinn sat alone in the library. Technically, he was supposed to be working on an assignment, but instead, he was staring at a blinking cursor and thinking about music.

Again.

His phone buzzed.

Probably Manny.

Probably another meme.

Probably—

His stomach dropped; the message wasn't from Manny. The sender was someone he didn't recognize. A blue verification checkmark sat beside the name.

Quinn blinked, then read the message, then read it again, then a third time.

Because there was no way. No possible way.

A Los Angeles music blogger with nearly a hundred thousand followers had sent him a direct message.

Not a mass message.

Not an advertisement.

A real message.

Specifically, to him.

Love your songwriting. Been following your uploads for months. Keep going.

That was it. One sentence. Thirteen words. Nothing dramatic. Nothing life-changing. Yet Quinn felt like the room had tilted sideways.

Months.

The guy had been listening for months.

Not one song.

Not one performance.

Months.

That night, he didn't tell anyone.

Not Manny.

Not his parents.

Not Kai.

Nobody.

The message felt too important, too personal, like sharing it might somehow ruin it. Instead, he sat on his bedroom floor with his guitar, reading it over and over. The words blurred together eventually, yet the feeling remained.

Someone had noticed.

Not Q.

Not the account.

Him.

His songwriting.

His work.

His voice.

For years, he'd convinced himself he was invisible. Now, evidence sat on his phone proving otherwise.

A week later, another message arrived. Then another. Then another.

Small things.

Industry people.

Bloggers.

Venue owners.

Local musicians.

Nobody famous.

Nobody who could change his life overnight.

But enough.

Enough to create momentum. Enough to make him wonder.

What if?

The question haunted him.

What if this wasn't the ceiling? What if this was the floor?

The answer arrived on a Tuesday. Quinn almost missed the email. Mostly because it landed between spam and a college announcement.

The subject line made no sense.

Audition Opportunity

He frowned, opened it, read, then froze.

A Los Angeles music development company was hosting auditions.

Writers.

Singers.

Performers.

Musicians.

The email wasn't addressed to thousands of people.

His name appeared at the top. Someone had recommended him. Specifically him.

Quinn stared at the screen. His pulse hammered against his ribs. Because this wasn't a coffee shop. This wasn't an open mic. This wasn't fifty dollars in an envelope. This was real. The kind of opportunity people moved to Los Angeles, hoping to find. The kind of opportunity that terrified him.

That evening, the Miller family gathered around the television. Kai's latest match played across the screen. Commentators discussed contracts, future opportunities, and professional development.

Quinn sat quietly in the corner, listening and thinking. For the first time, he realized something. Kai wasn't lucky. Kai had opportunities because he'd spent years saying yes to them.

Every tournament.

Every showcase.

Every chance.

One decision at a time.

Maybe that's how dreams happen, not through one giant moment, but through hundreds of small ones.

The audition email waited upstairs, still unread for the fifth time, still terrifying, still real, and for the first time in his life, the question wasn't whether he was talented enough. The question was whether he was brave enough.

Later that night, Quinn sat alone at his desk. The house silent. The glow of his laptop illuminating the room. The email remained open, waiting.

His finger hovered over the application link. The same way it had hovered over every important decision in his life. Unsure. Nervous. Afraid. Then he glanced toward the trophy shelf he'd built himself. The old talent show trophy. The writing competition certificate. The envelope from his first paid gig.

Little reminders, little victories, little pieces of proof.

Nobody else had built that shelf, nobody else had earned those moments.

He had.

Slowly, Quinn smiled, then clicked the link.

Because for the first time in his life...He wasn't asking permission to chase something; he was choosing it. And somewhere in Los Angeles, a future he couldn't yet imagine had just taken its first step toward him.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Harrison

The crowd was still chanting his name when Harrison left. Well, not his name, but his alias, Ghost.

The only name that mattered.

The warehouse behind him pulsed with bass and adrenaline as he pushed through the exit into the cool Los Angeles night. The battle had been brutal. Three rounds. Three opponents. Three bodies left bleeding pride on the concrete. The crowd loved it. They always did.

Harrison smirked as he lit a cigarette. People expected rich kids to be soft. Ghost enjoyed proving them wrong.

By midnight, the warehouse had transformed into a party. Someone dragged in more speakers. Someone else brought alcohol.

The crowd doubled, maybe tripled. Nobody checked IDs. Nobody cared.

Music echoed through the abandoned building. People danced. Hooked up. Got drunk. Got high.

Forgot tomorrow existed.

Harrison fit in surprisingly well, probably because nobody knew who he was.

Not really.

They knew Ghost. Not Harrison Tate. Not the son of one of the most powerful businessmen in Los Angeles. Not the future executive. Not the kid trapped inside a mansion.

Just Ghost.

The guy with a microphone and an ego problem.

The girl appeared sometime after one. Brunette, dark eyes, leather jacket, and a sharp smile. The kind that suggested bad decisions. His favorite kind.

"You got lucky tonight." She leaned against a support beam.

Harrison laughed. "Lucky?"

"That last guy forgot half his verse."

"He forgot all of it."

She smiled. "Arrogant."

"Accurate."

The smile widened; now they were speaking the same language.

One drink became two. Two became five. The music got louder. The room got warmer. The details became blurry.

Harrison remembered dancing.

Laughing.

Kissing her.

A rideshare.

An elevator.

After that?

Mostly static.

The next morning arrived like a punishment. His head pounded. His mouth felt like sandpaper. And he had absolutely no idea where he was.

The ceiling looked expensive, which was usually a good sign.

A woman's arm rested across his chest, that felt slightly more concerning.

Slowly, Harrison turned his head. Brunette. Pretty. Still asleep. Completely unfamiliar.

"Fantastic." The word escaped before he could stop it.

The girl shifted slightly. Harrison froze.

Please stay asleep.

Please.

For once in your life, Harrison, get lucky.

She rolled over, still asleep.

Thank God.

The apartment overlooked downtown Los Angeles. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Luxury high-rise. Definitely not his place.

The brunette's purse sat on a nearby chair. Her phone buzzed. A name flashed across the screen.

Ashlyn.

Good, now he knew something, more than she knew about him. As far as Harrison could remember, he'd never told her his name.

Just Ghost.

Always Ghost.

Five minutes later, he slipped quietly from the apartment. No note. No dramatic goodbye. No awkward morning conversation. Not because he was heartless, but because Ghost didn't exist in daylight. The fewer people who knew, the better.

The elevator ride down felt endless. Mirrored walls reflected the consequences of last night. Messy hair. Split lip. Dark circles. A grin.

Because despite everything...It had been a damn good night.

The valet immediately recognized him, of course, he did. Everyone always recognized Harrison Tate. That was the problem.

"Morning, Mr. Tate."

"Let's not call it that."

The valet laughed. "Rough night?"

"Potentially life-threatening."

The black SUV appeared moments later. Harrison climbed inside. The city blurred past the windshield. Downtown faded behind him. Then Hollywood. Then Beverly Hills. Then Bel Air. And with every mile, Ghost disappeared. The mask returned. The role returned. The prison returned.

By the time the mansion gates opened, Harrison Tate was back. The son. The heir. The disappointment. The future. Everything except himself.

The massive estate sat waiting at the top of the hill, cold, perfect, controlled, home, or at least the place he slept.

Harrison killed the engine and stared at the mansion. For a brief moment, he considered turning around and driving anywhere else.

Anywhere.

His father, Arthur Harrison Tate, believed in winning.

Nothing else.

Winning.

Not happiness. Not passion. Not freedom.

Winning.

Everything in life existed to be conquered. Businesses. Competitors. Markets. People, especially people.

Harrison parked the SUV and stepped inside. The foyer alone was larger than most apartments.

A housekeeper greeted him. "Good morning, Mr. Harrison."

"That's optimistic."

She smiled politely; everyone smiled politely here. Nobody said what they actually thought. That was another house rule.

The music room sat at the far end of the mansion. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Imported wood. Acoustic perfection. A Steinway grand piano, worth more than most houses. His father called it an investment. Harrison called it a prison.

The schedule waited on the piano.

Exactly where it always waited.

8:00 AM – Performance Training

10:00 AM – Classical Repertoire Review

12:00 PM – Media Coaching

2:00 PM – Private Instruction

4:00 PM – Academic Consultation

6:00 PM – Networking Dinner

His entire life looked like a corporate calendar, not a young man’s. Not a musician's. Certainly not his.

Harrison picked up the paper, read it once, then crumpled it into a ball. The sound echoed through the empty room, and for a brief moment, he smiled.

Small rebellions. Sometimes they were all he had.

A voice appeared behind him. "Your mother spent an hour organizing that schedule."

His father. Arthur Tate stood in the doorway. Perfect suit. Perfect posture. Perfect disappointment, always disappointment.

Even before breakfast.

"You were out all night."

Harrison leaned against the piano. "So?"

Arthur's expression hardened. "So."

The room fell silent, a familiar battle, one they'd been fighting for years. Neither side ever won.

Eventually, Arthur sighed. "You have every advantage."

There it was. The speech.

Harrison could practically recite it from memory.

"The best education."

Check.

"The best opportunities."

Check.

"The best connections."

Check.

"And yet you insist on wasting your potential."

Bingo.

Harrison laughed, actually laughed. The sound echoed through the room.

His father's jaw tightened. "What?" Arthur asked.

Harrison's smile grew. "You know the funny thing?"

Arthur said nothing.

"None of this was ever my dream."

The silence that followed felt dangerous.

Good.

Harrison liked danger. Because dangerous meant real. And real was becoming harder to find in this house.

Much harder.

That night, long after the mansion went quiet, Harrison sat alone on the roof overlooking Los Angeles. The city glowed beneath him. Millions of people. Millions of stories. Millions of lies. And somehow he felt trapped. The irony wasn't lost on him. Most people would kill for this

life. The money. The mansion. The opportunities. Harrison would've traded all of it for one thing.

Choice.

Real choice.

Not the illusion of it.

The real thing.

His phone buzzed. Another underground rap battle. Another warehouse. Another chance to be somebody other than Arthur Tate's son.

A grin spread across his face. Now that sounded like a plan. Because if the world insisted on seeing him as a future businessman...He'd make sure they met the monster first.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Harrison

The warehouse wasn't supposed to exist, at least not according to the city. The building sat abandoned near the Arts District, hidden between graffiti-covered walls and forgotten train tracks. Half the windows were boarded up. The other half were broken.

Perfect.

Harrison preferred places that looked like they might collapse. They felt more honest. Nobody pretended to be something they weren't in places like this. Not like Bel Air. Not like home.

The bass hit before he even opened the door.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

The sound rattled through the metal walls. The crowd inside erupted as two rappers screamed into microphones.

Insults.

Punchlines.

Ego.

Everything Harrison loved.

A grin spread across his face. Now this felt like home.

"Ghost!" Someone shouted.

Heads turned immediately. A few nodded. Others raised drinks. One guy lifted his fist.

Ghost. The nickname had started as a joke. Nobody knew who he was. Nobody knew where he came from.

He'd appear. Destroy somebody in a battle. Then disappear into the night.

Like a ghost.

The name stuck. Harrison liked it. A lot more than Harrison Tate.

The battle ended. One rapper stormed off stage. The other celebrated. The crowd roared.

Then the host grabbed the microphone. "Who wants next?"

Hands shot into the air, including Harrison's.

The host laughed. "Oh, hell."

The crowd immediately started cheering. They knew. Everyone knew. Whenever Ghost stepped into the circle, somebody's night got ruined.

The beat started. Slow, heavy, aggressive. His opponent looked confident, young, and cocky, a dangerous combination.

Harrison almost felt bad for him.

Almost.

The guy went first. The insults landed. The crowd reacted. A few cheers. A few laughs. Nothing special.

Then the microphone landed in Harrison's hand. The room grew quieter.

Harrison smirked and started.

Words poured out, fast, sharp, precise. Every line hit harder than the last. The years of private tutors, speech coaches, classical training, all of it became ammunition.

His father had spent millions teaching him how to communicate. Harrison simply chose a different audience.

The crowd exploded. Every punchline hit. Every metaphor landed. Every insult dug deeper. By the final verse, his opponent looked defeated. By the final line, the battle was over.

The room knew it, so did the other guy. The crowd erupted.

For a few seconds, Harrison stood there breathing hard, sweat dripping down his neck, adrenaline flooding every vein.

The applause washed over him. Every single person in the room wanted to be there. Wanted to hear him. Wanted more.

The realization sent electricity through his chest. At home, compliments felt like obligations. At school, praise felt calculated.

Here?

Here, nobody owed him anything, which made it matter.

"You're a psychopath."

Harrison turned. A girl leaned against the wall nearby. Dark hair. Leather jacket. Sharp eyes. She couldn't have been much older than him. Yet somehow, she looked completely unimpressed.

"Thank you."

She laughed. "That wasn't a compliment."

"It sounded like one."

She shook her head. "Ego like yours should be illegal."

Harrison grinned. "My ego is one of my best qualities."

"See," the girl pointed, "psychopath."

He laughed. A real one, not the fake polished version his parents expected.

The girl extended her hand. "Raven."

"Ghost."

She rolled her eyes. "No. Your actual name."

"That's classified information."

"You're ridiculous."

"Frequently."

Her smile appeared despite herself.

Victory.

Two hours later, Harrison sat on the hood of his SUV watching the city lights. The crowd had dispersed. The warehouse sat quiet again. His phone buzzed.

Mother.

Ignored.

Phone buzzed again.

Father.

Ignored.

Another message.

This one from his performance consultant.

Tomorrow's schedule.

Also ignored.

For once, he didn't care. Because tonight he'd stood in front of a hundred strangers. A hundred people who didn't care about his money, his last name, his father's connections.

None of it mattered.

They only cared whether he could back up his confidence.

And he had. Every. Single. Time.

The city stretched endlessly beneath him. For the first time all day, Harrison smiled. Not the practiced smile from family photos, not the arrogant smirk he wore during battles, a real smile. Because for a few hours tonight, he hadn't been Arthur Tate's son. He hadn't been a future executive. He hadn't been a carefully managed brand. He'd been Ghost.

And Ghost was becoming a problem. A very dangerous problem. One that was starting to feel a lot more real than the life waiting for him on the hill.

Chapter Twenty-Six – Harrison

Harrison Tate had two rules.

Rule number one: Never lose.

Rule number two: Never get caught.

The first rule was easy. The second was becoming a problem.

The warehouse was packed, more packed than usual. Word had spread. Ghost was battling tonight. The mysterious rich kid nobody knew. The guy who appeared out of nowhere and humiliated everyone in front of a microphone.

Harrison loved the attention more than he should have. The crowd formed a circle around the center of the room. Phones illuminated the darkness. Music rattled the walls. People shouted his name.

Well... Ghost's name. Same difference.

The host climbed onto a makeshift stage. "You ready?"

The crowd erupted.

"YOU READY?"

The noise doubled.

Harrison smirked. This - this was the feeling. Not piano recitals. Not charity galas. Not networking dinners.

This.

Chaos. Energy. Adrenaline.

Real people. Real reactions. Real life.

His opponent lasted three minutes, maybe four. Not because the guy was terrible, but because Harrison was better. The battle started evenly, then Harrison found an opening. One weakness. One mistake. That was all he needed. By the end, the other rapper looked ready to disappear into the floor.

The battle was over. The crowd knew it. Harrison knew it. Everybody knew it. The roar that followed was deafening.

He lifted his arms. The king of concrete. Just for one night. Just for one moment.

The feeling was addictive - dangerously addictive.

Then he saw the phone, a girl near the front row. Recording. Not unusual, everyone recorded. The problem wasn't the phone. The problem was the flash. For half a second, his face became visible.

Completely visible.

No hoodie. No shadow. No protection.

His stomach tightened. The moment passed instantly. Most people didn't notice. Harrison did. And for the first time all night...His confidence slipped.

By noon the next day, the video had thirty thousand views. Not millions. Not viral.

But enough, enough to be dangerous.

The comments moved too fast to read. People debated who Ghost was. Where he came from. Whether he was signed. Whether he was famous already. Whether he was secretly rich.

That last one made Harrison laugh; at least they got one thing right.

His phone buzzed.

Raven.

Raven: You seeing this?

Harrison: Seeing what?

Raven: Nice try.

Harrison: No clue what you're talking about.

Raven: You're trending, idiot.

He smiled despite himself, then his smile disappeared because another message appeared, one from his father.

Arthur Tate: My office. Immediately.

Well, that wasn't ominous.

The office sat on the third floor of the mansion. Dark wood, books nobody read, awards nobody cared about, a room designed to intimidate.

Arthur Tate sat behind the desk. Waiting. Which was somehow worse than yelling.

Harrison entered and closed the door. The silence stretched. Neither spoke.

Then Arthur slid a tablet across the desk. The video played automatically.

Ghost.

The battle. The crowd. The cheers. His face.

Harrison's stomach dropped. Not visibly, years of practice prevented that. Inside, a different story.

Arthur folded his hands. "Would you like to explain?"

"No." The answer came immediately.

His father's jaw tightened. Wrong answer. Good. Harrison wasn't interested in right answers today.

"You're embarrassing this family."

There it was, the speech. Always the speech.

Family reputation.

Family image.

Family expectations.

Family legacy.

Everything except family happiness.

"I was rapping."

Arthur stared, as if Harrison had just confessed to a crime. "Exactly."

The word hung between them. For the first time, Harrison understood something. His father wasn't angry because he'd broken rules; his father was angry because people liked it. Because people responded. Because Ghost was becoming real. And real things were harder to control.

That night, Harrison sat on the roof again. The city glowed beneath him. His phone buzzed endlessly.

Messages.

Followers.

Comments.

Attention.

The video continued spreading. A tiny spark becoming a fire. For the first time in years, he should've been happy, but instead, he felt angry. Not at the video. Not at the crowd. At his father. At the mansion. At the life someone else had planned for him.

The city lights stretched toward the horizon, endless possibilities, endless freedom. Somewhere down there, Ghost existed. Somewhere up here, Harrison Tate existed.

The problem?

One of them was becoming impossible to hide. And eventually... He was going to have to choose which one survived.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Harrison

Arthur Tate believed every problem could be solved. Money. Influence. Connections. Control. Especially control. If something wasn't working, you applied more pressure until it did. That philosophy built a billion-dollar empire. It also destroyed every relationship he had with his son.

Harrison knew something was wrong the second he walked into the music room. Three strangers stood beside the piano.

Not one.

Not two.

Three.

The performance consultant, the brand strategist, and somebody new. A woman in an expensive navy suit. Fantastic, another babysitter.

Arthur stood near the windows overlooking Bel Air, hands clasped behind his back, waiting…always waiting, like some corporate supervillain. "Harrison."

The single word carried the weight of a board meeting.

Not a conversation. A meeting. A negotiation. A problem.

Harrison dropped into a chair. "Who died?"

Nobody laughed.

Shocking.

The woman extended her hand. "Melissa Montgomery."

He ignored it. "Should I know who that is?"

Her smile never moved. "I'm your public image consultant."

Harrison closed his eyes because prison sounded more appealing by the second.

For the next hour, they talked about his future, his image, his opportunities, his potential, his brand, everything except what Harrison wanted.

Not once. Not a single time.

Melissa clicked through a presentation, actual slides, as if it were a business merger. "Harrison's demographic appeal is strongest among affluent young professionals."

Harrison almost threw himself through the window.

The performance consultant nodded. The strategist agreed. Arthur listened carefully, taking notes.

His son wasn't even in the room anymore, just a product. A project. An investment. An IPO. Exactly like he'd always suspected.

The breaking point came after lunch. Arthur handed him a thick folder, the kind of folder that ruined lives. "What's this?"

Arthur smiled, the smile of a man announcing a victory. "A contract."

Harrison's stomach dropped. "A contract?"

"For the October gala series."

The room suddenly felt smaller. "What gala series?"

Arthur's smile widened. "The one you'll be performing."

Performing, not considering, not discussing. Performing. Decision already made.

Harrison flipped through the pages. Three cities, private performances, charity galas, corporate events, classical music. Every weekend for six months.

His entire future was already scheduled, already decided, already owned.

"No." The word escaped before he could stop it.

Arthur blinked. "What?"

"No." The second time came louder and stronger.

Then there was dangerous silence, the kind Harrison usually enjoyed.

Not today. Today it felt explosive.

"You don't get to decide that." Arthur's voice remained calm, which somehow made it worse.

"I already did."

The room froze.

Father.

Son.

Neither moving. Neither blinking. Neither backing down.

For years, Harrison had avoided this fight, not anymore. "I'm not a product."

Arthur's jaw tightened. "You're being dramatic."

"No." Harrison stood. The chair slammed backward. "I'm being honest."

Nobody spoke.

For the first time in his life, Harrison realized something his father genuinely didn't understand. Not because he didn't care, but because he couldn't.

Arthur Tate understood success. He understood power. He understood winning. He didn't understand freedom.

Harrison left before dinner. He didn't ask permission, didn't leave a note, didn't care. The black SUV tore down Mulholland Drive as the sun disappeared behind the city. His phone exploded with messages.

Mother.

Father.

Consultants.

Ignored.

All ignored.

The city lights grew brighter. The anger grew hotter. The mansion shrank behind him.

Good.

Let it shrink.

By ten o'clock, he stood outside the warehouse. Music thundered through the walls. The crowd stretched around the building. The usual chaos. The usual freedom.

His freedom, for once.

Raven spotted him first. "Damn." She raised an eyebrow. "You look murderous."

"Feeling optimistic tonight."

She laughed. "Bad day at the office?"

"The worst."

Raven nodded toward the entrance. "Well." A grin spread across her face. "Let's ruin somebody else's."

Now that sounded therapeutic.

The crowd inside felt different. Larger. Louder. Hungrier.

Word had spread about Ghost, the battles, the videos, the mystery.

People wanted a show. Harrison intended to give them one.

The host grabbed the microphone, the room erupted. Names echoed through the warehouse. Chaos. Beautiful chaos.

For the first time all day, Harrison smiled a real smile because nobody here wanted him to be perfect. Nobody wanted him polished. Nobody wanted him controlled. They wanted fire.

And tonight, fire was exactly what he had.

The host pointed toward the center circle. "Ghost!"

The crowd exploded.

Harrison stepped forward, and the noise washed over him. The adrenaline hit instantly.

This was who he really was. Not the pianist, not the heir, not the future executive.

Ghost.

And somewhere in the crowd, a man named Elias Thorne had just arrived, and he was watching, listening, and waiting.

Harrison didn't know it yet, but the next battle was about to change everything.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Aydin

The club wasn't supposed to exist, at least not according to his parents. If Lawrence and Lorna Malik knew their son spent Friday nights in a converted warehouse in Silver Lake surrounded by drag queens, artists, musicians, and people brave enough to be themselves, they'd probably have security escort him home or send him to therapy.

Possibly both.

Which was exactly why Aydin never told them.

The bass pulsed through the floor. Lights flashed blue and purple across the crowded room. Bodies moved together beneath neon signs. Laughter echoed over the music.

For the first time all week, Aydin could breathe. No business school. No networking dinners. No discussions about acquisitions and real estate portfolios. No pretending.

Just music.

The way life should've been.

His friend Leo appeared beside him carrying two drinks. "You disappeared again."

Aydin accepted the glass. "I was standing right there."

Leo laughed. "Physically."

Fair. Aydin had a tendency to disappear into his own head, especially lately, especially when home felt less like home and more like a prison with a view.

A group of guys danced near the stage, and one of them caught Aydin's eye. Dark hair, leather jacket, a nice smile. The guy looked over. Their eyes met. For half a second, the world stopped, then Aydin immediately looked away.

Like always.

Like every time.

Coward.

The word appeared instantly; it was so accurate.

"You did it again." Leo sipped his drink.

Aydin groaned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You absolutely do."

"I absolutely don't."

Leo laughed. "The cute guy."

Aydin felt heat rise into his face. "Can we not?"

"Why?"

Because he knew why. Because attraction wasn't allowed in the Malik household unless it came with a future wife and two perfectly dressed children. Because his father talked about legacy the way other people talked about the weather. Because every family event eventually turned into a conversation about grandchildren. Because every time Aydin imagined telling the truth, he saw disappointment.

Or worse, silence.

The music changed to a slower song, the kind of track Aydin would've saved immediately. He closed his eyes. The bass vibrated through his chest. Music always made sense.

People didn't.

His entire life felt divided into two versions. The version at home. The version here.

The son. The artist. The future executive. The guy writing songs at three in the morning about loneliness and fear.

Some nights, he wondered which version was real. Most nights, he already knew the answer.

"Aydin." Leo's voice broke through his thoughts.

"What?"

"You should perform."

Aydin laughed sarcastically. "No."

The club hosted showcases every month with open mic nights. singer-songwriter events, performance opportunities.

Aydin always attended, but never participated. Because participating meant being seen, and being seen meant risk.

Leo shook his head. "You've got demos. Good ones."

"They're rough."

"They're finished."

"They're terrible."

"They're amazing."

Aydin rolled his eyes. The argument was familiar, mostly because Leo refused to let it die.

"You realize nobody is discovering you from your bedroom, right?"

Aydin looked away, toward the stage, toward the spotlight, toward the thing he wanted more than anything, then immediately looked away again. Because wanting something wasn't the scary part, trying was.

Later that night, Aydin stood outside the club alone. The city lights stretched endlessly beneath him. Cars moved through the streets below. Music still leaked through the walls behind him.

His phone buzzed.

Mother.

Ignored.

Another buzz.

Father.

Ignored.

A third.

Family group chat.

Definitely ignored.

The cool night air settled against his skin. For once, he didn't want to go home.

Home meant pretending.

Home meant expectations.

Home meant becoming someone else's dream.

The club door opened, and Leo stepped outside. "You okay?"

Aydin smiled, the practiced smile. The one everyone believed. "Yeah."

Leo stared, not buying it, not even slightly. "You're a terrible liar."

Aydin laughed softly. "Been told that."

The silence stretched, then Leo spoke. "One day you're going to have to stop hiding."

The words landed harder than they should have, because Aydin knew. He knew. He'd always known. The question wasn't if. The question was when and whether he'd still recognize himself when it happened. Far above the city, the lights of the Hollywood Hills shimmered in the distance. Waiting. The mansion. The expectations. The life he'd been assigned.

Aydin looked away from it, back toward the music, back toward the sound, back toward the person he wanted to be. For a few more minutes, he let himself imagine a different future.

One where he wasn't hiding.

One where he wasn't afraid.

One where he finally stepped onto a stage.

He just didn't know that future was already looking for him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Aydin

Aydin spent three days trying to convince himself he wasn't going; the problem was Leo.

Leo never let things die, especially good ideas, especially terrifying ideas.

"You're performing."

"I'm not."

"You're performing."

"I'm literally not."

"You're performing."

Aydin groaned and dropped his head onto the coffee shop table. Across from him, Leo looked entirely too pleased with himself. The flyer sat between them. Silver Lake Showcase Night. Thursday. 7 PM. Open Mic.

Aydin hated the flyer, mostly because he'd looked at it twenty times that week.

"People sing there all the time."

Leo shrugged. "Most of them suck."

"That's encouraging."

"I'm saying you're better."

Aydin rolled his eyes. The problem wasn't talent. The problem was exposure. The problem was stepping onto a stage and letting people see him, actually see him. His music. His thoughts. His fears. Everything he spent years hiding.

That was terrifying.

Thursday arrived anyway, which felt rude. Aydin spent nearly an hour deciding what to wear, changed outfits twice, then hated himself for caring.

The entire drive to the club felt surreal. Part of him wanted to turn around. Part of him wanted to floor the gas pedal. Neither side won.

He parked, sat there, stared at the building, and wondered when he'd become such a coward.

His phone buzzed.

Leo - **Stop sitting in your car.**

Aydin blinked, then looked through the windshield. Leo stood outside the entrance, waving like an idiot.

Aydin laughed despite himself.

The showcase wasn't crowded, maybe sixty people. A few regulars. A few performers. A few tourists who looked lost.

If he embarrassed himself, fewer witnesses. The logic helped a little, okay, not much at all.

By nine o'clock, he'd almost escaped…almost. Three performers remained, then his name got called.

Aydin froze.

Leo immediately shoved him. "Go."

"I hate you."

"Love you too."

The crowd laughed.

The stage lights felt hotter than expected. The microphone felt heavier. The room felt impossibly quiet.

Aydin stared into the darkness; dozens of strangers waited, watching, expecting. For one terrifying second, he forgot every lyric he'd ever written. Then he remembered why he'd written them. Not for fame. Not for success. Because sometimes songs were easier than speaking.

He closed his eyes, took a breath, and started.

The first verse came softly. The second was stronger. By the chorus, something shifted. The fear disappeared, not completely, just enough. Enough to let the music take over. Enough to stop thinking. Enough to feel.

The song was called *Glass House.* A synth-pop ballad about perfection. About pretending. About living inside expectations that never belonged to you. About loneliness.

The real kind. The kind nobody sees.

The room remained silent, not bored silent, a listening silent, the best kind.

Aydin finished the final note, opened his eyes, and realized nobody had looked away.

The applause wasn't explosive; it was genuine, which mattered more.

People stood. A few whistled. One woman wiped away a tear.

Aydin stared, feeling overwhelmed because they understood. Somehow, they understood. The things he'd never said out loud. The things he'd hidden for years. A room full of strangers understood them.

Afterward, he escaped to the alley behind the club. The cool air helped. His heart still raced. His hands still shook. The performance buzz hadn't faded.

A voice interrupted his thoughts. "That song was beautiful."

Aydin turned. The guy from last Friday. The one with the leather jacket. The one who'd smiled at him. The one Aydin immediately looked away from. Of course, it was him because life enjoyed making things difficult.

"Thanks."

Smooth. Very smooth.

The guy smiled. "You wrote it?"

Aydin nodded. "Yeah."

The smile widened. "You should keep doing this."

Aydin laughed nervously. "Doing what?"

"Being honest."

The words hit harder than any compliment, because honesty was exactly what scared him.

The guy extended his hand. "Jordan."

Aydin shook it. "Aydin."

For a brief moment, neither moved, neither spoke.

Then Jordan smiled again. "I'll be at the next showcase." And just like that, he walked away, leaving Aydin standing alone beneath the neon glow.

Later that night, Aydin sat in his car overlooking Los Angeles. The city sparkled beneath him. Millions of lights. Millions of possibilities.

His phone buzzed.

A text from Leo. **Told you.**

Aydin smiled, then opened his music app. The recording from tonight was already waiting there. One performance. One small stage. One tiny step.

Yet somehow it felt bigger.

Because for the first time, he'd stopped hiding, not completely, not yet. But enough.

Enough for strangers to hear him. Enough for someone to notice. Enough to make him wonder if maybe...

Just maybe...His father was wrong. Maybe being seen wasn't the thing he should fear. Maybe it was the thing that would finally set him free.

Chapter Thirty – Aydin

The worst part wasn't the comments. The worst part was how normal they were. Nobody yelled. Nobody argued. Nobody threatened him. The future was discussed as if it already existed, and Aydin wasn't allowed to edit the script.

The Malik estate hosted dinners the way other families hosted birthday parties…all the damn time, and always with a purpose.

Business associates.

Investors.

Politicians.

Developers.

People who shook hands worth millions of dollars.

Tonight's guest list included three city council members, two CEOs, and a family named Whitmore. Aydin hated the Whitmores. Not because they'd done anything wrong, but because they had a daughter.

"She's beautiful." His mother adjusted his tie.

Aydin sighed. "We've been over this."

"No." Lorna smiled. "You've been avoiding this."

The distinction felt important to her, not to him.

Across the room, Olivia Whitmore laughed at something one of the guests said. She was smart, funny, pretty, perfect, and Aydin felt absolutely nothing.

Not her fault. Not his either. Just reality.

Dinner dragged. Conversations blended together over politics, real estate, investments, expansion, everything sounded identical after a while. Then Lawrence raised his glass, the room quieted.

Aydin recognized that look. His father was about to make a speech.

Wonderful.

"To family."

Everyone smiled, nodded, and played along.

Lawrence's arm settled across Aydin's shoulder like a proud father with a perfect family, which was the perfect lie.

"My son graduates next year."

Several guests applauded. Aydin forced a smile. The one from the photographs. The one everybody believed.

"And after graduation?" Lawrence grinned. "The sky is the limit."

More applause. More smiles. Then came the sentence. The one Aydin would remember forever.

"One day he'll have a wife and family of his own."

The room erupted with approving laughter. Someone immediately looked toward Olivia, and another guest winked.

His mother smiled. Lawrence smiled. Everyone smiled, except Aydin.

Inside, something quietly shattered. Because nobody knew they were hurting him. Nobody knew that every word felt like a prison cell being built around his future. Brick by brick, smile by smile, and expectation by expectation.

The ride home felt endless. The city lights blurred beyond the windows.

Silence filled the car.

Then:

"Olivia likes you."

Aydin closed his eyes. Of course. His mother sat in the passenger seat. His father drove. The conversation felt inevitable.

"She's nice."

Lorna laughed. "That's not what I asked."

Aydin stared out the window. Hollywood stretched beneath them. A city filled with people living openly, freely, honestly.

Meanwhile, he couldn't survive a ten-minute car ride.

"Mom."

"Yes?"

"Have you ever wanted something different?"

Silence.

The question caught her off guard.

Good. Maybe for once she'd hear him. Maybe for once—

"Different from what?"

The hope disappeared immediately because she genuinely didn't understand, not even a little.

Aydin looked away. Back toward the city, back toward the lights, back toward the life he couldn't have. "Never mind."

Later that night, Aydon found himself back at the club. The same music. The same crowd. The same freedom.

Only tonight it felt different.

He stood near the bar watching couples dance beneath purple lights. Two men holding hands. A woman kissing her girlfriend. People existing without fear.

Without hiding, without pretending.

Aydin envied them more than he wanted to admit.

Leo appeared beside him. One look at Aydin's face told him everything. "Family dinner?"

Aydin laughed bitterly. "That obvious?"

"You've got the look."

"What look?"

"The one where you're trying not to break something."

For a while, neither spoke. The music filled the silence.

Eventually, Leo asked: "Have you ever told them?"

Aydin froze. The question sat heavily between them. "No."

Leo nodded slowly. "Will you?"

Aydin watched the dance floor. The freedom. The honesty. The courage.

Then thought about the mansion. His father. His mother. The future they'd planned. The love that came with conditions. The acceptance that came with rules. And for the first time, he said the truth out loud.

"I don't think they'd love the real me."

Leo's expression softened. "Aydin—"

"No." He shook his head. "They love who they think I am."

The words hurt because he believed them.

The music pulsed through the room. Aydin looked around at all the people brave enough to exist, then looked down at his drink. Because bravery felt very far away tonight, and somewhere deep down, he realized something. His father wasn't just trying to control his career. He was trying to control his future. His relationships. His identity. His entire life. Which meant if Aydin ever wanted to be free...He'd eventually have to choose.

The family he loved, or the truth, and he wasn't ready for that choice yet.

Chapter Thirty-One – Aydin

The song wasn't finished; that was the problem. Aydin sat cross-legged on the floor of his bedroom studio, staring at the screen. Synth tracks, lyrics, vocal layers, everything was there.

Almost.

Something still felt wrong.

The song was called *Glass House.* It was supposed to be about expectations, about perfection, about living in a life where everyone could see you, but nobody actually knew you.

Yet every time he listened to it, something felt missing.

The truth. The real truth. Not the version he let people hear. The version he buried. The version he wasn't brave enough to say out loud.

A soft knock interrupted his thoughts. His mother entered without waiting for permission, as always. Lorna Malik looked flawless despite the late hour. Hair perfect. Makeup perfect. Everything perfect. The entire Malik family specialized in perfection. "Still awake?"

Aydin removed one earbud. "Working."

Her eyes drifted toward the computer, toward the music software, toward the life she pretended didn't exist. For a moment, she said nothing, then "Your father scheduled lunch with the Sterling Group next week."

Of course he did. Another internship. Another networking opportunity. Another step toward becoming Lawrence Malik 2.0.

"Sounds exciting." The sarcasm escaped before he could stop it.

His mother's smile faded slightly. "Aydin."

"What?"

"You need to start taking these opportunities seriously."

There it was. The speech. Always the speech.

Different words. Same message.

The future has already been decided. Please stop resisting.

"Aren't I allowed to want something else?"

The question slipped out quietly, almost accidentally.

His mother froze. For a moment, he thought maybe she understood. Maybe she finally saw him. Then—"Everyone wants something else at your age." The hope vanished immediately. "Eventually you grow up." The door closed behind her.

Aydin stared at it. The silence felt deafening.

Grow up.

Translation - Become who we've chosen. Marry who we expect. Live how we've planned. Smile for the photos. Make us proud.

The script had already been written. His only job was performing it.

At midnight, he slipped out of the house, not unusual, not anymore.

The security guard at the front gate nodded as he drove away. The city lights welcomed him like old friends. Los Angeles always felt different after dark. Less judgmental, less controlled, more honest.

Tonight, he headed straight to Silver Lake. To the club. To the only place that ever felt real.

Leo immediately noticed something was wrong. "You look like somebody died."

Aydin laughed. "Close."

"Parents?"

"Parents."

Leo nodded; that explained everything.

The music pounded through the room. Bodies moved beneath neon lights. The familiar comfort settled around him.

For a while, neither spoke. Eventually, Leo handed him a folded piece of paper.

Aydin frowned. "What is this?"

"Open it."

He did; his stomach dropped. The Roxy. Talent Showcase. Saturday. 2 PM. The same flyer he'd been looking at online for weeks. The same showcase he'd convinced himself he'd never attend. The same opportunity he couldn't stop thinking about.

Leo smiled. "You're welcome."

Aydin stared at the paper; his pulse immediately accelerated. The Roxy wasn't an open mic. It wasn't a coffee shop. It wasn't a local showcase. People got discovered there. Real careers started there, which made it terrifying.

"You should go."

Aydin laughed nervously. "Absolutely not."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Why?"

"Because."

"That's not an answer."

"It is for me."

Leo took a long drink, then delivered the killing blow. "The real answer is you're scared."

Aydin looked away. Because unfortunately... He was right. He wasn't afraid of performing. He'd already done that. He wasn't afraid of singing. He'd done that too. He was afraid of succeeding. Because success would force choices. Real choices. The kind he'd spent years avoiding.

At two in the morning, he returned home. The mansion sat silent, exactly as expected.

Aydin slipped through the front door. Then froze. The light in his father's study was still on. Wonderful. Lawrence Malik never stayed awake this late unless something was wrong.

Aydin quietly headed upstairs. His backpack rested where he'd left it earlier. Half open beside his desk. The flyer disappeared inside before he could think twice.

Hidden.

Protected.

Safe.

Or so he thought.

The following afternoon, his phone buzzed.

Leo. **You going?**

Aydin stared at the message, then at the flyer hidden inside his bag, then toward the study downstairs where his father spent every day planning the rest of his life.

A life Aydin wasn't sure he wanted.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. Finally he typed:

I don't know.

The response came instantly.

Yes you do.

Aydin smiled despite himself. Because maybe Leo was right. Maybe he already knew. Maybe he'd known for years.

The flyer remained tucked inside his backpack.

Waiting.

The future waiting beside it.

And upstairs, in a mansion overlooking Los Angeles, Aydin Malik made a decision he wouldn't admit out loud. If music was the only place he could be himself...Then maybe it was time to stop hiding from it. Two days later, Lawrence Malik would find the flyer. And everything would change.

Chapter Thirty - Two - Noah

The police helicopter returned every Thursday, at least that's what Noah liked to tell people. The truth is, it probably came more often than that. After a while, nobody paid attention anymore. Not in East Hollywood. Not on Noah's block.

The helicopter blades chopped through the warm summer air as Noah sat on the roof of his apartment building watching the sunset. A half-finished joint rested between his fingers. His skateboard lay beside him. The city stretched endlessly toward downtown.

"Mom is gonna kill me." He stared at the joint, then took another hit. Not because he was some hardened criminal. Not because he was trying to be rebellious. Because he was fifteen, and fifteen-year-old boys were idiots, every single one of them.

The apartment building wasn't much to look at. Peeling paint, broken elevator, graffiti that reappeared faster than management could remove it, but it was home.

And home meant his mom, that made it enough, most days.

"You smell like weed."

Noah froze, his hand still resting on the refrigerator door; slowly, he turned. His mother stood in the kitchen in hospital scrubs with messy hair, carrying a coffee mug. The universal uniform of exhausted parents.

"Maybe the hallway smells like weed."

Elena stared. "Noah."

"Okay." He sighed dramatically. "Maybe I smell a little like weed."

"A little?" She laughed. "You smell like you lost a fight with a dispensary."

Noah grinned. She was supposed to be mad. The problem was that she rarely stayed mad. Not because she didn't care, but because she knew him. Knew he wasn't getting arrested. Knew he wasn't dealing. Knew he wasn't stupid. Well, not that stupid.

Elena pointed toward the table. "Sit."

"Am I dying?"

"Not today."

"Promising." He dropped into the chair.

His mother sat across from him, and for a moment neither spoke. Then, "You know I don't want you smoking."

Noah nodded. "Yep."

"You know it makes you stupid."

"Debatable."

She pointed her coffee mug at him. "Don't get cute."

Too late, he'd been cute since birth, or so he'd been told. Repeatedly.

The conversation lasted five minutes. No yelling. No punishment. No threats. Just honesty. That was how Elena handled almost everything. Because after years of working in emergency rooms, very little shocked her anymore.

"You gonna stop?" She asked.

Noah considered it. "Probably not."

She laughed, at least he was honest.

Later that night, he met Jax and Rico at the basketball courts. The courts sat behind an abandoned grocery store. Technically closed. Technically off-limits. Technically, none of them cared.

The three boys spent most nights there. Skating, talking trash, planning futures they had no intention of following.

"You're late." Jax tossed him a soda.

"My mother enjoys parenting."

"Rude."

"Extremely."

Rico laughed. "Did she catch you?"

"Yep."

"Dead?"

"Apparently not."

"Miracle."

The conversation shifted toward skateboarding, as it always did. Skating wasn't a hobby; it was a religion, an identity, a purpose, it was …everything.

The three of them spent hours discussing tricks they'd never landed, competitions they'd never enter, and sponsors they'd probably never get. Didn't matter, dreaming was free.

As darkness settled over the city, Noah rolled toward the biggest stair set near the court. Seven concrete steps, nothing impossible, still enough to hurt.

"You're not landing that." Jax called.

"Supportive."

"Realistic."

Noah dropped his board and pushed once. Twice. Three times.

Faster.

Faster.

Faster.

Then jumped.

For one brief moment, he floated. Weightless. No bills. No responsibilities. No neighborhood. No worries.

Just freedom.

Pure freedom.

The board landed beneath him. Perfect.

The boys exploded, shouting, cheering, and celebrating like he'd won the Olympics.

Noah laughed. The sound echoing through the warm California night.

For a few seconds, life felt perfect, simple, easy. Exactly the way fifteen-year-old boys think life should be.

He didn't know it yet, but years later, standing on stages in front of thousands of screaming fans, he'd still spend nights dreaming about moments like this.

The skateboard.

The neighborhood.

His friends.

His mom waiting at home.

Back before the world started changing.

Back before music found him.

Chapter Thirty-Three – Noah

Noah learned about money earlier than most kids. Not because anyone taught him, but because he had to. By sixteen, he knew exactly what "past due" looked like. He knew which bills made his mother's shoulders tense. He knew the difference between a good week and a bad week by the groceries in the refrigerator. And he knew how to pretend everything was fine. His mother did it every day.

The electric bill sat on the kitchen counter. Bright red letters. FINAL NOTICE.

Noah wasn't snooping. The thing practically screamed for attention. He stared at it while eating cereal straight from the box. The milk had run out two days ago.

Another sign, a bad week.

The front door opened. His mother stepped in wearing hospital scrubs that looked like they'd been lived in for the past sixteen hours…oh wait, they did. She looked beyond exhausted.

"Morning."

Noah glanced at the clock. "It's two in the afternoon."

"Exactly." She kicked off her shoes. "Morning."

Elena spotted the bill immediately.

Her expression changed for just a second. Most people wouldn't notice, Noah did. He always did. She made the same face every month with that dreaded bill. The face that said I'll figure it out, even when she wasn't sure how.

She grabbed the bill, folded it, and shoved it into a drawer.

Gone. Problem solved. At least visually.

"You eat?" She asked.

Noah nodded. "Cereal."

"Cereal isn't food."

"It is if you're creative."

His mother laughed. The sound eased some of the tension. Not all of it, just enough. "You need real food."

"I need a personal chef."

"You need a job."

The words were teasing. Mostly.

The problem was she wasn't wrong. Most of Noah's friends worked. Part-time. Fast food. Retail. Gas stations. Whatever they could find. Noah had avoided it. Not because he was lazy, but skating consumed every spare second.

School.

Skating.

Friends.

Repeat.

Life felt pretty simple until bills showed up.

That evening, he sat on the roof again, skateboard beside him, sunset spreading orange across the city. Jax climbed onto the rooftop carrying sodas. Rico followed.

As usual, the three of them practically moved as a unit.

"Your mom still mad?" Jax asked.

"No."

"About the weed?"

"No."

"Then why do you look depressed?"

Noah tossed an empty soda can toward him. Jax barely dodged it, professional athlete material…hardly.

Eventually, the conversation drifted; it always did. Girls, skating, music, future plans, the usual.

Then Rico said something dangerous. "You ever think about leaving?"

Noah frowned. "Leaving where?"

"Here."

The neighborhood. The city. Everything.

Silence followed.

Nobody joked. Nobody laughed. Because every kid on their block had thought about it.

Leaving.

Making it out.

Becoming something.

The problem was nobody knew how.

"My mom likes it here." Noah finally answered.

Jax snorted. "Your mom likes paying fourteen hundred bucks for a one-bedroom?"

The boys all shook their heads, then laughed. This was little money compared to most parts of the city, unless you were homeless, which had happened to each one of them at different points in their lives.

But Noah couldn't stop thinking about the question.

Leaving.

He'd never seriously considered it. His entire life existed within ten miles.

School.

Apartment.

Skate park.

Shop.

Home.

The idea of something bigger felt ridiculous, almost impossible.

The next afternoon, everything changed, not dramatically. Not movie-style. No explosions. No life-changing speech. Just a handwritten sign taped inside the skate shop window.

HELP WANTED Part-Time

Noah stared at it, then at the owner, then back at the sign. "You hiring?"

The owner looked up. "You applying?"

"No." Pause. "Maybe."

The owner laughed. "Good enough."

That evening, Noah handed his mother forty dollars, his first paycheck.

She stared at it, then at him. "Noah."

"It's not much."

She immediately shook her head. "No." Her voice cracked slightly. "It's everything."

The apartment felt unusually quiet. For a moment, neither moved, then Elena pulled him into a hug. The kind she hadn't given him since he was a kid.

Noah awkwardly endured it, like all teenage boys. Secretly loving every second.

Later that night he sat on the roof alone. The city lights flickered below.

The same neighborhood.

The same apartment.

The same life.

Yet something felt different. For the first time, he'd helped, actually helped.

Real money.

Real support.

The feeling settled deep in his chest. Better than landing a trick. Better than getting high. Better than almost anything. He didn't know it yet. But that feeling, the need to take care of the people he loved, would follow him everywhere.

Even onto a stage.

Even into a band.

Even into a life he couldn't imagine yet.

Because Noah wasn't chasing fame, never was. He was chasing a future where his mother never had to worry about the lights staying on again.

Chapter Thirty -Four – Noah

By seventeen, Noah had settled into a routine.

School.

Skate shop.

Skating.

Sleep.

Repeat.

It wasn't glamorous. It wasn't exciting. But it worked. The bills got paid. His mom smiled a little more. And life stayed simple.

Noah liked simple. Simple meant predictable. Predictable meant safe.

The apartment was unusually quiet. His mother had picked up another overnight shift. The hospital was short-staffed again, which apparently happened every week.

Noah sat cross-legged on the living room floor. The battered acoustic guitar rested against his knee. The same guitar his mom had bought for twenty dollars years ago. The same guitar he swore he didn't care about. The same guitar he played almost every night.

Funny how that worked.

Music wasn't something Noah talked about… ever.

Not with his friends. Not at work. Not at school. Definitely not online.

Music belonged to him. A private thing, like thoughts you didn't say out loud.

He strummed a few chords, then a few more. The melody came naturally. The lyrics followed. A song about empty refrigerators. About exhausted mothers. About trying to act okay when everything felt uncertain. Not exactly radio material, but it was honest.

Noah closed his eyes and sang, not loudly, just enough to fill the silence.

Outside the apartment building, Jax froze. "Do you hear that?"

Rico stopped walking. "Hear what?"

"The music."

The two stood beneath Noah's window, listening; neither spoke.

For the first time in years, Noah didn't know he had an audience, and he kept singing.

The song changed. The lyrics shifted. One song became another, then another.

Completely unaware.

Completely exposed.

Completely vulnerable.

Something Noah almost never allowed himself to be.

"Dude." Jax stared upward.

"Dude." Rico nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

Neither moved. The realization settled between them. Not because Noah could sing, they already knew that, but because Noah was good.

Really good.

The kind of good that made people stop talking. The kind of good that made people listen.

The next afternoon, both boys appeared at the skate shop, looking far too pleased with themselves, which was immediately suspicious.

"What?" Noah knew they were up to something.

"What what?" Jax smiled, the smile of a criminal, a dangerous smile.

Noah hated it instantly. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"You definitely did something."

Rico laughed. "He knows us too well."

The truth emerged ten minutes later, and Noah nearly threw them both out of the store.

"You WHAT?"

A customer actually looked over, but neither cared.

"We recorded it."

Noah stared. "You recorded me?"

"Technically."

"Technically?"

"Very technically."

Rico held up his phone. Noah immediately lunged for it. The boys danced backward laughing.

"Give me that."

"No."

"Give me that."

"No."

"Rico."

"Noah."

"Rico."

"Noah."

The argument continued for several minutes.

Neither side won.

The recording spread through their friend group, then beyond it.

Nothing major. Nothing viral.

A few dozen people. A few hundred plays. A few messages.

Still, far too many. Noah hated every second of it, mostly because people liked it, which made it worse. If people hated it, the problem solved itself. Instead, people kept asking questions.

Questions Noah didn't want.

Questions like, ‘Why aren't you doing anything with this?’

The answer was simple - because music wasn't practical. Music didn't pay rent. Music didn't keep the lights on. Music didn't buy groceries.

Skating made more sense.

Work made more sense.

Real life made more sense.

Dreams were expensive.

Noah couldn't afford expensive.

A few months later, he found himself sitting in the concrete bowl with Jax and Rico. Summer heat lingered long after sunset. The neighborhood buzzed with distant traffic. Someone passed a joint. Someone else passed a speaker.

The usual.

Then Rico pulled a folded flyer from his pocket. It was neon blue, wrinkled, but screamed important.

Noah immediately hated it. "What is it?"

Jax grinned. "The future."

"No."

"The Roxy."

Still no. Absolutely no. Noah already knew where this was going, and he wanted no part of it.

"The showcase?"

Rico nodded. "Yep."

Noah groaned. "Not happening."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Strong argument."

"Thank you."

The conversation lasted twenty minutes. Twenty exhausting minutes. By the end, Noah still said no repeatedly, firmly, and without hesitation.

Then Rico played dirty. "One hundred bucks."

Noah froze.

Jax immediately nodded. "We'll split it."

The boys weren't rich, far from it, which meant the money mattered a lot.

"One hundred?"

Rico nodded. "Cash."

Noah thought about groceries. Thought about bills. Thought about his mother. Thought about the electric bill that had appeared again last week.

The answer should have been easy, it wasn't.

Later that night, he returned home. The apartment sat quiet. His mother was asleep on the couch. Textbooks were scattered around her. The television was still glowing softly. Noah pulled a blanket over her, then looked at the kitchen counter. Another bill. Another reminder. Another reason.

His gaze drifted toward the flyer sticking out of his back pocket.

The Roxy. Saturday. 2 PM.

A ridiculous idea. A stupid idea. An impossible idea.

And yet, for the first time, Noah didn't immediately throw it away. Instead, he folded it carefully, placed it on the kitchen table, and stared at it.

The same flyer that was about to change four other lives. The same flyer that would eventually lead him to Nat, Quinn, Harrison, and Aydin.

He didn't know any of that yet.

All Noah knew was this: One hundred dollars could buy a lot of groceries.

And maybe, just maybe, one song wasn't the worst gamble he'd ever made.

Thank you so much for reading Secrets: The Prequel. Below, I'm including the opening chapters for each character from the book, Secrets, which is now available on Kindle and Kindle Unlimited. Secrets is where you can read about all the trouble that happens when all five young men meet and form a band. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GNRGBV3N

Aydin

The view from the Malik estate was a sprawling map of light and filtered ambition. From this height in the Hollywood Hills, the glowing grid of Los Angeles looked like a massive circuit board—one that Aydin's father, Lawrence Malik, believed he had wired himself. The air up here was thinner, cleaner, and smelled faintly of jasmine and expensive irrigation, a world away from the smog and exhaust of the streets below.

"The merger with the Sterling Group is finalized," Lawrence said, his voice cutting through the weighted silence of the dining room. He didn't look up from his tablet. The blue light of the screen reflected in his glasses, making his eyes look like cold, digital sensors. "Which means the internship at the firm is yours this summer. It's a formality, of course, but the optics are essential. It puts you on the fast track for the executive board before you even walk across the stage at USC next spring."

Aydin sat across from him, the silver fork in his hand feeling like a lead weight. The meal was a masterpiece of molecular gastronomy—small, perfect portions that tasted like nothing at all.

"The firm. Right," Aydin said, his voice sounding hollow to his own ears. "Thanks, Dad."

"Don't sound so burdened, Aydin," his mother, Lorna, added softly. She smoothed the silk of her Dior blouse, her movements as practiced as a stage performer's. "Your father has built a kingdom for you. Most boys your age are suffocating in North Hollywood apartments, working three jobs just to see the sun. You're being handed the keys to the city."

The keys to his city, Aydin thought. He forced a smile that didn't reach his eyes—the same smile he had used in every family portrait since he was twelve. In the Malik household, "success" was a measurable metric. It was square footage, quarterly growth, and the ability to command a boardroom. It was not the way a bassline thrummed in your marrow or the way a lyric could finally explain the knot of tension in your chest.

After the suffocating ritual of dinner, Aydin retreated to the "study." It was a room designed to intimidate—lined with leather-bound classics that had never been opened and awards that tracked his father's rise from a hungry immigrant to a titan of California real estate.

He needed to find his misplaced finance notes, but as he stepped into the room, he saw his father standing by the mahogany desk. His backpack was open. A glossy, neon-blue flyer was clutched in Lawrence's hand.

It was a call for a talent showcase at *The Roxy*—the legendary club on the Sunset Strip where icons were made. Aydin had folded it three times, hiding it in the secret lining of his bag.

"I went looking for your business law syllabus to see if you needed a tutor for the finals," Lawrence said. His voice was low, vibrating with a controlled kind of rage that was far more terrifying than shouting. "I found this instead."

"Dad, it's just a local thing," Aydin said. His heart hammered against his ribs like a trapped bird.

"A 'local thing'?" Lawrence stepped forward, the flyer shaking in his grip. "You are three semesters away from a degree that guarantees you a seat at the table of the most powerful developers in the state. And you're spending your time looking at open mics for wannabe pop stars? Do you have any idea how pathetic that sounds?"

"I'm good at it," Aydin said, the defiance slipping out before he could stop it. A hot flush of adrenaline burned through his veins. "I've been writing. I have tracks recorded. I have people following my work online—"

"People like 'content', Aydin. They don't respect it," Lawrence snapped. He threw the flyer onto the desk. "In this city, you are either the person who owns the stage or the person begging to stand on it. I didn't raise a beggar. Look out that window. Every waiter in this zip code thinks they're a singer. Every driver thinks they're an actor. And they all end up broke, bitter, and invisible. Is that what you want? To be a ghost in your own life?"

"It's not about the money," Aydin whispered.

"It is *always* about the money. Because money is the only thing that buys you the right to be who you want to be." Lawrence leaned in, his shadow looming large against the rows of books. "I am forbidding you from going to this audition. If I hear that you've wasted one more hour on this... this *noise*... I will cut the tuition. I will take the car. I will show you exactly how 'creative' you can be when you're hungry and homeless. Am I clear?"

Aydin stood frozen as his father walked out, the heavy oak door clicking shut with a sound like a guillotine.

He sank into the leather chair, his breath coming in shallow, jagged hitches. He looked at the flyer. His father had crinkled it, but the address was still legible.

The Roxy. Saturday. 2:00 PM.

Slowly, Aydin reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He scrolled past the dozens of unread texts from his business classmates and clicked on a hidden folder. He put in his earbuds and hit play on a rough demo he'd recorded last week.

The song was called *Glass House*. It was a pulsing, synth-heavy track about the terror of being seen and the exhaustion of being perfect. As the electronic beat kicked in, Aydin closed his eyes. In his father's world, he was a straight-line trajectory—a future CEO, a future husband, a legacy.

But in his music, he was something else. He was the boy who lingered too long in the gaze of the guy at the record store. He was the artist who wanted to scream until the windows of this mansion shattered.

He was twenty-one years old, living in the heart of the most creative city on Earth, and he was being told to be a ghost. He looked at his reflection in the dark window, the lights of LA shimmering behind his head like a halo he didn't ask for.

He wasn't going to throw the flyer away. He was going to sing.

Noah

The sun didn't shimmer on the pavement in Noah's neighborhood; it baked the asphalt until the smell of old oil and sun-rotted trash rose in thick, invisible waves. This was the part of Los Angeles that didn't make it onto the postcards—the cracked sidewalks of East Hollywood, where the palm trees looked tired and the sirens were a more consistent soundtrack than the ocean.

Noah hit the lip of the concrete stairs outside the laundromat, his board clattering with a violent *snap-clack* as he cleared the set. He landed clean, the vibrations traveling up through his worn-out Vans and into his marrow. For a second, he was weightless. For a second, he wasn't thinking about the past-due electric bill sitting on the kitchen counter or the fact that his mother had worked twelve hours straight at the hospital and was currently asleep in her scrubs.

"Clean, man. Way too clean," a voice called out.

Noah kicked his board up into his hand, the grip tape rough against his palms. His friends—Jax and Rico—were lounging against a graffiti-stained brick wall, their own boards propped up beside them.

"You got the height," Jax said, tossing a half-empty water bottle at Noah. "If you could land that at the park in front of the scouts next month, you're looking at a sponsorship. Real money, Noah. Not the 'spare change for a taco' kind of money."

Noah wiped the sweat from his forehead with the hem of his shirt. "Sponsorships are for kids with better gear and more time. I gotta get to the shop. My shift starts in twenty."

The Living Room Symphony

Noah lived in a one-bedroom apartment where the walls were so thin he could hear the neighbor's TV through the plaster. His "bedroom" was a section of the living room partitioned off by a beaded curtain and a stack of old skate magazines.

He slipped inside, moving like a shadow. His mother, Elena, was out cold on the sofa, her head resting on a stack of medical coding textbooks. She looked smaller than she used to. The grey in her hair seemed to have doubled in the last year, a map of every double shift she'd taken to keep them in this zip code.

Noah walked to the tiny kitchen, grabbing a piece of dry toast. On the corner of the table was an old, battered acoustic guitar with a missing high-E string. He picked it up, sitting on the floor so he wouldn't wake her.

He didn't consider himself a "singer." Singing was just something he did to fill the silence when the apartment felt too empty. He started humming a low, gravelly melody—the kind of sound that felt like the blues but tasted like the 2026 LA street scene. His voice was raw, a baritone that sounded like it had been cured in smoke and disappointment.

He started improvising lyrics about the way the light hit the chain-link fences at sunset. It was a hobby. It was a way to vent. It certainly wasn't a career.

That evening, after his shift at the skate shop, the guys were hanging out at the local concrete bowl. Rico pulled a crumpled, neon-blue flyer out of his pocket—the same flyer that had haunted Aydin Malik's dreams.

"The Roxy," Rico said, grinning. "They’re doing an open call. Pop, rock, whatever. Winners get a development deal."

Noah laughed, a short, dry sound. "Yeah, okay. And I’m the next Tony Hawk. Give it here, I need to light a cigarette."

"I'm serious," Jax said, grabbing the flyer back. "I heard you last night through the window, Noah. You got that raspy, soul-crushing thing going on. The girls love that. I dare you."

"No way," Noah said, leaning back on his board. "I'm a skater. I’m not some stage-kid in a sequins jacket."

"A hundred bucks," Rico said, leaning in. "Jax and I pool it. If you walk into that audition and actually sing one of those songs you mumble under your breath, we give you a hundred. Think about what that does for your mom's grocery budget this week."

Noah froze. The mention of his mother was the low blow. He thought about the empty fridge. He thought about the way she looked at the "Total" at the register and winced.

"One hundred?" Noah asked.

"Cash. Tonight," Jax promised.

Noah looked at the flyer, then at his battered board. "Fine. But if I get booed off stage, you’re buying the beer for a month."

Quinn

The air in the Miller household always smelled faintly of grass stains and sports drink. It was a clean, suburban scent that Quinn associated with the sound of a whistle and the roar of a crowd he never quite understood.

Quinn sat at the kitchen island, his laptop open to a half-finished short story, while his mother, Sarah, buzzed around the room. She was currently polishing the glass on a display case in the hallway—the one dedicated entirely to Kai’s career. It was a shrine of gold-plated trophies, framed jerseys from the LA Galaxy, and a photo of Kai shaking hands with the governor.

"He’s starting in the match against Seattle tonight," Sarah said, her voice bright with a pride she couldn't hide even if she tried. "Your father is already at the sports bar setting up the viewing party. Are you coming, Quinn? It’s a big night for your brother."

Quinn didn't look up from the screen. "I have a deadline for my workshop tomorrow, Mom. Professor Sterling is pretty strict about the word count."

Sarah paused, her cloth mid-swipe. She looked at Quinn with a soft, patronizing smile—the kind one might give a toddler showing off a finger painting. "Of course, honey. That little creative writing degree. It’s so good that you have a hobby you're passionate about. It’ll be nice to have something to fall back on when you’re... well, whatever it is writers do."

Quinn felt the familiar sting in his chest. It wasn't that they hated his writing; it was that they didn't see it as a "thing." To them, Kai was a professional athlete, a tangible, high-earning, celebrated reality. Quinn was just a kid taking classes at the community college, scribbling in notebooks.

"It’s not a hobby, Mom," Quinn said, though his voice lacked conviction. "It’s a career path. Scripts, novels, lyrics..."

"Right," she said, already moving back to the case. "Just make sure you keep an eye on your father’s dinner. It’s in the oven."

Quinn’s real life didn't happen in the kitchen or the "Trophy Room." It happened in his bedroom, with the door locked and a pair of noise-canceling headphones pressed against his ears.

While his parents saw him as a struggling writer, they didn't realize that Quinn’s "short stories" were actually meticulously crafted song lyrics. He had a secret SoundCloud account with a small but dedicated following. He didn't use his real name; he used a pseudonym: **Q**.

His music was indie-folk with a dark, cinematic edge, the kind of songs that felt like driving through the desert at 2:00 AM. His voice was a soft, airy tenor that seemed to float just above the acoustic guitar tracks he recorded on a cheap interface.

That afternoon, while the house was empty, Quinn picked up his guitar. He began to play a melody that had been stuck in his head since breakfast, a song about a shadow that grew so large it eventually ate the person standing in it.

“You’re the headline, I’m the footnote / You’re the anchor, I’m the small boat / Watching the tide pull you out to the sea / While the shore is the only thing waiting for me.”

He closed his eyes, his voice cracking slightly on the high notes. This was the only place he felt like more than "Kai's brother." Here, he was the architect. Here, he was the star.

The next day at the college library, Quinn saw the flyer. Neon-blue. **The Roxy.** He had seen it three times already this week, but he always looked away. Auditioning meant being seen. It meant stepping out of the shadow and into a spotlight that might prove his parents right—that he was just a kid with a hobby.

But as he looked at Kai's latest Instagram post, a photo of him signing an autograph for a crying fan, something in Quinn snapped. He wasn't Kai. He would never be Kai. But maybe, just maybe, there was room in LA for two Millers.

He tore the flyer off the bulletin board and tucked it into his notebook, right next to his creative writing assignment.

Harrison

The Tate estate in Bel Air didn't just have a security gate; it had a protocol. Every inch of the limestone mansion was designed to reflect the impeccable standards of the Zhao-Harrison name. His father, Maxwell, a venture capitalist with a penchant for "legacy building," saw Harrison as his most important IPO. His mother, Diane, could sell a skyscraper before her first espresso, and she treated Harrison's social standing with the same aggressive market-mapping.

Harrison sat in the music room, his fingers moving mechanically across the keys of a $200,000 Steinway. Behind him stood a "Performance Consultant" and a "Brand Strategist"—the two-man team his father had hired to oversee his development.

"The posture is slipping, Harrison," the consultant noted, tapping a tablet. "If we're going to secure the gala performance in October, the aesthetics must match the technicality."

Harrison stopped mid-sonata, the sudden silence ringing through the high-ceilinged room. He looked at his hands—hands that were trained for Chopin but hungered for the thump of a drum machine.

"I've played this piece six hundred times," Harrison said, his voice dripping with an effortless, sharp-edged ego. "I could play it in a coma. My technicality isn't the problem. The problem is that this music is dead."

"This music is *prestige*," Maxwell Tate said, stepping into the room. He didn't look like a father; he looked like a man who was always five minutes away from a hostile takeover. "And prestige is the only currency that matters in this city. You have the best team money can buy, Harrison. Don't waste their time with 'creative differences.'"

Harrison leaned back, a smirk playing on his lips. He didn't argue. He knew better. He just watched his father check his watch and walk away, the embodiment of a man who thought he owned the air his son breathed.

When the mansion settled into its silent, high-tech slumber at 11:00 PM, Harrison's real day began.

He didn't wear the tailored blazers his mother picked out. He threw on a heavy oversized hoodie, a pair of limited-edition sneakers that cost more than an LA apartment, and a mask to cover the face that appeared on his mother's social media feeds.

He slipped out through the service entrance, bypassed the perimeter cameras, a trick he'd mastered at sixteen, and drove his "low-profile" blacked-out SUV toward the neon-soaked corners of Koreatown and Downtown LA.

This was where the ego was fed.

Under the flickering streetlights of a parking lot in DTLA, a circle of people had gathered. A beat was thumping from a portable speaker, heavy, distorted, and raw. Harrison stepped into the center. He didn't need a piano. He had a tongue like a switchblade.

He started to rap. It wasn't the "poetic" musings his father wanted. It was an exhibition of speed, wit, and arrogance. He used his high-class education as a weapon, weaving complex metaphors and sharp insults into a flow that was as precise as his classical training.

He loved the way they looked at him; they didn't see the rich kid from Bel Air. They saw a monster on the mic. Here, he wasn't an IPO. He was the king of the concrete.

The following night, Harrison was leaving a secret underground battle in a warehouse near the Arts District. He was still buzzing from the adrenaline, his ego inflated by the crowd's roar, when he saw a man leaning against his SUV.

Harrison's hand went to his pocket, his instincts on high alert. "You're in the wrong zip code to be looking for a handout, man."

"I’m not looking for a handout," Elias Thorne said, stepping into the light of the streetlamp. He looked remarkably unbothered by the jagged energy of the neighborhood. "I’m looking for the kid who’s been playing Mozart for his daddy and fire for the streets."

Harrison stiffened. "Who are you? One of my father’s scouts?"

"Your father’s scouts are looking for a pianist," Elias said, tossing a card onto the hood of the car. "I’m looking for the guy I just heard inside. The one with the ego big enough to fill a stadium but the sense to hide it from the people who want to tame him."

Harrison picked up the card. **Vanguard Records.** He knew the name; his mother had tried to get him an introduction to their board of directors for a "classical crossover" project.

"Vanguard is for pop stars," Harrison sneered, though his grip on the card tightened.

"Vanguard is for whatever I tell them it’s for," Elias countered. "I’m building a collective. I have the voice, the rhythm, and the poet. But I need the fire. I need the guy who’s tired of playing by the rules and ready to own the game."

Harrison looked at the card, then back at the warehouse. The ego in him, the part that believed he was better than everyone his father had ever hired, flared up.

"I don't do 'collectives,'" Harrison said. "I’m the lead, or I’m nothing."

"Come to the office tomorrow," Elias said, already walking away. "Let’s see if you’re as good as you think you are when you’re standing next to people who have nothing to lose. Because right now, you’re just a rich kid playing dress-up."

Nate

The sun hadn’t even cleared the horizon over the Oklahoma panhandle, but Nate was already three hours into his day. The air was thick with the scent of turned earth and diesel, a familiar perfume that seemed to settle in the very pores of his skin.

He leaned against the rusted fender of his ‘98 pickup, watching the sky turn from a bruised purple to a pale, hopeful gold. In his hand was a thermos of coffee that had gone lukewarm an hour ago, but he didn't mind. Out here, you learned to appreciate things for what they were, not what you wanted them to be.

"You’re staring at the fence line again, Nate," a voice called out.

Nate turned to see his father, Silas, walking toward him. Silas moved with the stiff-legged gait of a man who had spent forty years wrestling with the Oklahoma soil and losing as often as he won.

"Just thinking about the south pasture, Dad," Nate lied.

Silas grunted, leaning next to him. "Liar. You're thinking about that bus ticket. Don't think I don't see you touching that envelope in your pocket every ten minutes."

Nate felt the heat rise in his neck. Inside his flannel shirt, tucked into his breast pocket, was a Greyhound ticket, the result of six months of bake sales, church raffles, and the "Send Nate to LA" jar that sat on the counter of the local diner.

"It's a long way, Nate," Silas said, his voice unusually quiet. "A lot of people in this town put their grocery money into that envelope. They aren't just sending a singer to California; they're sending a piece of all of us. Don't let the noise out there drown out who you are."

Later that afternoon, Nate pulled up to the local feed store. A dusty blue sedan was already parked there, and leaning against it was Vanessa.

She looked exactly like she had since they were ten: blonde hair pulled back in a practical ponytail, eyes the color of a summer storm, and a smile that felt like home. To the rest of the town, and especially to their parents, they were still the golden couple, the high school sweethearts destined for a farm and four kids.

Only Vanessa knew the truth. They had sat on the tailgate of his truck six months ago and realized that while they loved each other, they weren't *in* love anymore. They had shared their first dance, their first kiss, and their first real heartbreak together, and that had forged a friendship stronger than any romance.

"Hey, Superstar," Vanessa said, handing him a small, heavy velvet bag.

"What's this?" Nate asked, weighing it in his hand.

"The fundraiser from the fair last night. The 4-H club did a car wash. It's another four hundred bucks," she said, her eyes shining. "It's enough for a month at that hostel your agent found."

Nate looked at the bag, then back at the town he had never left. "Vanessa, I can't take this. People are acting like I'm already on the radio. What if I get there and I'm just... some guy from Oklahoma who can't hit a high note?"

Vanessa stepped forward and gripped his forearm. "You aren't 'some guy.' I've watched you sing *Broken Timber* at the Dusty Spur until there wasn't a dry eye in the house. You have a gift, Nate. And since I'm the only one in this town who knows you're going to LA as a single man, you owe it to me to go out there and be brilliant."

She leaned in and kissed his cheek, a chaste, familiar gesture that his mother, watching from across the street, would surely misinterpret as a promise of marriage.

Meet the Author

Izzibella Beau has been crafting stories since 2012, weaving emotionally charged narratives that explore desire, danger, and the deep connections that change everything. Now revisiting and rewriting her backlist while creating bold new material, she writes across several genres, blending cinematic tension with heartfelt romance and unforgettable characters.

With a background in film production and screenwriting, Izzibella brings a visual, immersive quality to her work—stories that feel as vivid as scenes unfolding on screen. Expanding her creative world even further, she is also developing original songs inspired by her books, offering readers a unique, multi-sensory storytelling experience.

A passionate animal advocate, Izzibella believes in giving a voice to the vulnerable—both on the page and off. When she's not writing, she stays happily busy with her kids and pups at home in Georgia, always chasing the next story waiting to be told.

Let’s Connect

I would love to connect with all you wonderful readers. I can be found on almost all social platforms.

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