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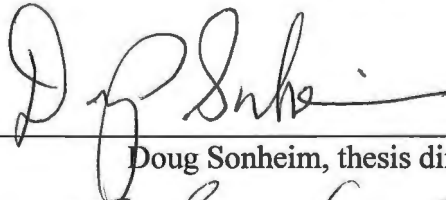
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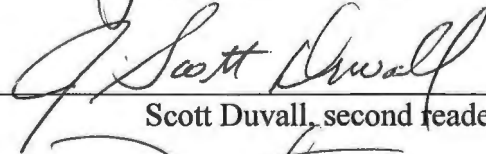
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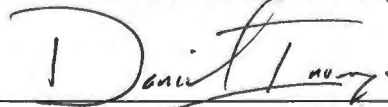
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Preface

When I began writing *Freeflight* in 2008, I did not think of it as part of the “Christian fiction” genre. I intended to write a realistic novel¹ containing ideas that interested me, such as unconditional friendship, the effects of fame, and the world of modern rock music. I wrote for a secular audience, envisioning my novel in the mainstream fiction section of a bookstore instead of on the one shelf of Christian fiction squeezed in the back corner. But finding the best balance between Christian themes and a non-Christian audience is a complicated matter. In this thesis, I attempt to identify what aspects of a Christian novel are most effective for conveying the Gospel to non-Christian readers while still providing unequivocal Christian ideas through the story. How does a Christian author write a realistic novel with supernatural content? How can fiction evoke questions in its audience about God and faith without turning non-Christian readers away? To answer these questions in this thesis, I divide the Gospel into four stages or themes that Christian authors may address in their novels, discuss the relationship between Christian authors and realism, analyze the technique and redemption theme of four novels in the Christian fiction genre, and analyze the same aspects in my own novel. I include a rough draft of my novel as an example of what I have found to be the most effective in communicating the Gospel to a non-Christian audience. While my novel is far from perfect, it contains several qualities that I believe are important to have in a Christian novel.

¹ The intended genre for *Freeflight* is a realistic, contemporary novel following the pattern of realism that began in the nineteenth century. According to *A Handbook to Literature*, realists believe that the truth is “associated with discernible consequences and verifiable by experience” and describe “the common, the average, the everyday” (398). Furthermore, a realistic novel “emphasizes truthful representation of the actual” (399). I hoped to accomplish these goals, as well as to include a touch of the supernatural without compromising them, in writing *Freeflight*.

Introduction

When writing the first draft of *Freeflight*, I learned that harmonizing my Christian beliefs with a novel was more complicated than I initially thought. I wanted my story to have a clear Christian background but to also be relatable to readers without a Christian background. But I made a rookie mistake by basing one of the main characters off of myself, imbuing the novel with Christian themes from its conception. Amber Knight was, at the beginning, me, which meant she was a young, white, middle-class Christian with no dramatic story about coming to faith in Christ.² In terms of her faith, she was a one-dimensional character, static and uninteresting, and her purpose was to be the voice of sense and virtue to contrast with the character in need of redemption: the rock star, Matthew Wolfe. Because Amber's only defining characteristic was that she was a Christian, the novel's natural course was bound to have hints of theology and the Christian faith, but I was unsure how to proceed with those ideas.

In the original version of *Freeflight*, I only hint at God through a mysterious "voice" that converses with Amber, such as in the following discourse:

"I-I don't know," I said, the previous fear and helplessness returning full force in the wake of the previous emotions. What was I doing here? How did I get here? Where did I belong?

Here.

There it was, that voice again. It was warm, soothing, like a caring father. And again, it didn't say words; it was more of an intuition, a feeling so specific that my mind interpreted it as a word. Here.

² Because of this, I also wrote the first draft of *Freeflight* in the first person point of view, which focused on a relatively unchanging character, Amber, instead of the most dynamic character, Matthew.

“Then why can’t I remember?” I found myself asking in a voice barely beneath a whisper, just in case the voice could hear me, “What am I supposed to do?”

Remember. (Freeflight, first draft 5)

I describe the voice as “warm, soothing, like a caring father,” yet it has no identity. The reader might assume or guess that the voice is God because it understands Amber’s thoughts and speaks to her through “intuition, a feeling,” but since I never connect it to God in the story, the voice’s identity remains an unhelpful mystery. In fact, I never overtly mention Christianity other than a single discussion about God’s nature in which Matthew spouts his misconceptions and Amber silently disagrees. The original draft’s theme was that unconditional love changes people’s lives - not a far cry from the theme of redemption in many Christian novels, except that the love was not attributed directly to God, nor was it even God’s love, but Amber’s. If I had taken the first draft of *Freeflight* seriously, I would have realized that my unstated goal was for Matthew to find redemption in Christ. As it were, the resulting statement of the novel was a vague encouragement to love others and meet their needs, an indistinctness to which I would now object in any novel that claims to have a Christian-based message.

By the time I began revising *Freeflight*, I was starting to think about the genre of Christian fiction and its purpose. Indirectly referring to God and the redemption found through Him was pointless; the reader could interpret it however he or she chose, nullifying or diluting the intended Christian message. I had encountered novels that made the same mistake and thought them to be worse than purely secular novels in some ways.³ Therefore, my second draft

³ *Offworld* by Robin Parrish is one such novel. The main character repeatedly appeals to a vague higher power to help him overcome tense, action-filled situations, but for much of the book there is no mention of God, or even of a definitive statement that someone or something like God exists, just the fanciful possibility. The characters, when protesting against the antagonist’s actions, are suddenly all professed supporters of a power looking after them. A character also spouts off some ideas that, in essence, are Christian, but that sound mystical, such as how a veil separates the spiritual realm from reality. Eventually, the characters learn to gain peace from God, which is good,

of *Freeflight* had long conversations involving an awkward blend of ambiguity and outright discussion about God:

“So you think love is the answer to everything.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be?” [Matthew] said in a slightly weaker voice. When he glanced at me, I was hit with a sense of longing for something that was perpetually beyond his reach.

Unconditional love, the Voice whispered.

“Maybe you’re looking for the wrong kind of love,” I offered, following the Voice’s lead.

...

“I’m not just talking about romance though,” I said. I wasn’t sure where I was going with this, but I pushed on. “What about something even deeper?”

Matthew raked a hand through his hair. “Are you talking about God again?” he asked wearily.

I thought about the Voice. “Yeah.”

...

I looked at the cross. Somehow its story was known to me. Its story of sacrifice, of a second chance . . . and it gave me the courage to speak. (*Freeflight*, second draft 88)

Amber and Matthew are talking about God, yet even after I imply that the Voice is indeed God, I continue to call it “the Voice.” I also mention the cross and “its story of sacrifice, of a second chance” but not how it applies to people today. A conversation that is supposed to prompt the reader to seriously consider the role of God in his or her life leaves the reader confused.

but it seems like an afterthought. It would have been much more effective and meaningful if it were a vein running through the entire story, not just a convenient way of closing the plot.

I abandoned that draft before I finished, realizing that my methods were not going to be effective in communicating the character of God to unbelievers. At this point, I was still unsure about what I wanted the core theme to be of my novel. I had kept with the theme of unconditional love, but the way I had developed it in the novel seemed both cliché and unconnected to God. Finally, I revisited the main characters, Amber and Matthew, in order to find a way to present a Christian theme realistically. But even after I adjusted Amber's character so that she was no longer me, I still did not know how to narrow down the theme. Conveying biblical truth through fiction to a secular audience is not a simple task. If I sent my manuscript of *Freeflight* to publishers, who would more likely accept it: Christian publishers, or secular ones? As I once heard a Christian musician say at a concert, "I'm too weird for Christians and too 'Jesus' for the other people, so I'm stuck here in the middle." In an effort to attract a non-Christian audience, I wrote my novel in a way that would not appeal to the typical Christian fiction reader.⁴ Some characters mildly swear, and the narration often implies acts of promiscuous sex, a common occurrence in Matthew's hedonistic lifestyle. Additionally, most of the characters are in their twenties, perhaps making them less relatable to older readers. On the other hand, Amber's obvious Christian faith, Luke's⁵ consistent Scriptural advice, and Matthew's eventual acceptance of God's love is likely to be too "churchy" for mainstream audiences who only want to be entertained, not preached at. While I tried to make Matthew's

⁴ Which is a Protestant woman in or around her forties, according to Melanie Duncan in her article "A Born-Again Genre" (2012). On the other hand, some editors like Christina Boys believe the Christian fiction audience is "much more diverse than the conservative stereotype held by the secular mainstream" (Duncan).

⁵ Luke Whiteman is Matthew's closest friend and a strong but closeted Christian.

spiritual journey as logical and realistic as possible, I can only do so much when spiritual matters are “nonsensical.”⁶

The Gospel: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation

How can a spiritual story manifest in a realistic novel without compromising its authenticity? To discover the core of the Gospel message, I order it into four steps: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation.⁷ God created the universe for a purpose and therefore has a plan for us; we have our beginnings in God, and creation exhibits His glory, power, and infinite knowledge. However, because human sin ruined the world, our existence involves a movement towards restoration with God. Sin’s consequences - separation, selfishness, disharmony, and death, among others - make it the root of all pain and suffering, and we as humans are personally responsible. However, redemption and forgiveness is available through the death of Jesus Christ, which fulfilled God’s need for justice while making salvation possible for all people. Redemption through Christ is empowering and provides freedom from sin. Christ not only died, but he also rose from the dead, foreshadowing the consummation that will eventually happen. We will have new bodies in a new creation, and death will be defeated forever. Consummation also gives us a heavenly perspective; our hope is not just a vague desire for a better time but also an expectation that God is faithful and will keep his promises. To disregard any of these concepts is to have an incomplete Gospel story. Therefore, any author that wants to present the

⁶ The Gospel is very paradoxical: dying to yourself to live in Christ, the last shall be first, love your enemies. We as Christians, having been steeped in Scripture, believe it makes sense, but it does not coincide with worldly logic.

⁷ This paragraph is based on and inspired by the “Great Story” concept presented in *Living God’s Word: Discovering Our Place in the Great Story of Scripture* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) with some of my adjustments.

Gospel to her readers must write with these four things in mind. As a result, each aspect of the Gospel will naturally emerge in the story, whether in a subtle or obvious manner.

While it is not necessary to confine a novel with Christian themes to the Christian fiction genre, such a novel distinguishes itself from purely secular fiction by the way it handles the four “big-picture” themes of the Gospel.⁸ Secular fiction, almost by definition, does not and cannot offer a view of Creation as Christians understand it: there is no God-driven purpose behind the world, no infinite or objective meaning to be found in anything. In explaining why certain things happen, people who do not believe in God fall on a spectrum ranging from pragmatic to spiritual. Events either happen in a logical sequence or because of the impersonal “powers of the universe.”⁹ What secular literature focuses on is the Fall - though, of course, secularism does not call it that. Most people, regardless of their religion, recognize that the world is broken, that war and disease and injustice happen. Flannery O’Connor, in her article “Novelist and Believer,” says that “drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not” and that all writers write “about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated” (167). Realistic novels have plots with high amounts of conflict, describing people in tough situations¹⁰ where something is not right and needs to be mended, because tragic situations are a universal experience in human life. Secular

⁸ In this paper, I am using the term “secular” to refer to any work that is not intentionally written to contain Christian themes with the purpose of revealing a new facet of the Gospel. Secular novels may have themes that originate in the Christian faith, such as redemption, forgiveness, grace, etc., but these themes are never attributed to a Christian source. “Christian fiction” refers to works that are marketed with obvious ties to the Christian faith and contain overt references to the Gospel.

⁹ The extreme state of this is naturalism, which is “objective in the presentation of material; amoral in the view of the struggle in which human animals find themselves—neither condemning nor praising human beings for actions beyond their control” (*Handbook*, 315) because people are merely victims of fate and biological urges.

¹⁰ Plots that, as Aristotle says of Tragedy, “imitate actions which excite pity and fear” and the “proper purgation of these emotions” (*Poetics*, xiii, vi).

authors focus on localized instances unique to their created world or characters, while Christian authors view any specific problem as evidence of a universal truth: we live in a fallen world where sin rules. While secular stories sometimes do not deny the existence and importance of the soul, the Christian author also understands the role of God in the soul's salvation and sees sin "as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future" (O'Connor 167) instead of as a result of uncontrollable environmental factors.

It is typical for both secular and Christian novels to redeem one or more characters at its end, but in secular fiction, the redemption is based on human agency - people are their own saviors, not God.¹¹ The problem with this from a conservative Christian viewpoint is that humans cannot provide their own permanent solutions, so that while the problem may be temporarily fixed, another problem is guaranteed to arise in the future. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy both overcome their prejudiced notions of each other and fall in love. Their "redemption" is their romance and marriage at the end of the book, made possible by the respective conquering of their pride. However, their marriage does not mark the end of their prejudice. Even though they overcome their misconceptions of each other, it is very likely that throughout the course of their life, they will act in a judgmental manner towards others. The problem of bigotry is temporarily solved in the novel, but the characters' core behavior has not been altered. The novel does not offer a solution to anyone's natural inclination towards hasty judgment. Christian novels, if done right, provide a solution through Christ, who works in and through people to change them from within. While a person will not completely quell their flaws in their lifetime, Christ promises to "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5) at His Second Coming, culminating in consummation. Life will be the best it can be

¹¹ However, I am not claiming that every single novel needs to have a Christian-based redemption, only those that try to offer a clear Christian perspective to the reader through its themes or characters. Thus there is a need for Christian fiction in order for there to be a genre through which Christian redemption can occur.

at the consummation, and we as Christians look forward to that time with hope. Secular works have either no mention of consummation - how could they when there is no mention of God? - or have an over-spiritualized notion of "heaven" where everything is magically perfect. Essentially, these novels represent the "type of modern man who recognizes spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord; consequently he has become his own ultimate concern" (O'Connor 159). This "modern man," as an author, retells the Gospel story with humans as the only characters. As a result, the novels by this kind of author present an incomplete and lopsided view of life. The framework of the secular worldview is inherently flawed in this way.

Realism And The Christian Fiction Genre

I struggled with writing realistic characters and situations in *Freeflight*, a problem that many authors have. A Christian author must be conscious of realism¹² and its effects, since it influences how a reader engages with the text. According to C.S. Lewis in his book *Experiment in Criticism* (1961), there are two kinds of realism: realism of presentation and realism of content. Realism of presentation concerns itself with how a situation is expressed. The more detailed and vivid a scene is, the more realistic it appears in the reader's imagination. On the other hand, realism of content applies to how likely a situation may happen. A novel can have any combination of these two, and Lewis believes that all combinations "are good and masterpieces can be produced in any of them" (60). One type or the other is not inherently bad, though in the past two centuries, readers have preferred realism of content. But readers have differing definitions of this concept: does it involve "the sort of thing that usually or often happens" or "the sort of thing that might conceivably happen" (Lewis 61)? Lewis does not

¹² For a definition of realism, see above.

decide on either one, preferring realism of presentation over both. O'Connor agrees with Lewis in that modern readers think that "the fiction writer is after the typical" (164) or, in Lewis' terms realism of content. However, she determines that "the novelist is bound by the reasonable possibilities, not the probabilities, of his culture" (O'Connor 164-5), and therefore would choose the latter definition of realism of content. Regardless of an author's preference, audiences expect realism in some form.

If Christian authors want to convey a specific biblical message in their writing, they must be conscious of their readers' expectations of realism. Otherwise, their message may not shine through the tangle of plots and characters in their novels, and the message is what sets Christian fiction apart from other fiction. Whether a Christian author focuses on realism of content or presentation, he must ensure that the realism is a vehicle for his story's message. Some authors give so much priority to biblical themes that they forget about realism altogether and create the "sorry religious novel" that O'Connor says "comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality . . . and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting himself as little dirty in the process as possible" (163). When an author does this, he is essentially writing a sermon and attaching characters to it as an afterthought, and the result is an unrealistic and aimless story that bores the reader.¹³

Since mainstream fiction can also edify its audience, the genre of Christian fiction might seem like a pointless category;¹⁴ indeed, I believe that separating Christian fiction from other genres of fiction – fantasy, romance, contemporary and the like – hinders its status among

¹³ One example of this type of novel is *Joshua* by Joseph F. Girzone, which I will further discuss below.

¹⁴ Perhaps even "the label itself – 'Christian fiction' – may prove problematic because of the ways authors, publishers, readers and the media translate or interpret the term" (Sanders).

potential non-Christian readers.¹⁵ However, this quarantine of Christian literature is understandable when one considers the marketing techniques and target audience of Christian publishers.¹⁶ But instead of worrying about writing for the typical Christian fiction audience, a Christian author should focus on transferring her vision, comprising of a seamless blend of biblical truth, realistic plot, and relatable characters, “as nearly whole as possible” (O’Connor 162) to her reader, whoever the reader might be. A Christian author should be most concerned about “how he shall make the experience – which is both natural and supernatural – understandable, and credible, to his reader” (161). A Christian novel should be real enough for the reader to engage in and spiritual¹⁷ enough that questions emerge in his mind, questions about his own soul and the significance of God.

But what about the *Christian* readers of Christian fiction who make up most of the genre’s audience? After all, the Christian fiction genre sprung from the need for biblical lessons that mainstream genres could not satisfy, and its Christian audience calls for specific, clear-cut Christian genres like Amish fiction. Amish novels have seen consistent popularity since 1997, when *The Shunning* by Beverly Lewis began the trend of “bonnet fiction.” Amish fiction sales have plateaued since 2009, with individual authors seeing lower sales due to the sheer influx of authors now writing in the genre (Crosby), and the genre has even crossed over to mainstream audiences (Riess). Publishers believe this is because audiences – both Christian and mainstream

¹⁵ Exiling what publishers label as “Christian fiction” from corresponding mainstream genres encourages readers to hold Christian fiction to a different standard; in fact, Christian fiction “is still erroneously pigeonholed by some critics as simplistic storytelling or ‘gentle reads’ that can’t compete with mainstream novels for complexity of plot and character development” (Duncan). As a result, the only readers who read Christian fiction are those who specifically look for it (i.e. Christians), leaving little opportunity for non-Christian readers to stumble upon Christian novels.

¹⁶ Though according to Duncan, Christian publishers are now “changing marketing strategies to appeal to secular readers . . . but it is essential that the publisher continue to speak directly to the Christian market.” The result of this shift remains to be seen.

¹⁷ That is, spiritual in the Christian sense of being closely connected and pertaining to God.

– feel a nostalgia for simpler times as they live in an age of technology and distractions (Crosby).¹⁸ The abundance of such novels affects the genre of Christian fiction as a whole and leaves little room for a more diverse canon of Christian literature. The problem is circular: the majority of the Christian fiction audience expects Amish fiction, romance, and historical fiction, so Christian authors write those genres and publishers refrain from accepting risky genres that would attract a more diverse audience. However, recent trends cautiously promise a “more sophisticated and demographically diverse” readership that is seeking more variety in Christian fiction (Duncan). This will help the genre attract more types of readers, including non-Christians, as it becomes more competitive with mainstream genres. As an author, I need to be aware of these changes as I consider the target audience for my novel.

Blaggard’s Moon: Effective Storytelling

Blaggard’s Moon by George Bryan Polivka does not belong in the current trends of Christian fiction, but its uniqueness helps rather than hinders its message. It takes place in a fantasy world filled with imagined lands, peoples, history, and culture, but not with an imagined religion. Based on context clues from the book and its complementary trilogy, Christianity as we know it exists in the Kingdom of Nearing Vast.¹⁹ They have the same Bible, which is always referred to as “Scripture,” the same method of salvation through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, and even an institutional church with priests and elders. It is a fallen world in need of redemption, a world in which God works and moves. Its people wrestle with the same

¹⁸ This is also the reason why historical fiction is popular as a Christian fiction subgenre.

¹⁹ The name itself, “Nearing Vast,” hints at the quest of all believers to gradually become sanctified through Christ and is an appropriate name for a world in which such sanctification occurs.

questions we do about life and death, good and evil, hope and grief. We see many of these questions through the thoughts of one character, Smith Delaney.

Delaney is a pirate when we first encounter him in the story, though not necessarily an evil man. His father took him from his mother when he was “just old enough to pinch liquor and vittles for his Pap, but not old enough to get jailed or beaten for it” (Polivka 21). After his father abandoned him a few years later, Delaney continued to steal, but felt guilty on account of priests that often harangued him on the streets about hell and damnation. He signed on to a ship crew because “he heard that priests didn’t sail much in ships” (22). When Delaney and some of his fellow crewmembers were thrown in jail for accidental murder, a pirate captain visited them and gave them the choice of either dying or joining his pirate crew. Delaney chose piracy, a decision he now regrets. As a result, he offers readers an “everyman” perspective on questions of faith.

In the first scene of the book, Delaney is stranded on a post in the middle of a lagoon with no immediate explanation of how or why he got there, but we know he is waiting for his death to come in the form of carnivorous marine monkeys, who emerge only at night. This dramatic beginning plunges readers *in medias res* and evokes immediate sympathy for Delaney. As he waits for the sun to set, on the lagoon and on his life, he reflects on his choices and his questions about how the world works, many of which are theological, because “death always caused Delaney to do at least a bit of pondering” (152). This results in an interesting structure for the book consisting of three points in time: Delaney’s present thoughts, which is where most of his internal development takes place; his memories of being jailed, turning pirate, fighting as a pirate, and his actions that led to his sentence of execution; and a story that he heard told by a storyteller on a pirate ship. Although Delaney heard the story after he became a pirate, the story itself is a true story that happened before he turned pirate in the first place, and it involves

characters that Delaney meets later. The alternating points in time are a little confusing at first, but it creates a meta-narrative perspective, panning out to a wider, more holistic view. Within the story itself, we can also see the emotional and mental effects that storytelling can have, because we see Delaney react to the story he is told and come to important conclusions based on that reaction.

Pirate storyteller Ham Drumbone recounts the tale of Damrick Fellows, Jenta Stillmithers, and the ruthless pirate captain Conch Imbry to the motley crew of the *Shalamon*, which includes Delaney. Through Delaney's eyes, we get both the story itself and the crew's reactions to it. Ham is a talented storyteller, and captures even the weak imaginations of the pirates through his words, able to "[call] up both lonesome longing and high hopes at the same time, painting those word pictures like only he could paint them" (16). The crew's responses to his storytelling technique echo issues and concepts that real-world authors must also consider when writing a novel.

For example, being largely uneducated, the crew does not appreciate Ham's attempts at metaphor, imagery, and eloquence. They want to be told a story of violence and treasure, and they are easily stirred into excitement at the mention of a fight, especially one that involves every pirate's rival: Damrick Fellows. Often when Ham pauses to artfully describe a scene or emotion, the pirates interrupt, calling for a battle scene instead, and when he uses "fancy" words, they voice their confusion. At one instance, when Ham is describing Jenta Stillmithers, he says that "she had long, wavy blonde hair, not light nor yellow, but golden, like fine sherry," to which a pirate asks, "What's a fined cherry?" Ham switches the comparison to "an excellent malt amber beer" (25), which illicit recognition and approval from the crew. Besides adding humor to the book, these interactions between Ham and his audience remind the reader that telling a story is

no easy feat, and that the author must always make an effort to communicate to his audience in an effective way. Otherwise, the story will not reach their minds and hearts.

The pirates' comments also offer helpful perspectives on the story's themes, perspectives that might not occur to the reader. After Ham introduces Damrick Fellows, a man with a righteous mission to kill every pirate he possibly can, one of the nastiest members of the pirate crew, a man named Sleeve, says he does not like him because he is "all righteous-like . . . [and] likes to kill . . . as much as any pirate ever did" (67). Later, Sleeve also says that Damrick was "a smart man and was a hero fer [sic] a while, until people figured out he was no better than a murderer, a man who found out he liked killin' and went and found a way to get paid to do it" (129). Damrick is supposed to be the hero of the story, at least to any reader or listener who is not a pirate, yet he is so bent on justice that he has no mercy, to the point that even a pirate does not agree with his actions. This theme of justice and mercy reoccurs throughout the book, implicitly discussing the nature of God.

Ham's storytelling even exemplifies how a mere story can open a way into sharing the gospel, which can be helpful to Christian authors seeking to do so. Because his audience is comprised of pirates, he never focuses on the specifics of Christian salvation, even though the story gives plenty of opportunities to do so. Instead, he shows the effects that salvation has on the characters who are Christians. For example, Wentworth Ryland, a hapless, rich drunk whose father uses nefarious means to marry him to Jenta, becomes a Christian thanks to her. He admits to her that he is not the man he wants to be and that he does not know how to change himself. Jenta asks him if he has ever prayed. At this point in the story, the pirate audience complains about Ham's inclusion of religion, and Ham responds that the pirates may not like it, but "such things happen in this world. People don't only turn to doing bad, you know. They also turn to

doing good” (167). But because he knows that the pirates are not interested, he only says that there were “prayers involved, and . . . readings from the Holy Scriptures” (168), and he does not go into detail. After saying that he will give the particulars of salvation to anyone who asks him later, he continues the story. He explains the effects that Wentworth’s prayer and Scripture reading had on him – how the man avoided pubs, stayed sober, and went to church – but that is all the storyteller says on the subject of salvation. However, Delaney recalls that a sailor approaches Ham later, asking how Wentworth “turned good.” Ham tells him that there are passages in Scripture that explain how to be saved and that “there are certain particulars that if you agree with them, even once, just one time in the secrecy of your own heart, why, you’ll cross over from darkness to light” (212). Afterwards, Delaney notices that the sailor starts to hang back from plundering and eventually leaves the pirate ship, never to return. Again, a character becomes a Christian, but instead of the focus being on the “salvation prayer” or the “salvation checklist,” it is on the effects of the character’s salvation in his or her life. This is more effective than other methods because it provides specific, applicable examples of God’s ability to change one’s thoughts, attitudes, and actions instead of offering a prayer to pray and no evidence of its true purpose. Who knows how many readers of a Christian fiction book might pray “the prayer” and think they have done all it takes to become a Christian, when in reality they do not understand what it means? Such books have an incomplete image of redemption.

Blaggard’s Moon does not just have a meta-narrative displaying the effects of storytelling but also themes that exemplify both correct and incorrect ways of viewing the world and living to honor God. One of these themes is dealing with the concept of a fallen world, which applies to the Gospel aspects of Creation and the Fall. The consequences of sin have “tarnished the creation, often producing pain and sorrow” (Duvall and Hays, 29), and only Christ can restore it

to its rightful condition. Delaney has plenty of time to ponder the nature of the world while he is waiting for death, especially because his reason for his execution is an unjust one. He was ordered by his pirate captain to kill a little girl, the daughter of Jenta Stillmithers, while the captain tortured Jenta to find where treasure was hidden. Delaney, who had bonded with the little girl and her sweet innocence, knew he could not carry out the order, so he helped her escape instead. Awaiting his punishment, he muses that “something [was] all akilter in the world when obeying orders would have got her killed and disobeying would get him killed instead” (15). He struggles to find sense in a world where goodness is punished and evil reigns as a result of the Fall. He also mourns the frailty of innocence and thinks it is “hard to see it, and harder to see it go, in such a sorry world” (94). Innocence is embodied in a song that the girl likes to sing, and her voice haunts Delaney with its purity, causing him to realize that the girl “didn’t know about such darkness, and yet [she] felt the shadow of it” (94). Even though the girl is young and innocent, she was born in a world where sin seems to prevail and fills every nook and cranny, a world that is the same as our own. Creation is fraught with injustice, and Polivka expresses this idea rather poignantly when he describes Jenta’s daughter:

That little girl had something of the next world in her, Delaney concluded . . .
. There was so much of this world’s strife bound up in the union that created her,
so much of longing for something better and running up against the harsh
brambles, so much of the dark in pursuit of the light, that it was only natural the
result would be a child connected to this world by a thread. (86)

Innocence is no longer an inherent part of creation, so when it comes up against the depravity of the world, it creates a “longing for something better” – namely, the world as God intended it to be when he created it.

What is unique about *Blaggard's Moon* compared to many other Christian novels is that the possibility of a character never being redeemed is as feasible as their redemption. While many characters are redeemed, others are not. In fact, some are unrepentant until the day they die and still believe they do not deserve death. This reveals the sobering fact that, realistically speaking, not all people ask for or desire salvation from God. Christian authors rightly feel the need to drive home the necessity of receiving God's grace, but in the process they can stereotype the antagonists into either being completely depraved (perhaps even being influenced by a supernatural evil force that justifies their absolute depravity) or being sorry that they did not end up like the main character, who is, of course, a Christian. But Christians will not always encounter one of these two options in their lives. People are not always possessed by demons or regretful of their sinful actions. God can save everyone, but not everyone will choose to be saved. Several pirates are evidence of this in the novel. Conch Imbry, the pirate captain and main antagonist, is eventually sentenced to hanging for his crimes, but he shows no remorse, cursing his captors with his final breath. His first mate, Mr. Mazeley, is a cold-blooded pirate who strikes Jenta as being "so rational, so...normal. And yet he did evil all day long, every day, every night" (319). He dies at the Conch's side, his last remark on his life of evil being nothing but a shrug. Belisar the Whale, the pirate captain who punishes Delaney, is consumed by greed for the Conch's supposed buried treasure, so much so that he is willing to torture Jenta and order Delaney to kill her young daughter. Belisar gruesomely dies at the hands of the Hants, the indigenous people he had enlisted to help him torture Jenta. These three characters, along with countless nameless pirates and civilians, die without accepting Christ. Not everyone is redeemed.

However, the theme of redemption is most prominent in characters who are Christians or who become Christians. Christian characters in *Blaggard's Moon* are steady sources of hope,

truth, and good that affect the nonbelievers around them. Avery Wittle is a fellow crew member who is imprisoned with Delaney when they are all given the option to turn pirate or die. Delaney, though uncomfortable with the decision, becomes a pirate. Avery, however, does not do the same. When confronted by a gun-toting Conch Imbry to join his crew, Avery is afraid of the menacing captain but gives him a “childishly sincere look” (84), a form of innocence in the face of evil. In response to the pirate’s reasoning about why piracy was a fine, logical choice, Avery says “I can’t rightly serve a pirate in this world and be prepared to meet my Maker in the next” (85). He is prepared to die on account of his faith and the uncompromising commands of Christ, and he does. Delaney tries to convince himself that Avery was only a coward, but the man’s death eats at his heart. Avery was afraid, Delaney thinks, but “his fear was just the ripple on top of a deep pond. Underneath, it was like Avery was doing something he knew he must do, even though he didn’t want to do it. It almost seemed, somehow, when you looked at it that way, *brave*” (85). Avery’s martyrdom forces Delaney to confront the significance of his own death and if he should consider God’s role in it. Delaney compares his decisions to Avery’s, and he comes to the conclusion that he is more of a coward than Avery was because he does whatever is necessary to preserve his life, no matter what sins he must commit to do so.

Jenta Stillmithers, as previously mentioned, leads Wentworth Ryland to God and meets every obstacle in her path with silent steel and inner hope. Father Dent, a priest, undergoes extreme torture and a bloody death at the hands of Conch Imbry because he will not betray those whom he believes are on a God-ordained mission. Another character, Windall Frost, offers grace in the form of second chance to Jenta’s mother, Shayla, to work for him again after she had scorned him for his previous help. All of these characters are not overtly Christian, spouting off

theological sayings and Scripture at all times, but their actions speak of an unworldly motivation that makes sense only when viewed in light of their morality's source: God and his Word.

But the real meat of the redemption theme in *Blaggard's Moon* is in three characters that embark on a spiritual journey without even realizing it, and they each find their own realization about God's character that answers the questions they always asked or corrects their conceptions of the world. The core of the novel's message lies in these characters.

Damrick Fellows is a sailor bent so much on justice that he has to experience grace firsthand to understand it. Despising pirates with a passion, his mission is to wipe them from the earth. Damrick forms a group of fighters called Hell's Gatemens who do not have to follow the official agreements between the pirates and shipping companies and who are set on killing every pirate they can find. Hearing Damrick's tale from Ham the storyteller, Delaney approves of Damrick's zeal, calling him "a man of action, who took the fight to his enemies" (114). The side effect of Damrick's method, however, is that he has no mercy. He takes no prisoners and murders without question, rushing into battle whenever the opportunity arises. He earns a violent reputation that causes pirates to fear him, but his single-mindedness shackles him to such violence and prevents any act of mercy or love. It appears that he believes in God, telling Jenta that God gives him power (280), and his father wears a cross around his neck that he often fingers when making decisions (138), so Damrick probably had a Christian upbringing. But his disregard for mercy shows that he completely misses the point of God's grace and believes that vengeance is something to be taken into his own hands without God's help. It takes a bloody, costly battle to bring Damrick to his senses. Jenta, his new wife, finds him defeated, injured, and slowly dying, stuck under a dock after his ship sinks, and for once he is vulnerable:

[Damrick] swallowed. It was a painful effort. "I've been lying here," he said with difficulty, "praying. Like my mother did."

[Jenta] wanted to say something, to do something. She wanted more than anything to climb up with him, and hold him. But all she could do was hold his hand while her soul was being rent in two.

"I prayed for you," he said. His breath caught. "And God brought you here." Light was in his eyes, but it was distant.

"I'm here. I'm here."

"He helps the helpless. That's what she always said." His eyes closed. Then he opened them again. "That's why He never helped me. Until now."

"Of course He's helped you."

Damrick just shook his head. "It's not so bad as I thought it would be." (321)
He realizes that he never thought he needed God, until his own strength and will gave out. He depended on himself, on his cunning and skill and sense of justice, but it was empty and got him nowhere. A few moments later, he says to Jenta,

"You saved me."

"No, Damrick. You saved me."

He shook his head. "I rescued you. But you saved me."

She couldn't understand. She'd gotten him killed. Then she realized he was talking about something more. He was talking about the next life. (322)

A man who pursued hard justice for his entire life, Damrick dies as a man who finally understands the value of love and mercy, especially God's love and mercy.

Wentworth Ryland is another character that undergoes drastic spiritual development that results in his redemption despite his suffering. He is a young, hedonistic drunk, heir to the largest shipping enterprise in the land and unable to obtain a wife for himself. Wentworth often visits Jenta, his betrothed, at the cottage that she and her mother share on the Ryland property, but he is always drunk and unpleasant, and once he even falls into a drunken sleep on their porch. Wentworth apologizes to Jenta the next day for his embarrassing drunken antics, and to his surprise, she is not angry at him. In fact, she helps him face his weakness, and he begins to feel hope that all is not lost for him. Jenta talks him through the salvation that God offers and prays with him. As previously explained, a change comes over him. He stops drinking, starts going to church, and gradually becomes a gentleman, kind and humble. But that is not the end of his story. He is captured by Conch Imbry, and the pirate's inhumane treatment reduces him to a sorry state:

[Wentworth's] eyes were black and sunken. His clothes, which were clearly of a fancy make and design, were stained and matted, torn here and there. His eyes were dull. The skin of his face and hands was caked and cracked and blistered, so it was hard to tell what was dirt and what was canker. He smelled strongly of urine. (304)

For Wentworth, becoming a Christian did not guarantee him a happy and perfect life. His faith in Christ does not protect him from suffering and the Conch's attacks. Yet when he is brought before the small group of sailors-turned-pirates of which Delaney is a part, Delaney notes that he has a peace about him and "that maybe Wentworth wasn't just tired and sick, and hanging his head because of it, but maybe he was praying" (304). Wentworth learns how to have hope in the midst of pain, and peace in the face of death. Right before Delaney kills him to prove his loyalty

to Conch Imbry, Wentworth's last act is to forgive Delaney for what he is about to do, an act that is "a stab, a sword that flash[es] straight into Delaney's chest" (325). Like Avery, Wentworth's inner strength will bother Delaney and prompt thoughts about God in the pirate as he waits for his execution. Wentworth went from a pitiful deadbeat to an uncompromising and confident Christian even unto death, redeemed by Christ.

Polivka expresses the process that leads to redemption most clearly through Delaney as he changes from a cowardly pirate to a wise sailor. Out of all of the characters in the novel, the reader has the most insight into Delaney's head. After all, the entire storyline is seen through his eyes, whether he experienced it himself or heard it in Ham's story. Because of his upbringing, stealing for his father and being frightened by priests' talk of hell, Delaney has a negative view of religion, believing that it is all about judgment and punishment. He was convinced that "he was sure to drop straight to hell just any moment, unless he repented" (22). Instead of influencing him to turn to God, the idea of hell pushed him away from Christianity because he did not know of God's grace. As a result, his thinking tends to be legalistic, and he tries to determine whether his actions deserve the death that he was sentenced with. He ponders the various people that he knows about through his personal experience and Ham's story, and he tries to reconcile his view of God with their lives. For example, Damrick, a man that Delaney likes for his sense of justice and zeal, finds at the end of his life that he was missing something important: mercy. Delaney is confused by this; shouldn't Damrick be rewarded by God for his righteous fervor? Isn't justice what God desires? At the same time, Avery Wittle, a righteous Christian, chooses not to fight his death and instead accepts it. Wentworth Ryland dies on his knees, humble and at peace, yet he became a godly man. To Delaney, that makes no sense.

Furthermore, Delaney's reflection on death pushes him towards making realizations about his own sinful nature and need for God's redemption. He says that all men "died alike in one way. They died scared" (152), and he himself is beginning to feel afraid about dying. His fear makes him want to "untie a few knots" (153), to confront his regrets and deal with them. This leads to a discussion with himself about heaven and hell; he is comforted by the possibility of there being a joyful place where righteous people went when they died. Delaney would "very much like to believe . . . about heaven, even if he had to believe some of hell to do it" (154). However, he is not considering the possibility for himself, because he thinks he has done too many evil things to deserve it. He sees salvation on a works-based system and has discarded the hope of ever being good enough to receive it, especially because of the deed he regrets the most: killing Wentworth at the Conch's orders. It is this event and its accompanying guilt that pushes Delaney to try to justify himself to God by saying that he did not know that Wentworth was a good man. His conscience - perhaps God's voice, though Delaney is unaware of it - tells him that killing the man was wrong, but Delaney protests:

"...But Conch, he woulda killed me if I hadn't done it, and then Sleeve or some other body woulda killed Wentworth anyways. And then I'd a' died for no reason."

Except for Avery's reason.

Delaney held his breath. That was the sticking point. That was the barb that hooked him every time. That was the pile of rocks at the bottom of the whirlpool. It was Avery's choice that made Delaney's look so poor. A good man dies before he'll do bad. It doesn't have anything to do with anything else. And there's no way around it, once you've seen it up close like that. Good men do good. And

they pay whatever price is to be paid for doing it. Avery did And then
Wentworth did. (305)

Delaney comes to realize that there is no excuse for sinning. To sin is to make the wrong choice, regardless of circumstances. And “now that he was looking straight at it without flinching, Delaney knew exactly what he had done. And he knew what it meant” (323). Done with making excuses, Delaney accepts that he had done evil in the sight of God and therefore “he deserved to be condemned. His stupidity was in his soul, not in his mind” (324). Consequently, as Romans 6:23 states, “the wages of sin is death” (HCSB), and Delaney is prepared to receive death and feels “worthy of damnation” (326) from the God who judges men’s souls. In one great epiphany moment, he embraces the fact that “there was a God after all. A God who saw. A God who judged. A God who cared. There was a God who would clean up the world” (326). Filled with guilt, he wants God to punish him because that will bring justice.

But God is a God of justice *and* mercy, and Delaney’s spiritual journey is not yet finished. As it grows dark, with his death coming at any moment, Delaney is terrified of the thought of going to hell. He believes God exists, but he cannot feel the peace he has heard about, the peace that comes from God. He wishes that he had the same love that Damrick had for Jenta when she felt like did not deserve it. But who could love a sinful pirate like him? God’s answer and redemption comes in the form of Jenta and the indigenous people, the Hants. They rescue him from the mermonkeys after executing his pirate captain for dishonoring them. Saved from death, Delaney still remembers the conclusions he came to when ruminating about his life and knows that “all of that meant something, and he purposed in his heart to find out what” (373). The reader knows what his findings are through Polivka’s sequel, *The Legend of the Firefish*, in which Delaney has a fresh cross tattoo with the word “Brotherhood,” and he tells a character that

he has “been a believer only just a couple years” (*Legend*, 139). For Delaney, redemption means realizing he was a sinner and turning to God to deliver or punish him as He saw fit. Instead of focusing on the exact moment when Delaney becomes a believer, Polivka concentrates on the internal process that brought him to the feet of God and thus communicates a clear theme of redemption.

The Guardian: Cliché Christianity

Just as good writing can influence the way readers respond to redemption themes in a book, bad writing can have the opposite effect. If the reader is distracted by clichés, overuse of certain phrases, and inconsistencies, or if the reader is not absorbed into the characters’ world and emotions, the desired message of the story is less likely to get through. The reader must be invested in the story for he or she to apply the ideas in it - whether consciously or unconsciously - to reality.

The Guardian by Robbie Chevront and Erik Reed is a novel about a scroll that the Apostle John wrote about the end times and supposedly passed down through his descendants. The main character, Anna Riley, is a descendant of John and is tasked with finding, protecting, and deciphering the scroll. The story is, in the authors’ own words, “one that is focused on Anna Riley’s journey of faith” (5) and is not intended to be a serious interpretation of the Revelation passage that mentions such a scroll. Although the book is classified as Christian fiction, several of its traits hinder the theme of redemption from being portrayed effectively.

First of all, the authors’ writing technique is lacking in eloquence and creativity, which calls attention to the text and distracts from its content. The narration has the voice of a newscaster stating facts, and most of the theological truths in the book are presented in sermon-

like sections that sound unnatural in the characters' discourse or thoughts, even if those characters are Christians. When a Christian character, Jason Lang, is trying to find the supposed key to the Garden of Eden, he has an epiphany and thinks about Jesus' words: "He who has ears, let him hear." Then, injected into the paragraph is a common church teaching that sounds like it was cut out of a Sunday School booklet and pasted into the book: "Understanding Jesus [isn't] about your physical ears. It [is] about spiritual discernment" (409). What gives this impression is the pronoun "you," which has no place in the narration and gives the paragraph a didactic tone. Squeezing mini-sermons into the midst of the storyline defeats the purpose of writing a novel with Christian themes instead of a Bible study. The desired message of any possible sermon should be lived out through the characters and events of the novel, which is more likely to impact the reader.

The inconsistencies and bland writing style detract from the story, and it is harder for the reader to immerse herself in the novel's world, characters, and plot. Consequently, she is distanced from any emotional or spiritual effects that the story might have. Other examples of sloppy writing include the authors reusing phrases in close proximity to each other, such as the same character smiling two sentences in a row (348), or a shower giving a character a "renewed vigor" (215, 237). They throw in an occasional second person pronoun in the narration (360, 409) and overuse the colloquial "mon" for a Jamaican character (344). Finally, the similes and figurative language they *do* use are sometimes incongruous with the intended mood of a scene. When describing the dire state of the pope, who is dying from poison, the assassin character named Jonathan describes him as being "still sick, still hanging in there like hair in a grilled cheese sandwich" (236). While the image is humorous, it fits neither the character's personality nor the overall scheming and reflective tone of the passage.

Even if one disregards the writing itself, the elements of the story still begrudge a compelling message. The characters are not realistic. The main character, Anna Riley, is not a Christian, yet she prays to God, swears like a third grader, and accepts everything she is told about God and faith without complaint or challenge. Her reaction to Christian things like church or Scripture is not believable. After attending a Catholic mass, the first church service she has been to since she was a child, she has no thoughts about religion, Christianity, or theology, only a vague opinion that the mass “was beautiful” (76). She prays multiple times, long before she considers becoming a Christian, as if it were a natural thing for her to do (206, 282, 356). She throws around phrases such as “I promised God” (293) and “You told me you asked God for something big. Well, I’d say this is it” (355), and calls God “Father” even though she has little theological background or knowledge on how to address God (436). In other words, she is a “Christianized” non-Christian character and therefore an unrealistic portrayal of nonbelievers. This does not help Christians who read the novel to learn how to interact with nonbelievers, nor does it help nonbelievers who read the novel to know how someone like them can become a believer.

The Guardian has a supernatural element that involves angels and Lucifer himself. Even though angels can be used as an effective plot device to offer a godly perspective or direction, they can too easily be portrayed in a way that is not biblical and be a sign of lazy writing. It is easy for an author to fall into the trap of lubricating the plot with angelic activity because angels or demons offer such a cut-and-dried view of good versus evil. Instead of exploring the complicated but applicable nature of the human heart in need of redemption, an author can explain a human’s motivation for doing right or wrong by having an angel or demon appear to them. In the novel, an angel often appears to Anna to tell her what to do or to encourage her in a

time of hardship. Furthermore, Lucifer, sometimes referred to as “Prince” in the novel, is the main impetus behind the evil deeds of the main antagonist, Cardinal Louis Wickham. Wickham, obviously not a Christian despite his title and position in the Catholic church, kills the pope, mentors his replacement, and orders Anna to be assassinated, all because Lucifer tells him to. While Wickham is at fault for listening to the Devil, Lucifer’s blatant involvement places the weight of the blame on Lucifer himself, which undermines the idea of humanity’s inherent sinfulness and therefore the need for God’s redeeming grace. How can the book express the significance of redemption if the characters are portrayed as mere puppets of supernatural forces?

The “censorship” of the novel - what I call the practice of excluding adult themes such as cussing, violence, and sex in Christian fiction - is inconsistent depending on the subject. I am not against censorship in Christian novels, especially because adult themes are much more likely to offend the target audience of such books, and authors must honor God with what they write. However, by watering down the depravity and moral darkness of the world, authors also water down how much they can show the impact of God’s light, peace, joy, and salvation. The darker a place is, the brighter a light will be. The acceptable balance of realism and censorship is up to the author, and the line between both is debatable. Nevertheless, Chevront and Reed go too far with their censorship, and it gives readers a confusing message about what is biblically acceptable.

On one hand, multiple violent deaths occur, most at the hands of Jonathan, the assassin hired to kill Anna, and many are written with enough detail to be somewhat gruesome. Jonathan shoots a man “five times in the chest and once in the forehead” (234) and kills two failed cronies by injecting air into their veins (347). Another trained assassin murders two people in front of another character, and then she murders that character the same way: two shots to the head (298).

A man's throat is "cut from ear to ear" and he is "soaked in blood" (363). An ally of the protagonist tortures two men by shooting one in each shoulder and the knee (333).

Despite all of this violence, all of the other aspects of the novel are heavily edited not to offend. The exclamations that all characters use, whether Christian or nonbeliever, good or evil, are so censored that they sound unnatural and cheesy. Anna, a moral but non-Christian character, screams "Holy freakin'—Good grief!" (13) when she is startled by a boy, and says "Oh my gosh!" (24) instead of the phrase "Oh my god" that is popular with the vast majority of nonbelievers today as well as, unfortunately, many Christians. While it is possible that she may use the former phrase over the latter due to her upbringing or other influences, it is unlikely and further serves to develop her as a "Christianized" nonbeliever. Jonathan has no qualms about brutally murdering people, regardless of whether or not he is ordered to do so, yet he never uses any language that is considered even mildly offensive, including times when he is impatient or angry. For example, when told that no one can find where Anna currently is, he snaps at one of his henchman to tell the searcher "to light a fire under his rear end" (247). Jonathan is clearly a dangerous, evil man, but in an aggravated state, the worst he says is "rear end." When reading the book, I was unable to take Jonathan seriously as a character after this scene because he simply did not seem threatening or realistic. Nonbelievers reading this book who are accustomed to using stronger language will notice such sanitized language even more, and it might turn them away from the story, or at least from taking it to heart. The authors did not necessarily have to include a curse word in its place, but saying that Jonathan cursed or used an expletive would convey the point. None of that happens in the story.

Redemption is present in *The Guardian*, but its value is lost in a myriad of distractions like the ones mentioned above. One person develops and improves spiritually: Anna. All other

characters are static and have the sole purpose of creating a plot in which to place her. The authors' self-proclaimed purpose of the novel is to convey her spiritual journey, and that purpose is fulfilled – that purpose, and nothing more. She goes from being a nonbeliever to a Christian. This in itself is not bad; in fact, every Christian novel that aims to show redemption must have this transformation in a character.²⁰ But the way in which this transformation takes place sets an effective novel apart from an ineffective one, and *The Guardian's* method makes it one of the latter. Jason, Anna's Christian boyfriend,²¹ tells her that the key to the final riddle they must solve is salvation, and that she does not have it. When Anna hears this, "her breath [comes] in little pants, and her face [is] sickly pale" (411). Her reaction is jarring with no explanation. Later, Jason explains step-by-step how to become a Christian and prays the "salvation prayer" with Anna. The authors write out every word. On the surface, it looks like this novel fulfills the purpose of sharing the gospel with any unbelievers who read it, but I believe that laying the steps out in such an obvious way actually has the opposite effect and damages the witness of the novel because it expresses how a nonbeliever should take a step of faith without having it relate to the character.

From the perspective of a nonbeliever, having to slog through several pages of Christian instructions would irritate me. I am probably reading the novel for entertainment value and perhaps because of a vague curiosity about Christianity. To have such a conspicuous effort of evangelism shoved in the midst of a plot might make me feel attacked or a victim of a furtive agenda. I am not saying that all nonbelievers would automatically feel this way, nor am I saying

²⁰ Another valid transformation is a weak Christian becoming a stronger one, a movement of faith towards God.

²¹ One major issue I had with *The Guardian* is the way in which Jason and Anna's romantic relationship develops. Cheesy romance aside, Jason says that he "had prayed about [his relationship with Anna] every night since the first kiss, and God pretty much confirmed it in his heart that she was 'the one'" (307). From this point on, Jason and Anna are romantically involved. However, this is biblically incorrect. God would not encourage a relationship with a nonbeliever and especially would not insist that a nonbeliever was "the one" for a Christian to marry.

that a Christian author should never have the gospel clearly laid out in their novel. But using a novel to preach a sermon on salvation is like using a sermon for nothing more than a storytelling opportunity. They are different media and ideally use different techniques to achieve the same purpose. A person will not be moved by a novel to allow God into their life if the novel merely repeats what they heard all their life in church, or if it confirms their ineffectual and indistinct impression of Christianity. Therefore, while the way in which Anna becomes a Christian is not incorrect, it is less likely to be effective than a more dramatic and realistic epiphany embedded in the plot.

***Eli* and *Joshua*: The Modern-Day Jesus**

Some Christian authors have taken a different approach to sharing the gospel through novels by going back to the root of the gospel itself: Jesus Christ. Novels such as *Eli* by Bill Myers and *Joshua* by Joseph F. Girzone place Jesus in a modern-day setting. While doing so can help readers see Jesus in a fresh way, it is also a dangerous route to take. These novels do not simply have fictional characters; they have Jesus Christ himself, a real person, in a fictional setting. Recreating his life in a different place and time means adjusting his actions and words from Scripture and making up details or situations that are not explicitly found in the Bible. The possible dangers of doing this are obvious. Furthermore, is writing a modern-day Jesus even a worthwhile endeavor? Are these authors implying that the Jesus of Scripture is inadequate to meet the needs of Christians today? And how can a modern-day Jesus effectively portray the theme of redemption without contradicting or replacing the Jesus in the Bible?

Myers and Girzone approach the concept from different angles, which affects how they portray redemption. In *Eli*, Myers sends his protagonist, Conrad Davis, into a parallel universe

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after Conrad is in a fatal car accident, giving the novel a science fiction spin. In this universe, the Incarnation does not occur until the 1960's, making Jesus' ministry happen in the late 1990's. Conrad, not a Christian, nevertheless comes to the conclusion that Eli Shepherd is the parallel universe's version of Jesus Christ, and that they are one and the same. Eli essentially confirms Conrad's suspicion, and the parallels between Eli's life and teachings and those of Jesus are unmistakable. On the other hand, Girzone calls his novel *Joshua* "a parable for today" and focuses on how people in the present might respond to Jesus if he appeared in their community. Instead of recreating Jesus' life, he recreates Jesus' character, names him Joshua, and places him in a small American town in the 1980's. While both books have thought-provoking insights into how the biblical Jesus lived and acted, I believe that *Eli* is a more effective work than *Joshua* because of superior writing style, plot elements, portrayal of the "Jesus" character, and relatable characters.

Despite the delicate nature of rewriting Jesus into a modern context, only Myers has a disclaimer before the start of the story. He states that he is aware of the shortcomings of his novel, such as the fact that "by removing the rich Jewish heritage of the gospel, [he has] deprived the story of much of its depth" (Myers 6). He places Jesus in America, born to American parents in the laundry room of a dingy motel. Even though Conrad describes Eli as having a "Mediterranean look, possibly Jewish" (48), the book has no mention of the Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, nor does it have much of the Jewish faith at all. Secondly, Myers says, he did not "accurately portray a world in which Christ has not yet come" because it "would . . . create a society so dark and ugly that it's doubtful any of us would recognize it, let alone relate to it" (6). The Christ-less society evident in the novel is much like our own except with an

emphasis on legalistic religion, coinciding with the Pharisaic misuse of the Jewish Law during Jesus' day. In addition, Myers includes why he decided to write a modern-day Jesus:

Those familiar with my fiction know that I believe storytelling's greatest strength lies in its ability to stir up our thoughts. By putting the gospel in a contemporary setting, I've moved Christ out of my comfort zone and put him back in my face where he can test me, challenge me, and encourage me. By stripping away the historical and cultural trappings that I hide behind to insulate myself from his truths, I allow him to become more of the radical life-changer he was the first time I encountered him. (6)

Myers eloquently explains the positive influence that a novel about a contemporary Jesus can have on readers. Attempting a novel like *Eli* involves much research and careful interpretation of Scripture, but it can force readers to confront how radical Jesus' teachings really were and how much our society makes the mistake of fitting him into our own comfortable box. It causes readers to dwell on the very essence of the gospel: the redemption of humanity.

Girzone offers no disclaimer or insight into his thoughts about writing his modern-day Jesus in *Joshua*, but a page at the beginning of the book states that "the author does feel . . . that what takes place in this book could very easily happen in real life" (Girzone 7). This statement is confusing and is not theologically correct. In the book, Jesus - though his name is Joshua here - moves into a small town, helps a few of the people there, confronts both a Christian church and Jewish synagogue about their view of God, then disappears. The Bible clearly states that Jesus' second coming will be dramatic and triumphant; until then, Jesus will not have a human presence on Earth. To suggest that Jesus comes and goes, helping people here and there, is misleading and incorrect. Furthermore, Girzone's labeling of *Joshua* as a parable contradicts the notion that the

story could actually happen, because parables are meant to be symbolic, fictional stories for teaching purposes.

One would think that by having Jesus himself as a main character, redemption would be a central theme in whatever story the author writes around him, since Jesus played the main role in redeeming humanity through his death and resurrection. This holds true in *Eli*. Even though the story centers on Eli, the main character is actually an unbeliever, Conrad, so from the start the reader sees Eli's words and actions from a skeptic's point of view. During the journey of Eli's ministry, Conrad undertakes his own journey of faith, learning Eli's teachings firsthand. His journey culminates with witnessing Eli's beating and death, both of which are described with enough detail to make the reader wince:

There, on the ground, bleeding and gasping, was what had once been Eli Shepherd. Only now he was a beaten pulp - his face so bloody, so swollen he was nearly impossible to recognize. Coughing blood and choking, he flew first in one direction, then another as the men's boots landed merciless blows, kicking him in his chest, his gut, his groin, his face.

(Myers, 320)

The obvious parallels between Eli and Christ are sobering, both to Conrad and the reader. Myers does not spare his characters or his readers any of the violent details which drive the point home without being needlessly gruesome. Then, to his confusion, Conrad suddenly sees himself in Eli's place for an instant. Spurred by this sight and out of loyalty to Eli - though not because of personal faith in him, not yet - Conrad starts fighting Eli's assailants and gets pushed to the ground. As a bloody Eli is maneuvered into place under a tree to be hanged, Conrad once again sees himself in Eli's place and remembers all of the times he had failed to be righteous. He believes he deserves the punishment that Eli is receiving, not the blameless Eli. Eli keeps

mumbling the words “justice and mercy,” and Conrad struggles with the two concepts being harmonized, remembering that “Eli had promised he would bring [justice and mercy] together” (325). Even as Eli is about to die, Conrad cannot understand how Eli hopes to fulfill his promise, nor how it affects Conrad himself. Then it all comes together for him:

Justice for every one of Conrad’s failures? Punishment for all he’d ever done wrong? But a punishment poured out onto someone else? Yes, Conrad should be up there. Yes, Conrad was the one who should be punished But another person was taking that punishment for him. Justice was still being accomplished, holiness was still being preserved, but through the suffering of someone else instead of Conrad. Through the suffering of Eli.

And that - *that* was the mercy. (325)

Conrad grieves Eli’s death and realizes that everything he had heard about Jesus in “the old world” - before he had the accident that put him in a coma - was now more personal for him because he had seen the event for himself. He finds redemption in accepting Eli’s sacrifice, and he begins to obey Eli without question once Eli reappears to his disciples. The novel ends with Conrad seeing Eli and running to him with abandon, struggling up bleacher stairs despite an abrupt breathing problem that mirrors his death throes in reality. As the coma-Conrad breathes his last, the other Conrad reaches Eli and embraces him, and Eli says, “We’re going home” (348), confirming Conrad’s redemption through Eli’s death.

On the other hand, redemption is not even a minor theme in *Joshua*. In fact, there is no significant character development at all; therefore Joshua does not redeem any characters through his actions. To write a book about Jesus without including the theme of redemption misses the entire point of sharing the gospel in a creative way with nonbelievers. Redemption is

closely linked with salvation, and Christ makes both possible. Instead of showing the purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, *Joshua* concentrates on specific issues in Christianity and current events. While addressing such issues is a valid endeavor, it should be done in the context of the overarching story of the gospel. Otherwise, the novel zeroes in on how to cure a few choice symptoms, not the disease. For example, Girzone politely criticizes denominations, all under the opinion of Joshua. According to him, the Presbyterian church he visited was "a very proper place and the people [were] well-dressed and polite, although they weren't overly friendly" and that "the minister had politely suggested that Joshua wear clothes that were more formal to the worship service" (Girzone, 91). Joshua also states earlier that "priests exist to serve the people, but they . . . would rather rule them instead The problem seems to be just the opposite with the Protestant churches" (89). He is fair and includes multiple denominations, including his own (Catholicism), so that he does not focus on the failures of any particular one, but this only harms the spread of the gospel. For any nonbeliever who is reading *Joshua*, the focus on the disunity of the Church dilutes the message that is consistent throughout all denominations of Christianity, and it may dissuade the reader from thinking it can have any effect on his or her life.

Discussing *Freeflight*

Freeflight is not a romance. The female protagonist does not fall in love with the male protagonist. Attraction sprouts. Love fosters reconciliation. But they do not kiss, date, or marry. I chose to do this because I see a flaw in stories where redemption manifests in romantic love. I have nothing against romantic love; I enjoy romance in novels, and even cheer it on. But the formulas for romantic novels are flawed in terms of where to find satisfaction and joy. Yes, they

are entertaining. Yes, they can be written well. Yes, they can even be wholesome and encouraging (though many romances in the popular market are not). But for my purposes, for writing a novel that points to the solution of regret and brokenness, romance has little to offer. The typical romance plot²² tells the reader that to find true happiness, one must depend on luck. If a woman doesn't run into that perfect, handsome man, she is doomed to be single forever and therefore unhappy. I, for one, am not content with those odds. Is it not much more encouraging to show that redemption and love is available for everyone through Christ if they are willing to reach out and accept it?

Again, I am not bashing romance. It has a place, even in Christian fiction and other novels written by Christian authors. But it is not the end. It does not make a person whole. It is not the solution. Matthew and Amber do not fall in love and do not have a relationship that fixes their respective problems because reality does not work that way. Instead, they have a relationship that builds up both of them in different ways: Amber learns the need for forgiving others through Matthew, and Matthew learns where to look for love through Amber. God uses each of them to teach the other. I could still express this concept through them if they had fallen in love, but I wanted to make a point: the consummation of a romance is not a necessary ingredient in the spiritual consummation of a person.

Many Christian fiction books are set in places where readers expect to find Christianity: the American South, small towns, and Amish communities, for example. While this makes sense, given that Christian themes are most natural and easiest to develop in these settings, I chose a setting for *Freeflight* in which one would not expect to find faith: coastal California and the popular music industry. Amber's lived-out faith stands out much more in such a setting, where

²² A man meets a woman. They fall in love, then a conflict pulls them apart. Then they overcome the conflict and resume their relationship "happily ever after."

most of the people she encounters are not Christians. Each new circumstance provides a new opportunity to show a Christian response to society's morals. The more worldly the society, the more dramatic the biblical worldview contrasts with it. But this prompts another question that all Christian authors must face: how explicit should an author be in describing the fallen world? On one hand, the author should not censor everything that does not agree with a biblical lifestyle. Otherwise, the reader gets a watered-down, unrealistic portrayal of society, a portrayal they know is not accurate through their personal interactions with society. On the other hand, a Christian author should not follow the pattern of many non-Christian authors, which is to specify every act of sex or every cuss word, because it encourages an ungodly mindset for both the author and the reader. Finding a good balance is difficult, and depends on the author's discretion. I decided to include some mild swearing for the sake of realistic dialogue, and although Matthew often sleeps with women, I do not describe the act itself.

A character coming to faith in Christ has occurred so much in Christian fiction that it is hard to write it in a way that is not cliché. Every believer's process and redemptive story are different, and the same holds true for characters, but I have noticed an abundance of formulaic salvation prayers in Christian novels that sound unnatural and predictable. The problem with so-called "salvation prayers" is that it ignores the continual sanctification that believers go through from the moment they decide to follow Christ. Salvation does not simply consist of one moment where God fixes every problem in a person's life; it is a process, a struggle, and a constant effort with inconsistent success.

Matthew's journey consists of gradually coming to a point where he realizes that he needs to go outside of himself to find satisfaction. The forgiveness of Amber causes him to seriously consider the effects of having faith in God, since she attributes her ability to forgive him to God.

At the end of the novel, he makes a quiet confession during a concert that he needs God, and through his changed actions and verbal hints in the final scenes of the book, the reader can infer that he has decided to follow God. While his salvation is slightly more up to interpretation this way, it is obvious that there has been a change in his life and that it is starting to affect his attitude and actions. I believe this is a more realistic portrayal of what happens when someone makes a conscious decision to start obeying God instead of one's impulses.

I show a biblically-centered lifestyle through the Christian characters, namely Amber, Luke, and his wife, Laura. Amber does not join in Matthew's rash decisions and loose way of living – she spurns any attempts of romantic attraction by Matthew,²³ does not curse, and does her best not to act rashly or spew hurtful words. I also contrast her with Charlotte, a promiscuous young woman who is briefly Matthew's lover for no other reason than the sex and his fame, and Sonata, *Freeflight's* harsh, judgmental manager and Matthew's old romantic flame. Unlike Charlotte and Sonata, Amber reaches through the superficial and addresses the internal turmoil she sees in Matthew's life. She cares about Matthew and does her best to nudge him towards God. Luke also has a sincere and unconditional friendship with Matthew, often being the voice of reason and encouragement against Matthew's temper and agitation. Additionally, Luke has a healthy, loving marriage that stands out against all of the other manipulative and selfish romantic relationships in the novel. Both Luke and Amber explicitly state that they are Christians, but instead of sermonizing their beliefs, they exemplify them to the best extent that imperfect humans are able to.

²³ Not because romantic attraction is sinful, but because she knows Matthew would not support a relationship that honors God.

Analysis of The Theme of Redemption in *Freeflight*

Pages 53-61: This passage establishes Matthew Wolfe as a main character, introducing his thought process, part of his normal routine, and his inner conflict. His character development expresses the main theme of the novel: how a person might arrive to the point where they recognize their need for redemption and turn to God. Here, he knows that something is missing from his life, but he assumes he will never find out what it is.

When he encounters Amber, she does not recognize him despite his fame. This is a widely-used archetype in literature, especially contemporary romance: a famous, attractive man meets a woman who is unaware of his status. Intrigued by the woman's unique treatment of him, the man becomes attracted to her, and the woman achieves a closeness with him that female fans can only dream of. While that is what happens, to some extent, with Matthew and Amber, there are some differences: they do not fall in love, Matthew is drawn to Amber for a reason other than physical appearance or romance, and, though they are both oblivious to it, they used to be friends when they were younger. Additionally, Amber finds no value in his fame when she finds out he is well-known.

His thoughts hint at the root of much of his guilt: Riley, his close friend in high school whom he hurt and alienated through his mistakes. Ironically, Amber and Riley are the same person, but she does not remember due to her memory problems, and he doesn't recognize her because she had surgery to repair facial scarring from an accident. Thus the story is a second chance for the two estranged friends to connect again, and Matthew is faced with similar decisions that were the cause of losing her friendship the first time.

Because he instinctually feels at ease with her, he shares part of a song he wrote, and she takes it seriously, showing the beginning of a genuine friendship – or the reinstatement of one.

All the while, he wishes he would stop feeling guilty about what happened with Riley years ago. It is obvious from Matthew's thoughts that he is focused on himself: he doesn't want to be bothered with Amber's needs for too long and is only helping her because she reminds him of Riley. If he helps Amber, he hopes he will feel like he is helping Riley and therefore making up for his mistakes concerning her.

Pages 108-109: Matthew is on an emotional high after a well-attended concert, and it makes him even more cocky and insensitive than normal. Matthew is quick to prove that he is more desirable to women than Dameon is, then when he focuses his conversation with Amber on himself while demeaning her attempts to have an emotionally honest friendship with him. When he sees the effect his brash words have on Amber, he regrets saying them but doesn't attempt to apologize and instead pretends that it doesn't bother him. As the novel progresses, he gradually becomes more willing to apologize for his words and actions, culminating in his apology for destroying he and Amber's friendship all those years ago. His increasing penitence leads to her forgiveness, which in turn draws him towards God's redemption.

This scene also hints at Luke's major character flaw: though he is a moral, reasonable, likeable person, he rarely takes action in addressing Matthew's morality issues despite being in a good position to do so. As Matthew's closest friend, Luke fails to hold him accountable or to encourage him towards God. But Luke still brings up useful points to Matthew, such as here, where he reminds him that Amber has unusual motivations compared to other women Matthew knows.

Pages 112-115: Matthew realizes that Luke and Amber are similar in that they have worthwhile relationships with him and that they are Christians – or, as Matthew phrases it, “they [take] life too seriously.” He admits to himself that he is afraid of the implications of such

sincere friendships – he cannot hide behind a façade and therefore might be forced to face his flaws.

The beginnings of Matthew’s internal change is evident here, when he admits without prompting that Amber was right about his music – he does not like singing his older songs that are more emotionally authentic because it reminds him of his mistakes. Amber’s sharp perception coaxes him into admitting to her that he is not happy with the kind of person he is, which is a significant step in his spiritual life, because it pushes him towards realizing his need for redemption. At the end of the scene, Amber’s simple action of hooking her arm with his causes him to start taking her friendship seriously and, consequently, confiding in her in future chapters.

Pages 133-135: Matthew’s gradual shift continues in his pseudo-apology to Amber concerning the harsh words he said to her earlier that day, when she saw him leaving Charlotte’s room after spending the night with her. The fact that he felt shame when Amber saw him shows that he is beginning to realize the folly in such a lifestyle. However, he tells himself that he was not wrong to lash out at Amber, refusing to take responsibility for his words, and he is determined to push the blame on her. He tries to explain that he will never be a “good” person like Amber wants him to be – his interpretation of her gentle urging towards authentic interactions and God – and he thinks that he ends the discussion with his faulty reasoning. Amber explicitly states that she wants to be nothing more than his friend, and then she hugs him. Matthew observes that she is “warm, comfortably so, like sunlight through a window,” while Charlotte and his other flings are “hot, blazing hot, passionate hot, heat that flared up and burned out quickly,” contrasting Amber’s kind of love with the lust that he usually experiences. For a moment, he yearns for stability, something that his turbulent, indulgent lifestyle does not

provide. That moment is lost when habit kicks in and he tries to kiss Amber, showing that he does not know how to handle normal friendships. Ironically, their subsequent banter shows that they have developed a friendship that will be significant – and has already been significant, as they will learn later. Matthew avoids meaningful relationships because he is afraid of complications and pain, but Amber has gotten beneath his skin despite his efforts to keep her out.

Pages 146-149: This conversation marks a pivotal point in Matthew's view of Amber. Amber proves that she knows Matthew well and is not afraid to pry delicately so that he is honest with her; she observes that Matthew runs when his mind is preoccupied. During their conversation, Matthew realizes that he has a unique relationship with Amber, one that he values because of its simple sincerity. However, that doesn't keep him from trying to avoid a long, honest conversation. He makes excuses for how he acts, blaming it on people's perceptions of him, and admits that Charlotte is no more than another superficial escapade. Matthew fishes for something in Amber's friendship that he is used to dealing with and asks her to "fangirl" over him, something that he knows how to handle. When she says that he is only a person to her, he encounters a paradox within himself: he is tired of fans fawning over him, but he treasures his prominent status. He pushes the issue aside and decides that he wants to make an effort at being Amber's friend, which he has not consciously done until this point. With easy banter, they move from the driveway, a place of truthfulness and vulnerability, to inside Charlotte's house, a place of pretenses and manipulation.

Pages 166-168: Amber demonstrates that she is not afraid to bring up uncomfortable issues with Matthew. He lets her read a song he wrote, one that is personal and significant to him, but he claims that he does not like people knowing too much about his personal life because they can use it against him. Amber tells him that he is afraid of being sincere about anything

because he does not want to rock the boat, so to speak. To avoid thinking about her words, he pretends that she is incorrect, though he appreciates her effort to “figure him out” since most people do not bother to. Despite his nonchalant reaction, her words linger in his mind and inspire him to write another song. In contrast to Amber’s influential presence, Charlotte appears, interrupting an honest statement that Matthew was about to say. The moment ruined, Matthew decides not to be honest with Amber after all. Through encounters like these, Amber is slowly impelling a new way of thought in Matthew that will eventually result in his decision to be honest with her, himself, and, most importantly, God.

Pages 230-235: After Amber finds out about the deed that Matthew most regrets, he is determined to punish himself for it, a singular occurrence in his life of no accountability or shame. Furthermore, he wants to shoulder all of the pain from it so that Amber does not have to, saying that “it’s [his] burden alone.” But Amber refuses to let him do so, and he objects to her unconditional love, pleading that she give up on him. Even after she remembers for herself the night he had taken advantage of her, she does not lash out at him or accuse him because it is obvious that it already fills him with shame.

Amber takes some of the blame for their estrangement, citing her own shortcomings, which confirms that she is not a perfect person – or character – and that both people in any relationship have a responsibility to seek reconciliation. Amber mentions that God can give Matthew the fulfillment he needs, but he “still [thinks] he [has] the power to be alone,” and she wonders what effect she could possibly have on Matthew if he was still stuck in a cycle of regret and self-indulgence after months of her being around him. She expresses the frustration many Christians have when trying to convey the awesome grace of God to nonbelievers. This insight

into a Christian's perspective may encourage non-Christian readers to seriously consider Christians' motivation in sharing their beliefs.

The catalyst for Matthew's sprint towards faith is Amber's forgiveness. When she forgives him, it changes him:

Something within him shifted, and he couldn't tell if something was breaking or being snapped back into alignment again. But it hurt. It hurt in a place already chafed raw by his guilt. He clasped his hands and brought them to his mouth, digesting her words. "I can't accept that," he finally said. "I don't deserve it."

Her forgiveness humbles him and causes him to realize the true state of his spiritual and emotional life. Through that, Amber has the opportunity to tell him what God has done for her, and that her forgiveness is an extension of God's forgiveness.

Finally, as she leaves, she tells Matthew that she cannot help him change, even if he wants to, and he begins to lose hope, believing he does not have the ability to transform himself into a better person. As he learns later, he is correct: he must depend on God to save him.

Pages 244-252: As the tipping point of Matthew's conversion draws closer, I surreptitiously add biblical truth to the process by disguising a parable as a true story in the characters' past. Luke's illustration of forgiveness, taken from Matthew 18:21-35, shows the biblical support behind Christian forgiveness but pulls the reader deeper into the characters' lives instead of holding them at arm's length with a Bible story.

However, even then, Matthew does not fully absorb the truth. It takes his own experience to urge him towards the edge of faith, and it begins with a casual question tossed towards God: why would he love Matthew? That question prompts a stream of thoughts about love and the nature of true love versus the superficial love that his fans offer him. Matthew's instinct is to

turn to self-pity and resignation, but after realizing that Amber's example does not involve those emotions, he takes the final step, admitting directly to God that he needs him. While this may not count as a conversion experience to some readers, Christian or not, evidence of his inner change appears in the final scene of the novel, in which he quits the band, which he has long treasured for the lifestyle it has provided; rejects Sonata's advances, representing his conscious abandonment of his habitual promiscuity; and expresses true gratitude towards both Luke and God, exhibiting the shift away from himself that has already begun to occur. Thus Matthew is redeemed by God, but the reader only sees the beginnings of its effects because sanctification is a lifelong process.

I can improve numerous things in *Freeflight*, of course, that do not currently conform to my vision of having the novel appeal to a non-Christian audience. These improvements will take extensive editing and much time, which is why the edition of the novel included here is only a rough draft. However, I think it is helpful to see the novel in its awkward phase, with its gangly limbs, acne-ridden skin, and unruly hair, because it exposes the process that I – and probably many other authors – must go through to get their novel where they want it to be. Seeing the scaffolding of a story-in-progress can reveal a lot about what holds up the structure of the novel; for *Freeflight*, that scaffolding is biblical truth. In this draft, the bare scaffolding shows through in outright conversations about God and theology, something that I will probably not include in the final draft. If this novel is for non-Christians, it is not the medium for straight theological discussions. I will also remove most if not all the scenes with the angel, Grayson. Although he is an enjoyable character to write, he is unnecessary to the plot; God can work through people directly without needing to use an intermediary. However, that is not to say that he never will. Lastly, I will fill out the timeline at the end of the novel so that there are scenes interspersed with

Matthew and Luke's conversations about God and forgiveness. As it currently is, it seems rushed and preachy because little action occurs between conversations.

Conclusion: The Christian Author's Audience

As an author, finding a balance between writing as a Christian and reading as a non-Christian is difficult, and any author attempting to do both should be prepared to displease audiences on both sides of the spectrum. But I believe it is a worthwhile effort to walk the line, because where the two worlds meet, conversation happens.

It is naïve to assume that every novel with a Christian message will change the life of each person who reads it, but the possibility is by no means unlikely. In addition, the Christian author's purpose is not to throw the Gospel at her audience, but to plant the seed of a question here, prompt a conversation about faith there. A reader may never link the beginnings of their curiosity about God to a novel they read, but that does not mean it did not play a part in their spiritual journey. A Christian author must write with that in mind; she may never see the direct fruits of her labor in someone else, but God could be working behind the scenes and using her words to ask questions in the hearts of people who need Him.

But what *is* the right balance in a novel between the Gospel and the world? Each author must answer that for themselves depending on their self-established purpose for writing. As long as novel is well-written and not encouraging the stereotype that Christian-created art is mediocre,²⁴ it has a valid place in the collection of Christian-themed literature. Different styles and genres of novels fill different niches in the fiction market, speaking to their respective audiences. However, some of these niches, like Amish fiction, have become crowded while others, like fantasy, are neglected. Much of this is due to what the audience of "Christian

²⁴ This view applies to modern literature, film, and even music.

fiction” demands and expects, which results in a cycle that provides little room for deviation.

But what about the non-Christian audience? Where are the novels that are written for nonbelievers that contain solid Christian ideas? Jesus tells us not to be *of* this world, but still to be *in* this world. Christian authors huddled in the secure confines of the Christian fiction genre often fail to fully interact with the world – a world full of hungry readers – around them. How can we expect to reach the lost when our books are only for the found?

Therefore, I challenge Christian authors to write and market their books with non-Christians in mind. Write stories in secular settings with hurting, deprived characters and broken situations. Write about despair and injustice. Write about our culture focused on sex, money, and attention. Write them realistically and unashamedly. Then write about redemption, hope, and reconciliation. Write about God’s justice and mercy. Write about the joy that He has guaranteed for believers. Shock readers who do not believe in God, who think there is no hope, who wonder if there is any possibility of healing. Contradict and deny their expectations. Force them to question their worldview and if there is a God. Make them wonder. Well-rounded, Christian readers who want to be “in the world, not of the world” will not limit themselves purely to “Christian fiction;” they will also be looking on the mainstream literature shelves for edifying books, so ensure that they will find them. Reach out to those who need someone to relate to; help them find that someone in a character who is just like them, but who also finds redemption in Christ. Then we will truly be writing for the glory of the Kingdom of God.

Freeflight, The Novel: A Draft

The world was spinning.

Amber opened her eyes to a cheerful cerulean sky, fleecy clouds scudding across its smooth expanse. The surf roared quietly to her right, the breeze whistling in from the water, and somewhere she could hear seagulls squawking. She was lying on her back, and could feel sand in her hair, her clothes, her mouth. When she licked her lips, she tasted salt, and could smell it too, mixed in with the damp air of the breeze brushing across her skin. Together, the unruffled sky above her and the steady sounds of the ocean created a soothing atmosphere, and she almost closed her eyes again, wanting to drift back into comfortable nothingness.

Then she realized she was already there. Her mind was wondrously blank; it had nothing to do except observe, because there were no other thoughts to think. No problems. No memories. No lingering opinions or feelings from previous events. She was just existing. There was no past, only the constant flowing of the present into the future.

When she struggled to a sitting position, the world spun violently around her. Her head ached and felt heavy, like she had been lying in the same position for hours. To her right, the ocean rolled gently up onto a picturesque beach, docile waves lapping against the shore with foamy fingers. The sun was brushing the horizon, and she guessed it was morning by how cool and fresh the breeze felt, and because the sand underneath her hands was almost chilly to the touch. Looking to her left, she noticed a small, paved road about fifty yards away, and directly behind her, a cluster of palm trees were swaying gently in the coastal breeze. Both the beach and the road were deserted.

She could remember nothing about her life, who she knew, or where she was. Her mind seemed to be functioning besides her lack of memories, however; she could remember her name, and how to count to ten, and what an ocean was. There were simply no memories to accompany them.

Feeling dazed, she took closer look at her surroundings, hoping to find some sort of clue as to what had happened to her, but the scenery offered nothing. The world was muted and detached, just like her mind. No matter how hard she tried, she could recall nothing. Nothing but sand, sea, and sky.

Amber jumped as a seagull called out above her. Taking a deep breath, she tried to stand up, only to falter when she made it to her knees. The horizon tilted before righting itself. Then some unknown prompting caused her to raise her eyes and look along the shore. A man was jogging along the tideline about two hundred yards away, and was moving in her direction.

Her first thought was that she was in no state to interact with someone at the moment, not when her brain was malfunctioning. She floundered behind a palm tree, clumsier than a fish out of water. At least this way, no one could stare at her as she tried to figure out what to do, especially whoever was approaching.

As she propped herself against the trunk of the tree, she could hear the man's footfalls, a wet slap of shoes on the sand. In a minute, he would be safely past. But right as he began to pass the trees, her flimsy balance gave out and her shoulder slipped from the trunk. Her face made a dull smack as it met the sand, and the footfalls abruptly stopped.

Well, she thought, this is awkward.

This morning, he woke up alone.

He didn't have many mornings like these, but he disliked most of them anyway. There was just something about waking up to an empty room that mockingly echoed the emptiness he always did his best to ignore.

Today's going to be a bad day, I can already tell, he mused through the foggy remnants of sleep, sitting up in his bed. The sunlight peeking through his bedroom curtains was muted, periodically interrupted by shadows as clouds made feeble attempts to subdue it. Mornings were some of his weakest times because his mind was still vulnerable from dreams that concocted ways to fill the ever-present void knocking in his soul. That was one reason he liked waking up with company: he had an immediate distraction from his problems. Usually, that distraction was an overwhelming sense of guilt, but he could deal with that better than dwelling on what wouldn't go away.

His feet hit the floor with a muffled thump as he stumbled out of bed. It was better to get going as soon as possible so he could begin the tiring process of finding ways to improve his mood, which was getting harder and harder as the years went by.

I'm twenty-five and I'm already tired of life, he thought.

In his bathroom, he looked at himself in the mirror as he splashed his face with cold water to wake himself up. He paused, staring emotionlessly at himself for a moment before throwing out a curse at nothing in particular and donning a sleeveless shirt and some shorts to take a jog along the shoreline. His house was set in a secluded area of a California beach, and it was relaxing to run on the damp sand with nothing but the omnipresent sound of the waves to keep him company. It was when he thought the most.

Thinking wasn't healthy for him, because he always arrived back at the same conclusions and was reminded of the same problems. But the process itself was soothing, if only for a while. Just like everything else that made him feel better these days.

The day was balmy and partly sunny, like every other mid-spring California day. He left his house through the back deck and took off along the shore, ignoring the picturesque, sparkling waves to his left and doing his best to focus on nothing. The beach was almost always deserted, since it was in an area relatively far away from any major cities, which was how he liked it, preferring to keep to himself as he let his mind wander.

He spotted the woman right away. He was still a ways off, so she was only a smudge on the pale sand of the beach, but his eyes were drawn to her immediately. He considered rearranging his route to circumvent her, but something made him keep going on his current path. Even though there was a one hundred percent chance she was going to recognize him, he figured he could always keep running if she turned out to be annoying.

For some reason, she was sitting on the ground, though it looked like she was struggling to stand up. Then when she turned her head and saw him, she did something that perplexed him.

Instead of staying where she was or continuing in whatever direction she was going, she scrambled to hide behind one of the few scattered palm trees that dotted the beach.

Does she really think I can't see her behind that? he wondered, keeping his eyes on her as he came closer. It was almost humorous, the way she seemed to be having difficulty staying upright, even while sitting. As he reached her, she tipped over and fell to the side, hitting the sand and becoming still.

This was not normal behavior, although some of his female fans did something similar: they hid somewhere along his path, intending to watch as he went by, so they could giggle about it afterward. He guessed there was something entertaining about watching someone when they couldn't see you, and he had yet to understand what that was. But those girls usually hid with their faces towards him because of the whole watching-him thing. This girl was face down in the sand.

He sighed, stopping. He had to admit, his curiosity was the main reason he had to pause and find out what was up with this woman.

"You're not very good at this, are you?" he said.

For a short moment he thought she was unconscious, or even worse, but after a pause, she said in a muffled voice, "At what?"

"Hiding."

She flinched and pulled herself up, looking up at him as she moved out from behind the palm tree. "Sorry, I—" She stared at him, words forgotten. Ever since he could remember, every female had a similar expression when they saw him. By now, he was used to his ability to stop girls in their tracks. It was always that way. Except that their expressions usually didn't have so much...confusion? He frowned.

She was about his age. Overall, she looked unremarkable, average in every way. She was a little on the skinny side, with plain brown hair that hung a bit raggedly around her face, like she had been laying down a short time before. Her attire was fit for the warm weather, but she had no towel or bag like a typical beach-goer.

"You were saying?" he prompted.

She shook herself out of her daze and looked down, clearly embarrassed. "Uh...yeah, I mean...I wasn't hiding...from you..."

Yeah right, he thought. Still, something about her helpless manner intrigued him. "Whatever. It's okay," he said, his voice carefully controlled to sound uncaring. He was good at that – he had many opportunities to develop it, "Girls pop up near me in random places all the time."

"They do?"

He had expected her to agree, or at least accept it; her questioning was unusual. He kept his indifferent act in place as he looked out at the ocean so he could avoid making eye contact with her. "It comes with the job."

"What's your job?" she asked.

Was she serious? Had he really just come across someone who had no idea who he was? Or was she just putting on an act, like he was doing, so that he wouldn't blow her off as another obsessed fan? She seemed sincere, but if there was one thing he learned about girls in the his past years of dating them, it was that they were good at sounding like they really meant it even when they didn't, and he had gotten to the point where he didn't care anymore. Whether they meant it or not, they all ended up the same - gone.

This woman was a mystery that made him more curious by the moment. He watched her closely as he held out his hand. "Need help getting up?" he offered, avoiding her question. If she didn't know who he was, he wasn't intending to help her find out.

She looked as if she was going to decline his offer, but then she changed her mind and took his hand. He pulled her up easily; she was surprisingly light, even with her build. He studied her more closely.

Women were typically one of two things to him: potential hook-ups and ex-potential hook-ups. Sometimes they stuck around long enough for an actual relationship, if they wanted to make the effort, but usually they just wanted the same thing he did. It was painless and simple that way. But this woman didn't quite fit into his black and white categories for some reason. She wasn't ugly by any means, but the notion of romancing her felt...wrong, somehow.

Apparently he was staring more than he thought, because she blurted out, "What?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking," he hastily muttered, dropping his hand from hers. With all of the experience that he had with women, why was he making a fool out of himself with this one?

He glanced at her again and noticed that her eyes were a pretty amber color, but there was something else about them that caught his attention. They were...intelligent. Bright. He felt like they could actually see past his exterior, maybe even past the persona he had so painstakingly erected around him. They had a certain knowledge about them that made it hard to look away.

What if she *could* see past his mask? Surely she would be repelled – the person that he hid beneath his good looks was ugly, a mutilated creature that no one wanted to see. That's why he hid it in the first place. That's also why he woke up so alone. Why he was always alone.

He suddenly noticed she was gazing at him concernedly, searching his face and finding something there that he didn't think he wanted her to find.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine," he replied, like it was the most ridiculous question in the world to ask, even if it was a very prudent one indeed.

She held eye contact with him for a long moment. Then to his alarm, she blinked and swayed, gripping her head and threatening to topple over. He steadied her with his hands on her shoulders.

"You don't seem to be doing too hot yourself," he said, the worry in his voice more earnest than he intended.

"I'll be fine," she said in a small voice. She winced and rubbed her head. "I just have a headache."

"Maybe you should see a doctor—"

"I'm fine," she said, and looked around her a moment before asking, "Where am I?"

"The nearest town is Kalupto Point, about a mile away," he said, surprised she didn't know.

His answer didn't seem to help her any. Kalupto Point was the only town within ten miles, so she must have been *really* lost.

She fell silent, and he followed her gaze to the seagulls winging patterns over the ocean. It was hardly an awkward silence, more of one that was there only because there was nothing to say. When he peeked at her again, she looked like she was about to fall apart. He gave her the friendliest smile he could muster, but he wasn't sure how friendly it really was – he wasn't used to using his genuine smile.

"I suppose I should introduce myself," he said, pausing for the expected exclamation of "oh, I know who you are" that never came. "I'm Matthew Wolfe," he finished, baffled at her lack of recognition.

"Amber," she replied, her tense shoulders relaxing as she smiled. It was such a pure, sweet smile that he couldn't help but smile back. Then he realized why the thought of romance with her felt so wrong: she reminded him of Riley. He couldn't put a finger on what it was, but suddenly, Riley filled his vision.

No. Not today. To distract himself from the unwanted invasion of his mind, he asked, "So, uh...what were you doing behind that palm tree?"

"Hiding," she admitted.

"Why?"

"I didn't want you to see me."

"Obviously," he rolled his eyes, "But why?"

"Because it would be awkward?" she said tentatively.

"So it didn't have anything to do with it being me?" he prodded. He had to ask - she hadn't even recognized his name, which was probably plastered on a million different things in America. *Where has this girl been for the past five years?*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Matthew Wolfe?" she repeated his name, but he could tell that she found no meaning in it.

"Anything else you know about me?" he tried one more time.

"Not really," she said, "Should I?"

"No," he said, suddenly regretting his impulsive interrogation, "forget about it."

"If you say so," she shrugged.

Matthew glanced at his watch and sighed inwardly. He bit his lip in indecision for a moment, wondering what to do about Amber. He couldn't just leave her on the beach when she

obviously had no idea where she was. From what he could see, she didn't have transportation of any kind.

He hoped he wouldn't regret this later.

Well, here goes nothing.

"I should probably be getting back. Wanna walk with me?" he made his voice as benign as possible, so that she wouldn't think he was trying to seduce her or something. Not that most girls would mind if he was trying to seduce them. He felt the familiar mixture of smugness and disgust at that thought.

"Sure," she said, "Where to?"

"My house. It's just down the beach a ways," he gestured vaguely in its direction, "Think you can make it?" He eyed her skinny form suspiciously. It didn't look like it could support her for more than a few yards, especially since minutes before, she had been having difficulty just sitting up.

But she said, "Of course," and took a few steps, "See? I know how to walk."

"You just look a little shaky," he shrugged, "Well, come on, then."

They started back towards his house. He walked slower than usual as to not overwork her, and he was grateful when she was mostly quiet the whole way. He continually cast quick glances in her direction as they walked to make sure she was doing okay. Though she seemed a bit too shaky on her own two feet, she managed to survive the twenty-minute walk back to his house, which surprised him.

"That's my house," he said as they came into sight of it, even though his announcement was pointless since it was the only house for at least a mile. Still, she had been quiet for so long that even he was starting to get uncomfortable with the silence.

"It's a bit...secluded," she said, craning her head to look past it and down the beach.

"It's the only privacy I get."

"Why's that?"

He stared at her for a minute. "Where have you been for the past few years?"

"Why does it matter?" she said, pointedly evading the question.

"Never mind." If she was keeping her life a secret, he could understand that. So was he.

As they approached his back door, she paused at the wall of his back deck, admiring the ocean view and breathing in the crisp, salty air. She seemed a little stressed. Was she uncomfortable with his friendliness? Did she doubt his intentions? He had done a lot of things with women, but they were always willing. He wasn't a...well, whatever.

"You can come in if you want," he said as he unlocked the door, leaving the choice up to her.

He heard her follow him inside, and smiled slightly to himself in relief. Maybe he didn't want to admit it, but this woman piqued his curiosity, and he wanted to figure out what made her so infuriatingly different, or at least why she didn't seem to know who he was.

She examined her surroundings with an acuteness akin to a crime scene investigator, taking note of everything from his wall decorations to his refrigerator.

“Make yourself at home,” he said. “I’m gonna go shower.”

He escaped to his room and shed his shirt in one movement, tossing it on his bed for the maid to pick up later. As he got into the shower, he realized that the thoughts that had been crowding his mind earlier that morning had scattered at the arrival of the strange young woman currently in his living room.

Did she really have no idea who he was? He was recognized by a substantial portion of the American public, especially by her demographic. There was no way that she had never heard about him. But then why was she acting like she had never heard his name? Part of him wanted to say that her ignorance was sincere, from the fact that he had detected no deception or cunning in her face; and something in which he prided himself was how well he could decipher women’s expressions. He had a lot of practice with that sort of thing.

Matthew turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel as he ruminated. The thing that really held his attention was how familiar she seemed. He had never met Amber before, and yet he felt something for her not unlike a long-time friendship, almost like a long-forgotten bond. Otherwise, he would’ve left her there. It was almost like falling in love, but without the romance. Not to say he loved her, of course, not at all. But he could not deny that thread of familiarity. Maybe she had met him at a concert. He refused to dwell on the other possibility: that she was a lot like the only female he never wanted to think about.

Now fully dressed, he took a deep breath, clearing his mind of its cluttered thoughts, and went back into the living room. When he entered, Amber broke off from where she was looking at his guitar and glanced at him. “You play guitar?” she asked.

“Somewhat,” he replied as vaguely as he could. “I like playing around with chords sometimes, that’s all.” He almost winced at the understatement. He took the guitar and sat down next to Amber on the couch. Hoping she wouldn’t question him further, he started playing the first thing that came to his head, which happened to be a song he had been working on earlier.

She listened for a minute or two, her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes resting intently on his hands as he played. He felt almost nervous under her rapt attention. Him, nervous. What was wrong with him?

“That sounds depressing,” she finally said in a soft voice. It wasn’t a derogatory statement, merely an honest one.

“That’s the point,” he murmured. Her shrewdness was disarming and almost uncomfortable, but in a way, he appreciated it.

“Well, it’s beautiful nonetheless,” she added.

He paused in his playing. “Thanks,” he said, hoping she could tell how grateful he was for her simple compliment. People said they liked his music all the time, but she was reading deeper into it than a casual enjoyment.

Sure, he wrote decent music. People bought it, listened to it, appreciated it. He was paid handsomely for it. His band was in high demand to play concerts. He had a lot of “friends.” But there was no way of telling which of them were real, not when he was so popular. He

doubted many of them were. That was just how it was in the music business. Lots of attention but nothing permanent. One was famous until someone better came along.

On a whim, he decided to share more with her. "There are words to it too," he said, not looking at her.

"Are they as depressing as the music?"

He almost smiled. She could decide for herself. "*Stories left untold, because there's no one there to listen, if you could be so bold, as to try and miss them.*"

When there was no immediate reply, he glanced up at her. She was staring intently at nothing, lost in her thoughts with a faintly troubled expression. Had she really taken his words to heart?

"I think I can understand what you're saying," she said quietly.

Surprised, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"It's saying that people wear a mask over their real emotions, because others don't care. At least, that's what I got from it." She was suddenly conscious of his intent gaze.

Her insight was uncannily accurate. "Yeah," was all he could say, feeling exposed before her. Swallowing the incriminating words that he wanted to say, he looked away, annoyed at himself for wanting to unload his private thoughts onto anyone, much less a woman he had just met.

After they sat in a moment of awkward silence, he checked his phone and got up. "I need to go pick up something from a friend's house. I can drop you off somewhere if you want. Like your house?"

Her expression shifted strangely, and she tucked her hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture. "My house? Um, no, that's okay..." she trailed off, not looking at him.

Matthew stared at her for a moment, waiting for her to say something else, and finally said, "Are you sure? I don't want you to have to walk all the way back—"

"I don't know where I live," she blurted out, then immediately clamped her mouth shut, embarrassed.

He tried to come up with some kind of clever comeback, but all he could think of was, "What?"

Faced with the awkward and irreversible situation of wanting to unsay what had been said, she resorted to curling up on the couch with her knees to her chest and arms around them. "Never mind," she mumbled.

"No, what do you mean? Like...you can't remember?"

After a beat, she nodded, still avoiding his gaze.

"Why not?"

"How could I know? I can't remember anything."

"Wait, you can't remember *anything*?"

This conversation was slipping out of her control more and more rapidly, and she gave up trying to salvage it. "No, I mean, I remember some things." She scrunched up her face, trying to

connect fragments of her thoughts together. “My name is Amber, I know that much.” She paused, “Actually, I think that’s all I know. About myself, I mean.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to tell me that bit of information?”

“Why, what could *you* do?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he replied sarcastically, “Maybe like, you know, take you to the hospital? If you got a concussion or suffered brain damage—”

“No!” she burst out, startling both of them. Then she shrank back. “Sorry, I don’t know where that came from.”

“Afraid of hospitals or something?”

“I can’t go back there...” she muttered.

“What?”

Her head jerked up. “Nothing. I mean, nothing that I know about. Thinking about hospitals gives me this...this clenching, horrible feeling.” Her hands mimicked her words, making fists and crushing her fingers against themselves. “I’ve been there too much. They’re too familiar.”

Great, bringing a crazy girl into his house was *not* a good way to start off the day. What if she had escaped from a psychiatric ward? And out of all the beaches in California, she had to pick *his* to hang around. Matthew lamented his moment of pity for Amber on the beach, but he might as well get his daily act of kindness out of the way.

He crouched down in front of her, talking to her like a child. “You need to see a doctor, Amber.”

She gave him a look that bordered on scornful. “I feel fine.”

He straightened and searched for his keys. “Come on, I’m taking you right now.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Someone needs to know where you are before you hurt yourself.” He located the keys on the counter and picked them up, giving them a habitual twirl around his finger.

“I’m not crazy.”

“Of course you’re not.”

“I’m not!” She stood but made no move towards the door. “You don’t seriously think I’m insane, do you?”

He shrugged, checking his phone again. His guitar was waiting for him. Dameon had borrowed it for only one week, but he dreaded to find out what he had done to it. The sooner Matthew could stop by his house, the better.

“Matthew – it’s Matthew, right? – I’m *not* crazy.”

“Matt,” he grunted.

“What?”

“Call me Matt.” He glanced up from his phone. Amber’s eyes were pleading and clear, silently begging him not to dismiss her as a lunatic. She had listened to his song and had commented on it – with insightfulness, even. A crazy person couldn’t do that, could they?

He sighed. “How else are you going to fix your memory if you don’t get it checked out?” he said in a gentler tone.

Her hands clenched again. “I can’t go there,” she whispered. “Too many changes.”

“If you’re gonna convince me that you’re not crazy, you should probably stop saying random things like that.”

The tension in her hands eased, and she smiled faintly. “*Touché*. I just...really don’t want to go there, okay?”

He twirled his keys again, thinking. If he couldn’t dump her at the hospital, what would he do with her? He couldn’t just leave her at a random street corner. “What about the police station? Or are you scared of those, too?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, I guess.” She grimaced faintly and touched her head, but Matthew pretended not to notice.

“Do you mind if we stop at my friend’s house first?” He wasn’t going to give Dameon any longer to screw something up on his instrument, and he didn’t know how long their stop at the police station was going to take; the tug of familiarity towards her wouldn’t let him leave without making sure she would be okay.

She started to shake her head before she thought better of it. “No,” she said. She touched her head again.

“Do you want some painkillers or something?”

“For what?” she said quickly, dropping her hand.

“Your headache.”

“It’s nothing. I’ll be fine.”

“Suit yourself. Come on, then.” Matthew steeled himself against showing her too much attention. The last thing he needed was another girl following him around like a lost kitten. The only reason he was helping her at all was because she reminded him so much of Riley.

I haven’t seen her in six years and she’s still giving me grief, he thought. When will I finally be free of her?

The car in Matthew’s garage was made entirely of sleek curves, glossy silver paint, and reckless speed. Amber absently ran her fingers over the four interlocking circles that made the emblem on the hood, appreciating the car’s obvious power and luxury even if she had no idea what it was.

“Audi,” Matthew said as he opened his door, “V8 engine, 430 horsepower.”

“It’s nice,” Amber said meekly, wishing she knew what those attributes meant. The interior was covered with black leather that still smelled new, and as Matthew started the car, she jumped at the engine snarling to life behind her.

As the car eased into the sunlight, she took one last look at Matthew’s house, perching on a bluff overlooking the ocean with the deck extending past the edge like a propped-up appendage. The house was partially concealed from the road by a few lumpy mounds of sand and a grove of palm trees, but had tasteful landscaping and a well-groomed appearance.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked as they turned onto the road. She tried not to look at the speedometer as it slid up to an uncomfortably fast level.

Matthew smiled to himself, shifting gears with practiced ease as he thought about how to answer. "You've probably noticed I'm pretty wealthy..."

"Yeah."

"...and you could say I'm, um, rather well-known..."

"Okay."

"...so you might be able to understand how weird this is for me."

"What is?"

"Knowing someone like you who has no idea who I am."

Amber nodded slowly, doing her best to imagine how he felt. "I guess that *is* pretty strange."

"I figure you'll find out eventually. No doubt you've already put some pieces together. But I'd rather just let you make your own judgments."

"Why's that?"

Matthew turned onto another road with a flick of his wrist at the wheel, and Amber was forced to brace herself against the seat. "People think they know me, think they have me figured out. In fact, everyone thinks they have me figured out. And they mostly do, I guess. But they don't know everything," he scratched his head, "I don't know what I'm saying. I guess I just want you to see what you want to see."

"That's not very reassuring. You sound like you want to be some sort of social chameleon."

"How do you even remember what a chameleon is?" Was there the slightest tinge of suspicion in his voice?

"I think I remember what things are, just not things about myself. That's possible, right?"

"I dunno, I'm not the one with the memory loss," he grunted, changing roads again. His grip on the stick shift was tighter than it should have been. Amber's lips thinned and she looked out the window, watching businesses and cars whisk by. If he didn't believe her, she didn't know what else she could do to convince him she was telling the truth.

"Please state your name."

"Open the gate," Matthew said to the small intercom set into the wall. In front of them, a wrought-iron gate marked the entrance to a plot of land that held an impressive, cream-colored house at its center. It wasn't quite a mansion, but it was close enough.

The monotone voice that had spoken was replaced with a deeper, vaguely amused one. "Dude, why do you never just say your name?"

"Dameon—" Matthew began, but the gate was already sliding open. Rolling his eyes, he guided the Audi down a winding driveway shaded by trees and stopped at the front of the house.

"We shouldn't be here too long," he told Amber, who hadn't said a word since he had been short with her. She was probably just annoyed with him - girls liked finding things to be angry about, and he had learned to wait it out. Either they held a grudge or got over it, and it wasn't like he would be unable to find another woman if he wanted to.

"Are all your friends as rich as you?" she asked, getting out of the car and pausing to appreciate a fountain of white marble that graced the front lawn.

"Pretty much," he said. He knocked on the front door but didn't wait for a response before opening it himself. Dameon met him in the entry hallway, a half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

Dameon Steele was darker and thicker than Matthew, with a head of messy brown hair and an easy-going grin. He spent his money as freely as he offered opinions, which was probably too often.

"If there's a single scratch on my guitar—" Matthew said.

"What do you think I am, an idiot?" Dameon said through a mouthful of peanut butter, "You love that thing more than any girlfriend you've ever had."

"Probably true." Matthew grinned.

Dameon's eyes shifted to Amber, who had just closed the front door behind her. "Who's this?" he asked.

Something about the way Dameon looked at her irked Matthew. "Oh, this is Amber. She's my...um..." what was she to him, exactly?

"Spent the night at his house, eh?" Dameon's eyebrows moved up and down as he addressed her.

"No, nothing like that," Matthew snapped, "Where's my guitar?"

Dameon, clearly unconvinced, turned slowly on his heel, giving Matthew a wry look as he stuffed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. Once he had moved out of sight, Matthew grimaced. "Sorry," he said, "Dameon can be a little..."

"Blunt?" she finished, examining a painting of a sunset on the wall, "It's okay. But that's usually true, right?"

"What is?"

"Any girl you get to know ends up staying at your house overnight."

He tried to chuckle but it came out an awkward wheeze. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged. "Most of the time, wealthy, good-looking guys are like that."

"Okay, first of all, that's stereotyping. And second of all, how would you know? Your memory is--"

"Very selective," she leaned against the banister of the curving stairs to his left. Something must have leaked through his expression because she added, "You don't believe me, do you."

"No, I do," he said, looking around at the decorations with feigned interest, "It's just...your situation is very unusual."

"Yeah, I'm aware."

Dameon reappeared, holding a long, black case aloft. "Here's your child," he said, holding it out.

Matthew took it from him and gave it a pat. "I'll probably have to spend the next two hours retuning it so that it'll be functional for our tour this week."

"Man, I don't know what you think I do with it when I borrow it, but I swear it's nothing destructive," Dameon said. "You guys hungry? I have the peanut butter out."

"We're actually about to go eat," Matthew said, knowing better than to accept any offer of food made by Dameon. Most things that he touched didn't seem to come out quite right, "I'll see you later."

The refusal didn't faze him. "Suit yourself."

As Matthew turned to leave, Amber suddenly asked Dameon, "What do *you* do for a living?"

Dameon burst out in a needlessly raucous laugh. "Okay, what did Matt promise you in return for saying that?"

"Um, nothing," Amber said, bemused.

Dameon kept laughing until he realized she was serious. "Wait, what?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "If it makes you feel any better, she didn't know who I was either."

"Wow, something really must not be right in your head," Dameon remarked, "I mean, seriously, not knowing--"

"Dameon, just shut up," Matthew said, and jerked his head at Amber, who thankfully was amused rather than offended at Dameon's comment, "Let's go."

"Have fun on your date, guys," Dameon said, waving cheerfully.

Matthew shut the door on him as quickly as possible.

"So you're a musician."

They were back in his car, and he had just double-checked that his guitar was stashed securely behind their seats. He pulled out of Dameon's driveway, deciding to go with the simple answer. "Yes."

"In a band?"

He said nothing.

"A pretty popular one, I take it."

"Brilliant deduction," he said sarcastically.

She remained silent, looking out the window, and he felt a pang of regret. Why was he being so short with her? She was only trying to figure out what was going on around her, and with a faulty memory at that. Still, his pride prevented him from commenting out loud about it, and the car was quiet until he pulled into the parking lot of a small deli.

"Is this okay for lunch?" he asked.

"I don't have any money," she said.

He tried to detect the usual veiled question in her voice, but it wasn't there. She was merely stating a fact.

"What, you don't think I can afford paying for two?" he gave a curt laugh, "And apparently since this is a date according to Dameon, I'm inclined to."

"Dameon seems to assume a lot."

"He has good reason to," Matthew said, his thoughts running along the past several years of his life, "You're an anomaly."

"In more ways than one," she muttered, "but just so we're clear, I hardly know you."

"So?"

"So this isn't...this isn't anything."

"You sure you don't want it to be?" he smiled disarmingly, wondering if she'd fall for it.

"Definitely."

"Well," he said, his smile fading, "there are so many women who would kill to be in your position right now, having a one-on-one lunch with me," he couldn't help but sit a little straighter thinking about it.

But Amber was unimpressed. "I'm sure it's only because you're such delightful company and nothing else," she said dryly.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with enjoying your fame," he countered, turning the car off and getting out. She knew nothing about what his life was like. He *deserved* to enjoy what he had. It was impossible not to, anyway. He was frustrated with her lack of appreciation for him, and how he was bothering to help her out when there were so many other things he could be doing. She should have been grateful he hadn't just kept running this morning.

Inside the deli, there were only a few customers sitting at tables, and fortunately none of them did more than stare at him for longer than necessary. Sometimes when he entered a public place, some fan or another would cause a commotion, but it looked like today he would be able to enjoy his lunch in peace.

"Table for two, Mr. Glossop," he told the portly man who bustled up to meet them.

"Of course, right this way," he said cheerfully, and led them to a booth near the back, leaving them with menus before he hurried away.

"Remember how to read?" Matthew jibed.

She didn't bother answering, giving him only an unamused look before perusing her menu. The entertainment he was planning to get from teasing her died a stillborn death, and it turned into a stale taste in his mouth.

"So what's good here?" she asked.

"Everything. I've been coming here since I was ten and have had pretty much everything on the menu," he answered, glad she hadn't decided to dwell on his mocking her memory problems.

As they ordered and waited on their food, Matthew couldn't seem to look away from her. She perplexed and fascinated him, not just because of the strange circumstances that came with their meeting, but because of the way she acted as a result of them. She didn't care about his

fame or his talent. She didn't care that half of America's population adored or idolized him. All he had going for him at this point were his looks, and she didn't even seem to care much about those, either.

How was that possible?

He could understand not comprehending his popularity, since she couldn't even remember what she had for dinner last night. But how could she place no value in his looks? How could she not appreciate him indulging her, or the fact that she was spending time with a man who was obviously in high demand? He recalled her initial reaction to seeing him, and knew that in that respect, she was no different than any other girl. But the way she reacted to it *was* different, and he wanted to know why. Had whatever trauma she had experienced damaged more than her memory?

He gave a small laugh at himself. Look at him, thinking that because a girl wasn't drooling over him meant there was something physically wrong with her brain. He should be pleased that, for once, he might be able to have a stimulating conversation with someone of the opposite sex.

"Are you still feeling okay?" he asked.

"My head doesn't hurt at all anymore," she told him, "I think I'll be okay."

"Still no memories though?"

She shook her head and looked down at her hands, which were fiddling with the edge of the tablecloth. She seemed afraid to look at him.

For several minutes after they got their food, they sat in silence, and Amber took the chance to study her surroundings. The walls of the restaurant were covered with various seascape paintings in ornate frames interspersed among rope, anchors, and other boat-related items. Booths lined three of the walls, and the tables in the middle were made of a dark wood that tastefully complemented the decorations. The smell of freshly baked bread, crisp onions, newly cut deli meat, and sliced tomatoes wafted around her, the homey scents comforting and simple.

"This is kinda awkward," Matthew finally said.

"Yeah," she agreed, putting down her sandwich.

"I can't make any conversation with you because you don't...know anything."

"Sorry."

Matthew tapped his fingers on the tabletop, obviously unaccustomed to not knowing what to say.

"Talk about yourself," she suggested.

"That's what they always say," he said in annoyance, "Girls always want to know about what I do, how I party, who I hang out with, how many other girls I've been with in the last month..."

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

She should have expected this. Of course Matthew wasn't going to open up to her like she wanted him to, not when she was only a fleeting visitor to his present life. "Never mind," she said, and they ate the rest of their food in silence.

When they were both finished eating, Matthew left money on the table and they made their way outside, blinking in the sudden sunlight. The moment they did so, a voice called out, "Matt!"

They turned towards its source, and Amber saw two teenage girls running up to them. Excited grins were plastered on their faces, their eyes bright with exhilaration. Matthew squinted at them, still half-blinded by the sunlight.

"We're like your biggest fans," one of them said as the other dug around in her purse, "We're actually going to your concert tomorrow! We're so pumped!"

"Awesome," he said, giving her a charming grin, "Ever been to one before?"

"Oh, loads of times," the other said, pulling a pen from her purse, "We're from Oklahoma, but we flew out here to see you in your hometown. We heard the concerts are even more awesome here."

"Like, they're longer and sometimes you play new songs that aren't even released yet."

"And we know you're gonna release an album in a couple months, so we were hoping we would hear some new stuff tomorrow."

"You're our favorite member of the band, definitely."

"Yeah, you sing really good."

"Plus you're really cute."

Amber studied the two girls as they thrust things out for him to sign. Their faces were flushed and their eyes never left Matthew as he chatted with them and signed autographs. One of them kept shifting her weight from foot to foot, hardly able to contain her energy. Amber's presence was hardly registered, which was fine by her.

After several minutes, the girls reluctantly drew away and went into the deli, still chattering excitedly. Matthew's grin faded as he rejoined Amber and they walked to his car in silence.

"Does that happen often?" Amber asked mildly as they drove away.

"All the time," he replied with little emotion.

"Do you like it?"

"Sure."

"It seems like it would get annoying."

"Maybe to someone who doesn't like attention."

She didn't miss the way he looked at her when he said it. "What?"

"You didn't say a word to those girls."

"They wanted to talk to you, not me," she said.

"Women get really protective when they feel their position is being threatened. A lot of the time, when I'm on a date or something and a female fan comes along, my date gets really snippy with them."

"We weren't on a date."

"I know. But you're still a woman."

"I have no illusions that you belong to me in any way, nor that you really care about me in any way. Am I not just another fan, so to speak?"

Something about what she said bothered him; his jaw clenched slightly as he drove, but all he said was, "I don't invite 'just fans' into my house."

"I'm not sure what to do with you," Matthew said as he threw his keys on the counter and pulled a can of soda from the fridge. Amber was examining a framed picture on his mantel of an older man with a tired face that had probably been handsome in younger years, no doubt Matthew's father. A wave of embarrassment flooded her at Matthew's words, and she didn't look at him.

"I really am sorry," she said, "I was thinking that maybe I *should* go to the hospital. At least they would know what to do with me, and get me off your hands."

"Still no side effects from whatever caused your memory loss?"

"No."

"Then I see no reason why you should go. You would have nothing to tell them."

"I thought you wanted me to get my brain checked out."

"You seem fine to me."

"That's your professional opinion, is it?" she glanced at him wryly.

He smiled and shrugged, taking a gulp of his soda and leaning over the counter on his elbows. "I just don't think there's much they can do. I mean, either you get your memory back or you don't. I'm pretty sure they won't electroshock you or something."

"At this point, I'm willing to try anything," Amber muttered.

"Okay, let me put it this way," he said, tilting his head at a jaunty angle, "Would you rather go to the hospital and get God-knows-what done to you, or come watch the rehearsal of one of the most famous bands of its day?"

"Let me guess: you're talking about *your* band," she said dully.

He raised his eyebrows and grinned, waiting for an answer.

She sighed. Why not. "I'll go with you."

"Thought so," he said with a cockiness that annoyed her.

Twenty minutes later, after a short drive down the coast, Amber's eyes widened as she regarded the sleek lines of the building looming above them. It was an impressive monument to the success of Matthew's band that they would play here.

"It was built for me," he said as he pulled into the back lot of the structure. He parked next to a battered 1980s Ford Mustang that looked pathetic next to the lustrous, modern Audi. "I mean, for my band," he added, wincing at how conceited his first statement had probably sounded.

"So you said this is a rehearsal?" she asked timidly, waiting for him to take his guitar from his car and then following him into the building and through the maze of hallways and rooms.

"Yeah, we're kicking off a tour here tomorrow and we have to get some songs down."

She didn't have a chance to say anything more as they arrived without warning at a room where three men were lounging on leather furniture. They were all around Matthew's age, and Amber recognized Dameon as one of them.

"How was your lunch date?" he asked, grinning. Amber flinched inwardly, knowing that his question would produce a wrong impression on the other two who hadn't met her.

"It wasn't a date," she told him when Matthew offered no response, "We hardly even know each other."

"Hasn't stopped him before," Dameon said bluntly. Amber looked to Matthew in appeal. He rolled his eyes and pushed Dameon with little real force as he passed him and opened a locker set into the wall. Dameon laughed and returned to fishing around in a bag at his feet. Feeling awkward, Amber remained where she was, feeling the eyes of the other two men on her.

"Aren't you gonna introduce us to your new friend?" one of them said to Matthew. His dark hair was cut in true punk fashion, somewhat short but in sections of varying lengths and gelled to perfection.

"Oh yeah, this is Amber," Matthew said, gesturing in her direction without turning around, "Amber, this is the rest of the band."

She smiled hesitantly at them. The one that had spoken nodded to her and introduced himself as Jordan Frink. He was pleasant enough, but a wary look in his eyes made her feel like she had done something wrong. The other man was stocky with light brown hair and a goatee. He observed Amber over the top of the creased paperback he was reading but said nothing. His assessment of her held no judgment or assumption, and she felt a sudden and inexplicable connection with him. Had she known him before her memory loss as well? And if so, did he remember her?

"Nerd over there is Luke," Dameon informed her with a smirk. Luke's eyes creased in a slight smile, taking the gibe good-naturedly, nodded to Amber, and returned to his book.

"Are we waiting on Sonata?" Matthew asked, coming to sit next to Dameon on the couch, guitar in hand. He started plucking the strings, grimacing as he heard the notes, "Seriously, what do you do to this thing?" he muttered to Dameon.

"Yeah, she's on her way," Jordan said.

"As far as I'm concerned, she can take her sweet time," Dameon drawled, finally pulling out a pair of drumsticks from his bag and beginning to tap a beat on the table in front of him.

"Careful, or we'll start to think you hate her," Matthew said wryly.

Dameon smacked him with one of his drumsticks and Matthew cursed at him. "Just because you get it on all the time with her doesn't mean she's that appealing to everyone," Dameon said, "Of all people, you had to choose my *sister* as your fallback..."

"Just because she's related to you doesn't mean she's not good in bed," Matthew shot back with a hint of smugness, "though apparently that trait isn't genetic, or you wouldn't be so jealous."

"That doesn't mean you can tell stories about how you and her—"

"Is this really a necessary discussion?" Luke intervened blandly, "I think we hear enough about Matt's sex life as it is."

Relieved and sickened at the same time, Amber silently agreed. Matthew and Dameon went back to their respective tasks, and little more was said until Sonata Steele arrived.

Her brown eyes swept the room with haughty confidence as she entered, not even pausing on Amber as she noted her presence. Without hesitation, she said in a brisk tone, "Onstage in five, and *Starfield Magazine* is here for the interview, so no messing around," her gaze rested on Dameon for a moment before moving to Matthew. He smiled at her as the others got up and left the room, murmuring to each other, and once they were gone, she sidled up to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Ready to woo some pop culture journalists?" she said, her voice more sultry than it had been a moment before.

"Always," Matthew said, "How'd your date go last night?"

"Didn't even spend the night."

"Shame," he grinned.

"Maybe I could come to your place after this? You know, so you can console a poor, heartbroken girl?" she said, now tracing a finger on his chest. Amber thought she looked anything but heartbroken.

"I would say yes, but..." his eyes flickered to Amber, and Sonata turned to appraise her. Amber felt like a rodent underneath the gaze of a carnivorous cat, and she could only maintain eye contact for a few seconds before looking down, thoroughly intimidated.

"Seriously?" Sonata turned back to Matthew, "You usually go for more of a sexy type—"

"She's staying at my house, not in my bed," Matthew said flatly, then lowered his voice, "It would be kinda awkward for her, don't you think?"

"Why do you even care?" Sonata glanced back at her, "Why is she at your house, anyway? Did you start some kind of virgin girl charity without me knowing?"

"He's doing me a favor," Amber said, incensed by Sonata's carelessly arrogant way of speaking and forgetting her fear through the rush of anger.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said scathingly, "He does a lot of girls *favors*. I just never thought he would bother doing them for someone like *you*."

Amber fell silent again, face burning. Usually she would defend herself, but Sonata's cutting tone left her defenseless.

"Sonata, that's not really necessary..." Matthew said, running a hand down her arm, "Maybe another time, okay?"

She gave him an irritated look and turned, stalking out of the room without saying anything more. Matthew took a few steps towards Amber and started to say something, but she turned away and shook her head, trying to control the feelings roiling in her gut. Why did Sonata

look at her like she wasn't even worth her attention? She had an air about her that booked no nonsense, and pressured those around her to either impress her or get out. Apparently, Amber was unimpressive in every way.

"Just ignore her, she's like that with everyone," Matthew said, and left the room as well. Amber didn't reply, but followed him down another corridor and out onto the open backstage area, where various equipment was hooked up to power sources, instruments, and amplifiers.

She hovered close to Matthew as the band fiddled with their equipment. "So what's the name of your band?" she asked him.

"Freeflight," Matthew said without pausing in what he was doing.

"Where did that name come from?"

"I just thought it was cool."

"So you picked the name?"

"Yeah, I started the band," he glanced at her with irritation, "Could you please not bother me with your stupid questions right now? We need to start rehearsal."

She crossed her arms. "Sorry my lack of memory and knowledge *inconveniences* you," she retaliated.

"Almost every question you ask can be answered in some other way than asking me," he plugged an amp into his guitar and adjusted a few settings before strumming an experimental chord.

"Maybe I want to hear it from you."

"Well hear it from me somewhere else. Go read or watch some interviews; there are plenty out there."

"I don't want those crap answers you give your fans. I want real ones."

Matthew's fingers froze on his guitar. "What're you talking about? And how would you know what kind of answers I give them?"

"Come on, a private person like you? You never share things you don't have to."

"That's not true."

"Look me in the eyes and tell me that."

He met her gaze, his blue eyes composed. "That's not true," he repeated evenly.

Amber studied him for a long moment. His handsome face was physically flawless, but something marred that superficial perfection, something she couldn't quite see. "Why do you feel the need to play a charade?" she said in a soft voice.

The question startled him, and he turned back to his guitar. "I'm not," he said, "and move out of the way, we're about to start."

She took a deep breath and started towards the stairs that led off the stage.

"And quit trying to psychoanalyze me," Matthew called after her.

"If you would just tell me the truth," she said under her breath, "I wouldn't have to."

"Yes, Mr. Tamsey, we'll be there...yes sir...you too." Sonata hung up, glanced at her phone screen for any new messages, and then tucked it into her blouse. Matthew always teased

her about putting it there, but pencil skirts didn't have pockets. Besides, she was more than happy to draw attention to that area whenever possible. Made dealing with men easier sometimes.

She smoothed her skirt and headed to the stage, hearing Freeflight rehearsing long before she emerged in the wings. She watched them for a while, ruminating on Matthew's behavior half an hour before. He rarely turned down an offer from her, irrevocably drawn to her like he had since high school. For some reason, he was caught up with that plain-looking girl that had been with him. The fact that he was distracted by another woman wasn't the strange part; it was that she was so obviously not his type. He had never been attracted to average, demure little things like her. He liked flare, style, passion. And curves. That girl had none of that.

And there she was, sitting in the semi-dark theatre like she was at an opera, her legs crossed, her hands in her lap, her eyes flickering across the stage. Sonata would have expected her to focus on Matthew, but she seemed interested in everyone and everything, from the layout of the stage to Jordan plucking the strings on his bass. Had this girl never been to a concert before?

The corner of Sonata's mouth twitched. Seriously, where did Matthew find these people?

The band finished a song, and the music dissolved into various comments among each other. Matthew shed his current guitar for another, snapping half-heartedly at his guitar tech about a string that was out of tune. The tech stammered an apology before scurrying out of sight, but Matthew didn't even offer a parting insult. Instead, he stared absently at the microphone in front of him, and then his eyes drifted to where the girl was sitting. He didn't attempt to smile or communicate with her; he simply looked at her. Then he picked up his spare guitar from the rack and eased the strap over his head with a preoccupied air.

Luke asked him a question, but he gave no indication that he had heard it. Sonata rolled her eyes. He was like a bird sometimes, so easily distracted by something shiny, like a new woman. But this girl? Really?

Whatever hold this girl had on him, it would only muck up Matthew's attention, and he needed to be concentrating on the upcoming tour, not his current fling. Sonata nodded curtly to herself. The girl needed to go, and she would make it happen.

Matthew pushed Amber from his mind – she had a way of complicating things that was unwelcome in his purposefully-uncomplicated life – and concentrated on practicing a few riffs from a song he would be performing tomorrow. He had never known someone so docile yet so incessantly prying. Sometimes he had half a mind to give her the answers she wanted, but habit and caution held him back. For years he had molded himself into what people wanted to see, which meant never completely exposing himself. No one had ever cared or noticed. No one except for this strange, memory-less woman.

"Matt."

He blinked out of his thoughts and saw that Dameon, Jordan, and Luke were looking at him.

“Why are you so spaced out right now?” Jordan asked.

“He’s probably fantasizing about his new girlfriend,” Dameon snickered from behind his drum set.

“Shut up,” Matthew said, “You just wish you had one.”

“What song do you want to rehearse first?” Luke asked before Dameon could think of a comeback.

“Let’s run through ‘Daylight,’” Matthew said without interest.

As they began to practice, Matthew ran his eyes across the semi-lit seats in the auditorium and found Amber sitting a few rows back from the front. This song was one of their most popular, played in homes, stores, and events across the country, and it was no doubt completely foreign to her. Its notes, words, and popularity meant nothing to her. There was no difference between his song and the other millions of songs out there.

He was still getting used to the fact that Amber was completely unfamiliar to names that were recognized worldwide. Yesterday he would’ve laughed at the thought of someone asking him what Freeflight was. Now, the idea caused an unwanted discomfort in the pit of his stomach.

He couldn’t make out her face from the stage, and he wondered if she were enjoying it. Most people did, but he knew enough about her now to know that she did not fall into the category of “most people.”

When they took a short break an hour later, Sonata confronted him at the edge of the stage.

“You need to get that girl out of here,” she said.

“Who, Amber?”

“I’m done putting up with your girls scurrying around and getting in the way. Get her out.”

“She’s just been sitting there.”

“She doesn’t belong here.”

“Of course she doesn’t,” Matthew snapped, “She doesn’t belong anywhere. That’s why she’s with me.”

Sonata gave him a scornful look. “What does that even mean?”

“She can’t—”

“I don’t care, just get her out. No fans allowed during rehearsals.”

“She’s not a—”

“*I don’t care,*” she jerked her thumb towards where Amber was still sitting, “Now.”

Matthew cursed under his breath and pushed past her, forgoing the steps on the stage and jumping down to the floor. Amber stood up as he approached.

“Hey,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets, “Would you mind going backstage to that room we were in? My manager doesn’t want people here who aren’t involved with the performance. Bad for the band’s image and all that.”

“Like hanging out with you wouldn’t do that already,” she said in a wry voice, “It’s okay, I’ll go be a burden somewhere else.”

Her smile told him she was just playing with him and that she took no offense. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "Sonata can be—"

"You don't have to make excuses for her," she interrupted, "It's okay. I'll go wait."

Matthew worried his lip as he watched her go. Sonata was just asserting as much control as she could over him and the band, and she wanted to make sure Amber knew who had the power here. Of course it peeved him that Sonata relished her control so much, but she was partly the reason why Freeflight was what it was. Her management skills, though sometimes ridiculous, were invaluable.

Sonata smirked as he lifted himself back onto the stage. "I appreciate it."

He didn't answer as he bent down and adjusted a cord that led into an amp. She watched him for a moment before the click of her heels announced her departure. He straightened and tried to immerse himself in the rest of the rehearsal, but the memory came anyway.

"You said your dad won't be home until nine o'clock," Sonata said.

"Yeah."

"So why are you freaking out?"

Matthew took a deep breath and tried to relax. He and Sonata were sitting together on the couch in his living room, and the late afternoon sunlight cast a steady warmth across their laps. They had just finished their sno-cones and were putting off their homework from chemistry class, their backpacks in a heap by the front door.

He couldn't quite figure out why he was so tense. This was a familiar scene: lounging at his house, alone with his girlfriend, killing time before the inevitable arrival of responsibility. But he sensed something different, a bloated expectancy in the way Sonata moved and spoke, and he didn't want to know what it meant.

"Relax," she said, linking her arm through his and kissing his cheek.

"I *am* relaxed," he lied.

Sonata turned his head towards her with a gentle touch. Her eyes pierced deeply into his, sizing him up as she always did in her sharp but strangely exhilarating way. And, as always, he met her approval. They kissed.

"Do you ever get bored with us?" she asked.

Immediately on his guard, he answered cautiously, "No?"

"I do," she stated bluntly, "I need excitement. Adventure. Movement."

"That's pretty obvious," he muttered, playing absently with her hair.

"Our relationship hasn't gone anywhere recently."

"Does it have to?"

She kissed him again. "Yes," she said.

"I think we're doing fine."

"Of course you do. All guys are like that," she said scornfully, "They don't understand that girls need *entertainment*."

“Am I not entertaining enough for you?” he smiled, knowing there was no danger to their relationship in her words. Sonata wasn’t happy unless she was criticizing something.

“Don’t you think it’s time to make things more—” she paused, a mischievous glint in her eyes, “—interesting?”

In an instant, he realized what she was leading up to, and a mixture of fear and pleasure rushed through him. “So—”

“No talking,” she said, “It wastes time.”

His instincts urged him to act on the invitation in her eyes and voice, but some thread of hesitation held him back. With a single tug, he could easily break it, but part of him didn’t want to. Something vestigial, maybe. He didn’t know.

“No, I want to talk about this,” he suddenly said, fending off her prying hands.

“Oh my God, you’re worse than a woman,” she snapped, “Are you willing to do this or not?”

Matthew hated himself at that moment for what was perceived by the world as insecurity. Why did he have any reason not to succumb to something as basic as desire? In fact, Matthew suddenly realized, if it weren’t for Riley and the Christian ideas she liked to spring on him, he wouldn’t even be conflicted right now. Her morals had a way of lodging in his conscience that he preferred not to deal with.

Matthew shook his head and signaled to Dameon to start the beat for their next song. He didn’t want to think about Riley right now. He never did. But she was part of the past, and he had learned a long time ago that the past was an enemy that could never be escaped. His personal history was a weight that he would never be able to leave behind.

Even if he wanted to.

The lounge backstage had an air of aloof comfort. Dark leather furniture surrounded a coffee table in the middle of the room, and a large flat-screen television was set into the wall on the far side of the door. The rest of the wall space was filled with pictures of various singers and bands that had performed on the stage.

Amber looked at them for a while, running her eyes over names and faces she didn’t care about. A news article tacked on a board told about a song by Freeflight that had topped the charts for months, a song about a crazy night that was written by Matthew. Fans ate it up, the article said, and admired Matthew for his irony and humor. She could see nothing humorous about it.

A large poster of Freeflight was on the back of the door, which she studied next. The band members were posed jauntily, content in their fame and, in Matthew’s case, secure in the knowledge that a pretty face would take him far without much effort on his part. For a moment, Amber imagined how she would feel if she were one of his fangirls, enraptured by his looks and driven to seek him out and gain his attention. But she already had his attention, through no doing

of her own, and it wasn't worth much more than the attention of anyone else. Not how she saw it, anyway.

What a strange position she was in, one that everyone but her wanted and placed there by even stranger circumstances.

The door pivoted inward, startling her. A breathless woman entered, paused, glanced around the room, then noticed Amber, her bright eyes peering at her from behind stylish glasses.

"Are you here for an interview too?" she asked Amber, a frown forming like a thunderstorm on her face.

"No, I'm just, um—"

"Thank God," the woman's expression cleared instantly, "You do *not* want to know what it cost me to get this interview, and I worked way too hard for it to have someone else just waltz right in and get the same face time I do. Simply infuriating!"

She sat down on the couch and fanned herself with the pad of paper she carried in her hand. With a satisfied sigh, she pulled the black pumps from her feet and massaged her toes. "I tell you, these shoes are *not* worth the pain they cause," she looked up at Amber as if just noticing that she hadn't moved, "Oh, I'm sorry, I just keep rambling on. I'm Shari Fischer, journalist for *Starfield* Magazine."

"I'm Amber," she said, shaking the offered hand.

"You work here?"

Amber shook her head.

Shari's eyes widened. "Oh, don't tell me you're one of their girlfriends! I *thought* that rumor about Dameon was true. I knew it!"

Amber laughed. "Oh no, I'm definitely not his girlfriend, or anyone's for that matter. Actually, I don't really know what I am."

"I hear you, girl. Sometimes boys just don't know what they want," Shari declared.

Amber didn't bother correcting her misconception, not quite knowing how she would explain her situation anyway. "So what are you going to ask the band about?" she asked as the woman continued to rub her feet.

"The usual. You know, what fans want to hear. Our target demographic is mainly female, so I'll throw some questions in there about romantic interests and whatnot."

"I'm sure Matt has plenty of stories to tell in that respect," Amber remarked.

"He definitely does," Shari said, "And that doesn't bother you?"

"Oh, it does," Amber assured quickly, "More than it does most other people, it seems like."

"So why are you with him?"

Amber wanted to groan, but she suppressed her frustration. "What makes you think I even know him?"

Shari tapped her head. "Journalist instincts. Got an eye and ear for things often missed. I can tell by the way you talk about him that you two are involved somehow."

"Not in the way you probably think."

“So your relationship with him is purely platonic?”

“I guess.”

“Why?”

Amber didn't want to answer, and she fidgeted uncomfortably. Shari laughed. “It's okay, you really don't have to answer. Sometimes I get into interview mode and get carried away asking questions. That's why I get to do the big ones.”

“Are you nervous at all?”

“Not really. Once you meet a lot of celebrities, the excitement wears off unless you get to meet someone you really admire. Matt's hot and all, but he's not my type. Too...experienced, if you know what I mean.”

Amber nodded, heartened to meet someone who wasn't completely obsessed with Matthew. It was so easy to assume that she was the only one and that she was superior to everyone else because of that.

“You from *Starfield*?” Sonata said abruptly from the doorway.

Shari stood up, slipping her shoes back on with a grimace. “Yes, ma'am.”

“This way,” Sonata turned and disappeared again. Shari said goodbye to Amber and followed her out.

Left to herself again, Amber inhaled slowly and sat in an armchair, looking around once more at the empty room. Before long, the band, minus Matthew, entered, ignoring Amber as they put their things away and took places on the couch and chairs. Luke had his book, and Dameon and Jordan were arm wrestling, their contest punctuated by swear words. Amber sat awkwardly in her chair until Luke spoke to her.

“So how do you know Matt?” he asked conversationally, lowering his book. It was titled *Perelandra*.

He probably meant it to be a simple question, but Amber wasn't quite sure how to answer it. “We, um, met on the beach this morning.” Had it only been this morning?

“That's Matt's favorite place to meet girls besides at his concerts,” Dameon interjected as he slammed Jordan's hand down on the table, apparently eavesdropping.

“I wish you guys would quit assuming we're...” Amber waved her hands around for lack of an adequate word.

“You know,” Jordan said, massaging his hand with a glare towards Dameon, “a lot of his women come in assuming they're different—”

“I'm not 'his woman,’” Amber groaned, covering her face with her hand, “Why don't you believe me?”

“So what are you, then?” Luke asked, his voice less confrontational than the others', “What is he to you?”

Another deceptively complicated question. “I'm not really sure,” she said after a long pause, “but he's definitely more than people want to see.”

Luke smiled, pleased with her answer. “And if you believe that, then you might be exactly what he needs.”

Amber tried to share in his unexpected optimism, but her future was so uncertain that she couldn't make herself believe it. There was absolutely no telling what was going to happen to her, or where she would even be this time tomorrow.

"How many juicy details about us did you share this time?" Sonata murmured. She and Matthew were standing together in the wings of the stage, arms around each other in the semidarkness.

"Oh, a few," Matthew grinned, "But there are still plenty they don't know."

They kissed deeply for a long moment, and Matthew felt the tension from the day dissolve in the familiar sensation.

"I wish you would let me come over tonight," Sonata breathed, the promise obvious in her eyes.

"I know, but I have to take care of Amber first," he said.

She drew away. "What is with you and that girl? You talk about her like a lost puppy."

"She has a bit of an unusual situation. She needs me to help—"

"I need you," Sonata interrupted, "You're replacing me with some random girl you don't even care about."

Matthew sighed. "I'm not replacing you," he noticed her obstinate expression, "Look, I'll have her out by tomorrow."

"Please don't tell me you're going to sleep with her," Sonata said in disgust.

The thought disturbed him. "God, Sonata, I'm not a sex addict."

"You act like one sometimes," she said with amusement.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he left her in the wings, circumvented the stage where Dameon and the interviewer were currently speaking, and sought out Amber, who was in the lounge talking to Luke. For some reason he didn't know, he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Let's go," he said, trying to disregard the tight feeling clenching in his chest that he didn't know the source of, and they left.

"Are you okay?" Amber asked over dinner.

Matthew kept his eyes on the piece of marinated chicken breast in front of him. "Yeah, why?"

"You've hardly said a word all evening."

"I just don't feel like talking."

"Something's bothering you."

Her certainty was unsettling. "I'm fine," he said shortly.

She took a bite of chicken. "Where'd you learn to cook like this? This tastes amazing."

"I was on my own for dinner a lot growing up. My parents were divorced and my dad worked late. I either had to cook or eat Ramen noodles every night." The corner of his mouth curled in a humorless smile as he thought about those lonely nights. His father had loved him, but he had just loved his job more.

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “I turned out okay, didn’t I?”

Her look told him she didn’t agree.

“Okay, how could I be better?” he challenged, “I make a good living, I made a name for myself, and people like me. What else could I ask for?”

She didn’t answer, but when she looked at him, her eyes were filled with a pity that angered him. How dare she had *pity* on him! She had nothing, not even a memory! He had everything!

“Stop looking at me like that,” he snapped, throwing his fork down, “You’re the one whose life sucks right now!”

“My life is actually just fine right now,” she said calmly.

“Of course it is!” he said disparagingly, “Eating with Matthew Wolfe all by yourself, following him around, hanging out at his house, acting like you’re his *best friend*...”

“You know that means nothing to me!” she retaliated, bracing her hands on the table.

“I’m all you have!”

The fierceness in her eyes didn’t diminish, but her voice softened. “No, you’re not.”

“So if I kicked you out right now, you would have somewhere else to go?” he scoffed.

“I don’t know.”

“You need me.”

She startled him by laughing pleasantly. “Are you sure you don’t just need me to need you?”

The conversation was starting to really irritate him. “I need no one,” he said, “I learned not to need anyone a long time ago.”

They finished the rest of their meal in silence, and when Matthew finally looked up again, Amber was fiddling with her napkin, lost in thought and looking somehow innocent and open in her silence. His frosty attitude eased.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

She considered his question. “Yes,” she said eventually, “though not because of you.”

“Surely Luke didn’t put in a good word for me. I saw you talking to him.”

Amber just smiled and shrugged, which was hardly a satisfactory answer. But Matthew chose to let it go. “Sometimes,” he said, “the way that people perceive me is very unforgiving. But I’m not a monster.”

“What happened to the ‘everyone loves me’ mentality?”

He winced at how conceited it sounded coming from her. “People might love me, but that doesn’t mean I’m good. I mean, I’m not a horrible person...” he was really screwing this up. He ran his hand through his hair and gave up trying to justify himself. “Look, I was going to offer that you could sleep in my guest room tonight, but apparently to some people I’m just short of a—” he stopped himself. He didn’t want that notion running around in her head all night.

Amber got up from the table and picked up her empty plate. “It’s nice of you to offer,” she said, “but please don’t feel obligated to take care of me.”

She did so while still watching Matthew, fascinated with his actions. When Dave stepped near her to get a shirt from the box, she asked, "How does he do that?"

He glanced over at Matthew and turned, immediately disinterested. "It's who he is," he said, giving the shirt to a fan and handing Amber the money, "Some people are just lucky enough to naturally give off a vibe that people like."

"But that's not how he usually is," Amber said.

"You kidding me?" Dave didn't even pause in helping another customer, "He's always a people-pleaser. Don't let him fool you into thinking he's anything better."

Amber pulled a tub full of posters to the edge of the booth and sat on it, trying to clear her head from the bustle and ruckus of the crowd. She wasn't cut out for this, juggling exuberant mobs and questionable rock stars. Whatever she had done before her memory loss, it definitely did not involve high exposure to the fast-paced lives of fame-studded musicians.

"You okay?" Dave asked behind her.

"Yeah, I'm just tired." She smiled at him. "Sorry I haven't been more useful."

He scratched his beard. "Hey, it's okay. Didn't have to do anything in the first place. I appreciate it. You can go ahead back to the bus if you want. I'm used to handling the autograph crowd by myself."

"No, I'll be fine," she stood up and patted Dave on the shoulder. "You're a good guy, you know that?"

"Doesn't mean anything in this business," he said grumpily, but there was a hint of a smile on his face as he returned to the table.

Matthew dropped his pen on the table, sighing gustily. The amphitheater was being locked up, so the last of the fans were grudgingly leaving, and as much as he enjoyed basking in admiration, he was ready to drop the smile and calculated reactions. Mingling with fans entertained and sometimes energized him, but it was easily exhausting as well.

"Another successful concert, I'd say," Dameon said with satisfaction.

"He's just saying that because he got a hot girl's number." Jordan rolled his eyes.

"That's like, what, your first one this year?" Matthew said.

"I bet you're just jealous that I got it instead of you," Dameon retorted, waving the scrap of paper with the number on it like a certificate of achievement.

"So she was hot, huh? Which one was she?"

"The blonde wearing that big hat—"

"Oh yeah." Matthew nodded. "In fact, I think she gave me her number too, though there were so many other ones that I can't remember..." He made a show of digging through the small pile of paper shreds in his pocket.

Dameon cursed and told him exactly where he could put those offers as they got up from the table to return to the bus. Matthew laughed and taunted him all the way back, but he let him go when he caught sight of Amber helping load boxes of merchandise underneath the bus.

"Looks like you found a place to belong," he said, going over to her.

“I offer willingly,” he said, rising and taking the plate from her, “Just know that you might be judged negatively for taking it.”

Her amber-colored eyes were warm as she smiled at him. “Don’t let people’s perceptions define you,” she said, “Otherwise, you begin to live a lie.”

His room was quiet.

Matthew stood at his window for a long time, moonlight washing his face in a ghostly glow and making his blue eyes shine a hollow silver. He had retired to his room two hours ago, but the covers on his bed lay untouched. Thoughts were sprinting across his mind too fast for him to catch them, many of them concerning Amber.

Usually his thoughts wouldn't be so caught up in someone like her, but she kept coming back to invade them. He honestly didn't want to think of her; she wasn't worth it. She would be gone by tomorrow, most likely, either to a hospital or to wherever her faulty memory would take her.

Amber had agreed to take his offer of the guest room, and he couldn't remember the last time a woman had stayed at his house without sleeping with him. It gave Amber a whole new dimension, at least to him. Obviously he knew there was more to women than that aspect, but he had never cared until the opportunity presented itself in Amber. Now he felt a desire to learn more about her that he didn't want to think about, because it threatened to damage the simple method he was using to live his life. No drama. No painful relationships. No challenges. Only success, passion, and comfort.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to know who she was past the surface, but he did know that she would never want to know *him* in that way. Not if she knew what that meant knowing.

Friend.

Why did that word keep sneaking into his thoughts? He almost felt like someone were speaking it to him, suggesting it, prompting something. What did a “friend” have to do with anything? Did it even refer to a specific friend? He had many friends, but none of them warranted consideration in the middle of the night.

Maybe he was dwelling too much on Luke. They had been friends since middle school, but recently their friendship had been a little turbulent due to Matthew’s increasingly hedonistic approach to life. Luke had always been the tame one, the steady one, the *boring* one. He had a boring, steady relationship with his wife; a boring, steady temper; a boring, steady personality. Luke never took risks or lived on the edge. Matthew frequently asked him how he could stand it, always being as predictable as a rock, and Luke mostly just answered with that infuriatingly calm smile of his and a shrug.

Matthew stepped away from the window and flopped onto his bed, not even bothering to pull back the covers. Every speck and line on the ceiling directly above him was familiar with painful clarity from the amount of times he had stared at it when unable to sleep. With his eyes, he traced a tiny crack in the plaster from one side of his vision to the other. He didn’t want to think about Luke right now, but he didn’t want to think about Amber, either.

Suppressing a groan, he rolled over and buried his head in his pillow. Why did sleep so gleefully elude him?

Sea spray tickled Amber's face as she dangled her bare feet over the water thirty feet below. From her position on the wall of Matthew's back deck, the ocean filled her vision and the horizon divided the world in half. The sky was still a dark blue where it met the waves, but above her it was already softened to a light turquoise by the rising sun.

The wooden wall was rough beneath her fingers and scratched against her pants. She had come outside right after she had woken up, confused by fragmented dreams that were more sound than image. The breeze helped clear them away, allowing her to assemble her thoughts in a more coherent order.

She didn't even know where to start when thinking about her state of mind. Every thought she had, every idea, seemed shaky and questionable, only because she was doubtful of their validity. She had no proof she was intelligent, or even sane; her very thoughts couldn't be trusted.

"Okay, God, I don't get what's going on here," she said out loud. There was something therapeutic in praying out loud, even though she knew he could hear her regardless of how she said it. She pushed a piece of hair out of her face and tried once again to remember something, *anything*. But nothing came to fill her mind. Just the noise of the waves and the smell of salt and sand.

"I know there's a reason that I lost my memory, and that I've been forced into this somewhat awkward situation, staying with someone like Matt—" she glanced back at the house before continuing, "but I don't get what it is. I don't remember *anything*, God. I'm completely helpless. What am I even doing here?"

She fell silent, letting the wind carry her words away. As she sat there, the sun breached the top of the house and illuminated the top of the wall. Two seagulls flapped noisily across the water, calling to each other.

Her gaze returned to the ocean, its waves rolling like foothills before a mountain, and her thoughts turned once again to her predicament. "Are answers too much to ask for?" she whispered.

"I hope you're not thinking of jumping."

Amber almost lost her balance at Matthew's unexpected voice coming from the doorway behind her. Gingerly, she shifted her upper body so she could see him. He was leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, still dressed in what he had slept in.

"I was just thinking," she said.

"About jumping?" he said with a grin.

"About my weird life," she said, "And how I'm dependent in everything."

Dependent in everything. That phrase lingered in her head.

"I was the one that offered for you to stay here," he pointed out.

"It's not just that. It's everything. It's—"

"I'm not exactly struggling to get by," he said wryly, "And I know you don't have much of a choice about depending on people. So come inside and get some breakfast."

After a moment of hesitation, Amber slid from the wall and joined Matthew. "Do you ever think I'm just acting mental so that I get to mooch off of you?" she asked.

"With a face like yours?" he said, shutting the door behind her, "Never." He headed to the toaster and dropped some bread into it. "By the way, in your room, there's a drawer in the dresser that's filled with random girl clothes. You can raid it as much as you like."

"Girl clothes?" she repeated.

"Girls stay the night all the time and sometimes they forget stuff. I usually never see them again, so I just throw it in that drawer."

Matthew was too busy fixing some bacon to notice Amber's repulsed expression. "Oh, right," she said, hoping he wouldn't elaborate. She fingered her blouse, realizing she hadn't thought about how she was going to fulfill her personal needs, like clothes, a toothbrush, and the like. It was probably about time for her little "vacation" to end. She needed to go back to her life, to the real world. But that required responsibility, and she wasn't sure she wanted to regain that burden quite yet. A little longer with Matthew wouldn't hurt, right? After all, how often did anyone get to see what the life of a celebrity was like from behind the scenes?

"So you have a concert today, right?" Amber asked over breakfast.

"First of the tour," he said.

"Are you nervous?"

He shrugged.

Amber chased a crust of toast around her plate with her finger, unable to look Matthew in the eye as she asked the next question, "What's going to happen to me?"

When she mustered the courage to look at him, he was studying her with what he hoped was an unreadable expression. "I told Sonata I would have you gone by today," he said.

"Right," she said resignedly. Her expression was carefully neutral, but he could almost feel her contained desperation. What was he supposed to do? Freeflight was leaving town tomorrow, and she couldn't stay. Why had it been him who had found her? Why couldn't she have been someone else's burden?

But even though he was reluctant to admit it, he *did* feel a strange connection with her unlike anything he could explain. It wasn't exactly mystical, or unsettling; it felt natural and solid, but without a source or foundation. Surely he had met her before. Somewhere.

He raised a hand to his head and blinked, shaking off the feelings. *No complications*, he reminded himself, *I'm not a babysitter. I have my own life to live.*

"I guess I should go, then," Amber said, standing up and carrying her plate to the sink, "I'll need to find a place to stay by tonight."

"Now wait a second, how much of a jerk do you think I am?" he said, then paused, "Wait, don't answer that. But seriously, you really think I'm going to toss you out just like that?"

“Well, there’s not much else you can do for me that you haven’t already done,” she said with a serene smile she probably wasn’t feeling within, “Thanks for everything.”

“I’ll at least drive you into town,” he said, “unless you really want to hitchhike there with creepy old guys.”

She laughed. “Fair enough.”

The doorbell rang, startling both of them. Matthew checked the peephole before opening the door, revealing an aged man in vacation clothes.

“Can I help you?” Matthew said.

“I found this on the beach and thought maybe it was yours,” the man said, indicating a yellow suitcase at his feet.

“Why would you think that?”

“You’re the closest house,” the man shrugged.

“What’s in it?”

“Honestly, I didn’t look.”

“Why not?” Before the old man could stop him, Matthew unzipped it and threw it open, “These are girls’ clothes, so of course they’re not mine, you idiot. If you would’ve checked before running off with it, you wouldn’t have to bother me.”

“Now look here, son—” the man began indignantly, but was interrupted by Amber.

“Those are mine,” she said, looking at the open suitcase with something close to awe.

“And how would you know that?” Matthew turned his scorn onto her.

She ignored him, pushing past him and closing the suitcase. “Thank you so much for finding it,” she said to the man. He nodded to her, still eyeing Matthew with distaste, and left.

After Matthew closed the door, he rounded on her. “What was that?”

“This is mine,” Amber said, now rifling through the contents, “I don’t remember it, but I just...know.”

“That’s complete crap.”

She scowled at him. “I don’t care whether or not you believe me, but it’s true.”

“I really don’t care if you jack some random chick’s stuff. Just don’t pretend you’re not completely lost. It makes you look desperate.”

“I’m not making it up.”

“There’s no way that’s yours.”

She held up an ID tag attached to a toiletries bag that said “Amber” in neat lettering.

“Okay, maybe it’s yours. But why would it just turn up on the beach?”

“Maybe I had it with me when I lost my memory and we just didn’t notice it nearby.”

Matthew bit his lip as he watched her put everything back and latch the case. Having her clothes suddenly show up was unsettling, and threw off his sense of control over her fate. After all, he was all she had, and had the choice of whether or not to keep her around.

But why did it even matter? She would be out of his life in a day at the most.

“Come on, Amber, you’ve got nothing else to do!”

Matthew couldn't comprehend this woman. He was practically begging her to come with him to a concert he was headlining, to a concert where he was the main attraction, where thousands of people would be screaming his name, and she would be there beside him. How could she even consider declining such an offer, especially in her position? It had taken a ridiculous amount of effort to even keep her around his long.

They were in his car on the way to the concert hall, and Matthew had half a mind not to stop no matter what she wanted. He would make her understand how much she was being offered.

She took a deep breath. "If it really means that much to you, I'll go."

"Good."

"I have a question though."

He waited expectantly.

"Why do you want me there so badly?"

If she was fishing for some kind of statement of affection from him, she was going to be sorely disappointed. "You need some fun."

"What I need is my memory," she muttered.

"Fun is important too."

"See, I think it has nothing to do with me. You want to display your power and fame, show me how awesome you are, that sort of thing."

"*What?*"

"You hate it that I don't really care, don't you? Everything that measures your self-worth means nothing to me and it scares you."

"Is this the repayment I get for taking care of you?" Matthew shook his head and swore.

"You said you didn't like me 'pretending' that I might have a chance at a normal life again, but you're the one acting like you care about me at all."

He moved his mouth, but no words offered themselves up to be spoken. Cursing again, he buried his anger and concentrated on the road. Her gall was beginning to grate on him - she needed to learn to keep her mouth shut. All women needed to; they tended to uncomfortably complicate things.

"Snare."

Dameon smacked his snare drum with one unforgiving blow after another. The sound rattled Amber's thoughts even though she was backstage, and she breathed a sigh of relief when the man behind the soundboard called for the next mic to be checked.

"Still around, huh?" Luke said companionably, materializing from the semidarkness.

"Yeah, mostly bec—" she flinched as Dameon began pounding a cymbal, and waited for him to stop before she tried again, "Mostly because Matt was going to have an aneurism if I didn't."

"He's like that," Luke agreed, "Always trying to impress."

"He doesn't even need to try that hard."

“Apparently he had to with you.”

“Because fame is worth nothing to an amnesiac,” Amber mumbled.

“Sorry, what?” Luke said over the bass drum Dameon was now checking.

“Nothing,” she said, “Hey, is there any way to get him to stop doing that?” she gestured to the drummer.

“He’s sound checking. He’ll be done in a minute,” Luke said, and leaned closer, “Between you and me, I think he’s been playing drums for too long. I’m pretty sure the noise has scrambled his brain over the years.”

“No, he’s just stupid,” Jordan said loudly, appearing beside them with his bass in hand. He ducked the drumstick that came hurtling at his head as well as the swipe from Dameon as he went to retrieve it.

“Jordan, you’re up,” the sound technician said.

Dameon joined Luke and Amber, twirling the drumstick that had been his weapon of choice. “I swear I’m not as stupid as they make me sound,” he said to Amber, “I mean, I graduated *high school*.”

He strode away, whistling, still twirling the drumstick. “How did that happen?” Amber whispered to Luke.

The guitarist tapped his temple and grinned. “Maybe his yolk was still intact then.”

At that moment, Sonata burst out of the back hallway, closely followed by Matthew.

“It’s the last night before we go on tour for a month!” she whined.

“But I’m throwing a party tonight, and I’m planning to meet some new girls, if you know what I mean—”

“First, you blow me off for that scrawny brat last night, and now you’re replacing me with whores!”

“They’re not—no, you know what I mean. I mean, you’re welcome to join—”

“You know that’s not my style,” she snapped, then noticed Amber, “Why is she still here?”

“Sonata—” Matthew began.

“Why is she still here?” she repeated in a voice that could cut stone, “You promised you would get rid of her, not bring her to the show! I want her out!”

“Sonata, she’s doing no harm,” Luke said gently.

“You, shut up,” she told him, and turned to Amber, “And you, stop meddling. Get out before I get security.”

“Seriously? You never care this much about me bringing girls to our gigs. Why get so mad now?” Matthew groaned.

“I just don’t like her, okay?”

With an ease born from much practice, Matthew grabbed her arms and pulled her to him. He planted a kiss on her lips. “You need to relax,” he said smoothly, now brushing a lock of hair from her face, “You’re so stressed out that you’re being unreasonable.”

Of course, she knew why. She was here for a reason.

“Hey Amber, check that guy out,” Dave said.

She opened her eyes and looked where he was pointing. A man was standing a few yards away, gazing into the entrance of the amphitheater. Even from a distance, his presence was quietly imposing; he was tall and well-built, with dark curly hair, a straight nose, and gray eyes the color of ice. His stance conveyed power but also gentleness, somehow both fierce and casual at the same time. As Amber looked, his eyes flicked to hers, and a chill stuttered across her skin. It wasn’t necessarily a negative feeling, but it was like nothing she had felt before.

The ghost of a smile softened the steel of his eyes, and he nodded to her slightly before going inside. Amber felt like she had just touched something electrified.

“Who *was* that?” she breathed.

“Dunno, but he was weird. Did you see those eyes?” Dave shuddered, “They looked so...”

“Knowing,” Amber finished. *As if he knew exactly who I was.*

Part of Amber wanted to search for the strange gray-eyed man in the audience as Freeflight got ready to play, but there were thousands of people in the amphitheater. All of the seats under the roof were filled, so she found a place on the grassy hill to sit. The anticipation of the audience was contagious; out here among the fans, Matthew seemed more like an inaccessible celebrity to her than someone she knew.

No one paid her any attention, one insignificant young woman in the crowd of many. She stretched out on the grass and let her eyes wander, watching friends and groups of people interact. One teenager with long blonde hair held hands with his heavily-pierced girlfriend, occasionally looking at her as if she were an angel. Three girls in bikinis and long hair surveyed available seats behind their large sunglasses, keeping their designer bags close. A couple in their late twenties bickered about something insubstantial as they sat a few feet in front of Amber. A few minutes later, their lips were otherwise occupied in a prolonged kiss.

Chuckling silently to herself, she moved a short distance to her left so she could see the stage. She could hardly see it over the audience’s heads, and the people on it were smaller than her finger. But she wasn’t too worried about *seeing* Freeflight – she saw more than enough of them already.

Fifteen minutes later, the crowd collectively surged to their feet like a single noisy beast as the four members of Freeflight materialized from behind their equipment. Without any ceremony, they approached their instruments, readied them, and with a brief drum introduction, they launched into their first song.

As Freeflight gradually ate through their set, Amber was unimpressed with the music itself. Yes, it was catchy, melodic, lively, and edgy, acutely personifying Matthew, in a way, but there was nothing special about it. No lyrics (from what Amber could understand – many of the words were unintelligible at her distance) or melody stuck out to her. Matthew, Luke, Dameon, and Jordan were all very skilled at what they did, but it lacked something. But, Amber

“If you had my job, you’d be stressed out too,” she protested, but some of the fight had gone out of her. Matthew kissed her again, and the rest of the tension left her shoulders.

“We have plenty of time to make it up,” he cajoled, “Especially after the tour, yeah?”

Sonata slithered out of his arms. “Maybe,” she said, “If I haven’t killed you by then.”

With one last loaded look at Matthew, she stalked off, and everything was quiet except for Jordan’s strumming as he finished his sound check.

“So...” Amber finally said, “does this mean I can stay?”

Two other bands had opened for Freeflight and were currently sprawled across every available surface in the lounge. Not wishing to encounter any of them, Amber explored the hallways of the building until she reached the lobby. The sheer amount of people she had glimpsed packed into the auditorium amazed her; until she had seen the crowd, she hadn’t fully realized just how popular Matthew’s band was.

God, what have you gotten me into? she asked as she withdrew her head from the doors. The stage had been so far away that she couldn’t make out any of the band members’ faces, so she abandoned any fledgling idea she had to watch from the back.

The plush lobby was quiet save for the muffled thunder of Freeflight’s music leaking through the walls. Occasionally, one of the doors to the auditorium would open, vomiting a sound byte of music into the room as a person visited the restroom, or as a couple left early, whispering and giggling to the doors that led outside. Ticket stubs and discarded flyers shifted like leaves across the carpet, moved by the changing air pressure at each movement of a door.

Amber quickly learned that there wasn’t much to see in the lobby besides a few event posters and plaques, but she had had enough of Freeflight and their music already. The rough chords and gritty lyrics didn’t appeal to her, especially when they seemed decidedly insincere. The stories in those songs were nothing she hadn’t already heard from Matthew. And gauging from the paltry amount of emotional diversity in his lyrics, he led a painfully simple life.

She drifted towards the far end of the lobby, where the bands’ merchandise tables were set up, manned by an assortment of people: a gum-chewing, short-haired woman, a man with more piercings than a tribal chief, and behind Freeflight’s table, a long-haired man with a narrow face. He stared at her as she looked over Freeflight’s wares.

“Gotta special deal – Freeflight’s full album set for thirty-five dollars, all four CDs,” he said, gesturing to the pile at the edge of the table.

Amber picked up one of the CDs entitled “Falling.”

“That was their first one,” the man told her, “Straight outta high school, they were. The title song there’s what made them famous.”

The cover of the album had a picture of the four band members in sunglasses. Luke and two men that had since been replaced by Jordan and Dameon were looking in different directions. Matthew was looking straight into the camera, teeth flashing in a charming smile, standing in the front as if he owned the world. When she read the song titles on the back, one caught her eye.

“Amnesia,” she murmured, “Ironic.”

“He refuses to play that song in concerts,” the man said.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “You’d have to ask him. All I know is, fans request it all the time but he doesn’t do it. Best song on the album, if you ask me. Besides ‘Falling,’ of course.”

She made a mental note to ask Matthew about it later. She took a cursory glance of the other items—posters, shirts, pins, bumper stickers, wristbands—before turning her attention to the man. “So do you do anything else for Freeflight besides be their merch guy?”

“What? Oh, uh, yeah. I’m also their driver, usually. For their bus, when they tour,” he scratched his beard, “I’m actually a friend of the guitar player.”

“Luke?”

“Yeah, we went to grade school together, back in the day. Lost my job couple years back, Luke offered to let me help ‘em out, so...yeah.”

“Luke seems like a nice guy,” Amber said, smiling as she fingered a Freeflight wristband, “Always calm, too.”

“Yeah, it’d take a lot to get him riled up,” the man scratched his beard again, “Don’t know why he’s still running with these guys, either. I mean, he and Matt were buds in high school; but he just doesn’t fit in with the rest of the band anymore. Too nice.” He grinned. “So how long you’ve been a fan?”

“I wouldn’t really call myself a fan...”

“Oh?” he said in surprise, “You come to see another band?”

“I’m more of a...friend, I guess. Of Matt’s.”

The now-familiar knowing look washed over his face. “Oh—“

“Not like that,” she said wearily, “Just a friend,” she picked up another CD and examined it, “Matt seems to write a lot of songs about the same thing, doesn’t he?”

“There’s only so much you can write a song about,” the man said blandly.

“Yeah, but if you look at these songs, you would think that all he does is mess around with women and get annoyed at stupid things.”

“I’m pretty sure that *is* all he does.”

“There must be more to his life than that, so why doesn’t he write about it?”

“Probably just doesn’t want to. Why don’t you just ask him. You said you were his friend.”

“I don’t think he would appreciate that,” she said, putting down the CD. “He hates getting personal.”

Sonata startled both of them by bursting out of a door that led to the hallways backstage. “Dave, how much have you sold?”

Once again, he scratched his beard. “Oh, um, let’s see...” he fumbled with the money box and sorted through the money. Sonata scowled at the amount he stammered to her.

“That’s pathetic. You need to start pushing things on people. And discouraging loiterers,” she glared at Amber before leaving. She seemed to take the air in the room with her.

“Sorry, I should probably go,” Amber said, “It was nice meeting you.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, still flustered, “Right, uh, you too.”

A roar of cheering erupted from the auditorium, signifying the end of Freeflight’s set. To escape the mass of people that were about to descend on the lobby, Amber followed Sonata’s path through the inner hallway to the backstage area. She found the band in the lounge, still energized from the audience even though they all looked like they had just leapt out of a shower. The men from the other bands were gone, probably to intercept audience members at their tables in the lobby. Matthew was standing apart from the other three, gulping down water from a bottle. When he saw her, he gestured for her to join him.

“So I’m guessing the concert went well,” she said, grabbing another water bottle from a table and handing it to him.

“Yeah,” he agreed, but his expression lacked candor. “You ready to go?”

“You’re not going to stay and interact with your fans?”

“I’m not feeling it tonight,” he said, tossing the water bottle at Dameon and scoring a hit on his calf.

“What the hell was that for?” Dameon whirled around.

“For messing up the first song.”

“That was Jordan’s fault, he threw me off!”

“I played perfectly,” Jordan interjected.

“I’m pretty sure no one noticed,” Luke said, “It’s not a big deal.”

Matthew pushed the clumps of sodden hair back from his forehead with a weary hand. “I’ll see you guys on Monday.”

“We still have to go out there for autographs,” Jordan told him, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m not.”

“Dude, all the girls stay for you,” Dameon said, “Not being there is like...like telling them to swim without water!”

“Very poetic, Dameon.” Jordan rolled his eyes.

The drummer jumped up. “You wanna go, dude? Arm wrestling tournament, *now*.” Jordan pushed him away.

“Why aren’t you staying?” Luke asked over Dameon, genuine concern creasing his brow.

“I’m fine,” Matthew said, answering the implication Luke was no doubt thinking. “I’m just ready to go home. I’ve had enough screaming girls for the night.”

“Usually you can’t get enough of—” Dameon began.

“Seriously, man, don’t start,” Luke said.

“Sonata’s not going to be happy,” Jordan said.

“Who cares? She’ll get over it. One night without autographs isn’t going to kill our popularity.” Matthew ignored all other protests and pleas and took his keys from an alcove next to the door, leaving without another word. Amber followed, anxious to question him.

Matthew’s hand was shaking slightly as he opened the door of his car, but Amber waited for him to make the first move. They were halfway home before he spoke.

“The crowd was great tonight.”

“So why didn’t you stay?”

He cracked a smile. “You get right to the point, don’t you?”

“I’m just wondering what’s going on in that weird head of yours. I figured meeting hot girls who are in love with you would be one of your favorite things to do.”

“It is.”

“Which brings me back to my question.”

“Honestly,” he said, “I don’t know. I’m in a weird funk right now.”

“Weird funk?”

He took a deep breath and licked his lips, trying to gather his words. “The whole time I was up there, I was really distracted.”

“By what?”

“I don’t know, but I was on auto-pilot. I just kept thinking about random things.”

“But that doesn’t explain why you suddenly turned anti-social.”

He said nothing for a minute, and Amber watched his features for any sign of what he was feeling. Headlights brushed across him in intervals, periodically illuminating the tension in his face.

“I was thinking about you,” he said finally.

“Oh, come on,” she said. *That is so cliché.* “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I mean, I couldn’t stop thinking about how you don’t care about anything I do.

Like, since you don’t have your memory, you don’t really know about Freeflight, or how big a deal we are. You saw it back there, but it’s still so foreign to you. You don’t have a stake in anything we do. Maybe you did before your amnesia, but even that doesn’t matter. I know some people don’t care for me or my music or whatever, but it’s never bugged me like this. I guess because they *chose* not to care.”

“I’m just one person,” Amber pointed out, “The fact that I don’t fully appreciate your work doesn’t change the fact that you have millions of fans.”

“I know. But...everything I am can be erased so easily. All it takes is for someone to not know who I am, and everything I’ve done is worthless. I need recognition for my music to keep going, and that can be taken away so abruptly. Then I’m nothing. I’m just an attractive womanizer who can play guitar.”

“And that scares you,” Amber said quietly, reading in his eyes what he wouldn’t say.

“Usually, what I have is enough. But sometimes...” a curious darkness spread over his face, “...sometimes I wonder.”

Matthew forced his eyes open, inhaling suddenly as he reacquainted himself with reality. Struggling out of his cocoon of sheets, he let cool air bathe his skin as he tried to still the roiling sea of his mind. His shoulders ached, a waking reminder of his recent nightmare, as if he would forget it otherwise; he rolled his neck, but the phantom pain persisted. It would wear off in a few hours, once he occupied his mind with something else.

After a few minutes of brooding, he stumbled out of bed, pushed his hair out of his face, and plodded to the kitchen. On the way, he took a detour and paused at Amber's room. Relief touched him when he saw her still sleeping, buried in a nest of covers, one pale hand hanging over the edge of the bed. She kept wanting to leave, and though Matthew would never admit it to anyone, he liked having her around. She offered a pleasant counterbalance to his impulsive and sometimes unsteady moods. As long as her memory was what it was, there was no reason that she shouldn't stay with him.

She shifted, and he quickly withdrew, heading to the kitchen where he fixed himself a bowl of cereal and settled down to watch television. The pain in his shoulders eased, so that by the time Amber appeared, he was feeling rather cheerful. They didn't leave for their tour until tomorrow, which meant he had a whole day to do whatever he wanted.

"Good morning," Amber yawned, "Sleep well?"

Matthew considered lying, but changed his mind at the last moment. "Not really."

"Why?" she joined him on the couch, crossing her legs and cocking her head at him.

He muted the television and blew out a reluctant sigh. "I've been having this dream—"

"Nightmare?"

"Yeah, nightmare, for a few weeks now, and it's not a big deal, but it messes with me, you know?"

"What's it about?"

Matthew reflexively massaged the back of his neck. "A load on my back that is painful to carry."

"Do you think it could mean something?"

"It's just a stupid dream," he muttered, "I think I'm just stressed or something."

"Stressed about what?"

"I don't even *know*," he looked away from her, unwilling to meet her eyes, "My life is supposed to be perfect. It *is* perfect. So why does this nightmare make me feel so. . . " he shook his head and switched subjects, "Let's do something fun today."

"Avoiding the problem never helps."

"It's not a problem!" he groaned, regretting ever bringing it up, "Why can't you just be like normal women and simply enjoy the fact that you're with me?"

"Okay, this whole arrogant thing needs to stop," Amber said frankly, "Sorry I'm not completely enamored with you, but you need to get over yourself."

"Are you gay?"

"*What?*" she burst out laughing, "No! Just because I haven't made out with you yet doesn't mean I'm gay."

"Yet? So you're planning to?" he smirked.

"You're ridiculous," she said with a smile, shoving him.

He fended her off easily. "So do you even think I'm hot?"

She colored slightly and pressed her lips together.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "So you *are* attracted to me! I knew it!"

“There’s a big difference between being attracted to someone physically and being attracted to their...other aspects,” Amber said, face burning at his comment.

“Okay, so I’m rich and I can sing. So what’s your problem? Doesn’t that count for something?”

“You’re also cocky, aimless, and immoral,” she said none too gently, “Not really my type.”

“You can’t remember anything—you don’t have a type!” Matthew retorted.

She regarded him for a moment in a way that made him uncomfortable, like she was examining him, appraising him. Then she dropped her eyes. “I’m sorry if I insulted you.”

Thrown off balance by her sudden apology, he blinked. “Oh, well, I’ve been called worse. All those things are probably true, anyway.”

“Don’t you ever get tired of getting the exact same things from people?”

“I like what I get.”

“But they’re all the same.”

He grinned. “I have to admit, you throw me off.”

“Good, it’s healthy for you,” she said.

They sat in silence for a while, Amber drawing patterns on the fabric of the couch and Matthew watching the soundless images on the television. He thought about turning the sound back on, but the silence felt ripe and poignant, delicate, personal.

“You watched the concert, right?” he asked.

Her finger jerked to a stop on the upholstery; had he interrupted something in her mind?

“I was actually backstage or in the lobby most of the time,” she said.

“You didn’t even watch?” he sagged against the cushions, “Seriously?”

“I kind of heard it through the walls,” she said sheepishly.

“You go to a concert with the band’s lead singer, and you don’t even watch it,” he shook his head.

“I talked to Dave.”

“Who?”

“Your merch-guy-slash-bus-driver?”

“Oh, right. So you talked to merch guy instead of watching the concert.”

“So?”

“So why?”

“He had some interesting things to say.”

“Like what?”

“You never play the song ‘Amnesia.’”

“It’s a bad song.”

“Your fans don’t seem to think so.”

“Well *I* think so.”

“What’s so bad about it?”

“Everything.”

“Come on—”

“Its lyrics are crap. I wrote it when I was like seventeen.”

“Let me read them.”

“No!”

“Please?”

“You’re so obnoxious!” he leaned over and fetched his acoustic guitar that was leaning against the back of the couch, “Here, I’ll play it for you. Will that make you happy?”

“You don’t have to—”

“No, you asked for it.”

She laughed good-naturedly. “Fine.”

Matthew plucked a few strings, adjusted their tuning, and played them again. He could still remember the words resonating in the place in his mind where they first came from. That area was rarely accessed now because it was located too close to the emotions he never showed, the ones he pretended weren’t there. That was why this song was dangerous; he had no reason for wanting to feel that again, or to remember its source.

He glanced at Amber. She was looking at his fingers, not at his face. Before he could change his mind, he started singing.

“You hide your face from me / Shame waits, and I can’t breathe / What have I done to your love / Defaced it, erased it, replaced it / I turned away from you / And reckless, I review / The options I have left / And run, run, I run / Into the depths...I never needed you / But your gaze comes back to haunt me / So I escape into distraction / And force myself to forget / Like amnesia, I forget / I forget you were my friend.”

Matthew stopped singing and let his hands drop from the strings, feeling a strange prompting in his chest, though what it was prompting, he couldn’t understand. The song evoked emotions that he had buried under years of hedonistic living, and he was reminded more than ever of why he didn’t sing it.

“What are you so afraid of in that song?” Amber asked, reading his face with much more accuracy than he felt comfortable with.

“Like I said, it’s just crappy,” he said half-heartedly.

“Who was it written to?”

“None of your business.”

“But—”

“None of your business!”

She crossed her arms. “Fine.”

Muscles that he hadn’t realized that were tense relaxed. “Good. Now how about you eat breakfast and then I show you what Kalupto Point has to offer?”

Kalupto Point was a relatively small but thriving coastal town. Overshadowed by its neighbor of Los Angeles, it offered a classy alternative to those who still wanted to live in a luxurious beachfront home but escape the crowds, smog, and traffic of Los Angeles itself. While

it drew a modest number of tourists year-round, its economy flourished through high-end stores and a chic downtown area that catered to the wealthy residents who lived there, as well as the visitors that the concert hall attracted with its various high-profile performers.

Mid-afternoon found Amber and Matthew sitting on the patio of a ritzy coffee shop downtown. The umbrella shading them creaked in the breeze, and every now and then, an expensive car would flash by, engine revving arrogantly.

The two of them hadn't talked much except for the times when Matthew pointed out a popular place or shared a factoid about the town. They lingered over their drinks in comfortable silence; Amber alternated between observing the people patronizing the stores across the street and trying to guess Matthew's thoughts from his face and body language.

He made such an effort to appear carefree. He filled the entire chair, his limbs hanging every which way like a broken action figure, the top buttons of his shirt hanging open, his blonde hair combed only by the wind. The only parts of him that weren't relaxed were his eyes; something dark and unsettled lurked behind those sky-colored irises. Those eyes might get him women, but they also betrayed him.

"Thanks for the coffee," Amber said, but he didn't acknowledge her, deeply lost in whatever he was thinking about as he stared at a traffic light changing red to green, green to red, red to green.

A sudden fluttering near the curb hooked her attention as a cluster of pigeons rearranged themselves around the corpse of a muffin left on the ground. She watched them idly as Matthew stretched and took a gulp of his latte. "You know," he said, "it's nice being able to hang out with a girl and still be able to hear myself think."

"You need to find yourself some better female friends."

"One's good enough," he said, smiling at her.

"I suggest one with a memory," she said, smothering the warm feeling that had sparked at his words. It was just his charm talking.

"So when you get yours back, you'll be perfect!"

"I'm starting to think that will never happen," she looked down at the foam crowning her cappuccino. She sent another silent question to God: *Why am I still here? You still haven't really shown me what to do.*

"Good news is, you'll have an excuse for memory loss tomorrow," Matthew said, crossing his hands behind his head in a jaunty manner.

"Um, how?"

"I'm throwing a party tonight, and I can guarantee you there'll be plenty of booze to help you forget *anything*."

"Are you serious?"

"Hell yeah."

Amber sighed. "I'm not really in the mood to party—"

"That's the point of alcohol."

"Matt, I'm not going to get *drunk* at your party!"

“Why not?”

“I may not have many wits left, but I’m determined to keep them, especially considering the kind of friends you have...”

“Suit yourself,” he said with a trace of disappointment, “You’re gonna miss out. I throw a pretty freakin’ awesome party.”

“Well I’ll be there anyway. I don’t really have a choice,” Amber said glumly.

“Who knows, maybe you’ll end up letting loose and *enjoying* yourself, God forbid!”

“Ha ha,” she said without expression.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

Amber looked up to see a tall, refined woman with caramel-colored hair in ringlets and a coy smile. Her dress showed more skin than fabric. Amber’s eyes darted to Matthew, whose face immediately broke into one of his disarming smiles. An emotion flickered across his face so briefly that she could almost convince herself that she had imagined it. Was it annoyance? Surprise? Pleasure?

“Jenna, it’s been a while,” he said, standing up and embracing her. She kissed him on the cheek.

“What have you been up to?” her full-lipped smile bordered on patronizing.

Matthew leaned against the back of his chair, the picture of total ease. “The usual, I guess.”

She seemed to notice Amber for the first time, and her eyes raked over her. “Is this the sort of girl you’re into now? Matty, I’m so disappointed,” she gave a disdainful toss of her hair in Amber’s direction, dismissing her from her attention, “I know you can do better. Reminds me of my recent boyfriend: sure, he starred in three movies last year, but he was boring. Not enough wit. He wasn’t half as exciting as you were.”

Matthew gave a lopsided smile. “I would think not.”

Amber was struck by the primitive lust in Jenna’s eyes as she let them slide over the singer. “You haven’t changed a bit,” the woman said.

“Are you in town for a while?” Matthew asked.

“I’m just here to pick up a gown from *Clara’s*, but if there’s a reason I should stay...” she raised her eyebrows.

“I’m having a party at my place tonight, and you’re certainly invited.”

“I might stop by,” she said, “But the quality of your company seems to be slipping,” she eyed Amber again.

Why did every woman Matthew knew seem to hate her? Amber held her tongue, knowing that nothing she could say would alter Jenna’s perception of her, and appealed silently to Matthew, but he was still fixed on Jenna.

“You won’t be disappointed,” he said, his eyes glinting.

“See you later then,” she kissed the air in his direction and left. Matthew watched her retreating figure so intently that Amber leaned across the table and smacked his head.

“What? She’s hot,” he said, rubbing his head and finally pulling his eyes away, “I should’ve dated her longer.”

“Do you always date jerks?” she crossed her arms, her gaze fierce.

“They’re just a lot different than you.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s okay for them to treat me like I’m trash.”

“You’re just jealous you’re not my type.”

“I’m *glad* I’m not your type.”

“Whatever,” Matthew drained his cup and plunked it down with a satisfied sigh, “Come on, we need to get back so I can set up for the party.”

Amber took a deep breath. “Right. Party. Can’t wait.”

Eight o’clock found Amber in Matthew’s living room, scanning the area for the last time before guests arrived. A maid had come to clean the house earlier in the afternoon, so Matthew only had to move a few things to prepare for the party, like his guitar on the couch and his disorganized sheets of lyrics. Since she could think of nothing to do on her own for several hours, she had decided to stay, but she was planning to shut herself in her room soon after the first guests arrived. She assumed being unable to remember who she would make typical party conversation awkward.

Matthew was buzzing around the house excitedly, looking forward to a night of entertainment and diversion. Despite the relatively small size of his house, this wasn’t the first time he had hosted an event, and he had told Amber with measurable pride that his parties were always a success. He jumped at the door the moment he heard a knock and ushered in a handsome young couple. Thus the night began.

Two hours later, outside on the deck, Amber grasped the wall and let the wind brush past her face, gratefully inhaling the clear air after the stuffy air inside the house. The ocean was a mess of dark foam and darker water, lit only by the waxing moon and a few tentative stars. The rustling of its waves never ceased as they were thrown against the shore again and again, but she had to struggle to hear it over the sound of the multiple conversations taking place between groups of people around her. The deck was a popular place for the guests, lit with a low, golden light from lamps at its edges. Every now and then a sharp laugh would pierce of the sea of conversation, or a glass would tinkle as it connected with a ring or bracelet. She had avoided conversation for the most part, and as long as she didn’t make eye contact with anyone, they left her alone. A few people had asked Matthew, in a voice they thought she couldn’t hear, who she was, and he replied that she was a visiting friend. She had been afraid that they would ask more questions, but their curiosity had been sated, and they had poked no further.

She tensed as she felt heavy footsteps behind her and a man stopped at the rail a couple feet away, hopefully just enjoying the view. But after a moment, he turned his head slightly towards her and said, “I have not seen you here before. Have you known Matt very long?”

“Not really,” she said, “But we’re friends.”

“Hit it off well, I take it?”

“I guess.”

He chuckled softly. “There is a lot more to Matt than people think. You might think you know him, when in fact you know nothing at all.”

“I think I know more than most.”

“Why is that?”

Amber shrugged, unwilling to give him an answer. When she sneaked a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, she could see that he was tall and thin, dressed in a high-quality shirt and tailored pants. A neatly trimmed goatee shrouded his pointy chin.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Nathan Stevens,” he answered, managing to mask most of his surprise. At functions like these, it was assumed that everyone knew who everyone else was, “And you are?”

“Amber. Are you a musician like Matt?”

He laughed. “No, no, certainly not. I’m a music producer. I have produced Freeflight’s most recent two albums. My studio is in Los Angeles, and I’m patronized by many big-name artists.”

“Good for you,” she mumbled.

“What about you? What do you do? I do not believe I’m familiar with any of your work.”

“Oh, I don’t do anything.”

“How did you meet Matt, then?”

She was saved from answering by Matthew himself, who had come outside to mingle and had spotted them. He scowled when he saw Nathan.

“Whatever you’re offering her, she’s not interested,” he said, stepping in between her and Nathan.

Nathan’s eyes glittered in the dim light. “We were actually having a pleasant conversation before we were so rudely interrupted.”

“Stay away from her,” Matthew warned before turning towards Amber, “What were you thinking, talking with him?”

“What is wrong with you?” she said indignantly, “I was actually starting to enjoy myself!”

“Yeah, he’s a real charmer, that one,” Matthew said darkly, casting a look over his shoulder as Nathan moved away, “He’s not someone you should trust.”

“And why’s that?” she said, crossing her arms.

“Trust me, I just know.”

“Why should I trust *you*?”

“You shouldn’t, but for some reason you do, so just...stay away from him.”

And with that somewhat cryptic remark, he left her, borne away by the attentions of a friend, and she was left on her own for the rest of the night. Nathan didn’t return.

Amber woke up early the next morning and was almost afraid to leave the sanctuary of her room, but she ventured out through the hallway to the living room, wondering if anyone had stayed the night.

To her surprise, Matthew was in the kitchen, making pancakes.

"Hi," she said, pausing at the entrance to the kitchen.

"Hey," he returned, "There's coffee if you want it," he nodded towards the gurgling coffee maker.

"What's with the fancy breakfast?" she asked as she grabbed a mug and filled it with coffee.

"I thought it would be good to fix something for the, um, guest."

"Guest," she repeated.

"Yeah," he flipped a pancake busily and cursed as he grazed the hot griddle with one of his fingers.

Amber took a sip of coffee and made a face at its bitterness. "So am I not allowed to have any of this fancy breakfast?" she said teasingly, trying to break the slightly awkward mood.

"You never said you wanted breakfast," he snapped, slapping a couple finished pancakes on a plate with more force than was necessary.

Daunted, she automatically took another draught of coffee, ignoring its scalding heat. For a moment, there were only the sounds of bacon sizzling in a pan on the stove and the coffee pot hissing as it used the last of its hot water. Matthew flipped his last pancake, waited, transferred it to the serving plate, and sighed.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"It's alright," she said, stepping next to him, "What's wrong?"

His shoulders sagged, and he didn't meet her eyes. "Nothing."

She waited.

He took the bacon off of the stove and dumped the strips onto another plate. One of them fell to the floor, and he cursed again, kicking it away. Then he plunked the plate of bacon next to the cooling pancakes, got the butter from the fridge, pulled the syrup from his pantry, and then stood at the counter, staring at the food.

"Nothing," he repeated, mostly to himself. Then, almost defiantly, he looked at her and said, "I had a great night."

"Oh, you made breakfast!"

They both turned to see the young woman who had appeared from Matthew's bedroom. She had short hair that was still hanging in remnants of curls from the party, and bright, deceptively innocent brown eyes. She was wearing an old t-shirt that looked like it was Matthew's, and was obviously startled to see Amber. Her eyes darted between Amber and Matthew, who flashed one of his ready-made, charming smiles.

"Hey, Jazz," he said, "help yourself. Amber, this is Jasmine," his eyes begged Amber not to mention what she had just been talking about.

"Hi," Amber said as pleasantly as she could manage.

"Hi," Jasmine said stiffly before circumventing Amber and giving Matthew a peck on the lips.

"Did you sleep okay?" Matthew asked her as she sorted through the pancakes and chose one that she deemed good enough for her consumption.

"Mmhmm," she replied, now picking out a piece of bacon, "I liked the not-sleeping part better though," she smiled at him coyly like she and Matthew shared a wonderful secret, even though it was entirely obvious what she was talking about.

Matthew laughed, and the three of them commenced eating the most awkward meal that Amber had ever eaten. Jasmine kept casting her suspicious glances, and Amber did her best to pretend she didn't notice them. Matthew offered no assistance in starting conversation, and so they remained silent until he got up to clear away the dishes.

"Do you want me to drive you home or do you want to stay for a bit?" he asked Jasmine.

Alarmed, Amber gave him a pleading look, but he was unmoved. Jasmine, feeling like she had won some sort of victory, answered with a smug smile that she would love to stay if Matthew didn't mind. Thus Amber was subjected to four more hours of painful conversation, third-wheeling, and the constant sense that she was distinctly unwanted by Matthew's lady friend.

Finally, a girlfriend of hers came to pick her up for some shopping, and to Amber's immense relief, Matthew declined their offer to accompany them. The moment the door closed, she heaved a noisy sigh.

"Don't ever do that to me again," she said, "That was horrible."

"It wasn't that bad."

"You weren't the one having to watch you two make googly eyes at each other the whole time."

"She was cute."

She rolled her eyes. "Too cute to resist, huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he retorted, immediately defensive.

"You're the one who doesn't like how you live your life, and yet you keep doing it the same way."

He turned away with a huff, finding truth in her words but unwilling to admit it. "I know what I'm doing."

Amber let his words hang reprovingly in the air as she helped him clean up the remnants of their lunch. When she glanced at him, his brow was creased with thought, and she hoped he was thinking about what she had said.

"Are you sure about this?" Amber let go of her suitcase with one hand in order to tuck a disobedient lock of hair behind her ear. Her cheeks were flushed from pulling her suitcase out of Matthew's Audi, and she stared dubiously at the bus squatting like a hulking beast against the side of Kalupto Point's concert hall. The sun was already starting to sag above the western horizon, but *Freeflight's* first stop of the tour was only an hour away in Los Angeles.

“For the millionth time, *yes*,” Matthew took her suitcase from her and carried it along with his own. The yellowing sunlight struck Amber’s eyes as she looked at him, causing them to burn a fiery gold against his own cool blue ones.

“Sonata’s going to hate me even more,” she said plaintively.

“Who cares what she thinks. She can suck it.”

Amber’s eyebrows raised, a movement he didn’t miss. “What?” he added defensively.

“You and Sonata have a weird relationship. Do you even like her?”

“She has her moments,” he said, certain instances surfacing in his mind, “If she’s in manager mode, everyone hates her and she hates them back. But when she’s not all business, she can be quite a woman.”

They were almost to the bus now. The luggage hatch beneath the windows was open, a gaping mouth waiting for their bags. He focused on it, not on the memories he was reminded of but didn’t like. Amber had a knack for making him feel uncomfortable, and sometimes even he didn’t understand why he wanted to keep her around.

“Do you love her?” she asked.

He glanced at her in surprise. “Uh, I’ve never really thought about it, honestly. But I mean, is it really important one way or the other?”

Amber just gave him an indecipherable look and dropped the subject. Matthew shook his head and shoved their bags into the compartment. Hopefully she wouldn’t be so frank on the bus around the others.

She hung back as they boarded, her eyes roving around the tight but well-utilized interior of the bus. The stairs from the door opened directly into an open space where leather couches lined the walls of the bus. Beyond them were the kitchenette, refrigerator, and bathroom, along with a modest television mounted on the wall and various nooks and closets for storage space. Matthew smiled at her wide-eyed reaction.

“Nice, huh? This is only half of it – through that door are the beds and the back lounge,” he dropped his carry-on bag on the corner of the couch and sat down with a comfortable sigh. The others had already arrived; besides the other three band members, there was the sound technician, Michael Seacrest, and the driver, Dave Butler, who was also in charge of their merchandise, and whom Amber had already met. The space inside the bus was filled with chatter and movement as they set their things down, claimed bunks, got situated, and exchanged comments.

Matthew noticed Amber still standing at the front and motioned for her to sit down next to him. She did so reluctantly. “Does Sonata not ride on the bus with you?” she asked.

He laughed. “Are you kidding me? Can you imagine her staying on here? She drove ahead to L.A. to make sure things were going smoothly for our performance. She usually stays in hotels and crap.”

“I wish I could say that helped me feel better,” she said.

“Relax,” he said, “Stop worrying about nothing.”

Jordan frowned when he appeared from where the beds were and saw Amber sitting next to Matthew. "She was supposed to be gone days ago," he said to Matthew with a note of accusation.

Maybe I spoke too soon, Matthew thought. "She's coming with us."

"Taking her backstage is one thing, but you can't just bring her along on tour," Jordan protested.

"Why not? We have room and an extra bed. And she doesn't get in the way. Don't give me that look, Jordan."

"You're being stupid like usual."

"She's coming, and it's not up for discussion," Matthew said angrily, and held up a hand to prevent Amber from speaking, "Don't even think about it."

"I really appreciate you sticking up for me, but this is ridiculous—"

"You got somewhere better to go?"

"I'm not going to be the cause of tension—"

"It doesn't matter—"

"Will you let me finish?"

Matthew stopped, caught off guard by Amber's unusually sharp tone. The inside of the bus was silent save for the humming of the engine somewhere behind the walls. She breathed in slowly.

"I don't want to cause any more issues than I've already caused. If my presence is going to be a problem, I'll find somewhere else to go."

"Like where?" Matthew scoffed.

"I'll figure it out," she said with unrelenting resolve.

"I'm with her," Jordan said.

"Why is this even a question in the first place?" Dameon said from behind Jordan, "She's not a part of this. She doesn't belong here."

"You can't always have your way, Matt," Amber said quietly.

Matthew ran a hand through his hair. "Do you *want* to leave?"

"Not really."

"Matt, she's just going to get in the way," Jordan insisted.

"I personally think she provides a nice balance to all of you guys' off-color antics," Luke spoke up from the couch opposite of Matthew and Amber, where he had been reading his book.

"Luke has a crush on the new girl," Dameon teased.

"Unlike you, I don't fall in love with everything that moves," Luke said coolly, and went back to his book. Matthew looked at Amber again, who was sitting uncomfortably under all of their attentions.

"You're welcome to stay, but it's up to you," he said, ignoring Dameon and Jordan's discontented mutterings.

For a moment, it looked as if she were listening to something that Matthew couldn't hear. Then she said, "I'll stay until otherwise told."

“You do know you don’t have to obey whatever we say, right?” Matthew said, amused. She smiled enigmatically. “I wasn’t talking about any of you.”

As the bus began moving, Amber found the unused bed and was relieved to see that it already had a blanket and pillow.

I hate feeling so poor and dependent, she thought, half to God and half to herself. She was tethered so closely to Matthew and his provision, all because God had dropped her here in the middle of everything with nothing but a suitcase of clothes. *All it takes is for Matt to decide he doesn’t want me around, and I’ll have nothing again.*

She staggered as the sound guy pushed past her with a mumbled “excuse me,” and decided to find a more open space. Dameon and Jordan were in the back lounge playing a video game, laughing and swearing loudly, so she went up front to where Matthew and Luke were. Matthew was taking up the entire couch on one side, stretched out on the cushions and listening to music with his earphones in and his eyes closed. Feeling awkward, she sat down on the other end of the couch from Luke, who was still reading his book.

“Thanks for not being completely against my being here,” she said to Luke.

“Trust me, it’s nice to have a new face,” he said, putting down his book and smiling companionably.

His friendly manner encouraged her to continue. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you so different from the other guys? You don’t seem to fit in. You’re actually, like...mature. And friendly.”

A curious sadness deepened in his eyes as she spoke. “Ah, that’s the question, isn’t it,” he glanced over at Matthew, who was still engrossed in his music, “Honestly, it’s because I’m a coward.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed, grimacing like something pained him. Curiosity aroused, Amber wanted to say something, but didn’t know what. She looked away, not wanting him to feel awkward, and her gaze landed on his open bag, where the corner of a book with gilded pages was sticking out. Excitement washed through her.

“You’re a Christian,” she scooted closer to him so she could lower her voice.

He looked at her in surprise and saw that she was smiling. “How did you know?”

She pointed to the Bible.

“Oh, right.” He tugged the top of the bag so that the book was completely covered.

“Well, I’m not a very good one.”

“Why do you say that?”

Luke glanced at Matthew again. “Look around you,” he said, gesturing, “I spend hours a day with these guys. I care about them. But they’re some of the best examples of immorality you can find. They don’t even know I’m a Christian. They know I don’t like getting drunk or cheating on my wife, but they don’t know why.”

“You’re married?”

“There’s a reason I’m called the mature one,” he said with an attempt at a grin.

“It takes a lot of courage to be a Christian in the midst of everything these guys do, though,” Amber said, “I mean, you might make mistakes, but it’s hard to cling to your faith when you’re surrounded by things and people that tell you it’s worthless.”

“I guess.”

“So you think you’re a horrible Christian because you don’t share your faith?”

“That’s what you’re supposed to do, isn’t it? That’s our calling as believers, and I don’t do it. I can’t.”

“It may be an important part, but it’s not everything. Choosing to be a Christian with the influences around you is difficult, and it’s one of the hardest steps of faith. I think you’re doing pretty good.” She nudged him encouragingly.

“Thanks.” He sighed again. “It just sucks sometimes.”

Amber looked down at her hands. “Matt doesn’t know I’m a Christian either. I feel like that would be a mark against me if he knew.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t really go for Christians.”

“Because they’re stuck-up, hypocritical, and think that anything fun is against their beliefs,” Matthew cut in, causing both Amber and Luke to flinch.

“Awkward,” Luke muttered.

“That’s stereotyping,” Amber said to Matthew.

“You were the one who refused to drink or do anything else at my party.”

“You really think I’m stuck-up?”

He shrugged.

“How much of our conversation did you hear?” Luke asked.

“Just the part where Amber thinks I’m an idiot.”

“I did not say that.”

Matthew grinned and closed his eyes, immersing himself in his music once again. Amber exchanged glances with Luke.

“For the record, I’m glad there’s someone on my side,” she whispered to him.

“Yeah, I think Matt’s an idiot too.”

“I heard that,” Matthew said.

Amber awoke to Matthew’s hand on her shoulder. The bus was still vibrating gently underneath the cushions, but it had stopped moving, and it was empty save for her and Matthew. His eyes were bright with the anticipation of performing. In a short time, he would be a god on a stage, drinking in the worship of his followers. But at the moment, he was still just a man.

“You okay?” his eyebrows creased as he studied her face.

She rubbed her eyes and tried to rub away the dream she had been having as well.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. What’s going on?”

“They’re unloading the equipment trailer right now. Dave’s about to lock up the bus.”

“Where should I go so I’m not in the way?” she asked, standing up and stretching her back.

“You can just hang around if you want.”

“Or I could help Dave—”

“No, you’re not getting out of seeing us play again,” he pointed at her emphatically, “You’re either going to be backstage or in the audience.”

“I guess that’s fair, since you so desperately need the ego boost it gives you...”

“Ha, very funny.”

The lot outside rippled with activity. Several vans and trailers were also there, as well as two other tour buses. People scurried around like agitated birds, unloading and moving equipment.

Amber dodged a man carrying a black box. “How many bands are here?”

“Four including us,” Matthew said, “Two are touring with us, and one’s a local band. We’re the headlining band, of course.”

The loading dock opened directly into the backstage area of an outside amphitheater. Past the stage, Amber could see rows of chairs under a metal roof and a grassy hill behind them, all enclosed in a pale blue wall. Before her, on the stage itself, countless boxes, amps, cords, microphone stands, half-assembled drum kits, instruments, and sound equipment made the area a virtual obstacle course.

A man who Amber recognized as Freeflight’s sound guy, Michael, intercepted Matthew and said something to him that she couldn’t hear over the other voices around her. Matthew turned to her.

“Can you wait here for a minute?” he asked. Before she could answer, he followed Michael back the way they had come, disappearing into the flock of roadies, venue staff, and band members.

Amber walked slowly to the center of the stage, picking her way between the cords already set up at the front. From her vantage point, the plastic blue chairs rolled towards the stage like patterned waves, with the grass incline swelling behind them. In a short while, it would all be filled with people, their eyes focused right where she was standing, and the air would pulse with the outcry of whatever emotions Matthew chose to share, and the voices of the people who loved him only because of what he gave them.

And he was satisfied with this? This temporary adoration that lived only on disinterested stages? Was this enough?

“You feel like God up here, don’t you?” Matthew said, coming up beside her, “Above everyone, above the world, and they’re all looking at *you*.”

“I hate that feeling,” she said, moving away from the center, towards the wings.

“Then you would hate being the front man of a popular rock band,” he laughed.

“What should I be doing right now?” she asked over his laughter.

“Enjoying yourself, for one thing,” he said at her lack of amusement, “Also, you can get a pass from Sonata that gives you unlimited access backstage. That way you don’t have to always be with one of us, and you can go out into the audience if you want.”

“Will she give me one?” Amber asked doubtfully.

“If she doesn’t, do what everyone else does when they want something they can’t have.”

“Which is what?”

“*Make* her give it to you.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Exactly. You’re too nice, Amber. You need to learn how to take things.”

“You’re the worst possible person to take moral advice from, you know that?”

“I know,” he grinned, “I need to go get some stuff from the trailer, so I’ll catch you later.”

“Wait, what do I—”

“Go get that pass from Sonata,” he called over his shoulder.

Sighing, Amber looked around. How was she supposed to find Sonata in this mess? Once she found her way around all of the equipment and out the back of the amphitheater, she stood by Freeflight’s bus, wondering where to search for the elusive band manager.

“Oh hey, Amber, right?” Dave had appeared around the back of the bus toting a clear plastic tub with CDs inside.

“Hi, Dave,” she said, “Are those for the merch table?”

“Yep. All the bands have a little booth just inside the amphitheater,” he readjusted his grip on the tub, “You okay? Look a little lost.”

“Do you know where I can find Sonata?”

He shrank back a little at the mention of her name. “Oh, uh, she’s probably near the trailer, being bossy and stuff. She, uh, tends to do that.”

“Thanks. I’ll probably come visit you again during the concert!”

“That would be nice,” he said, looking a little happier, “But don’t feel obligated.”

The trailer was mostly unloaded as Amber approached, and she saw none of the band members. But when she reached it, a pair of voices cut through the general bustle of the lot. She rounded the other side and saw Dameon and Sonata standing toe-to-toe.

“I’m sick of you trying to control my life!” Dameon’s normally smiling face was taut and twisted with anger.

“Sweetie, I *do* control your life,” Sonata said, her posture unwavering.

“No, you don’t. I’ve known you for twenty-two years, I know how you work. You can’t manipulate me like everyone else.”

“I know how you work too, little brother,” she said with dangerous sweetness, “And you shouldn’t forget who got you this job in the first place.”

“You’re such a—” Dameon stopped when he noticed Amber, “What do you want?”

“Sorry, I was just—” Amber faltered as Sonata’s piercing eyes turned on her, “—um, I was wondering if you had a...Matt said there was a pass I could get so that I had access back here.”

“And why would I give you one?” Sonata said scathingly.

“Just give it to her, Sonata,” Dameon said.

“Shut up,” she said.

Amber’s mind raced to think of a way to ask for the pass that Sonata would listen to. “What could it hurt? I’m just a harmless girl who’ll be gone soon anyway, right?”

“So be gone *now*.”

Matt, this was the worst idea ever, Amber thought.

“Here, you can have mine,” Dameon said, giving Sonata a smug look as he unclipped a laminated card from his pocket and handed it to Amber.

“Don’t you need—”

“Nah, they know who I am.”

“Thanks,” Amber said, and backed out before either of them could say anything else. She heard their argument start up again as she sought out the way to the outer part of the amphitheater, where people were milling around, waiting to be let in. Dave was already doing business at Freeflight’s table, selling items to the concert-goers that came by. He acknowledged her with a small smile as she slipped behind the table and started reorganizing the boxes of shirts that were opened in disarray on the ground.

After a while, the gate to the amphitheater opened, and the mob began to thin out as the people flowed into their seats. Amber was beginning to enjoy working the merchandise, because it provided a good opportunity to people-watch, as well as to interact with Freeflight’s fans. There was a surprisingly good range of people who enjoyed Freeflight’s music; teenagers and young adults of both genders, as well as a smattering of slightly older adults, mostly men. Amber had expected more female fans drawn by Matthew’s looks and charm.

“Keep an eye on those wristbands. People like to steal ‘em,” Dave told her as she straightened the display on the table.

“The shirts seem to be popular,” she commented.

“They always are. I was skeptical of the one with Matt’s face on it when it came out, but the girls like that one. Kinda creepy, yeah?”

She held one up and studied it. “Yeah, there’s no denying he’s attractive, but I’m not all for the idea of his huge face being plastered on my chest.”

“Thank God you’re normal.”

“Well, apparently I’m not.”

While Dave busied himself with a customer, she sat down and watched the crowd diminish to a trickle as the concert got underway. She sighed and tried to relax, closing her eyes, feeling the craziness of her life start to catch up with her. Who would’ve guessed she would ever be working Freeflight’s merch table and travelling with them as a friend of Matthew’s, no less? Not every amnesiac got off this well, that was for sure.

Of course, she knew why. She was here for a reason.

“Hey Amber, check that guy out,” Dave said.

She opened her eyes and looked where he was pointing. A man was standing a few yards away, gazing into the entrance of the amphitheater. Even from a distance, his presence was quietly imposing; he was tall and well-built, with dark curly hair, a straight nose, and gray eyes the color of ice. His stance conveyed power but also gentleness, somehow both fierce and casual at the same time. As Amber looked, his eyes flicked to hers, and a chill stuttered across her skin. It wasn’t necessarily a negative feeling, but it was like nothing she had felt before.

The ghost of a smile softened the steel of his eyes, and he nodded to her slightly before going inside. Amber felt like she had just touched something electrified.

“Who *was* that?” she breathed.

“Dunno, but he was weird. Did you see those eyes?” Dave shuddered, “They looked so...”

“Knowing,” Amber finished. *As if he knew exactly who I was.*

Part of Amber wanted to search for the strange gray-eyed man in the audience as Freeflight got ready to play, but there were thousands of people in the amphitheater. All of the seats under the roof were filled, so she found a place on the grassy hill to sit. The anticipation of the audience was contagious; out here among the fans, Matthew seemed more like an inaccessible celebrity to her than someone she knew.

No one paid her any attention, one insignificant young woman in the crowd of many. She stretched out on the grass and let her eyes wander, watching friends and groups of people interact. One teenager with long blonde hair held hands with his heavily-pierced girlfriend, occasionally looking at her as if she were an angel. Three girls in bikinis and long hair surveyed available seats behind their large sunglasses, keeping their designer bags close. A couple in their late twenties bickered about something insubstantial as they sat a few feet in front of Amber. A few minutes later, their lips were otherwise occupied in a prolonged kiss.

Chuckling silently to herself, she moved a short distance to her left so she could see the stage. She could hardly see it over the audience’s heads, and the people on it were smaller than her finger. But she wasn’t too worried about *seeing* Freeflight – she saw more than enough of them already.

Fifteen minutes later, the crowd collectively surged to their feet like a single noisy beast as the four members of Freeflight materialized from behind their equipment. Without any ceremony, they approached their instruments, readied them, and with a brief drum introduction, they launched into their first song.

As Freeflight gradually ate through their set, Amber was unimpressed with the music itself. Yes, it was catchy, melodic, lively, and edgy, acutely personifying Matthew, in a way, but there was nothing special about it. No lyrics (from what Amber could understand – many of the words were unintelligible at her distance) or melody stuck out to her. Matthew, Luke, Dameon, and Jordan were all very skilled at what they did, but it lacked something. But, Amber

conceded, she couldn't say she knew anything – or remember anything – about good music in the first place.

Over halfway through their show, however, Matthew did something surprising. While the other three took a break, he traded in his electric guitar for an acoustic one, and sat on a stool that a roadie provided.

"I thought I'd do something special for you guys," he said, "For years, fans have asked me to do this, and I thought it's about time I gave in. You deserve it. So...this song is called 'Amnesia,' acoustic style."

The crowd-creature roared its excitement and approval, drowning out the first few chords of his song. Amber smiled; compared to most of the other songs, "Amnesia" was satisfyingly authentic.

"See, Matt, they love it," she murmured as he finished to thunderous acceptance, "It's okay to show yourself once in a while."

Eager to get back to the bus and to escape the impending exodus of the audience, she left as Freeflight began their last song half an hour later. As she approached the merch table outside, Dave called for her to come help him with the post-concert rush. Just as she opened her mouth to answer, she caught a glint of gray eyes and dark hair as it disappeared around a corner near the outer gate.

"Be back in a minute!" she said, and hurried towards the place, ignoring Dave's protests. When she rounded the corner, the area was empty. Mystified, she continued to look around for him as she went back to the merch table, but whoever he was, he was gone.

A short time later, Amber was absorbed in dealing with the frantic fans from behind the table of merchandise, and she wondered why there was a sudden increase in the noise and energy of the crowd until she saw the members of Freeflight pushing their way through. Once the band was safely behind the table and Dave had cleared most of the items from the surface, the four men took seats, ready to give autographs.

Matthew was drenched from performing, his hair and shirt darkened with sweat. Amber gingerly squeezed around him so that she could stand on one side of him.

"I finally saw you perf—" she began.

"Not now," he said, not even looking at her as he grinned roguishly at the first fan in line, a pretty brunette.

Pressing her lips together, she tossed a pen on the table in front of him and stepped back. He met every fan with a smooth remark: an easy compliment for attractive women, a friendly comment tinged with arrogance for openly envious guys, a slick but pleasant observation for young couples. He knew exactly what to say, how to say it, and whom to say it to. Amber shook her head in amazement; he was the perfect blend of confidence, charm, cockiness, and humility.

"Amber, could you open another box of the black shirts?" Dave shouted from the other end of the table.

She straightened, grimacing as she stretched her back. "I guess. Dave usually has to do this all by himself, and it's—"

"Did you see the concert?"

"Yeah, it was good," she said, pursing her lips.

"Good?" He spread his arms, "I sing that stupid song for you and all you have to say is 'good?'"

"Oh yeah, I noticed that." She smiled slightly. "But you didn't sing it for me."

Amused, he blocked her way onto the bus. "Oh? Why did I, then?"

"Can I please get on the bus?"

"No, I wanna know."

Amber tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and sighed. "You wanted to prove to yourself that you aren't afraid of exposing yourself."

He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Trust me, I am definitely *not* afraid of exposing—"

"That's not what I meant," she said, accurately anticipating his attempt at humor.

"Where do you even get this stuff, my psychiatrist?"

"You see a psychiatrist?"

"No, but I feel like I do with you around."

"Maybe it's something you need, then," she said, eyes twinkling.

"Because then you could fix me, is that it?"

Her face fell, and he immediately regretted his harsh tone. Biting his lip, he stepped aside, and she boarded the bus without another word.

"What was that about?" Luke asked from behind him.

"Oh, you know, doing what I do best: being a jerk to women," he said, pasting an unworried expression on his face as he turned towards his friend.

"You do seem to do that a lot," Luke admitted in good humor, "Except they usually don't mind."

Matthew shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the bus. How he would love a shower right now; his clothes stuck to him with discomforting determination. "Amber just throws me off sometimes. I'm not used to women being so...honest."

"The difference being that Amber's primary goal does not have to do with getting in your bed. When was the last time you talked to a woman like that?"

"A while, and I think it was my mother." Matthew grinned.

"You're ridiculous." Luke slapped him on the back, "Come on, man, let's get out of here."

The next four weeks were filled with concerts in the western part of the United States, from New Mexico to Washington. Freeflight and its opening bands were met with impressive crowds in every city that were as lively and boisterous as the first one in Los Angeles.

Amber was kept busy helping Dave with selling the band's merchandise, and was grateful for it because she felt like less of a burdensome tagalong. At first, she was constantly uncomfortable on the tour bus, especially the first night she slept there. The beds were arranged in two sets of two against each wall, and she was given one of the unused ones closest to the front. Above her slept Dameon, and directly across from her was Luke, with an empty bunk above him. She rather enjoyed the humming of the bus's engine as she went to sleep, but the other noises were less desirable: Dameon's snoring, the clank of the toilet lid through the wall of the bathroom at the foot of her bed, a late-night discussion in the back lounge that was muffled just enough so that she couldn't understand most of the words and yet impossible to ignore.

The others warmed up to her a little as the days passed, though Jordan still looked at her with distrust for a reason she couldn't guess, and Michael, the sound guy, wouldn't talk to her at all. She found a particularly trustworthy friend in Luke, and he shared many attitudes and viewpoints that she had. He was also her best source for insights into Matthew, since he alone seemed to understand her relationship with him.

She still remained the closest to Matthew despite his increasing ego as the tour went on. Performing almost every day brought out more cocky self-assurance than she was used to, and it was harder to find him in a mood in which he didn't mind humoring her with serious talks. Those were the times she enjoyed the most.

Despite her faith that God had a purpose for her being where she was, he seemed distant. Her unique situation attested to the fact that God had a hand in it, but he wouldn't answer her questions of why. What if she were doing something wrong? What if there was something specific she was supposed to be doing, and she wasn't doing it?

And what would happen if she messed this up?

Amber massaged her upper arms, trying to relieve the soreness from helping Dave carry heavy tubs of merchandise to and from the bus's storage. Freeflight had just finished their second-to-last performance of the tour in Portland, and were about to head back towards California. What she was going to do then, she wasn't sure, but the notion of aimlessly staying with Matthew for an undeterminable amount of time was daunting.

"Doing alright?" Matthew asked as he exchanged his sweaty concert shirt for one he dug out of a bag on his bed.

"Yeah, just sore," she said.

"Why do you feel obligated to help, anyway?" he sat down next to her, shaking his hair. Her face crinkled as it was sprayed with sweat. "Oops, sorry."

"It gives me something to do," she said, resignedly wiping the dampness from her cheek, "Otherwise I would be hearing your set for the millionth time."

"What's wrong with that?" he joked, "You're getting a pretty good deal—"

"Everyone listen up," Sonata's voice commanded from the front of the bus. By this time, the other members had joined them, and they all turned towards Freeflight's manager. "I need to tell you some things about our last stop of the tour," she said.

“Yeah, I’ve never even heard of this place,” Dameon said from his place on the other couch, “Obviously it’s not big enough for us to play at.”

“We’re not doing it for the size, we’re doing it for the money,” Sonata said, “Some filthy rich businessman is paying the big bucks for a private concert for his daughter’s birthday.”

“We’re playing for a birthday party?” Jordan said with disgust, “Aren’t we beyond that now?”

“This guy is paying us more than we would get for a sold-out concert in L.A. A lot more. He’s also putting us up in his mansion and providing our meals for free.”

“Free food, I’m there,” Dameon nodded.

“So...how old is his daughter?” Matthew asked.

“Twenty-one,” Sonata said with a significant look at him.

“Is she hot?” Dameon asked.

“I honestly don’t care,” she said, “But don’t act like idiots while we’re there – we want to squeeze as much out of this guy as we can, and he’s not going to appreciate it if we screw something up.”

“I bet she’s hot,” Jordan said as Sonata left and the bus started up.

“Eh, why does it matter?” Dameon said in a mournful tone, “She’ll go for Matt either way.”

“Probably,” Matthew grinned.

Once they all settled into their respective amusements to pass the time as the bus droned down the highway, Amber sat next to Luke since Matthew had immersed himself in music and seemed unconscious to the world, draped across the opposite couch in a vaguely upright position. Dameon, Jordan, and Michael tended to occupy the back lounge, mostly to watch movies or play video games on the large television there, and Amber seldom joined them. She preferred the quieter atmosphere of the front, where Luke was usually reading and Matthew was on his laptop or watching the smaller television mounted at the end of one of the couches.

Luke smiled at her over the top of his book. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” she said languidly, “I finished that book you let me borrow.”

“*Perelandra*? How was it?”

“Unique but interesting. The ending gave me a weird feeling...”

“Like it could actually happen, in a way? Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Has that author written a lot of stuff?”

Luke laughed. “C.S. Lewis? Tons. If I had more of his books with me I would let you read them.”

“I’ve probably read a lot of them already,” Amber sighed, “I just can’t remember them...”

“That could be a good thing, though! What I wouldn’t give to read some stories again for the first time.”

Ever since she had told him about her memory loss, he had put it in a positive light as much as possible, doing his best to help her feel less stressed about it. Things still threw her off sometimes, especially when she found out she knew obscure things that she couldn’t remember

learning. She couldn't tell if her memory was slowly coming back or if her mind just reminded her of certain knowledge when the need for it arose.

Either way, a crucial part of her memory was still missing: her personal past. Her sense of self-identity was developed solely by the experiences she had gone through since she met Matthew, with a little help from God. With some of his discernment, she could be secure in believing that her perception was not far from the truth, but she had none of those character nuances that developed from distinct personal triumphs, adventures, situations. Not that she could see, anyway.

"Hey, it's gonna work out," Luke said quietly, detecting her momentary mental detour.

"I just want my brain back, is that too much to ask?"

"Maybe all those memories would get in the way of what you need to do here."

"Maybe..."

Through half-closed eyes, Matthew watched Luke and Amber talk. Even though his music was turned up so that he couldn't hear them, they proved an interesting pair to observe. They had bonded in a way he didn't understand, able to talk without any pretenses, verbal games, or even flirting. He wasn't surprised that out of all of the band members, she had connected the best with Luke; they were both unobtrusive, quiet people with an unusual grip on life and its problems and who had a penchant for avoiding raucous activities.

Not only that, but they both had a refreshingly different relationship with him compared to most others. Luke knew what made him tick and could anticipate his problems before he had them. Amber could somehow read him with a precision he didn't like, and she wasn't afraid to poke at the things she found there.

He was afraid of them. After all, there was a reason he had buried himself behind music and women.

Luke and Amber were talking intently now, facing each other with their heads close, expressions serious and confidential. He considered pausing his music to eavesdrop, but they were probably just talking about Christian stuff again or something equally as boring.

That was another thing they had in common: they took life too seriously.

The bus jerked, and Matthew could feel something grind on the road beneath him. "Seriously, Dave, could you drive this thing a little smoother?" he called towards the front. The scenery outside the window slowed and then stopped.

"What is going *on*?" Jordan complained, appearing at the entrance to the bunk area, scratching his head irritably.

"I think we have a flat," Dave said, putting the bus in park and opening the door, "I'll go check it out."

"Idiot can't even drive a bus," Matthew muttered.

"Give him a break," Amber said.

"Why do you like him so much?" Matthew pulled out his earphones. "He's replaceable."

"You're so mean sometimes." She crossed her arms and gave him a petulant look.

“What? It’s true.”

“Does it hurt to be nice?”

“With a face like mine, you don’t have to be nice,” he said roguishly.

“So if I get Dameon to punch you in the face, would you start being nicer?” A sparkle of humor glinted in her eyes.

“I’d totally be up for it,” the drummer said from behind Jordan.

“Why, so you’d have a better chance with the ladies?” Matthew jibed.

“You have nothing without your pretty face,” Dameon retorted.

“Except for a good voice, natural musical talent, undeniable charisma...”

“Shut up.”

“Oh right, I forgot, you don’t have any of that.”

“Yeah I do! I totally have that caramel thing—”

“Charisma.”

“Yeah! Plus you’re forgetting I’m the arm wrestling champion around here, remember? That’s worth *something*.”

Matthew ignored him, looking over at Amber. “What, no comment about giving him a break? Is Dameon not good enough for intervention?”

“Careful, or *I* might punch you in the face,” she said with a smile.

The bus shuddered slightly as Dave climbed back on. “Our front wheel hit something sharp. We have a spare but it’ll take some time to change it.”

“Sonata’s not gonna be happy,” Jordan said.

Dave wrung his hands and blinked nervously. “Don’t remind me,” he said.

“I’ll give you a hand.” Michael squeezed through Dameon and Jordan, and he and Dave went back outside.

“Well, this is fun.” Dameon dropped on the couch next to Luke. “Wanna arm wrestle?” he asked him.

Luke shook his head. “I’d like to retain the use of my arm, thank you.”

Matthew got up. “I’m going outside.”

“Why?” Dameon asked.

“I might go crazy in here.”

The sky hung low outside, a featureless gray tent overhead, but the air was light and refreshing. Matthew sat on a patch of gravel and packed dirt, blocked from the view of the road by the bus. Savoring the strong breeze, he stretched out, listening to Dave and Michael’s conversation as they worked on the tire on the other side.

“Mind if I join you?” Amber had followed him out.

“Sure.”

She sat next to him, gathering her hair in one hand to keep it in place against the wind.

“Getting bored of tour life yet?” he asked.

“With you guys, there’s never a dull moment,” she said dryly.

“Then you’re way too easily entertained.”

“It’s interesting to learn about everything behind the scenes, like what you guys are like.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s a blast.” Matthew rolled his eyes. Amber just shrugged. From the other side of the bus, Michael swore loudly, which was followed by a hasty apology from Dave. Matthew looked down the highway, squinting against the wind.

“You were right about the song,” he said.

“What?”

“Amnesia.’ I didn’t really sing it for you.”

“I noticed you haven’t sung it since then.”

“It was more of a personal dare.”

“What’s the *real* reason you hate that song? You can’t even remember the person you wrote it about.”

He didn’t immediately answer, wondering what version of the lie to tell her. “It doesn’t describe me anymore,” he finally said.

“That’s no reason to hate it. People change.”

“Not as much as I have,” he said, injecting a dose of satisfaction into his voice that he didn’t feel.

A moment of silence crept by, but Matthew didn’t look at her. If he did, she might see the ache in his chest.

“Matt.”

He blinked, inhaled, and faced her with an attentive smile. “Yeah?”

“You don’t have to lie to me.”

His heart stuttered. “I’m not.”

“Matt...”

“I’m not! I’m just—” his voice caught on the barbs of his lie and it never left his throat. He swallowed, forcing it down, but part of it stuck. He refused to look at Amber again, knowing what he would find in her expression. He didn’t want compassion. Didn’t need it. Didn’t deserve it.

He looked up, searching for assistance in the roof of clouds, but they rumbled with thunder in denial. The breeze stilled.

“That song—” he cleared his throat, but the stubborn lump wouldn’t move, “That song reminds me that I’m not who I want to be.”

“I thought you were the great Matthew Wolfe,” she said without sting, “I thought you said you ‘turned out okay.’”

His own words were a mockery. Of course he hadn’t turned out okay. She knew it, and he knew it. “I hate who I am, Amber,” he whispered, the confession sounding frail on its first venture out into the open, “I fool myself every day into loving myself, loving the way I use people, the way I live off of the worship of fans who don’t know who they’re worshipping, the way I can give everyone what they want, the way I can so easily please them. It’s a show I’ve acted in so long that I forget I’m even acting. And I’m okay with that. I’m just an illusion.”

“You’re pretty real to me,” Amber said.

A few raindrops pattered on the gravel beside him. One hit the top of his head and oozed a cold trail down his temple. He didn't wipe it away.

"I wrote 'Amnesia' at a time when I was betraying a lot of my friends, especially one."

"Who? A girl?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't a romantic thing, which made it worse in a way. I tried so hard to rip her from my life, all because someone suggested she was holding me back. I wanted them completely gone from my life, and they were."

Amber said nothing.

"My friends don't tend to stick around unless they want something from me," he continued, "probably because they know I'd do the same to them."

The rain began to thicken, but no response came from Amber over the sound of the weather's music. Matthew couldn't bring himself to look at her, now that he had laid himself out so raw before her. She was most likely rethinking their friendship right about now, not that he could blame her; there was a good reason why he hadn't told her this. He didn't want to lose her like he had everyone else. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut like he had for the past five years?

A minute passed, and still she said nothing. Then he felt an arm snake through the crook of his elbow and hold it. Amber laid her head on his shoulder, still not saying a word, and the action made the corners of his lips, defensively tightened against emotion, falter. The two of them didn't move, though the rain drenched them both, and for the first time, for an instant, Matthew let himself believe that he was not alone.

The church that was to be Freeflight's venue was posed on a hill that swelled above the town of Stone Bluff, its posture unyielding against the restless sky, its needle-like steeple crowned with a thunderhead. The bus groaned to a stop at the edge of its back parking lot, rain beading on its sides like sweat. The moment its doors opened, Sonata prowled aboard, her face tight with fury.

"Two hours late," she said through her teeth, standing over Dave's seat and pointing her finger at him like a scolding mother, "*Two hours*. I say we can't screw anything up, and you come two hours late!"

"The b-bus had a flat," Dave stammered, "and there was an accident on—"

"I don't care. You're fired."

"But—"

"You're *fired*," she turned towards the interior of the bus to address the band, "Performance is at eight, which gives you two hours to soundcheck, eat, and change. You can thank Dave—" she shot a scathing look in his direction "—that you don't have more time to get settled. Mike, there are some people in the church that seem like they know what they're doing — they offered to help set up."

Michael nodded and got off the bus to unload and direct the setup of Freeflight's equipment. Dave, looking shell-shocked, followed.

“Matt, I need to talk to you.” Sonata didn’t wait for a reply before stepping outside.

Amber scooted closer to the door as Matthew trailed after Sonata disinterestedly. Their conversation drifted clearly through the open door.

“Listen,” Sonata said, “You need to charm this girl like no other. The more she likes you, the more inclined her father will be to tip us. Shouldn’t be too hard – she’s in love with you already.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’ll do my thing and we’ll all be happy,” Matthew’s voice sounded bored.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What?”

“You look...off.”

A beat of silence. Amber imagined Matthew shrugging.

“You better be on your A-game.”

“I’m always on my A-game.”

“I’ve arranged a one-on-one with you and what’s-her-face before the concert, so get out of whatever funk you’re in and be ready in ten minutes.”

A moment later, Matthew reappeared and sank next to Amber on the couch. “It’s weird that we’re playing at a church. Isn’t that sacrilegious or something?”

“It looks pretty big, though,” Amber said, “Maybe it was the largest place available.”

“Ironic,” he muttered.

“Why?”

“God is useless. Why need him when you can get everything you want here?”

“Because you can’t.”

“No, no. I am *not* getting into this discussion with you.”

“Why, afraid I’ll sway you from your unbelievably egotistical standpoint?” she said with a smile.

“You wish,” he pushed her lightly.

“Jerk,” she returned the favor.

“Thanks for earlier, by the way,” he said more quietly.

“For what?”

“For listening to me. I rarely feel like I’m able to be that honest with someone.”

Pleasantly surprised at his show of maturity, Amber studied his face and saw a crack in the veneer of his outward character, and something alluring was leaking through. “Anytime.”

His demeanor shifted into an unfamiliar expression. “I think—”

“Did you take my beanie?” Dameon asked Matthew, rifling through the cushions on the couch. When he didn’t get a reply, he looked up. “Oh, sorry, were you two having a moment?”

“Psh, no,” Matthew said, leaning back, “And I didn’t take your stupid hat.”

“Oh, never mind,” Dameon pulled a ratty beanie from between the cushions, “Are you allowed to wear hats in church?”

“Duh,” Jordan said, coming out of the bathroom, “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t think you should be allowed to wear that hat anywhere,” Matthew said with disgust to Dameon.

“Matt, come *on!*”

Matthew flinched at the sound of Sonata’s voice coming from outside. He jumped up, ran a hand through his hair, undid another button on his shirt, and left.

“Your clothes look ruffled,” Sonata said, throwing a glance over Matthew.

“That’s because I’ve been wearing them all day, and they got rained on, slept in...”

“Are you serious?”

“She’s not gonna care how long I’ve been wearing my shirt!”

“Her father might.”

“He won’t if she won’t.”

“So you’re an expert on how families work, now.”

“No one cares about my clothes except you, Sonata.”

She made an exasperated sound. “You’re impossible.”

“That’s why you love me.” He grinned.

Sonata didn’t bother to reply as she led him through one of the church’s many entrances.

“Stay put,” she said, and disappeared through a door across the foyer.

Matthew crossed his arms and frowned up at a painting of an angel. All churches looked the same.

“Do you think they’re real?” Amber joined him.

“Sonata’s going to set you on fire when she sees that you followed us in here.”

Amber shrugged. He looked back at the painting, his critical eye slipping over the robed man with outstretched wings. “I don’t even think God exists.”

“Why?”

“Why does it matter? Either there isn’t a God and the world is messed up, or there *is* a God and he doesn’t care that the world is messed up.”

“How do you know he doesn’t care?”

“You may not remember any of them, but horrible things happen every day, things that shouldn’t happen, things that happen to perfectly good people. God could easily stop them, I’m sure, but he doesn’t. He likes seeing people suffer. Tell me, is that a God you want to follow and trust?”

“We live in a fallen world, Matt, and it’s our fault,” Amber said quietly.

“Then why doesn’t God fix it? He can, can’t he? Isn’t he supposed to be good?”

“He *is* good.”

“But apparently he doesn’t mind evil running around. Doesn’t add up to me.”

“Without evil, there would be no free will, no choice to do the right thing. And without free will, there wouldn’t be love.”

“Ha, love,” he said, shaking his head, “Another thing I don’t believe in. I’m sorry, Amber, I just can’t see how any of this makes sense to you.”

“When I lost my memory,” Amber said, “I lost my entire identity, everything I thought I was. I know nothing about myself or why I am the way I am. But the one thing I knew for certain when I woke up on that beach was that not only God was real, but that he was with me. Tell me how I could’ve made that up out of the whole pile of nothing in my head.”

“Must’ve been something held over from whoever you were before everything happened.”

“So the only thing I remember is everything I ever learned about God? All of that detailed theology and nothing else?”

“Maybe that’s normal for memory loss, I don’t know. Some people are weird with their faith. Maybe you were a religious nutjob,” he said with a grin.

“Maybe I was,” she said, her expression uncharacteristically steely, “But at least I believed in something.”

As Matthew watched her turn away from him, he felt a pang of remorse in his chest at antagonizing her. After all, she had been an unusually good friend to him in the short time he had known her. Even if she *was* crazy, at least she cared.

She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, he thought. Sometimes it was so much easier to believe a lie than any part of the truth.

“Dude, I gotta get me a piece of that!”

“*Matt*,” Amber elbowed him in the side before tracking his gaze to the three people who had just entered the lobby: Sonata, a man with graying hair, and a young woman.

“What?” he whispered, “Just look at her—”

“Seriously, stop,” Amber said, not even looking to see what body part he was gesturing to. She did, however, notice how Matthew straightened his shirt, dragged his fingers through his already-tousled hair, and gave a disconcertingly triumphant smile as they drew near.

“Matt, allow me to introduce Mr. James Tamsey, and his daughter, Charlotte,” Sonata said.

James Tamsey was a pudgy, balding man in his early fifties, with a beaky nose and rounded cheeks that sagged just below his eyes. He was dressed in a tailored but rumpled business suit, and in one hand he gripped a smartphone like a lifeline.

His daughter, on the other hand, was tall and slender, with angel-like blonde hair that fell in graceful curls below her shoulders. She held herself with a diffident but steady self-assurance, and though she was a little bashful in Matthew’s presence, she was unafraid to face him.

Matthew shook hands with both of them, and his hand lingered in Charlotte’s. She was no doubt beautiful, but Amber had to wonder if he would really go for a small-town girl like her. She seemed too tame to be his type.

Amber jumped as talons latched onto her arm, and she was pulled to the side by Sonata as Matthew continued his introduction. “Aren’t you supposed to be helping prepare for the concert?” Sonata accused her.

“You kind of fired the guy I was helping.”

Sonata waved her statement away like a bothersome fly. “He’s not fired. Go help him.”

Amber bristled at her imperious tone. She wasn’t under Sonata’s control! No way was she going to do something just because she said so.

“Fine, don’t,” Sonata said, correctly interpreting Amber’s lack of response, “But you’re not going to stand here and ruin Matt’s image. Are you going to leave on your own or will I have to publicly embarrass you?”

Amber met her eyes and saw cold, efficient determination. Clenching her jaw, she grudgingly headed back to the bus, not knowing what to do. A minute later, she saw Matthew and Charlotte leave the church and come towards her. Charlotte was holding a flowery purple umbrella but didn’t offer to shelter Matthew as well. He didn’t seem to mind. Amber wasn’t sure if she wanted to encounter them, but it looked like they were going to board the bus, so she was virtually trapped either way.

“This is our tour bus,” Matthew was telling Charlotte as they neared, “I think the others are still on there, so you can meet them as well.”

“I like the other guys too, but you’re my favorite,” Charlotte said in a demure voice, twirling her umbrella. The summer dress she was wearing flapped about her knees in the breeze, but somehow her styled long hair stayed in place.

Matthew laughed. Charlotte hesitated when she noticed Amber. “Who’s that?”

“Hi,” Amber held out her hand, “I’m—”

“She’s no one,” Matthew said hastily, “just part of the crew. Wanna check out the inside?”

“Thanks, Matt,” Amber said sarcastically as they passed, and he mouthed, “sorry.”

Jordan came out shortly after Matthew and Charlotte had gone onto the bus. “Looks like you’re being replaced,” he said with a small smirk.

“To replace me, she would need to occupy the same position as me.”

“She is, isn’t she? The girl at Matt’s side, that’s the position.”

“Not the same thing,” she said, mostly to herself.

Jordan scoffed and shook his head as he set out for the church, leaving Amber with the unwelcome doubt that perhaps what he had said was true.

Her presence was like fine wine.

Every movement was a ripple, every laugh the clink of a glass. Matthew drank her in with every moment, and she intoxicated him more and more.

Her delicate fingers wove patterns in her long hair while she chatted with him, hypnotizing him with their deft, twisting movements. He had just given her a quick tour of the bus, and now they were sitting together in the back lounge, and she was asking questions about him and the band, but mostly him.

“I didn’t know you lived right on the beach,” she was saying. Her lips formed each word in an exquisite way, so carefully, so perfectly.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful,” he said, his eyes being pulled into hers. It was only because of years of practice that he was still able to form coherent sentences. “Beautiful,” he repeated.

Her smile was touched with coyness. “I wish I could see it.”

“I should take you there sometime,” unconsciously he leaned closer. Her weaving fingers fumbled and stopped, and he took them in his hand. “The concert is starting soon, we should go back.”

“Right,” she stood up, her hand momentarily tightening in his. “My dad’s probably wondering where we went.”

“At first, it looked like he wasn’t going to leave you alone with me.”

“He’s very protective, but it’s just because he cares so much.”

“You’re lucky you have a dad like that. Mine was never home. He never cared what I did.”

“Is that why you’re so wild?”

“Ha, probably. Everything I learned, I learned during high school.”

“That’s when you met Sonata.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

Her laugh flowed like music. They were walking towards the church now, and she was spinning her umbrella again. Their hands were still joined, and neither of them made the move to draw their own away.

“Everyone says you love her, though,” Charlotte said.

“Love is a relative term.”

Matthew held the door to the church open for her, and when she brushed by him, the scent of cherries enveloped him. He sighed deeply; cherries were such wonderful things. So red and sweet and delicious and refreshing...

Sonata appeared abruptly in the lobby, cutting through his reflection. The smell dissipated.

“You missed soundcheck, but it’s taken care of,” she said, pointedly not looking at Charlotte, “You should probably get backstage.”

“Yeah,” he turned to Charlotte, “I’ll see you later,” he said with a wink. She blushed. He turned away too soon to see Sonata’s disdainful expression.

“That Charlotte chick is such a babe.”

“Okay, Dameon, you’ve said that like seven times now,” Luke said as he put in his earpiece, “We get it.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Something’s not right about her,” Amber said from her perch on a crate.

“You’re just saying that because she’s replacing you,” Jordan said.

She blew out a sigh in exasperation but didn’t answer. Maybe he was right – maybe she was more bothered by Matthew’s obvious infatuation with Charlotte than she should be. But something about the young woman unsettled her.

“Hey, guys,” Matthew flew in, breathless, his eyes glowing, “Ready to go?”

“Are *you*?” Jordan said, “Sure you don’t just want to marry her instead of sing to her?”

“Marrying’s not my thing,” Matthew said, grabbing his earpiece from Michael, “Let’s do this.”

The sanctuary of the church was impressive. Seating about two thousand people, it had two levels and four sections of seats arranged in a semicircle around the stage. Three large stained-glass windows were set above the choir loft; two held depictions of what looked like scenes of Jesus’s life, and the center one was mostly made up of a flying. A screen on each side of the stage was projecting moving abstract images to accent Freeflight’s performance.

The audience was bigger than Amber had expected for a birthday party, filling up about half of the seats, but she guessed the invitation had been extended to more than just Charlotte’s close friends and family. Teenagers fretted at the edges of the cluster of people directly against the stage, which consisted of Charlotte and a gaggle of girls. Further back were the older adults, probably Charlotte’s relatives and parents of some of the younger teens up front.

Amber watched Charlotte as the band made final preparations for their performance. The young blonde was strangely still within the boiling soup of excitement around her, and she was observing Matthew without any discernible expression. Her whole body was unmoving, like a sculpture of pale marble dressed in pink. When one of her friends jostled her, she still didn’t look away.

She must think every move Matt makes is awfully interesting, Amber thought.

Finally, the members of Freeflight went to their respective positions on the stage amongst cheers of approval. Charlotte’s calls joined the noise but she still didn’t crack a smile.

Since this was a private concert, Matthew was more casual with the audience. Usually he joked a bit anyway, but here he was looser with his comments and was more willing to spend time chatting as opposed to performing.

After playing several of their hits, Matthew switched out his electric guitar for his acoustic one and invited Charlotte to come onstage. She did so amidst catcalls and whistles. Blushing, she stood next to Matthew, her hands clasped in front of her. In his typical energetic, roguish manner, he sang “Happy Birthday” with a rock-style twist, no doubt making Charlotte the target of every female’s jealousy in the room. Amber rolled her eyes from her vantage point to the side of the stage.

As the cheering died down and Charlotte returned to the audience, a tingling sensation tiptoed across the skin of Amber’s arms. She searched the crowd, skimming over all of the eager, focused faces in the front, and the quietly witnessing ones in the back. Near one of the back doors, she saw him, the gray-eyed man. He wasn’t looking at her, but at Matthew, his face enigmatic in the semi-darkness. After a minute, he turned and left the sanctuary. Without a second thought, Amber slipped from the sanctuary and raced down the hall to the lobby, hoping to catch him again. The lobby was deserted. Annoyed, she turned the corner to search the area near the doors that led outside.

His presence brought her up short. He looked like he had been expecting her, his back towards the wall with the painting of the angel that Matthew had been looking at earlier, and his hands grasping the edge of the table beneath it.

"I'm not whom you should be seeking," he said, crossing one ankle over the other in a relaxed stance.

"Why do you keep popping up, then?" Amber stopped several feet away, wary. Here was a man that was far different than anything she could remember – which, granted, wasn't much. But something was significant about him, and she didn't know how to describe it.

His bright gray eyes, the color of ice, were warm. "It's what I do."

"Are you following me?"

He regarded her for a second, his gaze completely unreadable. Then he said bluntly, "Yes."

An idea occurred to Amber. "Do you know who I am?"

"More than you."

When he offered nothing more, she said, "So you know I've lost my memory?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how?" her heart quickened with the possibility of finally discovering what had happened to her.

"Yes."

Amber scowled. "Would you like to tell me?"

"It's not in His will for you to know at this moment."

"Whose will, God's?" a rush of heated anger swept through her, and on its heels swirled a wave of chilled epiphany. Was he...no, surely not. Definitely not. But nevertheless, she looked at him in a new light. He was watching her patiently.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Grayson."

"Grayson what?"

"Just Grayson," the corners of his eyes creased in the barest beginnings of a smile.

Amber took a deep breath, hesitant to ask her next question. "What...are you?"

His smile was full this time. "What a strange question."

Her eyes darted to the painting behind him, then back to him. No similarity. Self-conscious embarrassment clouded her thoughts – she was being ridiculous, grasping at straws, desperately wishing for a sign from God that she was not alone, that he was working closely in her life. This meant nothing. This man meant nothing. Just a distraction.

"I don't know what your problem is, but you need to stop following me," she said.

Unaffected by her frustrated tone, he uncrossed his ankles and straightened. "So be it," he said easily, surprising Amber with his willingness to leave. He pushed open the door to the parking lot and paused, looking over his shoulder at her. "It's a shame, though," he said, "We usually don't show ourselves."

His words haunted the air long after he was gone, mingling with the sound of *Freeflight*'s finishing music as it wafted from the sanctuary like a familiar smell, and seasoning the music with a spice it had never known.

A vitalizing wind was winging across the coarse grass as evening fully fell on the church. The last blush of sunset had faded from the horizon, and the wind had scoured the sky clear of clouds, revealing hesitant stars.

Matthew saw none of this, preoccupied by the behavior of Charlotte. As the after-concert crowd was finally thinning, she had taken his hand and pulled him outside the church to a spot along the fence of the church playground. The colorful plastic slides stood forlorn in the darkness, creaking every so often in the wind.

Matthew threaded the fingers of one hand through the links of the fence. "So what're we doing out here?"

Her face seemed to have lost some of its sweetness and looked almost sinister in the shadow. "It's tiring sometimes," she said, "keeping up pretenses."

"Can't argue with that," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

She studied him, her eyes visible only by the way they reflected the fluorescent light on the side of the building several yards away. Her long blond hair was moving in the wind; he reached out and tucked a piece of it behind her ear.

"We're really similar," she took a step closer to him, "We want the same things. The difference is, you openly seek them, and I can't."

"Why not?"

"Pretense."

He couldn't say her kiss caught him completely by surprise, but its intensity and confidence did. Angel-like Charlotte was far more experienced than she let on, and he found it easy to fall into habit, fitting against her like the tumbler of a lock. Suddenly, she wasn't just a beautiful woman anymore. She had potential, and a whole sheaf of possibilities was now open to him. She wasn't something to be admired now, and instead was something to be utilized. She had something to offer him that he was willing to take.

He was no longer the charmer. Now he was an animal.

"You're pretty good at this," he said when they broke apart a few seconds – a few minutes? – later.

"So are you. You're living up to your reputation," she raised her eyebrows.

"And you're exceeding yours," he kissed her again, curling his arms around her slim form, "I was expecting to be bored tonight—"

"Honestly, I'm intending for you not to be."

"Feeling bold, are we?"

"Is it working?"

Matthew just grinned and kissed her in answer.

The trailer was finally packed, but Amber hadn't seen Matthew for a while. When she did see him, the work was done and he was examining himself in a decorative mirror on the wall of the lobby, unbuttoning and rebuttoning the third button on his shirt and judging its effect. He was such a girl sometimes.

"Where'd you run off to?" she asked.

He whirled around like he had been caught doing something wrong, immediately defensive. "Why do *you* need to know?"

She frowned at him, then noticed there was a pink smear of lipstick on his neck. Suddenly, she knew the answer to her question. She should've known.

"You have a little..." she pointed to the corresponding spot on her own neck to indicate where she was talking about.

He rubbed at it with his fingers, looked at it, and scowled, wiping it on his pants. His scowl deepened at her knowing smile. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. It's all over your face. But you know what? I don't care what you think."

"That outburst is a little unneeded—"

Amber broke off as Charlotte emerged from the restroom, lipstick freshly applied. Matthew grinned at her. "Hey." His voice had shifted to a deeper tone.

"I forgot, who's this again?" she asked as he slipped his arm around her shoulders. She looked at Amber like she was an intrusion.

"You don't need to worry about her, if that's what you're implying," Matthew said.

"Oh, I can see that," she said pointedly, her eyes brushing scornfully over Amber again. Her point was clear. Amber gave a pleading look to Matthew, but he was distracted by the pleasing view he currently had down the front of Charlotte's dress.

"Matt, can I talk to you?" Amber willed herself not to show her anger, but her words came out clipped.

"No, not really—"

Amber grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the nearest room, which looked like some sort of classroom. She closed the door and stood in front of it with her arms crossed.

"You're so bossy sometimes," he said, rubbing his wrist like it had just been released from a manacle.

"I'm bossy?" She took a breath, changing tack. "Do you really think this is a good idea?"

"What?"

"Getting involved with Charlotte."

"Why not?"

"We're leaving tomorrow."

"So?"

"So, she lives *here*."

"Details, details..."

“Seriously, why bother with this? After tomorrow, you probably won’t see her again.”

“But she’s hot.”

“That has nothing to do with—”

“You know how people become boring? They get too concerned with details. You need to stop freaking out.”

“I’m just trying to help you see that it’s not a good idea to—”

“No, you’re just jealous.”

“I’m not! If I wanted the same thing that she does, I would’ve made a move on you by now!”

“But you didn’t. You lost your chance, and now you have to deal with it.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t make your jealousy her fault.”

Amber’s temper flared at his didactic tone. He was in no position to lecture her. “I’m *not jealous.*”

He flicked his hair out of his eyes. “You keep telling yourself that.” He pushed past her and opened the door. Amber let him go, still struggling to control her emotions.

Maybe she was jealous, but not of Charlotte. She was jealous of Matthew, of the ease with which he made decisions. He wasn’t bogged down with the morals she was, or a desire to be wise. He went with what felt right, what was easy and familiar. The biggest risk he ever took was choosing a redhead over a brunette, or performing one song instead of another. He didn’t concern himself with trying to change anything or anybody. Or trying to change himself. That would cause too many complications. His life was appealingly simple.

Until I came.

Amber stared out the window as the bus rolled through the gate of the Tamseys’ property. A two-story house stood at the end of a wide, circular drive, embraced by immaculate landscaping and gentle hills that were partially obscured by trees. The land seemed to stretch a significant distance behind the house itself.

Dave parked the bus along the edge of the drive, and Amber followed Jordan, Dameon, and Luke out into the breezy evening. They were all carrying their bags in preparation of staying the night, unsure of what to expect. Matthew had gone with Charlotte in her surprisingly masculine car, a refurbished 1960’s Chevy pickup truck in cherry red. Amber didn’t see it anywhere and assumed they hadn’t arrived yet.

Mr. Tamsey was getting out of his own late-model BMW, and waved at them as they drew near. “Welcome, welcome! Come on inside. Aaron will take your things.” He gestured to a tall man waiting by the front doors.

“Nice house,” Dameon murmured to no one in particular as they were given a brief tour. The rooms were spacious and tastefully decorated, with sleek tiled or hardwood floors and expensive rugs underneath the furniture. To Amber, many of the rooms had a hollow air to them, clean but unused.

“It’s just me, Charlotte, Aaron, and the maid,” Mr. Tamsey explained as they looked into numerous guest rooms on the second floor, “We have more rooms than we know what to do with. Four extra bedrooms. I’m assuming the young lady will want her own?”

Amber suddenly found the man looking at her expectedly. “Oh, yeah, that would be nice.”

Uneven stomping sounded on the stairs. “That will be Aaron with your things. These four rooms are yours. I’ll leave you to choose,” he turned to Amber, “The last one on the left there is the best. The view is beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Amber said, and he smiled kindly.

“You remind me a lot of my daughter. Have you met her? She’s very sweet and quiet like you.”

Amber was saved from replying by Aaron’s arrival. She took her suitcase and escaped into the room he had suggested. Wide windows interrupted by French doors revealed a panoramic picture of the ocean over the trees. A double bed and a small table were against one wall, and a chest of drawers and an armchair were on the other. Leaving her bag by the door, Amber opened the French doors and stepped out onto the balcony, which she noticed stretched across the entire side of the house.

What am I even doing here? she thought, half in prayer. The California night was sublime, but she couldn’t fully enjoy it, nor appreciate staying at such a luxurious house. Not when she felt like she was supposed to be accomplishing something. She couldn’t stand the thought of her life going nowhere.

The stuttering of an engine proclaimed the arrival of Matthew and Charlotte. Tires crackled on the cobbled drive below as Charlotte’s polished red truck pulled into the six-car garage. A few seconds later, the engine quit with a final grunt, and the two of them walked towards the house. Matthew had his arm draped territorially over Charlotte’s shoulders, and Amber could hear their conspiratorial voices from her vantage point.

Charlotte let out a sharp giggle right underneath the balcony as she and Matthew entered the house. Amber looked up at the sky, where the moon hung low above the trees, a yellowed crescent grin in a dark face freckled with stars.

If you want me to help him, God, Amber said silently, show me how.

“I don’t expect he’ll sleep here tonight,” Luke said as he rummaged in his bag on the bed.

Amber looked around at the bedroom, which was painted a pale yellow and garnished with white accents on the molding. “Staying in Charlotte’s room is kind of tacky, though. Don’t you think?”

Luke shrugged. “The worry of being ‘tacky’ is probably not the first thing on his mind.” He withdrew his toothbrush from its case, but then paused, his green eyes appraising her. “Are you doing okay?”

“Sure.” She wasn’t in the mood for a heart-to-heart, and followed the patterns on the bedspread with her finger to avoid his gaze.

Luke made an unconvinced noise but pushed no further, going into the connected bathroom to brush his teeth. Amber fell back on the bed with a sigh. There was nothing to do except hang around others, but she was sure that it bothered them.

Always a burden, she thought, I can’t do anything on my own.

But you can through me, the Voice welled inside her.

I know that, she said.

But do you believe it?

She sat up. “I’m really not in the mood for conviction right now,” she muttered. Looking around the room again, she noticed Matthew’s bag had been dumped by the door, and a book had fallen out of the open side pocket, its cover made of blank, mahogany leather. When she retrieved it and opened it to the first page, she realized it was a journal.

Matt keeps a journal? she thought, half-amused and half-impressed as she ran her fingers over his written name. Her first instinct was to turn the page – who knew what beads of genius were in a prolific songwriter’s private journal? It was probably full of the things he was too afraid to share. The good stuff.

But what would the point of reading them be? There was no telling how angry he’d be that she snooped around, especially with his temper. Whatever she could learn from his journal, she would rather him tell her himself. Plus there was just something dirty about doing something so intrusive to such a public man.

“He wouldn’t be happy if he knew you had that,” Luke said from the foot of the bed.

“I didn’t read any of it,” she said, putting it back in the pocket.

“He’s had that thing since high school. He puts all of his songs that we don’t sing in there. So basically all the ones he likes.”

Her hands itched to pick it back up again, but instead she sat on the bed and clasped them in her lap. “So you knew Matt in high school?”

“We were best friends.”

“Was he always...like this?”

“Like what, exactly?”

“All superficial and proud. And obsessed with women.”

“A little. But he used to be a lot different. And he used to be a much better friend.”

“What changed?”

He shrugged. “I’m not really sure. It was a gradual thing.”

Amber wondered if the change in Matthew had had anything to do with her. Luke wouldn’t remember, since apparently no one could. “Was it because he got famous?”

“Something like that. He’s definitely never himself when he’s in front of fans.”

“Or maybe he *is* himself,” she said, “and maybe that’s the problem.”

The instant Matthew opened his eyes, he was wide awake. The first thing he saw was a large, wet nose and a long pink tongue. Cursing, he sat up, pushing the Golden Retriever's muzzle away from his face. Charlotte had insisted on introducing him to "Leo" as soon as they had entered the house last night, and the dog had taken an instant liking to him.

Matthew sat there for a moment in Charlotte's bed, legs tangled in the sheets, Charlotte sleeping next to him. He could remember last night very clearly, which was an unusual morning-after sensation. What *wasn't* unusual was the instant doubt of whether or not it had been a good idea. Sure, he had thoroughly enjoyed every second of it, but it was likely that her father would not be pleased if he found out that Matthew had slept with his innocent, sweet daughter.

Charlotte had explained things at some point last night. Acting innocent was the only way she could get her father to let her do anything on her own. If Mr. Tamsey had any inkling of the kinds of things she did, he would keep her on a short leash. Plus, if she expressed any rebellious intent, he would force her to live elsewhere, provide her with little money, and she would – God forbid – have to get a job. She loved her luxurious lifestyle too much to rebel, hence the act.

As Leo panted beside him, it slowly occurred to Matthew's sleep-disoriented mind that the dog must have come in somehow, and sure enough, the door to the hallway was wide open.

Cursing furiously, he stumbled out of the bed, located his pants, and pulled them on. Leo happily trotted after him as he picked up his shirt and headed down the hallway. The house was quiet, and sunlight streamed in through the windows in the hallway; Matthew subconsciously skirted the pools of light on the way to his room. Before he reached it, however, Amber came out of her own room and froze when she saw him. Her eyes dropped to his shirtless torso and unbuttoned pants, then returned to his face. Somehow, her carefully expressionless face imbued him with a shame he automatically fought against. There was no way she was going to make him feel guilty for *anything*.

"Have a nice night?" she asked casually.

"It was great," he said.

"Then why are you running away?" Leo was sniffing her experimentally, and she scratched him behind the ears. After a few seconds, he got bored of her and wandered back to Charlotte's room.

"I'm not. I'm making sure her dad doesn't see me, obviously," Matthew said over the receding jangle of Leo's collar.

She gave him a look that made him want to slap her. Instead, he cursed; he was doing a lot of that this morning. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Why do you sleep around so much?"

"Why not? They're always willing."

"It just seems like it needlessly complicates things."

"It's worth it. But I guess *you* wouldn't know about that, being the prude you are."

He immediately regretted his words, even before he saw her face shift into injury. He sighed and said in a gentler tone, "Just leave me alone about it, okay?" He moved to pass her.

"I just want to help you," she said helplessly.

"I don't need help, Amber," he said, "Stop trying to fix me."

She continued to gaze at him with those big brown eyes of hers. They were filled with...what was it, exactly? He couldn't put a name to it, but it was begging for something further to be said.

"We're all broken, and none of us can fix it," he said.

"You're right," she said, and began walking towards the stairs. As he watched her go, he somehow felt hollow, like he had screwed up. What had he done wrong?

That's why he preferred the physical side of relationships. It was harder to mess up.

Amber circumvented the kitchen and dining room, where she could hear people conversing and smell bacon being fried, and left the house through the back patio. It held a fireplace and a full set of furniture, all covered by a roof supported by stone pillars. She hardly glanced at any of it, instead making her way past the pool and onto one of the meandering paths twisting between the trees. The moving, dappled shadows of the trees comforted her, the sunlight calming. Birds called to one another from the treetops, the only other sound being the breeze among the leaves.

A wooden gazebo at the junction of two paths seemed to be waiting for her after she crested a hill. She climbed its steps and hugged a support beam, looking out across the pleasant property. Here, she could breathe.

God, I just need help, she prayed, For once, could you give something instead of taking away?

"You all are such interesting creatures."

She whirled around to see Grayson sitting on the bench inside the gazebo. She hadn't noticed him there before. His posture was casual, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the railing behind him. He still gave her an odd sort of fear, yet he wasn't particularly frightening; she didn't know how to describe the feeling.

"You don't want help, and then you do want help," he continued, "You demand answers but are unwilling to accept them."

His words encouraged her to ask the absurd question circling her mind: "Are you an angel?"

"Yes."

His straight answer surprised her. "Oh."

An angel. The being in front of her wasn't human. Not even close. But he looked so ordinary, apart from his peculiar eyes. No glowing, no wings, no heavenly voices. Was she supposed to do something, like bow to him or call him "sir?" What was the decorum for interacting with an angel?

"You couldn't have just told me that in the first place?" she said weakly.

“It’s not important.”

“You’re telling me you’re an *angel*. That’s kind of a big deal.”

“God is a big deal. I’m only his messenger.”

“So you have a message for me?”

“There are many things I have been instructed to tell you.”

“Why doesn’t God tell me himself?”

“Humans tend to listen better with face-to-face interaction. The Almighty’s way of communication is more than sufficient, but sometimes he uses us as another method,” he crossed his legs, “Besides, this will be less of a personal revelation and more a factual description.”

“Of what?”

“What’s going on.”

“So I’m finally going to get some answers?”

“Not all of them.”

Amber groaned. “Can you at least tell me what I’m doing here?”

“You’ve already been told.”

“What, ‘guide’ Matt? What does that even mean?”

“You’ve seen who he is. What he needs.”

“You mean God.”

Grayson inclined his head.

“Well, what am I supposed to do about it? Obviously me being here isn’t helping at all.”

“He trusts you.”

“Does he?”

“He’s made himself vulnerable to you, something he doesn’t do with many others.”

Amber pursed her lips. This conversation wasn’t going anywhere. “I know that. But here’s the main problem I have with all of this: why do I still have no memories? Can’t you fix that with your magical angel powers or something? It makes everything a lot harder.”

“How can you make that judgment when you don’t remember how things were? Perhaps it’s easier this way.”

She looked hard at him. “I don’t believe you.”

He smiled, his white teeth flashing. “You don’t have to, but truth doesn’t change based on what you believe. Your world teaches differently.”

“My existence was eradicated. No one remembers me. As far as I’m concerned, I have no past because no one knows it, not even myself. It could be anything, but it doesn’t matter. Why does God have to reduce me to nothing in order to use me?”

Grayson’s eyes were unsettling in how clear they were, two discs of lucid ice, cold with the near absence of emotion and intimidating, but also completely devoid of malevolence. Refreshing in their purity. His gaze held her in a timeless grip. “Do you truly believe you’re nothing?” he asked quietly.

The force of his eyes compelled her to answer. “No.”

“You’re playing a significant part in an exquisitely complex story, and you can only see it through the lens of your own situation. Things are in motion that you will never come to realize.”

She dropped her eyes. “I just want answers.”

Grayson offered nothing. His presence made it hard for her to collect her thoughts. “So what am I supposed to do about Matt?” she asked.

“You know him better than most—”

“I just met him!”

“But you knew him before.”

“Which neither of us remember, so that’s useless.”

“Give him what he needs.”

“A leash?” Amber muttered.

“A friend. A real one.”

“He has Luke.”

“Luke isn’t willing to step up.”

“You think I am?”

Grayson didn’t answer for a long moment. A bird twittered somewhere above them. When Grayson spoke, his voice was gentle. “Yes, because you love him.”

Her head shot up. “What? No, I don’t! That’s ridiculous!”

“No need to get defensive.”

“This isn’t some cheesy romance novel. I don’t love”—she drew quotes in the air around the word with her fingers—“him. He’s too...himself.”

“I didn’t say anything about romance, but if that’s how you want to think about it—”

“I don’t.”

“—then fine. You care deeply for him. You want the best for him, and you would do anything for him if it helped him.”

“I’m not sure about that. There’s a lot of things I wouldn’t do for him.”

“But you did do this.”

“Meaning what?” Amber frowned at him. His inscrutable face had been unchanging the entire time except for when he had smiled. It was impossible to read him.

“God wouldn’t yank you out of your normal life if you weren’t willing. You chose this for yourself.”

“I *what*?” she jumped up. Grayson didn’t move. “What is *wrong* with me?”

She paced restlessly to the other side of the gazebo, thinking hard. This whole time, she had thought God was interfering in her life, that she wasn’t much more than a puppet. But if this was her choice...now the question was, did she trust herself? And did she trust God to turn it into good?

“But you still haven’t told me what to do,” she said, turning back to Grayson, but he wasn’t there. She was alone.

I really hope I'm not imagining him. The notion emerged unexpectedly. *My head isn't the most reliable thing, after all.*

"I didn't know you could cook!"

"One of my many talents."

"Why am I not surprised? It smells delicious."

Amber followed the voices to the kitchen, where Matthew was standing at the stove making omelets with Charlotte at his side. The Tamseys' housekeeper, Ms. Allen, a short woman with white-streaked hair and skin like creased parchment, was pouring orange juice into glasses while pausing frequently to judge Matthew's cooking over his shoulder.

Amber entered the room, unnoticed by Charlotte and Matthew. Ms. Allen smiled at her. "Is there anything I can get you, dear?"

"No, thank you," Amber said, but Ms. Allen handed her a glass of orange juice anyway. Charlotte cast a look behind her, but Matthew didn't even turn around. Amber pretended to be absorbed in the view of the grounds that the kitchen windows provided.

"That looks *so* good, Matt," Charlotte laid a hand on his upper arm, "How do you manage to make an omelet look that good?"

"It's not hard to stick an egg in a pan." Dameon had appeared in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. A few pieces of hair on the crown of his head still stuck up from lying in bed.

"Says the guy who lives on peanut butter sandwiches," Matthew replied, folding the finished omelet onto a plate with a swift twist of his wrist.

"Shut up," Dameon swiped a glass of orange juice and stomped out. Amber hid a smile.

"So how long are you staying?" Charlotte asked.

"Dunno, I think we're leaving around lunch time."

"So soon?"

Matthew hesitated, catching her big-eyed pouting look. "Sonata calls the shots," he said.

"I'm sure you could convince her to let you stay – I mean, like to let Freeflight stay. Right?"

"It *is* the end of our tour," he admitted.

"Or, everyone else could go home and you could stay."

"I wouldn't mind that," he smiled and handed her the steaming omelet.

"Fancy breakfasts made by handsome men. I could get used to this," Charlotte said, lingering unnecessarily close to him as she took it. The smug grin on Matthew's face made Amber want to slap him. He was such a show-off.

"Smells good," Mr. Tamsey came in, dressed in a crisp suit and tie. "Did you sleep alright, sweetheart?"

Charlotte flounced over to him and kissed his cheek. "Yes. Are you going to work?"

"I have a meeting with the marketing team, but I'll be home by lunch." He looked at Matthew, "You all are welcome to stay. Ms. Allen will be here if you need anything."

From the way Charlotte and Matthew exchanged glances, Amber could tell they were planning a repetition of their night. It was pathetic, how predictable they were, how hasty to return to their comfortable rut of physical pleasure. She couldn't figure out how she had ever been close to Matthew when he was always so focused on the things she avoided.

Amber plunked her glass down on the table and left; she had no intention of witnessing any more flirting if she could help it. She took refuge outside once again, this time on the back patio with her journal, and curled up on a sofa to listen to the birds singing among the foliage.

Ever since Matthew had opened up to Amber yesterday on the side of the road, he felt exposed around her. It was harder to meet her eyes, and he was afraid to speak to her past the point of small talk. It wasn't just because of his confession, though; it was also because she liked conversations that dug deeper into life and his ideology than he felt comfortable with. The only other person he knew that liked to talk of those things was Luke, and he hadn't brought anything up in years, worn down by Matthew's constant discouragement of doing so.

Still, the memory of his sharp words to her this morning jabbed his numbed conscience enough to cause him pain every time he thought about it. She hadn't deserved them, not really. He was so good at alienating the people who were the most empathetic towards him, which was why he had given up making any effort to keep them around. Amber probably didn't have much of a choice of staying near him, but she was doing a decent job of being his friend, despite his frequent outbursts. She must have really liked him.

Maybe she's only waiting for her chance to be with you, a nasty doubt suggested. Like all other women. She wants you for your looks, your fame. Everything else is an act.

But he didn't want to think like that. If that were true, why hadn't she acted on it already? Why was she waiting until someone like Charlotte came along and pushed her out of the way, making things harder?

Regardless, he wanted to talk to her. Not to apologize - he hadn't done anything wrong - but to...make amends. Smooth things over.

Charlotte was still in the kitchen when he saw Amber sitting alone outside. He approached her as he mentally crafted the words he was going to say. *Stick to the script*, he reminded himself. The script made things cleaner, simpler, easier.

"Hey," he said, pausing until she turned her head to look at him, "I just wanted to say that I didn't mean to snap at you earlier. I was just nervous that her dad would pop up and somehow know what...I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I mean, it's not like you did anything bad."

She raised an eyebrow. He probably sounded condescending. "So...I hope you're not...mad, I guess..." he added.

"If you're apologizing, I forgive you," she said with a smile.

"What? No, I'm not apologizing--" he didn't do anything wrong! "--I'm just saying that...it's not your fault that I was on edge."

Thanks, I feel so much better now, her sarcastic look said. This wasn't going well. He was trying to be nice! Why couldn't she take it and move on? Ungrateful, that's what she was. He didn't do this for just anybody.

"I'm trying to help you not make the same mistakes," she said after an awkward beat of silence, "Especially since you said you didn't like who you--"

"I know what I said," he cursed himself silently for ever having that moment of weakness, "But I can deal with it on my own."

"Right."

"Really."

"Mmhmm."

"What makes you think I need the help of a girl who doesn't know anything?" There went his big mouth again. *Stick to the script, idiot.*

Amber didn't deign to say anything in response, which was just as well. He needed a do-over. Taking a deep breath, he tried a more reasonable approach. "The problem is, you're trying to mold me into someone I'll never be. I appreciate it, and frankly I think you're a better person than I am - don't tell anyone I said that - but it's just not...me."

"You can change."

He shook his head. "I like who I am too much."

"But you said--"

"I know what I said! But you know what? I'm never going to become that guy I wanna be, and who I am right now is good enough. I'm getting everything I want, so why try to force it?"

She didn't reply, probably because she didn't have an answer. Bullseye. "I appreciate your concern," he said, "It's cute. But it won't go anywhere."

"Cute. Cute? Really?"

"Dammit, I'm sorry, okay? God, why are you being so difficult?"

She stood up, unfolding from her position like a walking stick. "Matt, you need to chill out. I think you're assuming things that I'm not trying to imply."

"Sorry," he muttered. It was so easy to spit out that word, now that it didn't mean anything.

"You need to stop trying categorize me. I'm weird. I don't quite fit in anywhere. I'm not one of your flings, or bandmates, or fans. I don't even want to be any of those things. Can't I just be your friend?"

"Of course," he said, like it was a stupid question.

"Then let me. That's all I want."

"Okay."

She regarded him for a moment, sizing him up. Then she surprised him by closing the distance between them and embracing him. After a startled moment, he wrapped his arms around her, and they lingered there, Amber's head against his chest. She was warm, comfortably so, like sunlight through a window. He was used to hot, blazing hot, passionate hot, heat that flared up

and burned out quickly. Not this solid warmth. Something inherent in its steadiness drew him in, and he wanted so desperately to cling to it.

That was one thing he didn't have: stability. His life was a path of sharp turns and sudden drop-offs, rocky but in the way one was able to enjoy it with a four-wheeler. That was how he chose to lead his life in order to get that deliciously exhilarating feeling in the pit of his stomach.

But was there really anything wrong with this? Having something - someone - dependable to lean on? Having someone who saw him through no filters and yet somehow still liked him? Or at least, willing to stick around after he antagonized them?

Filled with an rare sense of gratitude, he initiated the first action that habit told him to do: kiss the woman standing in front of him. So when she pulled away from the hug, he ensnared her hands in his and gave her his signature intense, soul-searching look that always melted resistance, if there was any. Then he lowered his head—

"Oh no, I am *not* kissing you, Matthew Wolfe," she shoved his face away and ducked out of his hold.

Caught off guard, it took a moment for his brain to provide him with a response. "Why not?"

"Did you not hear anything I was *just* talking about?"

He cocked his head, messing with her. "What did you just talk about?"

"You're so obnoxious," she groaned, and headed back towards the house, bumping him with her shoulder as she passed.

He smiled and rolled his eyes. Women. They always had to make relationships so complicated.

In any case, he knew one relationship that wasn't, and it was that one which he was about to go take advantage of. Simple and to the point.

Life was easier that way.

Too close. It had all been too close.

Matthew had been too close. She kept distance between them for a reason, and yet she had broken that. Nothing had been wrong with the hug itself, nor her reasons for doing it, but the comfort had overwhelmed her. She realized that she had been craving human touch while avoiding it. She needed to be held, but Matthew was the last person she wanted to encourage. He was *too* physical. He was driven by touch, desired it, functioned on it. He had proven that with his reaction. If he was offered a taste, he would take the whole plate.

But her own emotions had been too close as well, too close to being caught up in the moment. She had been dangerously tempted to let him kiss her. What would it hurt? She wouldn't let it escalate, not ever. One kiss would do nothing.

Yet something between them would have changed. An undefinable breath would shift, and suddenly she wouldn't be his friend. She would be a prospect. A possibility. Banal attraction would pollute the air and he would easily lump her with all the other women he knew.

It was necessary to keep that barrier. Otherwise, she would prove no better than anyone else, and her uniqueness was what was keeping their relationship intact. If she started to blend in with her surroundings, she would no longer have a purpose, because it was her purpose that set her apart.

“Come on, Amber, why do you have to be so boring?”

Amber stood with her arms tightly crossed against her ribs, her bare toes curling in protest against the sunbaked glazed tile bordering the edge of the pool. A slight breeze was pushing her hair into her face, and she was forced to glare at Matthew through the tangled strands. “I just don’t want to swim,” she said.

“But we need one more to make the teams even!” Matthew held up the volleyball.

“I’m good.”

“That magic bag of yours didn’t include a bikini or something?”

She shrugged. In truth, she had found a one-piece in her suitcase, but there was no way she would wear a swimsuit in front of Matthew, not when he was used to perfect bodies in tiny bikinis.

“Are you ever going to wear less clothes than that?” Dameon gestured to her casual ensemble of a t-shirt and shorts.

Her arms tightened around her torso. “Not for you,” she retorted.

“Dameon, just stop talking,” Luke said, aiming a spray of water at him with his hand.

Dameon splashed him back. “I’m just saying, she could learn a few things from Charlotte.”

Charlotte smirked from the other side of the volleyball net. Amber rolled her eyes and sat in one of the lounge chairs underneath an awning. From her bag, she took out her journal and pen, but sat with the journal unopened in her lap, watching the others’ antics in the pool as they began a game. She tried not to look too much at Matthew, who was predictably eye-catching in nothing but his swim shorts, or Charlotte with her tan skin and curves she could proudly flaunt in her pink bikini. Amber had never been overly concerned about her own appearance, but if there was any setting that exaggerated the benefits of good looks, it was a swimming pool.

Charlotte, Matthew, and Jordan were playing against Dameon and Luke, and judging by the verbal insults, the latter side was winning. Amber smiled faintly as Dameon spiked the ball and then did a creative victory dance on the steps of the pool. Matthew cursed at him loudly.

“Sure you don’t want to play?” Luke asked her a few minutes later while they were taking a break. He crossed his arms over the tiled lip of the pool.

She nodded apologetically, but before she could reply, Aaron approached from the house. “Miss Tamsey, Loren Bradford is here to see you.”

Charlotte scowled. “Why?”

“I don’t know, miss. Shall I send—”

She shook her head and gestured impatiently for the butler to bring the visitor outside. Aaron bowed and retreated.

“Who’s Loren?” Matthew asked, pulling her close to him. “Your friend?”

“Depends,” was all she said, and kissed him.

“Ooh, is she hot?” Dameon shot to the side of the pool in excitement. “I call dibs if she’s hot! And don’t steal this one from me, or I’ll hurt you!” he called to Jordan.

Jordan, who had the advantage of facing the house, drew a slow, badly-suppressed grin across his face. “Oh, this one’s all yours, Dameon.”

“Is she ugly?” Dameon whined, turning to see who had just come from the house, “That would suck so hard—” he froze as he looked up to see a very tall, very surly, and very male Loren Bradford.

Matthew felt Charlotte momentarily tense against him when Loren appeared, and his guard shot up. Was this guy a danger? A challenge? Competition?

Loren was built like a football player, tall and muscly, with his brown hair cropped short and his blue eyes menacing underneath thick eyebrows. He was dressed in a muscle shirt, shorts, and flip flips – the pointlessly expensive kind.

Matthew hated him instantly.

“Loren, what are you doing here?” Charlotte groaned. She climbed out of the pool (wow, she did look hot in that bikini, Matthew noted for the seventh time) and took the man by his thick arm, tugging him to a place several feet away, near the outdoor bar. Matthew’s eyes narrowed as he watched them talk, and he had to resist the urge to get involved. Charlotte would tell him what he needed to know, right?

“He looks your type,” Jordan was teasing Dameon, whose frown was so deep that his eyes could barely be seen beneath his brow.

“How was I supposed to know he was a dude? What kind of name is *Loren*? It’s a freaking girls’ name!”

“Look at those muscles. I bet *he* could beat you at arm wrestling. That’s what you two could do on your dates—”

Dameon shoved Jordan’s head underwater, and the two of them proceeded to thrash about in the water, trying to drown each other.

“Shut up,” Matthew snapped. Their splashing was concealing what little he could hear of Loren and Charlotte’s conversation. His bandmates ignored him.

Loren said something and touched Charlotte’s arm, his hand lingering there. Charlotte didn’t make any move to brush it away as she responded intently. Their faces were too close together for Matthew’s liking.

“That better not be her boyfriend,” he gritted out to Luke, who had swum up beside him.

“She has a boyfriend?”

“Not that I know of. But who else would he be?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, Matt. He could just be a friend.”

Matthew gave a sardonic laugh. “You’re way too naïve.”

“I’m just saying, don’t try to punch him or anything. He’d probably win.”

"I could take him."

Luke sighed and left him alone. Matthew shivered, suddenly chilled under the friendly California sun. He continued to eye the two of them, but neither turned, engrossed in their conversation.

"Hey, Amber," he said, sidling closer to her. She looked up from her journal, where she had just begun to write something, "Can you hear what they're saying?"

She glanced over at Loren and Charlotte, who were closer to her than to him. "If I listen hard enough," she said.

"What're they talking about?"

"Why don't you ask them?"

"Amber, come on."

Sighing, she turned her head slightly to hear better. After a few moments, she said, "He's her ex-boyfriend. Happy now?"

"No," he muttered, viewing Loren with renewed disgust. "What're they saying?"

"I don't think I should—"

"Just tell me!" he hissed.

"Stop trying to make drama and just wait for Charlotte to explain things," she suggested, lowering her eyes to her journal again in an obvious attempt to end the conversation.

"That's a stupid idea."

She shook her head, not looking up at him. Why did no one care about this except him? Did they not find it suspicious that this man randomly showed up to see Charlotte? Her ex-boyfriend, no less?

Finally, Charlotte returned to the pool, and Matthew immediately said, "So?"

She made circles in the water with her finger. "Loren wants to take me out as his birthday present to me."

"Take you out."

"Yeah, like, out to Pebble Beach."

"And you said yes?"

She looked up at him. Her blue eyes looked green against the water. "Yeah, why not?"

Matthew opened his mouth, and then closed it. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "When?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight? We're still going to be here tonight, Charlotte. *I'm* still going to be here."

"I know, but we'll have other nights."

"Will we?"

Charlotte glanced back at the retreating form of Loren. "I was hoping," she said in an undertone, "I was going to ask you later but...I could stay at your house on the coast. Come visit you for a while."

The thought warmed him, but he maintained an unyielding expression. "I'll think about it."

“Well, while you’re ‘thinking’ about it,” she said, slipping her arms around his neck, “how about we get out of the pool, and I make your decision easier?”

“And how do you plan to do that?” he finally broke a grin, already knowing the answer.

“Why don’t you come find out?” she pushed away from him with a coy smile and began making her way to the steps of the pool. Matthew followed, his mind made up and Loren forgotten. He was Matthew Wolfe, every woman’s dream, and not even a romantic night with an ex-boyfriend could change a girl’s mind. He may not have been certain about much in his life, but of that he was sure.

Sonata materialized around one o’clock with a film crew in tow. Matthew hadn’t seen her since the concert at the church; he had assumed she had stayed at a hotel and had spent her time doing whatever managerial duties she had to do. It looked like he had been right.

He left Charlotte in the living room, where they had been killing time playing around on the piano in the corner, and met Sonata inside the front door. Focused on business, she hardly acknowledged him.

“We’ll start in the back on the patio, so set up there,” she directed the crew, “Make sure to get the gazebo in the shot.”

“What’s going on?” Matthew asked, stepping out of the way of two men carrying a large camera apparatus.

“Video interview,” Sonata replied, checking her phone and typing something on it.

“About what?”

“The band, obviously.”

“Obviously, but why are—”

“Do I always have to spell everything out for you?” she finally glanced up at him, exasperation shaping her pretty face, “We’re about to record the new album, and we’re going to milk it for all it’s worth. We’re shooting an interview here to give the fans something to drool over while we finish it.”

“But why are we doing it *here*?” He had been viewing this time as a vacation, a welcome break from his music. Sonata was violating his sacred ground.

“It’s a beautiful location, and Tamsey is letting us use it for free. So why not?”

“But Charlotte’s here.”

“Charlotte?” Sonata grasped the front of his shirt and pulled him closer, “Matt, I don’t care about *Charlotte*, and if she ever dares get in the way of my job, I’ll make sure she’s not in the way of yours, either. Understand?”

“You’re jealous of her, aren’t you?” he said, his eyes prying into hers. He grinned. “You hate me right now.”

“Frankly, I’m surprised you’re still speaking to her after spending the entire night and morning with her. She must be pretty special.”

He shrugged. “Well, she’s pretty, at least.”

“Yeah, sounds like a keeper,” she sneered, “Anyway, tell the guys to meet me in the living room in five minutes. We have some things to discuss.” She followed the last of the crew to the back, and Matthew wandered the expansive house to locate the other three Freeflight members.

He had nearly forgotten about the upcoming album. He hadn’t even begun to think of general ideas for songs, much less written anything. Once he had reached this point where he could live off the proceeds from the music that was already out there, the motivation to make more by a certain deadline just didn’t seem necessary. Sure, he liked having fans, and new music kept them interested, but their latest album had been released a mere year ago. They could at least get by with waiting a few more months.

“Here’s the deal,” Sonata began when they were all grouped together in the living room, “We need to give the fans something different this time around, so when you’re asked about the new album, say it’ll have a different sound and leave it vague.”

“Shouldn’t we talk about that before anything’s decided?” Jordan brought up.

“What do you think we’re doing right now?” she answered, silencing him with a look, “You guys will hit a point in your popularity where you’ll stall and start descending if you beat your current style to death. You don’t want to do that, do you?” A smattering of timid head shakes moved around the room. “Right. I have some ideas that I’ll tell you about later. Obviously you don’t have to take them, but that’s not important right now. All I’m saying is not to give specific answers, because you can’t promise anything.”

Matthew crossed his arms. “So what *will* we talk about in this interview, then?”

“The tour. And yourselves. People know who you are, but you need to build personas they can really invest in and fantasize about. Characters, if you will.”

“You want us to make up crap about ourselves?” Dameon said skeptically, looking incongruous in a high double-winged armchair.

“You’ll still be yourselves...mostly. Except you – you might want to make up some attractive qualities seeing as you don’t have any.”

Her brother called her something that made Matthew instinctively look around for Amber to see her wince, but she wasn’t there. She would probably hate this whole idea anyway. “So you’re selling us now, not just the music,” he said.

“I’ve always been selling *you*,” she said with a satisfied smile at him, “But I want to do the whole band more. You’ll still be the centerpoint. In fact, I was planning to put even more emphasis on—”

“Hey, wait a second. We’re part of Freeflight too!” Dameon interjected, “Matt needs a band to do his thing—”

“You’re replaceable,” Sonata said coldly. Matthew flinched, even as pride tingled down his spine. He knew he was truly the reason Freeflight had the edge over the other bands, but Sonata didn’t have to be so blunt about it. It must have run in the family.

There was a bite to the air in the room. He tried not to make eye contact with the others. “They’re not replaceable, Sonata,” he had to say. Otherwise, she might have had a mutiny on her hands.

“Fine, sorry,” she said without feeling, “Anyway, none of you are allowed in front of that camera until you’ve been prepped, and your wardrobe has been chosen for you. That manservant, what’s-his-face, should be taking the clothes up to your rooms right now.”

In earlier years, the mention of a wardrobe would have been met with groans and viewed as a threat to their masculinity. Now that they were more often in the public eye, they approached stylish clothing with something close to enjoyment. But Matthew still balked from the standard interview makeup, even though it was only a basic foundation. Makeup was for women. Despite the fact that several men in his area of music wore eyeliner, he had long ago vowed to himself that he would never be one of them.

“Looking good,” Amber said when she encountered Matthew on his way to be interviewed.

“Shut up,” he said, “And stop smiling like that, it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Matthew Wolfe, uncomfortable? I didn’t know that was possible,” she said, grinning. He did look nice, dressed in dark skinny jeans and a fitted button-up shirt, his hair in perfect disarray.

“I’m wearing freaking makeup, of course I’m uncomfortable!”

“You can’t even tell.”

“I can. I can feel it blanketing my face and eating away at my beautiful skin—”

“You’re so weird,” she pushed him away, and he flashed her a grin before heading to the back patio.

She had just finished talking with Luke after his turn in front of the camera, and he had filled her in on what Sonata had said. The manager had something up her sleeve, a plan for the future of the band that most likely did not take into account the wishes of its members. Or at least *all* of its members.

But that wasn’t her primary concern. She was here for the future of Matthew, not his band. As the days she spent with him grew in number, she wondered if she should be more aggressive in trying to influence him. Did she have a limited amount of time? Was there a countdown somewhere ticking down to the instant when it would be too late to change anything? Was there a specific demise she was supposed to save him from?

Knowing what Grayson had told her helped. She had chosen this, and she was not alone in her endeavors. Though she had next to nothing, God was providing for her through others. But if she continued to have no effect on Matthew, would that provision stop?

As she walked past the open front door, she noticed Dave exiting the tour bus and realized she hadn’t seen him since the concert.

“Dave!” she waved when he turned around. He returned it before he opened the rear compartment of the bus where the band’s merchandise was kept. Amber helped him lug a couple of tubs from it.

“Thanks,” he said, wiping his hands on his jeans, “Sonata wants a few things for interview.”

“She wants all of them to wear their own faces or something? That’s kinda weird, right?”

“Yeah, who knows. All I know is that the stuff she’s asking for are at the bottom of the tub.”

“Of course.”

“Of course.” He hunkered down and opened one of the tubs, sighing as he did so.

“So where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you around,” Amber said.

“I’m not important enough to stay at the house, so I’ve been sleeping on the bus.”

“Seriously? That house is huge, I’m sure there’s somewhere—”

“It’s okay, I actually enjoy it, in a way. I don’t think I’d really like staying at the house, anyway. Kinda awkward.”

“Yeah, it is,” she agreed, “So what’ve you been doing all day, just sitting in the bus? You could’ve hung out with me – I’ve been going a little crazy being around Matt when he’s with Charlotte.”

“I’ve actually been out with Michael.”

“He’s around here too?” she glanced around for the sound technician.

“Yeah, he rented a car and we, uh, drove around.” Dave dug through the tub at his feet and pulled out several CDs. He stared at them and scratched his beard, lost in thought.

“Where did you go?”

“Oh, you know, nowhere, uh, specific,” he fumbled with the CDs, dropping them on the tiled driveway.

“Come on, Dave, I know you get nervous when you’re hiding something.” Amber squatted down with him and handed him a CD.

He sighed, taking it. “Fine. I’ve been thinking of quitting.”

“I wouldn’t blame you. How many times has Sonata fired you so far?”

“Lost count.” He gave a wan smile. “But I’m thinking about starting my own merchandising business.”

“I thought you didn’t enjoy this job.”

“I don’t enjoy working with Sonata,” he said, “But I’ve always liked the design side of things. Like designing t-shirts, and doing the graphics you see on posters and stuff, you know? So today I was talking to a guy Michael knows in town who has some connections with some other bands that I might try to design merch for. And then I thought, if I quit, maybe you could take over the merch table!”

“I don’t know about that...”

“You’ve been a great help on the tour. You pretty much know everything you need to know, and the guys know you.”

The thought of something as permanent as a job terrified her. She had been living day to day, expecting at any moment to remember enough about her own life to allow her to leave, or at least get out from under Matthew's provision. Forming an attachment like a job meant letting go of the idea that she was only stopping by. Was this how it was going to be for the rest of her life?

"There's no telling how long I'll be here," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dave paused in his search for whatever else Sonata had requested in the other tub.

"I have no control over my life."

"I think we all feel that way," he chuckled.

She straightened and replaced the tub he had finished with back on the bus. Was it worth explaining everything to him just to gain sympathy? No, she didn't need sympathy. No one needed to feel sorry for her.

"I'm just saying there's no telling how long I'll be here," she said.

Dave frowned. "You're thinking of leaving?"

"No, no, I just...circumstances are weird. I don't know. It's a long story."

He took out a rolled poster and replaced the other items, then pointed the roll at Amber. "We've spent the entire month together, and you haven't told me this story?"

She loaded the other tub to avoid his eyes. "It's complicated." She moved to close the hatch, but Dave grabbed the handle before she could. He shut it with a snap.

"I get it," he said amiably, "Gotta say I'm pretty good at listening, though. If you need that sorta thing."

"Thanks," she hugged him, forcing him into a slightly awkward embrace with his hands full of merchandise. "Oh, sorry—"

"No, that's okay—"

"But really though, I appreciate it."

For some reason, he appeared flustered. "Yeah, uh, any time. I know you're tight with Matt and all that."

"Not quite the listening type, though."

"True," some of the nervousness left him as he grinned, "Anyway, I better, uh, get these to Sonata," he held up the poster and CDs, "See you later?"

Amber nodded, and as he walked towards the house, she called impulsively, "I lost my entire memory."

He turned. "What?"

"That's the long, complicated story," she raised her hands and dropped them. "I don't know who I am."

He opened his mouth slowly. "So you—"

"Dave!"

He cringed like a beaten dog at Sonata's sharp voice from the front porch, hesitated, and trotted away from Amber. Suddenly feeling foolish at her declaration, she rested her forehead

against the warm exterior of the bus and sighed. It wasn't her fault that she had a missing memory, so why did she feel like an idiot every time she told someone? First Matthew, then Luke, and now Dave. She should just keep her mouth shut.

"So you're saying you didn't like it?"

"The process was stupid. I would get on a roll talking about something—"

"About yourself, you mean."

"Well yeah. And then Sonata would cut me off and tell me that fans didn't want to know that."

"Like how you giggled for ten minutes that one time because of that stupid cat video?"

"Shut up, everyone likes cat videos."

"But you were *giggling*."

"Was not."

"I'm pretty sure 'heeheehee' qualifies as giggling."

"I did not laugh like that! You sound like a drunk hyena."

"So do you, when you giggle."

Matthew slapped a card down on the bed and drew one from a pile sitting between him and Amber. "Anyway," he said pointedly, "all Sonata wanted me to talk about was the same stuff I've been saying to fans this entire tour. I'm saying stuff people already know."

"What, like how you suck at this game?"

"You're just getting lucky! I'm glad we did this interview thing, though. It focuses more on us as a band instead of the tours and music we've been doing."

"Yeah, focusing on your music would just be terrible. Oh look, I win. Again."

Matthew dropped his cards in defeat. "Probably cheated. And what's wrong with promoting ourselves? People will more likely keep up with us if they *like* us."

"I guess. But don't you ever get tired of being sold like a car or like...like a sex object?"

"I am what I am."

"You're more than a sex object!"

"Amber, look at me," he gestured to himself with a smugly crooked smile, "When someone meets me, the first thing they notice isn't my 'great personality—'"

"You'd need to have one for that," Amber muttered.

"—it's my astonishingly good looks—"

"Please tell me you're at least a *little* joking right now."

"—and *then* my great personality, and yes, I might be exaggerating my redeeming qualities just a bit. But only a bit!"

Amber shuffled the cards and put them away. "Sometimes I wonder how I could ever take you seriously."

"Come on, you can't tell me that the first thing you noticed about me wasn't my looks!"

"Well obviously I saw you before I got to know you, so I—"

“And then after you got to know me, you thought ‘wow, his looks really are the best thing about him.’”

“Am I detecting a hint of self-deprecation?”

“No.”

“No, I think I am. Why did you say that?”

“Look out, I think your psychiatrist is showing. How immodest of you.” He dodged the pack of cards that careened towards his head. “Hey, watch it.”

“Sorry for trying to build a meaningful relationship,” Amber said sarcastically.

“I bet Charlotte is building a ‘meaningful relationship’ with Loren right now,” Matthew said glumly, all sorts of scenarios flashing through his mind. They had probably just finished an expensive candle-lit dinner, and were now heading to some romantic lookout point over the ocean...

“You’ve known her for one day, Matt. Did you really expect her to be exclusive for you?”

Amber was being obnoxiously reasonable again. He let out a noncommittal grunt.

“I’m surprised you wanted to hang out with me,” she said, “I thought you would’ve sought out Sonata to cure your loneliness.”

“I hate Sonata right now.”

“Fair enough.”

Matthew slid off of the bed. “I’m going for a run.”

“You okay?”

“Yes, Amber, I’m fine,” he said, giving her a patronizing pat on the shoulder.

“Okay, okay, I’ll never ask again, geez.”

Matthew foraged for a sleeveless shirt in his bag and pulled off the one he was wearing.

“Whoa, a little warning next time, maybe?” Amber held her hand up to block him out.

“You know you like it.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to take off your pants too—”

He ignored Amber as he changed into shorts and located his tennis shoes under the bed.

“—or yeah, okay, that’s cool.”

“Be back later,” he said as he left.

The noise of his thoughts was so loud that he couldn’t hear Amber’s reply.

As Matthew passed through the gate of the Tamseys’ estate and jogged up the drive, he saw Amber talking to Dave outside the bus. Then he noticed an unfamiliar blue sedan idling in front of the door. He heard Charlotte’s coy “good night” before her blonde curls erupted from the passenger door, and she blew a kiss to the driver before she entered the house. Matthew shrank into the shadows as Loren’s car passed him, tires crackling on the cobbled drive.

Maybe one more lap around the block wouldn’t hurt, he thought. Setting his jaw, he turned and began running.

When he returned, Amber and Dave were still conversing outside. As he watched, Amber laughed and put a hand on Dave's arm, and Matthew frowned as he felt a prick of envy. He had no reason to be jealous; he didn't care if Amber was making friends or flirting with people. She could do whatever she wanted – he had no romantic interest in her. And even if he did, he knew he could catch her under his spell within ten minutes if he tried.

Shoving the unwanted feeling underneath a layer of pride, he slowed as he approached them. By the time he reached them, they had finished their conversation, and Dave had vanished into the bus.

Amber glanced over Matthew. He was breathing hard from his last spontaneous run around the block with a v-shaped stain of sweat darkening his neckline and his hair pushed back from his forehead. Matthew worried for an instant if she found him more attractive than usual at this moment, or if she found it unappealing. Then he stuffed that thought next to the jealousy.

"Have a good run, I take it?" she said.

"I guess. I saw you talking to Dave."

"Yeah?" she said slowly.

"You like him?"

"He's my friend—"

"But do you *like* him? More than that?"

She looked at him incredulously. "Why do you care?"

"I don't know, I could hook you guys up or something."

"You don't even talk to Dave."

"I could."

She laughed. "You don't have to set me up with anyone. I'm fine."

"You've hung out with the band this entire time, but you haven't made a move on any of us."

"Well, let's see," she said, ticking off her fingers, "Luke is married, Jordan doesn't like me for some reason, Dameon is...Dameon, and you always have at least three girls in line to make out with you. So can you blame me?"

"What about Dave?"

She just rolled her eyes. "So what's up with you?"

His breathing had slowed down a bit by now, and he managed to say in a very smooth, nonchalant voice, "What do you mean?"

"The more you need to think about something, the harder you run," she nodded to his sweat stains and heaving chest, "So?"

He didn't bother denying it. How did she know these things? "Just needed to clear my head."

"What was fogging stuff up in there?"

He let out a short chuckle and shook his head, but when Amber didn't shift her gaze, he blew out a sigh and put his hands on his hips. "I don't want to tell you about it because you see me as someone to fix."

"I see you as a human being with problems you don't talk to people about. I'm not pretending to have all the answers."

"Though you do always seem to know what you're doing."

"Wanna know a secret?"

"Okay."

"I have *no idea* what I'm doing," she said with a grin.

"You're doing well without your memory."

"Yeah, well...think of it this way. Based on previous experience, I could very possibly forget everything you tell me anyway, so..."

He laughed, and at the same time he realized he didn't want her to forget. Not to forget how they met, not to forget the things they had done – things abnormally free of regret for him – not to forget everything he had said to her. Not to forget him. Whether or not it was easy to admit, it was nice to have someone out there that knew what was in the dirt under his fingernails, and around whom he didn't have to bury his words of weakness.

He was getting so sentimental these days, about a *girl* no less. No, not just a girl. A friend.

Great, he just did it again – he sounded like one of those romance novels with the wistful women on the front.

But Amber didn't have an agenda to piggyback off his fame or get in his bed. The most cynical part of him insisted that it was all a ruse to do just that, but standing in front of her and meeting her eyes silenced that stubborn nagging.

"Fine," he said over his internal monologue, "fine, I'll tell you." He considered finding a place to sit, but it would only encourage him to make his explanation longer. It was better to keep it short. He settled for leaning against the bus and crossing one ankle over the other.

"I know I come across as confident – what?" he said at Amber's expression. "Okay, fine, 'arrogant,' but it's because people have shaped me that way. I mean, who likes a sexy rock star who's meek and complacent about their looks? People *want* me to play it up, so I do. I wouldn't do it if they didn't give me the fuel, you know? And what're you supposed to do with good looks if not use them?"

"Can't say I've ever had to face that horrifying conundrum," Amber said with good humor, "But go on."

"But the flipside to that view is that it's all people see you as. Everyone you know sees you in the context of your celebrity status combined with their personal relationship with you."

"Like what?"

"Like fans obviously see the cool, charming, excitingly rebellious guy. The band, thanks to Sonata, sees me as an attention whore. And Sonata, even though we're really close and care about each other – don't give me that look, Amber – she often sees only money. She's great when we're not doing Freeflight stuff, but that's not very often."

"What about Charlotte?"

He shrugged, trying not to visualize her with Loren again. "She's nice. We get each other. But at the end of the day, we're not much more than each other's conquests. Just like Loren is. Was. I dunno."

"And I just see you as a project, right?"

"I didn't mean that," he mumbled.

"Just so you know, if you were only a project," Amber said, "I would've given up on you and left by now."

Her smile was infectious, and he returned it. "Thanks for sticking around, then," he said.

She leaned against the bus beside him, their shoulders touching. "So running cleared all of that up for you, did it?"

He snorted. "Actually I don't think it did anything."

"I think it did something." She tilted her chin to look at the stars.

"Oh yeah?"

"It turned you from a smug, closed-off idiot to a pleasant companion who's manly enough to talk about his feelings."

"Well if that's how you really feel..."

"It is."

"Can you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Could you fangirl a little bit?"

"Over *you*?"

"Yeah, just a little!" He straightened as she burst out laughing. "Just a little!"

"I don't think I can," she said, wiping tears of merriment from her eyes, "Not with what I've seen."

"And what have you seen that fans don't know about, huh?"

"People fangirl over idols," she said, sobering, "You're not a god to me, Matt. You're just a person."

"Just a person," he repeated. How he longed for people to see him that way! But then again, where was the fun in that? No one cared about "just people." He was someone important. His clothes and other items had been sold on the internet for thousands of dollars, simply because he had used them or signed them.

And yet there was Amber, now walking away from him with a simple "good night," not over-valuing the fact that they had touched, had a private conversation, laughed together.

He didn't want thousands of dollars. He already had money. He didn't care if he was being sentimental: he wanted *her*.

"Amber!"

She turned.

"Sorry I tried to kiss you earlier. It's a bad habit."

She smiled. "It's okay."

"I know I'm sweaty and disgusting right now, but could I get a do-over for that hug?"

“Of course,” she said, coming back, “I was about to take a shower anyway. And despite my aloof demeanor, I do enjoy a hug from a rock star every once in a while, you know.”

They lingered in the embrace for a minute, saying nothing to break the faint song of crickets in the landscaped bushes. Matthew had no urge to kiss her this time, content enough to know that one was not required to keep her there. A refreshing thought.

“You smell like sweat,” she said into his shirt, then pulled back. “But to be fair, you did warn me.”

“What, not attracted to my – what do they call it? Musk?”

“That’s gross.”

“You don’t like my ‘scent?’”

“Just stop.”

“Of course, now you smell like it too.”

“I know, that’s why I’m practically running towards the house now...”

They continued to banter as they returned to the house, back to the voices, showers, and air conditioning. And back to Charlotte.

Standing on the balcony connected to her room, Amber took a deep breath of the mid-morning air and let the sunlight warm her face. From below, she could hear indistinct chatter as the band loaded their things onto the bus. They were finally leaving Stone Bluff and the Tamseys, and Amber was looking forward to Matthew’s more comfortable, if smaller, home and the private beach it watched over. No more cramped bus quarters, no more constant proximity to band members – besides Matthew, of course, whom she didn’t mind – and no more deceptive and doting Charlotte.

How had Amber managed to go on tour with the premiere rock band of its day? It still hadn’t completely registered, except for the times when she had to face frantic fans while working with Dave or when she could peek from the wings of a stage and see the bubbling swamp of people heaving towards the stage, feverishly gravitating towards the band, towards Matthew. Here, at a place like this, or on the bus, off their pedestals, they were simply men.

“You’re finally getting it.”

She jumped at Grayson’s voice and turned to see him standing in the shadows of the doorway to the balcony, a stamp of gold light illuminating half of his face. His gray eyes seemed to reflect it back at a higher intensity.

“Getting what?” she asked, willing her heart to calm after his sudden appearance.

“What you’re supposed to be doing. What you did last night was important.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Amber moved back inside the room, in case someone saw her on the balcony and wondered who she was talking to. She accidentally brushed Grayson, prompting an involuntary shiver. Whatever gave him breath was not worldly, and it saturated his entire body. He may have had blood rushing through his veins, but it didn’t give him life. If he really was an angel, he probably didn’t even need a physical body. How did that work, anyway?

“Since you’re an angel,” she said into the silence, “Does that mean you’re my guardian angel?”

“Man’s perception of a ‘guardian angel’ isn’t quite accurate,” he said, not moving from his place at the threshold to the balcony. “Our purpose is not to follow you around and save you from car crashes and armed robberies. If a man is supposed to survive those events, he will, whether we are there or not. Our protection and assistance is more of a spiritual nature and mostly unseen by humans.”

Amber had never heard him offer so much information at once. “Oh,” was all she said, afraid to ask for more. Could angels get irritated? Did they feel at all? *He’s not even close to human*, she had to keep reminding herself.

“And you are not my only charge,” he added.

“Charge?”

“Yes.” He appeared to be finished explaining himself, and for a moment he wordlessly appraised her as she closed her suitcase. His gaze wasn’t prying or awkward, but Amber found herself staring back at him. It occurred to her that he had answers that humans had sought after for millennia, but he would likely offer very few of them.

“Amber.” Her name sounded so personal from his lips. Why was that? “When the Almighty told you to guide Matthew, what do you think he meant?”

She wasn’t expecting such a deep and difficult question. “Uh,” she stammered, her eyes dropping from his, “I don’t know...tell him that a lot of the stuff he does is bad? Help him not to be so fake all the time?”

“All of that is good, but you’re missing the big picture. When it comes down to it, you can’t save him.”

She sat on the bed. “I know that, I guess. But then why am I here? Why go to all this trouble?”

“To lead him to the one that can.”

“If I start trying to talk to him about God, he won’t listen. He wants nothing to do with God.”

“Talking isn’t always enough.”

“So what do I do then? Drag him to a church?”

He shifted at her flippant tone, and Amber once again noticed how muscled his arms were as he crossed them over his chest. He was built like a warrior, not to mention whatever angelic things he could do. Why the heck was she being anything but diplomatic around this guy – er, angel?

Brilliant, Amber, just go ahead and joke around. He’s just, you know, an angel.

Her thoughts must have registered in her expression, because his face softened slightly. “Don’t be afraid,” he said, “I’m only an ally and a messenger.”

“You have to admit, you’re pretty intimidating,” she said sheepishly.

“This is not my world,” he replied, but did not elaborate.

“So, um, what were you saying about Matt? What should I do?”

“Show him.”

“Show him...God?”

“Show him what he needs. Be an example.”

“Of...”

“The love of Christ.”

The phrase sounded so epic, voiced in the angel’s deep, authoritative tone. Amber wished she could always think about it in the same way. “I can barely get him to listen to me, much less wait for him to ask me why I care about him. And even if he did, he wouldn’t understand the answer.”

“When a soul finds what it’s been missing for its entire life, it doesn’t have to fully understand it to know it’s what it needs.”

“He doesn’t think his soul needs *anything*. So he’s not looking.”

“That’s your job, Amber. Expose him to his need.”

“But how?” she insisted, desperate for a hint, advice, anything.

“Expose him to his need,” Grayson repeated.

“All packed up?” Luke asked, startling her. He waited at her door, his own bag in tow.

“Y-yeah,” she said, picking up her suitcase and glancing towards where Grayson had been. But, of course, he was gone.

The inside of the bus was cramped and stifling after the luxury of the mansion. Amber sat near the front, returning Dave’s smile as he settled into the driver’s seat. Luke boarded shortly after and sat next to Amber, opening his laptop. Dameron was already established at the corner of the other couch, eyes squeezed shut as he tapped a pair of sticks against the cushion, playing along to whatever song he was listening to through his headphones. Amber was hardly looking forward to hearing *that* the entire way back to Kalupto Point.

Tap tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap tap.

Jordan said a few choice words as he got on, and merely jabbed a finger towards the windshield when Luke asked what was wrong. Amber looked to see Matthew and Charlotte sharing a prolonged goodbye kiss, oblivious to Charlotte’s dog Leo barking around their legs.

“At least she’ll be gone,” Amber said to Luke.

“Only to be replaced by another,” he sighed, turning back to his computer.

Tap-tap tap-tap tap. Tap tap.

She sank against the cushions, staring up at their reflections in the mirrored ceiling of the bus. Luke was right: nothing had changed. She had stuck around for a month, and what good had she done? Made some friends and helped out a merch guy? But Matthew was her mission, her reason for being here, and he was still the exact same, making out with girls left and right with no motivation to do otherwise. She hadn’t helped him at all. What was she supposed to do, be more aggressive? It would probably just push him further away. Besides, where would she even start? Sure, he led a lifestyle she would never begin to consider for herself, but what could *she* do about it?

Tap tap tap-tap.

"I'm so useless," she groaned, crossing her arms on her raised knees and resting her forehead on them.

She felt Luke's comforting pat on her shoulder. "I think you're having more of an effect than you realize."

Tap-tap-tap-tap tap. Tap.

Before she could ask him to explain, Matthew's passionate farewell had ended, and he was brushing past them, smelling like Charlotte's cherry perfume. As the door hissed closed and the bus eased into gear, Matthew swiped Dameon's sticks and dropped into a seat, idly twirling them in his fingers and ignoring Dameon's various curses, which turned into mutinous pouting.

Amber leaned her head back to gaze outside, wondering why if the bus was moving, she felt so stagnant.

"It's nice to see you again, Sonata."

"You too," Sonata said automatically, glancing around at the cluttered office. Books on everything from famous bands to music theory competed for space with golf memorabilia and pictures of classic cars in the built-in bookshelves along the walls. Both the shelves and the mahogany desk were dusted with a layer of loose papers and mint wrappers. The mess made Sonata's fingers tingle with the desire to sweep it all into the overflowing trash can by the window, but she ignored the sensation, focusing on the man behind the desk.

Roger Dunlow cracked his knuckles and leaned back in his leather executive chair. "Usually, I would spend a few minutes talking about the weather or the downfall of the latest celebrity burnout, but I know you prefer immediately getting down to business."

"I prefer it that way in more than one area of my life, yes," she smiled her predator smile, "as you know."

He flashed his even teeth in a grin. "That I do. Now, what's going on with Freeflight these days?"

After taking a few minutes to briefly describe the tours, interviews, and performances that the band had been involved in over the past year, Sonata straightened and crossed her hands in her lap, giving Dunlow the full intensity of her gaze. "I think they need to go in a different direction, and that's where I need your help."

"What sort of different direction?"

"They've owned the rock scene for several years now. New fans trickle in, but not nearly enough to keep their momentum going. Meanwhile, all these mindless pop groups flood the market with their tried and true recipes for songs, stealing a substantial portion of consumers that *we* could be taking advantage of. I want to have Freeflight tap into that group."

He frowned slightly and stuck a mint into his mouth. "You want to make Freeflight a pop group? A micromanaged boy band?"

"Not entirely. They still need to retain a lot of their style in order to keep their current fan base. But if they add more of a pop sound in their music, they could start drawing from the

pop music listeners. I expect we'd lose a few fans to the adjusted style, but not enough to come anywhere close to the number of fans we would gain."

"You do realize that they can't be both a pop band and a rock band, right?"

She waved off his comment. "They'll be neither. They'll be a hybrid that will appeal to both sets of consumers," she paused at his skeptical expression, "Look, Roger, I'm not looking for a long-term plan here. Freeflight's run has been great, but sooner or later their peak will be over. They're good enough to keep a durable fan base of decreased but decent size for a while, but I won't have interest in still managing them by that point." She leaned forward. "I intend to squeeze as much money out of them as possible before people decide they're tired of them. Then I'm gone."

"I thought your interest in the band was sentimental," Dunlow said, unamazed at Sonata's declaration.

"What, because my brother's in it?" she scoffed.

"No, your little lover-boy."

"Oh, right." She examined one of her crimson-painted nails. "Matt's a worthy prize to be acquired, but he's been mine for some time. Even incredibly hot rock stars get boring after a while," she smiled again, but it faded quickly.

"So what do you want me to do about all of this?" Dunlow popped another mint into his mouth.

"Help me steer them, especially Matt, in that direction. You're producing their album. They'll listen to you."

"They're not going to turn pop all of a sudden."

"They're not turning pop. They just need to take a more...pop-like approach."

"Meaning...?"

"You're the producer, you tell me."

"Pop can mean a lot of things."

"Catchy lyrics, uncreative chord progressions, synthesized sounds, that sort of thing. Matt already writes about partying and girls and sex. With the right encouragement, he can just dumb down his stuff even more, and it'll be great. As long as it's addictive and appealing, that's all I need."

Dunlow readjusted his position in his chair. "I'm almost afraid to say this, but Matt is actually very proficient at writing songs when he puts his mind to it. Making him dumb it down will cause the band to lose one of its greatest assets."

"*Matt* is Freeflight's greatest asset, not his lyrics, not their music."

"Your efforts at throwing his sex appeal in people's faces *have* been pretty effective," Dunlow admitted, "I saw that magazine cover a few months ago."

"You should've seen the pictures inside," Sonata said smugly.

"Anyway, I have to agree with you that the pop industry certainly has a way of doing things that sucks people in, and Freeflight could utilize that, no problem. I'm just not convinced that the guys will go for it."

“Get Matt, and the others will be easy,” she said, “He’s the one to worry about. I’ll be working him on my end. Just think of something to do on yours, okay?”

They both stood up and shook hands. “So what do I get out of all of this?” Dunlow asked, raising his eyebrow.

“Besides another double-platinum record?”

“Well, yes. I was thinking something more...personal.”

She allowed her lips to curve slightly as she turned to leave. “I’ll think about it. See you again soon.”

As she left his office, Dunlow crunched a mint between his teeth. “I look forward to it.”

“I’m surprised you were willing to park your fancy car here for so long,” Amber said to Matthew as they headed across the back parking lot of the Oasis concert hall. “I didn’t know the tour was going to be that long.”

“This lot is kept locked and under surveillance, and it’s out of view from the road and main lot. Since the awning even protects it from the weather, I see no reason to worry about my baby.” He patted the Audi affectionately as he unlocked it. “Looks a little dusty, though.”

“I have a feeling that you love this car more than most of the girls you’ve slept with,” Amber commented, tucking her suitcase behind her seat and getting in.

He grinned but made no remark. The Audi growled to life and shot out of its parking space, darting around the bus and equipment truck and swerving onto the road through the gate. Amber was pressed against her seat as the car clawed its way past the speed limit.

“Yeah, I definitely needed this,” he said, noting the speed on the speedometer with satisfaction. “The bus drives me nuts.”

“And you’re probably going to drive *me* over a cliff, literally.”

“Relax,” Matthew took a hand off of the wheel to wave away her concern, and she flinched.

“Seriously.” She eyed the curving, two-lane road. “Can you slow down—”

“There aren’t any cliffs around here. I’m not going to drive off one.”

“I hope you get a speeding ticket.”

“Yeah, because those are *so* terrible. How will I ever afford the fine? I better slow down!”

“Shut up.”

The Audi’s engine dropped to a lower hum as Matthew eased the gas. “Better?”

“Thank you, I feel slightly less close to death now.”

“I’m a good driver, you know. Accident-free record.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Hey, you want lunch? There won’t be any food at my house. Edible food, at least.”

“Sure, I—”

Matthew turned right without slowing down, forcing Amber to brace herself. “What do you want? Burger? Mexican?”

“It’s kinda hard to think of food when you feel nauseous,” Amber said as the car wove around a large truck.

“On second thought, my groceries should be delivered by one o’clock. I’ll make a pizza.” He jerked the wheel again to reroute towards his home.

“You have your groceries delivered?”

“Of course. Going to the store would not be a fun experience. Can you imagine people mobbing me as I’m picking out avocados?”

“I can’t imagine you picking out avocados, to be honest.”

“I can be civilized,” he said with exaggerated urbanity.

“You have to be the most contradictory person I know.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Clouds were building on the eastern horizon as Matthew merged onto the highway. Heading south, Amber watched for glimpses of the ocean out her window, and the two of them rode for a while with only the radio playing quietly between them.

When Amber glanced at Matthew, he was mouthing the words to the current song, steering the car with two fingers on the wheel. Accident-free? Yeah, right.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” she said.

“So?”

“I just thought you would be a little put out after having to leave the love of your life or whatever.”

“Charlotte? She’s coming to visit tomorrow. She’s gonna stay at my house.”

Amber’s optimism fizzled. “That’s terrific,” she muttered. Not only was she failing to have any effect, but Matthew was going to get worse around Charlotte.

“Is that a problem?”

Amber chose to ignore the warning in his tone. “She hates me.”

“She’s like the opposite of you. Of course she doesn’t like you.”

“I’ve never even talked to her!”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Matt...”

“Are you mad that you won’t be the only girl staying at my house? That you won’t be special?”

“It’s not that—”

“Last time I checked, it was *my* house, and I chose to let you be my guest!”

“I know, and I’m grateful for that. But she’s just a girl you met three days ago. The newness is going to wear off and you’ll be at each other’s throats. You can avoid that heartache if—”

“You’re also a girl I just met. Does that mean you’re not worth knowing either?”

“No, I’m not saying—”

“Why are you making a big deal about this?”

Her words knotted in her mind and snagged on its corners. She clamped her mouth shut and stared out the window. She had a full view of the ocean now.

“Amber, come on. Why does this matter so much?” His voice had softened.

She still couldn’t decide what to say, but she looked at him. He gazed back. Sunlight from the sunroof crowned his head, giving a benevolent glow.

“Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“Please look at the road.”

He swerved intentionally. “What did you say?”

“Matt!”

“Fine.” He turned his head back towards the front. “You still have to answer my question, though.”

“Why?”

“I answer yours, don’t I?”

“Not always.”

“But sometimes. And that’s a lot for me.”

“Can’t argue that.” She chewed her lip, hesitant to ask the question that was eating at her. But what was the worst that could happen? He could get annoyed enough to kick her out, leaving her on the streets with no phone or money. But no, he would never do that.

“Random question,” she said, “Do you think God exists?”

“I’m not going to have that conversation with you,” he said in a bored voice.

“Just answer the question!”

“I don’t care enough to. Besides, you didn’t answer mine.”

“This has to do with it.”

“What? How – no, never mind.”

“Please?”

He sighed. “Then sure, God exists. Why not.”

“But if he did, you still wouldn’t care.”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never had a reason to care. When would I ever need God? I have everything I want.”

“Do you, though?”

“You’re trying to psychoanalyze me again—”

“Well maybe I need to!”

“My life isn’t perfect, but it’s close enough.”

She groaned and pounded her fist against the car door.

“Whoa, careful, this is a custom leather interior!” he warned.

God, there’s nothing I can say to him. He won’t listen, he won’t seek you out.

Matthew turned up the radio, but the next song was one of Freeflight's. He jabbed the power button off when his own voice began to blare from the speakers, and he slouched in his seat. "So what did any of that have to do with telling me why you're freaking out over Charlotte coming to stay?"

Amber leaned her head against the warm window. "I know I have to be here for a reason, and I thought it was to make some sort of difference in your life."

"Like the universe is trying to tell me something through meeting you?"

"Not the universe. God."

"Oh, of course," he rolled his eyes, "Because that's so much better than the universe, or karma, or coincidence. Maybe our paths just happened to cross. Does there have to be a deeper purpose behind everything?"

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Don't you want there to be?"

He was quiet for a moment. "So, in a roundabout way, you're saying you don't like the idea of Charlotte coming because you don't want me to make the same mistakes."

"Yeah."

"But what are these supposed mistakes I'm making? I don't see any of it as a mistake."

"You're trying to satisfy yourself with something that won't satisfy."

"I'm plenty satisfied. Have you *seen* my life?"

"I give up," she said. This task was impossible.

They had driven the rest of the way in silence, and now that his house was rapidly approaching, Matthew felt like he needed to say something to smooth the jagged end of their conversation. Amber could take things too seriously sometimes, but it had been a long time since someone had cared so much about him and had bothered to show it.

"I don't know what you count as helping me, but..." How personal was he going to make this? How honest? Screw it, she deserved honesty. "It's been nice having you around. I mean, you're a good friend. And I have trouble finding those." He wondered if she could detect his sincerity. He was used to plastering on his face whatever emotion he wanted, and he was sure he did it without even realizing it sometimes, the same self-assured expression for everything.

Amber smiled faintly. "Thanks." But she looked out the window instead of at him.

They pulled up to his house, but he parked on the driveway, peering at the clouds in the east and deciding that they posed no threat. Once they got inside, he sprawled on his leather couch with a contented sigh. He was home after a tour full of people who loved him and a woman who *really* loved him, and once his groceries were handed to him, he was going to make a delicious lunch and spend the day lounging on the deck of his oceanfront house and maybe washing his expensive sports car. His life would've been perfect if not for the impending wrath of Sonata when she realized he hadn't written a single line of lyrics for Freeflight's next album. Oh well, he would deal with that when he had to.

"Can you sit down? You're making me uncomfortable," he said to Amber, who was hovering around the kitchen.

"I'm bored," she said.

"We just got back!"

"It's weird," she said, sitting in the armchair, "not having any idea what I like to do. What did I do in my free time? Was I an outside, active person? Did I watch TV? Knit? Cook? Draw? Who knows?"

"You probably have some kind of amazing skill you don't know about."

"I doubt it."

"You would think you would've gotten your memory back by now, if you're ever going to," he said gently. Sometimes it slipped his mind that she was still rootless with nowhere to go. She functioned so well without her past that in a way, he envied her. Her history didn't matter, no matter what she had done. She had no regrets.

Despite his careless demeanor, there were still things he wished he had never done, things that stalked him at night when he couldn't sleep. Recently, an unusually heavy sense of guilt for something he'd done kept demanding his attention, but its source remained crouched in the shadows. He attributed his foggy recall to too much alcohol over the years. Whatever he had done, it had been long enough ago that its consequences had probably already come and gone, even though for some reason the guilt remained.

"I'm okay with it now," Amber said, "If I ever get it back, I'll get it back when the time is right."

There she went implying the whole "deeper purpose" thing again. Matthew mentally scoffed but kept his mouth shut as he got up and went to the fridge. Thinking of alcohol had made him crave a beer.

"Want one?" He held a second bottle up where Amber could see it.

"I'm good, thanks," she said.

"You could definitely use one," he said, shutting the fridge door and popping the top off of his beer.

"Why's that?"

"You need to loosen up some. I mean, you've been as busy as the rest of us on this tour. You deserve to kick back and indulge a little."

"I think if I did that, I might do something I'd regret."

Regret. He'd rather move on from that thought. He took a gulp of his beer. "I'm not saying to get drunk."

"Handling you requires *all* my wits," she said with a smile.

"You don't trust me?"

"In some matters, yes. In others having to do with self-control, not so much."

"I would never do anything to you."

"But if I had some alcohol in me, I might let you."

The mental image that her words conjured was somehow sobering. Matthew sat back down on the couch. "Oh," he said.

“But thanks anyway. And thanks again for being so generous with your house and food and all that. I hope you know how much I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, still thinking of the situation she had posed. Would he really not have the will to stop himself if the choice was up to him? Would he take advantage of someone like Amber? He didn’t exactly have the best track record of steely self-control.

For a moment, he had the unfamiliar sensation of being disgusted with himself. But it immediately dissolved when the doorbell rang. “Food!”

Once all of the groceries were put away, he pulled out the ingredients for a homemade pizza and called to Amber. “Hey, wanna see if your hidden talent is cooking?”

“Sure.” She joined him at the counter. “But please don’t sue me if I burn your place down. I don’t have any money.”

He laughed. “Well, you’d be burning yours down too. So I think I can trust you.”

But could she completely trust *him*? The answer was less clear than he wanted it to be.

The next day, Charlotte arrived like a wind storm. The moment Matthew opened the front door, she was all kisses and chatter. Amber and Matthew had been watching a movie while eating lunch, and when Charlotte saw her sitting on the couch, she dropped her bags.

“Oh my God, are you already seeing someone else?”

“No, no, she lives here,” Matthew said quickly. “You remember Amber? She was on tour with us.”

“What do you mean she *lives* here? Are you two that serious?” Charlotte frowned at him.

“It’s not like that. Will you just chill out?” He kissed her, but she remained unappeased.

“This ruins everything! She can’t stay here with us!”

Amber half-expected Matthew to throw her out right then and there, but he gave her an apologetic look before looking back at Charlotte. “I’m letting her stay here as a favor. I promise we’re not involved, okay?”

“You better not be,” Charlotte muttered, and kissed him for good measure.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay out of your way,” Amber said glumly, taking a bite of her sandwich.

“I’m starving,” Charlotte suddenly said, “Can you make me something like you made me that omelet?”

“There’s already another sandwich in the kitchen.”

“A sandwich?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Ew. You don’t have anything more...gourmet?”

“What if it’s a gourmet sandwich?”

“Oh, you’re so funny, Matty,” she said. “But seriously.”

“Here, I’ll make you something really fancy for dinner if you go with the sandwich now,” he said.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He kissed her. “Okay?”

“Okay.” She trudged towards the kitchen. “Oh, and can you put my bags in your room for me?”

“Yeah, Matty!” Amber said as he passed her.

“Shut up,” he said, picking up Charlotte’s things.

“So what’s on this sandwich?” Charlotte lifted a piece of bread suspiciously.

“Just your basic turkey and cheese with some toppings. You can add your own sauce,” Amber said.

“Are there *onions* on this?” Charlotte dropped the bread. “I’ll pass.”

Amber exhaled slowly and willed herself not to say anything. Had Charlotte become worse, or was Amber just less than thrilled at having her here?

Later that afternoon, while Charlotte was sunbathing on his deck, Amber joined Matthew outside where he was washing his car.

“Charlotte’s going to be disappointed that she missed the show,” she said wryly, indicating his shirtless top half.

“Oh, she’ll see plenty of it,” he said, scrubbing at the Audi’s front bumper.

“I really don’t want to know that.”

“Sorry.”

“So how long is she staying?”

“I don’t know. As long as she can, I guess. Her dad thinks she’s staying at a friend’s beach house.”

“Wow.”

“It’s more or less true. He doesn’t know how...adventurous she is.”

“She didn’t know I was going to be here, did she?”

“I didn’t think it was gonna be a big deal.” He wet his sponge in a bucket of soapy water.

“For such a ladies man, you sure don’t understand them.”

“Is it even possible to?” he joked. Amber watched him clean a wheel in silence, and he could tell she was thinking about something. She was always thinking about something.

“For a second, when she arrived, I thought you were going to make me leave,” she finally said.

“Amber, I’m not going to kick you out just because some girl wants me to. Are you actually worried about that?”

“A little,” she admitted, “You’re just so impulsive sometimes...”

He raised his head and eyed her over the glossy, half-cleaned hood of his car. “Look, you’re my friend, and your circumstances are a little crazy right now. I’m not going to make that worse.”

“Thanks,” she said, looking relieved, “You need help?”

“I’m okay. This is actually relaxing to me.”

“Okay, I’m gonna go back inside then. I might turn into a tomato if I stay out here much longer.”

“You could go tan with Charlotte and have some girly bonding time,” he teased.

“I’ll pass.” She turned to go back into the house.

A scream suddenly erupted from the direction of the deck, searing through Matthew’s ears. He flinched, and his ankle tangled in the water hose next to his feet. With a yelp, he lost his balance and toppled towards the unyielding pavement, his hands proving useless at breaking his fall. His head met the ground, and his vision flashed and curled into blackness.

“Look what you did!” Amber accused Charlotte, pointing at the unconscious form of Matthew slung haphazardly on the couch.

The blonde scrunched her nose. “There was a huge spider on me, okay?”

“But did you have to scream so loud?”

“It was enormous!”

Amber sighed and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a trembling hand. It had been an arduous task, dragging Matthew inside by herself, and Charlotte had been too panicky to help. A small lump had formed at his hairline, but it didn’t look too serious, and he would probably regain consciousness within a short time. It really hadn’t been Charlotte’s fault, and Amber shouldn’t have blamed her, but it made her feel better.

“Can you get an ice pack from the freezer?” she asked Charlotte, kneeling near Matthew’s head to get a closer look at the swelling.

“Get it yourself.”

Jaw clenching, Amber got up and located what she wanted in the freezer. When she returned, Charlotte snatched it from her and began soothing the swollen bump, caressing his face with her other hand and murmuring, “Poor Matty. You’ll be okay. Don’t want that bump to ruin your handsome face, do we...”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Amber said under her breath as she stomped out of the room.

When Matthew opened his eyes, the first thing that came into focus was Charlotte’s curtain of blonde curls. She was leaning over him with a worried expression.

“Thank God you’re okay!” she said, and kissed him in a way he did not feel like being kissed right after being hit in the head. Suffocated by her close proximity and perfume, he pushed her away with his hand and cursed as his wrist exploded with pain.

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte asked, lifting the ice pack from his forehead.

“Just get away,” he groaned. “Where’s Amber?”

Her eyes hardened. “I don’t know. Obviously she couldn’t care less about if you’re okay. Not as much as me, anyway.”

“Just get her.”

“Am I not good enough—”

“Charlotte!” He cursed again as the force of his own voice caused his head to throb. “I need to talk to her.”

“Fine!” She dropped the ice pack on his forehead, prompting a new burst of pain from that area, and disappeared from his line of vision. For a minute, he moaned quietly to himself as he explored the newly limited use of his left hand. Sonata was going to kill him.

Amber appeared and knelt by the couch. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“Awful. Where’s Charlotte?”

“Sulking under an umbrella on your deck. Why did you need to see me, anyway? She didn’t leave your side the entire time you were out.”

“What happened?”

“She saw a spider and she freaked out. You hit your head on the driveway, but I don’t think it’s too serious. The swelling’s already going down.” She touched the bump on his head lightly and he winced. “Sorry.”

“My hand and wrist hurt like hell.”

She examined it. “You must’ve landed on it. It looks pretty swollen.”

“Dammit,” he grumbled, “We’re about to record an album. There’s no way I can play guitar with this.”

“I’ll get some ice for it, too.” When she returned, she said, “Why did you tell Charlotte you needed to talk to me?”

“I had this dream when I was out.”

“Okay...?”

“About you.”

Her lips curled upward. “Should I be afraid?”

“No, no, it wasn’t weird or anything. It was actually pretty realistic. I was back in high school, and you were with me. We were friends, but I did something really mean to you. Like, I decided I wasn’t going to be your friend anymore or something, and I just...left. I felt really, really bad about it, but it was too late to do anything about it, so I just...didn’t do anything.”

“And this was a dream you just had?” Amber said in a strangely serious tone. “It wasn’t a memory?”

“How could it be? I didn’t know you in high school,” he said, confused.

“Right, of course. That was a stupid question.” She took the ice packs. “You should rest. I’ll go see if Charlotte’s forgiven you yet. She’ll probably come back.”

“Why weren’t *you* at my side the whole time?” he called after her teasingly.

For some reason, she blushed. “No reason.” She tossed the packs in the freezer and slammed the door with more force than necessary.

“What were you doing?”

“Nothing.” Her face was still pink as she hurried out of sight, ignoring his repeated question. He shrugged and closed his eyes, drifting into a light sleep.

“Hey Amber?”

She looked up from her journal to see Matthew at the threshold to her room. He leaned against the doorjamb woozily.

“You’re awake!” She got up from her bed. “What’s up?”

“Can you drive me to the doctor?”

“In your car?” His gleaming, scratch-free, custom-leather-seated, super expensive, high speed car?

“Uh, yeah, that’s typically how it’s done.”

“You let people drive that thing?”

“Only special people, when necessary.” He bent his wrist and winced.

“Ooh, I can drive!” Charlotte popped into view, taking Matthew’s uninjured hand eagerly. “Please?”

“No offense, but I have a feeling that Amber’s a better driver.”

Charlotte dropped his hand. “How can you say that?”

“I rode with you to your house, remember?”

“But Matt, I don’t...” Amber glanced at Charlotte, “I don’t, you know, remember how to drive.”

Charlotte snickered, and Amber felt her face flush. *God, why did you let me lose my memory? This is humiliating.*

“You probably would once you started,” Matthew said, “Like muscle memory or whatever. That still works for you, right?”

“I—maybe. I don’t know, I think you should let Charlotte do it.”

He sighed. “Fine, I don’t care. I can’t think through this headache anyway. Come on, Char.”

Still laughing behind her hand, Charlotte gave Amber a look that said “ha, I win!” and followed Matthew to the garage.

Amber saw him that evening when he showed up at her bedroom door again, his wrist and hand now bandaged. His hair was mussed and he still seemed groggy, but this time he stood without leaning on anything.

“That was a horrible idea,” he said without preface.

She couldn’t help but be amused. “What happened?”

“I almost died like eight times. She had no idea what she was doing. She was so...so...”

“Reckless?”

“Yeah.” He entered her room and flopped face down on the foot of her bed.

“Now you know how I feel when I’m in the car with you,” she said.

“At least I know what I’m doing! It’s completely different!”

“Whatever. So what did the doctor say?”

“Somehow I managed to sprain my wrist *and* a muscle in my hand, and it’ll take at least three weeks to heal, so that’s fun. And I probably had a mild concussion but it’ll be fine.”

Amber lifted his wrapped wrist to examine it. Only the last segment of his fingers peeked out from the bandage, tan against white. "Guess you can't play guitar with this."

"Yeah, it's a pretty bad sprain. Good thing the tour's over."

"What about recording?"

"Either Luke'll have to do my parts or we'll wait until it's better, I guess. Sonata wants it done as soon as possible, but she'll have to deal with it. Besides, she doesn't know that I haven't even started writing songs yet..."

"Matt! That's terrible! Aren't you going to the studio in a couple days?"

"I've been busy," he shrugged, his shoulders barely moving against the comforter.

"And how long were you supposed to have been working on this?"

"Well, I've been supposedly 'brainstorming' for two months now."

"But no storms in your brain?"

"Nope, not even a sprinkle."

"Sonata's gonna hate you."

"Nothing wrong with that," he turned over onto his back and looked at her. "You washed my car."

Amber suddenly became interested in the seam in her pillowcase. "So what?"

"Why?"

"The soap would've dried on it. I just rinsed it off—"

"No, you scrubbed the entire side I didn't get to. I looked."

She could feel her face turning red again. "It wasn't that hard."

"Even the wheels."

She didn't say anything.

"You didn't have to do that."

"I know."

"So why—"

"I didn't have anything else to do, okay?" she cleared her throat and met his gaze.

"Okay?"

"Okay." He sat up and massaged his bandaged hand. "I really don't understand you, but I kinda like it that way. Makes things interesting."

"Well as long as I make things *interesting*."

"You know what I mean! You know, I still feel bad about that dream I had. I would never really do that to you."

"That's good to know," she said with a half-hearted smile. Charlotte called from the living room, and he pulled himself up, staggering slightly before leaving. Amber stared at the doorway long after he had left. The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed that his dream wasn't a dream at all.

Maybe it was a memory.

The next morning, when Amber ventured into the living room after getting ready, she was surprised to find Matthew already awake, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts and sitting on the couch. Opened in his hand was the book that she had seen in his bag at Charlotte's house, the one where he wrote what he thought were his best songs. Creased sheets of notes were scattered on the coffee table and on the cushions next to him, but he was writing directly in the journal, the movement of his pen swift and deliberate.

Loathe to interrupt, she inched her way into the room along the wall. The great Matthew Wolfe was penning the next hit single of Freeflight – she thought this with a small amount of irony. Her movement caught his eye, however, and he lifted his head.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to distract you,” she said. “Finally writing for the album?”

He blew a piece of blonde hair off his forehead. “Maybe. If it's good enough.”

“Why are you up so early? I thought you and Charlotte would stay up long after I did.”

“We did. I just couldn't sleep.”

“Well I'll leave you to—”

“No, it's okay. I need a break.” He cleared the couch with a rustle of papers. “Sit.”

She did so, gesturing to the book. “Luke told me about your journal when I saw it in your room at Charlotte's.”

He snapped it shut defensively. “It's not a journal. I don't have a journal.”

Amber suppressed her amusement. “What is it, then?”

“A songbook.”

She couldn't see how that was any better than a journal, but she nodded. “Ah.”

“You're judging me right now.”

“No, I'm not!”

“I can tell.”

“So do you ever let anyone read the stuff in it?”

“Definitely not.” He brought it to his chest, faintly embarrassed.

“Just wondering.”

“Most of it is stupid, anyway.”

“That's not what Luke said.”

“What did he tell you?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Just that you write all the good stuff in there, the stuff you like.”

“Obviously I like all the stuff I write.”

“No one does!”

“What do *you* write in that journal you tote around, then?”

“Thoughts, notes, I don't know.”

He opened the journal again and gazed at the open page thoughtfully, quiet for a moment. Then he said, “I like to write more than people think I do. But most of it isn't Freeflight's style.”

“How so?”

“It's just not what fans expect from us, from me. It doesn't fit in with who we are.”

Amber wanted to say that he could change that at any time, but he wouldn't listen to her anyway. He would spout off something about how Sonata wouldn't go for it, or the fans wouldn't like it. Anything to keep the fans.

"So were you writing something for the album or just messing around?" she asked.

"I don't know yet." He read over what he had written, hesitated, then asked in an unusually timid voice, "Wanna read it?"

Heck yeah, she did! But she quelled her enthusiasm and said, "Are you sure? I don't want to ruin the exclusive, mysterious vibe you've got going on here."

"Take it before I change my mind!"

"Okay, okay."

Matthew pretended to engross himself in a sheet of song ideas, but every few seconds, he threw imperceptible glances in Amber's direction as she read his newest lyrics, attempting to gauge her reaction while appearing not to care.

Why did it matter what she thought, anyway? She barely knew her name, much less anything about songwriting. He had years of experience under his belt, and she had the memory span of a single month.

"This is amazing," she said.

But it wouldn't hurt to value her opinion.

She read over it again, and then looked up. "I've never heard anything like this in any of your songs. Have you always been able to write stuff like this?"

"I guess. I mean, that thing is full of songs like that one."

She flipped back a few pages, but he swiped it from her. "You're not that special."

She scowled. "I don't see what you're so afraid of."

"Songs can be really personal! Especially mine." He closed the book and fastened the strap that kept it together. "No one gets to know me *that* well. Not even you."

"You don't trust me?"

"I do, more than I trust a lot of people. But I can't just volunteer information about myself. The more people know about you, the more they can use against you."

"Is that what you're worried about?" she asked softly.

He sighed. "Don't start getting all touchy-feely again, it's not some crushing life issue that needs to be fixed. It's just life."

She pursed her lips. "I know, but hear me out. You like to keep things superficial because it's easier that way, right?"

"Sure."

"But have you ever considered that people don't stick around in your life because you treat them like you don't expect them to? Because you never even try to be vulnerable at all?"

"I don't feel like talking about—"

"No, listen. You can lie to me all you want and act like you don't care about what happens to you. You can tell me you feel like you're missing something and then pretend you

never said it. But if you want anything to change about your life, anything at all, you have to stop being afraid of feeling anything other than that weird blend of pleasure and regret from a one-night stand.”

“Amber—”

“But you’re so scared of feeling any pain other than headaches from hangovers because your lifestyle might lose some of its charm if you do. Maybe you need to lose something so you can gain something better. Ever consider that? Maybe you’re missing something because you’re so afraid of missing something.”

Matthew was at a loss for what to say after her unprecedented frankness. He took up his pen and twirled it in his uninjured hand, as if he were about to go back to writing, but she kept looking at him. She wanted a response.

“Where do you get this stuff?” he said with a forced scoff.

“From your eyes, and those looks that flash on your face when you think no one’s watching, and the little things you say in passing, and the way you say them. You don’t have to say anything, and I can still figure things out. Oh, and from that song.” She pointed to the book.

“That song had nothing about any of that.”

She shrugged.

“And you’re wrong about a lot of what you said. You don’t have me figured out at all.”

He was surprised that he wasn’t angry, not even a little. He wasn’t mad at Amber for trying to decode him, maybe because no one ever tried to, since they assumed they knew all there was to know. Amber probably knew him better than most people did, despite having met him only a month ago – how did that happen? That didn’t make sense – but she wasn’t content with that. There was nothing else to know about him, no puzzle to figure out. She was so desperate for one.

“Alright then, if I got everything so drastically wrong, I guess I should just give up.” She stood and headed to the kitchen. “Want some coffee?”

“Sure,” he said, amazed at her concession. That had been easier than he expected.

“Three sugars, no cream?”

“You know me!”

You know me. Just as he had finished telling himself that Amber didn’t get him, he had said the opposite out loud. But seriously, who remembered exactly how he liked his coffee? And how did she even know? She had never made coffee for him before. Who *noticed* things like that?

As much as he scorned them, her words stuck in his mind, clinging like spider webs no matter how hard he tried to shake them off.

Your lifestyle might lose some of its charm.

Amber was so obnoxious. Why did he even keep her around?

Maybe you’re missing something.

He jerked open the journal and started writing, scraping off the words in his mind and slapping them on the paper. Amber didn't say anything when she came back with two steaming mugs, simply placing his on the table and curling up in the armchair to sip at her own.

When he had no more words to write, he looked up at her. He should tell her. She liked it so much, she should know.

"That song you read," he said, "it was—"

"Matty?"

Charlotte was at the entrance to his room, standing almost shyly in one of his shirts, her long legs extending from beneath it. Memories of last night assailed him.

"I'm about to take a shower," she said, "Want to join me?"

Matthew made sure not to look at Amber, who was probably making a mock-gagging face. The offer was tempting, but the song at his fingertips was aching to be refined – or maybe that was just his wrist.

"You go ahead," he said. She stalked out of sight with a pout.

He swiveled his head towards Amber, whose expression told him nothing. "What were you saying?" she asked.

That this song was inspired by you.

"Never mind," he said, and chugged his coffee.

Matthew had never written so much in one sitting. He had conceived and polished two songs since early morning, and it was only noon. He was considering procrastinating this much on writing his future albums as well, if this was what it produced. He would actually have something to show Sonata and Dunlow tomorrow.

"I'm starving," Charlotte announced from behind him. After taking the longest shower in history, she had taken the entire morning to get ready in his bathroom. It would smell like girl for the rest of the day, but such were the risks of having women stay over. Ones that slept in his room, anyway. Not Amber.

"And I assume you want me to do something about that," he said, closing his journal.

"You still haven't cooked me anything."

"It's kinda hard to with one hand." He lifted his sprained wrist to remind her.

"That stupid injury ruins everything. Last night you almost clubbed me unconscious with it like five times." She planted herself next to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "So what was so important that you couldn't join me?" she asked in a bored voice.

"Writing for the new album," he said.

She perked up. "Really? Let me see!"

"Uh, they're not really ready for anyone to—"

"Are they in this?" She snatched the journal from his lap, his bandaged hand unable to prevent her.

"Don't—"

“Hmm, let’s see...” She opened it and flipped to his most recent page. “This one looks good.”

“Charlotte, I really don’t want you to—” He tried to grab it, but she danced away from him, giggling.

“It’s going to be heard by your millions of fans, so why not?”

He made a noise of exasperation, but resigned himself to letting her read it. More praise couldn’t hurt.

A frown gradually eroded her smile as she read. When she finished, she said, “I don’t get it.”

“What’s there not to get?”

“It’s just fancy gibberish. I don’t even know what some of the words mean.”

“It’s not gibberish. It’s...poetry, I guess. In a way.”

“Poetry?” She snapped the book shut. “*Poetry?* You’re not a poet, you’re a rock star. How are people supposed to like your songs if they don’t even understand what the hell you’re saying?”

“Did you even bother thinking about what it might be saying?”

“I shouldn’t have to. You can’t seriously be thinking about putting this crap on the album?” Either ignoring or not noticing Matthew’s offended expression, she dropped the book on his lap. “I’m going to go finish getting ready.”

He couldn’t see what else she possible had to do to herself. Gripping the leather-bound journal tightly, he stared hard at it like it was to blame. No one could be happy with what he did. His lyrics were either too bland or too eccentric, too vulgar or too soft, too cliché or too unique. Nothing was ever right.

With a sharp expletive, he hurled the journal across the room, where it hit the opposite wall with a dull thump and fell onto a shelf, knocking over the picture of his father. He stayed where he was, brooding, unaware of the pair of benign amber eyes that saw the whole thing from the edge of the hallway.

The wind whipped the lavender clouds into a froth against the pale sky, their edges gilded by the setting sun. Amber paused in her walk along the beach to admire a rip in the cloudy confection where the sun cut through like a sword being forged, radiating its glorious beams of gold in a concentrated dose. Around her, the wind whirled with unusual force, carrying a refreshing coolness and a hollow roar that blended with the sound of the ocean.

She enjoyed the alternating periods of evening relief and the fierce sunlight as the wind hurried the clouds along. It tugged at her too, but she was in no rush to get back. Charlotte’s incessant neediness and habitual treatment of her as a housekeeper had shoved her out of the house, and for the past hour, she had been strolling down the tideline and back, savoring the teeming solitude and silence filled with the background song of the beach.

She had been conversing with God – nothing eloquent or rehearsed, just voicing things as they surfaced in her mind. She was weary of having no memory and having no plans. Weary of

being constantly exposed to Matthew's antics and stubbornness. Weary of being bored and not being able to live her own life. This whole thing was like an extended vacation time with a difficult family member, and her whole life, whatever it was, was on hold. If she couldn't do anything to help Matthew, why was she still around?

Maybe she wasn't supposed to be. Maybe it was up to her to make the first move to get out of this.

But she couldn't simply leave Matthew. She liked him. They had formed an admirably strong friendship within a single month, though she knew that it wasn't a completely new one.

As Matthew's house came into sight, she noticed figures milling outside on the deck, much more than two. The farther she climbed the path up the bluff, the more she could hear the plodding bass of music, and once she reached the top, she saw cars parked along the road by Matthew's house.

He didn't say anything about a party, she thought as she squeezed through the cars on the driveway to reach the door.

The air inside was hazy with noise and the smell of alcohol. Amber stopped just inside the door and exhaled, beholding the room full of young people chatting, flirting, and drinking. Though she had no personal examples in her memory, she guessed that this was exactly how high school parties had been. Did these people ever grow up?

She found Matthew in the kitchen, bandaged hand around Charlotte's shoulders, the other pouring shots of vodka for the clot of friends around him. Amber didn't even try to get his attention – what would she say, anyway? It was his house, and he could do what he wanted. She navigated around a kissing couple and slipped outside to the deck. Out here, the breeze transmitted and mixed the conversations of the guests, then took them away across the ocean. She took a deep breath of the cleaner air and chose a position near the corner of the patio where no one was.

"I remember you."

She turned to see a familiar thin man with a goatee. His eyes glittered in a way that made her uncomfortable. "Uh, Nathan, right?"

"And you're Matt's girl."

She let his comment slide, examining him. He looked skinnier than she remembered, and his fingers were bony like bird feet. They trembled as he took a sip from his glass. Something wasn't quite right about him.

"I'm surprised he's made the effort to string you along for this long," he drawled.

"What do you mean?"

"You know him. He's not interested in long-term relationships, regardless of their nature." He spat bitterly over the wall.

"How well do *you* know him?"

"I've worked with him many times. You never truly know a man until you see him under pressure, and trying to get a decent album out on time gives a lot of opportunity for that."

“There’s more to him than people realize.” She fidgeted, scratching at the top of the deck wall with her fingernail.

“That’s what they all say,” he said.

Amber watched the fading sunlight glint on the surface of the sea, trying to tame her nerves. She didn’t remember Nathan making her this antsy.

“Yo, Nathan!” Matthew’s cocky voice boomed over the droning chatter. He was pulling a tipsy Charlotte along by the hand as he wove between party-goers. “No hard feelings, right?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Nathan said in an emotionless voice.

“It was Sonata’s decision, if you feel like hurting someone.” He laughed and moved away.

Nathan seemed unfazed by the entire exchange, and merely turned back to face the ocean, his wrists dangling over the wall as if he were too tired to support them.

“What was that all about?” Amber asked.

“Freeflight is recording their new album with Roger Dunlow instead of me for no particular reason that I know of. Traitors.”

“Um, I’m...sorry,” she mumbled awkwardly.

“Matt will get what’s coming to him.”

His words slid down Amber’s spine like ice cubes. “Why do you say that?” She was almost too afraid to ask.

He faced her, his eyes filled with something dark. “So will Grayson.”

Amber’s surroundings shrank, the sounds growing dim and distant. “What did you just say?”

“Don’t depend on him too much, girl, because he might never come back.”

“G-Grayson?”

“Yeah, your little helper?” he sneered.

She backed away from him, the summer breeze suddenly icy against her skin. Nathan made no move to prevent her as she turned and fled into the house, knocking into guests and pushing through circles of people until she reached her room. Thankfully, it was empty, and it could lock from the inside. She closed the door and buckled into a nervous ball on her bed. There, she fell into an uneasy sleep to the sound of raucous laughter, dance music, and the chill of Nathan’s voice still whispering in her ear.

Matthew awoke to a beam of sunlight striking him across his face, lancing through his abused brain like a hot knife. Groaning he rolled over to escape the pain but was impeded by someone in the bed next to him. Forcing his eyes open, he looked blearily at the sleeping woman, recalling flashes of her from the night before. What was her name again? He shifted onto his back, squinting up at the ceiling as he tried to remember. Right, Charlotte. Not a one-night stand. Charlotte, his...whatever she was.

Pleased with himself for recalling the details of his companion so quickly, he sat up, pausing a moment in order to allow his head to stop spinning. Then he threw off the covers,

pulled on some pants, and went into his bathroom. At his sink, he splashed some water on his face and studied himself in the mirror. His hair was disheveled, his eyes still swollen from sleep and a long night. A bruise was developing on his upper arm, and he couldn't recall why it was there. His eyes were dulled with the remnants of alcohol in his system, but there was something else that disturbed him about them. He couldn't quite grasp what it was, but they looked hollow somehow. Perhaps it was caused by the same thing as the shadows visible under his eyes: too many late nights and reckless partying. He seemed to look worse after each one.

Shrugging to himself, he left the bathroom, padded past Charlotte still sleeping on his bed, and ventured into his living room. It had looked better, but it was nothing the maid couldn't take care of when she came later in the day. He ignored the trash and dirty glasses as he went into the kitchen, browsing the refrigerator for something solid to settle his unstable stomach. Then the smell of coffee belatedly reached his groggy brain, and he frowned, looking at the coffee pot on the counter and noticing that there was already some coffee in it.

"I figured you would want something when you finally woke up."

Matthew turned to see Amber standing at the entrance to the hallway leading to the guest room, leaning against the wall, a mug in her hands. She was regarding him with a mixture of resignation and pity, not surprised at all to find him half-dressed and suffering from a horrible headache.

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable for a reason he couldn't fathom, he hid his reaction behind a sarcastic smile. "Sure, Amber, of course you can use my coffeemaker, go right ahead." He kicked the door of the fridge shut and went on a hunt for some aspirin. "Sometimes I think you forget this isn't your house."

"Sorry, I just thought you'd...never mind."

When he looked in her direction again, she had vanished back into her room, and he was left feeling uneasy. Gritting his teeth and wincing at the pain in his head, he found the aspirin and swallowed a few, willing the hangover to disappear. After standing in the empty, sunny kitchen for a minute, he glanced back at where Amber had been and then poured himself a cup of coffee. He hadn't meant to be snippy with her, but dealing with the effects of his night had put him in a bad mood. She could deal with it.

A few minutes later, Charlotte emerged from his bedroom, dressed only in her underclothes and a mostly-transparent top. Had she been wearing that last night? He couldn't remember.

"Hey," he said, smiling at her as he lounged against the countertop.

"Hey," she returned in a quiet voice. She looked a little better and more rested than he did, and when she came within reach, he pulled her close and kissed her.

"Sleep okay?" he murmured, drawing back and taking another draught of coffee.

"Yeah," she said, "You?"

He shrugged, aware of her eyes locked on him. The passion that had burned last night was still there, still evident beneath her gaze, and he was fully aware of it. But being short with Amber had broken whatever mood that had been lingering from the night before.

"You're meeting with your producer today, right?" she asked, pilfering the mug of coffee from his hand and taking a gulp.

He suppressed his irritation at her casual freedom. "Yeah. Shouldn't take long."

"Last night was fun."

"Yeah," he said, not sharing her mood.

She drew back. "You didn't have fun?"

"No, it was great. I'm just...tired." Matthew let out his breath slowly. He wasn't looking forward to seeing anyone associated with the band today, especially Sonata. She had been calling him the past couple of days, but he had never answered. She still didn't know about Charlotte or his injury, and she would be livid at both.

He unwrapped his hand and wrist and studied the swollen bruising that had formed. He couldn't even bend his fingers without his hand hurting. Gingerly massaging it, he moved towards his room. "Help yourself to whatever you want for breakfast," he told Charlotte.

"No omelet?" she pouted.

He didn't bother to stop and give her a reply.

Sonata stood with her hands on her hips and looked over the room where Freeflight was about to meet with Dunlow. The band *sans* Matthew was sitting on the modern furniture in Dunlow's studio, blinking drowsily despite it being early afternoon. She had been up since seven, taking care of the remaining details of the tour and meeting with Freeflight's business manager to cover costs and payments. She had also met with Dunlow again to make sure they were on the same page with where they were going to take the band.

"Partying hard last night, I take it?" she said to the room at large.

"It's Matt's fault," Dameon complained, "He was the one that threw it."

"Going to one of Matt's parties is never a good idea," Luke said, who looked a little more alert than the other two.

"Yeah, if you want to sit at home playing Scrabble instead," Jordan said. He seemed to be in a particularly foul mood as evidenced by his unstyled hair lying limp on his forehead, giving him the appearance of an ungroomed dog.

"I actually went on a date with my wife, if you must know," Luke said.

"Oh, that's so exciting," Jordan said sarcastically.

"Did you play Scrabble on your date?" Dameon quipped.

"Shut up."

"As entertaining as this is," Sonata interjected, "we need to get started. Does anyone know where Matt is?"

"I'm here, I'm here," Matthew said as he burst into the room, and he wasn't alone. The blonde woman that they had performed a private concert for trailed through the door after him, smiling appreciatively at the presence of the rest of the band and tossing her thick hair over her shoulder. Behind her was the Amber girl that he *still* hadn't gotten rid of. Was he trying to invoke Sonata's displeasure?

“Get them out,” she snarled without precedence.

“Relax, they’re just—”

“I will not have them in here, Matt.” She stabbed a finger in their direction. “Out. Now.”

Amber only stared at her with those insolent, muddy-colored eyes of hers, but Charlotte tilted her chin so that she was looking down her nose at the manager. “You can’t tell me what to do,” she said.

“I can, and I will. Unless you want to be groped by security, I suggest you leave.” There was no way a spoiled girly girl was going to defy her. Sonata glared back at Charlotte. “Do I need to repeat myself for the slow of hearing?”

“Just wait in the lobby downstairs,” Matthew murmured to Charlotte and Amber.

Charlotte bristled. “But—”

“Go.” He kissed her. “It shouldn’t take too long.”

Sonata made a mental note to drag out the meeting as long as possible.

Pouting, Charlotte stomped out of the room. Amber lingered to exchange a glance with Luke before following her. Interesting. *What sort of ties did she have with Luke?* Sonata mused. She would have to pry into that later – it might turn out to be useful.

“I don’t appreciate you toting your harem with you wherever you go,” Sonata chided Matthew as the door shut. “It’s growing by the week and it’s getting ridiculous.”

“I can bring them wherever I want!” he said petulantly as he dropped into an empty chair.

“This is a business meeting, not a make-out session.”

“Yeah, that was last night,” Dameon sniggered, until her glare silenced him.

With his two women gone, Sonata sharpened her focus on Matthew. Getting him to agree with her vision for the album would be easy, but she still need to be tactful. Ideally, he would think it was what he had wanted all along.

She cleared her throat. “Now that lover boy is here, we can—” she noticed the wrapping on Matthew’s wrist as he crossed his arms. “What’s that?”

He tracked her gaze to his wrist. “Oh, it’s sprained.”

“Sprained,” she repeated.

“Wrist and hand.”

“And how,” she said as she stalked towards him, “do you expect to record the album when you can’t play your instrument?”

The room was silent save for the clack of her heels against the hardwood floor. The rest of the band, watching with unblinking eyes, had long ago learned when to stay quiet, lest she turn on them next. They were so trainable, like pets.

The one ironically the least affected by her wrath, Matthew shrugged. “Luke can cover it.”

“So we’ll have to waste time for you to learn your part when we rehearse for the album kickoff tour? Outstanding.” She grabbed his hand and studied it. A bruise was creeping up his fingers, visible just beyond the bandage. “When did this happen?”

“Couple days ago.”

“And what stupid thing were you doing?”

“I fell on it.”

“You’re not exactly clumsy, judging by the gymnastics you do on stage,” she said.

He fidgeted. “Charlotte startled me,” he admitted.

Sonata called her something under her breath as she dropped Matthew’s hand.

“Seriously, Matt, she needs to go.”

“It was an accident—”

“I’m sick of your messing around with women interfering with your work,” she snapped.

“You need to get it under control.”

“What I do with women is none of your business.”

“It is when it screws with *my* business!”

“You don’t seem to have a problem when it’s you I’m doing it with,” he said snidely.

“That’s because I’m *in* the business, you idiot.” She took a deep breath. Now was not the time to fuel a fight. “Anyway,” she continued in a calmer voice to the room at large, “Now that you’ve had a few days off, hopefully you’ve come prepared to make some decent music. I trust Matt has some songs to start us off with?” She gave him a sideways glance, daring him to provoke her again.

“Yeah, I uh, brought the best ones.” He produced two folded sheets of paper from his back pocket.

“We moved more in a hard rock direction with the last album,” Sonata said, turning back to the others. “When Dunlow arrives, we can discuss this at length, but I suggest we try to reach out to a different audience with this one.

“Meaning...?” Jordan prompted.

“A lighter sound. Maybe with more pop influences.”

“Pop?” Dameon mimicked gagging.

“We’re not a pop band, we’re a rock band,” Jordan said.

“I’m not saying to go all out. Just enough to appeal to the pop-loving audience.”

“Why would we want to do that?” Dameon scoffed. “We already have the biggest audience of any rock band out there.”

“But don’t you want it to be even bigger?” Sonata raised her eyebrows with an enticing smile. “Why stop with what we have when we could have more?”

“We might disappoint some of our current fans, then,” Luke spoke up. His face, as always, was unreadable.

“There is absolutely no way Freeflight is going pop,” Matthew declared, “I think we all agree on that.”

“It’s ultimately up to you, of course,” Sonata faked agreement with a nod, “But even Dunlow thought it was worth consideration.”

“Wait a second. Are we working with Dunlow instead of Nathan Stevens because you can control Dunlow better?” Matthew said to her with a suspicious frown. He was being surprisingly astute today.

“Why would I want to control either one of them?” She straightened a crease in her blouse with an air of boredom. “I went with Dunlow because he has a better track record.”

“Not by much,” Matthew challenged.

“Last time I checked, it was my job to do the research,” Sonata said. “If you hadn’t been so busy running an out-of-house brothel—”

“Can we just get to the music?” Dameon interrupted.

“Yeah, we can figure out our ‘sound’ as we go along. It’s not that big of deal,” Jordan said sullenly, fingering a piece of his unstyled hair.

“Of course. Matt, do you thing. Dunlow should be here any minute.” Sonata sat in a chair and crossed her legs, maintaining a stiff posture. Things were progressing a little more roughly than she liked, but they would work out, as long as none of the band could see the strings attached to their limbs, the ones that she held in her hands.

“Right, so here’s the first one,” Matthew said, indicating the paper on his lap, “I was thinking maybe a fast start with electric guitar and then easing off at the start of the verse. But, um, here’s the words...”

Sonata listened as Matthew read out his lyrics in a halting voice, and the words stoked her temper. This wasn’t his usual style. Where had these lines come from? Certainly not from his head, not from the Matthew she knew.

Amber. The name dropped into her lap, and she had no doubt that the stupid girl had something to do with it. She was poisoning him, ruining him, awakening ideas in him that Sonata had long ago taken away.

She scanned the faces of the rest of the band, and they were just as she expected. Her brother frowned in concentration, doing his best to sort out what the lyrics meant. Jordan looked grudgingly interested, and Luke was nodding to himself. Luke *would* like this kind of crap.

It was time for damage control. “You said this was one of your best?” she said over a comment that Dameon was making when Matthew was done. “I’d hate to see what the other ones were, but they couldn’t be much worse, right?”

Matthew put a hand over the sheet of paper protectively. “Are you joking?”

“Are *you* joking? Those lyrics are on the other side of the spectrum from what we’re looking for.”

“I liked them,” Luke piped up.

“Shut up,” she said, and he shrank back.

“Last time I checked, you weren’t in the band,” Matthew said.

“I’m a part of the band as much as the rest of you. I do all the behind-the-scenes work after all. And as your manager, I’m supposed to ensure that you don’t make stupid decisions, and that song, Matt, is a stupid decision. What else do you have?”

Shaken, he shuffled papers. “Just this one—”

“Just one more?” Sonata leaned forward.

“Er, yeah.”

“Matthew Wolfe,” she raged through clenched teeth, “I told you to work on—”

“I know, I know. Save it,” he snapped. “I’ve been busy.”

“*Busy*—”

“Yeah. I’ll get the other ones done soon.”

“We have to start recording—”

“I get it—”

“There is no way we can stay on schedule now—”

“It’ll be fine—”

“The album needs to be out by October!”

Matthew shrugged, and Sonata suppressed the urge to wring his neck. He couldn’t be mad at her, not if he was going to listen to her later. She breathed in slowly through her nose and smoothed her skirt. “You have one day to write some songs. Some decent ones. If you don’t come through, we’ll get someone to write them for you. Do you understand?”

Matthew crumpled the sheets in his hand and stood up, ignoring Dunlow as the producer entered the room. With a muttered curse, the singer stomped out of the room, leaving a trail of anger wafting behind him. Sonata caught Dunlow’s eye and shook her head. Her plans hadn’t been fulfilled today, but she had formulated an additional one: get rid of Matthew’s girlfriends.

Charlotte flopped into the first chair she saw in the well-decorated lobby of the studio, still sulking at being pushed out of the room. Amber remained standing and looked at the pictures, album covers, and guitars lining the walls, trophies of success. The plaques gleamed pretentiously against the dark wall, winking at her like they wanted her to share in their secret of happiness. They didn’t know that to her amnesiac brain, they meant nothing.

“I don’t understand how you even compete with me.”

Startled at being directly addressed by Charlotte, Amber turned. “Compete?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.” Charlotte wasn’t even looking at her, instead pulling a tube of lip gloss from her purse and applying it.

Amber rolled her eyes. “There’s no competition. Not for what you’re thinking of, anyway.”

“That’s the point – there *shouldn’t* be any contest. But there is.” She smacked her newly-glossed lips.

“I don’t know where you’re getting that, because I make sure to keep my distance.”

“But you’re doing *something* to make him keep you around, and it’s obviously not sleeping with him.”

“How do you know that for sure?” Amber asked to toy with her.

Charlotte scoffed. “You don’t even get close enough to touch the guy.”

Amber didn’t reply, hoping to end the tiresome conversation, but after a minute, Charlotte continued. “I saw him try to kiss you at my house.”

“Don’t take it personally, he tends to do that.”

“You didn’t let him.”

“So what’s the big deal?”

“So, I know you don’t like me. You could’ve pissed me off then, try to take him away from me.”

“It’s not all about fighting for Matt’s romantic interest. This isn’t a soap opera.”

“I guess my point is: what do *you* want from him?” Charlotte was looking at her now.

Surprised, Amber stammered, “Why the sudden interest? Most of the time, you pretend I don’t exist.”

“I just wanna know who I’m up against.” She shrugged.

Amber gnawed at her bottom lip. What *did* she want from Matthew? She wasn’t hanging around because she wanted anything; she was here because the Voice had put her here, and she had no other place in her memory to go to.

Speaking of which, I guess I’m never getting that back, she thought.

“I can’t say I enjoy what you and Matt do,” Amber finally said, “but I don’t see you as...as an enemy.”

“You probably think I’m such a skank, though,” Charlotte returned with a casual flick of her wrist.

Amber didn’t say anything.

“It’s really not my fault. If my father wasn’t so overprotective, I wouldn’t have to do drastic things to get away from him.”

Moving closer to the opposite side of the room, Amber considered exploring the studio to escape the conversation. She wasn’t interested in hearing Charlotte’s excuses or her life story. It wasn’t her problem.

Listen, the Voice said firmly.

Why should I? Amber found a diagram of the building’s floor plan next to the stairwell and skimmed over it. *The lounge on the second floor sounds much more appealing.*

Listen.

An invisible thread tugged her towards Charlotte, one that Amber could easily break. She hesitated.

“It’s because I look just like my mom,” Charlotte was saying to the ceiling, “I never know her since she died when I was little, but supposedly she was all sweet and innocent. I’m really not like her at all, but he doesn’t know that. I can’t bring myself to let him think otherwise.”

With an inward sigh, Amber crossed the lobby and sat on a couch across from Charlotte. “Why not?”

“I don’t want to disappoint him. Like, I’m the closest thing to her that he has.”

“So instead, you lie to him so you can go party with your rock star boyfriend?” Amber tried to mask the accusing tone in her voice, but it seeped out.

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

“Unless he finds out.”

“He won’t find out unless someone tells him,” Charlotte said, pinning her with a cold stare.

“Well don’t look at me, I don’t care enough to do anything,” Amber said frostily.

Smirking, Charlotte picked at a nail. “Rebellion’s fun. You should try it sometime. You don’t seem to get out much.”

“Don’t need to. I have all—” Amber was distracted by Matthew’s entrance from the direction of the stairwell. His mouth was set in a scowl, and he walked stiffly, his shoulders tense. He didn’t say anything to either of them as he stalked through the lobby and out the front doors. Amber and Charlotte hurried after him.

“Didn’t go well, then?” Amber ventured when she caught up.

“My songs were shot down by everyone,” he muttered.

“Everyone?” she said in surprise. She had thought that Luke would like them, at least, and maybe the other two as well. “You can’t give up on those songs – they were really good.”

“No, that’s it. They’re done. I’m scrapping them.”

“Matt—” she said, but he ignored her as he unlocked the car. Charlotte pushed past her to duck into the front seat, but Amber didn’t object, too engrossed with Matthew’s songs being rejected. Just when she had thought she was making progress with him, encouraging his more genuine side, the outside world shut it down. How was she ever supposed to make a difference?

“I told you that I...no, wait. I told you once that you fanned the...or sparked? No, fanned. Fanned the flame...fanned the fire in my bones. Bones. Groans, loans, moans, phones...” Matthew scratched his head, taking a drink from the bottle of beer on his bedside table. “Tones, stones, zones. Stones? Your words flung back at me like stones?”

He tossed his pen down and plunked out a melody on the small electronic piano nestled among the sheets of his bed, mumbling potential lyrics under his breath. His left hand was throbbing and was as useful for playing guitar as a baseball bat, so he had resorted to the keyboard that his father had given him for his eighteenth birthday, which had been additional proof that his father hadn’t known him as well as he thought he had.

A soft knock on his doorpost startled him, and he cursed loudly, smashing a fist on the keyboard, and a discordant mess of notes blared from it. “Can’t you see I’m trying to work?” he snapped at Amber, who was in the doorway.

She flinched. “Sorry, I just wanted to see how it was coming along.”

“Horribly, thanks, especially since people won’t leave me alone in my own house!”

“Sorry,” she said again, inching back. “I’ll close the door—”

“It’s too late now. I lost my train of thought.” He sighed and leaned back against his pillows. “I can’t hit it exactly right this time. It’s hopeless.”

She crept into the room, encouraged by the change in his tone. “What didn’t they like about your other ones?”

“They weren’t what they wanted.”

“So *no one* liked them?”
He cocked his head, thinking. “Actually, it was mostly Sonata...”
“Figures.”
“...and she said it wasn’t what we – I mean, they were looking for.”
“She didn’t specifically say why they were bad?”
“No, she just made it really clear that she didn’t like them.” He paused. “You can come in, you know.”
She had been hovering near the door. She smiled sheepishly and ventured into his room. “I know, I just feel like I’m encroaching on a private space or something.”
“You basically live here. And my room isn’t exactly private...”
She glanced over to the corner of the room where Charlotte’s things were scattered around her bag. “Right.” She cleared her throat and sat down on his bed.
“Where is Charlotte, anyway?”
“Talking to someone on the phone on the deck. She loves it out there.”
“Best part of the house.”
Amber reached across him and played a few notes on the keyboard. “Where’d this come from?”
“It’s been stuffed in a closet. I don’t really know how to play it, but I can’t do anything on my guitar.”
“What did Sonata do when she found out?”
“Got angrier, I guess. She hates Charlotte even more now.” He watched her finger through the keys. “Do you know how to play?”
“It doesn’t feel familiar, but that doesn’t mean much,” she said with a self-deprecating smile.
“Do you know music at all?”
“Like what?”
He fished for a sheet of chords on his sheets and handed it to her. “Do those letters mean anything to you?”
She studied them for a long moment and said, “You know, I think I actually know what these mean. This ‘G’ means a G major chord, right?”
“So you remember major and minor chords, then?” He sat up.
“I think so.” She nodded slowly. “But the piano felt weird, and I don’t even know which note is which. Stupid selective memory loss.”
“Maybe it’s not as selective as you think.” He stretched out and fumbled for his acoustic guitar leaning against his bed. “Try playing this,” he said, and gave it to her.
“Matt, I’m not going to know—”
“Just try.”
“I don’t even know how to hold it. Like this?” She propped it against herself awkwardly, holding it by the bottom of the _____?
He laughed and turned the guitar around so that the neck extended to the left. “Now try.”

“Don’t I need a pick?”

“I guess so, if you want one. The real question is, can I find one...” He rummaged around in a drawer next to his bed. “I never use a pick, so there’s no telling if I have one,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I dunno, I just don’t. One less thing to worry about. Aha!” He brandished one and gave it to her. “Stop making excuses and try to play it now.”

“Okay, okay.” Amber re-adjusted the instrument and placed faltering fingers on the first two frets. She gave the strings a muddled strum, and Matthew snorted. “Shut up,” she said, grinning, and strummed again. One of the strings twanged in protest.

“So that answers that question,” Matthew said, reaching for the guitar. “No Freeflight guitar solos in your future.”

“Wait.” She brushed her hair behind her ear and shifted the guitar again.

“Do you want me to tell you—”

“Shh,” she cut him off. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she tried again with the same effect.

“Amber—”

“I think something’s coming back to me. Just give me a second.” She lifted both hands away from the guitar, clenched them into fists, opened them again, and situated her left hand on the frets. Gritting her teeth and closing her eyes again, she strummed one last time, and a harmonious E major chord resonated against the air. “I did it. I did it, right?” She looked excitedly at Matthew.

“Yeah, and your hand position looks really good,” he said, checking her fingers.

“Yes!”

“But that doesn’t mean you can play guitar.”

She played the chord again, tilting her head to listen closely to it. “I think there’s more,” she said, and played a different chord, and then another. The progression flowed from one chord to the next, and Matthew could tell from Amber’s face that she had no idea what she was playing.

After a moment of listening to it, however, Matthew did.

“Are you just making that up?” he said over her playing.

She stopped. “It’s hard to tell. I think it’s something I already knew.”

He took out his journal from the same drawer where the pick had been and opened it to a page near the beginning. “Play those chords again, and keep playing them,” he said.

She did, and he followed along on the page as she played. Something must have registered on his face, because the music fizzled after a few minutes, and she said, “What’s wrong?”

He had to be mistaken somehow, or maybe it was a coincidence. Surely he was wrong. “Um, nothing,” he said, and shut the journal.

“Come on, Matt.”

“It’s nothing.”

She glared at him.

“*Fine*, fine. It’s just...I mean, you’re playing the same progression as a song I wrote a long time ago.”

“So what? I’m sure loads of songs have that progression.”

“Yeah, but you added the same embellishments that I have written down. All of them. No more, no less. And the timing for each chord change is perfect.”

Amber pushed his guitar away and fiddled with the guitar pick in her hands, looking at it instead of him. “Weird,” she mumbled.

“Maybe there’s more to us than we think,” he said, not sure what he meant by it. He had pondered over it frequently since he had met her. It wasn’t the first time that he had met a girl with whom he connected strongly, but he and Amber had nothing in common.

“Probably,” Amber said, her voice embedded with an unknown knowledge.

“Do you know something I don’t?” he said with growing suspicion.

She twisted her mouth like she was preventing something from leaking out, and her fingers continued to play with the pick. He plucked it from her grasp and waited expectantly.

She sighed. “I was told we, um, used to know each other.”

He almost laughed. “That’s crazy. You think I would remember someone I knew if they just popped back into my life.”

“I don’t remember anything,” she pointed out.

“So you’re saying I happened to forget everything having to do with one person? Is that even possible?” He let out a disdainful chuckle. “I think I would notice if an entire chunk of my life was missing.”

“Not if you didn’t know it was there.”

She wasn’t smiling. This was a pointless conversation to be having. “That’s impossible,” he said.

She shrugged.

“You know what I think?” He held up his journal and shook it in her face. “I think you snooped through my stuff and looked at my songs without looking.”

“And then played it perfectly without remembering how to play guitar?”

“It’s muscle memory or something, I don’t know.” He threw it down. “I’m letting you stay in my house, Amber, free of charge. I drive you around places, pay for your food, take you on tour. And you think it’s a good idea to betray my trust just because you want to show off your freaky guitar skills?”

“I didn’t look in your journal! I didn’t even know I could play guitar, and I didn’t know that I was playing one of your songs.”

“Just leave me alone,” he snapped. “I’m tired of you messing around.” He stared down at his half-written lyrics so he wouldn’t see her hurt expression, and didn’t move until he heard her leave. He had work to do, and he didn’t have time to play along with Amber’s stunts.

The next morning, Matthew was pouring himself a third cup of coffee when he heard a key grinding into the lock on his front door. Without turning around, he selected the espresso option on his coffeemaker and whisked another mug from his cabinet.

The front door opened and closed, shortly followed by the tap of heels on the tiled kitchen floor. As the hiss of the machine faded, leaving behind a froth-topped mug, Matthew felt arms slide around his waist. He turned and handed the fresh cappuccino to Sonata. "I thought you'd be visiting," he said.

"Am I really that predictable?" She drew back to take the coffee and sipped it with relish. "Or maybe I just come over too often."

"Probably for my cappuccinos."

"Among other things. Where are your girlfriends?" She glanced around, the house silent except for the final gurgle of the coffeemaker.

"I made them go into town for a while. You should be proud of me – I'm actually trying to get things done." He indicated the electric keyboard tilted against the arm of the couch and the papers covering the floor like shingles.

"How many songs do you have so far?"

"Six."

"Wow, you've been busy." She eyed the mug in his hands. "How much sleep did you get last night?"

"Couple hours. Ideas kept coming to me."

"That's more like the Matt I know. I think those girls muck up your mind too much."

"They're good inspiration. In fact, Amber gave me a great idea last night."

"I thought you told me you never sleep with her."

"I don't, but we had this weird moment...I dunno, it's hard to explain."

She set her mug down and picked up a sheet of lyrics on the couch, scanning over them with a critical eye. "These are pretty good," she said, "definitely better than those other ones. Was that supposed to be a joke?"

He swallowed. "Yeah, something like that. I'm running out of ideas, though. I feel like all of the songs I've written so far are about the same thing."

She looked over the other papers. "There aren't any about chasing women. Isn't that your thing?"

"Yeah, but I figured it's been my thing for like two albums now..."

"And they sold like crazy. Why change it up?"

He sighed. "Fine. I just haven't felt motivated recently, you know? My life's in a rut. I need some excitement or something."

"I know where you can find some excitement," Sonata said, straightening and glancing over her shoulder at him.

"Oh?" He already knew where this was going, and it was precisely where he wanted it to.

"I'm just saying, it's been a while. Maybe you've finally tired of me?"

“Tired of *you*? I don’t think that’s possible,” he said with an easy grin, pulling her close. “You willing to give me some good song material?”

“It’s what I do best,” she murmured before he kissed her.

Is this what you want to do best? A voice inside Matthew questioned as he and Sonata moved to his bedroom. He ignored it; of course it was.

“Driving his car is freaking amazing,” Charlotte gushed, running her hand over its sleek frame. Her tan skin stood out against the silver paint.

Amber leaned against the passenger door and waited for her head to stop spinning. A dull headache had been creeping along the inside of her skull all morning, and Charlotte’s haphazard driving hadn’t helped. When her vision steadied, she looked around at the stores and restaurants of downtown Kalupto Point. A block away, she could see the coffee shop where she and Matthew had gone weeks ago, and directly in front of her was a used book store that had a front display that drew her towards the window. A sign advertising a sale on classics was taped to the glass with one curled corner undone, and below it, several hardcover books were propped on faded stands. One of them was titled *The Great Gatsby*, and the name made her mind itch.

“There you are!” Charlotte’s squeal stole Amber’s attention, and when she turned, she saw Jordan Frink crossing the street. He hugged Charlotte and whispered something in her ear that prompted her to smile.

“Hey, Jordan,” Amber said, “What’re you doing here?”

“None of your business,” he said, not even glancing at her. To Charlotte, he said, “Can I buy you some coffee?” He put his arm around her, and they walked towards the coffee shop together.

That can’t be good, Amber thought, watching them go. Shaking her head, she turned back around and pushed open the door of the book store. She needed to scratch the itch that had arisen in her mind.

The shop was like any other, crammed with books, their spines lined up on every wall and shelf like soldiers. Some were almost new, others worn and marked by their previous owners. The only other person in the store was an old woman behind the counter who merely stared at Amber as she entered.

Massaging her aching temple, Amber aimed straight for the book in the window and lifted it from its display. The binding crackled as she opened it, and its pages were yellowed but pristine. Nothing had been written in it except the price in pencil on the title page. She skimmed over a few pages but the words weren’t familiar. Her mind was bothering her again, like it was trying to pull something from the dregs of her memory.

“I’ve probably read this before,” she said to herself. Maybe it had even been her favorite book. The fact that she didn’t know saddened her.

She flipped to a random page and started reading. Daisy, Gatsby, Tom...the characters held no recognition. One sentence dug into her eyes: “I was reminded of something – an elusive

rhythm, a fragment of last words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago.” Amber was only drawn to it for its mention of remembrance.

But then an image flashed behind her eyes, like a single frame from a movie reel, of the same sentence underlined with a blue marker. She blinked, trying to solidify it, but only the brief picture remained. The ache in her head pulsed more strongly for a moment, and she grimaced and shut the book. She would buy the book if she had any money, but she replaced it on the display stand and left the shop.

“Where have you *been*?” Charlotte’s voice assailed her the instant Amber felt the sunlight.

Confused, she shaded her eyes against the sun and looked at Charlotte. She was standing next to the car with her arms crossed, and Jordan was nowhere in sight.

“I stepped into the bookstore for ten minutes,” Amber said. “Where’s Jordan?”

“He had to go do something band-related or something. He left like forever ago.”

“That was a really short coffee break.”

“Totally, but I’ll see him later. You coming or not?” Charlotte opened the car door.

“We’re leaving already? Don’t you think Matt needs more time to write?”

“I think two hours is enough, don’t you?” Charlotte tossed her hair and slid into the car.

Amber’s hand froze on the handle of the Audi’s door. Two hours? She glanced back at the book store, then at the copy of *The Great Gatsby* in the window. She had only been in there for ten minutes, hadn’t she? Maybe her head problems were worse than she thought.

Amber’s headache had retreated to a corner of her brain by the time she walked into Matthew’s kitchen. His house still smelled of coffee. What would he do if he knew that Charlotte had been sharing coffee with Jordan less than an hour ago?

Matthew set aside his piano keyboard as they entered. “How was the old K.P.?” he asked, kissing Charlotte when she reached for him.

“Quaint,” Charlotte said. “Did you finish your best-selling new album?”

“Not yet, but I’m getting there. I, uh, got inspired, so it’s going smoothly.”

“Good.” She kissed him again and flounced to his room with her shopping bags. “I’m going to try these on if you want to join me!”

“Does she want *me* to try them on too?” Matthew quipped.

Amber didn’t reply, glancing over the lyric sheets that Matthew had been working on. They were more of the same – no trace of the sincerity or depth that had been present in the ones Sonata had turned down.

“So what d’you think?” Matthew asked, gathering them up in a pile.

She handed him one titled “Always A Good Time” and said, “You should’ve kept the other ones.”

“These will be fine, and they were a lot easier to write.”

“What got you inspired?”

“Huh?” He shuffled the sheets.

“You told Charlotte you got inspired.”

He grinned impishly. “You really wanna know?”

“Um, maybe not.” Amber backed away and went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of iced tea.

Matthew leaned over the counter separating the two rooms. “Sonata came by.”

She slopped some of the tea on the counter. “Matt...”

“What? We had a nice...chat.”

She tore a paper towel off the roll and mopped up the spilled tea, shaking her head as she did so. Matthew was asking for drama, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“Don’t get all offended. You wanted to know,” he said sulkily.

She spun around. “If you don’t tell Charlotte, I will.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yeah, I will. I’m not going to sit around when a bomb’s about to go off.”

“So you’d rather detonate it?”

“At least I’ll know when to run for cover.”

“Stay out of my business.”

“How can I when it’s thrown on me?” Amber slammed her empty glass down and hiccupped. Great, that’s what she got for being angry and swallowing at the same time. It kind of ruined the effect.

“I didn’t throw it on you,” he said from the living room, where he had sat down again with the keyboard.

“It’s not just you.” She moved where she could see him. “It’s Charlotte, too.”

“She talked to you?” he said skeptically.

“No, more like showed me. She—” Amber glanced towards Matthew’s room and stepped closer to him so she could lower her voice. “She and Jordan are involved.” She sounded like such a gossip when she said that.

To her surprise, Matthew merely blinked and momentary shock and then shrugged. “So it goes both ways.”

“You’re not mad?” Amber would never understand these people, she decided.

“Annoyed, maybe. Jordan knows better than to steal my girl when I’m not done with her, but—”

“Do you *hear* yourself?”

He waved her off. “Bottom line is, it’s fine for now. She’s still hot, and she’s still more or less obsessed with me, so...”

“Ugh, I’m going to my room.” Amber mussed his hair as she passed him, paying no heed to his complaint. If he could stand his messy life, he could stand his messy head.

“What’s up with Amber anyway?”

Matthew could only see the curve of Charlotte’s shoulder against the subtle light of the moon coming through the curtained window. He flinched at the mention of Amber; thinking of

her in the middle of the night with a woman in his bed made him feel dirty. Unsatisfied with his silence, Charlotte fidgeted under the covers.

“I mean, you don’t like, *do* anything with her, right?”

“No.” He flinched again. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t want you cheating on me—”

“I said don’t worry about it.” He kissed her, mainly to shut her up. For a few minutes, she seemed placated.

“Who is she, though, really?” she finally asked.

Matthew sighed and rolled over to face away from her. “She’s no one.”

“Obviously she’s someone.”

“Just a friend who needs a place to stay, okay?”

She giggled. “How did someone like her get to know you?”

“Long story.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s personal.”

“Fine.” She turned over in a huff. “I just don’t understand why she would wanna hang out with you.”

“I thought every girl wants to hang out with me,” he said easily.

“Not one like her, unless she’s ridiculously naïve. What does she think we do in here, have tea parties?”

Her laugh grated on him. “She knows perfectly well what I do,” he mumbled.

“I have a feeling that the Matt I know and the Matt she knows are two different people,” she said smugly.

“I don’t doubt that,” he said.

“You’re such a player.” She said this with approval.

“Takes one to know one.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of that.” Her hand found its way into his hair and she kissed his shoulder. “You need to stop being so defensive about adapting to your surroundings.”

“Is that what you call it?”

She shrugged. “I see no reason why it would be wrong.”

He flipped onto his side so that he was facing her. “You don’t know me at all,” he said with a smile, and he was completely okay with that.

Matthew had another meeting in Los Angeles the next day. As they were waiting for Charlotte to get ready, a book caught Amber’s eye on a bookshelf near the television. She went over to it, giving a cursory glance to the books around it before focusing on the one she had noticed. Something made her want to put off the discovery she knew she was about to make.

She pulled the copy of *The Great Gatsby* from the shelf, sneezing at the dust it kicked up. It was a different edition than the one she had seen at the book store, a newer paperback version. She fanned through the pages, her heart stuttering as she saw annotations in blue marker

scattered throughout the book. After a minute of searching, she located the same quote she had read before, and sure enough, it was underlined exactly like the image that had flashed in her mind. She had encountered this book before. She had held it, read it, touched it; she brought it close to her chest as if its nearness could leak a little bit of her old life back into her soul, but no new memories came.

“Where did you get this book?” she asked Matthew.

He looked up from his computer. “What is it?”

She showed it to him.

“I read it in high school. I kept it because I actually liked it for some reason. Why?”

“Did you make these marks?” she asked, pointing out a random page of blue notes.

He frowned, taking the book from her to study it more closely. “I don’t think so. The handwriting looks really girly. Nothing like mine.”

“Do you know who did?”

He shrugged, gave it back to her, and returned to his computer screen. “Who cares?”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that you have a book on your shelf with someone else’s handwriting in it?”

He sighed and leaned back. “Fine, I’ll humor you. What’s so important about this stupid book?”

She told him about coming across the one in the store and reading the quote. “The page in this one matches the one in my head exactly, which means I’ve seen this book before. If you had it in high school, then maybe I knew you in high school.”

“Or you’ve just seen it on my shelf at some point after I kept it.”

“Sure, but either way, it’s proof that I knew you before I lost my memory!”

“You probably just saw—”

“I haven’t even touched this bookshelf since I got here. There’s no way I saw the inside of this book.” She read his skeptical expression. “You think I’m making this up?”

“It sounds ridiculous, Amber. I would’ve remembered you.”

“Why would I lie to you? Don’t you trust me?”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s why it’s worth trying to figure out!”

“If you’re doing this because of what I said earlier about playing the guitar, I’m over that. Seriously, it’s okay.”

“That’s not what this is about,” she groaned.

“Whatever. How about you give me that?” Matthew tried to take the book from her, but she held onto it. With a sharp tug, he yanked it from her grasp and tucked it against him. “Stop confusing yourself and thinking so much. Take a leaf out of Charlotte’s book and do something mindless for once, okay?”

With a huff, she whirled around and stomped to her room. The first link to her blank past, and Matthew had no interest in helping her. That was fine – she could figure it out herself.

Despite Charlotte's intensive appearance regimen, the three of them arrived at the studio in Los Angeles with time to spare before the meeting. Charlotte met up with a friend to do some more shopping, and Amber was relieved she wouldn't have to face the blonde's critical glances. Matthew was hunched over in the corner of the lobby, going over his new lyrics and muttering corrections to himself, so she left him alone and stretched out on a couch to watch the muted news channel playing on a screen mounted nearby.

Luke entered a few minutes later, and Amber waved to him. He joined her on the couch. "So how is living with both Matt *and* Charlotte?" he asked.

"It's *wonderful*. She views me as some kind of pathetic but effective competition, and there's nothing I can do about it."

He glanced at Matthew. "Did he finish his songs?"

"Yeah, but they're not near as good as the other ones."

"I figured." He sighed. "I think Sonata's up to something."

"Isn't she always?" Amber thought about her clandestine visit to Matthew's house.

"Yeah," Luke admitted, "but it's weird this time, like she's trying to sabotage Freeflight. Why else would she encourage us to go pop? That makes no sense."

"She's trying to make your music into *pop*? There's no way you guys could pull that off. No offense."

"No, I agree. That's why she shut down Matt's first two songs - they were too complex. She wants something easily digestible."

"Matt's already halfway there, but...that's stupid."

"Enough about him - how are *you* doing? You know, with the memory thing?" He pointed to his head.

She told him about *The Great Gatsby*, but left out the lost time in the bookstore. There was no need to worry him.

He mused for a moment, and Amber appreciated how he always took her seriously, not as a fangirl or helpless dependent but as someone wanting to figure out herself and help Matthew do the same.

"We read that book in our junior English class," he said, "but that's the only connection I know."

"Maybe I knew Matt in high school." She offered her theory tentatively.

Instead of laughing at her, Luke inclined his head in benign consideration of her statement. "Then why doesn't Matt remember you? Or any of us remember you? We all went to the same high school, you know."

Then her going to that high school as well would make perfect sense. She could be more connected to all of this than she thought. Maybe this was bigger than just Matthew.

She sighed. "I just want to make sense of everything. I don't think I'll ever get my memory back."

Luke patted her back. "It'll work out somehow. Don't let Matt get you down with his cynicism."

Amber hugged him. “You’re awesome. You know that?”

“Expanding our reach, our we?” a haughty voice said.

Amber pulled back to see Sonata watching them with a stony look. The woman smiled coldly at Amber’s embarrassment before moving towards the stairs.

“I should probably follow her,” Luke said, dragging himself upright. “See you later.”

Matthew left as well, followed shortly by Jordan and Dameon, leaving Amber alone in the lobby. She was used to this by now: having nothing to do, waiting around for Matthew or someone else. Lately, she had taken to imagining what her life was like, her real life. This was all a detour, a vacation. That was assuming she would ever get her memory back. But surely God wouldn’t completely take away her life, leaving her family and friends with no clues to her disappearance?

That was what most worried her. She could never forgive God if he had plucked her out of her life with no explanation and causing grief to those she cared about...whom, of course, she currently wouldn’t be able to recognize if they walked into the room. She felt a flash of frustration and refocused on the television to get her mind off of it.

“Well look who it is.”

She started and turned around to see *Freeflight*’s ex-producer, Nathan Stevens. He had come up behind her without a sound.

“Hey. What’re you doing here?” she asked. He appeared even more gaunt than before, his clothes hanging on his frame as if he were no more substantial than a clothesline. Something dark in his eyes unnerved her.

“Checking up on *Freeflight*,” he said in an eerily hollow voice. “Seems like your pet isn’t listening to you anymore.”

“What? You mean Matt?”

“He’s so easy to drown in temptation. No self-control, no sense of loyalty...except to himself and his desires.” Nathan rounded the couch and stared up at the screen, where there was a news story playing about an armed robbery. “Humans are all the same.”

Amber scooted a little farther away from him. “He’s not all bad. I think he’s just lived too long with his fame and forgets to take his mask off sometimes.”

His eyes turned on her, and their deadness made her shiver. “So quick to defend him,” he murmured, “but why? After what he did to you?”

“What do you mean?”

A smile crept across his face, though it more resembled a leer. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t remember.”

Her vision tunneled, and his skeletal face seemed to hurtle toward her, a train of disaster. “What?” she whispered. How did he know? And what was he talking about?

“You think you’re so special,” he hissed, “but you’re just like—”

A flash of light exploded in the middle of his sentence, along with an unearthly shriek. Chills rippled along her entire body as she shielded her face with her arms, but by the time she had raised them, the light was gone, and so was Nathan. Heart racing, she glanced towards the

entrance to the lobby, and then towards the stairs. She was alone, and nothing had stirred at the noise. No one came running. Not a single light had flickered. Not a single window had rattled.

She had been hallucinating. First the momentary blackout at the bookstore, and now this. The strain on her mind from losing her memory was finally wearing down her sanity.

She couldn't stand being in a room that had become empty so suddenly, even if the only other option was incurring Sonata's wrath. She was about to leave to find where Freeflight was meeting when Grayson appeared. She had never actually seen him appear before, but he simply materialized. One moment he wasn't there, and in an instant, with no sound or visual effects, he was. His manner was harried, but his eyes were calm.

Impulsively she reached out to hug him out of relief, but he stepped back. "You are safe," he said.

"What just happened?" she breathed, her voice cracking.

"That was a servant of the Adversary. They must consider Matthew important to their plans to interfere so openly like that."

"But that was Nathan," she said faintly. "I met him at Matt's party. He was...normal."

"He was emotionally compromised, and no doubt made a deal with whatever enemy approached him."

"Is he..."

"Dead? No. I sent what was in him back to its place, and took the man home."

Amber didn't know why she was so shaken. If angels were around, why not demons as well? It made sense, in an equally ridiculous sort of way, unless she had been hallucinating Grayson the entire time as well. But Dave had seen Grayson too, hadn't he?

"Um, thanks," she said. Were you supposed to thank angels? Did they care? Weren't they just under orders to help people?

Grayson received her gratitude with a small nod, and disappeared without another word. Amber had wanted him to stay. What if someone - something - came back?

Sonata caught Luke's arm after their meeting, indicating for him to stay behind. She was feeling particularly victorious after hearing Matthew's new songs and convincing the band to sacrifice their rock sound in subtle increments. Now it was time to work more on solving another problem of hers.

"What precisely is your relationship with that girl, Amber?" she asked Luke.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he stalled, but didn't lose his placid expression.

"Are you sleeping with her?"

"Of course not!"

She had already known what he would answer, but she had asked to throw him off. "You two seem especially chummy."

"We became friends on the tour, I guess."

"She's Matt's girl."

"She's not anyone's 'girl.'"

Sonata detected the first sign of tension in his face. Good. “Whatever. What do you know about her?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t make this difficult, Luke. I’m just trying to look out for Matt. I don’t want the quality of his work to decline because some idiot girl is distracting him.”

“Get rid of Charlotte, then,” he replied.

“Oh, don’t worry, that’ll be taken care of.” Sonata smirked. That was next on her to-do list.

He glanced at his phone, eager to leave. “If anything, Amber’s helping him,” he said, his cool green eyes meeting hers without fear. “Leave her alone.”

“Why do *you* like her so much?”

He considered her question, always careful, always deliberate. “She’s a lot like me,” he said.

Great, another frustratingly content, solid rock. Just what she needed. “How?” He needed to give her something specific to work off of.

“She’s immune to the foolishness of people like you,” he said, his tone uncharacteristically hard.

“I’ll take that as a challenge.” She refused to be daunted by his hidden hostility, and she smiled thinly. “No one can fight me if I want them to change.”

“Like what you did to Matt?” he snapped, clearly agitated now. Without waiting for a response, he pushed past her.

She listened to his footsteps receding down the stairs, her smile growing. “Precisely,” she said to the empty chairs in the room, silent spectators to her scheming.

“*Finally*,” Amber said when Matthew walked into the lobby, and threw her arms around him.

“Uh, you okay?” He returned the embrace, bewildered.

“Felt like forever,” she mumbled from under his chin.

“Why are you being so weird?”

She grimaced. “Sorry. Nathan Stevens came by and really freaked me out.”

“What?” He looked around. “Where’d he go?”

“Good question,” she said with unexplained irony. “Are we going home now?”

Her familial use of the word “home” did not escape him. “We have to go pick up Charlotte first.”

“Can’t we just leave her?”

He grinned. “You wish.”

From the other side of the room, Jordan cursed quietly. Matthew’s demeanor suddenly hardened. “You got a problem, Jordan?”

“Me? Never.” Jordan gave him a loaded look before leaving. Matthew made to go after him, but Amber grabbed his arm.

“He thinks he’s so cool,” he growled, “He needs to be taken down a notch.”

“I thought you didn’t care about him and Charlotte.”

“It isn’t about that.” It was definitely about that, and Amber probably knew it. But if she did, she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she asked something even worse.

“Are you tired of Charlotte?”

Why would she even ask that? He hadn’t given any indication that Charlotte was disappointing him in any way. Aside from the typical girliness, he had no complaints about her. She was hot, passionate, good company, and was obsessed with him. That was all he ever asked for.

And yet, as he thought these things, he found that he agreed with Amber. Charlotte was perfect, but she was the same perfect over and over again. She never challenged him, never reached deeper than his surface. But he wasn’t ready to lose her. Not quite yet.

He didn’t answer Amber’s question, stomping out its implication like a threatening ember. “Let’s get lunch. I’m starving,” he said, twirling his car keys around his finger.

Smiling, she nodded, knowing as well as he did that she had made him think more than he wanted to.

Amber’s words ruined everything. She had planted an itch in his mind about Charlotte and he couldn’t scratch it. With a single question, she had undone his fantasy, dropping the veil from his eyes so that every single tiny fault in Charlotte began to annoy him.

Dammit, Amber.

Feeling restless, he had decided to cook dinner for the three of them that night, despite having to work around his injured hand. He had tried to send both Charlotte and Amber off to the nearest grocery store with a specific list of supplies while he cleaned up and got the kitchen ready, but Charlotte refused to do it, and since Amber still felt unsure about her driving abilities, he had to order the supplies from his usual online service and pay a hefty fee to expedite the delivery. Once the food had arrived and he had started to prepare it, Charlotte had hovered around him, flirting and sneaking kisses, slowing the cooking process considerably. He despised people getting in the way as he cooked, and he finally snapped at her, evoking a sulky mood from her for the next hour or so. At least it shut her up.

He found himself devising ways to get rid of her - after one more night, of course. No use wasting an opportunity when he had one. Maybe he could go on an impromptu trip. Maybe he could get Jordan to take her. Or maybe he could just kick her out, but then that would lessen the chance of ever hooking up with her again.

Dammit, Amber, he thought again. If she hadn’t said anything, he wouldn’t be in this predicament. Simplicity was *always* the best way to go in relationships - as few feelings as possible apart from the necessary ones. Amber hadn’t lost her knack of complicating things in a way that wasn’t *entirely* unpleasant...just mostly unpleasant. But her words could speak to a part of him that she wasn’t supposed to know was there.

Frankly, he was beginning to dread the inevitable day when she would leave, whether because she regained part of her memory or because she couldn't stand him anymore. Who was going to remind him that he was being stupid then? Not that those reminders stopped him from doing what he wanted.

He stood back from the counter, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "Dinner's ready," he called. One thing he had never minded anyone judging him about was the supposedly feminine art of baking and cooking. It was useful, he was good at it, and the ladies loved it. No complaints from him there.

Amber materialized immediately from her room with his acoustic guitar in hand.

"Any luck?" he asked, taking the lid off a pot of steamed rice.

Without a word, she sat down on the couch and strummed a short series of riffs. Matthew raised his eyebrows. "That's pretty good," he said, "I mean, for a girl."

"Ha ha," she said, placing the guitar on its stand in the corner of the room. "I couldn't figure out much, but what I did play sounded familiar."

"Can you sing?"

"I doubt it."

"You should try!"

"Not in front of you, Mr. Angelic Voice."

"Angelic? Really? I sing for a rock band, and *that's* what you go with?"

"If you pushed yourself out of that pop rock box of yours, you could impress a lot of people with your talent." She leaned over the bar counter separating them and nabbed a slice of orange from the cutting board.

"Pop rock?" I'm offended!" He grinned, but mentally he was pricked by her challenge again.

"So what's on the menu tonight?" She sniffed the cooking aromas appreciatively.

"Orange zest teriyaki chicken and homemade eggrolls. Help yourself." He gestured to the pile of clean plates beside the rice. "Have you seen Charlotte?"

"Nope."

"Figures," Matthew mumbled. She was probably moping outside, waiting for him to make it up to her. He better go get it over with. "Be right back," he said, throwing down his towel.

Charlotte was right where he thought she'd be, stretched out on the outdoor couch as if she were trying to sunbathe in the weak remnants of the sunset. He sat next to her and pulled her close, showering her face and neck with kisses. She allowed him to do so but said nothing.

"Are you gonna be mad at me all night?" he murmured, wrapping his arms around her. He felt her slowly yield to his advances, as they always did.

She breathed a sigh of cherry perfume and let him kiss her again.

"What can I do to make it up to you?" he asked, continuing to punctuate his words with kisses in such a persistent manner that she giggled.

"I don't know if you can," she said, tracing his face with her fingers.

“I’ll do anything,” he said, “Whatever it takes for you to forgive me.”

“Anything?” she questioned, now cradling his face with her hands and looking into the blue of his eyes - like the sky had become caught in his eyes as the sun set, and retained its unashamed brightness there.

“Anything,” he confirmed.

“I could think of a few things...”

“I’m completely yours tonight, Char, just say the word.” He kissed her once more, and this time she kissed him back, the promise of more to come.

“I guess I can forgive you,” she said when they finally drew apart.

“Good.” He stood up, pulling her up with him. “Let’s go eat, and then turn in early. What d’you say?”

She answered with a provocative kiss and preceded him back into the house. Matthew smiled to himself; it was always so easy, so predictable. Turn on the charm and they become clay, malleable in his experienced hands, willing to be molded by his allure.

A thorn of guilt tore into his heart as suddenly as the accompanying memory that overtook him. The same thoughts produced another sudden feeling, a polar opposite to the first. How could the two be from the same source: satisfaction and shame, desire and regret? That negative beast was *not* going to plague him tonight, not tonight, not now. Its territory was the time of lonely nights and sleepless emptiness, hollow hours when it could roam free. Not tonight, when he had Charlotte as a fence to keep it caged.

Gathering himself together and reassembling the emotions Charlotte had ignited a mere moment before, he shook himself of doubt and went inside, but the thorn remained.

The three of them were sitting down at the kitchen table when Matthew’s doorbell rang. He checked to see who it was through one of the windows beside the door, then frowned and turned in Charlotte’s direction. “Are you expecting anyone?”

She shook her head, taking a sip of her wine, obviously annoyed at the delay of the enjoyment her meal with Matthew.

He eased open the door, but it was pushed ajar with a forceful hand. “Where is she?” the voice of James Tamsey demanded. “Where’s Charlotte?”

“I don’t—” Matthew began, but Tamsey shouldered his way in, calling his daughter’s name over Matthew’s indignant retort at his uninvited entrance.

“Daddy?” Charlotte stood up, wine glass still in hand, her eyes showing a glint of fear.

“Get your things. You’re leaving,” he said, shaking a finger at her.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are, young lady. You’re in a lot of trouble.”

“I didn’t do anything!” She took a hurried gulp of her wine as if hoping it would make her father disappear.

“You’re in a lot of trouble for lying to me, not to mention everything else you’ve done that I didn’t know about—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I know all about your little *adventures* when I’m busy with work, and—”

“Now wait a minute,” Matthew tried to cut in, “You can’t just—”

“There’s nothing wrong with staying at friends’ houses, Daddy—”

“I told you to get your things. *Now.*”

“This is so unfair!” Charlotte plunked her glass down and fled to the back deck in a manufactured tantrum, sobbing. Tamsey came after her, with a glowering Matthew on his heels seeking vengeance.

Amber forked a piece of chicken and chewed it slowly, listening to the swell of unintelligible furious voices outside. Drama concerning Charlotte had been inexorable, but she had expected it to be because of Jordan, not Charlotte’s father. Charlotte’s secondary fling with the bass player was surprisingly free of extreme emotion on everyone’s part. She didn’t understand it, but perhaps a monogamous relationship with Matthew was a thing of the past, especially with Sonata in the picture.

The front door, still unlocked from Tamsey’s entrance, eased open. Loren Bradford, Charlotte’s once-upon-a-time lover, stepped into the house. He was distracted at first by the luxury furnishings and high-quality sophistication of Matthew’s home, but eventually noticed Amber still sitting at the table. They stared at each other. Amber stopped chewing.

He moved further towards her, stopping at the bar counter when he heard the voices coming from the back deck. He listened for a moment before breathing a sigh of satisfied resignation. “This shouldn’t take long,” he said to no one in particular, leaning against the counter.

Amber said nothing, peering at him, wondering what the etiquette was for being alone with her friend’s girlfriend’s ex-lover. She didn’t peg herself as a watcher of soap operas, but surely they could have prepared her for this. As she was, she simply let the awkward half-silence lengthen. If Loren was here, this event was part of some bigger plot that she had no desire to be involved in.

After listening to the argument outside for a few minutes with no sign of it abating, Loren abruptly asked her, “Where’s Matt’s room?”

“Why do you need to know?” she challenged.

“Never mind, I can figure it out,” he said. He turned, glanced around, and started towards the front of the house where Matthew’s bedroom indeed was. Amber opened her mouth to tell him off, but couldn’t get the words out before he disappeared around the corner of the hall.

Matt gets me into the weirdest situations, she thought, and took another bite of her food. This was Matthew’s problem, whatever it was. She wasn’t going to try to fix it.

Eleven mouthfuls of rice and teriyaki chicken later, the back door shot open like a cork of a champagne bottle, and Tamsey marched in, his face set in an expression of surly fortitude. Charlotte was close behind, glowering from behind her thick blond curls, and Matthew tailed them, shouting numerous oaths and ill wishes on Tamsey as the desperate end of an unsuccessful debate.

Loren met them at the door with Charlotte's packed bags in his hands, and Tamsey exited without another word. Loren pulled Charlotte away from her attempt at kissing Matthew goodbye, and he prodded her out of the house in front of him.

Matthew stuck his head through the open doorway, his white-knuckled grip strangling the door post as he yelled, "You can't do this, Tamsey!" followed by a string of profanities. A car engine turned over, and tires crackled on Matthew's driveway. With a final curse, Matthew slammed the door so hard that the entire house rattled in agreement.

Amber watched with wide eyes as he stomped into the kitchen, took one look at Charlotte's abandoned plate of food, and slammed his fist on the counter, sending the stray lid of a pan and two spoons clattering to the floor. He stood there, his entire body heaving with furious breathing like a bull.

He turned on Amber and came at her so suddenly that she knocked over her glass of water. "Did *you* do this?" he snarled.

"Of course not," she said, righting her glass with trembling hands.

It looked like he was going to unleash the full threat of his anger on her, but then he saw something in her eyes and reigned it in. "They always leave," he said in a strange voice that was fragile with tension, not meeting her eyes. Then in another fit of rage, he picked up Charlotte's half-full wine glass and hurled it against the wall, shattering it. Without flinching, he turned away and dissolved into his room like a ghost, leaving the wine dripping like blood down the cream-colored plaster.

Early the next morning, Amber awoke at the sound of a door closing. It was around six a.m., way too early for Matthew to be up, and only the half-light of predawn was glowing through the windows.

She got dressed and crept out of her room. The house smelled of coffee, but nothing stirred in the living room or the kitchen. After Matthew had closed himself in his room last night, she had cleaned up the remains of dinner and had tried to get the wine off the wall as best she could. A stain still cried an embarrassed pink where the glass had shattered, a reminder of Charlotte.

When she reached the glass door to the back patio, she saw Matthew leaning on the wall of the deck, a mug in his hand. The door creaked as she went outside.

He saw her but didn't say anything, continuing to watch the dim waves create dimples on the horizon. She followed his lead, knowing there was a reason he was up so early, unshowered and undressed. Either he wanted to talk about it or he didn't.

"There's more coffee in the pot if you want some," he said after a minute, lifting his mug.

His voluntary breaking of their silence gave Amber permission to speak. "Thanks. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He paused. "It's just been a while since I had a night to myself. Sometimes I have to readjust."

The breeze picked up, and Amber turned her head so that her hair wouldn't blow in her face. At this angle, she had no choice but to look at Matthew. Not moving, he let his own hair blow into his eyes. "At least it's quiet," she said.

"It makes my thoughts too loud. They never shut up."

"Thoughts about what?" She could guess the answer, but she wanted him to say it himself. Would he go for it?

"All sorts of things," he said.

So no opening up, then. He was clenched tight like a stubborn clam, providing no access to the pearl inside. At this rate, she would know as much about his life as she did about her own. But it wasn't her business, right? She kept assuming it was because she had been thrust so pointedly into Matthew's life, but she had no authority on which to pry into his inner psyche.

He turned from the wall and flopped onto the outside couch, abandoning his coffee and propping his hands behind his head. Amber stayed where she was, watching him.

"Why do you still want to be my friend?" he asked her unexpectedly.

"What?"

"We're opposites in every way, and not in the opposites-attract kind of ways."

"Well, you let me stay at your house...and feed me...and let me tag along for band business."

"That makes you sound selfish."

"You can kick me out at any time. But please don't," she added with a grin.

"You already know I won't," he said wryly. "Not yet, anyway."

"Trust me, the moment I get any knowledge about myself or my family, I'll take off."

"You don't *have* to, you know."

She was thrown off by the unusual vulnerability in his eyes as he looked at her. Why was he being so openly attached to her? Did it have to do with what was on his mind? He was probably feeling lonely after the sudden departure of Charlotte. That was it.

"Maybe we're not as opposite as you think," she said, mostly to avoid any awkwardness he might feel when he realized how open he had just been. "I mean, can either of us really know what I'm like? I can't remember anything that's happened to me in my life, and don't experiences make you who you are? I'm a *tabula rasa*."

"A what?"

"It means 'blank slate' in Latin, and it's a term used to describe a person who's starting over."

"How do you *know* that?" he said with a humorous mixture of disbelief and exasperation.

"Weird, right?" Amber sat down next to him. "I must've learned it in English class at some point. I can remember that, but I can't remember what my middle name is. It's so stupid."

Matthew stared ahead. The horizon was partly obscured by bulky clouds, and the sky was painted with pinks and oranges from the rising sun, but he saw none of it. "Blank slate, huh," he said in a distant voice smothered by experience. "That would be nice."

She ran her eyes over his casual good looks, then at the side of his expensive house blushing in the sunrise. “Why would *you* want a blank slate?” She could guess, but she also thought he believed he had all he wanted.

“I’ve done a lot of things I regret.”

No jokes from him. No thinly-masked excuses. No colored lenses. She didn’t want to ask, but she knew she had to. “Like what?”

She tried not to jump as Matthew put his bandaged arm around her. It wasn’t a lead-in to anything else, but more like he needed the physical contact to remember she was there and she was close - and not just physically. She leaned into him and felt him sigh.

“Not much,” he said. “But enough.”

The sun broke out of its shroud behind them, smiling above the clouds. They both squinted against the sudden light.

“I can’t decide if I want to blame Freeflight or Sonata.”

“For what?”

“Doing the things I regret.”

“You do know how vague you’re being, right?”

He only chuckled, but it was lackluster. “I’ve hurt people so that I could keep the band successful. So I could keep *me* successful. And Sonata always encourages me to.”

“So you sacrifice real relationships for success,” Amber murmured. That would explain why he distanced himself from everyone.

He shrugged. “I won’t deny it. And I regret doing that, but it’s not like I can go back now, right? I mean, it worked. Everything’s going great...so great that I usually don’t have *time* for regret.”

She sat up and looked at him. His eyes burned bright in the morning sun, a breathless blue. The same image flashed in her mind from a different time, that pure, invigorating, summer-sky blue, except that Matthew’s eyes had shadows under them, brushed there by regret and the efforts to forget it. She closed her eyes, trying to keep the memory’s image. It had been from the cover of a magazine; she could almost make out the title of it, but it was blurred like an out-of-focus camera. *Come on, you stupid brain*, she thought.

“What’re you doing?”

She opened her eyes to see Matthew’s bewildered expression. “I almost remembered something.”

“Almost?”

“Too blurry. Hey, look at it this way – at least you have a memory that works enough to *remember* what you regret.”

“Thanks, that’s so reassuring,” he said sarcastically.

“But really, the regret isn’t going to go away unless you deal with it. You know, confront the people you’ve hurt.”

“Too late for that now.” He abruptly got up, grabbed his cooled mug of coffee, and went inside with the tread of a defeated man pretending to have triumphed. Amber closed her eyes and

sighed deeply, trying to flesh out the incomplete image in her head. Blue eyes, a magazine cover...captions to articles splattered across the photo. The face solidified and attached itself to a torso clothed in dark, stylish clothes. A smirk below the eyes. Handsome. Blonde hair.

A younger Matthew Wolfe on the cover of a tabloid. She groaned. Of course she had probably seen his face on a magazine at some point in her life. That told her nothing about herself.

Why couldn't she ever remember anything *helpful*?

The next day, a knock at the door jerked Matthew from a half-doze. Checking through the window to make sure it wasn't an ambitious fan, he frowned and opened the door.

"You again?" he said to the old man who had found Amber's suitcase. "What do you want this time?"

The man glowered at him but said in an even voice, "Does your...does that girl still live here?"

"Amber? Yeah, why?"

"I have something for her."

"Another suitcase?" Matthew leaned against the doorframe, scoffing.

"I don't know if you've bothered to stay informed, but there have been some muggings on the beach around here—"

"What?" Matthew straightened and peered at him.

The man gave an annoyed sigh at the interruption and continued. "—and I believe she might have been a victim of one. Has she said anything about it?"

"What are you, the police?"

"I've been trying to help the police as much as I can, and I think I have something she—"

"She's not in the house right now. Why do you care, anyway? Do you live around here or something?"

A pause. "I'm your neighbor, Adam MacFarlane."

Another pause, this one more awkward. "Oh," Matthew said.

"So," Adam continued, "they've been doing an investigation. They don't have any leads right now, but they told me they were done with this." He held up a wallet. "It's Amber's, and I thought she would want it."

Matthew reached for it, but Adam moved it away. "I'd rather give it to her myself."

"I'll give it to her when she gets back."

"I don't think I trust you—"

"I'm not gonna steal it or anything. She's my friend, you know."

Adam studied him for a moment, and then he handed over the wallet. "Celebrities," he muttered and turned away.

Matthew shut the door and put the wallet on a small table nearby. Then it occurred to him that it probably had some form of identification for Amber, identification that she didn't know.

She could find out who she was. Better yet, he could tell her.

He unzipped the inner pocket and opened it. Yes, there was a driver's license with Amber's photo for the state of Arizona. This was it! Smiling, he took it out and read her name.

His heart dropped. Everything turned harsh and bright. Suddenly he was hyper-aware of everything: the almost inaudible hum of the air conditioner, the slightly-warmed air from when the door had been open, the exact softness of the carpet under his feet.

He placed the card back in the wallet. Closed it. Opened the drawer of the small table and put it inside. Shut the drawer.

Then he heard the back door open and Amber's soft step on the threshold, and he shot away from the table like it was leaking radiation. When Amber appeared, he was flicking through a magazine on the couch as if he had been there all along.

Matthew glanced up as she came in, and she smiled at him.

"How was your walk?" he asked her as she took off her sandals.

"Good," she said. "What've you been up to?"

"Nothing," he said a little too quickly, and she paused. He was staring at her in a way she'd never seen him stare before.

"Are you okay?" she asked slowly.

"Yeah, great. How're you? I mean—" he winced. "How's your memory?"

"Still nothing substantial. Just bits here and there. No faces or anything else I recognize." She exhaled loudly and sat back in the armchair. "They're happening more often though, which is promising."

"I think I might know how you lost your memory."

She looked askance at him. "Are you serious?"

"My neighbor came by while you were gone and said there'd been some muggings on our beach."

"That's good to know after I just went down there all by myself..."

"So maybe someone attacked you and hit you on the head."

"It couldn't have been very hard." She rubbed her head. "I never noticed blood or a bump or anything. But it would explain why I didn't have any of my things with me. Just think, having my wallet would've solved—are you okay?"

Matthew had just made a strangled noise that sounded like a cross between a walrus and a small dog.

"Yeah, of course." Matthew cleared his throat. "Um, so you think you were mugged?"

"Maybe. If we go to the police station, I could—"

"Uh, yeah, we can do that, um, later, if you want."

Perplexed by his behavior, Amber wasn't sure what to say. "Cool. Even if I wasn't mugged, they might be able to help me figure out who I am. I've been thinking, it's about time I actively do something to figure that out, you know? I mean, who am I fooling, hanging around

here? I'm just avoiding my real life. The police have resources for finding someone's identity, right?"

"Don't get your hopes up." Matthew started flipping frantically through the magazine again. Amber noticed that he was holding it upside down and couldn't contain a sudden laugh. He brought his head up sharply, his eyes wide.

"Oh, sorry." Amber covered her mouth, hoping she hadn't offended him somehow.

"Sounds the same. How did I not hear it before?" he muttered, looking down again.

"What?"

"What? Hmm?" Matthew saw her slightly worried expression. "Oh, nothing." But his eyes had grown sad. Amber had no idea how to handle this turn of events and was feeling sufficiently awkward, so she inched towards her room.

"I'm gonna go take a nap." For a few seconds, she debated mentioning his weirdness and settled with, "Maybe you should do the same."

"Yeah, I should, um—yeah. I'm kinda...tired."

"See you in a little bit," Amber said. Matthew didn't seem to hear her because he neither moved nor replied. She shook her head as she entered her room and closed the door. He had probably been drinking again.

Rain pattered against the window, offering its own rhythm against the muffled beat of Dameon's drums a few rooms away. It was the second day of tracking drums for Freeflight's new album, and Matthew had nothing to do but haunt the studio and wait for his hand to heal. The whole band was at the studio to give input on the drums, but none of them were willing to bother actually helping. Jordan was still writing the bass part to a few songs, trying to finish before he had to record his part after Dameon was completely done. Luke was keeping the antsy Matthew company and wanted to be available if Matthew wanted to talk to him. He had noticed a change in his friend over the past few days, but he knew that asking any questions would cause Matthew to seal all hatches and submerge to escape all contact. So Luke waited.

Matthew was sitting next to the window, slowly flexing his hand back and forth, examining the fading bruises and occasionally saying an expletive under his breath when a muscle sent a pang of protest up his arm.

"It's looking better," Luke said.

"Doesn't feel better," Matthew grunted.

Luke fell silent again, listening to the thudding of the drums. Matthew rewrapped his hand and, after a few false starts and intakes of breath, asked, "You remember Riley?"

Of all the topics Luke thought were possible, Riley was at the bottom of the list. Matthew hadn't brought her up in years. "Of course," he said. Had Matthew finally heard from her?

The singer began twirling a pen in his fingers. "Do you know whatever happened to her?"

“I haven’t heard from her since high school,” Luke said. “She cut me off like she did everyone else.”

“So you don’t know anything?”

“She changed her number, disappeared from all her favorite hangout spots, and moved away. You know that as well as I do. She didn’t want to be found.”

Matthew was quiet. Then, “Do you think she still hates me?”

“I don’t think she ever hated you, Matt.”

“She should.”

Luke said nothing.

“I did some research the other day and found out some things.”

“About Riley?”

“She’s not blind anymore. She got some kind of eye surgery a few years back.”

“How d’you know?”

“I might’ve charmed and bribed a few hospital workers to let me look at their records…”

“Matt!”

“Not a ton of doctors do that kind of surgery around here, so the right one wasn’t too hard to find.”

Luke shook his head at Matthew’s audacity but only said, “It’s cool that she can see now. Good for her.” He smiled at the thought. Riley deserved it.

“That’s not all,” Matthew added, sounding like an incompetent infomercial announcer.

“She also got other surgery. Plastic surgery. On her face.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you know how she was scarred and stuff from that accident when she was little? Her parents paid for some extensive facial restructuring. She looks, like, normal now.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Money can buy anything, right?”

Luke exhaled slowly, processing it. “So why all this sudden interest in Riley? You haven’t thought of her in years.”

“Wrong. I think about her all the time.” The pen stopped spinning.

There’s regret in him, Lord. That’s the first step, right? Work in him. Use Riley to bring him to You, even in her absence, Luke prayed. “So are you going to find her and talk to her?”

Matthew didn’t answer his question. “Does Amber remind you of her?”

So that was what had started all this: Amber. Luke considered his words. “Yeah, I guess so. She has some similar mannerisms. I can see where you think that.”

“Amber *is* Riley.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but metaphorically—”

“No, she is literally Riley. Her full name is Amber Riley Knight. It says so on her driver’s license.”

Luke couldn't see how Matthew's statement could be possible, but he couldn't see how it could be impossible either. "I..." He couldn't think of a response and didn't dare ask how Matthew had come into possession of Amber's driver's license.

"Also," Matthew said, dropping the pen and standing up. "I'm not going to tell her."
And before Luke could process any of it, he left.

Riley Knight. In his mind, Luke couldn't connect his high school friend to the Amber he now knew. Granted, the more he thought about her, the more similarities he could see: her voice, her sense of humor, the way she sometimes tucked her hair behind her ear when she was nervous or trying to understand something. But too many things were different. Not just her appearance, but her smile, her style of clothing - which had no doubt changed when she could actually see what she was wearing - and, of course, the fact that she was traipsing around with Matthew without any hint of fallout from their fight.

No, it was unfair to call it a fight. Matthew had hurt her, and she had separated herself from him.

Luke didn't like thinking about it; he hadn't even been involved and it had still pained him to see such a violent and bitter schism between his two friends. He hadn't been offended that Riley had avoided him like she had Matthew; she had to escape from the problem in whatever way she could, and he was too close to Matthew. Luke, of all people, understood the appeal of backing down and running from confrontation.

He shook his head to himself as he tuned his guitar in preparation for recording. He had double the usual number of parts to master and retain in his head for the album, and he couldn't afford to waste brainpower on Matthew's situation.

"You ready?" Dunlow poked his head out of the sound booth, where the sound engineer and, annoyingly, Sonata were sitting. Sonata had no place here, but Luke wasn't about to say anything. She was determined to have her fingerprints all over this record.

"Yeah. Rhythm for track one, right?" Luke said.

"That's the one. Have everything you need?"

Luke glanced around at his sheets of notes, chords, and tabs. "Think so."

"Remember, you don't have to play it perfectly. We'll run it through a lot of effects to get the right sound, so it won't be hard to tweak it."

"Effects?" Luke muttered, but he contained the rest of his lamentation inside himself. The only effects he needed were a good amp and pedal board. Obviously Sonata had her own ideas.

An hour later, as he was giving his fingers a break, he saw Matthew in the studio lobby when Dunlow opened the door to step outside. Luke jumped up and joined the singer.

"Hey," he said to Matthew. "Where's Amber?"

Matthew scowled. "At home. Why?"

"Have you told her yet?"

"I told you, I'm not going to."

"You have to tell her."

“No, I don’t.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. She’s been wanting to know who she is for months. Why *wouldn’t* you tell her?”

Matthew’s gaze was dangerous. “You know why.”

Luke glanced towards where Sonata was still in the sound booth before lowering his voice. “This is your chance to make things right.”

“I-I can’t.” Matthew didn’t meet Luke’s eyes. “That’s impossible.”

“No it’s—”

“It’s impossible for me!” Matthew snapped. “Leave me alone.”

“Don’t punish her for your own fear.”

“Who says I’m afraid?”

You’re not fooling anyone, Matt. It’s been written all over your face for years. Luke felt a wave of pity and sorrow for his friend. “You have no right to keep that information from her,” he said, ignoring an inner voice that was telling him to probe deeper into Matthew’s motivations. That would make things too complicated for the moment. Besides, Luke already knew Matthew’s motivations; it was Matthew that needed to figure them out.

“I like things how they are, thank you very much,” Matthew said, and he ended the conversation by pointedly huddling over his phone and becoming immersed in it.

Dunlow had reappeared and was gesturing to Luke to continue his recording. The guitarist sighed, his eyes on Matthew’s stubborn face. “It can’t be this way forever,” he reminded Matthew, and then plodded back to his guitar, ill at ease, dreading what might end up being a repeat of six years ago - a time none of them wanted to return to.

Matthew’s eyes went straight to the drawer that held Amber’s wallet as soon as he entered the house. A brief search told him that Amber was on the deck writing in her journal and enjoying the first rays of sunlight that Kalupto Point had seen in days. With a long-suffering huff, he fetched the wallet from the drawer and went to the back door. Before he opened it, he lingered at the window, watching Amber shift her position on the deck chair and smile slightly as a gust of wind blew her hair in her face. Telling her would change what they had now. Would she immediately hate him again?

“*You have to tell her,*” Luke’s voice repeated in his head. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and sat on the chair next to Amber.

“Hey, how was recording today?” she asked, closing her journal and squinting at him through her blowing hair.

“A drag, like usual. The sound we’re getting is...I mean, it’s not horrible, but it’s not...Freeflight.”

“Are you sure you can’t change it?”

“And overrule Sonata? No way. It’s too late now, anyway.”

“Is Freeflight worth enough to you to stick with it even through what Sonata’s doing to it?”

“Of course!” he said without hesitation. “You of all people should know that.”

“What do you mean?”

He realized his fumble and backtracked. “I dunno, never mind.” He had been thinking about how Riley - Amber now, he reminded himself - had been just as passionate about forming Freeflight. It had been their creation. The band had meant as much to her as it had to him, if not more. It had been something for her to belong in, to put a part of herself into. She had fought so hard for Freeflight to gain momentum and attract listeners.

That’s why when he had forced her away from it, it had crushed her so completely.

He spent several minutes trying to concoct the ideal way to spring his news on her, but each idea he had was more awkward than the last. Thankfully she saw that he had something on his mind and didn’t try to fill the silence with some random topic of conversation.

Dammit, Matt, it’s not gonna go smoothly no matter how you word it. Just get it out and over with. He gripped the wallet tighter against his side. *Just say it, Matt.*

“What’s wrong?” she prompted, perceiving his increased agitation.

He could blame it on the recording, the music, Sonata. He could perpetuate his life as it was now. He could keep his and Amber’s relationship where it was: comfortable and reliable.

But that was how he always lived his life, and this was where it had gotten him: rich, famous, and without his best friend.

Regret stabbed at him with the suddenness of a switchblade. *No, not now.* He kicked it away, sending it skidding. It would be back.

“I, uh...” He made the mistake of meeting her eyes and saw the innocent curiosity there. His gaze dropped to his free hand and he examined it intently. “I know who you are.” There, now he couldn’t take it back.

He sneaked a glance up in time to see her mouth form a series of interrogatives starting with “w” before she settled on a stuttering, “W-who?”

“Your name is Amber Riley Knight. You’re twenty-four years old and live in Arizona.” He stated the facts like they meant nothing to him, with the emotion of a teacher taking roll call. Inside, his heart was twisting in on itself.

A moment passed where she registered this. Then she asked, “How do you know that?”

He handed her the wallet without looking at her. “The police found this on the beach and were keeping it as evidence for a while. They couldn’t find a way to contact you. Adam gave it to me.”

“Adam?”

“My neighbor. The old guy.”

She rifled through its contents. “No money or credit cards, courtesy of the mugger, I expect. At least my license is still here.” She held it up. “Yep, that’s me. Amber Knight. Huh.” She put it back and glanced over the other cards. “A couple of gift cards to some restaurants, an insurance card, a receipt for cab fare from LAX...what’s this?” She unfolded a scrap of paper. “An address? Do you recognize where it is? It’s just a number and a street.”

He read it, his gut clenching. He should have checked the rest of her wallet. “Yeah, it’s my address,” he said with difficulty.

“Oh my gosh, what if I’m some crazy stalker or weird fan? I’m so sorry, I promise I’m not trying to—this isn’t a ruse to—”

“Amber, relax.” Matthew almost smiled at her concern, then remembered why he thought it was funny: she hated him. Or she would if she could remember why.

“But what if I am? What if I was on my way to...to make out with you or kill you or steal a lock of your hair or—”

“Amber!” She cut herself off, eyes still wide. He continued, “You’re obviously not an obsessed fan. One, you’ve expressed no interest in making out with me. And two...” He hesitated. “We already knew each other.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“That explains why you were on your way to my house.”

“Yeah, but...are you saying you knew who I was this whole time?”

“No, no,” he said quickly, aware of the anger brewing in her tone. “Of course not. I would’ve told you.” *Even though I’m struggling enough telling you now as it is.*

“Then how the heck—”

“Look,” he said, “We went to the same high school. And you used to look a lot different.”

“What, like, braces? Glasses? A bad haircut?”

Matthew took a slow breath. “No, something more dramatic. You were...your face was really disfigured because of an accident when you were a kid.”

Her hands went to her face.

“You were blinded in the accident too. After you graduated high school, you had some procedures done that, um, fixed your eyes and face and stuff.”

Her fingers tugged and pushed at her skin. “This isn’t real?”

“No, it’s real. I mean, I don’t think they did anything weird. Skin grafts and...stuff...” Matthew was out of his element here. He shrugged hopelessly. “Your family could afford the best doctors in the state, and this is California, so there are a lot of them good at that kind of stuff.”

She surprised him by giving a rueful chuckle. “You would think they would’ve made me prettier. Might as well, eh?”

“Hey, don’t say that. I think you’re...” Flustered, he turned his head, ignoring the flush of heat on his face. *Seriously, man, that’s the last thing you should be admitting to anyone, especially to her right before she knows what—* He cut his thoughts off as well. This was becoming such a mess.

If she had noticed what he was saying, she pretended not to. “So you didn’t know what the new me looked like? I feel like I would send a picture to everyone I know for something as big as that. Or at least tell them I could freaking *see*.”

He evaded the point. “You used to go by your middle name, so there’s no way I could’ve recognized you when there was no reason for you to be visiting.” *And there also being a reason to definitely stay far away from here. From me.*

“Hmm.” She considered the scrap of paper with his address on it again. He should have kept it when she had handed it to him. “How well did we know each other?”

“Huh?” He stalled for time.

“Apparently I was on my way to visit you, so we must have known each other pretty well.”

“Oh. I guess.” He coughed nervously.

“So how could you have possibly missed the whole transformation news? If I fly from Arizona to visit you, surely we were good enough friends for you to know.”

“Right. Um, well, we...had a bit of a...uh, falling out, senior year.”

“Oh?” Her look pressed for answers he didn’t want to give.

“It was over some stupid teenage thing. I don’t really remember.” The regret was back again, lovingly slitting him open. “Probably nothing.” His laugh was close to one of pain.

She frowned but didn’t dig further. “Well, I’m glad we’re talking again,” she said, nudging his arm.

He smiled, even as guilt chewed at his insides. “Yeah. Me too.”

Matthew’s head shot up at the sound of Amber’s door opening. Exhausted from a day filled with meetings about the album, the constant stress of Sonata breathing down his neck, and the strange discovery of Amber’s identity, he had dozed off in front of the television around eight o’clock. He hadn’t seen Amber since that morning, when she had asked to borrow his computer and shut herself in her room, saying she was going to see what she could find about her life. He was curious about what she unearthed, especially if she discovered the reason why the two of them hadn’t spoken in years. Her knowledge of that would definitely change how things were now.

“Find anything?” he asked as she came into the living room. He stretched and muted the tv.

“Not a lot, but some. Are you sure you don’t have any old yearbooks?”

“If I do, I have no idea where they are,” he lied. “So what do you know now?”

“A little about my parents, where I went to college, and my job.”

“You have a job?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“I dunno, I guess I never thought about what you might be missing in your ‘real life.’” He put quotes around the two words with his fingers.

“Well, apparently I work at an accounting firm.”

“Sounds terribly boring.”

“Maybe not to me - I majored in accounting and finance.”

“Wow. You were always pretty good at math, I guess. Better than me, though that’s not saying much.” He grinned.

“Also, I found a few pictures of me and Luke in the archives of our school’s paper. Were we friends?”

“Yeah, pretty good ones. The three of us hung out a lot. I think you and I were closer than you and him, but you two had some sort of bond that I never really figured out.”

“Not sure what that’s supposed to mean, but...okay.”

He shrugged. “So is that all you found?”

“Pretty much.”

Well, she’s not running away from me, so I’m probably safe for now.

“Can I call Luke on your phone?”

...or maybe not. “Uh, why?”

“I want to talk with him to see what he can tell me about high school.”

Crap. “Why not talk to *me*?”

“You’re being weird about it.”

He acquiesced and handed her his cell phone, watching her as she found Luke’s number and dialed it.

“Hey, Luke, it’s Amber.” There were muffled words of recognition. “Yeah. Did Matt tell you about, you know...me?” An affirmative. “Awesome. Crazy right? Can I talk to you about it?” A concerned query. “Not really, no. I’ll get Matt to take me.” Another question. “No, it’s okay, he’s right here. Alright, thanks. See you in a little bit.”

She handed the phone back to Matthew, who thought rather highly of himself for not asking her what she specifically wanted to talk to Luke about. Once he sucked back his pride, he understood why she wanted to talk to Luke; Matthew always confided in him when he needed to do so. Luke was the most trustworthy person he knew.

“So I’m taking you to Luke’s?” he asked.

“Sorry I volunteered you.”

“No, it’s okay,” he said, already finding his keys. “It’s just a twenty-minute drive inland.”

She was silent during the trip, watching the white road strips tick by like a roll of film. The streetlights occasionally drenched her face with a muted yellow or orange. Matthew shifted into a higher gear and felt the Audi respond. The sooner she satisfied her curiosity about her life, the sooner he could stop being paranoid that she would find out the truth.

Luke’s house, unlike those of Matthew and Dameon, gave no indication that he was part of a famous band. It was in a nice suburban neighborhood with wide, smoothly-paved roads and landscaped yards, but the house itself was unimpressive. Luke’s outdated Mustang was parked on the driveway, which didn’t help its image.

When they pulled up, Amber glanced at Matthew, not sure what to say.

“I’m gonna go get a drink in town,” he said. “Just call me when you’re done.”

“You don’t want to join us?” she asked, secretly relieved.

“Nah.”

“Thanks for taking me.”

He shrugged. She got out of the car and let the sidewalk guide her between potted plants and rock borders. Luke opened promptly at her knock.

“Hey, come on in,” he said, looking over her shoulder as Matthew’s Audi revved and shot away. “He’ll make the neighbors complain again,” he mumbled.

“I hope it’s not too late—”

“Don’t worry about it. Laura and I were just about to settle in front of the tv.” He ushered her into a well-lit foyer that led almost directly to the kitchen. There, she was introduced to Luke’s wife, Laura. Amber immediately took a liking to her, a slightly heavysset woman with brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and merry blue eyes set in a sweet, expressive face.

Laura greeted her and said, “Luke has told me about meeting you and going on tour with the band, and he filled me in on what’s been happening. You have quite a unique situation.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m trying to take him away from you or something,” Amber said awkwardly.

“No, no, not at all!” Laura laughed. “I’m glad you two met. He needs a good friend.”

Luke flushed. “Anyway...” He gave his wife a kiss and turned to Amber, examining her. “Wow, I can’t believe you’re Riley,” he said in wonder. “I mean, you did remind me of her sometimes, when you said something a certain way or stuff like that, but...wow.”

“I know, this is so weird.”

“I’m sorry, I have to—” He gave her a quick hug. Embarrassed, Amber glanced at his wife, but she didn’t seem to mind. “I missed you, Ri—sorry, Amber.”

“I probably missed you too,” she replied with a wan smile.

Luke guided her to the living room, where they both sat on the couch. “So what do you want to know?” he asked.

“Um, I guess we could start with: what was I like? In high school.”

He answered slowly and thoughtfully. “Shy and quiet. Since you were blind, you were afraid to reach out and make friends, assuming they would make fun of you. You were a good friend though, especially to Matt. Loyal to a fault. You two struck an odd pair, but you were good for each other. He helped build your confidence, and you saw a side to him that few did, a private one where he was a sensitive musician and profound thinker. Though that side’s all but gone now,” he added as an afterthought.

“I can’t see Matt making friends with a scarred and blind girl.”

“He used to be a lot different. Plus you both loved guitar.”

“Oh yeah, apparently I can play that,” she said.

“You can’t just play it, you can dominate it! You’re ridiculously good. At least, you were. I don’t know if you still play.”

“But I was blind.”

“Which made it even more amazing. You had a real talent for it.”

So she was actually good at something. It was nice to finally know what it was. She digested that for a moment in silence while Laura brought them tea, and Luke signaled for her to stay.

“So...” Amber said, “if Matt and I were supposedly such good friends, how did we have a falling out so dramatic that he didn’t know my appearance had changed?”

Luke winced as if he had received a physical blow. “That’s not really my area.”

“He said it was some stupid teenage thing, but he was all sketchy about it.”

“Well, it was definitely stupid.”

“What happened?”

He sighed, wringing his hands in his lap. “I’m sorry, but I really think Matt should be the one to tell you.”

“Why does it matter?” Amber groaned.

“Because it was a horrible ordeal, and it was solely between you and Matt. He barely ever talked or talks about it, so I don’t even know much.”

“Luke, please.”

“I don’t want to get anything wrong. He needs to be the one who explains himself. He’s kept it bottled up for so long. You know, after it happened, he didn’t even tell me. I asked him how you were doing and he just told me you weren’t friends anymore. He didn’t talk to me, you didn’t talk to me...ugh, it was terrible.” He shook his head. “I don’t mean to be frustrating, honest. It’s just that he truly should be the one to tell you. I can talk to him about it if you want.”

Amber set her mug down and fell back against the couch cushions in defeat. “That might make it worse.”

“You’re right, I probably shouldn’t get involved. It’s not my business.”

“But she’s making it your business,” Laura said softly from the armchair in the corner. “She came to you for answers, love.”

He glanced at her in one of those wordless exchanges that only married couples can have. Then Luke shrugged one shoulder, at a loss for what to say besides, “This is between them.”

“It freaks me out that Matt is being so skittish about it,” Amber said. “He’s always cocky and closed off - if he doesn’t want to admit something, he flat out lies with no problem. I don’t know what could make him so uncomfortable and scared.”

“Because he actually regrets it,” Luke said. “It’s one of the few things he’s never been able to shrug off.”

“Now *I*’m getting uncomfortable and scared.” She racked her limited memory bank for any clue as to what happened, but it was as unhelpful as ever.

“You meant a lot to him.” Luke paused. “You still do.”

Amber couldn’t decide if she agreed with that, so she didn’t reply and took a shaky sip of tea. It was chamomile. Its warmth reached into her stomach. Laura returned to the kitchen to

finish cleaning up, and Luke, in his usual unobtrusive manner, allowed the silence to stretch to accommodate both his and Amber's thoughts.

"When was the last time you spoke to me?" she finally asked. "Before all this, I mean."

"Not sure. We were friends, but you basically cut off all contact with Freeflight. Just an occasional call or email. After all of us graduated, I never saw you."

"Why wouldn't I want to talk to you?"

"I reminded you of Matt? I dunno."

"Sorry about that, I guess."

"You're here now, aren't you?" He smiled and shrugged. His phone rang; it was Matthew asking if they were finished.

"So where are you going from here?" Luke asked Amber when he hung up.

"You have all the information. You tell me."

"I don't think I do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This is a you and Matt thing. I don't have any authority."

"You know my *life*, don't you understand?" Amber wanted to shake that unwavering concerned look off of his face. "I still don't know the first thing about myself. Everyone seems to know more than I do. It's not fair. I bet I could find my way home now if I tried. People are probably still looking for me while I'm wasting time wandering around with some womanizing ex-friend who didn't even recognize me! Why did this happen?" The tears started flowing. "Why did my whole life have to be complicated for no apparent reason? I just want to go home and return to how things were, but I can't because I forgot *everything!*"

Luke didn't know how to handle the crying woman in his living room, but fortunately Laura heard her and came in from the kitchen.

"Luke, are you making people cry again?" she teased, prompting a hiccup in Amber's tears. "I know what your problem is," Laura told her, "you're not drinking your tea, and it's good for the soul."

Amber picked up her mug and sipped at the cooling drink obediently. Laura nodded in approval. "There we go. Use the amount of time it takes you to finish that mug to ponder your options, and don't you dare try to decide before then!"

"You always have the best advice," Luke said, kissing her again.

"Of course I do," she replied. "I taught you everything you know!"

"Just like old times, eh?" Matthew was in prime form this morning, smartly dressed and chipper even though it was nine o'clock. He grabbed an apple from the basket on the kitchen table and flicked it into the air, catching it in front of Amber's face. She glanced up from her book to see his bright eyes a foot away from hers. He flashed an even grin, waiting for approval.

"You're blocking my sunlight," she said, but she cracked a reluctant smile.

He straightened and chomped on the apple. "Just you and me. No needy girl. No stressing on getting songs written. No stupid band meeting until the afternoon."

“So why are you up and looking like you’re about to go somewhere?” she asked, noting his nice jeans and casual button-down again.

“Is it a crime to look good?” he said through his next mouthful of apple.

“No,” she answered automatically, not really listening.

“I thought I’d take advantage of having the bathroom all to myself. Hey, why are you so caught up in that book?” He swiped it from her and read the back cover. “Sounds boring.”

She snatched it back. “Quit it, you lost my place! It’s good - Luke let me borrow it.”

“What is with you two and reading?” Matthew shook his head. “It’s a nice day - let’s do something!”

“It’s *always* a nice day.”

“So? How about a drive down the coast? Windows down, sunglasses on...”

Amber gave up trying to find her place and closed the book. “Will fangirls be involved?”

“I hope so—I mean, not. I hope not,” he switched, reading her expression. “No, no fangirls. Hopefully.”

She sighed.

“Come on, Amber, it’ll brighten your mood!”

She had been subdued since leaving Luke’s house the night before. Talking about her past had harshly reminded her that she had a life somewhere out there that she was missing and had no power to retrieve. She thought that knowing where she came from and being around people who used to know her would give her all the answers she wanted, but it had only increased her thirst for learning about herself. Matthew had given her a vague reply when she had repeated her quest to go to the police station soon, which only solidified her discomfort about what he wasn’t telling her. She could pressure Matthew or Luke into telling her more, but part of her didn’t want to know. Maybe not remembering was better.

“Alright, I’ll come, but only if we can go to the police station on the way back,” she said.

“Fine, fine, whatever.” He cocked his head. “You okay?”

“I didn’t sleep well.”

“Nightmares?”

“Memories, I think. Or weird dream versions of them.”

“Anything solid?” he asked intently.

“No.” Her dreams had been full of disembodied sounds: fragments of voices, gusts of laughter, inharmonious guitar music, someone crying. Memories were creeping out of the darkness, but only in pieces with no particular order. At least it was better than having no memory at all.

Or maybe it wasn’t.

The Audi’s wheels spun smoothly on the pavement of Highway 1, spitting out flashes of reflected sunlight as they caught the rays. A fresh breeze offset the strong California sun, blowing from over the Pacific through the open windows of the car to ruffle Matthew and Amber’s hair and clothing.

“Do you want some music?” he called over the wind.

“What?” she shouted back. With the windows down, the sound of the Audi’s powerful engine was louder. Amber had no chance of being heard.

Matthew turned on the radio, boosting the volume so that it cut through the ambient noise. Grinning with approval at the song, he shifted gears and accelerated, relishing the engine’s insolent snarl as it responded. It was worth getting famous, if only for owning this car. It mirrored him in its good looks, punchy accelerator, and the confident growl of its engine. It was made to be appreciated. It was made to be drooled at and driven recklessly. If he could get away with doing this every day with a decent girl at his side, he would be content.

Decent girl. He glanced at Amber, who had accepted the music and increase of speed with no change in expression. She was looking at line after line of beach houses and rolling coastal hills, but he doubted she was really seeing them. Luke had texted him last night after Amber had left, saying that he hadn’t told her what had happened. Matthew was relieved but surprised, given Luke’s penchant for honesty.

Matthew didn’t want to lose what friendship he had rebuilt with Amber over the past weeks. It was almost like they were in high school again, their relationship having that same taste of unlikely camaraderie and ease that it had before he had messed everything up. Moving on without her had highlighted her value to him even more than anything he had noticed before, and as much as he hated to admit needing or wanting anyone, he had suffered from her absence. There was no way he would screw this up again, and she would never have to know that by keeping the truth from her, he had manufactured his own second chance.

They had settled on the patio of an upscale ice cream shop, appreciating double scoops of Rocky Road under the shade of a patio umbrella, when Matthew’s phone rang.

“We need to talk.” Sonata’s voice cut into his ear.

He glanced at Amber, who was watching a bird peck at a discarded waffle cone. “I’m busy,” he said.

“I don’t care.”

“I’m not at home right now, so—”

“Where are you?”

“Pasadena.”

“Let’s meet up early at the record company.”

“But—”

“Noon. Be there.”

She hung up before he could say anything else. He sighed. Sonata loved truncating his personal time, especially if she wasn’t *in* it. But he didn’t blame her - she was only doing her job. If there was one thing that he could depend on, it was that Sonata never let anything get in the way of her goals. Freeflight needed that in the unforgiving music industry.

“We need to go,” he said to Amber.

“Why?” she asked, breaking off a piece of her cone and throwing it to the bird.

“Sonata wants to see me at the studio.”

Her face darkened at the mention of her name. “Do you realize how much control she has over you?” she asked, not looking at him.

He shrugged. “I mean, I usually do what she says unless I want to piss her off. She usually has a good reason for things.”

“Yeah, but are her reasons good for everybody, or just for herself?”

“What has gotten into you?” He shook his head and got up. “Come on, let’s go.” Sonata always had his best interests at heart - she had proven that time and time again. Amber had never liked Sonata; she had a long-time grudge against her without even knowing it. Matthew almost smiled. Some things never changed.

“You’re not gonna like what I have to say.” Sonata was sitting on the edge of the stage, her slender legs crossed. Matthew was a sucker for those legs and she knew it. Matthew tried not to get distracted as he finished packing up after rehearsal. The first of his songs for Freeflight were sounding better than he imagined, and the new members were getting along relatively well. Luke’s friend Jordan, who had been recruited to play bass, was a weird kid. Not like Luke at all, but he was no doubt a good bass player. Matthew still wasn’t sure about Dameon being able to function under the management of his sister, but he brought a good energy to the group. Matthew hoped he’d be able to stay.

“Matt, are you listening to me?”

“Course.” He threw a quick smile in her direction. “Keep going.”

“I just don’t think she’ll be able to handle it once Freeflight gets more famous. She’ll cause a lot of problems that would be a lot easier to avoid in the first place...”

Four songs were essentially finished besides a few tiny adjustments that would be ironed out by the end of the week, and he had three more written and ready to have the other parts added to them. That was seven songs right there, and they would be playable by the band’s first out-of-town gig on the sixteenth. He was starting to think he was actually onto something.

“...so Riley definitely can’t stay for that performance—”

“Wait.” He turned around, eyeing Sonata. “You’re saying you want me to kick Riley out?” Her words were finally filtering through his thoughts.

She threw up her hands in exasperation. “Yes, Matt, that’s what I’ve been telling you for the past five minutes. I *knew* you weren’t listening!”

“Whatever your reasons are for it, it’s not gonna happen,” he said, returning to the cords he was coiling into a case. Sonata was just complaining about Riley as she always did. Tomorrow she would think of something new to blame her for.

“She’s holding Freeflight back!”

“How? She’s an amazing guitar player.”

“She’s not good for our image.”

“Our?” He clasped the case shut and faced her. “You’re not part of the band.”

“I am as much as she is! And you *know* how much work I put into this. I do much more than she ever does. I’m telling you, having a blind and deformed girl will not be good for the band.”

“She’s my friend,” he said, warning Sonata that she was in dangerous territory.

“Exactly, so she’ll understand. Girls are going to notice you, and you won’t want her in the way, right?”

“It’s not like she’s competition.”

“But they won’t know that. They’ll think you have a thing for freaks—”

“Sonata—”

“—and they’ll forget about you! And Freeflight! Having a girl in the band is bad enough, but a *blind* and *ugly* one? That’s popularity suicide.”

“Just because she’s blind doesn’t mean—”

“She can’t perform. She can’t even see the damn audience.”

“Neither can I, when the lights are shining in my face.”

“What if she trips over a cord? What if she falls off a stage? What if she runs into you or another band member? She’s a risk, unless she stands perfectly still the entire time, which kills appearances and crowd appeal, as if her face wouldn’t do that already. It’s better for us and for her if she leaves.”

She had a point, but Riley had been doing fine in rehearsals. “We need her guitar skills.”

“Luke can do everything she does.”

“But she’s *blind!*” Matthew said.

“Exactly!”

Matthew bit his lip. “I don’t know...”

“You look so cute when you’re indecisive and do that lip-biting thing,” Sonata said with a coy smile.

“Shut up,” he said, going to her. They kissed.

“Just think about it,” she said into his ear. After another kiss, she slid down from the stage, slithered out of his arms, and left him standing there with an uneasy heart.

The Charlotte situation had gone precisely as Sonata had planned it. A protective father, a jealous ex-boyfriend - all it took was a short phone call and a “chance” encounter with the muscly Loren Bradford. Now she could focus on a more stubborn problem: Amber.

It was no wonder that Sonata had disliked her from the moment she had seen that thin, pale, pathetic girl peeking from behind Matthew with her large eyes. Those eyes contained a blank innocence that provoked Sonata’s immediate distrust. People with eyes like that were always hiding something, a deeper level of knowledge that tended to gum up her agenda.

How Matthew got mixed up with her had mystified Sonata at first. She had known Matthew for years - no, she had *made* Matthew. She knew what he liked, how to please him, what bothered and frustrated him. The Matthew she knew would never waste his time on a girl like Amber, not even to befriend her.

She had thought that he was branching out, trying something new to amuse himself. He went through phases of deviating from his usual preference of distraction, going for a different type - girl-next-door, motherly, an unusually attractive nerd. With Amber he could have been testing out the modest quiet type, to see if he could draw out anything exciting beneath the surface.

But the longer she had stayed, the more she didn't fit into the role of "Matthew's current fling." She didn't seem to want to be in Matthew's world of rock'n'roll and parties, or even to be around the band at all. She challenged Matthew as if she were unafraid of losing her status with him. Her kind were the most dangerous: over-confident goody-goodies who saw themselves above judgment and were unwilling to get their hands dirty.

Sonata loved getting her hands dirty.

So she had done some research: asking around, prying into secrets, dropping hints to the band members here and there, especially Luke since he probably knew something the others didn't. Something about Amber had bothered her besides the obvious personality discrepancies between the two of them. She had reminded her of someone else she didn't like.

She hadn't made the connection until Luke had mentioned what had happened with Riley in high school. *That* was who Amber reminded her of: Riley Knight, another aberrant recipient of Matthew's affection. But Sonata had gotten rid of her quite effectively, so Amber would pose no problem.

From the band members, Sonata had discovered piece by piece how Amber had shown up in Matthew's life. Conveniently popping up on the beach? Having nowhere else to go, nothing else to do? Having no money or identification? She thought it was all rather embarrassing, but she dug deeper and happened upon Matthew's neighbor, who had told her about the muggings and investigation. At the police station, Sonata had coaxed information from the officers on the case and found out Amber's full name. With that fact, her plan fell gloriously into place, a two-part plan that would get Amber out of the way and keep her out for good. Besides, no matter how much Matthew liked Amber, Sonata could always count on him putting one person over everyone else: himself.

Sonata allowed her gaze to rove appreciatively over Matthew as he entered the lobby of the studio; he was looking particularly nice today, wearing clothes that accentuated his naturally fit physique and gave him a cocky air on top of his usual bravado. She had owned that body since he had first caught her eye in high school, despite his steady line of girlfriends and flings. Amber wasn't the only one with a strong hold on Matthew.

Her lip curled as Amber trailed in behind him, clinging to his presence like a limpet. The girl looked more mournful than usual.

Sonata stood up and jerked her head at Matthew to join her in a vacant office room. He followed after her like a sheep.

The moment she closed the door, she pulled Matthew to her and kissed him hard. He responded easily, pushing her against the door with the force of his movement.

After she judged him sufficiently softened, she broke it off but let him maintain their interlocked position. Thought she primarily used their passions for persuasion these days, she still thoroughly enjoyed their intimacy. She was a woman, after all, a woman with access to a very desirable man.

“What was that for, then?” he asked, slightly breathless.

“You look especially sexy today.”

He took the compliment in stride, touching his lips to her neck. “So do you,” he murmured. “Is this what you had to ‘talk’ so urgently to me about?”

She pushed him off. “No, but I do admit I’m feeling a little nostalgic.”

“We did have some crazy days in high school, didn’t we?” He casually undid a button on her blouse, but she slapped his hand away.

“Do you remember when I helped you save the band by convincing you to get rid of that embarrassing blind girl?”

He drew back sharply, several emotions flashing through his eyes like the passing cars of a train. “Yeah, why?”

She thought she detected panic in his voice, along with something else. “This is about something similar, but hear me out.”

“I’m not kicking anyone out of the band.”

“I’m not asking you to. Thought I wouldn’t mind if Dameon—”

“No.”

She shrugged. “I’m worried about you.”

“Because...?”

“From an outside perspective, I don’t think Amber is good for you.”

“No, I’m not listening to this.” He made to leave, but Sonata was blocking the door. He turned away from her instead. “You’ve made your dislike for her very obvious, but that doesn’t mean she’s bad.”

“She’s holding you back.” Sonata kept her voice calm and reasonable.

“How?”

“By distracting you when you should be working. By giving you bad advice on your songs. That crap you first presented to us reeked of her. It’s obvious she doesn’t know anything about good songwriting.”

“I wrote those songs, not her!”

“Either way, she’s influencing you in a way that’s not good for the band. Or for you.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re going soft. You’re letting her walk all over you!”

“No.”

“How long has she been living with you, now? And exactly how much has she done to pay you back? Surely the sex isn’t *that* good.”

“For the last time, we’re not—”

“You’ve been slipping, and it’s because she’s in the way. And because of that, you’re endangering the band.”

A clock ticked in the silence.

“She’s a risk,” Sonata said.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I still don’t see how she’s hurting anything,” he said, but he sounded uncertain.

“It’s because you’ve been blinded by her—” Sonata had to force the word out: “—charm, or whatever weird sort of influence she has on you.”

He dropped his hand, still looking unconvinced. She took both of his hands, mindful of his injured one, and softened her tone. “I’m just looking out for you, Matt. I know how much you care about Freeflight.” She kissed his cheek, then his lips. He looked into her eyes like a child searching for reassurance.

“She’s my friend,” he said almost helplessly.

“I know, babe.” She kissed him again. “But you need to trust me, just like you did before with Riley. That turned out fine, didn’t it?”

But she suddenly lost him; his features hardened, his eyes grew icy, and he twisted away from her. “No!” he said, with what sounded like a sob.

“Matt—”

“I have to stop repeating my mistakes,” he said in a muffled voice. She couldn’t see his face.

“I’m only asking you to—”

“I won’t,” he said to himself. Then louder, “I won’t! Whatever you want me to do to her, I’m not gonna do it.”

He turned to her and she could see a strangely bold resolve in his eyes. Why did he have to pick *now* to get rebellious?

She straightened. “Fine,” she snapped, all traces of tenderness gone. “You’ve left me no choice.”

“Oh yeah? What’re you gonna do to me?” he sneered, resolve disfiguring into insolence.

“If you don’t kick her out of your house by tomorrow,” she said, parrying the steel in his eye with her own, “I will drop you from the band.”

“You can’t do that - I *am* the band!” He gave a derisive laugh.

“Then I guess the whole band will go down in flames. You know I can make it happen if I want it to.” Her look dared him to claim otherwise.

For a minute, they stared each other down. “You know I have the power to ruin you,” she said.

With a frustrated cry, he shoved her aside, threw open the door, and stormed outside, past a bewildered Amber sitting in a chair.

Sonata let him leave, smoothing her rumpled shirt and rebuttoning what Matthew had undone. She had no doubt he would come through.

After all, she had made him.

Matthew wouldn't speak to Amber. For thirty minutes he had been silent other than an occasional noise of anger or unexplained curse. They were driving back towards Kalupto Point, and Amber didn't dare ask about stopping by the police station or why he wasn't going to the band meeting. Obviously, something Sonata had said had upset him. Knowing Sonata, it could have been anything, but Amber had a feeling that it had to do with her.

She wavered between asking him and letting it be. If she was already the indirect cause of his irritation, she didn't want to make things worse.

Matthew continued his unexplained fuming when they got home. He took out a large mixing bowl as if he were going to cook something, but left it on the counter. Then he turned on the tv, stared at his guitar, and started towards his room while unbuttoning his shirt, changing course halfway and heading back to the kitchen. Alarmed at his schizophrenic behavior, Amber tried to think of something witty, but all she came up with was, "You seem agitated."

"Of course I'm agitated!" He disappeared into his pantry, and she could hear him rifling through boxes.

"Because of Sonata?"

"Who else would it be?"

She made sure that the counter was between them before she asked the next question: "What did she say?"

She jumped as he popped out of the pantry, his hands full of flour and other ingredients. He dumped them next to the bowl. "She always thinks she can control me."

Amber waited for further explanation, but he kept muttering things under his breath, making unnecessarily loud noises with the utensils. He didn't seem to notice - or care - that his hair was mussed, his shirt was still half-unbuttoned, and the garage door was hanging open from when he had entered ten minutes ago.

"What did she say?" Amber repeated.

Matthew took two eggs from the fridge, accidentally dropped one, and stared at the yolk oozing out onto the floor. His expression fought between anger and apathy. "Damn egg," he said under his breath. "Likes making it complicated. Everything could be simple like it always is, but *no*, it has to...cause problems." He considered the other egg in his hand. "Makes it more interesting."

Now he's talking to himself about eggs. Forsaking safety, she went to him and took his hand. "Matt? You okay?"

"I dropped an egg," he stated.

"Here." She took the other egg and set it next to the bowl, propping against the bag of flour so it wouldn't roll off. She led him by his uninjured hand as if he were a child to the couch in the living room. "How about you tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing," he said in that frustratingly not-nothing way.

"Matt, you were talking to eggs."

“Nothing *you* can help with.” He crossed his arms and glanced desperately back to the kitchen.

“Sometimes it helps just to talk about it.”

“How many times do I have to tell you: you’re not my psychiatrist!”

“No, but I’m your friend.”

That word sparked something in him, and he looked at her. She couldn’t decipher his expression. “I’ve known Sonata for a long time. I trust her. She’s been there for me. I know she actually cares about me.”

It took all of Amber’s willpower not to make a disdainful noise.

“But sometimes,” he went on, “she wants me to do things that aren’t...ideal. Usually that’s good because otherwise I’d never get anything done, so it’s for the best. But...” he trailed off.

Amber was beginning to feel uneasy. If Sonata had asked him to do something that even *he* was bothered about, it couldn’t be good. “What did she ask you to do?”

Matthew stretched and noticed his shirt was still half-unbuttoned from when he had changed his mind about putting on something more casual. He began to refasten the buttons, and his eyes were still on his shirt when he told her. “She wants me to kick you out.”

“So should I go pack my things?” Amber joked.

Instead of smiling, he rubbed his eyes. “She threatened to ruin me if I didn’t.”

“She’s bluffing, right?” Amber tried to keep concern from leaking into her voice.

“Her reasoning is that I’ll ruin the band anyway if I keep letting you distract me.”

“But I don’t distract you. I even gave you advice for your songs!”

“Exactly,” he murmured.

She peered hard at him. “You’re not seriously considering it, are you?”

His eyes flicked up to meet hers, and they said what his voice didn’t.

A surprisingly forceful landslide of anger and indignation collided with her head-on, crushing her self-control. “When will you stop listening to that-that...” Various words slammed against her verbal filter.

“She has good reasons—”

“Well if you agree with her, maybe you *should* kick me out! You seem to like putting your career over your friends anyway!”

The truth of her words pierced him, dredging up suppressed regret and nailing it to his heart, front and center. He had already abandoned her once for selfish reasons years ago. How could he do that to her again?

“That’s not what I meant,” he protested. “Just that she’s trying to do what’s best for the band. But I don’t agree with her, okay?”

“I can’t believe you’re even considering it.”

He grimaced with shame. “Self-preservation instinct, I guess. She can make my life hell.”

“By all means, we certainly don’t want that! How would you *ever* survive?”

“Amber...” He said her name but could think of nothing to say after it.

She abruptly cringed and put her hand on her head. Before he could voice a concerned inquiry, the spasm ceased and she looked at him. "I've run into Sonata before."

"Huh?"

"Before my memory loss, probably in high school because I think you were there."

"You just remembered something?" Fear crept into his mind.

"Just a part of a conversation with music jargon. I don't understand it. But I recognize her voice. And yours."

"Oh. Well, yeah, she went to the same high school too and graduated a couple years before we did. That's how I first met her."

"Were we ever... friends?"

He burst out laughing. "Are you serious? No way. She always hated you."

"Good thing she doesn't recognize me either, then." She rubbed her head, wincing. "I think I'm gonna go take a walk."

"Are you sure you're okay?" He reached out to her, but she pulled away.

"Yeah. My head just hurts." She searched around for her shoes, finding them next to the kitchen. Before opening the back door, she paused. "I'm still angry, by the way. Because you're being stupid."

That tends to be my pattern, Matthew thought as she left. Belatedly he realized that the tv was still on; it chattered back to him in an undertone, filling the silence. "I'm going to regret not taking her to the hospital that first day, aren't I?" he said to the empty room.

A sudden determination gripped him. He didn't want to lose her again. He would assure her that he would fight for her, against Sonata. Maybe he would succeed, maybe he wouldn't. But he wouldn't abandon Amber, especially if she needed him now more than ever.

And, to be fair, he needed her.

As he stood, he saw his unfinished concoction of the kitchen counter. He had been making his go-to comfort food: banana bread. And the dropped egg was still in a puddle on his floor.

He might as well clean it up now and finish mixing the batter. If he timed it right, he could even put it in the oven and have a fresh, steaming slice to present to Amber when she came back. Hopefully it would improve her mood as much as it did his.

Unconsciously smiling at her anticipated reaction, he grabbed a paper towel and stooped to wipe up the fallen egg.

Younger versions of Matthew and Sonata's voices swirled in Amber's head, muddling her thoughts. Most of the memories she had been remembering hadn't involved Matthew or anyone else she had met - or had been reunited with, she corrected herself - here. Not knowing her history with the people she currently knew was like stepping into a fast-flowing river and not knowing where it began, seeing only bits of debris from upstream.

After leaving Matthew's house, she hadn't gone far, only to the foot of the steps leading to the beach. This stretch of coast had become very familiar and comforting to her during the time she had been staying with Matthew, and she could understand why he himself often took jogs

along the shoreline. The inhabitants of the houses sharing the same beach were unintrusive, having their own desire for privacy, and the bluff made it hard for visitors to see the beach, much less access it without trespassing and drawing attention.

She watched the white waves make ruffles against the curve of the shore as she gathered her thoughts. Was there any purpose in what had happened to her? Out of all the places to lose her memory, she happened to lose it near the home of a man who used to be her friend. Apparently she had been coming to visit him, but the pieces of the situation didn't mesh well together. She blamed it on her faulty brain and memory gaps, but it still made her curious. She and Matthew used to be friends. Then they weren't, and yet she was going to visit him. Then they became friends naturally. Again. So they hadn't stopped being friends because of personality differences - they got along well enough, even without realizing their concurrent pasts.

If their friendship had ended because she had done something to hurt him, he would have reacted more negatively to discovering her identity. He would have immediately continued their self-imposed separation the moment he had known, but instead, he still expressed interest in spending time with her. That left two other options: either there had been a misunderstanding between them, or *he* had been responsible. And knowing Sonata's aptitude for scheming, Amber was sure it was the former.

Was Matthew operating under some misconception of her? What had Sonata done that had caused such a dramatic rift in a friendship that didn't even include her? Sonata was certainly not going to give any answers, and Luke was too scared to.

"What is with these people?" Amber muttered to herself, leaning against the side of the bluff. "I'm working blind here. A little help in the memory department would be great, God, if you wanna throw me a bone."

She waited for a flash of inspiration that never came. The sun was sinking towards the ocean, and a flock of seagulls fluttered overhead, headed for their nests in the rocks. After a while, she roused herself and plodded back up the steps without any new ideas on how to find out what Sonata had done.

When she entered the house, Matthew was slicing something on the counter, and a nutty banana smell filled the kitchen. At her entrance, he hastily transferred a slice of bread to a plate and held it out to her.

"What's this?" she asked, taking it.

"Banana bread. Best banana bread you'll ever taste. Try it!"

She broke off a piece. "So why am I eating this, again?"

"Because I was stressing out about Sonata...and I made you feel bad."

"You stress-bake?" Amber said, amused. He was right: the banana bread was delicious.

"Don't tell anyone. Rock stars aren't supposed to do that."

She chuckled and almost choked on her mouthful. He patted her back worriedly.

"Sorry." She cleared her throat. "Um, so I have a question."

Convinced she was out of danger from choking to death, he obtained his own slice of bread and stuffed half of it in his mouth. “Okay,” he said, the word muffled.

“I have a feeling that the reason we stopped being friends is because Sonata made you think something about me that isn’t true. Do you know what that might be?”

He stopped chewing and swallowed with difficulty. “Sonata?”

“Yeah. She was involved with whatever happened, right?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because she’s trying to separate us again. I mean, not that we’re ‘together’ or anything, but, like...she doesn’t like us hanging out. I thought maybe the same thing happened in high school, and that it’s her fault that we’re not friends now. Well, we *are* friends now, but I mean ‘now’ as in the ‘now’ before now...” Amber gave up trying to make sense and polished off her banana bread.

Matthew rubbed the back of his neck, his own portion forgotten. “Uh, yeah, she was definitely involved.”

“So it was her fault?”

He hesitated long enough that she felt awkward and began picking at the crumbs on her plate. He finally said, “You know, ever since it happened, I’ve been blaming her.”

Amber waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. “And?”

“That’s it.” He shrugged and began arraying the rest of the banana bread slices on a plate, his back turned towards Amber. She gritted her teeth in annoyance but didn’t press him. Sooner or later, *someone* was going to tell her what had happened, why it had happened, and whose fault it was. She wasn’t even going to consider returning home until she knew.

“*What?* Matt, it’s only a matter of time before she finds out!”

Matthew shushed Luke as they sat in the lobby of the studio. Amber was in the bathroom, insulated by a couple of walls, but she would emerge at any moment.

“I still have time. I need to break it to her slowly—” Matthew began.

“It won’t matter how you break it! She’ll freak out.”

“Then maybe she won’t ever have to know.”

“If she doesn’t remember on her own, and if you don’t tell her, I will.”

“It doesn’t concern you!”

“She’s my friend too!” Luke whispered fiercely. “You weren’t the only one who mourned her loss, you know. You affected others with what you did, too!”

Stung by Luke’s unusually potent declaration, Matthew snorted and crossed his arms, glaring at the wall.

“She needs to hear it from you,” Luke said more gently, “so she can also hear how sorry you are. Isn’t that what kept you two apart, that you never said that?”

Matthew grunted, unable to deny it.

“If word gets out to people that she’s Riley, and someone else tells her about what happened...you know how big Dameon’s mouth is.”

The snap of the door opening split the two of them apart. Sonata strode in, a certain excited energy in her sharp step that bode well for whatever dark motive put it there. Luke exchanged glances with Matthew.

“You guys look like two preteen girls caught gossiping,” she said, dropping her purse and notebook on a table. “But I have news that will beat whatever boring subject you were whispering about.”

“What, like you’re going to stop making us an older version of One Direction?” Matthew drawled, flopping into an armchair like a discarded doll.

“I wouldn’t be so blasé, Matt. It’s about you.”

“I’m so excited,” he said in a bland voice. “Please, do tell, before I explode from the suspense.”

She cocked a hip, surveying him coldly. “You kick her out yet?”

“Nope.”

“Kick who out? Amber?” Luke asked, looking from one to the other.

Sonata ignored him. “You think I won’t follow through with my threat?” she said to Matthew.

He shrugged.

Amber joined them, giving Sonata a wide berth and standing next to Luke. At the sight of her, Sonata’s smirk widened. “Perfect, you’re here,” she said. “It’s almost time for a little announcement. Where are the others?”

Indifferent shrugs were passed around the room. A foreboding gloom gathered within Luke like brewing storm clouds, and he quietly asked Amber, “You doing alright?”

“Yeah, great. Why?”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this.” Luke’s gaze darted around the room as he wondered what Sonata had up her sleeve. When she sought an audience, it was certainly never to give a compliment.

Dameon trotted in, Jordan at his heels. They were both munching on burgers. Jordan slowed, detecting the tension in the room, but Dameon marched right up to the couch and fell onto it, smacking contentedly as he took another bite.

“Now that we’re all here,” Sonata said, her lip curling at her brother. “There’s something all of you should know.”

Only the sound of Dameon’s chewing could be heard. Sonata glared at him until he registered her displeasure and swallowed.

“Can we get this over with?” Jordan said. “I’d rather not be here today.”

Sonata cleared her throat. “I’ve been doing some digging for Matt’s benefit—” Matthew scoffed, but she paid him no heed, “—because he needed help with a particularly stubborn and disgusting problem—”

“Herpes?” Dameon said. Jordan snickered.

“—namely, *her*.” Sonata shot a hateful glance in Amber’s direction. Amber met her leer silently.

“Oh, come *on*...” Matthew rolled his eyes. “Get over it, Sonata.”

“I found out some interesting things at the police station.” She paused for effect.

Oh no, Luke thought, and said a quick prayer.

“Is Amber a criminal?” Dameon asked excitedly.

“No, you idiot,” Sonata snapped. “But turns out, little Amber here has had a nose job and *more*.”

“At the police station?”

“Dameon, *shut up*. You’re wasting everyone’s time,” Jordan said.

“If you want to know about my snooping methods, baby brother, I’ll be happy to tell you later. But for the love of God, keep your mouth shut.”

Visibly hurt, Dameon did just that. Luke made a mental note to talk to him later. The poor guy didn’t deserve such an abusive sister. But for now, a more imminent problem was approaching. He glanced at Matthew, who had a stony expression carved onto his face.

“Anyway,” Sonata said, “Amber here was the victim of a robbery on the beach near Matt’s house. Apparently she was brain damaged by a hit on the head because she got amnesia, didn’t you, sweetie?”

Amber glared at her, and Luke could sense the hostility emanating from her, but still she said nothing.

“Turns out, she and Matt used to know each other back in the day, before she fixed her face, but Matt didn’t even recognize her. You can only imagine how freaky she must’ve looked if her current face is an improvement.”

“She already knows all of this,” Matthew said, feigning boredom. But fear was now visible in his eyes and the way his hands were shaking.

“Oh? Does she know you two aren’t friends anymore?”

“Yes.”

Sonata smiled. “Does she know *why*?”

There was a beat of damning silence. Then Matthew lied, “Yeah,” but not quickly enough. Amber had the sense not to ask, but she was burning with curiosity. She kept her eyes on Sonata as the manager savored her victory. “You want to know?” Sonata asked Amber with a gleeful smile.

Luke braced himself and stepped in. “Sonata, I don’t—”

“Stay out of this, Luke.”

“I really don’t think you should tell—”

“I said, stay out of this!”

He hung in there bravely. “Don’t do this. Matt needs to be the one—”

“Stop talking,” Sonata growled, “unless you want me to go into *explicit detail* about what happened and how *you* did nothing to stop it.”

Her words cut into him deeply, and he bowed his head.

“Just tell me,” Amber said steadily, eye-to-eye with Sonata. “Stop torturing everyone else and just tell me.”

Sonata put her arm around Amber's shoulders and pointed to Matthew, whose face looked more stricken than she had ever seen it. But he had given up and was prepared for the blow. "Your endearing rock star friend kicked you out of his new band and took advantage of your pain by sleeping with you. You had sex with him like every other woman on the West Coast!"

Matthew dropped his head and closed his eyes. Amber shook off Sonata's arm, not bothering to ask if it was true; the confirmation was unmistakable in Matthew's unusual show of shame. Sonata, her work accomplished, stood confident and silent, waiting for the fruits of her labor to unfold.

No one would meet Amber's eyes except for Luke, who was now looking at her. His gaze was filled with empathized pain. Of course he had known.

He rested a comforting hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away and fled the room. Matthew raised his head at the sound of her leaving. He stared at the closing door, then at Sonata, his expression bleeding into searing, unadulterated hate so strong that even Sonata's gloating mood faltered.

Matthew rose like some great leviathan with a gaping maw, his entire body clenched in a single instrument of wrath. "You—" he unleashed a torrent of curses, raging towards Sonata, and everyone ducked for cover.

Except Luke. "Matt, you need to—"

"Get out of my way, man. I'm gonna—"

"Matt! Listen!" He grabbed Matthew's arms as they flailed. "Matt, go talk to Amber right now. *Right now.*"

"After I teach that vile, demonic slut—"

"*Now*, Matthew! Forget about Sonata!"

"No, I have to...I can't..." His coherency dissolved and he suddenly looked lost. "I can't..."

"Now is the time to finally face your regret, friend," Luke said softly, catching and holding his gaze. "You can't avoid it anymore."

Like a car's ignition finally catching, Matthew's face cleared somewhat and he gave a weak nod. Shaken but functioning, he bolted for the door. Sonata was still standing, the smirk back on her face.

"You're not gonna win," Luke told her.

"Watch me."

Matthew found Amber outside, sitting on the hot cement of the parking lot with her back against the front bumper of his Audi. She wasn't crying, nor did she shirk from his approach.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Amber?" he ventured.

"You should've told me."

"I know."

He waited for her to say something else, but she didn't. Gingerly he sat down next to her. She flinched away when he touched her arm but made no other move protesting his proximity.

Behind his head, he could hear the occasional creak of the car's suspension as they leaned against it.

"So...do you want to slap me or something? Because my face is wide open." He tilted his head and raised his chin. "I prefer you slap this side because it looks slightly better than the other side, so it can take a hit—"

"Matt, just stop."

He stopped.

"Was it as bad as Sonata made it sound?"

Pride stopped up his throat like a cork in a wine bottle. He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged, unable to answer.

"You at least owe me an explanation."

"I know." He ran fingers through his hair again. "I'm not good at talking about this at all, I guess because it's hard to deal with."

"Yeah, that's what normal people feel."

He looked at her, surprised at her venomous tone, his own temper flaring. "Hey, I'm trying, okay?"

"Well try harder!" she snapped, glaring across the parking lot so she wouldn't have to look at him. Her arms were tight against her body, her muscles rigid. A new brand of shame trickled into Matthew's heart. Amber was so hurt that she was lashing out, and his blithe comments were making it worse. He shoved the shame away - it only bogged him down.

"We don't *have* to talk," he said tetchily, sniffing.

"The same way we didn't *have* to talk for six years? That helped a lot, didn't it? You really seem to care about the people you sleep with. Glad I'm not like *them*," she said sarcastically.

"You're not."

"You're wrong. I'm exactly like them! I thought I was different, but apparently the only way you know how to treat girls is acting like they're disposable!" She spat out the last word like she would a bug she might accidentally inhale.

Matthew's chastened silence agreed with her. That's how he treated everyone he knew, in fact, yet no one bothered to call him out on it because he was famous enough to get away with it. He knew that when he chose to remember it.

Amber suddenly gave a shaky sigh. "I'm sorry."

Matthew planned for the injured silence to stretch a little longer, but she was exuding so much despondency that he had to say, "It needed to be said."

She turned to him. "I want to hear what happened in your own words."

He picked his way through the story, afraid that she would detonate again without warning and in no hurry to relive it. "We were best friends because we both liked playing guitar, but you were so much better than me. We jammed together all the time and started performing places for fun. Naturally we decided to form a band, so we pulled in Luke and ran through a few bassists and drummers, eventually settling on Jordan and Dameon. Sonata caught wind of it and wanted to manage us. She seemed good at it so we let her. She never liked you and was always

complaining about how you dragged the band down and hurt our image. Somehow she got into my head, like she always does, I guess, and she convinced me to kick you out.” Matthew cleared his throat. “Freeflight was everything to you, and to rip it away from you was...it was cruel. I felt really bad about it the next day - you were my closest friend besides Luke, after all - so I went to your house that night. I was determined to make it up to you, whatever it took, mostly so that I would feel better. But I was bad at fixing it and I didn’t know what to do to comfort you - besides letting you back in the band, which was out of the question - yeah, I know, I was stupid,” he interjected, deciphering her expression, “anyway, Sonata had shown...well, we were dating and...I was in this mindset that I had this...this power over girls, and...I mean, obviously I liked you as a person, so I didn’t mind...I thought...I thought it would solve things. I don’t know why I thought that. It doesn’t even make sense. But...you never would’ve allowed it, but you were so upset...a-and I think you had been attracted to me for a while anyway, so it...so it didn’t take much...I knew that it wasn’t truly what you wanted, if you were thinking straight, but I was so caught up in myself, in my own world, and I...I didn’t...”

Matthew wanted to curl up and roll under the car, or maybe into the street where he would get run over, or rush back into the studio to be skewered in Sonata’s clutches - anything except confess his mistake to the last person he wanted to confess it to. The burden of it tipped over his head and poured over him like boiling water, scalding whatever it touched and making every conscious thought raw and painful. He was trembling like a tiny, terrified dog, and he hated himself for his weakness.

Amber simply looked at him, her eyes wet, but she said nothing, as if she were waiting for more. What else did she want, the details? Did she not think him sincere in his regret? Could she not see the wretched wreck he had been reduced to?

“I don’t know what more you want from me, Amber,” he groaned, burying his face in his hands. An involuntary sob escaped him, and he cursed at himself. *Get it together, Matt. Stop being so pathetic. You’re Matthew Wolfe. You’re Matthew Wo—*

No, he wasn’t “Matthew Wolfe, the rock star.” He was just Matt. An aimless, lonely, miserable, despicable little child.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his hands still covering his face. He could see nothing but darkness.

Then he felt an arm interlock with his, tugging it away, and the blazing California sun speared his vision once again. He blinked several times - just to adjust to the light, of course, not to clear away any moisture in his eyes - and looked at Amber, utterly humiliated. Her brown eyes were gentle, and the love in them soothed his soul.

“I forgive you,” she said.

He let out a slightly crazed laugh. “If you could actually remember it, I don’t think you’d be saying that.”

Her gaze didn’t waver, nor did the love in it. “You’re right, I can’t remember it. But I can remember putting up with you the past few months.”

He smiled, though it was diluted and lopsided.

“And even though you’re not the greatest guy ever,” she said, “you can be a good friend when you try to be. And that’s what I want to remember.”

Unable to fully understand what was happening, Matthew stared back at her. Her pain was still there, and she wasn’t disregarding it, but she had chosen the path that let her overcome it. She had somehow given up that pain to something else, so that she didn’t have to bear the brunt of it on her own.

She squeezed his arm in hers. “I don’t think I can go back in there,” she said.

Matthew didn’t even glance at the studio. “Me neither. Let’s go home.”

Matthew had spent all day *not* thinking about Amber Knight.

He had left the house before she was up, much earlier than he had to for arriving at the studio on time, but it was worth it not to see her. He wasn’t in the mood to talk about what had happened yesterday nor to see the dearly-bought forgiveness on her face.

At the Starbucks which he killed time at in a suburb of LA, he wasn’t thinking about the times in high school when they had bonded, when he helped her build her confidence and she kept ice on his swollen ego, or how she pushed him to improve on guitar because she was always showing him up. Pulling into the parking lot of the studio, nothing about her ran through his mind, like the first time they had performed together and she had trembled with stage fright until he promised her that, if it helped, he would take the fall for her if she messed up. He didn’t smile to himself as he entered the studio, remembering that *he* had been the one who messed up, and that she had covered his part with hers so seamlessly that no one had noticed.

He wasn’t at all distracted while recording vocals and avoiding Sonata. Why would he be distracted with the fact that Freeflight’s rise to fame had overpowered the fall of his closest friendship, so that he could pretend to forget that regret was his bedfellow? Singing of cheap sex and dark desires, what could possibly remind him of the night his arrogance had numbed his sense of shame?

No, he thought as he drove home that evening, he hadn’t thought about Amber all day. Not at all. There was nothing to think about. Everything was how it should be: perfectly uncomplicated.

Amber was in the living room, writing in her journal, when he got home. She looked up as he entered, then returned to her writing. He put his keys and wallet down, took a deep breath, adjusted his face to be neutral, and strode into the living room.

“Hey, what’ve you been up to today?” he asked in what he hoped was his normal, unassuming voice.

She put her pen down on her open journal. “I wrote a lot. And I researched possible flights to Phoenix.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Tomorrow. That is, if I can borrow some money to pay for the ticket. I’ll pay you b—”

“Done,” he said. “Anything you need.”

“Thanks. I tried to contact someone I know at home, but it’s hard when your phone was stolen and you can’t remember any names.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault.”

But pretty much everything else is, he thought.

“How was recording today?” she asked.

“Fine, but awkward. I’m not talking to Sonata.”

Amber didn’t ask why. She knew.

“Sorry I left you here. I, uh...” he realized he didn’t have an excuse ready.

“It’s okay. It was nice to be alone.”

He sat in the armchair. His conversation options were dwindling fast. “So leaving tomorrow, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Tired of sticking around?”

“I probably have stuff I need to get back to.”

They both sat, unmoving, unspeaking. Amber started tapping her pen against her journal.

“Listen,” she said, “about—”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Matthew suddenly said in a rush. “It’s like, I’ve been pretending for so long that it doesn’t bother me that I don’t believe myself anymore. I can’t ignore how much it’s killing me, even after so many years. But there’s nothing I can do about it, and it’s my burden alone. It’s my turn to bear it because you can’t remember it. And I don’t *want* you to remember it.”

She sat frozen, her eyes again filled with that mixture of love and pain that he couldn’t stand. He moved next to her, wanting to shake every hint of love out of that look so he could be free to bask in her hurt, his punishment. But at the same time he knew nothing he could do could erase that love from her heart, and that stung worse than even her pain.

Instead, he took her face in his hands, so close he could see every eyelash on her quivering eyelids. “Please stop,” he pleaded. “Please stop believing I can ever change. I’m too tired to try anymore and I don’t want to disappoint you.”

Amber closed her eyes, her brow crinkling in pain. For a moment, Matthew feared he was accidentally hurting her somehow, but before he could draw away, her eyes snapped open and her face relaxed. Terror flashed like lightning in those amber depths, then peace. Peace and rain.

“Amber?” he questioned, concerned.

“You held my face just like this,” she said in a barely audible voice, “that night.”

He jerked his hands away as if her skin had burned him. This was it, his most dreaded fear. She remembered.

“Your touch must have triggered...” She grazed her cheek with her own hand. She wasn’t looking at him, absorbed in the memory. “It had been so gentle. Like you cared.”

Matthew scrambled away from her. He was going to lose her. He was going to lose her all over again. But he deserved to relive this. He deserved to pay this penance. So he waited, expecting a sob, a verbal slap, a *real* slap. He had earned any and all of it.

She spoke, and he flinched, but all she said was, “Why didn’t you just tell me yourself? Why keep that from me once you knew?”

He would have preferred a slap. “I don’t know, I thought I could keep you from ever knowing somehow, and then you’d never know. We could restart our friendship. I could have a second chance.”

“That’s the worst way to get a second chance,” Amber said, getting up. “I’m gonna go to bed. My head’s killing me.”

Matthew was startled at her sudden pronouncement. “Oh. Um, good night, then,” he said, even though they both knew it wouldn’t be.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Matthew had made fruit-topped crepes for the occasion, though they were a little chewy at the edges, evidence that he had more on his mind than perfect breakfast food. The only sounds as they ate were the clinking of their forks against their plates and the sporadic hiss of the espresso machine as it released leftover steam.

It took the time period of three consumed crepes for Amber to push any words out of her heart, but she finally cleared her throat and laid her fork across her plate.

“It’s my fault, too,” she said.

Matthew’s fork paused in pushing the uneaten edge of a crepe around his plate.

“I mean, that we’re not friends anymore. I could’ve tried harder to make things right with you. I give you a hard time about avoiding your problems, but I do it too.”

“You cut everyone off,” Matthew said. “Even Luke.”

“Everyone that had to do with Freeflight, I know. I shouldn’t have.”

He said nothing, accepting her confession. A seagull squawked somewhere outside.

“And about what you said last night: you’re wrong about me believing you can change. But I believe you can *be* changed.

“By God,” he guessed.

“But you have to let him in.”

He shook his head and looked down at his plate. She saw pain in his face, but his pride still thought it could win over it. He still thought he had the power to be alone.

“It’s probably best that you stayed away from me, anyway,” he said. “I’d obviously hurt you again if I had the chance.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m not worth your time, Riley!”

The use of her old name shocked her into an awkward silence. She still couldn’t remember why she had come to California to see him in the first place, but surely it had to do with this. What had she wanted to do? What had she wanted to say? She was about to leave, and all she had to show for two months was knowledge about tour merchandise and intermittent headaches.

Matthew was still ashamed. She was still distant. She had learned long ago to let Christ shoulder her pain, but what good did that do for Matthew? Where did God fit into *his* life? He saw no use for him, no benefit. Amber could move on, but he remained, stagnant.

If only he could understand the freedom she had.

Then something suddenly occurred to her. He thought everything was back to the way it was, that with the return of her memory was also the return of the same ill feelings that had paralyzed them for years.

He didn't know what forgiveness tasted like.

"Matt," she said. She wanted him to be looking at her in the eye when she said this. And he did, his blue eyes almost transparent in the morning sunlight. "I still forgive you."

He dropped his hand and stared at her. She was looking him in the eye. Something within him shifted, and he couldn't tell if something was breaking or being snapped back into alignment again. But it hurt. It hurt in a place already chafed raw by his guilt. He clasped his hands and brought them to his mouth, digesting her words. "I can't accept that," he finally said. "I don't deserve it."

"That's not the point," she said, realizing that he had been humbled by her statement.

"Even after remembering exactly what I did to you, you still think I deserve to be forgiven?" He was practically begging her to let him steep in his guilt.

"I've learned some things since then," she said. "And I think I was coming to visit you in order to put those things into action."

"What kind of things?" he asked cautiously.

"Like the importance of reconciliation."

He shook his head slightly, looking down. "I still don't see any reason why you should forgive me."

She glanced outside the window at the sea beyond the deck, sifting her mind for the right words. "Because God forgave me for what I've done," she said. "For doubting him when I felt like I had lost my best friend. For ignoring his voice when I knew it was there. And for blaming him—" her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. "—for what happened to me, to my face and my sight. For telling him he hated me for no reason."

"Those things aren't that big of a deal, though, right? I mean, it's not like...you know, you ruined a perfectly good friendship."

"They're a big deal when I had already told God I'd trust him no matter what."

He got up from the table with an awkward, jerky movement as if he wanted to punctuate a definitive end to the conversation. Amber let out a shaky breath, feeling drained, and retrieved her packed bag from her room. "My taxi should be arriving at any moment," she said.

He dropped the dishes in the sink with a clang and came over to her, looking meek. "So do you remember everything now?"

"Is that even possible to know? Even people without head problems have gaps in their memory." She smiled, but there was no strength behind it. Her influx of memories had taken its

emotional toll on her. Matthew wanted to put his arm around her and encourage her like he had in previous times, but he didn't. No touch unless she initiated it. He wasn't going to mess anything up this time, at least in that area.

"You don't have to go, you know," he mumbled, running his finger in the dust of a built-in bookshelf. The maid needed to come and clean.

"I shouldn't stay here, especially when I have a life I need to get back to, one I actually know about now."

He turned to look at her. His desire for her to stay had been rooted in indifference but had grown into a fervent wish. But he couldn't express that to her; he would come off as needy, or even wanting to repeat the past. Her staying wouldn't fix anything. It wouldn't erase what he had done or its effects on either of them. He sighed. "I guess. I just feel like you're leaving for good. Again."

Her eyes softened. "Last time, I left for good because I felt like you were throwing me out of your life for good. At least now I know you actually want me in it."

"Not if I make it worse. First the sex thing, then putting you through my lifestyle, then having me and Sonata slap you in the face with the past all over again..."

"Matt, I'm glad this happened," she said. "Just think, we still would've been separated and hurting, still nursing shame and guilt even after all these years."

"What's to say I'm not still doing that?" he said under his breath.

"Point is, we're both here now, and we're talking and being friends and not hating each other, all because I had memory problems and you were too dumb to recognize me."

"Hey!" He retorted, and she laughed.

"I needed this to see how stupid I was being by hiding from everyone. I get that," she said in a more serious voice. Her tone made Matthew want to instinctively duck out of sight; he knew what was coming next. "Question is," she continued, "why did *you* need this?"

"You're wrongly assuming I needed it."

"Maybe I am," she said, but it was obvious she didn't even consider the possibility that he was telling the truth. It didn't matter - Matthew knew she was right. He *had* needed this, but it was ending too abruptly for him to figure out why. Wasn't Amber supposed to stick around, now that they were friends again, and help him out like she always had? Why did she have to leave right when their relationship was being mended? Wasn't that what she wanted?

The taxi honked news of its arrival outside, and Amber had already picked up her suitcase and moved to the door before it sunk in that she was actually leaving for who knew how long. Maybe forever.

"Wait, Amber, please." Matthew hastened towards her and reached her as she opened the door. She looked back at him. "Amber, you can't go." His voice had more of a tremor in it than he liked, but he didn't care. "I'm not a good person without you."

She smiled sadly. "You're not a good person *with* me, either." Setting her suitcase on the floor, she hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes, wanting to relive the better days of their friendship, days that stretched further and further into the past with every

moment and were so far gone that the haze of the horizon had long ago consumed them. All he had left from then was the regret, untarnished by time, and he knew that it wouldn't leave with Amber. It would stick to him like a limpet, his constant and only reliable companion. Because she was right, after all. He couldn't be a good person. Not even a decent one. He was too steeped in his habits and dependent on his passions to change. He felt his hope ebbing away like a low tide, with each wave pulling further away than the last.

Amber pulled away too soon, but there were hints of tears in her eyes. He picked up her suitcase for her, but she took it from him and stepped over the threshold. "Bye, Matt."

"See you soon?"

She hesitated. "I don't know," she said. "We'll see what God has planned."

Screw God, Matthew thought. If *he* didn't bring her back to him, Matthew would go after her himself.

He watched the taxi drive away through the open front door and remained there even after he could no longer see it, clutching the door handle, standing on the threshold. The warmth of the day pressed on his face, while the cool air from his house escaped into the outdoors. For a long moment he lingered there, uncertain, as his mind still scrambled to reassemble itself in light of what he now remembered.

"They always leave," he said softly to himself, closing the door on the sunlight. On her.

The house seemed to watch him in silence as he surveyed the living room. He hadn't noticed how much Amber's presence had filled the house, but now the space felt hollow. He ran his hands through his hair and down his face, sighing heavily, feeling the weight of his hangover and the sting of emotional pain that he had expended all of his energy trying to suppress.

Why? His mind circulated the word through his bloodstream and shouted it with each beat of his heart. Why, why, why, why, why? It jabbed him repeatedly like a nurse trying to find a vein. It breathed down his neck like an interrogator wanting an answer. It broke from his own lips in a voiceless sob, and its repetitions drifted down around him like fallen leaves.

Why had Amber forgiven him?

The phone was screeching in Matthew's ear, tearing his deadened state of slumber to painful shreds. With a groan, he rolled over without opening his eyes. The screeching continued.

Cursing, he flung his arm out in the general direction of the noise, but it met only more bed. In a burst of energetic frustration, he floundered and thrashed until his hand made contact with his crying phone. Trying and unable to open his bleary eyes, he answered the call through touch alone. "What?" he croaked.

"Hey man," Luke's voice tapped politely at his groggy brain. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell." What a dumb question.

"You were in pretty bad shape last night."

"Yeah?" Matthew dredged the unresponsive bog of his memory, but nothing surfaced.

"Do you remember anything?"

"Remember what?"

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ I had to come rescue you from Bear Lounge over on 4th.”

Matthew grunted, rubbing at his eyes.

“You were literally passed-out drunk. The manager called me after you had decided to take a nap *on* the bar. I’m honored to be on your ‘favorite contact’ list, by the way.”

“You share the honor with Sonata.”

“Then I’m even more honored,” Luke said wryly. “Anyway, count yourself lucky they didn’t dump you outside and leave you there.”

“They should’ve,” Matthew said under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. How did—” he winced as his voice creaked. “How did I get home?”

“I managed to get you to your house. Your car is still at the bar, by the way. I can take you to get it before we go to the studio today if you want.”

“You should just let me wallow.” He sat up unsteadily, blinking, and almost lost his grip on the phone. *Why do I do this to myself*, he thought. *I’m never drinking again.*

“Wallow?”

“In my loneliness.”

He heard Luke sigh on the other end of the phone. Let him sigh; Matthew deserved to be melodramatic today. “Well,” Luke said, “regardless of your wallowing, you’re gonna have to be at the studio today, so you might as well let me help you out.”

“Studio?”

“For vocals...?”

Matthew cursed, but the word came out a pathetic squeak.

“Here, I’ll just come over and bring some coffee with me,” Luke said. “All you have to do is have clothes on. Deal?”

“Fine.” He threw the phone down on his bed and scowled at his empty bedroom. Today was a terrible day. He hated Sonata. He hated making the album. He hated life. He hated everything.

But Amber doesn’t hate me. The thought nudged his crusty brain, butting its head against it like a goat against a wall. *Amber doesn’t hate me.*

The bar thrummed with the sounds of the Dodgers game on the tvs, the clink of shot glasses and beer bottles, and the game of pool going on in the corner. Clusters of men collectively cheered or groaned from tables as they watched the screens. Women at the bar, many skimpily dressed, flirted with the men who were sitting alone.

Matthew, worn out and grumpy from a rough recording session that afternoon and avoiding Sonata, was nursing a beer at the bar. So what if he had gotten drunk last night? Tonight was as good a night as ever to continue that tradition, not to mention he already had his eyes set on a brunette a few stools away. Reeling them in was easy: catch her eye, let her notice his attractive looks, wait for her to come to him. They always came. He could have whatever woman he

wanted. What his looks didn't do, his fame could. Women loved rock stars, especially charming ones.

As she approached him, he said his usual lines and made his usual moves, but a voice kept slithering in and out of his ears. *Amber's God wants nothing to do with you, just like Amber. He's given up on you just like Amber did. You're too much trouble. Isn't this so much easier, anyway?*

God? He wasn't even thinking about God. Matthew refocused on the woman in front of him, wanting to lose himself in the excitement of having a new catch, and a beautiful one, at that. He reached out and brushed a lock of hair out of her face. She blushed at his touch.

"You're not a good person with me, either." It was Amber's voice in his mind this time, and he wanted it gone. Hadn't she done enough damage when she had been here? He didn't need her presence nagging him, making him feel like he was doing something wrong.

The woman said something and touched his knee. He threw out a witty remark and let her laugh drown out his thoughts. Good. Things were on track.

But then his own voice mocked him with its brokenness: *"I've been pretending for so long that it doesn't bother me that I don't believe myself anymore."* Why had he even said that to Amber? Why had he encouraged her to think he wanted to be fixed? He shouldn't have strayed from the script, from the tried and true lines that always worked. Look at where being different had gotten him. Look at where it had gotten Amber.

The woman hinted at her lust for him, and he breathed a suggestive comment in her ear. With a smile tugging on her lips, she got up and took his hand. He willingly followed, already absorbed in the expectations of the night before them. This is exactly what he needed, something to purge the voices from his head and to convince him that he needed nothing more than what he already had.

The next morning, Matthew had left the woman's house before the sun had even breached the horizon. The Audi's tires were already spinning on coastal roads when he felt the first rays of sunlight strike his face, and he wasn't quite sure where he was going. He wanted to drive somewhere remote, somewhere that made him feel small and powerless, so he could reassure himself that nothing significant was happening within him and even if it was, that it didn't matter.

Something inside him was gumming up the smooth rotors of his heart. He had always kept them well-oiled with a lifestyle that catered to his desires above all else, but something had fallen in and gotten wedged deep in his workings.

And he had no idea how to dislodge it.

He let his mind wander as he drove, trying not to linger too long on any one subject, his thoughts drifting from one place to another like a bee searching for nectar.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he belatedly realized he had driven to his own street out of habit. His restlessness urged him to keep going, but he suddenly felt exhausted, so he pulled into his driveway and rolled to a stop, looking up at his house in the dawning light.

Now what?

He stumbled into the kitchen from the door in the garage, popped a few aspirin from the cabinet, and dragged himself into the living room. He didn't feel quite right, not physically-speaking - though his mild hangover and lack of sleep made that applicable - but internally, like mental indigestion.

Unsettled was the word, he groggily decided, and this was no state for the great Matthew Wolfe to be in. Except he had established that he wasn't great. Amber had said he wasn't even good.

It's not that he had never *tried* to be good. He had actually been a decent guy back in high school when Amber-then-Riley had known him, before he had met Sonata and before he sacrificed whatever he had to in order to make Freeflight mean something. But it had been easier to be a decent guy back then.

And Freeflight had already meant something before the band became famous. It had meant something to him and Amber. It was where their friendship had really grown and was formed into a treasure that would last beyond their teenage years. If Matthew hadn't ruined it, that is. Now what was Freeflight? Just a commercial creature trimmed and defaced by Sonata until it wasn't recognizable.

Matthew sagged against the wall at the realization. He didn't even have Freeflight anymore. It was no longer his.

More hopeless than ever, he meandered towards Amber's room - no, the guest room. It wasn't hers anymore. She hadn't known that the high school yearbooks she had wanted were stored in a box in the top corner of the closet. He had hidden them there because they were embarrassing, mementos of a time he had single-handedly dismembered. A time better than this one.

But he felt like he deserved a little nostalgia. And what else did he have to do?

He balked at the door, images of Amber sitting on the bed filling his mind. But he pushed ahead, making a beeline for the closet and flinging open the doors. Yes, there was the box, unopened and shrouded in dust. With a few coughs and curses, he got it down amid showers of dust, almost dropping it as a rush of dizziness hit him. He really needed to get some sleep.

Panting slightly, he plunked the box on the bed, the bedsprings creaking at its weight. Then he heard a muffled clang and a thumping sound. With a groan due to his stiff joints, he peered underneath the bed and retrieved a thin book from the floor. No, not a book, a journal. Amber's journal. It must have fallen between the mattress and the footboard when she had been packing.

Well, Amber, let's see what horrible things you wrote about me, he thought, sitting on the bed and opening it, yearbooks forgotten. He didn't care enough to read every page - it was a personal journal, so it was bound to be boring - but he flipped through until his name caught his eye:

...one of the voices kind of sounded like Matt's, which is weird because most of the pieces that come to me aren't that clear. But for some reason I can remember that voice saying, "we're good enough to try." Of course it's not anything specific that can help me...

This entry wasn't even about him! Nor the next, or the next...in fact, they were just fragments of memories that she could recall. Matthew flipped pages peevisly, searching for something interesting. The entries became more about God, talking about faith and purpose and guidance; he made a face and kept skimming. He hadn't realized how religious she was, except for those times when she had randomly asked him about God. Now he could see that those questions weren't random but rather part of a running internal dialogue - no, monologue. God probably hadn't talked back. Why would he?

Matthew reached the last page and closed the journal just as he heard the clanking of glasses in the kitchen. He gripped the journal and crept to the hallway, peeking around the corner. When he saw who it was, he sucked in his breath with annoyance and marched to the kitchen.

"Sonata, what—" He stopped as she turned to him, and he saw that she was wearing a very revealing top. Distracted, he stared for a moment but shook his head and continued, "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing." The espresso machine hissed, and she cursed as a spout of steam burned her. "Can you do this for me, babe? I'm not as good as you are."

Matthew stayed where he was. "How I was doing?" he repeated dumbly.

"Yeah, after that thing a couple days ago." She abandoned the espresso machine and turned to face him, leaning against the counter. "I'm surprised you're up the early. I was expecting to find you in bed." She gave a suggestive smile.

"Spent the night somewhere else," he grunted.

"I'm so proud!" She reached out to him, but he drew away. "You look awful."

"I *am* awful."

"The sex wasn't too great, huh?"

"No, *you* weren't too great," he snapped. "What were you thinking, telling Amber like that? You completely crushed her!"

"Since when did you care about *Riley's* feelings?" she said maliciously. "You obviously didn't care about them when you slept with her, not to mention your self-respect—"

"I was only doing what you taught me to do! You were the one that told me that the best way to make up with a girl is to—"

"I was talking about hot girls, Matt, not your ugly B.F.F. And I can't believe you're blaming *me* for that. I mean, you're right, I did teach you everything you know..."

"I wish you hadn't."

"Ha, whatever," she scoffed. "Sex is basically who you are."

For some reason, her remark sliced straight to his soul.

She noticed Amber's journal. "What's that?"

“Nothing.” He clutched it to his stomach.

She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I don’t care what you’re up to. I’m just glad she’s finally gone.”

“Who said she is?”

“Please, you came from the direction of her room. Unless you expect me to think you spent the night with *her*—”

“Stop talking about it!” he said so shrilly that even Sonata was taken aback. Matthew was balancing on the tightrope between rage and grief, and he was afraid to fall either way.

Sonata let a moment pass and then said in a gentle voice, “I’m sorry, Matt. I’m just concerned about you. You haven’t been yourself for a while and I want to know what’s going on.”

He wanted to fall into her arms, he really did. But that memory of her with her arm around Amber’s shoulders, pointing at him, kept him away. She was against him just like she was against Amber. Wasn’t she?

“Amber was my friend,” he said. “Why did you have to run her off like you did last time?”

“I didn’t run her off either time. You did.”

Matthew closed his eyes.

“I’m just trying to protect you from yourself. You don’t know what’s good for you and you’re blind to the way people control you. Riley is a parasite, both then and now. She leeches off your popularity, and she’s friends with you for the bragging rights. She’s a nobody without you, and you’re too nice to her to see that.”

“Then why did she forgive me?”

Sonata hesitated. “What?”

“She forgave me for what I did, even after she remembered it. Why would she do that?”

“She was lying. She liked being self-righteous, remember?”

“I guess so.”

“Either way, why does it matter?” She sidled up to him and tugged on his wrinkled shirt. “She’s gone now, thank God.”

“Yeah, thank...God...” Matthew glanced down at the journal he was still holding. Sonata began kissing his neck, and he let her, but his mind was elsewhere. If Amber forgave him because she had wanted to maintain her relationship with him, why had she left soon after? That made no sense. What would she do, brag to her friends back home about how she had forgiven Matthew Wolfe? Why would they believe her, or care? What kind of bragging right was that?

Sonata’s kisses had reached his mouth, but he pushed her away. “I gotta go,” he said.

“Are you serious?” He had never rejected her advances before.

“Lock the door when you leave,” he said, already holding his keys and moving towards the door, leaving Sonata with a baffled pout and a gurgling espresso machine.

Matthew felt a strange wave of comfort at the sight of Luke’s quiet house on the quiet street in a quiet neighborhood. This oasis still existed, unaffected by Matthew’s turmoil.

Everything here was solid and neat. No waves endlessly crashing against the beach. No sand that shifted with every breeze.

Luke opened the door before Matthew had even reached the steps. "Come in, come in," he said. "I'm glad you called. I've been worried about you—"

"I found this," Matthew said without preamble, hoisting Amber's journal. "Amber left it and I thought maybe there would be something in it about what she thought of me."

"You shouldn't read her personal journal. She didn't read yours, you know."

"Yeah, yeah." Matthew waved him off, not in the mood for one of Luke's guilt trips. "Too late. Then Sonata came by asking how I was and crap like that, as if she really cared, and she tried to make out with me like usual, but she made me think about how Amber left."

"By making out with you...?"

"No, by mentioning that Amber was gone and that the only reason she forgave me was because she's a parasite. But then why would she leave?" Matthew finished, out of breath.

Luke artfully steered him towards the living room as he spoke. "Are you asking me or thinking out loud?"

Matthew sank into a chair with a sigh. "I just don't understand the reasons behind anything Amber did."

"Like why she forgave you?"

He nodded.

"And it doesn't say anything in her illegally obtained journal?" Luke said with a wry smile.

"I didn't really look. She just talked about God a lot, so I skipped around."

"Maybe that's her reason."

Matthew looked down at the journal. "She said something about God when I asked her why. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"God forgave her. She forgave you."

"I wouldn't even forgive me."

"But God would. And according to Amber, He is the source of her forgiveness. If that's not true, why did she forgive you? Or if not why, how?"

Matthew fidgeted, turning the journal over and over in his hands. He didn't want God to enter this conversation.

But he had been his own boss for his whole life, and look where he was now. A little direction certainly wouldn't hurt.

Luke sighed in the silence. "I'm afraid I haven't been a very good friend to you."

"What're you talking about? You're one of the best friends I've ever had!"

"And you, mine. But I never talk to you about my faith, and yet it's an important part of my life." He looked up at Matthew, his green eyes earnest. "I know you don't like to talk about God, but he's worth talking about. He's done a lot for me, and that may sound like an empty platitude, but it's not. You know I don't go for that kind of stuff."

Luke was being vulnerable with him, and Matthew felt awkward and touched at the same time. “Yeah, man. And I may not listen to you all the time, but...” He cleared his throat. “It’s good to know someone cares.”

“Like Amber,” Luke said softly.

Matthew pressed his lips together.

“Matt, I’m not telling you that you have to make a decision right now, but the two people you come to the most of advice have God as their ultimate source of how to live. Just think about that, okay?”

“Yeah, but it’s advice I never want to follow,” Matthew replied, but he grinned at his friend.

Luke chuckled. “Believe me, I know. Now, don’t take this personally, but you look like you need a good shower and some sleep.”

“That I do.” Matthew stood up and stretched.

“Would you be weirded out if I prayed with you before you go?” Luke asked hesitantly.

“Oh, uh...as long as I don’t have to do anything.”

“Nope, just stand there.” Luke smiled and put a hand on Matthew’s shoulder, bowing his head. “God, thank you for my friendship with Matt and how you’ve used us to teach each other. Thank you for being accessible to us through your son Jesus, and for listening to us, regardless of if we’re praising or questioning you, God. Please help my friend find what’s he looking for in you. Amen.”

“Um, thanks,” Matthew said, not knowing what else to say. Showing dependence, even a small amount, by acknowledging a higher power was something he was uncomfortable exploring, yet it seemed to work out for Luke. “See you at the studio, I guess.”

“Yeah. Need some coffee for the road? I brewed a fresh pot a few minutes ago.”

“Sure, thanks.”

As Luke fetched him the coffee, Matthew fingered the journal and found himself thanking God, in case he was out there, for the unchanging friendship of Luke Whiteman.

Matthew dropped his groceries on the moving conveyor belt, pushing his sunglasses further up his nose. The hood of his sweatshirt was making his head itch, but it was part of his usual half-hearted disguise when he wanted to go out in public without being bothered. Sometimes no one paid him any attention, either not recognizing him or not caring enough to do anything about it. Other times, it didn’t work.

“Did you find everything okay?” the cashier asked. She was a pretty twenty-something with a nametag that read “Shari.” If he were in any other mood, he would flirt with her, but he was too preoccupied.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, burrowing deeper into his sweatshirt.

“I heard your album’s coming out soon.”

He looked at her sharply.

completely healed, and soon he would have to start learning parts to the new songs. It felt strange to have an album coming out that he hadn't played a single note for.

In his living room, he picked up Amber's journal and thumbed through it. He still hadn't read much of it in detail - his remnants of a conscience prevented him from doing so, and plus he could understand the necessary privacy of written thoughts, having his own book of them.

He remembered when he had let Amber read one of the songs in his book. She was the only one who had liked it, being a fan of authenticity. No one in his world could afford that luxury. She had always loved his songwriting, even when he had been embarrassed that he did such a "girly" thing. His high school self had been a lot more ashamed of things. Now he pretended he didn't know what shame was. Amber had never let him give up on his passion, though. That's why he was still writing and playing his own creations.

The loss of her friendship struck him with a sudden blow, and he hunched over on the couch, mourning his weakness, embraced in the cold arms of his comforts and empty rooms and the smell of simmering minestrone soup for one.

"I really miss her. Ugh, I feel like such an idiot saying that..." Matthew looked around Luke's living room, desperate to look anywhere but at his friend's solicitous face. Why did he keep coming here? Amber wasn't here either. He wouldn't find her here. There was only Luke and his insistent advice that involved religion. Matthew didn't want religion. He wanted Amber.

"Why? She's your friend—"

"*Was* my friend."

"*Is* your friend," Luke repeated firmly. "She forgave you. She did her best to mend your relationship."

"I still don't know how she could forgive me, though. She has *no reason* to."

Luke thought deeply for a minute, stroking his goatee. "I'm gonna tell you a story," he said.

"It's not from the Bible, is it?"

"It's a personal story," Luke said, smiling.

Wearily, Matthew waved him on.

"In the early days after school, when Freeflight was still gaining popularity, Laura and I didn't have a ton of money. She was in college, and I was working that restaurant job while trying to help with the band, remember?"

Matthew nodded. "You were almost literally broke."

"Yeah, and it sucked. On top of that, we were idiots and moved out of our apartment way too soon, to that house on Palmshore Drive."

"That house was basically the size of an apartment anyway." Matthew grinned.

"Tell me about it. For some reason we thought it was a good idea, even though we couldn't afford it, like, at all."

"You asked your uncle for that money, right?"

“Yeah. He loaned us a pretty hefty sum to help pay off some of our mortgage and to do necessary work on my crappy car that died at the worst time ever.”

“You had the worst luck. I remember that.”

“Now, when I had borrowed that money from my uncle, we had agreed that I would pay him back after a certain time. But when the time came, Freeflight was still not very popular, and I had a lot less money than I was expecting to have at that point. When I told my uncle and asked for more time, he agreed, even though I owed him a *lot* of money. I figured at that point, it was time to crack down and scrape up as much money as I could, so I asked everyone I had lent money to - you know, like a few bucks here and there - if they could pay me back.”

“Oh yeah, you asked me too.” Matthew winced.

“Yeah, out of all the people I knew, I had let you borrow the most money, and you always told me you would pay me back. But since you were trying to get Freeflight off the ground too, you couldn’t even give me... what was it, like a couple hundred bucks?”

“Something like that. I eventually gave it to you, right?”

“Yeah, but it took you a while, and when I first asked you for it, you asked me for more time. Just like I had asked my uncle for more time.”

“Okay...” Matthew couldn’t see where this was going.

“So think about this: what if I had demanded the money that instant? What if I told you that you had to work for me to pay off that debt? What if I tried to guilt trip you into selling your Les Paul and amps so that you had the money for me?”

“Why would you even do that?”

“Technically I have the right to, don’t I? You owe me money and told me you would pay me back, yet you couldn’t.”

“You would never do that.”

“But think about if I had. How would you have felt, knowing that my uncle had given me more time for a heck of a lot more money, money that he was probably missing?”

“I would’ve been mad.”

“And if my uncle had heard that I had forced my best friend to sell all of his stuff to pay me back, he probably would be angry with me, right? After all, he hadn’t forced *me* to do any of that, and therefore I have no right to be so hard on those who owe *me* money. He would then have every right to tell me to sell my house and car and whatever else I had, because I made you do the same thing.”

“And your point with all this is...”

“Imagine that God is kinda like my uncle. I’m really indebted to him because Jesus paid the debt of my sins for me - which is death, by the way, since sin leads towards death and away from God. I can never pay him back for that or his forgiveness. So what right do I have of keeping any record of wrongs against *me*? How can I punish people for what they’ve done to me when God - God *himself* - has chosen not to punish me for what *I’ve* done to *him*?”

“You’re like the perfect person.”

Luke laughed. "I'm definitely not. I might not lead *your* life, but I mess up too, believe me. I do one thing wrong, and *bam* - God has a right to punish me. But instead he chooses to forgive me, based not on anything I do, but because he's merciful and offered a way to be forgiven through Jesus."

"So Amber forgave me because she has to? Because she thinks God will punish her if she doesn't?"

"She forgave you as a response to God forgiving her. She's passing it on, so to speak. At least, that's what I'm guessing. I guess we can't know her motivations for sure."

"Unless you have her journal."

Luke sighed and gave him a slightly amused look. "I suppose." He paused. "Are you really going to read it?"

"If I haven't by now, I probably won't. Honestly, I don't think I wanna know what she really thinks."

"About you."

"About me."

"I think you already know what she thinks about you, Matt."

"Yeah, she hates me."

"She forgave you. That's not the deed of a person with hate in their heart."

"I still don't understand," Matthew groaned, rubbing his face. "I don't even know why I *want* to understand..."

"You want to understand because Amber lives in a way that contradicts everything you've learned about the world."

Matthew stood up. "I've had as much as I can handle for one day. I think I'm gonna go drink myself into oblivion now, and don't try to stop me."

"I gave up on that a long time ago," Luke said matter-of-factly. "Probably sooner than I should have."

"No, you're a good friend, man. Even if you're too nice for your own good." Matthew dug in his pockets for his keys. "I'll see you later."

"Alright. Don't forget what I said."

"Uncle, money, God, forgiveness, got it."

"I'm serious, Matt."

"See you later."

Luke exhaled slowly, hanging his head, hearing the sound of the Audi's engine snarl outside as his friend once again ran away from the complication of the simple truth.

The crowd was at a constant roar; Matthew could hear them through the walls of the locker room. Playing in stadiums and sports arenas was a simultaneously heady and nerve-wracking experience. The audience wasn't just in front of him. It would reach to the sides, flanking him, essentially surrounding him. Trapping him.

Sonata was talking to him, but the audience's noise filled his ears and attention. Even though her voice was clear and quite close, her words slid off of him without being absorbed. The fans sounded like hungry predators, craving his emotional life blood to be poured onto the stage. Matthew felt sick.

"Hello? Matt, are you even here?" Sonata's judging gaze scoured his face.

"I'm not feeling too hot," he mumbled.

"Well you *are* hot, and you're going to go out there and *be* hot. Snap out of it."

He hated Freeflight's new album. He had nothing to offer the crowd. His reserves were drained, his heart was drained, his spirit was drained. Performing a show would not restore him. If anything, it might destroy him. Not dramatically, but more like snuffing out a spark. This was his biggest show of the year, and he had nothing.

"Remember," Sonata said to the band at large, "this is televised, so everything you do might be noticed. This isn't a performance, it's a show, so basically, don't be yourselves. Especially you, Dameon."

Dameon glowered. Matthew reached for his beer, but he had already drained it. He needed something to keep him going, if only until the end of the show. Then he could skip the after-party, lose Sonata, and go home.

Nausea swelled in his gut. It wasn't nervousness. He didn't know what it was, but it sapped his energy.

"Hey." Luke was next to him, sensing his affliction. "You can do this. You're the best performer I know."

"No one even cares who we are," Matthew murmured. Confused by his statement, Luke frowned but didn't have a chance to question it before Sonata shooed them out the door.

Fitted with earpieces, the four band members emerged onstage amidst a screaming torrent of cheers. Matthew could feel thousands of eyes on him and sense the innumerable writhing souls hemming him into his prison, and he felt nothing but loneliness.

Freeflight finished their last song with a resounding chord that reverberated throughout the arena and blended with the roar of the crowd; as the notes faded, the cheers intensified. Usually, such a noise would sound more musical to Matthew than the music itself, but not tonight. No, tonight he was drowning in it, suffocated by it, besieged by it, mocked by it. In his mind, it had turned on him. It was his enemy, hitting him when he was weak, beating him to make sure he stayed down. Their love wasn't real. No one's love was real, right? Not even God's love, no matter what Luke or Amber wanted him to think.

Why would you love me, God? he thought, picking out individual faces in the audience and watching them stare at him with adoring eyes, scream at him in desperation, each one fighting to be noticed by him, if only for a single moment. They wanted Matthew Wolfe the performer, not Matt the screw-up. They wanted the character he had created for them to worship, the man who had it all together. They all idolized a lie. *This is all I can do: be a fake. You want the perfect me, or at least a better me. But this is all that I could possibly give you. An illusion.*

“I want you!” a girl shrieked from his right, buried somewhere in the mass of people. He turned his head, but her screams were lost in the noise. She didn’t want him. She didn’t even know him.

I do.

He turned again, searching for the source of the second voice in the front row of the floor crowd. They all jumped up and down and reached for him with hungry eyes. The voice hadn’t come from them. It had been too soft.

I get it, though. He raised his hand, acknowledging their cheers, summoning forth a new wave of approval and admiration. *You want me to know that I’m insignificant. They’d turn on me in a heartbeat, just like Sonata. When I’m gone, they’ll find someone else to love. It’s all a game. I know how to play it well, but in the end, they’re pretending as much as I am. We’re all part of one big joke.*

He glanced behind him to his left, where Luke was accepting the applause with a modest smile. Luke cared about him, but he shouldn’t. Matthew didn’t deserve it, just like he had never deserved Amber’s friendship.

Luke met his glance, and something he said came back to Matthew. “*She forgave you,*” he had said. “*That’s not the deed of a person with hate in their heart.*”

He wanted to be able to forgive like Amber had, or like Luke had during all the past years of the undeserved slights and harsh words towards him. He wanted to be able to acknowledge the wrongs that had been done to him and that he had done to others. He wanted to be able to face them and deal with them, and he had always failed because he was trying to do so alone. Amber thought God had enabled her to forgive him. Luke thought the same. And they forgave *him*, something even he couldn’t bring himself to do, and they thought God would forgive him too. And if God were willing to forgive him for deeds even worse than what he had done to Amber, then God didn’t hate him either.

And if that were true, maybe it was worth looking into.

Matthew looked at the crowd one last time, at their craving for him, at their cheaply-bought loyalty. “Thank you,” he said into the microphone. The crowd roared in a renewed frenzy, and he stepped back.

I don’t know if you want me, God. He lowered his head and walked off the stage, turning his back on the masses chanting his name and the safety net of confirmation they used to provide for him. He was shaking and he didn’t know why. *But...* He ripped out his ear piece and tore its cord and power source from his clothing, casting them on the floor. Sonata was there, saying something to him, accosting him, but he kept walking. *I think I might need you.*

“Freeflight’s new album, Deviate, has surpassed the expectations of their fans. The popular rock band blended their usual sound with a softer pop style, creating a lighter feel to the album as a whole. It was apparently what fans wanted – Deviate’s sales have already overtaken what had been their most successful album to date, Onslaught, from four years ago. Rumors had

it that the band was on their downslide, but with this album, they have proved themselves an unstoppable force in the modern music industry—”

Sonata muted the rest of the music news segment and turned to survey the band sitting in the plush seats of Dameon’s home theater room. They stared back at her with glazed eyes. She knew they didn’t want to be here, but she wasn’t going to let that get in the way of her gloating time. “I’m personally very pleased with this,” she said. “We had a few hiccups along the way, but I never doubted that my boys would come through!” She eyed Matthew, who had hardly said a word to her since she had surprised him at his house. Surely he wasn’t still pouting about her badmouthing Amber; the girl had had it coming, and it hadn’t been the first time Sonata had insulted her. Matthew had been so sensitive lately, and she wanted the old Matthew back, the one that loved her and enjoyed her sarcastic manner. This Matthew was boring.

The trick to engaging Matthew’s attention, which Sonata had learned over the years, was to provoke his potent temper, and she knew precisely how to do so at this moment. “Matt,” she said airily, “aren’t you glad your old *friend* is no longer around to distract you? That was such a problem while making this album, wasn’t it?”

All heads swiveled to him. His face darkened, and the beginnings of a snarl flickered on his lips. Sonata suppressed a smile. It was way too easy sometimes.

But Matthew said nothing, pressing his lips together and lowering his head. His shoulders rose and fell with his heavy breaths, and Sonata knew his temper had been kindled. So why didn’t he say anything?

She tried again. “I mean, there was that blonde, but we all know she was just something to sleep with while you tried to get back on Amber’s good side. Guess you screwed all that up, huh?”

Luke let out a loud sigh of disapproval and shook his head to himself. Matthew’s head snapped up, and Sonata almost jumped. “What do you want me to do, Sonata?” His voice was incisive but controlled. “Why do you always try to make me angry? Because it amuses you? To make me into a spectacle?”

Sonata had the acute sensation of being scolded, and she did not like it. Not at all. Her relish in inciting him took flight like a startled bird.

“You’re no different than the fans you market me to,” Matthew continued in the same tone. “You only like me for the show I put on, on and offstage. I’m like an entertaining pet.”

“Babe, you know that’s not—”

“No,” he interrupted. “Just stop.” He looked down again, letting the silence drop like a weight.

At least he was speaking now, though this wasn’t quite what Sonata had in mind. There hadn’t been a satisfying eruption of anger, just unsettling control. He hadn’t even sat up straight.

She cleared her throat. “Well, somebody’s grumpy today. As I was saying, I’m proud of you guys for hanging in there despite the obstacles and making an album that we all love.”

Jordan scoffed, but she ignored him. She knew none of them were happy with the album. She was just rubbing it in their faces. Regardless, they should be thanking her - the sales for this

album were the highest yet. So high, in fact, that she had decided that she wasn't quite done with Freeflight. They had at *least* another multi-platinum album up their sleeves. She could live with that.

"So," she said, "in honor of—"

"I'm quitting Freeflight."

All heads turned to Matthew again at his sudden pronouncement. *Great, now he's throwing a tantrum*, Sonata thought. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm serious," he said. He glanced at Luke, who smiled. They were plotting something.

"Okay, what do you want?" she asked, bored. This wasn't the first time he had pulled a stunt like this, but it was all an act. His fame and its money was worth too much to him.

"I want to quit." He said it with such calm and seriousness that Sonata almost believed him.

"Matt, we both know you're not serious. The band means too much to you," she said.

"You're right," he said, "but I traded Ril—Amber for Freeflight, and it wasn't worth it."

"That was years ago, and she's fine," Sonata said.

"Still doesn't make it right. And Freeflight made me into someone I don't like." He stood up, his eyes clear and earnest. "I let you mold me into something ugly, and it's time I let someone else take the job of changing me – for the better, this time."

"Yourself?" she sneered.

"Ha, no way. I'd do a crappy job. I'm—"

"If you leave this band, the whole Amber thing will be for nothing!"

His gaze was almost soft. "I'm going, Sonata."

"I'm leaving too," Luke said, standing next to Matthew. "I go where Matt goes."

"You won't get another chance to be in such a prominent band," she said dismissively.

"You really think that's why I've stuck around for this long?" Luke exchanged glances with Matthew and smiled.

"To be honest, this band's kinda crappy now," Jordan added. "And I don't want to be the only one stuck with this guy..." he jabbed a thumb at Dameon, who didn't seem to mind.

"Don't tell me you're quitting too?" Sonata said, too taken aback to be angry.

Jordan nodded. Dameon spoke hesitantly, "Me too. You're too mean."

She looked around at them for a few moments, waiting for them to start laughing and tell her it was a prank. But they only stared back.

"You guys don't realize what you're throwing away," she said.

"Who said we're throwing anything away?" Jordan said, his dislike for her evident. He had never so much as batted an eye against her before; she thought he was on her side. So much for loyalty.

"Who knows, maybe we'll form another band without you, sis," Dameon said, shrugging.

Now she was starting to worry. Just a tiny amount of concern that they were actually going through with this. "You won't be near as successful. I *made* this band and you all know it!"

"And now we're remaking it," Matthew said.

"Without you," Dameon added, as if that weren't obvious. Even her own brother hated her.

No, this wasn't happening. They weren't thinking straight. But now they were walking out without another word, without meeting her eye. Her subjects were rebelling. They were leaving her behind.

Matthew was leaving her behind.

"Wait!" She scrambled after Matthew, intercepting him at the front door of Dameon's house as the others milled about in the next room over. He paused. She looped her arms around his neck, giving him the full potency of her pout, and she scared herself with its authenticity. Matthew would never abandon her. He was hers. He always came back to her. "Are you really leaving me?" she whispered, pulling him closer.

He leaned in, and she tilted her chin for his kiss, but his lips only brushed against her forehead. "I'm sorry, Sonata."

When she drew back, she saw in his eyes the last thing she ever wanted to see: pity. And not a condescending pity, but a gentle pity. A loving pity.

He had never looked at anyone like that before.

She shoved him away, inner walls resurrected. How dare he kiss her like a child! How dare he pity her! How dare he walk away, acting like he was okay with this!

"You'll regret this," she spat. "I'll ruin you. You know I can and I will. I'm the *last* woman you want as your enemy, Matthew Wolfe!"

He smiled without a trace of enmity. "You're not my enemy."

Her anger unspent and aimless, she watched him turn his back on her and walk to his car. Something was different about him, and she didn't like it. Luke brushed past her, headed to his car as well, not even looking her way.

She wasn't quite done with Freeflight, but apparently they were done with her.

"You doing okay?" Luke asked when he reached Matthew's car. Behind him, just inside the door, Sonata was huddled against the wall, talking vehemently on the phone, already attempting damage control and planning her next move. She never stopped; she was like a shark, always swimming, always hungry, always on the alert for fresh blood.

Matthew sighed, rubbing a spot of dirt from the hood of his Audi. "That wasn't easy."

"Understandable. Freeflight is your baby."

"Me and Amber's baby," he corrected, then frowned. "Wait, that sounded weird."

Luke smiled but said, "How do you think she'll feel when she hears we're not a band anymore?"

"I dunno," Matthew said quietly. "It was such a source of pain for her. Maybe she'll be glad it's gone."

Luke crossed his arms and leaned against his car so that he was facing Matthew. "So do you think Freeflight's dead for good?"

Matthew was silent for a moment. "I am," he said.

"You're...dead for good?"

"Part of me, anyway. Or maybe all of me. I can't tell."

“Is it because Amber’s gone?”

Matthew looked up at him, his eyes clear like a calm sea. “It’s not about her. It’s not about me, either.”

His friend’s tranquility was unnerving to Luke. Usually it was the other way around. “Dude, what’s going on with you?”

Matthew shuffled his feed, rubbed the back of his neck, wiggled his shoulders in an embarrassed shrug. “I kinda took your advice,” he said. “I mean, I’m nothing like you or Amber, but...” He flushed, a rare phenomenon for the shameless rock star. “I gotta go.” He ducked into his car before Luke had registered what he said. The Audi’s engine roared to life and settled into a contented purr.

Luke tapped on Matthew’s window. “Took my advice about what?” he shouted over the noise.

The window rolled down, exposing Matthew’s face. “Maybe someday I can be the kind of friend you’ve been to me. I mean it.” Suddenly flustered, he scrutinized the steering wheel. “I think...God knew what he was doing when he stuck me in Ms. Blomberg’s kindergarten class in the desk next to yours. I guess I owe a lot to him and alphabetical seating order by last name, eh?”

Luke could only nod, and Matthew peered hard at him. “Are you...crying?”

“Nope.” Luke blinked and patted the edge of the window. “I’m just glad you’re...okay.”

“Your prayers would be much appreciated. I’m still pretty new at this,” Matthew said. And, flashing the brightest, most natural grin Luke had ever seen from him, he gunned the engine, and the Audi shot down the drive in a swirl of dust and spitting gravel.

“Does he really have to show off like that?”

Luke turned to see Dameon scowling in the doorway. The guitarist smiled. “Hey, cheer up. Your sister doesn’t own our lives anymore.”

“The band is dead, and Sonata’s gonna kill us.”

Luke chuckled. “She can’t kill us if we’re already dead.”

“Tell me again how that’s reassuring?”

Luke watched the receding silver gleam of the Audi now turning onto the main road. “New life can come from death.”

Dameon looked unconvinced, but Luke knew it to be true. He had experienced it himself. It might have been the end of *Freeflight*, but a new, much better story was beginning.